

**EAST MEETS WEST:
THE DILEMMA OF MANAGEMENT PEDAGOGY IN CHINA**

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Abstract

Management education in China has been booming over the past two decades. By examining the transformation of China's management education, this paper tries to identify the pedagogical problems in China's management education. The future orientation of China's management education and the roles of Western educational institutions will also be discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

Due to the unique nature of managerial practice, managerial development should be differentiated from other professional development such as medicine and law. The nature of the knowledge in management education is relativism (pragmatic truth, subjectivity, and contextual relativity) contrasting to objectivism (universal truth, generic laws). Accordingly, the pedagogy of management education should also be different in order to develop effective and pragmatic managers to meet society's needs and foster desirable attitudes (Holman, 2000; Raelin, 1995). Therefore, action learning model, critical reflection learning model, experiential learning model and service learning projects should be considered and promoted in management education system to against the traditional "academic liberalism" and "professional" models (Holman, 2000; Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996; Raelin, 1995; Reynolds, 1998). In other words, management education pedagogy should focus on experiential and participative learning, instead of traditional one-direction (from teachers to students) lecturing.

These Western thoughts of management education have been introduced to China, thankful to the aggressive search for international assistance in management education by the Chinese government (Boisot & Fiol, 1987; Bu & Mitchell, 1992). Several major developed countries such as United States, Canada, Japan, and Germany have been involved in assisting the development of management education in China since 1978 (see Boisot 1986 for review). However, despite the fact that hundreds of Western professors have come to China to help train Chinese managers and faculties over the past two decades, the pedagogy in Chinese management education institutions has not been much changed.

Problems listed by Bu & Mitchell (1992), such as lack of student participation and inefficiency of trainees' group discussions; still exist in Chinese management education. Why was it so hard for the Western management pedagogy to be accepted by the Chinese management institutions? We argue here that the reason for the slow acceptance of the above mentioned Western management education pedagogy is that it contradicts with Chinese values in terms of effective education. The purpose of this paper is to explore the dilemma between the Western management education pedagogy and Chinese cultural values.

In the Chinese management education literature, there are some studies focused on Chinese management education development (e.g., Chan, 1996; Warner, 1991). However, there is very few articles analyzing Chinese management education pedagogy and how it is influenced by cultural values, with an exception that Boiso & Fiol's (1987) described the pedagogical differences between Chinese and Western management education. This paper tries to analyze the main reasons for the difficulties from cultural value perspective. To achieve this objective, this paper will first review the evolution of China's management education, along which the Chinese traditional pedagogy will be introduced. Then, the cultural and historical roots of this traditional pedagogy will be presented. Thirdly, suggestions will be given to Western professors teaching in China. Finally, the future of China's management education will be discussed.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

China's Economy Evolution: A Brief Review

Management education is a function of economic development (He, Wang, & Yu, 2002). Its prosperity closely follows the rise and fall of the national economy. Moreover, in a transition economy like China's, management education has gone a roller-coaster cycle of rise, fall, and rise again, following the dramatic transformation of its economic system.

Since the People's Republic of China was founded in 1949, the conspicuous economic achievements under the new government have been widely acknowledged, especially when considering the dreadful conditions that New China inherited from the old regime. The path it has passed, however, is far from being straight as a ramrod. The process can be roughly divided into three stages.

During the first stage (1949-1957), the newly established government was strongly supported by the people and cleared up the shambles quickly. The economy has been restored and re-built efficiently by following the former USSR's economic model and with financial and technical aids from the "Big Brother". China had achieved much higher economic growth than several past decades.

With the gradually vicious expansion of the extremely "Leftist" ideology, however, China run counter to the objective economic laws during the following two decades (1957-1978). The failure of the so-called "Great Leap Forward" policy followed by the even more disastrous "Cultural Revolution" once again led the country to the fringe of economic collapse.

Fortunately, since 1979 when Deng Xiao-ping regained the paramount power in the government, he and his pragmatic colleagues initiated the "Reform and Opening to the World" policy. It saved the country's economy from bankruptcy and turned it on a right and promising track. The

economic miracle that China has then created is a noticeable and undeniable fact during the past two decades.

A Three-Stage Transformation of Management Education

In accordance with the economic transition, the transformation of China's management education can also be roughly separated into three stages.

Stage I: 1949 - 1957. Before the People's Republic of China was established in 1949, there already existed a handful of economic and business administration departments or schools in some colleges and universities in the country, such as Peking University, Shanghai Jiaotong University, Nankai University, Tsinghua University, and Fudan University. A number of these universities even had granted graduate degrees, although their programs were generally weak and of very small scale. When the new government was first established, it soon began a policy called "Total Acceptance" of the practice and personnel of the old management education.

After keeping the old education system basically untouched for three years, the new government implemented a strategic measure called "the Readjustment of Schools and Departments" in 1952. On one side, almost all the established management education institutions were either disbanded or re-structured. On the other side, two new institutions were set up to serve as prototypes in the new education system by copying mainly two corresponding institutions in the then USSR.

The first was the People's University in Beijing, a Chinese version of the Moscow National Economy College that trained officials of various ranks in the economy planning and control system of a highly central planned economy. The other one was the Department of Management of the Harbin Polytechnic Institute, copying the model of Leningrad Engineering Economy College that developed mainly economic engineers, a job somewhat similar to industrial engineers in the west. The former focused on the studies of Marxist-Leninist political economic concepts, using mainly qualitative methods. The latter mainly concentrated on applying a highly engineering-oriented curriculum with intensively quantitative methods. Russian professors were invited to either teach directly or act as

senior advisors in these two institutions. Hundreds of Chinese students and scholars were sent to study there. None of these two institutions, however, was designed to develop general managers of independent organizations in a market economy. Both of them regarded management knowledge as objective subjects, which could be learned through lecturing and passive learning.

The two institutions then acted as “seeds” spread throughout the whole country. Dozens of colleges and universities set up their own management programs based on the two models. Thousands of managers were developed through these schools, forming the core force of China’s enterprise management system in 1950’s and even early 1960’s.

During this period, the then government strongly believed in the former soviet pattern of economy and the rigidly central planning system. All market factor in economy were rejected and eliminated because those were exclusive components of capitalism and thus were absolutely harmful to socialism. The government also denied the fact that management itself is a sophisticated and separated body of knowledge which needs training and practice to master. Consequently, the training of general managers of enterprises as a relatively independent decision-maker was completely a nuisance. The government believed that Marxism-Leninism principles were the key for management. Any one who had been exposed to some basic concepts of Marxism-Leninism principles in general was supposed to be automatically and naturally an effective manager of any kind of institutions or organizations. Specific expertise or skills of management were of no need. All these oversimplified and lopsided biases originated from naive and dogmatic understanding of Marxism and more importantly from the ideology cultivated in an underdeveloped economy of rural society like China dominated the society at that time. Therefore, management education in this period was basically the passive learning of Marxism principles.

Stage II: 1958 – 1978. During this two decades, the ever-expanding extremely “Leftist” ideology in the government censured management education programs as “Bourgeoisie and Revisionist Hotbeds”. The lopsided and dogmatic understanding ideas about management education

went to the extreme during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1978). All universities and colleges were closed down and the People's University was even completely disbanded under the accusation of "acting as the incubator of revisionists". When many engineering and science education programs were partly restored in the later period of Cultural Revolution, those management development programs based on the two USSR models were still excluded from the government plan. By end of 1970s, management education in China was near to none.

Stage III: 1979 - present. Under Deng Xiaoping's leadership, the reform and opening policy has caused profound and broad changes in every aspect of China's social and economic life since 1979. Due to the dismissal of management education programs in the previous stage, China was in serious shortfall of the highly educated management personnel (Bu & Mitchell, 1992; Child, 1994; Warner, 1992). Therefore, education was one of the very first areas in which Deng Xiaoping initiated his reform policy. He included management education in those areas that China should learn from the Western developed countries.

During Deng Xiaoping's visit to U.S.A. in 1979, he asked President Jimmy Carter for assistance and cooperation with China in setting up a joint senior management development project. This project resulted in the establishment of the first China-West joint management training project in 1980 -- the National Center for Industrial Science & Technology Management Development (at Dalian), Dalian, Liaoning Province. Meanwhile, the Chinese government decided to strive for training a big team of ambitious managers to equip them with modern management concepts and techniques. In 1982, it proposed a guideline statement for management development in China, popularly known as the 16-Character Principle, i.e. "Taking our own practice and national situations as the main body, extracting and adopting the strengths of various countries extensively, combining them all together through refining to form our own unique management system eventually."

Being aware of the great demand for competent managers, the government invested a great amount of funds and efforts into improving and expanding its management education and training

system. Since 1982, management education and training have been mushrooming throughout the country. Thousands of economic officials, managers, scholars, and students have been sent abroad to learn Western management theories and practices. Meanwhile, hundreds of Western management scholars and executives were invited to visit China and to train Chinese managers and faculties. By the early 1990's, under the State Education Commission, various management programs and departments had been restored or established in around 400 universities and colleges. Among these 400, at least 40 universities had their own management/ business schools by late 1980's. Under the State Economy and Trade Commission System, on the other hand, more than 90 economic managerial cadre colleges and nearly 30 national centers for management development had also been set up. Some of them were cooperative projects with Western developed countries, such as centers in Dalian (with the United States as mentioned above), Beijing (with European Community), Xian (with the United Kingdom), Shanghai (with Germany), Tianjin (with Japan), and Chengdu (with Canada).

In 1990, the State Education Commission authorized 9 universities to run China's MBA programs on an experimental basis. These MBA programs were highly engineering or management science oriented (Child, 1994). By 1994, 26 universities had been authorized to grant MBA degrees. In 1996, the government established a National MBA Education Guiding Committee under the State Education Commission to unify MBA admission exam and to guarantee the quality of MBA students. In 1998, an additional batch of 30 schools joined the 26 universities to run MBA programs.

THE DILEMMA OF MANAGEMENT PEDAGOGY AND THEIR ROOTS

Boisot & Fiol (1987) developed a model (learning cubes) to describe the differences between traditional Chinese management education pedagogy and Western management education pedagogy. In their paper, they identified two extreme vertexes A and H to represent Chinese and Western learning styles respectively. Vertex A means directed/abstract/passive learning, in which a learner learns through textbook exercises under the guidance of a teacher passively. Vertex H is autonomous/

concrete/ interactive-learning style, with which a student learns through really world problem solving with his/her team members. Boisot & Fiol (1987) pointed out that Western professors brought in Vertex H teaching and learning styles, while Chinese managers used to Vertex A teaching and learning styles. Both sides felt frustrated with the difficulties to merge these two sides synergistically (Bu & Mitchell, 1992).

In Western business schools, more and more management education programs adopted action learning, critical reflection learning, experiential learning and service learning projects that represent the Boisot & Fiol's (1987) Vertex H learning model (Holman, 2000; Kolenko, Porter, Wheatley, & Colby, 1996; Raelin, 1995; Reynolds, 1998). Boisot & Fiol (1987) suggested that Chinese management education should also move toward Vertex H in order to train practical managers to meet the demands of the market economy. However, twenty years have passed. The Chinese traditional education model — pursuing objective knowledge through passive one-direction lecturing — is still the dominant force in China's management education. As Bu & Mitchell (1992) found, the preference of Vertex A (Boisot & Fiol, 1987) learning style caused many problems that could be identified in many areas, such as suspicious of pedagogy used by Western professors, lack of student participation, and inefficient group discussions in classroom. The main reasons for these problems in China's management education come from the cultural, political, and historical roots.

We argue that the Western management pedagogy clashes with Chinese traditional cultural values, which makes it hard for Chinese trainees to comfortably adapt Vertex H learning style. Although Chinese scholars realize the importance of autonomous/concrete/interactive management learning style (e.g. Deng & Wang, 1992; Warner, 1987; 1992; Wo & Pounder, 2000), there are difficulties at both trainers' and trainees' sides to implement autonomous, concrete and interactive management learning model. The following will analyze these dilemmas faced by Chinese management education scholars and practitioners.

Nature of Management Knowledge: Objective or Subjective?

The Chinese government tended to think that natural sciences and engineering were the major forces that could help China in her modernization course. This belief could be traced back to the late Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), and it has naturally led to an emphasis on engineering education over management training in Chinese education system. Managerial knowledge, if any worth at all, was also believed to be as objective as to other engineering subjects.

Under this type of mentality, in the 1980's, bachelor and master degrees in management departments or schools were offered only in the area of Managerial Engineering. More than 80 percent of management programs were based in engineering schools, which prefer objective and quantitative-based disciplines to subjective and qualitative-based disciplines. The preference was reinforced by the “fear” of involvement in social science studies, which were perceived as politically sensitive and apt to cause troubles. Added by the bias that the central planning system was the only optimal economic pattern for a socialist country, there was strong doubt against and resistant to the introduction of Western management education models. Although a few schools have eventually established comprehensive and multi-functional management programs, the primitive understanding of management being merely a physical, rational, “hard,” and precise science has not been much changed yet. The opinion that that all management problems should mainly be coped with quantitative analysis still exists. There is still a long way to go for taking management as more subjective, pragmatic, experiential, and critical subjects of knowledge in China.

Objective of Management Training: Specialists or Generalists?

In the former central planning economy of China, the government expected managers of State – owned Enterprises (SOEs, the dominant economic cells then) to do operation management only. Other management functions, such as finance and marketing, were none of the SOE managers' responsibilities. These managers used to be taken care by governmental agencies at different levels. Therefore, a good manager in the Chinese sense was traditionally supposed to be a specialist in a

specific engineering field, such as mining, steel making, or ship building. In fact, most present managers in China have been promoted from experienced engineers.

Based on this belief, the curriculum designed for developing managers was highly engineering-oriented. Courses about fund raising, marketing, human resources, laws, economics were excluded, as well as those “soft” courses such as organizational behaviors, communication, leadership, etc. This was related to the mentality of avoiding political risk and the bias of these courses being too subjective to master. Instead, political and ideological courses such as Marxism and Socialism Economics were included to guarantee political correctness of Chinese managers.

As we all know, in a market economy, an executive should be, as a final decision maker, responsible for all the aspects of the business of his or her firm in a broader context, and hence should have a much broader, pragmatic and flexible understanding of management knowledge, although it is not necessary or even impossible for him or her to be an expert in every functional field. They should be generalists or general managers instead of specialists in a specific function.

When Western thoughts of management education has been gradually introduced into China and the transition of planned economy toward market economy, government officials gradually accepted “westernized curriculum”. However, the basic ideology of manager’s role as an independent decision-maker has not been totally accepted by the Chinese education participants. In addition, the government still takes a significant role in intervening corporate decision making. All these barriers hinder the implementation of western management education pedagogy in China.

Teaching Methodology: Lecturing or Experiential?

Traditionally, the only favorite teaching/learning style in China was highly structured lecturing given by a knowledgeable and respected instructor. Instructors who strictly followed a well-conceived and detailed syllabus were regarded as a Master of Classroom Teaching. These masters well prepared to cover every detail in a class, even watching out which sentence should be spoken at which minute and which word should be written on which part of the board.

According to the Learning Cubic Model (Boisot & Fiol, 1987), which depicts teaching styles with three dimensions (conceptual versus practical, individual versus collective, and under instruction versus via self-study), the typical Chinese teaching/learning pattern fits the conceptual-individual-under instruction style. This means that Chinese students are accustomed to and prefer the way of studying as separate individuals under the detailed instruction of their teachers focusing mainly on theoretical topics. They expect and are expected simply to listen to, to take notes of, and to copy down what their instructors say and write. In contrast, Western teaching methodology is typically presented as practical-collective-self-study. It involves students actively participating in classes with experiential methods such as case study, role-play, and simulation.

Therefore, it was not surprising at all how shocked Chinese managers and faculties were when first exposed to case teaching method by American professors in the early 1980 at the Dalian Center. Both Chinese managers and faculties were skeptical about the effectiveness of case teaching method. The Chinese faculties, mostly with an engineering background, felt especially confused when they found that many cases even had not had an optimal and clear-cut answer with which they could judge whether the participants' analysis was correct or wrong. The Chinese managers were particularly upset with the fact that many US professors, well known for their expertise in their own fields, gave few lecture but let the participants to discuss with each other instead. These participants even questioned: "As instructors, if they don't lecture, why should we pay them with such a high price?"

Generally speaking, the "instructor centralism" in Chinese management pedagogy is derived two major sources: the traditional Confucianism culture, and the former Soviet pedagogy.

Confucianism. Teacher was ranked with Heaven, Earth, Emperor, and Parents as the Five Tops in ancient China. Han Yu, a top scholar of Confucianism in the eighth century, once defined the role of teacher as imparting doctrines of the sages, teaching a trade, and solving puzzles. Thus, a teacher should always be regarded as an authority who is more knowledgeable and more skillful than students, acting as the center or boss in the classroom. Teachers were supposed to be dominating and

initiative lecturers and senders of knowledge, while students were passive listeners and receivers. In addition, the Confucian value of “saving face” also discouraged students from expressing their own opinions and from confronting or debating with their classmates, let alone from challenging their teachers. They usually intended to avoid losing their own faces or getting their peers or teachers lose their faces.

Soviet Pedagogy. The core of the Soviet Pedagogy was represented by the “Five Basic Pedagogic Principles” and the “Six Links in Classroom Teaching” developed by the then most authoritative Russian pedagogist Kalov. These principles and rules, however, did not mention anything about students’ participation in teaching process. Instead, teachers were viewed as the dominating factor in classes and students were recipients of knowledge. These guidelines were very popular in China in 1950s and early 1960s, as they well matched the Chinese traditional teaching philosophy.

Over the past two decades, particularly since 1990, case teaching as well as other experiential methods have gradually been accepted in Chinese management education institutions. More and more instructors and students have participated in the process and experienced the advantages of them. Nevertheless, there is still a long way to go to make these methods more effective and relevant to the Chinese context. In fact, Chinese scholars did make efforts to develop their own cases and simulations more relevant to Chinese management circumstances. For example, a series of case-teaching workshops for management instructors have been organized since the Management Case Study Association (MCSA) was formed in 1986. Many Western sources also have contributed to the dissemination of the methods in China. For example, the World Bank has sponsored several case teaching workshops in China; and the University of Western Ontario supported the publication of the Chinese edition of its two key textbooks regarding case teaching method in the early 1990’s.

Sources of Trainees: Prospective or Incumbent Managers?

When considering the reform of China’s management education and training system, the Chinese government was facing two knotty problems: Should the emphasis be placed on the training of

millions of incumbent managers or on the development of prospective managers? Furthermore, in terms of developing prospective managers, should the undergraduate or graduate programs be highlighted?

In addition to the training of incumbent managers in those national centers and managerial cadre institutes, China's management-degree-education started with undergraduate programs under the State Education Commission in the early 1980's. The government's key argument for this decision was a comparison to the training of military officers: Since the Chinese arm forces have been very happy with the qualified military officers provided by undergraduate programs in various military schools, why don't we similarly run undergraduate programs in management schools to provide qualified managers to our companies? Consequently, for quite a while, most of the management programs in universities focused mainly on the development of young undergraduates with little working experience. On the other hand, believing that managerial job is a profession and getting a bachelor degree in management would result in a promising executive career, thousands of top students enrolled in management programs.

However, unlike most of their counterparts in the West, these Chinese undergraduate students had no working experience at all when entering universities right after high schools. The pedagogical problem of passive learning in Chinese management education as described above reinforced the disadvantages of undergraduate students. They often complained that they were trained to be neither fish nor fowl and their prospects were far away from brilliant as they originally expected. In fact, these undergraduate students of management were not welcome by enterprises after their graduation, as they were neither qualified managers nor engineers. If assigned an ordinary staff job at entry level, these graduated students tended to feel that it was a waste of their talents. Therefore, when the management tried to select candidates for managerial jobs, they often rather preferred engineers with good work performance to those management majors despite the latter's management education background.

In 1986, there appeared some criticism claiming that the overemphasis on developing undergraduate management education was a strategic mistake, as it had not produced enough quality managers to meet the urgent demand of the economy as expected. Instead, it caused some “double wastes of talents”—produced less qualified managers while spoiled those management majors with falsely promising executive career. The defenders’ argument was that China’s education system was embedded in its economy. It was not the undergraduate management programs but the economic system that did not provide suitable opportunities for those management majors to use the managerial knowledge they have learned. By now, the defender’s ideas have lost their market. China has become to highly emphasize MBA programs, which take incumbent managers and professionals.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

China’s management education has stepped on the right track and has made a great progress as a result of efforts contributed from various circles of the country. The government has been aware of the importance of a large pool of qualified managers to its economic growth. It has started to implement a plan to develop and upgrade thousands of competent managers to meet the demand of Chinese enterprises in the new century.

This is obviously a tough task given the twisty route that China has passed most of the time over the past half century. The conflicting pedagogical values and social institutions between modern management education in the West and China’s own circumstances further reinforce the difficulty. A lot of efforts still need to be put into management education to improve it not only quantitatively but qualitatively as well. Summarizing experiences and drawing lessons from the past 20-year practice in management education, and receiving the increasing influence from more and more frequent interactions with the West, the Chinese government has continued to set up its own MBA education system. The Program’s design has imbibed a lot of useful elements from the MBA system of the West. At same time it also should keep some features that are unique to China. For example, the content of

management education should be more China-related. The pedagogy of management education should also consider the above mentioned historical and cultural beliefs to make a unique Chinese management education model by combining western merits and Chinese values.

The above analyses reveals that although China's management education is moving toward adopting autonomous, concrete and interactive learning styles, there are still traditional value and cultural roots that hinder this progress. This suggests that Chinese scholars and Western scholars teaching in China, should realize these difficulties and adopting a compromising pedagogy, such as a learning styles combined the features of Vertex A and H. For example, case studies could be arranged in team discussion as Western business schools do, but teamwork reflections and after-discussion summaries should be followed to make sure students understand what they learned in a directed way. Vivid examples from real world will also be welcomed by students in class-room learning and Chinese-specific cases and examples will be considered more appropriate than Western cases. We would suggest that while adopting Western management education pedagogy, Chinese circumstances should also be considered and after-activity reflection and summary should be emphasized to make Chinese trainees feel that they did learn something from those concrete and interactive activities.

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