

Understanding Chinese Management Culture: The Shanghai Museum as a Management School

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How to avoid the dull classroom?

How do you teach Cross-Cultural Management? There are many ways to do this, but in most cases, teachers would explain some chapters of a book on national cultures and management styles and then do some exercises or role-plays to illustrate national differences and ways to deal with them. There are more creative ways, however, as I found out, teaching the subject to a small group from Maastricht School of Management. These students, four Chinese (one of whom from Taiwan), three Russians and two Dutch – were in Shanghai and I had the task to explain them something about cross-cultural management. It did not seem a very good idea to me to just sit in a dull class room talking in abstract terms about the phenomenon of culture, being in an environment where cultural differences can be observed on the street, in the shops, in fact everywhere where you care to look. So, in the preparation of this course, I was thinking of creating situations where my students would be given opportunities to observe and to interpret culture, thus discovering the foreign culture as well as better understanding their own. Various ideas came to my mind, like sending the students to a department store or to the local food market, asking them to interview people on the street, observing people at work in a factory and so on. Language problems – only the Chinese in the group could speak Mandarin – ruled out a number of options and the short time of preparation did not allow us to get the necessary contacts that would allow us to do observations inside a factory or something like that. I did have a European manager from a global company to talk to us on the last day of the course, but I felt that apart from someone else talking about his experiences of the Chinese culture I needed a situation in which the students should experience culture themselves.

Inspiration from Henry

The solution came from Henry Mintzberg, my favourite management writer. In his book ‘Managers not MBAs’, in which he criticises MBA education for its lack of relevance and outdated conceptions of management, he presents his own Advanced Management Program. One of the elements in this program is doing unusual things with his managers: he takes them to museums, Buddhist temples, churches and then has discussions about management on the basis of experiences in these environments. This gave me the ‘Aha-Erlebnis’: of course this could also be done in Shanghai, which has the most beautiful museum on Chinese culture of China, except maybe the museum in Taipei, Taiwan that has an even richer collection. So I decided to take my group there, to discover the essence of culture, focussing ‘Chinese culture’ because that happened to be the environment where the course was taking place. This also gave a nice opportunity to give my Chinese students a special position, to counteract their

‘natural’ tendency towards modesty in the group. They were in fact the four most knowledgeable persons in the group.

Conceptual groundwork: onions and business systems

Of course, I had to do some preparation in terms of concepts. In class I explained the idea of culture as the often implicit knowledge that people have of the world: the assumptions, concepts, rules and procedures that people in a given society use to make sense of what they see, guide their actions and interpret their feelings. Whereas the human brain is universal (high-tech, but mass-produced), it is ‘programmed’ differently in different societies. For business this becomes important as elements of culture become part of (often nationally defined) ‘business systems’ (according to Richard Whitley’s definition): the way business activities are coordinated in different countries. I showed the students the popular image of culture like an onion, consisting of different layers. The outside layer consists of ‘artifacts’: visible things, like houses, clothes, works of art. The innermost layer, or rather the kernel, contains the ‘world view’ that is at the basis of culture.

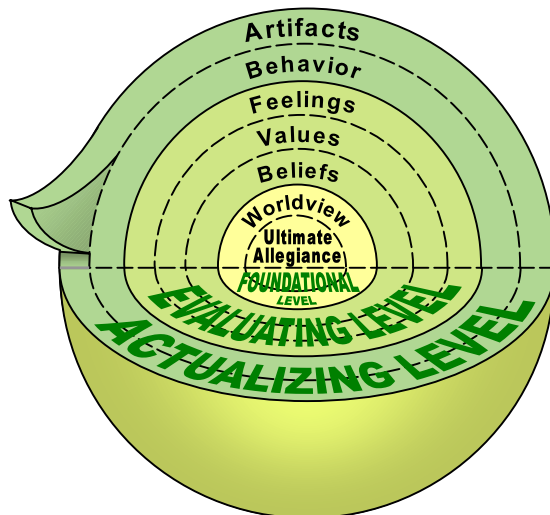


Figure 1: the onion of culture

The idea of the museum visit was to begin at this outside layer. We would see the different artefacts, like statues, seals, wine containers, paintings, handwriting, clothes and jade objects. In these objects we would try to find the cultural messages, the symbols and their meaning. And then we would try to find the implicit world view behind it, using general knowledge on Chinese culture and philosophy.

Lions, colours and landscapes

So, on Wednesday morning May 10, we were all at the museum. Most of us already noted interesting artefacts in front of it: lions and a sort of mythological creature that is supposed to

keep the evil spirits away. Then the little groups – a Russian, a Dutch and a Chinese group - went through most of the departments and looked at the objects: seals, ancient jade, Chinese calligraphy, ancient Chinese sculpture, ceramics, bronze objects and Chinese painting. As a teacher I decided to join the Chinese because they could explain me a lot to be used in class later. And this was really fascinating: every single object contained meanings and symbols that a Western eye is likely to overlook. The general idea that Chinese culture is a ‘high-context’ culture, where you must know a lot of background and ‘stories behind the story’ was confirmed in this visit.

Meanings behind the symbols

After a good lunch in a modern Japanese restaurant we went to class to talk about what we had seen, to connect our impressions and observations to the underlying world view and concepts. To do this, I created three groups. In each of them there was at least one Chinese person who could explain meanings of symbols to the Europeans. The groups had lively discussions and then we had three very interesting presentations. It had become clear to the students that these objects are full of symbols. They had noted for example that animals are important as symbols, not only real, but also imagined animals. The dragon, is the father of the emperors, for example, the fish – also because its Chinese name 魚¹ (鱼) is pronounced the same as another word that means ‘surplus’ 餘 (余) – refers to wealth. Colours have fixed meanings, where red is always positive, blue refers to the sky etcetera. Also numbers have important associations, like 4 being connected to death, because the two characters have a similar pronunciation (四 and 死), whereas 8 is a lucky number.



Figure 2: Reflection on the museum experience in the restaurant

Some of the observations by students were created by misunderstandings, and also this was useful to see, because misunderstandings are a normal phenomenon between cultures. The Russian students, for example, noted the importance of ‘wine’ in the history of China, by the amount of wine vessels in the bronze objects department. ‘But how is this possible’, they asked, because ‘there is hardly any wine in China now?’. The misunderstanding was about the word ‘wine’ that is used as a translation for 酒 (jiu), which just means ‘alcoholic drink’, including vodka if you like! And drinking is indeed important in Chinese culture, which

¹ I give the traditional characters first and then, within parentheses, the simplified version as now used in the People’s Republic, if these are different.

brought us to themes like good relationships (關係 (关系) guanxi). From the wine vessels we could also deduce that the more important the person, the bigger the vessel. The connection with high power distances in present Chinese society was not difficult to make. This theme kept recurring in the discussion: everywhere we saw this emphasis on power, ranging from power symbols like the lion to little scenes in paintings with rituals that always involve some hierarchical order.

The idea of levels and hierarchy was quite obvious in many paintings: often the space is divided into compartments, with thresholds between them that you cannot easily cross. Those of us who knew the forbidden city in Beijing could easily make the connection: there you find this structure of courtyards separated by gates and thresholds, showing a perfect hierarchy. So, this might also tell us something about the tendency of modern Chinese organisations to still have many levels and create barriers to get from one level to the other.

The paintings gave us some interesting clues to the way people related to nature and to the universe in ancient Chinese civilisation, especially if we tried to compare them to Western painting from the Renaissance onwards. It struck many of us that nature was dominating these paintings. If people or buildings were present, they would often be small and dominated by a mountain, by trees, rocks and rivers. Apparently these ancient Chinese saw themselves much more as part of the natural world than we did in say the seventeenth or eighteenth century, when people used to be in the background and nature acted as a sort of backdrop to the human theatre. That, of course, was our Humanism that was conspicuously absent here. Another thing that many of us saw, was the absence of perspective. In ancient Chinese painting it is impossible to tell where the painter was when he painted his painting. There is no fixed point of observation, no place for the subject, so to say. The painter is somewhere in the painting, maybe, but at the same time these paintings are pure fantasy, so the whole painting is just somewhere in the painter's head. So what we miss, from a Western point of view, is a clear distinction between observer and observed, between subject and object. There is no objective reality, but just a story that the painting tells us.

The ancient Chinese view of the world

Many other things came out of these presentations and discussions and I tried to bring some system – very Western! – to these discussion by summarising main dimensions of ancient Chinese culture, using the scientific literature as far as I am familiar with it:

- 1 The place of man in nature/cosmos : part of nature/cosmos, not observer of nature.
- 2 No objective view of reality (realism), no impersonal (photographic) perspective, but a pragmatic view of reality: reality is what we do with it and what we experience.
- 3 Classificatory logic: ancient culture connects fixed symbols to fixed meanings, this leads to a tendency towards classification and enumeration: the five virtues of Confucius, the two principles of yin and yang (陰 陽 (阴阳)) etcetera. Whereas Western culture since the ancient Greeks emphasizes abstract reasoning and general concepts, ancient Chinese culture focuses on a concrete symbols and an multitude of specific concepts in their mutual relationships.
- 4 Emphasis on ritual. Behaving according to fixed patterns defined by different roles in society is very important. An important element is maintaining relations of authority and protecting face, both your own face and that of others.
- 5 Hierarchy and power. Ancient Chinese culture focuses on personal power, based on personal qualities and morality. Its model is the (extended) family and the

powerful father. Power is a top-down thing: the emperor got it from the gods (in the form of the dragon etc.) and the emperor can give some of it to his bureaucrats. In contrast, in Western views of power, there must be support from the people and power must be based on general, abstract rules.

- 6 Improvisation and the absence of straight lines. As a sort complement to the ritualistic character of ancient Chinese society there is a very strong element of improvisation, of personal freedom and individual strength. This can be seen in painting and character writing, which is never mechanical and shows a lot of individual personality. To the Western mind this is maybe the most difficult aspect of Chinese culture: never a straight line from A to B, always full of surprises!



Figure 3: No straight lines (from a Garden in Suzhou)

Ancient views and modern Chinese management

So what could mean all this to managing in China now? I asked this question in class and was of course quick to add that present-day China is not the China of the emperors. It is a society that is increasingly open to the world. Nevertheless, as Whitley explains in his theory of business systems, the more recent the pre-industrial past of a country, the more you must expect ancient patterns to influence the way business systems are structured and the way people in business behave. So, we must expect some influence at least of this ancient culture. I gave my own – largely untested though plausible – hypotheses on the matter, using the six points above.

The conception of being part of the cosmos, having a natural place in it, combined with the lack of an idea of objective observation gives a very conservative flavour to Chinese culture. This way of viewing the world does not easily lead to innovative behaviour or the construction of rational organisations. People accept their place as given. If this is still true to some extent, it may explain the rather passive attitude of employees to the systems of which they are part and a lack of critical attitude if we view it from a Western perspective. If people

find it difficult to position themselves outside the world of which they are part, it is hard to conceive of a better organisation or a better society.

The love for classifications and fixed meanings may add to this. It may be a barrier towards abstract and generalised thinking as required in modern science. It creates a lot of complexity that may block learning and leads to non-testable propositions. On the other hand it contains a lot of creativity and inspires aesthetic experience, as Chinese art shows. For the adoption of Western management thought and techniques, being based on abstract concepts and straightforward logical reasoning, the traditional metaphorical way of thinking may constitute a barrier. At the same time however, Western management thought is discovering the strength of stories and metaphors now and may learn something from the Chinese in this respect.



Figure 5: Interpreting the culture

The combination of ritual and power distances creates a tension with modern management thought. We saw this in the class, when we were talking about Peter Senge's ideas on creating shared visions in organisations. They are based on personal freedom, open communication and very small power distances. As the Chinese students remarked: this will never work here. So the question is: what does this mean? Will Chinese culture have to learn to become less ritualistic and more egalitarian, or will management techniques have to be adapted to the Confucian values of Chinese society? I assume the former, but the short term will probably show adaptation of management to Confucian values, as the presentation of a Western manager later in the program clearly showed us.

The unpredictably, improvising side of Chinese culture, the absence of straight lines, may also create tensions between Western management and Chinese culture. Western management emphasise the hierarchy of abstract goals and concrete means. You find this logic in strategic

plans, in the design of organisational change processes, in quality systems and HRM practices. The basic question is always how to attain your goals in the most efficient way and to avoid the negative side-effects. The simpler the model connecting means and ends, the better. The preference for complex contextual reasoning, long stories and making 'feints' in Chinese culture may not be very compatible with this. Meetings and negotiations involving Western managers and Chinese colleagues may be difficult if these styles are not somehow reconciled.

When I presented these ideas to the group, I realised that we have to distinguish the short term and the long term here. In the long term, a convergence of management styles from East and West is likely and I expect that some of the Chinese characteristics, rooted in a distant pre-industrial hierarchical society, will not survive. On the short run, however, anyone who is involved in Chinese business will have to understand some of the persisting behaviour patterns and the worldview behind it. Visiting a museum may help.

Did the museum add to our management knowledge?

A first test, if this visit was useful, came two days later. A European manager from a global company came to visit us to tell us about his experiences as a manager in China. His emphasis was of course not on academic analysis, but on how to pragmatically deal with cultural differences. If you cannot change the culture, you have to live with it and adapt to it. According to this man China is still very much 'the Middle Kingdom' and you better accept that as a European manager. One nice example was the theme of punishment. You must accept, as a Western manager, that you have to use punishment to correct behaviour, in this case sinning against safety regulations. The connection between high power distance was easily made in class, of course. Another recurring in the manager's story was the indirect style of communication, the absence of 'straight lines' and the importance of long stories and indirect hints. As a foreigner you have to understand and use this high-context style. On the other hand, you must also correct some of the weaknesses. In solving complicated technical problems it is important that you get to the real root causes of problems and a straightforward 'Western' style of thinking is needed here. However it turns out to be relatively difficult for most Chinese to learn this style.

The theme of face – an important aspect of the vertical collectivist culture – was also brought forward by this manager in many examples. For example you have to be very careful with giving criticism in public and you better do this in private, but praise can be given in public, even in ways that would not be acceptable in Europe.

So, all in all, the practical story was perfectly compatible with what we learned in the museum, showing the tensions between present-day global business behaviour and deeply engrained ancient cultural patterns. But this could not have worked, of course, if there would not have been a lot of knowledge in the group already, to connect these disparate pieces of information. We could never have done this in India, for example, since we have no students in this group with personal knowledge of the culture of that country, and as a teacher I would not be very useful for that subject either, since I have never read very much about it. So, the explanation for the success of using a museum in a management course includes my study of Chinese culture, history, economics and philosophy, and even some language and the intimate knowledge of four of our students. It also includes the skills in this group, developed in earlier

courses at MsM as an ideal meeting-place for cultures, to share knowledge across cultural boundaries.

This means that I would recommend this sort of approach to colleagues, but not unconditionally. You have to make sure that you, as a teacher are really able to make the connections between culture and business and that you have enough cultural knowledge in your student group as well as intercultural competence to do this.

Implementing this sort of educational forms leads to a situation in which students do not only consume knowledge – the situation in most traditional management education – but they are involved in producing it. Without reducing the teacher to some sort of social coach without specialised knowledge, this type of education places the student in a role where she or he develops knowledge together with other students and this learning ability is what business needs much more than pre-packed knowledge swallowed whole. My students showed me it can be done.