

An interpretive comparison of Chinese and Western conceptions of relationships in construction project management work

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Abstract

Recent moves to introduce Western project management processes into China recall the need for caution in transferring management theories and practices across cultures. Not only are there a number of well-known contrasts between Chinese and Western cultural values that shape management beliefs in important ways, but also evidence shows that the cross-cultural transfer of management processes in general is not always successful. In this paper we report an empirical comparison of matched samples of Chinese and Western construction project managers' conceptions of their work. We adopt the interpretive research approach known as phenomenography, developed for the purpose of understanding the different ways in which people conceive given aspects of their reality. Many of the study's findings in both cultures relate to the primary importance of relationships in construction project management work. At the same time the study highlights fundamental differences in conception of the meaning and significance of different forms of relationship in construction project management work that have implications for practice.

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1. Introduction

During the last 50 years the professional discipline of project management has become well established in the Western business world. Until recently China has been relatively isolated from the influence of Western management practices, and there has in China been no comparable parallel development of the profession of project management. However, since the Chinese economic reforms of the 1980s, Western project management has become increasingly recognized in China as a management approach with potentially broad application. In the recent history of the Chinese construction sector, which had a legacy of poor performance, significant progress has been made towards the adoption of a commercial approach, including the introduction of Western project management concepts and processes.

With the deepening of these reforms it is worth examining the extent to which Western project manage-

ment ideas have been supported by the Chinese culture. Many cross-cultural studies have shown that different cultures support different sets of management beliefs and practices, particularly when those cultures reflect fundamentally different conceptions of reality. For example, Laurent [1] revealed significant cultural diversity among managers from 10 European countries in relation to their conceptions of the function of management. Pant et al. [2] found that matrix organizational structures do not work as well in Nepal as they do in the West due to the greater bureaucratic orientation of Nepalese managers. England [3] explored limits to the applicability in the US context of the Theory Z management norm [4] that has been successful in Japan. A study by Easterby-Smith et al. [5] concluded that Chinese concerns for relationships, group harmony and 'face' limit the adoption in China of established aspects of Western human resource management practice.

Building on studies such as these we argue in the following section that, because of certain well-known areas of difference between the two cultures, Chinese and Western project managers' conceptions of construction project management work are likely to be

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different. We generate seven theoretical propositions concerning the implications of cultural differences for Chinese and Western project managers' conceptions of their work. We then describe the methods and results of an interpretive empirical study designed to examine the propositions. We find support in our data for all our propositions, with differences in conception of relationships emerging as a particularly strong central source of explanation of cultural differences as a whole. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of our findings for research and practice.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Chinese and Western culture

Culture, consisting essentially of people's collective deep-held values and beliefs, is a critical factor in shaping people's conceptions of the world around them. There have been many studies aimed at understanding national cultures and identifying the influences of people's different values and beliefs on their life and work. We explore below some apparent areas of difference between Chinese and Western cultures based on three dominant models, namely those of Hofstede [6], Trompenaars [7], and Schwartz [8]. For the sake of comparison the UK and USA are taken to represent the West in the discussion, because, first, the project management profession has been mainly developed in the UK and USA, and second, the UK and USA are in the same cultural cluster – Anglo – and have been classified as typical developed Western nations [9,10].

2.1.1. Hofstede's model

Hofstede [6] first identified four dimensions of culture, labelled *power distance* (PD), *individualism vs. collectivism* (ID), *masculinity vs. femininity* (MA) and *uncertainty avoidance* (UA). These four dimensions were initially detected through a comparison of the values of matched samples (employees and managers similar in all respects except nationality) working in 53 national subsidiaries of the IBM Corporation. A fifth dimension, *long-term vs. short-term orientation* (LT) was added based on a study of students in 23 countries using a questionnaire prepared by the Chinese Value Survey in Hong Kong [11,12]. The data suggest that China is somewhat different from the UK and the USA on dimensions MA and UA, and more distinctly different on dimensions PD, ID and LT.

2.1.2. Trompenaars' model

Trompenaars' [7] study involved 30 companies in 50 different countries. Seven dimensions of culture were identified. Five come under the broad heading of *relationships with people*, which includes *universalism vs.*

particularism, individualism vs. communitarianism, neutral vs. emotional, specific vs. diffuse, and achievement vs. ascription. The sixth dimension concerns *attitudes to time* and the seventh *attitudes to the environment*. Trompenaars' seven dimensions have been described as 'conceptually related' to some of Hofstede's dimensions and as such 'can be interpreted as supportive of Hofstede's model' [13, p. 109]. For example, Trompenaars' dimension *attitudes to time* is related to Hofstede's dimensions of ID and LT in that individualist cultures with a sequential view of time such as the UK and the USA usually have short-term orientation, whereas collectivist cultures such as China, with a synchronous view of time, typically have long-term orientation.

2.1.3. Schwartz's model

Drawing on findings from his individual-level study of the content and structure of values Schwartz [8] proposed a continuum of cultural values representing the relationship between personality and cultural factors. His model was based partly upon Hofstede's [6] and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's [14] work and was tested using data collected between 1988 and 1992 from respondents in 38 nations. The two basic dimensions in Schwartz's model are *conservatism vs. autonomy (affective and intellectual)* and *self-enhancement (hierarchy and mastery) vs. self-transcendence (egalitarian commitment and harmony)*. Because it arranges value types and broad dimensions into a continuum, Schwartz's model is regarded as a refinement of Hofstede's work. According to the model, the two broad cultural archetypes of societies with different assumptions about life and work can be categorized as *contractual cultures* and *relationship cultures*. The former, like the USA (UK data were not included), adopt autonomous values along with value tensions between mastery (in terms of self-enhancement) and egalitarian commitment/harmony (in terms of self-transcendence). The latter, like China, mainly adopt conservative values and accommodate value tensions between hierarchy and harmony.

Although these dimensional studies carry the danger of stereotyping entire cultures, they have nevertheless informed and enabled national cross-cultural comparisons that are relevant to the workplace [15,16]. The results in the above three models present a list of contrasting dimensions that demonstrate the fundamental differences between Chinese and Western cultures. Taking into account conceptual overlap among the three models, a summary of important dimensional differences between the two cultures is shown in Table 1.

2.2. Propositions

Examining these cultural dimensions in the light of key aspects of construction project management work reveals the potential implications of culturally based

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