

Chapter 25

Integrating Oriental Wisdom in MBA Education: The Case of Confucianism

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Abstract The mainstream, hitherto Anglo-American dominated management education faces increasing challenge from both inside and outside the business circles in Europe and America. Instead of offering an ad hoc list of Confucius' wisdom on management, the authors of this paper aim to build up a thesis on how Confucianism may help to counter balance the deviation. And it is found such interaction may be best presented on three levels: (1) ontology of the management discipline; (2) epistemology and related methodology of the management discipline; and (3) value and practice instilled in the management education.

25.1 Why Oriental Wisdom

In a globalized economy, being well versed about Oriental wisdom becomes a competitive edge when one could comprehend the mindset of his Asian counterparties, and form the right strategy in the right cultural context (Kedia 2006). More importantly, the mainstream, hitherto Anglo-American dominated management education faces increasing challenge from both inside and outside the business circles in Europe and America. Integrating ancient Greek wisdom and Oriental wisdom into the MBA curriculum may offer a refreshing alternative in the sphere of ontology, epistemology and methodology of the management discipline.

It is also a good timing to initiate an integration of Oriental wisdom in management education at this very moment for the following two reasons: Firstly, the rise of Chinese economy when the country surpassed Japan and becomes the second largest economy in the world in 2010. The relevance of Oriental wisdom is even more significant today if we may add the economies of the Greater China, Japan,

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Korea, India and other dragon and tiger economies in South Eastern Asia into the picture together.

Secondly, there is rising confidence in the Chinese management thinking in tandem with the rise of the Chinese economy. After more than 30 years of opening up (since the start of the economic reform in 1978) to the outside world, the Chinese management academia has gradually emerged from the early “apprenticeship stage” when everything Western, from the paradigm of free market to techniques of quantitative modeling, is eagerly and sometimes blindly absorbed (Liang and Lin 2008).

When the wisdom of Anglo-American management theory is put into practice from economy transition in the early years to a more matured market economy in China today, new knowledge is created. The practitioners and scholars in China reflect on the efficacy of the Western theories, and ponder on the relevance of the classical Chinese teachings such as that of Confucianism which are gradually accessible in Mainland China after the turmoil years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). The pendulum of history seems to swing back from the radical slogan of “Down with Confucianism” (打倒孔家店) in the May 4th movement in 1919 when leading Chinese intellectuals embraced “science” and “democracy”, and vowed to smash the shackles of “old tradition”. After a long circle of around 100 years, the Chinese today seem to have a calm and more balanced sentiment for their cultural heritage in the advancement of modernity, and even find echoes of the Oriental wisdom in the works of modern and post modern writers in the West.

25.2 The Peril of Management Education

In a widely quoted Harvard Business Review article in 2005 by Warren Bennis and James O’Toole, American business schools are bitterly criticized as to be “failing to impart useful skills, failing to prepare leaders, failing to instill norms of ethical behavior – and even failing to lead graduates to good corporate jobs”. The authors claimed “these criticisms come not just from students, employers, and the media but also from Deans of some of America’s most prestigious business schools” (Bennis and O’Toole 2005). Their work echoes a stream of criticism on management education since the late 1990s (Vaara 2011; Slater and Dixon-Fowler 2010; Giacalone 2004), with the important papers from authors like Leavitt, Clegg, Mintzberg, Pfeffer & Fong, and Ghoshal, mostly published in *Academy of Management Learning and Education* (Leavitt 1989; Clegg and Ross-Smith 2002; Mintzberg 2004; Pfeffer and Fong 2002; Ghoshal 2005).

25.2.1 *Positivism Epistemology*

One major complaint on the mainstream management education focuses on its over-dependence on the mechanical models built with a positivist approach to explain complicated human behaviors. The management education is criticized for the influence of “physics envy” or “scientism”, the belief that the assumptions and

methods of the physical and biological sciences are equally appropriate and essential to all other disciplines, including the humanities and the social sciences (Bennis and O'Toole 2005).

In its attempts to imitate the natural science, “An epistemology of disciplined imagination is replaced by the epistemology of formalized falsification, the doctrine of Karl Popper”, “looking for sharp, testable propositions, to provide simple, reductionist prescriptions” (Ghoshal 2005). Therefore, the management discipline, which is supposed to be “pragmatic, variable, context dependent, based on practical rationality”, becomes “context-independent, objective, and value-free rationalist science” (Clegg and Ross-Smith 2002).

25.2.2 *Wrong People and Wrong Way?*

The positivism epistemology has its ramifications on how the management education is organized, its pedagogy and research methodology. In the case of pedagogy, the model of traditional business school is criticized as educating wrong people, in a wrong way and with wrong consequence (Mintzberg 2004). Even though experience is a requirement for entry in all “accredited” MBA programs, there are still programs where students are taught concepts and theories before they have ever encountered live managerial situations. Under the system of didactic instruction, students feel less responsibility when teachers direct and evaluate learning (Armstrong 1995).

In addition, despite the “capstone” course or the “integrating” project at the end of the program, a typical MBA curriculum follows a ‘silo-type’ disciplinary curriculum. It is an education emphasizing on analysis, functional specialties and soft skills, and less on the practice of managing in dealing with uncertainty and complexity. Frequently, it equates intelligence with analytic ability, and “good” thinking with analytic thinking (Leavitt 1989), without a proper mix of art (insight), science (analysis) and craft (experience) (Mintzberg 2004).

In the case of research and research methodology, Pfeffer & Fong found that “theorists often write trivial theories because their process of theory construction is hemmed in by methodological strictures that favor validation rather than usefulness”. That explains why researches of the management faculty have limited relevance and impacts on management practice (Pfeffer and Fong 2002). Ghoshal also lamented the loss of pluralism on scholarship in business schools over the last 30 years. When publications become the most important criteria in the incentive structure of the faculty members, the scholarship of discovery (research) has pushed other forms of scholarships, namely the scholarship of integration (synthesis), the scholarship of practice (application), and the scholarship of teaching (pedagogy), into the periphery and insulated from the academic high table that is now reserved only for the scientists (Ghoshal 2005).¹

¹This, however, might be partially true when more and more academic institutions began to emphasize and recognize the efforts for case study development, professional involvement and good result of teaching evaluations.

25.2.3 *Negative View of the World*

The positivism epistemology and its respective pedagogy and research methodology would do less harm if they were not incorporated to a negative view of the world, a set of pessimistic assumptions about both individuals and institutions, derived from the school of “liberalism” predominating the mainstream business school in the past decades (Ghoshal 2005).

The “gloomy vision” of the world starts from *Homo Economicus*, a model of people as rational self-interest maximizers. Students are inoculated with the ideas that managers and employees are neither trusted nor trust-worthy from the theory of “principle agent problem” and “transaction cost”; that cheating is the norm and cooperation is unlikely from the theory of “prisoner dilemma”, that companies must compete not only with their competitors but also with their suppliers, customers, employees, and regulators from the “five force model” and similar analytical frameworks.

Such a negative view of the world coupled with the “scientific” approach, which replaces all notions of human intentionality with causal determinism of patterns and laws, has dire consequences on the value system of the MBA graduates. In the words of Leavitt, “we then lay it upon well-proportioned young men and women, distorting them into critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts, and shrunken souls” (Leavitt 1989).

According to Leavitt, what the traditional management education really lacks is the “visionary, transformational, path-finding parts of the managing process”. Very much related to the value system of the young managers, the path-finding spirit has three related domains: vision, values, and determination. The vision domain encompasses issues of creativity and imagination, along with issues of longer-term direction and purpose (as distinct from shorter-term objectives and goals). The value domain covers a sense of duty and responsibility, and determination is about energetic and unrelenting purposiveness (Leavitt *ibid*). Despite the significant recent efforts of many business schools in that direction, including emphasis on CSR-related topics and activities, we feel that the comments raised by Leavitt still hold.

25.2.4 *Summary of the Criticism*

Perhaps it is pertinent to bring the concepts of “wisdom” and “knowledge” into the discussion. Wisdom is normally defined as “to make the best use of knowledge” and has a bearing on consequences of an action. To be wise means to act well, instead of accumulating piles of knowledge per se. Wisdom, according to Aristotle, includes *practical wisdom* (phronēsis or prudence), the characteristic of exercising sound judgment in practical affairs, as well as *speculative wisdom* (sophia), an understanding of the world at the metaphysical level (Adler 1996). As summarized in

Table 25.1 Criticism on Management Education

| Domain | Criticism |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Epistemology | “Physics envy” or “Scientism” Epistemology of formalized falsification |
| Pedagogy & research methodology | ‘Silo-type’ curriculum Emphasis on analysis and functional specialties Methodological strictures that favor validation |
| Ontology | “Gloomy vision” of the world |
| Axiology | Self-interest maximizing Antagonism and lack of trust Lack of longer-term direction and purpose Need to increase sense of duty and responsibility |

Table 25.1, the Anglo-American dominated management education may be deficient in both connotations of wisdom: First, sacrificing practical relevance in its pursuit of scientific rigor, an issue of epistemology (views on the nature of knowledge), pedagogy and methodology (the way we conduct teaching and research). Second, building upon an unbalanced view of the world in its ontology (views on the nature of the world) and axiology (the value system).

Perhaps a study of the ancient Greek and Oriental wisdom, in this case, Confucianism, may offer a balancing view to the hitherto Anglo-American dominated management education (Table 25.2 to 25.4).

25.3 Confucianism and Management

Confucianism, together with Taoism and Buddhism confers rich resources as the heritage of Oriental wisdom in China. Although some scholars emphasized the importance of the original works by Confucius himself around 500 BC (Ames and Rosemont 1998), the authors of this paper would consider Confucianism an open system, enriched and modified by generations of Chinese thinkers from disciples in the classic period like Mencius and Xunzi (around 300 BC), through the Neo-Confucianism of Zhu Xi (around 1100) and Wang Yangming (around 1500), until the waves of the New Confucianism in the contemporary age (Fu et al. 2003).

Max Webber is perhaps the most influential Western scholar who relates Confucianism with management and economic development in the early years (Weber 1905, 1915). In his comparison between Protestant ethics and religions of China, Confucianism was perceived incomparable with the spirits of capitalism which value individualism and competition. Such a negative view on Confucianism however began to loose ground as scholars in the world try to discover the cultural factors for the rise of economies in Japan in the 1970s and other East Asian economies later (Hahn and Waterhouse 1972; McFarquhar 1980; Tai 1989; Wong 2005; Lin and Chi 2007; Rarick 2007; Schwanfelder 2008; Yeh and Xu 2010; Warne 2010; Wong et al. 2010).

The positive views about Confucianism on its potency for management in the modern economy may be epitomized in Romar (2004) when he declares Confucianism “underlines much of the writing of Peter Drucker”, widely credited as the founder and a guru of modern American management. He argues that both Drucker and Confucius “emphasize authority, leadership, legitimacy, hierarchy, interdependence and individual ethical responsibility in their analysis of human affairs”.

In the meantime, forerunners of New Confucianism outside mainland China like Cheng (2006), and Tu (1996, 2003) also extended their research focus towards Chinese philosophy of management and its impacts on East Asian entrepreneur spirit. Their works resonate with a plethora of papers and books on Confucianism and management in mainland China since 1980s (Zhang 1989, 2007; Zhao 1989, 1998; Li 1993, 2007; Luo et al. 2010; Wang 2010; Yang 2011).

25.4 Confucianism as a Counter Balance

Instead of offering an ad hoc list of Confucius’ wisdom on management, the authors of this paper aim to build up a thesis on how Confucianism may help to counter balance the deviation of the mainstream management education. With the reference to the summary on the criticism in Chap. 2, the Confucianism counterbalance is presented in the following tables on three levels: (1) ontology of management discipline; (2) epistemology and related methodology of management discipline; and (3) value and practice instilled in the management education.

In the domain of ontology, Confucius sees man as a part of the universe rather than the conqueror. His higher purpose is to understand and participate in the movement of the sky and earth (参天地之化育). His understanding should be holistic, as every piece of the universe is interconnected, just as the ailment of one body part cannot be cured without rebalancing the opposite forces (Yin and Yang 阴阳) within the whole body. The dual cosmic energies of Yin and Yang are dialectic rather than dichotomous in the sense that they coexist, complement, give birth and succeed each other, in constant changes, going through the cycles from nascent, growth to zenith and decline. Such cyclical changes constitute an undercurrent of the universe including the state of man’s causes. The ideal state is harmony rather than sameness (和而不同), just like different notes constitute a harmonious tune.

This Confucianism view of the world is summarized in the right column of Table 25.2 in contrast to the features of the mainstream of management education; some of them have been reviewed in Chap. 2. While the implications of the counterbalance are multi-facets, for instance, an alternative to the “gloomy vision of the world”, one case to the point may be the interpretation of the Hofstede index through the dialectic lenses of “Yin and Yang”.

Hofstede is well known for his national index on cultural dimensions such as “power distance” and “individualism/collectivism” (Hofstede 1980). A dichotomous approach would assign a culture towards either end of the index, say Asian as collectivists and American as individualists. On the contrary, a dialectic approach

Table 25.2 Comparisons in the domain of ontology

| Mainstream management education | Confucianism counter balance |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Man versus universe | Man in the universe |
| Dichotomy (good & evil) | Dialectic (yin & yang) |
| Atomistic | Holistic |
| Economic man a part of system | Philosophical man with a high purpose |
| Universal standard | Difference in harmony |
| Passive stable background | Undercurrent in cycles |

Table 25.3 Comparisons in the domains of epistemology and methodology

| Mainstream management education | Confucianism counter balance |
|---|--|
| Division & specialist | Integration & generalist |
| Equilibrium analysis | Changing process |
| <i>Ceteris paribus</i> to develop theorem | <i>Mutatis mutandis</i> to solve problem |
| Statistical mean | Exemplar case |
| Experiment & test of hypothesis | Intuition, experience & empathy |

offers a better explanation to the fact that Asian people, like all other peoples, are collectivists in some situations and contexts but the same people are individualists in some other situations and contexts (Fang 2010).

The counterbalance of Confucianism in the domains of epistemology and methodology for teaching and research has three folds (Table 25.3). Firstly, for Confucius, the utmost important task of a teacher is to pass on the “ultimate truth” (传道), the fundamental principles of the universe. Therefore the ideal “gentleman” is a generalist who may integrate knowledge from various branches, instead of a specialist who is merely an instrument serving for a particular purpose (君子不器). It is a far cry from the approach of silo-type discipline and functional specialties.

Secondly, the notion that knowledge and wisdom in most cases are acquired through intuition (悟), or as the writers of the Neo-Confucianism put it, through observation, experience and empathy (格物致知), may complement or counterbalance the “scientific method” of experiment and hypothesis test on statistical means.

Thirdly, it is the goal of scholarship as combination of knowledge and action (知行合一) to solve the real world problems. For Confucius, what make an intellectual immortal are, in the order of importance: set up moral standards through teaching and practice (立德), accomplish causes which benefit the country and its people (立功), and last construct theories in writing (立言).

It is the values that Confucius teaching instills that makes Confucianism the most popular belief system in the past 1,000 years in China and some other parts of Asia. These values can be boiled into two doctrines: the doctrine of middle way (中庸) and the doctrine of five virtues (Table 25.4).

A counterbalance advocating moderation and middle way may be timely when today’s globalized economy saw excessive usage and exploration of resources in almost every corner of the world, driven by the urge for the maximized profit or pressure of competition. It echoes the challenge of the sustainable development and

Table 25.4 Comparisons in the domains of value and practice

| Mainstream management education | Confucianism counter balance |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Performance centered | Human centered |
| Contract & law | Trust & etiquette |
| Change environment | Adjust inner-self |
| Competition | Harmony |
| Direct, exalt clarity & certainty | Indirect, Embrace uncertainty & option |
| Drive for excellence | Middle way & moderation |
| Resource based view | Energy flow and force building |

the mission of socially responsible corporations, which aims for stakeholder value instead of shareholder value.

The five virtues of the Confucianism teaching call for the human centered approach (ren) (仁), the moral standard of doing only the appropriate things (yi) (义), the etiquette for regulating the social relationship (li) (礼), the prudence to embrace uncertainty and complexity (zhi) (智), and the importance of trust worthiness, over and above what may be codified by law and contract (xin) (信). They are listed in the right column of Table 25.4, together with other Confucianism teachings that may be counterbalance towards the respective values and practices of the mainstream management education on the left.

25.4.1 Application

It should be pointed out that some ideas of the “Confucianism Counter Balance” in the right column of the tables above are also shared by thinkers in other parts of the world, including ancient Greek philosophers. Aristotle, for example, taught that genuine leadership consisted in the ability to identify and serve the common good (Bennis and O’Toole 2005). In the recent years, leadership, CSR (corporate social responsibility) and corporate governance also drew increasing attention by more and more business schools in the world. There is also a resemblance between the pursuance of moderation/middle way in Confucianism and the concept of “sufficiency economy” promoted by His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand and the propagation of the Buddhism economics in the country (ONRCT 2003).

The case to the point on applying the Oriental wisdom in management may be the CP All public company limited, the leader of convenience store retailing in Thailand.² In his book on “oriental CEO” (Korsak 2005), the award winning CEO Korsak Chairasmisak gives a vivid account on how he instilled values in his nearly 100,000 employees and how the human centered approach led the company through the difficult times of the economic crisis.

²CP All is also a part of the renowned international conglomerate CP Group (Charoen Pokphand Group) with investments in 10 Asian countries in business like agro industry, food, marketing and distribution, telecommunication, and real estate etc.

25.5 Prospects

The main thesis of this paper is that integrating ancient Greek and Oriental wisdom into the MBA curriculum may offer a refreshing alternative in the sphere of ontology, epistemology and methodology of the management sciences.

With the ancient wisdom integrated, a new form of management education may be initiated, as reflected in the vision of Panyapiwat Institute of Management (PIM), a young corporate university in Thailand. It is work-based learning, a marriage of scientific rigor and practical relevance. It is network learning, a network of different branches of knowledge, as well as a network of different stakeholders in the learning process: students, academia, business corporations, and the society. It is professionals trained by professionals, professionals who are oriented toward practice, focused on client needs and have a high code of conduct. It has a variety of pedagogical tools: reflection on reading of classical writings, history and literature, problem solving, and even playing Go, an ancient abstract strategy board game popular in China, Japan and Korea.

Words of caution: critiques may point out both Greek philosophers and Confucius seemed to be embedded in a culture of elite, illustrated by the ideal of either “philosopher kings” of Plato or “gentle man” (君子) of Confucius. The human history, however, demonstrates a trend of “equalization” in the past 300 years or so. It started with what Tocqueville observed in 1830s as an equalization of wealth and consequent equalization of income and political power in the United States (Tocqueville 1835). The pop culture in the 1950s came along with a mass market of cultural products, hence an equalization of consumption of knowledge. The Internet and social media network seem to spur an era of equalization of production of knowledge. Whether or how this trend of equalization will continue, and how will it impact the Ancient wisdom in the past and human civilization in the future? These will be interesting questions to be answered by the students of Aristotle and Confucius.

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