On Zeng Shiqiang’s Comprehensive Viewpoints of Chinese-style Management through Retorting Misconceptions Held by Western Scholars

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Abstract. This paper discusses and analyzes the Chinese-style management’s preference for “comprehensiveness” over “two-sidedness” or “dichotomy viewpoints” held by Professor Zeng Shiqiang. The paper also describes Prof. Zeng’s viewpoints and his comments on some misconceptions of western scholars. The purpose of the paper is to present some philosophical thinking on the Chinese-style management to the world in order to let the world know China better.

Introduction

The mainstream value of 21st century should not be embedded in the advancement of weapons, otherwise mankind would be devastated. Instead, 21st century should count on the development of science and technology by taking the economic development and culture as the core, integrating global and local culture and strike a balance between them. One of the excellent examples is the “One Belt, One Road”, which is at its heart a pledge by China to use its economic resources and diplomatic skill to promote infrastructure investment and economic development that more closely links China to the rest of Asia and onward to Europe and other parts of the world in order to promote and enhance policy coordination across the Asian continent and the world, financial integration, trade liberalization, and people-to-people connectivity. China’s efforts to implement this initiative have produced an important effect on the region’s economic architecture—patterns of regional trade, investment, infrastructure development, and in turn have strategic implications for China, the United States, and other major powers. Thus, it can be seen that the Chinese-style management can adequately serve the fulfillment of such a great responsibility.

However, according to Zeng Shiqiang, there are still some western scholars who have some misconceptions about the Chinese-style management. In this paper, the author is to introduce some of Zeng Shiqiang’s important viewpoints on the Chinese-style management science to help the world get rid of these misconceptions so as to let the world have a better understanding of China.

Towards the Importance of the Chinese Management

Arnold J. Toynbee (1889-1975) is an English historian whose 12-volume A Study of History (1934–61) put forward a philosophy of history, based on an analysis of the cyclical development and decline of civilizations, that provoked much discussion. In his book A Study of History, Toynbee examined the rise and fall of 26 civilizations in the course of human history, and made the conclusion that they rose through the means of responding successfully to challenges under the leadership of creative minorities composed of some elite leaders[1]. The reason for civilizations to decline lies in the fact that their leaders stopped responding creatively, and the civilizations then sank because of the sins of nationalism, militarism, and the tyranny of a despotic minority.

Arnold Toynbee once predicted: politics excluded, the whole world, in accordance with the intention of the West, was becoming more and more alike in every other aspect. A universal way of living has come into being. In addition, Arnold Toynbee predicted that the country to bring the world
together in the future was unlikely to be a western country or a westernized one, but China. The reason was that Chinese governments had managed to maintain political unification over the past 2,000 years, despite a rather temporal interruption in history. In spite of the significant contribution of the western world to globalization, Arnold Toynbee still favored the idea that China will inevitably unify the world through politics and bring peace to the world community.

Since ancient times, Chinese management has dedicated itself to creating peace and harmony for its people. History has proven that instead of waging war on other countries, Chinese was always forced into wars following the infringement of its territorial integrity and sovereignty. Hence, Opium War, Sino-Japanese War and Korean War in China’s recent history were seen as justified self-defense to foreign invaders. Chinese people believe they should stop a war by entering the war with the purpose of restoring peace eventually. And they deem peaceful coexistence as the ultimate political achievement.

Nowadays, under the leadership of Xi Jinping, Chinese people have made great achievements in peaceful rise and great rejuvenation which have been the dream of generations of Chinese people. Our ancestors have created the world-famous Chinese civilization and glorious history. It is believed that the Chinese people are regaining their former glory by following the principle of rising peacefully. However, Zeng thinks that there are still some western scholars who still have some misconceptions which, from the perspective of Chinese-style management, seem very significant. Zeng summarizes the misconceptions and tries to give proper explanations to retort them[2]. Now let’s look at them one by one.

Towards Zeng’s Viewpoints of “Comprehensiveness” over “Two-sidedness” in Dealing with Management

Zeng Shiqiang, who is recognized as the father of Chinese management, has been the best-known and the most admired expert in management studies and practice in China. Prof. Zeng does not agree with the westerners’ dichotomy way to deal with things, for Zeng thinks that dichotomy way prefers a clean-cut division of things, with one split into two, and two into four, resulting in fragmented parts and pieces, and the absence of the whole. An integrated solution is difficult to be found when such dichotomy is applied. The Chinese are not against the idea of “division”, or identifying the two sides of a certain matter, they just prefer the idea of “integrating”. For instance, an “all-round” person or a “comprehensive” view is often regarded highly. And for a view to be considered “comprehensive”, it must be the fruit of all-inclusive discussions and analysis.

Zeng argues that the Chinese-style management’s preference for “comprehensiveness” over “two-sidedness” can be traced back to some ancient philosophical beliefs. In Analects, Confucius was recorded as saying “I have no preconceptions about the permissible or impermissible (wu ke wu bu ke)”[3], which encapsulates a concern for flexibility in coping with changing circumstances and avoiding seeing things in only black and white. And Zhuang Zi[4], the great Taoist thinker and influential philosopher in ancient China believed that everything in the world, be it completed or destroyed, is in its wholeness in a Taoist perspective. That is to say, turning two into three, instead of choosing one from two, can help one avoid going into the extreme.

Zeng points out that for most westerners, who prefer to see things in black and white, Confucius’s opinion that “having no preconceptions about the permissible or impermissible (wu ke wu bu ke)” does not mean being indifferent to the difference between right and wrong, shunning one’s responsibilities, and unwilling to take one’s stand. Chinese-style management does not go against a clean-cut division of anything, on the contrary, it advocates creating a buffer zone in-between the two opposing sides, because by doing so, the two contrasting elements can be integrated to give rise to a third element of greater flexibility and inclusivity, hence better results can be achieved.

Zeng takes problem solution as an example. Zeng claims that western-style management emphasizes that a problem is regarded as either solved, or unsolved. Problem-solving skills are required of a man who is deemed dutiful and responsible, and he will be considered the opposite if he
ignores problems and leave them as unsolved. However, the same person will not be forced to face the same dichotomy in a Chinese environment, because Chinese-style management prefers solving the problem by “dissolving” the problem” rather than “solving the problem”. For the Chinese, solving the problem means a new problem or a new set of problems will be generated. Therefore, “turning big problems into small ones, and small ones into no problems at all (Da shi hua xiao, xiao shi hua liao)”, a popular saying, is also a strategy widely applied at work by the Chinese. Moreover, for Zeng, there are often no complication or “after effect” when big problems are finally degraded into nothing. Such approach of “dissolving” can be seen as a third choice in-between “solving” and “unsolving”, which requires a lot of effort even though it seemed, from the outside, as if no action is being taken. It resembles the way Tai Chi works – Tai Chi moves impress people as being soft, weak and flowing, yet it requires one to summon almost all his might to complete the full moves.

Retorting Misconceptions Held by Western Scholars

The Chinese are Complacent about Their Past Glories, and Hence Fail to Pursue Innovations and Changes Proactively to Achieve Their Goal of Modernization.

Prof. Zeng claims that Chinese tend to divide the “time” into three phases, the past, the present and the future, and among them the present is regarded as the most significant. They believe that “a hero should be silent about his past glories”, and they find no need in bringing out the former splendor. Only when talking about their ancestors will they put those great deeds in glowing terms, not for bragging about their past, but with the purpose of encouraging the young to work diligently and strive to be excellent, and not to bring shame to their forefathers.

Zeng believes that in terms of understanding the presence and necessity of changes, as well as the urge to make innovations, the Chinese are well influenced by their parents since childhood. Though not stating and reiterating the importance of change and innovation, the Chinese have been practicing and pursing them with continuous effects. As for achieving the goal of modernization, since there are circumstantial differences existing between Chinese modernization and that of the West, western standards cannot be used to measure the progress of Chinese modernization.

The Chinese are People without Principle. They Treat Everything as an Individual and Independent Case, and They Have Different Answers for the Same Case in Different Occasions.

Prof. Zeng thinks that in Chinese society, it is true that the same event often leads to different results because of differences in time, place and participants. However, this does not equal to a lack in principle. On the contrary, Chinese people value principles and put great emphasis on upholding them. The paradox of “having no principle is the best principle” brought about by some is in fact specious and not an adequate explanation of the principle of the Chinese.

Zeng argues that the Chinese do have their principle, but at the same time, they respect and value differences in time, places, people and events, and make adjustments accordingly. They do not follow principles immutably, nor would they change their principles on a whim. The Chinese have a flexible magic weapon with which they can accommodate shifting events by sticking to the fundamental principles. However, for Prof. Zeng, it is unfortunate that there are still some modern Chinese who tend to take actions without knowing why, and even produce many opposite arguments, offering the wrong information for foreigners, making it harder for them to understand China. Prof. Zeng thinks that this also results in the fact that some Chinese people are misled to the point where they cannot understand their own manners and styles, only to follow the tide and twist their own principles.

The Chinese Have no Sense about the Mechanism of Check and Balance.

Prof. Zeng thinks that it is true that Chinese do not favor the overt mechanism of check and balance, because it indicates something of distrust to the leaders, which will not only embarrass the leaders, but also reduce the mechanism of check and balance to a means of extortion, or a kind of profit sharing.
The Chinese prefer a kind of covert mechanism of check and balance. In personnel arrangement and resource distribution, the leaders must balance all parties involved to avoid protests caused by unfair arrangement which may affect the overall harmony and stability. Moreover, the leaders should be privileged to consider the matter initiatively, which demonstrates their authority. As to the people who are involved in the arrangement, they will get to understand the subtle relationship between other parties and themselves, and they can never expect to have effective interaction with others if they do not cautiously abide by the arrangement and behave themselves. If they intend to extort the leaders with the power distributed to them, they may risk being undermined. Thus, under a relatively reasonable condition, they will cooperate to enhance their power for greater comparative advantage in the next shuffle.

The common people following these parties just wait and see the winning party and turn to support this party that can benefit them most and safeguard their rights. With the family system as the core, Chinese society boasts the intrinsic mechanism of check and balance, with which all the parties are in correlation and competition. So, Zeng thinks that it is of no necessity to adopt the overt and embarrassing mechanism of check and balance in China.

**Authority in China Equals to Unconditional Compliance.**

Prof. Zeng regards this statement as a great misunderstanding. Chinese are by no means comparable with Japanese in compliance. Chinese attach importance to mutual respect, and they tend to give as good as they get in interpersonal relationship, so they will never be unconditionally compliant to orders from others.

But they are seemingly compliant. They are supporters to any directives from their superiors. However, they may be harboring the disagreement while they claim to be supportive. Chinese do not prefer speaking their mind and they are not accustomed to do so in the superiors’ presence. They choose to deviate from superior’s directives. To Chinese, this is not deception but respect to the superiors.

So, the truth for Zeng is that Chinese who never conflict with their superiors appear to be submissive, but in fact, they have their own judgment and will secretly make adjustment by themselves. Chinese fear the authorities, rather than respecting them, thus it is impossible for them to be absolutely compliant.

**Chinese Attach Great Importance to Form and Formalities.**

Prof. Zeng believes although the Chinese can strictly follow the process of Management by Objectives (MBO), they can also make it a mere formality. The same goes for Management by Results (MBR), as a matter of fact, Chinese are pretty practical, they dislike the unnecessary and overelaborate formalities. In some ways, Chinese appear to be very impolite, because what they pursue are actual benefits, rather than ostentation. If we delve into the Chinese form and formalities, we will find their profound implication.

Zeng takes Chinese wedding ceremony as an example, saying its main purpose lies in the emphasis of the responsibility laid on the shoulder of the newlyweds. It is so solemn a ceremony that no one can afford to hold it more than once in their lives. To Chinese, the importance of the formalities should be more embodied in their substantive meaning than in their superficial form. Unfortunately, some of the Chinese nowadays fail to notice it, when they are performing the formalities, no wonder the foreigners have such a misconception that the Chinese attach great importance to form and formalities.

Zeng makes a more detailed explain by showing the following example. In most of the Western scholars’ view, fathers in Western countries treat their children tenderly, while the Chinese father treat their children strictly, which denies the children the feeling of father’s affection. It serves to prove that the Chinese way of showing love is embodied in people’s indwelling care instead of in their overt acts.
China’s Political Centralization Shows a Tendency of Dictatorship.

Prof. Zeng retorts this view as follows. Chinese people are greatly influenced by Taoism, which takes *I Ching* as its theoretical guidance. The system of *I Ching* is governed by “Tai Chi”, a concept which contributes greatly to the Chinese’s belief in uniformity[5]. The Chinese tend to believe that “there cannot be two kings in a country, and one cannot serve two masters simultaneously”, and it is as if everything under the sun should be “unified”. However, the *I Ching* claims that “Yin is within Yang, and Yang is within Yin”, and that everything is “two fold” in a dynamic way (Tai Chi generates two complementary forces), as well as “two merges into one” (Yin and Yang combine to give rise to Tai Chi) rather than following the simple and static monism. The *I Ching* system can be seen as “diversifying the One”, that is, even though it presents itself in monism, it is in fact dynamic and multidimensional.

Zeng claims that Chinese management respects the human effort and has people as the key factor. In this people-oriented management system, employees are allowed to express their beliefs freely, which will probably provide a platform for people to argue ceaselessly and sometimes even lead to a chaos state without reaching any agreed decisions. Prof. Zeng concludes that in China it is not suitable to rely on completely such a kind of so-called democratic management, since it can advance towards disorder and throw people into confusion.

Zeng also thinks that no one supports dictatorship, because no matter how intelligent and able the dictators are, they are human beings, and can make mistakes. Therefore Prof. Zeng thinks that the best way is to combine democracy with dictatorship together to create a kind of system, in which people can voice their personal opinions freely before the final decisions are approved by the top leader, who is the last say. And once the policy is decided, it must be implemented resolutely and firmly. In this way, the Chinese-style democracy is actually a kind of combination of democracy and dictatorship called “enlightened despotism”. Chinese corporate culture constructed in this manner is more in line with the actual needs, more conducive to realize cohesion, and more likely to generate the collaboration power. In conclusion, democracy is favored to encourage the wisdom of crowds before the policy is made, after the policy has been made dictatorship is favored to ensure the successful implementation of policy without interference.

Chinese are Intolerant of Opposing Opinions and Not Ready to Listen to Different Voices.

According to many Westerners who have lived for a long time in China and thus have been familiar to Chinese, Chinese are not accustomed to public discussion. Almost every time when Chinese have discussion, a bitter quarrel will break out, since Chinese will not tolerate any opposing ideas, and the discussion tends to end up in discord.

Prof. Zeng argues that in fact, Chinese are eager to listen to different ideas. They believe that advice most needed is least heeded, and much benefit and better solution can only be derived from listening to all opinions. However, they don’t like public debate or opposing ideas in discussion. Instead, they prefer to state different opinion in private. And they will pay attention to the communication skills, in order to make their opinions more acceptable to others. Hence, it is much easier to communicate with Chinese before and after the meeting than during the meeting.

Chinese Tend to Shirk Their Responsibility to Others.

To this problem, Prof. Zeng thinks that indeed, Chinese apparently tend to do so. But their actual motive is to save their face by pretending to shirk responsibility to others. Only when a Chinese carry out self-reflection in private and determine to make improvement, can he or she really realize their mistakes.

Chinese understand that their own responsibilities actually cannot be evaded anyhow. But they will pretend to shirk responsibility to others, in order to avoid getting their partners and families into trouble. And then they will wait and see how to cope with the problems later. Such an act of pretending to shirk responsibility to others and carrying out self-reflection in private is just an embodiment of the Interaction between Yin and Yang, which is an important principle in *I Ching*. 
Chinese-style Management is only Applicable to the Orderly and Stable Society, Not the Society in Constant Change.

To Prof. Zeng, actually, Chinese style of management can be traced back to *I Ching*. Originally called *The Book of Changes, I Ching* explores the principle of changes. The title of this book was changed to *I Ching*, since Chinese believe that “out of ten changes, only two are desirable, while eight are undesirable”, and they hope people will not change for the sake of change irrespective of other factors, in case people change things for the worse. Beyond the pursuit of the innovation and change, Chinese have found the way of remaining unchanged, which has developed into a series of theories about how to “maintain status quo against the constant changes”. Unfortunately, most of modern Chinese do not understand these theories. As a result, the Westerners fail to have a correct understanding about this aspect in the Chinese style of management. Nevertheless, it is undoubted that the Chinese style of management is advantageous in its adaptabilities.

**Conclusion**

Zeng Shiqiang has been recognized as the father of Chinese management and has been the best-known and the most admired expert in management studies and practice in China. This paper makes a detailed discussion and analysis of the Chinese-style management’s preference for “comprehensiveness” over “two-sidedness” or “dichotomy viewpoints” held by Professor Zeng. The paper also makes a comprehensive description of Prof. Zeng’s viewpoints and comments on some misconceptions of western scholars. It is hoped that this paper will make some contributions for the world to have a better understanding of the philosophical thinking of the Chinese-style management so as to let China be known better to the world.

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