THE FACILITATIONS OF CONFLICT AVOIDANCE AND CONFLICT TOLERANCE IN LEARNING ABOUT PROFESSIONAL QUALITY

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ABSTRACT

Contrary to Western tolerating for conflict to achieve harmony, Chinese way discourages opposite voices from those in subservient positions. This study defines a Chinese conflict avoidance style that stresses Confucius's "ordering relationship and respect this order". The findings reveal that this value, along with Western innovation and conflict tolerance, is positive to Chinese technical workers for their morality and work knowledge learning, and the two conflict-relevant cultures provide an almost equal level of influence. The convergence seemingly is uniquely Chinese.

Keywords: Chinese conflict avoidance, ordering relationship, conflict tolerance, innovative values

INTRODUCTION

Western innovative value reflects a style of learning orientation combined with the pursuit of prospective knowledge to facilitate inventiveness of the organization (e.g., [9]), which is reshaping the high-tech cultures of newly developed countries [13]. For instance, mainland and overseas Chinese (e.g., Taiwan) have been found moving toward a Western, innovative way more suitable for technology development [7]. Scholars have stressed the importance of seeking the organizational and social systems within which Chinese technical personnel work (e.g, [2]). This study is interested in the integrative influence of old values and new cultures on individual workers.

Contrary to the Western way that tolerates conflict by maintaining a considerable degree of freedom to enable employees to voice different opinions (e.g., [4] [19] [11]), Chinese tend to discourage those in subservient positions to voice objections to avert conflicts, with an aspiration to create a conflict-free, group-oriented social system [16]. This ordering relationship-based way remains prevalent to remind most Chinese- managed firms to adopt a unique Chinese style management rather than to accept entirely the Western strategy[18]. Technical industry often is the first sector to experience the influx of Western management influences in the less developed countries [13]. To extend the research, this study delves whether two seemingly contradictory styles –Western tolerance for conflict and Chinese conflict aversion by ordering relationships – compromise with one another to facilitate Chinese technical workers develop work knowledge and morality standards?

To address the question, this study begins by reviewing Chinese and Western innovative cultures. Subsequent analyses rely on a questionnaire survey and hierarchical regression to examine the integrative impacts proposed. The sample features engineering workers from Shanghai China and Hsinchu Science Park of Taiwan; both locations have experienced a great Western management influence and represent the spatial concentration of technological resources across the Taiwan Strait.

PROPOSITION

Aversion and Tolerance for Conflict

Wang et al., [16] posit an examination of Confucian ideas in order to best understand Chinese management practices. In the five dyadic roles of Confucius, namely, emperor-subject, father–son, husband–wife, elder– younger brothers, and friend–friend, most pairs reflect a dominant–subservient relationship [12]. As the primary social affiliations, they in turn lead to the core "hierarchy for harmony" value – in essence a "group orientation" that asserts individuals are part of a relation group [3]. Accordingly, Chinese have been requested to show kindness and propriety by following the social regulation that youths listen to seniors, seniors take care of youths, and personal interests come second to those of the group (e.g., Adler, [1]). These values, when allying with right people, can embrace a healthy Guanxi network that connects people to form resource coalitions [12]. Through such Guanxi networks, Chinese businesses share resources with their partners and obtain assistance that otherwise may not be available [14].

Providing the purpose to create a diversified climate for novelties, Western technical organizations are used to encouraging employees voicing differently to instigate new ideas. This project-based team concept, though also group focused, encourages conflict tolerance and other innovative values, such as autonomy, risk taking, allowance of mistakes, and competency valuing instead of seniority for performance (e.g., [9] [11]). Therefore, although both focus on group effort, Chinese stress sacrifice of personal voices for group commonality, whereas their Western counterparts emphasize that personal relationships within a team can be informal and easy in order to maintain a considerable degree of autonomy and freedom for different opinions.

Integrative Cultures

The two contradictory values seemingly integrate toward a new way more suitable for Chinese technological development. In a study of the adaption of Taiwan's high-tech industry to Western management values, Hampel and Chang [7] point out that the change remains uniquely Chinese in many aspects, particularly the problem given to the way that Chinese have in separating professional from personal conflict. Franke et al. [6] in their culture–performance survey explore that overseas Chinese societies, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, though reveal successful technological and economic development, are less individualistic and have less tolerance for conflict than their Western counterparts, with Taiwan emerging as the least tolerant and the highest Confucian ethic supporter among the three Chinese cultures. This study proposes an integrative culture model that brings together Western innovation and Chinese order-relationship ethic.

Innovative workplace is designable to provide a learning context that promotes not just technical knowledge, but also ethical attitudes of technical workers[10]. This study defines "Chinese conflict avoidance" as "respect for voices from an assertive position to avert conflicts for retaining work harmony"; and "conflict tolerance" as the Western way that enhance "tolerance for different voices from others regardless of position level for retaining work harmony". Based on these definitions, this study proposes that their integration can facilitate technology knowledge and morality learning.

Proposition: Chinese conflict avoidance retains a cultural dimension, coexisting with Western innovative values, and encourages morality and technology knowledge learning.

RESEARCH PROCEDURE

Measurements

The following measurements are designed to answer the proposition. All the measurement scales used seven-point Likert-type scales, ranging from 1 "strongly disagree" to 7 "strongly agree".

Conflict Avoidance. This measure pertains to the prevalent ordering relationships by status and observing this order in a Chinese work environment [8]. The measure consists of four items, indicating respectively

conforms to supervisory rules, respects seniors, values the ethics of seniority, and values personal relationships.

Conflict Tolerance. This measure pertains to the Western conflict resolution style that tolerates conflict by maintaining a considerable degree of freedom to enable employees to voice different opinions (e.g., [11]). The measure consists of three items, indicating respectively willingness of individual employees to talk in meetings, respecting the opinions of others despite conflicts, and communicate and compromise when conflicting.

Other Western Innovative Cultures. These measures pertain to the technology innovative values other than tolerance for conflict. They comprise autonomy, risk-taking, tolerance for mistakes (e.g., [9]), and value competence instead of seniority, because innovative behavior is more likely when it rewarded [17].

Personal Attributes. This measure relates to the facilitation of business cultures on employees' moral standards and work knowledge. It consists of 15 items adopted from existing morality scales [15] and task skill profiles [5]. Some of the items to assess moral attribues include "Look out for immoral behaviors, even when there are no written down rules" and "Bear in mind the best for others, not your personal interests." Work skills and knowledge refer to abilities with computers, data searches, information, professional know-how, and social knowledge beyond work.

Sampling

A total of 1,000 questionnaires were equally distributed to the high-tech organizations in Taiwan's Hsinchu Science Park and high-tech firms around the Shanghai area in China. Although selection of the participating organizations could not be random, participants come from various technical sectors. After removing the invalid questionnaires, a total of 417 questionnaires, 206 from Taiwan and 211 from Shanghai, remained for the final analysis. A little more than one-third (35.4%) of the Taiwanese respondents are younger than 30 years of age, whereas more than half (54%) represent this age group in Shanghai. Taiwanese respondents include one-quarter managers, while approximately half of the respondents from Shanghai are administrators.

Despite similarities in gender, education, and professional tenure, the Shanghai sample seems to have gained higher management levels and lower degrees of job mobility. This finding may result from firm ownership variable: 91.7% (189) of the Taiwanese sample was employed by privately owned enterprises, whereas 73.0% (154) of the Shanghai sample were employees of large multinational companies.

Data Analysis

The analysis begins with a factor analysis, using Varimax rotation, to derive fewer factors for the five measurements. Cultural items, including conflict-relevant and other innovative variable, were analyzed together in a combined factor model. The analyses were conducted separately for the two locations to compare whether the measurements generate similar variable constructs. Therefore, a total of six factor analyses were conducted. CFA (confirmatory factor analysis) then applied to examine the convergent and discriminant validities, as well as common method variance, of these measures.

Hierarchical Multiple Regression explored to compare the efficiency of the cultural values on technical workers. The dependent variables comprise work knowledge and moral attributes. The independent variables involved first both conflict-relevant variables in Model 1; all variables, including firm location and its interaction with conflict avoidance, then inserted in Model 2. Respondents' demographics were included as covariates in all the models.

FINDINGS

Factor analyses created six cultural values and four attributes across the two locations. They account for 66.6% to 72.1% common variance, with Cronbach's alphas all greater than 0.69, in support of the internal consistency and reliability. CFA showed convergent and discriminant validities in these factors across the two locations. Overall, these data display valid and consistent factor solutions from the separate data sets of the two locations.

On the basis of the contents of the measurements, the six factors of the cultural model are named risk-taking, mistake allowance, competency valuing, and autonomy, in addition to the two conflict resolution styles of conflict tolerance and conflict avoidance. This integration of all the six cultural ingredients in one factor model, with acceptable reliabilities and validities across the two locations, suggest these cultural styles could occur as a whole.

The four attributes are named general and professional knowledge, as well as social and professional morality. The two morality factors take these names because they can be recognized, respectively, as moral values at an organizational level (professional loyalty, avoiding the use of institutional data for private purposes) and a social level (universality, avoidance of harmful or immoral conduct).

Table 1 illustrates the relationships between the six cultural factors and their influence on the four attributes: Model 1 concerns both conflict-relevant values; Model 2 discusses all cultural variables and location factor. Based on these models, Chinese conflict avoidance is significant on helping general knowledge and the two morality variables except professional knowledge; conflict tolerance is significant in all models except Model 2 of general knowledge, in which conflict tolerance becomes insignificant when other innovative cultures are inserted. The influences given by the other four innovative values are not as significant as the two conflict-relevant factors, due to their significant influences fall only on one or two attributes.

Respondents' demographics seem only offering sparse effects, and the effect given by location is significant on the two moral attributes. Location is assumed one for Shanghai, and zero for Hsinchu. The significant negative interaction in Model 2 of social morality reveals significant moderation of location on the relationship between conflict avoidance and social morality, such that this relationship of Hsinchu is significantly stronger than is Shanghai. Further, the positive coefficient of location in Model 2 of professional morality implies that there is a higher level of this morality value in the Shanghai's sample than is there in Hsinchu's. Overall, it appears from these data that the old value of conflict avoidance has not gone away; it is facilitating attribute learning of Chinese technical workers.

Table 4 Results of hierarchical multiple regression

Dependent variables	General knowledge		Professional knowledge		Social morality		Professional morality	
Independent variables	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
(Constant)								
Conflict resolution:								
Conflict avoidance	0.28***	0.23***	0.02	0.06	0.14**	0.13**	0.09*	0.14**
Conflict tolerance	0.17***	0.00	0.52***	0.30***	0.43***	0.14*	0.54***	0.39***
Other innovative cultures :								
Risk-taking		0.20***		-0.02		0.11*		-0.01
Allowance for mistakes		0.12*		0.03		0.26***		0.08
Competency valuing		0.02		0.21***		0.10		0.18***
Autonomy		0.05		0.16**		0.10		0.01
Firm location [b]		-0.03		0.07		0.06		0.24***
Firm location [b] × Conflict avoid		0.05		-0.04		-0.14**		-0.01
Demographics: [a]								
Gender	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Age	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.13*
Education	-0.15**	-0.12**	0.10*	-	-	-	-	-
Managerial level	0.17***	0.15**	-	-	-	-	-	-
Tenure at current job	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Model F-value:	11.502***	9.155***	23.582***	16.374***	15.078***	15.221***	23.206***	17.152***
R-square	0.172	0.238	0.298	0.358	0.214	0.341	0.295	0.369
△R-square	-	0.066***	-	0.059***	-	0.127***	-	0.073***

a. Only demographics giving significant effects are listed.
b. Shanghai=1; Hsinchu=0.
***p<0.001; **p<0.01; *p<0.05

DISCUSSION

Attribute Learning: Conflict avoidance or Tolerance?

Is the old Chinese value of conflict avoidance useful in the emerging technology segments? Can it confront with the Western innovative values, prevailing currently in the global markets to inspire technology innovativeness? Our answer is positive, based on the current findings.

In addition to demonstrating the benefits of Western innovative cultures, this study shows significant relationships— in some cases even more significant than those pertaining to Western innovative cultures— between Confucius' conflict avoidance concept and personal attributes. This Chinese style conflict resolving variable, while it appears not within the commonly recognized Western innovative values, is as significant as the Western conflict resolving approach in impacting workers learning about general knowledge and both social and professional moralities. Among the five Western innovative cultures, conflict tolerance is the most effective, which also affects three types of attributes (professional knowledge and the two moralities). The three values — risk taking, allowance for mistakes, and competence valuing— all affect significantly on two attributes, while autonomy affects only one.

Conflict Avoidance vs. Conflict Tolerance: Compromise than Competition

In the current study, tolerance for conflict attains the highest significance for teaching lessons, which seems surprising in a Chinese work environment. Moreover, this Western conflict resolving style appears to compromise, rather than compete, with Chinese avoidance style of conflict to facilitate personal attributes, because both provide almost an equal level of facilitation. Such a collaboration situation also emerges in the culture–performance survey performed by Franke et al. [6]. Using comparisons across 20 Western and Eastern countries, Franke et al. show that persons in richer nations tend to have a higher level of tolerance for conflict to achieve harmony, except Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan. These three overseas Chinese societies are less individualistic and have less tolerance for conflict, with Taiwan emerging as the least tolerant among the three Chinese cultures and holding the highest level of Confucian dynamics values.

Finally, though the samples from both locations enjoy positive advantages from their combined cultures, Shanghai appears more Westernized than Taiwan, and Taiwan benefits more from Confucian conflict avoidance ethic and a higher level of attribute learning with regard to general morality. This result may suggest the benefits of Confucius's ideas, if they are not used excessively to emphasize the negative aspects. In addition, Westernization alone may not be the only useful approach in Chinese technological sectors.

Reconciling Innovative Cultures with Good Old Values

As prime mechanisms for creating and sustaining new technologies, innovative cultures are absolutely imperative in high-tech sectors (e.g., [19] [11]). Such work principles apply to both organizations and individual behaviors. This study contributes to suggest that conflict avoidance of Chinese style — observing predetermined relationship statuses for retaining harmony —appear to co-exit with the Western conflict tolerance and other innovative values in the Chinese technology culture model.

The current empirical factor analyses indicates a consistent six-factor solution, in which conflict avoidance dimension emerges as a valid factor that is independent of the other five innovative cultures across both locations. Correlation analysis suggests that this conflict avoidance factor only slightly relates to Western innovative values, but it is highly related to location and firm ownership. On the contrary, innovative factors reveal only sporadic significances with location contingency variables. Therefore, though technology may bring Chinese technological sector closer to Western innovative styles, this old Chinese ethic remains a unique cultural dimension, though the change is moving in a positive direction. Indeed, the original Confucian ideas or Guanxi oriented Chinese business means appear very little to do with ethical manipulation [12]. As shown currently, they do not imply that Chinese cultures offer no advantages for modern business management.

They thus reveal prospective contrasts with the negative conceptualizations, and provide a means to gauge whether Chinese technical personnel still embrace these traditional, positive values. By combining them with Western innovative cultures, firms in the Chinese technical sector may achieve several benefits. For reconciliation, the emphasis should focus on the more positive side of Confucian ethical dimension. That is, this more positive aspect exists on which development of professional quality conforms to supervisory rules (vs. autocratic), respects seniors (vs. centralized), values the ethics of seniority (vs. traditional), and values personal relationships (vs. crooked Guanxi), in order to justify how these values might function in a work context.

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