

Book reviews

The Art of Chinese Management: Theory, Evidence and Applications, Kai-Alexander Schlevogt, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002, hardback, £35.00, ISBN 0 19 513644 6.

This is one of the more intriguing books on management in China to be published in the last few years. It advances a hypothesis, though unproven in absolute terms, is certainly interesting: that Chinese management, in the quarter-century since economic reform began, has evolved in a very distinctive direction. Rather than converging with Western models, as most have predicted, rather Chinese management is returning to its cultural roots and evolving models and systems that, while on the one hand very modern, are on the other hand also distinctively “Chinese”.

The book’s starting point is what the author calls the “miraculous rebirth” of private enterprise in China. He attributes this to the rapid re-adoption by new Chinese businesses of the Chinese family model of business that had survived in the overseas Chinese community, and which the author Professor K.A. Schlevogt finds has been adapted and configured into what he calls the web-based model of Chinese management. This looks rather like the old-fashioned family model as described by so many authors in the early 1990s with some more formal bits tacked on, but the heart of the model looks authentic and sound.

Schlevogt goes on to develop what he neatly calls the “CHINA framework for high organizational effectiveness”, the key elements of which are consultative leadership, human competence, innovative strategy, network building and adaptable structure. He goes on to define ten “golden rules” drawn from his own experience in China, some of which have a rather Confucian ring to them; for example, Rule 7 is “select and shape your environment to avoid constraints”, while Rule 8 is “flexibly adapt your organization to the task contingencies”.

All these rules sound like good common sense in management anywhere, and this leads Schlevogt to a further question: is this Chinese web-based model of management so good, so robust that in time it will be exported to the West, rather like Japanization in the 1980s? Instead of Chinese management becoming more Western, will the Western one become more

Chinese? Will we in the end see globalization “with Chinese characteristics”? It is a fascinating thought, though in the end this position is wholly speculative.

Interesting and thoughtful though the book’s conclusions are, they will probably not satisfy the high standards of proof demanded by Western academic audiences. The author bases his conclusions to a large extent on survey data gleaned from Chinese managers through questionnaires, and says himself that many of those participating had never before been involved in a Western-style research project. Those who have conducted such research will know of the many inherent dangers in doing surveys in China, notably the tendency of Chinese respondents to tell questioners what they might want to hear, rather than what they really think. More allowance for this phenomenon in the book would perhaps have been wise. The three in-depth case studies conducted by Schlevogt are more interesting and illuminating, and it seems clear that his own long experience of teaching and consulting in China has been of great value in formulating his conclusions. He has presented us with a model of Chinese management as an art, and then chosen to study it using scientific methods; the result is a methodology that is not wholly satisfying, and we are left wondering if a more anecdotal and narrative account of the art of Chinese management might not have been of greater practical value. Nevertheless, this is a fascinating account with many insights.

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21 Leaders for the 21st Century: How Innovative Leaders Manage in the Digital Age, Trompenaars, Fons and Hampden-Turner, Charles, Capstone/Wiley, Oxford, 2002, hardback, US\$50.00/£25.00, 464 pp.

Management books can cover cycles, trends and thinkers, as well as fads and fashions. Few transcend the quality barrier; many are mediocre. A few books deal seriously with those who made an impact on the

“real world”. Whether responsible for new management theoretical ideas or practical innovations, there is a long list of “achievers”, like Taylor, Ford or Sloan, in one or both of these fields. Recent figures, like March and Simon or Welch and Gates come to mind. At a more popular level, the influence of “management gurus” has been very often the focus of articles in the business press and indeed there has been much written on their contribution. A number are outright charlatans. Often it is hard to sift the wheat from the chaff!

Turning now to how some writers can do better and can shed light on how individuals might have made their mark on new ways of managing, we review a new book that exemplifies this phenomenon.

From the Netherlands, Dr. Fons Trompenaar (who is a well known business consultant and author) and from Britain, Dr. Charles Hampden-Turner (who is internationally known for his writings) both qualify as such “gurus”, having have written many volumes on international business together.

They are particularly well known for their writings in the field of cross-cultural management. Both these co-authors and fellow-Dutch social scientist, Dr. Geert Hofstede are rivals in this field. The duo’s most recent book, *21 Leaders for the 21st Century*, written together with a number of their associates, looks at what makes a “great leader” in today’s increasingly complex and innovative business world. It is a “big” book, covering a great deal of ground. Based on extensive interviews of entrepreneurs and CEOs around the world, they have developed their previous theories one step further. Their main thesis is that successful leaders are those that resolve what they call “dilemmas” in their empirical approach better than those who do not.

Their approach is backed-up by very extensive empirical research and fieldwork, talking to managers across 50 nations.

They have covered a great deal of territory by the end of the project. The structure of the book is complex, with 22 chapters and many appendices, as it provides both an introduction to and resume of their existing research, replete with diagrams and drawings, in order more fully to spell out their findings. Then, these are related to individual business leaders. The specialized interviews with 21 celebrity leaders are, it must be said, most fascinating – including characters such as Richard Branson, Edgar Bronfman, Michael Dell, and so on. The pen-portraits of these individuals is most revealing and will be of interest of anyone studying management.

But their methodology may not be gain universal approval or not gain the approval of many orthodox social scientists. Again, a certain amount of the material is somewhat repetitious and a number of readers may be well familiar with the earlier findings from already published work by the co-authors. On the other hand, this is a book that some managers will find readable and many MBA students may find useful for their assignments. This reviewer can recommend this book for those who have limited contact with this area of cross-cultural management to date.

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