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Effectiveness of Western MBA programmes for Chinese managers

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to address how management knowledge transferred through Western management education programmes is effectively perceived and applied to decisions by Chinese managers, who have a cultural background quite different from their Western counterparts.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper first examines Western management concepts under Chinese culture and second reviews the development and status of Western Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes in China. Third, the framework of a three-dimension knowledge transfer model first developed in the USA is used to study the effectiveness of the transfer of academic management concepts to working managers in China through their perception of source, familiarity and usefulness of the concepts. A quantitative approach employing non-probability sampling method is adopted to survey a group of working managers enrolled in a Western MBA programme in Xi'an.

Findings – The result shows education to be a much more important source of management knowledge for the Chinese managers than for their US counterparts who regard it as the least important.

Research limitations/implications – Generalized interpretation of the results should be cautioned due to the limited scope of the study and the nature of non-probability sampling method.

Originality/value – The findings form a basis for further research in how cultural differences between the West and China are tempering the effectiveness of Western MBA programmes to Chinese working managers so that educators can better design their management programmes for China.

Keywords Knowledge transfer, Strategic management, Master of business administration, China, National cultures

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

Since China adopted its open door policy, mainland government officials, cadets and businesses have embarked on a road leading towards modernization and integrating with the rest of the world. After Deng Xiaoping, the chief architect behind China's open door policy, made his historical visit to the USA in 1979, Chinese leadership began to recognize the importance of management and the need for change in managerial mindset in tandem with the hardware and transfer of technology that the country was acutely seeking from the West (Fischer, 1999).

This was a recognition that the gap between China and the West lay not only in science and technology but also in the beliefs, values and attitudes of the people in a society at the verge of modernization. Thousands of years of ancient Chinese philosophical thoughts and deep-seated Confucius teachings coupled with decades of

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communist propaganda and social suppression would not make the adoption of Western style of organization and management a straightforward task.

In the 1980s, attempts were made on collaboration at government-to-government level to introduce Western management training into China. Collaborations gradually enlarged in scale and evolved into full Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes for business executives in the mid-1980s (Fischer, 1999; Wang, 1999). Since then, there has been a proliferation of education and training programmes in China. Many such programmes offer overseas degrees, which is a great attraction to practicing managers with family and financial commitments that prevent them from furthering studies overseas. However, it is the effectiveness of Western management education programmes in improving the management of Chinese businesses that is of primary concern to education and management researchers and practitioners.

This paper attempts to analyze the issue from a cultural perspective. It starts with an overview of current literature on the differences in national culture between the East and the West. The findings by Hofstede (1980a, b) and the debates round them are studied to help identify the cultural differences between China and the West so that validity of some Western management concepts can be critically examined. This paper then explores the development of China's management education and examines how effective that Western education is tempered by cross-cultural differences. Through this multi-disciplinary review, the gaps in existing literature are identified and finally, a framework to study the effectiveness of the Western MBA programmes in China is established for a quantitative analysis.

2. Western management concept under Chinese culture

Western management concept refers to those theories and practices in business and organization management that are generally adopted in economically advanced countries, particularly in North America and in Europe. It has its root traced back to the era of the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century when craft-like work was replaced by division of labour and economies of scale. Scientific management, championed by industrial engineer Frederick Taylor almost a century later, redefined workers' interaction with their tasks. In the early twentieth century, German sociologist Max Weber developed a bureaucratic management structure that emulated the machine as a form of design for a modern organization, which still offers a blueprint for the functional specialization of many professionally managed enterprises today (Fischer, 1999).

Culture is defined as "the collective mental programming of the people in an environment" by Hofstede (1980b, p. 43). Since culture is shared in common by all the people, it is built in every structure, from families to associations to government, from religions to work organizations; and it is also reflected in literature, buildings and even scientific theories. The framework proposed by Hofstede (1980b, p. 43) for studying national cultures under four dimensions, namely, "power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance", is founded on his empirical study on employees of IBM in 40 countries in the period 1967-1973. His findings enable him to classify the 40 countries into eight cultural areas. Other than Japan, countries or territories in Asia including Taiwan, Thailand, Hong Kong, Philippines, Singapore, Pakistan and India share high power distance, low to medium uncertainty avoidance, low individualism and medium masculinity. This is in quite

a sharp contrast with the Anglo-cultural area consisting of countries like the USA, Canada, Ireland, Great Britain and Australasia, where individualism and masculinity scores are high (Hofstede, 1980a).

These four dimensions can therefore distinguish different national cultures which reflect values that have grown into society norms which "determine to a large extent the political and organizational solutions which are feasible within that particular national culture". Therefore, management literature extrapolating organizational solutions across borders without questioning their validity in another culture may not apply (Hofstede, 1980a, p. 373).

2.1 Chinese management culture

According to Hofstede (1980b), there are marked differences in the four dimensions between clusters of Asian countries like Singapore, Taiwan and Hong Kong, where Chinese play dominant roles in their social and economic structure, and clusters of Western countries; notwithstanding that there are noticeable gaps amongst Western countries, such as high uncertainty in Germany and low in the UK, high femininity in Scandinavian countries and medium masculinity in the USA. China was not included in Hofstede's IBM study. However, if the East Asian overseas Chinese economies were taken as a proxy for the Chinese Mainland, China would demonstrate a high degree of collectivism versus many of its individualistic Western counterparts, and China's power distance index would be high, which is in line with what Chang (2003) argues. He also rates Chinese culture with a high degree of uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. A masculine culture puts China on the opposite side of the feminine cultures of many Western and Northern European countries but makes it similar to the USA in that dimension. In the individualism – collectivism dimension, Ralston *et al.* (1997, p. 179) contrast the cultural differences between the East and the West by "the relative focus on the good-of-the-group (collectivism) in the East versus the good-of-the-individual (individualism) in the West".

2.2 Western management theories in China

With all the cross-cultural differences behind China and the West unveiled, the transfer of Western management knowledge to China deserves more thoughts and its effectiveness more critical examination. The findings of Ralston *et al.* (1997, p. 202) on a cross-cultural study amongst the USA, Japan, Russia and China support a "multidomestic" approach as a strategy for international businesses, which implies that "understanding and coordinating the different cultural values" is more beneficial than "trying to force-fit them into a single corporate culture". Lloyd and Trompenaars (1993) point out that cultural differences across countries must be noted, respected, and taken advantage of in international business. Transnational competence is achieved through ultimately reconciling cultural differences (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 1998) and the capacity to reconcile the dilemmas different cultures share is transcultural competency (Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars, 2002).

Hofstede (1993) points out that since the Second World War, the export of Western management practices to poor countries has contributed little to their development despite the effort and money spent on training there, therefore it is doubtful that those management theories are valid in non-Western environments. Jaeger (1990) warns that uncritically adopting Western management theories and practices in other countries

could lead to organizational ineffectiveness and inefficiency. It may even lead to accusation of "cultural imperialism" which Jaeger (1990, p. 131) refers to as "being forced to adopt and accept practices which run counter to deeply held values and assumptions of the local culture". Hofstede (1981) further warns of the narrowness of American management style are not too aware of the cultures of other continents. Certainly, Hofstede's warnings bear implications to China in its import of Western management theories.

Maslow (1970) put forth in 1943 his famous "hierarchy of human needs", which is quite popularly taught in business schools and in training classes (Hofstede, 1991). However, Hofstede (1980b, 1991) argues that the theory is not universal because it was developed under an individualistic society which could not represent other collectivistic societies. For example, security needs would be regarded a high-level need in countries with strong uncertainty avoidance and high masculinity, while social needs would rank at the top for countries like Scandinavia which have weak uncertainty avoidance and feminine culture (Hofstede, 1980b).

In an individualistic society like the USA, the organization-employees relationship is based on enlightened self-interest, but in the collectivist culture of China, advocating the same relationship, exemplified by the "hire and fire" practice, may run into trouble because valued "mutual loyalty between company and employee" (Hofstede, 1980b, pp. 61-2) is not respected. Westwood and Lok (2003) point out that organizations in China have been, in the main, very cautious about firing and layoffs because of the traditional expectations on job security and sensitivities around employer-employee relationship. Likewise, the matrix organization structure which is common in many US multinational firms is not that appealing to a high power distance culture like France because it violates the unit of command, nor is it favoured by German managers, who may be frustrated by its ambiguity in organization roles because of their high uncertainty avoidance culture (Hofstede, 1980b). It seems reasonable to postulate that the high power distance and entrepreneurial spirit (a willingness to deal with uncertainty) of the Chinese culture may render the same not being applicable to Chinese organizational management. Lindsay and Dempsey (1985) find that Chinese management styles show high dependence on authority and that public conflict is something to be avoided.

Amongst leadership theories, the popular management by objective theory advocated by Peter Drucker of the USA as a principle in the philosophy of management (Drucker, 1954) is founded on a not-too-large power distance, high masculinity (performance viewed as important by both supervisor and subordinate) and weak uncertainty avoidance (that is, willing to take risks) culture (Hofstede, 1980b). The concept of participative management has been a widely discussed topic in management theories such as McGregor's Theory X and Theory Y (Koontz *et al.*, 1980) and Theory Z that leads to the legendary successes of so many Japanese giant corporations (Ouchi, 1981). Hofstede (1980b) argues that it is the manager who is supposed to initiate the participation process, and therefore in large power distance culture such as France people are not so concerned about it. It follows that in China, where power distance is expected to be high, participative management may not be easily accepted as an effective leadership style. This postulation is supported by Chan (1999), who points out that Chinese learners have been socialized to respect providers of knowledge and to

avoid challenging authority. Such pressure to conform inhibits discussion and debate, which are essential for effective learning (Macfarlane and Lomas, 1995).

In a study exploring the meaning of work to Chinese workers in Beijing and Hong Kong, Westwood and Lok (2003) find that a major difference between Beijing workers and their Hong Kong capitalistic counterparts lies in their value attached to serving society. After 50 years of communist party rule, the social policies and ideologies of socialism seems to have taken effect, though such orientation may be weakened as the switch away from a proletarian, egalitarian rhetoric takes shape. It is also interesting to note that Beijing workers rate highly "good interpersonal relations", which reflects traditional collectivist Chinese cultural values and the Chinese *guanxi* social mechanisms, whereas "promotion and interesting work" is not rated within the top five (Westwood and Lok, 2003, pp. 153-7), quite opposite to the findings in Hong Kong. Westwood and Lok (2003) therefore suggest that intrinsic work as a motivator is unlikely to work effectively in China versus the more developed workforce in Hong Kong. One common result between the two territories of particular relevance to this research is their concern for training and development opportunities, which is consistent with the value attached to education under traditional Chinese value (Westwood and Lok, 2003).

3. Management education in China

Business management is related to how people behave, which is in turn influenced by what they believe and what their values are. Confucius, born in 551 BC, preached the norms of ethical behaviour to his followers and has since been highly regarded in Chinese societies as the "Teacher for ten thousand generations". Chu (1991, p. 180) points out that Confucius asserts that rulers have to "govern with benevolence and justice" while people should "obey and respect their leaders". Confucius asserts that in a hierarchical society like China, a "morally motivated bureaucracy" has to be pursued. Except for a few eras throughout Chinese history, which include the Qin dynasty and the Cultural Revolution during Mao Zedong's reign of China, Confucius teachings and people with good education have been highly respected in Chinese societies. Imperial rulers in the Han dynasty (206 BC to 220 AD) actually practiced Confucius philosophy by opening chances for common people to get into government power, a form of upward mobility, through organizing the world's first examination system (Chan, 1999; Li, 1996). It would thus be reasonable to postulate that management education in China would reflect the influence of Confucian thoughts in context and in the way it is delivered. This bears implications on the ways in which Western management theories have to be delivered in China.

3.1 Western MBA programmes in China

In China, the investment in managerial education and development has been far less than that in the West, and it has been relatively uncommon to include management in the formal education system historically (Fischer, 1999). However, as global competition is mounting, it is conceivable that Western management education, which has become popular in the past decade, will continue to be in the front seat to help groom talents to sustain the country's competitiveness.

Contemporary management education in China takes the form of academic degree programmes in economics and management, professional degree programmes such as

MBA, or on-the-job training courses for management personnel (Wang, 1999). The first MBA programme in China was offered in 1984 under an EU-China training project between the European Commission and the Ministry of Foreign Trade and Commission with 34 students enrolled. The project moved to Shanghai in 1994 turning into the China-European International Business School attached to Shanghai Jiaotong University (Wang, 1999). A US-China management-training project was established in Dalian in 1984 with support from the Chinese State Economic Commission and the US Ministry of Commerce. Its first cohort was filled up by high-flyers, over half of them achieving vice minister status in the next 20 years, though the project emerged into an MBA programme with little US participation and lost its glory after the first two years (Fischer, 1999).

The development of China's own MBA programmes started in 1991 as a trial in 26 universities, under the supervision of the National MBA Coordination Group which was led by the Academic Degree Commission of China's State Council and the Graduate Education Office of the Ministry of Education (Wang, 1999). In 1994, China founded the National MBA Supervisory Committee to steer its MBA education development. By end 1998, over 15,000 students had enrolled in MBA programmes, and most of them studied full-time (Wang, 1999). On the job part-time MBA programmes were then offered, allowing some 5,000 managers each year to enroll after passing a national MBA entrance examination. Programmes run in collaboration with foreign institutions, approved by the Academic Degree Committee of the State Council and the Ministry of Education only when their unique contributions to managerial education are recognized, provide an alternate route for interested candidates (Southworth, 1999). By earning foreign MBA degrees locally near their homes, they can avoid derailing their careers and thus weakening their business contacts, which is not desirable under a rapidly changing economy but would otherwise happen if they leave for their studies (*Business Week*, 2006).

In the period 1995 to 2003, foreign education institutions started up over 170 properly approved programmes in collaboration with Chinese Universities at degree level and up. The USA, Australia and Canada followed by Hong Kong have been the main supply sources. Most of these programmes can be classified under the management, information technology related and engineering/science disciplines, and the majority of the programmes are management related (POC, 2004). The approval of new programmes under collaboration with foreign universities has become prudent (Qian, 2007) since then with the enactment of the new regulations on the Chinese foreign cooperation in running schools. Nevertheless, in terms of degree programmes held in collaboration with mainland Chinese institutions by any single institution, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University stands out as the most prominent foreign institution with 17 programmes offered (JSJXW, 2009; CMAO, 2009), demonstrating the unique contribution Hong Kong makes towards the mainland built on its experience in providing Western management education under Chinese culture.

MBA is used as a proxy for management education for practitioners because of the considerable growth in MBA education in the West. Many large corporations are inviting educational institutions to deliver tailor made MBA programmes to match their organization needs (Macfarlane and Lomas, 1995). Li (2007) estimates that in 2006, 96 universities in China recruited 23,000 new MBA students and between 1991 and 2006 there were a total of 160,000 MBA students.

3.2 Western learning approaches in China

Critics of management education argue that students are often disconnected from practice and do not develop adequate soft skills such as team work and leadership, and that what management education lacks is relevance (Smith, 2005). Berman and Ritchie (2006) find from their study on college graduates that students' competence is acquired partially through their personal experiences not in their school environment or is partly due to their personal characteristics. Therefore, business schools have responded with the use of problem-based learning (PBL), which originated in the early 1970s in the medical school of McMaster University of Canada (Smith, 2005). Under PBL, students do not learn by examination or by a syllabus but by experiencing knowledge and skills that would be needed to solve real world problems (Chaharbaghi and Cox, 1995). Students gather information around the problem they confront, and learn through small-group activities (Smith, 2005).

Since PBL is gaining popularity amongst business schools (Smith, 2005), it is justifiable to explore the implications of such approach, amidst others, in the Chinese context. It is a common belief amongst Chinese that the teacher is a wise person and students have to accept what is being told (Walker *et al.*, 1996). Under PBL, it is believed that for learning to be meaningful, it has to be discovered by the learner. Students learn by applying their understanding to develop acceptable solutions, and the role of the teacher is a facilitator and not a giver of knowledge (Walker *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, the introduction of the PBL approach, revealed by literature to be motivating and satisfying to students, may cast doubt on its effectiveness when the Western management programmes are run in the non-Western, Chinese environment (Walker *et al.*, 1996).

Nakarama in Redding (1990, p. 76) summarizes five characteristics of Chinese relevant to their learning behaviour:

(1) emphasis on perception of the concrete;

(2) non-development of abstract thought;

(3) emphasis on particulars not universals;

(4) practicality as central focus; and

(5) concern for reconciliation, harmony, balance.

In an observation study on a group of students practicing PBL at a Master's degree programme in a Hong Kong university, Walker *et al.* (1996) discover that Chinese students behave unduly politely than their Western counterparts and regard preserving group harmony and conformity more important than achieving task outcomes. Therefore, vigorous discussion in an open fashion or trying to get one's own ideas accepted by other group members may give way to avoiding conflict particularly when students higher up in position, age or status are involved. They would rather sacrifice personal concerns when seeking to attain their collective interests. Thus, to the Chinese students, their appreciation of PBL is more on the team support they share in the learning process and not the learning outcome. Though the generalization of such findings has yet to be established, the idea of encouraging constructive conflict and "dissolution of hierarchical boundaries" as advocated in Western education systems should not be accepted without critical examination particularly in the context of Chinese social culture (Walker *et al.*, 1996, p. 28).

The language under which PBL is carried out matters, even for students in Hong Kong where their bilingual skills are often superior to those of their Chinese Mainland counterparts. Walker *et al.* (1996) find out in their study that students have been unable to express their thoughts thoroughly because of their language barrier. Fan (1998) argues that language becomes the first barrier for Chinese managers to acquire Western management know-how as most of them do not speak a foreign language. For example, the term "marketing" has no adequate translation in Chinese. Even if the Chinese equivalent of a term is found in a dictionary, "the actual connotation and extension of the translated term could be very different from the original" (Fan, 1998, p. 214). Newell (1999, p. 288) points out that management knowledge as codified by practitioners or academics in the West may not be readily applicable in China on ground that "a shared code or mental model" is needed for the transferees to understand the value of the concepts and to accept them. As language is an inseparable part of a culture behind a nation, transferring management knowledge which is so socially enrooted, remains a key challenge for educators.

4. A framework to study the effectiveness of the Western MBA programmes for Chinese managers

Despite the popularity of Western management programmes in China, how effective they are in improving the work practices of Chinese managers is of interest. Simmonds *et al.* (2001) in their studies on US practicing managers find out that education is the least important source of academic strategic management concepts amongst four identified sources, the others of which are association, involvement and experience. Their findings have implications on the role of academics in the transfer of knowledge from academia to practicing management professionals.

4.1 Management concepts in the USA: source, familiarity and usefulness

Simmonds *et al.* (2001) carried out their study in the USA on a sample including 600 CEOs, 100 government officials and 500 MBA graduates holding executive positions. The participants were asked to fill out a questionnaire on the familiarity, usefulness and the source of acquisition of nine strategic management concepts which were selected through content analysis of keywords from all issues of *Harvard Business Review*, *California Management Review*, *Sloan Management Review* and *Academy of Management Executive* from 1994 to 1998.

Nonparametric tests were used to analyse the data because of their non-normal distribution, and much was ordinally scaled and required ranking. Results showed that the most important source of strategic management concepts was experience, and education the least important for practicing managers. Only those recently enrolled in college courses, and usually they were lower in their organization ranks, regarded education as a primary source of management concepts. The study also showed that participants were relatively familiar with the management concepts and found them useful; however, the acquiring of such knowledge was more likely to be intra-organizational, that is, through experience, involvement and association with the organizations.

4.2 Research questions

Given the review of literature leads to issue of the effectiveness of Western management programmes on the work practices of Chinese managers, as discussed in the previous section, a key research question to be put forth is to what extent do

Western management education programmes offered in China impact upon the decisions of practicing managers?

This is a general problem that makes good sense not only to management theorists or academics but also to many education institutions that are involved or about to be involved in offering education programmes to China. The research model of Simmonds *et al.* (2001) provides a platform on which understanding on Chinese practicing managers' perception of the source, familiarity and usefulness of Western management concepts can be obtained. Since there has been no prior related knowledge in the context of China, research focused on the three aspects of the model will contribute to the knowledge base upon which more diversified and related research can be conducted subsequent to this study.

In the context of China, based on the prior research work of Simmonds *et al.* (2001), the research questions in this study can be stated as:

RQ1. What are the main sources of management knowledge in China as compared to the USA?

RQ2. Are practicing managers in China familiar with some key academic strategic management concepts popular in the West?

RQ3. How useful do practicing managers in China find the concepts in their decisions?

4.3 The knowledge transfer model

The knowledge transfer model developed by Simmonds *et al.* (2001) is applied to conduct a quantitative research to address the three questions raised. The model consists of three dimensions: sources, familiarity and usefulness (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001).

4.3.1 Model dimensions.

(1) Sources. Weisman and Anthony (1999, cited in Simmonds *et al.*, 2001) find that knowledge is transferred in four ways:

- *Involvement.* "Entails knowledge acquired through direct participation in professional organizations" (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001, p. 362). It is the kind of proprietary knowledge which a person or a group "codifies on its own in order to make sense of particular situation" (Choo, 1998, p. 111).
- *Association.* It allows knowledge to be "acquired from formal or informal interactions with others in everyday activities, exclusive of a learned organization or society" (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001, p. 362). It is a form of organizational learning that allows colleagues to exchange information with one another, thus fostering more realistic collaboration. Learners gradually accomplish moves that incrementally advance their own agendas (Miller, 1996).
- *Experience.* It results in knowledge being acquired through implicit learning "without the learner being cognitive of the learning process" (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001, p. 362). It is acquired over time through interactions with family, friends, colleagues or other members of a person's sphere of contacts and it includes personal knowledge and commonsense (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001; Choo, 1998). Brockmann and Anthony (2002) see experience as stored knowledge in tacit form.

- *Direct education*. It refers to codified knowledge learnt through formal learning (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001).

(2) Familiarity. This dimension measures the extent to which individuals can affiliate the relevant knowledge to prior related knowledge (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001). This is the notion of absorptive capacity referred to by Cohen and Leventhal (1990, p. 131), who point out that an individual's ability to assimilate information depends on "the richness of the preexisting knowledge structure". This suggests that learning is cumulative, and that "learning performance is greatest when the object of learning is related to what is already known". Familiarity is found to be a determinant of productivity by Goodman and Leyden (1991).

(3) Usefulness. Simmonds *et al.* (2001, p. 363) regard usefulness as "an attitudinal perception of the effectiveness of applying specific information to resolve a problem or to make a decision". Perceived aggregate information is useful to managers because it helps them master a bigger picture and thus they can use their intuition to make better judgements (Mangaliso, 1995).

4.3.2 Source elements. The source of academic management concepts can be classified into 12 elements which can be grouped into the four ways of knowledge transfer that Weisman and Anthony (1999, cited in Simmonds *et al.*, 2001) put forth. The four ways, or source constructs, are involvement, association, experience and direct education.

Nine constructs of academic strategic management concept have been adopted by Simmonds *et al.* (2001) for examination under the three dimensions:

(1) the knowledge transfer or information flows;

(2) inter-organizational relationships;

(3) resource-based view;

(4) supply chain management;

(5) globalization issues;

(6) agency/opportunism;

(7) environmental issues;

(8) formal strategic planning; and

(9) dominant logic.

The relationship between the source constructs and the source elements is integrated in the survey framework (Mak and Yan, 2008). A total of 21 survey items have been developed by Simmonds *et al.* (2001) for the nine constructs and these items are listed in Table I.

Based on the above 21 survey items developed by Simmonds *et al.* (2001), 12 ordinal categories for sources have been identified. According to Simmonds *et al.* (2001), a five-point Likert scale is used to assess respondents' familiarity with the constructs and a seven-point Likert scale for the usefulness dimension. With Cronbach alpha of 0.82, 0.65 and 0.82, respectively, the three scales used are deemed reliable instruments (Crocker and Algina, 1986).

Dimension	Scale	Knowledge transfer Management constructs		Questionnaire items
Sources	Involvement	Outside consultants from academia	Resource-based views	Before a firm can be successful, it must possess a core competency which can be exploited for competitive advantage (i1)
		Outside consultants not from academia		A firm can be viewed as bundles of resources (i2)
		Existing company protocol		To achieve a competitive advantage, a firm must possess resources which are rare, and difficult to imitate or obtain by competitors (i3)
		Staff meeting (with other departments)		My company would probably be unsuccessful if it pursued lines of business other than its core business (i21)
	Association	Business peers inside company	Dominant logic/product relatedness	My company seeks similarities/synergy between existing and future product and service offerings (i4)
		Business peers outside company	Globalization issues	To some extent, most firms compete on a global level (i5)
		Friends		My firm competes on a global level (i6)
		New college graduates	Knowledge transfer/information flows	The management of knowledge and intellectual capital is becoming more and more of an issue at this company (i7)
	Experience	Personal readings		My company has (or needs) a person to seek and manage new knowledge and/or technology (i8)
		Personal experience		Most firms are capable of learning and creating knowledge (i9)
	Direct education	Personal college education		My company is constantly learning and gaining new knowledge (i10)
		Personal contacts in academia (e.g. a professor)		My company uses recommendations from recent business writings/research (e.g., books, journals) (i18)

(*continued*)

Table I.
The survey framework

Table I.

Knowledge transfer Management constructs	Dimension	Scale	Questionnaire items
		Other	
Supply chain management			I am familiar with the concept of supply chains (i11)
Inter-organisational relationships	Familiarity	Five-point Likert SD – strongly disagree D – disagree N – neither agree or disagree A – agree SA – strongly agree	My company does a good job in managing our supply chains (i12) Relationships between organizations can be governed by mutual trust (i13) My company seeks or has business relationships with other firms which are based on trust (i14)
Formal business planning	Usefulness	Seven-point Likert 1 – absolutely not useful 4 – neutral 7 – most useful	When preparing a business plan, we use a formal, systematic process (i15) When conducting an analysis of our competition, we use a formal, systematic process (i16)
Environmental issues			Firm success will depend in part on the firm's attention to environmental issues and groups (i17)
Agency/opportunism			Firms should have governance mechanisms to guard against potential opportunistic (i.e. negative) behavior by employees (i19) "Outsider" board of director members are more stringent monitors of management's actions than "insiders" (I20)

Source: Adapted from Simmonds *et al.* (2001)

4.4 Research method

A quantitative approach is adopted using a deductive strategy to address the research questions through analyzing primary data collected in a quantitative survey. An anonymous, self-administered questionnaire, adopting scales that have been validated in a similar study conducted in the USA by Simmonds *et al.* (2001), is designed in English and then carefully translated into Chinese before being used to survey the Chinese managers.

As it is impossible to survey every individual manager in China having received Western management education, a sample is taken from the population. A non-probability sampling (Blaikie, 2000) strategy is argued and justified within the constraints of this research. Practicing managers enrolled in an MBA programme offered by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in its Xi'an teaching centre are invited to participate in the survey because they are judged to have received Western management education and are practicing managers in their own fields.

The questionnaire is designed based on the academic strategic management knowledge transfer model developed by Simmonds *et al.* (2001) with the questionnaire items slightly modified. The questionnaire is divided into four sections. The first three correspond to the three dimensions of the model and the fourth section collects demographic data of the respondents. All the questionnaire items are repeatedly used in the first three sections though they are measured under a different scale in each section.

Because of the nature of the data collected being mostly nominal or categorical and non-normally distributed (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001), nonparametric tests are appropriate for the analyses (Siegel and Castellan, 1988). The results address the three research questions raised on the source, familiarity and usefulness of the strategic management concepts. They form a basis for comparing the differences in the findings of the two countries amid their cultural differences.

5. Survey findings

The survey was carried out in Xi'an from mid-December 2005 to end January 2006. A total of 244 questionnaires were distributed to the target group of MBA students during the period after their class lectures. A total of 102 valid questionnaires were collected by the end of January 2006, yielding a return rate of about 42 per cent. A few participants left some sections of the questionnaire blank, making the sample size of certain sections slightly smaller than 100.

The data were entered into a file under the computer software programme SPSS. Some converted data fields were also created, for example, the grouping of the tallies of different source items into the four source constructs. Statistical tests were then applied to the data. Significance of test results is based on probability p which is less than 5 per cent. For p-value between 1 and 0.1 per cent, the result is described as highly significant, and for p less than 0.1 per cent, very highly significant (Coolican, 1994).

5.1 Profile of respondents

All participants of the survey are working managers pursuing part-time studies in a MBA programme hosted by The Hong Kong Polytechnic University in collaboration with Xi'an Jiaotong University in China. Therefore, they all had received tertiary education at the time of the survey and were undergoing Western management

education if not also trained in Western management theories in their previous education or professional training.

Over 65 per cent of the respondents had received more than 80 hours of management training in the last 24 months and the last time they studied in a Western management training course was largely (43.2 per cent of respondents) within the last three years. About a third of the respondents cited their current MBA studies as their last Western management training experience. A small percentage of the respondents (2.1 per cent) had very little management training (less than four hours over the past 24 months) before their MBA studies. Respondents came quite evenly from a wide range of organizations of varying size. Close to one-fifth of them work for corporations with over 3,000 employees and slightly less than one-third work for small and medium enterprises with less than 100 employees.

As the MBA programme selected for the survey is designed for experienced practicing managers, the respondents generally (over 80 per cent) have in excess of ten years of work experience and the majority of them are in middle management positions or above (99 per cent of respondents). About 43.2 per cent of all respondents occupy senior management positions such as President, CEO, Chairman, Managing Director and Vice-Presidents.

5.2 Sources of academic strategic management concepts

The responses on the perception of the sources of the academic strategic management concepts by the survey participants are tallied and the number of counts on each source element across the items for all respondents are anlaysed. The 12 source elements are represented by s1, s2, . . . , s12. Sources not represented by any one of the pre-coded sources are grouped under s13 in the survey. The total number of times each source element is chosen by any one of the respondents and the corresponding percentage that particular source element is chosen amongst all source elements are summarized in Table II.

A summary of the statistics is shown in the Appendix, Table AI. The mean of each source element represents the average number of times the particular element is chosen by the respondents as the source of management knowledge amongst the 21 concept

Table II.
Source elements and their frequencies and percentages

Code	Source element	Sum	Percentage
s1	Personal readings	317	15.5
s2	Personal experience	542	26.5
s3	Business peers inside your company	167	8.2
s4	Business peers outside your company	115	5.6
s5	Friends	59	2.9
s6	New college graduates	19	0.9
s7	Personal college education	243	11.9
s8	Outside consultants from academia	114	5.6
s9	Outside consultants not from academia	63	3.1
s10	Existing company protocol	200	9.8
s11	Staff meetings (with other departments)	45	2.2
s12	Personal contact in academia (e.g. a professor)	115	5.6
s13	Other (please specify) _____	45	2.2
Grand total		2,044	100

items presented to them. It can be seen that s2 has the highest score (5.31) while s6 has the lowest (0.19). However, the range of outcome for s2 is also the highest, with a minimum of 0 and a maximum of 20. The standard error of the mean is also highest for s2 (at 0.438) and lowest for s6 (at 0.055). This observation suggests that personal experience is clearly the most frequently sought after reason by respondents as the single most likely source they learnt the management concepts. The wide ranging response suggests that a huge perception difference lies between some respondents with some attribuitng all but one concepts to acquiring through experience while some perceive none is mainly attributable to personal experience. The high standard error confirms that variability in naming personal experience as a main source of management concepts is most noticeable. New college graduates, on the other hand, are least regarded as most important and very little variation in opinion is seen, since their supporters at most attribute three items out of the 21 items to them.

The source elements can be classified into four source constructs which are the four ways of knowledge transfer, namely, involvement, association, experience and direct education (Simmonds *et al.*, 2001). For analysis purpose, scores of the source items for each way of knowledge transfer are added up and the weighted average taken to come up with the aggregate scores for the four source constructs in the following way.

When the source elements are grouped into the four source constructs and the weighted average of each source construct is calculated for each respondent, the mean and sum across all respondents are tabulated in the Appendix, Table AII. It is apparent that experience scores the highest mean (4.2108), followed by direct education (1.7549) and involvement (1.0343). Association comes last with a mean score of 0.8824.

Measuring each of the sums of the source constructs against the total of all sums (849) gives an overall indication of respondents' importance attached to the four key source constructs. Experience rates number one, attracting a weighted average of 50.59 per cent of all votes, followed by direct education, accounting for 21.08 per cent. Involvement comes third with 12.43 per cent and association last with 10.60 per cent. Source of management knowledge outside the four constructs accounts for 5.30 per cent of all responses. This was not found in the study of Simmonds *et al.* (2001) when the category was not then available. A pie chart showing this major finding is shown in Figure 1.

It has been found that personal experience is the most common source of strategic management concepts amongst Chinese practicing managers surveyed and new college

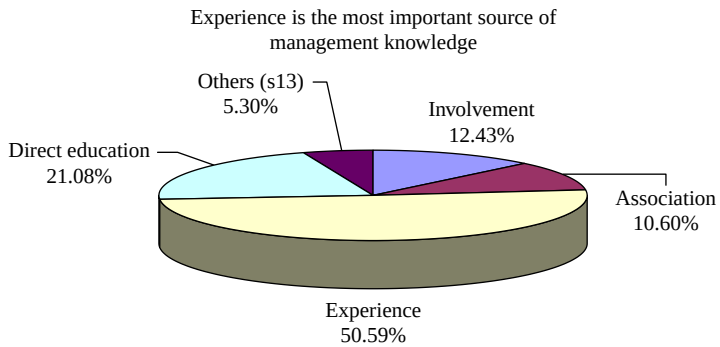

Figure 1.
Relative importance of sources of management knowledge

graduates contribute the least to the managers' knowledge. Amongst the four ways of knowledge transfer, like their counterparts in the USA as revealed by Simmonds *et al.* (2001), Chinese managers attain their management knowledge most frequently through experience. Direct education is found to be the second most important source, followed by involvement and association. These results are not exactly similar to the findings of Simmonds *et al.* (2001) in the USA, and education is assuming a much more important role. Table III summarizes the similarities and differences between US managers and the Chinese managers surveyed.

Table IV summarizes the source element scores of the four ways of knowledge transfer in comparison with the results revealed in the study of Simmonds *et al.* (2001) as discussed above.

Amongst the two source elements within experience, which is the most important way of knowledge transfer, personal readings make up slightly more than a third (36.9 per cent) of the answers while personal experience about 63.1 per cent.

Table III.
Relative importance of ways of knowledge transfer

Source of knowledge	Chinese managers	Percentage	US managers	Percentage
Experience	Most important	50.6	Most important	49.6
Direct education	Second most important	21.1	Least important	6.6
Involvement	Third most important	12.4	Third most important	20.4
Association	Least important	10.6	Second most important	23.2

Source: US data extracted from Simmonds *et al.* (2001)

Table IV.
Comparing involvement and association element scores with the US study

Selected source elements	Chinese managers Sum	Chinese managers Percentage	US managers Percentage
Experience			
Personal experience	542	63.1	N/A
Personal readings	317	36.9	N/A
Total	859	100	100
Direct education			
Personal college education	243	67.9	N/A
Personal contacts in academia	115	32.1	N/A
Total	358	100	100
Involvement			
Existing company protocol	200	47.4	23.7
Outside consultants from academia	114	27.0	28.5
Outside consultants not from academia	63	14.9	15.5
Staff meetings (with other departments)	45	10.7	32.3
Total	422	100	100
Association			
Business peers inside your company	167	46.4	65.5
Business peers outside your company	115	31.9	27.6
Friends	59	16.4	2.5
New college graduates	19	5.3	4.3
Total	360	100	100

Source: US data extracted from Simmonds *et al.* (2001)

For respondents who think that direct education is their main source of the management knowledge, about two-thirds (67.9 per cent) of them regard personal college education as the primary element and about a third (32.1 per cent) regard personal contacts in academia are more important.

Involvement, which is third after direct education as a source of management knowledge transfer, has company protocol as its key element, accounting for 47.4 per cent of all scores. The Chinese managers surveyed on the other hand find staff meetings contribute much less to knowledge transfer (only 10.7 per cent). The percentage scores of outside consultants are 27.0 per cent for academia; and 14.9 per cent for not from academia.

On association elements, Chinese managers surveyed view business peers inside their company as most important (46.4 per cent amongst all responses under association) followed by business peers outside their company (31.9 per cent). Friends and new college graduates account for only 16.4 and 5.3 per cent, respectively, of all responses categorized as transferred through association.

5.3 Familiarity of academic strategic management concepts

To determine if the respondents find the academic strategic management concepts familiar, the hypothesis that:

H1. The familiarity rating of the average item is higher than neutrality is set.

And the null hypothesis is that:

$H_0 1$. The average item familiarity rating is neutral.

The one-sample *t*-test (Coakes, 2005) against neutrality score of 3 is applied and all items but one have scores that are very much significantly higher than neutrality ($p < 0.001$). The *H0* is rejected and the alternate hypothesis that:

H2. The familiarity rating of the average item is higher than neutrality is supported as differences are on the higher side of neutrality (i.e. >3).

Respondents generally regard themselves familiar with the academic strategic management concepts presented to them.

5.4 Usefulness of the concepts

Similar to the treatment of the familiarity rating, the one-sample *t*-test is applied to the data. The result confirms that all usefulness item scores are very much significantly higher than neutrality with $p < 0.001$. The *H0* is thus rejected. As significant differences all appear on the higher side of the test value, the alternate hypothesis (*H2*) is supported. Respondents generally regard the concepts presented to them as useful.

5.5 Relatedness of source to familiarity or usefulness

In the study conducted by Simmonds *et al.* (2001), it was found that managers who learned through involvement show higher familiarity rankings than the others and managers who learned through experience find the management concepts less useful than the others. In the current study on Chinese managers, whether there exists such differences are tested by applying the Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance to the data.

For testing the relatedness of familiarity to the sources of learning, the hypothesis to be tested is:

H3. Managers who learn through the different sources (i.e. involvement, association, experience and education) have different average scores in the familiarity of the knowledge items.

The corresponding null hypothesis is:

$H_0 3$. Managers who learn through the different sources (i.e. involvement, association, experience and education) have no different average scores in the familiarity of the knowledge items.

Similarly, for testing the relatedness of usefulness to the sources of learning, the hypothesis is:

H4. Managers who learn through the different sources (i.e. involvement, association, experience and education) have different average scores in the usefulness of the knowledge items.

The null hypothesis is thus:

$H_0 4$. Managers who learn through the different sources (i.e. involvement, association, experience and education) have no difference in average scores in the usefulness of the knowledge items.

For the purpose of testing these hypotheses, the respondents are classified into four groups by analyzing the modal class of each respondent when the 21 knowledge items are each associated with a source element belonging to one of the four source constructs. For example, if a respondent identifies in 12 items out of 21 items (obviously the majority of times) a source element that belongs to involvement, that respondent's modal class is involvement and is regarded as a manager learning through involvement for the purpose of this analysis. In a tie situation, the particular respondent's responses are discarded.

The results of the tests are summarized in the Appendix, Table AIII. It can be seen that the average usefulness ratings are highly significantly different across the different source categories ($\chi^2 = 12.371$, $p < 0.01$) but the familiarity ratings are not significant ($\chi^2 = 0.818$, $p > 0.05$). It is interesting to note that for the average usefulness ratings, managers who learned through direct education assign the highest scores to the knowledge items (mean rank = 51.75) and those who learned through experience the second highest (mean rank = 47.73). This reflects the positive attitude of those managers learning management knowledge through education towards the utility of the concepts learnt. On the other hand, managers would not be seen as more familiar with the strategic management concepts because they acquired the knowledge through a particular way, as revealed in the findings.

6. Conclusions and implications

The current research has advanced understanding on the general research problem regarding the extent of the impact of Western management education programmes on the decisions of practicing managers in China. The results have shown that Western management concepts impact upon the decisions of practicing managers who have

studied in Western management education programmes offered in China to the extent that they generally find the academic strategic management concepts that are popular in the West familiar and unambiguously useful to their decisions; and that direct education is the second most important way, only after experience, through which they have acquired such knowledge. This fact suggests that Western management concepts are well accepted amongst Chinese practicing managers, at least within the limitation of the sampled population.

The Chinese managers surveyed rate direct education as a significantly more important source than involvement and association, only after experience. For many of those who learn the concepts through direct education, they regard the concepts useful, more so than the others who learn the concepts through experience, involvement and association. Even for those who learn through experience, their respect for the usefulness of the concepts is higher than those through involvement and association.

This research therefore provides some evidence, at least in Xi'an and the region around it, that education does matter in terms of its impact on practicing managers. This finding is in sharp contrast with the findings of Simmonds *et al.* (2001) in which education is found to be the least important as a source of management knowledge, and practicing managers who learn through experience, constituting the majority of all those surveyed by Simmonds *et al.* (2001), regard academic strategic management concepts not as useful as the managers who learn through the other sources.

This research has advanced understanding in the transfer of academic strategic management concepts from academia to practicing managers beyond that of Simmonds *et al.* (2001) in the context of China. It reveals the relatively higher role management education assumes in the eyes of the Chinese practicing managers than that of their counterparts in the USA. This finding perhaps could be related to the respect for the learned and for education, which is deep seated in Chinese culture. The findings in the current research provide a basis for more research to be conducted to address questions untouched. Studies along such line may eventually help fine tune existing Western management programmes delivered in China both in the relevance of their content and in their delivery process to Chinese practicing managers.

This research is limited in scope and the survey was done in one city of China and therefore the findings should be interpreted with extreme care. How cultural factors actually shape the transfer of management knowledge from the West to China remain untouched. In some recent research, Gaspay and Legorreta (2009) discover that national culture impacts the effectiveness of distance learning and is mediated by cultural practices as well as learning models. Perez-Nordtvedt *et al.* (2008) have examined the effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge transfer through international business affiliates across national borders to the USA. However, how cultural factors will temper the effectiveness and efficiency of the transfer and how the case of imported Western management programmes to China will be like remain open to future research. Such understanding will help educators better design their management programmes in China.

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Further reading

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Appendix

	s1	s2	s3	s4	s5	s6	s7	s8	s9	s10	s11	s12	Others (s13)
Valid (*n*)	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102	102
Missing (*n*)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mean	3.11	5.31	1.64	1.13	0.58	0.19	2.37	1.12	0.62	1.96	0.44	1.13	0.44
SE of mean	0.281	0.438	0.187	0.125	0.119	0.055	0.307	0.149	0.128	0.276	0.081	0.163	0.101
SD	2.842	4.425	1.892	1.264	1.198	0.558	3.105	1.504	1.290	2.789	0.815	1.651	1.020
Skewness	1.135	1.025	1.165	1.016	2.598	3.181	1.890	1.664	3.290	2.780	2.038	2.283	3.186
SE of skewness	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239	0.239
Kurtosis	1.324	0.762	0.547	0.449	8.279	9.852	3.810	2.584	13.385	11.350	4.129	6.963	11.984
SE of kurtosis	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474	0.474
Range	14	20	7	5	7	3	14	6	8	18	4	9	6
Minimum	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Maximum	14	20	7	5	7	3	14	6	8	18	4	9	6

Source: Yan and Mak (2009)

Table AI.
Statistical summary of the responses on all source elements

	n	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SE of mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Sum	Percent of total
Involvement	102	0.00	5.00	1.0343	0.09444	0.95378	1.068	1.739	105.50	12.43
Association	102	0.00	3.00	0.8824	0.07763	0.78405	0.759	−0.249	90.00	10.60
Experience	102	0.00	10.50	4.2108	0.27827	2.81037	0.537	−0.567	429.50	50.59
Direct education	102	0.00	7.00	1.7549	0.15837	1.59942	1.179	1.357	179.00	21.08
Other (s13)	102	0	6	0.44	0.101	1.020	3.186	11.984	45	5.30
Valid *n* (listwise)	102									
Total									849.00	100

Source: Yan and Mak (2009)

Table AII.
Statistical summary when source elements are combined by four source constructs

		Descriptive statistics			
	n	*Mean*	*SD*	*Minimum*	*Maximum*
Familiarity average rating	99	3.6253	0.41905	2.52	4.52
Usefulness average rating	98	5.1970	0.70050	3.57	6.52
Source category	92	2.91	0.765	1	4
		Ranks			
	Source category	n	*Mean rank*		
Familiarity average rating	Involvement	9	44.44		
	Association	4	33.88		
	Experience	64	45.46		
	Direct education	12	46.67		
	Total	89			
Usefulness average rating	Involvement	9	25.28		
	Association	4	15.13		
	Experience	63	47.73		
	Direct education	12	51.75		
	Total	88			
		Test statistics [a, b]			
	Familiarity average rating	Usefulness average rating			
χ^2	0.818	12.371			
df	3	3			
Asymp. Sig.	0.845	0.006			

Notes: [a]Kruskal-Wallis test; [b]grouping variable: source category
Source: Yan and Mak (2009)

Table AIII.
Kruskal-Wallis tests on relatedness of familiarity and usefulness to source of learning