Confucian Classical Philosophy and Modern Management Principles—An Introduction and Analysis of Zeng Shiqiang’s Management Thinking

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ABSTRACT

Chinese style management is not just a set of tools, techniques and methodologies, it is also a form of a culture influenced by Chinese classical philosophy. Just as Zeng Shiqiang (Zeng for short) put it, if it were to sacrifice Chinese distinct cultures for the sake of internationalization and modernization, then the loss would outweigh the gain. This paper is to introduce and analyze Zeng’s Chinese management philosophical thinking and the corresponding Chinese management principles and strategies in order to let the world have a better understanding of Chinese management principles and the relationship between Chinese classical philosophy and Chinese management principles.¹

INTRODUCTION

Entering the 21st century, China is no longer merely a land-locked country, but rather a cultural power keeping an open door to the outside world. China’s remarkable achievements in economic development have proved the superiority and effectiveness in the Chinese style management and have attracted more and more attention from the people all over the world. What is the Chinese management and the Chinese management philosophy? What characteristics and advantages does the Chinese management possess? What is the relationship between the Chinese

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classical philosophy and modern Chinese management principles and strategies? The paper is to answer these questions by turning to Zeng Shiqiang’s (Zeng for short) philosophical thinking applied in the Chinese-style Management.

TOWARDS ZENG SHIQIANG

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. Having published more than 50 books and 50 articles, his unique areas of focus include the comparative studies of Chinese and western ways of management, the importance of the interpersonal relationships and communication in the success of the management, etc. In his works, Zeng mainly undertakes a study on the national character of Chinese people, the Chinese management theories, the embodiment of the Confucius\(^2\), Taoist and other famous classical philosophical thoughts in the Chinese management. Zeng argues that Chinese management principles and strategies have come into being with close guidance and influence of the Chinese classical philosophy. It is well known that Chinese classical philosophy has never shut itself in its ivory tower since its creation, and has demonstrated its powerful influence in every field, including the management. So, Zeng thinks that when we study Chinese management, we should uphold great respects for the sages and philosophers in the Chinese history. Without them, today’s fruitful results in Chinese management would not become a reality.

ZENG’S PHILOSOPHICAL THINKING IN THE MANAGEMENT

Zeng’s Definition About The Management

Zeng defines the management as the course of cultivating oneself and bringing peace and comfort to the others. The gist of cultivating oneself lies in improving members’ self-consciousness, self-discipline and self-determination [1]. Chinese style of management upholds the view that rule of man is more important than rule of law. The social purpose of rule of man is to encourage and convince people to obey the law and regulations of the organization spontaneously, voluntarily and automatically rather than forcing them to do so, unless necessary. He who wants to administer others should first manage himself well. The goal of bringing peace and comfort to others is to create a harmonious atmosphere for both ourselves and for others in order to make the organization or company to achieve a great success in the fierce and stiff competition.

\(^2\)Confucius Was a Famous Chinese Educator and Philosopher of the Spring and Autumn Period of Chinese History. He Was Also the Founder of Confucianism.
Confucianism: Xiushen, Qijia, Pingtianxia and Xieji, Anren

Zeng advocates that a man will not be in his right position to talk about management without following Confucius’s principle: Xiushen, Qijia, Pingtianxia, which means self-cultivation, regulating the family, administering the state and realizing universal harmony in the world. When one’s personal life is cultivated, family is the next concern, that is Qijia. One must regulate his own family well to be qualified to govern the state. If a person fails to regulate his own family, he cannot be trusted to be competent enough to govern the state, or Pingtianxia. This is where the conventional wisdom rings a bell, the logical relationship of which is that self-cultivation propels the regulating of one’s family, which in turn will benefit the administering of one’s state. Finally, all factors will combine together to contribute to a universal peace and harmony.

As far as management is concerned, Zeng thinks that Xiushen equals “Xiuji” meaning cultivating oneself, which is regarded as the starting point in Chinese management with the aim at “Anren”(Qijia), meaning bringing peace and comfort to others. To achieve that, the manager must practice “Xiuji” or cultivating oneself first. Therefore, Chinese style management, simply put, is the course of refining oneself and bringing peace and comfort to others [2].

Achieving Peace and Harmony by Means of Self-Cultivation

Chinese management is considered to be people-oriented rather than system-oriented, which means that people play a very important role in the organization, and the desirable outcome can be guaranteed only by harmonious co-operation between the leader and the subordinates. In the company, everyone should put self-cultivation or “Xieshen/Xiuji” on the top of his agenda, and during the four steps of “self-cultivation, family-regulation, state-administration and universal harmony”, regardless of what stage they are in, an individual’s self-cultivation must be looked upon as the foundation. Under the guidance of Confucius wise thinking, Zeng summarizes the following Chinese-style management principles and strategies for achieving the organization’s harmony and conclusive success. The first is self-cultivation.

Self-cultivation is concerned with the feature of self-discipline and self-consciousness. First, for an employee, he must be conscientious, diligent and responsible with sureness to fulfill his duties of his own work and not let the superior feel uneasy and worried. Self-disciplined and self-conscious employees should always remind themselves to take the initiative, rather than adopt a passive work style, since only active people have original and constructive means and ideas and thus make greater contributions for the organization or the company. Zeng advocates that all the company stuff should follow the opinions of Confucius, “When you see a wise person better than you, try to equal them; when you see an unwise person not as well as people expect, reflect upon yourself to see if you have any flaws in your character or any inadequacy in your work in order to improve or
correct them.” When mistakes occur, admit them and try to correct them. When the others point out your mistakes in a polite and hospitable way, you should respond in the same nice manner and proper attitude, because they remind us of our mistakes for hoping us to perceive them and get rid of them. The success can be ensured only under the condition that every member of the company can cultivate themselves just as the enlightening remarks argued by Zengzi:[3], “Daily, I examine myself from three perspectives. Have I done my best when doing thing for others? Have I been trustworthy in dealing with friends? Have I revised the lessons I have been taught?” Zeng especially emphasizes that to err is human. Therefore, as long as the person dare to cultivate themselves by making practical self-criticism and try never to repeat the mistake, not only will he not lose face, but will save face on the contrary.

**Achieving Peace and Harmony by Means of Communication**

Chinese people have a high degree of autonomy, preferring making decisions on their own rather than to be manipulated by others. But it does not mean they may ignore the healthy communication with their superiors. In fact, it is a good practice for a responsible employee or subordinate to keep superiors informed about their work progress. Zeng emphasizes that a person, no matter how carefully he does the work, is certain to encounter problems, such as whether the work can be completed on schedule, or the result is to be good or not, etc. These are what the leaders also concern most. However, perhaps the superior is in a dilemma whether to ask his subordinates or not about their work. On such occasions it’s best for the subordinates to actively report them without delay in order to make the superior feel comfortable. Zeng suggests that the subordinates can make regular and timely report to keep their superior informed of their progress, such as the challenges they have met and whether they have successfully solved them, or whether they are able to complete the project on time, etc. What’s more, as a subordinate, he should put himself in his superior’s shoes to consider his position and “face”, instead of making him embarrassed. That means that a competent subordinate must respect the superior, giving him adequate “face”, considering the pressures he has given to his superior [4].

**Achieving Peace and Harmony by Paying Attention to Face Problem**

Being self-restraint is very important for a manager which can be dealt with from the perspective of Anren (Qijia), namely to bring peace and happiness to others.

Zeng argues that as a manager, when not satisfied with someone else’s performances, he shouldn’t criticize him or reason with him directly. A better approach is to save “face” for him by giving him certain hints, making him to become conscious of the problem and adjust his words and improve his actions.

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3Zengzi Was an Influential Chinese Philosopher and Disciple of Confucius.
afterwards. For anyone can make some honest mistakes in life. To be criticized on the spot would make him think that he is prejudiced against and may go to the other extreme by quarreling with the superior or even resent the superior by insisting on his wrong doing. Therefore, when faced with such a situation, the best thing for the superior to do is to restrain himself from criticizing the person on the spot and try to put himself in their shoes and realize that mistakes would happen to anybody, including himself. Thus, he would try harder to uphold subordinates’ face by having a private talk in proper time. Chinese people care greatly about their self-image. When Chinese people feel their face has been upheld, they will normally act more reasonably and conscientiously [5]. In reality, Chinese people treasure the belief: “give face to the others and they will be sensible and considerate”. Thus, the polite wording is always necessary for a manager when talking or discussing something with his subordinates, and the subordinates should give the same polite response. To Zeng, nothing needs to be said very straight and out-loud.

**Achieving Peace and Harmony by Respecting Individual Differences**

Zeng claims that the goal of “bringing peace and comfort to the others” is to unite people not only in action but in spirit as well, thereby creating a kind of harmony needed to achieve successes in doing numerous tasks of the organization. Since the members of the company are of a family, the concerted effort generated from such harmony can create the really unified power in realizing the purpose.

“Harmony”, in the Chinese mindsets, is equal to wholeness. From the quantitative angle, a “whole” is the sum of many individuals or parts. From the qualitative angle, the “whole” is bigger than the mere part. When applied to the management, it refers to the concerted effort of the organization members in terms of achieving the same goals.

Confucius said, “The gentleman aims at harmony, and not at uniformity. The mean man aims at uniformity, and not at harmony.” No two persons are the same. Blindly unanimous compliance only leads to failing to bring their initiative into full play. So a good manager should respect the individual differences rather than disregard them, in order to bring out the harmony through reasonable strategy.

Zeng makes a very proper comparison to demonstrate the individual differences. He claims that it is just like cooking soup or playing a tune: soup would not be made by adding only water, different ingredients are needed to make delicious soup. In the same way, a tune cannot be created by repeating a single key, which would be sounding extremely dull. In the same way, only when individual differences are recognized, respected and tolerated, can an organic and harmonious whole be produced.

In fact, the focus of people-oriented Chinese management lies in “seeking differences on the common ground, and common ground in differences”; in other words, reconcile contradictions and resolve conflicts when they occur by bridging their differences. While the goal of “Anren” is fixed, that is “bringing peace and
comfort to people in order to achieve harmony”, the manager needs to adopt various measures according to the differences in participants, situations, places and surroundings.

Achieving Peace and Harmony by Standing up and Admitting Mistakes First

Whenever a mistake occurs, the superior should be the first to stand up and shoulder responsibility, which will relieve others of their nervousness, and make them more willing to admit their own mistakes later. Following the superior, the employees are able to be brave enough to acknowledge their shortcomings and mistakes, it will become easier for them to know well what kind of mistakes they have made, what kind of responsibility they should take, and what kind of work they should do to correct them. Besides, other comrades in the group can draw lessons from it so as to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future. Contrarily, if the superior holds a defensive attitude and puts the blame on others, then his men would follow the example, then nobody would realize what really goes wrong, and most probably would commit the same mistakes again. So, don’t cast the first stone and shift the blame onto others, which can do nothing but force the others to defend themselves by evading the responsibility or even turn against you and reprimand you.

The Chinese believe in the power of the collective, success cannot be achieved by only one person, in the same way, work failure cannot, most probably, be brought about by one individual either, but by a group of people except with different degrees. Now that the responsibility should be taken by all, so if there is the first one stepping out to admit the mistake, others will be encouraged to follow him. Mencius’ teaching may help to shed some light on this problem, as he proposes the principle that “the superior should take initiative in doing things, hence setting a model for his subordinates to follow”. Supposing the superior takes the initiative in admitting mistakes, the subordinates and the other employees would view following the superior to shoulder responsibility as an honorable deed, thus eager to do introspection to timely correct the mistakes they have made [6]. Even Confucius wishes that he could avoid “making grave mistake”, which shows that it’s quite natural for people to make errors. Through a group discussion and introspection, the mistake can be identified more easily and corrected more effectively.

Achieving Peace and Harmony by Sharing Achievements with Everyone

Zeng emphasizes that when there are achievements, a competent manager will share them with everyone in a courteous and modest way. Only everyone has a share, the achievements will be more ready to be acknowledged. Chinese society treasures harmonious environment, where everybody feels happy and relaxed by sharing the merit together.
However, if sharing is replaced by grabbing, nobody is happy but very angry for not being treated equally, because taking credit to oneself will cause fierce rivalry in the company, irritating those who are involved in it but fail to get the benefits. So, Zeng thinks that when holding a meeting for reviewing past performance, the leader should cherish one thing in mind, that is credit ought to be modestly shared with others, particularly with the complainers if possible, while mistakes and responsibility should be shouldered first by him, even though he should not have to.

CONCLUSIONS

Chinese people highly value Confucius’s philosophy “Cultivate one’s moral self, regulate one’s family, maintain one’s state rightly and make the world peaceful”. Zeng applies Confucius philosophical thinking to the management and makes a convincing explanation about how to self-cultivate oneself and bring peace and happiness to others in order to achieve the harmony of the organization and the company. Chinese style management is a people-oriented management, so both the stuff and the superior, especially the superior’s improvement and betterment are considered to be of great importance. This paper introduces and analyzes Zeng’s opinion about the definition of the management, how to make a self-cultivation and how to achieve harmony in an organization, all of which are carried out under the guidance of the classical philosophical thinking.

Chinese people love peace, and never think of invading other countries militarily, diplomatically, economically or politically, on the contrary, we have always been pursuing the strategy of making friends with peoples all over the world. Zeng argues that Chinese people are eager to do their part towards the world’s peace and stability. So, to set “peace and harmony” as the ultimate goal of the Chinese style management meets the demand of Chinese culture.

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REFERENCES