The impact of Chinese cultural values on the arts management process

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Key words Arts management, Chinese cultural values, passive resistance techniques, vertical chain of command (VCC), state owned enterprise (SOE)

Abstract This paper is based on the findings of a combined field research study and historical-comparative research analysis. It was undertaken by the researcher during 2003/2004, whilst working for a State Owned Enterprise (SOE) engaged in tertiary visual arts education, in South East China. The research focuses on the premise that Chinese cultural values shape the decision-making process, inter-personnel communication and relationships within a Chinese visual arts organization; specifically in terms of decision making, conflict management and consensus. Three significant characteristics dominated the research findings: a strong adherence to a vertical chain of command (VCC), highly restrictive and controlling forms of information sharing, and a strong dependence and emphasis on relationships. These characteristics are considered by the researcher to reflect the strong contextual framework in which the Chinese arts manager operates, and suggest a direct link to traditional Chinese cultural values.

Biography Since 1999 Joy has worked on various arts cross-cultural collaborations between China and Western Australia, Greece and Holland. She has lectured on arts management and project management at several universities and art colleges in Shanghai, where she continues her teaching and professional practice in arts management.

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Introduction

Since 1979 China has realised a significant increase in cultural exchange with other nations. By 1995 China had signed cultural cooperation treaties with one hundred and three countries, and has since developed close cultural ties with over one hundred and sixty countries (Chinese Consulate, Melbourne 2002). The export of Chinese culture and the production of international visual art events is flourishing. Shanghai for example, holds events such as the Biennale, International Art Festival, International Art Fair and the recent Annual Art salon. However, arts management as a professionally recognized discipline, is still an alien concept in China (China. Org. CN 2002).

Amongst several Chinese art theorists, there is growing concern that a lack of professional management training is restraining development of the arts and cultural industries (China. Org. CN 2002). In China most large galleries and museums are still state owned. Nearly all exhibitions and events are subject to government monitoring (Starr 1997: 242). Many of these organizations continue working to Soviet or traditional Chinese principles whereby the leader controls everything. These factors may have a dramatic impact on how visual arts venues and projects are managed.
Farh et al. (2004: 250) argue that culture manipulates people’s belief systems, which in turn determines their choice of behaviour within a given work context. For example, from a Chinese mindset, conflict is viewed as harmful to society. Therefore, in contrast to many western organizations, there is less inclination to take a confrontational approach, which may contribute in the western model to more individual responsibility and choice (Chow & Ding 2002: 669). It would appear that the search for consensus and interpersonal harmony are dominant factors in Chinese organizational behaviour.

Farh et al. also believe that culture defines the benchmark for our perception of organizational competence (2004: 250). Thus we can argue that cultural history shapes the way art is interacted with and the context in which it is referenced (Pick & Anderton 1996: 53). Thus, the cultural character of the Chinese people, how their education system functions, government policies that control both the arts and cultural heritage and the general distribution of wealth within China, are all likely to have a dramatic impact on the evolution and administration of the arts. In this sense, arts managers are like all other managers; their work practices are highly dependent upon and connected to historically evolved work systems and procedures.

This paper focuses therefore on the premise that Chinese cultural values shape the decision-making process, inter-personnel communication and relationships within a Chinese visual arts organization; specifically in terms of decision making, conflict management and consensus.

**Comparative History Review**

Contemporary theoretical research suggests that Chinese cultural values have remained relatively stable over time, even in the midst of considerable social, economic and political upheaval. To understand the impact of cultural values on the mindset of the Chinese people, the evolution of contemporary Chinese organizational management practices, decision making, conflict management and consensus; it is pertinent to examine some of the key characteristics of Chinese traditional philosophical and political thought.

**Chinese Traditional Philosophy**

China had entered the Iron Age by the time of the Zhou Dynasty (770-221BC). During this period there was extensive political unrest and resultant chaos, which actively encouraged diverse philosophical discourse amongst scholars and philosophers. Known as the ‘Contention of a hundred schools of thought’ the central discourse of the Zhou Dynasty evolved around the need to improve society during these times of anarchy, political solutions and theories concerning the creation of utopias (Warner & Zhu 2003; Low 2001). This created significant advancement in the form of science and technology (hardware), philosophy, and strategic theorisation (software) (Low 2001: 6). Subsequently four major streams of philosophical thought emerged: Confucianism, Taoism, Te Ching and Chinese War Strategies such as Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. These doctrines came to dominate Chinese traditional thinking, and are considered, amongst modern intellectuals and researchers, to have had the most impact on Chinese contemporary society, including the cultivation of organizational management practices (Warner & Zhu 2003: 24).

A noteworthy characteristic which emerged from this period, is the perception that knowledge is holistic, which compares to the western notion that knowledge is a series of different domains, each with a different set of constructs. As a consequence of this holistic approach, various Chinese philosophies have influenced each other, and in some cases have merged themes (Warner & Zhu 2003: 24). Two major themes can be traced through Chinese traditional thinking, and are considered to have a strong impact on contemporary society, especially organizational/
management practices. The first is a strong sense of morality, the other, the cultivation of harmony; both of which can be found in Confucianism and Taoism. According to Confucius, the correct form of governance was by teaching people through a moral education, not by constructing legislation and law enforcement,

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\text{Govern the people by regulations, keep order among them by chastisements, and they will flee from you, and lose all self-respect. Govern them by moral force, keep order among them by ritual and they will keep their self-respect and come to you of their own accord. (Confucius 1996: 13)}
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The Chinese respect for authority, age and social norms can be traced back to the Confucian concept of Li (a moral code realised through rituals and proprieties). The principle of Li provides guidelines by which the Chinese behave as individuals and as members of society (Hong & Engestrom 2004: 553). Thus social duty and communication channels are strictly defined. These rules govern conduct, the correct way to speak, and leadership by example (Hong & Engestrom 2004: 553). The ultimate purpose is to create conditions under which both a sense of honour and shame is cultivated. According to Confucius this leads to individuals performing good deeds of their own accord (Warner & Zhu 2003: 25) and affirms a philosophical position that man is innately good. This innate sense of man’s goodness, a strong connection with family and interconnected patriarchal relationships, fosters an egalitarian mindset in the social and organizational lives of Chinese people. As stated by Hong and Engestrom (2004: 554),

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\text{“The Chinese tend to be very sensitive to their hierarchical position in social structures and will behave in ways designed to display, enhance, and protect both the image and the reality of this position”.}
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Lao Tzu, a contemporary of Confucius, believed the correct way to behave was through effortless activity (Wuwei), where a person followed the path of fate rather than self determination (Warner 2003: 26). The foundation of Taoism is based on ‘oneness’ and ‘yin-yang’,

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\text{Tao gave birth to the One; the one gave birth successfully to two things, three things, up to ten thousand. These ten thousand creatures cannot turn their backs to the shade without having the sun on their bellies, and it is on this blending of the breaths that their harmony depends. (Lao Tzu 1997: 91)}
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According to Warner and Zhu this teaching from the ‘Tao Te Ching’ refers to the basic principle of the universe, which supports the polar opposites of ‘yin’ and ‘yang’. ‘Yin’, the feminine, represents the dark forces and ‘yang’, the masculine, the light forces. Nothing can be seen or understood in isolation, but in all things there is a constant

The Pre-Reform Period 1949 – 1979

Before the 1980s there was no free movement of labour in China. Employees were allocated to SOEs through the ‘iron rice bowl’ (Tie fan wan) employment system (Lewis 2003: 42). The origin of this system can be traced back to the 1950s and was heavily influenced by the Soviet Russian management model and Japanese employment practices derived from the Manchurian occupation (Warner 2004; Hassard 2004; Lewis 2003; Ding et al. 2000). The ‘iron rice bowl’ system, established to guarantee life time employment for urban dwellers, was implemented through a cellular network called a Danwei (Li, Kleiner 2001: 63). A Danwei owned property, constructed its own dwellings and had all the facilities found in any community. The Danwei was unique in that the facilities were available exclusively to its own members, and was isolated from other communities and the rural population (Li, Kleiner 2001: 59-60). The government,
through a highly centralised administration system, controlled wages, housing, welfare and social benefits, thus organizing the entire needs of the residents. Human resource management (HRM) systems provided secure employment, and maintained a uniform living standard for employees of the state, by way of egalitarian incentive frameworks and benefit programmes (Mitsuhashi et al. 2000: 198). Within this HRM framework rewards were allocated to benefit the whole group with no consideration of individual merit. A 'cradle to grave' social welfare system was created with neither redundancies nor dismissals.

From 1949 to 1979 the training of Chinese workers was controlled by the central government, which also planned and allocated all work and corresponding job positions (Hassard et al. 2004). Administrative staff received training that was strong in political ideology, but weak in technical skills. The Communist party line placed a higher regard on politically pure personnel as opposed to technically skilled but non-politically pure personnel (Lewis 2003: 47). This resulted in professionals being replaced with non-professionals and specialists managed by unskilled personal. Such policy was rooted in the socialist ideology that, "everyone was equal because everyone was an equal master of the country and making the same contribution through different posts" (Li, Kleiner 2001: 62). It was noted that this system produced employees with low morale and inefficient work systems (Lewis 2003: 47).

Child (1991) claims that inadequately constructed management systems, which undermine Chinese organizational performance, can be traced back to the pre-reform period. He stresses that the lack of independence in Chinese organizations prevents the evolvement of accountability and self-responsibility (Child 1991: 95). For example, large volumes of paper work are created in Chinese organizations to secure approval of personal actions and as a means of self protection (ibid: 98). Such organizational behaviour is encouraged by a top to bottom model of government in the form experienced at the time of the Cultural Revolution (ibid: 96). Child concludes that both job and work groups within Chinese organizations have exact and discernable limits which reinforces a narrow perception of what individuals believe their work duties to be. When combined with an organization employing a Vertical Chain of Command (VCC) there is a tendency to regard information as a personal privilege (Child 1991: 99). This restrictive practice, Child (ibid) contends, has a strong bias on the approach a Chinese employee takes towards information sharing, which has a direct impact on decision making, conflict management and consensus.

**What does this mean for contemporary management?**

Extensive research by Tjosvold et al. on Chinese conflict management, suggests the “value of harmony” can be viewed as the need to avoid conflict (2001: 166). High power, distance and hierarchical values, pressure subordinates to subdue their personal feelings for the common good of the group (Tjosvold et al. 2001: 166). Furthermore, managers and their subordinates retain a strong commitment to interpersonal relationships and prefer indirect ways to negotiate their conflicts; thus avoiding assertive behaviour (Tjosvold et al. 2001: 166). Earlier studies by Tjosvold, concluded that: when ‘face’ (Mianzi) is confirmed rather than affronted, it greatly aids Chinese people to discuss their problems. The inclination to ‘save face’; to persuade and influence; and the communication of interpersonal warmth, were seen to assist a spirit of cooperation where open minded and opposing views could be discussed productively (Tjosvold et al. 2001: 166).

Due to a strong emphasis placed upon harmony and the principles of ‘yin’ and ‘yang’ within Chinese society, a large amount of human effort is required to counterbalance any tendencies by individuals to move from one extreme position to another, within the workplace. This balancing act is demanded by an organizational culture which seeks to retain a visible and psychological, if not accurate, perception of stability within the work environment. Consequently, the indeterminate nature of external and internal
environmental factors compels them to adopt highly flexible strategies in order to survive in the workplace. The result of combining different forms of traditional doctrines provides Chinese organizations with guidelines for developing strategic business objectives (Warner & Zhu 2003: 29).

In exploring the impact of Confucian and Taoist doctrines on the decision making process, one could argue that the Confucian principle of benevolence manifests itself in Chinese contemporary organizations, leading to the perception that one’s workplace is also one’s family. This sense of family within the workplace is organized according to relationships; the interplay between benevolence and obligation helps achieve balance and harmony. In return employees will maintain a high commitment to the organization, provided they perceive that both the organization and management follow the family/relationship principle. Employees benefit with employment security, bonus and reward schemes, and training. From the employer’s perspective the worker’s behaviour manifests itself by self-discipline and the sacrifice of individual needs, for the common good of the organization and its management (Warner & Zhu 2003; Chen et al. 2002). The core function of these principles helps ensure a peaceful and organized work environment which, within a Chinese context, creates psychological attachment amongst individuals. This can be viewed as a matter of personal loyalty and not one of impersonal obligation (Chen et al. 2002).

Research by Chen et al. (2002), conducted on Chinese managers and their employees, reveals personal values have little impact in controlling and framing personal behaviour in the workplace. Their research evidence suggests that loyalty to the leader far outweighs loyalty to the organization. Chen et al. believe this helps to explain why work performance is driven by blind loyalty to the manager, rather than necessarily empathy with the manager’s values (2002: 353). Further evidence by Chen et al. suggests consistency with the argument that reciprocity and role obligations are highly important within Chinese society, and that,

“In a relation-orientated society, the supervisor may be a more important factor in influencing employee behaviour and attitudes at work, rather than the organization as an impersonal entity” (2002: 353).

Thus, it could be asserted that where there are deep rooted cultural beliefs which foreground the importance of relationships, there is a greater focus on how a manager operates. This is best understood in terms of the manager’s moral behaviour and organizational relationships i.e. within a contextual basis, and is less concerned with the end result. In reference to arts management practice, this reveals itself in the tendency to keep relationships amongst stakeholders as harmonious as possible, even at the risk of compromising the integrity of the end result. This form of behaviour is ‘context’ based, as opposed to the ‘content’ orientation of western art managers (see Scott 2004: 72-73).

Methodology

A field study was conducted by the researcher in a State Owned Enterprise (SOE): an arts-based academic institution in South East China, where the researcher was a resident lecturer. The researcher is Anglo Australian, and has worked on cross cultural arts projects for five years, with the academic institution on which this research is based. As a matter of respect to this institution however, the researcher wishes to maintain the institution’s anonymity. Due to the sensitive and sometimes personal nature of the situational and relational contexts under investigation, a decision was made not to conduct interviews or surveys of any kind, but to rely on ‘first hand observation’ as the research method. The study employed a qualitative approach to the collection and analysis of the data generated.

The focus of the field study was orientated around a major arts project, hosted and managed by the institution. The project management team for the project comprised ten
permanent members, including the researcher as an integral member of the project team. Members came from various departments throughout the institution: administration, foreign affairs, design, digital media, fine art theory/history, art gallery administration, plus some post-graduate students. This multi-discipline team was led by a Senior Project Manager (SPM) with a middle manager as second in charge. Neither the SPM nor the middle manager had any formal training in management. The middle manager had fifteen years experience in international exchange arts projects and exhibition management, and worked closely with the author, co-managing several cross-cultural projects between Western Australia and China. The SPM had considerable experience in local government public art projects and was a senior board director on many key Chinese arts organizations. The remaining members of the team had post-graduate degrees in the visual arts, but (aside from the researcher), had no training in project or business management.

The activities observed were mainly concerned with project development and exhibition management procedures. Activities were usually in the form of meetings or hands on operational situations and were documented by the researcher in a journal. As a matter of respect, conversation amongst team members was conducted in English in the researcher’s presence. However, an interpreter was present during formal meetings, for the benefit of the researcher, who did not speak Chinese and the SPM who did not speak English. The research consisted of a field study in the form of direct observation/participation of the project by the researcher. The findings generated were then analysed by the researcher, in the context of an historical-comparative literature review.

Research findings and discussion

In response to the research statement on decision making, conflict management and consensus in a Chinese SOE, the findings suggest there are several implications for the organization in its ability to make competent decisions and facilitate general consensus. The evidence suggests that a dominant VCC appears to have a strong influence on how information is shaped, negotiated, distributed and controlled.

The impact of the VCC on work performance and competency

From the author’s western perspective, the project team’s ability to make informed decisions was significantly undermined by the VCC. This appeared to be a consistent problem from senior management down. The Chinese authoritarian communication technique of moving up and down the VCC, in order to facilitate decision making, frequently gave rise to detrimental consequences. As anticipated, the VCC affected the pace at which the project moved forward and deadlines were difficult to achieve. On many occasions deadlines were met by making last minute compromises and rushing work through to the detriment of the project. This encouraged an environment where lack of attention to detail seemed to be common practice, mainly because individuals had little control over the outcome of their labour. For example, during the project a team member failed to prepare catalogue design proofs which was only discovered a week before opening night. At this late stage, the Senior Project Manager (SPM) stepped in and reassigned the work to an outside junior designer, expecting work to progress night and day until the task was completed. Such a greatly reduced time scale left little room to produce a genuinely professional finish. The core team members further hindered the problem, by feeling overly sympathetic for the junior designer. Unwilling to increase the designer’s workload, the team refrained from being too critical of the proofs. Thus, the finished catalogue was compromised by a lack of attention to design principles, page layout, proof reading and general editing.

The attitude of the team illustrated a relational approach to work as opposed to a task based approach, signifying a contextual response to work issues. Neither the SPM nor members of the team raised any public opinions, concerning the original designer’s
mishandling of the situation. Nor did anyone question why the situation had not been monitored more closely by the SPM and the problem identified much earlier. Yet there was much evidence to suggest that team members were not satisfied with the way the situation was handled. Team members were frequently heard to remonstrate with their peers, expressing general feelings of frustration and discontent concerning their perceived inability to work more effectively on this particular exhibition. Although there was much dissatisfaction with project planning and co-ordination, there appeared to be no attempt by team members to rectify the situation, by taking the issue further with senior management. There was no project review on completion, even though it was clearly evident that changes were required if they were not to repeat the same mistakes. The attitude of both the middle manager and the team members was passive. A strong sentiment expressed to the author was that action was futile, and against everyone’s long term interests.

These findings support the theories of Wood et al. (2001) and Huo & Si (2001), that Chinese traditional and socialist values combined with a strong VCC, have a powerful impact on contemporary behaviour and attitudes in the workplace. The findings of this field study also suggest that a VCC can have a negative impact on arts management procedures and implementation. As such these findings endorse the fieldwork of Child (1991) that a VCC cultivates a work environment which is unable to nurture or sustain accountable and self-responsible work practices; furthermore such a closed system encourages and actively promotes person-orientated behaviour as opposed to task-orientated behaviour.

The necessity of experienced boundary personnel to negotiate the Vertical Chain of Command (VCC)

There are many levels of power within the organization’s VCC. Such a system takes a long time to reach consensus, and once agreement has been reached it becomes almost impossible to make adjustments. The middle manager (boundary personnel) was the only person in the team who had the authority, skill and time to negotiate the VCC. He had excellent interpersonal communication skills, flexibility, the ability to communicate at all levels, from workers to the highest leaders within the organization, and due to the cultivation of an extensive network of relationships, was able to perform his tasks within a relational context and thus make things happen. The middle manager was, in reality, the overall coordinator. He negotiated and liaised with the VCC and the SPM, implementing the wishes of the SPM in a format acceptable by the VCC. For example, in order to secure logistical, human and financial resources, the middle manager’s project plan contained just enough information to gain approval from the VCC. Additionally he ensured there was little or no likelihood of any major changes, requiring further negotiation. At this juncture, the middle manager’s skills came into play. Once the project was approved, the only way to guarantee a successful outcome was to work outside the official organizational structure, utilizing relationships, building bridges and negotiating for resources. This is known as ‘glue making’. (The Chinese refer to this type of working process as ‘glue making’ - or how to make things stick).

The researcher concluded that highly adept boundary personnel can cultivate and retain power, by virtue of the fact that they can indirectly control the process through the VCC. Through their interaction with the VCC, boundary personnel can have a direct influence on how a project is shaped, accepted or rejected. They can enhance their power within the organization, by knowing how and where to secure confirmation and information within the VCC, and by using their relationship networks. In this sense, the evolution of an arts project is dependent not only upon the SPM’s agreement, but also on the boundary personnel’s interest and ability to secure agreement from within the VCC, maintain cohesion within the project team and communication with external parties (i.e. ‘glue-making’).

This type of behaviour appears to be consistent with traditional Chinese cultural values and resultant behaviour patterns, which reflect the principles of yin and yang, and the
teachings of Confucianism. The findings correspond with the research of Warner and Zhu (2003), which emphasise a need by the Chinese to maintain a sense of balance in all things. This means that such a cultural mindset on organizational practice, endeavours to cultivate tactical policies, which offset any movements between one extreme and another. In turn this compels the Chinese to adopt highly flexible thinking strategies, as illustrated in the behaviour of the middle manager, when going about his

The relationship between the VCC and the flow of organizational information

The necessity in the Chinese work environment to maintain harmony was found in this field study to have a dramatic impact on information distribution. At times the need to maintain harmony also had a negative effect on the arts management process and ability to achieve consensus.

Confucius taught that authority is to be both honoured and obeyed. In Chinese culture this concept has evolved into a set of conditions that are directly associated with speaking; namely that not all individuals have the right to speak (see Hong & Engestrom 2004: 567). The author’s observations of the behaviour of the project team members would appear to agree with this. In order to speak in China, a person must have seniority, experience, authority, technical skill and knowledge. The following scenario supports the notion that, as a direct consequence of this form of thinking, the Chinese people have adopted listening as a dominant form of communication (Hong & Engestrom 2004: 567).

The general atmosphere in meetings between the SPM and his team was one of personalised informality. Superficially everyone appeared to be relaxed. The SPM often communicated using humour and open body language, with much emphasis being placed on equality and cooperation for the common goal. Conversely, despite this congenial atmosphere, only the SPM spoke in any great detail about major aspects of the project. The majority of team members engaged in what could only be defined as passive listening. Team members would listen to the SPM, but would rarely make any work related comments; neither asking questions about their particular tasks, nor the project in general.

Team members did not openly share information with each other, nor did they report directly to the SPM in front of each other. Even the middle manager, with whom the author worked closely, never reported directly to the SPM in front of the author or other members of the team. Thus, in this context, information gained at a horizontal level was considered to be a personal rather than a collective possession. This was predominantly so when dealing with multi-discipline team members in circumstances where information was necessary to realise the success of the project. The only interactive communication where specific information was received and addressed as noted above, was between the SPM and the team member involved, on a one to one basis.

Therefore the findings of this field study also endorse Child’s (1991) theory that within Chinese organizations there is no flow of information at a horizontal level, this being regarded as a personal privilege. Furthermore, the research conclusions support the notion that passive listening attitudes are inherent in organizations with a strict VCC (Child 1991). There appeared to be no concept of ‘inter-dependence’ amongst team members and their departments. In fact there was a general lack of interest as to how the members fit within the strategic structure of the organization as a whole.

Controlling information at a horizontal level as a means of power

Information sharing is the most important facet of the communication process. As previously noted there was virtually no flow of information amongst departments at a horizontal level. Multi-discipline team members refrained from involvement in project
Conclusions

The intention of this research paper was to demonstrate how Chinese cultural values shape the decision-making process, inter-personnel communication and relationships within a Chinese visual arts organization; specifically in terms of decision making, conflict management and consensus. Three significant characteristics dominated the research findings:

- strong adherence to a vertical chain of command (VCC)
- highly restrictive and controlling forms of information sharing
- strong dependence and emphasis on relationships

These characteristics are considered by the author to reflect the strong contextual framework in which the Chinese arts manager operates, and suggests a direct link to traditional cultural values. The findings support the conclusions of Westwood and Kirkbride (1999: 559), that cultural values are retained, even in the midst of chaotic times; thus indicating that cultural values can continue to persist in the mindsets and behaviour patterns of any given society. In China, this can be understood in reference to the high importance placed upon relationships. For instance a great deal of time and
energy, as revealed in this field study, was spent by team members paying attention to people’s feelings and relationships. Consistent with the research of Ward et al. (2002), cultural values were seen to have a powerful influence over the team’s work procedures and behaviour. Furthermore, cultural values were responsible for cultivating subversive tendencies in the team, such as passive resistance techniques. In this particular case, such behaviour undermined the final delivery and presentation of the project.

This research study has also emphasised the key importance of boundary personnel within Chinese organizations, particularly State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) with a strong vertical chain of command (VCC). The findings suggest that these positions require high levels of experience, skills and knowledge, not only in their own discipline, but in their ability to understand and negotiate the VCC. The author had the impression that uniquely amongst team members, the middle manager (boundary personnel) gained a high level of satisfaction and empowerment from his ability to negotiate the VCC. This manifests itself in the middle manager having more control over the project than other team members, with the exception of the Senior Project Manager (SPM).

These findings suggest that, in comparison with western management practice, Chinese arts managers are not currently in a position where they can easily cultivate and sustain self-responsible and accountable work practices. The highly regulated VCC, coupled with an inability by team members to share information freely, hinders the management process and undermines the quality of work produced. Hence, on many occasions compromise is the only plausible option.

As China moves towards further modernization, there are major challenges to be faced by arts organizations and their staff. The greatest challenges, based on the conclusions of this paper, will be the acceptance of individual accountability and responsibility, and learning how to develop effective horizontal communication channels, particularly in the areas of openly sharing information.

References


