

The Challenge of Mission-Driven Business Education in China:

A Response to Henri-Claude de Bettignies

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To speak about the complex reality of China in meaningful terms is a very difficult task, and to reflect on business education and its mission in this context is an even bigger challenge. We are very fortunate to have Professor Henri-Claude de Bettignies sharing his experiences and thoughts with us. For a significant part of his life, Professor de Bettignies has been engaged in understanding business in East Asia and China and building bridges between the East and the West. He has showed a strong commitment to assist Chinese business people in raising their ethical awareness and to help steer them through a great deal of complex ethical situations. Thank you for being with us.

Before discussing several more specific points, I would like to emphasize the importance of what Henri-Claude said in his introduction. In fact, China has been facing enormous challenges in her development over the last 30 years, and it is hard to overestimate the gravity of those multiple difficulties. Unfortunately, China watchers and critics from abroad too often do not grasp the complexity of China's process of reform and opening-up and too easily slide into China bashing that deflects the attention from the real problems that exist. The Chinese are still mindful of the invasion of Western powers in the 19th and 20th centuries. Thus, when the West thinks it important to criticize China, the criticism should be done with empathy and politeness.

Henri-Claude's presentation is rich of valuable observations and offers many interesting points for discussion. It also echoes recent criticism business schools have encountered in the West after the series of business scandals at the turn of the century. I fully agree that business schools should be considered as agents of change and bear heavy moral responsibility, given their impact on present and future decision makers in China as well as in other countries. I also agree that the Chinese government, and I would add the Communist Party, play a dominant, sometimes invisible, role in the "transition" from a centrally-planned to a decentralized market economy "with Chinese characteristics." In my teaching of business ethics to Chinese MBA students at CEIBS in Shanghai I too was confronted with a widespread attitude of ethical relativism and crude pragmatism (which, of course, is far away from a proper understanding of utilitarianism). Moreover, I also believe that Confucius's message is still alive, despite the horrendous attempts at wiping it out during the Cultural Revolution. Today it enjoys even the active promotion by the Chinese government. Let me now turn to the questions that prompted my special attention.

My first question: Is there “a values vacuum” in China?

In his introduction Henri-Claude speaks of “the ‘values vacuum’ [that] has induced a money making race where greed could become the accepted means to the glory of getting rich.” And: “Only material success – measured through the yardstick of money - seems to be driving individual behavior.” Indeed, there is a lot of talk about the “values vacuum” or “ethical vacuum” in China, particularly by non-Chinese China watchers. But is this a correct characterization of the general ethical climate in China today, apart from the “bad apples” that certainly exist? I suggest that there is still a strong ethical fabric, clearly distinct from the understanding of “value-free” business in the West (see Enderle 2005). It is amazing with how much enthusiasm the Chinese reacted to the recent catastrophic earthquake in Sichuan province, not only citizens and government but also businesses and business schools. It is also interesting to note that the Chinese government, in contrast to Western governments, does not shy away from public exhortations to behave ethically, as, for instance, President Hu Jintao did with his eight Dos and Don’ts in January 2006.

The ethical fabric in China is shaped by many traditions: The San Fa (that is, the old three philosophies of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism), the socialist ethics promulgated since 1949, and numerous Western and other influences. This does not mean that China has a unified and consistent ethical understanding. Indeed, one can observe not only moral pluralism but also much moral confusion (which, by the way, also characterizes other countries in varying degrees). In my view, the question is less whether or not ethics matters – it does, also in business – and more what kind of ethics should be applied. As in Western countries, China has to deal with moral pluralism and build up “an overlapping consensus” (John Rawls). Fortunately, we can find many common features shared by different traditions, for instance between Confucian and Christian ethics about the market economy (see Lam 2006, Enderle 1997). Renowned scholars of Confucianism (De Bary et al. 1998, Bauer et al. 1999, Bell 2000) also contend that human rights are compatible with Confucianism. No doubt, to accept the liberal idea of an overlapping consensus is more difficult for orthodox Marxist.

I would like to conclude this first point with a short comment on the frequently mentioned “obsession of making money” and “obsession of technology.” While fully aware of the dangers of those obsessions, I want to recall the historical situation when Deng Xiaoping, after 1978, launched the economic reform. After the traumatic experiences of the civil war of the Cultural Revolution, making money was a liberating experience because it meant moving away from class struggle and killing neighbors. We might remember similar experiences in Japan and Germany after the Second World War. As for the obsession of technology characteristic of numerous public and corporate policies, admittedly it has often strangled the quest for meaning. But there is also a positive side of science and technology; that is, it provides a relatively neutral ground which is less contested by opposing ideologies.

My second question: How to define and make explicit the mission of a business school?

In line with the main theme of our conference, Henri-Claude discusses the challenge of mission-driven business education in China. He affirms business schools must be mission-driven in both the pursuit of their educational objectives and in the function as change agents. In what does this mission consist? In a nutshell, in teaching individual and corporate responsibility.

“Responsibility” is a key concept of contemporary morality that characterizes a practical-ethical attitude and also includes important theoretical features. Henri-Claude points to the ethical dimension of leadership, the duty to society, the commitment to sustainable development, and the accountability for the far-reaching, even global consequences of corporate and individual behavior. He also insists that business schools have a duty to make their mission explicit.

Let's compare this vision with a few mission statements of top business schools in

China. Guanghua School of Management at Peking University:

Our Mission is to advance management knowledge and develop business leaders for China and the global society.

As a leading business school in China, Guanghua School commits to provide the local and international business community with cutting-edge management knowledge and services. With Peking University's heritage of innovation and social responsibility, our faculty continues to serve the nation with aspiration and dedication. We educate business leaders who make a difference to the world.

Antai College of Economics & Management, Shanghai Jiaotong University:

The Antai College of Economics & Management, Shanghai Jiaotong University, aims to develop the highest-level managerial talent, with totally international viewpoints and capacities, to compete in the global economy. While focusing on academic research, the college is also committed to serving national and international corporations and institutions, through leading-edge consulting and research, as well as development of outstanding managers of the future. Already a top-ranked school in China, we strive to be recognized as among the top business schools in Asia, and to become famous worldwide.

Mission of the China Europe International Business School (CEIBS):

To support China's economic development and to further China's integration into the world economy by preparing highly competent, internationally-oriented business leaders capable of working within the Chinese economic environment, while adapting to the driving forces of business globalization, international competition, and international co-operation.

A couple of observations are noteworthy: Each statement covers both the national and international realm of business and professes to serve the country of China, Guanghua School and Antai College (but not CEIBS) adding service to the global society, international business community, international corporations and institutions. All three schools aim to develop outstanding business leaders or managers who make a difference to the world, are of the highest talents to compete in the global economy and highly competent and capable of working within China and adapting to the changing international environment. Except for invoking Peking

University's heritage of social responsibility, no school promulgates individual and corporate responsibility, and moral language is consistently avoided. Is this only a consequence of so-called "moral reticence," or does it indicate the irrelevance of ethics for leadership and business? Is it perhaps a hint that a values vacuum actually exists in China, despite what I have said before? Frankly speaking, I don't have an answer at hand and thus want to leave the question open.

My third question: Is Confucian ethics a strong basis for management education in individual and corporate responsibilities?

Henri-Claude provided us with a very fine introduction to Confucian ethics, emphasizing the virtue ethics of "the gentleman" who unswervingly strives for benevolence, wisdom, and courage, practicing self-cultivation and moral leadership. This homegrown Confucian ethics seems to be more accessible to Chinese executives than imported Western ethics. I certainly can see the merits of this approach and have tried, to some extent, to apply it in my own teaching of MBAs as well. It is a rich and powerful philosophy for the purpose of developing men and women of character. But I do have some doubts as to whether this kind of Confucian ethics is an appropriate and sufficient basis for management education in China. It certainly helps to develop a sense of individual responsibility (that is, by the way, quite a modern term, which Confucius didn't know). But it cannot be used for promoting gender equality and is unsuitable for defining corporate responsibilities or the ethics of business organizations. Even if Confucian ethics is transformed and modernized and then used creatively and productively – as Professor Chung-ying Cheng (1996) suggests – the very difficult question of building an ethical culture of a corporation (or an organization in general) remains unanswered. In China, many companies are struggling hard to create organizational cultures of "joint forces" or integrity because the traditional focus on the family and the state has implied less importance of intermediate organizations and group-thinking (as is the case in Japan).

Some findings of a survey on Business Ethics Education for MBA Students in China

I would like to conclude my response by sharing a few findings of a most recent survey on "Business Ethics Education for MBA Students in China" conducted by Professor Zucheng Zhou (Zhou et al. 2008) at the Antai College of Economics & Management (Shanghai Jiaotong University). The survey includes the answers of 80 business schools in China (that is, 84.2 percent of the approached 95 schools; by 2007, there were 127 schools with MBA programs). A little less than half the schools (37) taught business ethics as part of the MBA program (and all of them answered); a little more than half did not. Among the teaching objectives, the highest ranks were: understanding corporate social responsibility, exploring possible approaches to doing business with ethics, and enhancing a sense of moral responsibility. Main difficulties consist in a lack of appropriate teaching materials such as cases, videos and films, a lack of qualified instructors, and a lack of incentives and pressures from society. There is no vibrant civil society that forcefully brings ethical issues to the public forum. However, the prospects for teaching business ethics are quite good. First, the macro environment including the political, economic, and social is developing in favor of business ethics education. Second, international accreditation

and international ranking of business schools also play a role in encouraging Chinese business schools to pay more attention to teaching business ethics. And, third, significant progress in teaching business ethics made in the past decade provides a valuable basis of experiences that can be shared with an increasing number of business schools.

Our speaker Henri-Claude de Bettignies raised important challenges for mission-driven business education in China and I have added some more. Business education needs commitment and faith. As Confucius said, “If people have no faith, I don’t know what they are good for. Can a vehicle travel without a link to a source of power?” (Analects 2:22 in Cleary 1992, 29) I look forward to our conversation.

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