

开拓东西交流 新丝路



Charting an East/West Passage

by James Erik Abels

Professor Ming-Jer Chen maps a new route to connect managers in the East and West

In both the East and the West, it was hard to believe the story. At a factory in Shenzhen, China, at least 14 workers killed themselves in 2010. The factory, owned by Foxconn, produces iPads and iPhones for Apple and computers for Dell and Hewlett-Packard. By most accounts, the manufacturers' unrelenting production demands had triggered the spate of suicides.

So, who's responsible? The Western companies, who rely increasingly on Eastern contractors to produce their products for low wages and low prices? Or the Eastern manufacturer, whose plant managers and workers face incredible pressure to meet ambitious deadlines?



Darden Professor Ming-Jer Chen is vice president and program chair of the Academy of Management. He will assume presidency of the 19,000-member organization in 2012 and is the first U.Va. professor to be elected as an Academy Fellow for his significant contributions to the science and practice of management.

In his strategic management course “Strategic Thinking: Integrating East and West” this past spring, Darden School of Business Professor Ming-Jer Chen asked his students to opine on the issue.

“Chinese managers are shifting to the Western culture of produce, produce, produce,” said Kristyn Kelly of the Class of 2011. “It’s the sort of hyper-productivity that only works if people are ready, willing and able to say ‘no.’” But Kelly says many Asians — long accustomed to rigid hierarchies — simply won’t say no. This time, the cultural clash appeared to have contributed to the tragedy.

The Foxconn case spotlights the challenges Eastern and Western managers face as they blend their businesses.

And Chen is the perfect person to steer the conversation.

A New Discipline

Chen’s work and life focus on balance. He grew up in Taitung on the southeast coast of Taiwan. As a youth, he studied philosophy and the Chinese classics with a cousin of Puyi, “The Last Emperor” of China. In 1981, Chen emigrated to the United States with a visionary quest: to “make the world smaller.”

Before joining the Darden faculty in 2001, he was a professor at Columbia Business School and was founding director of the Global Chinese Business Initiative at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania.

Chen focuses on ways to help managers combine the cultures, to narrow the East-West divide. “I very much consider myself an academic entrepreneur,” says Chen. And he’s a rather bold one. This summer, the management professor will blaze a new trail.

As vice president and program chair of the Academy of Management, Chen — who will assume presidency of the group in 2012 — at this year’s annual conference intends to ask business scholars from around the world to study Eastern and Western management techniques. His goal: find ways to characterize and quantify their differences so executives can incorporate the best — and avoid the worst — of each.

“Ming-Jer has put his finger on a very important question,” says Jan Rivkin, the Bruce V. Rauner professor and chair of Harvard Business School’s strategy unit. “Can a superior model of management emerge from combining the best of both worlds?”

The academy conference should help Chen and his colleagues around the globe find an answer. In August, the meeting will host more than 11,000 of the organization’s 19,000 members. Among its ranks, the 75-year-old group counts some of the world’s top scholars. For five days, they’ll meet in San Antonio, Texas, to discuss the theme “West Meets East: Enlightening, Balancing and Transcending.”

The topic’s timing may be just right. “The United States still has the best business system, but the system has also shown its vulnerability,” explains Chen.

In 2008, a period of financial chicanery abruptly ended when the bubble it created in the U.S. housing market popped. Many still feel the effects of the recession that followed its explosion.

“Because the economies in the West are soft, there are Westerners moving here,” says Darden alumnus Peabody Hutton (MBA/JD ’77), general counsel of Ajia Partners, a Hong Kong

investment firm. Hutton says that for American Asians to set up shop on Eastern shores is not uncommon.

That’s one reason Chen thinks the market is ready to formally expand its horizons.

He may be right. Harvard’s Rivkin leads the academy committee that decides which sessions to feature during the annual meeting’s full-day “All-Academy Theme” program. Proposals have ranged from whether Asian business schools should follow a Western model to yoga’s impact on an organization’s effectiveness.

The variety of the proposed topics suggests that people may be ready for new ideas. “For a long time, there was an assumption that Western management was good management,” Rivkin says.

That may be changing, but can

still be a hard sell.

Defining the Eastern Paradox

Easterners and Westerners think differently.

The Foxconn suicides were a somber reminder of that. Yet these differences are often expressed more subtly than through questions about workers’ rights.

“Business [here] tends to be conducted less on the basis of merit and price than on the basis of relationships,” says Ajia’s Hutton. The results can be unpredictable.

To help explain the cultural nuances, Chen has lately been publishing about an idea he calls “transparadox.”

It’s designed to offer Westerners a new way to think about ideas that appear to contradict each other but which may be two sides of the same coin. In essence, transparadox proposes that notions that appear to be oppositional — such as competition and cooperation — are interrelated or even interdependent, connected by a series of implicit links. Chen seeks to bridge a fundamental philosophical difference between the way Easterners and Westerners regard paradox. “By making these links explicit,” says Chen, “we can enhance a mutual understanding that differences are not irreconcilable.”

“The Chinese are used to ambiguity,” says Hutton. Chen says there are plenty of reasons for Westerners to get used to it, and

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As a result, Easterners and Westerners have good reason to adapt to one another.

"If you don't learn, there's a penalty," says Grayson. "You fail."

Measuring Ambiculturality

Given their philosophical differences, how do Easterners and Westerners successfully combine their management strategies?

The answer could become one of Chen's biggest hits. Last November, he publicly coined a term that may ultimately define not only this summer's academy conference but also the study of Eastern and Western management as a whole: ambicultural.

It reads like intellectual popcorn. Say it aloud and ideas like ambidexterity and cultural sensitivity come easily to mind. "The basic premise is that each culture in society has its own strengths and weaknesses when they're applied to business practices," Chen explains. Combining the best parts of each approach is ambicultural.

But this involves a trick. Strengths cannot be combined and weaknesses avoided until they've been defined. So the professor is creating a survey to be sent to Eastern and Western managers later this year that he thinks will do just that.

For instance, the survey may ask executives to rate the importance they place on personal connections, and to numerically prioritize their interest in employees, stakeholders and society.

"I think there will be many different ways we can quantify the variables that can reveal how ambicultural a company is," Chen says. Already, he hopes to create a scale for companies to rate their use of cross-cultural management strategies.

This wouldn't be the first time Chen has developed a way to quantify the seemingly unquantifiable. In the mid-1980s, he spent months analyzing a database of airline industry events that were covered by the trade newspaper *Aviation Daily*. Thousands of articles were scored against variables, such as "event visibility" or "response announcement speed," that Chen helped pioneer as a way to study airline competition over an eight-year period.

The database made the competitive patterns that businesses fall into clear enough to study — and often, to predict.

The result: A popular new area of strategic theory named competitive dynamics emerged over the past 25 years in the management field and continues to thrive today. Competitive dynamics is the analysis of competition at the action and response level to predict how a firm will act or react toward opponents.

An Eastern or Western Face?

All the signs suggest "ambicultural" will be as big a hit.

The concept is not even a year old, yet management experts are already starting to buzz about it.

In March, an Asian edition of the *Harvard Business Review* translated the word into Chinese. Now, the editors of the U.S. edition are talking to Chen about producing their own story on it. And next year, many business students will study the term in the new edition of a well-known textbook on strategic management.

The word's surging popularity isn't surprising. People are hungry for ways to sail between the East and West more easily.

"Right now, what we need to do is to compare management systems from one country [against those of] another country," says Grayson.

The hard part is doing that without judging the results harshly. Consider job interviews. Grayson says that rather than just examining competence, Asian companies focus on learning "who" they are considering hiring. This may entail asking questions some Western countries deem illegal, such as whether the candidate is married or plans on having children.

Chen's ideas can't solve legal problems like those, but they may help managers bridge the cultural chasm underlying them.

Still, it's a big task — certainly too big for one man to perform alone, and the strategy expert has no intention of trying to do so single-handedly. Rather, his plan is to work through the Academy of Management to expose his colleagues to a framework they can use to study it on their own. The approach already seems to be working.

Darden student Kelly — who worked for the U.S. Navy before coming to Darden and studying Foxconn with Chen — says she opened her eyes to the East.

"We're still viewing China through a Western lens," she says. "We're not viewing the Chinese as partners." ■

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