



Yi Qin

Chinese Expatriates Working in Thailand

The Experience of Intercultural Leadership



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Qin Yi

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with an overview of the background of the research, and explains why this topic is chosen. Then, the purpose, research questions and significance of the study are presented. Finally, it provides the assumption, scope and limitations, delimitations, and definitions of key terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

In the past few decades, the economic growth and development of East Asian economies were recorded as the fastest in history. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its “plus three”, the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and ASEAN+3 Forum have become the growing support for regionalization in the context of economic globalization. The economic achievement of the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Philippines is significant and highly remarkable (Redding, 1990). According to the survey of Thailand Business News, the bilateral trade between Thailand and China increased from US\$3.8 billion in 1996 to US\$6.2 billion and US\$ 11.6 billion in 2000 and 2003, respectively, and by 2010, this had reached US \$46 billion. As the economy continues to globalize, and the workforce moves across national boundaries, cultural diversity has become a substantial challenge which businesses need to “understand how enterprises are managed across diverse cultures; they must be aware that because of cultural differences, the managerial style that works in one society often does not work well in others” (Rodrigues, 1998, p.29).

Leadership has been considered more important than ever before in the organizational context. According to the findings from the Human Resources Institute’s Major Issues survey (2003-2004) (Human Resources Institute, 2004),

among North American companies, leadership is viewed as the single most important issue in light of its impact on workforce management, and it ranked third among European companies. A survey conducted by Right Management Consultants for the 2004 World Business Forum revealed that 65% of the surveyed firms placed leadership development as one of the top five focal points for corporate strategy (Marcus, 2004). Leadership has been expected to remain as a top issue in the future (Human Resources Institute, 2004).

Differences in the foreign environment make leading and influencing people in a multicultural operation much more complex and challenging than in the domestic operation. "The factor that probably contributes most to this increased complexity and challenge is culture" (Certo, 1996, p.96). Culture guides the actions and responses of every human being. This process requires attention to everything people do to survive, advance in the world and gain satisfaction from life. Cultural programs will not work if crucial steps are omitted which happens when people unconsciously apply their own rules to another system (Hall & Hall, 1990). People from different cultures develop particular ways of life, philosophy and value systems which influence their work behavior and leadership styles (Pongyeela, 1995). Leadership styles vary from country to country, and from culture to culture. Fatehi (1996) argued that what constitutes a good leader in one culture may not constitute a good leader in other cultures.

In order to achieve effective leadership in another culture, a leader must understand the social values, customs, norms, leadership behavior and work-related cultural values of the host country's workforce (Trompenaars, 1993; Fatehi, 1996), as well as having their own cultural values which influence greatly their leadership styles. In such instances of examining cultural differences, most of the consideration has been given to national culture, the highest level in which culture can be presented (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998). For example, in Hofstede's research he concentrates on the impact of national culture upon values (Hofstede, 1980; 1987;

1991; 2001) within a business context. Consequently, his research has also led to more in-depth studies that focus specifically on the impact of national culture upon management values (Laurent, 1983). Laurent's (1983) research reveals significant differences in management values among certain national cultures of which he asserts, "national culture seems to act as a strong determinant of managerial ideology" (p.77). Geert Hofstede identified major differences between national cultures especially between Eastern and Western cultures. While the notion of Eastern vs. Western cultures is frequently used, it is important to recognize the unique distinctions that lie within Eastern cultures as well as within Western cultures.

Therefore, references regarding China's culture should not be interpreted to mean these characteristics are necessarily present in all Eastern cultures, for instance in the culture of Thailand. Many countries and regions of the world have developed a particular organizational and management style based largely on their national culture. These national differences could then count for variation in preferred managerial practices particularly in the areas of decision making, leadership styles, and human resource management (Newman & Nollen, 1996). Leaders at all levels of organizations, especially those at higher levels, must work across national and cultural boundaries to achieve goals and objectives. The risk of not possessing the appropriate organizational leadership capability is great (Treverton & Bikson, 2003). The International Labor Organization (2004) found that 70% of global business ventures worldwide failed due to intercultural differences.

Comparing the managerial learning studies in the United States and Europe, Tsang (2001) pointed out that, "research on Chinese managerial learning is still in its infancy despite the obvious importance of the topic" (p.30).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The emergence of the stateless corporation and the increasingly interdependencies among the world's economies mean that the leaders today are

constantly exposed to different cultures with different lifestyles. This has resulted in the recognition of different management and leadership practices and a growing understanding of the importance of intercultural leadership. The understanding of intercultural leadership practices is paramount to successfully managing global business activities and efficiency and effectiveness in organizational performance.

For many leaders, possessing intercultural leadership experience often comes as the result of a job assignment or opportunity to work from a headquarter's location to manage within a non-headquarter's nation facilities.

What is the experience like for these individuals?

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the essential structural themes of the intercultural leadership experiences of Chinese expatriate leaders working in Thailand.

The researcher can reach this intent by (a) exploring the perception of intercultural leadership experienced by Chinese expatriates in Thailand through qualitative inquiry, (b) describing the underlying themes and contexts that account for the perception of intercultural leadership experienced by Chinese expatriates, (c) examining the universal structures which bring about the Chinese expatriate's feelings and thoughts on intercultural leadership in Thailand, and (d) describing the invariant structural themes and essence of experiencing intercultural leadership by Chinese expatriates in Thailand.

1.3 Research Questions

"To do phenomenological research is to *question* something phenomenologically and, also, to be addressed by the question of what something is 'really' like" (van Manen, 1990, p.42). In other words, doing phenomenological research is to explore what is the nature of the lived experience. The purpose of this research is to understand the experience and essential meanings of intercultural leadership as it is experienced by Chinese expatriate leaders in Thailand. In order to

respond to research intent, the research question in this phenomenological inquiry is:

How do Chinese expatriate leaders in Thailand perceive and describe their experience of intercultural leadership?

In phenomenological research, the research questions must be stated in clear and concrete terms, and the key words of the questions should be carefully defined, discussed, and clarified so that the intent and purpose of the inquiry are evident (Moustakas, 1994). The major components in the above research question are ‘*how*’, ‘*Chinese expatriate leaders*’, ‘*perceive*’, ‘*describe*’, ‘*experience*’, ‘*intercultural leadership*’. The use of the word ‘*how*’ facilitates clear, concise wording of the questions and denotes the researcher’s openness to anything emerging about intercultural leadership in the course of interviewing co-researchers. The phrase ‘*Chinese expatriate leaders in Thailand*’ indicates and delimits the object of this research to be Chinese residents assigned to Thailand for work-related management assignments. The words ‘*perceive*’ and ‘*describe*’ refer to what intercultural leadership is and means for co-researchers. The word ‘*experience*’ is a way of pointing to the fact that the researchers will be seeking comprehensive stories from the co-researcher of how they perceive and describe intercultural leadership in their everyday lived experience.

In addition, “a phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also be ‘lived’ by the researcher” (van Manen, 1990, p.44). One of the missions of a phenomenological researcher is required to pull the reader into the research question in such a way that the reader cannot help but wonder about the nature of the phenomenon as well. From a phenomenological point of view, the researcher must keep remembering that “phenomenological research, in all its stages, is to be constantly mindful of one’s original question and thus to be steadfastly oriented to the lived experience that makes it possible to ask the ‘what it is like’ question in the first place” (van Manen, 1990, p.42), which is an important reminder for all phenomenological research.

Sub-questions in phenomenological research, following Moustakas' (1994) procedure, should include the *statements, themes, contexts, thoughts*, and the *overall essence* of experiences related to the phenomenon under investigation. By adding a set of sub-questions related to intercultural leadership, the researcher comes up with the following procedural sub-questions:

1. What are the meanings of intercultural leadership perceived by Chinese expatriate leaders in Thailand?
2. What are the underlying themes and contexts that account for the perception of intercultural leadership by Chinese expatriates in Thailand?
3. What are the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts about intercultural leadership experienced by Chinese expatriates in Thailand?
4. What are the invariant structural themes that facilitate the description of intercultural leadership as it is experienced by Chinese expatriates in Thailand?

1.4 Significance of the Study

There are two major significances in this study:

1.4.1 Contribution of Phenomenology to Human Resource Development

Phenomenology as a particular qualitative research methodology has direct application and contribution to Human Resource Development (HRD), because it helps explain the essence of human experiences that are relevant to HRD practice (Gibson & Hanes, 2003). Moreover, management, like leadership, is a highly complex interpersonal and relational activity that is very much concerned with the development of the human side of the enterprise (Ehrich & Knight, 1998). In addition, the effects of investigating particular human experiences outside the confines of pre-existing theories and well-established constructs can yield “startling new insights into the uniquely complex processes of... managing and leading” (Van der Mescht, 2004, p.1).