

Business ethics: is it useful? – An empirical study of Chinese enterprise

Ying Hong

Introduction

With the establishment of a socialist market economy, China is experiencing a quick transition period. There are many ethical issues that confront business all at once, such as environmental problems, wage relations, rent-seeking, etc. In academic literature, both Chinese and English, many argue that there is really some relation between business ethics or economics and ethics. For example Amartya Sen, who won the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economics, is also an ethicist. Hosmer and Chen (2001) suggested that there are multiple opportunities for interactive research. Luo (2000, 1998) analyzed business ethics as a special economic resource to improve the performance of enterprise. Zhang (1999) used the case of 'Tong Ren Tang' to prove that ethics can bring profit and continuous development to enterprise. Xu (1999) analyzed the ethical base for enterprise continuous development. Wang (2000) demonstrated the importance of ethical management in enterprise in order to create harmonious relations in enterprise and in the relation between community and enterprise and in order to improve the performance of enterprise. Thus, in the relation between business and ethics, ethics has been used to make profits and to improve the long-term development of enterprise. In this sense, ethics has been regarded as an instrumental value. However, most of this literature shows a paucity of theory or a rather simple sourcing of views from old economic and ethical values that existed in ancient times, for example Wang (1995) and Li (2000). But the

question is what do business people think, today, in transitional China? Do they believe that there is a relation between business and ethics now? In this paper, after interviewing 21 business people who are owners, chief executive officers or senior managers in state-owned enterprise or private enterprise, I show that the relation between business and ethics is ambiguous in an immature market economy and that it varies with social value orientation.

The usefulness of business ethics: a historical and cultural perspective

Chinese people created a distinctive culture and isolated it until the late Qing dynasty. Chinese culture consisted of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Confucianism played a dominant role in Chinese society, and indeed still does. The several reforms of Confucianism had kept Chinese society stable for an incredibly long 2,000 years. Thus to any observer of religions of China, it is evident that Confucianism holds a privileged place in traditional society. Although Confucianism experienced several reforms from Confucius (551–479 BC) to Zhuxi (a famous sage in South Song Dynasty), the core thought of Confucianism still exists. The core thought in Confucianism is Humanity (Ren), and Propriety (Li).¹ The meaning of 'Ren' is to love others as you love yourself, whereas Propriety (Li) reflects social custom, social rule and moral standard. When you apply to the spirit of 'Ren' and 'Li' to develop yourself,

you will become a moral human being. The moral human being not only will be respected by other people but will also get something, such as power to rule, material benefit and so forth. Thus, there is an indirect functional connection – ‘Morality’ means ‘Gaining’.² However, the meaning of moral is not only ‘gaining’ but also ‘to prevail’. Therefore, the spirit of Chinese ethics is to teach people how to develop into a moral human being and live better lives, and put the public interest before individual interest. Moreover, the spirit of Chinese culture emphasizes an intense social responsibility, an obligation to everybody.

At the same time, traditional Chinese ethics focused on interpersonal relations in a social hierarchy. Business people were considered to occupy the lowest stratum in traditional society because business people always think about material interest. They were thought less ‘moral’ in the sense as this is understood in the relationship between ‘Yi’ (moral norms in Confucianism) and ‘Li’ (profits). The connection between them is expressed by the deep-rooted Confucian view that a person of noble character can understand ‘Yi’, but a low person only knows ‘Li’, as Confucius wrote. Although Confucius was not completely against ‘Li’ and wanted to put ‘Yi’ into ‘Li’, he paid more attention to ‘Yi’ than ‘Li’. On the basis of ‘Yi’ and ‘Li’, two other topics were elaborated with the development of Confucianism, namely the distinction between ‘Gong’ (collective) and ‘Si’ (self) on the one hand, and ‘Li’ (a different character meaning ‘reason’) and ‘Yu’ (desire) on the other. Zhuxi put it as follows: “keep the most hallowed or natural norms, and get rid of over-desire” (cun tian li, mie ren yu). Since then, people must use the moral way to reduce their desire. That is, ‘Yi’ governs and is opposed to ‘Li’ everywhere. However, no matter how important the subsistence agriculture in traditional society, people still would need to exchange some commodities. It is in this context that business ethics in traditional society emerged as commercial ethics.

In the exchange of commodities, commercial ethics constitutes ‘Sincerity’ (Cheng), ‘Humanity’ (Ren), ‘Genuineness’ (Zen), and ‘Friendliness’ (He). ‘Sincerity’ was the key ethical requirement for business people. Throughout the long history

of Chinese management thought, business people were simply divided into unscrupulous merchants on one hand and honest merchants on the other. Honest merchants put the interest of the buyer first. They don’t cheat their customers and there is an emphasis on building trust between the two trading parties. By contrast, unscrupulous merchants put their own interest first, and fix the price according to circumstance. However, the aim of all business people is profit. The dispute between ‘Yi’ (the moral norm) and ‘Li’ (Profit) not only existed for the literati and officialdom, but also for the business people themselves. According to Confucianism, when a noble person looks at profit, he would think about the moral norm (jianli siyi), and put the moral norm before profit (xianyi houli). So the first principle of honest merchant management thought is ‘Yi’ (the moral norm), and this is a premise for ‘Li’ (profit). An honest merchant would apply this criterion of Confucianism to himself and his business. This meant in effect that Sincerity (Cheng) became the principle in which ‘Yi’ was translated into commercial practice. And this principle became the norm of commercial ethics of business people from ancient times until today.

‘Humanity’ meant that one would have to think about the social circumstances of the two trading parties and take this into account in business practice. In other words, business people should make a reasonable profit in the light of circumstances. For example, the commodity price should not fluctuate too much between a year of abundance and a year of scarcity. That is, business people should not intend to make prices fluctuate too much and enlarge the conflict between supply and demand. A typical example was a famous businessman, Bai Gui who lived in the warlord period (Zhanguo period 403–221 BC). He ran a business which included agricultural products, handicrafts and a large amount of trade. He used the thought of ‘Humanity’ to manage his business, thus not only bringing advantages to his consumers but also supporting production and adjusting the ratio between supply and demand.

‘Genuineness’ aims to produce goods of quality, that is ‘genuine goods at a fair price’ (huozhen jiashi). The Chinese sayings ‘to have no second

price' (no bargaining – *zhenbu erjia*), and 'a higher price is equivalent to higher quality' (*yideng jiaqian yifenhua*) show that quality should be expressed in the price. 'Genuine goods at a fair price' shows that business people also applied 'Sincerity' to their business behaviour, and that was one of the secrets of becoming successful. Hu Xueyan (who lived in late Qing) had even put a label with the words 'I have no second price' on his store (*Huqing Yutang*). Furthermore, quality is not only related to the reputation of the enterprise and the competition of goods but also related to the interest of consumers. Government through different dynasties has always made a quality requirement in market regulation.

'Friendliness' is a criterion which was used both in internal management and in customer service. The aim of 'Friendliness' in management was to achieve harmony between employer and employee, and among the employees themselves. 'Friendliness' in customer service required one to be patient to everybody, good-looking or ugly, noble or common, elder or junior. Another Chinese saying provides the reason for this, namely 'Friendliness' is conducive to business. In combination, these four principles constitute the basis of commercial ethics. Among them, 'Sincerity' is the most important. This, in fact, is a premise, and the other three principles are derived from 'Sincerity'.

In sum, the market economy in traditional society was one where standards could be clearly seen. Confucius believed that profit ought to be obtained by correct means. So throughout ancient Chinese history, there were many great merchants' stories which demonstrated that commercial ethics could be the basis of all profits because it attracted more customers. Reference was commonly made to 'graceful merchants' who reflected the spirit of 'Morality' equals 'Gaining'. In this way, business ethics or commercial ethics was seen to be very useful or instrumental.

The ethical dilemma of business people in the contemporary period of transition

The progressive relaxation of controls since 1978 in the non-state sector, which comprises collective

enterprise such as the township and village enterprises, individually owned entities and foreign invested firms, as well as corporatized state-owned enterprises (since 1992), has resulted in a highly diversified and complicated corporate landscape in China. In this transitional period, business people are facing ethical dilemmas in practice even as they believe that 'one has to be a moral human being first, before one can fulfill one's task' (*xian zuoren hou zuoshi*). The principle of business ethics seems to lose value. How business people deal with the real world depends on social value orientation. And so, at this time, situational ethics has become the main principle of social value. What is proper business behaviour cannot be seen clearly in this period. When the spirit of 'Morality' cannot equal 'Gaining', the principle of business ethics has become a rule of flexibility. It is in this situation of fluidity and uncertainty that the method of *guanxi* seems to have gained in importance.

(i) Building *guanxi* or bribery?

The Chinese have a proverb: 'depend on your parents when you are at home, but depend on your friends when you are in society' (*zaijia kao fumu, chumen kao pengyou*). In the case of a businessman this means that if he wants his company to perform well, he not only needs to manage people inside in his company, but also needs to make friends with many outside relations. The relation among businessmen, civil servants and government officials is as delicate as it is important in China. According to tradition, the mandarin career is the highest rank of all careers. Because Confucianism prescribes a strict hierarchical ordering among members of any organization unit to maintain social order and harmony, the mandarin class would usually command more respect and interest than others could. People would seek their friendship as a matter of priority. After 1949, the Chinese Communist Party built the 'big rice wok' system to close the gap between the rich and poor, but even so the income of government officials and bureaucrats on fixed and standardized public sector remunerations systems remained higher than that of ordinary people. In addition, a high-ranking official would have

privileges in medical services, housing and so on. However, with the development of the market economy they are now losing their privileges, and with it their sense of superiority. Many rich businessmen now can enjoy the same living standards as them without any restrictions. Meanwhile, central government has loosened control of society. In pursuit of their private interest, these mandarins now seek to build a good relation with businessmen or become businessmen in their own right. From their side, businessmen realize that if they can have contacts with officials, they are likely to get protection from government because the enforcement of government policy depends on the work that officials do. Different government departments, tax bureaus and so on have different powers to authorize projects, issue licences for import and export, help enterprises enter the stock market, approve a loan. Therefore, building a long-term *guanxi* becomes a common phenomenon. Many westerners find it difficult to distinguish *guanxi* and corruption. But for Chinese people the boundaries appear to be quite clear. However, building *guanxi* is a practical issue that must put the sense of morality aside.

There are several methods to build *guanxi*. Gift-giving is probably the most popular method. As some of my interviewees put it:

My boss always feels it is a headache to give a gift to somebody at the end of the year. Now people don't like to receive gifts-in-kind, they like 'hongbao'³ instead. Accounting regulations exist to make sure that one creates entries in the books to cover this sort of money. It may not be big money each time. Usually somewhere between 500 and 1000 Yuan (almost £80) may be given to a government official, depending on their status. In addition we will invite them for dinners, drinks or nightclubs. Although a one off gift of 1000 yuan is not big money, we have more than one national holiday and festival. If you do a calculation, you can imagine how much money they have been given in a year. (Deputy general manager⁴ in a big private company)

*Why I move to this place which is a development area? Because I have smooth *guanxi* with the local 'section', there are fewer 'mother-in-laws' (Chinese people have come to call some sections which have authority over a company 'mother-in-law'). Previously, when*

my company was located in the city center, there were many troubles. Even the neighbourhood committee could make trouble for you because your company was located there, not to mention the industry and commerce bureaus and the tax bureau. Of course, generally people were good, but still we can't exclude some bad things that happened. We have an old saying that says 'small ghosts will make troubles'. So we have to give them some gift now and then. (Owner and general manager in a private company)

*Our company is going to enter the stock market, my role now is to establish different *guanxi* with government and bond company. I can't tell you the details, but it is really dirty. We have no choice but to do what every company does. If you don't do it, you can't survive. (Company secretary in a big private company)*

If gift-gifting is an apparent method to build *guanxi*, the arrangement of jobs for the children or relatives of powerful people is an indirect but very useful method too.

*The Chinese economy is *guanxi* economy or 'affective' economy. We are in this society, we have to conform to this environment. If according to standards that I apply in my business, I don't want to use a certain person as employee but he/she is a child or relative of a person who has power to effect my business, I have to use him/her. At the same time, I have to recruit more people to solve this conflict because I need capable employees to deal with company business. (Owner and general manager in an IT private company)*

When we recruit people, we will do our best to treat people equally. But it is very difficult to do in fact. For example, financial agency is an important relation for our company. We had to recruit somebody from them some time ago. He was a relative of the head of a financial agency. We had to accept him. But he had graduated from middle school and was not from the local area. What use could he be? I had to create a position for him. Some companies keep many people like this, and then they can get on smoothly with different departments and sections. In order to benefit my company, I don't think it is wrong. (Deputy general manager in a private company)

When we recruit people, we have several requirements in our organization, such as being from a local household and graduated with a finance major. Actually, the first one must be achieved because local people could seek more way to bring money into organiza-

tion. It should say we think about two kinds of people. One who could bring money into organization directly, for instance, he has a father whom is the head of department of finance; the other who is a capable person could make profit in the future. Whatever, the capability is becoming more and more important now because your father is the head of department of finance today, he will not be in this position forever. The development of our organization in the first stage, we might say that depended on the former kind. I calculated that in this section, the headquarters in this city, more than 85% of people have a father whom is above vice-head of department of this province. (Manager of HR department in a state-owned financial agency)

Because the reform is not a bottom-up process, neither state-owned nor private enterprise can exist without a smooth relation between businessmen and officials. With the spread of rent seeking based on power, every aspect that can affect the destiny of enterprises is being penetrated. Given that abnormal phenomena are becoming the norm, a guanxi economy is undoubtedly a practical choice for Chinese enterprises. The boundary between building guanxi and bribery is very ambiguous. This is a big dilemma for business people. 'We have no choice' is a common excuse in enterprise survival. In the interest of the company, 'I should do what other people do', is another excuse and this has gradually become a principle in business.

(ii) 'Genuine' versus poorer quality?

As mentioned above, 'genuine goods at a fair price' was one of the secrets of becoming a successful business person in traditional society. Is it still a principle today?

My company exports toys. The quality is very important in this industry. Too many toy factories want to export their products. Why do I get the contract? Because I emphasize quality, I always educate the workers to take responsibility for quality when they work. We have a book of quality regulations. ISO9000 and CE standard are parts of this book. According to the sequence of products, there are different quality standards to enforce. As general manager, I am in charge of the quality assurance department. So we have advanced rules for testing quality. Due to these products being exported

to the European market, I enforce these rules strictly. (Owner and manager in a private toy company)

We are a big state-owned enterprise. So we have advanced rules for testing quality. There are three layers of documents: Quality Guarantee Manual, Quality Management Manual and Technological Process Manual. It should be said we have full documents and details to be operated. Of course, these manuals could not be enforced 100%. As regards the Technological Process Manual, I would say that the workers observe requirements strictly. So the quality of products should be good. However, good quality along cannot ensure that the products are competitive. State-owned enterprise cannot adopt some methods which are in a grey area between legal and illegal methods, like private enterprises do. So we are not on a level playing field. (Manager of department of quality testing in a big state-owned company)

The certification of quality testing cannot show the true quality of the products. For example, I know some goods have problems in my own enterprise, but when I put them in the state-owned department store, there are certifications on every piece. It shows the quality is good and the material is genuine. It is easy to get quality certification because the Bureau of quality testing lowers the quality standard to get more money. This is mutual-benefit behaviour. Both the Bureau of quality testing and private enterprise, especially small private enterprises can make a profit. On the other hand, many state-owned enterprises used to have very good quality products before, and they have strict rules for testing. Thus, their cost of production is higher, and so is the price. Meanwhile, their management system is not flexible enough to adapt to conditions of marketing competition. Therefore good quality is not the only point for enterprise survival in market. (Owner and manager in a private arts and crafts company)

Therefore, good quality at fair price is a relative principle here. Business people would adopt different strategies to deal with different market and situation. 'Genuine' has become half-genuine and half-false in the name of competition.

(iii) To observe the rules fully or to observe the rules partially?

In order to protect the interests of the employee, the government enforces enterprise laws and rules, such as the Labour Law, pension schemes, etc.

To meet labour policy requirements, I suggested to my boss that we should establish a pension scheme and a medical insurance scheme based on the true performance of our company for every employee. This entails a big cost to the company. However, other companies did not set up such schemes equally honestly. I know of another company, their profit is much higher than ours. As a result they get far more praise from the government and their employees. My boss is now very frustrated and blames me. As for the employees, they still blame me because their salary can not compete with that of other companies. So if you do thing the proper way, the results are not good. (Deputy general manager in a private company)

I did not sign a proper labour contract with some of my employees. I think it is not necessary because this is a small company. In addition, if I sign labour contract with them, I have to pay various insurances for them. It is too high to me. So I use them as 'temporary' employees according to the rule. (Owner and manager in a private company)

Every year, we choose some enterprises as model of the 'spirit of civilization'. Since 2000, we also give the award to private enterprise in order to improve their business behaviour in a healthy way. The first requirement is that the profit of these enterprises should have increased continuously in the last few years. Another requirement is that the enterprise in question should have received another award, for example from the municipal administration and that it should have had some municipal media exposure as a consequence. A third requirement is that the Bureau of Industry and Commerce and the relevant Private Enterprise Association should given the stamp of approval for these enterprises. But to be honest, the most important requirement is the profit of these enterprises. (An officer in the 'spirit civilization' office which belongs to the provincial department of propaganda)

Therefore, the driving force of government policy is to encourage enterprise to increase its profits. Such policy will increase money worship still further. Enterprise behaviour already tends towards profit maximization regardless. Furthermore, without an efficient audit system, fraudulent accounting books cannot reflect the true performance of the enterprise. Under this circumstance, business people choose a fraudulent way to make profits because profit comes first.

In sum, for business people the rule of thumb is 'don't think too much'. Results are the best evidence. Such an attitude is actually in tune with Confucianism in so far as the latter puts a premium on everybody taking responsibility for the outcome of their activity. Although there are also belief systems within Chinese culture that emphasize standing aloof from worldly affairs, e.g. Taoism and Buddhism, most people are orientated towards the pragmatic outcome. So enterprise performance is much more important than the sense of morality. Given that an honest merchant cannot get a good reward, the original principle of business ethics becomes useless. This demonstrates (1) that business ethics is strongly related to the general social ethical climate, and (2) that in the daily praxis, business people struggle to balance historical Chinese values with the reality of contemporary market conditions.

Creating a good ethical climate

As mentioned above, there are many ethical dilemmas for business people. Many of them, in their heart, still believe in the axiom 'to be an honest and moral man first, then you can fulfill your task'. However, they are facing a complicated social environment. And as they all put it (in their interviews), they cannot change the whole economic system but have to adjust to it. In other words, business ethics does not only relate to business people and business behaviour itself, but also to the ethical climate outside the enterprise. If we want to improve the moral sense of business people, we should make an effort in a number of areas surrounding the enterprise.

During the process of corporatization, the concept of 'corporate' has undergone a profound transformation. It has changed from social organization to economic entity and a legal person.

Today we look to enterprise as a subject of the market. So the goal of enterprise is maximizing profit. From the perspective of law, enterprise should be an independent legal person. (Owner and general manager in a private company)

At this moment, we derive more sense of enterprise from the concept of modern enterprise. Enterprise should achieve shareholder's aim and maximize profit. Meanwhile, I still have a sense that shareholder, employee and manager is an organic whole. If one part goes wrong, this enterprise cannot get good development. But the most important is profit because enterprise is an economic entity. (Owner and general manager in a private company)

However, many big and middle state-owned enterprises still have to undertake both responsibilities, of being an economic and 'social' organization, to fulfill the state's requirements. This leads to extra burdens.

We undertake a big burden. In our company, there are 3000+ employees who are working and 3000+ employees who are retired. That means that half our employees should make money for the other half. Moreover, we also need to support a nursery, hospital, canteen, etc. But at the same time we have to compete with other types of enterprise to make profit. (General manager in a state-owned enterprise)

Thus, to balance the concept of corporate with an ethical dimension it is important that we should integrate ethics into business education because business people do not know too much about business ethics, even professional people.

I have heard this topic from some lecturers in the business school. But they just said it and didn't give us any concrete content. It seems it is not important at all. When they talk about market competition, employees' training, and employees' quality education, etc, they talk about business ethics. However it is not a topic in class. (Deputy general manager in a private company)

When I was an MBA student, there was a course about management. In lectures, they just told us this is a hot topic in America, but they didn't tell us what it is. (Company secretary in a big private company)

There are employee training courses in my company, but they are just limited to technology training. (Deputy general manager in a private company)

In my view, what these statements show is that there is a need to integrate an ethical dimension into business education, and thus balance the

present concept of the corporate enterprise through education.

Since the Government has the stated aim, going by its own slogans, 'to govern the country in a moral way' and 'to grasp two civilizations: a material civilization and a spiritual civilization', government policy should favour ethical enterprise. Otherwise the intention to create 'a harmonious development of economy and society' is just an empty phrase. If we concede that human beings are self-interested by nature, then we should create the conditions under which business people feel that ethical behaviour indeed can yield positive results.

For example in dealing with fraudulent commodities I believe that the offenders should be run the risk of jail sentences. Now, we just let them pay a fine. The punishment is too light for this kind of behaviour. (Owner and general manager in a private company)

Furthermore, fines are counterproductive in as much as they tell people that if you have money to pay, you escape punishment. This increases the sense of money worship. In other words, government policy still needs to reflect more on the spiritual tension between 'gaining and morality'. Let ethical enterprise get more rewards than the others should be an efficient way to improve the moral sense of businesspeople.

If this sounds a bit too idealistic, the establishment of a transparent audit system is both feasible and a very first step. This system should target that which most people are concerned about, namely, the personal bank accounts of officials, and the accounting books of enterprises.

I feel that officials have everything, power and money. I am a businessperson, I have money only, and money cannot equate to power. If we could disclose their salary and the gifts which they receive, then I believe the whole situation could be better. (Owner and general manager in a private company)

We need to establish an efficient supervisory system which depends on advanced technology. For example, with personal account in China, you can never know how much money a person has. It is very easy to hide their grey income. (Deputy general manager in a private company)

Many companies have three or four accounting books. Cooking the books to evade tax is a common phenomenon. Otherwise, where is the profit? (Owner and general manager in a private company)

So without an efficient audit system, it seems impossible to improve the whole ethical climate.

As a result, whether business ethics is useful or not is related to the result of business behaviour. Without doubt, the aim of business people is profit. However, if the guiding hand of public policy and the audit system is efficient, business people could make profits through a proper way. Only if the whole ethical climate improves, can business people be persuaded to break the present common rule of fraudulence. Only when morality can become compatible with profit, the principle of business ethics could be accepted. That is why some interviewees have suggested that the Chinese market will be forced to become rule based like it is in the mature market systems of the West, after entering the WTO. In this sense, business ethics will be useful in the future but not now.

Notes

1. 'Li' is the sound of a Chinese character. In this paper, I use three different meaning characters, but the English spelling of these sounds are the same. The meaning of 'Li' is propriety, profit, and reason respectively.
2. Fan, H. 1992. 'The historical structure of Chinese ethical spirit'. Jiangsu People's Publisher (in Chinese).
3. Hongbao is a tradition in Chinese New Year where people use cash wrapped in red paper to give to children as gift; likewise bosses use this method to give their subordinates bonuses.
4. Usually, the CEO in Chinese enterprise is addressed as general manager.

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