

A comparative analysis of the Chinese and South African work ethic

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Abstract

Purpose - South Africa is a developing country, and within this context, it is essential to be economically competitive and proactive. Various sources reveal that the national productivity has been traditionally low, and continues to remain low. Within the context of the international arena, this is unacceptable. If South Africa is to become a recognised role player in the international arena, it is imperative to increase productivity like China. This paper aims to focus on the issues involved.

Design/methodology/approach - A 65-item inventory which measures seven conceptually and empirically distinct facets of the work ethic construct, i.e. the multi-dimensional work ethic profile (MWEP) was utilised to critically distinguish between the Chinese and South African workforces. The samples approximated 150 subjects in each grouping. Findings which emanate from this study have distinct ramifications for the South African economy.

Findings - It appears as if a linkage exists between productivity and work ethic, as illustrated by amongst others, Hamilton-Attwell and Du Gay and Pryke. Paradoxically, a number of other variables exist which impact on the productivity phenomenon, thus rendering a strict causal relationship between work ethic and productivity tenuous in nature. Despite this, it is a recognised reality that there is a substantive "negativity" in the work ethic of the South African labour force, possibly in relation to historical and cultural factors. The Chinese work ethic is diametrically opposed to that of South Africa.

Research limitations/implications - In discussions with Chinese workers held in 2010, four primary schools of thought emerged: a firm belief that hard work will bring desired results; pride in personal accomplishments and hard work; fear of embarrassment or shame in case of failure; and immense patriotic pride in China and its achievements. It is the present authors' conviction that none of these apply to the South African labour force, and that most certainly could be partly responsible for the economic disparities between the two countries. Hence, additional research should be conducted to improve the current state of affairs.

Social implications - Of the seven facets in the MWEP, six are positively slanted, while the other, leisure, can be construed as negatively aligned with a positive work ethic. Interestingly, if the Chinese sample is compared to the South African, this is the only facet where the latter obtains a superior score. The inference is clear: South Africans are essentially more concerned about having free time. In the overall context of the MWEP, this is a strikingly negative observation.

Originality/value - One of the major challenges confronting South Africa, since the triumph of democracy in 1994, is low productivity of labour. Therefore, comparing South African work ethics with that of China will enable South Africa recognize the gaps in terms of behavior towards work and stimulate the countries international competitiveness.

Keywords Chinese people, Education, Work ethic, Labour force, Productivity rate, South Africa
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The concept of “work ethic” has intrigued researchers for a long time. It could be stated that it attracted attention right at the start of the human relations movement, which was marked by the work of Elton Mayo at the Western Electric Plant in Chicago from 1927 to 1932. The concept is certainly actively present in the theories X and Y construct, as described in McGregor’ s seminal work of 1960.

The concept is not merely the realm of researchers and academics – it remains a definitive interest for managers at all levels, and across enterprises. The assumption is that there is a causal link between work ethic and individual work performance, indeed, this hypothesis has been confirmed by amongst others, Hamilton-Attwell (1998) and Du Gay and Pryke (2002). Even in a highly collectivist society, e.g. Mexico, there appears to be a direct linkage between productivity and work ethic, as described by Firestone *et al.* (2005).

Definitions of work ethic abound. Miller *et al.* (2001, p. 2) define it as “[...] a commitment to the value and importance of hard work [...]”. They further state that the concept was originally constructed by Max Weber in 1904, in his classic work entitled: *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, in which he postulated that the rise of capitalism was partly due to the puritan value of asceticism, as well as a belief in a calling from God.

Similarly, Hill (1996, p. 1) defines work ethic as “[...] the cultural norm placing a positive moral value on doing a good job because work has intrinsic value for its own sake [...]”. In the historical analysis of the work ethic which Hill provides, it is apparent that the concept can be traced back to the classical period, and that it has its roots firmly embedded in Judeo-Christian beliefs. Not surprising therefore, that the modern interpretation of work ethic makes constant reference to the so-called “protestant work ethic”, a very exclusive term, in that it does not allow for interpretations from other cultures – an issue which is debated by Du Gay and Pryke (2002), who maintain that each culture develops its own personalised conceptualisation of the concept.

In an economic sense, all countries stand in a relationship to other countries. This applies to South Africa and China as well. South Africa is the economic powerhouse of Africa, while China has the third biggest economy on earth (Fenby, 2009, p. xxxii). According to Chinability (2010) (www.chinability.com/GDP.htm), the situation shown in Tables I and II applies.

For comparative purposes, 1 RMB (China yuan or renminbi) is equal to R1.09 (South African Rand), thus roughly similar.

Year	GDP (RMB billion)	GDP per head (RMB)
1952	67	119
2001	10,965	8,622
2002	12,033	9,398
2003	13,582	10,542
2004	15,987	12,336
2005	18,386	14,040
2006	21,087	16,084
2007	24,661	
2008	31,404	
2009	33,535	

Table I.
Chinese GDP

Comparatively speaking, the South Africa economy is about 6 per cent that of China. Statistics from the South African Government (2009) web site (www.southafrica.co.za/about-South-Africa/economy) reveal that South Africa is China's key trade partner in Africa, accounting for 20.8 per cent of Chinese trade in Africa in 2007. Further, the total trade volume increased from R60.7 billion (\$7.9b) in 2006 to R88.3 billion (\$11.56b) in 2007.

A further index which should be considered in this context is the world competitiveness scoreboard for 2009. The *World Competitiveness Yearbook* has become an authoritative source on the economic competitiveness of nations. In 2009, 57 countries were evaluated in terms of a number of criteria, i.e. productivity and efficiency, labour market (costs, relations, and availability of skills), finance (Rand efficiency, stock market efficiency, and finance management), management practices, and attitudes and values.

If South Africa is evaluated against China, the position shown in Table III appears. Whilst South Africa has improved its relative position from 2008 to 2009, and China has deteriorated, a vast gap remains in the competitive quality of the nations, and more so if Hong Kong is brought into the equation.

In 2008, the People's Republic of China was the world's second biggest manufacturer, with 15 per cent of output (Fenby, 2009, p. xxxiii). The same author notes that the Chinese market economy has grown tenfold in three decades, and there are three primary factors responsible for this, i.e. cheap labour, cheap capital and high productivity. None of these factors are present in the South African economy.

There are definite lessons which South Africa can, and should, learn from the Chinese. If the country is to become a competitive force on the world stage, serious attempts should be made to address weak points in the economy. As described in the *World Competitiveness Yearbook*, the human element plays a cardinal role, as can

Year	GDR ZAR (billion)
1998	1,026
2000	1,018
2002	842
2004	1,654
2006	1,968
2008	2,114

Table II.
South African GDP

Source: Trading economics (2009) (www.tradingeconomics.com)

Country	Ranking (2009)	Ranking (2008)	Index
USA	1	1	100
Hong Kong	2	3	98.146
China	20	17	76.595
South Africa	48	53	52.850

Table III.
World competitiveness
scoreboard 2009

Source: IMD (2009)

be determined from the above-mentioned indices. Productivity is a non-negotiable phenomenon, and as stated earlier, it appears as if there is a causal link between it and the work ethic subscribed to by a workforce.

In order to evaluate the construct of the work ethic in the two countries, the following study was undertaken.

Methodology

Measure

The multi-dimensional work ethic profile (MWEP) as developed by Miller *et al.* (2001) was utilised in this study. This is a 65-item questionnaire which measures seven distinct facets of the work ethic construct. The authors believed that existing measures were too uni-dimensional, that they were outdated, and that they were too puritan/protestant in nature. Their exhaustive study in 2001 developed the following seven facets:

- (1) hard work (attitudes and belief systems about the intrinsic value of hard work);
- (2) leisure (belief systems about the relative importance of free time);
- (3) centrality of work (the relative importance of work in a person's life);
- (4) wasted time (perceptions about the negativity surrounding unproductive time utilisation);
- (5) religion/morality (concerns about religion and morality);
- (6) self-reliance (the degree of independence from other people); and
- (7) delay of gratification (the ability to postpone need gratification).

Owing to the fact that many of the items are of an abstract nature, care had to be taken in the translation in order not to lose content validity - this remains a probable weakness of the present study. The instrument was translated into Mandarin, and the English version was accompanied by a Xhosa (an indigenous South African language) version.

In order to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of the facets of the MWEP, sample items from the facets are:

- (1) Hard work:
 - Nothing is impossible if you work hard enough.
 - If one works hard enough, one is likely to make a good life for oneself.
- (2) Leisure:
 - Life would be more meaningful if we had more leisure time.
 - I would prefer to have a job that allowed me to have more leisure time.
- (3) Centrality of work:
 - I feel uneasy when there is little work for me to do.
 - Life without work would be very boring.
- (4) Wasted time:
 - I try to plan out my workday so as to not waste time.
 - I constantly look for ways to productively use my time.

- (5) Religion/morality:
 - One should always do what is right and just.
 - I would take items from work if I felt I was not paid enough.
- (6) Self-reliance:
 - People would be better off if they depended on themselves.
 - One should live one's own life independent of others as much as possible.
- (7) Delay of gratification:
 - Things that you have to wait for are the most worthwhile.
 - I prefer to save until I can afford something and not buy it on credit.

Subjects

An a priori assumption was made that different occupational groupings, as well as educational groupings, would evidence differentials in terms of the work ethic construct. A similar assumption was made about cultural groups. In order to circumvent this, a decision was taken to keep the subject groupings as homogeneous as possible. In order to achieve that, a requirement was that subjects had to have no more than ten years of formal schooling; that they were to be drawn from a blue-collar level in a manufacturing industry; and that they had to be from the same cultural grouping.

In China, a total of 153 workers in two factories were exposed to the questionnaire, while 162 workers from three South African factories participated.

Procedure

Subjects took the questionnaire in the presence of the researcher, as well as the person who translated the English questionnaire. Any questions or uncertainties on the part of the subjects were addressed by the researcher and translator. Again, it needs to be stressed that content validity of some items might have been compromised through translation.

Results

It was important to focus on the mean scores which the two subject samples obtained on each dimension, and also to consider the level of variability on each dimension. In order to assess these, independent student *t*-tests were conducted, the results appear in Table IV.

Thus, it is apparent that there are significant differences between the two subject groupings on all seven dimensions. It is interesting to note that only on one dimension,

Table IV.
Means and standard
deviations per
subject grouping

	Chinese (<i>n</i> = 153)		South African (<i>n</i> = 162)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Hard work	24.13	6.16	18.27	5.32
Leisure	23.26	5.97	25.83	6.21
Centrality of work	22.71	6.08	20.32	5.73
Wasted time	24.18	6.04	22.64	5.81
Religion/morality	20.29	5.41	19.38	5.28
Self-reliance	25.11	6.83	22.79	5.83
Delay of gratification	26.22	6.92	23.46	5.91
Total	164.81	25.3	152.11	24.1

i.e. leisure, the South African sample achieved a higher mean score than the Chinese sample. From the above, it can broadly be postulated that the Chinese exhibit a higher work ethic overall than the South African sample.

Discussion

According to Miller *et al.* (2001, pp. 26-7), it appears as if the MWEP scales relate significantly to attitudinal measures, being job involvement, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment. Although it is often debated whether these attitudes are significantly linked to individual and organizational performances, it would certainly be desirable to have a premium level of these attitudes in any organization, as opposed to the converse.

Of the seven facets in the MWEP, six are positively slanted, while the other, leisure, can be construed as negatively aligned with a positive work ethic. Interestingly, if the Chinese sample is compared to the South African, this is the only facet where the latter obtains a superior score. The inference is clear: South Africans are essentially more concerned about having free time. In the overall context of the MWEP, this is a strikingly negative observation.

Industrial action (strikes) is of the problematic areas in the South African economy. According to the South African Department of Labour (South African Government, 2009), a total of 497,436 working days were lost in 2008, leading to lost wages totalling nearly R48 million. This was somewhat of an anomaly, as it was the lowest figure since the 1990s. Comparatively, in 2006 a total of 4,152,563 working days were lost, and in 2007, 9,031,509 leading to lost wages of R316 million.

It is thus apparent that dramatic intervention is required on a number of levels if the work ethic of the South African labour force is to be positively altered. In the late 1970s, China was an extremely poor country, brought to the verge of destruction by the economic policies of Mao Zedong. An estimated 250 million people lived in absolute poverty, and the country was in no position to compete economically with any of its Asian neighbours. After 30 years, it has the third biggest national economy on earth, and in 2007 was able to offer Africa triple the aid the continent receives from the West (Fenby, 2009). As a direct result of Deng Xiaoping's economic reform policies which started in 1978, more people have become materially more efficient, in the shortest time period, than ever before in human history. The same can hold true for South Africa (retaining the three caveats which Fenby (2009) identified: cheap labour, cheap capital and high productivity, two of which are linked to the concept of the work ethic).

In informal discussions with Chinese workers held in 2010, four primary schools of thought emerged:

- (1) A firm belief that hard work will bring desired results.
- (2) Pride in personal accomplishments and hard work.
- (3) Fear of embarrassment or shame in case of failure.
- (4) Immense patriotic pride in China and its achievements.

It is the present author's conviction that none of these apply to the South African labour force, and that most certainly could be partly responsible for the economic disparities between the two countries.

It is proposed that in order to address this situation, four remedial activities are paramount:

- (1) *The promulgation of an individualistic work ethic through education.* A large sector of the South African labour force essentially espouses a collectivist work ethic. This is an indirect outcome of the concept of Ubuntu, which dictates that one should take care of one's family and friends. *Per se*, a worthwhile and noble dictum, but in stark contrast with the values held by China, and indeed, the whole of the capitalist world. In addition, as a direct result of the apartheid system, a type of passive-resistant approach to work developed over decades, and is still very much in evidence in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

A large-scale educational drive is necessary in order to turn this mindset around. This can be driven at all levels - family, community, schools as well as organizational and governmental level. Change will not be resultant overnight, but the next generation will certainly be more conversant with the principles of individualism.

- (2) *Incentives for performance.* It is not justifiable to promote individualism as an ethos if there is no discernible result. It is imperative to link performance to outcome, which needs to be observable, measurable, tangible, immediate, and direct. If these requirements are not satisfied, the individualist work ethic will remain a hypothetical non-reality.
- (3) *Labour legislation.* The South African labour legislation has been described as the most labour friendly legislation in the world. If more direct control over the economy is an ideal, the state should demonstrate willingness, as well as competence, to exercise such control. If this does not happen, the state should be cognisant of the fact that it will perennially remain a hostage to the whims and fancies of the labour force. Direct and centralized control in this sense is non-negotiable.
- (4) *De-politization of the relationship between government and labour.* For an appreciable number of years, there has been a very close relationship between the African National Congress and Congress of South African Trade Unions. Indeed, this relationship was partly responsible for the demise of apartheid in 1994. However, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this relationship has become tenuous and somewhat fractious at times. If a government is continually influenced by its labour ally in order to retain power, it certainly does not govern according to the true principles of democracy, which is designed to guarantee benefits to all citizens.

It is obvious that if South Africa is to re-formulate its economic stance on the world stages, dramatic action steps have become a strident clamour for attention. It is not practical or feasible to retain a continuation policy of the present status quo, as this will certainly not render dramatic change. A bold and courageous stance has become necessary and urgent, which can, as per the Chinese example, put South Africa on the road to economic and social power.

