Organizational Heroes in Storytelling:  
A Fantasy Theme Analysis of Two Chinese Companies

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ABSTRACT

Business giants in China today are frequently the focus of attention and are hailed as organizational heroes. This study approached organizational culture through one of the most important but under-explored cultural phenomena that holds rich promise within organizations: hero storytelling. Based on Schein’s three-level hierarchical model of organizational culture, fantasy theme analysis was adopted as an operational way of eliciting the espoused values (Level 2) and basic underlying assumptions (Level 3) from the fantasy themes and types about organizational heroes (Level 1) in two Chinese companies.

Five fantasy types of organizational heroes were uncovered from 159 hero stories by in-depth interviews: charismatic leaders possessed certain charismatic personal qualities to distinguish them from others; managerial talents were market oriented and able to catch opportunities and make right long-term strategies and short-term tactics for their ever-expanding organizations; politicians exhibited special qualities of politicians and were good at creating and maintaining excellent guanxi with government officials for strong support from local governments and banks; and autocrats tended to centralize both administrative and managerial power and did things by their own definition. The fifth fantasy type, organizational heroes as moral models, not only indicated the qualities the extant organizational heroes were lacking but also revealed organizational members’ further expectations of these heroic figures. They traveled a heroic journey following a chronicle pattern of four discernable phases that provided a real scenario in their pursuit of business successes. A model of corporate heroism in the Chinese companies was proposed.

The combination of the five identified fantasy types of organizational heroes together with the four stages of their heroic journey formulated the rhetorical visions of corporate heroes shared by organizational members as a result of symbolic convergence in the Chinese context.

A unified organizational culture model was developed as the theoretic framework for the study of organizational hero storytelling, and the value systems and basic underlying assumptions were deciphered from the identified fantasy types of organizational heroes. Nine espoused and widely shared values were uncovered based on the assimilation degree of organizational members with their perceived corporate heroes and four general basic underlying assumptions were revealed from respective fantasy types. Important issues such as Chinese definition of organizational heroes, communication channels of hero stories, impact of these heroic figures on their members, their roles in organizations, persuasiveness of the rhetorical visions and storytellers’ rhetorical devices were also considerations of this study.

This study documents the most important aspects of organizational culture in the two Chinese companies during this time of rapid economic development in China. The knowledge of Chinese corporate cultures today and the understandings of the cherished values and basic underlying assumptions hopefully help both Chinese organization administrations and foreign counterparts seeking business opportunities in China in their goals of better internal integration and external adaptation.
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