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Employee imagination and its implication for entrepreneurs

Abstract

Purpose – In 2015 the European Group of Organisation Studies released a call for papers highlighting poor knowledge of employee imagination in organisations. To address this need, the current study hypothesises employee imagination consisting of seven conditions common to the organisational experience of Chinese Entrepreneurs.

Design/methodology/approach – The current paper reviews the Chinese enterprising context. Cases from China are used to illustrate the effects of proposed conditions and their value for entrepreneurs and innovators in businesses undergoing change.

Findings – Employee imagination underpins and conditions how Chinese employees make sense of their organisations and better understand the process of organisational change. From the viewpoint of human resource management, coaching and developing imagination enables businesses to stay competitive and adapt to environmental demands such as lack of information, too much information, or the need for new information.

Research limitations/implications – The proposed conditions apply to the Chinese context, however, their application to wider contexts is suggested and requires attention.

Originality/Value - Theoretically, our research adds new insights to knowledge of a poorly understood organisational behaviour topic – employee imagination. Practically, the research findings provide managers with knowledge of conditions, which could be adopted as powerful tools in facilitating organisational change management

Keywords: Change Management; Entrepreneurs; Coaching; Employee Imagination; Mentoring.

Introduction

Recently, imagination has been highlighted on the organization research agenda. In 2015 the European Group of Organizational Studies released a call for papers and recognized employee imagination (EI) as a resource for organizational change, flexibility and growth (Komporozos-Athanasίου and Fotaki, 2015; Dodgson, Gann and Philips, 2013; Castoriadis, 1987). However, this is not a new idea. The last hundred years have benefitted from imagination. Entrepreneurs like Jonathan Ive chief designer at Apple computers produced innovative designs of products (the iPhone) by imagining beauty and functionality (Dormehl, 2013). At Disney and Lego a core value is the ability to actively use imagination for breakthroughs (Collins and Porras, 1996; Schulz, 2016). Imagination underlines entrepreneurial ability to form company visions and excite follower confidence, whilst also motivating individual employees to think differently.

But Komporozos-Athanasίου and Fotaki (2014) note that despite its strong influence imagination has received little attention. We contend that for its central application in societies and indispensability to entrepreneurs and employees constraint by environmental demands; currently, there is a need for researchers to define imagination. We contribute to this significant knowledge gap by hypothesizing seven conditions of imagination common to organizational change experiences of Entrepreneurs in China. We see imagination as essential to Chinese entrepreneur as well as individuals who hold sway over change capability (Liu and Almor, 2016; Yang, 2014). First the Chinese context is introduced, which highlights the resourcefulness of imagination. Second, we present each imagination condition using interdisciplinary literature and provide illustrative business cases of entrepreneurs and leaders in China's thriving economy. Thirdly, we discuss the theory implications and practical value of our conceptual findings in the business context of China.

Creativity, Imagination and Innovation: Definitions

The past four decades gave rise to a body of research on creativity and innovation. However, there remains poor clarity about what the terms mean, and we found that the term imagination is also largely implicit and neglected. Anderson et al (2014) provide an extensive review of the creativity and

innovation field and point out that across studies the notion of idea generation is commonly associated with creativity of entrepreneurs and leaders, whilst successful idea implementation is associated with innovation. Some studies position creativity as part of the encompassing process of innovation (Paulus, 2002). It has also been noted that creativity might be a psychological phenomena whilst innovation is produced through social interaction and cohesion (Rank et al, 2009). Others suggest that creativity (idea generation) and innovation (idea implementation) co-operate and inform each other in entrepreneurial behavior (Anderson et al, 2014; West, 2002; Amabile, 1997).

On this conceptually complex terrain, we found that literature does not distinguish and define 'imagination' or its underlying meaning. Plugging this gap, we position imagination as a distinct process that is integral to both creativity and innovation. First, we adopt the view that imagination is a fundamental and generative psychological process necessary for creativity and innovation. Second, a novelty continuum has been proposed to locate both creativity and innovation according to the extent of novelty involved in the concerned idea or behaviour (Anderson et al, 2014; Zaltman, Duncan, & Holbek, 1973). We propose that imagination is an essential part of this continuum in so far as generation of both old and novel ideas on the continuum requires skillful use of mental images and inferential meanings. In the current study we define imagination as the psychological process of generating ideas through the combination, recombination and transformation of mental content (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2005:317). An imagined episode is meaningful and may include visual content (i.e. imagining an unfolding interview scene or static image in your head whilst rehearsing for an interview). It may involve phonetic content (i.e. your manager's supportive speech running in your head like a tune) and olfactory content (the imagined smell associated with a scene) (Ryle, 2002:246). Across disciplines, most often, imagination is intuitively associated with visual content, that involves the skilful analysis and synthesis of images in meaningful ways (Browski, 1967:195; Thomas, 1999:207; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011:66; Beiser, 2015:308).

Expounding this basic definition we propose specific psychological conditions that demand skills from Chinese entrepreneurs committed to private and social gains. The gains include product replications with improvements, modifications and novel outputs (Newman et al, 2015). Underlying our definition is the assumption that imagination is a mental process for generating an idea. But we

also note that every idea is not arrived at by imagining extensively or in the same way. Conclusively, through the current paper we emphasize the resourcefulness of imagination as a skilful activity for Chinese entrepreneurs attempting to grow through their cultural settings, whilst struggling with cultural stagnation and rhetoric of change.

The Chinese Context of HRM (Human Resource management) and Organizational Change

Industries, sectors and organizations in China have undergone changes over the past decades in large part focused on human resource enhancement. Historically, the enterprise reforms of the 1980's and 1990's reshaped the Chinese economy and human resource practices with significant consequences for organizations (Warner, 1996; Zhao, 1994). Planned measures were taken - decentralized decision-making improved organizational flexibility, introduction of labour contracts improved transparency and accountability, incentivization of job tasks meant performance improvements, and greater autonomy for managers enabled innovative venturing. The trend continued with the adoption of new methods for training and development, performance management and fast tracked promotion (Applebaum, et al, 2000; Chow, 2004; Cooke, Saini and Wang, 2014). However, Chinese firms in recent years have felt competitive pressures from foreign rivals (imports and Foreign Direct investments) who often produce and market domestically in China (Cuervo-Cazurra and Dau, 2009; Abrami et al, 2014; Peng, Sun and Markoczy, 2015). To remain competitive entrepreneurs and leaders have unleashed imagination in line with state policy reflecting a pro-innovation attitude (Wang, 2010; Ding et al, 2000). Successful entrepreneurs, who are often leaders, recognize that being creative is crucial but they also realise that organizational change depends significantly on imagination in both self and others. In Beijing the rise of the creative class was meant to attract more talent and innovation. Chaoyang experienced investments in technology to enhance the generation of creative solutions to challenges facing the economy (Hui, 2006:322)^{footnote 1}.

Broadly speaking, China's culture promotes patience and taking long term perspectives. This forms fertile ground for cultivating imagination of leaders. The entrepreneurial leader of Alibaba Group Holding Limited used to be a school teacher. As a leader he founded China's first internet-based company in 1995 and created the precedent for others to follow (Havinga et al, 2016:16). Jack Ma set

in motion online commerce and to achieve this he changed his mind-set by questioning and imaging the potential benefits of taking Chinese business online. The courage to imagine is vital for successfully changing into a better company. Drucker (2002: 95) notes that for innovative ideas “...analysis will take you only so far. Once you’ve identified an attractive opportunity, you still need a leap of imagination...” The importance of imagination lies in its power to transcend bounds of reason, to produce new knowledge and visually experiment organizational space reshuffling in the mind’s eye (Collie, 2011). Chinese companies can benefit immensely from management of human resource (skills, knowledge and ability) that drives leader, entrepreneur and individuals to imagine business scenarios and solutions. Hui (2006:328) contend that in Chaoyang District, Beijing there is a skill base and creative potential in the sectors of advertising, performing arts, publishing, digital entertainment and architecture. Alongside entrepreneurs and leaders, Human resource strategists in the China context also employ imagination in their jobs. “The image is of a human resource strategist who is imaginative, opportunistic, entrepreneurial and creative, able to bring together diverse energies as well as disarming harmful forces and willing to tolerate risk as opportunities are grasped” (Whiteley, Cheung and Quan, 2000:91).

Somewhat radically, Wuwei (2011:26) argues that the Chinese economic model of production should be changed such that creative industries are strengthened. He points out that at the core of these industries is ability to create new pathways into uncharted territory by imagining novel solutions and creative ways forward. Cooke (2013:23) points to the education system of China and change required at this level to compete with MNC’s (Multinational Companies). He argues that Chinese education should transition from its dominant mode of reproduction of knowledge by students, towards creative and open learning. This can provide human capital for organizations to resource for competitive advantage over MNC’s. Organizational change presents Chinese companies with uncertainty due to poor information, lack of information or demand for new information. In this context start-ups are emerging, which imagine growth beyond borders, often capitalizing on the success of more established MNC’s (Shirky, 2015).

Ding et al (2000:219) note that the degree to which foreign investment may “implant new human resource management systems and techniques is constrained by the Chinese context,

particularly the cultural and institutional heritage” of China. Therefore, bottom up change requires that organizations build and nurture skills and ability from the ground up rather than adopting the top down approach of commandment setting (Abrami, et al, 2014). Cai (2013) highlights the lack of innovation and skill shortage in China, which is likely to reduce economic growth significantly in the coming decade. Imagination in the enterprising Chinese context is a valuable human resource, currently poorly understood by both human resource theorists and practitioners.

Cultural Orientation

Historically, Chinese culture advocates organizational harmony, valued relationships with colleagues and a sense of stable and collective existence (Tsang, 1996) There is low tendency to disturb the status quo of culture (Jensen et al, 2016). With this comes low willingness to take risks and try new things, a sign of poor entrepreneurial practice (Liu and Almor, 2016). Suggesting otherwise, more than a decade earlier Lee and Peterson (2001) noted an emerging shift in the mind-set of younger generations “developing an entrepreneurial spirit characterized by innovative thinking, modernization and individualism”. Since then under looser state controls individuals have experienced autonomy at work, driven by their imagined ways of working and living. Tan (2002:97) noted that the Chinese exhibit conservatism coupled with high level of innovation and entrepreneurialism. But over the past few decades China’s conservatism has progressed towards greater freedom in values and less risk avoidance in parts (Atuahene-Gima and Li, 2004; Liu and Almor, 2016). Chinese conservatism is changing towards freer modes of thinking open to grasping new behaviours by imagining innovative and relatively novel possibilities. Greater appreciation for entrepreneurship in China is leading towards a rapid increase in the number of entrepreneurs entering sectors of the economy (Liu and Almor, 2016; Zhou, 2013). We assert that entrepreneurial imagination is fundamental to China’s transient cultural shifts in how risk and uncertainty is seen and re-imagined, until businesses, leaders and entrepreneurs get it right.

Conclusively, in the context of Chinese cultural trends imagination is a central driver of creative and innovative entrepreneurial behavior. It is implicit in theoretical debates and experienced through practice; however, as a topic it remains poorly researched and largely invisible. Given the

value of imagination as a resource for Chinese businesses undergoing and implementing change, we propose seven conditions sufficient for recognizing employee imagination (EI).

Conditions of Employee Imagination

Our definition, offered earlier, depicts imagination as a psychological process experienced by entrepreneurs and leaders (Anokhin et al, 2008:123). It involves looking at the world by generating and superimposing images and visually playing with them to make sense of situations (Browski, 1967:195; Thomas, 1999:207; Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011:66; Beiser, 2015:308) sometimes involving phonetic and olfactory stimulation (Ryle, 2002:246). A good example we identified with is Andriopoulos and Gotsi (2005:317) definition of imagination as “the process through which individuals envision and/or create objects and events that do not yet exist from the combination and recombination or transformation of established concepts”. Consequently, imagination is a micro process in the mind of entrepreneurs leading change, employees supporting new initiatives, and sometimes those who resist change for its imagined disastrous ends. For Chinese entrepreneurs it is an essential tool in the adaptive toolkit (Yang, 2004; Cai, 2013). Chinese enterprises adapt to the market through actions of individuals and the creative experience of imagination. Our interdisciplinary review found that imagination during organizational change is resourceful and exhibits seven underlying conditions of the individual’s experience.

Condition 1: The first condition is *non-correspondence relations*. This states that imagined objects are not like perceived objects. They do not correspond to objects outside the mind in the same way that the latter have consistent relations over iterations of being perceived. An imagined object has no corresponding relation in the sense that perceived objects in the environment relate with each other in a more or less stable manner. A mental image may be self-induced (i.e. conceived) rather than perceived stimuli that exist in their relations (Dilman, 1968: 93 draws on Wittgenstein). A change in imagined objects does not necessarily correlate with change in some external stimuli or object (Ryle, 2002:246). However, to some extent it is through the process of ‘imagining’ that social reality is often

made conceivable (Kamporozos-Athanasiou and Fotaki 2015:330). Images are presented as whole and readymade, and unlike the act of perception, where narratives emerge, partly outside the observers control (Stawarska, 2005). Images spontaneously appear and are self-generating entities. From one image several others may be conjured.

The non-correspondence relation is a condition that enables Chinese entrepreneurs and leaders to reconfigure scenarios and visualise them creatively in private space. Resulting outcomes can inform social interactions and relations that are at the heart of Chinese business culture and communication channels crucial for change. During change the entrepreneur's perception of uncertainty makes extensive use of mental reconfigurations of images in service of rationalizing new ventures, which to some extent determines entrepreneurial success in China (Liu and Almor, 2016:3). Studies indicate that conservative perceptions about uncertainty embedded in traditional Chinese cultural values are changing, as surrounding structural and institutional practices are seeking novel solutions (Anderson et al, 2016). On this frontier, given the freedom of thought characteristic of our proposed non-correspondence relation, the entrepreneur's imagination is a central mental capacity for producing creative ideas to cope with uncertainty. That is, to redress the unknown into the known. To this end, with more risk taking attitudes amongst younger generations (Lee and Peterson, 2001; O'Connor and Xin, 2006:277) and cultural conversations about autonomy and empowerment (Saini and Wang, 2014; Men et al, 2017) entrepreneurs will imagine novel practices for managing self and others resourcefully.

Condition 2: The second condition we propose is the *conceptual-perceptual confluence*. This states that most imagined objects (i.e. even when an observer shuts his or her eyes) can be influenced by perception, whilst most perception of objects can conversely be influenced by imagined objects (Sartre, 2013; Beres, 1960). This condition suggests that imagination as the process of forming images (i.e. objects in the mind) occurs in the context of continual perceptual and sensory feedback. Our account depicts the faculty of imagination as an open system susceptible to influence from surroundings (Taylor, 2006). The premise is that the internal social and physical environment of an organization can influence employee thoughts, feelings and imagination (Earle, 2003; Davis, 1984). Harnessing the relationship of self with the environment in a paramount way involves imagination.

Culturally, in Chinese organizations the organizational outcomes of entrepreneurs are correlated with high and low *suzhi* (Xu, Fu and Xi, 2014; Yang and Mei, 2014). Xu, Fu and Xi (2014:133) define *suzhi* as a somewhat slippery concept which encompasses the individual or the organization's quality or fineness, particularly as judged from a moral value perspective. In globalized business contexts entrepreneurial imagination underlines *suzhi* in that it conditions the sense making of a situation as *suzhi* relative. In particular our proposed condition of conceptual-perceptual confluence makes imagining possible to the extent that it is required for an open attitude to the perception-environment fit; characterized in Chinese social circles as high *suzhi*.

Thus, the condition 2 is a part of the structure of imagination as a global phenomenon. That is, our condition hypothesizes the open and continual co-operation of conceptual and perceptual stimuli (Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2005, p. 317). Our imagination as an entrepreneur and leader is constantly in education from environmental confluence.

From a Chinese change management perspective the proposed conceptual-perceptual confluence means imagination can be stimulated and perhaps even trained and developed as a resource for innovative leaders (Karwowski and Soszynski, 2008; Chang, Bai and Li 2015). International studies have advocated training techniques through practice focused on specialist tasks. Necka (2001) and Dobrowolowicz (1995) propose solving particular problems (i.e. instrumental training) such that perceptual data from tasks conditions mental heuristics (i.e. mental rules) involved in looking at a problem from unique and novel ways. Companies focus on designing work environments to induce perceptions that can channel creative imagination. Wisniewska and Karwowski (2007) propose techniques including personality training designed to sharpen traits that may drive imagination. Chinese firms should continue to focus on Change management tools designed with imagination-as-resource in mind and a *suzhi*.

Condition 3: The third condition we propose is that of non-sequential ordering. This means that mental objects or images - which have form and signification (Tovar-Restrepo, 2013; Kaporozos-Athanasidou and Fotaki, 2015) - need not be sequentially or linearly imagined in the mind as they are perceived in the social world. Therefore, cognitively (i.e. in making sense of a situation) an entrepreneur can imagine what it might be like to experience a conversation about power with Sun

Tzu without having to traverse hundreds of years of events. Likewise, spatially, an observer can imagine standing inside the Taj Mahal without having to physically board a plane and get a taxi. This condition of EI enables mental experiments that traverse temporal and physical bounds of organizations (Cobb, 1959; Casasato and Boroditsky, 2008). Under this condition imagination subsumes logic in so far as one can order imaginatively that $2+2=4$ and also that $2+2=5$ (Fiocco, 2007: 368). Logic, often a product of imagination, does not bound imagination.

The context of China provides entrepreneurs described as the rising creative class, with deep pockets, capital with the state, and affluent lifestyles (O'Connor and Xin, 2006:277). This population is where the ability to imagine radical new possibilities can incubate and be realised amidst cultural change in values and openness to new foreign individualism (Lee and Peterson, 2001; Liu and Almor, 2016). Our condition of non-sequential ordering emphasizes imagination as a breeding ground for innovative ideas on the rise with the state agenda. Crucially, it enables a transition of the mind-set of entrepreneurs managing change by employing radically different management technique and thinking (Hout and Michael, 2014). Western studies offer human resource management techniques for building imagination. Shorr (1978) suggests that employees can come up with imagining scenes that will lead to increased awareness of behaviour patterns in self and others. Prior to initiation of organizational change, employees can be empowered by being asked how they imagine the organizations success (Callan, 1993). In the context of employee appraisals (Beer, 1982) managers can illicit raw imagery and emerging themes in context.

Condition 4: The fourth condition we propose is emotional experience as part of imagination. This condition means that imagination may involve form and content of thought infused with emotions^{footnote 2}. A human resource manager during change may imagine what it is like to walk in the shoes of colleagues and hence experience empathy (Beaney, 2005: 1). Imagining retrospectively can inform imagining what to do next. It can also give rise to regret (Goldie, 2009) or some other emotion like jealousy, both with motivational force. By imagining your future self you can bridge the gap between your current self and future selves. In the imagined experience emotion may serve a motivational function for Chinese entrepreneurs and leaders. An example of the effective use of imagination by leadership during change is found in the following passage

“Sofia, a senior manager, often micromanaged others to ensure work was done “right.” So she imagined herself in the future as an effective leader of her own company, enjoying trusting relationships with coworkers. She saw herself as relaxed, happy, and empowering. The exercise revealed gaps in her current emotional style.” (Goleman, Boyatzis and Mckee, 2001: 31).

Neurological evidence supports the thesis that imagining doing things, which involves experiencing emotions, can prepare one for future demands of coping with those tasks when they are carried out (Guillot et al, 2012). No matter how competent a manager might be his or her capacity to manage people will suffer without the act of imagining emotional perspectives, purpose, culture and strategic environments for organizational advantage (Zaleznik, 2004). In imagining future states and balancing international human resourcing strategies (Zheng, 2013), Chinese MNC’s can activate a variety of emotions in the workplace, which might motivate or demotivate employees coping with formal and cultural change (MacIntyre and Gregersen, 2012; Zhou, 2013). Chinese human resourcing strategies currently lack methods for identifying and coping with imaginative and emotional episodes that are increasingly strong in organizational change contexts facing Chinese Multinational enterprises (Zheng, 2013). Introducing a deeply rooted issue Wang (2012:79) argues that from childhood the Chinese are educated into managing disruptive emotions, and consequently, little cognitive resources are left for innovative thinking, placing a culturally determined limit on future entrepreneurs and leaders.

To cope with dynamic external demands, human resource strategies in the context of need for enterprise and state support should aim to cultivate and balance a co-operation between employee imagination and its emotional dimension.

Condition 5: The fifth condition we propose is *Multiperspectivism*. This means that the individual can imagine many perspectives during an imagined episode. Goldie (2005) proposes two perspectives of imagination, which he advocates as inherently emotional in nature and learnt from the individual’s culture.

First, one can adopt the perspective of the person imagining the situation. One sees through the eyes of the person (i.e. self or other) who is immersed in the imagined event (i.e. *one is imagining from the inside*). This is a sufficient condition for empathizing with others and for appreciating their

feeling driven perspectives in the context of change. Second, an entrepreneur can imagine by looking from the outside into the situation. This is a godlike imagination where the entrepreneur is looking at a simulation of the organization in its conjured entirety (Wolheim, 1984; Goldie, 2000). The entrepreneurial leader stands at the top of the proverbial pyramid and in full view of the elements crafts a vision of change. During organizational change, one can employ either type of imagination to develop knowledge of the situation. In China the ability to imagine exploitive perspectives drove many entrepreneurs to take short term risks in early 2000's. This dampened the policy efforts of the state to improve life expectancy of enterprises (Yang, 2004). Of late however entrepreneurial leadership, a core part of which is the ability to imagine and create unique solutions, has been emphasized in Chinese MNC's. Entrepreneurial leaders in top positions should guide MNC change and development by formulating a vision emphasizing entrepreneurship across the business model and enhancement of human capital internationally (Ya-Hui and Jaw, 2011) **across globally diverse cultures**. This requires taking different perspective through the exercise of the imagination and learning to hone the imagination. For entrepreneurs multiperspectivism is useful in strategic decision making, teasing out uncertainties imaginatively, and planning ahead with **culture creating** vision (Schoemaker, 1997; Bueno Campos and Paz Salmador Sánchez, 2003). The misfortune of some employees over planned organizational changes may be imagined as both fortuitous for the organization and felt sympathetically in relation to the employee's limited prospects (Goldie, 2005). An entrepreneurial leader's ability to imagine different perspectives allows the identification of human capital building opportunities and risks across global markets (Ya-Hui and Jaw, 2011:121).

Condition 6: The sixth condition we propose for imagination is *intentionality*. This means imagination of entrepreneurs and leaders is directed at what it is about. The content of mental states like imagination is about things like events, market anomalies and behaviour of actors (Crane, 1998; Fodor, 1990: 8-9). An employee like a musician can imagine through metaphor and poetry (Cornelissen and Clarke, 2010), she can also imagine through static or moving images (Mills, 1959: 201; Gordon, 1985), and through symbols and anthropomorphisms; all of these forms of attentiveness are about something or intentional. What imagination is about might be a static image such as a portrait on the wall, or it might be something imagined in process such as an unfolding scene in a

meeting boardroom between employees in conversation (Kamporozos-Athanasίου and Fotaki, 2015:331). To the extent emotion is involved in imagination, it is also intrinsically an intentional experience. Entrepreneurs fear some fearful aspect of risk, rather than just feeling fear alone without directionality (Searle, 1983:1-3). The act of directing attention towards something that one imagines and may reserve feelings about presents intentionality as a form of attention. This is a necessary and sufficient condition for imagination as well as other mental states (Jacquette, 2011). The prudence of employee deliberation during imagined states instantiate intentionality at a fundamental level of awareness. Fodor (1990: 9) notes that intentionality is certainly fundamental to conscious mental content; which stands at the crux of our definition of imagination.

Condition 7: Lastly, we propose the condition of language as a regulating medium of imagination. Language refers to the use of words and symbols in speech, writing, and conversations (Pinker, 1994; 149). We posit that the use of language in organizations stimulates images, conceptions and emotions within the employees mind. It impacts human motor mechanisms that alter biology and psychology (see Papeo, Corradi-Dell'Acqua and Rumiati, 2011 on mirror systems related to imagination and verbs). If as Kant purports, the imagination is the mental capacity for organizing mental images and precepts into coherent unities (Johnson, 2013: 165) then language here assigns i/name of objects and ii/ correlating symbols and images manipulated in the process of imagining. Whilst there is no consensus on the extent to which thought depends on language (Carruthers, 2012: 382-283), it has been recognised that central cognitive faculties like the ability to imagine might depend on language as input-output stimulus (Fodor, 1975).

An entrepreneur's ability to speak different languages can affect how the mind works, which organizations recognize as an influence on choice of strategies (Andersson, Danilovic and Hanjun, 2015:33). We posit that imagination capacity and the entrepreneurial experience are moderated by language as a tool for innovative idea generation in businesses. In the social domain use of language can also enable the articulation of imagined experiences in conversations between employees and management involved in change (Honeycutt, Choi and DeBerry, 2009; Shaw, 2002: 8). This may lead to collective resistance or support, and the contagious spread of ideas, metaphors, images, creativity, and actions (Jo Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Cleary and Packard, 1992). The relationships between

imagining creatively and human language may be rooted in developmental years of education. Yi et al (2013) found that creative school climates in the Jiangsu Province of China correlated with level of creativity displayed in adolescents, suggesting language has a crucial role to play in the development of future entrepreneurs and leaders. To this end, the education system is crucial and requires reforms to improve free thinking (Cooke, 2013:23) and affect wider cultural practices, nurturing creative and daring entrepreneurs.

In conjuring up novel and innovative ways to change organizational workings, routines, tasks or products, entrepreneurs may move from language to visualizations of moving images. For instance, one acts like a mathematician who reads an equation ($A = \pi r^2 = \text{the area of a circle}$) and proceeds to geometrically illustrate it as a circular image. In imagination, similarly one can transform propositions found in language into a rotating three dimensional image in the mind. The power of imagination bridges language and images, rendered transformable in private psychological spaces interacting socially. This has advantages for organizations in so far as employees in innovative industries can experiment and create competitive solutions through visualizations (Reckhenrich, Kupp and Anderson, 2009).

From a change management perspective the use of language can stimulate advantageous images in the employee's minds. The non-instrumental dimension of change management involves the use of symbolisms to entice imagination and secure employee confidence in entrepreneurial leaders and their moral advocacy (Prasad, 1993: 1401; Ke, 2015). The central idea is that symbols have no intrinsic meaning apart from the function assigned to them by language users, and in times of change, moral outcomes are potent factors for support. One example is at Honda motors a prominent Japanese company where the idea of innovation is stimulated by the slogan of project team leader Hiroo Watanabe "Theory of Automobile Evolution". This slogan guided employee imagination. Thinking differently, his team asked the question "If the automobile were an organism, how should it evolve?" Consequently, "The evolutionary trend the team articulated came to be embodied in the image of a sphere" (Nonaka, 2008: 100). Based on their leaders envisioned motto the team shared and extended possibilities until the logically acceptable model was adopted. This demonstrates interplay

between imagination and language in a team innovation context, which remains an example of entrepreneurial “gift of the gab” and “thinking through imagination”.

Our findings integrated interdisciplinary debates about imagination, and applied them to entrepreneurial behaviour studies of Chinese businesses operating through socio-cultural contexts of state supported change (Wang, 2010; O’Connor and Xin, 2006:277-78). The conditions of – non-correspondence relations, conceptual-perceptual confluence, non-sequential ordering, emotional experience, multiperspectivism, intentionality and language – were core factors in the use of imagination by entrepreneurial leaders and stakeholders facing change management issues. We define imagination as a process of producing meaningful experiences with the support of the proposed psychological conditions. Our paper provides a picture of what imagination might involve, and a way of thinking about imaginations resourcing potential for Chinese entrepreneurs building innovative social inventions. Simultaneously there remain questions about its value and application in the context of theory.

Theoretical Implications

At a macro level we contend that the proposed conditions highlight imagination as a resource worthy of the kind of long-term production change advocated by Wuwei (2011:26). The conditions are resourceful both in Industry and in Chinese education that offers potential human capital for creative and innovative capacity building (Cooke, 2013; Hui, 2006) and reflects future socio-cultural need for imaginative individuals (Cai, 2013; Cuervo-Cazurra and Dau, 2009; Abrami et al, 2014).

In terms of existing research, studies of creative and empowering leadership offer relevant topics for exploring imagination further. Consider that an entrepreneurial leaders ability to imagine creative new ways regarding what to produce, how to do it, and when to strike, constitute key determinants of performance by self and others (Zhang and Bartol, 2010; Tung and Chang, 2011). We assert that entrepreneurship adopted by leaders and entrepreneur’s defined as creative “ways of thinking” (Darling and Beebe, 2007) relies on imagination conditions proposed in our paper. For example, leaders who share power with others do so in part because they are able to adopt multiple perspectives within their approach and vision (*i.e. multiperspectivism*). The enterprising leader

visualizes how empowering teams can germinate actions and lend voice to cultural concerns. He reaches this conclusion by sorting, re-combing and re-ordering mental images (i.e. non-sequential ordering and non-correspondence relations) to foster new meanings (Ryle, 2002; Andriopoulos and Gotsi, 2005). Some prospects may excite both leaders and teams (i.e. emotional experience and intentionality), and lead to better performance. In sum, our imagination conditions proposed in the current paper introduces psychological level relationships within minds of leaders and followers that explain the implicit role of imagination underlining better leader performance. For example, in a conversation about delineating a team members job and entrusting power to her (Zhang and Bartol, 2010) our proposed conditions of imagination explain the psychological toolkit of innovative and creative entrepreneurial leaders. From a human resourcing perspective, entrepreneurship amongst China's leaders requires tools that sharpen the imagination in supportive cultures. Training and development of aspiring leaders utilizes coaching, inspiring and mentoring (Chang et al, 2015), which draws on imagined and 'what if' scenarios of identifying with the organization (Martin, 2010). In this regard, entrepreneurship incubators can provide freedom to experiment in safe work spaces and share radical new ideas (Hong and Lu, 2016) to promote business image and innovation capacity (Bijaou, 2015).

The problem of how innovative leaders induce creativity in others (Kanter, 2008; Zahra, Sapienza and Davidsson, 2006) represents another fertile area for exploring our proposed conception of EI through psychological conditions. This examines the social and cultural aspects of imagination and thus places our conditions in a circuit where mental capacity and social settings are in confluence (i.e. the conceptual-perceptual condition). Questions arise from a human resource perspective about whether imagination can be educated and trained for competitive advantage. Our condition of language appears as both an individual level psychological influence, and simultaneously as a social tool that is used to condition how individuals and groups across China and Taiwanese cultures innovate (Chang and Shih, 2004:530). It is suggested that regional conditions and local arrangements are aided by language and culture of Universities and research institutes that encourage innovative thinking (Chen and Kenney, 2007). Methodologically, we propose the use of the repertory grids for further research into imagination. The technique was invented by Kelly (1955). The basic premise is

the use of three components: the set of elements, the set of constructs, and ratings linking the constructs by elements (Bannister and Fransella, 2013; Fransella, 2005; Fransella, Bell and Bannister, 2004; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Holman, 1996; Smith and Ashton, 1975). Grids have been used in studying the adoption of innovative technology and the importance of the mental faculty of cognition (Swan, 1997) and managerial thought (Smith and Stewart, 1977). A study of this sort would potentially provide a narrative picture of how imagination functions both with respect to our proposed conditions of process and with respect to the employees reasoning and affective faculties.

A second methodological approach involves getting individuals to engage with science fiction narratives. Works of science fiction broaden the imagination (see Lamarque and Olsen, 1994). Mills (2000:8) notes that through imagination we understand possibilities of social order and become somewhat familiar and less surprise by the onset of change. Grant (1999: 19) presents a description of Richard Matheson's book *The Shrinking Man* (1956), which illuminates how it might be like for an alienated employee experiencing imagined new worlds of organizational change and feeling small in the midst of the unknown management scheme.

"...even as his body dwindles. At first Scott Carey is terrified by the new challenging world in which he finds himself....Why had he never thought of it; of the microscopic and the macroscopic worlds?...In horror, creatures are monstrous violations of ideological norms, while in science fiction monsters are often simply a different life form.

Overall, there is ample room for further research into the theoretical aspects of imagination in China's innovation hungry context. Technological advancements and investments in organizational change must be made with oversight of resourcing potential of imagination for business.

Practical Managerial Implications

Decade long state reforms have developed human resourcing as a crucial function of China's growing and changing organizations. Creative ideas and innovation are key factors on the agenda and have supported entrepreneurial ventures (Ding et al, 2000; Wang, Lamond and Worm, 2010; Chang and Shih, 2004:532; Tsang, 1996). Underlying the innovation and creative results of high business performers is the ability to imagine **in a culture that is transforming towards individualism**. Our paper

provides practitioners with knowledge to identify conditions in self and others that co-operate during imagined scenarios. Whilst improving knowledge of practitioners, this begs the question of relevant managerial practices for sharpening the proposed conditions as combinations of entrepreneurial skill and knowledge. We propose the potential use of imagination incubators. The notion of an incubator is not new to entrepreneurs (Chandra and Fealey, 2009; Chandra, He and Fealey, 2007; Chan and Lau, 2005; Grimaldi and Grandi, 2005). Technology incubators have been linked with the emergence of an innovation based economy (Lalkaka, 2002). China based entrepreneurial organizations may foster creative imagination and imagination that replicates results within appropriately designed incubators tailored to local socio-cultural contexts. This would provide dynamic environments for development of the proposed conditions and demonstrate experiential learning.

Conclusion

In this conceptual article we propose that employee imagination comprises seven conditions. We have critically discussed the nature of each condition and justified why these conditions are important to the Chinese entrepreneurs and their business management practice. We use real cases from China to illustrate the effects of the proposed conditions and examine their values and functions in change management. From the viewpoint of human resource management, imagination is argued as a useful resource for managing changes in Chinese business cases. Coaching and developing imagination is crucial because employees with powerful imagination can enable businesses to stay competitive and adapt to environmental demands. Employee imagination also underpins how individuals make sense of their organisations and better understand the process of organisational changes. To conclude, our research has added new insights to the knowledge of a poorly understood organisational behaviour topic – employee imagination. The research findings also have provided managers with the knowledge of conditions, which could be adopted as powerful tools in facilitating organisational change management.

Footnotes

1. We must highlight that being creative is one way of using imagination. The word ‘creative’ signifies a new idea. An individual can imagine new possibilities and in this sense imagination enables creative streaks. At the same time, the exercise of ‘imagining’ can also replicate more familiar objects – say visualizing older scenarios in service of producing or creating new ideas. In this sense, creativity is one instance of using imagination, where the latter includes generation of both old and new ideas.

2. There are basic and more complex emotions as defined by Izard (2011: 372) “First-order emotions require only the minimal cognitive processes of perceiving and imaging in order to trigger a rapid and sometimes automatic action. These processes may often occur without reportable awareness, particularly in early development. In contrast, emotion schemas always involve interactions among emotion feelings and higher order cognition – thoughts, strategies, and goals that complement and guide responding to the emotion experience.”