

Riding on the back of Professional Consultants to BRI

One of the well-guarded secrets to business success is knowing who to hire as management consultants and who can truly deliver regardless of your challenges. When businesses go abroad, the first step is finding a local business guide who is trustworthy, understands the landscape and trouble spots to avoid, and knows how to work with you, and most importantly, can get the job done. *"Management consulting is one of the oldest professions"*, said ICMCI Chairman Nich Warn, and is often misunderstood. Savvy CEOs know how and when to engage their modern-day Sun Tzu. These advisors to kings and family businesses in days past, are now the modern-day McKinsey, Bain, and BCG. In China, we have emergent players like Kmind, Leverage Consulting, Hension, and Lichen, which have become strong local brands, powering alongside local franchises of the Big Four.

The ICMCI, or the International Council of Management Consulting Institutes, held its 2025 annual global conference in Pudong last week and was hosted by the China Enterprise Confederation (CEC), which serves as China's national professional management consulting institute. The first topic was how consultants are empowered – and also being destroyed – by AI. Still, the theme underpinning it was how Chinese businesses might leverage the strengths of these company doctors and strategists to take them into the Belt and Road. Go overseas! Imagine if BYD were to open a market in a BRI city. How would their trusted and reliable SWAT team prepare and set up the local office?

Twenty-five years ago, the ICMCI sent yours truly and Prof. Alfred S. P. Ho to China as part of its ambassadorial delegation to determine which of the hundreds of requests from national associations should represent a national member of the ICMCI. The ICMCI, under the auspices of the

United Nations, is tasked with improving the professionalism and certification of management consultants worldwide. This is the engine behind the designation CMC (Certified Management Consultant), of which there are nearly 60000 worldwide. ICMCI eventually settled on China's CEC as the sole representation for the Institute of Management Consultants in China.

So, when is the best time to plant a tree? 25 years ago.

Last week's visit to Pudong brought back memories and introduced a new perspective that, with hindsight, only someone who was there 25 years ago could see. Back in 2001, China had just joined the WTO. But now in 2025, it is rewriting the rules of global business. China's GDP was half of the US's in 2005, but by 2025, China's GDP will have outpaced the US by at least 30% in PPP terms. Today, China is introducing new laws on the use of AI, encouraging compliance with Green and ESG metrics, and has set in place one of the strongest protections for user and data owner privacy, outpacing even Europe's GDPR. These have vast implications for how management consultants can work with their clients and their clients' overseas supply chains.

The presentations by the local management consultants were first-rate, well-thought-through, and highly innovative. We saw Bain Capital variants in which consultants would co-invest with their clients. Some would offer advice from market entry to IPO listing on NASDAQ. BPO (business process outsourcing), AI-enabled enterprise assessment, and new approaches to New Quality Productive Forces were presented and debated. Modern enterprises in China, from governance to management, should mandate new and evolving practices and how they connect to their supply chains. Consultants are the systems builders and plumbers for the latest, modern Chinese enterprises operating outside China. (My only personal disappointment was not being able to meet anyone who had met me 25 years ago).

A local firm cited how one of his clients used DeepSeek to question his recommendations. That client wanted to know why he had to follow a consultant's advice and not AI's. The power of AI cut both ways, great for

those who know how to leverage it, and terrible for those who do not. As in most industries, those who know how to master AI will replace those who do not. Geopolitics and AI have taken some consultants to the cleaners. Those who can pivot, however, will always find a niche.

But how to assess and determine which management consultants are trustworthy, competent, resilient, with integrity, and not overly self-oriented? Unless other professional designations like CPA and CFA, the CMC brand is considerably less well-known, given its primacy. But increasingly, nations like Canada would rather award projects to CMCs than to non-designates because CMCs have a strict Code of Conduct, independent quality assessment, minimum years of experience, and ongoing academic and professional training. Because management is so fluid, trying to nail down what exactly constitutes a management consultant has been difficult. The CMC uses an internationally recognised competency framework. To kickstart China's set, the IMC in Hong Kong worked with Tsinghua University and the CEC to develop the first competency set for China's reference. These are naturally outdated after 25 years.

There needs to be a new competency set, with AI, geopolitics and even "astropolitics" as NewSpace becomes the new contested background, and ESG as additions to the existing competency standard. Given its history and respect for civil exams, which serve as an entry barrier, China should likely introduce much stricter examination measures to further improve the quality and productivity of the experts who shall install and repair management systems. We all appreciate that quality breeds respect. The higher the threshold to enter, the stronger the profession. The standard of quality used to be from the West. That is now changing.

I expect to see outstanding and innovative consulting approaches emerging from Shanghai and Beijing (and that trend should parallel the rapid growth, increasing dominance, and global reach of China's academic research). In fact, by 2030, Chinese management consultants will be operating with an AI-enhanced diagnostic cloud, and the role of management consultants will be there, more to convince their clients when and how much repair is needed. Further specialism would further evolve.

Let's not forget that management consultants are fundamentally agents of change. Tools, paradigms, and technologies are essential, but a good company doctor also needs good bedside manners. Today, the only constant is change, and speed does kill. Perhaps 25 years from now, we can hold a follow-up conference for CMCs globally, this time in Hong Kong, for consultants who have worked in the BRI and contributed to tremendous growth and resilience there.

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