

PM has shifted from 'Management of Projects' to 'Management by Projects'

Interview with Ou Lixiong^{1, 2}

Professor, Northwestern Polytechnical University
Executive Vice President, PMRC
Vice President, IPMA
China



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Journalist's Introduction to subject of interview

'For/By People, Goal/Objective Orientation, Flexible/temporary organization, Uncertainty/change management, Stakeholders satisfaction'. These are the five key phrases that Professor Ou Lixiong used to describe project management in his eyes.

Dr. Ou Lixiong, works as a professor in Northwestern Polytechnical University. He is Vice President of IPMA, and Executive Vice President of Project Management Research Committee, China (PMRC).

Working as a professor, author, researcher, trainer and consultant, Professor Ou Lixiong has been in the profession of project management for three decades. At first sight, you may be impressed by his handsome looks, but by having in-depth conversations with him or by

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listening to his lectures, you will be amazed by his forward-looking insight, persistence, global perspective and research spirit.

His research focuses on contemporary project management theory and body of knowledge, organizational project management (OPM), project management competence and performance evaluation, mega-programme management.

He is the first to put forward the concept of OPM in China, OPM theory framework and application models. He has also published the textbook titled 'Organizational Project Management'.

Based on Shenzhou spacecraft programme management practice, he has proposed 'Shenzhou project management maturity model' that is of Chinese characteristic and universal applicability.

He is also a participant in the formulation of IPMA OCB and ICB. He has made great efforts in promoting the development of project management in China and around the globe.

'Life is to be fantastic because of persistence' is the belief and motto that drives Professor Ou Lixiong forward along the 30-year journey. Faced with all kinds of distractions and temptation, he is firm in carrying on the research of project as a discipline and promoting Project Management development and application in China, which may not be beneficial in terms of money. That's because what matters most to him is spiritual satisfaction.

Interview

Part 1: PM with Chinese Perspective

Q1. PMRC is the only multi-industry project management professional/academic organization in China. What are the goals and future strategic direction of PMRC?

Ou Lixiong (Lixiong): PMRC is the only multi-industry project management non-profit professional organization in China and it will continue to fulfill its tenet as it has always done in the past. It is committed in promoting the advancement of project management discipline in China and the professionalization and internationalization of project management in China.

PMRC's recent priority is the creation of the 'Science of Project' (named as 'PROJECTICS') and establishment of 'Chinese Project Management School'.

Q2: Earlier this year, PMRC initiated a survey in an effort to know how much China is project-oriented. Would you please share the survey results with us? Have you noticed any differences between China and western countries in terms of projectification?

Lixiong: The research actually forms a part of a bigger project being undertaken by IPMA called Projectification and its Impact on Societies. Our research objective was to investigate the level of projectification in China and we found that China's current projectification level is at 42.7%, which is significantly higher than the numbers obtained in Germany, Norway and Denmark. The results also find that each industry has its own unique characteristics in regards to Projectification.

Q3: You have been promoting establishing China's own Body of Knowledge in project management, which is echoed by many experts. Why is it so important? Please share the progress of the work with us.

Lixiong: Body of Knowledge is the implication and foundation of a discipline. Since project management is a discipline with both natural and social attributes, it is necessary and significant to establish a project management body of knowledge that reflects Chinese perspective and is suitable for the Chinese social environment.

Research work on China's Project Management Body of Knowledge was launched in 1993. The first version of China's Project Management Body of Knowledge was released in 2001. In the following years in 2006 and 2008 two updates were made and currently a new version is under revision.

Compared with other Project Management Body of Knowledge editions, China's Project Management Body of Knowledge has the following features:

Firstly, it is discipline-oriented. Many editions of Project Management Body of Knowledge were established to support PM certifications, while China's Project Management Body of Knowledge is focused on building the PM discipline framework.

Secondly, the 'modular structure' is adopted to facilitate the knowledge on-demand portfolio and the constant need of knowledge updating.

Thirdly, the extension of project management has been expanded from 'Management of Projects' to 'Management by Projects'.

Fourthly, the framework and key contents of Organizational Project Management (OPM) was put forward as an effective form of permanent organization management in a changing environment.

Fifthly, the knowledge modules were organized based on the phases of project lifecycle, which reflects the characteristics of project management as a practical application discipline. Organizing knowledge using project lifecycle as the main thread is helpful in guiding the practice of project management.

Sixthly, the contents related to project conception phase have been strengthened. Right decisions have been set as the precondition for project success.

Lastly, the knowledge area in regards to soft skills has been further elaborated in detail; soft skills related to culture, leadership, communication management, conflict management are all included in China's Project Management Body of Knowledge.

Q4: It's well-known that you've established 'Shenzhou Project Management Maturity Model'. Would you like to introduce it?

Lixiong: 'Shenzhou Project Management Maturity Model' (SZ-PMMM) was built on the basis of Shenzhou Spacecraft programme management practices and it took into consideration China's culture and environment. The model challenges the traditional concept that project management maturity equals project management process maturity, and introduces 'soft' aspects such as culture to reflect project management capability. The model evaluates project management maturity from a broader scope of areas i.e-process, structure, personnel, methods and tools. In addition, it also focuses on project management competence variations across different projects in a permanent organization. It also emphasizes the dynamic mechanism of improving the project management capability of a permanent organization, and provides guidelines for the evaluation and improvement of project management capability of organizations at all levels.

Q5: In the context of multi-cultural and diverse project teams, it's essential to take the cultural factor into consideration in project management practice. Right?

Lixiong: Absolutely right! In multi-cultural and diverse project teams, it is essential to take cultural factors into account in project management practice. Research on China's 'Project Management Body of Knowledge' and 'Shenzhou Project Management Maturity Model' are both good examples of project management practice with a cultural focus.

Q6: One of your research focus is 'Science of Project' ('PROJECTICS'). Why should we treat Project as a subject or discipline?

Lixiong: It is generally voiced that project management lacks fundamental theory. 'Science of Project' is designed to solve the problem that project management lacks in fundamental theory.

With the advent of the concept of project-oriented societies, we should not only focus on research related to the management of projects but rather emphasis should also be given to the study of other issues related to projects. 'Science of Project' is a potential solution that will provide a new avenue for the development of other disciplines.

Part 2: PM in VUCA era

Q7: Having participated in many international conferences, what trends in project management have you observed?

Lixiong: Based on my observation, here are the hot topics in project management: Projectification of Societies, Coping with Complexity, Human factors in Project Management, Education in Project Management, Diversity in Project Management, Green/sustainable Project Management, Agile Project Management, Ethics in Project Management, Standards in Project Management and Project Success.

Project Management has evolved from 'Management of Projects' to 'Management by Projects', From 'Project as a Management Object' to 'Project as a Management Measure', from 'Application Research on PM' to 'Fundamental Research on PM', from 'Interdisciplinary study on PM' to 'Multidisciplinary study on PM', from 'Research on Project Management' to 'Research on Project', from 'Systematic PM' to 'Agile PM'...

Q8: In the VUCA era of digital transformation, what are the top competitive qualities of a project manager? Will Chinese project management style have a competitive edge in the new era? How should we deal with changes?

Lixiong: The VUCA era of digital transformation is featured by the onset of big data, information technology, cloud computing and artificial intelligence, etc. Therefore, with this sort of VUCA change, the technology tools of project management will change and we will be faced with a new set of problems and challenges. Henceforth for project managers, the ability to use digital technology and big data and having the adaptive ability to deal with new environments and challenges in this digital age will be utterly essential.

In IPMA's ICB, 'Competence= Attitude + Knowledge+ Experience'. Attitude is the most important for project managers. However, in light of the VUCA era ushering in an era of change, it also means the opening of doors to a world of new possibilities and opportunities. This also means that the study of 'how to manage opportunities' would be an area that is worth researching. Also we previously used to emphasize on 'responding to changes', however, now we should put emphasis on 'embracing change'. Previously when encountering changes, we may wonder if there are problems but now faced with changes we should try to identify opportunities. Therefore, for project managers the attitude towards changes needs change. And In this changing era, what we should do is to embrace change and realize that the criterion of project success has altered from old concept of 'deliver the deliverable within agreed framework' to the new concept of 'satisfaction of key stakeholders'.

That being said, I believe Chinese project managers will be more likely to succeed in this era as their management style is more people-oriented while the western project management approach places more emphasis on structured and standardized tools or processes, which was more suited for the industrial age. I believe that people are the core of all projects. Therefore, in this sense the Chinese approach towards project management is more flexible with fewer limitations. Maybe it lacks re-productivity and controllability, but in today's changing environment that will become a strength. Western project management is rather specific while Chinese-style project management is more abstract. With the development of society, western project management based on the industrial era may meet challenges but the Chinese-style project management approach also has room for improvement. We should adopt various approaches and reach a balance according to the needs of each project.

Part 3: 30-year Love with PM

Q9: As IPMA VP, Research, what are your major roles and responsibilities?

Lixiong: IPMA VP is an IPMA Executive Board member. And being a part of IPMA's Executive Board, we are responsible for IPMA's daily operational decisions and its overall management. As for the role of IPMA VP Research, I'm in charge of research-related strategic execution, the development of research related projects and the organization of various research events at IPMA.

Q10: Having been in this field for nearly 3 decades, do you feel exhausted or bored? What are the milestones in your PM career?

Lixiong: I have been in the profession of project management for a good three decades, starting from 1988. Since then, I have been involved in the promotion, research, teaching, training and consulting work of project management. I still absolutely enjoy the work I do, on the pro side since every project is different from the former and each new project allows me to expand my knowledge base, learn something new, gain new insight and even meet new people from all over the world. The only con is that sometimes, one can be really overloaded with a lot of work.

Here are some memorable milestones:

1988: I started to learn Project Management and my career in Project Management started.

1994: I started doing my research on the Project Management Body of Knowledge.

1997: I got involved in the preparation work of introducing PMI-PMP certification to China.

2001: China's Project Management Body of Knowledge was published; I was appointed as the leader of standards team of IPMA Certification Body in China and started to develop IPMA 4-L-C certification in China; I also began to focus on research on Organizational Project Management.

2005: I got involved in the Shenzhou Spacecraft Programme with my main focus on mega-programme management research and consulting.

2009: My research on Organizational Project Management achieved preliminary results; I got elected as the Vice President and Secretary general of PMRC and took the role in charge of the operation of PMRC.

2015: The textbook on Organizational Project Management got published; I began to focus on my research in the field of 'PROJECTICS'; I was also appointed as Head of the IPMA Certification Body in China.

2016: I was elected as a Vice President of IPMA.

2018: I worked on a monograph on 'PROJECTICS' – to be published before the end of 2018.



PMR Journalist Yu Yanjuan and Prof Ou Lixiong

About the Interviewer



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Yu Yanjuan, Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for Project Management Review Magazine and website. In the past, she has worked as a journalist and editor for China Manned Space Agency website and *Student English Times*. She once worked part-time as English teacher in training centers. For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjian-yu-76b280151/>.

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