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From Hunters to Farmers: Cultural Paradigms and Strategic Management
Peer Reviewed Essay
by Thomas Walenta

From Hunters to Farmers: Cultural Paradigms and Strategic Management [1]

Thomas Walenta

Abstract

This essay explores how Western and Chinese cultural paradigms shape contrasting views of time, leadership, and strategy. Western societies, particularly the United States, tend toward short-term, individual-focused, linear approaches, while Chinese traditions emphasize long-term horizons, relational thinking, and cyclical perspectives rooted in agrarian practices. As François Jullien notes, Western notions of static "Being" contrast with the Chinese focus on dynamic "Living," influencing how change and continuity are managed. This divide is mirrored in project versus program management: projects reflect efficiency, speed, and discrete outputs, whereas programs embody effectiveness, adaptability, and long-term coordination. Addressing forthcoming challenges will require a wide repertoire of viewpoints and methods, so integrating both perspectives into a pluralistic mindset is beneficial, as it supports balancing immediate action with long-term, systemic change.

Keywords: *Paradigms, Program vs. Project Management, Chinese and Western culture, Hunter vs Farmer metaphor, Being vs Living, strategic management, pluralistic global mindset*

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Introduction

Understanding the underlying mental models for perceptions and decision-making helps in selecting the most appropriate one for the current situation. While the terms "project" and "program" are often used interchangeably, they reflect fundamentally different approaches to complexity, time, and value creation. These differences are also rooted in deeper cultural and civilizational paradigms.

A paradigm is understood in this essay to be a foundational set of assumptions, values, and mental models that shape how individuals, organizations, or societies interpret the world and make decisions (Kuhn, 1970; Schön, 1983). It acts as a cognitive framework—often invisible to those operating within it—that determines what is seen as true, normal, or possible (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Paradigms shape not only the way problems are framed but also the kinds of solutions that are seen as legitimate. In science, for instance, the transition from Newtonian mechanics to quantum physics marked a profound paradigm shift that transformed the understanding of reality itself (Kuhn, 1970). In culture, Western individualism and Eastern collectivism offer sharply contrasting paradigms that influence everyday behavior, leadership, and governance (Hofstede, 2001; Rosemont, 2025). Paradigms are powerful precisely because they guide thought and action so deeply that they often go unnoticed, until they are disrupted by contradictions, crises, or alternative perspectives (Morgan, 2006). Recognizing paradigms, including one's own, is vital for working in complex environments, sparking innovation, and engaging constructively across cultural boundaries.

Western models often emphasize short-term gains, linear time (Chronos), and individual control, typically expressed through project-based execution. By contrast, Eastern perspectives, shaped by Confucianism, Daoism, and agrarian traditions, stress event-driven time (Kairos), long-term planning, harmony, and collective outcomes, aligning more with program-oriented approaches. This essay examines how ten paradigms of Western thought—including free markets, liberal democracy, and moral superiority—have influenced global governance and project practices, and how these are increasingly challenged by China's rise and alternative worldviews. Fear and individualism reinforce Western short-termism, while the farmer metaphor, rooted in China's agrarian heritage, underpins habits of patience, coordination, and ecological awareness.

Rather than being part of a formal philosophy, this agricultural legacy serves as a key reason why long-term, relational thinking has developed through societal evolution in some civilizations. Chinese approaches to governance, organization, strategy, and making change happen evolved out of this thinking and can be observed today. By examining the contrasts between Western and Chinese paradigms, the essay explores

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how different worldviews influence not only global politics and organizational strategy but also how we organize and implement change. Project and program managers, policy strategists, organizational leaders, and cross-cultural teams will gain valuable insights into how cultural paradigms affect decision-making, strategic alignment, and long-term value creation.

This essay builds on ten Western paradigms outlined in Saji Madapat's forthcoming work *The Gods Must Be Crazy II: A Rooseveltian Renaissance for Trump 2.0 American Renewal in the Chinese AI Century* (Madapat, 2025). Madapat uses satire to critique the United States and call for a Rooseveltian revival of leadership, drawing on strategies once used by Theodore, Franklin D., and Eleanor Roosevelt to steer the nation through crises such as World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II. The analysis extends this debate by contrasting Western paradigms with Chinese perspectives, drawing also on François Jullien's twenty pairs of concepts to highlight deeper civilizational differences. Later chapters examine Western anxieties and China's agrarian heritage as cultural anchors shaping distinct outlooks. Taken together, these comparisons reveal how cultural assumptions influence not only governance and strategy but also the ways projects and programs are conceived: in the West as instruments of short-term control and execution, and in China as vehicles for long-term adaptation, coordination, and systemic balance.

Methodology

This essay employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that presents contrasting perspectives to spark debate, reveal hidden assumptions, and foster new insights. Going beyond traditional project and program management research, it incorporates insights from cultural psychology, philosophy, and international political theory. The study uses a comparative framework to highlight differences between Western and Chinese views on values, leadership, and systems thinking. By using conceptual juxtaposition and a dialectical method, the analysis sees tensions not just as conflicts but as opportunities for synthesis. Argumentative analysis tests the strengths and limitations of each paradigm, aiming to demonstrate how structured debate can deepen our understanding of governance and leadership across different contexts. This paper made limited use of digital writing and editing tools to support clarity and coherence. Grammarly was employed for grammar and style checking. Generative AI tools, including OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5, September 2025 version) and Perplexity AI, were consulted to suggest phrasing alternatives, summarize complex ideas, and assist with structural refinement. All conceptual framing, argumentation, and interpretive contributions remain the responsibility of the author, and AI-generated content was reviewed and revised to ensure accuracy and originality.

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Research question

"How do contrasting cultural paradigms in Western and Chinese traditions shape approaches to time, governance, and strategic management, and what implications does this have for projects and programs in a globalized world?".

Paradigms rooted in Western and US culture

Western powers, particularly the United States, have often operated on assumptions that their cultural, political, and economic models are widely applicable and effective, at times treating them as universally relevant. Paradigms like free-market absolutism, technological determinism, and the supposed inevitability of liberal democracy have influenced everything from foreign policy to development aid, corporate governance, and project and program management frameworks. These beliefs have shaped global strategies and, in some cases, led to a reduced sensitivity to cultural diversity and local context. However, the increasing international influence of China and the assertiveness of alternative governance models challenge the dominance of these paradigms, necessitating a critical re-evaluation of them. The ten Western paradigms from Madapat's upcoming book (2025) and the twenty Chinese paradigms listed by Jullien (2019) re-enforce each other and demonstrate how these unquestioned assumptions continue to influence decision-making across politics, organizations, and project environments, often unconsciously, affecting how problems are framed, solutions are prioritized, and value is assessed in both national and international contexts. Madapat's paradigms are:

1. Western Superiority Paradigm: The belief that Western systems of governance, economics, and culture are universally optimal and should guide global development. (Acharya, 2014; Ikenberg, 2011). Programs shaped by assumptions of Western superiority may overlook local knowledge and stakeholder contexts, reducing legitimacy and long-term sustainability.

2. Linear Progress Paradigm: The assumption that history moves in a straight line toward liberal democracy and capitalist globalization, treating alternative models as "behind" or "underdeveloped" (Fukuyama, 2018; Appadurai, 2013). This paradigm is deeply rooted in a Chronos-based conception of time, where history unfolds in measurable, sequential stages, often associated with Western Enlightenment ideals of progress, rationality, and modernity. Chronos, as a representation of chronological, forward-moving time, reinforces a teleological worldview in which societies are ranked according to how far along they are on the presumed universal path to liberal capitalism (Zerubavel, 2003). As a result, non-Western systems are often interpreted not as alternative trajectories, but as earlier stages awaiting maturation. This framework limits the capacity to recognize plural modernities and cyclical or adaptive models of development, such as those emphasized in Chinese strategic thinking (Hartog, 2015). A

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linear progress mindset can anchor program schedules and milestones, but risks ignoring cyclical dynamics and emergent change.

3. Free Market Absolutism: The belief that unfettered markets, minimal government intervention, and widespread privatization always produce the best outcomes for economic and societal well-being (Mazzucato, 2013; Stiglitz, 2019). This idea emerged from neoliberal economic thought, becoming dominant in the late 20th century with the rise of Reaganomics and Thatcherism. It assumes that the invisible hand of the market is not only efficient but also morally preferable, viewing state-led planning or public ownership as inherently inefficient or authoritarian. Free Market Absolutism can sometimes undervalue alternative economic models, such as China's state-capitalist hybrid or Scandinavian welfare capitalism, by framing them as deviations from a preferred model rather than as systems developed in response to distinct historical and cultural contexts.

Embedded within this paradigm is a Chronos-informed vision of economic development, where liberal capitalism is seen as the final, inevitable stage of evolution in a global economic timeline. Other systems are often described as "lagging behind" or "catching up," which reinforces a view of linear, Western-centric economic growth and supremacy. This perspective hides the important role of government intervention in historically successful capitalist economies, including the U.S. It also overlooks the piling-up evidence that markets alone cannot solve complex issues such as inequality, climate change, or public health. As Mazzucato (2013) states, innovation and progress often need active public investment and bold government leadership, elements that Free Market Absolutism tends to ignore. Recognizing the limits of this approach allows us to imagine new economic models that combine market mechanisms with shared purpose and long-term public benefit. Programs driven by free market absolutism often focus on efficiency and cost reduction, but may underfund public value, resilience, and long-term advantages.

4. Technological Determinism: The idea that technological superiority automatically ensures social progress and geopolitical dominance (Morozov, 2011; Zuboff, 2019). This view assumes a direct, cause-and-effect link between technological innovation and societal development, often mixing technical ability with moral, political, or civilizational legitimacy. Rooted in Enlightenment rationalism and modernist ideals of control and mastery, it reflects a worldview where human history is seen as a march toward greater efficiency, automation, and data-driven optimization. Technological determinism undergirds much of Western discourse on AI, cybersecurity, and innovation, where nations compete not only for market share but also for symbolic leadership in a presumed future shaped solely by those who "own" the next breakthrough. This perspective marginalizes cultural, ethical, and systemic dimensions of technological

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adoption—failing to account for how values, governance models, and social contexts mediate the impact of technology.

The paradigm also reflects a Chronos-based view of time, imagining history as a race where being first—whether in developing AI, achieving quantum supremacy, or building the fastest processors—gives lasting global dominance. This linear perspective often leads to "future shock" and techno-anxiety, where falling behind technologically is seen as a sign of civilizational decline. In contrast, other worldviews (e.g., Chinese strategic patience or Indigenous cyclical time) may focus less on speed and disruption, and more on continuity, adaptation, and ethical integration.

When programs adopt technological determinism, they risk equating success with innovation alone, neglecting governance, ethics, and social adoption.

5. Exceptionalism and Invincibility: The assumption that the United States is too powerful to fail, rooted in its historical victories in global conflicts, economic dominance, and self-perception as a uniquely virtuous and indispensable nation (Bacevich, 2020; Walt, 2018). This paradigm frames America not just as a superpower but as a civilizational exception—exempt from the cycles of rise and fall that have defined other empires. It promotes the idea that American leadership is both inevitable and eternal, reinforcing a sense of moral superiority and structural immunity to decline.

At the same time, some analysts suggest that concerns about relative decline, and what has been characterized as a strategic "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO), have shaped responses to China's rapid ascent in technology, infrastructure, and global influence (Buckler, 2025). There is also a subtler FOJI "Fear of Joining In" (De Sousa, 2024): a resistance to integrating with multipolar governance structures or adopting alternative models of development, for fear that doing so would dilute America's unique identity and authority. This paradoxical fear, of being both left behind and forced to collaborate, undermines the paradigm's own claims of confident leadership.

Notably absent from this worldview is humility: the capacity to recognize one's limits, look at oneself from the outside, acknowledge structural weaknesses, and learn from others. Exceptionalism discourages self-critique and makes it difficult to imagine that the U.S. might benefit from adopting or even studying non-Western approaches to governance, strategy, or sustainability. It promotes a Chronos-bound vision of leadership: one in which dominance is earned by winning past races (the two World Wars, the Space Race, the Cold War) and is thus presumed permanent. History shows that empires that fail to adapt, blinded by their own myths, are often the most vulnerable to decline.

Programs influenced by exceptionalism may dismiss risks or alternative models, leading to overconfidence and failure to adapt in volatile contexts.

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6. Democracy as a One-Size-Fits-All Model: The belief that liberal democracy, characterized by competitive elections, individual rights, and free-market institutions, is not only the best but the inevitable form of governance for all societies, regardless of their cultural, historical, or institutional contexts (Carothers, 2007; Diamond, 2019). This paradigm rests on a universalist assumption that all political development naturally culminates in Western-style liberal democracy, a view famously articulated in Fukuyama's "end of history" thesis (Fukuyama, 1992).

Often promoted through international development programs, conditional aid, and foreign policy rhetoric, this model tends to treat deviations—such as single-party governance, hybrid regimes, or non-Western forms of meritocracy—as either transitional or defective. It overlooks the historical contingencies and structural conditions that shaped Western democracies, including industrialization, colonialism, and geopolitical insulation, while ignoring how other societies might prioritize harmony, stability, or collective well-being over electoral competition (Bell, 2015).

This paradigm also reflects a Chronos-based teleology: a linear and progressive vision of political development in which societies are imagined as being at earlier or later "stages" on the path toward democratic maturity (Zerubavel, 2003). This not only reinforces a civilizational hierarchy but can also justify interventionist policies under the guise of democratic promotion, even when such efforts lead to instability or backlash (Méndez, 2012).

Critics argue that exporting democracy as a one-size-fits-all solution has led to democratic fatigue, backlash, and unintended consequences, from failed state-building efforts in the Middle East to disillusionment in post-authoritarian societies (Levitsky & Way, 2010). A more pluralistic and context-sensitive approach would acknowledge that legitimate political authority can take diverse institutional forms shaped by local histories, philosophies, and societal needs.

Applying a uniform democratic model to program governance can obscure the need for context-specific participation, stakeholder inclusion, and legitimacy.

7. Military Power Equals Global Influence: The belief that maintaining overwhelming military superiority is the key to ensuring global leadership, stability, and deterrence—regardless of shifts in geopolitical dynamics that increasingly emphasize soft power, economic interdependence, and technological influence (Brooks, 2016; Gilli, 2019). This paradigm is rooted in the legacy of 20th-century great power politics, where military might was synonymous with international prestige and strategic leverage, especially during the Cold War and the unipolar moment that followed. However, the assumption that hard power guarantees sustained influence overlooks the changing nature of global power in the 21st century. As Joseph Nye (2004) argues, soft power— the ability to shape preferences through culture, values, and diplomacy—is becoming

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increasingly important in a networked, media-saturated world. Meanwhile, economic statecraft, digital infrastructure, and global supply chain integration have enabled countries like China to exert considerable influence without matching U.S. military capabilities (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Luttwak, 1990).

Moreover, reliance on military primacy often leads to overextension and strategic myopia. From Iraq and Afghanistan to Libya, recent history shows that superior firepower does not translate into lasting political outcomes or legitimacy. The pursuit of global dominance through military means also diverts resources away from long-term investments in education, diplomacy, infrastructure, and innovation—domains increasingly central to strategic competitiveness.

This paradigm also reflects a Chronos-bound logic of geopolitical dominance: the idea that the future will resemble the past, and that past victories (WWII, Cold War) provide a blueprint for enduring supremacy. It fails to adapt to a multipolar world in which influence is exerted less through occupation and more through platforms, narratives, and economic dependencies (Khanna, 2016).

Programs rooted in a militarized paradigm often equate scale with strength, overlooking softer forms of influence such as networks, trust, and cultural legitimacy.

8. Short-Term Thinking: The prioritization of election cycles, quarterly profits, and immediate gains over long-term strategy, systemic resilience, and public investment (Jacobs, 2011; Farrell, 2019). While most evident in democratic governance—where political leaders are incentivized to deliver fast, visible results within tight electoral timelines—this paradigm extends to the corporate world, media, and even public discourse, where short-term wins are often celebrated at the expense of structural foresight (Tooze, 2021).

This generalized short-termism reflects a deep cultural orientation toward immediacy, efficiency, and performance metrics (Schor, 1992). It discourages bold, long-horizon projects—such as climate adaptation, education reform, or infrastructure renewal—that may not yield measurable outcomes within a fiscal year or political term. Instead, it fosters reactive policymaking, speculative finance, and superficial innovation, often masked as agility or pragmatism (Mazzucato, 2021).

Philosophically, this paradigm is rooted in a flattened sense of time, driven by a Chronos-centric obsession with sequencing and deadlines, but stripped of the wisdom associated with long-term stewardship (Zerubavel, 2003). In contrast to civilizations that emphasize multi-generational thinking—such as Indigenous traditions (Whyte, 2017) or Confucian philosophy (Bell & Chaibong, 2003)—short-term thinking severs policy from legacy and action from consequence. It is compounded by digital attention economies and hyper-

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mediated politics, which reward speed, spectacle, and crisis management over thoughtful deliberation (Lanier, 2018; Zuboff, 2019).

Ultimately, this paradigm reflects a loss of patience, humility, and historical perspective—qualities essential for addressing complex global challenges that unfold not in weeks or months, but across decades.9. Moral Superiority of the West: The belief that Western nations conduct global affairs from inherently noble or altruistic motives, positioning themselves as guardians of universal values such as freedom, democracy, and human rights—even when these actions are primarily driven by strategic, economic, or geopolitical interests (Mazarr, 2017; Kapoor, 2018). This paradigm frames Western interventionism as a moral obligation rather than a pursuit of power, often obscuring the complex interplay of self-interest and ideology behind foreign policy decisions.

Short-termism drives programs to chase quick wins and visible outputs, undermining deeper transformation and benefits realization.

9. Moral exceptionalism: By claiming the moral high ground, Western states can legitimize actions—such as military interventions, sanctions, or regime changes—that might otherwise be seen as imperialistic or self-serving. This narrative is deeply tied to a historical narrative of "civilizing missions," where Western powers portrayed themselves as bearers of progress and enlightenment to the rest of the world.

However, this sense of moral exceptionalism can foster blind spots and hubris, preventing critical reflection on the consequences of Western policies, from the Iraq War to economic conditionalities imposed by global institutions. It creates a "virtue shield" that not only masks strategic interests but also delegitimizes alternative value systems—such as collective harmony or non-intervention—that underpin Chinese or other non-Western diplomatic philosophies.

This paradigm resonates with a Chronos-based linearity, implying that the West, by virtue of being "ahead" in historical progress, has both the right and the duty to define moral norms. Yet, as Kapoor (2018) argues, such narratives often reinforce global hierarchies rather than challenge them, subtly framing non-Western actors as morally deficient or perpetually "catching up" to Western ethics.

Global initiatives like green project management, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, human rights conventions, and sustainability standards are often seen as universal frameworks for guiding responsible actions in programs. While they offer important reference points for legitimacy, accountability, and long-term value creation, their roots in mostly Western institutions and perspectives can imply a hidden claim of moral superiority. When these frameworks are used in a prescriptive way without enough awareness of cultural and political differences, they can be viewed as external impositions rather than shared commitments. Such views may reduce stakeholder

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engagement, cause resistance, or lead to reallocating resources toward symbolic compliance instead of real impact.

For program management, the challenge lies in reconciling the normative appeal of these frameworks with the realities of diverse local settings. They are most effective when treated as dialogical instruments—principles to be adapted and interpreted collaboratively—rather than as rigid prescriptions. Programs that acknowledge and negotiate cultural pluralism in the application of these moral standards are better positioned to sustain legitimacy, foster cooperation, and achieve meaningful outcomes. In this light, the issue is not the frameworks themselves but the manner in which they are framed and enacted: as expressions of Western moral superiority or as catalysts for genuinely shared global responsibility.

10. Happiness as the ultimate human goal: viewed as the highest aim in modern psychological and philosophical discussions, defined mainly as a personal pursuit focusing on subjective well-being (positive emotions and life satisfaction), individual autonomy, and the pursuit of pleasurable experiences or fulfilment. These ideas are especially highlighted in Western individualist cultures, rooted in Enlightenment philosophy, where happiness is considered both a personal responsibility and a measurable aspect of life outcomes. (Diener, 1999; Seligman, 2011; Krys, 2024)

Many of these beliefs are not shared by other global players and most of humanity, particularly in China, Russia, Africa, Latin America, and India. Several of these Western paradigms, such as beliefs in cultural superiority, linear progress, and market absolutism, are deeply rooted in colonial ideology. The paradigms not only justified empire-building but continue to shape global governance today, sometimes under the guise of Western values. The assumption that liberal democracy, free markets, and technological dominance are universally applicable echoes the colonial logic of a civilizing mission. Even in contemporary policy and development efforts, the West often acts from a position of moral and strategic exceptionalism, imposing one-size-fits-all solutions while neglecting cultural and historical context. Recognizing these paradigms as colonial inheritances is essential to deconstructing enduring power asymmetries in the modern world.

The continued reliance on Western paradigms, whether in the form of exceptionalism, market ideology, or democratic evangelism, has shifted from being a source of strength to acting as a barrier to adaptation. By holding onto outdated assumptions, the West risks strategic shortsightedness, alienates emerging nations, and weakens its influence. China's rise does more than challenge Western power; it questions the mental frameworks through which that power is understood and wielded. A new era requires humility instead of dominance, diversity instead of universal rules, and long-term strategic thinking rather than short-term ideological comfort. If the West aims to stay relevant, it

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must move beyond its long-held myths and accept a world that is no longer shaped solely in its image.

Programs influenced by individual maximization may optimize for personal gains or consumer satisfaction at the expense of collective or systemic well-being.

Chinese views contrasting with Western paradigms

Chinese traditions often emphasize multipolarity, long-term planning, and collective adaptation, while Western approaches tend toward innovation, individual initiative, and short-term efficiency. Instead of viewing these simply as opposites, they can be seen as complementary—much like yin and yang, where each balances the other's weaknesses. In the sense of Hegel's dialectics, the discipline of projects focused on speed and precision may serve as a thesis. At the same time, the patience of programs oriented toward continuity and coordination acts as its antithesis. Their combination is a synthesis that offers more than either alone. Practically, this means projects enable immediate delivery, while programs support longer-term resilience and transformation. When merged, these two traditions equip leaders with a richer toolkit for managing initiatives that must respond to current pressures without losing sight of future goals.

1. **Western Superiority → Civilizational Multipolarity**

China explicitly rejects the notion of Western superiority, promoting "civilizational multipolarity." It emphasizes governance and development "with Chinese characteristics," arguing that multiple pathways to progress are legitimate. However, critics note that this stance may sometimes serve to legitimize China's own exceptionalism, positioning its model as uniquely valid (Wang & Zhao, 2020). In program management, multipolarity encourages collaboration across diverse stakeholders, recognizing that no single actor holds all authority or insight.

2. **Linear Progress → Historical Cycles and Strategic Patience**

Chinese thought often views history as cyclical, drawing on Confucian and dynastic traditions. This perspective supports resilience and long-term strategy (Feng, 2018). Yet, cyclical thinking can also risk underestimating the speed of disruptive change, creating blind spots in anticipating global shifts. Programs shaped by cyclical and event-driven time logics integrate reflection and renewal phases, allowing adaptation after each cycle rather than forcing linear progression.

3. **Free Market → State Capitalism / Socialist Market Economy**

China has developed a hybrid economic system combining market mechanisms with strong state oversight (Huang, 2019). This has enabled rapid growth and stability, but it also generates challenges such as inefficiencies in state-owned enterprises, uneven

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regional development, and limited transparency in decision-making. Governance in a state-capitalist paradigm aligns programs with long-term national, societal, and global human goals, ensuring individual initiatives serve collective strategy.

4. Technological Determinism → Technology with Political Discipline

While China invests heavily in technology, it embeds innovation within centralized political frameworks to align with national goals (Zhao, 2021). This allows for coordinated advances but raises concerns over surveillance, censorship, and restrictions on individual freedoms, which can hinder creativity and international trust. Techno-pragmatism encourages program managers to treat technology as an enabler within cultural and organizational contexts, rather than assuming it dictates outcomes.

5. Exceptionalism→ Strategic Humility & Civilizational Confidence

China often avoids overt declarations of exceptionalism, instead drawing on historical continuity to project civilizational confidence (Lampton, 2016). Nonetheless, narratives of "national rejuvenation" may foster nationalist sentiment that complicates international cooperation. Prudence fosters risk-aware program management, where ambition is balanced with careful positioning and resource stewardship to secure long-term success.

6. Democracy → "Whole-Process People's Democracy"

China argues for its own governance model "whole-process people's democracy" which emphasizes stability, performance legitimacy, and collective well-being (Yu, 2022). While effective in some respects, this model has been critiqued for limiting political pluralism and dissent, raising questions about representation and individual rights. Programs benefit from legitimacy when governance structures are tailored to local contexts, strengthening acceptance and stakeholder engagement.

7. Military Power → Multidimensional Power

China emphasizes a broad notion of Comprehensive National Power (CNP), which integrates not only military strength but also economic influence, diplomatic engagement, and cultural appeal (Zhang, 2019). This reflects a strategic tradition that sees power as multidimensional and rooted in civilizational identity, drawing on Confucian ideals of harmony and long-term stability (Bell, 2015; Jacques, 2012). Cultural diplomacy, such as the establishment of Confucius Institutes and the promotion of Chinese historical narratives, is seen as part of this holistic approach to global influence (Nye, 2004). At the same time, China's expanding presence has generated concerns among Western observers about potential dependency through infrastructure projects like the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as about shifting security dynamics in Asia and beyond (Hillman, 2020). By valuing soft power, programs emphasize trust-building, reputation, and cultural resonance, creating durable partnerships that outlast project lifecycles.

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8. Short-Term Thinking → Long-Term Planning

China's approach to strategy is frequently interpreted by Western analysts as being shaped by a long-term cultural orientation. This perspective is rooted in traditions of cyclical history, Confucian emphasis on continuity, and agricultural practices that value patience and gradual cultivation. Unlike the short electoral cycles common in many Western democracies, Chinese governance often prioritizes decades-long horizons. For example, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a vast infrastructure and connectivity project spanning Asia, Africa, and Europe, is conceived not as a short-term venture but as part of a generational strategy to deepen economic interdependence and enhance China's influence over time (Rolland, 2017). Similarly, policies such as the "Made in China 2025" plan and the long-range China Dream 2049 vision illustrate a mindset in which national goals are articulated over decades, integrating economic, technological, and geopolitical aims into a cohesive trajectory (Zeng, 2019; Economy, 2018).

Western commentators often note that this long-term orientation provides advantages in consistency and infrastructure development, while also raising concerns about debt sustainability, transparency, and the geopolitical leverage embedded in such projects (Hillman, 2020). Thus, China's emphasis on long-term planning reflects both a distinctive cultural phenomenon and a strategic practice with global implications. Patience equips program managers to pursue long-term transformations, resisting the pressure to deliver only short-term gains.

9. Moral Superiority → Sovereignty First, Non-Interference

China rejects Western moralizing and promotes sovereignty and non-interference (Xu, 2021). While this principle protects diversity in governance models, it has also been criticized for limiting international action on humanitarian crises. Collective morality reframes program benefits as shared outcomes, promoting alignment among stakeholders and reducing resistance.

10. Happiness → Harmony and Moral Cultivation

Chinese perspectives often link happiness to harmony, relationships, and moral development (Joshanloo, 2014). While this enriches community life, it may also place pressure on individuals to conform, at the expense of personal freedom or alternative lifestyles.

China's contrasting paradigms exhibit differences from Western traditions in their long-term orientation, holistic approach to thinking, and emphasis on collective well-being. From some perspectives, these approaches can raise concerns about centralization, limits on political diversity, surveillance, or trade-offs between social and environmental priorities. Yet dismissing them outright overlooks the ways in which they offer alternative strengths, such as strategic patience, systemic coordination, and a focus on shared

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outcomes. For program management, the key is not choosing one tradition over the other but learning to recognize both the benefits and the limitations of each. By integrating these insights, leaders can design programs that extend beyond narrow efficiency targets to create broader benefits, such as sustainability, resilience, and social cohesion.

#	Western Paradigm	Chinese View on the Western Paradigm
1	Western Superiority	Civilizational Multipolarity
2	Linear Progress	Historical Cycles & Strategic Patience
3	Free Market Absolutism	State Capitalism / Socialist Market Economy
4	Technological Determinism	Technology with Political Discipline
5	Exceptionalism & Invincibility	Strategic Humility & Civilizational Confidence
6	Democracy as One-Size-Fits-All	Whole-Process People's Democracy
7	Military Power Equals Global Influence	Multidimensional Power
8	Short-Term Thinking	Long-Term Planning
9	Moral Superiority of the West	Sovereignty & Non-Interference
10	Happiness as Individual Maximization	Harmony & Moral Cultivation

Table 1 Ten pairs of paradigms (source: author)

Francois Jullien's "From Being to Living"

A detailed comparison of Chinese and European philosophical paradigms is offered by François Jullien, a French philosopher who spent many years living and working in China. Juxtaposing Chinese and European thought is more illuminating than comparing China with the United States, since China and Europe share over three millennia of parallel intellectual development, whereas U.S. culture is comparatively younger and largely shaped by European traditions. In *From Being to Living*, Jullien (2019) identifies twenty pairs of concepts drawn from Chinese and European traditions. Importantly, he does not present these as strict opposites but rather as gaps, intervals, or openings that highlight how each tradition treats what it assumes to be general truths. His goal is to create what he calls heterotopias—different thinking spaces—that invite cross-cultural reflection.

The book's title contrasts the European notion of Being with the Chinese notion of Living. Being, or subjectivity, has long been a central paradigm in European philosophy, emphasizing stability, permanence, and ideal forms. It expresses itself in ontologies—

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the philosophical study of being—and in analytic methods influenced by Aristotle's hylomorphism and Descartes' reductionism. In project management, this orientation is mirrored in practices that stress fixed objectives, work breakdown structures, and scope refinement.

By contrast, Living emphasizes transitional states, continuity, and the flow of change. This paradigm, shaped by Daoist ideas of harmony and transformation, focuses on process rather than permanence, privileging smooth and often silent shifts over abrupt interventions (Chia, 2014; Ronan & Needham, 1978). In organizational practice, this resembles the mindset of program management, where goals and benefits emerge over time and strategies adapt to shifting environments. Within this frame, time is understood not only as Chronos (linear, measurable time used to track milestones and budgets) but also as Kairos (event-driven, situational time).

Jullien's twenty lemmas further expand these contrasts. For example, his first lemma—propensity vs. causality—illustrates the divergence between Western and Chinese modes of action. In Western thinking, causality suggests a direct link: "if X, then Y," leading to targeted interventions. In Chinese thought, by contrast, the emphasis is on cultivating the potential of contextual factors so that circumstances evolve gradually toward a favorable outcome. This approach, described as "working on context," "indirect action," and "smooth transformation" (lemmas 1, 2, 6, 7, 11, and 13), challenges Western habits of direct control and instead highlights the subtle shaping of conditions to achieve resolution—or dissolution—of problems (Jullien, 2019).

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	Chinese - living	Western – being
1	**propensity,** leaning, indirect influence	**causality,** reasons, direct action
2	**potential of a situation** (shi), landscape	**initiative of the subject,** cogito ergo sum, free will
3	**receptivity,** disponibility (no idea, no plan/position, no ego), trust in the world	**freedom,** autonomy (ego)
4	**reliability,** viability	**sincerity,** honesty, transparency
5	**tenacity,** persistance, overcome hurdles	**will,** self control
6	**obliquity,** indirect, slant	**frontality,** direct
7	**indirectness,** situative detour, adaptive, nudging	**method** to reach a goal - rational
8	**influence**	**persuasion,** rhetoric
9	**coherence,** keep together, harmony	**meaning**
10	**connivence,** secretly allow, landscape	**knowledge,** connaissance, awareness, cognition
11	**maturation** (context), nurturing	**modelization** (idea > reality), causality
12	**regulation** (start-growth-harvest-straightness), coherence, but no-rule	**revelation,** revolution (<< modeling + action)
13	**Silent transformation,** ubiquitous, continuous, subtle >> maturation	**resonant event,** loud/visible, heroic, efficient
14	**evasive,** ambiguous, becoming. 'feng' (Wind)	**assignable,** logos, being
15	**allusive,** en passant, flowing, pervasive, dynamic, implicit, no ontology of being	allegorical, truthful related to symbolic figures, being, static
16	**ambiguous,** example intimacy	**equivocal,** multiple meanings, example love
17	**between**	**beyond,** afterlife, meta
18	**surge,** growth, upswing, life, effectivity,	**settled,** inertia, standstill, being
19	**non-postponement,** not delaying, presence, mindfulness, alert	**delaying knowledge,** absence, postpone, procrastination
20	**resource,** combining yinyang,	**truth,** sophia=episteme, leads to religion

Table 2 'From Being to Living', 20 lemmas by Jullien (source: author)

The Fear-Individualism Nexus

Individualism-induced fears of FOMO and FOJI

The prevalence of short-term thinking in many contemporary societies has been linked to cultural orientations that emphasize individual achievement and autonomy. Within this framework, fears such as the fear of missing out (FOMO) and the fear of joining in (FOJI) emerge as not only psychological patterns but also expressions of broader philosophical traditions that shape modern identity. By analyzing the connections between these fears, individualism, and Cartesian thought, we can better understand how the modern self has become both empowered and, at times, isolated, often drawn into an intense focus on the present.

Fear as a Contracting Force

FOMO and FOJI act as powerful motivators that constrain mental horizons by emphasizing instant gratification and social validation. FOMO reflects anxiety about exclusion from opportunities or experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013), while FOJI highlights hesitancy to participate due to concerns about judgment or irrelevance (De Sousa, 2024). Together, these fears create a sense of urgency that can narrow attention

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to immediate outcomes, making it more difficult to sustain focus on long-term goals or invest in emerging opportunities.

Climate change initiatives provide a telling example. While initially supported by a wide range of Western countries, political contestation has at times undermined long-term commitments. In recent years, debates have extended beyond far-right scepticism, leading some governments to scale back or delay their pledges (Dryzek et al., 2023; Falkner, 2016). By contrast, China has presented itself as intensifying investment in renewable energy, particularly solar and wind power (Mathews & Tan, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Yet China is not alone in this orientation: Scandinavian welfare states, for example, have also pursued long-term sustainability by embedding collective responsibility into social and environmental policy (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Similarly, many Indigenous communities around the world employ stewardship models that consider seven generations into the future, offering a different paradigm of time horizons and communal responsibility (Whyte, 2018).

Individualism and Cartesian Thought

The philosophical roots of this orientation can be traced to early modern thinkers such as René Descartes. His statement "Cogito, ergo sum" ("I think, therefore I am") established reason as the foundation of existence, shifting emphasis from external authorities toward individual consciousness (Descartes, 1637/1996). This intellectual move was liberating, paving the way for autonomy, self-determination, and scientific progress. Yet, as Charles Taylor (1989) notes, the "disenchantment" of the world following the Enlightenment also produced a more buffered and self-reliant individual, less connected to transcendent sources of meaning. While this shift empowered modern freedom, it also heightened anxieties by collapsing meaning into the finite present.

Implications for Contemporary Society

The legacy of Cartesian thought and individualism continues to shape contemporary life. The rise of social media, consumer capitalism, and fast-paced lifestyles reflects societies that often prioritize short-term visibility and success (Turkle, 2011). The constant flow of information and opportunities amplifies FOMO and FOJI, creating feedback loops of anxiety and compulsive engagement (Kuss & Griffiths, 2017). This short-term orientation complicates collective responses to challenges such as climate change, inequality, and mental health, as immediate concerns regularly outweigh longer-term planning (Giddens, 1991).

In summary, the tendency toward short-term thinking in modern culture can be understood in relation to fears such as FOMO and FOJI, which are linked to broader traditions of individualism. While these traditions have contributed to personal freedom and innovation, they have also introduced new vulnerabilities by weakening communal

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ties and transcendent frames of meaning. Alternative paradigms, whether found in Confucian relational ethics, Scandinavian welfare policies, or Indigenous stewardship models, illustrate that cultural frameworks emphasizing community, sustainability, and interdependence can broaden time horizons and strengthen resilience for future generations.

The roots of Long-term thinking in farming societies

China has a long and rich history of agriculture, which shaped its ecological thinking by integrating humans, the environment, and farming practices (Zhao, 2022). Ancient Chinese philosophy, including the parables of Mencius, reflects this agricultural worldview. In the story of 拔苗助长 (bá miáo zhù zhǎng), Mencius warns against impatience and over intervention: a man, worried his rice plants weren't growing fast enough, pulled at them, only to find them withered by his misguided effort (Hughes, 1989). The lesson illustrates a key principle of agricultural thinking—growth requires patience, care, and an understanding of natural cycles.

This mindset is especially clear in rice farming, which encourages collectivism, holistic thinking, and long-term planning. Unlike wheat or herding economies, rice cultivation requires ongoing cooperation to develop and maintain irrigation systems. In places like India, Japan, and Malaysia, rice farmers form cooperatives to coordinate labor and align harvests, reflecting a deeply rooted culture of interdependence and future focus (Talhelm, 2022).

Jullien argues that this way of thinking developed in China's agricultural society over 10,000 years ago (Jullien, 2004). Social evolution led to behaviors that enabled the growth of plants over months and years by nurturing, watering, and protecting them. In contrast, European society included hunters/gatherers with more short-term beneficial behaviors, as hunting is successful in minutes, hours, and days (Zhao, 2022). Related to this paradigm is to work on the context by gradually increasing the beneficial potential of context variables, leaning towards favorable outcomes.

This contrast between farming and foraging cultures highlights a fundamental cognitive divide. Agricultural societies evolved systematic, future-oriented approaches to managing resources, while hunter-gatherer societies developed present-focused, flexible strategies suited to dynamic environments (Chen & Li, 2021). These divergent orientations persist today. Farmer-style thinking promotes delayed gratification, strategic planning, and hierarchical systems, while hunter-gatherer cognition supports rapid adaptation, distributed decision-making, and situational awareness (Gurven & Kaplan, 2020; Kaplan et al., 2019). Neurological studies support this distinction: agricultural tasks tend to activate specialized, goal-focused brain regions, whereas hunter-gatherer

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behavior engages broader networks for environmental scanning and adaptability (Burkart et al., 2021).

Understanding this deep-seated cognitive duality is especially relevant in facing contemporary global challenges. For example, climate change demands both the farmer mindset—to commit to long-term solutions—and the hunter-gatherer mindset—to respond nimbly to immediate threats (Chen & Li, 2021). Rather than viewing these paradigms as opposing, integrating their complementary strengths may offer a more resilient and adaptive path forward.

The persistence of these mindsets across millennia suggests they are not just cultural constructs, but evolutionary strategies. Recognizing and leveraging both forms of thinking—systemic and spontaneous, long-term and immediate—can help societies meet the complex demands of an increasingly uncertain world.

Impact of paradigms on projects and programs

While there is no universal agreement on the exact definitions of projects and programs, and both concepts are often unclear in research and practice (Lycett et al., 2004; Pellegrinelli, 2011), projects are generally characterized by two main aspects: a limited timeframe and the uniqueness of their results, which differentiates them from operations (PMI, 2017; Turner, 2009). Programs, on the other hand, are defined by their ability to integrate a group of related projects and coordinate them to achieve benefits that would not be possible if managed separately (Thiry, 2004; OGC, 2011). Because programs encompass multiple projects, they are typically viewed as larger and more complex strategic initiatives than projects. Historically, projects were used to produce specific deliverables within defined constraints (time, cost, scope), whereas programs served as vehicles for implementing long-term strategic goals (Pellegrinelli, 1997; Artto et al., 2009). The defining aspects of projects and programs, such as limited scope and product uniqueness for projects, and resulting benefits from multiple projects for programs, are not mutually exclusive. The same initiative may be viewed as a project due to its distinct deliverables and timeframe, or as a program when understood as a strategic effort composed of interrelated projects aimed at broader, long-term value. However, due to the different mindsets, purposes, and management approaches for projects and programs, selecting the wrong category can significantly impact the perceptions of success or failure.

The ideas of project and program reflect deeper cultural paradigms: projects tend to align with Western, short-term, linear thinking, emphasizing control, speed, and measurable outputs (Jacobs, 2011; Hofstede, 2001), while programs are more connected to Eastern, long-term, holistic worldviews that prioritize strategic alignment, adaptability, and collective results (Tu, 1985; Chen & Li, 2021). Western paradigms, such as free-market

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fundamentalism and technological determinism, often view projects as isolated performance units (Mazzucato, 2013; Zuboff, 2019), whereas Chinese traditions, rooted in Confucianism and systems thinking, favour programmatic approaches that promote gradual, system-wide change (Uchida & Kitayama, 2009; Zhao, 2022). Recognizing this difference enables project professionals and organizations to select the most suitable structure for addressing complex and evolving challenges in a multipolar world.

Limitations and Further Research

While this essay provides a comparative analysis of Western and Eastern paradigms and their influence on project and program thinking, it remains primarily conceptual and does not draw on primary empirical data. Its conclusions should therefore be read as interpretive rather than statistically validated. Empirical research can fill that gap by addressing research questions like

RQ: How do managers in Western vs. Chinese organizations actually perceive and enact project vs. program distinctions in practice?

Generalizations about "Western" and "Eastern" worldviews, even when rooted in cultural theory, inevitably simplify and risk overlooking the diversity, hybridity, and ongoing evolution within each tradition. Focusing on China as the main case study can also obscure valuable insights from other non-Western cultures with equally rich perspectives. This triggers a potential research question:

RQ: How do cultural traditions such as Indian, Islamic, or African perspectives shape alternative paradigms for projects and programs, and in what ways do these compare with Western and Chinese models?

Future research could address these gaps by examining how cultural paradigms shape the planning and execution of projects and programs across different regions. A promising avenue would be to explore the contrast between Western short-term, output-driven project logics and Eastern long-term, relational program orientations, particularly in terms of stakeholder engagement, success criteria, and approaches to risk. Psychological factors such as fear, control, and individualism also merit closer study for their role in reinforcing short-termism.

Looking at Chinese traditions shaped by Confucianism, Daoism, and agrarian heritage opens up different ways of thinking about governance and collective planning. At the same time, it is worth asking whether a global shift is underway, away from Western-centered models of development and toward more diverse and culturally responsive approaches, particularly as China's role in program-based initiatives grows. A promising line of inquiry also lies in hybrid governance systems that combine Western efficiency with Eastern adaptability, offering practical value for international organizations and

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PMOs operating in complex, multicultural environments. These considerations lead to research question such as:

RQ: What leadership competencies are required to integrate Western and Chinese paradigms in large-scale, multi-stakeholder programs?

RQ: How can organizations design governance structures that reconcile short-term project imperatives with long-term program transformation in culturally diverse contexts?

Studying these areas would not only advance academic theory but also help develop more effective and culturally sensitive frameworks for managing projects and programs in a growing multipolar world.

Conclusion: Toward a Pluralistic Global Mindset

This essay asks how Western and Chinese cultural paradigms shape approaches to time, governance, and strategy, and what this means for projects and programs. By juxtaposing paradigms rather than treating them as binary opposites, the essay opens space for synthesis, offering a more nuanced framework than the prevailing "either/or" discourse. The findings suggest that Western traditions of linear progress, individualism, and short-term control align more closely with project thinking, while Chinese traditions of patience, interdependence, and cyclical orientation resonate with program approaches. The divide between project and program is therefore not just a technical or managerial difference but reflects deeper cultural worldviews that shape how leaders define action, value progress, and envision long-term change. Program management becomes more than an administrative layer above projects; it serves as a pathway for long-term adaptation, resilience, and cultural connection across different contexts. This view challenges the idea that one model can be a universal best practice. Addressing global issues like climate change or AI disruption requires a diverse mindset: delivering with the precision and discipline of projects while supporting transformation through the flexibility and systemic understanding of programs. Ultimately, success in the 21st century will rely less on choosing a single paradigm than on developing the foresight and judgment to blend them, fostering leadership that is aware of the situation and culturally adaptable agile.

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About the Author

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Thomas Walenta brings more than 50 years of experience in projects, including over three decades in leadership and two decades in program management. He delivered his first project in 1974 and went on to spend much of his career at IBM, where from the mid-1990s he built PMOs, led complex programs, and successfully turned around troubled initiatives. His work included major SAP rollouts, outsourcing contracts, and portfolio integration across industries and regions. More recently, he supported a German manufacturer in introducing enterprise-wide portfolio management and a hybrid PMO. Over the years, his assignments have taken him through government, banking, insurance, electronics, and automotive sectors, and his professional journey has spanned Europe, Russia, the U.S., Japan, India, and nearly 100 countries worldwide.

Since 1998, Thomas has been an active volunteer with the Project Management Institute (PMI). He served as President of the PMI Frankfurt Chapter, completed two terms on PMI's global Board of Directors, and spent five years on PMI's Ethics Review Committee. In 2012, he received the PMI Fellow Award, awarded to fewer than 100 individuals worldwide. He has held the PMP since 1998 and the PgMP since 2014. He continues to volunteer for global PMI groups and works as an event manager for the local Chapter.

Thomas has led his own consulting business since 2001, taught project management at two universities for over 20 years and spoken at more than 100 international conferences. He has published extensively on project and program management, earned a diploma as a non-executive director from the UK's Institute of Directors in 2017, and has been pursuing a DBA at SBS in Zurich since 2023. He also mentors around 15 professionals, apprentices, and refugees. Thomas lives in Hackenheim, near Frankfurt, Germany, and can be reached at thwalenta@online.de.