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**Developing A Design Thinking
Mind-set to Stimulate
Sustainable Development in Chinese SMEs**

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Developing A Design Thinking Mind-set to Stimulate Sustainable Development in Chinese SMEs

Introduction

Challenges enveloping society, culture, economy, and environment, the four central pillars of sustainable development, are becoming increasingly complex and forcing entities to innovate and adopt new ways of thinking ([Martens & Carvalho, 2017](#)). The top-down approach of government policy in mainland China is well critiqued, particularly with regards to supporting large scale initiatives that tackle national priorities such as energy ([Liu et al, 2018](#); [Wu, Zheng, Khanna & Feng, 2020](#); [Zhao, Li, Zhang, Yang & Liu, 2016](#)), pollution (Gao et al, 2016; Jin, Andresson & Zhang, 2017; [Liu, Adams, Core, Geng & Li, 2018](#)), quality standards ([Li, 2018](#)), living standards (Yang, Pan & Yao, 2016;) etc. However, noting that China has over 43 million SMEs equating to 90% of enterprises in the country and contributing towards 60% of the nation's GDP ([Min, Sawang & Kivits, 2021](#); [Textor, 2021](#)), scholars have questioned the degree to which this major component of China's business landscape is adopting sustainable development principles ([Jieqiong & Bell, 2007](#); [Jia, Tang & Kan, 2020](#)).

Benefits for organisations engaging in sustainability related initiatives are well documented. It may be equally noted that the positive relationship between corporate social performance and brand image has resulted in questionable motives behind some organisations engagement with sustainable development. Within the China context particularly, there has been a noted adoption of philanthropy as a mechanism for promoting the image that a given company is socially and/or environmentally responsible ([Kao, Yeh, Wang & Feng, 2018](#)). Besides critiquing the sincerity behind such motives, there lies the bigger challenge of Chinese SMEs often being marginalised within government policies that have historically focused on large state-owned firms ([Jia, Tang & Kan, 2020](#)), Chinese SMEs are competing within an

increasingly mature market that emphasises rapid business growth over responsible leadership ([Kim, Wu, Schuler & Hoskisson](#), 2019; [Min et al](#), 2021), and challenges for Chinese SMEs are further compounded by the combination of a lack of funds and practical know-how, killing off many sustainability initiatives before they have the chance to even begin. These latter challenges are not unique to China as SMEs globally experience barriers in unlocking capital ([Jieqiong & Bell](#), 2007; [Min et al](#), 2021), are frequently unfamiliar with the uses and benefits of technologies that support sustainability (Zelenika and Pearce, 2011), exhibit organisational inertness ([Kiesnere & Baumgartner](#), 2019), as well as experience ongoing practical constraints, such as limited motivation, network, resources and time ([Das, Rangarajan & Dutta](#), 2020).

Following the global outbreak of Covid-19 in early 2020, Chinese netizens and organisations alike have evidenced a growing awareness towards the need for more proactive engagement in sustainability-orientated initiatives ([Kim & Ji](#), 2021; [Stern & Xie](#), 2020). Supported by the wider narrative of cultivating socialist values (President Xi, 2014; [Deng & Jeffreys](#), 2021; [Hu, Yan, Tang & Liu](#), 2021) that have subsequently been integrated into the 14th Five Year Plan; President Xi's September 2021 announcement of a Beijing based Stock Index for SMEs has led to press speculation towards an increase in investment and innovation within the China SME space ([China Global Television Network](#), 2021). Given that China's 14th Five Year Plan also places significant emphasis on governance, sustainability and inclusive growth ([Stern & Xie](#), 2020), the ability of an SME to demonstrate these characteristics and support their local culture, society and/or environment is increasingly necessary for modern China sustainability. Within this context, exploring approaches to support Chinese SMEs in better engaging with sustainable development is of timely relevance. This paper therefore explores how SMEs may adopt a design thinking mind-set when seeking to proactively kickstart sustainability-orientated initiatives.

Understanding Design Thinking as a Mind-Set

Design thinking evolved during the late 1970's to offer a human and environment centred approach to problem solving ([Razzouk & Shute, 2012](#)). Grounded in the idea of starting with human needs within a given environmental context, design thinking proceeds by emphasising entrepreneurial creativity and value creation, offering a contrasting framework to more traditional and analytical based management approaches to decision making ([Brenner, Uebernicketel & Abrell, 2016](#)). Discourse around design thinking has taken divergent paths, with one rooted in more technology orientated design specialisms and the other in managerial functions ([Hassi & Laakso, 2011](#)). Focusing on the application within the wider context of management, there is growing discussion around design thinking being a mind-set that may be adopted by management professionals (Wrigley and Straker, 2017). This mind-set may be characterised by two central pillars (i) acceptance towards ambiguity, and (ii) overarching focus on human need.

When defining the concept of 'wicked problems' in 1972, Rittel recognised 10 criteria that bore the underlying challenge scenarios as virtually impossible to solve. Whereas the indeterminate nature of wicked problems creates a potentially universal scope, raising significant challenge to conventional forms of problem solving that seek definitive solutions ([Buchanan, 1992](#)), design thinking embraces ambiguity. [Luka](#) states that "*ambiguity means that for one phenomenon more than one possible meaning or explanation exists*" (2014, p.65). The search for a solution is not necessarily about right or wrong but becomes more about better or best alternative within recognition towards given limitations and constraints. This is further differentiated by design thinking's emphasis not merely on the present 'what is', but also the future 'what if', which invites ongoing rounds of iteration and ongoing improvement ([Luka, 2014](#)). The acceptance of ambiguity within real-world scenarios and problems is thus part of the design thinking mid-set.

The other core pillar of design thinking as a mind-set is the focus on human needs and the idea that the needs of this audience may be experienced ([Brenner, Uebernicketel & Abrell, 2016](#)). The very first stage in design thinking is championed by the word ‘Empathy’, which intrinsically heralds inclusivity and diversity (Panke & Harth, 2018). By acknowledging diverse perspectives from interdisciplinary teams that include both traditionally prioritised and marginalised stakeholders, opportunities for generating fresh insights and new ideas are enhanced (Melles, Howard & Thompson-Whiteside, 2012). Design thinking encourages the confrontation of preconceived ideas and supports organisations to facilitate a comparatively open-minded approach to explore underlying pain points that may not be commonly realised or addressed (Panke & Harth, 2018). Importantly, design thinking aids decision makers to not only reduce cognitive bias, but via the combination of empathy for the feelings and experiences of others with creativity and rationality, specific problem contexts may be analysed and appropriate solutions generated (Wrigley & Straker, 2017). Via integration of reflection, thinking and acting into the pillar of experience, design thinking thus completes all core phases of an effective learning cycle ([Beckman & Barry, 2007](#)). From first stage to last, focusing on human needs permeates the design thinking process and mind-set.

Several models for facilitating the design thinking process have been developed. Ultimately however, each model seeks to balance the three core factors of (i) the desire to offer a measurable improvement towards a human need, (ii) the available resources to approach this need, and (iii) understanding towards the constraints and opportunities present within the initiative scope ([Tschimmel, 2012](#)). Design thinking seeks to approach these via its embrace towards verbal and visual expression, typically via forms of sketching and prototyping tools. [Tschimmel](#) (2012) proposes that this edging away from emphasising diagrams and tabled data invites an increased level of abductive and inventive reasoning when compared to more analytical, deductive, and inductive traits of traditional problem-solving tools. As [Dorst](#) (2011)

comments, abductive reasoning not only needs to consider the working principle with regards to ‘how’ something is done, but also needs to reflect and ascertain the ‘what’ one is attempting to achieve in the first place. Relating to China-based SMEs that may never have purposefully undertaken a sustainability initiative before and may be unsure of where to begin or what to do, a design thinking mind-set assists with constructively initiating the engagement process. Combined with an increased acceptance towards failure as being part of this process, design thinking seeks to nurture an environment wherein ideas may evolve and grow upon each other (Thoring and Müller, 2011), ideally maturing in impact as an SME matures in its evolving embedment of sustainable development within its own organisational culture (Maon, Lingreen & Swaen, 2010).

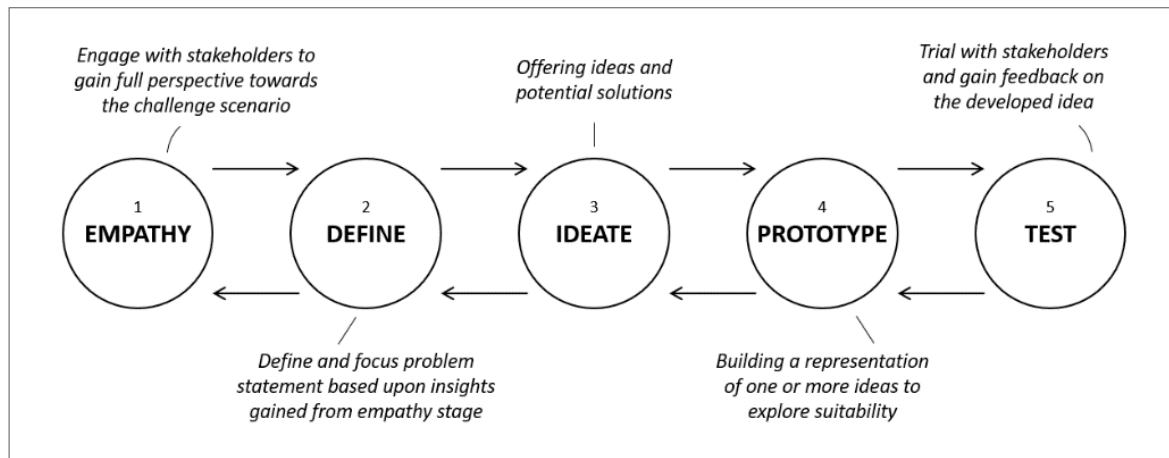
Application of Design Thinking to Kickstart Sustainability Initiatives

The underlying assumptions behind proposing a design thinking mind-set for SMEs are that (a) sustainability-orientated initiatives are action based, meaning that measures for evaluating impact assessment should be matured over time, (b) Chinese SMEs are to play an increasingly significant role in China’s engagement with sustainable development, (c) Chinese SMEs face a range of challenges that limit proactive engagement in sustainable initiatives, and (d) proposing a practical approach that alleviates these challenges may support more Chinese SMEs to actively kickstart sustainability-orientated initiatives.

In the following sections, drawing on insights from pedagogical literature and deliberation theory, the five-stage cyclical process of design theory is introduced through which a mind-set for kickstarting sustainability initiatives in Chinese SMEs may be inspired. The cycle begins by empathising with stakeholders, followed by defining specific challenges, ideating, prototyping, and testing, at any stage of which the cycle may be interrupted by the need for further iteration (Fig.1). Furthermore, factors presenting challenges for Chinese SMEs

in participating in the design thinking stages are raised.

Figure 1: Design Thinking as an Iterative Process



Stage 1 – Empathising

Empathy comes from the Greek word ‘*empathia*’. Despite the ancient roots, the English word is itself rather new and was only coined by an American psychologist in the 1930s ([Wispé, 1990](#)). There remains discussion concerning a concordant definition of empathy ([Elliott, Bohart, Watson & Greenberg, 2011](#)). However, for the purposes of this paper, we will recognise ‘*pathos*’ as the root of the word, meaning ‘feeling’, and the prefix ‘*em*’ which is commonly translated as ‘to go into’. We therefore interpret that the general aim of ‘Empathising’ within design thinking is therefore ‘to get into feeling’ with another person or group. It is an emotional and cognitive activity that seeks to affectively comprehend the viewpoints and experiences of another person or group via concrete interactions and generate a reactive outcome ([Köppen & Meinel, 2015](#); [Gasparini, 2015](#); [Davis, 2006](#)). With regards to mind-set, this logically prompts two questions: A) empathise with *whom*? And B) *how* should SMEs empathise?

Stakeholder Mapping as A Tool to Address the Question of ‘Whom’

Stakeholder mapping provides a starting point for addressing this question as it supports the process of visually highlighting the internal and external stakeholders of an SME that may be directly or indirectly affected by the company at a given point of time – current or future ([Brenner, Uebernicketel and Abrell, 2016](#)). Whereas traditional approaches to stakeholder dialogue tend to prioritise stakeholders based upon their ability to influence power-relationships around a set of economic interests ([Parmer, Freeman & Harrison, 2010](#)), design thinking seeks to embed the thoughts and opinions of lesser emphasised stakeholders into the heart of information gathering ([Geissdoerfer, Bocken & Hultink, 2016](#)). This distinction is of particular importance within a macro environment that emphasises business growth over responsible leadership. Storm (2021) proposes that SMEs may adopt a 3-stage stakeholder mapping exercise that adheres to the interactive and visual expectations of design thinking, whilst seeking to combat the limitations of power-relationship inherent within traditional forms of stakeholder mapping. In accordance with design thinking principles, an example via a fictional component manufacturer is provided below, culminating in the illustrated Figure 2.

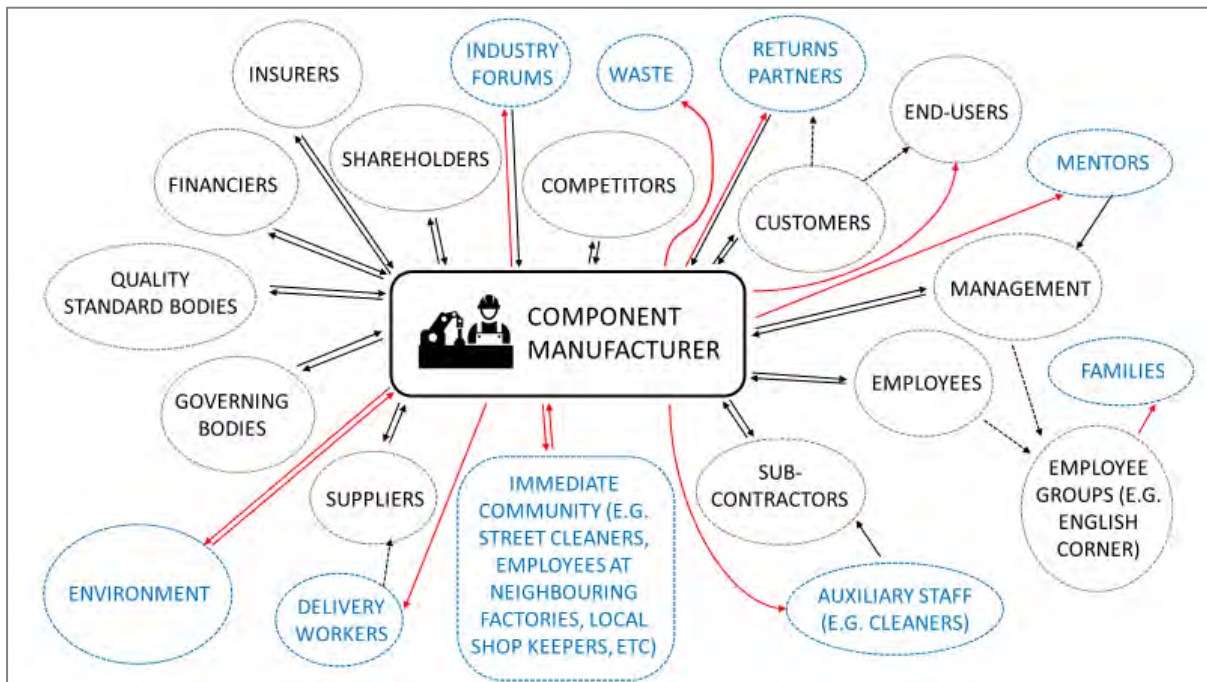
Stakeholder mapping – step 1: This step involves mapping out on a blank canvas the diverse range of stakeholders that the given SME considers itself to interact with. SMEs undertaking this activity should be encouraged to consider stakeholders from a cradle to grave perspective.

Stakeholder mapping – step 2: SMEs should then consider stakeholder groups not represented in Step 1 and add them to the canvas in a separate colour. The addition of colour stimulates emotion and memorability, and facilitates distinction between the categories of immediately aware and not immediately aware ([Baker, 2004](#)). At this stage, participants employing the model may experience a limitation in their thinking processes, influenced by the operational setting and environment of their work routines. To broaden thought processes, the

17 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) may be reflected upon within the context of the given SME. Absence of representation in the stakeholder map of a given SDG that the SME directly or indirectly engages with may provide a direction for identifying a lesser emphasised stakeholder. Equally, some SMEs may exhibit a degree of reluctance at including certain stakeholders in their stakeholder map. This may partly be in recognition towards SMEs often feeling excluded from the governance mechanisms of the industry within which they operate, but which are rather controlled by larger entities and/or specialised non-governmental actors and interest groups ([Soundaararajan, Sahasranamam, Khan & Jain, 2021](#)). Herein lies the benefit of the alternative HCD model of design thinking via its explicit statement of highlighting ‘Hearing’ ([Tschimmel, 2012](#)). Whereas listening is central to all design thinking models, the HCD models explicit statement of ‘Hearing’, irrefutably highlights the need for putting ones’ own viewpoints to the background whilst bringing the factors raised by others to the foreground (Innes & Booher, 2010). Step 2 has thus focused on enhancing the SMEs perception of its relevant stakeholder groups, highlighting opportunities for increased levels of listening.

Stakeholder mapping – step 3: The final stage of stakeholder mapping involves indicating the perceived frequency and directionality of dialogue. This may be visualised via the insertion of arrows between the SME and each of the stakeholders represented on the canvas. The use of two colours may provide a quick key wherein one colour indicates stakeholders communicated with on a regular basis (e.g. black), with the second colour indicating stakeholders that may benefit from an increased level of dialogue (e.g. red).

Figure 2: Example of Stakeholder Mapping



Upon completion of the stakeholder map, SMEs should have gained an indication of stakeholder groups that they may consider engaging with more, contributing more towards, and/or gaining an improved understanding of (Storm, 2021). As constructive dialogue should be two-ways, the SME may notice instances where it receives ample communication from a given stakeholder, but not sufficiently reciprocate, or vice-versa. This may have been visualised via the red arrows. Similarly, the absence of a stakeholder group as at Step 1 may have indicated a stakeholder receiving less immediate attention from the SME. The stakeholder mapping activity will likely not have been an exhaustive process. However, design thinking recognises a comparatively innate comfort with ambiguity that prevents this from being a barrier from continuing to the next step in the process (Tschimmel, 2012).

Stakeholder mapping is not an uncommon tool in strategic management decision making processes. However, there is a tendency for stakeholder mapping tools to orientate around factors such as power/influence, level of stakeholder interest, proximity of the stakeholder, relevance towards key goals, agreeability to share information, etc. These areas of

emphasis inadvertently result in the marginalisation of stakeholders outside of the narratives of business growth and economic prosperity ([Parmer, Freeman & Harrison, 2010](#)). Thus, a model that supports the highlighting of less emphasised groups according to the other pillars of sustainable development, culture, society and environment gains relevance. The action of recognising less emphasised stakeholders represents an important pre-cursor to achieving a design thinking mind-set as it seeks to bring alternative viewpoints, perspectives and areas of need into the horizon of decision makers ([Geissdoerfer, Bocken & Hultink, 2016](#)), thus assisting to address the question regarding ‘whom’ to empathise with.

A Stakeholder Profiling Canvas to Address the Question of ‘How’

Profiling facilitates the ability to understand the operating context, environment and needs of a given party ([Wolfe & Putler, 2002](#)). Utilised across a wide range of professional disciplines, stakeholder profiling has been critiqued for its frequent neglect by managers, encouraging stereotypes, misrepresenting others’ perspectives, failing to achieve a guaranteed level of accuracy, and oversimplifying complex inter-relationships ([Wartick & Mahon, 2009](#); [Wolfe & Putler, 2002](#); [Nauman & Piracha, 2016](#)). Each of the stages of design thinking must therefore be recognised as an iterative process, wherein information gained at any later stage may require the revisiting and/or resetting of conclusions that may previously have been assumed as finalised.

Having taken steps to identify a stakeholder group with whom the SME may engage with more, contribute more towards, and/or gain an improved understanding of, the participating SME should aim to build a profile of the stakeholder to gain an increased understanding of that stakeholder’s broader operating context and environment. Osterwalder, Pigneur, Bernarda and Smith (2014) produced a customer profiling canvas that has aided businesses in improving their understanding of a given customer group. Terms employed in the

canvas may be applied to other stakeholders to transform the canvas into a stakeholder profiling tool (Storm, 2021). These 3 core considerations are to: (i) Clarify the primary objectives of the stakeholder via exploring the activities and tasks that the specific stakeholder group is aiming to achieve practically, socially and emotionally. (ii) Clarify the core pain points of the stakeholder, via exploring factors that block and/or prevent the stakeholder from achieving their desired objectives. And (iii) Clarify gains, corresponding to measures that the stakeholder may employ to evaluate whether an objective has been accomplished.

Beyond identifying the objective needs and positions of a stakeholder group, the SME may consider simulating a video journal from the perspective of the stakeholder that expounds on the feeling when one of the identified pains is encountered, contrasting with the feeling experienced when one of the gains has been achieved. The process of connecting thought, action and feeling facilitates a deeper level of connection with a desired group ([Brenner, Uebernicketel & Abrell, 2016](#)), which in turn may stimulate enthusiasm within the SME participants to develop initiatives that support the identified stakeholder.

Via Stakeholder Mapping and Stakeholder Profiling, the aim for participating SMEs is to have begun deliberating over the two questions previously raised: A) empathise with *whom*? And B) *how* should SMEs empathise? Whilst inclusion of the stakeholder throughout the process is favoured, the level of direct engagement between an SME and a stakeholder during the profiling phase will likely be influenced by available resources. Preferably, the SME would be able to receive first hand input into the profile, or at least be in a position to clarify that interpretations and understanding are accurate ([Tschimmel, 2012](#)). Perspectives from first-hand accounts should ideally be reinforced via observational data collection and relevant secondary research. Undertaking these processes does not guarantee that a state of empathy has been attained, though encouragement towards a reactionary output is a key desirable ([Davis, 2006](#)). Within the China context, empathy-based discussions with stakeholders may also be influenced

by power-distance barriers and an under-established ‘guanxi’ that restricts free flowing discourse. Ultimately however, design thinking prioritises action over an inaction that may otherwise arise from over-deliberating in the pursuit of perfection. Design thinking presumes failure, remains comfortable with ambiguity, and believes that challenges may be solved through pending action.

Stage 2 - Defining

Design thinking integrates live stakeholder engagement throughout the empathising and define stages, providing frequent opportunities for the interpretation of viewpoints and needs to be corrected and rebalanced ([Luka, 2014](#)). The aim of design thinking’s Define stage is to gain agreement regarding a succinct understanding of the core challenge scenario. Complete consensus between all stakeholders may not be possible, however generating authentic dialogue supports the determination of how challenges may be interpreted and barriers realised ([Kohlrieser, 2007](#)).

Framing Definitions via use of ‘How might we...’ statements offer a valuable and succinct means of posing a challenge as a question to prompt a response. Storm (2021) highlights 4 characteristics of effective ‘How might we...’ statements as (i) being human centred, (ii) having a broad enough scope to facilitate creativity, yet narrow enough to be practical, (iii) being action orientated, and (iv) being assumption free. Where a point of view statement may be written as follows:

[**Stakeholder**...(descriptive)] needs [**need**...(verb)] because [**insight**...(compelling reason)]

An effective ‘how might we...’ may be written as:

How might [**we**...(noun)] [**state desired outcome**...(verb)] to/for/because [**insight**...(compelling reason)]?

Recognising that ‘How might we...’ statements encourage an orientation towards action, it is important for participating SMEs to avoid integrating ideas and recommendations at the Define stage. The SME is seeking to articulate the problem in a mutually agreed way that invites constructive consideration and thought, with this one clearly articulated problem serving as a solid foundation for subsequent ideation.

Completing Stages 3-5 of the Design Thinking Cycle

The remaining stages of design thinking are to be undertaken as illustrated in Figure 1. There exist a plethora of approaches towards the stages of Ideating, Prototyping and Testing, with the final approach chosen by an SME being determined by a range of factors, such as familiarity with the model, time available, resources available, number of stakeholders participating in the process and scope of the challenge. Ultimately, the approach(es) taken would require group participation and collaboration to be representative of a design thinking mind-set. Furthermore, it is via embracing verbal and visual expression that the benefits of abductive and inventive reasoning arises ([Tschimmel, 2012](#)). Equally, Chinese SMEs new to design thinking may experience several challenges when attempting to complete this interactive cycle. Firstly, China’s rapid economic growth has transformed the country in recent decades. One of the noticeable areas of transformation is the education sector, where annual graduates have risen 487% from 1,036,000 students per year in 2001 to 6,082,000 students per year in 2011 (Goodman, 2014). The relevance of this is that much of the management force in China today has never received formal management training. This presents challenges when introducing a new framework such as design thinking. Not only may several stakeholders core to the process be unfamiliar with design thinking principles, but some may also have wider challenges with understanding and recognising the foundational benefits of having a framework in and of itself. Unfamiliarity creates increased risk of confusion and negative

disruption infiltrating the process, thus facilitation from an experienced agent may be beneficial. Secondly, the Chinese education system and culture have traditionally emphasised technical skills over human-skills. Corporate trainers have experienced interactive activities with Chinese groups to varying degrees of success. Whereas younger groups are arguably more formally educated and comparatively open-minded towards alternative approaches towards learning, a significant population of mature management participants demonstrate a noticeable resistance towards such approaches. Resistance has been recognised to stem from a range of factors. Some are more negative in nature, such as the fear of revealing that they do not have the answers, the belief that artistic games are beneath them, or simply a fear of looking incompetent when trying something new. Other resistances may inadvertently stem from an effort to overcompensate for another issue. For example, some management members may adopt silence in effort not to overshadow or limit contribution from other team members who may otherwise exhibit a more agreeable attitude towards their boss's opinions regardless of personal viewpoint. Additionally, management need to be willing to accept critical feedback without personalising it. For example, it is important to iterate that testing should not merely be a technical evaluation, considering whether or not a practical solution is proposed, but deeply integrate end user-experience and feedback into the discussion ([Ge and Maisch, 2016](#)). This process will likely generate conflicting feedback that highlights limitations in initial ideas, outcomes that authoritarian management styles may be less receptive towards.

Discussion

Within the context of Chinese SMEs gaining an increased self-awareness and playing an increasing role in the nations' economy, calls for enabling improved engagement in sustainability are gaining traction ([Min et al, 2021](#)). When designed and positioned appropriately, application of design thinking tools may be suitably implemented to stimulate

engagement with sustainability in Chinese SMEs. Furthermore, critical exploration of issues around empathic dialogue with stakeholders may raise discussion around the generation of social capital that may in turn help SMEs achieve improved understanding of local cultural, societal and environmental challenges, as experienced by others ([Soundaararajan, Sahasranamam, Khan & Jain, 2021](#)). As exposure to and action on alternative stakeholder needs increases, there becomes improved opportunity for immersing sustainability principles into an SMEs' evolving organisational culture.

Given that design thinking places an onus on empathy, facilitating authentic dialogue is of particular interest throughout each stage of the process. Whilst recognising that Chinese SMEs are a heterogeneous group with varying sub-contexts ([Jieqiong & Bell, 2007](#)), there are observable cultural traits that separate how Chinese SMEs approach problem solving to that of Western SMEs. For example, these may range from increased challenges such as managing concerns related to transparently communicating with a wide array of stakeholders involving perceived exposure towards organisational limitations. Contrastingly, literature exploring entrepreneurship and innovation in mainland China highlights how Chinese culture may facilitate increased acceptance towards the idea that initiatives evolve with experience and time (Chu, Kara, Zhu & Gok, 2011) – which is aligned with underlying assumptions in design thinking as previously addressed.

Several boundary conditions to a design thinking mind-set exist. First, as collective discussion across a wide range of stakeholders is involved, it may not be possible to guarantee complete agreement between the various actors. With diversity of interests, disagreements are likely to be commonplace ([Randel & Jaussi, 2003](#)). Equally, approaches with an iterative process offer improved opportunities for stakeholders to raise concerns and have their voice heard ([Soundaararajan *et al.*, 2021](#)). Second, adopting a design-thinking mind-set to kickstart sustainability initiatives does not automatically translate into development of a rigorous

framework for evaluating performance of said initiatives. Chinese SMEs employing a design thinking approach may require further support to implement the process, generate stakeholder feedback, strategize how to implement and expand on their initiatives, as well as measure output and firmly embed new practices into their own unique organisational culture. Third, the proposed process of developing sustainability initiatives through iteration and continuous improvement suggests that situational factors including the changing contexts of stakeholders, macro issues and societal concern may make defining the end point of the design thinking process difficult to determine.

Conclusion

Chinese SMEs are gaining increasing awareness towards the need for engaging with sustainability. Recognising that they represent a significant component of China's business landscape, Chinese SMEs experience several factors inhibiting the adoption of sustainability that include the marginalisation of government policies that focus on larger firms, operating within an environment that emphasises rapid business growth over responsible leadership, and encountering systemic challenges via lack of resourcing and practical know-how. On the other hand, Beijing appears to be emphasising the role of SMEs within the economy and there is growing speculation with regards to regulation and policy reform within the SME space. Furthermore, Chinese culture exhibits a favourable willingness to change that facilitates an openness towards embarking on new ventures. Although lacking empirical data to comment on the effectiveness of the ideas offered, a design thinking mind-set rooted in empathic stakeholder dialogue conceptually supports SMEs to engage with the increasingly complex challenges that envelop China's society, culture, economy, and environment and force all entities to innovate and adopt new ways of thinking. The proposition of innovative approaches that proactively include and respond to the various and ambiguous needs of stakeholders is therefore vital to

sustain responsible SME growth.

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