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## A philosophical approach to project management: Project as a phenomenon and the case of Incheon Bridge

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### Abstract

Project as an object of project management inevitably conceives a certain end goal to attain, which represents human dreams, hopes, and visions for the future. This paper attempts to offer a philosophical interpretation of project as a phenomenon that is open toward changeable and uncertain time and space that allows creative human intervention from the moment of its conception through its realization. A case study of Incheon Bridge, a national project in Incheon, South Korea, will elucidate how the phenomenal understanding of project can help project management create a sustainable source of future profits.

In the first half of the paper, I will articulate a philosophical interpretation of project as a phenomenon. First, project will be conceived and situated within the world of phenomena that originate from the human mind. Secondly, the benefits of interchange between philosophy and project management studies will be shown to extend our understanding of various realms of human life including politics, economics, society, culture, diplomacy, and education. Ultimately, recasting project as a phenomenon will help broaden the conceptual reach of project management as a general process of realizing human dreams.

In the second half of the paper, I will substantiate my conceptual argument with a case study of Incheon Bridge, an internationally acclaimed PM case. The success of Incheon Bridge project owes to the mechanism of translating a philosophical understanding of project as a phenomenon into a concrete matrix of numeric, which helped transparently visualize the whole PM process and further transform Incheon Bridge as a sustainable source of future profits.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past half-century, project management has been developed and disseminated across the world (Bredillet, Tywoniak & Dwivedula, 2014; Cicmil and Hodgson, 2006; Söderlund, 2004; Packendorff, 1995). The development of project management begins with project manager's needs and desires for progress (Ahlemann et al., 2013; Morris, 2013; Gauthier & Ika, 2012). Previous studies on project management show that a positivistic research that analyzes the results of substantial phenomenon has contributed significantly to the development of management methods (Bredillet, 2010; Smyth & Morris, 2007). However, along with the growth of project management, various problems have been constantly addressed due to the following reasons. First, positivism-driven research faced the limits to satisfying project manager's needs for development (Ahlemann et al., 2013; Ellmann et al., 2007; Cicmil & Hodgson, 2006; Pollack, 2005). Second, there have been various definitions of project which exist from different project management institutions across the globe. And third, there was an absence of project manager's comprehensive perception in respect of the project. In order to overcome these limitation factors to the growth of project management and come up with solutions to the problems addressed, it is required for project managers to change their perception and way of thinking.

The aim of this study is to show the dynamic recognition process of project management, which was overlooked in various angles of existing project management research, by newly defining the concept of project based on the knowledge to perceive a phenomenon (Söderlund, 2013). Project manager's perception on the new project concept contributes to expanding the scope of project management and enhancing project efficiency by providing project managers with comprehensive perception over the project (Oleary & Williams, 2013; Söderlund, 2004). This will be verified through the case study of Incheon Bridge project implemented by the author.

## 2. Literature Review

In the area of project management, the project concepts have been defined in a various manner to date by different institutions such as IPMA, PMI and ISO (IPMA, 2006; PMI, 2012; ISO, 2012). These various concepts of project definition have surely been further extended and developed, beyond the previous boundaries of understanding, encompassing project manager's outlook on the world, their way of thinking and methods, albeit considered still in a nascent state (Maxuchen & Maerhang, 2014; Ellmann & Månsson, 2009). This paper attempts to figure out the nature of project based upon the understanding of the nature and properties of phenomenon from a philosophical approach to perceive a phenomenon because all projects present themselves as phenomena in our perception (Söderlund, 2013).

For thousands of years, a number of Eastern and Western philosophers have strived to seek the nature of phenomenon with revealing its definition as concepts categorized in time and space which is the form of spirit (Bronte & Stephan, 2014; Budriunaite, 2014; Cohen, 2012; Giddens & Giddens, 2006; David Loy, 1985 Whitehead, 1978; Chan, 1969; Hegel, 1952). Especially, Confucius had a significant impact on the development of Eastern philosophy by perceiving a phenomenon and its nature with the concepts of 'Tao' and 'Sincerity' in 「The Doctrine of the Mean」 representing his theory (Legge, 1971). These categorized concepts are perceived as data gained from experience, which could be developed to design the future through the process of appropriation with recognizing a new substance. Such a mechanism is named Epistemic Mechanism of Phenomenon by the author, or could be called EMP for short.

The paper focuses on that a new insight could be brought up by means of perceiving the nature of phenomenon through EMP in order to get the various project concepts existing across the globe integrated into one general concept (Söderlund, 2013). It was attempted with 3-stage process: Firstly figuring out the nature of phenomenon through EMP, secondly introducing project phenomenon with applying the concept of project into the nature of phenomenon, and thirdly, integrating various existing concepts of project into one general concept. The definition of project viewed from a new perspective of phenomenon contains the process of project being actualized from the abstract concept, which complies with project manager's desires for progress to make abstract goals a reality. In addition, project manager's goals and objectives established from this perspective accord with the nature and properties of project phenomenon, thus project efficiency and sustainability being promoted through the accomplishment of such goals and objectives.

This study brings attention to the process of project being actualized from ideation to actuality, through which it suggests the sustainable expansive development and growth potential of project and project management.

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