Commentary on 'Opportunities and Challenges of Engaged Indigenous Scholarship' (Van de Ven, Meyer, & Jing, 2018)

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The mission of *Management and Organization Review*, founded in 2005, is to publish research about Chinese management and organizations, foreign organizations operating in China, or Chinese firms operating globally. The aspiration is to develop knowledge that is unique to China as well as universal knowledge that may transcend China. Articulated in the first editorial published in the inaugural issue of MOR (2005) and further elaborated in a second editorial (Tsui, 2006), the question of contextualization is framed, discussing the role of context in the choices of the research question, theory, measurement, and research design. The idea of 'engaged indigenous research' by Van de Ven, Meyer, and Jing (2018) describes the highest level of contextualization, with the local context serving as the primary factor guiding all the decisions of a research project. Tsui (2007: 1353) refers to it as 'deep contextualization'.

In the thirteen years since its founding, MOR has published many innovative studies that reflect the role of historic cultural roots and current institutional context on contemporary management and organizational forms in China. MOR is the source for uncovering how institutions, formal and informal, may influence business practices. Articles in MOR have introduced several important Chinese cultural constructs. I will list a few illustrative examples here. Chen, Chen, and Huang (2012) offer a comprehensive review of the *guanxi* literature published in MOR and other international journals. The idea of *guanxi* proves to fascinate scholars of social networks, as explained in Bian (2017), who praised the analytical and comparative work on *guanxi* and social networks by Burt and Burzynska (2017). Fang (2012) introduces Yin-yang as a new perspective for the comparative analysis of culture while Jing and Van de Ven (2014) provide a interesting account on the role Yin-yang plays in organizational change. Lin (2011) describes the Chinese form of capitalism and Jia (2016) documents the unique Chinese flavor of the

political strategies of the Chinese private sector. Nee and Cao (2005) report how market transition produced income inequality in the rural sector. Liu, Zhang, and Jing (2016) offer a multiple institutional logics explanation of innovation behavior of Chinese non-profit firms. However, on the whole, progress in discovering unique Chinese theories of management (Barney & Zhang, 2011) is much less than desired (Jia, You, Du, 2012). This call for 'engaged indigenous scholarship', or the deepest level of contextualization, is both important and long overdue.

Indigenous research implies that by engaging local people (subjects, observers, or scientists), the investigation can arrive at a more unbiased, objective, and accurate understanding and explanation of the social phenomena of interest than it would be the case otherwise. It has been well accepted by social scientists that social phenomena are highly contextual (Risjord, 2014). Though there are potential universal laws that may provide common explanations of some social actions at the individual and collective levels across contexts, universality can be claimed only when the investigation is conducted in situ unbiased by a priori frameworks that were developed in different socio-economic contexts. This means that the search for universal theories must begin with indigenous research. This is the distinction between the scholarship of discovery and the scholarship of integration in Boyer's framework (1990) on the nature of professorial work. Comparative and cross-cultural analysis is the scholarship of integration, the discovery of universal laws by integrating discoveries from different contexts, using different methods or relying on different disciplinary perspectives.

The word contextual does not necessarily imply 'unique'. Uniqueness can only be claimed through deeply contextualized or indigenous research that a similar discovery does not exist elsewhere or has not yet been discovered elsewhere. In other words, in the social sciences all indigenous discoveries or universal laws have to be held as 'tentative', to be continuously reexamined in different contexts, different times, or even in the same context. This is the value of 'replication' research that many journals, including MOR, now welcome and encourage (Lewin et al., 2016.)

An important assumption underlying 'engaged indigenous scholarship' is that local people may have experiences that are different from that of outsiders, and are better able to express their experiences than by outsiders. We may challenge this assumption on two grounds. First, the fish (local people) may not know the nature of water (local context), and second, even if it knows, it cannot explain it to others. Polyani (1966) refers to this as 'tacit knowledge' and Nisbet and Wilson (1977) found people 'know more than they can tell'. How would 'engaged indigenous research' solve this dilemma? Further, if an outsider is not a fish or has never lived in water, how would the outsider begin to understand the experiences of the fish in water no matter how the locals try to explain it? Would indigenous research necessarily guarantee a higher likelihood of discovering truth in a local context? The answer is not so clear. I encourage research on the methodological challenges, including the philosophical issues of ontology and epistemology in

indigenous research, to improve the confidence on the substantive discoveries. The call for 'engaged indigenous scholarship' promises many exciting lines of inquiry for scholars interested in discovering the mystery of how China has been able to transform, in forty years, from an impoverished nation to an economic powerhouse globally (Tsui, Zhang, & Chen, 2017).

In brief, the debate about the imperialistic connotation of the word 'indigenous' notwithstanding, indigenous research is good social science by taking the context seriously in efforts to accurately describe, explain, and discover both unique Chinese approaches and universal practices in the growth, development, and management of Chinese organizations locally and globally. Serious attention to indigenous research also is a timely response to the call for 'responsible research in business and management' (RRBM, 2018, see position paper on www.rrbm.network). RRBM offers seven principles guiding the production of both credible and useful knowledge. Principle 2 refers to the need to engage stakeholders in management research. This is engaged scholarship. Principle 5 refers to acknowledging the importance of different regional perspectives and multidisciplinary research for the development of both global and local knowledge. This is an encouragement of indigenous research. Responsible research is about developing credible knowledge on problems important to business and society in the contemporary contexts, both global and local. This is after all the goal of 'engaged indigenous scholarship' and the vision of *Management and Organization Review*.

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