


Remembering James March

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INTRODUCTION

On September 27, 2018, Professor James G. March, a giant in our field, passed away at the age of 90 (1928–2018), just one month after his wife and high school sweetheart, Jayne, passed away. March's impact on the field of organization studies and beyond is profound and long-lasting. The advancement of the field is truly indebted to March's brilliance and dedication to the search of truth as a great scholar. March wrote the inaugural article for *Management and Organization Review* (MOR) (2005), 'Parochialism in the Evolution of a Research Community: The Case of Organization Studies'. This article not only provided a critical foundation underlying the editorial structure and philosophy of MOR but also argued eloquently for the salience of indigenous Chinese management studies as a necessary condition for building both contextualized and universal knowledge.

To remember, celebrate, and advance March's rich ideas on organizations, MOR and the IACMR held, in June 17–18, 2019, a special paper development workshop at the University of Nottingham Ningbo, China for a special issue of MOR. Following the workshop, invitations to submit revised manuscripts based on the feedback provided at the workshop were sent out for the final submissions before the due date of October 30, 2019. In total, we received eleven well-developed submissions, out of which five articles were accepted for publication in this special issue. Next, we will present synopses of the five articles, and then discuss critical implications for future research.

SYNOPSIS OF SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLES

Entitled 'In Search of Optimal Distinctiveness: Balancing Conformity and Differentiation via Organizational Learning', the article by Hu, Zhang, and Gao

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(2021) addresses the research question regarding how firms manage the conformity-differentiation tension through cross-level learning behaviors by applying March's exploration-exploitation framework to the issue of optimal distinctiveness as a competitive strategy. When a new technological area or a nascent industry is emerging, competing firms are exposed to multiple technological trajectories. Firms need to engage in independent experimentation to achieve differentiated advantages, as well as inter-firm imitation to ensure legitimacy and adaptability. The existence of such cross-level (intra-firm and inter-firm) learning confronts firms with two paradoxes while orchestrating multiple technological alternatives: the ambidexterity paradox demonstrated as the exploitation-exploration trade-off and the optimal distinctiveness challenge represented by the conformity-differentiation paradox.

Based on a mixed method design, combining a case study of the Chinese photovoltaic industry with a follow-up computational simulation, the findings suggest: (1) conformity among firms in bottleneck or core technological areas with a primary dependence on inter-firm learning (imitation), and (2) differentiation in downstream market applications with a primary dependence on intra-firm learning (independent experimentation through exploitation and exploration). Although inter-firm learning (imitation) tends to help the focal firm achieve its optimal distinctiveness, overreliance on exploiting existing industry knowledge may hurt the focal firm's long-term performances. The study also specifies the *extent* to which firms should rely on inter-firm learning (imitation) and from *whom* they should learn from to achieve optimal distinctiveness. Among the three imitation strategies, i.e., imitate the largest firm, imitate the crowd (choice adopted by most firms), and imitate the firm with the best recent performance, the third strategy (imitating the best) can best help a firm to reach optimal distinctiveness.

Entitled 'Organizational Learning Under Institutional Complexity: Evidence from Township Clusters in China', the article by You, Zhou, Zhou, Jia, and Wang (2021) builds on the institutional logic perspective by examining how inter-organizational learning is affected by institutional complexity in community clusters. Although inter-organizational learning is both path-dependent and shaped by economic performance considerations, it is also affected by mimetic isomorphism of institutional norms in a community, but the extant literature has paid limited attention to why the effectiveness of learning is different for firms in different communities. Institutional logic is defined as a set of values, norms, and beliefs that are shared by a group of organizations and institutional complexity is present if there are multiple logics in a community cluster. The authors defined two types of institutional logic that co-exist in a community: community logic and government logic. Whereas the former refers to the norms, beliefs, and values that are socially constructed and shared by participants in a community, the latter is defined by the extent to which an authoritative entity (e.g., a local government) uses rules to regulate and influence the actions of firms and interactions among firms in a community cluster. The article advances the argument that community

logic is positively associated with inter-firm learning, while government logic negatively moderates such a positive effect. Further, social connections between community and local governments are expected to mitigate this negative moderating effect. Their analysis of 354 firms in 39 township clusters in Jiangsu province of China provides empirical support for their hypotheses.

Entitled ‘Neither-And Thinking: Understanding James March’s Unique Solution to Paradox’, the article by Li (2021) explores how March has inspired other scholars to study paradoxes, but this has also led to the false impression that March only identified organizational paradoxes without providing solutions. In fact, March implicitly suggested that solutions can always be distinguished from other extant solutions. Hence, this study addresses the research question: What is James March’s unique solution to the organizational paradox between exploration and exploitation?

Much extant literature provides solutions using three categories – both/and, either/or, and neither/nor. This study goes one step further by inferring from March’s discussion of the logic of consequence and logic of appropriateness as well as by distinguishing primary thinking (principle) and secondary thinking (practice). Placing these two forms of thinking on both the horizontal and vertical axes, which have three solution categories each, this study presents a unique typology and creates a 3×3 matrix. March’s and extant solutions such as ambidexterity, yin-yang, and Zhongyong are matched in each cell. March’s solution is Neither-And thinking, which refers to thinking that intends to achieve neither of each end, but results in achieving both of them in practice. This study then applies this unique thinking to other paradoxes in various fields such as destruction philosophy, Buddhism, and quantum physics. Such broad applicability indicates that March’s Neither-And thinking may be an encompassing solution for organizational paradoxes and paradoxes in general.

Entitled ‘Beyond Bounded Rationality: CEO Reflective Capacity and Firm Sustainability Performance’, the article by Jia, Tsui, and Yu (2021) focuses on applying March’s decision-making insights to the issue of CEOs’ optimum decision-making by evoking a personal attribute of *reflective capacity* as the cognitive capability to increase awareness of the firm’s current and future opportunities, which presumably allows CEOs to enjoy expanded information search and processing ability. By defining reflective capacity and demonstrating its relevance to the firm’s sustainability performance, this study develops a conceptual model of CEO reflective capacity. As CEO reflective capacity emphasizes both internal mental structures and external behavioral manifestations, CEOs with a high level of reflective capacity successfully address both short-term and long-term needs of their organizations.

This study develops and validates a measure of reflective capacity using two executive samples. Reflective capacity consists of three sequential dimensions: (1) diverse information sources, (2) diverse information content, and (3) learning and integration. Based on a sample of CEOs and their subordinate-executives in

213 Chinese small- and medium-sized firms, the study tests three hypotheses on how CEO reflective capacity is related to a firm's sustainability.

The results support the conceptualization of CEO reflective capacity and theoretical model connecting CEO's reflective capacity to firm sustainability performance through the mediation of comprehensive strategic decisions and CEO behavioral complexity. The findings confirm the value of CEO reflective capacity as a means to weaken the limitation of bounded rationality.

Entitled 'Invest in Innovation or Not? How Managerial Cognition and Attention Allocation Shape Corporate Responses to Performance Shortfalls', the article by He, Huang, and Yang (2021) develops a theoretical framework by considering the role of managerial cognition in firms' responses to performance gaps from the perspective of the attention-based view of organizations. The authors advance the argument that managerial cognition affects managers' attention allocation, which influences their interpretations of performance gaps, perceptions of innovation in solving firms' performance problems, and subsequent strategic choices. The authors first hypothesize that performance shortfalls lead to more R&D investment and then develop theoretical hypotheses arguing the moderating effects of managers' experiences, connections, leadership structures, and industry environments on firms' decisions to invest in R&D since these factors determine managerial cognition. Using a sample of Chinese high-tech firms from 2009 to 2017, they find that Chinese firms tend to invest more in R&D with an increase in performance shortfalls. They also reveal that this main effect is even stronger if the CEOs have an R&D or engineering background, also serve as the board chair, or are not politically connected. Further, the main effect is also positively moderated by the competitiveness of an industry and industry norms in innovation as indicated by industry R&D intensity.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

If we group the above five articles according to the diverse themes covered by March, we can observe that the first and second articles are closely related to the theme of organizational learning, which emphasizes the impact of path dependence and routine based in Marchian tradition. Further, the third article is related to the theme of paradoxical thinking as a recurring theme throughout March's research program. And, the fourth and fifth articles are closely related to the role of top managers in the processes of organizational learning and decision-making, especially concerning the unique effect of *ambiguity* (as a lack of clarity to encompass both vagueness and inconsistencies or contradictions, March, 1994).

Theme of Organizational Learning

Related to the theme of organizational learning, the first and second articles apply March's general model of organizational learning to the concrete issues of optimal

distinctiveness in the domain of business strategy and institutional complexity defined by the presence of multiple institutional logics.

The article by Hu, Zhang, and Cao (2021) seeks to unfold the conformity-differentiation paradox through the perspective of organizational learning as another paradox. First, this study enriches March's exploitation-exploration model by introducing the notion of cross-level learning. While independent experimentation (intra-firm learning) is often exploitative at the firm level but exploratory at the industry level, imitation (inter-firm level) is often exploratory at the firm level but exploitative at the industry level. This enriched learning model helps obtain a more holistic understanding of organizational ambidexterity.

Second, this study represents a novel and pioneering attempt to bridge institutional theory and strategic management via the organizational learning perspective. Cross-level learning with two forms of learning, i.e., intra-firm experimentation and inter-firm imitation, acts as the primary mechanism when pursuing optimal distinctiveness, and conformity-differentiation balance can be reframed as the problem of balancing between exploitation and exploration at the group level. Hence, this reveals the inherent connection between the two paradoxes of organizational ambidexterity and conformity-differentiation.

Finally, this study treats the conformity-differentiation paradox as a multidimensional issue rather than a simple either/or choice or a unidimensional continuum, so the findings also support the Chinese meta-lens of *yin-yang balancing*.

The article by You, Zhou, Zhou, Jia, and Wang (2021) makes a nice contribution to the current literature on inter-organizational learning by extending an important idea championed by Levitt and March (1988) that vicarious learning in a community is largely driven by the diffusion of social norms. It is an important revelation from their study that co-existing institutional logics in a community cluster (community logic and government logic in their context) could have conflicting impacts on the outcomes of inter-firm learning. This new conceptualization advances March's insight into organizational learning by developing the premise that the isomorphic diffusion of social norms in community-based organizational learning is negatively moderated by another key institutional force, government logic.

Second, this study helps us understand how inter-firm learning outcomes might differ due to the compatibility and incompatibility of multiple institutional logics that co-exist in a community by revealing the circumstances under which competing or harmonious relationships prevail in a community. Specifically, this study theorizes whether and how the negative moderating effect of government logic on the relationship between community logic and organizational learning depends on the social connections between firms in the community and local governments. In this way, this study offers new insights into the conversations regarding the compatibility and incompatibility of multiple institutional logics and their effects on organizational outcomes. Again, this is related to the Chinese meta-lens of *yin-yang balancing*.

In sum, the theme of organizational learning is central to March's research program, especially the ambidextrous nature of organizational learning in terms of the balance between exploration and exploitation. Such an ambidextrous perspective bears much broader implications for diverse research streams, such as the conformity-distinctiveness balance and institutional complexity in terms of competing logics (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). In this regard, the Chinese meta-lens of *yin-yang balancing* is of special value for the management (not any possible solution) of all paradoxical issues, and much greater attention should be put on the wider and richer applications of March's model of ambidexterity to many other issues and domains in the future (Li, 2014a, 2016; Rhee & Kim, 2019).

Theme of Paradoxical Thinking

Related to the above theme of organizational learning, the article by Li (2021) elaborates on March's unique approach to the exploration-exploitation paradox, which is implicitly embedded in his writing. Further, this study also provides a typology of thinking by analyzing March's writings and arranging the extant literature into a 3×3 matrix, placing primary and secondary thinking on horizontal and vertical axes. This enables deeper understanding, which is hard to achieve by other typologies using one continuum with two ends (e.g., exploration and exploitation) or using three categories (e.g., both/and, either/or, and neither/nor). This typology also shows the distinctiveness of March's Neither-And thinking.

Finally, this study extends March's exploration-exploitation model and Neither-And thinking to various fields, including Asian philosophies, such as yin-yang, Zhongyong, and Buddhism, especially from the perspective of pragmatism in solving paradoxes by framing the primary and secondary thinking as related to the core dimensions of principle and practice for pragmatism. In particular, this study interconnects March's Neither-And thinking with his notions about the logics of consequence and appropriateness, as related to the principle and practice dimensions of pragmatism, all being paradoxical in nature.

It is worth noting that the proposed 3×3 typology of thinking modes is in contrast to the typology of three paradox-related logics in terms of Aristotle's 'either/or' logic (formal logic), Hegel's 'both/or' logic (dialectical logic), and the Chinese indigenous meta-lens of *yin-yang balancing* as 'either/and' logic, in addition to the fourth, popular but erroneous, 'both/and' logic (see Li, 2014a, 2016 for reviews). Future research should explore how to effectively apply the meta-lens of *yin-yang balancing* to more managerial paradoxes, especially the measurement and also analytical challenges in empirical studies beyond the currently dominant case studies. Also, more attention should be directed at further development of March's ideas about the logics of consequence and appropriateness, especially the latter logic as it is closely related to exploration, ambiguity, foolishness,

playfulness, imagination, and other good, often neglected, qualities of scholarship (see Li, 2021 for the last interview with March in the current issue).

Theme of Decision-Making

Related to the theme of decision-making, the fourth and fifth articles apply March's overall perspective of decision-making to the concrete issues of reflective capacity and managerial attention, both in the domain of managerial cognition for decision-making.

The article by Jia, Tsui, and Yu (2021) recognizes CEO's reflective capacity as a potential contributor to a firm's sustainability performance. First, this study contributes to research in strategic leadership by extending research on the upper-echelon framework. Earlier studies on strategic leadership have mainly focused on unobservable mental structures, narrowing the central role that CEO cognition plays in the firm's decision-making process and capability development. This study goes beyond mental activities by including associated behaviors or actions, such as acquiring information from diverse sources.

Second, this study provides a holistic view of managerial cognition. While the extant research on CEO cognition is fragmented, this study introduces an interconnected three-dimensional measure of CEO reflective capacity. This study provides further insight into the interaction between cognitive elements. Third, this study sheds light on the possibility of overcoming the limits of bounded rationality. By addressing how CEO reflective capacity transforms the information filtering process from a vision narrowing to a vision broadening process, the study suggests CEO reflective capacity as a means to weaken the limits of bounded rationality. With implications for firm sustainability performance, CEO reflective capacity may be particularly important in dynamic and complex environments. Finally, this study enriches March's notion on 'low intellect' and 'high intellect' learning modes. Reflective capacity aligns with the two learning modes in a way that enables CEOs to obtain intelligence by combining diversified 'low intellect' learning with casual 'high intellect' learning.

Attention is a key concept in Cyert and March's (1963) behavioral theory of the firm, and the attention-based view has become an important perspective in strategic management and organizational studies. Closely linked to the article by Jia, Tsui, and Yu (2021), the study by He, Huang, and Yang (2021) emphasizes the important role of managerial cognition and attention allocation in firms' decision-making and learning processes. Contributing to the performance feedback theory of organizational learning, this article argues that organizational learning and search are not only influenced by aspirations based on past experiences but also affected by a cognitive process based on a forward-looking process.

Second, the study by He, Huang, and Yang (2021) contributes to the performance feedback learning model by emphasizing the subjective interpretations of managers about the suitability of firm innovation as a viable solution to address

a firm's performance problems. They provide a contingency perspective arguing that the impact of this subjective interpretation depends on certain individual and structural factors that affect their attention allocation process. Finally, the article by He, Huang, and Yang (2021) enriches the understanding of 'situated attention' in the attention-based view of firms by highlighting social context in which managers are embedded in. It emphasizes the role of interactions between managers and their environment in their cognitive and attention allocation processes and the subsequent impact on firm innovation. By using this cognitive lens, this study reveals possibilities of organizational learning from both the past and the future, and subsequently makes the current strategic choices.

In sum, the theme of managerial cognition in organizational learning and decision-making is also central to March's research program, especially the research streams on bounded rationality, behavioral theory of the firm, the garbage-can model, ambiguity, playfulness, foolishness, the logics of consequence and appropriateness, among others. The issues covered by the fourth and fifth articles in terms of reflective capacity and managerial cognition and attention are interesting extensions of March's research on managerial decision-making, but more issues related to organizational decision-making in general, especially those assumed to be more effective under the condition of VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) or VUCA+ (adding the dimension of *novelty* to the original set of four dimensions), such as ambiguity, foolishness, playfulness, and the logic of appropriateness, are closely related to exploration (March, 1982, 1991, 1994, 2006, 2010). All those issues related to exploration deserve much more attention in the future.

CONCLUSION

Beyond the above three themes covered by the five articles in the special issue, we want to highlight two other issues worth special attention in the future. First, it is worth noting that all exploration-related issues are consistent with the Chinese methodology of 'wu' (悟 in Chinese) in terms of intuitive imagination for insight via metaphor (Li, 2016). It is worth noting that March hosted two workshops on the campus of Stanford University in 2010 and 2012 around the theme of ambiguity from the Chinese perspective. Further, we need to explore the inherent link between Chinese traditional philosophies and March's own convictions. For example, from his book *On Leadership* (March & Weil, 2005), we can see clearly that March's long-held belief in dialectical thinking, which is also emphasized in the Chinese notion of *yin-yang balancing*, is explicitly expressed in the introduction of the book about the fundamental issues of leadership, including private lives and public duties; genius and madness; diversity and unity; ambiguity and coherence; domination and subordination, among others. In particular, March highlighted Niels Bohr for his framing of 'profound truths' about opposites being complementary: 'because the struggles with these truths have no resolutions,

they create enduring inter- and intra-personal conflicts' (March & Weil, 2005: 5). Finally, March explicitly posited that 'effective leadership implies an ability to live in two worlds: the incoherent world of imagination, fantasy, and dreams and the orderly world of plans, rules, and pragmatic action' (March & Weil, 2005: 3).

It is interesting to note that the prevailing logic of consequence is much more limited and restricted than generally expected because it is more related to exploitation than exploration. As March pointed out, 'the analytical rigidity of rationality is seen as limiting it to refinements on what is already known, believed, or existent and is contrasted with the imaginative wildness of various forms of creativity. The argument is that a technology of rationality has to be balanced by other technologies that free action from the constraints of conventional knowledge and procedures and introduce elements of foolishness into action' (March, 2006: 203), especially under VUCA+ conditions. Hence, from the perspective of path-breaking exploration, the role of foolishness as 'a leap of faith about the virtue, joy, and beauty of imagination' (March, 2006: 211), often via playful experiments under VUCA+ conditions, where ambiguity is reframed from a negative problem to a positive solution in terms of offering diverse or even competing perspectives, and all VUCA+ dimensions can be reframed from threats to opportunities.

Since the 'heroism of fools and the blindness of true believers' as related to the identity dimension of the logic of appropriateness are deemed necessary and desirable for exploration (March, 2006: 201), the routine dimension of the logic seems problematic as it could restrict distant search in favor of path-dependent local search. Such limitations could be remedied by balancing some competing logics (Greenwood et al., 2011; Thornton et al., 2012). Further, it is helpful to differentiate goal-related rules (e.g., identity) from means-related rules (e.g., routine). Finally, beyond the local search for solutions for a local balance between exploitation and exploration within a single firm (Levinthal & March, 1993), often through the mechanisms of structural and temporal ambidexterity, it seems that internal hierarchy is good at exploitation, while inter-firm alliance in an open ecosystem is more promising for exploration, or more accurately co-exploration (Li, 2010). In this sense, future research can integrate the currently separated research streams on institutional logics, behavioral theory of the firm, learning, innovation, entrepreneurship, bricolage, stretch goal, improvising, simple rules, among others into a holistic and dynamic meta-framework based upon the extensive theme of March's research on decision-making with help from the meta-lens of yin-yang balancing.

Second, more attention should be paid to what March forcefully argued in the inaugural issue of *MOR* in 2005. In a separate article on the development of organizational studies as a field in North America from 1945 to 2000, Augier, March, and Sullivan (2005) pointed out the benefits of field development brought about by the emergence of organizational studies in other regions. In this article, March had specifically placed a high hope on the impact of Chinese

indigenous research, especially in terms of the necessity and feasibility for Chinese business schools to be distinctive from the overwhelming dominance of the US model so that they can effectively engage in a needed paradigm shift toward a proper balance between global unity and local diversity in a healthy tension (Augier et al., 2005; Li, 2014b, 2021; Rhee, 2010; Rhee & Kim, 2019; Van de Ven, Meyer, & Jing, 2018). A recent debate further reinforces this perspective (cf. Bruton, Zahra, Van de Ven, & Hitt, 2021; Filatotchev, Ireland, & Stahl, 2021).

In conclusion, we truly miss James March as a great mentor for countless scholars worldwide, including those who want to engage in indigenous research in China. We firmly believe that March's influence will continue to bear on research in the broad domain of organizational management, both from global and indigenous perspectives as well as their interaction and integration.

NOTES

Names of the Guest Editors are alphabetically ordered. They made equal editorial contributions to this special issue. Peter Ping Li acknowledges financial support from NSFC Grant 71732007.

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