Indigenous Management Research in China from an Engaged Scholarship Perspective

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ABSTRACT   This commentary discusses the four articles in this special *MOR* issue on indigenous management research in China. It begins by recognizing the importance of indigenous research not only for understanding the specific knowledge of local phenomena, but also for advancing general theoretical knowledge across cultural boundaries. Challenging to undertake, we propose a method of engaged scholarship for conducting indigenous research. The four articles in this special issue provide good examples of applying principles of engaged scholarship in their indigenous Chinese management studies.

KEYWORDS   China, culture, engaged scholarship, indigenous research

INTRODUCTION

Opportunities and Challenges of Indigenous Research

We appreciate this invitation to comment on this special *MOR* issue on indigenous management research in China from the perspective of engaged scholarship.[1] The four articles in this issue nicely illustrate basic principles of engaged scholarship for undertaking indigenous research. At the most basic level, engaged scholarship requires researchers to reflexively appreciate and respect the unique values of indigenous people and contexts; that they are not all alike, and each can contribute useful knowledge for understanding a topic being studied. Moreover, indigenous research requires a methodology for engaging and bridging the perspectives of stakeholders in different local and global communities.

The term 'indigenous' has a variety of possible meanings, including 'belonging to a certain place', 'living naturally', or 'the people who identify their ancestry with the original inhabitants of many countries worldwide' (Wilson, 2008: 34). In their call for papers for this special issue, Leung, Li, Chen, and Luo (2009) define indigenous research in a broad sense to encompass any context-sensitive

approaches to a uniquely local phenomenon, which may or may not have global implications. In a similar way, Tsui (2004: 501) defines 'indigenous research' as '*scientific studies* of local phenomena using local language, local subjects, and locally meaningful constructs, with the aim to test or build theories that can explain and predict the specific phenomenon and related phenomena in the local social cultural context'. By scientific studies, Tsui (2004) emphasizes the need for indigenous research to be of high quality by following rigorous methods of inquiry as judged by the scientific community.

This scientific community is not monolithic, and the West has no monopoly rights in defining scientific theories, methods, and institutions. Like Zhao and Jiang (2009), we think management and organization science may suffer by the recent trend in China, Europe, and other parts of the world of imitating the American brand of management scholarship. While this trend is understandable for newly-emerging research communities in order to learn and gain legitimacy, it may have the unintended consequence of stifling diversity and innovation in management knowledge. Instead of homogenizing management research by trying to adapt and apply foreign theories and methods that are not sensitive to local contexts, we should encourage its heterogeneity by developing indigenous management theories, methods, and institutions.

Management and organization researchers have given very limited attention to the tremendous differences and disparities in managerial practices, cultures, structures, and institutions across regions and countries. As Van de Ven (2002: 177) emphasized in his Academy of Management presidential address, 'one of the greatest opportunities for the future of our global management research community is to reach out and learn about the management and institutional forces that capture and explain different management and organizational practices among countries and local regions within them. Our future as a society and management profession depends on this'.

Indigenous scholarship is badly needed in order to develop management knowledge that expresses and celebrates the unique contexts and settings of different countries and regions. It also provides scholars a career strategy for building on their strengths rather than weaknesses because it focuses on studying topics in the local cultures and contexts they know best and to which they have direct access, rather than those alien to them. This is a central founding objective of the International Association for Chinese Management Research, and its journal, *Management and Organization Review*.

The term 'indigenous' is culturally sensitive, with negative meanings to many indigenous people of the world. Some of these negative meanings are captured by Smith (1999) in the context of research on the Maori indigenous people in New Zealand. They deserve attention because they suggest research methods and practices that need to be avoided in studying indigenous topics and communities.

> From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term 'research' is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism. The word itself, 'research', is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary. When mentioned in many indigenous contexts, it stirs up silence, it conjures up bad memories, it raises a smile that is knowing and distrustful. It is so powerful that indigenous people even write poetry about research. The ways in which scientific research is implicated in the worst excesses of colonialism remains a powerful remembered history for many of the world's colonized people. It is a history that still offends the deepest sense of our humanity. Just knowing that someone measured our 'faculties' by filling the skulls of our ancestors with millet seeds and compared the amount of millet seed to the capacity for mental thought offends our sense of who and what we are. It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that it is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us. It appalls us that the West can desire, extract, and claim ownership of our ways of knowing, our imagery, the things we create and produce, and then simultaneously reject the people who created and developed those ideas and seek to deny them further opportunities to be creators of their own culture and own nations. (Smith, 1999: 1)

As Smith glaringly captures, research on indigenous topics and communities has been badly abused in the past, and consequently has lost its legitimacy in the eyes of many indigenous communities. It appears that these abuses are due more to the methods used by the researchers than to the substantive topics that they examined. Quite likely, Western researchers simply applied the positivistic methods of science in which they were trained, and did not inquire or appreciate the unique cultural values, interests, and knowledge of the indigenous people they studied. Without engaging the indigenous community, the researchers failed to recognize the negative obtrusive effects of their 'foreign' research methods. A much deeper and reflexive engagement of indigenous people is necessary to obtain their informed consent to the research and their unique knowledge contributions to the topics studied.

Of course, any form of research can be abused. The vast majority of indigenous studies have been conducted properly and many have made significant contributions in advancing specific practical knowledge of a topic in its local context and general theoretical knowledge that applies across contexts. The development of paternalistic leadership (PL) theory provides a good example of indigenous research.

In the late 1960s, a Ph.D. candidate of Harvard Business School, Robert Silin, went to Taiwan to investigate how large private firms were controlled by individual leaders. Based on a year-long field study of a local private firm, Silin (1976) found some unique phenomena, such as centralized authority and didactic leadership,

which were quite beyond his understandings of an ideal leadership model from an outsider's point of view. Some of his findings were supported and extended by Redding's studies of Chinese leaders in firms in Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, and Indonesia, as well as Westwood's studies of organizational leaders in some Asian countries including China (Redding, 1990; Westwood & Chan, 1992).

These studies revealed some interesting, cultural-specific phenomena of leadership patterns in Chinese society. By climbing the ladder of abstraction to identify the general phenomenon of which the specific observed instances are a part, Cheng and his colleagues developed a general theory that can be extended and adapted to other contexts. Cheng's study began with his observation of an authoritarian leadership case in a Taiwanese shoe factory as an anomaly that violated the common understandings based on Western theories, and his sensitivity to the influence of Chinese traditions inspired him to seek the general theoretical explanations of this specific phenomenon (Cheng, Wang, & Huang, 2009). To empirically ground his abstract conjectures in reality, he actively engaged and interviewed 18 owners of family businesses and 24 of their first-line managers using ethnographic methods (Cheng, 1995a). This specific knowledge enabled inferring generalizations about PL using the theoretical lens of psychological dynamics between Chinese leaders and their subordinates (Cheng, 1995b). Moreover, Farh and Cheng (2000) rooted the PL concept and its three dimensions in the cultural and historical context, revealed its theoretical rationales in Chinese society, and further developed the general theoretical model and measuring instruments. These empirical studies on context-specific cases informed theory refinements at the more abstract level of inferring generalizations and boundary condition of the theory in comparison with Western leadership theories (Cheng et al., 2009). In sum, the development of PL theory is actually an outcome of many collective efforts by researchers from different Eastern and Western countries/regions, such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, the U.S., and the U.K. The indigenous studies in different countries/regions used a variety of research methods such as interviews, participant observations, case studies, and ethnographies to ground specific knowledge of PL in its local cultural context.

ENGAGED SCHOLARSHIP

As this PL example nicely illustrates, we propose that engaged scholarship provides a constructive way to undertake indigenous research. Engaged scholarship is a participative form of research for obtaining the views of key stakeholders (academics, practitioners, policy makers) to understand a complex problem in its particular context (Van de Ven, 2007). By definition, stakeholders are people who have different stakes or interests in a study topic, and therefore know the indigenous values and local circumstances of the specific context being studied. By exploiting

differences in the viewpoints of these key stakeholders, engaged scholarship produces knowledge that is more penetrating and insightful than when researchers work alone.

Engaged scholarship entails a fundamental shift in how we as researchers define our relationships with the topics being studied and the stakeholders (other researchers, students, and practitioners) in the indigenous communities that are relevant and needed to do a study. It begins with the recognition that we often study topics or problems that exceed our limited individual capabilities. Because each of us is a product of a certain history, culture, and disciplinary training, we inevitably examine a topic or issue from a limited perspective. We can study these topics better if we step outside of ourselves and engage relevant stakeholders in the research process than when we do the research alone.

This form of engagement requires researchers to be participants in a collective learning process and to be reflexive of whose perspectives and interests are served in a study. It is about humility in one's own limitations and profound respect for other kinds of knowledge producers. This is 'not because we don't have an important and distinctive role to play in knowledge production, but because we do not have the exclusive right to such production. As we begin to engage in relationships with [different stakeholders] on the basis of such deep respect, we allow ourselves to become real-world problem solvers in a way that is otherwise not possible' (Edward Zlotkowski quoted in Kenworthy-U'ren, 2005: 360).

Engagement is a relationship that involves negotiation and collaboration between researchers and practitioners in a learning community; such a community jointly produces knowledge that can both advance the scientific enterprise and enlighten an indigenous community. Instead of viewing people and organizations of an indigenous community as data collection sites and funding sources, an engaged scholar views them as collaborators in a learning workplace (idea factory) where practitioners and scholars co-produce knowledge on important questions and issues by testing alternative ideas and different views of a common problem. 'Abundant evidence shows that both the civic and academic health of any culture is vitally enriched as scholars and practitioners speak and listen carefully to each other' (Boyer, 1996: 15).

In addition to clarifying a researcher's identity, indigenous research requires a methodology for engaging and bridging the perspectives of stakeholders needed to achieve both context-specific knowledge and more general theoretical knowledge of a topic being studied. Research undertaken to obtain context-specific knowledge requires studying a topic deeply in its unique context in order to understand its specific indigenous character. This specific understanding of a topic in its indigenous setting provides the opportunity for abductive grounded theory building in which a scholar moves up the ladder of abstraction to find the general case and situations of which the concrete instance is a part. Moving down the ladder of abstraction, application and refinement of this general theoretical knowledge

requires knowing the theory's boundary conditions and how it can be adapted to or embedded in the specific local context being investigated. As the PL example showed, concrete specific knowledge and more general theoretical knowledge are highly interdependent, and both are required to do rigorous indigenous research. Context-specific research is needed to ground the phenomenon up close and in sufficient detail to capture its unique essence, and theory (which by definition is more general abstract knowledge) is needed to explain the phenomenon and its boundary conditions.

The research activities to achieve specific and general knowledge are combined through problem formulation, theory building, research design, and problem solving tasks of the engaged scholarship model, as illustrated in Figure 1. Van de Ven (2007) argues that researchers can significantly increase the likelihood of producing knowledge that advances theory and practice by engaging others whose perspectives are relevant in each of the following four study activities:

Problem formulation – situate, ground, and diagnose the research problem or topic in its specific context or setting by determining who, what, where, when, why, and how the problem exists up close and from afar. Answering these journalist's questions requires meeting and talking with people who experience and know the problem, as well as reviewing the literature on its prevalence and boundary conditions.

Figure 1. The engaged scholarship diamond model
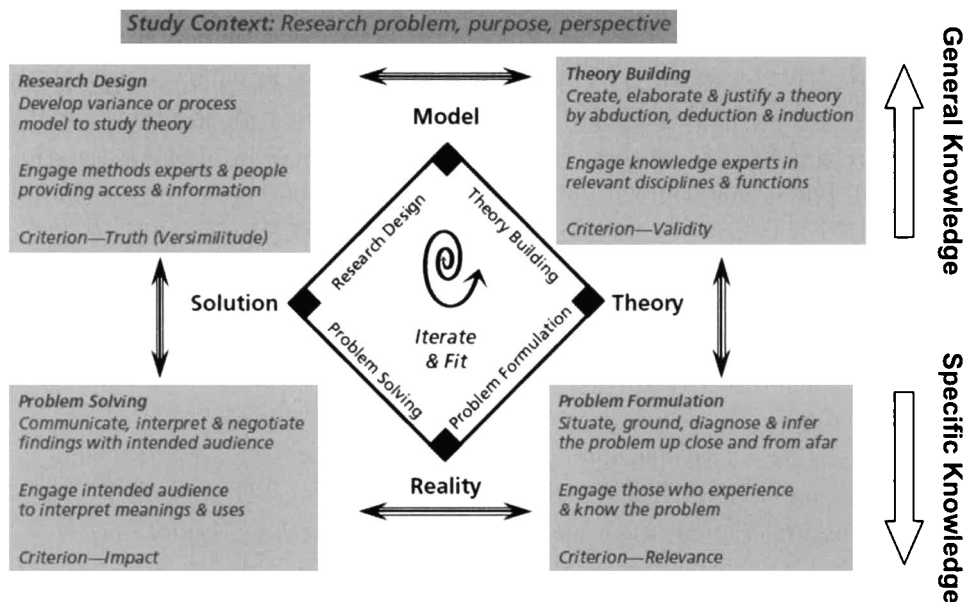
Theory building – develop and adapt plausible theories (or propositions) that address the problem as it exists in its particular context. Developing these alternative theories requires a review of existing theories and research in the literature that may address the problem/topic being studied, as well as conversations with knowledge experts from relevant disciplines and functions. In essence, all theories are indigenous and bounded to the local cultures and regions from which they emerged. Theory building entails the tasks of creating, elaborating, and justifying general theoretical knowledge to fit the research problem and question in its specific indigenous context.

Research design – gather empirical evidence to compare the plausible alternative models that address the research problem. Most scientific methods and research designs are widely available, but need to be modified to fit the specific problem being investigated. Doing this well typically requires getting advice from technical experts in research methodology and from people in the indigenous communities who can provide informed consent to the study and access to data.

Problem solving – communicate, interpret, and apply the empirical findings on which models better answer the research question about the problem. The greater the difference in content-specific knowledge between researchers and the intended audience of the study, the more they need to communicate in order to understand and use the research findings. Indigenous research typically entails two audiences – stakeholders in the indigenous community and the relevant scientific community. These communities have unique cultures, assumptions, and speaking patterns, and communicating with them requires developing interactional expertise with each community. Communications might begin with written reports and presentations for knowledge transfer, then conversations to interpret different meanings of the report, and then pragmatic and political negotiations to reconcile conflicting interests.

As shown in Figure 2, engaged scholarship can be practised in many different forms, including: (1) doing basic science with stakeholder advice; (2) co-producing knowledge with collaborators; (3) doing evaluation research for professional practice; and (4) action/intervention research for a client showing there are many ways to become involved as a researcher (Van de Ven, 2007: 26–29).

COMMENTS ON THE FOUR ARTICLES

In terms of the four tasks in the engaged scholarship diamond model (see Figure 1), our summary of the four articles in this special issue is illustrated in Table 1. There are many reasons to like the four articles because they exemplify key principles of engaged scholarship for doing indigenous research, as called for by Leung et al. (2009) in their call for papers.

Li (2011) argues that an indigenous study should contain at least one concept or variable unique to the local phenomenon. All of the four studies exemplify this feature, and their research topics involve some specific concepts or phenomena in

Figure 2. Alternative forms of engaged scholarship

Source: Van de Ven, *Engaged Scholarship*, Oxford University Press, 2007: 27.

Chinese society, such as *guanxi*, 'Party membership', 'paternalistic leadership', or 'Chinese cultural traditions'. Their research problems are nicely situated in the Chinese indigenous context such as transition economy ('SOE restructuring') and cultural values ('Confucianism', 'Buddhism', 'Legalism', 'Taoism', 'The Art of War', 'Yin-Yang perspective'). The boundaries on these indigenous concepts are also clarified by distinguishing them from Western concepts and literatures, such as 'rational-legal bureaucracy', 'social exchange relationship', 'Schwartz value survey', and 'Hofstede's cultural paradigm'. The research methods range from quantitative ones (multivariate analysis, structural equation modelling) to qualitative ones (grounded theory building, case illustration). Some of these data collection methods involve direct personal engagements of researchers with indigenous people, such as with personal interviews, Delphi method, and dyadic questionnaires. As a consequence of the building-up with approaches and materials from the Chinese context, the research epistemology also represents some indigenous features such as the holistic view of cultural traditions in Pan, Rowney, and Peterson's study, and the Yin-Yang dialectical view of cultural dynamics in Fang's study. These unique Chinese views 'make the familiar phenomenon appear novel' (Whetten, 2009).

We now comment more specifically on how each study exemplifies engaged scholarship principles for indigenous research.

Ma (2012) examines a particular question of how authority relations affect the restructuring of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs). Given the transitional Chinese context where *guanxi*, principled particularism, and patrimonial traditions remain, he develops a relational view of the organizational restructuring process that shows how close relations of SOE managers with superiors decreases the likelihood of SOEs being sold or discontinued and that of the blockage of managerial careers. Based on a multivariate analysis of 133 personal interviews with

Table 1. Research process of the four studies

Papers	Problem formulation	Theory building	Research design	Problem solving
Ma, *A relational view of organizational restructuring in transitional China*	• In the transitional Chinese context where *guanxi*, principled particularism and patrimonial traditions remain strong, how do authority relations affect SOE restructuring?	• Close relations of SOE managers with superiors decrease the likelihood of SOEs being sold or discontinued and blockage of managerial careers, especially when managers are party members.	• 133 personal interviews of CAS SOE managers while CAS was restructuring. • Multivariate statistical analysis.	• Hypoteses supported except for party membership. • Contrary to rational-legal bureaucracy, the study highlights the Chinese traditional influence of principled particularism on SOE restructuring and managerial career blockage.
Wu, Huang, Li & Liu, *Interactional justice and trust-in-superior as mediators for paternalistic leadership*	• What cultural factors may extend knowledge of Chinese paternalistic leadership (PL)? • How can PL affect subordinate work performance/OCB through social exchange relationship?	• The effects of three PL dimensions (moral, benevolent, and authoritarian leadership) on subordinate performance are mediated by interactional justice and trust in supervisor.	• Used Chinese measure of indigenous PL concept, and English measures of other variables. • 271 complete supervisor-subordinate dyad questionnaires in 23 private Chinese family businesses. • Researchers visited all respondents to explain and gain permission in study. • Structural equation modeling.	• Hypotheses supported except for one on authoritarian leadership. • Subordinates' performance increases with moral and benevolent (but not authoritarian) leadership, mediated by interactional justice and trust in supervisor.
Pan, Rowney & Peterson, *The structure of Chinese cultural traditions*	• Lack of measures that provide a holistic view of Chinese cultural traditions. • How to identify and measure Chinese cultural traditions and relate them to established SVS cultural model?	• Grounded theory building using Delphi to identify major schools and measures of traditional Chinese thought and then tracing items back to original writings. • Engagement of 27 interdisciplinary Chinese cultural scholars in Delphi.	• Following Delphi method to identify 5 schools and 35 measures, conducted a pilot study of initial instrument with 200 managers, followed by two samples of 2658 respondents in Beijing and 718 cases in 27 provinces. • Psychometric analysis using exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis.	• The newly-developed SCCT instrument provides a unique indigenous model of culture in Chinese businesses. • The SCCT complements, but cannot be reduced to generic values in the SVS instrument.
Fang, *Yin Yang: A new perspective on culture*	• Hofstede's static and bipolar (either-or) dimensions of national culture is incapable of capturing cultural dynamics. • Chinese indigenous Yin Yang thinking overcomes these weaknesses.	• Yin Yang view of paradox as opposites-in-unity is different from Western either-or (mutually-exclusive) and dialectical thinking. • Yin Yang provides a better foundation for conceptualizing dynamic cultures than Western dialectics.	• Deductive propositions of cultural coexistence, situationality, accessibility, and interaction. • Case illustrations of China, Sweden, and other countries' cultural values.	• The Chinese indigenous philosophy of Yin Yang stimulates cultural learning and change by addressing cultural differences and oppositions in partially complementary and partially conflicting (not either-or or dialectical) ways.

SOE managers of the Chinese Academy of Science (CAS), Ma finds support for the hypotheses, except for the main effect of Party membership. The study draws an important indigenous finding. Contrary to rational-legal bureaucracy, the study highlights the Chinese traditional influence of principled particularism on SOE restructuring and managerial career blockage.

As the up-close and personal stories of Mr Wang and Mr Li nicely ground and illustrate, *guanxi* is very sensitive and particular to interpersonal relations, and can be easily disturbed by some subtle, even unconscious events. Such dynamic features make the timing of observations by actors of *guanxi* relations critical. We may argue that a better measure of authority relations could result from having both managers and their superiors reporting their quality of *guanxi* before reform rather than relying on the sole testimony of the SOE managers. The participation of various stakeholders will likely lead to conflicts or interpersonal tensions that are associated with different interests and approaches, so managing conflict constructively is integral to engaged scholarship research. The existence of various perspectives among juxtaposing people can provide constructive opportunities for learning by leveraging differences through arbitrage.

Wu, Huang, Li, and Liu's (2012) study extends a line of research on the Chinese indigenous concept of paternalistic leadership (PL). It examines the general hypotheses and measures of how interactional justice and trust in supervisors mediate the relationship of PL and subordinate work performance/OCB. Through extensive engagement in research design by visiting all respondents to explain and gain permission in the study, the researchers compiled 271 complete supervisor-subordinate dyads questionnaires in 23 private Chinese family businesses. The research findings are discussed in ways that advance both general knowledge about the social exchange process between leaders and their subordinates and particular knowledge about the PL dynamics that are deeply contextualized in indigenous Chinese culture. Specifically, subordinates' performance increases with moral and benevolent (but not authoritarian) dimensions of PL, which is mediated by the subordinates' perceived interactional justice and trust in the supervisor.

According to DiMaggio (1995: 394), the reception of a theory is shaped by 'the extent to which a theory resonates with the cultural presuppositions of the time and of the scientific audience that consumes it'. Paternalistic leadership is an indigenous theory, and its coexistence of three seemingly opposite dimensions, including authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality, can be easily accepted by Chinese scholars due to their cultivation of Yin-Yang thinking. However, if researchers want to bridge the findings with global knowledge, this framing is often confusing to Western scholars (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). For example: Does PL involve a meta-construct or three independent constructs? Why and how can a leader reconcile and embrace these three seemingly antithetical features? Are benevolent acts by paternalistic leaders coming from a genuine benevolence or just from an impulse of benevolent dictatorship? To answer these questions, some additional

qualitative research would be beneficial. By directly interviewing indigenous business leaders and employees, researchers can provide a more detailed description of this leadership construct and distinguish it from Western leadership concepts.

Pan, Rowney, and Peterson (2012) formulate a specific problem of the lack of measures that capture Chinese cultural dimensions. They use a grounded theory-building approach with extensive engagement of interdisciplinary Chinese scholars to identify five major schools and 35 measures of Chinese cultural traditions, and then trace these back to original writings in the literature. Following good psychometric methods of test construction, the researchers conducted a pilot study of the initial instrument, followed by two large samples consisting of 2658 respondents in Beijing and 716 participants in 27 Chinese provinces. The research nicely addresses the problem. It contributes a newly-developed instrument of the Structure of Chinese Cultural Traditions (SCCT) that measures a unique indigenous model of Chinese businesses. It also expands our general knowledge on cross-cultural research by showing that the SCCT is complementary, but cannot be reduced to generic values as generated by the Schwartz Value Survey.

Perhaps due to space limitations, the definition of each construct of SCCT, though essential to an indigenous exploratory study, is not represented. Due to its long history and pluralism, each school of cultural tradition as a single factor would embody a different meaning in different contexts to different people. Moreover, engaging and leveraging knowledge experts is crucial to theory building activities, which typically requires reaching out and either talking to or reading works by others who can offer different perspectives and classifications of the problem domain. For example, as some previous studies (Hofstede, 1994; Leung, 2010) and Fang's (2012) study in this issue show, the above SCCT components often contradict one another; nevertheless, the interesting thing is that Chinese people can always adhere to these multiple values at the same time. This unique indigenous phenomenon actually has deep, but under-explored implications to cross-cultural research literature (Leung, 2010). Therefore, through deep communication with business practitioners about their experience of embracing and employing SCCT components, this study has the potential to advance powerful knowledge for both theory and practice.

Fang (2012) addresses the Chinese indigenous concept of Yin-Yang mostly in a general knowledge sense-making way. He critiques Hofstede's model of national cultural dimensions as static and bipolar, and advances Yin-Yang thinking as proving a better foundation for conceptualizing dynamic cultures. Being a conceptual article, this study develops a set of deductive propositions and uses the China-Sweden IKEA case to illustrate the changing cultural values. The article makes the important general theoretical contribution that the Chinese indigenous philosophy of Yin-Yang stimulates cultural learning and change by addressing cultural differences and oppositions in complementary (not mutually exclusive) ways.

Research findings do not necessarily mean the end of a study. Instead, they represent the beginning of the problem-solving phase in the engaged scholarship

model, which is followed by a lot of communicating, interpreting, negotiating works of the research findings with intended audiences. For example, in the view of business practitioners, the above Ying-Yang perspective on cultural change is more likely to be adopted and diffused, if it is perceived as having a relative advantage over the previous frames. To make the perspective seem advantageous, the study has to 'be compatible with current understandings of business practices, simple to understand, explicit, observable and can be tried out' (Van de Ven, 2007: 241). While the IKEA case in this study is a good example, we think that more knowledge interpretation and translation works between researchers and practitioners are needed for it to supersede Hofstede's model.

CONCLUSION

The central theme of this essay is that engaged scholarship is a constructive way to do rigorous indigenous research. By engaging and bridging the perspectives of stakeholders in different communities, indigenous research can pursue both local knowledge innovation and global knowledge accumulation. Based on the key tasks and principles of engaged scholarship, we comment on how the four studies of this special issue provide good examples of indigenous research. Moreover, we discuss how to exploit the potential of each study more fully from the stakeholder's view of engaged research. In this section, we present three practical suggestions for doing indigenous management research in China.

1 Stakeholder engagement in problem formulation and solving. Many Chinese management studies suffer from elaborating theories that are based on an insufficient diagnosis of the problems and their indigenous context. This phenomenon can be characterized as conducting 'unengaged or disengaged studies' (Van de Ven, 2007: 273). Even with sound methods of analysis, they would miss the opportunity to advance knowledge by 'solving the wrong problem well' (Von Glinow & Teagarden, 2009: 82). Therefore, engaging stakeholders in problem formulation and solving activities are important. Researchers can invite indigenous practitioners to join into their research teams and discuss with people who experience the problem through casual conversation, interviews, or in group meeting. By leveraging their distinct competencies, research teams composed of researchers and practitioners have the potential to more thoroughly situate the problems in their specific context and identify the most important and relevant questions of the indigenous research topic. As the major funding agency of Chinese management research, the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) might place more emphases on the relevance of the research projects to the Chinese business context.

2 Collaboration inside the Chinese research community. Through enduring indigenous studies by numerous engaged scholars, the pursuit of a 'Chinese

theory of management' can become the mission of the Chinese research community in the future (Barney & Zhang, 2009; Li, 2011; Tsui, 2009). Here, foreign collaboration is important, but engaged scholarship inside the indigenous community is essential. This has important implications for practising Chinese management research. The peer-review system for academic articles and research projects is not well-established; co-authorship between domestic scholars (except that of students and their supervisors) is rare; collaborative research among universities is hard; and successful cases of interdisciplinary academic research groups have not been forthcoming (Zhao & Jiang, 2009). Divergent objectives, conflicting interests, and other institutional reasons account for this problem, thus collaborative spirits and skills are critical for engaged scholars. In order to be successful, indigenous Chinese researchers need to develop skills of negotiating different and sometimes conflicting interests, and of accommodating, adapting and integrating different perspectives. Without these skills, 'engagement may produce the ancient Tower of Babel' (Van de Ven, 2007: 290), where intentions to build a tower ('Chinese research community') to reach heaven ('a Chinese theory of management') are thwarted by the noisy and confusing language of the people.

3 Communication with Western scholars. As the four studies in this issue show, high-quality indigenous research can also contribute to global knowledge (Tsui, 2004). In order for this to work, good communication between Chinese and Western scholars is expected during the four phases of the engaged scholarship model. Huff's (1999) conversation metaphor implies that academic dialogues among people from different cultures require them to share some common knowledge in order to better understand each other. But in reality, they often have quite different contextual knowledge, interest points, thinking styles, or even expected communication patterns (Stening & Zhang, 2007). To overcome these problems, Carlile's (2004) knowledge transferring, translating, and transforming strategy as a progressive process is very helpful. Another useful strategy is 'deep explanation' (Van de Ven, 2007: 249), which means the speaker uses the knowledge base of the listener. A deep explanation requires that the local researchers figure out what the Western audiences know and do not know to efficiently explain their research. Through numerous engagements in communicating at the boundary of cultures, researchers can get better at developing an adequate common discourse for sharing and assessing each other's knowledge that could benefit both Chinese and global management research communities.

We conclude on a reflexive note that the engaged scholarship model largely reflects American indigenous research experiences. As such, it is important to modify, adapt, and test the model in Chinese indigenous research contexts. Moreover, once embedded into the Chinese indigenous research context, stakeholders in

the Chinese research community will need to legitimate and refine the modified engaged scholarship model. As the saying goes, 'outsiders propose, insiders choose'.

NOTES

[1] Being a foreigner to China, Andy Van de Ven found it ironic to be asked to comment on this special issue because outsiders can judge if an indigenous piece of research is different from what they know, but not its quality – for that would imply imposing foreign standards and criteria that may not be appropriate for evaluating indigenous scholarship. To reduce this dilemma, Runtian Jing, a native to Chengdu in Sichuan Province, agreed to co-author this commentary so it can reflect both inside and outside perspectives. We are grateful for the valuable comments on a previous draft offered by Ping Ping Fu, Anne Tsui, as well as the editors of this *MOR* special issue: Kwok Leung, Peter Ping Li, Chao Chen, and Jar-Der Luo.

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