

Dialogue, Debate, and Discussion

Living in the Present of the Future: In Memory of James G. March (1928–2018)

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We are honored to have the opportunity to remember master James G. March. As a productive intellectual, March was involved in a wide range of research fields and different disciplines, such as management and organization, education, and political science. An important aspect of March's thoughts and research approach is to attach great importance to scientific rationality but to avoid coercion and arrogance of scientism predetermined by absolute rationality while manifesting an orientation of strong humanistic spirit, which is implied by March and his colleagues' view of 'bounded rationality'. The core concept of 'bounded rationality' has two connotations. On the one hand, it reminds people to pay attention to the limitation of rationality by being aware of the humanistic approach apart from scientific rationality and being restrained from becoming arrogant in order to avoid the disastrous consequences of scientism. On the other hand, it encourages people to actively use their rationality and take initiative (Gavetti, Levinthal, & Ocasio, 2007; Xi, Liu, Kong, & Ge, 2013). Another important idea of March is to be vigilant against utilitarianism and consequentialism in management research, and to emphasize appropriateness process and the role of aesthetics, justice, and responsibility. These tenets are reflected in many of March's works on decision-making, leadership, organizational intelligence and evolution, and business education (March, 1991, 1994, 2005, 2006, 2010, 2018; March & Weil, 2005). These ideas are significant and valuable for re-enlightenment in the current context of constant global trade conflicts, blocked cultural exchanges between the East and the West, and divergent roles of new technologies for human existence. Therefore, it is also worthy of prominent emphasis, repeated advocacy, and development.

In terms of organization and leadership research, for example, March emphasizes that the evolution of organizational ecology depends not only on random mutation, but also on organizational learning capability or organizational

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intelligence. Organizational intelligence is not simply to adapt to survival, to follow pure rational logic and consequentialism, to pursue only efficiency and exploit, but, perhaps, to fulfill identity responsibilities, to apply techniques of foolishness and process orientation, to pursue esthetics and justice, and to carry out exploration (March, 1996, 2006, 2010). Regarding leadership, March argues that, “There are two essential dimensions of leadership: “plumbing,” i.e., the capacity to apply known techniques effectively, and “poetry,” which draws on a leader’s great actions and identity and pushes him or her to explore unexpected avenues, discover interesting meanings, and approach life with enthusiasm’ (March & Weil, 2005: 98). He uses Quixote as an example to teach leadership, trying to illustrate that besides the logic of consequentialism, the foundation of leadership also entails the role of fulfilling the identity of self.

March’s thoughts have deeply influenced our work. It not only provides an important source of ideas for the establishment of HeXie Management Theory (HXMT) in 1987, but also continuously inspires our research on organizational evolution and leadership. As the founder of HXMT, Youmin Xi’s life experience put him in a unique position to understand and absorb March’s thoughts because he had plenty of practical experience in management before embarking on a journey of research. Xi, when first embarking on the journey of management research thirty years ago, observed that methods based on sheer scientific rationality not only failed to solve problems of immense ‘internal friction’ in management practice but also created more internal friction problems (Van de Ven, Meyer, & Jing, 2018; Xi, 1989). Xi realized that in complex management practice, scientific methods were inadequate in solving problems and it was important to pay attention to not only scientific rationality but also the humanistic approach, which corresponded with many of March’s ideas. In order to deepen our learning about March and disseminate his ideas in China, our two authors Youmin Xi, Xiaojun Zhang, and their colleague translated the book *On Leadership* co-authored by March and Thierry Weil in 2018.

Different logics coexisting in the process of organizational evolution and leadership is repeatedly emphasized by March, which is not fully based on utilitarianism and consequentialism. He does not deny the importance of human intervention in balancing different logics, but he has been exploring hence providing no definite answer to the question of how to balance. HXMT has absorbed many of March’s ideas and deepened them. For instance, HXMT posits that the management process is an evolution process under limited human intervention. To be specific, ‘theme-oriented problem-solving framework with He Principle and Xie Principle coupling’ was proposed (Xi, Han, & Ge, 2006; Xi et al., 2013; Zhang, Fu, & Xi, 2018), which could be applied in organization and leadership. For example, the ‘harmony’ of organization development can be achieved when management problems are identified by appropriate themes through parallel adoption of both the He Principle (HP) defined as an adaptive mechanism arising from organizational members’ initiative and self-determination, and the Xie Principle (XP) defined as a control mechanism based on rational design and

optimization. In the HXMT framework, leadership is the capacity and influence to command different logics to promote organization development.

When treating issues of ambiguity in the study of organizational evolution and leadership, HXMT resonates with Mach's views. First, under the guidance of the HeXie theme, similar to the idea of appropriateness emphasized by March, the coupling framework of He Principles and Xie Principle would create the enabling capacity for the actions and interactions based on different logics. And such coupling would help cope with the tension caused by different logics. Second, like what March did in his work, HXMT does not emphasize the personal characteristics of a leader, rather, it emphasizes the key role of leadership in dealing with the tension of coexistence of different logics - for example, exerting imagination, sticking to responsibilities, etc. Based on the aforementioned aspects, we have, in a Chinese way, contributed to the whole knowledge system of organizational evolution and leadership. These efforts and contributions responded to March's appeal and provided examples to support his judgment. Like how he wisely pointed out, 'The future, like the past, will be produced less by plan or coordinated action than by the uncoordinated and inconsistent actions of ambivalent scholars. In that spirit, it is imaginable that future organizations scholars may come to embrace a dream of a research community that recognizes the exploratory advantages of fragmentation into enclaves of high but differentiated quality at the same time as it endorses the multidisciplinary, multinational and multilingual contacts that exploit those advantages in the service of a more inclusive vision of knowledge. With the coming development of the Chinese organizations research community, such a dream would be rash as a prediction, but perhaps sustainable as a hope' (March, 2005: 20).

In fact, the research approach of HXMT that begins with good observation resonates with that of March. Early in 2011, Youmin Xi, one of the authors, participated in a seminar hosted by James March on exploring and coping with ambiguity in which not only was Xi impressed by March's insights but also captured by such a personal aura of a master being modest, approachable, humorous, and wise in conversing. As was described by Xi after attending March's seminar, 'March likes to use the word observation, with particular emphasis on good observation. Maybe his being observant of reality from peculiar angles is exactly the reason why he is able to discover and propose many novel and enlightening scientific questions, which propelled further research yielding manifold theories affecting the world'. March's life experience also provides inspiration for the educational philosophy of Xi. Xi pointed out that the reason why March becomes a master might be attributed to his good family education since childhood, his mission of contributing knowledge to human beings, open-mindedness, being filled with interest and enthusiasm to explore the unknown, as well as his sublime sense of humility.

As to education, March points out that although the utilitarianism and consequentialism prevailing in business schools emphasize 'usefulness', which cannot

be easily abandoned, this philosophy fails to capture the essence of education. He believes that ‘Higher education is a vision, not a calculation. It is a commitment, not a choice. Students are not customers; they are acolytes. Teaching is not a job; it is a sacrament. Research is not an investment; it is a testament’ (March, 2018: 227). March’s educational philosophy is more about the human, humanity, human pursuit, and the elevation of its realm and abilities. Inspired by March’s thoughts and senses of humility, we have put forward the concept of HeXie Mindset in order to respond to the contemporary complex environment. This concept includes the following aspects: Fostering the Vision & Mission oriented system view and dynamic evolution; Forming the sense of direction of HeXie thinking; Construction of the symbiotic system by coupling the XP & HP; Supporting HeXie Coupling through the capacity of syntegeation and balance; Breaking through the status quo through edge innovation. We hope to help the students by cultivating their HeXie Mindset, helping them develop strong competence to adapt to society as well as fostering their abilities to be happy.

March has left us for almost a year, but his classic writings and their profound thoughts are still illuminating us. From the manifold theoretical thoughts and conceptions of March, such as the Garbage-Can Theory, Exploration and Exploitation, Technology of Foolishness, we would assert that March has always been trying to inspire us in his works, that is, to live in the present of the future, a future that is not just rationally calculated and consequentialism-oriented.

NOTES

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