Chinese management theories: Indigenous insights or lessons for the wider world?

Peter B. Smith

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Over the past century, our understandings about the functioning of organizations has been aided by theorists from Europe (Weber, 1921/1947) and especially from North America (e.g., Schein, 1992; Scott, 1995). The more recent growth of insights into Chinese organizational behavior that provides the basis for this handbook has arisen from everyday awareness that Chinese organizations are not in all respects the same as organizations in other parts of the world. To better understand how Chinese organizations achieve effectiveness, it has been a priority to identify distinctive elements that contribute to their success and failure. Researchers in other non-Western cultural contexts have also explored aspects of local organizational behaviors that appear to be distinctive to their cultural contexts.

This local emphasis has led researchers to formulate descriptions of a series of what have been called indigenous psychologies (Sinha, 1997; Kim & Yang, 2005), which do not derive from the dominant Western models of social organization. An indigenous psychology is one that has been developed on the basis of local analyses and insights. An indigenous psychology may also prove to be distinctive, but is not necessarily so, since similar insights may arise in more than one specific cultural context. The purpose of this chapter is to explore whether aspects of Chinese organizational behavior that have been identified as indigenous are in fact distinctively Chinese. There are several alternative possibilities. Firstly, a phenomenon identified within one Chinese culture may not be present in all Chinese cultural settings. Secondly, a phenomenon identified in Chinese cultures may also be present within non-Chinese national cultures that share common elements with Chinese cultures. Finally, processes that are particularly emphasized in Chinese cultures may actually be present in more muted form in all other cultures, but have been overlooked by researchers whose

awareness and priorities lie elsewhere. Aside from the question of presence or absence within differing cultures, it is equally important to examine whether a phenomenon has the same consequences in differing cultural contexts. To choose between all these possibilities, we need to examine relevant research not only within Chinese cultures, but also in other cultures. The strongest candidates for scrutiny would be cultures that share some of the cultural characteristics first identified by Hofstede (1980), such as their positioning on collectivism and power distance.

Other contributors to this handbook identify both distinctive and universal aspects of Chinese attitudes to work (Kulich & Henry), attributes of Chinese paternalistic leadership (Wu & Xu), how *guanxi* relationships have a distinctive effect on interpersonal and business effectiveness (X.P. Chen & Chen), and the ways in which the dynamics of face management affect Chinese relationships (Lun; Hwang). To gain a clearer perspective on these characteristics, it is useful to specify what criteria must be satisfied before we consider a particular aspect of Chinese work behavior to be distinctive. Ideally, we should require evidence that a phenomenon is found to be present not just in China, but also in Hong, Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and among Chinese immigrant communities in other parts of the world, and is absent from all other cultures. We do not have sufficient information to make judgments of this type. More realistically, if phenomena said to be distinctively Chinese are also found in some non-Chinese contexts, we shall need to find new ways of labeling them. As Tseng (2006) noted after reviewing the evidence for culture-based clinical syndromes, they would be better considered as 'culture-related', rather than indigenous. Let us examine the available evidence in the domain of organizational behavior.

Work Motivation

High levels of motivation to achieve among Chinese students and among adults have been well documented (Hau & Ho, 2010; Yu, 1996). Of particular interest here is the basis of

this motivation. Yu proposes that, consistent with the relational context of Chinese culture, achievement motivation is socially oriented. One strives to achieve success not for personal glory, but for the good of one's family, group, team or nation. The distinctiveness of this motive was strikingly demonstrated by Earley's (1989) study of what has been described in the United States as 'social loafing', in other words the tendency to let others do relatively more of the work when responsibility is shared. Earley led managers in the US and in China to believe that they were either working on their own or working in a ten-person team, while they worked on an 'in-basket' of tasks. The US managers worked relatively harder when on their own, whereas the Chinese managers worked relatively harder when in a team. This effect was shown to depend on the stronger collectivist values endorsed by Earley's Chinese respondents. This study is one of the most dramatic accomplished by cross-cultural psychologists, because it does not just show that the effect being studied is weaker in one culture than in another; the direction of the effect is totally reversed.

Earley (1993) made a further, similar study, this time sampling managers in Israel, China, and the United States. The effects obtained with the Chinese and US respondents were replicated, but it is the results for the Israelis that are of interest here. The Israeli managers also worked harder when they believed they were in a team than when they were on their own. In this study, however, Earley also led some of his respondents to believe they were working with an in-group, while others were led to believe that they were working with a group of strangers. Both among the Chinese and the Israelis, the significant increase in working hard was found only in relation to an in-group. These effects were again related to a stronger endorsement of collectivist values. These two studies therefore show that the distinctive work motivations of Chinese managers can also be found among an equivalent non-Chinese population that also endorses collectivist values. It is collectivism, not Chineseness that relates to the work outcome.

Paternalistic Leadership

Western researchers into leadership have most frequently stressed the efficacy of charismatic or transformational leader behaviors, through which the leader elicits among subordinates a shared vision of desired individual, team, and organizational performance. The 61-nation, cross-national survey of leadership by House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, and Gupta (2004) showed that managers in China and other Confucian-Asian nations rated charismatic leadership less highly than did those from many other parts of the world. In a similar way, a meta-analysis by Leong and Fischer (2011) of studies that had used Bass's (1997) measure of transformational leadership showed lower scores for respondents from Confucian-Asian nations.

As C. C. Chen and Farh (2010) report, these conceptions of leadership are frequently studied in contemporary China, but there is also a growing interest in developing and testing an indigenous model of paternalistic leadership (see Wu & Xu, this volume). Farh and Cheng's (2000) model of paternalistic leadership specifies three dimensions of effective leadership: authoritarianism, morality and integrity, and benevolence. Measures of these dimensions have been shown to have predictive validity in China (e.g., Cheng, Chou, Huang, Wu, & Farh, 2004), but later research has only partly supported their predictions. While morality, integrity and benevolence are found to predict positive outcomes, authoritarianism has more often been found to predict negative outcomes (Wu & Xu, this volume). Thus, one of what may be the more culturally distinctive aspects of Farh & Cheng's model has not been supported.

Some leadership researchers in cultures that are collectivist but not Chinese have also developed and tested models of paternalistic leadership (Aycan, 2008). The most detailed model of non-Chinese paternalism has been presented by Aycan (2006). She identifies five components of paternalism:

- A family atmosphere at work

- Individualised relationships between supervisor and each team member

- Involvement in employees' non-work lives

- An expectation of subordinate loyalty

- Status hierarchy and authority

Her measurement instrument was most fully developed and validated in Turkey, where she found a significant relationship between paternalism and organizational commitment. However, a shorter version of the same questionnaire had earlier been administered to employees in 10 nations by Aycan, Kanungo, Mendonca, Yu, Deller, Stahl, and Kurshid (2000). In this survey, the highest scores for paternalism were found in India, Turkey, China, and Pakistan. Aycan's measure of paternalism was also used by Pellegrini, Scandura & Jayaraman (2010). They found that it was a significant predictor of organization commitment among respondents in both India and the United States. Further single-nation studies have indicated the importance of paternalism in Iran (Ayman & Chemers, 1983) and in Kenya (Jackson, Amaeshi & Yavuz, 2008). Wu & Xu (this volume) note additional studies suggesting positive effects of paternalism in non-Chinese cultures. However, these studies have used a variety of measures, and the extent to which they tap similar aspects of paternalism is unclear. In one study, Chen and Kao (2009) administered Cheng and Farh's paternalism measure to non-Chinese respondents working within a Taiwanese multinational organization. In this case, respondents reported more stress where their Taiwanese supervisor was rated high on morality and high on authoritarianism. This indicates a culturally-distinctive effect for the morality dimension, but not for authoritarianism. However, we do not know whether the same effect would have been obtained among Chinese respondents working within this particular organization.

Aycan's dimensions of paternalistic leadership are similar to the dimensions of

Chinese paternalism proposed by Farh and Cheng (2000). We will not know whether there are subtle differences between the way in which paternalism is expressed in Chinese and non-Chinese cultural contexts until studies have been conducted that use the same measures with both Chinese and non-Chinese respondents. It is notable, however, that Aycan's dimensions are strongly similar to the dimensions of *guanxi* superior-subordinate relations identified in the study by Y. Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang and Lu (2009), which is discussed in the next section. It appears likely that paternalism must be considered culture-related rather than distinctive to China.

Guanxi

Empirical research into *guanxi* as an indigenous characteristic of Chinese interpersonal relationships has been rather more extensive than has been the case with any other aspect of Chinese cultures. As X. P. Chen and Chen (this volume) indicate, *guanxi* is increasingly denoted in terms of relationship quality, rather than in terms of the demographic affinities upon which it has traditionally been based. However, until recently these studies have been focused entirely within Chinese cultures. Consequently, although *guanxi* may be increasingly well understood, we cannot yet form a view as to whether *guanxi* relationships are distinctive to Chinese cultures.

A first step toward a broader focus was provided by Chua, Morris, and Ingram (2009). These authors asked managers in China and the United States to make ratings about persons whom they considered to be important members of their personal network. The rating scales referred to both affective aspects of trust (sharing problems, hopes and dreams with the other party, etc.) and cognitive aspects of trust (being reliable in having competence and completing tasks, etc.). Based on a discussion of *guanxi* relations, it was predicted and found that among Chinese respondents these two bases of trust would be more strongly associated with each other than among the American respondents. However, the relation between the

two types of trust was significantly positive in both samples, differing only in magnitude.

As Chua et al. (2009) acknowledged, *guanxi* relations are not simply defined by trust. Including other aspects of *guanxi* within a study's design may reveal sharper differences between Chinese and non-Chinese samples. Smith, Huang, Harb, and Torres (in press, a) examined *guanxi* relations as the basis of a distinctive form of influence between two parties. Their goal was to determine the degree of similarity or difference between *guanxi* and instances of informal influence that have been identified by other researchers as indigenous to various non-Chinese cultures. *Wasta* is a type of informal influence that is widespread in Arab cultures, and some authors have suggested that it has much in common with *guanxi* (Hutchings & Weir, 2006). *Jeitinho* is defined as an ingenious informal way of overcoming bureaucratic obstacles in Brazil. It is said to be a key element in understanding the functioning of Brazilian organizations and Brazilian society more generally (Duarte, 2006). Within the United Kingdom, the closest analogue to these concepts is the phrase 'pulling strings', although there has been no suggestion by British researchers that this concept is culturally distinctive.

Smith et al. (in press, a) asked students in China, Lebanon, Brazil, and the UK to respond to brief scenarios exemplifying informal influence. Scenarios relevant to student life were generated separately in each nation, but the origins of each scenario were then disguised. Students in each nation reacted to 12 scenarios, three drawn from each nation. Thus, the Chinese students responded to three *guanxi* scenarios, three *wasta* scenarios, three *jeitinho* scenarios, and three "pulling strings" scenarios. The students were first asked to rate whether the scenarios were *representative* of the local influence process. Chinese respondents did rate the three *guanxi* scenarios as more representative of *guanxi* than the other nine scenarios. Respondents in other locations also rated the local scenarios as more representative of the local type of influence than the other scenarios.

Respondents were next asked to rate how *typical* each scenario was of what happened in their context. The Chinese respondents rated the *guanxi* scenarios as more typical than the other scenarios, thus providing some support for the indigenousness of *guanxi*. However, when the results were compared across nations, it was found that the Lebanese respondents rated all four types of scenario as most typical, while UK respondents rated all four types of scenario as least typical. Thus, the *guanxi* scenarios were seen by Arabs as more typical in an Arab culture than they were seen to be in a Chinese culture by the Chinese raters. In a final set of ratings, respondents indicated how *positively or negatively* they reacted to each scenario. Across the whole sample, the "pulling strings" scenarios were most popular and the *wasta* scenarios were least popular.

Some care is required in interpreting mean scores cross-culturally, since scores on rating scales can be affected by cultural differences in acquiescent response bias (Smith, 2004). However, the means in this study were corrected for acquiescent bias. The results of this study therefore suggest that informal influence varies across cultures as much in frequency as in distinctiveness. Some aspects of *guanxi* are distinctively apparent to Chinese respondents, but these same elements are also seen as typical in some non-Chinese contexts.

The results of this study could have been specific to the student sample that was employed. Smith, Torres, Leong, Budhwar, Achoui and Lebedeva (in press, b) therefore conducted a further study using managerial respondents. In this case, the nations sampled were Singapore, Brazil, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and UK. New scenarios that referred to business-related events were used, but the experimental design was essentially the same. In this case, the Singaporean respondents rated both the *guanxi* scenarios and the *wasta* scenarios as equally representative of *guanxi*. Furthermore, Singaporeans saw the *guanxi* scenarios as significantly less typical than did the Russians and the Brazilians. In this study, all the scenario types were rated as most typical by the Russians. These results pose further

challenges to the view that *guanxi* is indigenous to Chinese cultures. The Singaporean respondents were Singapore Chinese, but they did not distinguish between the extent to which the *guanxi* and the *wasta* scenarios actually represented *guanxi*. Once again it appears that informal influences vary more in terms of frequency than in terms of distinctiveness.

The use of brief scenarios to characterize *guanxi* relations has some limitations. If the degree of detail provided in the scenarios is insufficient to make explicit key elements of a *guanxi* relationship, then the results may favor a universalistic explanation, but spuriously so. In order to test more fully the distinctiveness of *guanxi*, more detailed and explicit measures will be required. A step in this direction has been provided by Y. Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, & Lu (2009), who developed and validated a psychometric instrument characterizing *guanxi* relations between superiors and subordinates in China. Chen at al. identified three dimensions of a *guanxi* relationship, which they named as affective attachment, personal-life inclusion, and deference to one's superior. As noted earlier, these dimensions are closely similar to Aycan's (2006) delineation of paternalistic leadership. Further studies will be required to determine the extent to which these attributes define *guanxi* distinctively or else describe a type of superior-subordinate relationship that is widespread in nations that were characterized by Hofstede (1980) as both collectivist and high in power distance.

Other aspects of *guanxi* will also require further investigation. For instance, the study by Chua et al. (2009) found that the networks of trusted persons reported by their Chinese respondents were more densely interconnected than were those reported by their US respondents. In a similar way, Batjargal (2007) found the networks of Chinese entrepreneurs to be more interconnected than those of Russian entrepreneurs. A full evaluation of the distinctiveness of *guanxi* may require as much attention to extended networks as to dyadic relationships. This possibility awaits future research.

Face

As Lun (this volume) and Hwang (this volume) note, preservation of one's own and others' face is a key element of Chinese work relationships. It is also integral to the effective conduct of *guanxi* relations. Few cross-national investigations of face have been reported, although theories have been advanced as to cultural differences between the priority of saving one's own face versus preserving the face of others (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Earley, 1997; Hwang, this volume). However, it is evident that the Chinese distinction between *lian* and *mianzi* finds parallels in other East Asian cultures. Choi and Lee (2002) propose that Korean *chemyon*, Chinese *mianzi,* and Japanese *mentsu* are closely similar concepts. In Thailand, the system of values favoring harmony distinguishes individual responsibility for acting appropriately (*kreng jai*) from interpersonal obligation (*bunkhun*, 'indebted goodness') (Komin, 1990). This contrast suggests some parallels to Chinese *lian* and *mianzi*. Among the Malay population in Malaysia, there is also a distinction between individual responsibility (*adab*) and interpersonal obligation (*budi*) (Abdullah, 1996).

Broadly focused surveys confirm the cultural preference for indirect communication of emotion in East Asian cultures in contrast to more explicit communication in several other regions of the world (Matsumoto, Hoo, Fontaine, & 58 co-authors, 2008). Some initial studies are now available that test more directly for the cultural distinctiveness of face concerns. Hwang, Francesco & Kessler (2003) compared students' reports of asking questions during class in Hong Kong, Singapore and USA. Those who feared face loss were less likely to ask questions in all three nations, but only in the US did those who hoped to gain face ask more questions.

Kam and Bond (2008) compared the responses of students in Hong Kong and the US to a face loss episode. Compared to the US, the Hong Kong students felt *more* angry, but were *less* likely to retaliate and felt that their relationship had been more damaged. In a further comparative study, students reported on an episode when someone had harmed them

(Hui & Bond, 2009). Hong Kong students were less likely to retaliate, more forgiving and more in favour of maintaining a good relationship with the offending party than were US students.

These studies support the view that concern for face is present in all cultures, but elicits stronger effects in Chinese cultures. However, it is not clear that the measures that were employed in any of these studies reflected the distinctive contrast between *mianzi* and *lian* that Chinese authors have described. Oetzel, Ting Toomey, Masumoto, Yokochi et al (2001) surveyed face concerns and facework behaviours reported by students who had experienced a conflict with another party. They found that a measure of self-face concern scored higher in Germany, USA and China, while a measure of other-face concern scored higher in China and Japan. A third measure described as mutual face-concern showed no difference in frequency across samples. Thus, China was the only sample in which all three types of face concern scored high, which does provide some direct evidence for Chinese distinctiveness. The extent to which types of face concern vary between cultures requires fuller exploration.

Differing types of face concern lead to differing preferences for the types of facework to be employed. Oetzel et al found that more direct forms of facework were employed in Germany and the US, while more indirect forms of facework were reported more frequently in China and Japan. These contrasting preferences can prove particularly problematic in cross-national work relationship management (Brew & Cairns, 2004).

Conclusions

This chapter has sought to place the study of distinctive Chinese organizational processes into a broader cultural framework. The development of studies in the field of organizational behavior as a whole has been dominated by studies conducted in the United

States and by the incautious assumption that theories and measures developed in that cultural context will prove valid and useful in other cultural contexts. In reaction to this academic and disciplinary dominance, researchers from several parts of the world have sought to define culturally indigenous phenomena, in order to generate insights that that have greater local validity.

These developments are valuable, but one can also conceive of their value in a broader way. It is possible to think of the mainstream studies in organizational behavior as comprising the indigenous psychology of North America. In contrast, we may think about the understandings of Chinese organizational behavior that are summarized in this handbook as also providing a rich source of insight into organizational behavior in non-Western contexts that have some common features with Chinese culture, but which have been less intensively studied.

In each of the areas discussed in this chapter, it appears that the scale and consequences of phenomena on which recent Chinese research has focused may find expression also within the broad range of non-Chinese nations that Hofstede (1980) characterized as high in both collectivism and power distance. If this proves to be true, it will in no way diminish the usefulness of current studies identifying key elements of Chinese organizational behavior. On the contrary, it will open up new possibilities for facilitating the increasingly frequent cross-national collaborative work relationships. Organizational phenomena are no doubt in some sense universal and in another sense distinctive to specific national cultures and to specific organizations. The key to enhanced performance lies in estimating the magnitude of these similarities and differences and identifying effective ways of managing them locally.

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