

# **Comparative Management with Chinese Characteristics:**

## **Commentary and Reply to Oded Shenkar**

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**Abstract:** Scholars of Chinese management are debating how to position their work within global scholarly discussions and theoretical frameworks. In this reply to Oded Shenkar, I argue that diversity of societies a reality well recognized in the social sciences, yet only superficially acknowledged in management scholarship. As management is a socially embedded activity, knowledge of the social context is essential for both relevance and rigor of management research – especially in contexts distinctly different from Anglo-Saxon societies (where leading management research is empirically grounded), such as China. Therefore, developing a better understanding of how and why context matters should be a prime concern for management scholars, not only in China but worldwide. I outline some suggests for contextualizing management research in China.

**Keywords:** comparative management research ; context-specific research ; diversity of societies; global management knowledge

### **Introduction**

Following Oded Shenkar, I start my essay by sharing where I come from, as personal experience shapes views on many issues, including research priorities. First, I am European who has been exposed to different countries from early age, and has lived substantial time in different countries (Germany, England, and Denmark). From this follows an intrinsic awareness that not only cultures and political systems vary, but also the ways businesses operate vary - down to the objectives of why firms exist.<sup>1</sup> This awareness of national diversity is naturally stronger among those educated and living in smaller countries; they have no single baseline culture against which to compare a ‘foreign’ culture or economy.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, most US business textbooks start from the premise that the purpose of a firm is to serve shareholders, which is incorporated in corporate law in Anglo Saxon countries. Yet, this is in direct conflict with societies that view firms first and foremost as social organization, or even the constitution in the case of Germany, which states “Property obliges. Its use shall also serve the good of the community.” (Grundgesetz [basic law], article 14.2).

Second, in my studies before embarking on a PhD, I and many of my peers have been fascinated by the rise of Japanese businesses, both as exporters and as foreign investors. Hence, we endeavored to understand both the historical context that gave rise to powerful Japanese enterprises, and the management approaches supporting their international competitiveness. Authors we read include for example Ronald Dore (1987) and Frank Gibney (1982) but also Japanese authors like Kojima and Ozawa (1984). While this literature is inconclusive as to the sources of the Japanese miracle, it clearly points to national history and cultural values as conditions facilitating the evolution of Japanese management practices such as quality circles and just-in-time, some of which later influenced management well beyond Japan.

Third, during my PhD studies in the 1990s, a central theme was the economic transition of Central and Eastern Europe, and in the process I became involved with scholars of comparative economics, or, as it was also known, economic systems. This field of studies was traditionally aiming to explain the differences between capitalist and socialist systems, but even before 1990 had turned its attention to the differences among capitalist economies (e.g. Dore, 1987), and among socialist economies (e.g. Kornai, 1986). In the early 1990s, scholars in this field were debating what type of capitalism to develop in the transition economies and how to get there, in particular among economists related directly or indirectly to the World Bank (e.g. Bleijer, Calvo, Corricelli, & Gelb, 1993, Estrin, 1994, Lavigne 1995, Murrel, 1991).

Given these intellectual roots, the quest of the American Association of Management to develop "general theory" that supposedly is valid universally has to me always seemed rather odd for a social science discipline. After all, as an applied science, the ultimate objective of management research is to explain social phenomena, and they are by definition embedded in societies. Without understanding the societal context, thus, management research will at best scratch at the surface, and generate little insights relevant to practice.

My own scholarly journey has been marked by efforts to understand specific contexts and extracting insights relevant beyond the specific context. An example where we succeeded in writing for different audiences within a project has been my work in Vietnam. To understand the local context, we worked with local partners who contributed to our book project (Estrin & Meyer, 2004); and together

we wrote practitioners oriented pieces on ‘doing business in Vietnam’ (Meyer, Tran & Nguyen, 2006) on cooperating with local state firms (Nguyen & Meyer, 2004) and on acquisitions as an entry strategy (Meyer & Tran, 2006). The engagement with the Vietnamese context provided the foundation for developing the theoretical concept of ‘sub-national institutions’ (Meyer & Nguyen, 2005), which was subsequently picked up and frequently cited by scholars working on other contexts, notably in China (Chan, Makino, & Isobe, 2010; Filatotchev et al., 2007; Shi, Sun & Peng, 2012). The data we collected in Vietnam also supported multi-country studies in which country level variables were the main focus on the contribution (Estrin, Baghdasaryan & Meyer, 2009; Meyer, Estrin, Bhaumik & Peng 2009). When we first designed the project and applied for funding, such multi-country analyses were our primary objective. However, it is not always so straight forward to achieve such synergies.

Living in China for six years, I observe the challenge of connecting local insights with global scholarly discourses from a different perspective. Many of the insights I gained through engaging with businesses here are hard to communicate to scholarly audiences and reviewers who seem more often than not to be sitting in an ivory tower. At the same time, I recognize how work published in leading journals often shows superficial understanding or even misinterpretations of business in China – especially by scholars who do not actively engage with corporate China but rely on archival data – including China-born scholars spending most of the scholarly career in the USA, and reacting to the incentive system applying in the USA (as indicated by Oded Shenkar). For example, studies of corporate governance often invoke principal agent theory. Yet, in Chinese organizations it is often not very clear who is acting as whose principal; for example government official or parties secretaries may hold far more power than their official title suggests. Under such circumstances, using US-informed assumptions about who is a principal and who is an agent can lead to misleading analyses.

Awareness of the discrepancies between ‘Western knowledge’ and locally realities has substantially shifted around 2008/09, shortly before I moved to China. This shift can be attributed to three major events: the successful hosting of the Beijing Olympic games, the mature handling of the Sichuan earthquake, and the global financial crisis that in the eyes of Chinese observers undermined Anglo-Saxon businesses as role model to follow. Recent divisions in the politics of Western societies with Brexit in the UK and the Trump presidency in the USA further undermined the appeal of ‘Western’ ideologies. These high-level societal changes

also influence the reception of Western management knowledge – both of scholarly theories and of best practices shared in business education. The local self-confidence is evident in leading EMBA and MBA programs such as those at CEIBS, where participants are rarely satisfied with foreign cases, but want to discuss the contemporary experiences of businesses in China.

In this essay, I reflect on my experiences and views on management research in a culturally, politically and economically diverse world. I start from the intellectual roots of social sciences – and hence management scholarship – around the world. Then, I discuss the challenges of comparative management research before offering suggestions on how to better bring context into Chinese management research. While my views on the intellectual roots and the diversity of contemporary management scholarship vary from those of Oded Shenkar, we reach similar conclusions when trying to identify roots forward.

### **Diverse Roots of Social Science Scholarship**

Since ancient times, philosophers have been reflecting over human societies, with branches of modern social sciences gradually branching off from philosophy and forming their own disciplinary communities, management being a relatively recent one. In Europe, intellectual development diverged with the rise of national languages that replaced Latin as ‘lingua franca’ at the end of the Middle Ages. Philosophers and other intellectuals writing in French, German, Italian, Spanish or English developed distinct intellectual traditions. Philosophy, economics, sociology and anthropology have strong traditions in Europe that well predate the rise of business schools. Inter alia, I would like to mention the historical school in economics in Germany and Austria, which emphasized this historical context of economic activity (Schmoller 1904) and the origins of empirical sociology in France (Durkheim 1895). Modern Anglo-Saxon literature rarely acknowledges such non-English contributions, apart from authors who turned to English as their medium of communication, such as Schumpeter (1939) and Hayek (1944).

Particularly influential for my own thinking about business and economy has been Walter Eucken (1952; also see Goldschmidt & Wohlgemuth, 2008). He analyzed the necessary and supporting framework conditions for a competitive market economy and established the ‘Freiburg School’ of economics, which has significantly shaped economy policy in post-World War II Germany. Yet, I have not even been able to find English translations of his works. Eucken’s analysis of constituting and regulating principles of a market economy anticipates many of the

ideas that later became popular in the Anglo-Saxon literature as institutional economics with the work of Douglass North (1990); with the difference that Eucken never thought these institutions might emerge spontaneously.

Management is the odd one out among social science disciplines. Clearly, American business schools have been pathbreaking in management education in the mid-20th century, as emphasized by Oded Shenkar. Yet, the perception within the US management scholar community that the rest of the world is devoid of scientific insights relevant to management scholarship is ethnocentric, to say it politely. The fact that Max Weber (1920) was the only major continental European intellectual influencing American management scholars (based on an imprecise translation published 30 years after his death) says more about the insularity of US business schools than the state of scholarship outside of the English-speaking world.

Thus, I disagree with Oded Shenkar's observation that *"the United States is still the source of almost all management theories, the dominant ground for field research, and, in the more limited space of comparative studies, the constant and overwhelming referent. In other words, if a different country is studied, it is more often than not as a comparison point to the United States. ... the "audience" we write for was, and very much remains, the corporate executive at the helm of a US company, or, perhaps more accurately, the American researcher, as the institutions of the profession have by and large admitted their failure to connect with the real world, numerous pleas towards "relevance" notwithstanding."*

Such an assessment is probably correct for the publications of the American Academy of Management (which as symptom of its ignorance over its limited global relevance actually calls itself the Academy of Management) and for scholars at US-based business schools. But for someone like me who never worked with US data and never was employed at a US-based business school, such an assessment is a bit off. Europe-based management journals such as *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Studies* and *Human Relations* have long traditions of publishing theoretically and methodologically diverse research, while *Management and Organization Review* and *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* are on course to become prime outlets for insightful non-mainstream research on business in the Asia Pacific region.

Unfortunately, many business schools, especially in the USA, employ incentive schemes for their academics that focus on lists of journals that tend to include mainly US-based journals, and thus the AoM view of what good management scholarship is. Sadly, schools in Asia often follow US schools in the construction of their lists, which is detrimental to the relevance of their work. I have been arguing for a long time that business schools ought to ensure that their incentive schemes – including their journal lists! – need to be aligned with their mission. Thus, if a school in Asia has ‘local relevance’ as part of their mission, then it should recognize a set of Asia-focused research outlets in their promotion and tenure criteria (Meyer, 2006).

In contrast, the field of economics, has never been as US-centric as management scholarship, though the focus on mathematical modelling has arguably been similarly unhelpful in developing context-embedded and practice-relevant knowledge. Within economics, cross-national diversity has been explored in comparative economics and more recently in institutional economics. For example, studies of comparative corporate governance have long acknowledged variations in the role of stock markets and banking systems in the governance of firms (e.g. Dore, 1987). However, mainstream of empirical institutional economics has focused on national level variations using a variety of indices capturing characteristics of countries within large scale multi-country datasets. Yet, this implies an assumption of a singular optimal configuration of such indices.

The literatures on the varieties of capitalisms (Hall & Soskice, 2001; Jackson & Deeg 2008) and on business systems (Whitley, 1999; Redding 2005) provide richer perspectives on cross-national variations. They argue that market economies vary not only by some regulatory institutions, but by the inherent logic by which different actors in the economy interact. In particular, variety of capitalisms emphasizes the variations in cooperative versus competitive interactions between players such as education institutions, banks, and trade unions with businesses. If the inherent logic of different systems varies, then, consequently, it is not possible to take a regulation from one country to another and expect it to have the same effect. In Asia-Pacific, the variety of capitalism perspective has been developed in particular by Michael Witt and Gordon Redding (2013, 2014), who additionally emphasize the varying forms of state involvement in the business sphere across Asia. The varieties of capitalism view recently received an additional boost by applications of novel fsQCA methodologies at a national level. Specifically, Judge,

Fainshmidt & Brown (2014) applied fsQCA and identified multiple institutional arrangements that generate high level outcomes with respect to economic welfare.

### **Why is there so little solid Comparative Management research?**

Management is a social activity that is taking place in a variety of different organizational and national settings, and the effectiveness of any management practice is naturally conditioned by its specific context – as explained eloquently by Geert Hofstede (1993; 1995). The differences of national context are at the core of the field of international business – both in terms of variations in business strategies and practices, and in terms of challenges for businesses crossing borders (Meyer, 2013; Shenkar, 2004).

Yet, despite the recognition of the importance of systemic differences between countries, there is little solid comparative work in the field of management. Why? A major reason is that comparative research is methodologically very difficult to do; the relevant data are hard to obtain. Comparisons between a small set of countries usually identify many differences, and enable deep descriptions of alternative systems (e.g. Redding 2005; Witt & Redding, 2014). Yet such work makes it difficult to establish testable causal relationships: Of all the variation in national cultures, laws and regulation, and economic fundamentals, what is critical for explaining observed variations of management practice? A useful way forward would be more systematic replication studies across national contexts (cf. Tsang & Kwan, 1999); fortunately at least some management journals are revising their previously dismissive attitude to replication as a scholarly endeavor (Bettis, Helfat & Shaver, 2016).

Insights from bilateral comparisons are particularly limited when the USA are used as a benchmark because the USA are in many aspects of culture and society and outlier (e.g. Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010), as also noted by Oded Shenkar. More insightful may be comparisons of neighboring societies that share core features but vary on critical dimensions such as China and India, or Taiwan, Hong Kong and mainland China (White, 2002). This enables focusing on specific aspects of contextual variations, and thus sharper theoretical contributions as to what aspect of context may explain variations in business practices.

Alternatively, scholars investigate many countries by including country-level variables in empirical analyses of large cross-country datasets. Yet, this approach tends to run into at least two measurement problems. First, different dimensions of

context are highly interdependent and correlated. Theoretically, cross-country analyses should incorporate multiple dimensions, but that would require datasets with firms from a large number of different contexts, a major challenge when studying nation states as unit of analysis. Second, many of the theoretical constructs suggested by management theory (or sociology) are themselves contextually bound and thus cannot be measured in the same way in different contexts – either because the constructs do not apply or because respondents would interpret a questionnaire item differently. Hence, breadth of data coverage usually involves compromises on issues such measurement equivalence.

Given the challenges of multi-country studies, some scholars opt for a deeply contextualized approach that explores the mutual interdependencies of contextual variables, including cultural, regulatory and political aspects of the society. For example, Child and Marinova (2014) provide a deeply contextualized analysis of Chinese MNEs in Africa, a novel phenomenon with distinct antecedents and consequences. By focusing on a specific phenomenon in a specific context, they are able to outline research agendas, and to generate novel insights into theoretical concepts. However, deeply contextualized analysis requires deep knowledge of the relevant local contexts, and the engagement with scholarly work beyond one's own field of specialization. In my own afore mentioned work on Vietnam (Meyer & Nguyen, 2005; Meyer & Tran, 2006), local scholars were critical in helping me understand the context of the country.

### **Routes forward for China-focused Management research**

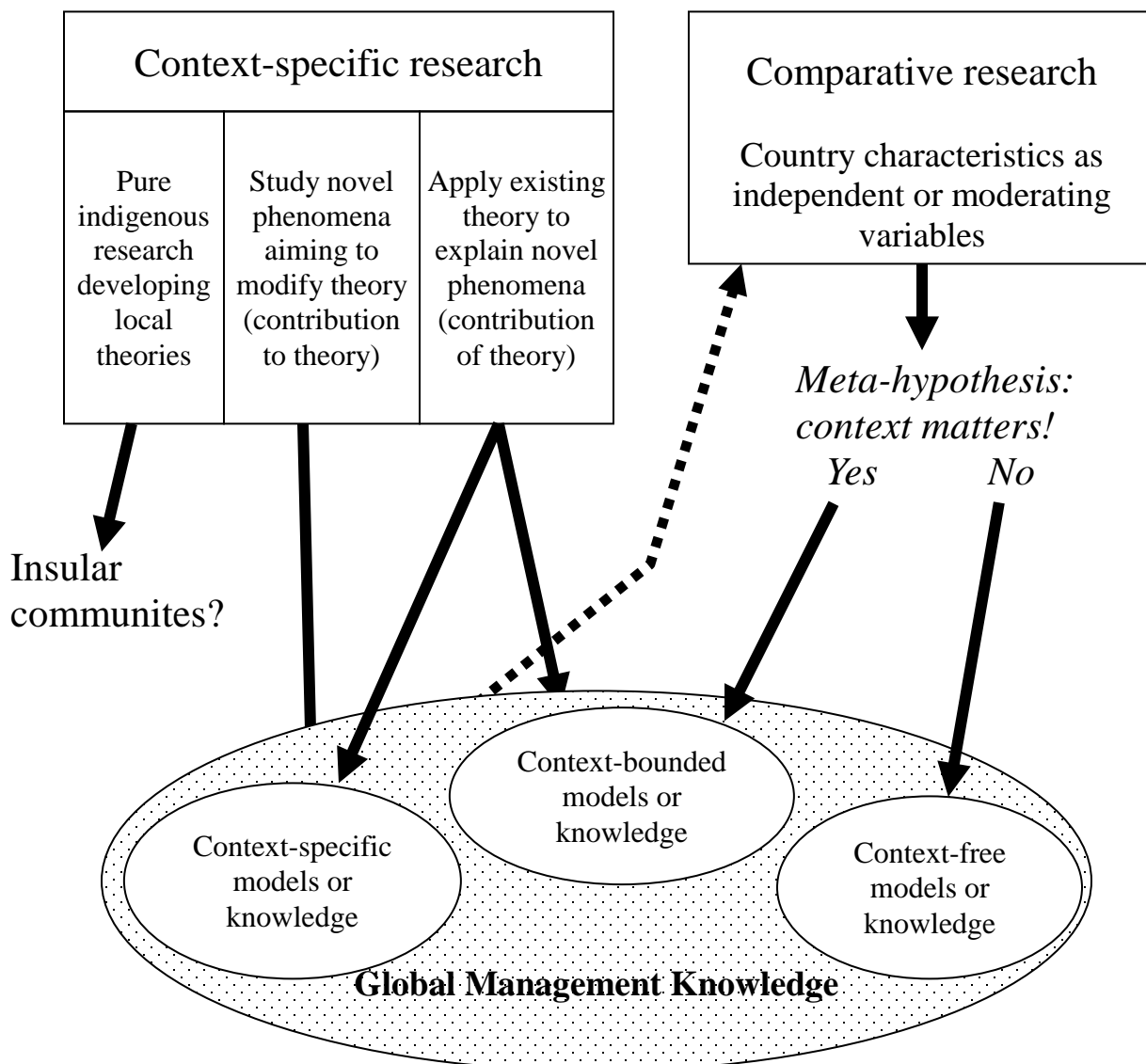
In view of the concerns with each approach, scholarly communities need to encourage methodological pluralism to develop rich, context-aware theory development (see also Meyer, 2006; 2015). Scholarly discourses live from well-argued ideas, backed up with a variety of types of evidence. The Chinese business environment has several distinct characteristics, even among emerging economies. Our understanding of management phenomena may thus best be advanced by scholars pursuing multiple avenues of theory building – yet ensuring that they stay in in dialogue with each other.

A major challenge is to negotiate a balance between the conflicting pressures for local relevance and global scholarly traditions, which determine journal acceptance practices. The former risks applying theoretical lenses that are blind to locally critical phenomena and hence attaining low explanatory power; the latter risks engaging in incestuous local debates that end up 'reinventing the wheel' yet with a terminology that is incompatible with global discourses.



Journals aimed at international audiences are interested in theoretical insights relevant to readers who are not specifically interested in a particular context – be it an industry, a country or a period of history. Despite my skepticism towards the explanatory power of ‘general theory’ in management research, I see ‘theoretical insights relevant beyond the particular context’ as reasonable expectation for scholarly journals, as long as ‘theoretical contribution’ is interpreted broadly. How can empirical management research in China achieve this objective? Oded Shenkar thus points to the need for hybrid approaches. The framework in Figure 1, which has been derived from work by Anne Tsui (2004) and David Whetten (2009), may help identifying opportunities.

**Figure 1: A typology of Scholarly Management Research and Management Knowledge**



Substantially, scholars have three ways to investigate a local context. First, , they may take a leading theory or concept in the global management literature and investigate if and how it may have to be adapted to be relevant in a given local context. Second, they may start from a local phenomenon that appears surprising through the lens of theory, or empirically distinctly different from other countries, and then use concepts from the literature to try and explain this phenomenon, thereby modifying the theory. David Whetten (2009) called these approaches respectively “contribution of theory” and “contribution to theory”.

These two paths lead to the knowledge of context-specific management knowledge, i.e. the study shows what theory applies in the given context without providing clear evidence how and why context affects the results. Sometimes, applications of theory (e.g. replication studies) help clarifying the contextual boundaries of a theory, and therefore create context-bound theory, i.e. theory with clear statements on the contextual conditions under which it applies. Note that contribution to theory starts from a novel phenomenon or from tension between theory and empirical observations; such theory to practice gaps in my view more powerful for generating novel theoretical insights than “gaps in the theory” that ivory tower academics may prefer.

Third, some scholars have been trying to develop indigenous research in China by drawing on traditions of intellectual thought in China such as Confucianism, Legalism or Daoism. For example, Tong Fang (2012) has been arguing for a yin and yang model of culture to capture the opposing tendencies that he observes in many cultures. Recently, Jing and van de Ven (2014) applied the same concepts in a case study of the Chengdu Bus Group to develop a ‘yin and yang’ model of organization change. Other fascinating work has been presented by Xing and Liu (2015) who analyze the use of poetry in Chinese management, specifically different purposes for which Chinese leaders invoke poetry in their leadership. The challenge for scholars pursuing this path is to develop (or maintain) a shared language that enables communications with scholars outside their own community. However, in view of this recent work, I am more optimistic than Oded Shenkar for

the potential of indigenous research to develop novel insights in China that will eventually influence scholarly discourses beyond China.

## Conclusion

China offers great opportunities for context-aware management research that may eventually challenge the ‘general theory’ focused ideology of certain scholarly communities. However, to do so requires careful attention to and interpretation of the contextual boundary conditions that influence phenomena under investigation.

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