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EDITORIAL
Indigenous Chinese HRM research: phenomena, methods, and challenges

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Abstract

Purpose – This article aims to highlight major unique Chinese organizational phenomena and delineate associated qualitative methods for exploratory inquiries and to focus on perceived challenges in developing indigenous knowledge in HRD and related management fields.

Design/methodology/approach – The author takes an in-outsider position and adopts an observational and reflexive approach to the phenomena, methods and challenges important for indigenous Chinese HRM research.

Findings – The paper presents six major indigenous phenomena commonly seen in Chinese organizations. With a recent study exploring one of the phenomena, it discusses how grounded theory and phenomenology methods, combined with reflexivity, may be embraced for exploratory indigenous research. It also delineates challenges for indigenous Chinese HRM research.

Research limitations/implications – Indigenous research is the first and necessary stage to understand unique and indigenous Chinese organizational phenomena. With appropriate qualitative methods, indigenous phenomenon entails indigenous understanding that leads to modifying, enriching, supplementing existing theories, and possibly developing new ones at a later stage.

Originality/value – This paper identifies six major unique organizational phenomena in the Chinese organizational context. It makes a strong case for indigenous research adopting exploratory qualitative methods for engaged scholarship and theory building research.

Keywords Unique organizational phenomena, Indigenous research, Grounded theory method, Phenomenological approach, Reflexivity, Organizations, Organizational culture, Chinese people, Human resource management

Paper type General review

The recent scholarly dialogues on building a theory of Chinese management versus a Chinese theory of management for indigenous research have received increased attention in the worldwide Chinese management research community (Child, 2009; Leung, 2012; Li *et al.*, 2012; Tang, 2012; Tsui, 2004, 2009; Van de Ven and Jing, 2012; Whetten, 2009). A number of recent studies have demonstrated that exploring unique Chinese organizational phenomena cannot only develop understanding and better conceptualize the local phenomena, but also offer substantial potential to derive

indigenous theories (Tsang, 2004; Ma, 2012). These efforts have signified that indigenous research is necessary, important, and fruitful in management research.

The ongoing discourse has suggested two distinguishable and closely related theory building processes or stages. The first is to identify and explore unique Chinese phenomena through inductive indigenous research to derive conceptual understanding of local phenomena; and the second is to construct and verify the relevance of indigenous conceptualization in relation to existing theories derived in other contexts, and possibly develop new theories (Child, 2009; Tsang, 2009; Tsui, 2009; Whetten, 2009). In the theory building process, these two stages may be independent of each other or closely integrated. Given prevailing research on duplicating Western theories in the Chinese context, it is necessary to emphasize the importance and criticality of indigenous research in its current nascent stage (Li *et al.*, 2012).

Indeed, in the human resource management (HRM) arena, many prevalent indigenous phenomena unique to Chinese organizations have not been identified nor explored. More importantly, indigenous exploration of Chinese HRM practices has not become the choice of research but an occasional exception. Perhaps this is not because of the lack of such phenomena in Chinese organizations, but is due to the influence by mainstream HRM theory and the relative easiness in getting published by duplicating popular HRM theories with Chinese samples (Barney and Zhang, 2009; Tsui, 2009; Zheng and Lamond, 2009; Lamond and Zheng, 2010).

In this article, I take an "in-outsider" position (Tsui, 2009, p. 3), from a perspective of engaged scholarship (Van de Ven and Jing, 2012), to highlight some unique Chinese organizational phenomena that have not been discussed in the literature for indigenous research. Through an example, I delineate a few major qualitative research methods associated with exploratory research on the indigenous phenomena. I conclude by outlining ongoing challenges faced by Chinese HRM scholars in exploratory indigenous research.

Context-based indigenous phenomena

If you have visited China frequently enough in the last decade, you might have observed or experienced the following local phenomena. While they may appear to be indigenized local responses to the Western practices after being introduced to the Chinese context, they effectively show that the local context does make a difference.

The first phenomenon is what I call "the Coke phenomenon." It was associated with the way that Coca-Cola was "cooked" and consumed. During the summer of 2004, in a family reunion dining-out in a major Northwestern city in China, I was introduced to a then popular way of drinking Coke. I ordered a drink from the menu, Coke with ginger roots, and observed the restaurant server boiling a jar of Coca-Cola with sliced ginger roots on a coffee maker, and served with bowls. The taste was different, unique, and not bad at all. I thought it was quite creative. Later I was told that the cooked Coke also had a Chinese name, the "Li Peng No. 1." It was said that it was one of the favorite drinks of Li Peng, a former Chinese premier, for curing stomach problems. This phenomenon has disappeared quietly after a few years and is no longer popular.

Later, I had another experience on how Chinese locals drink red wines. Western red wines were not a traditional Chinese alcoholic beverage until the 1990s. An evening in summer 2005, I took several American colleagues to a Western-style bar in a major Southwestern town. After we ordered a bottle of Italian red wine, the bartender quickly

mixed the bottle with two cans of Sprite in a big jar without asking us if we wanted it this way. We then complained, this is not the way red wine should be drunk. But we were told that this is the way they drink all red wines, and that was why a bottle of red wine came with two free cans of Sprite. Looking around the bar, it was exactly how others were drinking. Even today, this practice can still be observed in bars and restaurants around the country.

Perhaps the way Chinese people observe Christmas is more dramatic. We know that in the Western world, observing Christmas is supposed to be quiet, in a church or family environment, with major shopping activities taking place in shopping malls prior to the holiday. But in China, the flavor was changed again. While many went to crowded churches on Christmas Eve, in most cities, the real action would take place in central city areas on the night of Christmas Eve. Substantially larger crowds, mostly comprising younger generations such as college students and young lovers, would gather in downtown areas wandering around aimlessly until after midnight for two or three consecutive nights, similar to the ball dropping event in New York City on New Year's Eve. This has been further escalated in the last decade by retail commercial activities around the country to attract more people joining the crowds. In many major cities around the country, the local authorities have to announce a multiple-night traffic control several days before Christmas day, mapping out all the major streets in the center city areas for pedestrians to avoid traffic problems. In the meantime, a popular and emerging tradition for the middle and upper class is to attend lavish but equally crowded Christmas Eve banquets in luxury hotels or resorts.

These phenomena represent Chinese ways of integrating and embracing Western practices under the indigenous social, cultural, and transitioning context. They may be metaphoric of what has happened when the Western HRM practices have been introduced to China: convergence, divergence, or cross-vergence (Ralston *et al.*, 2008; Warner, 2008); or may even be "indigen-vergence"? The local responses to Western HRM practices are not only rooted in the Chinese cultural context, but ingrained in the following indigenous organizational phenomena, discussed in the following section.

Indigenous organizational phenomena in China

The phenomena identified here are directly or indirectly related to Chinese HRM practices. While many may be unheard of, or unfamiliar to outsiders, they constitute the lived experience for insiders.

The first phenomenon is that of housing subsidies provided for employees by all types of organizations. This now popular practice was initially imposed by the government in 1994. It was stipulated that no less than 5 percent, and up to 12 percent, of the employee's salary, with equal matching percentage by the employer, must be deposited in a special housing fund (住房公积金) for the employee's current and future housing needs. While government regulation on housing may not be unique as Singapore has a similar policy, what is unique in Chinese organizations is that many go beyond the government mandate to subsidize employees' housing on a larger scale. Companies would build or purchase apartments and sell them to their employees substantially below market price. This phenomenon can be observed in all public-sector organizations including SOEs, public schools and universities, and the private sector.

Similarly, a phenomenon of non-cash benefits distribution (NCBD) may be observed in almost all types of organizations. In the earlier years prior to the reform,

this phenomenon was almost always in the form of in-kind distribution (发东西) of household necessities by the organization to the employee. The items might include anything from rice, flour and cooking oil, to frozen meats and seafood, to toilet papers, shampoo and soft drinks. During recent decades, the phenomenon has been intensified and has evolved into more diverse forms, not only including valuable items, but also extending to entertainment activities and cash equivalencies. They may include anything from tea makers, rice-cookers, mixers, microwave stoves, to laptop computers or iPads, to movie or shopping cards, ranging in value from a few hundred to several thousand Chinese Yuan. Another form of NCBD is organization sponsored entertainment activities, ranging from free group dinners followed by karaoke activity in the evenings, to entertaining employees in luxury hotels or vacation resorts, to offering organized tours to domestic or overseas tourist locations during work days. The interesting part is that the distribution of the items or activities is not related to individuals' jobs or performance. Instead, it is based on the headcount in the organization or work unit. This phenomenon can be found in all ownership types and all industries, including multinational companies (MNCs).

Related to the NCBD is the organizational union phenomenon. A key role of the union in the organization is related to coordinating, purchasing, and distributing NCBD in state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and public organizations. The unions' function in the areas of employee relations or bargaining activities is minimal or nonexistent given their Chinese Communist Party (CCP) dependence rooted in the institutional and historical context (Cooke, 2011, 2012). A number of authors have been critical of the functions of Chinese unions when compared to roles undertaken by Western unions (Clarke and Pringle, 2009; Taylor *et al.*, 2003). I argue that in HRM research, it may make more scholarly sense if we study the roles and mechanisms of Chinese unions as organizational phenomena in their existing contexts. While I have no intention to underestimate international labor activists' efforts in advocating Chinese unions toward a more autonomous role, their function is unlikely to be changed significantly any time soon given the Chinese social and political context. It may not be appropriate to use the Western union model to determine what Chinese unions should or should not do. Just because the organizational form happens to be named as "union", does not mean that it has to function the same way as Western trade unions. This is similar to my earlier description of "the Christmas phenomenon." We cannot make Chinese people observe Christmas the same way as Westerners do.

A fourth organizational phenomenon is the triangular relationships between the party secretary (党委书记), CEO/general manager (总经理) and the chairperson of the board of directors (董事长) in all SOEs and state-controlled enterprises (SCEs). Let me call it the PGC triangular phenomenon. Given the party's dominance, the triangular PGC phenomenon is currently not only in SOEs/SCEs, but also can be observed in other types of ownership system. For example, in the mid-1990s, Motorola (China) became the first foreign-owned enterprise (FOE) with a branch of the CCP and a party secretary. In many share-holding and privately owned organizations, the triangular structure is also required. The PGC phenomenon has clearly influenced the functioning of Chinese SOEs/SCEs, particularly their top management teams in a way that is very different from their Western counterparts. Current management literature has been silent on the nature and the function of the organization structure and the role each pillar of the triangle plays in organizational decision-making. This phenomenon has

obvious implications for many important management topics in the Chinese context, such as organizational governance, leader-member exchange (LMX), leadership style research, and executive team dynamics.

Related to the PGC phenomenon is the organization department (OD, 组织部) phenomenon. The appointment of senior executives in all SOEs is strategically assessed and determined by this key CCP department at all levels (Macgregor, 2010). While the OD practice has been focused on political aspects since the early 1920s in the CCP history, the OD's role in shaping the new giant SOEs/SCEs and pushing them into the *Fortune* Global 500 list has recently been noted (Li, 2011). Today, in all large SOEs, behind each HR department, there is an OD function. The two departments perform separate functions with one set of staff and different foci. While a few studies have started to reveal the functions of the OD in leadership selection and management development in the literature (Gu *et al.*, 2012; Wang *et al.*, 2009), we know very little about the mechanism and the processes related to HRM. Exploring the OD phenomenon can help better understand executive succession, executive compensation, and factors affecting their performance, as well as executives with dual careers switching between SOE leadership and public administration (Li, 2011). Recently, the OD of the CCP Central Committee has established a new training institute, the Institute for OD Cadres (中组部组织干部管理学院), which is separate from, but closely related to, another phenomenon, the party school (PS).

The PS (党校) phenomenon in Chinese state-sector organizations is important for Chinese HRM and development. The PS is a complex political and ideological training and development system established in the early 1930s. It currently has a top down structure from the CCP central committee to provincial and city or county committees. Like other phenomena, it has evolved dramatically during the reform era, and has been extensively involved in leadership and management development for both party officials and SOE executives. Attending the PS's training programs has been considered not only a political honor and a sign of "promotability," but also establishing one's certificate-like credentials for other career opportunities in SOEs and public sectors. In recent decades, the PSs at the CCP Central Committee and provincial levels have started offering advanced formal degrees at doctoral and/or master's levels to both SOE managers and the general public. Today's PS system has evolved into an integrated training system combining political ideology, general education, and leadership and management development. It is likely to play a crucial role in shaping the future of SOEs. Exploring the PS phenomenon may help understand career development, career advancement options and processes, and executive recruitment in SOEs and public sectors.

All phenomena discussed have existed since the communist party took power in 1949 and have continued with new developments after the nation's economic reform three decades ago. Even the housing subsidy practices has its roots in the pre-reform free-housing provision. Overall, they represent "HRM with Chinese characteristics" (Warner, 2008, p. 777). These unique organizational phenomena in the HRM arena have hardly been explored in the existing Chinese management research. This is not because they lack significance in Chinese organizations but because the research requires different approaches and methods that are not commonly seen in the mainstream camp of management research (Barney and Zhang, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2012). In light of recent calls for further qualitative exploratory studies (Barney and Zhang, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2012; Tsang, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2009), I offer a preview of a study on one of the above phenomena.

Exploring the NCBD phenomenon

The NCBD phenomenon has been popular and enduring in Chinese organizations (Wang and Sun, 2012). Unlike annual department retreats, company picnics, or employee appreciation days in Western counterparts, this phenomenon is more pervasive in frequency and magnitude in Chinese organizations. Perhaps the only written information publicly available about this phenomenon is on some internet discussion forums in Chinese online communities where people share and compare what they have received in a typical NCBD season, such as Chinese New Year and the Moon Festival.

In a recent study, Wang and Sun (2012) explored the phenomenon using a grounded theory approach. The study collected interview data at three levels, senior executive, middle managers, and employees. We selected individuals in all types of ownership system, FOEs, SOEs, and privately-owned enterprises (POEs) in two different cities.

The interview data revealed the following empirical regularity. First, unlike other government regulated employment benefits such as housing subsidy, health insurance, and retirement pension, there was no officially required stipulation regarding NCBD. In spite of this, all firms and individuals referred to the NCBD as employment benefit or welfare (福利). On the other hand, no firm had an official policy on NCBD, nor had they informed job candidates in interviews or employment contracts about potential NCBD. All NCBDs were voluntary and discretionary decisions at the management level. No manager had reported that they had a budget plan for any items or activities for the upcoming year. Second, most NCBDs were not based on an individual's performance. Everyone, from the executive to the janitor, receives a form of NCBD. There was some evidence, however, that the NCBD in the companies studied appeared to be based on organizational or work unit performance.

Third, while the frequency of the NCBD appeared to be spontaneous, most interviewees were able to somewhat predict regularity in the timing of NCBD events. That is, during all the major Chinese holidays and in the summer time (though it could also happen any time between the expected events). In terms of the administration of the NCBD, the key organizational units coordinating the NCBD activities were the administrative offices of the work units in FOEs, POEs and SOEs, and the unions at all levels in POEs and SOEs.

The study revealed the relationship between the NCBD and other commonly studied HRM constructs. For example, the NCBD appeared to play a role in the relationship between organization effectiveness and employees' perceived job satisfaction, organization citizenship behavior (OCB), and employee perceived psychological contract. It is also likely that NCBD is positively related to employees' affective and continuance commitment. In the meantime, the NCBD phenomenon can found its imprint in collectivism, traditional egalitarianism, and paternalistic leadership style, among other contextual factors (Wang and Sun, 2012). These are clearly areas for further and more widespread research, informed by the initial grounded approach.

The constellation of the local phenomena when intermingled with the unique social, cultural and political context, even in the dynamics of one organizational setting, can show that Chinese organizations, SOEs in particular, are very different from their Western counterparts. To explore and understand the unique Chinese organizational phenomena, indigenous research should not only be a preference, but also a necessity (Li et al., 2012; Tsui, 2004, 2009).

The choice of research methods

The choice of research methods depends on research subject, the purpose and the objective of the study (Silverman and Marvasti, 2008). Exploring Chinese local phenomena entails indigenous research (Li *et al.*, 2012). That is, to study "a unique local phenomenon or a unique element of any local phenomenon from a local perspective to explore its local relevance, and, if possible, its global relevance as well" (Li *et al.*, p. 9). Such research requires qualitative methods such as grounded theory and those informed by phenomenology (Tsang, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2009). Qualitative research aims to obtain an in-depth understanding of human behavior and the factors that govern such behavior (Creswell, 2003). Compared to quantitative methods, it is more adaptable in exploring multiple but difficult to aggregate realities than quantitative research, while being more sensitive to the many mutually shaping influences and value patterns encountered in the research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Therefore, a qualitative approach offers a series of important alternative insights that are advantageous in exploring indigenous organizational phenomena (Creswell, 2003; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2001; Patton, 2002).

First, the naturalistic ontology underlying qualitative research takes reality as a whole that cannot be understood in isolation from its context, or fragmented for separate study of the parts, as in quantitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). As such, it is an approach that reveals how well parts work together to form a whole. Second, qualitative researchers are the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. The data collected are mediated through the researcher rather than through an instrument like a questionnaire. In this sense, researchers are adaptive to the context of the study. Third, qualitative research requires an emergent design. This form of design offers flexibility and allows findings to emerge rather than being constructed based on preconceived notions (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Lastly, qualitative research adopts an inductive analytical approach rather than a deductive one. This is particularly important when conducting research in the Chinese context and when little is known about the phenomenon being studied (Li *et al.*, 2012; Tsang, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2009). With these advantages in mind, I highlight the value of grounded theory, phenomenology, and reflexivity for exploratory indigenous research in the Chinese context.

The grounded theory method

By definition, grounded theory offers a method of "discovery of theory from data" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 5). It is often used to develop an explanatory theory for basic social processes and phenomena, such as "how" and "what" by linking the processual dimension with structural conditions (Strauss, 1987). A major assumption of grounded theory is that the development of a rigorous theory is most likely to occur when it emerges from a thorough analysis of contextual data. Therefore, it is generally agreed that "grounded theory building is appropriate when phenomena are ill-defined and when existing theory cannot provide convincing answers to the research problem of interest" (Tsui, 2004, p. 505).

Studies utilizing the grounded theory method establish emerging impressions from evidence, conceptualize the data, and then analyze emerging relationships between concepts. Therefore, the researcher is expected to initially "ignore" related literature and existing theory instead of being guided by them, to reduce the likelihood of contamination of the data with existing or biased concepts (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). As such, it has a clear advantage in capturing the contextual uniqueness and

developing new knowledge. "A discovered, grounded theory, then, will tend to combine most concepts and hypotheses that have emerged from data with some existing ones that are clearly useful" (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 46). Once an inductively and indigenously developed model is confirmed, refined, or elaborated through deductive testing, we can compare knowledge generated in that context with knowledge on similar phenomena described in the existing literature. Yang *et al.* (2008) have recently used grounded approach to explore organizational ownership behavior and Sun and Wang (2012) have used a similar method for managerial career transition in China.

The phenomenological method

Similar to the grounded theory, this method focuses on a central phenomenon in order to acquire an emic perspective of the social or organizational phenomenon under study (Merriam, 2001; Moustakas, 1994). It involves the use of comprehensive description and close analysis of the lived experience to understand how meaning is constructed through embodied perception (Sokolowski, 2000; Stewart and Mickunas, 1974). With rich qualitative data, often on a small scale, phenomenological research entails a more comprehensive understanding of human experiences and the central phenomenon under investigation. The researcher seeks to understand the very nature of a phenomenon, and reveal more fully "the essences and meanings of human experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 105) as experienced by the individuals as data sources.

The advantage of this approach is that it permits the researcher access to a person's internal world and uncover the individual's perceptions and feelings through in-depth, interviewing. The emergent nature of the phenomenological approach and the open and flexible method not only reinforced the "ultimate value of what inductive analysis will yield" (Patton, 2002, p. 44), but also contributes to deeper understanding of lived experiences by exposing taken-for granted assumptions about the ways of knowing. The deeper insights generated from such a study may lay a foundation on which new theory can be derived. Thus, this method is equally valuable for indigenous Chinese HRM research. Tsang (2004) has offered an excellent example on superstition-based decision making in Chinese firms. Wang and Wang (2006) have presented another phenomenological approach to exploring managerial training in the Chinese transitioning context.

Reflexivity

As a methodological tool, reflexivity in qualitative research is to legitimize, validate, and question research practices (Alvesson, 2003). To differentiate reflection from reflexivity, Chiseri-Strater's (1996, p. 130) clarifies: "to be reflective does not demand an 'other,' while to be reflexive demands both an other and some self-conscious awareness of the process of self-scrutiny". Thus, reflexivity is to deal with the relationship between the researcher and the subjects of study. This process includes two aspects: interpretation and reflection (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). Interpretation means that all references, trivial or non-trivial, to a research subject, are the results of elucidation referring to reality. It thus calls for the utmost awareness by the researcher of the theoretical assumptions and the importance of pre-understanding. Reflection emphasizes on "inwardness: towards the researchers and their related experiences". For qualitative inquiry, research is regarded as a joint product of the participants, the researcher, and their interactions. For the research to be credible and trustworthy,

it is critical for researchers to analyze how subjective and inter-subjective aspects of the research affect their findings (Li *et al.*, 2012).

For qualitative indigenous research, researchers must be very aware of their position of being an insider and/or an outsider. For a researcher originally from a Chinese context, this offers an advantage of reflexive awareness with pre-understanding of the rich contexts, with lived experiences, and implicit knowledge about the phenomenon. As outsiders, the researchers need to be attentive to their prior backgrounds and relationships with the phenomena being studied. This is to bracket their preconceived notions about the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Through reflexivity, researchers may acknowledge the existence of potential bias or subjectivity that is likely to influence the findings and explicitly demonstrate their role as a research instrument during the research process, thus increasing the transparency and credibility of the research.

Challenges in indigenous research

There is no shortage of local phenomena in Chinese organizational settings that deserve our scholarly attention for indigenous research. There are also plenty of research approaches and tools available in the methodological arsenal. The recent scholarly discourse has raised some notable challenges in indigenous research. Among others, the challenges include Chinese scholars' inadequate understanding of the philosophy and purposes of science (Tsui, 2009), research design in identifying theory relevant local construct for theory building (Child, 2009; Li *et al.*, 2012; Van de Ven and Jing, 2012; Von Glinow and Teagarden, 2009; Whetten, 2009), conceptual and methodological issues regarding indigenous research, and the difficulties in publishing in mainstream Western, especially US-based journals, as well as institutional pressure on publications (Barney and Zhang, 2009). In addition to these challenges, I present two more faced by Chinese management scholars in indigenous research. One is the skill and knowledge required for the research, and the other is a bias against subjectivity based on ideological reasons.

Since the turn of the century, Chinese management scholars have been working hard to catch up with the popular and sophisticated quantitative methods, thanks to many reputable, dedicated, Western trained scholars engaging in development workshops and training sessions. But qualitative research requires a different set of research skills and a paradigmatic mindset – the requirement for rigor in the research is fundamentally different from quantitative study. Reflecting on the transition of my own experience embracing both quantitative and qualitative methods, I have experienced several stages, from rejecting and ignoring, to accepting and being willing to learn, and to being able to adopt different methods based on the differing research settings and research questions. It was an enlightening and fruitful transition. Facing the same challenge, Chinese HRM scholars will need to determine the methodological preferences and develop the required skills accordingly. Compared to quantitative methods, qualitative inquiry may appear to be more time-consuming. The entire process involves observing, interviewing, transcribing, coding, triangulating, translating, analyzing and interpreting the findings with the possibility of further deriving new theory. Combined with the institutional pressure to publish in Western journals for tenure and promotion purposes (Barney and Zhang, 2009), the methodological hurdle may take longer to overcome. Related to this is developing new scholars who are competent in qualitative research. Currently most management programs in Chinese universities do not offer qualitative method training

to doctoral students. Those that do offer, it is usually in the form of short workshops without any clear requirements.

The other challenge is associated with a historical bias against subjectivity, rooted in the current Chinese political and education systems. Since 1949 in China, subjectivity has been associated with unfavorable ideology and is thought to carry a negative connotation. Qualitative inquiry with engaged scholarship for indigenous research requires the researcher to take a constructivist paradigm with subjective and interpretive understanding of the data (Li *et al.*, 2012; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2001; Tsang, 2004). It involves constructing the meaning from the rich qualitative data associated with the specific context under investigation. Accordingly, for meaningful indigenous research, Chinese scholars are required to differentiate subjectivity for scientific inquiry from that of political ideology.

Conclusion

This editorial essay has sought to highlight what have been identified as major and unique Chinese organizational phenomena for indigenous research; to delineate some of the major qualitative methods associated with exploratory research; and to outline potential challenges facing Chinese HRM scholars. I have argued that these indigenous phenomena require indigenous understanding by adopting and implementing appropriate qualitative methods. The outcomes of indigenous research can then be further examined on whether a resulting construct constitutes a contingent indigenous variable, is contextual noise to an existing theory, or a discrete variable has its own right for a brand-new theory. Through this process, indigenous research contributes to modifying, enriching, supplementing existing concepts and theories, and possibly developing new ones. The right tools, with the right steps and hard work, and perhaps some patience along the way, will enable us to climb the learning curve for indigenous Chinese HRM research and further theory building.

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