

International Association for Chinese Management Research
Dissertation Grant and Workshop

Topic: Indigenous Management Research in China

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Conceptual Definition: What Qualifies as Indigenous Research?

In general terms, *indigenous research* is any study about a uniquely local phenomenon that examines its local (emic) implications and/or its global (etic) implications. Whether a study is indigenous or not can be judged by a simple rule that the study involves at least one construct or variable *unique to a local phenomenon*. Further, the quality of an indigenous study can be assessed by the *novel contribution* of such unique construct or variable in terms of building new theories or revising the extant theories. This can be a working definition of indigenous research with two central features: providing unique and novel perspectives concerning a local phenomenon.

Specifically, indigenous research contains four dimensions: (1) “*what*” (research target), i.e., a unique local phenomenon in contrast to a generic global phenomenon; (2) “*why*” (research rationale), i.e., highlighting the endogenous and divergent natures of a local phenomenon in contrast to its exogenous and convergent natures; (3) “*how*” (research approach), i.e., adopting a context-specific or context-sensitive approach so as to create locally-relevant constructs, methods and theories in contrast to a globally-applicable approach with context-generic elements; and (4) “*for whom*” (research result), i.e., a contribution in terms of substituting/superseding the “imported” elements as an “import-substitution” (i.e., a local perspective) and/or as an “export” toward a geocentric (culture-integrative) framework (i.e., a geocentric perspective) in contrast to a contribution based on utilizing or modifying “imported” elements for local applications or adaptations (i.e., a foreign perspective).

If we adopt the above four dimensions as four criteria, any research that meets one of the criterion will qualify as broad indigenous research. We can regard the four criteria as representing different approaches at different stages of the development of indigenous research (see Table 1). First, the most basic approach involves a naïve local *application* of extant theory from the West as a basic exploitation (Stage 1). Second, a more advanced approach involves a cross-context comparative research with the potential to derive some *novel constructs or measures* unique to a local phenomenon so as to modify and revise the extant theory from the West as an advanced exploitation (Stage 2). Third, an even more advanced approach involves the development of a *novel context-specific theory* to complement or supersede the extant theory from the West as a basic exploration (Stage 3). Fourth, the most advanced approach involves an integration of the above emic and etic approaches toward a *geocentric framework* as an advanced exploration (Stage 4).

While Stage 1 is a necessary initial step, it is hardly indigenous in a strict sense. Stages 2 and 3 can be argued as the current dual focuses of the indigenous research, but Stage 4 can be regarded as the most advanced form of indigenous research toward the ultimate ideal of developing geocentric knowledge. *Geocentric* refers to a mosaic-style integration of an etic theme (the global core) with all the diverse emic versions (the unique local details) of the etic theme, thus becoming culture-integrative.

Most research concerning China remains at Stage 1 with little theoretical contribution to better explain a local or global phenomenon. Such research, unless it finds something unique as well as explains it by proposing a novel construct or variable unique to the local phenomenon, is hardly indigenous in nature. A growing research concerning China enters Stage 2 with some potential theoretical contribution because it is more likely to find and develop some novel constructs or variables to better explain a local or global phenomenon. Such research is rooted in the traditional cross-cultural comparative studies with a renewed focus on the uniqueness of any local

phenomenon. This approach is consistent with Whetten’s notion of *contextualization* (2009). Another growing research concerning China expands into Stage 3 with perhaps greater potential theoretical contribution because it focuses exclusively on developing locally-derived theories due to the disillusion with the universalistic claim of Western theories. This approach is consistent with Tsui’s notion of *context-specific* research (2004). The final emerging research toward Stage 4 attempts to integrate the research streams at Stages 2 and 3 by building cross-cultural constructs and theories. The last approach is consistent with the notions of *emic-etic synergy* by Morris and colleagues (1999), *leveraging diverse cultural perspectives* by Chen and colleagues (2009), and *geocentric mosaic* by Li (2008).

All the research approaches at Stages 2, 3 and 4 have their own unique challenges, but the later stages must be built upon the good progresses at the earlier stages as the necessary input. For instance, the integrative research at Stage 4 relies on the contributions of contextualized and context-specific research at Stages 2 and 3 with the diverse cultural-specific constructs and theories as unique and novel contributions to Stage 4. In other words, cross-cultural diversity found at Stages 2 and 3 should serve as the input for the geocentric mosaic as the ultimate output of indigenous research.

Table 1: A Typology of Indigenous Research

Arrows for the Positive Trends	Exploitation [Basic] [Approach & Outcome]	Exploration [Advanced] [Approach & Outcome]
Unilateral/ Separate Impact [Basic] [Target & Goal]	<i>Western emic-as-etic:</i> [Weak Indigenous: Stage 1] Adopt extant Western theories (blind etic as “import”) To apply/verify/confirm Western theories	<i>Eastern emic-as-emic:</i> [Strong Indigenous: Stage 3] Build novel Eastern theories (isolated emic as “no trade”) To complement/supplement or supersede/substitute Western theories
Bilateral/ Joint Impact [Advanced] [Target & Goal]	<i>Western-Eastern etic-to-emic:</i> [Moderate Indigenous: Stage 2] Find Eastern uniqueness (moderate emic as moderate “export”) To compare/modify/revise Western theories	<i>Western-Eastern emic-and-etic:</i> [Geocentric: Stage 4] Integrate Western and Eastern theories (balanced emic-emic “trade”) To transform emic theories into a mosaic-style emic-and-etic framework

Note: This framework integrates the duality perspectives of inside vs. outside; endogenous vs. exogenous; divergent vs. convergent; context-specific vs. context-generic; emic vs. etic approaches as well as of export vs. import; creation vs. imitation, and exploration vs. exploitation as the targeted results. *Integration* is a balance between local (unilateral and separate) and global elements (bilateral and joint) as well as between exploitation and exploration under the auspices of the lens of yin-yang duality and the golden rule of balance.

Methodological Design: How to Conduct Indigenous Research?

The overall approach for indigenous research is summarized by Figure 1. Figure 1 is an integration of the model of Morris and colleagues (1999) and that of Enriquez (1990), which refers to a holistic, dynamic and dialectical balance between emic and etic approaches as a *yin-yang* duality to mutually affirm and negate each other in accordance with the *golden rule of balance*.

The rationale for Figure 1 is that the geocentric approach is not a form of homogenous universalism but an emic-etic integration toward an overall framework resembling a mosaic-style unity-in-diversity. Indigenous or emic research is not confined to the goal of explaining a unique phenomenon at the local level for its own sake; it often bears widespread global implications. For instance, *guanxi* is a Chinese version of informal interpersonal ties found everywhere in the world, only to different degrees in different aspects and/or at different times. Another case is *paternalistic leadership*, a phenomenon not confined to the Chinese context; although perhaps more pronounced in China, it can be found everywhere in the world (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008) as an integral part of a mosaic-style geocentric theory. Hence, emic constructs and theories as diverse cultural perspectives can compare and integrate with each other so as to enrich each other toward a more complete, mosaic-style picture with an overlapped core and diverse unique details (e.g., the link between micro and macro, with the macro as a mosaic pattern of diverse micro components).

We should regard the concepts, methods and theories in the West as emic or indigenous research in its context, no more or no less imperative than the emic research in the East. However, we also have to acknowledge that Western research has been the early-mover in modern times, so Eastern research, as the latecomer, tends to start by “importing” from the West. Nonetheless, there is no reason why Eastern research cannot catch up and be innovative via exploration. The cultural perspectives from the West and East will have to be integrated if one seeks to develop geocentric constructs and theories.

Eastern research has the unique advantages of being a latecomer. We can avoid the mistakes made in Western research, such as the premature dominance of a few paradigms at the expense of diverse perspectives, the premature emphasis on quantitative methods at the expense of qualitative methods, and the premature fragmentation into disciplinary domains at the expense of interdisciplinary integration. For instance, the lenses of *yin-yang* duality and golden rule of balance, both regarded as the dual cores of Chinese traditional wisdoms, can be vital for reversing the fragmented, static and linear trends driven by the logic of an either/or dichotomy or dualism. We can promote interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, cross-level, context-rich, process-oriented, multi-method, and practice-relevant research in the East to remedy the prevailing problems in the West. In this sense, the lens of *yin-yang* duality and golden rule of balance can be regarded as the grand perspectives from the East in contrast to the either/or logic as the grand perspective of the West. On the other hand, the either/or logic can also inform the Eastern perspectives to be more formal and structured (less fuzzy and ambiguous) so as to be more effectively applied to our research.

It is worth noting that social research, including the indigenous research rooted in the cultural and historical contexts of each and every locality, cannot and also should not copy or imitate the methodologies and methods prevailing in natural sciences, which is the prevailing methodology in the West. Hence, naïve positivism must be questioned and challenged, while an integration of positivism and constructivism is required to engage in effective social research. The grand perspectives from the East can help overcome the above problems in the West, while the grand perspective of the West can help clarify and operationalize the Eastern perspectives.

A working model for conducting indigenous research is proposed by Cheng and colleagues (2009):

1. Discovery of local phenomena that challenge Western theories (as indigenous exploration)
2. Field observations (qualitative methods best for theory-building as indigenous exploration)
3. Development of a novel theoretical construct or framework (the current dual goals of indigenous research toward the ultimate goal of building integrative geocentric constructs and theories)
4. Empirical examination (quantitative methods best for theory-testing as indigenous exploitation)
5. Theory refinement (as indigenous exploitation)
6. Back to Step 1 to start a new cycle (the key lies in the *cross-cultural sensitivity for unique and novel insights*).

To further illustrate our framework, consider the four approaches to scale development suggested by Farh and colleagues (2006). Two fall into the basic indigenous approaches appropriate at the early stages of indigenous

research (i.e., translation at Stage 1 and adaptation at Stage 2), while the other two fall into the advanced approaches appropriate at the later stages (i.e., contextualization at Stage 3 and de-contextualization at Stage 4). We further suggest that, to integrate the emic and etic approaches in the same design, one can add an emic scale to the etic scale (e.g., adding a *guanxi* scale to the scale of social capital or adding a *guanxi* exchange scale to the scales of social and economic exchange) in the same survey questionnaire. This approach can shed light on both emic and etic theories and contribute to their integration toward a geocentric framework.

Consistent with the working definition and typology of indigenous research (Stages 2, 3 and 4), three specific approaches to indigenous research can be proposed.

First, the research at Stage 2 can gain inspirations from a comparative study of *Western and Eastern distinctions* in a similar phenomenon (e.g., *guanxi* vs. non-*guanxi* ties; paternalistic vs. non-paternalistic leadership) as well as paired cultural values (e.g., collectivism vs. individualism). In this regard, the focus is to discover cross-cultural diversity so as to develop some unique and novel *micro-level perspectives* (related to the unique and novel features of a similar phenomenon in different local contexts) as well as some *mid-range perspectives* (related to the unique and novel values of diverse cultures).

Second, the research at Stage 3 can gain inspirations from the Chinese classics (e.g., Confucianism and Taoism) as well as the unique Chinese values (e.g., long-term orientation and harmony enhancement). In this regard, the focus is to develop some *grand perspectives* of Chinese culture (i.e., the lens of yin-yang duality and the golden rule of balance) as well as some *mid-range perspectives* (related to the unique and novel values of Chinese culture).

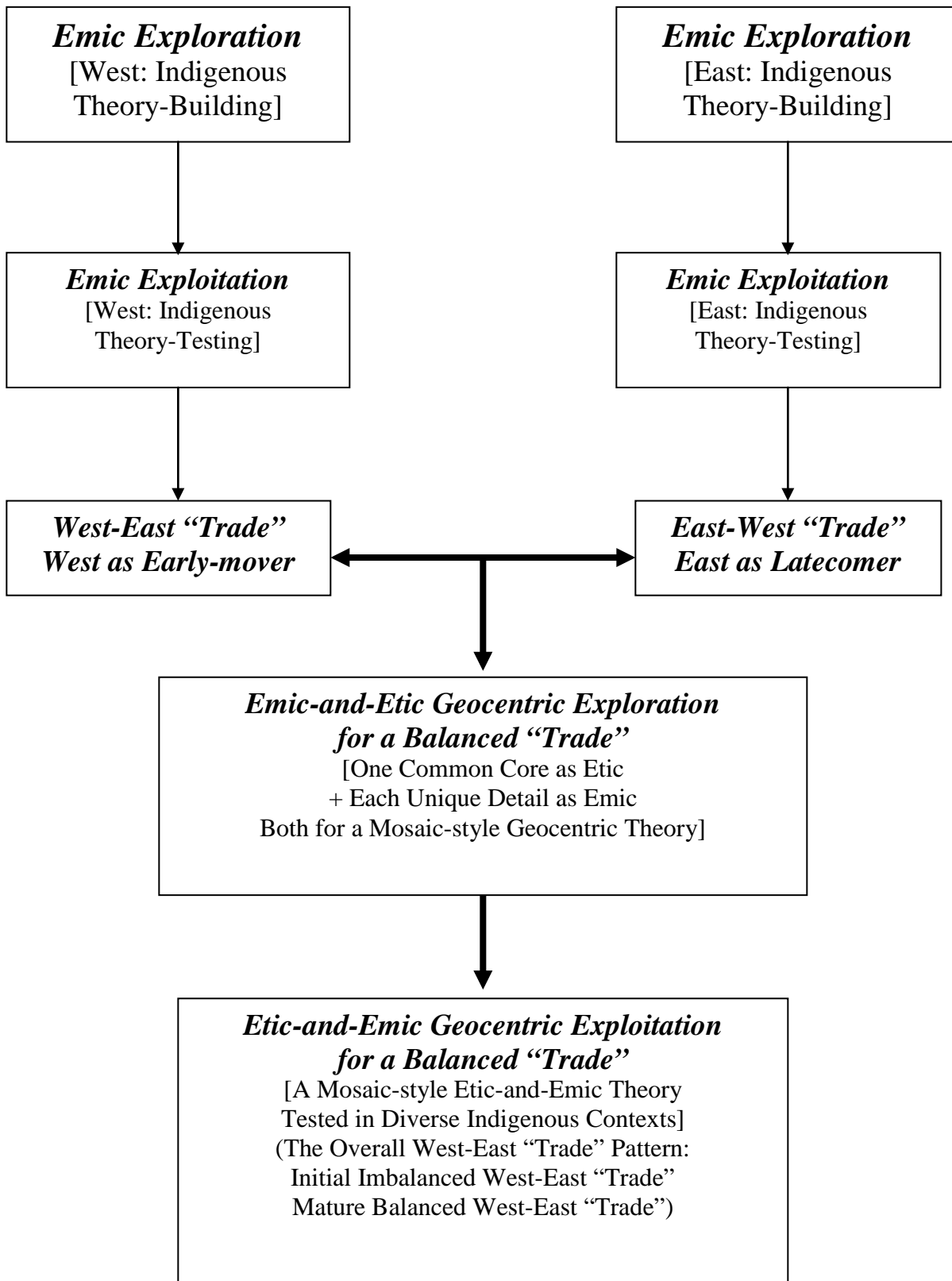
Third, the research at Stage 4 can integrate the above two approaches at Stages 2 and 3, ranging from the micro-level perspectives to the grand perspectives. In practice, the above three approaches are often intertwined with various overlaps among these three approaches.

One particular version of the third approach is *to reconstruct the extant Western theories from the grand Eastern perspectives* of the lens of yin-yang duality and golden rule of balance (e.g., the unity-diversity balance for team design; flexibility-stability balance for alliance network; transaction value-and-cost balance for the theory of the firm; know-how and know-who balance for knowledge typology; control and trust balance for governance mode; teacher-student balance for learning; internal-external as well as determinism-choice balances for strategy formulation; global-local balance for multinational strategy; and formal-informal balance for institutional context, etc.). This approach can be readily applied to many research areas.

As for the specific methods to adopt for the indigenous research on Chinese management, we should adopt an open and flexible mind, especially regarding qualitative methods. It is logically appropriate to adopt more inductive and synthesis-based qualitative methods for the purpose of building novel constructs and theories in the early stages of indigenous research. In this sense, such qualitative methods as grounded theory method and case study method are the most appropriate for the indigenous research at the current stage. Only at the later stages when the indigenous constructs and theories are fully developed, theory-testing becomes necessary. Only then should we adopt the deductive and analytical quantitative methods, such as large-sample statistical analysis and structural modeling. The urgent need is to develop *novel indigenous constructs and theories* (the dual goals of the indigenous research at the current time at Stages 2 and 3) via qualitative methods.

Figure 1

The Duality of Emic-Etic Approaches



Appendix 1: Suggested Readings and References

Conceptual Models

All articles in *Management and Organization Review* 5(1), Editors' Forum on 'The future of Chinese management research': 1-143.

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