

## Letter to the Editor

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### The Danger of Chinese Exceptionalism

Dear Editor-in-Chief,

In the movement of Chinese indigenous management research, a sort of ‘Chinese exceptionalism’ (as critiqued by Peng, 2005: 133) seems to have been emerging, namely, some Chinese scholars see Chinese culture, philosophy, and way of thinking are unique and cannot be accounted for by some of the established, often West-based, theories.

One example is Li and Liang’s (2015) explanation of why successful Chinese entrepreneurs pursue political appointments. According to them, Western theories of life career development are inadequate for this question due to their egocentric nature, namely, they ‘have focused on self-fulfillment as life’s ultimate goal’ (610) which is ‘increasing individual resources and attaining personal goals’ (595); in contrast, Confucian doctrine of role transition is more suitable because ‘For Confucius, the ultimate purpose is that individuals extend themselves to serve the larger community and to pursue societal harmony’ (595).

Li and Liang’s analysis is based on the Confucian ideal of ‘adult life as a four-step transition from an “inner-focused sage” (内圣) to an “outer-focused king” (外王)...that is, from a focus on the self to a social focus’ (595). While being a novel alternative, Li and Liang’s analysis is less convincing than the so-called ‘egocentric’ Western theories because they confound the prescriptive nature of Confucian ideology and the reality of political participation among Chinese entrepreneurs.

Leung, Koch, and Lu (2002) see a decoupling between the classical Confucianism and the secular version of Confucianism, namely, the real behaviors of Chinese people are different from the prescriptions of Confucianism. While I do not deny the possibility that many Chinese have such a pro-social spirit, I find Li and Liang’s argument less convincing that many Chinese entrepreneurs pursue political participation primarily because of their ultimate aims of “‘bringing order to the state” (治国)’ and then “‘preserving world peace” (平天下)’ (595) for three reasons.

First, there are prior studies showing that ‘the likelihood of an entrepreneur’s participation can be explained by the underdevelopment of markets and market-supporting institutions’ (Li, Meng, & Zhang, 2006). A recent study on Chinese private firms’ political strategies (Jia, 2016) echoes such a political economy perspective.

Second, in China, political participation of individuals in general and entrepreneurs in particular is highly controlled by the Communist Party and government, who decide who can participate in the political life and how to participate. So, political participation is an honor rather than a free choice for Chinese entrepreneurs, which makes the argument less convincing that the purpose of participating in the largely ‘rubber stamp’-like People’s Congress or People’s Consultative Conference (Jia, 2016: 79) is to ‘bring order to the state’.

Third, as Figure 1 in Li and Liang (2015) clearly shows, the rise of the political appointment ratio did not start until 2002 when the ‘Three Represents’ Theory of Jiang Zemin was endorsed at the sixth plenary session of the 15<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in September 2001 and written into the Party Constitution at the 16<sup>th</sup> Party Congress in November 2002. As Jia (2016: 79) points out, ‘this phenomenon has become somewhat controversial because private firm owners are overrepresented in the Congress and the Conference relative to citizens from other walks of life, particularly peasants... There is some concern that private firm owners might use their positions to pursue private interests rather than those of their constituents’.

In short, such a Confucian social model is less convincing because it is purely based on the prescription of classical Confucianism rather than the real behaviors of Chinese entrepreneurs. The above discussion reminds us of the danger of Chinese exceptionalism because it may give Chinese indigenous management researchers a kind of bias toward Western theories and Chinese phenomena.

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