Independent Thinking: A Path to Outstanding Scholarship

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ABSTRACT   This editorial essay addresses the importance of independent thinking in the process of developing outstanding scholarship. Through analysing the difficulties of maintaining independent thinking in the Chinese culture, the paper proposes four approaches: understanding the power of the minority; transforming outside pressure into intrinsic motivation; listening with an open mind; and developing a passion for research.

KEYWORDS   independent thinking, listening, passion, power of the minority

INTRODUCTION

China is emerging as a prominent force shaping global business. In some sectors, China is like the 'world's largest startup' and, in other sectors, its largest 'turn-around' (McGregor, 2005). The secret of the Chinese economic miracle relies on its fast growing companies, grassroots entrepreneurial activities and its hard-working people. As the largest developing economy in the world, China provides a rich context for management research and a great opportunity for management scholars to experiment and to test theories, models and ideas. China today is a golden opportunity for management scholars to make contributions to theory as well as practice. For example, the wide variety of corporate ownership and governance types provides a rich context for investigating its influence on firm performance, on access to financial and human resources, or on success in the global market. Another example is the huge talent war that involves not only individuals, but also entire teams, leaving firms for better offers elsewhere. While employee turnover has been studied for decades, 'group turnover' may have its own characteristics and mechanisms that have not been investigated in prior research. Moreover, in addition to these opportunities for research on novel topics, many traditional topics, such as grassroots entrepreneurship, leadership, teamwork, cooperation, or competition have not yet not been studied in the Chinese context.

These opportunities are richest for Chinese researchers who know best the Chinese context. Yet for Chinese researchers, myself included, many challenges exist as well. One such challenge is from within. We Chinese often constrain ourselves to certain ways of thinking and conducting research. Sometimes we dare not break old moulds to propose completely new paradigms. We follow what others do and study the topics that have been studied by others; we hope that our ideas do not deviate too radically from the norm so that our papers can be accepted for publication (Leung, 2007; Tsui, 2007). In this editorial, I would like to address this challenge and share my view of the most important quality in an outstanding scholar – independent thinking.

THE CHALLENGE OF INDEPENDENT THINKING IN THE CHINESE CULTURE

Independent thinking is the capacity to maintain a rational, neutral, objective view about all topics and phenomena, including social problems, organizational issues, teamwork issues and even individual problems. It includes the ability to use multiple perspectives or unique or unusual perspectives to analyse and interpret certain phenomena. Scholars who are independent thinkers insist on using consistent scientific criteria and universal value systems to evaluate the phenomena of their interest. They emphasize using new approaches and being different rather than following and imitating others. Similarly, managers who think independently do not blindly adopt a popular practice without asking for evidence to support the usefulness of the practice and to ensure the practice is meaningful for their companies.

Yet, independent thinking is difficult in Chinese culture, both for scholars and managers. Individuals in any society are 'socialized' by the society and unconsciously wear 'coloured glasses' when observing and judging what they see. As a result, they primarily see what they expect to see or want to see (Dearborn & Simon, 1958). Sometimes, they overlook facts, and they can even interpret opposite evidence as supporting their views (Tranfield, Denyer & Smart 2003; Weiner, 2003). Another psychological barrier to independent thinking about Chinese phenomena is the outmoded 'advanced–backward' construct (Jiang, 2006), which gives rise to evaluating Western ways as 'advanced' and non-Western ways as 'backward'.

This mindless premium placed on practices of Western origin can be seen in several trends in Chinese management. In recent years, many ideas and slogans from Western management fads have become popular in China, such as 'fire the bottom 10 percent of the workforce', 'competitive advantage', 'self-managed teams', 'balanced scorecard', 'six sigma', '360 degree evaluation', 'ERP' and 'CRM'. These injunctions seem to be taken more seriously and applied more rigidly in China than in the USA. For example, when GE uses the 'fire the bottom

10 percent of performers' policy in managing performance, it measures two dimensions: performance and value congruence. If an employee scores low on both dimensions, he or she is likely to be fired. This evaluation system created a very competitive environment inside GE; it was consistent with the corporate culture and the streamlining that now retired CEO Jack Welch wanted and probably contributed to GE's sustained growth through his years at the helm. In contrast, most successful US companies have never deployed such a policy. Three years ago when I visited China, almost every business executive was talking about GE's evaluation system and told me that they wanted to use it in their companies too. When I asked them why, they said that if GE's success is partly related to this system, then this system should be equally effective in their companies. They were not considering the strategic context in which this policy worked for GE and whether or not this corresponded with their own context.

Another example of Western trends applied to Chinese management practice is the 'Learning organization' concept (Senge, 1994). It refers to an organization in which members are engaged in constant learning and apply new knowledge to improve the quality of product or service. These organizations encourage employees to 'think outside of the box', try new ways of doing things, share knowledge and challenge one another. For firms in fast changing markets, these practices helped the firms continually reinvent themselves. This construct was well received by US companies, and many become more willing to increase investment in employee training and development. Many companies opened campuses for training, provided tuition reimbursement, or invested in online tools to facilitate employee learning. However, when this concept came to China, it was applied very loosely to groups and organizations of all kinds. The phrases 'learning family', 'learning school', 'learning government' and even 'learning China' appeared in Chinese newspapers, magazines and business forums (see http://www.xxzg.net/ for a full range of these terms).

Just as Western constructs are appropriated uncritically in management practice, so are they also in management research. Chinese scholars and students often ask me what's 'hot' in today's management research. They want to find out what's popular, and they assume what's popular is 'advanced'. The cliché of 'advanced vs. backward' guides choices of statistical methods as researchers apply 'advanced' statistical tools (e.g., hierarchical regression, HLM) in their research to increase the likelihood of acceptance for publication, regardless of the fit to the problem. A review of Asian management research by White (2002) and of Chinese management studies by Li and Tsui (2002) confirmed that Asian scholars tend to focus on topics popular in Western literature.

The salience of such a phenomenon is consistent with the Theory of Reasoned Action (Ajzon & Fishbein, 1980). This theory posits that people are rational and they engage in deep analysis before taking an action. Two main factors are taken into consideration in this process: (i) one's personal attitude toward such action;

and (ii) one's perceived social norm, or 'how others will perceive me if I do such a thing'. When these two factors are consistent and positive, people take the action without hesitation. However, when these two factors are not consistent, people are unsure whether to follow their own attitude or the perceived social norm. Research findings from cross-cultural research suggest that there exists cultural difference in such behaviour. In countries that emphasize individualism, such as the USA, Canada, or Australia, the majority of people will rely on their own value or attitude to make a decision, whereas in countries that emphasize collectivism, such as China, Japan, or Korea, people are more likely to follow the social norm in determining behaviour (e.g., Suh, Diener, Oishi, & Triandis, 1998). Therefore, in collective and relationship oriented cultures, people's behaviour to a large extent reflects the value orientation of the society, rather than their own values. Scholars raised in a collectivist culture, such as China's, are not immune to this condition; they will experience more strain in pursuing independent thinking than scholars raised in more individualistic cultures.

Pursuing popular topics rather than independent topics has consequences. One is short-term success rather than long-term impact. Because hot topics change fast (today OCB, tomorrow emotional contagion; today competitive advantage, tomorrow creativity and innovation), scholars following the fads do not accrue accumulated insights into one topic. The distinctiveness of the scholar's identity is diminished. After decades of research, such scholars do not have a focused research stream and, hence, do not develop a reputation for an idea that they could claim to be their own. Those who pursue hot topics are unlikely to become the leader of a research stream or an innovator of a new research paradigm and, as a result, their contribution to management science will be very limited. Without independent thinking, a researcher is unlikely to become an outstanding scholar.

DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT THINKING

The Chinese landscape is filled with opportunities to study unique phenomena and to develop new explanations for them. To develop relevant and valid knowledge about organizations in China, there is a critical need for independent thinking about Chinese organizations. Below, I offer four means by which scholars can develop independent thinking.

Understanding the Power of Minority

Assume for a moment that you and your colleagues are discussing a research idea about studying the group turnover phenomenon I mentioned at the beginning of this essay. Your colleagues suggest the notion of 'job embeddedness' (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski & Erez, 2001) to study this, yet you feel that other factors might have more predictive power, for example, the charisma of the team leader,

conformity of the members, or company policy. Your colleagues argue that job embeddedness is a relatively new concept and that there have been studies supporting it. Using this concept would increase the probability of your paper being accepted. Everybody seems to agree with this suggestion. What would you do? We can gain some ideas from social psychological research on conformity.

Psychologists have studied individual conforming behaviour in groups for many years. The most classic are the experiments conducted by Asch (1951). Asch had a basic assumption that the USA is a society with a strong individualistic orientation and with an emphasis on independence. Individuals are more likely to insist on their own thinking and less likely to be influenced by others. Therefore, when facing a simple task with a group of strangers, people will give independent answers. He designed a simple judgmental task of line length to test this idea. To his surprise he found that only 25 percent of the participants gave an independent and correct answer. More than 70 percent of the participants followed others' incorrect answer at least once.

To further find out the group size effect, Asch experimented with groups of one to 14 members with unanimous or differing responses. He found that when there is one person expressing a different view, even when all the other people express the same view, the likelihood of conformity decreased dramatically. More interestingly, he found such an effect even when this one person remained silent rather than expressing a different view! Many replications by other researchers have confirmed this finding that a single person with a different view can undermine the power of the majority's consensus and give courage to those who originally do not dare to express different views. This is the opposite of conformity and I call it 'the power of the minority'.

This power of the minority is illustrated in a famous US film called *12 Angry Men*. One jury member, who believes in the innocence of the defendant, manages to convince the other 11 jurors, who all originally believed that the defendant was guilty. From history, we also know a lot of cases where the 'minority' influenced the majority and changed the course of history forever. Galileo, Darwin, Marx and Einstein once were all 'minorities'. It was their courage to express their minority views that changed the majority's perception and understanding of the world, and their ideas eventually became mainstream. When you find out that the topic of your interest is in the 'minority' or when you discover that your perspectives are completely different from those of others, do not be scared or discouraged. It is possible that when you speak your mind, even with a trembling voice, it gives courage to people after you to express their 'minority views'.

Under which circumstances will the minority's voice be heard by the majority? Research shows two crucial conditions (see Moscovici, 1985, for a review). First, the minority opinion needs to be highly consistent. For example, all your colleagues think that 'job embeddedness' is a viable concept for your study, but you see a lot of problems and raise your concern. At first, they ignore your view because it does

not concur with theirs. Yet, if you repeatedly raise your concern and provide consistent evidence and arguments to prove your concern's validity, they are more likely to pay attention. Second, the minority's attitude should not be too rigid. Suppose when you question the usefulness of 'job embeddedness' to explain group turnover, your colleagues provide many reasons to justify their case. If you fail to listen or blindly insist that you are right, your influence on them will be limited. In contrast, if you express that you hear their logic and see their data, but also emphasize the reasonableness of your opinion, you will be able to influence them more. Being in the minority is lonely. Often the majority is not monolithic; there are likely to be a few individuals in the majority who are sympathetic to the minority view but have not expressed this. With persistence, the minority can incrementally win over the support of others in the group and lead them to look at things from different perspectives. Once they see the logic and rationale behind the minority's position, they are more likely to accept their views (Moscovici, 1985). Understanding the power of the minority could encourage a person to engage in independent thinking.

Transforming Outside Pressure into Intrinsic Motivation

Both professors and students in China are under great pressure to publish, especially in international journals. Many Chinese universities have instituted a promotion and tenure system similar to that in the West, especially the USA (Zhang, 2004). Even doctoral students need publications to graduate. This pressure can make research more painful than stimulating, and it can discourage independent thinking. Pressure for quick publication often gives rise to less creative contributions. The researchers add one moderating variable to an existing model and write one paper, then add another mediating variable and write another paper. This situation is not healthy for the development of the Chinese management field and the discovery of valid knowledge.

To counteract these external pressures, we need to reawaken our intrinsic motivation for research. This is consistent with the essence of the 'self-determination theory' (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-determination theory posits that when a person's behaviour is driven by his/her intrinsic forces, the motivation is strongest. When the pressure is from outside, there will be several reactions to it: rejection, acceptance, identification and internalization. With rejection or superficial acceptance, one completes a task but does not see much meaning associated with the task. With identification and internalization, one actually transforms outside pressure to intrinsic motivation and regards the work as a necessary component of self-realization. Research has shown (e.g., Chen, Pillutla, & Yao, forthcoming) that behaviours driven by external pressure such as material rewards or punishment are likely to disappear once such pressure is lifted; whereas behaviours driven by 'internalization of pressure' are unlikely to alter with changes in the

external environment. Consequently, if the value and meaning of conducting research are internalized by the researcher, the drive for the pursuit of truth will last longer and so will the effort for engaging in independent thinking.

Listening with an Open Mind

Sometimes, different views or interpretations about a person or an incident may be due to different information about this person or incident rather than different opinions or different values. However, in many situations, once we form an impression about a person or an incident, we do not like to get new information or adjust our evaluation. Stasser and colleagues (e.g., Stasser & Stewart, 1992; Stasser & Titus, 1985) have studied the information sharing process in group decision-making. They discovered the 'information sampling' phenomenon. In their classical experiment, they formed three-person groups to make a decision about who was the best candidate for the president of a student association. They first asked the subjects to read the candidates' background information individually, then to discuss them as a group. The information about the three candidates A, B and C, is shown below in Table 1.

They created three experimental conditions. First, all group members have all information. Second, some information is shared by all members (i.e., common information), while other information is owned by only one group member (i.e., unique information). For example, two pieces of positive information and two pieces of negative information about candidate A, two pieces of positive information and two pieces of neutral information about candidate B and four pieces of negative information about candidate C are shared by all members (common information), whereas one piece of positive and one piece of negative information about each candidate is only known to one of the members (unique information). Third, only two pieces of positive information about each candidate are shared by all members, whereas all of the other information is unique. After participants individually studied the information they received, they were put into three-person

Table 1. A typical experimental design to study information sharing in group decision making

Information (by piece)	Candidates		
	A	B	C
Positive	8	4	4
Neutral	0	4	0
Negative	4	4	8

Note: This illustration is derived from the following studies: Stasser and Stewart (1992); Stasser and Titus (1985).

groups. Theoretically, if all information is discussed (no matter if it is common or unique information) during group interaction, all group decisions will be the same, i.e., A is the best candidate.

What Stasser and colleagues found, however, was something quite different. Only groups in the first condition chose A, whereas the majority of groups in the second condition chose B and groups in the third condition made different choices. Based on the content analysis of the videotaped group discussions, they found that, contrary to what one would have expected – that the unique information would catch members' attention during their discussion, the information that was discussed the most, over and over again, was the common information. In other words, the information received before group discussion somehow had a great effect on members' judgment, and this judgment influenced how they processed information during group discussion. Two conclusions can be drawn from this research: (i) when people receive the same information, they make similar judgments, indicating that the judgment criteria are similar, whereas when they get different information, even with similar criteria, they make different judgments; and (ii) once a person has made a judgment based on the available information, it is likely that this person will disregard new information not consistent with his/her original judgment.

Therefore, when we hear different views or opinions, we should not assume it reflects that we have different value systems or judgment criteria than the speaker. It is equally likely that we had different information, facts, or evidence. Independent thinking encourages us to listen with an open mind, and listening carefully will further foster independent thinking.

Developing a Passion for Research

A few colleagues of mine are world renowned management scholars. They have researched many interesting phenomena, published hundreds of articles and earned great respect in the field. I asked them what made them work so hard and be so productive. Their answers were surprisingly similar, that is, they are passionate about what they study. It is this passion that drives them to continue working hard after they get tenure; it is this passion that sustains their exploration of different research topics and produces their unique views and thoughts; and it is this passion that brings them great satisfaction in publishing articles, while ignoring the 'fame' or 'external reward' associated with publishing.

There is a connection between a person's passion about a research topic and the depth of his/her observation and insights regarding the topic. Often I hear my students say that the most difficult time during their doctoral study is when they need to choose their dissertation topics. Sometimes even after they have made their topic choices, they feel unsure and even pained every time they need to think more about the topic. I jokingly say to them, 'if this research topic brings you such pain,

you'd better stop now rather than later'. It seems to me that they are in the strange cycle of doing research for research's sake, rather than doing research for the love of discovering something interesting, something that has not been revealed before and something that really intrigues them. Without passion for the topic you study, it is difficult to think deeply and offer insights, thus limiting one's potential contribution to the field.

I remember the first time I read an article on social dilemma written by David Messick and his colleagues (Messick, Wilke, Brewer, Kramer, Zemke & Lui, 1983). It was 1986 when I was a student at Hangzhou University pursuing a Master's degree. In the article, they described the resource dilemma and studied the need for leadership in contexts where group members overuse resources. I was absolutely elated and stunned by the complexity of the dilemma and couldn't stop thinking about it afterwards. My level of interest was passionate, perhaps even obsessive! I needed to choose a research topic for my master's thesis at that time, so, without a doubt, I chose social dilemma. I designed my own experiment, recruited subjects by going to classrooms for volunteers and borrowed a conference room as my laboratory. I remember the great sense of exploration and adventure I had at that time. It was the very first social psychological experiment ever done in the history of our department. It was an incredible experience.

For the same reason, I felt great excitement after I arrived at the University of Illinois and found out that Professor Komorita was conducting social dilemma experiments. During the years of my doctoral study, I kept thinking about one question: in a social dilemma situation where there is a conflict between maximizing personal interest and maximizing collective interest, what will be effective means to induce group members to cooperate and contribute to the group? I thought about this when I was in class or asleep, when I was walking or when I ate. Sometimes ideas would come to me when I woke up in the middle of the night. I also used the social dilemma perspective to observe things that I would not have noticed before. For example, issues related to team cooperation, strategic alliance, air pollution, over-lumbering, population control, recycling, even corruption, could be analysed using the social dilemma perspective. Thinking about these issues has become an automatic process of my brain; it thinks in these terms on its own, without needing my instruction to do so. It was this kind of 'obsession' and deep thinking that produced many research ideas and insights to this problem. My curiosity has generated many studies and lead to many published articles on this topic.

In fact, many management scholars are 'obsessed' with what they study. For example, Jeanne Brett studies negotiation, adopts the negotiation approach to other phenomena and constantly discovers factors that could influence the negotiation process such as individual characteristics, cognition and cultural aspects. Almost all of her published articles are related to negotiation (Adair & Brett, 2005; Brett & Okumura, 1998; Brett et al., 1998; Brett, 2000; Tinsley & Brett, 2002).

Weiying Zhang is another example; his 'obsession' with game theory is evident from all of the books and articles he has written. He uses game theory to explain many phenomena in Chinese society such as personal property, law and regulation, company reputation and interpersonal trust, and he provides a lot of insights into the understanding of the nature of the problems and possible solutions (Zhang, 2001, 2003, 2006).

Toshio Yamagishi is another scholar who is completely passionate about his research. His early work was related to social dilemma, and he proposed the structural and motivational approaches as solutions to social dilemma. Under the structural approach, he studied how the sanction system works to promote cooperation. Later he moved back to Japan (from the University of Washington) and started to research differences in the mechanisms of trust between Americans and Japanese. He proposed a theory challenging Fukuyama's (1995) arguments about high levels of general trust in Japan. He posits that the high level of general trust among the Japanese can be explained by the sanctioning system in Japan. That is, in the closed social networks of Japanese society, anyone who violates the norm will be sanctioned (e.g., lose his/her reputation). If you remove this sanction by putting a Japanese person into a group of complete strangers, the general trust level will be dramatically reduced (Yamagishi, 2003; Yamagishi & Sato, 1986; Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). I visited Yamagishi in Japan in 2006 and had several dinners with him, and he told me about his new experiment on trust with great excitement and enthusiasm. He is studying the trust between people from different countries and regions, examining, for example, how much trust there is between a mainland Chinese and a Chinese from Taiwan, between a mainland Chinese and a Japanese and between a Japanese and a Chinese from Taiwan and how that trust influences their communication and behavioural interaction. Even though he does not have animated facial expressions when he talks, you could clearly feel the passion inside him. It is this passion that leads him to pursue research for his life, to think independently and to leave his mark in the scientific pursuit of social phenomena.

CONCLUSION

Independent thinking is a path to outstanding scholarship. I hope this essay will stimulate more discussion on this issue and give encouragement to Chinese scholars for innovative scholarship through independent thinking.

NOTE

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