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COMMENTARY

# Chinese Management Research at a Crossroads: The Past, Present, and Future

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**Abstract**
Contemporary business and management research in China has advanced rapidly, making significant strides in the introduction of theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, local theory development, and practical applications. Much of this research continues to draw on Western theories, and since the reform and opening up, Chinese management research has evolved through distinct stages of globalization and localization. Today, it faces new challenges amid anti-globalization trends. At this critical juncture, the key question is whether China should continue integrating Western theories or capitalize on the opportunity to develop indigenous management theories. This paper explores the differences in scientific development concepts and focuses between China and the West, the historical trajectory of Chinese management research, and the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. To enhance China's contribution to global management research, we propose that it is essential to sustain international collaboration, deepen understanding of frontline enterprise practices, promote micro-level research and interpretation with Chinese characteristics, and cultivate an open academic community, while optimizing the research evaluation system.

**摘要**
自改革开放以来，中国管理研究经历了全球化和本地化的不同阶段，而今天又在逆全球化趋势中面临着新的挑战。在这个关键时刻，中国是应该继续整合西方理论，还是利用这个机会发展本土管理理论是十分重要的议题。本文探讨了中西方科学发展观念的差异、中国管理学研究的历史发展轨迹以及面临的挑战和机遇。为了增加中国对全球管理学领域知识的贡献，我们建议必须保持国际开放合作，加深对企业一线实践的 理解，推动具有中国特色的微观层面的研究和解释，并在优化科研评价体系的同时努力培育形成开放的学术社区。

**Keywords:** anti-globalization; globalization; localization; management research
**关键词:** 管理学研究; 全球化; 本土化; 逆全球化

## Introduction

Since the 1978 reform and opening up, China has rapidly developed into the world's second-largest economy and an emerging leader in scientific research. By 2016, China surpassed the US in total basic science publications, and in 2019, it overtook the US in the top 1% of most-cited publications (Wagner, Zhang, & Leydesdorff, 2022). This progress is largely attributed to China's substantial investment in science and technology and its highly skilled workforce.

The discipline of management, introduced from the West, has evolved in China alongside the nation's transition from a planned to a market economy, resulting in significant advancements in research, education, and management practices. Today, China is a major contributor to global business research, both in terms of volume and impact (Mao, 2018). The development of business management in China has been driven by rapid industrialization, marketization, and global informatization. Initially influenced by the Soviet model, China later adopted management theories from the US, Japan, and

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Europe. As China's economy developed rapidly, companies such as Huawei, Tencent, and Haier gained international recognition (Gary & Michele, 2018; Greeven, Xin, & Yip, 2023; Guo, Zhang, Dodgson, Gann, & Cai, 2018), Chinese management scholars are now increasingly focused on developing models with local characteristics. However, despite the increase in publications in top management journals, a significant gap remains compared to the US, particularly in terms of high-quality papers (Sun & Yao, 2022) and theoretical innovations rooted in Chinese practices. This raises important questions regarding the potential for independent contributions without international collaboration and the alignment of Chinese research with universal management theories developed in the West.

Over the past four decades, emerging economies like China have become increasingly central to management research. However, Western theories – such as institutional theory, resource dependence theory, and agency theory – continue to dominate analyses of Chinese companies (Liu, Heugens, Wijen, & van Essen, 2022). Nearly all management theories stem from developed economies, thereby reflecting a Western perspective (Filatotchev, Ireland, & Stahl, 2022). This has sparked a debate over whether management research should prioritize localization or universality. Some scholars advocate for internationalization, contending that certain theories possess universal applicability. Filatotchev et al. (2022) propose an open system perspective, using multiple universal theories in situational research while considering contextual characteristics to explain unique phenomena. However, critics argue that this approach remains insufficient, as it fails to fully address the underlying limitations of theories developed from a Western viewpoint. These theories may overlook context-specific differences such as the causes of persistent poverty. As a result, some scholars call for the development of indigenous management theories tailored to local conditions, which could also foster methodological innovation (Bruton, Zahra, Van De Ven, & Hitt, 2022). This raises critical questions about whether management research should consider the unique specificities of developing countries and whether there exists a singular, unified management science or distinct management sciences across different regions.

In recent years, scholars have increasingly reflected on the trajectory of China's management research and its future direction. Some criticize Western management theories being ill-suited to China's unique context (Wei, Yang, & Chen, 2022), calling for the development of a distinct knowledge system rooted in Chinese characteristics (Du & Sun, 2022). As Chinese management research approaches a critical juncture, this paper aims to review its historical development and address the following key questions: What challenges does Chinese management research currently face? How does it differ from Western approaches? How should China's management research evolve to make meaningful contributions to enrich the global pool of management knowledge?

## Management Research Development in China: Globolization and Localization

### *Globalization Trends and the Development of Chinese Management*

After China joined WTO in 2001, the country became increasingly integrated into the global economy. But back in May 1998, China already set the goal of building world-class universities to enhance the global competitiveness of its higher education system. Supported by government initiatives, many Chinese universities have since achieved global success. China's entry into the WTO further advanced management research through increased international exchanges. Strategic measures, such as the 2004 'going global' strategy and the 2006 'Plan 111' for world-class universities, promoted international collaboration, technology transfer, and the global dissemination of academic achievements. These initiatives have strengthened China's global research competitiveness and nurtured top international academic talent.

Early international collaborations were instrumental in introducing Western management theories to China. Notably, the workshops on empirical management research at Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (1999–2002), led by Professor Anne Tsui, played a pivotal role in integrating Chinese practices with Western methodologies, training many junior researchers who later became leaders in organizational management. Tsui also founded the International Association for Chinese Management Research (IACMR), which has been crucial in advancing research on organization

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and management within the Chinese context. The IACMR's diverse academic activities have significantly contributed to the internationalization of Chinese research, with its flagship journal, *Management and Organization Review*, further promoting Chinese management research globally. These efforts have boosted academic exchanges, leading to an increase in publications by Chinese scholars in top-tier management journals and greater participation in global academic activities (Zhang, Luo, Song, & Huang, 2016).

Since the late 1980s, Chinese academia has increasingly focused on quantifying journal quality through impact factors, leading to the creation of ranking lists like the UK's CABS Academic Journal Guide (Tsui & McKiernan, 2022). As Chinese management research internationalized, its journals began to align with Western standards, emphasizing quantification, normative practices, and theoretical rigor. This shift advanced Chinese management research, fostering empirical research paradigms and greater scientific rigor. Many scholars who studied abroad and returned have played a key role in globalizing Chinese management research, aligning it more closely with Western standards. This alignment is evident in the standardization of methodologies, the expansion of general management knowledge, and increased collaboration with Western scholars. These efforts enabled a more globally comparable analysis of Chinese phenomena, particularly in the contexts of emerging and transitioning economies.

China's drive to build world-class universities has also pushed research institutions to prioritize quantitative metrics and publications in top international journals, restricting scholars' autonomy in selecting research topics and creating tension between national interests and international publication goals (Gao & Zheng, 2020). This extreme incentive model encourages faculty to focus on publishing in journals listed in UTD24, often at the expense of meaningful theoretical advancements and societal impact. Consequently, the emphasis on 'A-list' publications overshadows the importance of addressing practical problems and offering solutions (Tsui & McKiernan, 2022). This trend is exacerbated by the lack of a fair domestic evaluation system and the pressure for internationalization.

### The Idea of Localization and the Development of Chinese Management

In ancient China, influential philosophies like Confucianism, Taoism, along with Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* – considered as early strategic management texts – exemplified the nation's intellectual contributions, gaining global recognition. However, as China integrated into the global community, a debate arose: Can Western management theories effectively guide Chinese organization practices?

The Oriental Management Research Center at Fudan University, established in 1999, was the first institution dedicated to studying Chinese management thought, aiming to develop research grounded in Eastern philosophies; however, most publications from that center were written in Chinese. Meanwhile, many scholars outside mainland China have made notable strides, with concepts like *mianzi* (Hwang, 1987; Lockett, 1988), *guanxi* (Chen & Chen, 2004; Child & Lu, 1996), *yin-yang* (Fang, 2012; Li, 2014), and 'paternalistic leadership' (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014; Farh & Cheng, 2000) gaining international recognition. Despite this progress, the global influence of Chinese management research remains limited, prompting scholars to strengthen the local academic community and establish journals to promote indigenous research.

In recent years, Chinese companies have experienced remarkable growth in scale and innovation, producing a substantial number of high-quality and unicorn enterprises. As of the 2023 Fortune Global 500 list, China leads with 142 companies, surpassing the US's 136, with 31 Chinese firms ranked in the top 100. Chinese companies have attracted international attention, with 147 corporate cases involving 110 firms featured in the Harvard Case Library, such as Haier and Alibaba (Zhang & Wu, 2019). China has become one of the global leaders in sectors like e-commerce, mobile payments, and artificial intelligence, pioneering innovative business models, and has achieved success in fields like high-speed rail and ultra-high voltage. This has spurred the domestic academic community to focus more on narrating Chinese stories and developing knowledge systems rooted in local practices. The National Social Science Foundation has emphasized Chinese modernization in its project selection, while top domestic journals, such as *Management World*, encourage the inclusion

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of Chinese cases to promote indigenous research. Recent publications have highlighted China's breakthroughs in core technologies and its new system for mobilizing resources nationwide.

The debate over whether Chinese management research should focus on international applicability or distinct Chinese characteristics is ongoing. Many scholars advocate for creating original Chinese management concepts and theories rooted in local practices (Tsui & Lyu, 2015). Some argue that through integrating these local practices with proper Western management theories, China can develop its own theoretical innovations and make marginal contributions that could also be valuable for Western management practices. These practices and theories developed are not mutually exclusive. Ignoring this balance may hinder constructive dialogue between China and the West in developing management science.

### *The Balance between Globalization Paradigm and Localization Trend*

Analysis of Chinese research in leading management journals since 1998 shows a steady rise in both publications and citations, reflecting the growing influence of Chinese scholars (Wei et al., 2022). Despite the globalization of Chinese management research and the increasing attention on Chinese management practices, the theoretical gap between Chinese and Western management research persists, as many Chinese scholars often adhere to Western values and models, neglecting unique Chinese characteristics (Bruton, Zahra, & Cai, 2018). Most research relies on Western theories and paradigms, which may be less effective in analyzing Chinese phenomena if not properly contextualized (Tsui, 2004). The alignment with Western paradigms often results in narratives that lack relevance to local realities (Liang, 2018) and the paradox of strong scientific rigor with low practical relevance (Mao, 2018).

Some studies, primarily offering Western interpretations, may even misrepresent original policies. For instance, a paper published in *Organization Science* in 2016 (Eesley, Li, & Yang, 2016) claimed that China's 985 universities were designed to enhance students' entrepreneurial and innovative capacities, a view that may have misinterpreted the government's actual goals. Similarly, a paper published in *Production and Operations Management* in 2023 claimed that China's strategy for innovative cities aimed to boost enterprises' international innovation and competitiveness through increased US patenting, which might be far away from the original policy objectives (Chen, Liu, Li, & Linderman, 2023). These misinterpretations happen when the authors adhere to dominant Western theories when making arguments and predictions, and even with empirical evidence, they do not offer true understanding of China's realities.

Furthermore, an overemphasis on standardization and complex quantitative methods leads to fragmented, data-driven studies with limited theoretical contributions. Academic research should prioritize contributions to science and society. However, the increasing use of financial incentives for Chinese management research has introduced a utilitarian bias, where financial rewards for high-level publications compromise scientific rigor (Tsui & Lyu, 2015). A growing trend toward applied research has also resulted in chasing 'hot' topics, where concepts like sharing economy and blockchain are explored superficially to align with social trends. Scholars may prioritize proposing novel concepts over in-depth exploration of social responsibilities or real phenomena, stifling theoretical innovations. In contrast, breakthroughs in management research often stem from decades of sustained scholarly inquiry, highlighting the need for rigorous and long-term research.

## The Crossroads of Chinese Management Research Development

### *The Difference between Generality and Particularity*

Western scientific research prioritizes the development of a universal knowledge infrastructure, positing that knowledge transcends race, country, and region. It emphasizes that science should be universally applicable and not constrained by particularities, reflecting Western market economy perceptions and individualistic values. Many universal theories in management science are rooted in Western Judeo-Christian traditions. In contrast, China focuses more on the applicability and contextual aspects

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of knowledge, emphasizing collective culture and serving national strategic needs. This approach sometimes creates a gap with the universal values of science, leading to a focus on applied aspects of management studies. Consequently, China's knowledge architecture created by scholars is a hybrid of Western theories and Chinese-specific domestic needs or factors. However, in reality, scholars must realize that it is challenging to establish generalized theoretical explanations that fit all firms at all times and everywhere. Suppose scholars select the appropriate level of abstraction when studying in the Chinese-specific context, as China accounts for 20 percent of the world's population and has over sixty million enterprises. In that case, these research findings focusing on the Chinese market can also make a lot of generality (Murmann, 2014).

### *Different Focuses on Macro and Micro Aspects*

Western management science emphasizes micro-behavioral mechanisms like emotion, motivation, values, and interpersonal relationships, believing that understanding these aspects is crucial for uncovering general knowledge and reflecting on philosophical issues. This emphasis on individuality fosters a diverse body of knowledge. In contrast, Chinese scholars prioritize knowledge that addresses practical needs, given China's developmental context. For example, we have seen an obvious increase in studies that received government grants that focus on certain core and key technologies as research subjects. Research tends to be problem-driven and aligned with state strategic priorities, leading universities and research institutes to concentrate on similar topics to secure funding. This trend limits academic attention to micro-research that also has theoretical value, reducing the potential of abstracting regional-level and individual-level issues and impeding theoretical development at a micro level. Thus, scholars pay more attention to topics such as the whole national system, industrial policy, technological catch-up, etc., causing management research in China to become increasingly homogeneous. Besides, cultural differences between East and West remain influential. For example, while Western research often highlights topics like gender equality, race, religious beliefs, trade unions, and inclusiveness, Chinese management research tends to afford less attention to these issues.

### *The Impact of Anti-Globalization*

The scientific community ideally operates on a global scale. However, the rise of 'anti-globalization' due to political and economic developments, such as the Sino-US trade and technology war, has intensified academic barriers. The US has adopted a more hostile stance toward scientific collaboration with China, leading to increased visa scrutiny for Chinese STEM students and reduced bilateral cooperation. Deteriorating US-China relations have notably impacted population flows and academic exchanges (Wang, Tang, Cao, & Zhou, 2023), and the cooperation between industry and top universities has declined. Historically, China and the US had a strong research partnership, with over half of CNS journal papers from Chinese scholars involving US collaboration (Wang, Yu, Wei, & Liu, 2021). Yet, while co-authored papers between the two countries increased between 2015 and 2020, its growth has slowed since 2018 (Mitchell Crow, 2022). Furthermore, management research, which often addresses strategic and industrial policies, faces additional scrutiny due to national security concerns. Geopolitical tensions are thus affecting academic development, with increasing emphasis on localized research potentially creating a more insular academic environment, contrary to open science principles, hindering the development of the management discipline.

## Enlightenment and Prospects for Future Development of Chinese Management Science

As Chinese management science evolves, it encounters both opportunities and challenges. The historical development and current state of the field raises critical questions: Can Western management theories adequately explain Chinese phenomena, or is there a need to develop distinct Chinese management theories? Bruton argues that developing countries should create indigenous theories grounded in local contexts, which could complement or even transform existing frameworks. Over time, such

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theories might achieve universal acceptance (Bruton et al., 2022). Conversely, some assert that theories are not confined by national borders; if they can elucidate Chinese scenarios, they should also apply to phenomena in developed nations like the US. The applicability of existing Western management theories, such as agency theory, to Chinese management practices cannot be overlooked. The future of Chinese management research must strike a balance between utilizing universal theories and developing unique, context-specific insights. Therefore, we propose the following directions:

**First, we advocate for sustained international cooperation and openness, recognizing that global collaboration is essential for scientific progress**. The essence of scientific advancement lies in fostering a better and more sustainable existence for all humanity. Many advanced, long-term research endeavours necessitate substantial human, material, and financial investments, often spanning multiple disciplines. Numerous challenges confronting the scientific community transcend national borders, such as the governance of artificial intelligence and climate change. International cooperation facilitates resource-sharing, knowledge exchange, and the integration of cutting-edge practices from academia, industry, and research worldwide. Such efforts not only drive scientific and technological advancements but also enhance social development. Openness allows Chinese researchers to leverage and assimilate international theories, methodologies, and experiences, thereby forging close connections with practical realities and enhancing the applicability of research findings, and boosting the global impact of China's academic community.

**Second, it is essential to strengthen our understanding of frontline enterprise practices.** While Chinese management research integrates some local practices, this integration remains insufficient. Several Chinese enterprises are setting global standards with distinct practices, yet academic research often lags in capturing the true mechanisms behind them. This disconnect results in research findings that do not fully reflect the realities of corporate management, with entrepreneurs rarely being the target audience for academic papers. We advocate for a shift within the academic community to increasingly deepen engagement with frontline practices. Some companies, like Tencent, are already fostering closer ties with researchers, offering opportunities for corporate visits and case study development. We hope that the academic community will compile typical case studies of Chinese companies and effectively narrate their stories. The academic community should forge closer collaborations with industry partners and harness relevant databases to conduct high-quality research. Drawing inspiration from Japan's example, such as total quality management (TQM) and lean production, which has had a strong impact on mainstream Western management theories, Chinese entrepreneurs' management approaches should likewise enrich global management theory. The success of Chinese companies offers valuable lessons for both Chinese and international enterprises. For example, the *Rendanheyi* model created by Haier shows that when everyone is directly accountable to customers and employees are energetic entrepreneurs, a big company can be agile (Gary & Michele, 2018). Companies like Alibaba, BYD, and Handu Group are reshaping management with 'digitally enhanced directed autonomy' approaches (Greeven et al., 2023), which empower employees with autonomy at scale, embracing 'single-threaded leadership', also offer valuable insights into their success.

**Third, there is a pressing need to deepen distinctive micro-level research and interpretation.** Delving into the contextualization of Chinese management phenomena is paramount for the development of theories imbued with local characteristics and for contributing to the global academic community. Through meticulous observation and case analyses of specific organizations, it becomes possible to unearth and synthesize management theories that are more easily explained. These theories can then be refined and validated, rendering them more universally applicable. Enterprises serve as the primary agents of innovation, with leaders, teams, and individuals within them serving as the proponents, implementers, and decision-makers of innovative ideas. Future studies should focus more on process development and internal behaviours of the companies, using participant observation and multiple sources to collect data. For example, a paper published in AMJ illustrates how the Chinese company Xiaomi became an ecosystem leader from a peripheral complementor through demand-side mobilization and supply-side orchestration (Shi, Liang, & Ansari, 2024) based on a 9-year observation (2014–2023). Another paper used Tencent as an example illustrating how WeChat as a new-to-the-world innovation is developed through intrafirm coopetition dynamic mechanism

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(Murmann & Zhu, 2021), while much previous research attributes WeChat's success to the quick iteration and the development of mobile internet based on superficial information, not digging into the real product development process. These studies are the result of a long-term track of Chinese companies that are connected with existing theories while also making significant new contributions. With more second-hand data available, researchers should engage in deep analysis of the mechanisms behind a phenomenon. For example, an empirical paper that studied how the Chinese public R&D subsidies influence firms' exploration behaviour under multi-level institutional settings in China, considering the contingency factors of different subsidy providers and recipients (Gao, Hu, Liu, & Zhang, 2021), provides a new perspective for the research field. Furthermore, enterprise management practices exhibit significant variations across diverse cultural and institutional contexts, conducting characteristic research and analyzing microscopic mechanisms are essential for achieving crucial theoretical breakthroughs. China boasts a diverse array of industries and enterprises, providing fertile ground for micro-organizational research, with numerous intriguing phenomena awaiting exploration. Noteworthy theoretical landmarks such as the *Jiangcun Economy* by Fei Xiaotong have emerged as hallmarks of Chinese sociology, describing how a rural village's economic system relates to the particular geographical environment and social structure (Fei, 2022). The case study method has held a particular significance in Chinese research (Eisenhardt, 2012). We believe such research endeavours will enhance the quality and reliability of scholarship while amplifying the international influence of Chinese management knowledge.

**Finally, it is imperative to cultivate an inclusive and open academic community while optimizing the scientific research evaluation system.** Disciplinary development and academic standards hinge upon mutual exchanges and learning among scholars. Encouraging diverse perspectives and fostering both competition and cooperation are essential. An inclusive and open academic platform will furnish scholars with ample dialogue opportunities, enabling the verification and refinement of research conclusions, and facilitating the legitimacy of theoretical innovations. However, the public nature of scientific knowledge, coupled with the imperfections of the current scientific research evaluation system and fierce competition in the academic community, often dissuades scholars from sharing and discussing their research findings out of concern for safeguarding the novelty of their ideas. In the field of management, publishing top-tier research often entails protracted periods of research, refinement, and review cycles. Nonetheless, young scholars confront mounting assessment pressures and often opt for the path of incremental innovation, prioritizing speed and quantity over quality and depth. Consequently, they gravitate toward mainstream international issues while neglecting local phenomena or non-mainstream topics that could yield significant academic contributions. Evaluations of research should not only focus on whether the questions are addressing national strategic needs; those derived from industrial or individual needs are also worth investigating, thus fostering industry–academic collaboration. This approach will invigorate researchers and industry entities alike, enabling management research to benefit industry development, fostering creativity among scientific researchers, empowering senior scholars to lead explorations, and guiding the majority of scholars back to the path of conducting research with a scientific spirit.

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