EDITORIAL ESSAY

MOR and Me: Reflecting on the Wisdom (and the Harm?) in Harmony

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> *The refined person seeks harmony but not sameness; the*
> *petty person seeks sameness but does not harmonize.*
> –Confucius, Analects 13.23

Management and Organization Review (MOR) was launched in 2005 as the journal of the International Association for Chinese Management Research with the mission to 'promote scholarly studies of organization and management of firms in the Chinese context'. This was an ambiguous message, with at least two distinct meanings. One goal was facilitating research impact by scholars in greater China, who had been largely excluded by the leading management journals. For example, Chinese researchers were often asked to justify using a sample from Shanghai or Hong Kong in ways that their Western counterparts were not asked to justify a sample from London or Chicago. Another goal was to further the management field's understanding of Chinese contexts. The journal sought to open management research to Chinese scholars and open China as a topic for management research.

As one of the team of founding editors, I've been asked to reflect on MOR's origins, its development, and its future.

Has MOR fulfilled its dual mission?

There can be no doubt that it has achieved the first goal of providing representations. Today we celebrate the journal thriving in its 20th year. A glance at the masthead reveals a largely Chinese editorial team. The Table of Contents from any issue reveals authors with Chinese names based at universities in the P.R. China or other culturally Chinese nations. Indisputably, MOR has been a conduit for the researchers of greater China to join the international discourse.

Progress in MOR's second endeavor of fostering insight is harder to assess from the surface. We are fortunate, however, to have a rigorous bibliometric study by Jia, You, and Du (2012) that tracked the management field's attention to Chinese contexts and MOR's role within that. They tallied China-related research over the years in the six leading management journals, starting with a few papers in the late 1980s and growing to a handful a year in the 1990s and then to a dozen or two a year by the late aughties. The start of MOR in 2005 substantially boosted the number of China-related articles, doubling it in some years.

Beyond merely counting articles, Jia et al. (2012) also analyzed their content for degree of theoretical contextualization. High contextualization corresponds to research that doesn't just draw on Chinese data but explains phenomena in terms of locally salient factors. Even higher contextualization involves building models from indigenous constructs and testing their generality. This analysis revealed that China-related MOR articles featured higher theoretical contextualization than the China-related papers in the mainstream journals. They have illuminated, at a macro level, the role of the *state* in corporate sponsorship and governance and the role of the *party* within organizational functions, and, at a micro level, the role of *Confucian norms* in interpersonal trust and relationships. In sum, MOR heightened the quantity and quality of research insights about how organizations and management is affected by Chinese contexts.

As the most 'micro' of the founding editors, trained in social and cultural psychology, I've been most involved with research on Confucian norms. If there is a central ideal in Confucian philosophy, it is *he* 和 (harmony), a virtue they admired in persons, relationships, organizations, societies, and even in nature. While the full resonances of this theme extend far beyond management, Confucian notions of intrapersonal and interpersonal harmony are very relevant to the conduct of managers in activities such as hiring and promoting, building trust in relationships, seeking financial support, and so forth. Confucians had no illusions about the inherent goodness of human nature. Individuals must be educated to restrain their emotions, thoughts, and interactions so as to preserve harmony 'in a complex society of contentious human beings' (Park & Luo, 2001: 456). Some of the hallmarks of Confucian ethics include role-appropriateness, concern for the collective, and respect for hierarchy. A refined person cultivates the right state of mind and the right relationships so as to sustain the harmonious social order.

The key to human social organization for Confucius was *wulun* (cardinal relationships in life). In the fundamental familial bonds – that between parent and child, or that between husband and wife – unequal parties find equilibrium through complementary roles. Likewise, for the organizational relationships that Confucius considered primary, such as between teacher and student or between a ruler and minister, a synergy emerges from complementary contributions. These relationships exemplify the logic of *yin-yang*, the balancing of opposing forces. Related constructs in the indigenous folk psychology are *ren* (benevolence), *jie* (self-restraint), *renqing* (the reciprocation of favors), *mianzi* (face), and *guanxi* (connections).

While these constructs have guided Chinese officials for many centuries (Hwang, 1987), their continuing relevance at the time MOR launched was an open question. Many sociologists held that business tends to be embedded within prior social networks when legal protections against defection are lacking (North, 1990). For this reason, they predicted a decline of *guanxi* practices in China as market and legal reforms were introduced. Guthrie (1998) found signs of this in interviews with managers at large Shanghai corporations. However, anthropologists such as Yang (1994, 2002) maintained that norms of developing trust through gifts and favors are a deep cultural repertoire that plays out differently in each new era. Consistent with this, Lin (1995) found that economic activities in rural areas were strongly embedded in social networks of kinship and other connections. Bian (1997, 2018) found evidence that the role of personal contacts in hiring increased as China implemented economic and legal reforms. Chen, Chen, and Xin (2004) found that hiring decisions favoring relatives hurt procedural justice perceptions in Chinese organizations but decisions favoring schoolmates did not.

The launch of MOR set off a wave of research that probed more deeply into antecedents and consequences of managerial relationships. In a study of individual differences that affect negotiator behaviors, Liu et al. (2005) found that measures of harmony, face, and *renqin* orientation mattered (beyond the influence of standard personality dimensions) in Chinese cultural contexts but not American contexts, highlighting the value of culturally sensitive constructs. Luo (2005, 2011) noted that family ties give rise to a psychology of obligation while weaker ties to acquaintancs involve *pao* or reciprocity. Chen and Chen (2004) called for studying the processes of developing ties to other businesspeople. Chen and Peng (2008) identified critical interpersonal events that change the affective closeness of relationships in Chinese contexts. Luo (2011) identified steps taken to transform acquaintance ties into family-like familiar ties. Studies by Chua and colleagues (Ng & Chua, 2006) and experiments by Song, Cadsby, and Bi (2012) established the key role of affect-based rather than cognition-based trust; this feeling of rapport rather than rational expectations accounts for the effects of social ties on trustful economic investment. Large-scale comparisons of managers' social networks found that affective ties tend to be intertwined with economic dependence ties in Chinese societies while they tend to be separate in Western societies (e.g., Chua, Ingram, & Morris, 2008, 2009; Morris, Podolny, & Sullivan, 2008). Evidence from several kinds of studies suggests that relationships among businesspeople develop differently in Chinese contexts in keeping with Confucian notions of harmony and *guanxi* (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013).

Another question is whether social network structures have different effects in different contexts. The uses or effects of Batjargal and Liu (2004) showed that *guanxi* ties were used to gain advantage in labor markets as well as capital markets. Zhou, Wu, and Luo (2007) examined how they can help in forging international partnerships and markets. However, is the process parallel in these

very different uses of relationships? Fu et al. (2006) distinguish different folk logics used by Chinese businesspeople with different kinds of relationships – *qinren* with family members versus *shuren* with acquaintances versus *shengren* with strangers. These tend to be used to gain access to different types of resources. Similarly, Li, Yao, Sue-Chan, and Xi (2011) showed that managers at state-owned enterprises tend to have more governmental ties than those employed by non-state-owned enterprises. Guo and Miller (2010) used case studies to how *guanxi* operates for entrepreneurs at different stages and in different industries, noting how in knowledge-intensive industries sharing critical insights replaces traditional gift giving and banquets.

Related to this is the question of how much network effects differ across national cultures? An early comparison of urban entrepreneurs and investors in China versus Russia (Batjargal, 2007) revealed that network ties generate more trust in China than in Russia. More recently, Burt and Burzynska (2017) and Burt and Opper (2017) compared Chinese and Western samples in large survey samples, establishing that in both contexts network brokerage relates to entrepreneurial success and network closure relates to trust. Not only were Western social capital constructs useful in explaining patterns in China, but concepts from *guanxi* research about critical events were found to be useful in explaining success in the West. It may be that the value of cross-national research on this question will be to expand our understanding of trans-cultural principles. But the question is not yet settled. In 2020, MOR dedicated a special issue to this question and more papers relevant to it appear in almost every issue.

Confucian harmony and *guanxi* is relevant to this reflection not only as a topic that MOR research has elucidated. It strikes me in retrospect that MOR is also exemplified.

This started with the *relationships* among the founding team. The journal's Editor-in-Chief Anne Tsui drew on her large network to recruit editors to start the journal. At the same time, she showed a great deal of generosity and consideration as she organized planning retreats. We hailed from different subfields and different generations, which produced broad-ranging discussions and occasional disagreements. Once we grew used to the differences, it became an intellectually stimulating process. We all learned about different areas of management and organizational scholarship. Later our annual meetings at conferences felt a bit like a family reunion, Anne in the role of matriarch, myself perhaps in the role of youngest sibling.

Our leader's commitment to the cause was inspiring and contagious. We all became convinced that supporting the rise of management research in China was a critical mission, given China's emerging economic importance and its relative dearth of management expertise. Like the other senior editors, I initially signed up for a typical three-year term, but we all stayed on longer to see MOR through its growth pains. We simply could not say 'no' to Anne's face (or to her 'face') when she would ask us to handle one more manuscript. To Americans, it's counterintuitive that paternalistic (or, in this case, maternalistic) leadership can be a positive force. But Chen, Yang, and Jing (2015) found that two of its elements – paternalistic benevolence and paternalistic morality – boost a team's performance, at least in Chinese contexts. And this was how it affected the team of founding editors.

MOR evinced Confucian harmony in its *policies* also. The decision to pursue two distinct goals – facilitating the impact of Chinese scholars and fostering insight about China – worried me at first. But it worked because the two agendas could be harmonized. Scholars from China were well positioned to discover distinctively Chinese organizational dynamics, so it made sense to pursue these two ends simultaneously. While Chinese scholars should not be limited to studying the influences of Chinese contexts, it is likely to be one of their comparative advantages. Jia et al. (2012) found some empirical support for this: China-related articles with higher theoretical contextualization attracted more citations.

Another goal was to be developmental rather than discouraging. Eventually, we concluded that the best way to accomplish this was PDWs for young scholars to develop research projects before submitting manuscripts. But an earlier suggestion was that MOR editors might join a struggling paper as a coauthor or play matchmaker by bringing in an experienced scholar. The intention was to bring disconnected scholars into the field, but we realized that in practice it would create conflicts of interest. We decided that editor and coauthor are roles better left unharmonized!

Finally, MOR also harmonized in its organizational *structure*. It drew much of its financial sponsorship from China but was registered in the US. Likewise, the Editor-in-Chief had affiliations in Hong Kong and China but most of the founding editors were based in the West. While I'd guess this

balancing act has required great diplomatic talent at times, it has been an adaptive structure, preventing capture by Western-centric biases, on the one side, or by Sino-centric biases, on the other side.

More about Me

Perhaps I saw MOR through a Confucian lens because I'm a cultural psychologist. I started my career studying the cognitive influences of Confucian social constructs. My dissertation research proposed that the frames of Western individualism and Chinese collectivism create different biases in people's everyday attributions for observed behavior. Working with a talented visitor from China, Kaiping Peng, I compared participants in the US and China on the 'Fundamental Attribution Error', the bias to over-explain a person's actions in terms of their dispositions.[1] We found much less of this bias in China (Morris & Peng, 1994). As cultural psychologists, we wanted to objectively measure the biases produced by cultural logics.[2] It was no accident, however, that we focused on an area where Western frames produce a blind spot and Confucianism frames guide more adaptive judgments. To establish a cultural literature, it's valuable to document the utility of non-Western biases.

In 1995, I took a sabbatical at the Chinese University of Hong Kong to study culture and conflict resolution. My collaborator was Kwok Leung, who founded the Asian Association of Social Psychology that year and later became a mainstay of MOR (Bond, van de Vijver, Morris, & Gelfand, 2016; Morris, Chen, Doucet, & Gong, 2017). Kwok had made his name with cross-cultural studies documenting East-West differences in conflict resolution preferences (Leung, 1987, 1988). We explored the connection of these differences to differences in social judgment biases. We found that one contributor to Americans' proclivity for courts as opposed to negotiation is the negative traits they impute to counterparts in conflicts, which discourage them from procedures like mediation that depend on good faith cooperation (Morris, Leung, & Iyengar, 2004). After several such projects elucidating Confucian harmony in conflict resolution, we reinterpreted cultural differences in justice perceptions (Morris & Leung, 2000). We also produced a theoretical framework for using both 'emic' indigenous constructs and 'etic' universal dimensions (Morris, Leung, Ames, & Lickel, 1999).

Another project focused on managing conflicts with coworkers. Standard dual-concern models, such as Ruble and Thomas's (1976) 'assertiveness' versus 'cooperativeness', or Rahim's (1983, 1986) 'concern for self' versus 'concern for other' distinguish five styles of conflict management (collaborating, accommodating, compromising, competing, and avoiding). Teaching in this area valorizes competing and collaborating. By contrast, accommodating was regarded as weakness and avoiding as neurotically dysfunctional. Our results showed a disturbing pattern that managers in China were more prone to the avoiding style, and this was associated with their greater endorsement of a cluster of values celebrating social order and tradition (Morris et al., 1998). Could it be that young Chinese managers shied away from actively responding to conflicts – and did so out of Confucian values?

We didn't believe that a complex ethical tradition reduces simply to conflict-aversion. Confucius himself was no shrinking violet; he cherished open debate and expression of differing perspectives. Leung, Koch, and Lu (2002) argued that there are two quite different notions of relationship harmony in Chinese culture. A simplistic folk norm admonishes individuals against assertiveness (e.g., 'One must withdraw to advance'. Or, 'the bird that stands out is shot first'.). But a more subtle ideal enjoins an active process of reconciling differences. Philosopher Chenyang Li (2006, 2013) points out that 'harmonization' may be a fairer translation of what Confucian ethicists praised. The ideal is to be neither adamant nor accommodating to find 'a middle way' (10). Leung et al. (2002) argued that active harmonizing forges sustainable win-win solutions and proposed different dimensions of harmony orientations (Leung et al., 2011). Similarly, Friedman, Chi, and Liu (2006) observed conflict avoidance in Chinese contexts that did not reflect the same concerns as avoidance in Western contexts. To explain it, they drew on Confucian concepts such as *li* (role-appropriateness), *xinpinqihe* (calmness), and *mianzi* ('face').

Of course, Chinese avoidance may reflect simple harmony goals and some complex harmony goals (Leung & Morris, 2015). Hwang (1997–1998) had previously conjectured that the dual-concern model fails to capture some Chinese habits of conflict management. He conjectured that the folk

conception of harmony produces the approach of accommodating in public but competing in secret. More recently, research led by Shi Liu (Liu et al., 2021) fleshed out this idea by expanding the taxonomy of conflict management modes to distinguish overt competing from *covert competing* – striving to get one's way without direct confrontation of one's opponent. In cross-national studies and cross-ethnic studies in the US, we found that East Asians rely on this approach in conflicts and peer competition situations. Individual difference measures as well as experimental manipulations linked this strategy to low relational mobility. East Asians are more likely to feel that they are stuck in an in-group that they can't easily exit or replace. Hence, they don't risk overt confrontations. A side-effect however is that they feel more paranoia about in-group peers. The *harm* in a harmony is that friendly seeming peers may be secretly working against you (Liu et al., 2019). This research encountered resistance in the review process (and then on Weibo.com after publication), because it suggested a downside of Confucian collectivism. But we can only fully understand the influence of a cultural legacy if we look both at its upsides and downsides.

The disadvantages can also come for Chinese immigrants to the West. Most research on Asian immigrants has focused on their academic and economic achievements. In the past few years, Jackson Lu and I have investigated the 'Bamboo Ceiling', the obstacles to executive roles for Asians in the US. We find that this comes in large part from lower verbal assertiveness and it affects East Asians but not South Asians, who are not socialized into Confucian norms (Lu, Nisbett, & Morris, 2020, 2022). Once the advantages of a given cultural orientation have been documented and accepted, then researchers must also consider its disadvantages. The first battle was countering Western misrepresentations by documenting areas where Chinese managers commit fewer errors. Once the value of non-Western cultures was established, then it was time to also expose their distinctive limitations (Morris, 2024).

More about MOR

While I've enjoyed reflecting on MOR's success as a sponsor of Chinese management research, and on my own journey in the burgeoning of cultural psychology, it's more important to reflect on the journal's future. Does MOR still exemplify Confucian harmony? Does the harmony orientation still serve it well?

In terms of interpersonal relationships, all appearances suggest an affirmative verdict. The leadership has passed to a younger generation, but the current Editor-in-Chief, Xiao-Ping Chen, continues the tradition of leading with face, charisma, and character. As in Anne's case, her influence is earned through years of dedicated effort to the cause of promoting Chinese management research. For years, Xiao-Ping has been an active organizer, reviewer, and editor. She served as the second President of the IACMR. And she has been the driving force behind *Management Insights*, which distills management research into student friendly summaries in both English-language and Chinese-language versions. She also brings a humane warmth to all of these roles. She is a paragon of maternalistic morality and benevolence, who fosters the creativity of everyone on the MOR team.

In terms of *policies*, MOR still upholds dual goals of Chinese inclusion and Chinese insight. There is synergy between the goals because Chinese scholars still have special access to and insight into Chinese management contexts. For a while, the journal sought to insight about transitional economies worldwide. But this new insight goal didn't harmonize as well with the inclusion goal.

Likewise, the policy of being a developmental journal remains, but it also remains challenging. A core feature of Confucian ethics is particularism rather than universalism: a person's obligations in an interaction hinge on their relationship to the other party. Particularistic ethics strain against impartiality as a regulative ideal (Lambert, 2020). Some cultural researchers (e.g., Karhunen et al., 2018) describe societies with particularist customs as prone to corruption. However, this is by no means inevitable. Examples like Singapore show that a society can be very Confucian yet virtually eliminate corruption. This comes from having very explicit rules and clear enforcement of them. MOR would be well served to make the obligations of associate editors very clear. Inconsistency in the treatment of authors is a struggle for every scientific journal, yet the challenge is higher for a journal committed to harmony. Ideally, MOR could find ways to act nurturing toward authors yet vigilant toward their manuscripts, but this combination is not easy to sustain. The challenge for associate editors as a journal becomes more and more

competitive is that they must deliver disappointing news to authors who are their associates, friends, or even mentors. Scientific universalism involves conflicts with particularistic obligations.

A vibrant scientific journal needs policies encouraging debate. Debate is harder to cultivate in face-oriented cultures (Yao et al., 2017). In my home field of cultural psychology, researchers have become loath to evaluate or theoretically analyze culturally conferred behavioral patterns. Conference presentations have become more descriptive and sometimes platitudinous. Indigenous constructs are exciting bases for scientific theory, but they are not theories themselves. Interpretive social science respects the emic 'native's point of view', but folk concepts must not be regarded as sacrosanct. As with cultural psychology, the Chinese management field needs spirited debates. MOR has featured some provocative debate, such as Li's (2014) article challenging sweeping claims about the superiority of *yin-yang* reasoning to Western logics. The vitality of our journal and conferences depends on finding new policies that foster dissent and debate while also keeping the discussion developmental and diplomatic. In some domains of creativity, East Asian innovations have weighted acceptability of ideas more than originality of ideas, but in other creative fields, East Asians have been more original than Westerners (Morris & Leung, 2010). An academic field can institute norms of debate and novelty even within a broader societal tradition of harmony.

Finally, we must ask whether the *structure* of MOR as an international organization remains adaptive. To my understanding, MOR remains moored to its sponsoring Chinese universities, yet also remains grounded in the West through its registration and the involvement of many US- and Europe-based scholars. In the two decades since its launch, China's universities have risen in the world rankings, but they face heightened content restrictions in research and publishing (Pringle & Woodman, 2022). This means that MOR plays a more critical role than ever. I have been proud to see that politically controversial papers have found a home at MOR in recent years (e.g., Haveman et al., 2023). However, the more that MOR emphasizes harmony, the harder it will be to do this. The biggest danger is not external censorship but self-censorship. Even scholars who are not Chinese and don't work in China are vulnerable to this. In journals and conferences sponsored by Chinese institutions, we may polish the conclusions for political palatability so as not to make trouble for our hosts. These challenges are by no means unique to China; there are political pressures on scientists and scholars in every society. They are undeniably on the rise in the US. MOR can play an invaluable role to both the East and West as an honest broker of ideas that can transcend the parochial prejudices of the Western and East Asian worldviews. Doing so will require maintaining consciousness and conversation about the forces of censorship that operate in different societies.

Notes

1. This is the error of getting personal in your explanation of behavior that is all about the situation; for example, it's a mistake to conclude that a librarian speaking softly is 'shy' as the library context suffices to explain her quiet voice. Comedian Dave Chappelle notes another example: We are quick to conclude that Oscar on *Sesame Street* is 'a grouch' while not considering the situation: he lives in a garbage can. To classical Western social psychologists, this bias was a human blind spot that gives rise to much of the conflict and mismanagement in the world.

2. In a test of causality impressions from cartoons, American and Chinese perceivers had parallel perceptions of mechanical causality but diverging impressions of social causality. An individual who swims ahead of others was perceived by American participants as moving for its own inner reasons, *leading* the others; it was judged by Chinese participants as provoked or *chased* by the others. Menon, Morris, Chiu, and Hong (1999) found the reverse for group actors. Chinese perceivers are more likely to attribute to their inner dispositions. Later, Zou, Tam, Morris, Lee, Lau, and Chiu (2009) uncovered that these differing biases of perceivers in the US and China are largely carried by perceived descriptive norms and perceptions of their respective social contexts.

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