

A note on what do we talk about when we talk about Chinese Research?

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Abstract

This research note addresses the question stated in its title, what do we talk about when we talk about Chinese research? The article provides arguments for an understanding of Chinese research as a cultural unit, regardless of regional, political and historical differences that can be found in different territories. This does not mean the regional, political and historical differences are not relevant to researchers, on the contrary, they must be considering by researchers. Cultural similarities are needed to connect the different types of Chinese cultures, but not at the expense of omitting regional differences.

Key words

Chinese research, Chinese culture, emit-etic, indigenous research.

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1. What do we talk about when we talk about Chinese research?

This article aims at addressing the question stated in its title, what do we talk about when we talk about Chinese research? And to provide arguments for an understanding of Chinese research as a cultural unit, and understanding that acknowledges regional, political and historical differences that are part of modern Chinese research. For the last 30 years, China has been growing in importance and relevance to the world, and a clear definition of what is and what is not Chinese research could help to research in general but also to establish what is indigenous Chinese research and what is not aiding on the etic-emic debate and research (Wang, et al., 2013).

Following the work of Greeven, and Van de Kaa (2013) who develop a working theory for understanding the business environment in Mainland China, this research note complements their work by addressing the cultural aspect of what does it mean to be Chinese, from a cultural perspective (Sposato, 2019). Even though there is one country called China, officially the People's Republic of China, and unofficially referred to as Mainland China, there are many Chinese cultural societies with different degrees of autonomy classified as Chinese from a cultural perspective (Fan, 2000; Yau, 1988). For example, Hong Kong and Macao are part of the People's Republic of China but have a large degree of political autonomy. Taiwan, which is officially named the Republic of China, is a politically independent entity but considered by the Beijing government as a rebel province. Therefore, 'Cultural Chinese' is the term that better represents the shared history, experiences and ethnic ancestry of this group of people (Hong et al., 2010).

In a looser sense, the concept of Chinese societies could also be applied to Singapore, with a prominent Chinese ethnic population and entrenched Chinese values; or to Chinese communities in Southeast Asian countries, who migrated from Mainland China and have largely kept themselves separate from the indigenous population, as is the case in The Philippines, Thailand and Malaysia, among other countries. These communities have been the focus of research on Chinese cultural values (Westwood, 1992, 1997) and can consequently be classified as Chinese regarding ethnicity and culture.

The idea of Chinese culture as a unit independent from political differences is mostly based on the study conducted by the Chinese Cultural Connection (CCC) in 1997. This study identified 40 core Chinese cultural values which are independent of political systems and define what it means to be culturally Chinese. Fan (2000) conducted a study validating and expanding the values to 71, showing the importance and contested nature of these values. While Chinese people have been said to share the same values and beliefs, it has been highlighted that they may understand and apply these beliefs in different ways (Fan, 2000).

Political differences have not stopped researchers from using and comparing theories, research instruments and techniques among these different political jurisdictions, where communities are part of the Chinese cultural context (López Jiménez, Dittmar and Portillo, 2021); for instance, The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology (Bond, 2010) makes no distinction in general terms between different groups of culturally Chinese people. The text quite often presents findings from studies of Mainland China, together with findings from Taiwanese and/or Hong Kong samples, making no cultural distinctions. The following is a quotation from Tang et al. (2010), included in The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Psychology:

Flexible and egalitarian gender roles attitudes are generally endorsed by better-educated individuals, especially female university students, in China (Chia, Allred & Jerzak, 1997), Hong Kong (Leung & Ng, 1999), Taiwan (Zhang, 2006) and Singapore (Teo, Graham, Yeoh, & Levy, 2003). (Tang et al., 2010: 537).

This quotation is a clear example of how research in Chinese cultural settings is used and presented in a unifying manner, independently of geographical or political boundaries (López Jiménez and Dittmar, 2018; Dittmar, 2012). Additionally, the same methodology and conceptualizations have been adopted by The Handbook of Chinese Organizational Behaviour (Huang and Bond, 2012), a similarly relevant and influential book in the field of organizational behaviour.

The International Association for Chinese Management Research (IACMR, n.d.), the body which groups the leading management scholars in Chinese studies, also takes a similar approach, highlighting that "[it pursues] scientific analyses of individual, group, and firm behaviors in the Chinese context" (online). Also, it is clear from its activities that by Chinese context, it means culturally Chinese societies. As an illustration, its main publication, the peer-reviewed Journal of Management and Organizations Review, publishes articles not only related to Mainland China, but also to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macao and Singapore; in essence, research conducted in Chinese cultural contexts. As it does this publication the Journal of Chinese Human Resources Management with its inclusive approach to a greater, cultural China. Publishing an entire special issue on Human Resources Management in China (Jin, 2016) and also greater China (Wang and Tian, (2011), for example; Macao (Vong et al., 2018), Hong Kong (Chan and Burgess, 2010) and Taiwan (Korte and Li, 2015).

Furthermore, leading scholars in Chinese management research do not account for regional differences. One such example is Anne Tsui, one of the top 100 most cited researchers in business, economics, and management, according to the Academy of Management (webapp4.asu.edu) and Kwok Leung, the former President of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (iaccp.org). When researching in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China, Anne Tsui considers these territories as culturally Chinese, but when the differences are political or institutional, they may be significant to the study and require highlighting as well as discussion.

Finally, thematic reviews of management in China also tend to include a broader Chinese perspective and are often guided by the concept of Chinese culture instead of political divisions. This point is eloquently expressed in the literature review conducted by Jia et al. (2012). Their article analyses the levels of local contextualization within research carried out in China but focuses on Mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan, all being considered under the umbrella term of Chinese cultural research. As so far argued in general research articles like the published by Hatum and Preve, (2015), just do not create subsets of cultural distinctions.

However, as stressed by Huo and Randall (1991) and Stening and Zhang (2007), researchers should acknowledge regional and subcultural differences within China. Throughout the extended Chinese territory and its numerous populations, Chinese culture is prone to the creation of subcultures, which leads to the possibility of encountering emic knowledge, which falls under the umbrella of Chinese culture. Also, emic knowledge that is only relevant to the specific Chinese subculture studied, in this case, Hong Kong, as well as etic knowledge which is universally relevant across

cultures (Sposato and Rumens, 2018). Based on this evidence, it is possible to conclude that in the broad field of management and its different subfields, Chinese culture tends to be understood and researched as a unified concept (Sposato, 2015).

Having argued for a common understanding of Chinese culture, it is also necessary to acknowledge the singularities of Chinese subcultures must also be considered. For example, in the case of Hong Kong, whilst 92.6% of the population is ethnically Chinese (Census and Statistics Department Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, 2014), Hong Kong was still a British colony for more than 150 years, an influence which demands consideration. In the case of Singapore, the country is a multicultural society where Chinese culture coexists with Malay and Indian cultures; and in the case of ethnic Chinese groups living in Southeast Asia, these groups have also been exposed to native cultural influences and in cases intermarried. Therefore, it is necessary to highly how local singularities have had an impact on each of the Chinese cultural groups when conducting research (Sposato and Jeffrey 2020).

2. Conclusion

In conclusion, wide arguments have been presented in this paper for the understanding of Chinese research as a unified term that united the idea of a common Chinese culture, providing scope for unifying different Chinese groups. Nevertheless, differences should also be considered when conducting research in a Chinese cultural context, as different political systems have also influenced the meaning of what is it to be Chinese.

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