Fast-Changing China Needs Its Own Organizational Behavior Research and Theory

A review of

Handbook of Chinese Organizational Behavior: Integrating Theory, Research and Practice

by Xu Huang and Michael Harris Bond (Eds.)


$260.00

Reviewed by

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Foxconn is the world’s largest electronics manufacturer, and it has supplied parts to many companies such as Apple, Dell, Hewlett Packard (HP), Motorola, Nintendo, Nokia, and Sony Ericsson. It drew considerable media attention in 2010 because of a series of suicides by workers at several production facilities located in Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Hebei provinces. Fourteen workers died, and four survived with serious injuries. All were between 17 and 25 years old. They had left their poor hometowns in the hinterlands for higher wages in the booming factory towns of the coastal areas.

Employment practices at Foxconn were investigated by several of its customers, including Apple and HP. In an interview with Bill Weir of ABC News, a Foxconn counselor said, “Some [suicide] has to do with the management. But they had more to do with the new
generation of migrant workers from the rural areas, their state of mind, and how they cope with society” (Weir, 2012, “Everywhere You Look,” para. 6).

The suicides at Foxconn are a China-specific problem. The pace and scale of China’s economic transformation have no historical precedent. The per capita gross domestic product of China has been growing at an average rate of more than 8 percent per year, and China has become a main economic locomotive in the world (Zhu, 2012). With its macroeconomic state coming to the Lewisian turning point, China’s rural-to-urban migrant workers—once subservient, cheap, and perfect for quick production schedules—are unwilling to accept low wages or military-style discipline in factories any longer.

The suicides of Foxconn workers also have significantly influenced Chinese organizational behavior practice and research. Despite China’s economic impact in the world market, theoretical development and empirical studies on organizational behavior in the Chinese societies lag far behind. Addressing this problem, the Handbook of Chinese Organizational Behavior: Integrating Theory, Research and Practice, edited by Xu Huang and Michael Harris Bond, is among the best books on Chinese organizational behavior that I have read in recent years. It is a timely book, filling the huge gap between management practice and research in Chinese societies. Scholars who are interested in research on Chinese work behaviors and practitioners who have business connections in China will find much of value in this book.

This is the first comprehensive handbook exploring Chinese organizational behavior. It covers most of the important topics, which makes it a valuable reference book for scholars and practitioners in the field.

The aim of this state-of-the-art handbook is to review the large body of work on organizational behaviors in Chinese societies and to identify indigenous theories and constructs as well as to show potential challenges and directions for future research. The book’s 28 chapters are organized into five parts, the first and last consisting of an introductory and a concluding chapter, respectively.

Part 2 discusses some key theoretical foundations for contextualizing research on organizational behavior in China and other Chinese societies, including cultural dimensions of Chinese societies and the limitations of current theoretical frameworks when applied to these cultural dimensions. Fourteen chapters then address important issues in the field of organizational behavior, including emotional intelligence, dirty work, social comparison, creativity and innovation, abusive supervision, leadership, cooperation and competition, teamwork, social exclusion, conflict management, trust in organizations, organizational justice, the psychological contract, and job insecurity.

The chapters are written by prominent scholars who provide critical reviews of the theoretical foundations of the topic, discussing key findings, comparing findings in the Chinese context with Western findings, assessing Chinese findings compared with mainstream theories of organizational behavior, and analyzing implications for future research. In Part 4 of the Handbook, eight chapters review Chinese theories and constructs,
including Chinese personality, work values and ethics, paternalistic leadership, and guanxi (the basic dynamic in personalized networks of influence in Chinese society).

In Part 5, the conclusion, editors Huang and Bond assert that most research reviewed in the book is “primarily dominated by studies applying, modifying and extending purportedly universal theories mainly developed in North America, simply using Chinese samples” (p. 513), and this also applies to research in this field in general. The authors call this practice North Americanness. And they found that “there has been only little sustained effort in developing contextualized theories and constructs that help advance our understanding of specific Chinese work behaviors” (p. 513). Even those indigenous theories also have many shortcomings.

The critiques in the concluding chapter are penetrating and thought provoking. The general directions for future research that Huang and Bond offer demonstrate their deep understanding of the field. They believe that by contextualizing theories and constructs, moving beyond cultural dimensions, engaging in more systematic cross-cultural research, examining within-culture variation, and employing new methods, Chinese organizational research can be elevated to a new level.

I met with one of the book’s editors, Michael Bond, last summer at Kunming, China, at the 9th Biennial Conference of the Asian Association of Social Psychology, where he gave a keynote speech titled “Unpackaging ‘the Elusive Situation’ for Social Psychology.” His insightful understanding of culture impressed me greatly. What also touched me was his sense of responsibility toward the development of social psychology in Asia. This insight and sense of responsibility are woven into the fabric of this great handbook. Anybody who wants to understand the current state of Chinese organizational behavior research and practice should make the book his or her first choice.

References

