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The emergence of Human Resource Management in China: Convergence, divergence and contextualization

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to use the emergence of Human Resource Management (HRM) in China to shed light on the dynamism of convergence, divergence and contextualization in the broader field. It argues that the ways used to manage people in China have diverged or converged with Western or foreign-developed theories and practices, in different institutional contexts and at different periods of time. Overlapping with this intellectual narrative, it looks at HRM in China in its contemporary historical setting, to show how theories such as the US-inspired Scientific Management and Human Relations and the Soviet model of Personnel Administration have influenced and shaped various ways of managing people. The bibliometric review of the unfolding of HRM in China presented in the article will, we argue, also shed further light on wider issues of convergence/divergence and contextualization.

1. Introduction

In this article, we ask if the emergence of Human Resource Management (HRM) in China is a possibly unique case, or indeed even otherwise, in order to emphasize and add further evidence to the study of convergence, divergence and contextualization in the study of management in general and HRM in particular.

The reason for selecting China as an example is due to its long history from a feudal to a modern and industrialized society, the rich experience of the nation's closing and opening its doors to stop or speed up interactions between East and West over the last hundred years, and in particular its unprecedented transition from a planned to a market-driven economy over the last four decades. The dramatic changes that have occurred in the way people are managed in China have clearly shown evidence of divergence or convergence with Western or foreign-developed theories and practices in different periods of time because of distinctly different institutional contexts and different stages of economic development.

To start with, in this article, we examine an *intellectual narrative* of what is now known as 'Human Resource Management' (*renli ziyuan guanli*) (HRM), albeit 'with Chinese characteristics' (*juyou zhongguo tese*), in the People's Republic of China (PRC or China), in order to show the diverse influences and legacies in its development and to identify areas for further study. We propose to set out the foundations of this field of study, looking at both its past, present and future in greater detail than previously or more recently attempted, via a *bibliometric review* of the field (e.g., Busse, Warner, & Zhao, 2016; Chen, Su, & Zeng, 2016; Warner, 1995; Zhu, 2005) and adding evidence to and drawing out the implications for the debate on convergence/divergence and contextualization.

Overlapping with its evolution, we also take note of US-inspired *Scientific Management* (*kexue guanli*) (SM), stemming from the

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work of the American theorist and practitioner, Frederick Winslow Taylor (1856–1915), and of *Human Relations* (*renji guanxi*) (HR), arising from the contribution of the Australian-born, later Harvard academic, George Elton Mayo (1880–1949), both said to be influential in the inter-war period across a range of countries. After 1949, we take account of the significantly Soviet-influenced model of Personnel Administration (*renshi xingzheng*), which was widely taken up in China, and its impact, which extended up to and even beyond 1978 (see Kaple, 1994). In turn, after Deng Xiaoping (1904–1997) introduced economic reforms in 1978, we note how HRM went on to take root in Chinese enterprises in the 1980s and 1990s (Zhu, 2005).

Many scholars have examined the impact of Chinese traditions on management, especially HRM in China. These include thousands of years of culture, such as philosophy, beliefs and values, with Confucianism as a typical example, as well as various political and institutional systems (e.g., Chang, 1976; Warner, 2014a, 2014b; Yang, 2012; Yuan, 2013; Zheng & Lamond, 2009a, 2009b). Other writers in the field, such as Rarick (2007) and Warner (2016), have made a plausible case for the term ‘Confucian Management’.

Republican China under the *Guomindang* (also known as *Kuomintang* or *KMT*) had set Confucianism ‘in pride of place’ and encouraged an *indigenous* school of management (Warner, 2014a, 2016). The role of traditional management practices in China is said to have been influential, both in mainland China and in overseas Chinese enterprises. It is evident that there are some direct links, as well as a great number of indirect ones. To a degree, many of the links, we will argue, may well be *conjectural*. Even so, there are clearly many convincing ‘family resemblances’ to be found, as we shall see later.

In the literature on HRM in China, there are still many questions that few studies have examined up to now, such as what were the respective indigenous and foreign influences shaping the management of people in China during different periods (e.g., before 1911; 1911–1949; 1949–1978; and late 1978 to the present day) and what impact have they produced for the development of a definitive version of HRM in contemporary China? (see Chen et al., 2016). These questions will be addressed by our study and the answer to them, we argue, could well enrich the field of research on convergence/divergence and contextualization and perhaps globalization (see Rowley, 2017; Warner, 2017a).

It is worth noting that only a relatively few studies have included the aforementioned Republican period from 1911 to 1949, which is indeed missing from one book on traditional Chinese thinking on HRM practices (see Yuan, 2013: 86). The lacuna of this particular period could be related to the fact that the Communist Party of China (CPC) was not in power during that period of time, which in turn may have influenced the focus of attention. Hence, one section of this article will focus on this much less studied, or even ignored period in the study of HRM in China, because it affects our general themes.

Our study starts with a set of empirical conjectures to highlight the key issues to be further researched in the area of HRM in China. It is then followed by a short research methods section. It next pursues a review and analysis of HRM development in different periods in contemporary China to examine both foreign and indigenous influences of history on such an evolution. Then the discussion focuses on the relevance of the emergence of Chinese HRM to the debate on convergence/divergence and contextualization, which leads to our propositions for future study. Last, the article ends with a set of conclusions.

2. Empirical conjectures

We approached the key issues to be studied by broaching the following empirical conjectures:

Conjecture 1. The emergence of HRM in China derives from a ‘hybrid’ model. By this we mean that HRM was a synthesis of several schools of thought that preceded its full development in China at the end of the last century, including Scientific Management, Personnel and Labour Administration, and Western-developed HRM, which, in turn, led to the coexistence of many mutually exclusive ideas and practices.

Conjecture 2. The unprecedented economic reforms that have radically changed and shaped current HRM policies and practices in China are more visible in the private sector than in the public sector. This speculation was raised because it appeared that Western-developed HRM concepts and practices had been transferred earlier, quicker and rather more extensively to the private sector than to the public sector in China, due to a strong legacy left by Mao Zedong (1893–1976) and much limited political change nationally, compared with reforms in other areas (e.g., economic, institutional and cultural sectors).

Conjecture 3. The effectiveness of HRM, i.e., how HRM was perceived by employees from different sectors and how HRM was linked to both financial and social performance in different sectors, remains ambiguous. We raise this conjecture to argue that the evidence is not clear about the extent to which HRM with Chinese characteristics has been strategic in sectors with different ownership structures, industries and regions in China.

3. Research methods for the literature review

In this study, we used both CNKI (China National Knowledge Infrastructure) Scholar Engine (the largest scholar engine for studies written in Chinese and chose Advanced Search) and Google Scholar to search for key words in relevant publications in either Chinese or English. The journals searched include ‘SCI Indexed journals’, ‘EI Indexed Journals’, ‘Core Academic Journals in China’, and ‘CSSCI Indexed Journals’, to ensure that all were peer-reviewed academic journals. Using the same key words, we also searched for conference articles by selecting ‘international conference’ and ‘domestic conference’, respectively. Further, relevant doctoral theses were also tracked by ticking the ‘PhD thesis’ option in the search engines. We then put the key words either in Chinese characters or English into the search and each article identified had the title, keywords, abstract, full text, and references. The key words used in our

searches include: Human Relations (*renji guanxi*, HR); Human Resource Management (*renli ziyuan guanli*, HRM); Personnel Administration (*renshi xingzheng*, PA); Personnel and Labour Administration (*renshi laodong xingzheng*, P&LA); people management (*renyuan guanli*); worker (*gongren*); ancient Chinese management philosophy (*Zhongguo gudai guanli zhhexue*) and Psychology in Management (*guanli zhongde xilixue*). Most of the articles identified were published after Mao's regime, which will be detailed later.

4. People management in Ancient China (before 1911): evidence of divergence

People management in China before 1911 was greatly influenced by the philosophy of many ancient Chinese scholars such as Confucius (551–579 BCE), Mencius (372–289 BCE) and Laozi (Lao Tzu: dates uncertain; speculation ranges from 600 to 200 BCE). Among these, Confucius, and his ideology (called Confucianism), have had a major influence on what became known as 'Confucian Management' (Warner, 2010, 2016; Yang, Peng, & Lee, 2008). This way of managing people was guided by Chinese traditional thinking, which is revealed and preserved through a set of core-values based on Confucian doctrines. Among these values, harmony (*he*), which emphasizes harmony within human society is given most importance in Confucian philosophy and maintaining harmony in hierarchical societal structures was an important part of ancient people management (Yuan, 2013).

Furthermore, some other Confucian values have played important roles more widely in Chinese society and the way to manage people, such as benevolence (*ren*), loyalty (*zhong*), *guanxi* (personal connections) and *mianzi* (face) (see Yuan, 2013). These values fundamentally affect social interaction within organizations. For instance, it was generally believed that an ideal leader must have the virtue of 'ren' (benevolence), and rule the organization with the awareness of 'people-centred' to achieve harmony (*he*) (Kong & Zhang, 2011).

When discussing these concepts/factors, the researchers indicate that these sets of values underlie Chinese individuals' social, political and business lives and significantly affect preferences in recruitment and selection, ways of communication and negotiation, the relationship between superiors and subordinates, the relationships between employees and leadership-style (Yuan, 2013; Yuan & Chia, 2011). An interesting example of the impact of Confucianism on people management in ancient China is presented in the work of Zheng and Lamond (2009a), who explored the relevant sayings and stories of ancient Chinese sages, especially Confucius, and how their wisdom was utilized in selecting the right people for the right position (selecting leaders, recruiting employees), revising rewarding principles, and promoting participative management approaches at that time. Although some of the practices of people management in ancient China seem similar to Western HRM practices, they claim they indeed originated from China long ago (Zheng & Lamond, 2009a).

Another important practice of people management in ancient China is its distinct Imperial civil examination system used for over 1300 years for the selection of civil servants (e.g., Chaffee, 1985; Kracke, 1964; Warner, 2013). The Chinese Imperial examination (*ke-jū*) system, established in the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE), was gradually regularized and institutionalized during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) and Song dynasty (960–1279). Then followed a kaleidoscopic succession of dynasties, the system was fully developed and formally utilized throughout the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and nearly the whole period of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) until its abolishment in 1905 (Chaffee, 1985; Miyazaki, 1981).

This examination system was developed based on Confucianism as "Confucius invented the notion that those who govern should so because of merit and not inherited status, setting in motion the creation of the imperial examinations and bureaucracies open only to those who passed tests" (Sienkewicz, 2003: 434). The system used merit as a criterion (e.g., knowledge of Confucian classical texts, Confucian principle of government, ability to write classical Chinese and calligraphy) to select government officials, which helped supplant some traditional (and feudal) practices such as nepotism, social class, tribalism or favouritism in selecting men for government service (Kracke, 1964; Sterba, 1978).

The Chinese Imperial civil examination system produced extensive influence on the staffing of public servants in the world as argued by many researchers. For instance, while Elman (2000) claimed that the Chinese Imperial examination system has long had a great impact on East Asia over the centuries such as Korea and Japan, Warner (2013: 248) stated that the meritocratic Chinese Imperial examination system had important influence outside Asia as the system was 'admired by the eighteenth-century Enlightenment *philosophes* in Europe and later most significantly shaped the Northcote-Trevelyan Report (1857) in the UK on the reform of the Civil Service in British India and later in the United Kingdom'. According to scholarly consensus, the earliest example of an administrative meritocracy, based on civil service examinations, dates back to Ancient China (e.g., Kazin, Edwards, & Rothman, 2010; Konner, 2003; Tucker, 2009). Therefore, the literature has clearly shown that the origins of merit-based personnel practices is from China and this system predated Western practices by nearly one millennium.

5. Proto-HRM in the early stages of modern China's development (from 1911 to 1949): some evidence of convergence

The year 1911 is regarded as the beginning of modern China when Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925) launched the Republican Revolution (also known as *xinhai geming*) that overthrew the Qing dynasty, ended thousands of years of the feudal/imperial era (from 221 BCE to 1911 CE) and established the Republic of China (ROC). The year 1949 later witnessed the establishment of the PRC (the so-called 'Liberation') and the adoption of a Soviet-inspired Personnel Administration system.

Over this time, a number of articles were published on Scientific Management in China in the early decades of the last century (see Morgan, 2006; Warner, 2014a, 2017b). It was also, in turn, referred to as Scientific Industry Management Methods (*kexue de shiye guanli fa*). The first publication on Taylor in Chinese was written by a pioneer, Yang Quan (also known as Yang Xingfo, 1893–1933), an intellectual who was sent to study in the USA for six years from 1912 to 1918. After enrolling at Cornell University and gaining an MBA from the Harvard Business School, he published an article on Scientific Management in the journal *Kexue* (Science) in 1915. Mu

Xiangyu (also known as Mu Ouchu or H.Y. Mo, 1876–1943), a businessman who had also been in the US, translated Taylor's *Principles* in 1916 and built up businesses in Shanghai and applied those theories in them. Morgan (2003, 2004, 2006) provides much detailed evidence from Chinese journal articles in the interwar period containing psychology-oriented content, combined with people-management-related topics. For example, Morgan (2006) reported that the establishment of the Chinese Industry and Commerce Management Association (CICMA, *Zhongguo gongshang guanli xiehui*) and then the Chinese Scientific Management Association (*Zhongguo kexue guanli xiehui*) in 1930 indicates the emphasis on the promotion of Scientific Management, and in 1931 the Ministry of Industry published a journal with a Special Issue on Scientific Management (*Gongshang ban yuekan: Kexue guanli zhuan hao*). The CICMA set up research committees and personnel issues became one of their major foci.

After conducting extensive research for this study relating to publications specifically on HR during the period from 1911 to 1949 in the English and Chinese literature, only a limited amount was found in English, although 16 early articles and one book in Chinese were identified through CNKI. Most of these publications used *renshi* (personnel or human relations in general) and *renshi-guanxi* (personnel or human relations in particular) and the book is entitled *renshi-guanli* (personnel management) (He, 1933a). During that time, the term *renji guanxi* (interpersonal relationship) was not seen in this search. Of the 16 articles, the earliest about *renshi* (HR in general) in China was published in 1923, while the earliest on *renshi guanxi* (HR in particular) was published in 1930. Human relations or personnel-researched issues in these articles include various categories, such as white- and blue-collar workers, school teachers and women employees.

All the articles identified between 1923 and 1937 were mainly published in the 1930s. No relevant publications were found in two time-periods, i.e., from 1911 to 1923 and from 1938 to 1949, in this database, but another search found a few other linked publications which existed apart from the former ones (see Busse et al., 2016). This shortfall may be attributed to the short history of modern China in the first time-period because the CICMA was established in 1930 and a journal called *Renshi guanli yuekan* (Personnel Management Monthly) was only introduced then as a consequence (Liu, 2001, cited in Morgan, 2006: 414). Further, World War II (1937–1945) and the Civil War between the CPC and the *Guomindang* (*Kuomintang/KMT*) (1945–1949), respectively, in the second period, contributed to the shortfall.

However, it is worth noting that the *Boxer Indemnity Scholarship Program* established in 1909 enabled over 1800 students to study in the USA from 1909 to 1929, which helped to transfer Western technology and managerial concepts and practices to China (Ye, 2001). One scholar in particular, He Qingru (1901–1985), was among this group of scholars (Zhang, 2010). Upon completing his study at Tsinghua University, he obtained a Boxer Indemnity Scholarship and completed his studies for Master and PhD degrees at Columbia University in the area of occupational psychology. Although he is regarded as the founder of contemporary Chinese occupational studies, he also published many articles and one book in the area of personnel management in China (He, 1930, 1932, 1933a, 1933b, 1934, 1935a, 1935b, 1937). His publications have clearly indicated the application of Western-developed people management concepts to the situation in China. Hence he is the first person to include all the major functions in the Chinese articles and his book on people management.

Fourteen of the 16 articles identified in CNKI were published in a journal called *Jiaoyu yu zhiye* (Education and Vocation), and the scholar who published most in this area (i.e., nine out of the 17) during the period was He Qingru. His later publications in the period are more focused on personnel studies including psychology in the education sector (see <http://xuewen.cnki.net/CJFD-ZJLT200713027.html> for this author's bio-note in Chinese). Similarly, other articles identified also link personnel administration to occupations (Ding, 1935; Liu, 1935; Pan, 1936; Zheng & He, 1934). Most of these early studies are practically based, as they are related to some practices of personnel work, such as how to formulate grades to assess a person's skills, including 'analytical skill, ability to learn, integrity, interpersonal skill, leadership and responsibility' (He, 1932: 405), how to select one's occupation in the education field (from primary to university levels) based on job requirements such as qualification, age, family, and compensation (Zheng & He, 1934), and how to select staff in the education field without focusing only on *guanxi* (personal connections) (He, 1935a, 1935b). Of the literature identified, only one article (He & Hu, 1930) discussed *renshi* (personnel or human relations in general) issues for female employees by introducing German experience to promote women's employment, which seems a milestone for research related to gender.

Most of these publications used *qualitative* methods to illustrate the phenomenon of personnel administration. The quantitative approach was only used in a very limited way, i.e., only frequency or percentage tables were used (see Zheng & He, 1934; tables were used to compare education received, marriage status, job application and compensation among educators at different levels). Only a few articles used references that are mainly in English, indicating the Western influence on personnel management in China. For a comprehensive overview of personal interrelations of Chinese politicians, researchers and managers that were educated out of China between 1910 and 1930 and brought management knowledge to their homeland, we may again refer to Morgan (2006).

One book entitled *Problems of Personnel Psychology*, published by Xiao Xiaorong (also known as H. H. Hsiao, 1897–1963: Hsiao, 1944), indicates the introduction of psychology (*xinlixue*) to China early last century. Remarkably, the first Department of Psychology was set up in Peking University (*Beida*) as early as 1916. However, some researchers noted that this science was linked to a foreign discipline, initially American-European, later to Soviet, until it was gradually outlawed as a 'bourgeois' discipline during Mao's regime (Blowers, 2000, 2009; Blowers, 2014; Munro, 1977). One expert on Chinese psychology suggested to us rather controversially that 'There were no [empirical Chinese] studies of "Human Relations" at all in the period' (Blowers, 2014: 1). Although psychologists at one point became interested in industrial psychology, Blowers continued, they lacked the laboratories to carry out studies of the kind done by Elton Mayo and there was no reference made to the "Hawthorne Effect" [at the time]' (Blowers, 2014; Busse & Warner, 2017).

Thus far, the proto-HRM-related study in the early stage of modern China (1911–1949) has clearly indicated the influence of Western-developed concepts and practices on Chinese scholars, and an initial exploration and examination of personnel management

were observed mainly in the 1920s and 1930s before World War II.

6. Personnel administration during the ‘Maoist’ regime from 1949 to 1978: from convergence to divergence?

Very few publications were found in Chinese in the CNKI database about proto-HRM-related management policies and practices, adding up to ‘people management’ broadly speaking, in the period 1949–1978, and no trace of Western influences such as Mayo’s, but we did find indirect links to Soviet-style Taylorism. We have also been unable to trace much impact of HR on Chinese theory or practice in the 1950s in personnel psychology journals and in the decades before 1978, whether directly or via Soviet sources (see [Blowers, 2009](#)).

It is worth noting that psychology in China was revived with the support of the CPC after the establishment of the PRC in 1949. However, it was observed that ‘at this time it was widely held that psychology had to be revised to better fit into the new social and political milieu. Like other intellectuals, psychologists had to study Marxist philosophy’ ([Blowers, 2000](#): 75).

For instance, the former President of the Central University, Professor Shu Pan (or Shuh Pan), was made Director of the Institute of Psychology, Chinese Academy of Sciences (IPCAS), which was re-established in 1951 as the sole national-level, basic research-based body. The Chinese Psychology Society was then set up in 1955 and the journal *Acta Psychologica Sinica* was launched in 1956, as well as *Psychological Information* and *Psychological Translations*. However, we find that ‘contacts with Western psychology were curtailed, and Soviet psychology became a model’ ([Barabanshchikova & Koltsova, 1989](#): 116). In the process, ‘most of the allowable textbooks in psychology were translations from the Russian’ ([Petzold, 1984](#)).

Although we were unable to find any references to ‘Human Relations’ or similar terms in the CNKI database, for the period 1949 to 1978, we did find at least a dozen relevant personnel psychology articles, using the search term ‘workers’. Other terms we used as alternatives yielded zero results. These twelve papers were all published during the period from 1957 to 1965 and the most popular author is Shuh Pan.² The Soviet influence is clearly reflected as in these articles a large volume of references used are in Russian and the abstracts of these articles are all bilingual, i.e., in English and Russian. Thus, even as China nearly closed its doors to Western countries, especially the USA, it embraced the then-Soviet ideology in the 1950s. The question on convergence/divergence here is which benchmark should be used for such a debate.

The Institute of Psychology was closed in 1959 (but later revived in 1977) and research and teaching in psychology were suppressed altogether in the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Many journals ceased publication between 1949 and 1978, such as *Education and Vocation*. In general, psychology in Mao’s regime was linked more to ideology than to human-related management, which can be observed from a book, *Psychology in Contemporary China*, from the period ([Brown, 1981](#)).

Although no article identified during this period (1949 to 1978) is related to HRM, labour and personnel administration was actually practised instead. There are more publications in Chinese in the data-bases used than in English on labour and personnel-related administration policies and practices during Mao’s regime (e.g., [Child & Lu, 1996](#); [Warner, 1995](#); [Zhao, 1986](#); [Zhao, 1994, 1995](#); [Zhu, 2005](#)). Although one can observe the convergence to Soviet psychology in the 1950s, personnel administration during Mao’s regime significantly diverged from Western theories.

7. Human relations and Human Resource Management in China after 1979: moving towards convergence?

The Chinese term for human relations (HR) had been renamed *renji guanxi* (interpersonal relationship) under Mao’s regime. According to our results from academic search engines, Chinese scholars started to reuse the term *renji guanxi* (interpersonal relationship) in research journals from 1979, within the definition of HR from Western scholarship at this later stage, unlike the interwar period. From 1979 to 1981, we can find about 25 articles introducing this new concept to Chinese scholars. From 1982 to 1985, about 500 research articles in Chinese journals/books mentioned the concept HR within the above definition. Three articles (in Chinese) published in the early stage of the reforms were found to be related to HR ([Ma & Liu, 1980](#); [Yang, 1980](#); [Yang & Han, 1979](#)), all of which tried to introduce the term of HR in a Western sense to Chinese readers. Indeed, the work of [Yang and Han \(1979\)](#) is the first Chinese academic article using the term HRM (*renli ziyuan guanli*) since 1978. The earliest instances of HRM in academic Chinese sources that have been found also include the two Chinese articles published in 1980 as the earliest that mention Human Resource Management or similar concepts. The first article discussed human resources utilization in Singapore and how to learn from its management’s experiences ([Gao, 1980](#)). The second focused on employees’ fatigue during work, which is an important aspect for HRM (as stated by the author) ([Wang, 1980](#)).

Further, a convincing ‘bridge’ from personnel management going beyond HR, and on to HRM in China after Deng introduced his reforms in the late 1970s, would appear to be the then innovative work on people-management by a newly-involved academic, Shuming Zhao (at the Nanjing University Business School), who gained his PhD from the US during the period 1987–1990 from Claremont Graduate University, California. In 1992, he published his text, *International Enterprises: Human Resource Management* (*Guoji qiye: renli ziyuan guanli*) ([Zhao, 1992](#)), now in its 5th edition, which is probably the very first book specifically on HRM ever published in China (see [Zhao & Du, 2012](#)). The text introduced to Chinese readers many Western HRM experts and their work. Its sales rose to over 10,000 copies in the 1990s and over 40,000 across all editions, although this may not be such a large number in the vast Chinese market. Another indigenous academic, Zhongming Wang (at Zhejiang University Business School), who wrote on management psychology (e.g., 1993), should also be mentioned here.

² The references of the articles can be supplied at request due to limited space of this article.

Based on the search engines of CNKI and Google Scholar, the publications in the fields of Human Relations and Human Resource Management appear to have been on a rapid increase from 1979 to 2015. For instance, the number of items in the literature on Human Relations found from CNKI and Google Scholar is zero from 1979 to 1985. However, this number becomes 5732 in the period of 1986–1990 and then 16,663 after one decade and 151,622 after another decade (2006–2010). Further, the number of peer-reviewed academic journal articles related to Human Relations has shown rocket changes as this number was zero from 1979 to 1990, and then changed rapidly from 10,078 (1991–1995) to 29,834 (2001–2005) and then 40,299 (2011–2015). Similarly, the number of articles found for the keyword Human Resource Management from both CNKI and Google Scholar is 107 for the period of 1979–1981, and 1404 after one decade (1986–1990), then becomes 20,129 (1996–2000) and jumps to 289,092 (2006–2010).³

The data above indicate that in the first decade of the new millennium (2001 – 2010), publications on HR or HRM in China increased very rapidly. Some researchers reviewed and analyzed the publications mainly in the HRM field over the last three to four decades (since the introduction of the Dengist economic reforms) to highlight HRM development in China and areas for future research (e.g., Cooke, 2009; Cunningham & Rowley, 2008; Li & Nesbit, 2012; Warner, 2014a; Zheng, 2013; Zheng & Lamond, 2009a, 2009b; Zhu, Thomson, & De Cieri, 2008). To understand what indigenous and foreign influences that shape the management of people in China are, and what impact they have had on the development of HRM in contemporary China, however, it's important to see beyond the last three or four decades. Here we refer to two recent reviews to justify our study.

The first article we may note here (Chen et al., 2016) traced the evolution of HRM in five historical periods, ranging from pre-Opium (before 1840) to the present. The authors provided an analysis of Chinese HRM, tracing several stages of HRM evolution from before 1840 to the present time. Drawing on the resource-based view and path dependence theory, the authors conclude that path-dependent decisions, reflecting institutional contexts, explain differences in Chinese HRM institutions. While the authors emphasized factors that have shaped Chinese HRM, including production development, culture and traditions, labour regulatory environment, and foreign influences (such as global competition and Taylor's Scientific Management ideas during the period 1918–1949), the focus of the study is on identifying the underlying mechanisms that have shaped HRM in China. The authors note the prevalence of Scientific Management, especially during 1918–1949, and also the influence of HRM practices from Asia, the United States and Europe during the period 1979 to the present. Although how SM and HR produced their impact in China was not the exclusive focus of this study, it does indicate the impact of convergence on HRM in China.

The other paper by Busse et al. (2016) attempted to trace the transfer of Western management knowledge, specifically human relations and scientific management, to China, using Chinese-language databases. The authors note evidence of scientific management and human relations in China in recent publications, but their methodological approach (bibliometric analysis of Chinese sources) constrained them from making overly decisive conclusions. We extend this research and further explore academic literature (in English sources as well as Chinese) to identify evidence of the impact of scientific management and human relations on HRM development in China since 1980.

8. Evidence of the influence of scientific management and human relations on the emergence of Chinese HRM: convergence, divergence or more, depending on the context?

In our study, the literature pertaining to the influence of scientific management and human relations approaches in China since 1980 is addressed in this section. In the CNKI database, we found 613 references to 'Taylor' and 'Scientific Management' jointly from 1979 up to mid-2016, and 97 for 'Mayo' and 'Human Relations' (also up to mid-2016). The earliest for the former was 1979 and the latter 1983. There were 123 for 'Taylor' and 'Taylorism', and 137 for 'Mayo' and 'Hawthorne'.

Apart from the search in the CNKI, we used the following keyword combinations to locate relevant scholarly articles on scientific management and China published since 1980 in Google Scholar, Proquest and Business Source Premier: Scientific Management AND Taylor AND China, Taylor (or Taylorism/Taylorist) AND China, and Fordism AND China. Using the same databases, the following keywords were also used to locate scholarly articles on HR and China: Human Relations AND China, Human Relations AND Mayo AND China, Human Relations AND Hawthorne AND China, and Theory Y AND Human Relations AND China. Our intention here was not necessarily to quantify the number of articles published citing scientific management and HR, but rather to provide a richer account of their subtle influence on the development of HRM in China. Through our initial search, we identified several sources on scientific management practices in China; however, very few studies were identified on HR during this period beyond those that reported 'soft' approaches to HRM (see the discussion below). In light of the limited evidence available on HR practices in China during this era, we extended our search to include leadership and motivation, as both are core elements of the HR approach (Burnes, 2014). This latter phase produced several scholarly articles, some of which are discussed in this review.

The emergence of scientific management in China in the 1920s and 1930s has been well documented (Busse et al., 2016; Warner, 2014b). In an earlier account, Morgan (2006), as noted earlier, explored the transfer of scientific management within the context of soft technologies (more commonly referred to as management 'know-how'), in particular, Taylorism, to China in the early 20th century, concluding that Taylor's ideas are evident in China as early as the 1920s and 1930s. However, a review of more recent literature, including several reviews of HRM within the Chinese context (Chen et al., 2016; Cooke, 2009; Lamond & Zheng, 2010; Zheng, 2013 & Zheng & Lamond, 2009a, 2009b), highlights a dearth of research that explicitly examines the prevalence of scientific management and HR practices in the period since 1980. This finding is somewhat consistent with Busse et al. (2016), who noted the

³ The summarized number of publications in HR and HRM, respectively, in different time periods, including journal articles, peer-reviewed conference articles, PhD theses and books in Chinese can be supplied at request.

presence of scientific management published in Chinese in recent decades, but also asserted that current research is dominated by HRM. Closer inspection of the literature suggests that former scientific management is particularly evident in some industries such as manufacturing (Freeman, 2013; Yu, 2008).

Despite relatively recent evidence of scientific management within manufacturing firms in China, very few studies explicitly referred to HR in their observations of HRM practices in China. There is, however, evidence where it is reflected in ‘soft’ HRM based on Theory Y that emphasizes control through commitment (Truss, Gratton, Hope-Hailey, McGovern, & Stiles, 1997). Further, Li and Nesbit (2012) identified both ‘soft’ approaches, including leadership, low-instrumental reward and relationships, which is associated with the HR movement (Truss et al., 1997), co-existing with ‘hard’ ones, which included control, discipline and top-down management that are aligned to scientific management.

This notion of both ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ practices permeating HRM within Chinese firms is reinforced by Zheng (2013), who argues that the behavioral perspective of HRM is related to both the scientific management (i.e., Taylorism, Theory X, instrumentalism and hard approaches) and the neoclassical HR theory (i.e., Mayo’s Hawthorne experiments, Theory Y type, and ‘soft’ approaches). Zheng (2013: 62) raises the question of ‘whether the organization-based theories guiding the firm’s uptake of HRM in the West are equally applicable?’, which indicates the need to examine the influence of Western theories on indigenous practices and areas for further study. Citing Truss et al. (1997), Zheng (2013) argues that managers of most firms in China would be more likely to embrace the ‘tenets of the soft, commitment approach’, while their employees are likely to experience ‘the hard, strategic control, command HRM approach’ (Zheng, 2013: 62).

Recently, Zhang (2015) used China’s automobile industry as a case-study to examine the implementation, effects and problems of ‘lean-production’ within China’s automobile industry. Zhang reports that automakers adopt mixed strategies that combine ‘lean’ production techniques with existing Taylorist-Fordist mass production approaches, as well as with socialist organizational practices, such as small work-groups and the ideological control of the Party.

The idea that both scientific management and HR ideas may be relevant to HRM in China depending on the situation was explored by Yan, Peng, and Francesco (2011). They argue that both approaches could be effective in the management of HRM practices, particularly if the circumstances under which each is appropriate can be understood. More generally, several scholars have used China as the ‘context’ to test and examine Western management principles and theories (Cooke, 2009; Child, 2009; Warner, 2014a, 2014b), including those emanating from the HR movement (i.e., leadership, empowerment, and motivation: see Burnes, 2014; Li & Nesbit, 2012; Miller & Vaughan, 2001). Chen et al. (2016) used a sample of 571 Chinese service-firms and found a positive relationship between employee relationship quality and employee wellbeing. The authors highlighted the relevance of employee relationship management and the promotion of employee wellbeing. Some researchers (Li, Xu, Tu, & Lu, 2014), for example, point to the alleged suicide scandals reported in a number of Chinese and foreign-owned firms.

Researchers have also examined the universality and applicability within China of motivation theories. Yang (2011) explored the factors that motivated workers across China, questioning whether Western theories, such as Hierarchy of Needs Theory, McClelland’s Theory of Needs, Herzberg’s two-factor Theory, ERG Theory and Job Design, were adequate in explaining motivation among Chinese workers, whose values were said to be influenced by Confucianism. There is also evidence, however, that motivational theories may lose some of their applicability when transferred from an individualistic to a collectivist culture (see Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; Warner, 2014a, 2014b).

Similarly, Cheng, Sculli, and Shui-fun Chan (2001) examined the universality of management theories, arguing that many theories do not adequately account for the role of culture because they focus on the individualistic paradigm. Collectivist cultures, such as China’s, identify with the group and are influenced by collective norms (see Tu & Lu, 2013). The ideas that the universality of management practices depend, in part, on the national culture has been discussed by Zheng (2013), who suggested that national culture may provide coercive forces against the adoption of universal best practices in some contexts. Citing Adler (1997) and others, Cheng et al. (2001) suggest that US management theories of motivation offer limited explanation outside the US. The authors offer an alternative perspective, methodological relationism, which takes the individual as embedded in a social network, thus shifting the focus from the individual to the individual in relations.

While we do not argue that national culture is unimportant, we point to more recent evidence that both ‘hard’ (scientific management) and ‘soft’ (HR) approaches have been reported in the Chinese context (Li & Nesbit, 2012; Zheng, 2013). Our review has unearthed a body of research that seeks to examine or apply Western-derived theories and concepts relating to HR, including leadership, empowerment and motivation, in the Chinese context (Nie, Chua, Yeung, Ryan, & Chan, 2015; Tu & Lu, 2013; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). This evidence suggests that concepts and practices relating to HR still permeate the development of HRM within China, although their presence and effect may not be explicit.

9. Discussion: the emergence of HRM in China vis-à-vis the dynamism of convergence, divergence and contextualisation

This article first aims to identify some family resemblances (i.e., Chinese characteristics) in the different ways by which Chinese human resources were managed in different time-periods in order to address two research questions raised for the study: what were the foreign and indigenous influences shaping the management of people in China during different periods (e.g., before 1911; 1911–1949; 1949–1978; and late 1978 to the present day) and what impact has this produced for the development of a definitive version of HRM in contemporary China?

One ‘family resemblance’ observed in HRM in China over different periods of history is the legacy of Confucianism, which has a powerful influence in Chinese society (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Peterman, 2014; Warner, 2010, 2016). For instance, Confucian values such as the emphasis on harmony (*he-xie*), respect for seniority and authority, and *guan-xi* (reciprocal social/personal relationships)

that shape workplace relationships are important markers of Chinese behavioral norms (see Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997; Hwang & Hu, 2004; Jiang, 2005) and are reflected to various extents in the way that human resources are managed.

Another family resemblance observed in contemporary Chinese HRM since the PRC was founded is the central role of the Party-state in how staff are employed and managed, especially in the public sector (Liang & Langbein, 2015). The sovereign right of the CPC to govern cadres gives the Party full authority over the selection, appointment, monitoring, and evaluation of state cadres at all levels of public sector organizations (see Li, 2012). This is supported by policy that dictates cadres must be led and managed by the CPC (*dang guan ganbu*) (Bell, 2015). The Party secretary of each organization is regarded as the supreme leader within the organizational hierarchy (*yi ba shou*) (Zhang & Yang, 2007). While the policy aims to solidify the Party's administration and enhance the CPC's ability to rule, the reliance on the personal power of the leader may have negative effects (Zhang, 2010).

The second aim of this article is to use the case of the emergence of HRM in China to add further evidence to and also draw implications for the debate on convergence/divergence and contextualization. In the literature, the claim that either a convergent or divergent international HRM approach should be adopted has led to a debate in the realm of HRM in the context of emerging economies (Björkman, 2003; Dewettinck & Remue, 2011; Pudelko & Harzing, 2007).

The convergence perspective argues that emerging economy firms' HRM policies and practices should be aligned with Western models and MNEs across various locations will become similar (Björkman, 2003; Rowley & Benson, 2002). To support this argument, scholars found that HRM policies and practices from Western countries that seem to generate higher performance are widely adopted by firms in emerging economies (see Andreeva, Festing, Minbaeva, & Muratbekova-Touron, 2014; Fan, Zhang, & Zhu, 2013; Gooderham & Nordhaug, 2003). However, given diverse cultural and institutional forces across nations, a divergent HRM model with country-characteristics has been adopted when scholars investigate HRM practices in emerging or already-emerged economies (such as China) (Branson, 2001; Li & Nesbit, 2012). The divergence perspective assumes that emerging economy firms will localize HRM practices and act differently to MNEs from developed economies. In Pudelko and Harzing's (2007) research, 'localization' of HRM practices reflects a direct effect of divergence, where both national culture and institutional characteristics in the host-country limit the initiative of HRM policy and practice transfer between developed-country headquarters and subsidiaries in emerging economies. Cooke (2012) also found that divergent HRM practices are preferred to suit local needs, when emerging economy firms have a strong localization mindset, with a high level of autonomy for their managers.

Regarding the convergence/divergence debate, more and more researchers contend that 'contextualization' must be taken into account for localized HRM practices (e.g., Andrews, 2016; Schuler, Dowling, & De Cieri, 1993). Special attention has been paid to understanding HRM practices in relation to the influence of an array of contextual factors in different national contexts (Kim & Wright, 2011; Van Helden & Reichard, 2013). Zhou, Liu, and Hong (2012) argue that a 'contextualization' approach is needed when examining the pluralistic structures, measures and predictive effects of HRM systems in China. Brandsen and Kim (2010) also affirm that HRM practices such as performance appraisal should be matched with the settings of particular contexts. In the context of China, political factors affect Chinese HRM through the central role of the Party-state which set politically oriented performance criteria and the sovereign right of the Communist Party of China during public organizations' selection, appointment and evaluation processes (Li, 2012; Liang & Langbein, 2015; Wang, Zhu, Mayson, & Chen, 2017).

For the cultural context of Chinese firms, studies have suggested that Confucianism and its related concepts, feudalism and socialism can impact organizational and individual behaviours (Li & Sun, 2013; Yang, 2012), which can be summed up as 'Confucian HRM' (see Warner, 2010, 2011, 2012). In terms of institutional factors in the Chinese context, the household registration system (*hukou*) may still be a determinant to divide China's labour-force into rural workers and urban workers, even if the system is currently under reform, and it continues to influence Chinese HRM practices significantly (Li, Loyalka, Rozelle, & Wu, 2017).

Through investigating the emergence of Chinese HRM, we argue that our study has found that the characteristics and corresponding perspectives are heterogeneous for Chinese scholars and managers at different stages/time periods. Specifically, in the early 20th century, a number of articles in relation to scientific management were published in China, and then personnel management/administration was initially introduced by a few Chinese scholars during 1920s and 1930s. In turn, a 'convergence' perspective had a predominant role in HRM at this stage. During 1949–1978, personnel (including both cadres and workers) administration systems began to form, which were integrated with a Maoist model characterized by its heavy-industry-oriented Stalinist big-push strategy, a socialist command economy system and Maoist ideology (Zhu, 2005). In this period, the prevalent HRM practices became divergent as personnel administration was fused with the current Chinese political and economic system. From 1979 onwards, Chinese scholars began to introduce the term *renji guanxi* (interpersonal relationship) as the meaning of HR to Chinese readers. Since then, the fast-increasing publications on HR and HRM have witnessed profound effects. Additionally, in order to adapt to Chinese specific circumstances, Deng introduced new approaches to both economics and people management during the period of economic reforms after 1979 (see Gewirtz, 2016; Warner, 2017b). Given these arguments, we propose that:

Proposition 1. As evidenced by the emergence of HRM in China, the adoption of convergence, divergence, or contextualization perspective is 'dynamic', rather than stable, in different time periods.

In the meanwhile, the adoption of contextualization approach has confirmed that Western-derived theories of HRM may be effectively used in Chinese HRM practices, if they adapt to the local political, economic, culture and institutional context (Nie et al., 2015; Tu & Lu, 2013; Zhang & Bartol, 2010). Chinese scholars emphasize context-specific institutional practices, such as the managerial roles of the CPC on managing people and cultural influences, and the mixture of both Confucian and Party norms on employees' behavior and HRM practices. Moreover, through the adoption of contextualization, diversity may appear when there are variations on sector, firm size and region within national contexts. For instance, the Party-state has the essential role in hiring, selecting and rewarding cadres and workers especially in the public sector, while Western HRM concepts and practices are considered

more relevant in the private sector. Therefore, we would argue that:

Proposition 2. Contextualization of HRM/IHRM research should extend from national to sub-national investigation, including comparative public/private sector and regional difference analysis to show their impact on convergence and divergence.

Further, national culture is considered to be associated with the practice of people management in China, as it significantly impacts employees' perception and reaction. In considering the influence of culture on the emergence of HRM, studies argue that Confucianism and feudalism may account for the development of many HRM practices (Li & Sun, 2013; Yang, 2012). Confucianism has had a long-lasting impact on the Chinese society, as noted earlier, because it was deeply embedded in Chinese public sector organizations. Confucian values such as *guan-xi* and *de* (morality) are related to managerial philosophies and practices in China. *Guan-xi* is said to influence organizational knowledge-sharing, which may have an effect on employees' values and behavior. *De* (morality) is commonly regarded as a key performance criterion, while morality and personal responsibility are critical to the social harmony and equality system (Yang, 2012). Similar to Confucianism, feudal values may emphasize rule by elites (Liu, 1991) and value the importance of holding a high position (*guan-wei*). People working in the public sector especially value *guan-wei* because of its virtue for gaining respect, social reputation, power, and influence (Wang et al., 2017). The importance of culture influence leads to our last proposition:

Proposition 3. We would argue that national culture (such as Confucianism and feudalism) has had a unique and long-lasting influence on the emergence of HRM in China, which adds extra merits to the adoption of convergence, divergence, or contextualization perspectives.

10. Conclusions

Taking our initial three conjectures, we believe they are confirmed by the evidence presented here. The emergence of HRM may be best seen as, first, hybrid, second, later linked to reform, and, last, ambiguous in its impact. Its intellectual narrative is indeed a 'tangled web' of overlapping influences but we hope we have usefully clarified it in the study. Further, our examination of the HRM development in China has shown that convergence and divergence is not one-way only, that is, from developed to developing countries. This can be seen from the influence of the Chinese Imperial civil examination system on the development of civil selection practices in other countries. Our study has also clearly indicates the importance of context at a particular time, such as different political environments, different stages of economic development, in different sectors – public or private – and institutional development. From the case of China, we may argue, we can add more evidence to the complicated and dynamic process of convergence/divergence, even globalization, then draw implications for the importance of context when examining relevant managerial practices. The three propositions, we hope, will draw further attention to the study of HRM in these areas.

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