# Confucian Entrepreneurship: Towards a Genealogy of a Conceptual Tool

# Abstract:

The concept of the ‘Confucian Entrepreneur’ is now used by many scholars to understand entrepreneurship in China and other East Asian countries. This paper traces the development of this concept from its roots in the writings of nineteenth-century Western authors to its use in modern management journals. We show that while this conceptual tool has been adapted over time, the claims associated with it have remained largely similar. Use of the term Confucian entrepreneur implies belief that Confucian ideas induce Chinese entrepreneurs to behave differently than their Western counterparts, a claim for which the empirical foundations are weak. We do not go so far as to say that those who research Chinese entrepreneurship should discard the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur simply because of its historical origins in colonialism. However, we do call on researchers to reflect on the historical origins of their conceptual tools. By historicising our theories of entrepreneurship, this paper should encourage greater scholarly reflexivity and thus the development of entrepreneurship and management theory with greater predictive power.

Key words: Chinese entrepreneurship, Max Weber; Gordon Redding; Foucauldian genealogy; Confucianism; meta-theory

# Introduction

Since 1990, the concept of the ‘Confucian Entrepreneur’ has been used extensively by academics who study entrepreneurship in China and other East Asian countries (e.g., Li and Liang, 2015; Redding, 1990; Zhu, 2015). The use of this term implies belief that Confucianism induces significant differences in behaviour between entrepreneurs in Confucian countries and their Western counterparts. This conceptual tool now influences how non-academics perceive the world, as the term Confucian entrepreneur has migrated from English-language scholarly journals to texts read by business practitioners in both the West (e.g., Financial Times, 2012) and East Asia (e.g., EEO, 2018). In 2018, there were more than 15,000 references to Confucian entrepreneurship儒商*rushang* in the Chinese media. A recurring idea in these texts is that Confucian entrepreneurs are more ethically constrained than non-Confucian ones.1 The term ‘Confucian entrepreneur’ has even been used to frame trade shows and other business gatherings (PR Newswire, 2018). In sum, the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur influences how many people think about business in China and other East Asian countries.

When the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur appeared in management research in the 1990s, its value as a tool of interpretation was questioned by scholars who charged that Western academics had over-estimated the impact of Confucianism on the behaviour of East Asian businesspeople (Dirlik, 1997; Greenhalgh, 1994; Hill, 2000). Despite the publication of such criticisms, this conceptual tool continued to be used by researchers. In recent years, however, scholars have once again called into question the utility of the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur. For instance, Chuah et al. (2016, p. 1095) expressed scepticism about the value of this concept when they reported that they had found ‘no evidence’ to support the claims that Confucian ideas influence actual Chinese entrepreneurial behaviour. These authors suggest that since the theories built using the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur lack predictive power, we should cease using the concept. Chuah et al. imply that while the ‘Confucian entrepreneur’ is a popular conceptual tool, its continued use by researchers may be a barrier to understanding business phenomena in China.

This paper contributes to these ongoing efforts to problematize the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur. Thinking critically about this concept is important because theories such as the theory of Confucian capitalism have been built upon it (e.g., Yao, 2013). This paper problematizes the concept by documenting its origins and explaining how it became widespread. Our paper shows that this conceptual tool emerged from texts produced by nineteenth-century Western missionaries, merchants, and other observers of China whose worldviews were coloured by colonialism. In this paper, colonialism denotes an intellectual system that represent non-Westerners as profoundly different from, and inferior to, Westerners (Boussebaa et al., 2014). Colonialism is a discredited intellectual system that is associated with very low predictive power (Özkazanç-Pan, 2008). Many researchers who today use the conceptual tool of the Confucian entrepreneur appear to be unaware of its historical origins in colonialism. These scholars need to become aware of the concept’s origins because, as Birkinshaw et al. (2014) have persuasively argued, lack of awareness of the historical origins of their concepts reduces the ability of management scholars to make theoretical advances, a point reinforced by Rowlinson et al. (2014). By raising awareness of the origins of a frequently employed conceptual tool, this paper will help researchers to produce more self-reflexive research that has greater predictive power. As Zahra (2007, p. 452) has argued, becoming aware of the social processes that inform theory development can allow entrepreneurship scholars to engage in more ‘effective theorizing’.

We do not go so far as to say that those who research East Asian entrepreneurship should discard the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur simply on account of its historical origins in colonialism. However, we do argue that researchers should use considerable caution in operationalizing theories derived from the writings of colonialist authors. The findings presented in this paper will be of interest to a wide range of management researchers who use the concept of Confucian entrepreneurship to understand phenomena in China and other East Asian countries. The importance of Chinese entrepreneurs in the global economy has increased according to a wide range of metrics, such as the percentage of the world’s most successful entrepreneurs who are Chinese (Forbes, 2018). In view of the growing global importance of Chinese entrepreneurs, it is surely important for academics to reflect on whether they are using the right conceptual tools to research this topic. In our view, the users of this conceptual tool need to be alerted to its origins so they can make an informed decision about whether to continue using it.

Literature Review and Theory

In this section, we discuss the theoretical underpinnings of the paper. We begin with a discussion of the different theoretical lenses that academics now use to understand Chinese entrepreneurship. We identify two rival approaches for understanding Chinese entrepreneurship, one of which concentrates on the formal institutions that are the central focus of the New Institutional Economics, the other of which focuses on cultural-cognitive phenomena such as religion.

Rival Approaches to Understanding Entrepreneurship

Our primary concern is the evolution of the conceptual tools that scholars use to understand Chinese entrepreneurship. However, it is useful to frame that discussion by briefly considering the theories in use in the field of entrepreneurship as a whole. We know from recent state-of-the-field papers that entrepreneurship remains a diverse field populated by researchers who use a wide range of methodologies to answer an array of research questions (Aldrich, 2000; Shepherd et al., 2019; Terjesen et al., 2016). As a strategy scholar once observed, entrepreneurship has ‘many different DVs [dependent variables]’ while the field of strategy is focused on just one DV, firm performance (quoted in Shepherd et al., 2019, p.160). While the field of entrepreneurship lacks a single DV, it does have core research questions, one of which is explaining why levels and forms of entrepreneurship differ through time and between different geographical localities (Ricketts, 2008). Research on the puzzle of what causes variations in entrepreneurial behaviour is clearly important in light of the evidence that such differences can help to explain variations in the economic performance of nations and localities (Dodd et al., 2013; Islam, 2014).

However, while entrepreneurship researchers agree that understanding the causal mechanisms behind temporal and geographical variation in entrepreneurship is essential, they have very different approaches to this issue. The field of entrepreneurship is thus marked by a tension between those who regard formal institutions as the set of variables that best explain temporal and spatial variations in entrepreneurial behaviour (e.g., Bjørnskov and Foss, 2016; Bosma et al., 2018; Bradley and Klein, 2016; Li and Zahra, 2012) and those who believe that the study of religion, attitudes, and other “cultural-cognitive” variables provide the best explanation (e.g., Henley, 2017; Parboteeah et al., 2015). Scholars in the first camp (e.g., North, 1990) typically use the rational-actor model and theorize that socially-beneficial entrepreneurship is most likely to occur in a jurisdiction in which property rights are secure and government is limited (Baumol, 1996; Bruton et al., 2010). Their paradigm is rooted in the classical-liberal ideas of Adam Smith (Hodgson, 1989), who said in 1755 that ‘little else is requisite to carry a state to the highest degree of opulence from the lowest barbarism, but peace, easy taxes, and a tolerable administration of justice’ (quoted in Langlois, 2016, p. 55).

Scholars in the other camp argue that we must concentrate on cultural factors if we are to account for temporal and geographical variations in the quantity and quality of entrepreneurship (Casson, 1993; Doepke and Zilibotti, 2014; Down, 2013; Freytag and Thurik, 2007; Gartner, 2013; Morales and Holtschlag, 2013; Watson, 2013). The cultural-cognitive literature discusses issues such as perceptions of entrepreneurs (e.g., Atherton, 2004; Shane, 1993) and the relationship between religious ideas and entrepreneurial intentions and entrepreneurial behaviour (e.g., Dodd and Seaman, 1998; Zelekha et al., 2014). A range of entrepreneurship theorists (Licht and Siegel, 2005; van Burg and Romme, 2014; Welter, 2011) have reported that entrepreneurship research on cultural-cognitive factors continues to be extensively influenced by the theory of the German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920). Weber’s ideas remain influential in entrepreneurship (Shepherd et al., 2018), despite the fact scholars have documented that Weber’s writings frequently misrepresented non-Western cultures and were based on very limited empirical research (Ashley, 2015; Boatcă, 2013; Farris, 2013; Hung, 2003; Kersten, 2012; Mills et al., 2013; Said 1978). Peng (2005, pp.327-328), notes that while Weber’s book on religion and enterprise in China has been criticised for its many factual errors, it remains influential.

Literature on Chinese Entrepreneurship

As Huang et al. (2016) observe, China is now an increasingly important area for entrepreneurship researchers. Chinese entrepreneurship is discussed using a diverse range of theoretical frameworks, which include the Resource-Based View, agency theory and behavioural economics. Part of this literature uses empirical material that is derived from observations of entrepreneurs who happen to be in China but appears in papers that are not concerned about the relationship between entrepreneurship and national context (see Figure 4 in Su et al., 2015). However, two main strands within the literature on Chinese entrepreneurship are pre-occupied with what makes Chinese entrepreneurship distinctive. Speaking of one of these strands, Su et al. (2015, p. 54) observe that scholars who study entrepreneurship in China frequently discuss the impact of Confucianism: ‘Confucian culture also provides a cultural foundation, which makes networks of interpersonal relationships (*guanxi* in China) extremely important. For these reasons, China is a special place for examining social context and its effect on entrepreneurship.’ (Su et al., 2015, p. 64). The conceptual tool of the ‘the Confucian entrepreneur’ appears frequently in papers that fall within this cluster.

The scholars who use the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur to understand Chinese phenomena posit a variety of causal mechanisms by which Confucianism is said to influence Chinese entrepreneurial behaviour. For instance, a frequently-cited article by Yan and Sorenson (2006, p. 235) stressed the power of Confucianism in relation to firm succession, declaring that the ‘influence of Confucianism is staggering.’ They contrasted the ‘highly individualistic cultures’ of the West, where ‘business networks tend to be formal and based on contract, and succession is treated as a private issue for the business family,’ with Confucian societies, where written agreements play a less important role in family business succession (2006, p. 246). Unfortunately, the authors failed to provide any comparative data to back up their assertion that there is an essential difference between Chinese and Western entrepreneurs that can be attributed to Confucianism. Differences between the formal political systems of countries also go unmentioned in their paper, even though they also offer plausible explanations for the *explanandum*. The reader is thus left wondering whether some other variable, such as differences between legal systems or the costs of hiring lawyers, is responsible for the pattern observed. A paper by Cheung and King (2004) claimed that the moral choices of Chinese entrepreneurs were influenced by Confucian ideas. These authors spoke of ‘the Confucian entrepreneur’s willingness to forgo material advantage out of moral considerations’ (2004, p. 255), which implies that non-Confucian entrepreneurs have fewer, or at least different, ethical constraints than Confucian entrepreneurs. Cheung and King (2004) presented no comparative data, qualitative or otherwise, to support this assertion that Confucian and non-Confucian entrepreneurs make different trade-offs between material gain and moral considerations. Moreover, they did not consider whether differences in formal institutions might provide a more convincing explanation for any visible differences.

In paper in a prestigious journal, Li and Liang (2015) argued that the decisions of many mainland Chinese entrepreneurs to obtain seats in legislative bodies are driven by their Confucian ideals. These authors used the results of a survey in which such entrepreneurs had been asked to describe their motives for seeking public office to argue that Confucianism pushes Chinese entrepreneurs to behave in an altruistic or pro-social manner. The authors neither questioned the accuracy of the entrepreneurs’ descriptions of their own motives nor provided comparative data about the motives of entrepreneurs who obtain legislative positions in non-Confucian societies, such as the United States, or in Taiwan, a Confucian polity with democratic political institutions. Zhu (2015) applies neo-Weberian theory in the course of understanding how the Confucian teachings about *ren-yi-li* (‘love and compassion, righteousness, and propriety’) influence ‘Chinese SME entrepreneurial decision-making.’ Zhu does not provide comparative data to back up his claims about the influence of Confucianism on entrepreneurial behaviour, which means that we do not know whether Confucian entrepreneurs behave in a measurably different fashion than Western and other non-Confucian entrepreneurs. Pointing to the absence of a comparative element in the papers on Confucian entrepreneurship, Chuah et al. (2016, p. 1095) declared we currently lack any hard evidence to support the claims that Confucian ideas significantly influence actual Chinese entrepreneurial behaviour.

As we have seen, a significant number of researchers who use the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur to understand Chinese entrepreneurs. The researchers who use the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur generally ignore the work of the similarly large cluster of entrepreneurship researchers who study Chinese phenomena using Northian neo-institutionalist theory (Su et al., 2015). The scholars who draw on the new institutional economics to understand Chinese entrepreneurship include Ding et al., (2014), Milana and Wang (2013), Puffer et al., (2010), Schweinberger (2014), and Yueh (2012). For authors within this school, cultural factors such as religion are, at best, a residual. Whereas the neo-Weberian scholars attribute tremendous causative power to Confucianism, authors in this group use the rational-actor model of human behaviour to understand the relationship between political institutions and the incentives for individuals to engage in entrepreneurial behaviour. A core idea running through the neo-institutionalist research on Chinese entrepreneurship is the theory that Western-style ‘limited government’ is more supportive of entrepreneurship that political systems in which the state intervenes extensively in the market. The phenomena discussed by scholars who use the new institutional economics lens to study Chinese entrepreneurship include privatization, effective tax rates, and competition between Chinese provincial governments for investment capital. The approach taken by these scholars is thus radically different from that taken by the researchers who use the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur.

Context: History of Sino-Western Interaction, 1842–1911

During the Treaty Port Era (1842–1911), Chinese sovereignty was severely limited and the Western colonial powers carved enclaves out of Chinese soil. The end of the First Opium War in 1842, which saw the forcible opening of China to Western business, marked the start of the Treaty Port Era. The year in which the Qing dynasty was overthrown in a revolution supported by much of the emergent Chinese bourgeoisie, 1911, marks the end of this period (Bergère, 1983). The treaty ports were Chinese cities in which Western business people were allowed to reside and trade. The volume of Sino-Western trade in the period 1842–1911 rose dramatically (see Table I), as did the number of Westerners resident in China. The presence of Westerners allowed Chinese merchants to acquire the capital and skills needed to modernize the Chinese economy (Cox and Chan, 2000; Hao, 1986; Motono, 2000).

Throughout this period, the degree to which China was poorer than the West was immediately ‘visible’ to visitors (Wong and Rosenthal, 2011). While there is debate among economic historians about precisely when and why the West overtook China in GDP per capita (Li and van Zanden, 2012; Lowrey and Baumol, 2013; Vries, 2015), there is a near-consensus among economic historians that China had fallen well behind the West by 1840 at the very latest (Broadberry, et al., 2014; Deng and O’Brien, 2016). China’s GDP per capita was $600 in 1850 and $545 in 1900, while in the same period the GDP per capita in the UK was $2,330 and $4,492, respectively (Maddison Project, 2013). This massive gap in living standards framed how Westerners saw China and thought about Chinese entrepreneurship.

The treaty port system gave Westerners greater opportunities and incentives to observe and debate Chinese entrepreneurship. In this era, Westerners frequently debated why China was economically backward. They also debated why Chinese entrepreneurship was underdeveloped relative to that in the West. Businessmen, Christian missionaries and other Western writers offered a variety of competing explanations for the underdevelopment of Chinese entrepreneurship. Western expatriates published their ideas about Chinese entrepreneurship in a wide variety of formats. For instance, Chambers of Commerce in the treaty ports published petitions and memoranda, retired merchants wrote memoirs about their careers in China, and diplomats filed reports on commercial conditions that were published by their home governments. These primary sources, which are listed in Table II, offered contemporary readers competing explanations for why Chinese entrepreneurship was less developed than entrepreneurship in the West. Some Western observers focused on institutional impediments to entrepreneurship in China, while others depicted the allegedly superior entrepreneurship dynamism of the West as proof of the superiority of Christianity and other elements of the Western cultural tradition over Chinese religion, culture and value systems. The latter approach essentialized the differences between business people in the rational and progressive West and those in the allegedly stagnant and tradition-bound East. This approach was clearly informed by the colonialist ideologies that influenced how many Westerners in this period viewed non-Westerners (Bickers, 1999; Chang, 2015; Forman, 2013; Keevak, 2011).

Context: History of Sino-Western Interaction, 1978–2016

The start of our second period also marks an event in Chinese political history: the famous Communist Party plenum in December 1978. In the period between the Communist Revolution in 1949 and 1978, mainland China was virtually autarkic and played a trivial role in world trade (see Table I). China was also a centrally-planned economy in which the private sector was virtually non-existent. During the Maoist experiment with central planning (1949–1976), Westerners rarely discussed Chinese entrepreneurship, as they had little need to do so. Market-based reform was embraced after December 1978, unleashing a wave of entrepreneurship: over the next few years, the role for the private sector in agriculture and then urban commerce was increased (Coase and Wang, 2016; Ge, 1999; Vogel, 2011). Deng Xiaoping and other Chinese leaders came under the influence of Western economists such as Milton Friedman, who taught that adopting free-market or liberal economic institutions would accelerate growth (Gewirtz, 2017). A new class of Chinese entrepreneurs emerged, some of whom would become dollar millionaires and eventually billionaires. Economic liberalization continued with China’s entry into the World Trade Organization in 2001.

As China re-engaged with world markets after 1978, Westerners had both increased opportunities and greater incentives to analyse Chinese economic conditions, as in the period 1842–1911. In the 1980s, Westerners would once again debate Chinese entrepreneurship, returning to a topic that they had discussed in the pre-1911 period. The result was a steadily growing stream of academic work in English on the subject. The periods 1842–1911 and 1978–2016 are analogous in that both eras saw China’s rapid integration into the global economy and a surge in entrepreneurial activity. The post-1978 scholarly debate on Chinese entrepreneurship has witnessed the revival of the two rival lenses that had developed in pre-1911 debates about Chinese entrepreneurship, with one lens directing the attention to entrepreneurship researchers to political institutions, while the other stresses the importance of cultural influences in entrepreneurial cognition.

While there are striking parallels between the terms of debate about Chinese entrepreneurship in these two periods, there are also important differences between the two periods. First, while China in the 1840s was forced to open its markets in the aftermath of a military defeat by Westerners, China’s post-1978 liberalization was not forced on the Chinese government by outside powers. Moreover, Western attitudes towards non-Western peoples had changed dramatically in the intervening period, thanks to the global civil rights revolution (Thörn, 2006). The associated cultural shifts mean that the overt religious and racial prejudices that Westerners displayed in their discussion of Chinese entrepreneurship in the period in 1842–1911 were no longer acceptable. Another important difference was that by the second period, the peer-reviewed article had emerged as the most important genre of text for debating Chinese entrepreneurship. In first period, the debate about the reasons for the underdevelopment of Chinese entrepreneurship took place in non-academic publications, such as businessmen’s memoirs.

# Method

This paper compares the representation of Chinese entrepreneurship in English-language texts in two historical periods: 1842–1911 and 1978–2016. In historical analysis, periodization (i.e., selecting the beginning and end date for historical epochs and narratives) is crucial (Rowlinson et al., 2014). We have chosen to compare the periods 1842–1911 and 1978–2016 because both eras witnessed the rapid integration of China into the global economy after a period of isolation. During each period, China’s importance to the West increased dramatically, which helps to account for the production of English-language texts in which the authors sought to understand entrepreneurship and other business phenomena in China. In the intervening period, very few, if any, English-language texts about Chinese entrepreneurship were produced, likely because China was perceived as an extremely inhospitable environment for entrepreneurship. To understand the context in which these discourses were produced, we provide two brief histories of Sino-Western trade below.

We compare representations of Chinese entrepreneurship in these two historical periods to develop an archaeology and a genealogy of knowledge, to draw on the distinction made by Foucault (1977) in his work on research methods. In designing our research project, we reflected carefully on which methodology would be most helpful to answering our research questions while remaining consistent with our own fundamental assumptions about knowledge, which are, broadly speaking, ‘critical rationalist’ (Popper, 2014). Popperian critical rationalist theory (Miller, 2006; Popper, 2014), which stresses the path dependent nature of academic knowledge, teaches that academic research is biased towards the use of venerable and prestigious theories at the expense of accurate theories. However, it also teaches that awareness of the processes by which theory is created can help researchers to escape from such path dependency. We concluded that the use of the Foucauldian techniques of archaeology and genealogy was compatible with our Popperian, critical rationalist framework. We agree with Rowlinson and Carter (2002) that there is much that is problematic in some of the works produced by Foucault’s followers in management schools, particularly those that ignore the socio-economic contexts in which texts are produced. Hardy and Thomas (2015, p.680) have recently called on management academics to re-engage with Foucault’s ideas about the ‘co-constitutive nature of discursive and material processes.’ They argue that while Foucault was acutely aware that the discourses and ideas present in a given culture were closely related to the underlying material conditions, some Foucauldian management academics have lost sight of this relationship by ignoring materiality as they studied textuality.

We heartily agree with their view and would note that in the 1990s there was an unfortunate tendency for Foucauldian management academics to ignore materiality. We maintain that understanding the discourses in which Chinese entrepreneurship was represented requires the presentation of data about the socio-economic and historical context in which the discourses were produced. For this reason, we present information about the history of China in our two periods and link the discourses about Chinese entrepreneurship in each period with the underlying socio-economic context. Our use of Foucault differs from that of the first generation of Foucauldian management academics in the 1990s in that we operationalize the methodology introduced by Foucault (1977) in a fashion that draws on the works on qualitative research methodology (Saldaña, 2015) that identify current best practice for reducing confirmation bias and other sources of coding error.

In Foucault’s archaeological research model, the focus of the scholar is on understanding the intellectual systems of a particular historical period and socio-economic context. The part of our paper that discusses how Westerners in the Treaty-Port period understood Chinese entrepreneurship is in the archaeological research model. In Foucault’s framework, the archaeology of ideas is an essential first step towards the writing of a genealogy of ideas. Genealogy, the method first used by Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), builds on archaeology by tracing the development of a nexus of ideas over time. This method has been adopted across the social sciences (Koopman, 2013) and by scholars who differ from Foucault in ideology and empirical research focus. Foucauldian genealogical approaches have been used to understand the development of a number of key concepts in accountancy (Hoskin and Macve, 1986), project management (Lenfle, 2014) and organisation studies (Bardon and Josserand, 2011; Simpson et al., 2014). Our paper applies a similar genealogical approach to the evolution of ideas about Chinese entrepreneurs in English-language texts. In the parts of the paper where we show that ideas from the treaty-port period have been used, adapted, and transmitted by modern management academics, we provide a genealogy of knowledge. The two periods compared in this paper vary considerably in terms of the number of surviving texts in which Chinese entrepreneurship is discussed; therefore, different methodologies were required for use to write an appropriate archaeology for each era. Below, we discuss the methodologies used to research how Chinese entrepreneurship was represented in texts during the two periods.

Methodology Used for Period 1842–1911

We began the data collection for this phase of the research by searching for works about Chinese entrepreneurship in English-language books published in the first of our two target periods. We sought to identify all English-language works that were published between 1842 and 1911 that advanced some explanation for why the level and character of entrepreneurship in China were different to those in the West. To ensure a comprehensive search for relevant texts, our identification procedure involved the intensive use of the holdings database of the British Library (BL), a globally important library of copyright deposit that collected the vast majority of English-language books published in this period. The BL holdings are unusually comprehensive because the copyright laws in place during the first of our periods strongly incentivized publishers to deposit a copy. We keyword-searched for relevant books using date parameters in the BL catalogue using keywords such as ‘China + commerc\*’ and ‘China + enterpris\*]. When particular texts could not be physically located within the British Library’s collection, we used electronic versions provided by the Hathi Trust. Since only a small number of relevant texts were found, we decided to read them all rather than use a sampling method. The historical texts we found and analysed are listed in Table II, which categorises the sources according to the author’s approach towards understanding entrepreneurship in China.

Readers will note that only one of the texts listed in Table II was written by an academic (Sargent, 1907), the rest being written by journalists, businessmen, and government officials. These texts were influential in their period because they were read by many Westerners. Moreover, some of these texts were cited by Weber, a thinker whose ideas, in turn, influenced Redding (1990) and, via him, several generations of academics. Table II notes the occupational background of the author or authors of each text. Information about the author’s occupation and nationality has been taken from the text in question and from other sources, such as biographical dictionaries. Eight of the twenty-two texts listed in Table II were created by diplomats, three by individuals who have been coded as businessmen, one by a British government official, one by a Canadian-born individual who worked in the Chinese customs service and one by a professional engineer.

In addition to identifying author background, we coded each text for content. There is considerable debate about coding methodology and inter-coder agreement in qualitative research (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003; Pierre and Jackson, 2014). These discussions about coding methodology connect to wider debates about transparency and findings confidence in qualitative research (Moravcsik, 2014; Symon, et al., 2018; Torrance, 2008). The current best practice in qualitative social science rests on the insight that while individual authors can carry out accurate coding work, the reliability of coding is increased through the involvement of more than one investigator. For this reason, coding by multiple researchers minimises the potential of culturally biased or otherwise inaccurate coding by an individual investigator (Neuendorf, 2016; Saldaña 2015). In research projects published in elite social science journals, content coding of texts is now generally done by more than one author to reduce the risk of coding error. When very large datasets are coded, which was not the case in this paper, a metric of inter-coder agreement such as Krippendorff’s alpha, is calculated and presented to the readers (Krippendorff, 2010). In line with this generally accepted best practice, the researchers decided that the content coding of each the primary sources listed in Table II should be carried out by both authors of this paper. Each researcher read and coded the texts independently from the other co-author. The researchers then compared and discussed the results of their coding decisions.

Table II lists the main barrier to Chinese entrepreneurship identified by each author (Column 5) as well as the theoretical lens or approach towards entrepreneurship identified (Column 6). The other columns categorise the author of each primary source according to their nationality and occupation. Column 6 of the table shows how each text was coded according to the theoretical framework applied in the primary source. The process of coding for the theoretical framework involved each of the two authors of this paper reading the text and then arriving at a judgement as to the theoretical frame that the author of the primary source had applied. For column 5, we coded the primary sources into three categories: Institutionalist, Religion-Focused and Mixed. Primary sources coded as Institutionalist attributed the retardation of Chinese entrepreneurship to China’s illiberal political institutions and did not attribute the differences between Western and Chinese entrepreneurship as being due to religion or any other cultural variable. Our coding protocol focused our attention on sentences containing causal statements. In contrast, texts that argued that China’s non-Christian religions were the root cause of the underdevelopment of entrepreneurship in China were coded as Religion-Focused. Texts that blamed China’s illiberal institutions and China’s culture and/or religion were coded as Mixed.

The following example illustrates how we coded the primary sources for column 5. In 1870, the Shanghae [sic] General Chamber of Commerce, which represented the interests of Western merchants in that city, published a text explaining why China was economically underdeveloped relative to the West. Their report attributed China’s slow commercial development to both the country’s ‘oppressive’ system of government and Chinese culture, which discouraged commercial ambition. Of these two factors, the ‘greater’ obstacle, it said, was ‘the passive and unconscious resistance of a people of stagnant ideas’ and ‘of very limited enterprise’ (Shanghae General Chamber of Commerce, 1870, p. 47). We coded this text as Despotic Government/Chinese Merchants’ Stagnant Ideas. In coding for Column 6, we looked at the theoretical framework or philosophy that informed the text as a whole. If the author or authors adopted Adam Smith’s view that existence of limited government was the main variable that explained the presence of entrepreneurship and economic development, it was coded as Institutionalist. The text by the Shanghae General Chamber of Commerce had been coded as Mixed: Institutionalist and Religion-Focused.

We found that we arrived at the same coding judgements for all of the texts. The fact that researchers who come from very different cultural backgrounds and work at universities on different continents arrived at the same conclusion about each primary source analysed and should improve reader confidence in our coding accuracy (Lombard et al., 2002). Coding each primary source by author occupation (Column 4) was straightforward, since biographical information about the author was readily available, except in the case of Shanghae General Chamber of Commerce (1870), which was written collectively by a group of Western businessmen in Shanghai. Coding for author nationality was generally straightforward.

Methodology Used for Period 1978–2016

In the second of the two target periods, the peer-reviewed article emerged as the most important genre for discussing competing views of Chinese entrepreneurship. Our description of post-1978 academic discourses about Chinese entrepreneurship is based on a recent literature review (Su, et al., 2015), our own analysis using the Scopus database and our reading of recent papers in the field and attendance at conferences. We used Scopus, as this service offers more versatile search options than rival databases and recently expanded its coverage of pre-1996 publications, which was crucial for our purposes. We conducted a Scopus search for English-language scholarly publications that contain both ‘entrepren\*’ and either ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’ in the title, keywords, and/or abstract. Our search produced 625 results. Our Scopus search for articles on Chinese entrepreneurship shows that, on average, just 0.4 scholarly papers per year on that subject were published in the 1980s. In the 1990s, the figure rose to three per year and then 21 per year in the subsequent decade. In the period 2010–2016, an average of 63 publications annually on entrepreneurship in Greater China were published.

The Scopus database also shows that entrepreneurship in China has attracted the attention of academics worldwide: whilst 255 of the authors who published on this subject in the period 1978–2016 had institutional affiliations in mainland China, 213 of the authors had US institutional affiliations. Research on entrepreneurship in culturally Chinese societies was also published by academics at universities in the UK (213 authors), Hong Kong (67) and Canada, and appeared in such journals as the *Asia Pacific Journal of Management* (23 articles), *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* (12), *Journal Of Business Venturing* (16), *Journal Of Business Ethics* (9 articles), *Entrepreneurship Theory And Practice* (7), and the *Journal Of Management Studies* (4).

The bibliometric research by Su et al. (2015, Figure 4) identified a cluster of Chinese entrepreneurship scholars who used either neo-institutional theory or neo-Weberian theory. After reading the paper by Su et al., we decided to read a range of recent and highly-cited scholarly works on entrepreneurship in China that represented the neo-institutionalist and neo-Weberian interpretative traditions. To understand the precise ways in which these scholars applied these theories, we felt that it was necessary to go well beyond a mere bibliometric analysis and to read a range of papers on Chinese entrepreneurship that were published in our target period. The results of our reading of these works are discussed below.

Representations of Chinese Entrepreneurship in the Period 1842–1911

To provide readers with a clearer idea of how we went about coding each text in Table II, we here discuss two of these texts and share direct quotations that help to illustrate how each author accounted for the retardation of entrepreneurship in China. An example of a text we coded as Institutionalist is that of Forbes (1844), a New England merchant’s memoir about trading in Guangzhou. Forbes expressed admiration for the Chinese merchants with whom he had interacted, particularly Houqua, an ‘enterprising merchant’ who had recently died due to China’s ‘oppressive government’ (Forbes, 1844, p. 14). In Forbes’ account, Chinese merchants were the innocent victims of a despotic regime that tormented commerce (Forbes, 1844). Forbes suggested that the main barriers to entrepreneurship in China stemmed from the country’s political system rather than any aspect of Chinese culture or character defects on the part of the Chinese merchants. Forbes was religiously neutral and did not venture an opinion about whether Chinese religions encouraged or discouraged entrepreneurship. Instead, Forbes applied a classical-liberal lens that focused on political institutions. Forbes was thus applying Adam Smith’s view that the existence of limited government was the main variable that explained the presence of entrepreneurship and economic development. As readers will observe from Table II, other Western observers of Chinese business (e.g., Heard, 1896; Jernigan, 1904; Knox, 1878; Medhurst, 1872; Rapier, 1878; Robertson, 1873) adopted a broadly similar approach towards understanding why capitalist entrepreneurship was underdeveloped in China. For all of these authors, political institutions were central.

The authors of other texts listed in Table II utilised a radically different theory to account for the underdevelopment of Chinese entrepreneurship, one that focused on culture and religion. These authors disagreed with the view that illiberal political institutions were the sole or even major cause of the commercial retardation of China, and instead advanced cultural explanations that emphasised the exotic or Oriental nature of the Chinese and the inferiority of their religion as compared to Christianity. These texts belittled the commercial capabilities of Chinese individuals, even those who lived under the classical-liberal institutions of the British colony of Hong Kong. In our view, these texts reflected the aforementioned well-documented anti-Chinese prejudice that was then common in Western culture.

A representative example of this approach towards understanding the under-development of Chinese entrepreneurship is Eitel (1895). The author of this text, who was a former missionary, was employed by the British colonial administration in Hong Kong in 1895. Whereas Forbes displayed a tolerant attitude towards China’s indigenous religions, Eitel was extremely hostile to these varieties of religious experience. It should be noted that he had earlier published works denouncing Buddhism (Eitel, 1884) and Feng-shui (Eitel, 1873). Eitel (1895) argued that the internalisation of false religious ideas by China’s merchants was holding back Chinese commercial development. Eitel depicted ‘Chinese merchants’ as superstitious and primitive (Eitel, 1895, p. 167). Eitel described ‘Oriental’ entrepreneurs as essentially passive players in the economic history of Hong Kong, with all agency and dynamism being attributed to European merchants: ‘it seems indisputable that… European merchants have ever been the leaders’ and the ‘Chinese merchants the indispensable hangers-on.’ The white merchants, and not the Oriental ones, were the incarnation of the mighty ‘spirit of free trade’ (Eitel, 1895, p. 569). Drawing on the then-fashionable Social-Darwinist ideas about racial destinies, Eitel declared that the ‘destiny of the one race is to rule and the fate of the other is to be ruled,’ with the success of Hong Kong illustrating not the vigour of the indigenous merchant class but rather what ‘Chinese labour and industry’ could achieve under the direction of whites (Eitel, 1895, pp. ii and v). Eitel’s views of the relationship between religion and entrepreneurship in China influenced Weber, as his 1915 cites Eitel, along with other missionaries, as an authority on the Chinese mind.

INSERT TABLE II ABOUT HERE

Representations of Chinese Entrepreneurship in the Period 1978–2016

The rapid growth in academic research on Chinese entrepreneurship since the 1980s is particularly striking when we consider that in the period between the establishment of communist rule in 1949 and the death of Mao in 1976, ‘entrepreneurship and China were seldom mentioned together’ by academics (Ahlstrom and Ding, 2014, p. 610). Under Mao, virtually all private-sector activity was suppressed in mainland China (Li, 2012), and while ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs in Hong Kong, Taiwan and elsewhere continued to display tremendous dynamism, their activities were simply not discussed in the academic literature on entrepreneurship, perhaps because Western academics’ image of the Chinese was then dominated by the Maoist economic system of the mainland.

Since market reforms began in 1978, China witnessed the ‘rebirth’ of entrepreneurial activity (Atherton and Newman, 2016) along with a revival of debates in English about the nature of Chinese entrepreneurship. Starting in the early 1980s, Chinese entrepreneurship became a fashionable research topic and authors began to publish empirical studies of entrepreneurship in cultural Chinese societies. Today, as in the early twentieth century, Chinese entrepreneurship is discussed using a diverse range of theoretical frameworks (see Figure 4 in Su et al., 2015). These frameworks are also popular with North American (Figure 2 in Su et al., 2015) and European (Figure 3 in Su et al., 2015) entrepreneurship researchers who study entrepreneurs in their own societies. None of the theoretical lenses we have just mentioned has roots in colonialist ideas.

However, there are researchers who study Chinese entrepreneurship using theoretical lenses, which are indeed rooted in colonialist ideologies. One of these lenses is built around the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur and holds the Confucianism has a pervasive impact on Chinese entrepreneurship as it strongly influences the cognition and behaviour of Chinese entrepreneurs (Su et al., 2015). This strand is intellectually descended from Weber’s work on the relationship between the religious and economic institutions of China (1915), which was translated into English in 1951. Weberian ideas about Chinese entrepreneurship were revived in the 1980s and 1990s by scholars such as Redding (1990). Redding’s seminal book on *The Spirit of Chinese Capitalism* (1990), which stressed the importance of culture and religion in influencing entrepreneurial behaviour, cited the 1951 translation of Weber (see Redding, 1990, pp. 8–9, 140) but it also adapted his theories in order to remain credible.

Redding needed to adapt Weber’s ideas about the Chinese because nobody in the 1980s could have plausibly argued that individuals in Confucian societies were fundamentally incapable of entrepreneurship. By the 1980s, ethnic Chinese entrepreneurs in Taiwan, Singapore and elsewhere had proved to the world that they were at least as proficient in entrepreneurship as individuals from the Western Protestant cultures Weber lionized as the nursery of modern entrepreneurship (Mackie, 1992). In this context, Weber’s theory that Confucianism was incompatible with extensive entrepreneurship required modification. Whereas Weber, and the nineteenth-century authors on which Weber had based his theory, had regarded Confucianism as a negative force that discouraged entrepreneurship in China, neo-Weberian researchers such as Redding and his followers generally depicted Confucianism as having a positive impact that made Chinese people more entrepreneurial than Westerners. Redding and his followers also argued that Confucianism changed the structure and strategies of Chinese family firms, with the result that they operate in a fashion quite different from those of the West (Zhu, 2015). The idea has been adapted by scholars who argue that Confucian entrepreneurs behave in a more prosocial manner than their Western counterparts (e.g., Li and Liang, 2015).

In the 1990s, Redding and the first wave of neo-Weberian scholars of Chinese enterprise were robustly and eloquently criticised for essentializing the differences between Western and Oriental businesses (Dirlik, 1997; Greenhalgh, 1994). The fact that some Asian writers adopted the neo-Weberian concept of Confucian entrepreneurship did little to mollify its critics, who condemned this practice as ‘reverse Orientalism’ (Hill, 2000). The approach pioneered by Redding has been critiqued by many researchers, most recently by Chuah et al. (2016, p. 1095), who found ‘no evidence’ to support the claims that Confucian ideas influence actual Chinese entrepreneurial behaviour. Similarly, a study of Chinese entrepreneurs in Thailand by Koning and Verver (2013) undermined the theory that Confucian ideas are relevant to understanding the behaviour of Chinese entrepreneurs. Redding’s neo-Weberian theory nevertheless remains popular with a group of entrepreneurship scholars and other management academics who work on China and other Asian countries. As of 2015, there were more than 2,200 citations of Redding (1990).

The research inspired by Weber and Redding includes the growing body of work on ‘Confucian Capitalism’ (Barbalet, 2014; Chai and Rhee, 2010; Ma and Tsui, 2015; Warner, 2014), the influence of Confucian ethics on contemporary Chinese business practices (Ahlstrom and Bruton, 2002; Anderson and Lee, 2008; Cheung and Chan, 2005; Cheung and King, 2004; Young and Corzine, 2004; Zhu, 2015, p. 627) and part of the literature on Asian management cultures (Chen, 2004; Hasegawa and Noronha, 2014; Minkov and Blagoev, 2014). In sum, the conceptual tool of the Confucian entrepreneur became widespread in the literature and was used by the authors of papers that appeared in the most prestigious management journals (e.g., Yan and Sorenson, 2006; Cheung and King, 2004; Li and Liang, 2015; Zhu, 2015).

We now turn to how scholars of Chinese entrepreneurship apply neo-institutionalist theory, we began by reading the frequently-cited book by Huang (2008), who understands entrepreneurship in China through neo-institutional economics, a lens descended from Smith (1776) and similar to that applied by Forbes (1844). Huang’s book contains abundant information about the security of property rights, tax rates, the rule of law and other factors that influence the extent to which Chinese economic actors are incentivised to engage in entrepreneurship. The following terms do *not* appear in the index of his book: *Confucianism*, *culture*, *religion*, and *values*. When we look at recent articles in management journals on entrepreneurship in China, we can see that many researchers have adopted Huang’s neo-institutionalist approach: Ahlstrom and Ding, (2014); Milana and Wang (2013); Puffer et al., (2010); Schweinberger (2014); Yueh (2012). For authors who adopt this approach, cultural factors such as religion are of secondary importance at most.

# Review of the Results of our Archaeological Analysis

In this section, we present the results of our archaeological research into how Chinese entrepreneurship was represented in English-language texts in the two periods. As the coding in Column 6 of Table II indicates, the primary sources from the period 1842–1911 are theoretically diverse, with some authors adopting approaches that are focused on institutions, whilst others regarded religion or some other aspect of Chinese culture as the key variable at work. Of the 22 texts in Table II, eight used Institutionalist theory, seven focused on religion, and a further seven used a mixed approach that identified both institutional and religious impediments to entrepreneurship. Our survey of the post-1978 literature on Chinese entrepreneurship found a similar level of theoretical diversity.

Genealogical Analysis

In this section of the paper, we build on our previous archaeological analysis of discourses in the two periods to provide readers with a genealogical interpretation that links the ideas used to understand Chinese entrepreneurship in the 1842–1911 period with those applied in the subsequent period. We thus now switch from Foucault’s archaeological mode to the genealogical mode of research to establish the connections between the ideas used in the two periods to understand Chinese entrepreneurship. Table III establishes the relationship between the theoretical traditions used in the two periods whilst also acknowledging the differences in how these theories were applied.

INSERT TABLE III ABOUT HERE

As demonstrated above, writers such as Forbes (1844) used classical liberalism as a lens for understanding the predicament of Chinese entrepreneurs. Their view was that China’s illiberal political institutions were the main brake on Chinese entrepreneurs and that, if only China’s political and economic institutions could be remade in the image of Western economic liberalism, Chinese entrepreneurship would flourish. A broadly similar perspective is provided by some modern academics writing about Chinese entrepreneurship, such as Huang (2008). This is not to say that modern neoliberalism, as represented by entrepreneurship scholars such as Huang, is precisely the same as the historical classical liberalism represented by Forbes, but here is a strong family resemblance between the two approaches (Ebenstein, 2015) that is visible in how authors from this tradition understand Chinese entrepreneurship and the barriers to it. Both Forbes (1844) and Huang (2008) can be regarded as intellectual descendants of Smith (1776).

Relationship between pre-1911 Religious Explanations and Contemporary Neo-Weberian Explanations

Turning now to the authors who focus on religion and culture in analysing Chinese entrepreneurship, we see a similarly strong family resemblance between the ideas that Westerners used to understand Chinese entrepreneurship in the 1842–1911 period and the modern neo-Weberian accounts of Chinese entrepreneurship. These resemblances are far from coincidental: modern neo-Weberian research on Chinese entrepreneurship is informed by the ideas of Redding (1990), who based his interpretation on Weber (1915), who in turn based his theory on some of the pre-1911 texts discussed in our paper. The crucial link between the pre-1911 descriptions by missionaries and other travellers and the modern academic research is Weber, the German sociologist who based his highly influential account of Chinese business on some of the texts in Table II. As we noted above, the footnotes in Weber’s 1915 book on Chinese religions show that his theory of the relationship between Chinese religion and business culture was based on the accounts of Morse, Eitel and the other Westerners who had travelled to China. Weber’s book, which was written in Berlin in 1915 (Radkau, 2013, p. 480; Weber, 1951, p. 252), was not informed by personal observation, as Weber had never visited China and had never met a Chinese entrepreneur (Scaff, 2011, p. 175). Instead, Weber’s analysis was based on second-hand accounts. He distilled the views of Morse, Eitel, and others and turned them into an academic theory that went on to have a major influence on modern management research.

The central argument of Weber’s 1915 book was that China’s religions, and not its political institutions, were the primary factor that had inhibited the development of an entrepreneurial capitalist economy in that country. Weber’s account stressed the ways in which China’s political system had promoted commercial development by freezing tax rates (Weber, 1951, p. 54) and promoting economic freedom (Weber, 1951, p. 100). Despite the fact that China’s emperors had instituted laissez-faire policies, capitalism had, according to Weber, failed to develop in that country due to the religious ideas that had been internalised by Chinese merchants. ‘Though this state of affairs would seem very favourable to the free development of profitable bourgeois enterprise, a bourgeois stratum of occidental character has failed to develop’ (Weber, 1951, p. 100). Weber repeatedly stated that the main barriers to Chinese entrepreneurship were ideas and culture, and not political and economic institutions (Weber, 1951, pp. 237–8): China’s largely favourable ‘economic policy did not create the economic mentality of capitalism.’ Weber connected the underdevelopment of ‘industrial capitalism’ in China (p. 151) to the differences between the ‘Confucian life orientation’ and the Protestant religious ideas that had supported the growth of capitalism in the West (Weber, 1951, p. 161).

The continued relevance of Weber’s 1915 book to research on Chinese entrepreneurship is illustrated by the fact it continues to be cited by management academics who write on this topic and closely related subjects. Our search of the Scopus database found that between 1978 and 2016, 585 scholarly works used the Weberian concept of the ‘Confucian Entrepreneur.’ Three of these paper were published in the 1980s, 23 in the 1990s, 172 in the period 2000-9, and 387 in the period 2000 to 2016. In the 1990s, many of these papers cited either Weber (1915, 1951) or the works of Redding, who derived his theory from Weber (Redding, 1990). After the year 2000, direct citations of Weber and Redding become less common, as management scholars who do research on Confucian entrepreneurship came to cite more recent papers written in response to Redding and his followers. However, a significant minority of scholars who work in this area continue to cite Weber or Redding directly. For instance, of the 257 management papers published in 2013-2016 that use the concept of the Confucian Entrepreneur, 21 (8.2%) cite Weber’s seminal works and 32 cite Redding (1990). The remainder of the 199 papers cite more recent scholars who cite Redding and/or Weber.2 These figures suggest that the Weber’s seminal book, and thus the ideas of the colonialist authors on whom he based his 1915 text, continue to exert a considerable, albeit indirect, influence on management research on entrepreneurship in China and other East Asian countries.

Discussion

At this stage, we will review the primary theoretical contributions of the paper. First, our study of the concepts used to study Chinese entrepreneurship has shown that management academics today use conceptual tools that were developed in the nineteenth century by missionaries and other colonialist writers. Researchers continue to use theoretical apparatus such as the neo-Weberian concept of the Confucian Entrepreneur, even though scholars such as Chuah et al. (2016) have expressed serious reservations about the predictive power of the associated theories. Chuah et al.’s observation that the theory built around the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur has weak empirical foundations raises the question of why it is so widespread. We suggest that the conceptual tool of the Confucian entrepreneur became entrenched in the literature on Chinese entrepreneurship because it has been used in English-language debates about Chinese entrepreneurship since the nineteenth century and has been endorsed by a prestigious social theorist, Max Weber, one of the fathers of the discipline of sociology.

Our paper has traced how theories developed by colonialist authors eventually migrated into the modern management research on Chinese entrepreneurship. We hope that by documenting the origins of conceptual tools that are now in widespread use, this paper will encourage greater scholarly reflexivity, particularly with reference to using such social constructs as ‘Confucian capitalism’, ‘Confucian entrepreneurship’ and ‘the East’. All of these terms date from the era of colonialism, when Westerners created intellectual systems to justify their dominance of China and other non-Western countries. While the origin of these concepts in colonialism does not necessarily mean that management academics should stop using them, the origin of these conceptual tools suggests that researchers should consider carefully whether the colonialist origins of these tools may limit their utility to scholars seeking to arrive at the most accurate understanding of their research topics.

The second major theoretical contribution of this paper is our finding that the tools that academics now used to understand entrepreneurship in China and other Confucian societies were originally developed by non-academic colonialist writers. In a paragraph below, we discuss what, if anything, researchers who study Chinese entrepreneurship need to do in light of our finding that modern neo-Weberian scholars of Chinese entrepreneurship are applying theory that has been indirectly derived from the ideas of nineteenth-century writers. In this paragraph, we raise the question of whether management researchers are using other conceptual tools that have origins in colonialism of which they are unaware. We propose that researchers investigate whether other concepts originally developed by nineteenth-century colonialists have migrated into the pages of management journals. Research that parallels that presented in this paper ought, therefore, to be conducted. In searching for other examples of colonialism-derived conceptual tools in management research, investigators should proceed on the understanding that proving that a given theory or concept originated in colonialist texts does not necessarily mean that the theory or concept should be abandoned, merely that researchers who should be aware of the historical origins of the theory or concept. Researchers should remember that the usage of a mental tool derived from colonialist ideology increases the risk of the researcher being led astray on his or her search for truth.

Our genealogical analysis suggests that the theoretical lenses for viewing Chinese entrepreneurship have had tremendous resilience and that the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur has existed for generations despite limited empirical support. Does this finding matter and if so, why? A staunch postmodernist would argue that the persistence of this conceptual tool is unsurprising, since different groups of writers create and cling to theories regardless of whether they are true. Postmodernism holds that all theories are equally fictive and are created simply to advance the agendas of the theorists. At the other end of the spectrum, a naïve empiricist would hold that any theory that has come into widespread use has done so simply because it fits the available facts better than the alternatives. The naïve empiricist viewpoint implies that the persistence of the two rival theories (neo-institutionalist and neo-Weberian) within the field of Chinese entrepreneurship studies must simply be the result of different groups of scholars encountering different types of data. Our Popperian critical rationalist perspective adopts a middle position and argues that the persistence of these two rival theories over more than a century reveals important truths about the path-dependent nature of academic research that must be acknowledged if we are to produce better theory (i.e., theory with greater predictive power).

We argue that the persistence of these two rival theories over such a long period of time has important implications for anyone interesting in the production of management theory, as it illustrates the grip of long-dead theorists on modern management researchers. A critic might argue that our research showing that the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur emerged out of the writings of late nineteenth century colonialists is interesting but irrelevant to whether the continued use of this concept is desirable. As critical rationalists, we agree that a tool, conceptual or otherwise, does not need to be discarded simply because it was created by people who had some objectionable views. It would be an error of logic to use *ad hominem* argumentation to attack the theory of the Confucian entrepreneur or any other management concept. However, it would be equally wrong to say that the history of management concepts is irrelevant and that historical information of the type presented in this paper should have no bearing on whether to continue to use a conceptual tool. We argue that scholars of Chinese entrepreneurship should be aware of the history of their conceptual tools and should use caution in using any tools derived from colonialism. Having read this paper, these researchers will need to decide for themselves whether they wish to continue using the conceptual tools whose evolution we have charted.

We have noted the problems with much of the existing research that applies the theory that Confucianism encourages Chinese entrepreneurs to behave differently than entrepreneurs in non-Confucian societies. Those who use the concept of the Confucian entrepreneurship frequently fail to consider whether the patterns described can be better explained with reference to political institutions rather than to religion and culture, the importance of which are simply assumed. The neo-institutionalist research on Chinese entrepreneurship has the opposite approach: it attributes everything to political institutions and ignores cultural and religious variables. We now need empirical research on Chinese entrepreneurship that will examine the claims made by both groups of scholars so as to establish the relative importance of the cultural-cognitive and institutional variables discussed by both groups.

Given that these two rival lenses for viewing Chinese entrepreneurship have co-existed for so long, one might be tempted to conclude that these parallel research traditions are unlikely to be combined or synthesised. However, Peng has suggested in an important paper how the two paradigms might be synthesized. Peng (2005) used Weber’s ideas about Chinese clan connections and entrepreneurship as a point of departure for a highly rigorous study of how culture and formal institutions influenced entrepreneurial behaviour in 378 villages during the post-1978 reform period (i.e., when formal property rights were still quite weak in China). Whereas Weber had emphasised the entrepreneurship-inhibiting effects of Confucianism and of China’s clan system, Peng found that villages with a high density of kinship networks had more entrepreneurial activity, which was the opposite of what Weber’s theory would predict. Peng’s paper, which pays attention to both formal institutions and to cultural-cognitive variables, demonstrates the value of combining the two rival lenses discussed above. More research on Chinese entrepreneurship of this type is required.

One possible approach towards synthesizing the neo-Weberian and neo-institutionalist views of Chinese entrepreneurship would be to explore how variations of values and of political institutions between Chinese cities and regions influence entrepreneurial orientation and performance. Scholars of political economy and of innovation have documented profound differences between the regions of mainland China (Shi et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2015), as well as differences between the People’s Republic and other culturally Chinese societies (Ahlstrom et al., 2014). For instance, Breznitz and Murphee (2011, p. 115) observe, in passing, that while Beijing’s Haidan District has ‘developed an entrepreneurial culture’ that differs from that of both Shanghai and the Pearl River Delta. In a pioneering study, Kwon (2012) used Hofstede’s cultural dimensions to demonstrate significant cultural differences between workers in Taiyuan and Shenzhen. More extensive research about differences in entrepreneurial cultures within China would help to keep us from falling into the traps of viewing the Chinese as a monolithically Confucian group or of assuming that differences in entrepreneurial behaviour are due to either formal institutions or to culture. Such research projects ought to be a priority.

If researchers who study Chinese entrepreneurship can synthesize the institution-focused and neo-Weberian paradigms in a fashion that allow us to assess the relative importance of formal institutions and of cultural-cognitive variables such as religion in influencing entrepreneurial intentions and behaviour, they will have produced theoretically ground-breaking research that would likely interest entrepreneurship researchers around the world. As we noted above, the research on entrepreneurship in Western contexts is characterised by tension between institutionalist and cultural-cognitive approaches: a cluster of researchers have used institutionalist theory to study entrepreneurship, another cluster has looked at religions and values, and two rival traditions have not been creatively synthesized. If we can use Chinese empirical research to synthesize the institution-focused and neo-Weberian theories of Chinese entrepreneurship, scholars who study entrepreneurship in other cultural contexts may be inspired to make similar research breakthroughs.

We now turn to implications for practitioners. As we mentioned in the introduction, the conceptual tools whose histories are charted in this paper have started to diffuse from academic research into the practitioner sphere. For instance, in an article on Chinese entrepreneurs in a newspaper read by Western business people, the concept of Confucian entrepreneurship was introduced as a way of understanding why Chinese entrepreneurs are different than Western ones (Financial Times, 2012). Practitioners in China also appear to be using the concept of the Confucian Entrepreneur, judging by the frequency with which the term 儒商*rushang*, which is commonly translated as ‘Confucian entrepreneur’ or ‘Confucian merchant’ appears in the Chinese business press. Indeed, there is some evidence that some Chinese entrepreneurs are starting to brand themselves as *rushang* when they pitch their ventures to investors: in September 2018 a practitioner conference on the subject was held in Shandong, which claims to be the birthplace of Confucianism. One of the aims of this conference was to bring self-described Confucian entrepreneurs into contact with venture capitalists (PR Newswire, 2018).

As noted above, the utility of the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur, which Professor Gordon Redding derived from a 1915 book by Max Weber, has been doubted by some management researchers. If research along the lines we have proposed disproves the neo-Weberians’ claim that Confucianism has a significant impact on Chinese entrepreneurial behaviour, management academics will want to discourage our students and practitioners from using the concept. If, however, the research we have proposed does support the contention that neo-Weberian theory about the Confucian entrepreneur has considerable predictive power, we will want to encourage more practitioners to make use of the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur. In the meantime, practitioners should be cautious about applying the concept of the Confucian entrepreneur. Every time a practitioner hears someone talking about Confucian entrepreneurship, they should remember that the speaker is using a conceptual tool (the idea of the Confucian Entrepreneur) for which there is not yet proof of validity.

The last implication of our research is meta-theoretical and should interest a wide range of management academics, not just those interested in Chinese entrepreneurship. The paper has shown that a set of concepts widely used by management academics was the outcome of an intellectual-historical process that began in the nineteenth century. The paper calls on researchers who still use these concepts to pause and reflect on their origins. We argue that reflection on the historical origins of all core concepts should become an integral part of the theory development process in management. We propose that when working on theory, researchers set aside time and mental energy to consider the origins of the concepts. They can best do so are by asking three straightforward questions: First, what are the historical origins of my key concepts? Second, how is the socio-historical context in which these concepts were created different from my own context? Third, what value systems/ideologies prompted the creation of these concepts? By posing such questions during the theory development process, researchers will be able to increase their rigour.

# Concluding Comments

As noted above, the interpretations of Chinese entrepreneurship offered by Western observers of late Qing China resemble those of some of the modern management academics who have examined entrepreneurship in today’s People’s Republic and other culturally Chinese societies. Scholars of present-day entrepreneurship can take several main lessons from our genealogical study of the lenses used to make sense of Chinese entrepreneurship. First, researchers must develop mechanisms for guarding against deep-seated cultural biases affecting their analysis of entrepreneurship in other cultures. We must avoid perpetuating intellectual frameworks that essentialise the differences between the so-called East and West. The analysis of cultural differences is, of course, important in understanding entrepreneurship, but there is a danger of exoticizing and othering so-called non-Western business people.

We would also argue that management academics must be very cautious when using macro-geographical labels such as East and West, not to mention Latin America and the Middle East. Such macro-geographical terms may sometimes be useful in thinking about cultural differences, but their use can also put us on a slippery slope that results in exaggerating the differences between various populations at the expense of the recognition of common humanity and, more importantly, local and individual variation. There is one final lesson that researchers should take from this paper. We must recognise that all lenses for viewing entrepreneurship or indeed any business phenomenon have ideological and cultural biases that may not be immediately apparent to us.

NOTES

1 Statement based on search of Wisers Information Portal database of Chinese newspapers, 11 October 2018.

2 Statement based on Scopus search for English-language scholarly articles that contain both ‘entrepren\*’ and either ‘China’ or ‘Chinese’ in the title and/or abstract. Our search produced 625 results.

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Table I China’s Economic Performance and Degree of Global Economic Interconnectedness

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 1870 | 1913 | 1952 | 1978 | 1990 | 2003 |
| Population | 358 | 437 | 568 | 956 | 1,135 | 1,288 |
| GDP | 189.7 | 241.3 | 305.8 | 935 | 2,123.8 | 6,187.9 |
| GDP per capita | 530 | 552 | 538 | 978 | 1,871 | 4,803 |
| Commodity exports | 1,398 | 4,197 | 8,063 | 15,639 | 62,090 | 453,734 |
| Export as % of GDP | 0.6 | 1.2 | 2.6 | 1.7 | 2.9 | 7.1 |
| Commodity exports | 102 | 299 | 820 | 9,750 | 62,090 | 438,230 |
| Chinese exports as % of world exports | 2.0 | 1.6 | 1.0 | 0.8 | 1.9 | 5.8 |

|  |
| --- |
| Note: Population in millions; GDP in billions; GDP per capita in dollars; Commodity exports in 1990 prices dollars (million); Export as % of GDP in 1990 international dollars (million); Commodity exports in current prices dollars (million); Chinese exports as % of world exports in current dollars.  Sources: Maddison, A. (2007a). *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*. Historical Statistics, Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing;  Maddison, A. (2007b). *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run*. Development Centre Studies, OECD Publishing. |

Table II Analysis of the Primary Sources Analysed for this Paper

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Text | Year | Author Nationality | Author Occupational Background | Main Barrier to Entrepreneurship in China Identified | Theoretical Lens/Approach Towards Chinese Entrepreneurship Adopted |
| Forbes | 1844 | United States | Businessman | Despotic government | Institutionalist |
| Shanghae General Chamber of Commerce | 1870 | Mixed Western, collective author | Mercantile | Despotic government/Chinese merchants’ stagnant ideas | Mixed: Institutionalist and Religion-focused |
| Medhurst | 1872 | British | Diplomat | China’s political system | Institutionalist |
| Baber | 1873 | British | Diplomat | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Robertson | 1873 | British | Diplomat | Despotic government | Institutionalist |
| Thomson | 1873 | Scottish | Geographer and photographer | No barriers to Chinese entrepreneurship identified | Mixed |
| Allen | 1874 | British | Diplomat | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Alabaster | 1876 | British | Diplomat | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Forbes | 1876 | United States | Businessman | No barriers to Chinese entrepreneurship identified | Mixed |
| Playfair | 1877 | British | Diplomat | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Tidman | 1877 | British | Businessman | No barriers to Chinese entrepreneurship identified | Mixed |
| Knox | 1878 | United States | Diplomat | Guilds/cartels | Institutionalist |
| Rapier | 1878 | British | Engineer | Bureaucrats | Institutionalist |
| Douglas | 1895 | British | Diplomat | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Eitel | 1895 | Naturalized British subject of German origin | Colonial official | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Heard | 1896 | Born in the Ionian Republic, Irish ancestry | Journalist | China’s political system | Institutionalist |
| Douglas | 1899 | British | Diplomat | Feng Shui | Religion-focused |
| Gorst | 1899 | British |  | Guilds/cartels | Institutionalist |
| Jernigan | 1904 | United States | Businessman | Guilds/cartels | Institutionalist |
| Sargent | 1907 | British | Management academic | Despotic government/guilds, as well as Chinese religion | Mixed: institutional and religion |
| Morse | 1908 | Canadian | Government official | Culture, guilds/cartels | Mixed: institutional and religion |
| Morse | 1909 | Canadian | Government official | Culture, guilds/cartels | Mixed: institutional and religion |

Table III Genealogical Linkages Between Theories Used to Understand Chinese Entrepreneurship in the Two Periods

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Historical Period | Theoretical Tradition | Key Features | Theoretical Tradition | Key Features |
| 1842–1911 | Religion-focused | Held that Confucianism inhibited entrepreneurial activity in China | Institutionalist approach | Informed by the strong classical-liberal ideology that is committed to limited government |
|  | ↓↓↓ |  | ↓↓↓ |  |
| 1978–2016 | Neo-Weberian | Argues that Confucianism changes the nature of entrepreneurial activity | Neo-Institutionalist  approach | Informed by a neoliberal ideology that generally favours markets over states |