

## THE GLORY AND TYRANNY OF CITATION IMPACT: AN EAST ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

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When a citation analysis can be done at the push of a finger, it is no surprise that citation impact has become the sine qua non of scholarship assessment. There is now mounting pressure all over the world for academics to publish in the most-cited journals and rake in as many citations to their work as possible. Citation impact is such a major source of joy and anguish that Judge, Cable, Colbert, and Rynes's (2007) comprehensive analysis of its antecedents is a timely signpost to help academics to cope with the constant demand to prove their relevance and impact. The major goals of my commentary are to reflect on some of the findings of Judge and colleagues from an international (i.e., non-U.S.) perspective, with specific reference to the geographic region in which I work, East Asia, and to explore the implications of the rising importance of citation impact for management research there.

### Demand for Academic Excellence in East Asia

East Asia is the only economically developed region in the world that is not part of the Euro-American cultural cluster. Geographically, this region includes mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, Japan, and Korea, but I include Singapore in my analysis because it is wealthy and has a visibly Chinese cultural heritage. Despite the fact that mainland China is the only developing country in the region, its huge size and hyper growth actually add substantial weight to the importance of the region.

Economic might engenders academic aspirations, and all East Asian countries, including mainland China, crave for world-class universities on their soil. Throughout East Asia, governments have engaged in various selective investment programs to leapfrog their best universities to levels rivaling the likes of Harvard and Cambridge. The United Kingdom-based *Times Higher Education Supplement* provides a worldwide university ranking based on both objective criteria and subjective evaluation, and it places many Asian universities in the top 100 universities in the world. Shanghai Jiaotong University provides another worldwide university ranking, using purely objective criteria

based on research performance, although these criteria tend to focus on sciences, engineering, and medicine (collectively referred to as the “science areas” in this paper). In Asia, only Japanese universities are in the top 100 in this ranking, but several universities from other East Asian countries are improving steadily, and some will probably make it into the top 100 soon.

The favorable global ranking of top East Asian universities is primarily driven by their research performance in the science areas. In fact, top students in East Asia traditionally go into the science areas, and it is no accident that East Asia is strong in these areas. However, administrators of the top universities in East Asia are now beginning to demand that academics in business and other social sciences match the research output of their colleagues in the science areas because they realize that a top university cannot just excel in the science areas.

### A Stampede for Top-Tier Publications

Judge and colleagues agree with Starbuck (2005) that the quest for top-tier publications is especially intense in less prestigious schools. Obviously, such publications provide an objective way to add prestige to a school in all public communications. Top business schools in East Asia probably fall into this prestige-hungry category, and the publication pressures in some departments are indeed relentless. Generally speaking, the current discourse in top business schools in East Asia mirrors that in the best research universities in the United States. The big buzzword—especially among untenured professors—is “hits” in top-tier journals. Lists that prescribe the recognized journals and their status are commonplace, and hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions are significantly affected by publications in major journals. In parallel with this development, citation impact has also become an important yardstick for evaluating senior academics.

Common lists of recognized journals and their tiering in East Asia are similar to such lists in the United States, which means that they are dominated by American journals. Globalization and convergence are obvious in terms of the kind of jour-

nals that academics from all over the world now aim at. On the basis of a meticulous analysis, Judge and colleagues (2007) concluded that the citation impact of an article is most affected by the prestige of the outlet in which it is published. Impact factor becomes a major determinant of the prestige of a journal, as indicated by the high correlation between the impact factor of a journal and the subjective evaluation of its quality. Viewed from this perspective, equating publication in a top journal with a golden fleece at the end of an academic voyage is both rational and sensible. Nothing seems able to slow down the stampede for a slot in the most cited journals.

The “publish or perish” mandate has dawned in East Asia, and many East Asian academics now set their eyes on the best management journals in the West. Many East Asian academics have been trained in the West, and some publish very well. For instance, the University of Texas at Dallas provides a ranking of business schools based on school publications in 24 top journals, and during the period 2002–06, four universities from Hong Kong and two from Singapore were ranked in the top 100 in the world. Nonetheless, many researchers in East Asia are not familiar with the requirements of top management journals but still submit their work to them. As have Judge and colleagues (2007), I have heard editors expressing concern about the workload associated with recent surges in submissions, a sizeable chunk of which are coming from East Asia. From a cost-benefit analysis perspective, the behavior of this group of researchers is rational, because their papers stand some chance, although a slim one, of being accepted. Even if their papers are rejected, they can use the feedback received to revise them for less demanding journals. Publication pressure has been high in Hong Kong and Singapore, and my impression is that top business schools in Korea, mainland China, and Taiwan are putting more pressure on their faculties to publish internationally as well. The current surge of submissions is perhaps only the tip of the iceberg, soon to be followed by an avalanche that will probably change the way top journals operate in significant ways.

### **Consequences of the Quest for Citation Impact for Asian Management Research**

Leong and Leung (2004) suggested that Asian academics exhibit three responses to the pressure to publish internationally. One response, the “adopted Western” approach, is to accept this pressure and try to publish in high-impact journals in the West. The second, the “Asian” approach, is to focus on domestic and indigenous issues and pub-

lish in local journals. The third response, the “integrationist” approach, focuses on both international journals and local issues. In the transitional stage before a dominant paradigm emerges, there is tension between the internationally oriented and the locally oriented groups. The locally oriented group sees the international group as being ignorant of local issues and neglecting the needs of local MBA students and executives, whereas the internationally oriented group sees the local group as unable to add prestige to their institutions in the international arena. Leong and Leung (2004) argued that the adopted Western approach will eventually prevail in Asia because academics following the Asian approach will be marginalized, and people who attempt to be integrationist are likely to eventually give up the local issues because it is hard to do both.

A second consequence of the focus on Western top management journals is that the conceptual and methodological rigor of East Asian research has improved. Many graduate schools have strengthened the training of their graduate students to prepare them to compete with their Western counterparts. In fact, the best management graduates from doctoral programs in Hong Kong and Singapore may have published one or two top-tier papers when they graduate, which was unheard of ten years ago. Some of these graduates are competitive in the global job market, and I can think of a few individuals who now hold positions in respectable institutions in the West. Another interesting trend is that at Asian management conferences, including those of the Asian Academy of Management and the International Association of Chinese Management Research, workshops that help graduate students and junior faculty members sharpen their research skills have become very popular. The emphasis on high-impact publications has elevated research standards in East Asia in many ways; metrics ranging from the quality of graduate student training to the caliber of papers presented in Asian conferences are increasing.

Third, several leading management scholars, including Weick, Mintzberg, Barney, and Hambrick, have criticized the current state of management research and the biases associated with high-impact management journals (for a review, see Tung [2006]). These critics have observed that top management journals favor deductive rather than inductive research (for example, most, though not all, *AMJ* articles have formal hypotheses), ideas derived from well-known rather than nascent theories, and methodological rigor. Thus, the means for East Asian academics to break into top management journals include working on topics and issues

that are popular in the West, grounding work in well-known theories, and investing heavily in rigorous methodologies. Supporting this observation, in an analysis of highly cited social psychologists in Asia (Leung, 2007), I concluded that highly cited Asian researchers tend to publish on research topics that are well known in the West.

The downside of the adaptive response to the pressure to publish in highly cited journals is that virtually all Asian management research falls within the confines of well-known Western theories (see Leung and White [2004] for a review). Meyer (2006), noting the lack of innovativeness of Asian management research, encouraged Asian researchers to be more confident and delve into indigenous issues for theoretical innovation. However, to secure a slot in a top management journal, being confident may not be as useful as being paradigmatic in terms of adhering to well-known research traditions. A side effect of the current emphasis on highly cited journals in East Asia seems to be the suppression of trail-blazing theoretical work.

Fourth, a number of scholars have lamented about the disconnect between research and practice in management (e.g., Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). Demand is increasing for researchers to remedy this gap by demonstrating the social relevance of their research. For East Asian researchers who try to impress Western reviewers, it seems more effective to frame the practical value of their research from a Western perspective—that is, to highlight the practical value of their research to Western practitioners. For instance, the bulk of research on international joint ventures in China concerns factors that affect their success. Western academics and executives are interested in such findings for their obvious practical value. In contrast, much less research has examined the transfer of know-how from foreign partners to Chinese partners, because this issue is not a central concern in the West. From a Chinese perspective, however, this issue is of supreme importance, and Chinese executives are keen to know the factors that facilitate such a knowledge flow. Nonetheless, academics in China who are eager to score a hit in a top management journal are unlikely to work on such a topic. In their monolithic focus on Western top management journals, however, East Asian academics may run the risk of alienating their local constituents, including local executives and government officials who may require their brainpower to formulate competitive strategies and national industrial policies.

Fifth, the two preceding conclusions may seem disturbing, if not depressing, for Asian academics, but the recent emphasis on internationalization in

Western academia counteracts them. For instance, the Academy of Management embarked on a globalizing path some years ago, and I became the chair of its Research Methods Division during 2005–06. The number of non-American participants in the Academy's conferences has been rising, with a significant number coming from East Asia. The Academy journals have made some genuine efforts to include editors and editorial board members who are not based in the United States. Given the rise in academic standards in East Asia, the number of East Asians occupying key roles in major journals and professional activities will increase. Their presence should help promote a more balanced view of what research should be regarded as important and valuable.

Finally, a force that promotes an Asian voice in management research comes from some recent efforts to develop high-quality management journals based in Asia. The importance of high-impact publications, in part, gives rise to the need to develop some prestigious Asia-based journals. Spearheading this effort are the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Management* and the *Management and Organization Review*. These two journals are obviously sympathetic to research that is based on Asian management theories and whose applied value appeals more to Asians than to Westerners. Both journals have ambitious plans to raise the quality and impact of the papers they publish, and although they are not yet top-tier journals, they are on a rising trajectory and are poised to join the club of major journals in a decade or two.

### Citation Impact and the Future of Management Research in East Asia

It is hard to “crystal-ball” the future, but the emphasis on citation impact seems to predict several important trends in the development of East Asian management research. Management research has entered Thomas Kuhn's (1962) stage of “normal science,” even in East Asia. The research conducted by East Asian scholars is becoming indistinguishable from that conducted by Western scholars, in terms of both guiding theoretical frameworks and methodologies. The role of national culture in management has been a visible research topic for decades, but an etic, or culture-general, approach is dominant. Nonetheless, emic (or culture-specific) approaches appear to be considered favorably by top Western journals so long as they are framed from a Western perspective. For instance, there is considerable interest in the Chinese emic construct of *guanxi* (interpersonal connectedness), but its importance is generally justified by

the argument that Westerners need to understand *guanxi* dynamics to function well in China.

On the bright side, the number of papers published by East Asian scholars in top management journals is rising steadily (e.g., Judge & Simon, in press), and so is the number of East Asians who are involved in the editorial activities of top management journals. The best Ph.D. students coming from East Asia are competitive in the global job market. These trends are not surprising, given that Judge and colleagues (2007) found that the citation impact of management articles is mostly driven by universalistic variables, suggesting that East Asians compete on a more or less level playing field. However, a fair game does not mean an easy game. Many East Asians, especially those who have not lived in an English-speaking country, find the language hurdle overwhelming, if not insurmountable (imagine the difficulties a nonnative English speaker encounters in crafting a nuanced but forceful reply to sharp criticisms raised by grilling reviewers). Their geographical and cultural distance from the West also requires Asians to exert more effort, especially those who were not trained in the West, in networking with key players in the field to enhance their visibility. Perhaps most unsettling of all, the success of East Asian researchers comes primarily from a close adherence to the Western research paradigm, especially the American paradigm. The trade-off is that ground-breaking theorizing is unlikely to emerge from East Asia, because most East Asians believe that top management journals are unlikely to be impressed by new theories that they formulate, and few would invest in such work. The most influential theorizing from East Asia may be Nonaka's (1994) framework of tacit knowledge, but other theoretical work at this level of impact is nowhere in sight on the East Asian horizon. It is ironical that the same force that propels East Asian academics to fly high and seek to publish in high-impact journals may also "clip their feathers" in the theoretical realm.

When will East Asians be able to make major theoretical contributions to the broad field of management? My prediction is that the rise of East Asian theoreticians will coincide with the ascendance of some Asia-based management journals to the top echelons. Major theories from East Asia are likely to be intricately tied to the specific social-economic-political conditions of the region (e.g., Tsui, 2006), and Asia-based journals are more likely to be appreciative of the nuances and importance of such theories. Because it takes decades to build a top-tier journal, the contributions of East Asians will be primarily empirical in the next de-

cade, and their theoretical contribution will follow after their status as world-class empiricists is firmly established.

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