

Theorizing Historical Processes: Implications for Chinese Management*

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Abstract

I elaborate organization and management theories of history, and unravel how history and different historical processes affect subsequent organizational behavior and strategy. To provide more clarity on mechanisms of historical influence, I first compare and contrast three organization and management theories of history—imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect—that differentially channel effects from the past. I then apply these different historically oriented organization theories to understand contemporary Chinese management issues, including state-owned enterprises, private enterprises, social enterprises, and the Belt and Road Initiative. I finally provide some future research directions. This essay thus contributes to a better integration of historical processes and organizational theories, and also provides important practical implications for Chinese management from a historical perspective.

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Introduction

“The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see.”

— Winston S. Churchill

History plays an important role in management research, and scholars have increasingly examined the role of history in understanding current organizational behaviors (e.g., Jones & Khanna, 2006; Kipping & Usdiken, 2014; Rowlinson, Hassard, & Decker, 2014). For instance, by summarizing existing literature on the nexus of history and management research, Godfrey, Hassard, O’Connor, Rowlinson, and Ruef (2016) encouraged scholars to more fully recognize that “history matters” by theorizing with history rather than just using history as a backdrop or context for testing existing theories. And Kipping and Usdiken (2014) advocated a number of different ways that researchers could integrate history into organizational behavior, such as using more historical data and developing historically oriented theory. Recognizing this trend, several leading management journals have recently devoted special issues to urge researchers to pursue more historically oriented work, including the *Academy of Management Review* in 2016 (call in 2012), *Strategic Management Journal* to be published in 2019 (call in 2016), *Organization Studies* to be published in 2019 (call in 2016), and *Strategic Entrepreneurship Journal* to be published in 2019 (call in 2016).

Yet as it stands, historically oriented studies in management are mostly about historical contingencies, i.e., how specific relationships vary over time (Marquis & Huang, 2010). Indeed, since the field of organization theory has matured, many processes have been shown to be historically contingent (Davis & Marquis, 2005). For example, regarding social embeddedness, which is commonly assumed to have a general effect on firm behavior (Granovetter, 1985;

Uzzi, 1996), Mizruchi, Stearns, and Marquis (2006) showed that network effects on firms' borrowing behaviors varied as standards of legitimacy in the broader institutional context changed over time. Despite this work that shows that much of accepted general theory is in fact historically specific, we know relatively little about how history and historical processes in general affect organizations and management (Godfrey et al., 2016). As a first step to more systematically unpack how history and historical processes affect organizations and management, i.e., to understand how history matters, I compare and contrast how three orienting perspectives on historical effects—imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect—affect organizational behavior and strategy differently.

Leveraging distinctions among these three different organization theories of history, I then show how understanding historical processes provides insight into some representative issues and phenomena in the Chinese management field, including state-owned enterprises, private enterprises, social enterprises, and the Belt and Road Initiative. This essay thus contributes to a better understanding of organization theories of history, highlighting how history matters in organizational processes and providing important practical implications for Chinese management from a historical perspective. I also highlight future research directions in further exploring how history matters and integrate the three orienting theories with different organization and management theories to gain a fuller understanding of how history and historical processes affect contemporary organizational behaviors.

How History Matters: Imprinting, Path Dependence, and the Cohort Effect

History may matter in a number of ways, and I elaborate below three theoretical perspectives that have previously been used in management studies—imprinting, path

dependence, and the cohort effect—to understand more fully how history matters. The overarching goal is that by systematically defining and contrasting each of these perspectives, I will lay the groundwork for better developed historical studies in the future.

Imprinting. The idea of imprinting was proposed by Konrad Lorenz (1935, 1937), who found that after being placed in a box and separated from both their mother and Lorenz, goslings would reliably follow either their mother or Lorenz, depending on whom they first encountered after hatching. The use of the concept in the social sciences dates to the classic essay by Stinchcombe (1965), who argued that organizations and types of organizations founded in a common period reflected the social technology at founding and that these similarities based on historical conditions at time of founding tended to persist. Subsequent research has shown that historical influence on organizations reflects founding institutional environments (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006; Marquis & Huang, 2010). For instance, many Chinese firms exhibit a socialist imprint that emphasizes devotion to the country, leading them to distribute more profits to society (Raynard, Lounsbury, & Greenwood, 2013), and many Chinese entrepreneurs bear a communist ideological imprint that affects their ventures' strategies (Marquis & Qiao, 2018).

Marquis and Tilcsik (2013: 201) provided a review and theoretical integration of the imprinting perspective, defining imprinting as a process wherein focal entities develop “prominent features of the environment” (i.e., imprints) when they are more susceptible (i.e., during sensitive periods), and these imprints “continue to persist despite significant environmental changes in subsequent periods.” Three key elements of the perspective are prominent features of external environments, sensitive periods, and the persistence of influence.

For instance, prominent features of the external environment may include institutional arrangements and regulations (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006; Marquis & Huang, 2010), economic conditions (Tilcsik, 2014), and available technology (e.g., travel technology; Marquis, 2003). Typical sensitive periods of organizations are founding and key transitions—going public or changing the main business (Hannan, Burton, & Baron, 1996). Persistence can last as long as hundreds of years (e.g., Greve & Rao, 2012; Johnson, 2007).

While imprinting is a multilevel perspective, and prior work has shown that individuals, organizations, and supra-organizational entities—e.g., industries, networks—all can bear imprints (e.g., Marquis, 2003; Marquis & Qiao, 2018), most studies have analyzed historical impacts at the organizational level. For instance, Kriauciunas and Kale (2006) found that being founded during socialist economic environments constrained Lithuanian firms' ability to adapt to post-reform market environments. Marquis and Huang (2010) documented that founding technical and institutional environments of organizations affect their capabilities for managing geographically dispersed branches and consequently their tendency to acquire out-of-state banks, and Johnson (2007) argued that the imprint left by the Paris Opera founder Louis XIV still persists in the present.

The imprinting perspective has received significant research attention and has been incorporated into the institutional literature (e.g., Marquis & Huang, 2010), organizational ecology perspective (e.g., Dobrev & Gotsopoulos, 2010; Swaminathan, 1996), and entrepreneurship literature on founders' impacts (e.g., Baron, Hannan, & Burton, 1999). For instance, the institutional environment might affect firms' future adaptation to new environments (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006), and resource availability during founding might

affect firms' future use of resources and survival (Swaminathan, 1996). And founding entrepreneurs might stamp their ventures with specific business models and labor relations (Baron et al., 1999; Marquis & Qiao, 2018) that last after the founders leave (Burton & Beckman, 2007).

Path dependence. The concept of path dependence, developed in the economics literature, suggests that contemporary decisions depend in part on past events, which are not necessarily the most efficient or optimal for the present situation (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995). David (1985: 332, emphasis in original) defined how path dependence primarily concerns the way evolutionary trajectories can be influenced by unsystematic events: “A *path-dependent* sequence of economic changes is one of which important influences upon the eventual outcome can be exerted by temporally remote events, including happenings dominated by chance elements rather than systematic forces.” Meanwhile, the effects build over time as the arrival of subsequent events will only serve to reinforce the advantage of the previous random choice of path (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995). Therefore, like imprinting, path dependence is also a process, and its core element is the self-reinforcing mechanism that leads to lock-in (Sydow, Schreyögg, & Koch, 2009). According to this perspective, remote and unsystematic events in history might affect more recent periods.

A classic example of path dependence is the layout of the QWERTY keyboard, which has lasted for more than 100 years despite the fact that it was not the most efficient design (David, 1985). Specifically, the original design was thought unsystematic but gained predominance as people increasingly continued to learn and use it, which created lock-in effects (Sydow et al., 2009). The current layout thus was a result of an unsystematic path and subsequent self-

reinforcement. This perspective has been widely adopted in management research (Vergne & Durand, 2010), especially that on the evolution of technology and innovation (e.g., Beckman & Burton, 2008). For instance, Greve and Seidel (2015) argued and found that because of path dependence in technology diffusion processes, failed production asset innovations also were adopted by subsequent users.

Cohort effect. A concept that contains elements of both imprinting and path dependence—the cohort effect—is defined as an aggregate of actors who are born in the same time and so share similar experiences, which leads to similarity that is reinforced over time (Rosow, 1978). This perspective originates in historiography and historical studies (Mannheim, 1923/1952). The cohort effect stipulates that the shared temporal experiences of focal entities lead to “a high degree of similarity in characteristics and outcomes within cohorts” (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013: 206) and that “[t]hose in one generation react the same way, but differently from members of another” (Rosow, 1978: 72). For instance, Generation X (born in 1966-1976), Y (Millennials, born in 1977-1994), and Z (born in 1995-2012) in the U.S. and those born in the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s in China (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010) all exhibit within-cohort defining characteristics because of common experiences. Furthermore, cohorts’ effects are reinforced by collective memory processes, which are shared accounts of the past shaped by historical events that mold individuals’ perceptions (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016: 658).

At the organizational level, there are many examples of the cohort effect. For instance, a special cohort called “minimalist organizations” referred to the aggregate of state bar associations that require few resources for founding and sustenance and are flexible in

organizational structure and high in adaptiveness (Halliday, Powell, & Granfors, 1987). The existence and abundance of minimalist organizations enriches the population ecology perspective, which suggests that most organizations are more likely to fail in the early stage (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) and suffer the “liability of newness” (Stinchcombe, 1965). However, minimalist organizations exhibit distinct failure patterns in that the total founding rate increases over time—suggesting liability of newness for the whole population—and smaller organizations are more likely to fail, indicating liability of smallness for individual organizations. Zhao and Zhou (2004) also documented different cohort effects in terms of personal promotion of Chinese organizations founded in the pre-reform (1949-1979) and post-reform (1980-1994) periods.

Unraveling Imprinting, Path Dependence, and the Cohort Effect

Despite the importance of understanding how history matters, existing studies have not yet fully documented the differences among the three important perspectives, and they often mix the different approaches and their assumptions together (Beckman & Burton, 2008; Sydow et al., 2009). Table 1 depicts the key conceptual differences among imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect.

=====Insert Table 1 about here=====

Imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect differ in terms of origin of the historical impacts, formation period and/or event, importance of initial conditions, sustaining mechanisms, influence/stability over time, and scope condition of historical influence.

Origin of the historical impacts

The three perspectives differ regarding the importance of the origin of the historical influence. Imprinting is focused on how the prominent and systematic elements of

environmental features are stamped on focal entities and become imprints (Mannheim, 1923/1952). This harkens back to the assumption of selective attention in that focal entities attend to only certain environmental stimuli while ignoring others (Marquis & Qiao, 2018). For instance, salient institutional and economic elements—such as regulations and legitimate business modes—during the founding period affect the focal organizations enduringly.

Path dependence alternatively argues that impacts arise from some weak and unpredictable events; for instance, the design of the keyboard is potentially random as QWERTY is not the most efficient design (David, 1985). The cohort effect exists when social actors within the same aggregate in terms of birth year/age and/or geographic location exhibit similar behavioral and cognitive patterns that reflect assorted (all) elements of the environment since birth rather than certain salient characteristics. For example, organizations born in the pre-reform and post-reform periods in China are essentially two cohorts and exhibit distinct rules in promoting personnel (Zhao & Zhou, 2004). Both imprinting and the cohort effect suggest that elements of certain periods get crystalized into focal entities (Alwin & Krosnick, 1991), although the features (imprints) that have long-lasting effects suggested by the cohort effect are much wider in scope and accumulate over time. In other words, the cohort effect includes almost all elements that stem from the external environment.

Relatedly, the cohort effect maintains uniformity of behaviors and cognitions within cohorts, defined by time of birth/age and/or geographical location. This is because although the cohort effect reflects a wide variety of environmental elements, individual entities within the same cohort tend to exhibit homogeneity. The imprinting perspective suggests that there could be heterogeneities among focal entities, as the prominent environmental features have certain

boundaries across regions and over time and are internalized by focal entities differentially. For instance, the cohort of minimalist state bar associations founded in the late nineteenth to early twentieth century exhibited homogeneity within the cohort, and the low initial and maintenance costs, few reserve structures, and high adaptiveness reflect the general environment of the U.S. legal profession and industry, i.e., the segmented niche markets and norm of low competition (Halliday et al., 1987). In contrast, local environmental features may imprint banks in ways that affect their acquisitive activities, which exhibit heterogeneity at the organizational level in absorbing these prominent features (Marquis & Huang, 2010). To summarize, regarding the importance of the origin of the historical effects:

- Imprinting: Prominent features of the external environment in history become imprints
- Path Dependence: Unsystematic historical events or processes
- Cohort Effect: Assorted but combined elements from external environments

Formation period/event

The formation period and/or event also varies among the three perspectives. Both imprinting and path dependence emphasize processes that channel effects in history to later periods, while the cohort effect is an outcome that is driven by collective memory and shared experiences over time within the cohort (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016). The imprinting perspective builds upon the impressionable year hypothesis, which stipulates that focal entities are open to experience only in certain short sensitive periods (Mannheim, 1923/1952). The process forming the historical influence—i.e., the imprint—is the *imprinting process* (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). For example, the imprinting perspective argues that organizations are especially affected by their founding period or periods of important transitions, such as going

public and changing major businesses (Hannan et al., 1996).

In contrast, both path dependence and the cohort effect assume that effects build through experiences in subsequent periods. Path dependence argues the initial choice is reinforced by contingent event chains and then creates a lock-in effect such that focal entities become over-reliant on the path and cannot switch (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995). For instance, Sydow et al. (2009) suggested that there were pre-formation, formation, and lock-in phases of the path-dependent effects such that the first two stages witness selection and competition among different possible ways by contingent events. The cohort effect is built through subsequent shared experiences (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) and the resulting collective memory (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016). For example, the generational (cohort) identities of organizations are built upon their commonalities—such as age and experiences—and shared memories of important events (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010; Schuman & Scott, 1989). Hence, the subsequent common experiences in the cohort effect are similar to the contingent event chains in the path dependence perspective.

Note that it is possible that imprinting sets the stage for subsequent path dependence processes, i.e., the initial condition of path dependence is largely affected by prominent features of the environment rather than pure randomness or unsystematic events, such that many historical effects are a combination of imprinting in the first place and path dependence, which reinforces the imprints. Existing studies have also cast doubt on how randomness and unsystematic events get established and institutionalized over the historical course (Stack & Gartland, 2003). For instance, Sydow et al. (2009) suggested that the VHS monopoly—a well-known example of path dependence—was not driven by a random or small event but by

Matsushita's securing content delivery through an agreement with major Hollywood studios, which became the crucial step in defeating the technologically superior Sony Betamax standard. Relatedly, scholars have argued that the keyboard design was also intentionally designed rather than random (Stack & Gartland, 2003). At that time, the typewriter arms with letters that marked the page could not bounce back quickly, and therefore inventors tried to design the layout of the keyboard in a way that minimized delays from having keys collide during typing at a fast rate. The layout persists, with some modifications, and reflects the technical limitations when it was invented.

In addition, compared with imprinting, the cohort effect embodies various imprints over a long period of time and assumes that focal entities are open to experience all the time—rather than only during certain impressionable periods (Mannheim, 1923/1952). If focal entities absorb all elements rather than the prominent ones selectively—from all events and times instead of only the sensitive periods—then the imprinting perspective and cohort effect lead to the same prediction. This leads to the following points with respect to formation period/event:

- Imprinting: Short, specific sensitive periods
- Path Dependence: Long, contingent event chains
- Cohort Effect: Shared experiences over life histories

Importance of initial conditions

Imprinting stipulates very strong impacts of initial conditions,¹ one of the periods when focal entities are more susceptible through the imprinting process (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Studies have documented that founding environments and characteristics enduringly affect

¹ I used initial condition as an example of a sensitive period stipulated in the imprinting perspective to ease comparisons with other perspectives.

organizational behaviors (e.g., Baron et al., 1999; Beckman & Burton, 2008; Hannan et al., 1996). In contrast, path dependence maintains that the effects of initial conditions are weak (Sydow et al., 2009). As noted above, although the initial choice is unlikely to be completely random, and studies have argued it could reflect purposefulness (e.g., Stack & Gartland, 2003), path dependence indicates the final choice of path is about the subsequent process instead of initial conditions (Sydow et al., 2009). For instance, although the design of the keyboard might have been intentional, it is subsequent self-reinforcement by generations of computer users that contributed to the final dominant design that seems inefficient and in an ad hoc fashion (David, 1985). And so under path dependence, it is likely that the initial conditions are not predictive of future behaviors (Vergne & Durand, 2010).

The cohort effect assumes relatively strong effects of the initial conditions, which then tend to be enhanced by subsequent similar experiences. Therefore, compared with the imprinting perspective, the cohort effect reflects a weaker initial condition. For instance, Brooks and Bolzendahl (2004) documented the importance of subsequent learning in forming gender role attitudes in addition to the original condition within the same cohort. However, the initial condition is more important to cohort effect studies than path dependence ones, since it to some extent demarcates age groups and sets the stage for collective memory (Mata, Portugal, & Guimaraes, 1995). This leads to the following differentiations among the three perspectives with respect to the importance of the initial condition:

- Imprinting: Very strong
- Path Dependence: Weak
- Cohort Effect: Relatively strong

Sustaining mechanisms

Imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect depict distinct mechanisms that channel historical influence. According to imprinting theory, focal entities tend to internalize and institutionalize prominent features, which become imprints or imprinted elements (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). The internalized and/or then institutionalized imprints establish certain routines, structures, and other elements and thus create inertia and rigidity, sustaining the historical influence (e.g., Amburgey, Kelly, & Barnett, 1993; Burton & Beckman, 2007; Hannan et al., 1996). For instance, at their founding, organizations might develop certain structures (Baron et al., 1999), forms and routines (Beckman & Burton, 2008; Hannan et al., 1996), and capabilities (Marquis & Huang, 2010). And the legacies of these internalized elements may affect subsequent environments, even over centuries (Greve & Rao, 2012; Johnson, 2007).

By contrast, at the core of path dependence is self-reinforcement processes (Sydow et al., 2009), which are caused by positive feedback (Arthur, 1990), switching barriers, and sunk costs (David, 1994). For example, technical barriers and established habits prevent many users from switching from the Windows operating system to the Macintosh one, contributing to the enduring prevalence of Windows (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995). And geographically, Silicon Valley in California amassed certain key people in the early U.S. electronics industry—such as William Hewlett, David Packard, William Shockley, and the Varian brothers—and mobilized local resources, which led to a self-reinforcing entrepreneurship dynamic in the technology industry as these firms later attracted more firms to enter the area, and the positive feedback loop created the densest concentration of electronics firms in the U.S. (Arthur, 1990).

The cohort effect channels historical influence to later periods through similar experiences

and the resulting collective memory (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016; Schuman & Scott, 1989). The collective memory then gives rise to cohort identity such that entities within the same cohort behave similarly, and their behaviors reflect previous shared experiences in history (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004; Joshi et al., 2010). Schuman and Scott (1989) documented that different cohorts recalled different events and changes, and these memories reflected a combination of national and personal histories that subsequently affected values and behaviors like job attitudes (Twenge et al., 2010). Therefore, there are the following distinctions among the three perspectives regarding sustaining mechanisms of the historical influence:

- Imprinting: Internalization and then institutionalization
- Path Dependence: Self-reinforcement
- Cohort Effect: Collective memory from similar shared experiences

Influence/stability over time

All three perspectives suggest that history has lingering effects, which vary in terms of their stability and persistence over time. Imprinting argues that the imprints stably and persistently affect entities' behaviors, albeit the persistence might be declining over time. For instance, Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) suggested that the persistence of imprinting effects did not imply permanence, and there could be a natural trend of decay because memory of the past may fade over time. By contrast, path dependence suggests that the impacts of initial conditions increase over time by self-reinforcement (David, 1985; Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995; Sydow et al., 2009). For instance, the VHS standard became stronger over time, and the Sony Betamax standard faded away (Arthur, 1990). The relative importance of initial conditions and the evolutionary trajectory of imprinting and path dependence reflects a key distinction between

these two approaches. Specifically, while the imprinting process occurs in the initial (or some certain sensitive) period, elements of which persist and affect later periods, path dependence stresses self-reinforcement over time as the important process indicating that impacts increase over time.

The cohort effect is likely static as it embodies the entirety of elements of all time. Specifically, the cohort effect reflects all elements of prior histories of focal entities within the cohort and thus tends to exhibit homogeneity across these individuals. In other words, historical patterns are in theory uniform across different individuals within the same cohort. For example, both initial and subsequent experiences are important in forming the collective memory and thus cohort identity (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004; Joshi et al., 2010). Consequently, for instance, Generation X or Y likely exhibits the same and uniform characteristics among individuals within that cohort (Twenge et al., 2010). Thus, here is how the three perspectives differ regarding the stability of history's influence over time:

- Imprinting: Stable but may decline
- Path Dependence: Increasing
- Cohort Effect: Static and uniform

Scope condition of the historical influence

Finally and relatedly, scope conditions for the three perspectives vary. Since imprints are integral to focal entities, their impacts are unconditional and do not need strengthening by subsequent self-reinforcing events (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). For instance, legacies left by an early and influential leader hundreds of years ago still affect the Paris Opera today (Johnson, 2007). In contrast, path dependence relies heavily on self-reinforcement (Sydow et al., 2009),

and it is thus conditional on subsequent processes (Arthur, 1990). In other words, initial conditions and/or designs are likely amplified by subsequent self-reinforcing events such that history plays a significant role. For example, the original keyboard design (David, 1985; Stack & Gartland, 2003) or operating systems (Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995) shaped certain habits of initial users, who then taught later users, and the process continued in this fashion; thus arguably inferior designs (QWERTY and Windows) achieved dominance because of self-reinforcement. The cohort effect depends on subsequent similar experiences (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013), which are important in the formation of collective memory and finally cohort identity (Joshi et al., 2010; Schuman & Scott, 1989). Again, in the language of path dependence, succeeding shared experiences are the self-reinforcing events that define the cohort and strengthen collective memory and distinct identity that lead to homogenous behaviors within the generation. For instance, gender role attitude may have exhibited a weak cohort effect if subsequent ideological learning was not in place (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). These conceptual distinctions suggest the following statements concerning the scope conditions of historical influence:

- Imprinting: Unconditional
- Path Dependence: Conditional on self-reinforcement
- Cohort Effect: Conditional on subsequent similar experience

A Historical Perspective on Chinese Management: Some Examples

These organization theories of history can be applied to analyze and provide practical implications for Chinese management and organizations, including state-owned enterprises, private enterprises, social enterprises, and the recent Belt and Road Initiative that provides

extensive opportunities for firms to expand their business globally.

State-Owned Enterprises

The existence of state-owned enterprises (SOEs), a defining feature of the economy in China, has drawn growing attention from researchers all over the world (e.g., Guo, Huy, & Xiao, 2017; Ralston, Terpstra-Tong, Terpstra, Wang, & Egri, 2006; Scott, 2002). SOEs tend to routinize operations during short historical periods, such as the 1956 Socialist Reform, which means that many of them reflect corresponding institutional environments at that time, such as established welfare systems and strong reliance on economic plans and government subsidies. For example, the focus on production and low priority given to sales and marketing—mainly because of the absence of market mechanisms and the strong central economic planning—may get institutionalized within these organizations and ingrained in managers' mindset such that these imprints enduringly and subsequently affect SOEs up to the present day (Wang, Cao, Zhou, & Ning, 2013).

Thus, a number of studies have suggested that socialist imprints tend to become a liability that is at odds with post-reform market environments (e.g., Kogut & Zander, 2000). For instance, Steensma and Lyles (2000) suggested that managers' socialist imprints might make it hard for them to collaborate with those from capitalist countries, Kriauciunas and Kale (2006) found that socialist imprints of Lithuanian firms prohibit them from adapting to the current market environment, and Shinkle and Kriauciunas (2012) documented that such historical institutional imprints hindered the functioning of good, contemporary institutions. And Marquis and Qian (2014) found that SOEs were less likely than private firms to introduce new governance innovations.

Meanwhile, problems facing SOEs may also result from path-dependent processes that amplify the impacts of initial conditions through self-reinforcement (Nee & Cao, 1999). For instance, while the human resource management of SOEs reflects a socialist imprint, it is a result of path-dependent reinforcement processes as well. The permanent employment system (aka “iron rice bowl”) and egalitarian distribution of wealth of SOEs may dampen employees’ incentives since no matter how hard they work, their rewards are the same. Thus the socialist imprint tends to lead to a self-reinforcing conflict with market practices (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006), and thus a major reform at SOEs is to reduce overemployment and abolish the permanent employment system and related benefits (Lee, 2000).

While imprinting sets the stage for these liabilities, path-dependent processes reinforce the existing system. This example suggests that theories of history need to attend to multiple different historical processes to understand the effect of history on the present period. For example, while routinized and stable human resource practices reflect the founding institutional environments, they are also self-reinforced by members (employees) with vested interests who are trying to protect the old institution and system to maximize their own benefits (Nee & Cao, 1999). In this way, a certain “cohort” of SOEs came into being, often characterized as low in efficiency and high in employees’ welfare (Lin, Cai, & Li, 1998).

Taken together, imprinting and path dependent legacies suggest SOEs need to pay special attention to their history and the associated structural inertia—the rigidity in organizational routines—and recognize these issues when trying to break out of the old, inefficient paths. For instance, acknowledging this, SOEs should especially focus on developing their marketing skills and refocus on the overall operation rather than production. Many SOE steel

factories now suffer overproduction problems. The phenomenon is a reflection of the general overcapacity of the Chinese economy that resulted in the Belt and Road Initiative to transfer these capacities to other less developed countries. SOEs should also provide physical benefits more often to employees in order to achieve better human resource management and thus organizational outcomes. For instance, SOEs should integrate some market principles—such as material incentives and economic contracts that motivate employees for better performance—with the tradition of job security in order to stay competitive in the labor market and marketplace in general.

Private Enterprises

Private entrepreneurs and entrepreneurship are booming in China. Individuals and their families have established a majority of these private enterprises. Many such entrepreneurs have a humble background, suffering from poor socioeconomic conditions when growing up and likely leaving school early to work in business at an early age (Tsang, 1996). These less-educated entrepreneurs are unable to find jobs in the government/Communist Party of China (CPC), which emphasizes educational attainment (Wang, Du, & Marquis, 2018; Zhang, Marquis, & Qiao, 2016). Studies have shown a general social class imprinting process in that successful businesspersons are still persistently affected by their family backgrounds (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015), and it is likely that the family imprint applies to Chinese entrepreneurs as well. For example, poor living conditions require entrepreneurs to be frugal and thus may leave a long-lasting imprint on entrepreneurs who tend to focus on saving and cutting down costs.

Communist entrepreneurs. A unique phenomenon among Chinese private enterprises is that some of them are founded by Communist Party of China (CPC) members (Dickson,

2003). Some entrepreneurs become CPC members before they establish their ventures (Lu & Tao, 2010), and it is likely that the communist ideological imprint tends to have a persistent effect (Wang et al., 2018). Specifically, entrepreneurs who previously went through the communist socialization processes and took an oath to devote their entire lives to the communist cause tend to internalize such historical events over the short socialization period. The communist doctrine may become a distinct feature of these entrepreneurs' way of doing business, exerting a strong, stable, and unconditional influence on them (Marquis & Qiao, 2017).

For instance, in a recent paper my coauthor and I analyzed how such communist ideological imprinting processes negatively affect entrepreneurs' tendency to internationalize their ventures (Marquis & Qiao, 2018). Specifically, before 1978, i.e., during the Mao Zedong Administration (1949-1978), the country was antagonistic to foreign capitalists—who were portrayed as mercenary and exploitative—and emphasized self-reliance. The communist ideology at that time was anti-foreign, and entrepreneurs who experienced such communist ideological indoctrination and socialization events likely bear in mind these doctrines (Wang et al., 2018). After 1978, the government/CPC deregulated the market and initiated economic reform, integrating entrepreneurship and market economy practices into socialism and the CPC constitution while justifying foreign capital as an economic necessity. In this way, communists tend to feel comfortable starting a business and becoming an entrepreneur, but less comfortable cooperating with foreign capitalists. Therefore, entrepreneurs with a communist ideological imprint tend to avoid foreign cooperation. Subsequently however, interactions with the reformer-led government, involvement in industry networks established

by the current government, and observing support of internationalization by the contemporary government all lead to imprinting decay such that entrepreneurs with a communist ideological imprint find cooperating with foreigners increasingly less problematic, in terms of both attracting foreign capital and exploring overseas markets. In some exploratory analysis, we also found that entrepreneurs with a communist ideological imprint still maintain the rule that prioritizes society over individuals and focuses on devotion to the society, and thus they donate more, consistent with the socialist imprinting of SOEs (Raynard et al., 2013).

Policymakers should pay attention to these entrepreneurs and help them in business practices, such as by providing information and offering them preferential policies—international business opportunities, lower interest rates, cheaper rental fees, and tax subsidies. These communist entrepreneurs likely in turn help the government with a wide range of social issues, such as education, poverty, and disaster relief (Zhang et al., 2016). And importantly, it is also likely that politicians—most of whom are important policymakers, e.g., mayors—may still defend traditional communist ideology, and their imprint may prohibit them from collaborating with businesspersons (Wang et al., 2018). The healthy interaction between the government and private enterprises, especially those led by communist entrepreneurs, is especially interesting, and the communist ideological imprinting processes on both sides may turn out to affect and coopt each other.

Confucian entrepreneurs. Because of the strong Confucian cultural imprint, entrepreneurs and businesspersons tend to emphasize a Confucian model that characterizes lofty individuals who are rich and benevolent, righteous, polite, wise, and trustworthy (Li & Liang, 2015). Consequently, the Confucian cultural imprint suggests that businesspersons

should do corporate social responsibility (CSR) without expecting a return. Even as early as in ancient dynasties, many rich businesspersons provided cash and in-kind donations to the society (Zhao, 2014). Interestingly, studies have also found that Chinese philanthropy follows a different model—collectivist—from the Western individualistic one (Marquis, Li, & Qiao, 2017). Specifically, the rich in China tend to donate under the name of a collective rather than as single individuals. This is likely a reflection of the collectivist cultural imprint that stems from China's Confucian background, which is different from what is commonly seen in the West.

Yet because of the dominant role of the government, whose power is highly centralized, and the Confucian tradition that to some extent denigrates business (Baumol, 1990), the business–government relationship is critical for entrepreneurs and businessmen, who might rely on the government for legitimacy and resources (Marquis & Qiao, 2018; Tsang, 1996). The importance persists until the present, and studies of Chinese private organizations have made major contributions to the corporate political activities (CPA) literature. However, studies have also found governmental needs and even dependence on firms, such as unemployment reduction, poverty alleviation, and education program implementation (Zhang et al., 2016). It is therefore necessary to build up a healthy interaction between business and the government, and the current anti-corruption campaign can help resolve the issues of power abuse and bribery. Meanwhile, some path-dependent ways of engaging in CPA may have changed or need to change since the anti-corruption campaign has been initiated by President Xi Jinping. Both business organizations and the government are exploring a new

and healthy way to interact with each other, and the path-breaking campaign provides new opportunities for firms to formulate strategies appropriate for the contemporary period.

Social Enterprise

Social entrepreneurship is defined as “innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sectors.” (Austin, Stevenson, & Wei-Skillern, 2006: 2). Unlike non-governmental organizations, most social enterprises are for-profit. Like non-governmental organizations, social enterprises solve social problems and aim to maximize social well-being, such as by addressing environmental pollution, energy shortages, and traffic jams. The addition of social goals differentiates social enterprises from ordinary corporations that build profits by solving market demand rather than social issues and focus mainly on business goals. As a new type of organizational form, social enterprise is a promising trend in China and around the world.

There are many examples of social enterprises, and many organizations that are usually thought of as traditional firms arguably are social enterprises or social businesses. For example, bike-sharing companies oFo and Mobike both established their business models and profits on helping alleviate an environmental problem (air pollution), contributing to an energy-saving plan initiated by the government (Scientific Development by President Hu Jintao), and solving traffic jam issues, as well as the last-kilometer problem faced by hundreds of millions of commuters.

Since the government may fall short in addressing many social problems (Zhang et al., 2016), the value-creating activities that solve them often occur within communities in the form of social enterprises. The historical legacies of lineage and close relationships among villagers facilitate trust, information exchange, and joint problem solving, and in many ways

serve as an imprint that facilitates creating new start-ups (Peng, 2004). Indeed, many entrepreneurs initially became rich by bootstrapping—relying on family members, relatives, village neighbors, etc. (Sarasvathy, 2001)—and the very first generation of entrepreneurs since the Reform and Opening-up mostly founded community-based ventures or CBVs (Marquis & Qiao, 2018; Peredo & Chrisman, 2006). These CBVs helped resolve social problems, such as the excess labor because of the Send-Down Movement from 1967-1978 (Zhou & Hou, 1999) and insufficient food provision to villages. The creation of CBVs also contributed to the reform process that transformed peoples' communes/collectives into enterprises, which then gradually became modernized. For instance, the very first transforming commune in Xiaogang Village, Xiaoxihe Town, Fengyang County of Anhui Province that triggered Reform and Opening-up is a vivid example of a type of social enterprise that shoulders governmental responsibility in liberating agricultural productivity.

It is likely that bootstrap financing in founding some social enterprises, as well as founding environments—e.g., the need to reform people's communes and collectives and the institutional features at the time—leave persistent imprints on many social enterprises in China and are reflected in the missions and business models of these organizations. For instance, the bike-sharing company oFo originated in Peking University and tried to share and rent bikes and resolve problems of bike theft faced by college students. The CEO Wei Dai collaborated with his friends in Peking University and expanded his business mainly on university campuses within the first three years of operation. The original social problem oFo sought to solve thus had a persistent impact on its future business.

Although it is likely that such socioeconomic conditions—social structure and the particular need for environment protection and sustainability in general—will still strongly and stably give rise to social enterprises, the growing urbanization may weaken these ties that unconditionally affect social entrepreneurship. Entrepreneurial individuals, however, may still utilize such a unique culture in establishing their ventures, and the growing marketization and continuing governmental reform may leave greater white space for social enterprises, i.e., the decreasing governmental size and associated insufficient provision of social goods. It is also possible that the emergence of social enterprises may become path dependent in that existing social enterprises attract new ones, creating a self-reinforcing loop like Silicon Valley (Arthur, 1990). For instance, recognizing the importance of social enterprises and its limitations in providing public goods and services, the Chengdu government implemented corresponding laws and regulations on certifying social enterprises and encouraging new establishments. There are predictions that there will be a self-reinforcing social enterprise loop in Chengdu within several years (The Xinhua Net, 2018).

The Belt and Road Initiative

Going global (exploring overseas markets, i.e., outward internationalization) is an important component of economic reform in China and has become a national economic development strategy since 2001 (Peng, 2012). Outward internationalization, by way of intensive trade, acquisitions, joint ventures and strategic alliances, wholly owned subsidiaries, and/or greenfield establishment, might also benefit from historical imprints such as the historical export records (Keller, Li, & Shiue, 2011). The Treasure Voyages in the Ming Dynasty for instance show that expansion by Chinese firms has a long history. Meanwhile, during the Mao Zedong administration, many African countries received aide from China,

which might also have been used to reduce institutional distance and the liability of foreignness in entering corresponding markets.

More recently, initiation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a signature policy of the Xi Jinping administration, has promoted the outward internationalization of Chinese firms even further. The BRI draws on the historical experience (imprint) of the land-based Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) that covered China, Korea, Japan, Middle Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, the Arabian peninsula, Egypt, Kenya, and Mediterranean countries from 1st-century BC to 18th-century AD, and the ocean-going Maritime Silk Road (MSR) taking Chinese traders to Southeast Asia, the Indonesian archipelago, the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian peninsula, Somalia, and all the way to Egypt and finally Europe between 2nd-century BC and 15th-century AD. Building on these historical legacies, the BRI aims to enhance economic cooperation between Eurasian countries—primarily those in SREB and MSR nations—in terms of trade and infrastructure investments. Infrastructure investment, construction materials, railways and highways, automobiles, real estate, power grids, and iron and steel are the current foci of the BRI.

As a national economic development plan, the BRI is a good example of how historical international business imprints affect contemporary policies. The origin was undoubtedly the Silk Road that formed during sensitive periods for some of the participating countries and influenced their developmental processes, as the Chinese emperor formalized such long distance trade patterns (Brandt, Ma, & Rawski, 2014). President Xi Jinping has often emphasized the historical roots of the plan,² and countries included in the BRI were mostly

² See the full text of President Xi's talk at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.

those on the ancient Silk Road, land- or sea-based. Yet countries on the Silk Road developed distinct paths of growth and experienced a wide variety of events over the course of centuries that may have disrupted their idiosyncratic paths—i.e., democratization, colonization, national independence movements, the collapses of several gigantic empires—as well as the seclusion policy of the Qing Dynasty such that international trade was suspended. Therefore, neither path dependence nor the cohort effect could explain the phenomenon. Rather, the government has capitalized on this historical imprint and emphasized the value of such a legacy, even if trade was interrupted for hundreds of years. The history of the Silk Road will likely strongly, stably, and unconditionally affect the implementation of the BRI.

The BRI will provide many opportunities to Chinese companies, and they should be cognizant of historical processes to better implement their strategies. For instance, historical imprints likely reduce institutional distance by providing references to how ancestors of both parties dealt with each other, and these experiences may become valuable for contemporary transactions. Business networks might be more easily established, and Chinese firms could find more trustworthy partners in host countries and thus not need to employ organizational hierarchy—through acquisitions, joint ventures and strategic alliances, wholly owned subsidiaries, and/or greenfield establishment—to facilitate their business operations. Meanwhile, firms located in areas of historical trade—including Beijing, Chengdu, Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Changsha, Nanchang, Hefei, Tianjin, Ningbo, Shenzhen, Zhanjiang, Shantou, Qingdao, Yantai, Dalian, Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Sanya (Zhang, Du, Zhao, Wu, & Zhang, 2017)—could leverage the historical status as a valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) asset to further their trade advantage (Barney, 1986a).

Meanwhile, the BRI might also attract more inward foreign direct investments from the 68 countries involved, and firms should attend to these opportunities in foreign collaboration. However, firms have to creatively adopt these imprints as the current environment differs from ancient ones. Dramatic changes have taken place over the past centuries, and lots of countries and their governments on the Silk Road have changed, so firms should respect their history and culture and, more importantly, their business norms, ethics, and regulations. There have already been several derailed projects because of failure to meet these standards, and firms should be aware of these new environments rather than relying solely on the historical friendship with antiquated governmental entities.

Meanwhile, these imprints may lead to path dependence, and Chinese firms should be aware of this possibility and consider whether current modes of doing business with foreign partners at home or abroad are effective. If not, corporate decision-makers should consider alternative ways to break out from the path—even if there are still positive feedbacks—and try to seek new ways of doing business. For instance, in 2018 the U.S. Department of Commerce enacted a 7-year trade ban in response to the Chinese telecom giant ZTE's violations of sanctions on transacting with Iran and North Korea. Quickly, ZTE closed its doors since it relied heavily on procuring chips—the core component—almost exclusively from U.S. firms. After rounds of negotiations and with the help of the Chinese government, ZTE paid a fine of over one billion U.S. dollars to lift the ban, and it became active again. The event suggests that many Chinese firms specialize in lower-end products and are not yet able to produce cutting-edge chips effectively. This is likely because when these firms were founded and/or tried to expand globally, the technological environment in China was poor,

and thus they had to accept the international labor division by working in low-end markets, such as the assembly and manufacturing of unimportant objects, which has led to self-reinforcing processes that continue to hinder competition in the global market. However, there are also reasons to envision that a new generation of Chinese firms might be more innovative and law-abiding, both because the shock of the 2018 ZTE event may create a sensitive period to form a new imprint and because the Chinese government has put forward the Made in China 2025 plan in order to reverse this trend, aiming to focus on industries such as high-end technology products, core materials, and innovation-based manufacturing.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I elaborated organizational theories of history and historical processes. I first distinguished imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect as three orienting theories of history, and I provided an account of how each approach conceptualizes how history matters. I then applied the developed perspectives and elaborated mechanisms to several unique phenomena of Chinese management, including state-owned enterprises, private enterprises, social enterprises, and the Belt and Road Initiative. A historical perspective of Chinese management is likely helpful both for academic research and business practice. Below I provide some possible directions for future research.

Suggested research directions

Differentiate and integrate imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect empirically. The study suggests that it is important to not only recognize that “history matters” but also to understand “how history matters.” It is necessary to empirically test how certain history and historical processes affect the contemporary. For instance, there are some debates on how institutions evolve, and most studies suggest path dependence as a major

force (David, 1994); even some imprinting studies have explicated path dependence as a main mechanism (Greve & Rao, 2012). However, it is possible that both imprinting and path dependence are at work, as certain important environmental features set the stage of institutional evolution in the first place (Acemoglu, Johnson, & Robinson, 2001), while path-dependent processes are responsible for future evolution (Pierson, 2000). Our field needs more and better empirical evidence to show how history affects subsequent periods, especially phenomena such as institutional evolution, innovations in certain fields, and other organizational practices.

The theories themselves. Theoretical advancements can be made by modifying and challenging assumptions (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011). The impressionable year hypotheses, selective attention, and bounded rationality are the assumptions of the imprinting perspective corresponding to the three important elements, i.e., sensitive period, prominent features, and the persistence of historical influence (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). For instance, according to Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) and Simsek, Fox, and Heavey (2015), how imprint change is understudied. Investigating imprinting dynamics challenges the persistence assumption that is at the core of the imprinting perspective. For example, Marquis and Qiao (2018) found that individuals' imprint might be eroded by their interactions with the imprinter—the imprinting entity. Specifically, selective attention suggests that behaviors of the imprinter are likely particularly salient to the imprinted entity, and thus imprinters may remove the imprints they established. In our context, entrepreneurs who became CPC members were imprinted by the government/CPC with an anti-foreign sentiment during Mao's reign (1949-1976) and are less likely to internationalize since that involves foreign cooperation. However, after Chairman

Mao's death, the government/CPC changed course dramatically and initiated a series of socioeconomic and political reforms, particularly welcoming foreign cooperation. Hence, subsequent interactions between entrepreneurs with a communist ideological imprint and the post-reform government eroded the imprint such that the more interactions these entrepreneurs had, the more likely they were to internationalize their firms.

Traditional path-dependence theory focuses on self-reinforcement following weak initial conditions (Sydow et al., 2009). However, as noted, studies have challenged the weak initial condition assumption (Arthur, 1990, 1994; Liebowitz & Margolis, 1995; Stack & Gartland, 2003). It seems more likely that the initial condition is imprinted, and thus path dependence can be seen as a continuation of imprinting. The associated sunk costs, switching barriers, and limited search that sustain the old path are believed to result from bounded rationality. Alternatively, prohibitively high switching costs may also be responsible for the phenomenon, and investigating costs between staying and switching may be one way to test the bounded rationality assumption (Bebchuk & Roe, 1999). The cohort effect is the least studied historical process concept in organizational theory, and most studies have assumed away the subsequent similar experiences. Without subsequent reinforcement by similar experiences, individuals may not form collective memory and/or cohort identity (Brooks & Bolzendahl, 2004). Therefore, studies on the cohort effect need to highlight how subsequent shared experiences help solidify the cohort.

Integrating with other theories. Many other perspectives also implicitly theorize historical process, and to provide a holistic picture of organization and management theories of history, there should be more systematic and explicit integration with other organizational theories.

Table 3 presents some exemplary theoretical arguments of several theories and how they consider history in addition to imprinting, path dependence, and the cohort effect.

=====Insert Table 2 about here=====

For instance, organizational learning has a historical component, as the core concept absorptive capacity requires time to build and thus is historically dependent (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). The formation of absorptive capacity may be imprinted by the external environment and organizational attributes. Through learning, organizations then might code history into their routines. And absorptive capacity exhibits certain path-dependent properties in that it grows over time and is subject to self-reinforcement (Zahra & George, 2002). Relatedly, according to the Carnegie School and the behavioral theory of the firm (Argote & Greve, 2007; Cyert & March, 1963), organizations develop routines based on their specific historical environment to minimize uncertainty and smooth future functioning, which is an imprinting process. These routines may then evolve and become rigid and taken for granted due to path dependence (Sydow et al., 2009). For instance, studies have shown that the socialist imprint helps explain why certain firms' search behaviors and aspirations are less adaptive to the new market environment (Kriauciunas & Kale, 2006).

Further, history plays an important role in institutional theory. The Great Society movement created a tendency toward a larger and more active government in the U.S., and thus the institutional environment became more salient for organizations. Therefore, unlike "old institutionalism" that focuses on individual organizations (Selznick, 1949, 1957), the new institutional theory centers on task and institutional environments that organizations have to deal with (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Institutionalization thus involves certain portions of history

while ignoring others, and according to Selznick (1949) some organizations are institutionalized and thus survive, while others die out. Existing literature has suggested that imprinting is responsible for the institutionalized elements (Greve & Rao, 2012). The institutional economics literature also posits that historical experience provides the foundation for more efficient institutions in subsequent periods—an imprinting hypothesis (Acemoglu et al., 2001)—and that institutional evolution is often path dependent (David, 1994). Consistent with these arguments, the institutional logics perspective maintains the historical contingency of institutions (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). For instance, despite the German reunification, the state logic held by individuals in the former East Germany were still affected by the socialist imprint that favors governmental intervention (Alesina & Fuchs-Schündeln, 2007). Some scholars also argue that institutional legacies are created by collective memory (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016).

History is also important in reducing information asymmetry and thus affecting network tie formation. Specifically, knowledge of the history of prior interactions positively affects tie strength, new tie formation, and how trust, information exchange and joint problem solving are developed (Uzzi, 1996). Historical imprints from when parties first transact may help form new ties, which might self-reinforce and lead to path dependence of tie formation.

Meanwhile, population ecology and imprinting both stem from Stinchcome's (1965) chapter. Structural inertia, strategic momentum (Amburgey & Miner, 1992), and rigidity (Amburgey et al., 1993) are all likely products of imprinting. An important integration of history—imprinting in particular—in the ecological perspective is density delay theory, stating that high population density during founding time is positively associated with higher failure

rates for organizations in the future since organizations founded during periods of more intense competition would have persistently weaker resources and capabilities (Carroll & Hannan, 2000; Dobrev & Gotsopoulos, 2010).

Moreover, resource dependence theory argues that dependence on certain entities renders power to them that may facilitate control (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). Organizations have to constantly deal with their dependence on other parties. It is likely that the initial resource allocation and distribution—by defining the power-dependence relationship—may have profound impacts on subsequent periods, such that organizations may enter into a historically imprinted power-dependence relationship. The power-dependence relationship could also become path dependent as organizations may elect not to explore other possibilities—because of sunk costs, switching barriers, etc.—and thus self-reinforce the existing relationship. However, either imprinting or path dependence may make dependent organizations worse off as they fail to use or restructure power to alleviate the dependence situation (Gulati & Sytch, 2007). Therefore, the direct power use and power restructuring that attenuate dependence—through motivational withdrawal, alliance formation, cultivation of alternative partners, cooptation, and constraint absorption—are to some extent eliminating established imprints that have become a liability and/or a process of breaking from the firms' existing paths.

In addition, the contingency perspective maintains that there is no simple best organizational design and that organizations have to adapt to the changing environment constantly (Galbraith, 1974; Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967). Consequently, the imprinted organizational design, which may also become path dependent as a result of the self-reinforcement process because of maintenance by existing coalitional members and

socialization of new members of organizations, may be obsolete such that firms become mechanistic and reflect environmental features of certain periods (Burns & Stalker, 1961). However, it is also likely that some flexibility can be imprinted and self-reinforced over the path-dependent sequence.

Finally, the resource-based view (RBV) suggests that valuable, rare, imperfectly imitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) assets bring sustained competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). The initial acquisition of such resources, likely due to characteristics of the strategic factor markets at founding (Barney, 1986b), is an imprinting process that sets the stage for asset accumulation. The imperfect imitability that sustains such VRIN assets is path dependent, creating a Matthew effect in that the differential between those with VRIN assets and those without widens over time (Barney, 1991). Meanwhile, the dynamic capabilities perspective, often regarded as a complement to RBV (Eisenhardt & Martin, 2000), suggests that history might be a liability, as being flexible enough to leverage resources is critical to gain sustained competitive advantage (Teece, Pisano, & Shuen, 1997). The liability can be either a result of imprinting or path dependence, while the dynamic capabilities should deal with them so that organizations are able to adapt to changing environments constantly.

Conclusion

This article focuses on unraveling different processes of how history matters, and I hope the current research discussed here can encourage future studies to better incorporate history into organizational research and provide a wider range of historical perspectives on organizations and management. Of particular interest is Chinese management, the field of which has been witnessing many new phenomena and organizational forms. For instance, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are on the rise in China, and it is interesting to see

how history and historical processes affect the establishment, operation, success, and failure of these organizations. The NGO form is imported from the West, and it is possible that early missionary activities in China may have helped establish legitimacy and reduce institutional distance such that such organizations may grow faster in regions that experienced more intensive early Christian activities in the Qing Dynasty (Bai & Kung, 2015). However, governmental endorsement and background may also add unique features to support this type of organization (Zhang et al., 2016), and NGOs and their home countries' historical relationships with China are likely especially important. Meanwhile, the post-90s cohort has mostly entered the job market, and managing and incentivizing this young single-child generation—the “little emperors/empresses” (Cameron, Erkal, Gangadharan, & Meng, 2013)—may pose some challenges. A good understanding of their life history and historical environments they went through may be useful. Specifically, sensitive periods of individuals are typically early childhood, early adulthood, and when they start their careers, and certain prominent environmental features during all of these periods—disaster, socioeconomic background, parental marital status and care, etc.—are important in molding certain work attitudes, behavior, and cognition, which provide good reference points for management and motivation.

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Table 1 Key Differences among Imprinting, Path Dependence and the Cohort Effect

Properties	Imprinting	Path dependence	Cohort effect
Origin of the historical impacts	Prominent environment features	Unsystematic historical events or processes	Assorted and combined elements
Formation processes	Short and specific sensitive periods	Long, contingent event chains	Shared experiences over life histories
Importance of initial condition	Very strong	Weak	Relatively strong
Sustaining mechanism	Internalization/institutionalization	Self-reinforcement	Collective memory from similar shared experience
Influence/stability over time	Stable but may decline	Increasing	Static and uniform
Scope condition	Unconditional	Conditional on self-reinforcement	Conditional on subsequent similar experiences

Table 2 Integration of Historical Perspectives with Key Organization and Management Theories

#	Theory	Argument
1	Carnegie School	<p>For organizational learning</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Absorptive capacity requires a learning history to build up. 2. Relatedly, organizational learning is history dependent. 3. Organizational learning codes history into organizational routines. <p><i>Imprinting and path dependence affect the accumulation of absorptive capacity.</i> Organizational routines are developed from operational history. <i>Organizational routines are based on initial resources and environmental conditions.</i> <i>Path dependence may affect evolution that follows.</i></p>
2	Institutional theory	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. History is selectively institutionalized. 2. The history provides a good referent in designing an efficient institution. 3. Institutional evolution is history dependent. 4. Institutions are historically contingent (institutional logics perspective). 5. Collective memory codified certain histories as institutional legacies. <p><i>Imprinting affects the initial condition of the institution, which lasts for a long time.</i> <i>Path dependence might characterize the subsequent evolution of institutions.</i> <i>Collective memory carries the institution over time.</i></p>
3	Network	<p>Interacting history affects tie formation and sustenance.</p> <p><i>Imprinting and path dependence determine the position, tie strength, and network structure, as well as the dynamics.</i></p>
4	Population ecology	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Structural inertia ensues as organizations age/want to exhibit reliability. 2. Strategy momentum and rigidity in a similar fashion are developed. 3. Density delay: high population density at the time of founding is associated with higher failure rates for organizations. <p><i>Structural inertia, rigidity, and strategy momentum are all results of imprints themselves.</i></p>
5	Resource dependence	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Resource allocation and distribution in certain history may have long-lasting effects on the power-dependence relationship. 2. Power use and restructuring tactics may change the situation because of imprinting and/or path dependence. <p><i>Imprinting and/or path dependence may become a liability for dependent organizations such that they have to deal with the historically determined dependence situation.</i></p>
6	Contingency theory	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Firms have to adapt to the environment constantly, and thus imprinted and/or path dependent organizational design might be detrimental. <p><i>Imprinting and/or path dependence may become a liability for organizational design, yet either of them can be beneficial if they maintain flexibility.</i></p>
7	RBV (Dynamic Capability)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time compression diseconomies make asset stock valuable. 2. Imperfect imitability is history dependent. 3. Sustained competitive advantage itself requires history to realize. 4. Dynamic capability also squares on history. <p><i>Path dependence might create certain VRIN assets.</i> <i>Imprinting in certain periods may also contribute to such VRIN assets.</i></p>