

# Being versus becoming ontology of paradox management

Runtian Jing

*Antai College of Economics and Management,  
Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Shanghai, China, and*

Andrew H. Van de Ven

*Carlson School of Management,  
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA*

558

Received 15 May 2016  
Accepted 22 May 2016

## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to discuss the theoretical contribution of Li's (2016) "Yin-Yang balancing" approach of paradox management, as well as its future development to guide paradox management research across the east and west contexts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – It begins by recognizing the importance of paradox management research, especially the indigenous epistemological approach as Li (2016) has followed. The authors take "being" and "becoming" ontology toward social reality as the basic premise in this commentary, and summarize the knowledge that the study has contributed to existing literature.

**Findings** – The "Yin-Yang balancing" approach can extend the knowledge about paradox management phenomena at least from four aspects: the "either/and" frame to view a paradox system, the importance of "seed" or "threshold" in defining moderate rather than extreme groups, duality map as a novel tool for paradox management, and comparison of being and becoming ontology.

**Originality/value** – Based on the comparison of "being" and "becoming" ontological view, the authors suggest to further develop this "Yin-Yang balancing" approach by emphasizing the following issues: eastern culture does not have exclusive ownership of the "becoming" ontology toward the world, elaboration of alternative theoretical explanation to win out the identity approach about organizational existence, the linkage between the "Yin-Yang balancing" epistemological system and process research method, and boundary condition of the "Yin-Yang balancing" approach.

**Keywords** Yin-Yang, Being and becoming ontology, Paradox management

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Due to ever-increasing environmental uncertainty, the contradiction between stability and adaptability underlying any fundamental organizational and strategic decision (Thompson, 1967) becomes even more distinct. And organizations turn to be a paradoxical system in various dimensions, such as belonging vs organizing, learning vs performing (Smith and Lewis, 2011). Considering the importance of paradox-related research questions in current management field, we appreciate this invitation to comment on Li's (2016) paper about the "Yin-Yang balancing" approach of paradox management.

"Paradox" is defined as the "contradictory yet interrelated elements that exist simultaneously and persist over time" (Smith and Lewis, 2011, p. 382). One significant feature of Li's (2016) contribution to the paradox management literature is its indigenous research feature, providing a vivid example of "Chinese Theory of Management" that Chinese management community is looking for (Barney and Zhang, 2009; Van de Ven and Jing, 2012). Most of the literature on paradox management was written by western



---

scholars, following western cultural logics. As previous studies have shown, concepts of paradox and contradiction vary according to cultural values, and a monolithic research view to see the global society seems to be very limited (Schad *et al.*, 2016). Based on Chinese cultural wisdom, Li (2016) intends to contribute a “Yin-Yang balancing” epistemological system of paradox management. This approach encourages managers to embrace or “live with” paradox, by shifting their expectations for rationality and linearity to accept paradoxes as persistent and unsolvable puzzles. Meanwhile, different from previous western literature including the dynamic equilibrium model recently proposed by Smith and Lewis (2011), this approach has its unique features as follows, to extend our knowledge about paradox management phenomena.

### **The “either/and” frame to view a paradox system**

The “Yin-Yang balancing” approach holds an “either/and” framework toward a paradox system, which is different from the Aristotle’s “either/or” logic toward contradiction, and Hegel’s “both/or” dialectical logic and even the “both/and” dialectical logic. The “either/or” framework resolves paradox by fully separating opposites, the “both/or” framework treats paradox as temporarily tolerable, and even desirable, but ultimately problematic, while the “both/and” logic even refuses to recognize the potential existence of contradictions. These three frameworks toward paradox share their common bias toward absolute positions by treating opposites as either fully complementary or fully conflicting. Embracing the notion of balancing, Li (2016) adopts the duality position by treating opposites as partially conflicting and partially complementary, and none of the entities can ever entirely win/lose the contradiction. This is an “either/and” framework, with “either” indicating the existence of opposites and “and” indicating the existence of unity. In other words, paradox resolution does not imply eliminating a tension but finding a means of meeting competing demands or considering divergent ideas simultaneously (Ashforth and Reingen, 2014).

### **The importance of “seed” or “threshold” in defining moderate rather than extreme groups**

As an important claim, Li (2016) proposes that “Yin-Yang balancing frames the tradeoff and synergy between opposite elements as endogenous because each opposite contains the ‘seed’ of the other opposite” (p. 53), and “the interface between partial integration and partial separation can be delineated by a threshold as a range of proper points of balancing between the overlapping and non-overlapping parts in a single domain or across two domains in an entire system” (p. 54). This is a basic assumption underlying the “Yin-Yang” view (Jing and Van de Ven, 2014), and can serve as an inspiring idea to reframing the relationship between opposite forces in a paradox system. We agree with Li (2016) that the notions of seed and threshold are important for developing novel theories about paradox management in the future.

### **Duality map as a novel tool for paradox management**

The appearance of paradox often reflects human cognitive limitations rather than physical resource limitations (Jing and Benner, 2016). Thus, how to upgrade managerial cognition is the key to resolve a paradoxical problem. In this sense, Li (2016) highlights the importance of “Wu” (“悟”) in paradox management, and elaborates the tool of duality map for the managers to balance organizational paradox. In essence, duality map is an exquisite design to implement the “Yin-Yang balancing” epistemological

system in practice. It can be employed to analyze the paradoxical tensions within any social organization such as social value vs financial profit, exploration vs exploitation, and can inspire managers to crafting balancing strategies at/across three different organizational levels (i.e. micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level).

### **Comparison of being and becoming ontology**

“Being” refers to “a fixed, certain, and complete status or form of an existence before acquiring its relationships with other entities,” while “becoming” refers to “an interdependent and interactive process with other entities before and after any entity acquires its status or form” (Li, 2016, p. 50). Western culture has largely been obsessed with the “being” ontology, which regards reality as an assembly of static individuals whose dynamic features are taken to be ontologically secondary and derivative. On the contrary, philosophers holding “becoming” ontology insist that reality is continuously going on and coming about. In other words, becoming can be regarded as the mode of being common to the many kinds of occurrences or dynamic beings. As Li (2016) has made, the “Yin-Yang balancing” epistemological system is built up on the “becoming” ontology of reality.

We will now focus on the comparison between being and becoming ontology, since it is the foundation for understanding the benefits and challenges in developing a “Yin-Yang balancing” epistemological system. Taking this as a basic frame, the following section includes four pieces of comments or suggestions:

- (1) As the “either/and” frame has indicated, eastern culture does not have exclusive ownership of the “becoming” ontology toward the world. Since Aristotle’s substance metaphysics, the “being” ontology has been the dominant philosophy in western society, however, this does not deny the development of “becoming” ontological philosophy as the opposite. For example, the Greek theoretician, Heraclitus, is best known for his doctrines that things are constantly changing (universal flux), that opposites coincide (unity of opposites), and that cosmic fire is the basic material of the world. According to Heraclitus, everything is in flux, which entails the co-occurrence of opposites. Moreover, the unity of opposites creates an overall balance of reciprocity by cyclical transitions between extremes. Later, such a becoming ontology has been further flourished by process philosophers such as Whitehead (1929) and Rescher (2000). Similar to the “Yin-Yang balancing” approach, these process researchers also focus on analyze becoming and what is occurring as well as ways of occurring, and organizational becoming is taken as a space of possible occurrences rather than a certain organizational attribute.
- (2) Elaboration of alternative theoretical explanation to win out the identity approach about organizational existence. As a reflection of the “being” ontology in social context, researchers have developed identity theory to explain why individuals (“who I am”) or organizations (“who we are”) need to maintain a coherent identity during their development (e.g. Albert and Whetten, 1985; Erikson, 1968). For becoming ontology to win out, we need a rigid theoretical explanation against the identity rationale, and provide evidences of the “becoming” reality which identity theory cannot well explain. Here, we assume that both internal and external reasons may account for the lack of a central, enduring, and distinctive identity of social organizations. First, in dynamic environment, the development of each organizational attribute would breed the emergence of its opposite. The success of a strategic

---

change is relying more on the dynamic capability to organizational grinding-in process by a flexible possibility, rather than a stable design of structure (Galunic and Eisenhardt, 2001). Here, we do not deny that there is temporal stability, but regard it as a result of interaction of organizing processes. Second, due to the bounded rationality of managers, uncertainty, and ambiguity cannot be completely removed from the organizational development process. In their empirical study, Zhang *et al.* (2015, p. 560) found that “paradoxically oriented leaders may position themselves more effectively in complex environments. By responding to paradoxical forces, they dynamically coexist with environmental complexities over time”. In sum, the art of balancing would be more effective than the aim of optimizing in a continuously organizing process.

- (3) The linkage between “Yin-Yang balancing” epistemological system and process research method. As the concept of “seed” or “threshold” implies, to achieve a geocentric integration between the west and the east, the easiest way is to find the common part in each opposite side. As Luo and Zheng (2016, p. 390) have pointed out, “most Eastern philosophies are difficult to use a scientific approach to empirically verify and systematically operationalize”. However, our confidence in the credibility of a theory increases when it is subjected to tests that are more likely to be rejected, thus we need to develop methods and evidences of falsifiability about the “Yin-Yang balancing” epistemological system (Popper, 2002). To do so, we encourage the author and readers to use a process research method to empirically assess Yin-Yang balancing. Based on the “becoming” ontology, process researchers focus empirically on evolving phenomena, and they emphasize theorizing that explicitly incorporates temporal progressions of events and experiences as basic elements of explanation and understanding (Langley *et al.*, 2013). By the aid of this method, we can translate a “Yin-Yang balancing” problem into a process-based research question, and collect longitudinal data to examine how specific paradox cases arise and evolve in organizational context (e.g. Jing and Benner, 2016), and how the balancing strategies at/across difference levels have affected the process patterns and outcomes. In this way, we can test the above approach and model in both east and west contexts.
- (4) Boundary condition of the “Yin-Yang balancing” approach. What are the disadvantages of the “Yin-Yang balancing” approach? What are its boundary conditions? These questions deserve future research. Weick (1979) points out that any theoretical view inevitably has trade-offs in being general, accurate, and simple criteria as a good theory. “Being” ontology and “becoming” ontology have their boundary conditions, respectively. As the duality map has indicated, the “Yin-Yang balancing” approach has the advantages in explaining the vertical and horizontal interdependences at/across different organizational levels. For example, how the whole organization continuously influence which components enter into the constitution of the whole and in which way these components occur? The interdependencies between a whole and its parts cannot be accommodated with a “being” ontology that is committed to the basic that concrete identities are fully determined (Rescher, 2000). Meanwhile, the greater the complexity of a “becoming” ontological theory, the more difficult it is to test.

**References**

- Albert, S. and Whetten, D.A. (1985), "Organizational identity", in Cummings, L.L. and Staw, M.M. (Eds), *Research in Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 7, pp. 263-295.
- Ashforth, B. and Reingen, P.H. (2014), "Functions of dysfunction: managing the dynamics of an organizational duality in a natural food cooperative", *Administrative Science Quarterly*, Vol. 59 No. 3, pp. 474-516.
- Barney, J.B. and Zhang, S. (2009), "The future of chinese management research: a theory of Chinese management versus a Chinese theory of management", *Management and Organization Review*, Vol. 5 No. 1, pp. 15-28.
- Erikson, E.H. (1968), *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, Norton, New York, NY.
- Galunic, D.C. and Eisenhardt, K.M. (2001), "Architectural innovation and modular corporate forms", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 44 No. 6, pp. 1229-1249.
- Jing, R. and Benner, M. (2016), "Institutional regimes and path dependence: case studies of the conversion of military firms in China", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 53 No. 4, pp. 552-579.
- Jing, R. and Van de Ven, A.H. (2014), "A Yin-Yang model of organizational change: the case of Chengdu Bus Group", *Management and Organization Review*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 29-54.
- Langley, A., Smallman, C., Tsoukas, H. and Van de Ven, A. (2013), "Process studies of change in organization and management: unveiling temporality, activity, and flow", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 56 No. 1, pp. 1-13.
- Li, P.P. (2016), "Global implications of the indigenous epistemological system from the east: how to apply Yin-Yang balancing to paradox management", *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management*, Vol. 23 No. 1, pp. 42-77.
- Luo, Y. and Zheng, Q. (2016), "Competing in complex cross-cultural world", *Cross Cultural & Strategic Management*, Vol. 23 No. 2, pp. 386-392.
- Popper, K. (2002), *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*, Routledge Classics, Oxford.
- Rescher, N. (2000), *Process Philosophy: A Survey of Basic Issues*, University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh, PA.
- Schad, J., Lewis, M.W., Raisch, S. and Smith, W.K. (2016), "Paradox research in management science: looking back to move forward", *Academy of Management Annals*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 5-64.
- Smith, W.K. and Lewis, M.W. (2011), "Toward a theory of paradox: a dynamic equilibrium model of organizing", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 36 No. 2, pp. 381-403.
- Thompson, J.D. (1967), *Organizations in Action*, McGraw Hill, New York, NY.
- Van de Ven, A.H. and Jing, R. (2012), "Indigenous management research in China from an engaged scholarship perspective", *Management and Organization Review*, Vol. 8 No. 1, pp. 123-137.
- Weick, K. (1979), *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Longman Higher Education, New York, NY.
- Whitehead, A.N. (1929), *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, Macmillan, New York, NY.
- Zhang, Y., Waldman, D.A., Han, Y.L. and Li, X.B. (2015), "Paradoxical leader behaviors in people management: antecedents and consequences", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 58 No. 2, pp. 538-566.

**Corresponding author**

Runtian Jing can be contacted at: [rtjing@sjtu.edu.cn](mailto:rtjing@sjtu.edu.cn)

---

For instructions on how to order reprints of this article, please visit our website:

[www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm](http://www.emeraldgroupublishing.com/licensing/reprints.htm)

Or contact us for further details: [permissions@emeraldinsight.com](mailto:permissions@emeraldinsight.com)