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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Neglected State of Organizational-Level Turnover Studies in the Chinese Context: A Call for Research

Abstract In this essay, the authors discuss the neglected state of organizational-level turnover research in the Chinese context. They provide a brief overview of the importance of turnover research in the organizational sciences, highlight the role of performance-related turnover rates research, and outline general theories and findings that appear in the Western and English-language literature. This evidence is compared with a dearth of studies using samples of Chinese organizations and in Chinese-language journals. They conclude by calling for additional theory and empirical studies on turnover rates.

Keywords turnover, retention, strategic human resource management, organizational performance, productivity, strategic management

The study of turnover—voluntary and involuntary departures from the organization—spans 100 years and the area is considered a foundation area within industrial and organizational psychology, human resource management, and organizational behavior (Hom, Lee, Shaw, and Hausknecht, in press). Aside from the practical value of turnover research, this domain has produced some of the most iconic individual-level theories in our field, such as March and Simon's (1958) pioneering desirability and ease of movement theory, Mobley's (1979) job content model, Lee and Mitchell's (1994) unfolding model, and Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, and Erez's (2001) job embeddedness

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theory. Spanning nearly 70 years, these theories provide detailed, multifaceted explanations for why people quit their jobs and why they stay.

In terms of implications for management and organizations, organizational-level turnover research may be even more critical. This stream details not only the antecedents of turnover patterns in organizations, but also how workforce churn impacts the organizational performance. At this level of analysis, the research tradition is nearly as rich. Researchers in many disciplines (e.g., management, finance, economics, sociology, medicine, marketing, and public administration) have detailed conceptual models and accompanied them with empirical testing for why and how the organizational context and practices influence quit and discharge rates (e.g., Batt and Colvin, 2011; Shaw, Delery, Jenkins, and Gupta, 1998) and for how turnover patterns relate to important outcomes such as accident rates, productivity, profitability, and stock market returns (e.g., Arthur, 1994; Huselid, 1995; Shaw, Gupta, and Delery, 2005; Shaw, Duffy, Johnson, and Lockhart, 2005). These findings are showcased in two major meta-analyses (Heavey, Holwerda, and Hausknecht, 2013; Park and Shaw, 2013). Theory tradition at the organizational level is also abundant; major, differential theories have been developed or brought to bear in economics, sociology, human resource management, and organizational behavior, to name a few (Park and Shaw, 2013; Shaw, Gupta et al., 2005).

In this editorial, we outline the importance of such organizational-level turnover rate research and note the striking dearth and major omission of this type of research in the Chinese context, and outline a call for contextual and industry studies in China to fill the gap.

1 The Importance of Turnover Rate and Organizational Performance Research

The organizational-level turnover literature is poly-theoretic; four main themes predominate (Park and Shaw, 2013). The first is a view of depletion via human capital or social capital losses. Per this perspective, higher turnover rates damage organizational performance by reducing the organization's ability to function effectively. The mechanisms between voluntary turnover and the ultimate financial performance of the organization are presumed to be workforce-related,

viz., lower productivity and customer satisfaction as well as higher disruption, accidents and errors. A related view originated in Price's (1977) sociological perspective on turnover. Price's (1977) theorization takes a similar direction of thought, but instead presumes that turnover effects are not monotonic. Instead, he argues that the first instances of voluntary quits are the most damaging to performance (Shaw, Gupta et al., 2005). In this view, a rise from zero turnover to moderate levels creates the most impactful loss of knowledge, skills, and abilities (Alexander, Bloom, and Nuchols, 1994; Shaw, Park, and Kim, 2013) and the most significant disruption-creating gaps in organizational communication networks (Shaw, Duffy et al., 2005).

A third view originates in the organizational behavior literature and, perhaps, enjoys the most popularity, but the least empirical support, in terms of describing turnover's effects. Dalton and Todor (1979) and others lauded a functional view of turnover, arguing that moderate turnover rates bring new ideas and infuse the organization with stagnation-fighting energy from outside. In direct opposition to Price's (1977) arguments, the functional view presupposes that low-to-moderate turnover improves organizational functioning; Price (1977) suggests that these levels are the most damaging. In the inverted-U view, at higher turnover levels the negative depletion effects on performance will ultimately prevail. It is difficult to search the literature and find examples that support the inverted-U approach unequivocally; Glebbeek and Bax (2004) and Siebert and Zubanov (2009) offer some limited support (see, Shaw (2011), for a review). A fourth view is a classic contingency model that originated in the strategic HRM literature. Arthur (1994) argued and found that the relationship between turnover rates and performance was moderated by how much the organization had invested in its people (see also Guthrie (2001) and Shaw et al. (2013)). High investment organizations tend to perform better, but suffer greater productivity loss via turnover than organizations that invest little in their people.

In more recent years, researchers have attempted to synthesize and extend these founding theories by considering the role of replacements or hiring in assuaging the negative effects of turnover (e.g., Nyberg and Ployhart, 2013) and by factoring in the timing or clustering of turnover (Hausknecht and Holwerda, 2013). These new advancements have spurred a spate of additional empirical testing and hastened accumulation the evidence (Call, Nyberg,

Ployhart, and Weekley, 2015; Reilly, Nyberg, Maltarich, and Weller, 2014). As noted by Shaw (2017), the morass of organizational-level theory may have created some initial confusion, but the upside to the situation was a vast amount of empirical testing of alternative formulations. Thus, in addition to the presumed practical value of examining these relationships, the empirical literature provided the fuel for two comprehensive meta-analytic studies (Heavey et al., 2013; Park and Shaw, 2013), which confirm practically significant negative relationships between turnover rates and performance outcomes. These meta-analyses also show (1) little evidence to support other formulations other than practically important declines in performance as turnover rates rise, (2) few differences in turnover rate relationships across voluntary and total turnover operationalizations, and (3) some evidence that turnover rate effects differ across employment relationships and job types.

2 Organizational Turnover Research in the Chinese Context—A Missing Link

The meta-analyses noted above were conducted, like most meta-analytic studies in Western journals, using available English-language studies. For example, Park and Shaw (2013) analyzed data from more than 100 papers and 300 sample-level correlations. Strikingly, only 4 of those studies included data from Chinese companies. This is remarkable underrepresentation given the increasing volume of research being produced in greater China and by Chinese scholars worldwide. In addition, given the vast Chinese economy, significant global economic influence, and strident economic growth in the past several decades, the lack of contextual research from China on this critical topic in the field of management is curious and troublesome.

In our preparation for this editorial we sought to dig deeper, hoping to undercover a trove of research that was overlooked in the English-language meta-analyses that would somehow balance the view. To do so, we searched the literature to identify organizational- or unit-level empirical studies on turnover rates that appeared in Chinese language journals in the last 10 years. What we found confirmed our initial conclusion that organizational-level turnover research in China is neglected. We first searched CNKI database to identify articles on turnover using broad turnover-related key words; this search yielded

2294 articles. We then perused these articles to identify empirical studies that examined organizational- or unit-level turnover rates. In the end, only 16 papers met our inclusion criteria, two of which were published in Chinese social science citation index (CSSCI) journals (Chen, Yuan, Zhou and Wang, 2016; Mei and Zhao, 2016); the remaining 14 papers were published in non-CSSCI journals or magazines. Nine out of 16 articles were guided by formal theories, such as agency theory, tournament theory, equity theory, and social identity theory. In terms of analysis strategy, regression analysis was used in thirteen of these articles, and the remaining three articles simply descriptive statistics or content analysis. Table 1 shows the summary information of these articles.

The clear theme among these 16 studies is a focus on top management teams (TMTs). This contrasts with the large Western literature where the focus tends to be on turnover rates among core employee groups or on turnover rates in the entire organization. Firm performance, pay structure, and pay levels were the most-studied antecedents of TMT turnover in the Chinese papers. As examples, Cai and Li (2016) examined whether firm performance and incentives would explain top management turnover. Taking an agency theory view, the authors found that firm performance and stock incentive were negatively related to top management turnover rates, but pay level was not significantly related. Drawing on tournament theory and fairness theory, Deng, Du and Yang (2016) predicted and found among 376 top management teams from listed A-share companies that TMT pay dispersion increased turnover rates and, further, that pay level attenuated this positive relationship.

A telling finding is that only the paper by He and Liu (2011) investigated the performance-related consequences of turnover rates using key or core employees. Building on the human capital literature, the authors predicted that employee turnover rates would be negatively related to organizational productivity. The authors sampled employees from 14 plants of a company covering the years 2007 to 2010 and found that total and involuntary turnover rates related positively to defective rates, defined as errors caused by manpower, machine, material, method, measurement, and environment. In addition, voluntary turnover rates related positively to the defective rate caused by manpower.

Table 1 Summary of Empirical Studies and Findings

Study	Sample(s)	Turnover Type	Formal Theory	Antecedents	Consequences	Analysis Strategy	Key Findings
Cai and Li, 2016	A panel data of 187 companies listed in growth enterprise board covering the years 2010 to 2013	Top management team	Agency theory	Firm performance, pay level, stock incentive		Multiple regression analysis	Firm performance and stock incentive were negatively related to TMT members' turnover rates. Pay level had non-significant negative effect on turnover rates.
Chen, Yuan, Zhou, and Wang, 2016	107 media reports on collective turnover events occurred in the period between 2000 and 2015	Networks	Social network theory	Centrality, strength of connection		Content analysis of media reports and depth interview with 8 employees of 4 companies	Centrality in a network predicted the first leaver. Strength of connection predicted following leavers.
Deng, Du, and Yang, 2016	376 top management teams in listed A-share companies from 2012 to 2013	Top management team	Tournament theory	Pay dispersion, pay level		Hierarchical regression analysis	Pay dispersion among top management teams was positively related to managers' turnover rates. This positive relationship was weakened by average pay levels.
Li and Liu, 2016	861 listed state-owned companies	Top management team	Tournament theory; social comparison theory	Pay dispersion		Fractional Logit model	Pay dispersion among top management teams was positively related to turnover rates of TMT members.
Liu and Tang, 2015	36 firms listed in growth enterprise board covering the years 2010 to 2013	Top management team		Pay level, stock options, firm growth, firm performance, firm size, firm longevity, managers' age		Hierarchical regression analysis	Firm growth was positively related to TMT members' turnover rates. Firm size was negatively related to turnover rates. Pay level, stock options, firm performance, firm longevity, and average age of TMT members were not related to turnover rates.

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Study	Sample(s)	Turnover Type	Formal Theory	Antecedents	Consequences	Analysis Strategy	Key Findings
Mei and Zhao, 2016	Chinese A-share listed companies from 2005 to 2013	Top management team	Tournament theory; equity theory	Vertical and horizontal pay dispersion	Firm performance	Fractional Logit model	The relationship between pay dispersion and firm performance was mediated by turnover rates of VPs. The positive relationship between pay dispersion and turnover rates was stronger in state-owned enterprises than in non-state-owned ones.
Shen, Xu, and Jiao, 2011a	19 ST companies and 19 non-ST companies from 2008 to 2009	Top management team		Firm performance, TMT members' average pay levels, shareholder monopolization		Logistic regression	Firm performance and TMT members' average pay levels were related negatively to top management team's clustered turnover. Shareholder monopolization was related positively to turnover clustering.
Shen, Xu, and Jiao, 2011b	19 ST companies and 19 non-ST companies from 2008 to 2009	Top management team		Financial distress, shareholder monopolization, TMT members' average pay levels		Logistic regression	Financial distress and shareholder monopolization related positively to top management team's turnover clustering. TMT members' average pay level was related negatively to top management team's turnover clustering.
Shen, Quan, Yang, Huang, and Zhang, 2016.	A Chinese hospital	All employees		Performance appraisal		Descriptive statistics	After a new performance appraisal system was implemented, turnover rates in a hospital dropped from 7.14% to 4.55%.

(*To be continued*)

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Study	Sample(s)	Turnover Type	Formal Theory	Antecedents	Consequences	Analysis Strategy	Key Findings
Yang, 2013	Chinese A-share listed companies	Top management team	Tournament theory; justice theory	Pay dispersion		Linear regression	Pay dispersion among top management teams was positively related to turnover rates.
Yang and Huang, 2008	64 top management teams	Top management team	Structural hole	Collective job satisfaction, trust, shared team vision, collective turnover intention, network intensity, structural hole, structural bridge, network centrality		EFA, CFA, SEM	The authors claimed that collective turnover intention and team social network structure were associated with turnover rates, but they did not report how these variables were measured and how the SEM model was tested.
Zhang, Hao, Wang, Liu, and Zhang, 2014	A Chinese hospital	All employees		Work system		Descriptive statistics	After integrated medical care working mode was implemented in the hospital, turnover rates of nurses dropped.
Zhao, 2016	419 firms listed in growth enterprise board from 2009 to 2014	Top management team	Agency theory; prospect theory	Stock incentive, restricted stock		Linear regression	Stock incentive was positively related to management turnover rates, and restricted stock options were positively related to abnormal turnover rates.

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Study	Sample(s)	Turnover Type	Formal Theory	Antecedents	Consequences	Analysis Strategy	Key Findings
Zhou, 2008	211 listed companies from 2004 to 2006	Top management team	Social identity theory	Demographic heterogeneity		Hierarchical regression analysis	Age heterogeneity and education heterogeneity related significantly and positively to turnover rates. Team tenure was positively related to turnover rates, but the relationship was not statistically significant.
He and Liu, 2011	14 plants of a company from 2007 to 2010	All employees			Productivity	Linear regression	Total turnover rates and involuntary turnover rates related positively to total defective rate. Total turnover rates, voluntary turnover rates, and involuntary turnover rates were positively related to defective rate caused by manpower.
Xie, 2012	100 open-ended funds of 50 fund companies from 2008 to 2010	Managers			Fund performance	Hierarchical regression analysis	Fund managers' turnover rates was negatively related to fund performance.

3 A Call for Research

The preceding review makes the purpose of this essay—a call for additional organizational-level turnover and performance research—clear. Our search efforts were meticulous, if not exhaustive. These endeavors uncovered only a handful of Chinese studies, while hundreds of such studies conducted in Western samples appear in the Western literature. The reasons for the dearth are unknown, but we can offer some speculation. First, it is possible that researchers believe that turnover consequences are not as severe in this context. The meta-analytic evidence does show that the turnover—organizational performance correlation is somewhat weaker in Asian samples (Park and Shaw, 2013) but it is difficult to place confidence in this comparison given the small number of Asian-sample studies. Second, it is possible that it is more difficult to collect or obtain such data in China compared to North America, where most of the studies originate. In the North American context, key-informant research designs are plentiful (Gupta, Shaw, and Delery, 2000). In these studies, turnover data are typically obtained from key informants (e.g., plant managers or HRM managers) in large samples of organizations within or across industries. These turnover reports are then placed into empirical models with archival data obtained from industry associations, government databases, or purchased from third-party suppliers (e.g., Huselid, 1995; Shaw, Dineen, Fang, and Vellella, 2009). Although individual-level survey data sets seem to be relatively easy to collect within Chinese organizations, organizational-level research conducted with a key informant design appears to be lacking. Third, strong industrial associations often characterize or bring together organizations in Western industries. Researchers are often able to access organizations and data via industry associations and trade conferences. These connections lead researchers to rich data sources underpinning years' worth of within-industry studies, for example, in automobile manufacturing (MacDuffie, Sethuraman, and Fisher, 1996; Jacobides, MacDuffie, and Tae, 2016) and trucking (Shaw et al., 1998; Shaw, Gupta et al., 2005; Shaw and Gupta, 2007), to name only two. It is possible that these associations function differently in China, making it more difficult for researchers to obtain the data and access needed for large organizational samples.

Whatever the root causes, our contention is that such research is potentially fruitful and may offer insights that are not apparent in the existing broader

literature. First, there is certainly a need to continue to test alternative theories of the turnover—performance relationships that already appear in the literature. Indeed, as Shaw, Gupta et al. (2005) and others have pointed out, tests of differential or competing theories are needed in the literature, as are attempts to integrate these alternative theories (see Nyberg and Ployhart, 2013; Shaw et al., 2013). Second, it is certainly possible that turnover—performance dynamics operate differently in Chinese organizations, leaving open the possibility for new theoretical development and empirical comparisons against existing conceptual foundations. Third, there are many clear differences in employment relationships, workforce management, and the labor market in China. These contextual factors could be brought to bear as antecedents of turnover rates, or as moderating factors between workforce outflow and performance. Fourth, Chinese organizations face some temporal and seasonal challenges that are unique. For example, there are severe, yet somewhat predictable, mass turnover events after the Lunar Year Holiday and/or after bonus payments. In addition, many organizations near metropolitan centers deal with frequent influx and outflow of migrant workers, which creates administrative, hiring, exit, and productivity-related challenges that are not seen in Western countries where the residential population and labor market are more stable.

To conclude, we hope this call challenges and energizes Chinese researchers to consider the value in turnover rate studies at the unit and organization level. Such endeavors will surely balance the scales of empirical evidence. Additional studies in the fascinating Chinese context will also likely lead to facets of insights that, despite its 100-year history, have yet to be observed in the turnover literature.

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