

## The Last Interview with James March

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On the morning of February 20, 2016, I interviewed James March ('Jim' hereafter) at a nursing home in Northern California, not far from Stanford University, where Jim and his wife were living. This is perhaps the last interview Jim had in his lifetime. In the following, I present the most interesting parts of my interview with Jim (see the Supplemental File for the transcript of my full interview).

### DIVERSITY-INTEGRATION BALANCING

**Peter:** In your MOR 2005 article (March, 2005), you referred to the peripheral position of the indigenous research communities relative to the mainstream research community. Do you think the Chinese research community is like that?

**James:** So far as possible, we would like to maintain some diversity. The ideology of research is international and sharing, but the risk is that you converge too completely and too fast. So how do you keep it from converging too rapidly and too completely? National and other communities being separate is our way to maintain diversity. It is a complicated problem because, from the point of the view of the separate community, that is not advantageous; they will be more advantageous if they converge with the dominant view; from the point of the view of the total community, there is an advantage having diversity. One of the ways to maintain that diversity in our present world situation is being national with a combination of separate cultures, separate languages, and some kind of local enthusiasm. Whether maintaining the optimum diversity is a much more complicated question, but a completely convergent is not optimum, so you need some diversity.

**Peter:** Is this analogous to the argument that if you don't maintain exploration, then there is a tendency that the community will convert into exploitation?

**James:** It can be framed as exploitation-exploration issue. And that issue arises in all places, and in all places that I know, we have no optimum solution to it. We don't know what the best mix is, but we know that is not the extremes. Diverse totally is not what you really want to be, but how much diversity you want is very complicated. Some parts are very simple. The longer you look ahead, the more you want diversity; the shorter your time perspective, the less you want diversity; that is fought over and over again. And some areas we have theorems that show that is true. The one I know best is the *two-armed bandit world*.

That is a set of problems that can be characterized as like going to a casino and confronting a whole array of slot machines. You know these slot machines have different payoffs. But you don't know which one is the best, so you start experimenting. What is your search rule? After a while, you have found one that appears to be the best. And obviously, you will do well by repeating that rule. But when you repeat that one, you don't search for any other ones. If you search for another one, you do less well in the short run, but you might do better in the long run. We don't have any real solution to that problem. We do not know how to determine the optimum outcome.

**Peter:** I think we need diversity, at least some diversity in the situation where there is a dominant culture, like the United States. We need some room for other cultures to co-exist, just for the purpose of counterbalance, right?

**James:** That is not quite yet. They co-exist as the experiment for the way you want to go, so you maintain the diversity as a short-run strategy, but you are going to converge into something. You are using the diversity to experiment to see what looks good. When you move to whatever looks good, the risk is that you will lose the diversity when you do that.

**Peter:** Diversity is more related to novelty and experimentation for exploration.

**James:** Right, within the theorem, that is diversity all about. In that sense, not permanent diversity. Permanent diversity does not permit any imitation.

**Peter:** This is just like a swinging pendulum. Once you find an effective solution, you converge to that, but you still need room for diversity so that you can try other alternatives for a continued progress.

**James:** That's the genius of the American culture. New cultures are coming in and they provide diversity, but they merge. The Irish culture has now almost entirely merged into the standard American culture; you don't really have Irish communities anymore.

**Peter:** In this sense, there should always be an open policy towards immigration, so the new immigrants can bring cultural diversity. No other country can afford to have this policy, such as Japan.

**James:** They exercise exploitation, which is the standard description of the Japanese. The Japanese industry is very strong in improving things, but not very strong in bringing novelties.

**Peter:** If they want to have more novelty, they probably have to work with countries like the United States. What about Europe now? Some people worry about the European community in the sense that they have passive immigration policies, no longer well-managed.

**James:** Yes, they worry a lot. I have not really thought about the European situation. Europe has a long history of antagonism. You know French and German have lived together and certainly mingled on the borders, but they have kept fighting the wars regularly. Europe is a history of wars, a little like China. That makes it harder for the kind of immigration that you need for the positive role of diversity.

## INDIGENOUS RESEARCH IN CHINA

**Peter:** Let's turn to the Chinese scholarly community. A small group inside that community wants to maintain some diversity as indigenous, but I think the majority still want to convert to the mainstream. I used to think it a wrong balance, but now I feel it maybe a right balance, but we still need some room carved out for people who want to engage in indigenous research. They should be taken as legitimate; they should be fostered and tolerated at least at the early stage when they are weaker than the mainstream. How would you advise?

**James:** Sure. Well, it's really an exploration-exploitation question, as always. I think it's indeterminate because we have a lot of things we have not specified. But my instinct says you are right. Both the Chinese scholarly community and the international scholarly community would be better off with most Chinese scholars seeking to become internationally recognized scholars, and that is what the system does and means at the moment, thus English rather than Chinese. But I think it's clear that we hope that there remains a kind of Chinese differentiation, even within the most people who are seeking international reputation. This can be done in different ways. There could be diversity within their own community, but people outside that community who are seeking to join the community are also useful. It's very difficult, even if it is useful for them. They'll suffer their development and suffer their success.

For example, the Chinese traditions, will probably be heavily developed by Chinese scholars. Other people can read their literature and translation, but that's not going to be the dominant thing. I personally would hope that there would be a Chinese group, and they'll continually have a problem because of translation and so on. But you'll

maintain a diverse set of ideas. For me, the Scandinavian community is not a bad model. They try very hard to be both international and local. I think they are fairly successful. I think the discipline itself is better served by that kind of a variety.

**Peter:** This is probably related to the two logics discussed in your research: the logic of consequence and the logic of appropriateness. Following the logic of appropriateness, some want the identity of indigenous scholar, even if they consequentially pay the price in their career (e.g., the smaller number of publications, publishing in less known journals, and greater difficulty in getting promotion). Should we embrace these two logics as both valid and legitimate?

**James:** I think so. However, you may dislike the fact that individual scholars are often intolerant. Once individual scholars want to make scholarship international, want to get the right ideas, limit the wrong ideas, they don't need to have very much tolerance for diversity. But you want a system that somehow would tolerate diversity. It is not easy to think what the design is. A national system is not a bad design because it keeps national loyalty and so on, and at the same time also international community. I'm not sure it's the best design.

**Peter:** The Chinese community wants both international recognition and the Chinese indigenous characteristics, so a major conflict.

**James:** It seems to me that the Chinese philosophy is rather consistent with that because the Chinese philosophy is much more tolerant of contradiction than other philosophies. In such a world, it is simultaneously believed that I am wholeheartedly international, and I must be 100% Chinese. Of course, it's contradictory, but you believe in both, and you try to execute both. Understanding how we act in situations in which we have deep beliefs that are clearly contradictory is one of the things that I think our field needs, and the Chinese scholars may be able to help

## INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND CRITERIA FOR 'GENRE'

**Peter:** Let's get into interdisciplinary research agenda. Would the interdisciplinary approach also apply to the issue of diversity-integration balancing?

**James:** Well, it is a different situation and a different part of this colored world. You take the way or place where I work, which is most about decision-making, change and so on. It's in essence interdisciplinary as it is not very well contained in any one discipline, so it turns up to be interdisciplinary not because anyone thinks and calls it interdisciplinary, but just because the way we organize our disciplines is not parallel with the way a particular phenomenon is. So, I used to say, and I still say that

I work in a very narrow area--a focused, limited, narrow area, but it happens to be an area that cuts across disciplines. It is intrinsically interdisciplinary not because I have chosen it to be interdisciplinary, but because it is. And others remain much more contained within one discipline. So, I don't think there is anything inherently good about interdisciplinary or not. I think it is likely to be true that the scholarly community finds things that cut cross harder to deal with than the things that stay within one discipline.

**Peter:** What will be some topics or phenomena that you think intrinsically or inherently interdisciplinary, perhaps leadership?

**James:** I'm not sure that leadership is the topic for scholarly work. Everybody likes to talk about that, but we don't exactly know what it is; we do not know how to observe it, and we know very little about the way to systematically think about it. Whenever I am involved, I have resisted hiring researchers on leadership. Because I don't see the research, and I don't see other researchers can help us learn anything.

I can also think other areas like that. Most areas started out that way. They started out with practical problems, and practical observations. At the moment, the main thing is innovation. That is not because scholars think this is interesting, but because the society is caught up with the wave of innovation, like computer revolution. So, innovation has become a very important topic. What do we do in universities? Universities are fairly adaptive institutions, actually. You know innovation is a very important thing out there, as everyone is talking about it; everyone wants to consult on it, and everybody is complaining about it. So, the first thing we do is to hire some innovators and meet with professors to talk about their own experience in innovation.

We don't want to leave it to that, and we want to capture that field. So, we get some younger people to do research on innovation. They try to carve out some field as something to do with innovation. Gradually they take over the courses and gain some experience as professors. So, professors who have never done innovation become scholars of innovation. That's the natural dynamics of scholarship in university. Well, sometimes it doesn't work very well because scholarship doesn't get anywhere. I think leadership is one of these areas that scholarship has rarely got very far. There are special fields or some sub-fields of leadership where scholarship has done pretty well. You know, people know something about personality, characteristics or traits of successful leaders. I think we know fair about interpersonal relations between leaders and others. So, we can teach courses about those things, but those tough topics, like who are the leaders, and where do they come from, or

how to get better leaders, are harder to teach. So, I don't think they become good research areas.

**Peter:** Can we then argue we have different forms of rationality like genre, so artistic rationality could be different from scientific rationality, so they should not be judged and conform to one kind of formal rationality?

**James:** Well, I think most scientists will agree with that, and why should I disagree? I know some scientists who believe that the rules of science apply to all things, including theology and arts, but they are the minority. There is a sort of 'live-and-let-live' attitude: within my domain I want to enforce standards, but I do not try to enforce my standards outside my domain.

That struggle went on and is still going on to some extent, but it is pretty much over. In the social sciences when putting forth a new movement, there were people in the dominant group who said that was a separate genre and they would develop their standards of its own, so we did not pay much attention to it. There were other people who said that's a corrupt version of science and had to be weeded out. The third group would say that maybe they had something we ought to integrate into us. And I think that's fairly common. I can put it into the exploration-exploitation frame because it's about how much deviance you are going to allow, but you cannot allow everybody to go everywhere, so there must be some standards and understanding. But what about something on the edge?

One of the advantages of nation states and culture is their natural boundaries as the standards that everybody has to meet as basic requirements. Everybody understands there is a special French version of physics, which is part of overall international physics, but it has different emphasis and different thrust. As everybody understands that, that's ok.

**Peter:** In Denmark, Niels Bohr, for the Copenhagen school of quantum physics, has a flavor of something different. I'm so grateful that he borrowed the yin-yang symbol to explain the wave-particle duality.

**James:** But Bohr was recognized as a first-class international physicist. He has some funny ideas, but that's ok. And there are Austrian philosophers. They are recognized as first-class international philosophers, but with different tilt.

**Peter:** Almost in every discipline, even within some natural sciences, that there are some different versions. We should allow diverse interpretations of the same phenomenon. One is probably the dominant, but there are others as well.

**James:** There is always tension.

**Peter:** In social research domains, some scholars now talk about competing institutional logics with strong tensions, and sometimes some new

logics could even substitute the old logics. If you do not allow any room for exploration, the old logic will persist, which may not be the best choice.

**James:** Yes, you know that we have that tradition. In our intellectual history, we talked about the Vienna school of something. The Vienna school is recognized as the deviant school, but still respected school. Historically, they could become the dominant school. That is sort of a typical picture. In our scholarship, some subgroups have got two positions that they are recognized as someone deviant and still respectable.

**Peter:** I think these are two key words: deviant or distinctive, still respectable or respected at the same time.

**James:** Of course, respect is always relative. If you take something you know well, such as the Carnegie School, I think you can say it is deviant but respected, at least ultimately; when it started, it was visible. Gradually, people started talking about it as a recognizable, deviant group, but acceptable. You might say, they were wrong, and they just didn't understand something, but you still treated it as part of the community.

### FOOLISHNESS, PLAYFULNESS, AND COMPETING LOGICS

**Peter:** Is foolishness related to the logic of appropriateness? Exploration? Playfulness?

**James:** Well, it is certainly related to playfulness and exploration. Underlining it is a notion that rationality is a theory, and when we enforce it on people, we in fact enforce a theorem. Foolishness is a claim that in this plural world, there is something other than rationality, but it does not have a clear structure like rationality; it has to be admitted like a kind of arbitrary medium, which is supposed to be foolishness. This is sort of the ability to leave out of normal rational thinking. And at least play has a special property. We are allowed to leave out of normal rational thinking. But we acknowledge this is a strange thing to do; as we acknowledge that in a normal life, we don't play, but play is a special activity and has special rules, sort of freedom from rationality. Freedom from rationality, while we acknowledge rationality, is like the 'Mother Church', so to speak.

**Peter:** So, we normally follow the mainstream track, but occasionally some of us want to deviate from the mainstream track for a moment so as to explore novel tracks, but we still come back to the mainstream route, right?

**James:** Yes, exactly, when you deviate from it, you are not denying what you are deviating from.

That's like some people using drink for, you know. When I'm drunk, I'm allowed to do things I would not normally do, like this is me, but also not me. The idea about foolishness is it needs to be given a more positive flavor because you need to escape from, not irrationality because it is a term too narrow. You need to escape from the established ways of thinking. If the established ways of thinking are not tolerant, you need escape from them. You want to be Confucius for a while.

**Peter:** You describe playfulness as a *temporary* relaxation of the rules, like a temporary deviation from your normal track.

**James:** Yes, right. And you are certified by others that you know and you will return. I'm not always drunk. You may convict me of being drunk and get me in jail, but you can't convict me of being anti-Catholic or something else, because that's not what I really mean.

**Peter:** What about yin-yang balancing?

**James:** There I have read something. For me, the strongest sense of yin-yang, which is not nearly as detailed as yours, is it's one of the examples of the simultaneity of contradictory things. In the culture I grew up, that was not allowed. You have to get away from that. To think I should experience life by recognizing the contradictions that I have to sustain and endure is a relatively new idea for me. And I certainly think it's very fruitful for thinking about management and organization.

**Peter:** You mention healthy tension. Do you think healthy tension is related to yin-yang?

**James:** It's a very healthy tension. I think that's right. The healthiness of it is that, although you experience a very strong tension, that experience is not a motivation to eliminate the tension.

I argue that making a choice is worse because choosing between your absolute values is the worst thing you can do.

**Peter:** In that sense, this is an example of the logic of appropriateness. For example, as a father, you love your children equally, regardless any consequences.

**James:** Yes, absolutely.

**Peter:** If I follow the rational thinking, I should invest in the more promising children because they can have the higher returns.

**James:** If I think family as a cooperation with various assets, yes, but that's different.

**Peter:** So, in social life, social value, social identity, sense of responsibility, and love cannot be explained by the logic of consequence.

What about your love for science and art? Do you see any tension?

**James:** No, not really. I have written poetry with a lot about fantasy. One of the solutions to conflict is to consign some to fantasy. The idea is that our

desires and what we think is appropriate are quite often in conflict, so we move our desires into fantasy and enjoy them there. That's all.

**Peter:** I think that the logic of consequence is actually only short-term in focus, but the logic of appropriateness could be the one for long-term consequence.

**James:** You can point out that good marriage is exploitation only. You develop your relationship with one woman. Obviously, you are giving up something, but you also gain awfully a lot, and for most people in their lifetimes, exploitation is a better strategy.

**Peter:** So, marriage should be explained by a different logic other than the logic of consequence.

**James:** That's certainly right.

## REFLECTIONS

There emerge *four major themes* in the above interview. We started from the issue of immigration into the first theme of diversity-integration balance, especially framing it from the lens of exploration-exploitation balancing as ambidexterity. In particular, Jim highlighted how to apply the frame of exploration-exploitation balancing to that between diversity and integration with immigration as an analogy for how to balance mainstream global research with peripheral indigenous research.

The second theme is about how to balance indigenous research with global research in the context of the Chinese scholarly community. Jim endorsed the approach of asymmetrical balancing in terms of a greater emphasis on mainstream global research relative to peripheral indigenous research. However, peripheral indigenous research is not only legitimate but also indispensable for the required diversity in the process of exploration.

The third theme is about the interdisciplinary approach and the issue of 'genre' with different criteria to judge each unique 'genre'. Jim pointed out that his research areas happened to be interdisciplinary in nature simply because the way we organize our disciplines is not parallel with the way the actual phenomenon exists. More important, Jim provided a great insight that it was critical for new schools of thought (e.g., the Vienna Schools, and the Carnegie School) to be regarded as both *deviant* and *respectable*, thus another paradox.

The last theme is about the unique value of foolishness, playfulness, and yin-yang balancing. Jim's notions of foolishness and playfulness are related to the first three themes to the extent that we normally follow the mainstream, integrated, and exploitative track, but occasionally some venture to deviate from the mainstream track for a moment so as to explore new tracks. In that sense, we need to balance rationality with foolishness or playfulness as an effective way to balance exploitation with exploration.

A new perspective paper (Zhou, 2021) illustrates the inherent link between Jim's overall way of thinking and the meta-lens of yin-yang balancing in terms of *organized anarchy*, reflecting the paradoxical nature of Chinese bureaucratic system as a dynamic balancing between looser and tighter coupling to various degrees as *variable coupling*. To a large extent, while Jim's intellectual scholarship was perceived as consistent with Confucian teaching (Rhee, 2010), I would regard Jim as even more associated with Taoism (Li, 2018).

Further, beyond the research on ambidexterity, all research streams involving 'ambi-' (e.g., ambiguity, ambivalence, ambivert, among others) can benefit from the meta-lens of yin-yang balancing for both theory-building and empirical testing (Li, 2014, 2016).

To best remember Jim, I strongly encourage more Chinese scholars to engage in Chinese indigenous research with its rich interaction with global mainstream research, especially by applying the meta-lens of yin-yang balancing to all critical paradoxes.

### Supplementary Material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/mor.2021.62>.

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