INTRODUCTION

Often when I make a presentation or submit a manuscript in the West, especially in the United States, reporting research findings from China and pointing to elements not consistent with the received theories, inevitably someone in the audience or a reviewer asks the question, “Since the data is from China, are the findings generalizable?” I am sure many of the scholars present at this conference have experienced similar questioning when they present their research from the East to a scholarly audience in the West. Whenever possible, I respond by making a rhetorical remark, “This is an interesting and good question. I often wonder whether findings from a study conducted in Detroit, Indianapolis, New York, or Northern California can be generalized.”

This response, of course, reflects an instinctive annoyance that the issue of generalizability is seldom raised, at least in my subjective estimation, when the data comes from North America or Western Europe, even when the observations are made in a limited geographical area. It also reflects a misgiving that much of social science research is ethnocentric and in favor of North American or Western European traditions. These traditions have been held as a reference from which other traditions are then seen as “deviations” that require specification or justification. Thus, there is a gut-level resentment among us about the “unfair” and “biased” Western responses to data or observations from different societies and cultures. Do these questions, consciously or unconsciously, reflect a continued sense of subjugation of the East by the West, or a sustained cultural colonization of the West over other regions in the world?

A further reflection suggests that the problem lies deeper than an “innocent” question and a sarcastic response. The normative practices of science and the historical precedents of theories developed in the West constrain the degree of freedom with which scholars from other
societies and cultures can make theoretical “break-throughs.” In this presentation, I will outline these constraints, and, by way of describing a modest attempt at theorizing based largely on observations made in the East, I will try to demonstrate ways of “breaking” out of these constraints.

Before I begin, let me hasten to point out that I use the terms “West” and “East” rather loosely. The West here refers to thoughts and theories developed in Europe (especially Western Europe) and North America in the past two centuries. The East refers roughly to the region of East Asia where Confucian thoughts and ideals have been salient. In the remarks that I will make, a second demarcation may be noticeable: the “West” represents the location where the overwhelming majority of sociologists reside, and the “East” refers to all other regions—a core and peripheral distinction in terms of concentration of participants and institutions. I will try to be more specific as the context calls for it, but may blur the boundaries more in other circumstances.

**Pre-eminence of Western Theories**

To understand why “Western” theories, especially in sociology, have been so dominant, two factors come to mind: (1) that the normative practices of theoretical development favor theoretical confirmation rather than theoretical challenge and (2) that empirical discrepancies observed in Eastern societies (and other societies outside Western Europe and North America) tend to be explained away with theories purportedly capturing societal differences, with Western Europe and North America seen as the anchor or point of social reference. This dual-development reduces much of the scholarship from the East to work towards confirming received theories (immersion) or modifying them (contingency specifications).

It is generally understood that a theory begins with an explanation proposed for a set of phenomenon, and proceeds with propositions which are then examined, in the deductive process, with empirical data or observations. Analysis of the data affords an inductive process whereby the propositions are either lent credibility or subjected to falsification and modifications. While methodological textbooks emphasize that both deduction and induction are important in linking the development of theory and empirical observations, the normative practice of scientific research is dictated by deduction which is considered as the