


PERSPECTIVES

Change, Governance, and Diffusion of Institutional Logics in and Beyond Chinese Contexts

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Abstract

The institutional logics perspective provides a powerful theoretical lens that emphasizes how meanings and practices are intertwined in relatively enduring configurations that can profoundly shape organizational behavior across space and time. In this article, we propose the need for a broader research agenda on the dynamics of institutional logics in the Chinese context, particularly in three aspects. We begin by elaborating on the distinct configuration of logics in China, where state logic is more dominant and often directs other logics, thus shaping organizational behavior differently than its Western counterpart. We then argue for the need to examine (1) the change of logics per se, leveraging China's market transition, which provides a unique opportunity to observe how existing configurations of logics undergo transformational change and regain coherence; (2) the governance of logics, focusing on the influence of social evaluators and command posts; and (3) the diffusion of the China Model, a distinct configuration of logics and orders, to other countries through the Chinese state's political and economic campaigns.

摘要

制度逻辑视角提供了一个强有力的理论视角, 强调意义与实践如何交织成为相对持久的构造, 从而对组织行为产生跨越时空的深刻影响。在本文中, 我们提出了一项更为广泛的研究议程, 以探讨中国场景下制度逻辑的动态。首先, 我们详细阐述了中国独特的逻辑构造, 其中国家逻辑占据主导地位, 并常常引导其他逻辑, 从而使组织行为的塑造方式与西方模式显著不同。接着, 我们主张需要研究三个议题: (1) 制度逻辑本身的变迁, 借助中国市场转型这一独特契机, 观察现有逻辑的构造如何经历变革并重新凝聚; (2) 制度逻辑的治理, 聚焦社会评价者与指挥机构的影响力; (3) 中国模式的扩散, 即这一独特的制度逻辑与秩序的构造如何通过中国政府的政治与经济活动传播到其他国家。

Keywords: Chinese management; governance; institutional logics; institutional theory

关键词: 制度理论; 治理; 制度逻辑; 中国管理

Introduction

The institutional logics perspective offers a powerful theoretical framework that emphasizes how practices and meanings are interwoven into relatively enduring configurations, which can profoundly shape organizational behavior across time and contexts (Lounsbury, Steele, Wang, & Toubiana, 2021; Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Over the past two decades, this perspective has coalesced into a thriving scholarly community, marked by exponential growth in publications and broad

recognition as a foundational perspective in management and organization theory (Greenwood, Meyer, Lawrence, & Oliver, 2017). Research within this framework has explored a wide range of commercial and public settings, covering areas such as corporate social responsibility (Yan, Ferraro, & Almandoz, 2019; Zhang & Luo, 2013), corporate governance (Chung & Luo, 2008; Greve & Zhang, 2017), social entrepreneurship (Pache & Santos, 2013), and healthcare management (Reay, Goodrick, Waldorff, & Casebeer, 2017), among others. Given its robust explanatory capacity, the logics perspective has also extended its influence into other disciplines, including political science, information systems, marketing, and economics (Ertimur & Coskuner-Balli, 2015; Faik, Barrett, & Oborn, 2020; Ho & Im, 2015).

While scholars employing this perspective have explored a broad spectrum of empirical contexts, most studies tend to fall into two dominant streams: one focusing on the outcomes and effects of institutional logics, and the other on the intra-organizational management of multiple logics. However, both approaches have faced criticism for a problematic trend toward ‘treating logics as reified objects or things’ (Lounsbury et al., 2021: 263). Lounsbury and colleagues (2021) argue that future research should pivot toward understanding logics as complex social phenomena in their own right, rather than persistently using them merely as explanatory tools.

Building on this renewed research agenda, we argue that Chinese contexts offer unique opportunities for institutional scholars to develop innovative theories that treat logics as phenomena to be explained – focusing not only on their coherence and durability but also on their adaptability and elasticity. The ongoing economic reforms in China, which have unfolded over the past four decades and led to radical institutional changes, provide a rich, contemporary, and longitudinal observation window for studying the evolution, revision, and reconstitution of various institutions. In this article, we propose a broad research agenda on the dynamics of institutional logics in Chinese contexts, with a particular focus on the change, governance, and diffusion of logics.¹ In developing this agenda, we highlight and elaborate on a series of research directions, drawing on different theories and approaches that we consider relevant and fruitful for this endeavor.²

In the following sections, we begin with a brief introduction to the distinctive configuration of logics in China. In this context, state logic holds a more dominant position and exerts greater influence over other logics than its Western counterpart, leading to a unique shaping of organizational behavior. However, even this dominant state logic has adapted and co-evolved with other logics (e.g., market, professional) that have revived or re-emerged during economic reforms. In the subsequent sections, we advocate for a systematic examination of three key areas: the change of logics, exploring how existing configurations of logics undergo transformation and regain coherence; the governance of logics, focusing on the influence of social evaluators and command posts; and the diffusion of China’s distinct logics and orders to other countries through the Chinese state’s political and economic campaigns.

Institutional Logics in China: A Distinct Context and Configuration

The institutional logics perspective offers a metatheoretical framework for analyzing the institutional dynamics of various actors, such as organizations and individuals, within social systems. Thornton and Ocasio (1999: 804) define institutional logics as ‘the socially constructed, historical pattern of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules by which individuals produce and reproduce their material subsistence, organize time and space, and provide meaning to their social reality’. In their book on the institutional logics perspective, Thornton and colleagues (2012) provided a general theoretical conceptualization of ideal-typical logics associated with seven institutional orders – state, family, corporation, community, religion, market, and profession – each of which comprises elements that vary across multiple dimensions (e.g., root metaphors, sources of legitimacy, basis of attention) and provide governance for the constitution of logics. Institutional

logics scholarship has grown dramatically, influencing research in management, organizational studies, strategy, sociology, political science, marketing, information systems, education, and public policy.

While institutional logics research has been influential, most of it has been centered in North American and European countries, leaving us with a limited understanding of how logics operate outside of traditional Western capitalist democracies. This limitation underscores a pressing need for studies that unpack the dynamics of logics in various countries around the world, fostering the development of a more historical and comparative agenda. Such an agenda could enhance our understanding of how logics are created, evolve, and shape behavior in diverse contexts (Haveman, Joseph-Goteiner, & Li, 2023; Lounsbury & Wang, 2023; Wang, Steele, & Greenwood, 2019). In this spirit, there has been growing research on logics in China.

China is undoubtedly an important and distinctive research setting. It has a robust history of a socialist planned economy, shaped by a dominant state logic and a highly powerful government. However, after the ground-breaking ‘reform and opening-up’ policy initiated in 1978, China began to embrace and introduce market-based institutions, sparking extensive research on the tension between state and market logics. For instance, scholarship has emerged on how this tension has affected state-owned enterprises (SOEs) (Chen, 2020; Genin, Tan, & Song, 2021; Zhou, Gao, & Zhao, 2017), business groups (Yiu, Hoskisson, Bruton, & Lu, 2014), and other types of organizations, such as private corporations (Child & Tsai, 2005; Greve & Zhang, 2017; Zhang, Li, & Tong, 2024), foreign companies seeking to operate in China (Xing, Liu, & Lattemann, 2020), and social enterprises (Liu, Zhang, & Jing, 2016). The clash between state and market logics is often portrayed as a tension between Chinese and Western logics. For example, Wang and Jones (2021) highlight the rising tension in Chinese universities between Chinese and American logics. They illustrate how the welfare-centered permanent employment system in Chinese universities operates alongside a newly introduced performance-driven tenure-track system from the US, responding to increasing global competition in higher education. However, the ‘up-or-out’ system dominant in American universities has been transformed into an ‘up-or-transfer’ system due to the legacies of China’s ‘work units’ system.

Some scholars have moved beyond the basic tension between state and market logics to explore a broader configuration of logics in China (Ge & Micelotta, 2019). For example, Zheng, Shen and Cai (2018) demonstrated how a constellation of state, market, corporate, professional, and family logics shapes the Chinese doctoral education system. They found that while Chinese doctoral education has been impacted by international academic norms and global marketization trends, it is profoundly shaped by Chinese state logic and traditions linked to other institutional orders in China. Similarly, Wang, Raynard, and Greenwood (2021) suggest that the ongoing dynamics of state, market, and professional logics have significantly reshaped professional norms and values in medicine and healthcare, leading to questionable professional practices.

However, much more research is needed on distinct institutional logics in Chinese contexts. For instance, while religion plays a vital role in many countries around the world (e.g., Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism), the Chinese government adopts a religious freedom policy that is regulated by state logic. This does not mean that Chinese people lack religious commitments – religions like Buddhism and Taoism have deep historical roots and significant influence in China – but they are subject to state regulation (Yue, Wang, & Yang, 2019). While religious conflicts have become a global grand challenge, they have not regularly occurred in China. Understanding how religious logic is shifting in content and influence within Chinese contexts is an important focal point for future scholarship. Additionally, more research is needed on family logic. Unlike the nuclear family focus prevalent in Western contexts, family logic in China has historically been more extended, encompassing not only core family members but also close relatives and even clan members (Peng, 2004). However, with the growing urbanization of the population, family logic appears to be shifting toward a more nuclear family focus.

To reiterate, more systematic research is needed on the distinct configuration of logics in China. Compared to Western contexts, often characterized by more mature institutional infrastructure and relatively stable logics, China offers a unique setting where a broad array of logics undergoes more radical and rapid changes. Even the dominant state logic has seen its meanings negotiated and adapted during governmental transitions due to external pressures and internal tensions, which, in turn, prompt changes in market and other logics (Lei, 2023; Shambaugh, 2008). This context offers scholars valuable opportunities to observe not only how actors manage, leverage, or reshape various logics, but also how these logics interact, adapt, and co-evolve. Our agenda focuses on the change, governance, and diffusion of logics, including the ongoing tension between state and market logics. It also examines how these logics are influenced by changes and effects in other logics, such as those related to profession, family, religion, community, and various aspects of society and the economy, both in China and beyond.

Change of Institutional Logics

The change of an institutional logic typically involves the reformation, reinvention, or reconfiguration of its original constituent elements, resulting in a significantly different pattern of practices and symbols. There are various forms of logic change: Some involve mainly bottom-up processes (e.g., emergence), while others are characterized by top-down processes (e.g., creation) (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007; Ocasio, Mäskopf, & Steele, 2016). The economic and political reforms in recent Chinese history – particularly the market transition – offer a unique opportunity for scholars to observe how the existing constituents of an institutional logic, ranging from beliefs and values to practices and artifacts, undergo transformational change and regain coherence.

Below, we elaborate on how future studies can examine the change of three specific logics (i.e., market, professional, and community) in contemporary Chinese history by drawing on three distinct approaches. We acknowledge that these approaches may be effective across different logics, but we posit that certain approaches may resonate particularly strongly with specific logics. In doing so, we also propose important questions for future research.³ Table 1 offers a brief summary of these approaches and a list of potential research questions.

Reforming the Market Logic: Orchestrated Improvisation

First, we propose a distinct approach to studying the reformation of market logic in China: *orchestrated improvisation*. This approach requires researchers to focus not only on how actors at the top revise institutional arrangements to stimulate changes in existing practices and symbols (i.e., orchestration) but also on how actors on the ground react or proactively respond to these changing arrangements to survive and thrive (i.e., improvisation), which might, in turn, influence future orchestration (Ang, 2016; Wang, 2021). This approach builds on and significantly extends the experimentalist governance theory from political science and public policy, which focuses on the government's 'recursive' problem-solving processes through initiating, learning from, and then revising local experiments (Kellogg, 2022; Sabel & Zeitlin, 2008, 2012). However, while experimentalist governance is primarily developed to examine policy change through recursive interactions between central and local government actors, orchestrated improvisation centers on exploring changes in logics by delving into the more dynamic interactions among a broader array of state actors, market participants, and social audiences.

Compared to its Western counterparts, Chinese society has a significantly stronger state logic, with state actors often playing a prominent, top-down role in shaping market logic, whether through its suppression or revival (Ge & Micelotta, 2019; Lounsbury & Wang, 2023). During the Socialist Transformation campaign in the 1950s, the Chinese state denounced and associated market practices and symbols with Western capitalism, viewing them as nurturing exploitation and inequality (CPC

Table 1. Three approaches to studying the change of institutional logics

	Orchestrated improvisation	Institutional complexity	Boundary, identity, and power
Features	Examine changes in logics by integrating bottom-up and top-down processes, along with the dynamic interactions among a broad array of social actors.	Explore the shaping of a focal logic by focusing on a multitude of institutional logics and organizational responses across sectors and fields.	Investigate the evolution of a focal logic by demarcating its boundaries, understanding its identity, and uncovering its power dynamics.
Potential research questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do central and elite actors reframe the meanings and values of practices on the ground?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When and why do some actors engage in collective efforts to shape a distinct logic, while others lose autonomy and accept the prescriptions of other logics?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do social actors establish, maintain, or break down the boundaries of a localized logic?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the framing by central actors adapt to external pressures and internal tensions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What enables actors to creatively use or manipulate different logics as cultural resources, turning institutional complexity into opportunities?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Why and how do groups of actors aggregate, form communities, and co-create a meaningful community logic?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do local actors react or proactively respond to top-down orchestration?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does institutional complexity affect the shaping of professional ethics and lead to mistrust or distrust in professions?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does an established identity become challenged, disrupted, and regain coherence?
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the iterative interaction between top-down and bottom-up processes constitute a coherent logic?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How does the emergence of a focal logic reshape inter-institutional configurations?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How do power dynamics within and between different social groups shape local instantiations of a logic?

Central Committee, 1956). In other words, market logic was suppressed by the state. It was not until the late 1970s that the state decided to reintroduce market practices and values into society (Nee & Oppen, 2012; Solinger, 1984). However, after more than two decades of suppression and stigmatization, reviving market logic proved challenging – even for the authoritative Chinese state (Wang & Steele, 2024). A radical and wholesale revival of market logic could have threatened the state's legitimacy and authority, as it was the central government that had initially banned and denounced market practices and values.

Orchestration

Instead of reviving market logic in a wholesale fashion, the Chinese state adopted an experimentalist approach, beginning with localized pilot trials involving various constituent practices and symbols of market logic (CPC Central Committee, 1978). Since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has iteratively reformed institutional arrangements based on the outcomes of these local experiments, orchestrating the revival and revision of market practices and symbols that had previously been delegitimized, stigmatized, and even criminalized (Nee & Oppen, 2012). While state actors often alter institutional arrangements through the establishment and modification of laws, rules, and regulations, legitimating and destigmatizing practices and values that have been tainted for an extended period is a complex process (Wang & Steele, 2024; Zhang, Wang, Toubiana, & Greenwood, 2021). This process demands significant persuasion and effort to convince audiences to accept – let alone engage in – such practices.

We believe that work on framing or theorization is a particularly useful tool for exploring how state actors orchestrated the reformation of the meanings and values of market activities to align them with state logic (and other logics), making them acceptable to the general public and ultimately suitable for reconfiguration into a distinct and coherent market logic. Originating from studies of collective action frames in the social movement literature (Benford & Snow, 2000), studies of framing can guide scholars in investigating how state actors justify changes in institutional arrangements. This involves diagnosing the causes of socioeconomic problems (e.g., unemployment and economic stagnation in the late 1970s), developing market practices as potential solutions to these challenges (e.g., profit-seeking to revive the national economy), and motivating market activities on the ground to address these issues.

While the literature often examines how framing is leveraged by marginalized groups and social movement organizations to pursue social change (Isaac & Christiansen, 2002), elites and regulators can also use frames to advance economic and political agendas (Ansari, Wijan, & Gray, 2013). We suggest examining three components (Gamson, 1992) of the state's reframing of market logic: first, how the state crafted an injustice component by re-evaluating the unjust stigmatization and suppression of market practices and values; second, how it constructed an agency component by emphasizing the role of the market in alleviating economic stagnation; and third, how it developed an identity component by fostering a sense of belonging among emerging market actors. Through these dynamic and iterative framing processes, the constituent elements of market logic are revived, re-evaluated, and ultimately rendered coherent.

Moreover, the Chinese government's orchestrating activities adapt to the evolution of state logic itself. Despite being viewed as authoritarian and coercive, the Chinese state is multifaceted and influenced by intra-state tensions (Tsai, 2007). While in the early 1980s the state primarily focused on reviving the shattered economy, emphasizing the constructive force of the market, it became relatively polarized in the late 1980s as different political factions within the state held conflicting views on the market's impact on the socialist regime and political stability (Solinger, 1984; Wang & Steele, 2024). This underscores that the revival of market logic is shaped by the evolution, malleability, and internal conflicts of state logic. Future studies can explore how the government reframed the role of various market practices and values (such as innovation and entrepreneurship), transforming some

into core constituents of market logic, as well as how the government's framings adapted to internal tensions and transitions.

Improvisation

In response to the shifting institutional arrangements induced by the state's orchestration, emerging market actors may improvise by recreating, reinventing, or rejecting various market practices and symbols based on the state's changing frames and feedback from other social actors, such as customers, investors, and the media. Not all market-related activities and symbols that arose during the revival of market logic persisted and became integrated into a coherent pattern. Instead, some newly emergent practices and symbols were abandoned after unsuccessful trials (Nee & Oppen, 2012; Tsai, 2007). For example, practices that threatened the political legitimacy of the state regime or the stability of market logic itself – such as private banking in the 1980s or peer-to-peer lending platforms in the 2010s – were temporarily or permanently eliminated to preserve the coherence of the logic. We view this iterative trial-and-error process as an essential component of improvisation (Ang, 2016; Wang, 2021). This process also attests the elasticity and decomposability of institutional logics, the extent of which warrants further investigation (Lounsbury et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2019).

Rather than being 'cultural dopes' trapped by institutions, individual market actors can be cultural entrepreneurs who regard changing arrangements and various frames created by the state as cultural resources to be leveraged or manipulated for success (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). We suggest that the scholarship on cultural entrepreneurship is particularly useful for examining how market actors improvise based on their interpretation of the state's evolving orchestration (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2019). Just as the state's orchestration adapts to shifts in state logic, market actors' improvisation must also adjust to the changing institutional environment. As a result, their improvisational efforts may sometimes be uncoordinated and spontaneous or, at other times, distributed and deliberate, responding to the institutional dynamics shaped by the state and other more centralized actors (Lawrence, 2017).

In summary, we propose that a systematic examination of the iterative interaction between orchestration and improvisation can reveal the processes through which newly reformed market practices and symbols constitute a coherent and enduring logic. Additionally, future research should explore the inter-institutional reconfiguration that results from changes in one logic, such as how the reformation of market logic may, in turn, reshape the state and other logics.

Shaping the Professional Logic: Institutional Complexity

Whereas studies of professional logic in Western contexts have tended to focus on the market's encroachment on specific professions (Muzio, Aulakh, & Kirkpatrick, 2019; Smets, Jarzabkowski, Burke, & Spee, 2015), we contend that the reformation of professional logic in China has been largely shaped by the institutional complexity arising from both state and market logics. These two logics are often incompatible and can impose competing pressures on professionals (Cheng & Li, 2012; Wang et al., 2021). While studies using an institutional complexity approach primarily focus on examining various organizational responses to conflicting prescriptions from incompatible logics (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011), we extend this approach to explore how a multitude of institutional forces and organizational responses may influence the transformation of professional logic.

The professional logic in China differs significantly from that in the West, particularly in two critical 'categorical elements' of the logic: 'sources of authority' and 'control mechanisms' (Thornton et al., 2012: 73). In the West, professional authority is typically established and maintained by professional associations, which confer professional autonomy – i.e., the extent to which professionals can determine their own practices. However, following the founding of the socialist regime in 1949, most independent professional associations in China were disbanded, while others were taken over by the

state and became semi-official organizations (Davis, 2000). Legal and accounting professions, core fields of the professional logic, were condemned for their perceived support of Western capitalism and largely dismantled during the Cultural Revolution (Pan, 1999; Zhang & Li, 2008). The medical profession, though not abolished, underwent significant transformation and became largely absorbed into the state logic, as many medical facilities were converted into public institutes or became affiliated with governmental agencies or SOEs. Governments thus became the primary authority regulating the profession (Yao, 2016).

In addition, in the West, control mechanisms under the professional logic typically refer to 'a code of ethics and peer surveillance' organized by professional associations (Thornton et al., 2012: 55). However, in China, the revival of professions and the re-establishment of their ethical code are significantly shaped, if not controlled, by the state (Liu & Halliday, 2016). Additionally, the growing influence of market logic has also impacted the reshaping of professional ethics, including considerations regarding the potential incentives associated with specific professional practices (Wang et al., 2021). To understand the renewal of a distinct professional logic in China, we propose that scholars employ an institutional complexity approach to explore how the competing logics of the state and market influence the shaping of two critical aspects of professional logic – professional autonomy *and* the professional code of ethics.

Professional autonomy

In many countries, professions are regarded as 'state-sanctioned monopolies' (Muzio et al., 2019). State-backed licensing is widely adopted in professional fields such as health, law, engineering, and accounting, among others (Redbird, 2017). In other words, legal and regulatory measures used by the state are crucial and effective means to (re)define the scope of professional jurisdiction, granting professionals varying degrees of autonomy and authority in determining which practices should be rejected or incorporated into professional logic. Over the past four decades, the Chinese government has significantly re-demarcated the boundaries of various professions, empowering different groups of professionals to operate with varying levels of independence within their respective fields (Liu & Wang, 2015; Yao, 2016).

In the legal field, for example, the government issued the *Interim Regulations on Lawyers* in 1980, establishing a legal foundation for the restoration of the legal profession. More recently, the state has amended its legal framework to safeguard lawyers in their professional activities, such as document review, evidence gathering, and investigation (State Council, 2012). The 2007 revision of the *Lawyers Law* further strengthened the legal rights of lawyers, particularly in criminal litigation, by stipulating that lawyers' arguments and statements in court are exempt from legal repercussions unless they endanger national security, involve malicious defamation, or severely disrupt court proceedings. These state-driven changes have reshaped the legal profession's autonomy and logic by (de)legitimizing specific professional practices.

Another significant means of shaping professional autonomy is through the establishment and operation of professional associations. Since the initiation of market reforms, the state has permitted various professions to re-establish their own associations. For example, the All China Lawyers Association and the Chinese Institute of Certified Public Accountants were founded in 1986 and 1988, respectively. In Western contexts, professional associations are entrusted with tasks such as providing qualifications, self-regulation, coordinating technical knowledge, and advocating on behalf of their members (Muzio et al., 2019). However, we need to exercise caution when examining the influence of professional associations in shaping professional logic and practices in China. This caution stems from the fact that professional associations in China are often under government control, leading some scholars to advocate for a state-centered approach to understanding professions (Liu, 2011; Michelson, 2007).

The institutional complexity approach we propose calls for attention not only to the impacts of the state but also to those of the market and the growing body of professional members. As some studies show, professional institutions tend to be more elaborated and less controlled by the state in regions with a more advanced market economy (Cheng & Li, 2012; Liu & Wang, 2015). It is not surprising that the ways in which professionals respond to local institutional complexity may vary across regions (Liu, Liang, & Michelson, 2014). Indeed, future research is warranted to examine when and why some professionals engage in collective efforts to shape a distinct and coherent professional logic, while others accept or normalize the pressures from the state or market, resulting in a less distinct professional logic that may even serve as a mere vessel for state or market logic. Further research is also needed to explore the conditions that enable professionals to creatively leverage or manipulate different logics as cultural resources, turning institutional complexity into opportunities for revising professional logic (Zhang, 2021).

Professional code of ethics

Another key aspect through which we can study the change of professional logic is the negotiation between professionals and other social actors regarding professional values – specifically, a code of ethics designed to ensure that professionals maintain a high standard of moral conduct (Bevan & Wilson, 2013; McMurray, 2011). Since professions in China are not fully autonomous, their ethical code is inevitably shaped by the logics of the state, market, and profession. According to Thornton and colleagues' (2012) ideal-typical framework, a profession's essential goal is to enhance its reputation by consistently and ethically providing expert services. However, in China, this professional goal is often mixed, to varying extents, with the state's objective of providing public goods and the market's pursuit of profit.

In the healthcare field, for example, public hospitals in China remain under government supervision and direction to uphold social welfare values while simultaneously facing market pressures to generate profit. In contrast, private hospitals are increasingly driven by market logic, prioritizing profit over public service (Lim, Yang, Zhang, Feng, & Zhou, 2004). Similarly, in the legal field, corporate lawyers have experienced substantial income growth by accommodating demands from various market actors, while lawyers in less marketized regions are predominantly constrained by state objectives, often relying on local government payroll (Xu, 2014). The recombination of these competing goals often fails to produce a coherent pattern of values and practices for professional logic. Instead, it may lead to conflicting responses from various audiences, rendering professional logic volatile and prone to erosion (Wang et al., 2021).

Future research is warranted to explore how professionals negotiate with state and market actors when their values and goals become incoherent, particularly when such incoherence threatens the legitimacy of the profession and fosters mistrust or distrust in professional institutions. It is also crucial to recognize that the shaping of professional ethics and logic in China is an ongoing process, as the development of institutional infrastructure for professional fields continues to evolve and varies significantly across regions. Additionally, future research should investigate how the emergence of professional logic might, in turn, reshape state and market logics through inter-institutional reconfiguration.

Evolution of the Community Logic: Boundary, Identity, and Power

The original inter-institutional system was derived from Western contexts (Thornton et al., 2012). For instance, family logic was built upon the idea of nuclear families, while community logic was developed to represent aggregates of actors who share common activities and value systems, typically supported by well-developed civil society organizations (Greenwood, Díaz, Li, & Lorente, 2010; Marquis, Davis, & Glynn, 2013). However, these ideal-typical logics do not always align with the Chinese context. In the case of community logic, the historical division of social-political systems

between urban and rural communities in China, coupled with the limited development of community infrastructure, has led to distinct instantiations and evolutionary paths of community logic for these two types of communities.

In rural China, particularly in the South, ‘clans’ (*zongzu*) – also known as Chinese kinship or lineage – have historically served as the foundation of many community-oriented (and family-oriented) practices and symbols. Clans remain a salient institutional domain (Peng, 2004). A clan is a patrilineal group of related Chinese families and family members who share a common ancestor and often reside in an ancestral village. Thus, the boundary and logic of a clan frequently overlap with those of a rural community (such as a village). During the agricultural cooperative movement and the People’s Commune period, clans were largely suppressed due to the growing state control in rural areas. In other words, before the 1980s, the clan-centered logic of rural communities was dismantled or absorbed to varying degrees by state logic. However, following the initiation of market reforms, clans widely re-emerged and, in many rural communities, moved to the forefront of common socioeconomic activities – as evidenced by the growing number of kin-based organizations and the increasing publication of genealogies (Greif & Tabellini, 2017). Additionally, the meanings of community logic have been influenced by the rising market logic driven by the urbanization of rural areas (Wang & Lounsbury, 2021).

In contrast, in urban China during the Maoist regime, residents were largely organized around their work units (*danwei*), such as SOEs and public institutes. These work units formed distinct employment-based communities, connecting groups of people through economic rewards for their work, collective housing often located near the workplace, and a comprehensive list of welfare services within proximity, such as ‘free medical care, child care centers, kindergartens, dining halls, bathing houses, service companies, and collective enterprises to employ the children of staff’ (Li, 1993: 23). Given their political, social, and civil functions, work units largely defined the spatial boundaries of daily life for employees and their families, becoming ‘the principal source of identity for urban residents’ (Bray, 2005: 4). However, the market transition has largely dismantled the work unit system, creating space for re-emerging market and civil organizations, which in turn have reshaped the meanings of community logic in urban areas.

To explore the evolution of community logics in contemporary China, we propose building on the growing interest in studying communities in organizational research, drawing insights from economic geography and sociology (Cresswell, 2015; Dacin, Zilber, Cartel, & Kibler, 2024; Duarte, 2017; Wright, Irving, Zafar, & Reay, 2023). Based on these studies, we suggest exploring community logic through three dimensions: boundary, identity, and power.

Boundary

Boundary is a straightforward and fundamental aspect of community logic. Communities are defined by the boundaries within which common activities are carried out and shared values are established. These boundaries can be spatial, geographic, physical, digital, or cultural (Dacin et al., 2024). In urban China, with the breakdown of the work unit system, urban residents in the same neighborhood no longer necessarily share strong socioeconomic connections. Instead, emerging civil society organizations might fill the spatial gaps left by work units and reconnect community members, somewhat akin to the formation of communities in the West (Zheng et al., 2018). However, the development of the civil society sector varies significantly across geographic regions and is often intricately intertwined with state and market actors within the same space. In regions where community boundaries become porous to state control, community logic might once again be absorbed by state logic. This is reflected, to some extent, in the ‘silent community’ phenomenon observed during the dynamic zero-COVID period, which has drawn scholarly attention to the study of community logic and governance (Huang, 2022).

In contrast, the boundaries of rural communities are influenced not only by the revival of local clans but also by urbanization driven by both government projects and market forces. While many

rural regions have undergone gentrification, a significant number of rural residents have migrated to cities in pursuit of better salaries and more convenient lifestyles (Guo & Yao, 2013). This, in turn, complicates the landscape of urban communities, as rural migrants have formed clan-based networks or enclaves within urban spaces, interweaving the boundaries of different communities and influencing the socioeconomic behavior of community members, such as occupational choices (Chen & Chen, 2018). These dynamic changes in community boundaries often involve the erosion, evolution, and reconstruction of community logic in China.

As a crucial first step for future studies on evolving community logic, we suggest that researchers map out the shifting boundary arrangements of urban and rural communities, focusing on community organizations and other actors that establish, maintain, or dismantle these boundaries. This approach can help us understand why and how groups of actors aggregate, form communities, and share a meaningful community logic.

Identity

Identity is another crucial aspect in understanding the constitution of community logic. This place-oriented identity enables community members to develop a distinct sense of mutual affinity and solidarity. In urban areas, community identity is often co-constructed and maintained by local governments, market actors, and civil society organizations, ranging from social welfare nonprofits and charities to sport teams and tourism associations (Marquis et al., 2013). Together, these actors can nurture, preserve, or reinvent local collective memories, values, and experiences (Kornberger, Meyer, Brandtner, & Höllner, 2017). For example, when a city develops a distinct identity, it is often shaped by its local economic structure (e.g., pillar industries), political status (e.g., capital city, border city), cultural resources (e.g., cuisine, history), and social networks, which are significantly influenced by the diversity and ethnicity of local residents and immigrants (Liu & Faure, 1996; Zhang, Drujve, & Strijker, 2018).

In contrast, the identity of rural communities is often conflated with that of local clans, which are built upon shared lineage and family history, and tend to be relatively exclusive of outsiders (Wang & Lounsbury, 2021). Despite being suppressed for decades, this clan-centered identity has been resuscitated and reconstructed by reviving kin-based organizations and practices, such as ancestral worship rituals and the revision of genealogies (Greif & Tabellini, 2017). This identity entails mutual recognition among clan members of their collective values, practices, and experiences. While the sizes and histories of local clans may vary, a clan-based identity is typically believed to be collectivist, emphasizing responsibilities for clan prosperity over individual interests (Guo, Yao, & Foltz, 2014). However, rural community identity is also being altered and eroded as urbanization and market development projects advance, penetrating former rural boundaries.

We suggest that future research should explore how community identities are co-constituted with various practices by community members. In addition, research should examine how an established community identity may be challenged, disrupted, and potentially regain coherence when the boundaries of the community undergo substantial changes due to market-driven urbanization or administrative reforms of local community divisions.

Power

Power is the final core aspect for examining community logic, encompassing political and territorial struggles between different actors for local resources and control. In the Chinese context, the state often plays a prominent role in shaping community logic, particularly in urban areas. Concurrently, the development of civil society organizations remains ongoing and subject to constraints imposed by government regulations (Gao & Teets, 2021). Further, in urban regions more susceptible to market influence, business organizations tend to exert substantial impact on local community territories. In contrast, clan actors play a more influential role in shaping the territories and power dynamics of rural communities (Greif & Tabellini, 2017).

However, even in rural areas, clan organizations often find themselves competing with the rising influence of market actors and the expanding reach of the state into grassroots levels. For example, in regions tightly controlled by clans, residents often rely on clan-based informal lending networks to fund their entrepreneurial endeavors due to the absence of formal financial institutions (Guo, Zhang, & Yao, 2013). Yet, as the market transition progresses, clan-based financial networks begin to compete with powerful formal financial institutions, often putting clan-backed enterprises at a disadvantage and ultimately diminishing the authority of clans in local communities (Ruan & Zheng, 2012). Moreover, although clans once played a prominent role in local governance, the state has increasingly infiltrated rural areas, seeking to expand its influence through advanced control mechanisms (Chen & Li, 1991; Liu, Li, & Dong, 2022).

Future research should examine the dynamic territorial competition within and between rural and urban communities, which shapes local instantiations of community logic. Specifically, there is still relatively little understanding of how power struggles influence not only material and resource allocation but also community culture, values, and beliefs.

In sum, we suggest that more research should explore how the boundary, identity, and power dynamics of communities may be reshaped by the rise of market logic (Wang & Lounsbury, 2021), whether community logic might become a mere vessel for political ideologies if the state further strengthens its control through digital or artificial intelligence technologies (Liu et al., 2022), and whether the use of social media could contribute to the creation of new types of communities and distinct instantiations of community logic (Wang & Tracey, 2024).

Governance of Institutional Logics

Following Lounsbury et al. (2021: 271), we define institutional orders as the ‘governance systems that maintain and bridge different instantiations of logics in a regionalized zone, enabling the meanings and practices that are woven together in and across those instantiations to be perceived as coherent and durable’. By adapting the concept of field governance (Fligstein & McAdam, 2012; Zietsma, Groenewegen, Logue, & Hinings, 2017) to our development of institutional governance, we categorize the governing organizations of institutional orders (i.e., governance systems) into three types. The first type, *regulators*, establishes and maintains formal rules, regulations, and standards that provide stability and durability to different instantiations of logics within a regionalized zone (e.g., industry, local, national, or transnational) (Helms, Oliver, & Webb, 2012). The second type, *coordinators*, includes collective interest bodies such as trade, industry, and professional associations, which organize institutional life and help shape the practices and norms of actors embedded in the logics (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006). Third, *social evaluators* encompass a variety of third-party actors, ranging from accreditation organizations and members of the press to intermediaries and watchdog groups, which render social assessments of whether specific instantiations of logics are coherent and appropriate by leveraging various evaluation tools such as rankings, ratings, certifications, reviews, awards, or media coverage. Together, these types of organizations govern institutional activities and dynamics (Hinings, Logue, & Zietsma, 2017).

Given the transformational change driven by the market transition and the resulting different instantiations of logics, the Chinese context provides a unique opportunity to observe how institutional logics may be governed and maintained. In particular, we propose two approaches that hold promise for future research. Table 2 succinctly summarizes these approaches and provides a list of potential research questions.

Bridging Social Evaluations and Institutional Logics

Compared to regulators and coordinators, social evaluators are less examined as key actors in governing institutional logics. While there is a burgeoning body of literature on social evaluation (e.g.,

Table 2. Bridging literatures for studying institutional governance

Bridging literatures		Potential research questions
Social evaluations	Reputation	• How do different social evaluations compete in governing institutional logics?
		• How do different types of reputation (e.g., general vs. specific) influence the governance of logics?
		• How might reputation be leveraged by regulators or coordinators to control logics and organizational behavior?
		• What enables reputation to become more or less effective in bridging and maintaining different instantiations of logics?
	Stigma	• How does stigma serve as a social control mechanism in bridging and maintaining different instantiations of logics?
		• How do different social evaluators use stigma to differently influence the coherence, durability, and evolution of logics?
		• What is the co-constitutive process of logic evolution and (de)stigmatization?
Command posts	Power dynamics	• How do different command posts interact or collaborate with each other to maintain different instantiations of logics?
		• How do command posts make governing decisions when conflicts arise between different logics?
		• What enables command posts to coax or coerce other actors into maintaining the coherence and durability of a particular logic?
	Critical events	• How do critical events influence the power dynamics surrounding an institutional logic, particularly through a series of interrelated events over time and across fields?
		• How do critical events impact logics within or across fields and industries?
		• How do multiple critical events influence each other and subsequently impact institutional governance?

reputation, stigma, status), much less is known about its role in governing and maintaining different instantiations of logics (Pollock, Lashley, Rindova, & Han, 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). Social evaluators, also referred to as ‘arbiters of taste’ or ‘social arbiters’ (Sauder, Lynn, & Podolny, 2012; Wiesenfeld, Wurthmann, & Hambrick, 2008; Zietsma et al., 2017), provide ‘a quintessential intangible asset’ for the evaluated organizations (Pollock et al., 2019: 444) because individual organizations do not directly control or own them. Social evaluation has three aspects: Its rational aspect reflects ‘audiences’ efforts to make reasoned assessments’ of an organization’s practices and worth vis-à-vis corresponding logics within a regionalized zone, while the moral aspect reflects ‘the extent to which an organization meets, exemplifies, or violates a broadly held set of values or norms’ (Pollock et al., 2019: 446, 449) that constitute the logics. Scholars have also begun to examine the emotional aspect, which reflects the audiences’ affective responses to an organization’s conformity or violation of institutional logics and prescriptions (Voronov & Vince, 2012). We explore how two particular types of social evaluation – reputation and stigma – may contribute to the governance of logics in distinctly different ways.

Reputation

Defined as ‘a set of attributes ascribed to [an organization], inferred from [its] past actions’ (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988: 443), reputation is formed in a social context and exerts social influence on the evaluated organizations. There are two distinct types of reputation: *General* reputation, which pertains to the overall positive perception of an organization as being ‘good, attractive, and appropriate’ (Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011: 155), and *specific* reputation, which involves being known for a particular pattern of behavior or outcome. They could be applied to govern institutional logics in different ways in the Chinese context, as we elaborate below.

General reputation is formed by aggregating various attributes of an organization that are of interest or value to multiple audiences, rather than being based on expectations of a specific behavior (Lange et al., 2011). It reflects audiences’ overall affinity for an organization. A strong general reputation is evidenced through public endorsements, such as generally positive media coverage or inclusion in third-party rankings based on overall favorability. Studies have shown that a favorable general reputation can be utilized by an organization to access critical resources, improve its performance, and enhance its competitive advantage and sustainability (e.g., Pfarrer, Pollock, & Rindova, 2010; Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, & Hubbard, 2016).

In the market context, while general reputation should primarily reflect a firm’s conformity to market and corporate logics, it often signals the firm’s alignment with state logic as well, as firms in China are expected to contribute to political goals and societal welfare. During the reformation of market logic and order in China, various business-related social evaluation tools have been created and regularly updated to provide and publicize third-party assessments of business enterprises. For example, *Fortune* magazine’s list of ‘China’s Most Admired Companies’ has become an influential ranking, serving as a model evaluation of a firm’s general success based on the evolving meanings of market logic. Moreover, a firm’s general reputation is reflected in overall media discourses. As many influential media outlets are controlled by the Chinese government, a firm’s general reputation may both reflect and influence its management of the institutional complexity arising from the interplay between market and state logics.

In contrast, specific reputation concerns how different audiences perceive an organization’s likelihood of delivering particular values or exhibiting specific desired behaviors over time (Lange et al., 2011). Since an organization’s audiences may uphold diverse logics, values, and objectives, it may receive multiple social judgments, resulting in a range of specific reputations (positive or negative). For example, a firm may be known for outstanding financial performance (Jensen & Roy, 2008), reliable quality control (Rhee & Haunschild, 2011), and its commitment to environmentalism (Kumar, 2018). Like general reputation, specific reputation may act as a social control mechanism that governs

organizational behavior (Fombrun, 1996; Rindova, Martins, Srinivas, & Chandler, 2018). However, unlike general reputation, specific reputation is not an overall assessment but an audience-specific judgment based on the varying logics prioritized by different audiences.

For example, as environmental, social, and governance (ESG) criteria have become increasingly important in evaluating businesses, a variety of specialized rankings has emerged. This includes, but is not limited to, *Fortune's* 'China ESG Impact' list, which evaluates a firm's success in light of the rising community and environmentalist logics (Bao, 2023). In the field of higher education, some rankings, such as the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities, influence the governance of professional logic by focusing on research excellence, while others emphasize universities' graduation rates and market performance (see Espeland, & Sauder, 2007, for a comparison in the West). In other words, each of these social evaluation tools is used to manage a particular aspect or value of an institutional logic by shaping an organization's specific reputation(s), thereby making institutional governance more complex.

By endowing a well-behaving organization with a reputation and the resources that follow, social evaluators may incentivize the organization to align (or keep aligning) with a particular logic, thereby maintaining its coherence. However, the importance of reputation might vary across contexts depending on the power of regulators and coordinators. It is possible that state institutions in some regions are too coercive for third-party evaluations to have significant influence. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that the ways in which logics and the organizations embedded in them are governed by reputation might vary across regions. Future research is warranted to examine the competition between different social evaluators in governing logics, how reputation might be leveraged by regulators to control logics and organizational behavior, and the conditions under which reputation becomes more or less effective in bridging and maintaining different logic instantiations.

Stigma

Whereas reputation assessment is primarily based on rational evaluation, stigma entails stronger moral and emotional judgments, typically invoked by an organization's morally repugnant attributes or practices (Hampel & Tracey, 2019). Defined as a negative discrepancy between an organization's 'actual social identity' (i.e., perceptions of what it is) and its 'virtual social identity' (i.e., expectations of what it ought to be) (Goffman, 1963), stigma is inherently a negative evaluation. Stigmatized organizations are viewed as 'deeply flawed and discredited' (Devers, Dewett, Mishina, & Belsito, 2009: 155). While much of the work on organizational stigma has focused on examining various management strategies for coping with stigma from different sources (Roulet, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021), it was originally pointed out that the 'obvious function' of stigma is as a means of 'social control' (Goffman, 1963: 70; see also Wang, 2025).

The consequences and implications of being stigmatized can be substantial, ranging from devaluation and discrimination to vilification and socioeconomic isolation (Link & Phelan, 2001; Wiesenfeld et al., 2008). Moreover, such consequences can be both publicly endorsed and institutionalized in laws and regulations (Pescosolido & Martin, 2015). By imposing stigma and corresponding penalties on an organization, social evaluators may compel the organization to cease its deviation from a particular institutional logic or entirely separate it from 'normal' actors, all to protect the coherence of different instantiations of that logic. In other words, the stigmatization of organizations with a poor moral record can serve as a social control mechanism to correct or reject their misalignment with a specific logic (Lamont, 2018; Zhang et al., 2021). For example, bankrupt companies often become stigmatized, and their top executives devalued, for violating market values and expectations (Sutton & Callahan, 1987).

During the market transition in China, for instance, professional organizations are often influenced by the rising market logic. However, when professionals pursue market practices and values at the expense of professional ethics, they may become stigmatized by broad audiences. This is evidenced by the growing violence against physicians in response to perceived overly profit-seeking

behavior, which serves to defend professional logic (Wang et al., 2021). In another example, the Red Cross Society of China, one of the most prominent charity organizations in China that should uphold a community and public welfare logic, was widely discredited and on the verge of stigmatization during the Guo Meimei incident due to its questionable usage of public donations and lack of transparency (Shieh, 2017). Once again, stigma serves as a key mechanism for governing logic by penalizing inappropriate behaviors.

Moreover, stigma removal, or destigmatization, can also influence the governance of logics and contribute to the creation of new logics. Through a historical case, Wang and Steele (2024) explore how the Chinese state led the destigmatization of private business during the market transition as it reestablished market logic, which had been stigmatized and demonized for decades. They highlight the state's need to balance destigmatization with maintaining its own legitimacy, requiring iterative strategy adjustments based on local feedback, evolving public opinion, and intra-state competition. Interestingly, they suggest that beginning with an emphasis on the pragmatic values of a stigmatized institution before moral reevaluation can mitigate ideological conflict, fostering a broader re-legitimation of the institution. This research offers a novel perspective on the complex dynamics between stigma and institutional governance.

We propose that the burgeoning literature on stigma can contribute to our understanding of how institutional logics may be governed, especially from a moral and emotional perspective. By bridging the literatures on stigma and logics, future studies can better unpack the social control function of stigma, particularly in bridging and maintaining different instantiations of logics. In addition, further research can explore how different evaluators might use stigma differently and the resulting impacts on the coherence, durability, and evolution of logics.

Command Posts: Power Dynamics and Critical Events

We believe it is fruitful to examine command posts, a critical group of governing organizations of institutional orders, which manage and uphold the coherence and durability of logics. These command posts include 'traditional centers of societal power [such as] varied governmental agencies; the military; and other formal bodies of governance ... but also professional elites and the bureaucratic staffers that have an interest and some jurisdiction over critical policy domains' (Lounsbury et al., 2021: 272; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). In other words, they encompass regulators and certain coordinators involved in policy-making processes. While the literature on corporate governance has extensively studied how corporate leadership prompts firms to uphold corporate logic and maximize shareholder value (Hillman & Keim, 2001; Inkpen & Sundaram, 2022), we know much less about how command posts at a broader societal level shape the meaning and practices associated with particular logics.

In the Chinese context, governmental agencies and officials – at both central and regional (e.g., provincial, prefecture, or even lower) levels – wield significant influence. Although these command posts rely on state power to conduct governing activities, they play an important role in the governance of both state and other logics, given their cross-order influence. While some studies on political strategies have begun to explore how corporate political connections shape a firm's responses to institutional pressures (Luo, Wang, & Zhang, 2017; Wei, Jia, & Bonardi, 2023), much less is known about how governmental agencies may interweave core meanings and practices across different instantiations of corporate, state, and other logics. Furthermore, as the government extends its reach into other governance bodies, it is common for semi- or retired governmental officials to preside over industry or professional associations (e.g., health, law), creating complex jurisdictional overlaps in institutional governance. In these cases, command posts might become carriers and advocates of potentially incompatible logics. We suggest that a promising research direction is to study how actors in such command posts make governing decisions when conflicts arise between the state and other logics.

Moreover, when studying the governance of logics, we recommend using a lens of *power*, which allows scholars to better analyze the dynamics and interactions among different command posts that may have conflicting agendas while shaping the same logics. Although some critics have accused the institutional literature of neglecting the role of power in the study of institutional change and maintenance, there has been a renewed research interest in reconnecting these two aspects (Lawrence & Buchanan, 2017). Given the significant influence of governmental agencies and officials, Chinese contexts provide an ideal milieu for investigating the power dynamics involved in the governance of logics. In contrast to the prevalent forms of power engagement with governments in the West, such as lobbying and campaigns (Katic & Hillman, 2023), *guanxi*-building (Bu & Roy, 2015) is more common in China. We suggest that future research should delve into the power dynamics through which command posts and other actors (e.g., firms and nonprofits) may co-govern logics, as well as the conditions under which command posts can ‘coax’ (Gill & Gill, 2023) or even coerce other actors into managing the coherence and durability of certain logics.

However, as the literature cautions, power dynamics may not always be readily observable (Fleming & Spicer, 2014; Lukes, 2005). In light of this, we recommend focusing on *critical events* (Hinings et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2019). Building upon the concepts of ‘field-configuring events’ (Zietsma et al., 2017) and ‘cultural encounters’ (Wang & Lounsbury, 2021), we define critical events as occasions when underlying cultural and political tensions between different command posts bubble to the surface and become observable. Such critical events could include ‘natural catastrophes, accidents, political reforms, economic and financial crises, military conflicts, and trade agreements, [which] raise questions about the value or appropriateness of a logic’ (Clemente, Durand, & Roulet, 2017: 24; also Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Schüssler, Rüling, & Wittneben, 2014). We acknowledge the impact of critical events on the coherence and evolution of logics and the opportunity they provide for observing power dynamics between command posts.

In China, the National Congress of the Communist Party and the plenary sessions of the Central Committee of the Party are particularly critical, as these periodic events represent ‘the ultimate authority in the entire political system’ in China (Wu, 2015: 2). The Party Congress, attended by numerous leaders of governmental agencies and SOEs as well as professional and industrial elites, is held once every 5 years. During this event, the Party’s constitution may be revised, and the Central Committee – the highest organ of state – will be elected. The Central Committee convenes at least once a year at a plenary session, which functions as a top-level venue for the discussion, revision, and public release of important decisions and policies across various institutional domains. At a more regional level, local party congresses are also critical occasions during which power dynamics become more apparent and observable, especially when they formulate the Five-Year Plans (Luo et al., 2017). In other words, these are the crucial events that allow for a better examination of power dynamics between command posts.

In addition to formal political events like the National Congress, future research should also explore catastrophic events that impact different fields and industries, such as crises caused by collective action, regulatory shifts, or natural disasters. For example, environmental activism may significantly challenge the established meanings and values of various institutions (Marquis & Bird, 2018), prompting the state and other actors to reshape environmentally associated logics. Similarly, the Chinese government’s sudden crackdown on after-school education incited a chaotic period during which firms, education professionals, and students had to re-make sense of the professional and market logics in this field, as well as their own responses (Feng, 2022).

In summary, we propose that an event-focused examination can help us better understand the governance of logics and orders. Future studies should go beyond single critical events and explore more innovative ways to observe power dynamics that may evolve through a series of interrelated events over time and across institutional fields.

Global Diffusion of Institutional Logics

Much of the early organizational research on Chinese contexts adopted an ‘impact and response’ approach (Cohen, 2010), focusing on how Western institutions and logics impacted organizations in China and how Chinese organizations responded to Western influences. However, with the growth of the Chinese economy, certain nations and businesses have begun to explore China as a potential alternative framework for a global economic and political order that could potentially rival the Western liberal model of democratic capitalism (Lounsbury & Wang, 2020; Meyer, 2010). This so-called ‘China Model’, or the Beijing Consensus, in contrast to the Washington Consensus, might represent a viable alternative logic and order for many developing countries. In other words, China has increasingly become a significant actor exerting influence, necessitating responses from other parties. We believe that more research should focus on exploring how the alternative logics and orders offered by Chinese contexts diffuse and impact organizations and institutions in other nations and regions through the Chinese state’s political and economic initiatives worldwide (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative [BRI]), how the West responds to such initiatives, and how their responses, in turn, impact international business and globalization (e.g., the US–China trade war). Below, we elaborate on these two directions.

Building Global Infrastructure: The BRI and Beyond

By adopting a more pragmatic approach to achieving robust economic growth, China emerged as the world’s second-largest economy following the global financial crisis in the late 2000s. This development was seen as strong evidence supporting ‘the notion of particularity as opposed to the universality of a Washington model’ (Elen, 2016). In line with its ‘Major Country Diplomacy’ strategy (Wang, 2022), the Chinese government aims to export an alternative to the Western configuration of state, market, and corporate logics to the world through cultural and economic expansion projects, such as the BRI launched in 2013 (Smith, 2021). However, the question of whether China’s alternative logics might gain recognition and traction in other societies is a topic worthy of further exploration.

To investigate the global diffusion of China’s distinct institutional logics, we propose an approach that emphasizes the establishment of *institutional infrastructure* in regions that may adopt these logics. Institutional infrastructure encompasses ‘field governance arrangements, but also other cultural, structural and relational elements that generate the normative, cognitive and regulative forces’ that materialize institutional logics and enable institutional governance to be performed (Hinings et al., 2017: 170). While the BRI has primarily focused on building physical infrastructure through both land corridors (which roughly correspond to the historical Silk Road) and sea routes, it is also through these physical infrastructure projects that various dimensions of institutional infrastructure, such as economic and political partnerships, professional and trade education, and mutual funds invested in cooperative projects, have become established (Leskina & Sabzalieva, 2021). These dimensions of institutional infrastructure act as important channels for the diffusion and translation of logics.

In addition, a complementary approach we propose for exploring the diffusion of logics is to adopt theories of framing (Klein & Amis, 2021). While we argue that infrastructure building is key to the diffusion of logics, the process of meaning construction for this infrastructure is also worth closer examination (Lounsbury et al., 2021). As China’s distinct logics diffuse through the BRI, their meanings and values are continually reconstructed by competing actors. While many countries have officially endorsed the BRI or even partnered with China, acknowledging the positive meanings and benefits of building new infrastructure, critics – primarily from non-participant countries – interpret it as a strategy for economic hegemony and cultural neocolonialism (Murphy, 2022). These competing perspectives provide a valuable opportunity for understanding the framing dynamics surrounding the diffusion and translation of logics.

Because the diffusion of logics beyond Chinese contexts is a relatively recent and ongoing phenomenon, several critical questions arise: How do Chinese firms and governments establish institutional infrastructure across regions? To what extent and in what ways does this institutional infrastructure facilitate the diffusion of China's distinct logics to other countries and regions? How does the development (limited vs. highly elaborated) of a region's pre-existing institutional infrastructure affect its responses to the BRI? And how do the framing dynamics influence the development of infrastructure and the process of logic diffusion? Addressing these questions will enhance our understanding of logic diffusion beyond China.

Anti-Globalization Sentiments and Actions: The Trade War and Beyond

As China seeks to assume a greater leadership role in global affairs and export an alternative model, it inevitably provokes reactions from the US and other Western regimes. In fact, as early as the 2000s, the US and European governments and businesses began to express concerns about the impact of China's rising exports on their own manufacturing employment, following China's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001. This phenomenon was referred to as the China Shock. While some studies have indicated higher unemployment, lower labor force participation, and reduced wages in American states with industries competing with their Chinese counterparts (Autor, Dorn, & Hanson, 2013), others have found that both countries experienced overall welfare improvements, and this was not the primary factor contributing to the decline in manufacturing employment in the US (Caliendo & Parro, 2023). However, the US–China trade war appears to have escalated the conflicts between the two major economies.

Moreover, Western responses to China's ascent and dissemination of its own logics have had a profound influence on the global economy and international politics. For example, research has linked reactions to China's rise to political polarization and a surge in populism and anti-globalization sentiments in the West (Broz, Frieden, & Weymouth, 2021). Some scholars have shown that British voters in regions more exposed to Chinese import competition were more inclined to support Brexit in the 2016 referendum (Colantone & Stanig, 2018). Further, exposure to the effects of a rising Chinese economy has resulted in negative attitudes toward ethnic minorities, particularly among white males in the US. (Ferrara, 2023).

More importantly, the rise of anti-globalization sentiments has imposed strong pressures and challenges on multinational companies (MNCs), including both Western MNCs operating in China and Chinese MNCs operating in the West. For example, many states, mostly right-leaning, have proposed or enacted legislation aimed at severing economic ties with China by limiting Chinese investment, especially in high-tech sectors, or even restricting Chinese purchases of land, buildings, and houses (Rappeport, 2023). This anti-Chinese sentiment, further intensified during the pandemic and the 2024 presidential election, has led to consumer discrimination against both Chinese MNCs in the US and Asian American-owned small businesses (Huang, Krupenkin, Rothschild, & Cunningham, 2023). Many of these interactions have provoked heightened negative emotions that MNCs and other types of international organizations must address.

As anti-globalization sentiments and actions continue to evolve, we believe it is timely to explore important questions, such as: How do Western organizations and governments respond differently to the rise of China and its export of logics through economic and political initiatives? How do these responses, in turn, affect the diffusion of China's logics and the reconfiguration of logics in other nations and regions? To what extent and how might these responses impact the governance of and potentially alter the prevailing logics within China? How do MNCs or other international organizations address anti-globalization sentiments and the associated negative emotions? Substantial research is required to provide a deeper understanding of the global dissemination of logics beyond Chinese contexts.

Conclusion

Institutional logics perspective offers a powerful lens for studying culture and unpacking social structures. While a substantial body of literature has employed this perspective as a toolkit for explaining organizational behavior, institutional logics themselves are complex social phenomena rooted in dynamic processes that require deeper attention and further research. Chinese contexts, with their distinct configuration of logics, present unique opportunities to explore the change, governance, and diffusion of institutional logics. In this article, we propose a research agenda addressing these critical themes through diverse theories and approaches. Specifically, we outline three distinct approaches to studying the change of institutional logics and their pathways to regaining coherence. We suggest bridging institutional logics with literatures on social evaluations and command posts to better understand the governance of institutional logics. We also advocate for future exploration of the diffusion of institutional logics, particularly through China's global infrastructure initiatives and ideological campaigns. By advancing this research agenda, scholars have the opportunity to break new ground and provide innovative insights into the intricate dynamics of institutional logics. As China continues to challenge and reshape global norms, understanding these complex phenomena is not merely an academic pursuit but a vital endeavor for grasping the future of global institutional governance and organizational practices.

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Notes

1. A recent review article by Haveman, Joseph-Goteiner, and Li (2023) highlights the growing scholarly interest in studying how the distinct tensions between state and market logics in China drive varying organizational actions. Complementing their agenda, we argue that future research should not only investigate the effects of these logics but also understand them as complex phenomena (Lounsbury & Wang, 2023).
2. We treat institutional logics as a meta-theoretical perspective (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012). Therefore, our aim is not to develop an exhaustive list of theories to examine the change, governance, and diffusion of logics. Instead, the theoretical directions we propose are intended to inspire novel theoretical development.
3. We recognize that the three approaches we have identified may also be useful for examining changes in other logics, such as family or religion. However, for the sake of parsimony, we do not delve into how these other logics might be explored. For example, the re-emergence of religious logic during the market transition is a topic worth examining. Religion was prohibited during the Cultural Revolution, but freedom of religion was reintroduced to social life after 1982, albeit influenced by both state and market logics (Yue, Wang, & Yang, 2019).

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