Institutional Pluralism and the Organization’s Response: A Case Study of Chinese Women’s Ice Hockey

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Institutional theory has been widely used to understand the influence and pressure of an organization from multiple social orders (Greenwood et al., 2017). Within institutional theory, concepts of institutional logics and institutional work have become increasingly prominent for studying organizational actions (Dacin et al., 2002; Lawrence et al., 2011; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). Researchers have applied institutional theory to institutionalized sport settings (Washington & Patterson, 2011), having placed great emphasis on the competing nature of logics (Allison, 2016; Nite et al., 2013; Southall, Nagel, Amis, & Southall, 2008) and the institutional work of sport organizations (Dowling & Smith, 2016; Edwards & Washington, 2016; Nite, 2017). Currently, many emergent sport organizations are facing problems of multiple structures and logics, termed institutional pluralism (Kraatz & Block, 2008). However, previous studies have not well addressed the implications of logics from multiple levels (e.g., individual, organizational, cultural) on the organizations and how organizations respond to those situations. Thus, the purpose of this study was to understand how an emerging organization navigated institutional pluralism to gain legitimacy.

In China, men’s and women’s ice hockey has become an emerging sport after Beijing’s successful bid to host the 2022 Winter Olympics. However, women’s ice hockey in China has faced many challenges such as traditional Chinese culture, gender norms, and sport reform from multiple institutional contexts. Indeed, Chinese ice hockey can be conceived as a case of institutional pluralism. Therefore, the integration of institutional theory and Chinese women’s ice hockey allows us to address the following research questions: How do the actors within the organization of Chinese women’s ice hockey navigate institutional complexity to acquire legitimacy?

To answer these questions, we utilized a qualitative case study methodology. Data collection entailed 13 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Chinese ice hockey government administrators, hockey association leaders, professional ice hockey club managers, coaches, and professional hockey players. In addition, we also collected data from secondary sources such as documents from General Administration of Sport of China, Beijing Organizing Committee for the 2022 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, Beijing Kunlun Red Star Hockey Club, and Shenzhen Kunlun Red Star Vanke Rays Club. Data analysis followed an open coding strategy wherein researchers identified first order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia et al., 2012).

Preliminary findings have suggested that governmental regulatory bodies work as powerful actors to institute dominant logics that helps development women’s hockey in China. However our data suggests that many of those logics contradict each other. For instance, the physical nature of hockey directly contradicts normative expectations of women in Chinese culture. The professional Chinese hockey clubs also engaged in institutional work to change the previous institutionalized template of Chinese women’s hockey. Professional clubs created a new type of organization with a new, hybrid logic combining the nationalism logic, business logic, education logic, as well as a new sport logic. This research provides insight into how sport organizations manage institutional pluralism through institutional work to disrupt and shift existing institutional logics.