‘Eating Bitterness’ in a Chinese multinational: identity regulation in context

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Abstract

This paper responds to the call for more focus on how micro level processes of identity regulation are shaped by, and constitutive of, wider societal institutions. We provide a case study of identity regulation in a Chinese multinational and shows how senior managers in the firm draw on distinctive national and organizational contexts in China to construct, reinforce and reproduce a particular set of identities for employees. These identities draw upon discourses in the wider Chinese context which reflect the struggle of China to become a major industrial power after a century of humiliation by the West and the need for employees to provide this extra effort in the face of the existential challenges faced by the company and by the country. We demonstrate how managers create specific HR mechanisms that intertwine these discourses with the identities of employees and with the identity of the organization. This paper contributes to a better understanding of how micro process of identity work, and mid-level processes of identity regulation and firm strategy, are linked to macro-level institutional structures. Based on the framework provided, the paper discusses how far similar identity regulation mechanisms could be adopted elsewhere where similar macro level discourses might be available, firstly in other Chinese MNCs, secondly in other East Asian countries such as South Korea, thirdly more widely in emergent economies where MNCs are embedded in state driven forms of capitalism and finally in developed economies where populist nationalism is becoming increasingly influential. In this way, studies of identity regulation can bring organization studies into greater dialogue with other social sciences concerned with wider institutional change and continuity.

Introduction

The study of identity in organizations has grown massively in recent years. Literature on identity has experienced a growth rate of over 600% in the past two decades (Miscenko & Day, 2016; cited by Brown, 2018). In organization studies this is reflected in the growing interest in identity regulation, which seeks 'to understand how organizations work to shape the identities of their employees to achieve managerial goals' (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017, p.9). Studies of identity regulation (e.g. Bardon, Brown & Peze, 2017; Paring, Peze & Huault, 2017; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011; Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis & Ingram, 2010) often reach back to Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) seminal work and investigate how organisations adopt various organizational practices to influence employees' subjectivity and manufacture preferred types of individuals with appropriate behaviours. These organizational practices, or 'modes of regulation' in Alvesson and Willmott's term (2002, p.623), provide employees with 'catalogues of corporate-approved identities', and enjoin them to engage in particular forms of identity work (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas, 2008, p.16).

Research in identity regulation and associated topics such as identity work often 'take interest in micro-analysis of individual identity constructions' (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.12), yet we know little about the link between these micro-level forms of identity regulation on the one hand, and on the other hand how they connect to the wider national and institutional context. Brown (2015, p.31) states that 'we still do not know about how context – particularly organizational and national cultural settings –affect individuals' identities and identity work'. Boussebaa and Brown (2017, p.24) also call for 'greater attention to how micro/meso-level processes of identity regulation are shaped by, and constitutive of, wider societal discourses'.

As Whetten (2009, p.30) observes, ‘pleas for great sensitivity to context effects are appearing in the organizational studies literature with increasing regularity’ (also see Johns, 2006; 2017; Hällgren, M., Rouleau, L., & De Rond, M. 2018).

We address this gap by presenting a case study of identity regulation in a Chinese multinational and showing how senior managers in the firm draw on distinctive national and organizational contexts in China to construct, reinforce and reproduce a particular set of identities for employees. Through our case study, we make two contributions to wider theories of identity regulation. First, we contribute to a better understanding of how micro process of identity work, and mid-level processes of identity regulation and firm strategy, are linked to macro-level institutional structures. We argue that this is not a deterministic relationship; managers are able to activate discourses and symbols available in the wider institutional context and make them meaningful in terms of the goals of the firm and the identity of the employees. Studies of identity regulation therefore should consider what range of discourses and symbols are available in particular contexts to play such a role for managers. Secondly, we argue that managers can create specific mechanisms that intertwine these discourses with the identities of employees and of the organization. In particular, we show that managers can set up career and status hierarchies which allow employees to choose the degree to which they commit to these discourses. We describe this in terms of the layering of identities embedded in HR systems which spell out the performance levels expected from employees as they take on specific identities ranging from a general commitment to the firm at entry level to a more intense and fully blown commitment to the firm. This layering enables employees to believe that in some sense they are free to choose their level of commitment or even step back to a lower level of commitment if they want to prioritise their family life. They feel that they choose these identities rather than having them imposed on them even though the identities are constructed and maintained through senior managers' discourses and HR systems. In our discussion and conclusion, we consider what are the boundary conditions for these processes and mechanisms? Because our case study is based on a Chinese multinational, we ask firstly whether this managerial strategy is open to all Chinese companies. Secondly, we consider briefly other East Asian countries which share elements of the Chinese context. Thirdly, we suggest that whilst there are substantial differences between emergent economies in general and developed Western economies in terms of whether such strategies can be used, there is also evidence that the rise of populism and nationalism in the West is opening up new possibilities for companies to link identity regulation and macro-level discourses. We therefore aim to show that it is possible to combine micro-level analyses of identity regulation with macro level analysis of institutional contexts in ways which are not determinist, which recognize the role of actors and specify the relay mechanisms which are required to be in place in order for these connections to be made. Achieving this integration offers the possibility of a challenging agenda of comparative research on issues of identity regulation.

Our paper proceeds in the following way. Firstly, we review the identity regulation literature in order to highlight both the relative neglect and the relative importance of the organizational and institutional contexts in identity regulation. In the second section, we detail the methods of data collection and analysis which we followed in developing our case study. In the findings section, we discuss how identity was articulated, communicated and regulated by managers in our case study and the range of responses to these processes shown by the employees. In the Discussion section, we discuss the boundary conditions of identity regulation, suggesting contexts where similar processes may occur and other contexts where such processes are unlikely. We suggest that this framework offers a useful research agenda whereby institutional influences on identity regulation can be made much more explicit and relevant. In the Conclusion, we reflect on the potential directions of further research.

Identity Regulation and Contexts

Identity regulation is a form of organizational control, where 'employees are enjoined to develop self images and work orientations that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives' (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p.619). Through various 'modes of regulation' such as corporate media, induction programmes and trainings, organizations seek to provide employees with 'catalogues of corporate-approved identities', based on the belief that one's identity provides directions for one's feelings, values and (proper) behaviors (Alvesson et al., 2008, p.16). Identity regulation requires identity work, i.e. 'the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept' (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Brown, 2017). Employees seeking to make sense of their own identity engage in identity work through various activities such as claiming, affirming, accepting, complying, resisting, separating, joining, defining, stabilizing, sensemaking, reconciling, restructuring etc. (Brown, 2015; Corlett, McInnes, Coupland & Sheep 2017). The variety and complexity of employees' responses to identity regulation is discussed in many studies (e.g. Down & Reveley, 2009; Mallett & Wapshott, 2015; Meriläinen, Tienari, Thomas, Davies, 2004; Thomas & Davies, 2005). In general, these studies emphasise the agency of actors, and show how actors make sense of and negotiate with the dominant discourses of identity within their organizations as individuals 'generally have some leeway to craft preferred versions of their selves' (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017, p.10). Whilst some studies show how employees take on these identities and make them their own, others reveal resistance, organizational misbehaviour, cynicism, lampooning, humour and satire (e.g. Ackroyd & Thompson 1999; Fleming, 2005; Fleming & Spicer, 2003).

Identity regulation is embedded within organizational identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas 2010, Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley 2013; Schultz, Maguire, Langley & Tsoukas 2012). Organizational identity 'provide(s) a context within which individuals are embedded, that is simultaneously enabled and constrained' (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, p.19), and 'the context within which members interpret and assign profound meaning to surface-level behavior'(Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, p.437). Organizational identity (OI) analysis addresses questions such as 'who are we as an organization?', 'what business are we in?' and 'who do we want to be as an organization?' (Albert & Whetten,1985). OI 'situates the organization in a social space by categorizing it as being like some organizations and unlike some others' (Pant & Ramachandran, 2017). This is in part outward facing and about building brand, reputation and market position but it also has the implication that inside the organization, employees perform in ways consonant with the organizational identity which in turn requires that managers engage in the regulation and shaping of employees' identities (Kenny, Whittle & Willmott, 2016; Scott & Lane, 2000, Schulz et al. 2012, Brickson, 2005; Bartel, Baldi & Dukerich, 2016). Kenny, Whittle and Willmott (2016, p.143), for example, state that:

'Internally, Organizational Identity can be a potent means of developing and managing the motivation and "engagement" of staff, thereby extracting "discretionary effort"—that is, labor performed beyond the contractual obligation of employees—at no extra cost.'

(see also *inter alia* Kuhn, 2006; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009; Symon & Pritchard, 2015; Srinivas, 2013; Gagnon & Collinson, 2014; Huber & Brown, 2017; Paring et al. 2017).

However, Alvesson, Ashcraft and Thomas (2008, p.12) point out that 'even as we take interest in micro-analysis of individual identity constructions vis a vis social relations and materials, we suggest that close readings be balanced with consideration of broader contexts and macro developments to avoid myopic pitfalls' (a call echoed in Phillips, Tracey, and Kraatz, 2016). Rodrigues and Child (2008), for example, point to how existing studies of organizational identity tend to neglect the importance of wider national institutional contexts as a set of discursive, material and symbolic resources that can be activated by managers to reinforce (see also Dorrenbacher & Geppert 2011). Their analysis shows how a Brazilian telecoms company adapted its strategy, structure and identity to the complex politics of the country as it moved over 50 years from military dictatorship to democracy and different discourses and symbols at the national level came to the fore or faded away. Boussebaa and Brown (2017) also call for 'greater attention to how micro/meso-level processes of identity regulation are shaped by, and constitutive of, wider societal discourses' (p.24).

In conclusion our research question is how far do senior managers exercise identity regulation by drawing on wider national discourses and symbols in order to support this? What mechanisms and processes do they develop in their HR practices in order to encourage employees to take on particular identities that are reinforced and legitimated by these wider discourses? Identity regulation efforts by senior managers are required to create discourses, stories and symbols allied to HR practices that draw employees to a specific form of identity work that guides them, in Kenny et al's words, to 'go the extra mile'. In our empirical study, therefore we are looking to reveal how, within our case study company, these processes worked and with what effect. We then seek to theorise the connectedness of these processes and their boundary conditions.

Research Strategy, Methods and Data Collection and Analysis

The empirical research was conducted through a case study of a single Chinese MNC and its UK headquarters. *Teleman* (a pseudonym for reasons of confidentiality) is a very well known large high tech Chinese MNC which manufactures telecommunications equipment for and provides related services to local and international clients. Established in the late 1980s, its revenue has increased steadily every year in the past decade with annual increase of 20% in 2014 and 37% in 2015. Revenues generated overseas reached over 60% of its total revenue in both 2014 and 2015. The majority of its employees are from computer science and engineering backgrounds, and approximately 80,000 out of its 170,000 employees are based in what the firm describes as its Research and Development functions. *Teleman* has large operations in marketing and sales and project delivery in Western Europe, employing a total of 9900 employees in Europe and 1100 in the UK alone.

Access to the European operations of the MNC (and through this to some departments of the firm in China) was achieved in part through the use of personal connections and in part through the pre-existing expertise of the first author who had worked in recruitment consultancy in China and was able to gain temporary employment working as a recruitment specialist in the HR section of *Teleman's* UK headquarters for a period of over 3 months. During this period, the first author (hereafter, the researcher) made it clear that he was attached to a university and it was agreed that he could approach employees for interviews (outside work time). His position gave the researcher the opportunity to experience part of *Teleman'*s working environment as well as the ability to learn informally through everyday interactions about how Chinese expatriates were making sense of their role. In the course of participant observation, the researcher talked with managers in different departments and with senior executives from China. The researcher was mainly treated as an 'insider', and people were willing to talk and share their thoughts and viewpoints about the company and working in it. However, similar to other qualitative investigators, the researcher, while enjoying ‘the value of shared experiences’, ‘the value of greater access’, ‘the value of cultural interpretation’ and ‘the value of deeper understanding and clarity of thought’ as an ‘insider’ (Labaree, 2002, p.103), faced dilemmas about how to maintain objectivity and accuracy, and how to reject the sense of familiarity resulting from being an insider. He sought to follow the advice of Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.86) that researchers should “maintain a more or less marginal position, thereby providing access to participant perspectives but at the same time minimizing the dangers of over-rapport …..being simultaneous insider-outsider”.

Data for this study was collected from multiple sources, including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and extensive use of corporate documentation and media reports, enabling triangulation between sources (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Data collection for the study began in February 2013 and was completed in December 2015. Forty-eight formal interviews were conducted in this study with 41 informants, including current (31) and former (4) employees, and six employees of *Teleman’s* competitors and clients. Half of the *Teleman* interviewees were either working in the UK when interviews were conducted or had worked in the UK in the past 5 years. All other interviewees worked or had experience in other EU countries as well as Asia. A small number were local (UK nationality) or locally employed Chinese. Interviews lasted between 1 and 3 hours and explored in a semi-structured way the employee’s background qualifications, experience inside and outside *Teleman*, their knowledge of the identity of *Teleman* as expressed in management discourse and their own degree of identification with that discourse. The study did not aim to seek a representative sample; rather the goal was to target those informants who were especially sensitive to the area of concern, and those more-willing-to-reveal informants (Hammersley &

Atkinson, 2007). The resulting snowballing sample of informants represented a diverse group of interviewees in terms of geographical location in Europe and job position, ranging from engineers, sales managers, project managers to account directors, department heads and senior executives.

During the period of participant observation, the researcher also engaged actively in various company events as well as having informal conversations with different employees that were recorded in fieldnotes on a daily basis. Documents from the company's official website, including its annual reports, *Teleman People*, the company's internal publication for employees, in both Chinese (as newspaper) and in English (as a magazine) were accessed as well as a set of volumes entitled *Teleman Writings Collection* (which contained various types of articles such as CEO speeches, meetings diaries). In total, over 200 documents were examined, mainly focused on internally-produced publications on the basis that these reflected how the company portrayed itself, including its employees. These documents were critically examined since they very clearly represented 'the voice of leadership', which 'distil management's collective preferences into abstract principles, catch phrases, and key words openly designed to educate and influence' and 'reflect management's desires, even wishful thinking, in formulations removed from everyday reality' (Kunda, 1992, pp. 57–58). These documents also contained personal stories from individual employees, offering insights on their feelings, attitudes and identity. Such insights, of course, should not be treated as definitive accounts of organizational reality but in triangulation with other sources, they reveal additional perspectives to those emerging in interviews and observations (Yin, 2009)

Following an intensive period of reading the transcripts, fieldnotes and documents, open coding techniques were used to generate categories by looking for key events and instances in the texts of interview transcripts, fieldnotes and documents, leading to a list of 41 analytical concepts or themes. A process of memo-making followed, leading to a series of descriptive cases which were full of stories and narratives and mainly focused on various management practices and how employees experienced these practices. The original codes were then turned into theoretical categories, and it became clearer how they were connected in a larger, overall process. Theoretical sampling then took place involving 'going back to the field to gather specific data to fill gaps within categories, to elaborate the analysis of these categories, and to discover variation within and between them' (Charmaz & Mitchell 2001, p.168). This led to a new set of interviews being undertaken, with conversations centering around the emerging key themes of control, response and resistance. The last step in the data analysis was to link the categories into an integrative framework and to develop an understanding of how *Teleman* regulated the identity of their employees.

As with any case study based research, we have faced a number of challenges to cast our field involvement in research accounts (Langley and Klag, 2017) and make our work 'convincing'. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1993) who first used this term in relation to case study research lay down three main criteria – authenticity, plausibility and criticality (also Siggelkow, 2007). In relation to authenticity, the study is based on extensive ethnographic work arising from participant observation, formal and informal interviews, and the systematic examination of a wide range of internal and external documents. This has allowed us to construct a plausible account of how *Teleman* works through the mechanisms of identity regulation and we have sought to probe this critically so that readers can understand our assumptions. As with any case study research, we have not tried to over-claim for our approach but instead suggest that further research developing our framework will be a useful contribution to the understanding of identity regulation.

Identity Regulation in *Teleman*

In this section, we present our findings on *Teleman*'s 'modes of regulation'. Our research reveals that identity layering has been used by *Teleman* to produce three seemingly optional identities for employees, supported by three levels of organisational discourse and HR practices respectively (i.e. nationalism, militarism, materialism). Our research further reveals that in order to enable such identity layering to function, *Teleman* draws on distinctive national and organisational contexts in China to develop its specific discourses and practices.

Nationalism, a 'Chinese' Firm, and FD-Man

In *Teleman*, the process of identity regulation starts with the company's official corporate value, *Jian Ku Fen Dou.* Our research indicates that *Teleman* has re-articulated, revived and leveraged an old Maoist term as part of its corporate values, and incorporated new meanings related to corporate performance and the individual's role within that. By doing this, a strong element of nationalism was installed in the organisational discourse, aiming to provide employees with an identity of FD-Man.

In *Teleman*'s corporate website and annual reports, six core values are listed: customers first, *Jian Ku Fen Dou*, continuous improvement, openness & initiative, integrity, and teamwork. If *Teleman*'s other core values are not unusual and may be used by other companies, *Jian Ku Fen Dou* seems to be a very distinctive one for *Teleman*. *Jian Ku Fen Dou* (艰苦奋斗 in Chinese characters, JKFD hereafter) is a term without a proper English equivalence. *Jian Ku* literally means harshness and hardship, and *Fen Dou* literally means working hard and fighting to achieve something. In *A Modern Chinese-English Dictionary*, it is translated as 'plain living and hard work'. JKFD has a strong cultural and historical meaning, which is familiar to most Chinese people. It is generally believed that it first came from Chairman Mao's 1936 work *The Strategic Issues of Chinese Revolution Battle,* where he claims, 'Without the *JKFD* of the Chinese communist party in the past 50 years, it would have been impossible to save the country from national subjugation.*'* Before the establishment of the new China in 1949, he said, 'The Chinese revolution is a great one, but the post-revolution road is longer, greater and harder. We must make it clear to the party so that our comrades must continue to be modest and humble, and must continue to keep the *JKFD* style.' Since then, *JKFD* has become a critical part of the ideology of the Chinese communist party and its leadership. It has been continuously emphasized to all party members and to Chinese people through formal and informal education by every Chinese state leader. However, in spite of the Party's propaganda, or perhaps because of it, to most Chinese people, JKFD has become a slogan, with little relevance to their daily life. Therefore, whilst it is embedded institutionally and culturally in Chinese society and thus available to all companies, very few actively use it. However, in *Teleman*, the use of JKFD terminology is legitimized through associating it with the old Maoist labels and at the same time, filling them with historical resonances as well as with relevance for the current social and economic situation.

In *Teleman*'s managerial discourse, therefore, the company identifies itself as part of a wider national rejuvenation discourse whereby humiliation at the hands of the Western powers in the 19th and early 20th centuries is being revenged by the rise of China in the current period (Bickers, 2017; Wang, 2012). Wang, for example, states that 'Chinese national pride had been deeply wounded as a result of humiliating experiences in the wake of Western and Japanese incursions. The restoration of the nation's ancient central position on the world stage thus became the most profound factor in shaping China's modern and contemporary history (Wang 2012, p.154). He shows how 'the one hundred years of humiliation' suffered by China from the mid 19th to mid 20th centuries is continuously reproduced in the present day in rituals, ceremonies, historical monuments, speeches, education, textbook, the media, films etc. The Chinese Communist Party aims to construct a collective identity that will ‘never forget national humiliation’ (Wang, 2012) and will bind even recent generations with no experience of China’s humiliation into mobilizing popular support for the regime (Brown, p.2018). JKFD inside *Teleman* picks up on this to create a positive image of the present and the future in contrast to the ‘100 years of humiliation’. For instance, the founder writes:

> Our great nation is now full of vigour. All people across the country are, under the direction of the central Party, working hard to construct our country…We should learn from the predecessors of proletarian revolution the spirit of solidarity and JKFD, to catch up and surpass the world advanced level, and fully satisfy the ultimate needs of clients. We should use our corporate culture, which is built on the basis of national culture, to glue employees together, collectively FD, and work hard for the prosperity of our great nation, for the revitalization of the Chinese nation, and for the happiness of yourselves and your families. (1995)

Externally and internally, *Teleman* is commonly linked with the rise and rejuvenation of China. It is described as a ‘national-banner’ enterprise and a ‘globally-successful indigenous firm’ by the media and the government. For instance, an article published in March 2015, the *People’s Daily*, the Party’s national propaganda outlet, states:

> [*Teleman*] has amazed everyone who knows Chinese brands. Behind [*Teleman*]'s ‘halo’ is China's development as the world's second-largest economy. The story of [*Teleman*] is also part of the annals of Chinese brands' efforts to innovate and be persistent…[*Teleman*] has become a brand new name card for China's image, allowing the world to witness China's endeavor and take-off. [*Teleman*]'s success is a microcosm of the Chinese dream.

The objective to create a company-approved identity, ‘Fen Dou- Man’, or ‘FD -Man’ (the common usage gendered shorthand for those employees who believe in the meaning and values of JKFD and readily ‘walk them out’) is more than simply exhortation. Specific HR practices have been developed within *Teleman* as mechanisms to regulate employees’ identity as JKFD. For instance, since 2010 *Teleman* employees in China are required to voluntarily sign an agreement with the company, agreeing that they wish to become an FD-Man. For those who do not sign, they automatically become ‘ordinary employees’. In applying to become an FD-Man, employees agree that they are willing to forgo annual paid holidays and overtime payments. During our research, we asked our interviewees to define what it meant to be an FD-Man, and received various answers such as ‘hard working’, ‘be loyal to the company’, ‘high spirit and not afraid of difficulty’ and ‘ambassador of *Teleman* and China’. More prosaically, several interviewees bluntly responded that being an FD-Man meant ‘lots of overtime work’. In return for this level of commitment, being an FD-Man provides status as they are seen as the backbone of the company and are provided with preferential treatment above ‘ordinary employees’ when it comes to performance evaluations, promotions, salary increases and stock share allotments.

Militarism, a ‘Hardship’ Workplace, and Corporate Soldiers

However, it was clear in our analysis of *Teleman*’s managerial discourses, that there was another identity articulated by the company which deepened the level of commitment beyond that expected of the FD-Man. This identity was labelled as that of ‘the corporate soldier’. In *Teleman*’s managerial discourses, military vocabularies and expressions were frequently used, and what happens in the army was also frequently cited as an example for company employees. Overseas markets are commonly called the ‘front line’ (*Qian Xian*), supporting teams in China HQ are called ‘rear base’ (*Hou Fang*) and expatriates are regarded as ‘fighting on the front line’ and ‘fighting for lands and food’, whereas people working in China HQ are described as ‘supplying gunfire’. Employees are transformed from an ‘FD-Man’, which has a general meaning, to a ‘corporate soldier’, who is expected to ‘endure hardship and make sacrifices’ even beyond that of the FD-Man. Whether a person is willing to endure hardship and sacrifice for the company is regarded as the prime criterion to identify, select, and promote them to the status of corporate soldier. Being unwilling to endure hardship and sacrifice is equal to giving up the opportunity to move up the career ladder. Therefore, career prospects in *Teleman* are a choice between identities. If one wants to advance, the identity of ‘corporate soldier’ needs to be embraced.

While a ‘corporate soldier’ could be working in China or abroad, the company typically linked this to the willingness to work overseas. In the company’s discourses, becoming an expatriate was to demonstrate morality and a sense of honour as it meant enduring hardship and sacrificing family life whilst sharing ‘the company’s fate’. Expatriates are ‘soldiers marching to the front line to join the battle’, as illustrated by the following speech by the founder at an event for outgoing expatriates in 2000 entitled *Farewell Meeting for Soldiers' Overseas Expedition:*

> Valiantly, spiritedly, marching across the Pacific and, of course, the Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean. If you are heroic sons and daughters, you should step forward bravely and go to the place where the market most needs you, even if the environment there is tough, the work is very difficult, the life is lonely, and you are far away from your families. For the country’s prosperity, for the nation’s rejuvenation, for *Teleman*’s development and your happiness, let’s work hard and fight. If we FD, there will be sacrifices, sacrifices of youth, sacrifices of family and love. If we don’t FD, we have nothing.

This is reinforced in how the outside media discuss *Teleman*. For instance, China Daily, the Party's official propaganda outlet in English, in an article entitled '*Learning from wolves to fight lions'* published in 2010 portrayed how *Teleman* has become an inspiration for many Chinese firms.

> If business is a jungle where the lion is king, then the wolves are looking to usurp the throne. At least that's how many Chinese experts see the battle to drive competitive innovation in industry and manufacturing. While Western executives are learning business acumen from the sixth Century BC Chinese classic, The Art of War by Sun Tzu, Chinese industry leaders are being told to study one of their contemporaries.

The perception of *Teleman*'s identity as a company with military style discipline and self-sacrifice is congruent with *Teleman*'s efforts in promoting such an organisational identity internally and externally, and enforcing the 'corporate soldier' identity to its employees. For example, *Teleman*'s global branding campaign in 2015 in the outside press and in company publications, featured a ballerina's feet, one elegantly posed in a satin pointe shoe, the other bare, battered, and bandaged. The strap line in English versions reads, 'The people make a sport of the sublime. If they could see it as it is, they would be unable to bear its aspect' and the Chinese version states: 'Our life, painful, and joyful'.

Materialism, a 'Rich' Employer, and Frontline Fighters

Teleman's identity regulation does not stop at turning employees into corporate soldiers. Our research reveals that there is another level beyond this which is labelled Frontline Fighters. Frontline fighters in *Teleman*'s discourse are different again from other corporate soldiers in that they have to work directly in the enemy's territory; they have to 'walk extra miles', 'endure extra hardship', and make extra sacrifices by leaving China and 'fighting in a foreign land'. Their job is not just to stay in the overseas offices of *Teleman* but to work outside in 'foreign territory', gaining business, designing and fulfilling projects in social and physical conditions that stretch their strengths to the utmost. In terms of HR practices, our research reveals that considerable prestige and status goes along with undertaking work as a 'frontline fighter'. It is supported by a generous compensation package, in terms of basic salary, annual bonuses, stock options, and expatriation allowances as well as becoming a basic requirement for most senior management positions. As one expatriate stated, 'The company's policy is to give preference to people who go overseas. Not only salary, bonus, stock options, but also promotions.' It is commonly recognised that generous reward packages (even by Western standards) are provided for facing the severe challenges of being a frontline fighter. *Teleman*'s CFO stated, in the National Business Daily 'At [*Teleman*], your salary is decided by your value… there is no limit for excellent people. We pay you based on how ambitious you are, how capable you are, and how much potential you have'.

In conclusion, *Teleman* expends huge resources on building the identity and commitment of its employees to the firm and to their tasks. It draws on nationalism, militarism and materialism to develop a hierarchy of statuses which differentiate levels of sacrifice and hardship as well as of rewards. Its identity regulation efforts are supported and reinforced by its HR practices, and its unique externally accepted organisational identity as well as by the continuous reproduction and references to the need to rebuild China to its former greatness.

Ambiguities and Resistances to *Teleman* Identities

Whilst the senior management of *Teleman* continuously reinforced the importance of these various identities through discourses, symbols and material practices, by creating a hierarchy of statuses they enabled employees to feel that they were exercising some choice about their level of involvement rather than simply being coerced. They were exercizing agency by means of responding to the 'contradictions, weaknesses and gaps between alternative subject positions' (Thomas & Davies, 2005, p.687). This made most of our expatriates willing participants, whilst only a few were openly cynical about the whole approach.

The willing participants: The majority of our interviewees fall into this category. They largely welcomed the corporate soldier and frontline fighter identity offered by the company and tended to display high internalisation of the company's JKFD values. They accepted the company's decisions on overseas destinations, they put the company's interest before their personal interests, and worked long hours. One local non-expatriate Chinese employee commented about one of *Teleman*'s expatriates:

> "He is very strict with himself, and has high standards for others too. From all aspects, he is a typical *Teleman* person. They are so capable of 'eating bitterness'… I sometimes really feel sorry for him, staying away from his family and living here alone. You know, he doesn't speak good English, but he needs to work together with local people. It's really not easy."

Teleman's official newspapers were full of stories of expatriates living up to the standards and expectations of corporate soldiers and frontline fighters. Portraying themselves as soldiers and fighters, expatriates frequently describe how they live out *Teleman's* specified moral and behavioural codes. They passionately share stories about their battles in extremely difficult natural environments such as deserts, plateaus, rain forests, oceans, earthquakes, and flood areas, as well as dangerous social environments plagued by wars, riots, and disease. Often the stories emphasize not just how the employees survive harsh environments and get things done but more importantly, how they enjoy the task of overcoming difficulties.

The cynics: our research also identifies a small number of other employees, whom we label as the cynics (c.f. Fleming & Spicer, 2003). Cynical employees disagreed with the JKFD value and did not follow the company's logic that a good employee is a soldier and fighter, sacrificing self-interest for the interests of the company. During the interviews, they emphasized individualism and indicated that they had avoided what they saw as the company's efforts at 'brain washing'. In practice, however, they had mostly accepted the company's decisions on overseas destinations, they worked long hours and they fought to deliver projects to clients and to help the company succeed. One good example is an expatriate called Daniel, who stated: 'In this regard, I think our company is very wrong. First of all, an employee is a person. Before he becomes your employee, he is a son, a husband, or a father…. However, our company always puts the identity of the employee first. I think this is a fundamental mistake'. However, even whilst criticizing the company's 'disappointing management philosophy', Daniel had been recently promoted and worked extremely hard. When asked why he remained in Europe, he bluntly stated that he would not be able to find another job within or outside the company which could offer him such a good income. Other expatriates criticized the company for frequently moving them around.

> 'The frequent relocation is quite annoying to a person at my age. Because you don't know what your next country is. Sometimes, you want to stay in this country for longer period, but you are not allowed to do so. This worries me a lot.'

Several employees had clearly learnt from experience that they did not want to be FD-Man any more and were choosing to go back to China to be with their families rather than develop further their status as a frontline fighter or corporate soldier even if this had a cost for their career and rewards.

By contrast, local employees in Europe were exempted from these pressures. Detailed examination of *Teleman*'s in-house English magazine distributed globally revealed that between January 2009- June 2015, a total of 53 issues were published, with over 1000 articles and reports, but only 16 of them contained such key words as ‘JKFD’, ‘FD’ or ‘FD-Man’, including several pieces where ‘FD’ was just briefly mentioned without any further explanation. Furthermore, within these articles, some very different and diverse definitions of JKFD were presented. For example, the UK HR Director shared her understanding of FD in one article; the result was far away from the meaning of hardship, endurance and self - sacrifice proposed by the company in its Chinese language publications:

> ‘FD’ does not have a direct translation into English, but I have translated it to define a team of people that will focus on achieving the goal, through team work, self development, and initiative.

Not surprisingly, therefore, *Teleman*’s expatriates made no real attempt at introducing the Chinese version of FD etc. to local employees. They did not engage in communicating or socialising with local employees to promote values and norms of FD man etc. This is in sharp contrast with some existing literature which emphasizes the expatriate’s role as culture/value promoter (Harzing, Pudelko, & Reiche, 2015). On the contrary, many of our respondents talked about ‘respecting the local way’ and implementing a ‘dual management model’ where Chinese and non-Chinese employees are managed differently. Chinese expatriates were generally tolerant of local employees not working much overtime even though they themselves were expected to do so. They were also tolerant of the different interpretation of some key values of the company by local employees. The company used the Chinese institutional context only where it made sense to do so, i.e. with its Chinese managers where these discourse, symbols and language meshed with their everyday experience and historical memory. They shielded their foreign employees from the main features of that organizational identity and instead simply presented an anodyne version of ‘teamwork’ that had little distinctive meaning in the UK context.

In conclusion, the management and regulation of identity was ubiquitous and unrelenting inside *Teleman* for its Chinese employees. Senior management drew on specifics of the Chinese context, such as the history of struggle against Western powers, the sacrifice of Mao and the Long March to power through war with the Japanese and the Nationalists, the hard work necessary to rebuild China in the late 20th century, and the challenges of the 21st century. They appealed to long-standing traditions of Chinese civilization and the need for military action and economic development to sustain, preserve and develop China. They explicitly built these discourses and symbols into a framework for the company and its employees, by metaphorically constructing their own employees as ‘soldiers and fighters’ engaged in a war against foreign forces often in hostile conditions. These forms of identity regulation were reinforced by the external legitimacy of its organisational identity, and by the internal HR practices, which delineated the increasing expectations on employees as they layered the different forms of identity into their own frame of meaning. This strategy allowed employees to feel that they had an element of choice; they could be an ‘ordinary employee’ or they could progress as far as they were willing up the hierarchy from FD-Man to corporate soldier to frontline fighter. As the CEO stated:

> ‘We require cadres to focus on the job, but this should be distinguished from ordinary employees, who are expected to combine work and leisure together and have a regular work schedule. Our strict requirement to cadres should not be applied to employees, and the relaxation enjoyed by employees should not be applied to cadres.’

Discussion

Studies of identity regulation and identity work in Organization Studies have been conspicuously lacking in efforts to link internal processes to external wider contexts. While other researchers ‘take interest in micro-analysis’ of individual identity work within organizations (Alvesson et al., 2008), we focus on how micro processes of identity work, and mid-level processes of identity regulation and firm strategy, are linked to macro-level institutional structures, thus answering recent calls by authors (e.g. Brown, 2015; Boussebaa & Brown, 2017) for greater attention to how processes of identity regulation are shaped by, and constitutive of, wider societal contexts.

In our study, we have shown how managers draw selectively on external discourses, and work hard to link them to the experience of the firm and its employees. They continually construct and reinforce analogies between the experience of the Chinese nation as a whole, itself articulated and constructed in specific ways by the leaders of the Chinese Communist Party, and the experience of its employees. The stories told by the senior managers and employees in their internal communications as well as in their interviews draw on specific language and discourse about China, its rise, fall and subsequent rise that is continuously present in the Chinese public sphere. Ideas of Chinese patriotism, sacrifice and commitment, struggle against foreign enemies permeate *Teleman's* managers' discourse about the role which the firm and its employees are playing. In 2012, Xi Jinping, the Communist Party leader, stated 'The Chinese nation has suffered unusual hardship and sacrifice in the world's modern history…its people have never given in, have struggled ceaselessly and have finally taken hold of their own destiny' (quoted in Bickers, 2017, p.407). It is a language and rhetoric continuously employed within *Teleman* which also sees itself under existential threat because of its 'Chinese character'. The potential for hacking and spying through the sort of networks produced by *Teleman* has made some governments ban the company from their markets for fear that that it acts as a 'Trojan Horse' for Chinese government cyber espionage. *Teleman* continuously denies this but the fact that the founder of the company was once a high-ranking officer in the Chinese army reinforces these fears whilst it also strengthens in *Teleman* the sense that it is in the same 'battle for survival' as China itself.

To remain a globally successful indigenous firm that can be held up as an example for other Chinese firms and to sustain this powerful organizational identity, *Teleman* managers continuously draw legitimacy from their context and translate it into micro-processes of identity regulation that impact on their employees. They engage in enmeshing individuals with the fate not just of their own part of the work task, nor just with the firm but with China's rise as a whole. However, contrary to much existing research on identity regulation which identifies a single 'meta-identity' (Bardon et al, 2017; Gotsi et al., 2010; Paring et al. 2017) we find that a series of identities are nested within each other and hierarchically ranked in terms of the status and career opportunities available. These hierarchical gradations are important as they allow for management to sponsor and encourage certain individuals with the appropriate levels of commitment to move upwards between status positions (or actively dissuade some individuals from seeking such movement on the grounds that they are unfit for the next stage/status). It also enables individuals to feel they have a choice as to how committed they want to be to the organization whilst continuing to allow all to feel part of China's rejuvenation as represented by *Teleman's* success. By differentiating levels of commitment and of status, senior managers ensure that employees see their sacrifices etc. as their choice. As with any choice, it has implications and *Teleman* clearly load the dice in favour of employees trying to move up the hierarchy by offering not just status but better rewards and more likely career advancement. Most employees feel it is better either to cooperate or be silent and repress such feelings, becoming a 'cynic' in private.

How might we wish to build our findings into a more general framework for understanding identity regulation and its relationship with extra-organizational contexts and discourses in order to make the sort of ‘conceptual leap’ described by Klag and Langley, i.e. moving from our specific case to ‘an abstract and explicit set of concepts, relations and explanations that have meaning and relevance beyond the specific context of their development’ (Klag & Langley 2013, p.150)? Following Phillips et al’s injunction (2016) that the study of identity can usefully consider how institutional contexts create a range of possibilities for organizational and individual identities that can be legitimated and reinforced from the outside, we would suggest the following model of relationships:

(FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE)

This model is designed to show the potential connectedness of these three levels through the action of the participants in the process. Thus, we do not assume that the institutional context impacts on organizational identity but rather that it may open up specific ways in which managers can draw on dominant discourses if they have relevance to how the organization’s identity is constructed. However, actors outside the organization have to reinforce and authenticate this by showing that in some way the connection has been recognized externally as both a legitimate use of the institutional context and as something that has a positive impact on the organization. At the organizational level, this connection has to be turned into a specific set of practices and meanings associated with the work of the company and its employees where HR mechanisms have to be constructed to support this form of identity. Individual actors themselves have the ability to choose within constraints whether they will accept these identities or whether they will, if not challenge them, at least remain skeptical and/or cynical, recognizing that this will have an impact on how their performance is evaluated within the HR system. At each level, therefore, actors are making choices about how to develop identities linked to the wider institutional context and the opportunities which it opens up, how to legitimate the role that these identities take in managing the organization and in shaping careers and HR practices.

This framework offers the chance to develop some interesting comparisons within and across contexts. In our case study country China, some key aspects of that wider context are clearly relevant to *Teleman's* ability to engage in the sort of identity regulation we have described. Firstly, the lack of workers' autonomous associations in China and the under-developed social welfare system has facilitated strong managerial controls in most Chinese firms (Chan 2015; Lee & Kuruvilla, 2011; Liu & Smith, 2016). For most Chinese employees, there is no welfare safety net to fall back on, and material aspirations for themselves and their family are high, therefore they choose to become cooperative employees even in overseas contexts (Smith & Zheng, 2016). Secondly, China's national dream to become a technological and economic superpower which dates back to the 1960s and 1970s when the 'Four Modernisations' (in the area of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence) became a national policy (Bresnitz & Murphree, 2011) has been incessantly discussed and propagandised in China in a context where alternative or conflicting accounts are not allowed. Further it is well recognised by Chinese leaders that in order to sustain long -term economic development, China's national innovation system must produce world-class science and technology (Lewin, Kenney, & Murmann, 2016; Zhou, Lazonick, & Sun, 2016). Thus, a favourable policy environment is created for high tech firms such as *Teleman* to help realise China's ambition to 'become a global technological force' and 'create globally competitive indigenous firms' (Low, 2010). This links *Teleman* and its workforce directly into China's trade policy and its broader economic (and political) ambitions. Thirdly and reinforcing this, telecommunications is a politically sensitive industry in China and has particularly been endowed with economic, social and political objectives to serve China's national interests (Zhang, 2002; by comparison see Rodrigues & Child, 2008). *Teleman's* identity as a globally-successful indigenous firm, a rich and generous employer, and a militarized company where hardship and self-sacrifice was constructed within this very distinctive institutional context.

Would we expect other Chinese multinationals to follow *Teleman's* model, utilizing such a powerful discourse of synergy between firm objectives and national rejuvenation at the level of identity regulation and HR practices? Here we would suggest differences in strategy and structure mean that similarities from the Chinese context may play out in different ways. Research on Chinese multinationals in Africa where state owned and private sector enterprises have been mostly involved in oil and mineral extraction, major infrastructure projects and agricultural development describes these subsidiaries as heavily dominated by Chinese expatriates who live in barrack-like conditions away from their family (who remain in China) and separated from the local population behind fences (Cooke, 2014; Lee, 2017; Sun, 2017). Such conditions of hardship are similar to *Teleman* and may therefore be conducive to the development of similar discourses though unlike *Teleman* many of these expatriates have limited skills and are often engaged in mundane low paid manual tasks which the Chinese company is unwilling to trust to the local population.

By contrast, Chinese banks working in the City of London aim to access global financial markets and learn how to operate in them for the advantage of the Chinese state. Like Japanese banks before them (Morgan et al., 2003), their problem is how to bridge the institutional and cultural gaps between their home context and the context of London as a global city so discourses that emphasize 'war' and 'conflict' might be counter-productive to the establishment of such links. Similarly, where Chinese MNCs are seeking to learn from foreign environments, they may be less inclined to emphasize difference and more inclined to blur the boundaries between themselves and local firms, seeking to reduce the liability of foreignness by trying to reshape their identity towards minimizing difference (Edman, 2016). This suggests that there is likely a considerable variation amongst Chinese MNCs; they may share the same home institutional context but how they make use of it and selectively appropriate it varies according to ownership, location and sector and the sort of organizational identity they are aiming to create.

What about other countries? There are certain analogies with the rise of Korean firms, a product of the military conflict of the Korean War and with a legacy of military dictatorships through to the 1980s. Janelli and Yim (1993) described the militaristic work discipline within South Korean chaebols in the 1980s as they battled to establish the economy following the Korean war and linked this strongly to what has been termed ‘techno-nationalism’, i.e. the role of the state in building up globally competitive industries such as consumer electronics, information technology, and cars, as part of the effort to create a modern Korea connected to its deep historical roots (Cummings, 1997). The massive insecurity represented by the North Korean state adds to the complexity of this ‘techno-nationalism’ creating an external threat that helps bond insiders together (Taylor, 2015). However, in contrast to China, the period since 1997 and the Asian financial crisis has seen an increasingly significant US influence, partly via ownership but also in terms of the import of many US based HR practices which centre on individual performance, appraisal and monitoring. Korean firms therefore increasingly present their management policies in terms of incorporating the best techniques available in the global environment (Chung et al., 2014; Rowley & Warner, 2015) rather than resting on Korean nationalism as they did two decades ago or as *Teleman* does in relation to

Chinese nationalism. Carney's discussion of what he describes as forms of 'authoritarian capitalism' in East Asia suggests a wide variety of institutional contexts that offer different discourses and practices whilst drawing on similar themes of nationalism and militarism in the context of the increasingly unstable international politics of East and South East Asia (Carney, 2018).

Emergent economies more generally seem a potentially fertile set of contexts for the type of analysis proposed here. Their multinationals are starting to become more significant in the global economy and in many cases their linkages to the state and national state formation projects is openly acknowledged (on state dominated capitalisms particularly in Latin America but also elsewhere see e.g. Mussachio & Lazzarini, 2013). Often, as with China, these state and firm formation projects seek to connect the present to the past in very particular ways and using 'memories' (as constructed in various official texts) to reinforce this. They attempt to make sense of how societies, firms and individuals inter-connect and can be constituted and developed in ways to enhance the performativity of employees in various contexts. In emerging markets, one may expect to see strong efforts to unify around certain themes, even as at the same time as these themes may be contested for their partial and partisan nature (Rodrigues & Child, 2008). We do not claim that all contexts produce equally effective (and potentially unifying) discourses that offer these possibilities. More developed economies with higher levels of free speech, democracy and overall education may be characterized by a greater polyphony of voices and discourses though the recent rise of populist economic policies e.g. in the US with Trump's Make America Great Again campaign suggests the possibility of efforts to create a more unifying discourse around macro-level themes of national interest. Our case suggests that where the links can be developed and sustained inside the firm through shaping identities, effort and commitment, then senior managers are willing to work hard on this in the belief that it pays off for the company. However, whether senior managers in firms wish to draw on such discourses to reinforce and support their internal processes may depend on the nature of those discourses, the social context in which they are articulated and the sort of organizational identity they are creating.

Conclusions

In our discussion, we have shown how it is possible to link the institutional context and its possibilities to processes in the formation of organizational identity which in turn frames individual identity regulation. This is not a simple relay process whereby a set of values is imposed on organizations and individuals. Rather we suggest managers engage in evaluating and interpreting dominant discourses to assess how useful they might be in creating the identity of their own organization, and its identity, strategy and structure. The language of nationalism and militarism is unlikely to be relevant to the work situation of the Chinese student employed by McDonalds in Beijing. But for that person, working after graduation in a Chinese multinational in Africa or Europe, this may be an important way of making sense of the level of effort they are expected to make and the reward they are receiving. Our approach is therefore determinedly organizational as well as institutional not just in terms of context but also in terms of identifying the necessity for managers to construct modes of articulating the discourse, narrative and national memory with which they want to engage the employee and linking these to specific mechanisms of HR management that work to incorporate the employee into the organizational identity. We suggest that what is important here is that employees feel they are making a choice and are not just coerced into a particular pattern of identity regulation.

By starting to specify the boundary conditions under which the form of identity regulation we have identified in *Teleman* occurs, we argue that our framework opens up a series of questions for further research that can evolve across different countries, different firms, and different sectors. How, why and when do managers draw on wider institutional resources to exercise identity regulation and influence individual's identity work? How does organisational identity as a context impact on the outcome of identity regulation? How are different forms of identity hierarchically nested within organizations and what impact does this make on issues of effort, commitment and resistance? We suggest that these issues are likely to be particularly prominent in MNCs from emergent economies where the inter-relationship between national state formation projects and the development of powerful MNCs is particularly strong. On the other hand, it would be short-sighted to think that this is just the prerogative of emergent economies as Trump's America First campaign indicates by creating new possibilities for the use of nationalist rhetoric by the managers of US firms to shape organizational and individual identity regulation. Similar possibilities are emerging also in the European context e.g. through the impact of Brexit and the rise of populism more widely. Developing the sort of linkages between these macro-level discourses and processes of organizational identity and individual identity regulation therefore offers the exciting possibility of more interaction and dialogue between organization studies and other social sciences concerned with how a new economic order may be emerging. Progress on these questions requires further empirical research and theoretical development from a variety of philosophical and methodological positions drawing on deep comparative studies or organizations and their institutional context.

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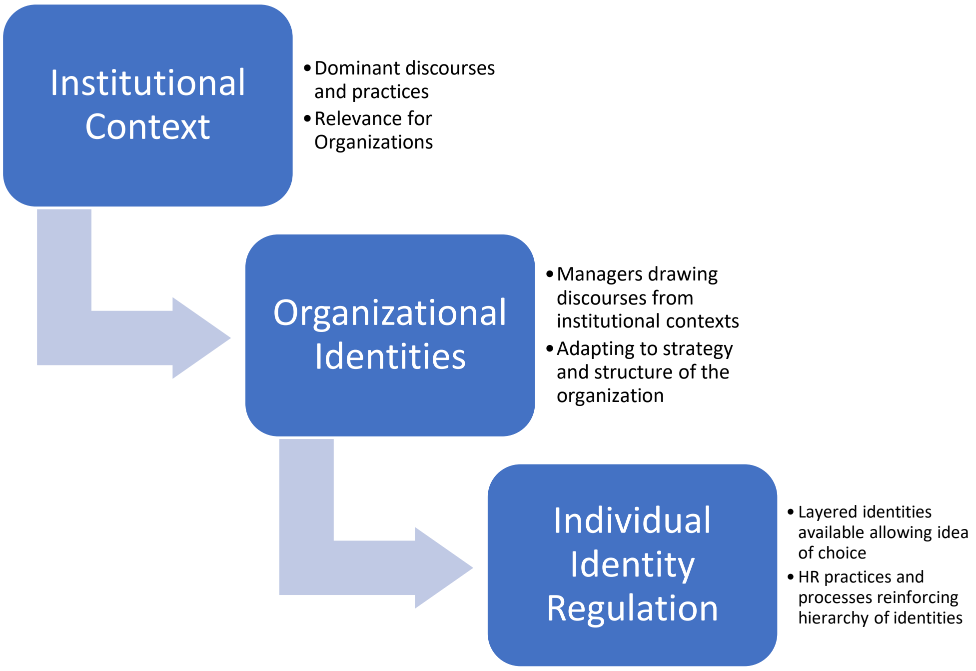
Figure 1: Institutions, Organizational identities and Individual Identity Regulation


Institutional Context
• Dominant discourses and practices
• Relevance for Organizations
Organizational Identities
• Managers drawing discourses from institutional contexts
• Adapting to strategy and structure of the organization
Individual Identity Regulation
• Layered identities available allowing idea of choice
• HR practices and processes reinforcing hierarchy of identities