



The invisible whirlpool in the river of organization development: the evolving process of organizational politics in China transitional economy

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Abstract

Literature on organizational politics (OP), normally focuses on the individual and team levels. Relatively less research has been undertaken to understand how OP at the firm-level is developed; this is particularly so in the context of the transitional economy of China where OP is very prevalent with the practice of guanxi. Therefore, applying the grounded theory analysis, we carried out in-depth interviews that generated 1,132 coding items which were categorized into 328 secondary concepts. Our study eventually leads to a theoretical model to provide a holistic and contextual understanding of OP. The analyses identify antecedents to OP and factors impacting the links (power structure, interest structure, guanxi structure, political motivation, political ability, and political context), among which guanxi structure and political motivation are novel findings as for the Chinese setting, and the functional mechanisms of OP (motivation, evaluation, selection, and conditions), which offer a dynamic perspective to how OP works.

Keywords Organizational politics · Transitional economy of China · Guanxi · Grounded theory · Functional mechanism

Introduction

Organizational politics (OP) is known to be a form of behavior inconsistent with accepted organizational norms with regard to promoting self-interest; OP leads to unnecessary expense/negative performance outcomes, considerable

delays, and an unwillingness to share knowledge (Clercq et al., 2018; Olson et al., 2014). In practice, OP is a very important factor that exerts a huge impact on employee morale, management decision-making; OP can even cause organizational catastrophes (Chang et al., 2009; Hochwarter et al., 2020). For example, among the forces that brought down RIM (BlackBerry Limited), the former mobile empire, “a split personality in the executive suite” helped toll the bell (Connors et al., 2012). The CEO and founder of RIM, Mike Lazaridis, focused on a make-or-break push to launch a new generation of BlackBerry with a new operating system. Meanwhile, RIM’s co-CEO, Jim Balsillie, pursued a different strategy, seeking to license out the company’s proprietary technologies. Organizational politics kicked in under such a structure and diverted orientations. Disagreements ensued, as well as conflicts, bypassing, and fighting for resources. Therefore, it is critical to understand what drives OP and how OP works.

Past OP research has accumulated a considerable understanding of the conceptualization and effects of OP, and especially the perceptions of OP (POP). For example, earlier work focused on developing the constructs and measurement of POP (Poon, 2003; Kacmar & Ferris, 1991). More

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recent work has moved to investigate: (1) the relationship between POP and individual/team/organizational outcomes (Bergeron & Thompson, 2020; Franke & Foerstl, 2018; Fitriastuti et al., 2021), (2) the mechanisms (i.e. moderating or mediating effects) of these relationships (De Clercq et al., 2021; Castanheira et al., 2021), and (3) the moderating effects of politics itself on the relationship between different organizational factors (Clercq et al., 2018; Dong et al., 2021; Choi et al., 2021).

Despite these developments, existing literature still shows a number of weaknesses. First, existing studies have mainly worked on either individual or team-level (Arain et al., 2021; Bai et al., 2016), while overlooking the more complex OP practices at business level. Prior OP studies have focused on the individual or team level, mainly emphasizing political skills. This study, however, examines the antecedents of OP and the relationships among these antecedents from a firm-level perspective. The holistic model illustrating the whole picture of these relationships, can only be expressed at organizational level. Second, existing OP literature contains relatively fewer studies with regard to how OP is developed, especially from the above-mentioned organizational approach. Even less research has been done on how OP is driven and develops, particularly at firm level (see Kidron and Vinarski-Peretz, 2018; Poon, 2003 as rare exceptions). Third, very little OP research related to the transitional economy of China has been conducted, particularly when compared to studies of other developed economies. A majority of OP studies focus on developed economies, especially in the USA (O'Reilly & Pfeffer, 2021). However, in China, which has the world's largest transitional economy, organizations and individuals are subject to the heavy impact of China's unique political dynamics and its cultural traditions (DiTomaso & Bian, 2018; Cao & Zhang, 2021). As such, OP activities in China differ from those of other countries. To address these research gaps, this study adopts the grounded theory to investigate and provide insight into the development of OP in Chinese companies. Thus, we discover the invisible whirlpool in the river of organization development, which has not yet been reported in past studies.

This research thus makes three contributions to existing literature. First, OP research is enriched with a model of OP development from an organization's perspective. Second, this research adds to extant OP literature, specifically with regard to how OP is developed in business organizations. Third, this study also contributes to existing literature by deepening our knowledge of OP among Chinese businesses that are run in the context of the Confucian culture.

Theoretical background

Sources and influencing factors of OP

There are four kinds of OP sources. (1) Human nature: transaction is humanity (Newman, 1979). (2) Enterprise interest: enterprises with different interests form a union to obtain resources, resolve conflicts, and complement deficiencies in contracts, uncertainties and risks (Bacouel-Jentjens & Yang, 2019). (3) Resource scarcity: power usually affects the distribution of resources, and thus, political behavior will inevitably emerge for reasons of self-interest (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1974). (4) Environment: a power-based organizational structure tends to trigger OP if the organization lacks a clear objective, decision-making processes, and performance criteria (Ferris et al., 2019). Research has categorized the factors that irritate political behavior as being personal factors and organizational factors (Ammeter et al., 2002).

The relationship between OP and individual/team/organizational outcomes

Differences in definitions and gaps of realization lead to distinct recognition of OP. Passive proponents indicate that OP impacts morale and degrades performance (Castanheira et al., 2021), affects and dominates the formulation of a business strategy (Elbanna, 2016), wastes energy, damages the reward and penalty system, and finally deteriorates a business's long-term benefits (Newman, 1979). Active proponents suggest that OP enhances team development, promotes individual and organizational performance (Good & Schwepker, 2022), contributes to strategic management (Zahra & Latour, 1987), and can be constructive in shaping people's commitment to change (Bouckenooghe, 2012). Neutral proponents argue that the impact of OP on team performance depends on the prevalence of a common professional background and collective team commitment (Semrau et al., 2017). In addition, they maintain that employees' perceptions of political and procedural justice influence the general evaluations of psychological contracts (Rosen et al., 2009).

OP and its interactions with other organizational factors

In addition to the researches mentioned above, which focus on the two variables that make up the relationship between OP and outcome, more complicated investigations have been conducted to observe the interactions between OP and other factors in the context of the whole organization. These researches offer a wider organizational perspective

and actually show the demand of a whole OP framework in this field. For instance, the relationship between a leader's political skill and team performance (Hou et al., 2021), the moderating role of rumination on the relationship between OP and outcome (Rosen & Hochwarter, 2014), and the interaction between perceived organizational support and the perceptions of OP (Bergeron & Thompson, 2020) are all addressed. Moreover, studies have also started to concentrate on the moderating effect of politics itself on the relationship between different organizational factors. For example, political climate plays a regulating role in the relationship between dispositional envy and job performance (De Clercq et al., 2018). Electronic human resources management is influenced by the institutional environment of the organization and a series of micro-political and power relationships in the political structure of a company (Burbach & Royle, 2013). Other studies deal with similar issues.

Therefore, according to previous studies and theories on OP, although it may have some negative connotations, it also has many positive ones. On the one hand, it can affect morale and degrade performance, waste energy, damage the reward and penalty system or deteriorate a company's long-term profits. On the other hand, OP can significantly improve individual performance, team development, organizational commitment and support strategic management. Prior studies regarding the different factors influencing OP offer theoretical background for our analyses. However, the factors in our following research analyses were emerged, rather than took the exact factors from literature, since our research aims to deduce propositions with grounded theory methodology. When applying the grounded theory, the researcher does not formulate the hypotheses including the factors in advance since preconceived hypotheses result in a theory that is ungrounded from the data. It is important that our model is not forced beforehand but has emerged during the comparative process of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

Method

Grounded theory

This study adopts grounded theory to establish files to reflect upon how, in the “real world”, OP is developed. In addition, explanations are produced for the mechanism, for two reasons: First, OP is often viewed as something that has been kept secret and hidden, deep below the surface. This suggests that grounded theory should be a more appropriate method than quantitative research to reveal organizational political behavior patterns. Second, as discussed earlier, prior studies only document to a limited extent how

OP develops in Chinese firms, where grounded theory is an ideal way to develop theory. Grounded theory, a very useful qualitative approach in many disciplines (Walsh et al., 2015; Kidron and Vinarski-Peretz, 2018), is a process of producing theory from data. This is very useful when researching phenomena that are not theoretically fully understood (Shaffer & Hillman, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Grounded theory is a research paradigm used to discover and uncover emerging patterns in data (Shaffer & Hillman, 2000; Walsh et al., 2015; Banks et al., 2016). This, in turn, allows people to free up their creativity and theory-building capacity, which have been hindered by limited methodological choices through the sole use of qualitative data and similar techniques (Walsh et al., 2015). When applying this method, researchers start with data; they identify patterns, trends and relationships. Based on the findings, a theory that is “grounded” in the data itself is constructed (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Grounded theory provides us with relevant predictions and explanations (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

There are two reasons that ontological and epistemological assumptions are not developed in this study. First, researchers choose grounded theory because of the lack of prior theory and research regarding their specific theme (Bellesia et al., 2019; Graebner, 2004) (the theme is an overall OP framework at firm level in our setting). Second, when applying grounded theory, the researcher does not formulate the hypotheses in advance, since preconceived hypotheses result in a theory that is not grounded in the data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). To deal with the complex, holistic, and dynamic nature of a topic, studies require a more interpretative approach, one which underlies “theory building” models and demands a logic dynamic of “justification” and “hypothesis rejection” (Carrero et al., 2000). It is therefore important that our model is not forced beforehand but rather that the model emerges during the comparative process of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017).

Data collection: text analysis and interview process

This study employs a focus group and semi-structured interviews, coupled with text analysis, to explore OP.

Text analysis

This includes an analysis of new as well as existing texts. Before the interviews, the authors immersed themselves in a great number of existing texts, including text related to news, reports and research publications relevant to the firms. The aim was to gain a basic understanding of the tasks to be undertaken. Then, a detailed analysis of the new texts generated from the interviews was conducted, which is discussed in Sect. 4.

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews can be of three kinds: structured, semi-structured and non-structured. Grounded theory requires open-ended nonjudgmental questions that, on the one hand, are intended to extract stories beyond expectations (Charmaz, 2006). On the other hand, the interviews needed to focus on the intended questions, in order to trigger delicate discussions. For this reason, semi-structured interviews were used in this study.

Focus group interview

The focus groups were comprised of panels of people who were invited to comment on material and information related to the research problem. This included previous research conclusions, policy documents, hypotheses and hot issues. The site chosen for the focus group interviews was an isolated private space. This meant that even topics that were relatively sensitive could be broached, and when this happened, the participants were quite eager to talk. Since the interviewees were motivated and very interested in the issue, the interviews were efficient and effective. The authors were able to collect great deal of information within a short time.

Interview process control

- (a) Preparation was needed in order to achieve pre-specified interview objectives. Specifically, this preparation refers to the design of the interview questions, contact with the interviewees, and finalization of the time and place the interviews were to be conducted.
- (b) Time and place of the interview: Each interview took an average of two hours. To ensure the interviews' effectiveness, isolated, comfortable and quiet places were selected, such as a single booth or a quiet area in a coffee or tea shop. To ensure coherence and concentration (and also to avoid interruption) all interviews were conducted during rest periods and away from each participant's office.
- (c) The interview process: The interview process was divided into the three phases of start, expansion and conclusion. Interviews usually started with a warm ice-breaking greeting, intended to build a pleasant ambiance. The expansion phase was also conducted in a relaxed, free-style manner. Discussions during this phase concentrated on the research topic and interview questions, while a sequence of questions was followed fairly loosely. It was deemed important to allow the interviewees to express themselves freely and without

any subjective interference. Due to the fact that OP is a vigorous and really topical issue, interviewees were quite willing to convey their opinions. The interviewer asked for clarification of nonspecific or ambiguous points whenever necessary. Sometimes, the interviewer would extend the interview if a particular interviewee was eloquent and had mentioned some important detail, or to obtain more information, even if the interview had run over time.

- (d) Interview skills: The interviewers followed the suggestions of Seidman (Seidman, 2011) by practicing active listening, being sensitive to clues, following the interviewee, asking for clarification, searching for details, stating the intended story, not interrupting, avoiding misleading questions, asking open questions, balancing intuition and interview questions, tolerating silence, and so on.
- (e) Interview records: Interviews were recorded using recorders and computers; interview records were then transcribed into text files, checked and verified.

Interviewees

Twenty-one enterprises from selected cities in China were investigated. One top management team member from each organization was interviewed. Typically, the number of participants in phenomenological studies ranges between three and 10 (Creswell, 2014); thus, our sample size was evaluated as appropriate to provide the necessary information for this study. Silverman (2009) suggested that, in qualitative studies, one should concentrate on a sample that is handy and easily accessible. In addition, interviewees, sites and events must provide the maximum amount of information possible. Therefore, the ones interviewees with whom the authors had good connections were chosen. The interviewees for this study included some from medium-to-large state-owned enterprises, foreign-invested enterprises and private enterprises in Chinese cities such as Xiamen, Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen, Suzhou, etc.

Coding process and theory formulation

Three-stage coding

The authors followed the principle that coding is at the core of forming a grounded theory, which in turn is concerned with natural discovery, rather than precision and verification (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). Coding is the process of labeling, categorizing and describing a data segment; coding transcends data and is the first step of analytical explanation (Charmaz, 2006). For this study, coding was conducted by two of the authors.

Open coding is the first stage in qualitative coding. This study adopted progressive coding and applied action words connected to data to concentrate and generalize interview statements, paragraphs and the implications of an event. Hidden meanings were even found behind verbal descriptions. In grounded theory, precisely grasping and understanding the real thoughts of the interviewees is vital.

The second stage is focus coding, which uses the most important or frequently-appearing open codes to classify, synthesize, integrate and organize data. Through focus coding, the most prominent area in a pile of data can be discovered. The key to focus coding is being able to judge what open codes can accurately and best summarize the data. In short, focus coding transforms open codes to abstraction, forms categories and sub-categories and builds connections between them.

The last stage, theory coding, solidifies the connections between the categories that were obtained from focus coding, and turns analytical stories into theoretical ones. Theory coding can clearly explain both the general and the specific situation of a particular phenomenon, and can also briefly describe what conditions can cause the phenomenon to occur or change. The outcome can also be generalized.

Theoretical sampling

During the three-stage coding process, it is important to notice theory saturation. Theoretical sampling is a critical strategy in grounded theory as a way to look for relevant information categories to process and refine. This occurs until no more new property emerges, which means that the categories are saturated. After this, classification is implemented, in order to analyze the connections and finally form a theory. If the relevant theory is not saturated, theoretical sampling needs to be continued until saturation is reached. Theoretical sampling can help examine, confine and briefly describe the category boundary, and embody the connections among categories.

Research memo-writing

Grounded theory emphasizes the integration and composition of research memoranda after interviews. Writing memos helps researchers to continue comparing and connecting, including among data, coding, concept, and category. This enables researchers to develop ideas and modify the way data is subsequently collected. Memo-writing is a continuous process, involving data analysis, exploration and viewpoint development. Memoranda provide a record of research and analysis, and ultimately become part of the research report.

Research validity

This research is in strict accordance with the recommendations of scholars (Suddaby, 2006; Walsh et al., 2015) in terms of the appropriate application of ground theory. The detailed research process of the grounded theory approach and design, mainly including interviews, open coding, focus coding, theory coding, theoretical sampling and memo-writing, is described. To initiate this study, a set of open interview questions was developed, and interviewees were selected. Next, interviews were conducted, and primary data was collected (records of approximately 3,400 Chinese characters per interviewee were obtained). Open coding was then applied. Later, focus coding was implemented, before theory coding was finally executed to build connections between the coding obtained earlier. Continuous comparisons between data and data, data and coding, and coding and coding were carried out. Extra data required were complemented, and theoretical sampling was conducted through five extra interviews (obtaining another 16,035 Chinese characters). Research memoranda were prepared at the same time.

In particular, the two rigorous self-examination methods of grounded theory, memo-writing and theoretical sampling, were conducted, in order to ensure that the theory better fits the data. Memo-writing offers an opportunity to “constantly compare” the data and the coding/category/concept, while theoretical sampling enables the generalizability of the derived theory.

Analysis: follow the grounded theory procedure

Open coding: from data to coding items and secondary concepts

Open coding is the first step needed to code data and develop a grounded theory. Open coding is also a process of abstraction, extraction and presentation; reality is seized via appearance. An example of open coding is shown below:

(Interview) Miss Chou: Our company has just been awarded a project, which was given up by another company that was not able to do it. This is certainly a difficult project, but my boss still accepted it (coding: accept a difficult project). She (my boss) assigned this task to T, because she thought that T has good connections (coding: leader assigns task to subordinate whom she thinks is capable). As a result, T went on a long detour and finally found my classmate, S, who is in charge of this project in a bureau (coding: indirect

relationship and classmate); S called to tell me that T approached him, and asked whether he should help T or not? (coding: classmate priority). I told S that he would be hitting me if he helped T (coding: destructive spoiling, or undermining); S then answered that he knew what he should do.

After open coding, 1,132 coding items were obtained, which then were categorized into 328 secondary concepts.

Focus coding: emergence of six influencing factors

Focus coding, which is more directive, selective, and concept-oriented, is the second main step of coding. From open coding to focus coding, 328 secondary concepts were classified, synthesized, and abstracted to take the shape of 20 subcategories. These 20 subcategories were then processed with a high level of generalization and focus coded to create six categories. The progression from open coding to secondary coding, subcategory, and category is shown in Table 1.

Therefore, after abstraction and selection, six categories – power structure, interest structure, *guanxi* structure, political motivation, political ability, and political context – were obtained. The six categories and subcategories are described below.

Power structure

Power structure refers to the distribution and connection of power in an enterprise. Fayol defined power as “the capacity to order and force others to obey” (Wren, 1997). Distribution of power determines whether decision alternatives will be accepted, modified, or rejected (Narayanan & Fahey, 1982). However, if power excludes all other purposes and becomes the servant of politics, then power will be unorthodox, uncivilized, and brutal, ultimately leading to self-destruction. In this study, all interviewees, without exception, stressed the importance of power in OP and indicated that power is both at the core of and the servant of politics. From our coding, the power structure was found to have two perspectives: organizational and personal. This finding is in line with the view of a previous study (Ammeiter et al., 2002).

(a) Organizational perspective: From the perspective of the organization, the factors that affect OP include two pivotal points, namely the power center structure and the power centralization levels.

The term ‘power center structure’ refers to the number of independent terminal power centers, as well as how the centers are connected. Is there one dictator, two antagonists, or competition between several rivals? Different power center structures present different OP. In a company where a dictatorship prevails, everything is up to the boss; the power is unshakable, and the issue of politics is less obvious.

Table 1 Focus Coding Examples

No.	Open coding (1132 items)	Secondary concept (328 items)	Subcategory (20 items)	Category (6 items)
1	Indirect relationship and classmate, No <i>guanxi</i> and background, General Manager and Chairman are fellow villagers	Classmate relationship, Fellow villager	<i>Guanxi</i> type	<i>Guanxi</i> structure
2	Classmate priority	Classmate priority	<i>Guanxi</i> intensity	<i>Guanxi</i> structure
3	Undermine, Vilification in front of boss, Discredit, isolate, press, and threaten, offering a way out, be framed	Undermine, Vilification, Discredit, isolate, press, and threaten, offering a way out, be framed	Political skills	Political capability
4	Quitting job for hopeless promotion and persuading others to leave to harm the organizational interest	Career development organizational interest	Personal interest Organizational interest	Interest structure
5	Prompt political actions to safeguard organizational interest	Prompt actions	Political sensitivity	Political capability
6	General manager’s power of resource allocation	General manager(org. perspective) General manager(personal perspective)	Power center Power position Power range	Power structure
7	The necessity of political actions	Positive politics	Political recognition	Political context
8	Refuse to take political action because of one’s values	Rejection	Rejection motivation	Political intention
9	The politics are not always plots, Real politics follow the right path	Positive politics	Political recognition	Political context

Source: Table created by the authors based on our focus coding

Companies like this can be under the absolute control of the largest shareholder (for example, in a private enterprise). In an antagonistic company, two centers individually contend against one another; in such cases, politics cannot be avoided. An antagonistic situation like this might exist in state-owned companies, particularly those in which the president and general manager have different backgrounds and different values. In a company with multiple investors, several competing sectors will exist, and there may be a dynamic balance between them. Here, politics will be of a more practical nature. Examples of interview questions and answers:

How many groups are there in the company? The company consists of three different power factions: American, English, and Chinese. The organization's structure is not clear, because product lines are in the same position as the region.

Actually, it depends on how the power center operates. An individually-owned private company is run by one person, and politics is less important. A private corporation with several shareholders will surely be influenced by politics. State-owned enterprises are even more unique, since power is the focus of the struggle.

The power centralization level is the vertical and horizontal distribution of power within a company. Is the management style centralized or decentralized? For instance, is the power concentrated or distributed from a vertical perspective? From a horizontal perspective, does one department dominate others, or are all departments equal and cooperative?

Further examples of interview responses:

The board of trustees has authorized the power of approval to the general manager to a certain extent. The president doesn't interfere and is only in charge of the seals. I form a bridge between the president and subordinates, but the board of trustee has not authorized me with any specific power.

The head of the chairman's office has too much power, without checks and balances, and the boss places too much stake in him. Everything is up to him (the head), without a system of power checks and balances (in place).

Thus, OP is related to both the formal and the informal structure.

(b) Personal perspective: From a personal perspective, the factors affecting OP include the following:

Power position refers to the job and position in the enterprise, such as chairman, general manager, director, or manager. Position is the main source from which people gain power and influence in an organization, and is the most direct form of dependence (Ammeter et al., 2002). During the interviews, all interviewees recognized the importance of position and also noticed that this is often used by the leader to reinforce his or her own position. A favored member of the leader's group may be promoted; conversely, someone the leader does not like may be replaced.

The boss doesn't want a newcomer to be the team leader, so X was promoted as the higher-ranking manager.

The new big boss doesn't like my superior and decided to replace him in late-2010. They are unsuited to each other and are clearly two different kinds of people.

Power range: During organizational political activity, every player has his or her own power range and area of influence. Different jobs and responsibilities are usually linked to some level of importance in an enterprise. A core section is certainly more highly-valued than others and will occupy a dominant position. Small or marginal sections basically have no say when it comes to the making of a big business decision. The 'power range' thus represents the importance of an individual in the social network. Therefore, the transfer of someone from an important position to an unimportant one with no real power is a political means of punishment (Ritti & Levy, 2003). Separating a business decision into segments is a common practice; the responsibility is spread over several different sections, in order to maintain a balance of power. This practice was confirmed during the interviews. For instance, in state-owned enterprises, a cadre in the management department controls the promotion and demotion of managers, and so the cadre's position is especially important. The human resources management section is in charge of salary decisions and performance evaluations, which makes the people in that position important, too, and gives them a certain specific power. Top management may actually have no real power if their power range is limited.

Performance evaluations can be used as a political tool and can be the cause of change in organization structure.

The cadre's investigations in a state-owned company are political behavior; they survey morality, capability, diligence, and performance. If top management

deviates from normal behavior, the investigation can then become an elimination mechanism.

Power basis: The power position and power range are, on the one hand, only the original status specified by the organization. On the other hand, the power basis reflects the stability of actual influence. If someone can gain a good reputation amongst colleagues, have the sincere support of subordinates, the assistance of coworkers, the appreciation of the superior, and if they can become a confidant of the core leader, an ally of fellow workers, and a protective umbrella of key subordinates, then that person will have a very good power base. Similarly, personal charm and the power of expertise (expert power) can also enhance the individual power base.

You must communicate with the general manager and portray the future prospects and situation as a big picture. Once he is convinced and decides to invest resources, you can do whatever you want.

Position power is not enough; you must increase your influence via expert power and personal charm to gain the recognition of colleagues.

Interest structure

Interest structure defines the way that people pursue benefits (primarily economic interests) at different levels within an organization. This includes organizational interests, group interests and personal interests. Fei (2008) indicated that people like to gain interest – primarily economic interest – from power. In any organization, management has a set of activities designed to realize organizational objectives and also to seek personal benefits. Performance, promotion, salary, power, and reputation are all interest objectives for which management strives (Ammeter et al., 2002). The interests in an enterprise can be categorized at three levels: organization, group, and individual (Fig. 1).

(a) Organization interest: The long-term interest of an enterprise is the common objective of organization personnel. On the one hand, the results will be positive if OP operates to realize the enterprise's interests. On the other hand, the results will be negative and passive if OP is being used to achieve personal interest. Burton and Obel (1988) showed that, the more connected the elements in an organization are, the more that organization's performance will be sensitive to activities conducted to pursue personal interests.

Only when the advice of a subordinate is confirmed to be beneficial to the organizational interests will the boss accept the subordinate as an insider.

Sometimes you need to comply with company interests; sometimes you need to be in line with the boss's interests; the boss has personal interests, too.

The scramble for power, interests, and favor between top management will not be nakedly apparent but will be dignified under the label of company benefit.

OP is positive if it serves the long-term benefit of the company.

(b) Group interest: The data show that dispersed individuals could form a group with a common objective and common interests when an incentive exists. This group will work as one to deal with outsiders. In almost any organization, serious conflict can occur between different formal groups, such as the sales and production departments; many different excuses can also be used to explain such struggles. This collision of interests and the conflicts between formal groups, formal and informal groups, and informal groups, or even the fact that group interests exceed organization interests, are all manifestations of OP.

Organizational structure changes, and small groups emerge in the company. There are usually conflicts between group interests and organization interests.

Those who were sent to Sweden for training were not skilled enough after coming back; the number of (trained) people is not enough, either. Consequently, the sales and production departments have problems and find all kinds of excuses to fight with each other all the time.

(c) Individual interests: Individuals in any organization will struggle to obtain their own benefits under specific situations. This may trigger conflicts with other individuals and groups, and a structural balance will need to be reached through negotiation (Lucas, 1987). Emplacing the social relationships of *Chaxugeju* (the pattern of difference sequence), the Chinese commonly give high priority to personal and family interests (Fei, 2008). Interviews revealed that individual interests could include power, career development, security and stability, material benefit, and recognition. If a manager in a high position is a strong and power-demanding person who likes to control others, the exercise of power will be mainly directed toward the manager's personal interests, and not those of the organization. Therefore, those over whom the manager exerts power will

resist strongly when their interests are threatened. Some interviewees also mentioned the possibility that personal and organizational interests can be balanced. The interviews demonstrated that various forms of personal interests are the critical factors that influence OP.

One must realize personal interests by using ingenious ways that don't affect enterprise interests.

Interests include economic and political ones, being a government officer, having the authority to dispose, to allocate resources, being respected, to mean what one says, being fawned upon, a sense of achievement, and the like.

Guanxi structure

'Guanxi structure' here means the combination of *guanxi* types and *guanxi* intensity in the context of Chinese culture, based on the Chaxugeju (the pattern of difference sequence) theory, proposed by Fei (2008). The basic components of *guanxi* include a system of destiny, clan ideology, and traditional Confucian-centered ethical thought (Chen et al., 2013). According to *Chaxugeju*, a Chinese social relationship is centered on oneself, and the closeness is judged outwards, from near to far. *Guanxi* is often classified into several broad categories, such as family vs. non-family, affective vs. instrumental, personal/informal vs. impersonal/contractual, and mixed *guanxi* (Chen et al., 2013). Moreover, the intensity of relationships of different types, or even the same type, can be distinct. For example, some relationships are deep, close, and intimate, and some are not. Both similarities and differences exist between *guanxi* in Confucian culture and Western social networks (Burt & Burzynska, 2017). It is proposed here that the relationship between *guanxi* and formal institutions is both auxiliary and competing, leading to convergent and divergent outcomes, respectively (Horak & Restel, 2016). The main difference between *Guanxi* structure and power structure is that *Guanxi* is personal attributes, constituting an informal connection, whereas the power is bestowed by the organization, representing a formal connection.

(a) *Guanxi* type: *Guanxi* type is an important structural index in Chinese *guanxi* structure. Chinese *guanxi* (meaning 'relationships') include 12 types: relatives, countrymen, classmates, colleagues, fellow enthusiasts, friends of the family, previous superiors, previous subordinates, teachers, students, those of common origin and friends (Yang, 2005).

The interviews presented various kinds of *guanxi*, from the common classmate and countryman all the way to relatives, about whom Chinese care the most. Some interviewees

even entered the enterprise at the same time as their friends, family members, classmates, etc. They worked in the same position or stayed in the same dormitory. Some were employed because they had been interviewed by certain people; others had been superiors or subordinates. In addition, similar personalities could form hidden relationships.

You must enter the close circle, such as concurrent employees, who went on duty in the same place, slept in the same dormitory, and were linked in countless ways.

The leader likes subordinates with compatible personalities.

My superior is also the previous subordinate of this administration director.

(b) *Guanxi* intensity: Even for the same *guanxi* type, such as classmates, the intensity of specific *guanxi* may be quite different, and individual motives and effort can significantly impact the intensity of the *guanxi*. Some interviewees mentioned the promotion issue; they indicated that, except for performance, *guanxi* intensity plays a quite prominent role and even directly affects the final outcome of promotion decisions.

"Two people were in conflict, and they beat the table in front of the boss. This embarrassed the boss and made him decide to fire the vice general manager, who was his old cadre; they had worked together to capture the territory. The vice general manager had resources and did a lot of business; he was very close to boss."

Promotion is strongly related to factions; those who are close to the boss get promoted, and those who are not close do not.

Political motivation, political ability and political context

Following the same procedure mentioned above, three other categories were extracted (i.e., political motivation, political ability, and political context), as well as their subcategories. All are depicted in Fig. 1. In our study, political motivation is the idea and willingness to encourage individuals to engage in organizational political activities, including participation, neutral, and rejection motivation. Political ability implies the capability and possibility of individuals in the organization successfully completing political activities. Political environment includes organization characteristics

and the cognition of political behavior at organizational level. This is the context in which OP develops.

Theory coding: emergence of three functional mechanisms

Theory coding is an integrated process used to analyze the relationships between categories. Theory coding solidifies connections between the categories obtained from focus coding, turning analytical stories into theoretical models. For example, when comparing and connecting the two categories, interest structure and power structure, along with their stories (see sample memos below), the relationship between the two categories gradually becomes clear. What unfolds in front of the researchers is that “interest structure stimulates power structure”; then, the theory code “motivation mechanism” emerges. In this way theory coding explains the general situation of a particular phenomenon, and generalizes the outcome.

“The president has no real power. He is being controlled by two shareholders” (focus coding: power structure).

“Only when the advice of a subordinate is confirmed to be beneficial to the organizational interests will the boss accept the subordinate as an insider.” (focus coding: interest structure).

“A manager may reject the new business and push aside the newly-recruited talent, since he felt that his position was threatened” (focus coding: interest structure).

After the theory coding had been completed, a holistic developing and evolving OP framework with two antecedents and four moderating factors, including interest structure, power structure, *guanxi* structure, political motivation, political ability and political context, and three functional mechanisms, comprise motivation, selection and condition mechanism, was developed (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 attempts to map a systematic OP framework in the context of the current Chinese economy and culture. The main antecedents, moderating factors and mechanisms are identified. The factors located at the left part of the figure, including interest structure and power structure, and the factors at the right part, which are comprised of the *guanxi* structure, political motivation, political ability and political context, represent the antecedents and moderating factors of OP, respectively. The two arrows between interest structure and power structure refer to the interactions between the two structures, the motivation mechanism and the selection mechanism. In addition, the principal axis in the middle of the figure, two thick solid lines, shows the main path to stimulate OP. This means that interest structure, the very source of OP, motivates OP via power structure. The up-and-down dotted arrows indicate moderating mechanisms, which moderate the impact of power structure on OP. The main elements in this framework thus seem to include:

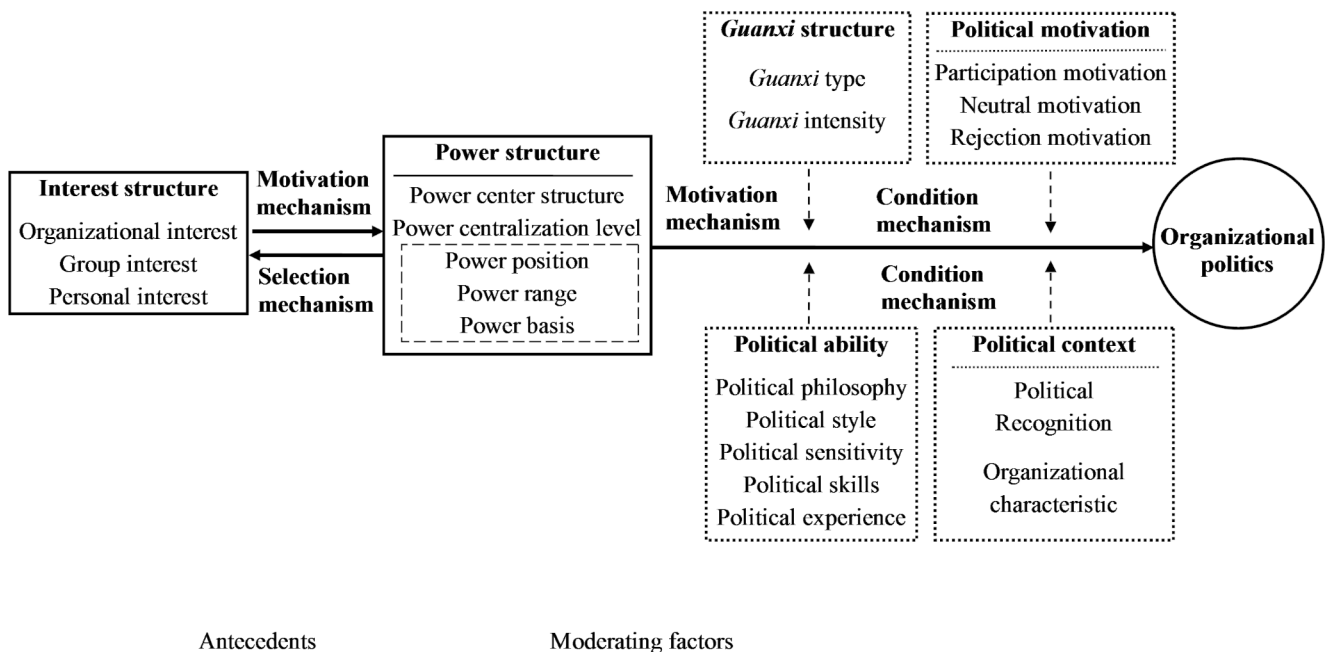


Fig. 1 Integrated Model of Antecedents, Moderating Factors and Functional Mechanisms of Organizational politics
Source: Figure created by the authors based on our theory coding

Motivation mechanism

The interest structure stimulates the power structure, and the power structure has an impact on the development of OP.

Selection mechanism

In reality, OP is a complex gaming process of continuous selection. In addition to the motivation from the interest structure to the power structure, a reverse effect also exists (a selection mechanism) from the power structure to the interest structure.

Moderating mechanism

The moderating mechanism includes the timing, degree, size and range of the moderating factors' influence on OP.

(a) The moderating effect of *guanxi* structure: The impact of interest structure and power structure on OP is influenced by the *guanxi* structure. This makes OP even more complex, due to factors like social relationships and reputation. (b) The moderating effect of political motivation: People initiate actions according to their motivation. Those with different political motivations will adopt different attitudes toward political behavior. (c) The moderating effect of political ability: Political ability plays a vital role in moderating political activity. Those with brilliant political philosophies operate from strategically advantageous positions and possess theoretical and ideological dominance. (d) The moderating effect of political context: Political context comprehensively influences the initiation, evolution, and final outcome of OP.

Theoretical sampling: spatial self-check tool for findings

Theoretical sampling is the final stage and is also essentially one of the self-check tools for grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 2017). The authors conducted theoretical sampling of the finalized categories, and five new organizations in Xiamen City were studied. Coding was applied to verify that categories had not changed, which proved the theory to be saturated (Tian et al., 2015).

Memo-writing: temporal self-check tool for findings

Another self-check tool in grounded theory is memo-writing, which runs through the entire study process. Researchers collect information and write memos during and after each interview and the three stages of the coding process. Writing memos helps researchers to better understand the

data and stimulates theoretical thinking. In addition, the memos themselves are important sources of data.

Discussion

Findings

Trying to resolve research conflicts, namely that there are contradictory findings that have not yet been fully explained by existing theory, this study reveals a systematic developing and evolving OP model. The model itself implies: two antecedents (i.e., interest structure and power structure), four moderating factors (i.e., *guanxi* structures, political motivation, political ability and political context), and three functional evolutionary mechanisms (i.e., motivation, selection, and condition). The motivation mechanism is formed by the interest structure of the multi-heterogeneous and intrinsic conflict that initiates potential OP. This implies the psychological calculation of price and expected benefit of a power and interest structure, turning potential conflict into organizational political action. Along with the evolution of gaming participation, the unbalanced interactions of power and interest structure (i.e., motivation and selection) determine the progression and outcome of political activity. *Guanxi* structure, political motivation, political ability, and political context moderate the stimulation, actuation, and selection of organizational political activity. The same factors affect the timing, degree, size, range, and the outcome of activities. The six factors and three mechanisms that influence OP (which have been proposed here) provide a relatively complete and systematic model that we believe could better explain and analyze OP within an enterprise.

Our model, which emerges from data, is consistent with existing theory. For instance, the complex interaction between interest structure and power structure is in line with the social exchange theory (Cropanzano et al., 2017). The moderate effect of *guanxi* structure, political motivation, political ability and political environment has roots in the natural system perspective of organization theory, since an organization is actually a political consortium of participants with different motivations (Scott, 2015). We also believe that power structure drives organizational politics, which is in accordance with existing findings. Prior studies have shown that centralization and hierarchical level influence organizational politics (Landells & Albrecht, 2017; Andrews & Kacmar, 2001; Ferris & Kacmar, 1992). Actually, in this study, power structure is defined as the distribution and connection of power, in which centralization and hierarchical level become involved. *Guanxi* practices show how performance and contributions lead to optimal interpersonal relationships for decision-making (Nolan &

Rowley, 2020; Lv et al., 2022; Wu & Ma, 2022). Building a durable and reliable *guanxi* is the basis of trust and loyalty, which is necessary for doing business and good relations in Chinese companies (Zhao & Castka, 2021; Ma et al., 2023).

Implications for theory and research

This study investigates OP practices, looking deeply into the black box of Chinese firms. The study uses grounded theory and identifies two antecedents, four moderating factors and three mechanisms of OP, effectively enhancing the overall understanding of OP. This research results are in line with the essences of models that discovered the relationships between politics and outcomes (Abbas et al., 2014; Hsiung et al., 2012), in the way that politics does have the power to influence various performances. In addition, this study reveals the inner mechanisms of how OP occurs. By offering a relatively systematic framework to explain and analyze OP within enterprises, this study helps to explain some of the contradictory findings mentioned above. Our research also complements the models that had already been attributed in the OP field.

The findings here are theoretically interesting for several reasons. First, this study reveals an OP development model from an organizational perspective. Without this view of OP, we risk missing important aspects of OP's development at organizational level. Admittedly, previous research has identified the importance of the interests of different groups and their ability to influence decision outcomes (Bidwell, 2012). However, our research provides a more detailed view of the relationship of these two organizational factors in the framework and explicitly specifies the different roles they play in OP development (i.e., the interest structure impacts OP, and political ability moderates the effect). Therefore, the framework offers a fuller and more specific picture that helps explain the logic of OP. Furthermore, the proposed framework enables further research that could consider different variables for empirical analysis in different ways.

Second, this research deepens our understanding of how OP is developed in organizations. The approach used here deviates from past studies, which tend to focus on OP's outcomes, while this study reveals the factors linked to the development of OP. In particular, our study shows: (1) antecedents and the moderating factors of OP (i.e., power structure, interest structure, *guanxi* structure, political motivation, political ability, and political context), and (2) the functional mechanisms of OP (i.e., motivation, selection, and conditions).

Finally, the model proposed here allows us to interpose a long-standing debate as to whether or not OP positively affects organizational and individual outcomes (Chang et al., 2009). This is achieved by introducing *guanxi* structure

as a cultural dimension into the framework. Thus, this study contributes to cross-cultural research by considering *guanxi* structure as one of the important moderating factors, thus enabling us to have a contingency perspective. This finding is in accordance with previous research (Abbas et al., 2014; Vigoda, 2001) in terms of the way to consider cultural factors, such as power distance differences (Hofstede, 1983) and also offers new evidence from China. This cross-cultural factor may contribute to understanding the generalizability of theories that link OP to employee outcomes. Chinese cultural factors of the employees, such as *guanxi* (personal connections) influence OP (Guo et al., 2019; Gu et al., 2020).

Practical implications

Our framework enhances the overall understanding of OP, which could eventually facilitate more efficient management. The model helps to sort out the forces of all parties in OP, identify the key elements and respond effectively. In essence, the model works as a tool that can be used to analyze the organizational political issues in practical work. Firstly, based on the functions of interest structure and power structure and their interactive functional mechanism of motivation and selection, the model could be helpful for managers seeking to develop more effective organizational structures. The model balances both factors and disables the negative interactions between them. Secondly, in our model, *guanxi* structure is especially vital in terms of helping foreign-funded enterprises understand the way OP works when running businesses in China, due to the different cultural backgrounds. Thirdly, HR departments may match varied positions with appropriately motivated talents, by understanding how political motivation moderates the relationship between power structure and OP. Last but not least, this study suggests that political ability should be included in leadership training, since our model shows that political ability is one of the important ingredients needed for leadership.

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Data Availability The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Declarations

Competing interest The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author

states that there is no conflict of interest.

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