

Meso-level Mechanisms of Optimizing the Business Environment in Ethnic Regions on the Construction of Community: a Case Study of Linxia Ethnic Specialty Food Industry

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ABSTRACT

The optimization of the sphere of business in ethnic territories can bring about spillover effects on community building by organizational coordination and the change in rules. Nevertheless, there is no adequate explanation of the intermediate mechanisms that propagate these effects based on currently available theory. In order to bridge this void, we analyze the ethnic specialty food sector in Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture, Gansu Province, and present a meso-level analysis framework with the focus on institutional supply -organizational coordination- relationship reconstruction- community outcomes. Our findings indicate that industrial park anchoring, chain-leader enterprise mobilization, standardization and brand integration have transformed the industry into organized cooperation instead of fragmented operations. Such alterations are creating step-by-step conditions to build communities since they allow establishing common rules, expressing interests, and strengthening the interactions between the participants. Our claim is that the spill-over into community building of business environment optimization does not rely on the policy rhetoric. It is determined by the way institutional supply is converted into steady cooperative relationships and continuous interaction situations through industrial organization. The research offers a fruitful analytical viewpoint on the issue of how the regulation of business environment in ethnic regions could play a role in building communities.

Keywords: *Business environment, Ethnic regions, Community construction, Meso mechanisms.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the Regulation on Optimizing the Business Environment the notion of business environment means institutional and systemic factors determining the activity of market economy. In essence, this idea is to create the state that is stable, fair, transparent, and predictable. To reach this goal it should be done through reforms based on the principles of the market and the rule of law. These reforms are an overall effort in governance that includes three main components: providing rules, ensuring stable expectations, and creating trust. Not only these attempts affect the effectiveness of resource allocation processes. They can also change the limits of cooperation and the circumstances in which interactions take place, exerting a direct effect on community making.

Ethnic regions tend to experience these consequences not only in terms of economic efficiency but also extend to the sphere of social relations. The economic activities are a crucial vehicle of social reproduction and inter-ethnic communication due to multi-ethnic settlement patterns, cultural diversity, and a dual embeddedness in both local and trans-local networks. The example of Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture demonstrates this process in a clear manner. In Linxia, the chain-based and standardized implementation of ethnic cuisine has been developed through the concept of the Hezhou Flavor Linxia Cuisine brand, [2] which is based on a mix of the integrated policy tools. The strategy demonstrates what enhancing business environment may influence community construction through restructuring the industrial framework.

Consequently, the case offers an exemplary framework of examining the meso-level processes that relate institutional governance to social integration. [7]

The field evidence indicates that there is a distinct organizational change in the ethnic specialty food industry in Linxia. The industry has shifted away the fragmented, trust-based activities to organized cooperation and is currently supported by industrial parks, major companies, and regulation-driven management. In the course of such a shift, transactional relationships formerly carried out via personal networking and informal coordination are slowly being incorporated into trackable and accountable cooperation systems. Hence, a major aspect of business environment optimization turns into a driving force behind social reorganization and the creation of communities¹. City administrators have chosen strategic measures aimed at ready-made meals, meat processing, and dairy produce, using the platform investment and chain-leadership tools. Simultaneously, national-level standardisation processes of ready-made meals form a macro-institutional setting in which trust is stabilised by the governance. On this basis, the current research considers a central issue: given the context of multi-ethnic co-residence, what happens to the business environment development and goes further than the cost reduction role it plays traditionally to create tangible community construction effects due to industrial coordination? What intermediary mechanisms can help with this translation? In which boundary conditions does it work? When could coordination be replaced with differentiation? Such questions are the core of our theoretical framework.

The given work has not regarded the business environment, industrial organization, and community construction as different topics that are positioned next to each other. It is rather an attempt at explaining the relationship between these three aspects as they appear in real life within the industrial practice of ethnic regions. The research question is guided by three fundamental questions: the first is how institutional supply redefines the area of coordination; the second is how coordination in turn alters social relations; and the last one is in which circumstances such alteration ultimately leads to a spillover effect on community construction. This research has the greatest worth in

providing an analysis-oriented approach based on cases, instead of making normative suggestions.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Institutional economics is able to explain what changes the borders of industrial coordination in the business environment. Its main point is that transaction costs and uncertainty jointly define the manner in which market participants coordinate their actions.[8] At the same time, institutional supply tends to alleviate uncertainty and stabilize mutual expectations that, in turn, affects the organizational structure. In this view, the business environment is not simply an issue of administrative simplification. It acts as a major institutional platform on which depends the scope and trustworthiness of cooperative action.

Nevertheless, it is not sufficient to rely exclusively on institutional economics to understand the process of how industrial coordination in ethnic regions produces the creation of communities. The embeddedness theory states that economic actions are invariably rooted in the prevailing social relations. Industrial collaboration networks in ethnic regions tend to be interwoven with kinship ties, local associations, and religious ties. Shifting some forms of cooperation out of a personalized trust into an institutionalized generalized trust, the business environment could greatly alter the stability and sustainability of cross-group and cross-locality cooperation.[17]

Community construction theory is adding another level of complexity to the idea that restructuring social relations will not necessarily lead to communal results. Communities are not a natural occurrence, but rather they form slowly through the development of shared rules, sustained interactions, and accumulated common experience. Taking this into account, the current paper is not just putting the three theoretical frameworks next to each other. Rather, it creates an explanatory chain that is step-by-step - starting with the institutional supply, then organizational coordination and relation reconstruction, and finally reaching community outcomes. This model serves to shed some light on the way in which optimization of business environment influences community construction through industrial synergy.[18]

The suggested framework will be unfolded along four steps. To begin with, institutional supply,

1. State Council of the People's Republic of China. Regulations on Optimizing the Business Environment[Z]. 2019. (in Chinese with English abstract)

including rules, standards, services and infrastructure, reduces uncertainty and defines the limits of collaboration. Secondly, organizational coordination is used to describe the trend towards chain-based division of labour, platform-based cooperation, and brand-led integration. Thirdly, the concept of relation reconstruction depicts the shift between particularized trust and the generalised institutional trust that in turn brings stability to the way interests are expressed and causes more frequent interaction. Finally, community outcomes are defined as the process-oriented outcomes, namely, common rules, thicker interaction networks, and increasing dependence on institutions. The main point behind this claim is that social spillover happens gradually, and industrial organization is the intermediate layer.

The earlier research on ethnic industries also focuses on growth performance, brand marketing strategies, and policy measures but ignores much of the intermediary mechanisms that link the optimization of the business environment to community development. This meso-level process is reclaimed in the present study at the border of institutions, organizations and interactions.

Based on the analysis presented above, three testable propositions can be derived. The initial one is the one suggesting the institutional supply as a factor that redefines the limits of coordination and hence directs the transition between disorganized activities and organized cooperation. The second proposition is that some form of spillover effect in the creation of a community is not merely based on increased scale, but that the persistence of common rules, stated interests, and ongoing interaction. The third is a warning that should institutional supply not bring about comprehensive coverage or when there are concentrations of resources in a small number of core nodes, efficiency improvements will be attained without extending beyond them. The purpose of this inquiry is not to decide if optimization works or not, but to reveal the principles according to which it functions and the circumstances under which it does not work.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

The adopted approach in this study is an in-depth single-case design with the inclusion of meso-level mechanism analysis. The study site chosen is Linxia Hui Autonomous Prefecture in order to explore how the business environment optimization facilitates community construction through industrial coordination. There are a number

of characteristics that render this case especially informative: a lengthy industrial chain, a large number of actors, a thick regulatory structure, and an intensive market orientation. All these factors combine to focus the whole institution supply process in which institutional supply penetrates industrial organization and changes the modes in which actors cooperate.[4] Empirical research is centered in a critical period commencing in 2023. It analyzes the relationships between institutional supply, organizational coordination, and inter-actor interaction in four major functions, including anchoring industrial parks, implementing chain-leader enterprises, developing standard systems, and brand growth.

We have used three significant sources of information based on our data. The first one comprises institutional documents that are produced at the state and ministry level. The second one involves policy documents, government work reports and media reports of Gansu Province and Linxia Prefecture. The third one has comparative materials taken out of the Qinghai Lamian and Xinjiang Nang industries that allow us to determine boundary conditions. To serve the operational needs, we divide business environment optimization into five types of institutional supply: regulatory transparency, park and infrastructure provision, quality standards and inspection, development of platform-type organizations, and social branding. The community construction, on the other hand, will be evaluated in four aspects, including equality in governance, intensity of interest articulation, density of interaction, and degree of institutional dependence. Three approaches are combined in an analytical strategy: textual analysis, process tracing, and cross-source verification.

4. CASE DESCRIPTION: THE ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES OF LINXIA'S INDUSTRY

The developmental trajectory of the ethnic specialty food sector in Linxia has moved past the basic increase in size. It has since taken on clear organizational restructuring. The actions including anchoring industrial parks, mobilising chain-leading companies, coordinating platforms, brand integration, and standardisation are not independent actions. They are rather a set of mutually reinforcing parts of a new operational model. Connections, which have long been scattered among catering establishments, family workshops,

and local networks, are slowly being introduced into a cooperative network that is based on rules and facilitated by platforms. The 2024 China Ethnic Cuisine Industry Development Conference, held in Linxia, indicates the governments continued commitment in this field.[6]

Multiple indicators are also increasing steadily when looking at industrial scale and structural change based on publicly available information and reliable media reports. They include the number of food processing companies, above-scale businesses, industrial park development, supply chain programs, and stores that operate under public brands. These trends do not imply mere quantitative growth. There is a more significant structural change underlying these trends: a shift towards a less fragmented, intuitive set of activities towards a system that involves the division of tasks within the chain, coordination of activities through platforms, and governance using standards.[5]

One of the features that are most striking about this organizational transition is the proximity between the governance systems at the local levels and those at the national level institutions. Using the industrial chain leadership structure, Linxia Prefecture has integrated investment promotion, resource allocation, infrastructure delivery and enterprise services into a single organized system. The senior officials personally monitor the activities aimed at extending, adding and reinforcing the chain. It is a break away from the overall policy support to the overall governance systems based on the functioning of industrial chains.

An important shift in the course of action is the establishment of the joint venture supply chain company by the chain-leading company and the local state-owned capital platform. It does not merely attract business but gradually evolves loose, experience-based offline transactions into networked collaboration networks based on the platform that combines the features of order aggregation, process control, and quality tracing. The local governance instruments thus cease to be just written policy documents but become part of the fabric of industrial organization and directly change the manner in which actors interact and relate.

The process of bringing in chain-leading enterprises is not only a consequence of attracting investments. It is a crucial point at which the business environment optimization ceases to be just an institutional text and becomes a reality of

organizational capacities. The importance of this is that the enterprise did not enter into the picture after cooperative relationships had become established, but rather at a preliminary level where cooperative relationships were weak. Through its implementation of all the institutional arrangements at once, it minimized uncertainties beforehand and created the initial trust of cooperation.

Public sources report that negotiations with Shandong Huifa Food Co., Ltd. were not only viewed as an issue of attracting capital, but also as an act of empowerment of both parties. Through the signed agreement, priority was given to the employment of local workers especially the unemployed rural workforce and those who were previously impoverished, plus training on skills which would assist them to integrate into the modern industrial systems. Simultaneously, the company needed to fit into regional agrarian supply chains, increasing and unifying the purchase of specialized products. Hence, this objective did not involve the implementation of some project alone. It sought to integrate the chain-leadership enterprise into the local employment structure and supply chains, making it a source of industrial restructuring.

As a result, regional authorities have offered customized institutional support which focuses on reducing barriers to entry and balancing expectations of cooperation. It consisted of tailor-made standardized factories, reduction of the initial rents, agency services to register and approve, synchronized access to credit and improvements in cold chain logistics, water and electric infrastructure. Such measures are far more than the improvement of the administrative efficiency. They change unpredictable cross-locality relations into contractual agreements subject to negotiations, predictability and enforcement. Due to the bilateral agreement, the joint venture had been registered, the factory had been refurbished, and the equipment had been debugged at a high clip, with the production starting operation in just six months. Coordinated approvals, factor guarantees, and customized services taken together are a package of institutional conditions that enable cross-locality enterprises to enter and contribute to the development of initial trust between local actors.

Meanwhile, national measures to standardize and regulate prepared dishes provided Linxia with the necessary compliance assistance to make its industrial upgrade. China reached a new level of standardized development in 2024 as the authorities

defined the meaning, extent, and regulation requirements. The institutional window was ideal to Linxia when it chose to focus on prepared dishes. Local governments made investment in public capacity to conduct inspections, cold-chain logistics and quality traceability and national compliance demand became a capability to access the industry and build its reputation. Consequently, the associated costs of regulatory alignment with regard to the national market were greatly minimized.

In terms of market players, the enhancement of business environment can be observed through various policies that have been implemented in the past to improve financial assistance, employment opportunities, logistics facilitation, and marketing of brands. As per the information in the public records, about 73.41 million yuan in subsidies and incentives has been issued to the purpose of brand building, standardization of production, and technological improvements. A further 422 million yuan of entrepreneurial loans have also relieved some of the financing constraints on small and medium-sized enterprises as well as individual entrepreneurs. Furthermore, the establishment of brand systems and the growth of catering networks have generated approximately 170,000 positions. All these initiatives create the virtuous circle where the process of industrial growth and income growth based on employment support each other.

The measures are not just about providing external assistance to growing businesses. In essence, they make it easier to access contemporary collaborative industrial networks. Before, farm families, cooperatives, micro-processors, brand shops, supply chain firms, and platform business had to use divided resources to compete on their own in the market. But now, they are slowly being integrated into an interconnected system supported by financing services, logistics guarantees, uniform processes, and brand systems. It is exactly at this point where the optimization of the business environment attains prerequisites of integration effects: not only the improvement of conditions in which enterprises develop, but the ability of actors of different ethnicities, sizes and functions to be included into the same organizational order.

5. PATHWAYS OF COMMUNITY CONSTRUCTION

Social development in an ethnic area is not simply a matter of conceptual support or common interest, but rather, it should be institutionalised

with common norms and continuous interaction. The Linxia example shows how industrial coordination is used to optimize the business environment and thus produce fair governance, articulation of interests and institutional dependence, which are some micro-social conditions that are necessary to create a community.[20]

The fair governance can be taken as a logical starting point. Cooperation moves out of the realm of identity-based trust to procedural trust through the replacement of differential trust structures (kinship ties, acquaintance networks and local customs) with uniform rules and state control, which allows people of different ethnic backgrounds to cooperate across primordial lines.

Technical rules and institutionalized enforcement are critical entry points within the food industry. The national regulatory standards on prepared dishes, along with the park-based organization, standardization,² and traceability of Linxia have turned over the transactions as reputation-based to institutionalized ones based on third-party inspection and standardized practices. Institutional-based fairness comes into effect when different actors operate under the same set of rules - it goes beyond the initial borders of the groups and develops a firm foundation of inter-ethnic collaboration.

The process of interest articulation needs to be more than just including various stakeholders in the industrial chain, as it should include the integration of such different stakeholders into the processes of value realization, which are interdependent. The basis of community stability is based on a commonality of interests; only when actors establish authentic benefit-sharing and risk-taking relations can cooperative order go beyond transactional features and become a stable relationship.

The case of Linxia shows this embedding: chain-leader introduction, forty-two supply chain companies, and an organized chain connecting farmers, cooperatives, processors, platform, and brand stores have tied Han and Hui actors in a common industrial ecosystem. The returns and risks are not isolated anymore but mutually influenced by order stability, brand reputation, and standard implementation. In this governance structure, the

2. International Organization for Standardization. ISO 22000 -Food safety management systems[EB/OL]. <https://www.iso.org/standard/69085.html>, 2024.

government is the coordinator, the chain-leader has the exporting capacity, and the SMEs and farmers participate based on the specialization of their labour division - creating binding power beyond single transactions.

However, this mechanism is not inherently stable. The process of interest articulation only gains its material basis in a community when values are distributed fairly. When chain-leaders have all the benefits and micro-actors have all the risks without any dividends, articulation turns into structural dependence. To maintain this foundation, fair distribution mechanisms and risk mitigation measures in chain-based collaboration are therefore necessary.

The city of Linxia has launched specific safety measures: enhancing rural cooperatives by subsidy and technical training in order to promote stable order-based relationships with chain-leaders; developing a common cold-chain logistics to save money on micro-actors; and establishing public technical service platforms offering free quality inspection and standard consultation. Such measures equalize interest relations on the chain and ensure that all the different actors can share dividends fairly without the process of interest articulation deteriorating into dependency.

Interaction and integration are the essential connections between the institutional frameworks and the socio-psychological community formation. There is a structural framework offered by rules and interests, but with no long-term high-frequency interaction, cooperative relationships can be purely instrumental and do not sink into inter-ethnic comprehension. Community does not happen immediately due to common institutions and interests, but as a result of multiple practical confirmation and reproduction.

The collaboration between industrial chains institutionalizes such change. It is in the context of co-work that the principles of co-residence, co-study, co-work, and co-enjoyment of the state are most actively implemented. The ethnic food industry in Linxia integrates a variety of actors into common production chains-standardized bargaining, joint manufacturing, coordination of logistics, and unified training all generate cross-ethnic, high-frequency interaction situations. What matters here is not the intensity but the fact that it is cooperation, which is no longer episodic but routine and professional.

These interactions are organized under the influence of brand norms and service standards; they settle down into permanent cooperative behaviors and cross-cultural understanding - creating occupational ties that go beyond kinship and localism. It turns out to be an essential mediator between the community of interests and the community of social life.

Institutional identity is not an abstract approval but a long-term process of realization: it is only through integration into universal standards and uniformity that local specifics and ethnic assets acquire market credibility. It is a higher-order result built up by the fair administration, expression of interests and their interrelationship and it gains endogenous momentum as the actors observe actual benefits instead of reacting to external pressure.

The Linxia ethnic food industry is a self-proclaimed supplier of "Belt and Road" foods that are destined to national and foreign markets. It requires integration into strict internal and external regulatory frameworks, including food safety management, quality traceability, halal certification, and import-export registration. The governments have created inspection, testing, traceability, and certification capacities as public goods offering businesses affordable or no cost institutional support.³ They do not serve as the mere means of obtaining qualifications, but to ensure that local industry finds its footing within more extensive market orders and regulatory mechanisms. Institutional identity does not in this case eradicate local features but facilitates their increased market articulation under a common set of regulations. Market agents therefore slowly rise above reliance on particular cooperative regulations to value appreciation of national unified market order and contemporary governance- providing basis of community of institutional identity.

The Linxia experience follows a progressive course: rule supply-synergy deepening-interaction intensification-identification strengthening. Transparency of rules increases cooperative expectations; cooperation in-depth strengthens the expression of interests; the increased level of interaction builds up social capital; institutional interdependence strengthens the stability of rules. However, this process is not natural or linear. It needs a sustainable institutional supply, fair sharing of resources and open organizational structures.

3. International Organization for Standardization. ISO 22000 -Food safety management

Unrest at any link will bring the construction of the community to a halt at short-term cooperation or create new exclusion. The ultimate question of whether optimization will spread into the social integration domain does not depend on policy formulation but on how the mechanisms of integration generation operate in the stable manner.

6. DISCUSSION: BOUNDARY CONDITIONS AND COMPARISON

The business environment optimization does not necessarily imply community construction, as its effect depends on the specifics of industrial morphology, the availability of resources and inclusivity of institutional supply. Although the Linxia example illustrates how chain-based coordination can lead to rule-sharing and increased interaction, it also indicates the dangers of core-periphery differentiation. Over-concentration of standards, brands, and channels in parks or chain-leaders, together with unequal access to certification, logistics, and financing of smaller actors can lead to poor governance and make the articulation of interest become a form of dependence. In this case, the extent of the spillover into the community results is not just based on the institutional supply, but also on its equitable coverage and integration.

The business environment optimization works under different organizational logics. The community-construction effects are situational: institutional supply can go beyond efficiency benefits and create social cohesion when it is deeply entrenched into the industrial organization and supports fair interest articulation and continuous interaction. In cases where such embedding is missing or uneven, results might still be restricted to the upgrading of an economy. Therefore, community construction analysis in ethnic areas should be based on specific industrial forms- the model presented in this paper is a limited explanatory device, not an overall solution.

7. CONCLUSION

The paper shows that in ethnic regions, business environment optimization can be seen as an economic governance model aimed at achieving efficiency gains and market growth, but it may also extend to the processual outcomes of community development by way of reconstruction of the industrial organization, sharing of rules, and increased interaction. In the case of Linxia, it is

shown that this spillover is not a natural consequence of development but rather the outcome of prolonged actions of institutional optimization through organized co-operation and repeated interactions. Precisely, equal governance conditions facilitate the transition of cooperative bases between identity-based trust and procedural trust; interest articulation involves other actors in interconnected value realization processes; increased interaction turns institutional cooperation into observable cross-ethnic interaction; and institutional dependence increases the stability of implementation of the rules and the joint order.

However, it has to be remembered that, due to limitations in material types, the understanding of subjective experience and long-term identity modifications in this paper tends to remain rather limited. The future studies ought to include additional interview, survey, and tracking materials to increase even more the ability to identify the boundaries of mechanisms, their intensity, and the dynamism of the changes.

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