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From vocation to profession: multiple identities of Chinese management academics

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The academic landscape in China has undergone a profound transformation, shifting from a spiritually rooted vocation to a model driven by managerial efficiency, catalyzed by market reforms that dismantled the traditional, centrally planned system. This seismic shift has forced scholars to adapt to a performance-oriented environment, leading to significant transformations in their professional identities. Contemporary literature, primarily centered on Western role-theory perspectives, often fails to capture the intricate cognitive dynamics that shape academic identities under the varied influence of power dimensions. This study addresses this gap by exploring how Chinese academics' identities are constructed amidst a complex interplay of power dynamics, external changes, and internal motivations, moving beyond simplistic group-level categorizations. Employing an intersectional approach within a multidimensional organizational power framework, this research utilizes case study methods to probe deeply into the multiple identities of academics in the Business Management discipline across various Chinese higher education institutions. The study reveals a dynamic interplay among multiple power dimensions, including American research hegemony, industrialization of academic governance, self-regulation, and rebellion against 'academic games'. These forces collectively shape distinct identity modules among Chinese academics: fanatic convert of American research, career survivor, diligent game player, and career retreator, each responding uniquely to the evolving academic pressures. This research significantly enhances our understanding of academic identity construction by extending beyond traditional role-based analyses to encompass a broader spectrum of cognitive processes. It highlights the nuanced intersectionality of academic identities, effectively integrating structuralist perspectives with personal agency. This comprehensive examination provides critical insights into the development of Management disciplines, university governance, and professional practices within the academic community in China.

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Introduction

Max Weber once depicted the ideal scholar as someone for whom academia is a ‘vocation of the spirit,’ characterized by a profound passion and dedication akin to a believer’s devotion to their faith (Weber, 1946). However, the contemporary academic landscape, especially in management studies, faces significant challenges. The rising influence of managerialism has cultivated a global culture that prioritizes performance, accountability, and instrumental research, diminishing the authenticity and integrity of scholarly work (Alvesson et al., 2022; Soin and Huber, 2023). This paradigm shift has recast academia as a competitive arena where scholars are compelled to produce outputs incessantly (Aboubichr and Conway, 2023; Kalfa et al., 2018).

Similarly, China has experienced a comparable trend. Initially modeled on the highly centralized Soviet system in post-1949, Chinese academia was governed under a ‘paternalistic management’ model. This model exerted direct governmental control over all core activities, operating institutions akin to bureaucratic *danweis* (work units), providing extensive state-defined roles and securities, known as the ‘*steel bowl*’ guarantee, which included housing, spousal employment, children’s education, and healthcare (Li et al., 2013; Zhao and Hao, 2010). The post-1992 era, catalyzed by Deng Xiaoping’s market-driven reforms, significantly disrupted this *danwei* system, transitioning faculty from ‘unit persons’ entrenched in the state apparatus to ‘societal persons’ engaged with the market economy (Chen, 2020). The dawn of the new millennium brought accelerated transformations to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) through expansions, mergers, and market-oriented reforms (Chen, 2020), rapidly reshaping the academic landscape and imposing new challenges on faculty for career progression and survival.

Problems emerge in this evolving context, for example, dominant research paradigms are particularly constraining the development of management studies, limiting the generation of original theories that are relevant to Chinese management contexts (Du and Sun, 2022; He et al., 2021). This is because the pressure to publish in high-ranking Western journals often drives Chinese scholars towards adopting technical statistical methods to enhance publication metrics, thereby creating a disconnect between theoretical research and practical management applications (Lv, 2010). As a result, academia has evolved from a spiritual calling into a more conventional profession. This profound shift has led to identity crises among academics, who are increasingly labeled as ‘academic migrant workers’ (Han and Xie, 2022), ‘knowledge workers’ (Huang and Peng, 2015), or likened to ‘worker bees’ (Lian, 2012), reflecting a significant secularization of the academia. It is crucial to explore how individual scholars are navigating and articulating their identities during this transformation, shedding light on the broader implications of these changes for the academic profession.

The multiplicity of academic identity is widely recognized (Brown, 2022; Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015; Ramarajan, 2014), yet analyses of strategies and responses to external changes in a diversified, competitive, and market-oriented environment tend to result in high-level, archetypal responses. Moreover, contemporary research on academic identity construction tends to employ narrow perspectives, primarily using role theory (Ashforth, 2000; Brown, 2022; Stryker and Burke, 2000). This approach views academics as passive role-bearers, exploring how these roles influence their identities. These issues essentially overlook the inherent complexity of academics’ self-aspects, leaving more fine-grained assessments of internal cognition untouched (Linville, 1987). While identities are constructed within power relations (Bardon and Pez , 2020; Brown, 2022; O’Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016), they have yet to be fully molded to

reflect the multi-dimensional aspects of cognition (Ramarajan, 2014). Hence, parameterizing academics’ cognition from a perspective of power dynamics and integrating it into the framework of various multiple academic identities seems to be promising. Against this backdrop, we seek to answer the following questions: How do Chinese academics construct their academic identities? How do intersecting dimensions of power contribute to the multiplicity of identity? And in what ways do different dimensions of power interact with one another?

Academic identity research lacks a comprehensive framework that encapsulates its diverse elements (Ramarajan, 2014). To bridge this gap, we adopt an intersectional approach alongside organizational power dimensions. We specifically apply Fleming and Spicer’s (2014) multidimensional power framework, which articulates four dimensions of organizational power: over, through, in, and against. This framework is acutely aware of the nuances in identity construction and performance within power dynamics and aligns with Foucault’s (1988) analysis of identity. Foucault posited that identity involves submission to control and dependency or an attachment to self-identity through consciousness and self-knowledge, both indicative of different forms of power—one dominating and the other submissive. This perspective highlights that power serves as both a mechanism of domination and control (Callero, 2003, p. 120) and a creative force (Taylor, 2011). Indeed, today’s HEIs navigate a myriad of expectations from diverse stakeholders, including states, professional bodies, and the public (Jongbloed et al., 2008; Mainardes et al., 2010). The ‘four dimensions of organizational power’ framework, emphasizing power’s multidirectional nature, is pivotal for analyzing academic identities and understanding the intricate factors influencing social and organizational systems (Alvesson et al., 2008).

This research employs a case study approach, centering on Chinese academics within the Business Management discipline. Unlike the predominant focus on Anglo-Saxon contexts in existing literature, this study explores the distinctive interplay of managerialism with deep-rooted bureaucratic traditions and managerialism in Chinese higher education (Huang et al., 2018; Zhao and Hao, 2010). The paper is structured as follows: The literature review section provides an overview of the various dimensions of academic identity and explores how multidimensional power influences identity construction, highlighting the importance of an intersectional perspective. The subsequent sections delve into the data analysis and present the findings from a qualitative perspective. The paper concludes with a discussion that deepens the understanding of multiple academic identities. It highlights that the identity construction influenced by power transcends a singular or straightforward path, revealing instead a multifaceted interplay of various dimensions.

Theoretical background

Multiple academic identities. Identity is broadly defined as how people make sense of themselves in relation to others (Brown, 2015). This concept is inherently multifaceted, reflecting roles and self-conceptions at both the organizational and societal levels (Brown, 2022). In the realm of postmodern thought, identity is little more than a convenient label that refers to ‘an assembly of fragmented, perpetually shifting discursive positions and performativity effects’ (Brown, 2022). The journey to comprehending the intricacies of multiple identities, however, has been arduous, hindered by their inherent complexity and reliance on specific contexts (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015; Ramarajan, 2014). Research has predominantly focused on marginalized groups (Luiz and Terziev, 2022), yet the exploration of the diverse array

of academic identities remains scant (Ramarajan, 2014), a gap attributable to the autonomy and authority of researchers, which allows for a varied navigation of contexts (Trevelyan, 2001), and the lack of a unified framework for examining identity multiplicity (Kang and Bodenhausen, 2015). The multiplicity surrounding academic identities deserves more scholarly attention, especially considering the challenges associated with the convergence of career development, organizational change, and the convergence of various disciplines. These factors play a significant role in shaping academics' self-perception, sense of belonging, and self-esteem (Henkel, 2005; Li, 2021). A deeper understanding of the multiplicity of identities is paramount in fostering a more dynamic, innovative, and inclusive academic environment while also providing critical insights for organizational interventions.

This paper endeavors to broaden the understanding of 'multiple identities' within the academic sphere. Conventionally, 'multiple identities' refer to an individual's various roles across different social dimensions, including organizational affiliations and personal traits like gender, race, and religion (Ramarajan, 2014). In academia, individuals often embody diverse roles such as teacher, researcher, and administrator. Prior research has explored the multifaceted nature of academics' professional, managerial, and individual identities (Borlaug et al., 2023; Currie and Logan, 2020; Luiz and Terziev, 2022), drawing upon role theory, which posits that identities derive from the meanings individuals attach to their roles within organizations and society (Brown, 2015).

Departing from the traditional lens of role multiplicity, our paper shifts its focus to a cognitive multiplicity of individual academics (Caza et al., 2018; Linville, 1987), particularly within the researcher role. This focus is critical, especially in the context of Chinese business schools where research often takes precedence over teaching, thus shaping the identity of management scholars predominantly as researchers (Han, 2014). This analysis is crucial for unraveling the underlying motivations, values, decision-making, and potential for innovation among academics.

The exploration of academic identities has often been at the group level, categorizing individuals based on their reactions to external changes in a competitive, market-driven environment, such as 'leaders, followers, dropouts, and outsiders' (Han, 2014) or 'protective conservatives, independent selective conformists, and adaptive conformists' (Sitaloppi et al., 2022). Huang (2017) further categorizes academic practitioners who adapt to new managerialism into three types: 'unidimensional adapters, symbolic adapters, and value-split adapters'. This approach, however, tends to overlook the complexity of individual identities and the dynamic nature of their construction. Just as 'Jekyll and Hyde' (Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012) in 'The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde' symbolizes, an academic's identity is a dual personality and dynamic entity, being a 'comprehensive' rather than 'either-or'. Recognizing the multiple dimensions of professional identities is thus essential for a nuanced understanding of the academic profession.

Power and identity construction. In sociology and organization theory, power is generally understood as an influence toward a course of action that an agent would not otherwise undertake (Clegg et al., 2006; Weber, 1978). In contemporary organizational landscapes, identity increasingly becomes a central locus of power (Bardon and Pez , 2020; O'Mahoney and Sturdy, 2016). The prevailing scholarly consensus highlights that involvement in an organization goes beyond economic benefits, significantly shaping how individuals perceive themselves and their worldviews. Scholars focusing on identity and power dynamics have scrutinized how organizations influence individual identities, often

employing power mechanisms to bolster alignment with managerial systems (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). Additionally, these researchers have delved into how individuals within organizations perceive and possibly counter these efforts to direct their identity (Brown et al., 2021).

In this context, Michel Foucault's interpretation of power is particularly pertinent. He challenges traditional notions of power as simply oppressive, instead portraying it as a pervasive, multifaceted, and subtly creative force that shapes subjectivities via discourses and practices (Foucault, 1980; Taylor, 2011). This approach positions subjectivity as a dynamic construct, shaped by history and culture and continually evolving in response to the interplay of power structures (Foucault, 1982; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). Foucauldian perspective thus complements the dual scholarly focus on identity construction: one strand investigating identity regulation (rooted in structural dimensions of power) and another examining identity work (emphasizing the agency of individuals in crafting their identities).

Identity regulation refers to external forces that shape identity perception and enactment, including both social and organizational elements that influence the construction of identity (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). From a social standpoint, a myriad of factors, such as the historical and cultural milieu, prevailing policy frameworks, and the dynamics within academic communities, significantly shape scholars' perceptions of their societal roles and their capacity for driving innovation (Henkel, 2005). For instance, recent research has unpacked the complex interplay between phenomena like 'Englishization' and 'globalization', and their connection to normalization processes, surveillance mechanisms, and a type of identity regulation that seeks to align local academic identities with the global mandate of competitiveness (Boussebaa, 2020; Kothiyal et al., 2018). From an organizational perspective, the characteristics, prevailing culture, and overall climate of academic institutions, along with the multifaceted roles they play, are instrumental in influencing how individuals adapt and adjust their roles (Fitzgerald et al., 2012). A substantial body of research has investigated how various organizational aspects, such as international journal rankings (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017), tenure-track systems (Figlio et al., 2015), modes of administrative management (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016), and the ethos of 'new managerialism' with its focus on evaluation and accountability (Fleming, 2020), are pivotal in shaping the identities of academics.

Moving away from the structural viewpoint of identity regulation, the concept of identity work adopts a more agentic perspective. Academics within this framework have the autonomy to conform to the norms and power structures of their professional environments (e.g., Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Clarke et al., 2012). Conversely, there's a school of thought suggesting that academics can also resist identity regulation. This resistance often manifests subtly through informal behaviors like 'complaining' and 'minimal compliance' (Anderson, 2008) or through expressions of 'cynicism' (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). While such actions may seem to challenge existing power structures (Sewell and Barker, 2006), some argue that they may only offer an illusion of autonomy and freedom rather than genuine liberation (Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006).

Recent scholarly discourse increasingly posits that combining structural and agentic perspectives can yield a more comprehensive theoretical understanding of identity (Day and Balogun, 2018; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2012). The construction of academic identity is seen as a dynamic process that emerges from the intricate interplay between individual agency and the evolving structural contexts within higher education. This process is informed not only by an individual's personal experiences, values,

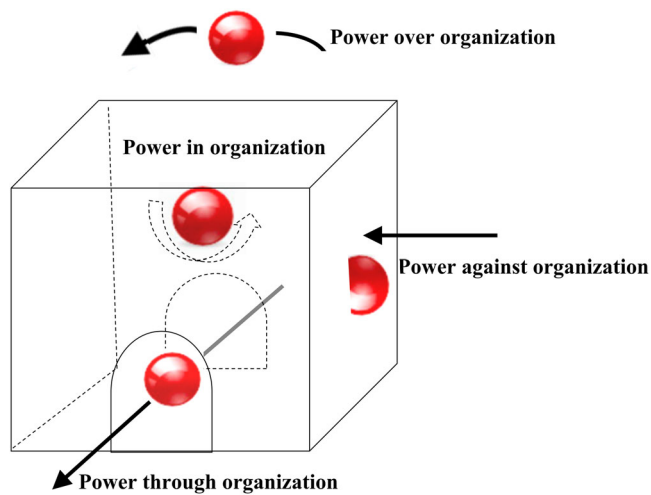


Fig. 1 Four dimensions of organizational power. Source: Adapted from Fleming and Spicer (2014).

and aspirations but is also shaped by the broader context, culture, and prevailing expectations prevalent in the academic world (Corley, 2004). An intersectional perspective further deepens this understanding by examining the multifaceted influence of power on identity construction, thereby offering a holistic approach to analyzing the interconnections between structure and agency.

Four dimensions of organizational power: an intersectionality framework. Intersectionality offers a vivid prism through which the multifaceted manifestations of power in the process of identity construction can be discerned (Ramarajan, 2014), providing a scholarly lens that harmonizes structural and agentic perspectives. The genesis of intersectionality lies in the feminism of women of color and ethnic minorities in the West, highlighting the simultaneity and multiplicity of power (Combahee River Collective, 1978, pp. 362–372). Collins and Bilge (2016) articulate a general description of intersectionality: ‘...People’s lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped by many axes that work together and influence each other. Intersectionality as an analytic tool gives people better access to the complexity of the world and of themselves’ (Collins and Bilge, 2016, p. 2).

In this vein, Spicer and Alvesson (2016) dissect four types of power—coercive, agenda-setting, ideological, and discursive—each shaping professional adoption of managerialist norms and practices in unique ways. Schildt et al. (2020) delineate systemic and episodic power as formative in the shape and substance of sensemaking processes. Building on these insights, Fleming and Spicer (2014) formulate an organizational power structure framework that underpins an intersectional analysis of identity construction.

Fleming and Spicer’s (2014) framework helps to understand organizational power through four key dimensions (see Fig. 1): The ‘power over organization’ underscores the sway of external forces over organizational behavior, encompassing goals, strategies, and structures. ‘Power through organization’ considers the organization as a vehicle or actor to further specific political interests and objectives. ‘Power in organization’ concentrates on the behaviors of individual members within the organization, while ‘power against organization’ scrutinizes the forces that challenge or counteract the organization. Previous research has applied these dimensions to investigate identity construction, offering insights into this multifaceted process. For example, studies on the impact of ideologies and globalization on non-

Western scholars (Boussebaa, 2020; Kothiyal et al., 2018) exemplify ‘Power over organization’. Research into how management practices influence academic values (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Barry et al., 2001; Fleming, 2020; Parker, 2023) represents ‘Power through organization’. Studies on scholars’ proactive research adjustments (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006) and academic resistance strategies (Anderson, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Sewell and Barker, 2006) correspond to ‘Power in’ and ‘Power against organization’, respectively. While insightful, most current research is Western-centric. There’s a compelling need for studies within the Chinese context to understand how these power dimensions interact and shape the identities of Chinese scholars.

This theoretical scaffold is particularly pertinent in the examination of academic identity construction for several reasons. Firstly, Alvesson et al. (2008) suggest that identity construction research should accord greater significance to contextual elements. The power spatial structure theory underscores a holistic exploration of power’s expression both within and outside the organization. Secondly, its capacity to encapsulate various forms of power dovetails with the research aim of delving into the multiple origins and traits of academic identity. Lastly, the evolution of Chinese business schools, reflecting a confluence of internationalization, localization, governmental guidance, and market dynamics (Li, 2021; Ren and Liu, 2021), necessitates an intersectional viewpoint. This perspective is apt for probing how these complex contextual dynamics mold academic identities.

Methodology

Research design. Our study is dedicated to exploring the construction of professional identities among Chinese academics, particularly within their roles as researchers. We are intrigued by how the intersecting dimensions of power contribute to the formation of multiple identities and their interplay. To achieve a thorough and context-rich understanding of these processes, we have chosen a qualitative case study approach, recognized for its efficacy in delving into complex social phenomena (Piekkari and Welch, 2018; Yin, 2018).

The case study method is particularly advantageous for our research aims. It allows for a holistic exploration of identity construction processes in their natural settings, illuminating how academics interact with and navigate the power dynamics within their institutional contexts (Stake, 1995). This approach aligns perfectly with our research objectives, focusing on ‘how’ questions related to the intricacies of identity regulation and manifestation (Merriam, 1998). As Schramm (1971) aptly observed, case studies are invaluable for revealing the intricate ways in which phenomena unfold within specific contexts.

Furthermore, the case study methodology facilitates abductive reasoning, enabling us to weave iteratively between established theories and new, emergent data (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This iterative process is essential for developing theoretical insights that are both grounded in existing literature and informed by empirical evidence, thereby enriching our understanding of academic identity construction within the realm of Chinese higher education.

Case background. Our research focuses on the intriguing environment of Chinese business schools¹ to examine the identity construction processes of management scholars within a multifaceted power system. Given their position as the primary workplace for these scholars, business schools offer a rich setting to explore identity regulation and work. The evolution of business education in China provides a compelling context for this study.

Historically, Chinese business schools operated under traditional university management models, distinct from their Western counterparts. In China, most HEIs are public, governed under a system where university leaders, akin to government officials, are appointed by either central or local government bodies (Wang, 2010). This governance structure extends to the process of selecting top university leaders, with the government employing criteria similar to those for appointing government officials. As a result, university leaders, including presidents, often hold administrative titles comparable to governmental officials, reflecting their official status (Liu, 2017; Wu, 2006).

Since the 1990s, there has been a significant shift in Chinese higher education from a centralized system towards one that allows for greater institutional autonomy (Yao, 2014). In this changing landscape, business schools have experienced a move from strict governmental control towards more self-governance while concurrently facing the pressures of marketization and competition. The influence of globalization has also led to strategic internationalization efforts, branding initiatives, and the adoption of practices from leading international business schools (Liu et al., 2019). Despite this transition towards marketization and internationalization, the state retains significant control, such as over ideo-political education and the appointment of university presidents and party secretaries (Han and Xu, 2019), leading to a situation described as ‘semi-independence’ (Li and Yang, 2014) or metaphorically as ‘dancing in a cage’ (Yang et al., 2007).

This unique context has profound implications for how Chinese scholars construct their academic identities amid competing demands. Their identities are influenced by the tension between market-driven academic values, which emphasize individual achievement, and traditional Chinese educational management principles that prioritize collective good under socialism (Li, 2021), alongside their survival needs and personal academic convictions (Ren and Yu, 2021).

For our study, cases were selected through theoretical sampling to find information-rich examples that offer deep insights into our research questions (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007). The selection criteria included: (1) The business school studied should be both representative and influential within the field of Management Studies in China. Thus it is selected from among the top 10% in the Shanghai Ranking’s Best Chinese Business Schools. (2) The business school should have certified mainstream international accreditations as signs of internationalization (e.g., AACSB, EQUIS, and AMBA). (3) The business school should have been established for more than 20 years so its ‘ecosystem’ and organizational culture can be well observed. Based on these criteria, four business schools were selected as the study cases: BD, WH, DW, and SC (see Table 1). Following recommendations for in-depth case study research, four cases enable a thorough analysis of each school’s institutional context (Yin, 2018).

Data collection

Interviews. From September 2021 to July 2022, our research team conducted 43 semi-structured interviews at four distinct business schools. The primary interviewees comprised 33 faculty members, encompassing a diverse mix of academic ranks from post-doctoral researchers to full professors. To add depth to our faculty perspectives, we also interviewed 10 doctoral students whose experiences offered valuable insights into the early stages of academic careers and the development trajectories of scholars. Recruitment leveraged the research team’s existing institutional contacts, combined with snowball sampling for referral-based expansion of the sample. Maximum variation sampling was used to capture diversity across institutions, ranks (e.g., postdoc, lecturer, associate professor, full professor), and roles (e.g., deans, department heads, regular faculty) (Patton, 1990). Recruitment concluded upon reaching theoretical saturation. This approach enabled gathering in-depth insights from a diverse cross-section representing the academic pipeline.

Interviews and data collection were structured around four key themes related to dimensions of power as outlined in the literature. These four power dimensions include: power ‘over organization,’ ‘through organization,’ ‘in organization,’ and ‘against organization.’ This thematic framework was instrumental in exploring how power dynamics influence the construction of academic identities. For instance, we asked interviewees questions like ‘How have external expectations influenced your research agenda?’ to probe the impact of power ‘over organization’ on their professional identity. We also asked, ‘How would you describe your career experiences within this institution?’ to understand how identities form in response to institutional power structures.

The 60–120-min interviews were conducted by trained researchers who used member-checking to validate interpretations. In total, over 780,000 words and 57 h of audio data were generated.

Observation. Our research methodology included a comprehensive participant observation component, leveraging our unique positions as academic insiders. As faculty members and doctoral students within business schools, we were ideally situated to closely observe and document the intricate workings of management systems, daily work routines, and the nuances of power dynamics. This immersive approach allowed us to gather insights through our direct engagement with fellow colleagues and students over a prolonged period. To ensure a comprehensive and multi-perspective analysis, the three authors of this study convened regular debriefing meetings to discuss and triangulate their observational findings. Member-checking interviews were also conducted with selected faculty to validate interpretive accuracy. In total, our participant observation efforts culminated in the compilation of over 30,000 words of field notes.

Table 1 Case descriptions.

	BD	WH	DW	SC
Location	Northern City	Southern City	Northern City	Southern City
Founding year	1985	1981	1982	1993
Faculty size	116	269	116	89
Vision	A world-class business school	China’s leader in global business	An influential business school with an international impact	A world-class business school with financial expertise
Reputation	China’s top-ranked program; A leading Asia-Pacific business school	One of China’s earliest modern business schools	The first one to bring Western business education to China with a U.S.-accredited MBA program	China’s first business school established on the American model

Table 2 Summary of data analyzed^a.

	BD	WH	DW	SC	Data source	Words count
<i>Interviews</i>					43 interviewers	700,000+
Postdoctoral (PD)	1		2		3	
Lecturers (L)	1	4	2	3	10	
Associate Professors (AP)	3	3	5		11	
Full Professors (FP)	2	1	2	4	9	
Doctoral Students (DS)		2	4	4	10	
<i>Observation</i>						
Management systems (MS)	√		√			30,000+
Work routines (WR)			√			
Interactions with colleagues and students (ICS)			√			
<i>Archival documents</i>					89 documents	
Related literature (RL)					20	200,000+
Retrospective/summary works (RSW)					5	
News reports (NR)					33	
Organizational documents (OD)		2	4		6	
Social media discussions (SMD)					25	

^aLabels in parentheses indicate our notations in the text. For example, when quoting from the interview data, we assign each interview a number from 1 to 3 and use the prefix PD to refer to the postdoctor. We use similar notations for our observation and archival data.

Archival documents. Our study extensively utilized secondary sources to develop a nuanced understanding of the Chinese university system, particularly focusing on the evolution and current status of management studies and business schools. We gathered a diverse array of materials, including scholarly retrospectives and summaries by key figures in the field (e.g., Chen, 2009; Qian, 2013, 2016; Tsui, 2012; Zhang, 2012), news reports, institutional documents from university websites, and social media discussions from platforms like WeChat Official Accounts, Weibo, and RED. This compilation, totaling over 200,000 words, provided a multifaceted view, encompassing both institutional perspectives and individual experiences. Table 2 in our manuscript details these sources, showcasing the range of data utilized to inform our analysis.

Data analysis. Our study has delineated a three-phase coding methodology consistent with grounded theory principles (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). This methodological choice is predicated on its proven efficacy in systematically revealing inherent patterns and linkages within qualitative data, a critical aspect in constructing a solid foundation for qualitative inquiry (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). The coding process unfolded in three successive stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Figure 2 outlines our research process, beginning with early themes that arose during the pilot interview and illustrating how we iteratively moved through three main stages in our analysis.

Initially, we conducted open coding to break down qualitative data into discrete parts to examine similarities and differences in events, actions, and processes (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). This allows researchers to develop organically from participants' own words and experiences documented in the interview transcripts, field notes, and documents (Charmaz, 2006). Our focus during this phase was to unearth emergent concepts directly from the data. We paid special attention to themes such as performance metrics, incentives, training methodologies, leadership communication, peer interactions, and strategies of resistance. For instance, a statement like '*Using numbers seems more objective—otherwise, how can you judge who is better or worse? There doesn't seem to be an alternative...so we just have to rely on quantities*' (FP3²) was categorized under the theme 'Distrust of collegial subjective judgments'. Another example, '*Our annual performance reviews are solely based on metrics - we need to publish at*

least three SCI papers, obtain two research grants, and supervise a PhD student. These numbers are the only criteria for promotion and bonuses' (PD1), which was coded as 'Metric-based performance evaluation'. These initial codes were then classified into broader first-order conceptual categories, such as 'Overreliance on quantification', one among the 24 emergent concepts from our open coding phase.

During our axial coding process, we rigorously applied the constant comparison method among the primary concepts identified during open coding (Glaser and Strauss, 2017). The constant comparison of data and codes allowed us to develop 'patterns and variations, and eventually to the development of categories and their properties at different levels of abstraction' (Boeije, 2002, p. 393). This approach facilitated the identification of broader relationships, encompassing causal factors, contextual elements, and strategic responses. By employing such inductive reasoning, we were able to synthesize the initial concepts into eight cohesive theoretical categories.

The final phase of our coding process, selective coding, was aimed at formulating a coherent theoretical framework (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). This involved 'systematically relating categories to each other at the level of properties and dimensions, validating those relationships' (Corbin and Strauss, 2015, p. 117). Employing advanced analytical techniques like in-depth questioning, continuous comparative analysis, and conceptual abstraction, we integrated core categories that emerged from second-order themes. This rigorous process enabled us to construct a theoretical narrative detailing how the four dimensions of organizational power influence the multiple aspects of academic identity.

Our analytical journey began with the identity literature and the theoretical underpinnings of organizational power, which provided initial guiding concepts. Through a process of rigorous memoing and collective discussions within our research team, we continually refined our theoretical model. This refinement involved constant juxtaposition and integration of second-order concepts with central categories, leading to the emergence of five aggregate theoretical dimensions that succinctly encapsulated our data. We continuously referenced back to the original transcripts to ensure our model remained firmly rooted in the empirical data. This selective coding process, characterized by its methodical and comprehensive nature, resulted in a concise yet rich model that effectively captures the complexities involved in the construction of academic identity.

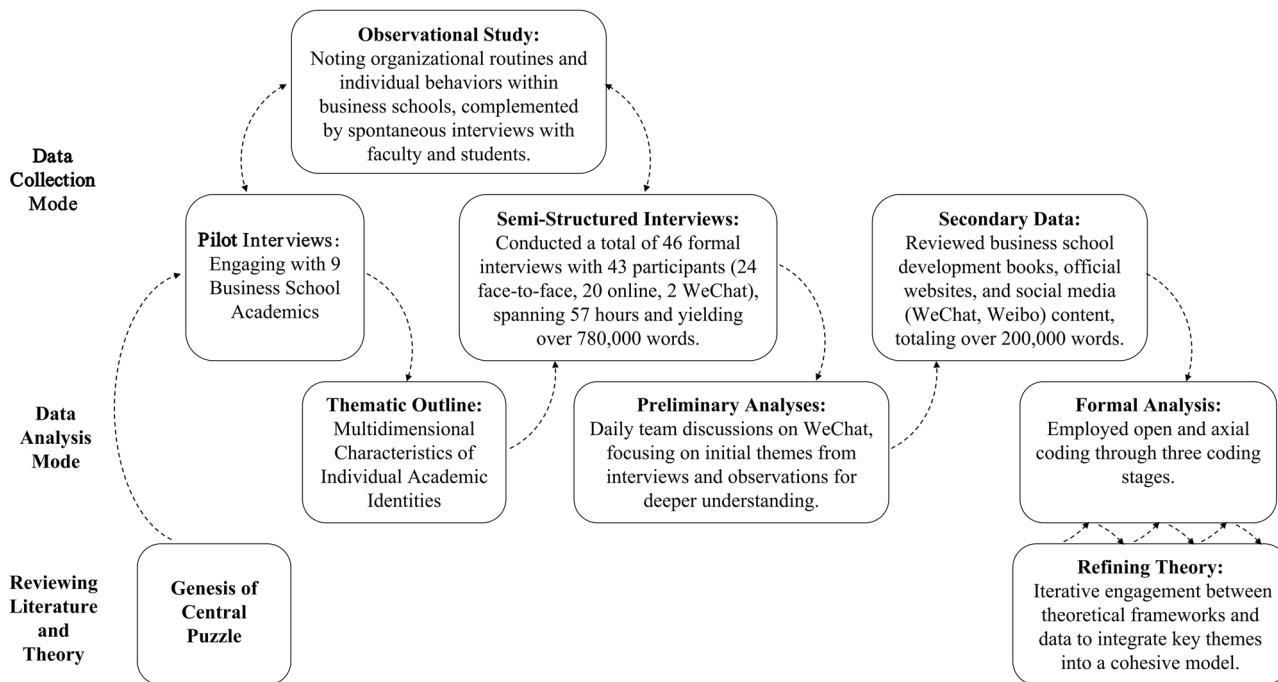


Fig. 2 Research methodology flowchart. Flowchart illustrating the iterative research process, highlighting the cyclical progression from literature review, to data collection, to analysis, and theory refinement.

In line with our grounded theory methodology, we executed a phased coding process that aligned with the specific objectives of our research. Initially, through open and axial coding, we pinpointed key dimensions of power (Table 3). In the subsequent phase, this coding approach was reapplied to delve into how these identified power dimensions influence the construction of academic identities (Table 4). The final phase involved selective coding, where we synthesized our codes into a comprehensive model. This model vividly maps out the ways in which dynamics of organizational power shape the multifaceted nature of contemporary academic identities (Table 5), while a data encoding structure is depicted in Fig. 3. By adopting this phased approach, we were able to systematically construct an integrated model that progressively builds upon each stage of our analysis.

Our analysis involved deep immersion in diverse data sources and triangulation from various organizational perspectives, enriching contextual understanding. We engaged in reflective validation by sharing detailed descriptions with key informants for feedback on analytical accuracy. Additionally, peer debriefing sessions facilitated critical scrutiny of underlying assumptions, leading to the refinement of our theoretical model. These rigorous steps strengthened the validity of our findings, uncovering new insights into the relationship between organizational power dynamics and academic identity formation.

Findings

Academic hegemony: fanatic convert to American research

American research hegemony. Academics shape their perspectives through in-depth engagement with their discipline’s history, debates, and key thinkers, aligning their research with established standards. However, the academic culture that produces and certifies knowledge also wields authority akin to external power (Delamont et al., 2000), which manifests as a form of ‘power over organization’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). In the field of Chinese management studies, this phenomenon is evident in the disproportionate of American paradigms. These paradigms set

universal standards, thus limiting the scope for non-conforming studies. This state of affairs, dubbed here as the hegemony of American management research, mirrors cultural colonialism, where Western assumptions dominate, and local contexts are often marginalized (Kramer, 2011). The prevailing disciplinary culture within Chinese management academia largely stems from its pursuit of global recognition and a transition from the periphery to the center of the global academic order. It underscores the influence of strategic decisions by scholars and institutions in shaping the evolution of Chinese management studies.

Since China’s 1978 shift towards Western engagement, government-led educational policymakers have strived to meet international standards, integrating insights from Chinese scholars trained in Europe, Canada, and the U.S. into domestic educational practices (AP3). However, the most significant influence came from the American model. A key development in this regard was the 1979 establishment of the Dalian Management Training Center, set up under a Sino-American agreement (MS8³). This center was crucial in incorporating American-style curricula and management into China’s education system, a significant step towards aligning with Western educational models (RSW2, see Chen, 2009). The influence of the American educational model was further solidified in 1986 with the National Natural Science Foundation of China (NSFC) creating a management science division. A veteran professor reflected, ‘Under the guidance of China’s National Science Foundation, institutions such as Tsinghua University and Beijing University began to adopt the U.S. business school model, marking a significant shift towards internationalization.’ (AP3)

Meanwhile, Hong Kong has emerged as a pivotal hub for propagating American influence in management education. Its first-tier universities⁴ have become vital centers where Chinese scholars, educated in American management styles during the 1980s and 1990s, converge. These institutions regularly host faculty development and training programs, inviting mainland Chinese academics to engage with and learn from U.S. research and educational methodologies (RL20, see Wu, 2022).

Table 3 Examples of multidimensional power shaping academic identity.

Example quotes	2nd-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
<p>Our collaborations with American business schools have opened our eyes to international business education standards. Working with those partners has shaped our development path... we realized we needed to transform the Chinese model in order to better align with the global standard. (FP1)</p> <p>Between 1999 and 2002, Prof. XXX organized four research methodology training seminars at X Business School, which is affiliated with one of China’s leading Universities, and around 40 young Chinese management scholars per session. These seminars, for the first time, introduced frontier research approaches of American management studies to China. Prof. XXX brought the ‘Gospel’ and put Chinese business studies into a fast lane towards internationalization. (RSW4, see Tsui, 2012, p. 3)</p>	<p>Replication of external academic criteria</p>	<p>American research hegemony</p>
<p>If you focused on China’s speciality research problems, your work possibly cannot be accepted by top journals or American journals, as social sciences have ideologies...(L5)</p> <p>To publish top-tier, you have to follow their paradigms as the top journals have their own ‘traditions’. (AP11)</p>	<p>Dominance of the U.S. academic model</p>	
<p>The evaluation system becomes too short-sighted. Our school expects you to publish 5 good journal papers within 3 years, if not your pay would be cut, even yourself got sacked. (L7)</p> <p>Adopting KPI in assessing scholarly work seems fair and objective—otherwise, how can you judge who is better or worse? There doesn’t seem to be a better alternative... (AP4)</p>	<p>Delicacy management</p>	<p>Industrialization of academic governance</p>
<p>We are formally and informally forced to apply for research funding, even if we don’t really need it to do research. It’s not about the research anymore, just checking off that box of the evaluation form. Doing research is like growing crops —applying for funds is like farmers getting chemical fertilizer, ironically, getting chemical fertilizer (or the funds) becomes the goal, not doing research. (L2)</p> <p>Schools only reward research for promotion...No one really cares about teaching, as teaching cannot be standardized or well-evaluated by KPI. (L6)</p>	<p>Standardization management</p>	
<p>Being a professor is a pretty sweet gig. You don’t make big money or have major influence like in government or business, but you get respect and independence. (AP4)</p> <p>The classroom is why I love my job. When I see that a student enjoys his learning in my class, I get a sense of fulfillment. (AP7)</p>	<p>Customize academic, professional values</p>	<p>Self-regulation</p>
<p>The line between work and life is vanished. But let’s be real: every industry needs overtime. Compared to tech and finance, our situation is way better. (AP11)</p> <p>Developing nations need firstly focus on ‘basic needs’ such as economic growth, similarly, Chinese scholars in management subject need ‘quantity’-get as many publications as possible. (AP4)</p>	<p>Rationalize the status quo</p>	
<p>I do not care about ‘excellence’, instead, I try to meet minimum requirements in evaluation. More importantly, I keep my research interests and do research at my own pace. (AP6)</p> <p>I don’t care much about school requirements. I won’t do meaningless ‘paper machine’ work.... (L9)</p>	<p>Stick to personal interests</p>	<p>Rebellion against ‘academic games’</p>
<p>It’s disappointing when no one cares about research papers you work hard on - like taking an exam. That’s why I now enjoy writing popular science articles and teaching, in that I can engage readers, have discussions, and make a real impact. (AP2)</p> <p>I’m fed up with the academic system, the way research is evaluated...I also can’t stand the so-called ‘academic stars’ or those just clawing their way to the top. I don’t want to run with that crowd anymore. I can’t change academia or other people, but I can change myself—by getting out. (SMD5)</p>	<p>Seek for differentiated paths</p>	

Mainland China’s business schools have tapped elite scholars to enhance academic standards. Initiatives like American research methodology workshops, faculty training programs, international conferences, and engagement with foreign scholars have shaped the domestic academic community’s development. A notable initiative is the 2002 establishment of the International Association for Chinese Management Research (IACMR) by Professor Anne Tsui, distinguished for her academic success in the U.S., aiming to align Chinese management research with global academic norms (RSW4, see Tsui, 2012).

These initiatives have markedly steered the trajectory of China’s academic sector, trapped in a ‘web of knowledge and

authority carefully woven by orthodox scholarship’ (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 18). Western, particularly U.S., theoretical frameworks and methodologies are often viewed as the universal standard, sidelining other approaches. An academic in Accounting noted, ‘studies focusing on Chinese localized research problems face skepticism, due to the persistent ‘why China’ concern, limiting top journal acceptance’ (FP4). Consequently, Chinese management academics closely follow trends in American journals, conforming to their mainstream paradigms. This influence is evident in the development of qualitative research in China. During the 1980s, increased exchanges with North America and the rebuilding of domestic management disciplines led to a

Table 4 Examples of multiple academic identities.

Example quotes	2nd-order themes	Aggregate dimensions
Our school only give credits to top international journals, the top local journals don't count, like 'visiting monks give better sermons.' (SMD20)	Fanatic convert	Multiple academic identities
During job interview, I was shocked by Chinese management scholars' narrow perspective: I was doing discourse analysis, but professors sitting in panel questioned my work in a positivism stance, they ask questions like: where are your research variables? I was like, seriously? That's not what my research is about! (AP2)		
They call it the 'Eight-Year War'—become an associate professor in three years and a full professor in five. Once you've accomplished that, you've earned your time. After getting ashore, you can escape the low-level academic games and pursue real research. (AP4)	Career survivor	
I used to prioritize the quality of research over the quantity of publications, but now I have to change in order to survive, to get through the evaluation... (L9)		
Though I'm already a tenured professor with job security, I still feel strong incentives to work hard. It's like leveling up in a game by beating monsters—you always want to get bigger influence. (AP4)	Diligent game player	
I have no desire to join the game. I just want to tend my own little plot of land... (AP6)	Career retreator	
Academic ideals and reality always misalign, unlike others who get upset or blame, I tend to keep quiet. (FP3)		

Table 5 Specific connotations of main coding categories.

<i>Four dimensions of organizational power</i>	
American research hegemony	The American management paradigm as a universal standard and symbol of advancement constrains diverse perspectives in Chinese management research.
Industrialization of academic governance	Academic organizations mirror industrial approaches by applying standardized, precise, and quantifiable metrics to evaluate academic work.
Self-regulation	Academics achieve self-governance through self-discipline rather than external enforcement by voluntarily adhering to accepted academic norms and ethical standards.
Rebellion against 'academic game'	Academics prioritize intellectual and social values over organizational metrics and objectives.
<i>Multiple academic identities</i>	
Fanatic convert	Empirical research methodologies were introduced to Chinese scholars by U.S. management scholars in the 1990s. However, some Chinese scholars have become dogmatic scientism adherents who regard the positivist paradigm as the universal standard for conducting all kinds of management research despite the existence of various research approaches.
Career survivor	Scholars who prioritize long-term job security and advancement over risky or idealistic actions that may compromise their professional stability.
Diligent game player	Scholars who enthusiastically follow organizational directives and metrics in order to receive rewards, recognition, and promotions aligned with the organization's goals.
Career retreator	An academic becomes resigned and disengaged at work, prioritizing job security over advancement or initiative in order to retreat to other life interests.

preference for scientific and quantitative methods. By the 1990s, influenced by American case-study teaching, Chinese academia began favoring American-style multiple case studies, showing a limited appreciation for other methods (RL16, see Wan and Wei, 2023). Today, there is a push in Chinese academia to root management studies in the national context, with calls to 'anchor research in our homeland' (MS7). Yet, transitioning away from dominant American paradigms remains a complex challenge due to their deep-rooted influence and perceived universality.

Fanatic convert. The concept of the 'fanatic of the convert' aptly illustrates a scenario where individuals who are eager to embrace a foreign culture become excessively devoted to it, elevating foreign cultural norms to almost religious levels of reverence (Benjamin, 2007). In the academic sphere, this manifests as a form of 'original equipment manufacturing' (OEM), where scholars methodically reproduce Western academic standards reminiscent of an assembly line producing foreign-branded goods. This phenomenon underscores the deep-rooted veneration for American academic paradigms in China. Reflecting this sentiment is the Chinese adage 'visiting monks give better sermons', highlighting a preference for external validation. Many Chinese researchers, in their quest for recognition, heavily rely on

'quality English literature' to shape their research topics and adhere to publishing standards, aiming to gain acceptance in prestigious U.S.-recognized journals.

The dominance of American paradigms has fueled the rise of another phenomenon in Chinese academia: an over-reliance on positivist empirical research. As one prominent scholar clarified at a recent conference:

We see all kinds of Western 'bests'—research especially keen on pursuing rationality, objectivity, scientific rigor, and theoretical precision. Yet in the Western world, knowledge created by the 'scientific method' faces increasing questioning, challenge, even disillusionment. Still Chinese management researchers flock to it. (WR13)

Some academics adhere to the notion that human social life is governed by universal causal laws, and as such, researchers must maintain objectivity and neutrality while following specific rules to ensure rigorous research. They consider only studies that conform to the 'hypothesis testing' model as genuine scholarly work. For instance, a top Chinese business school explicitly states:

Management Research should be conducted within a framework of positivism paradigm. Only in this way can

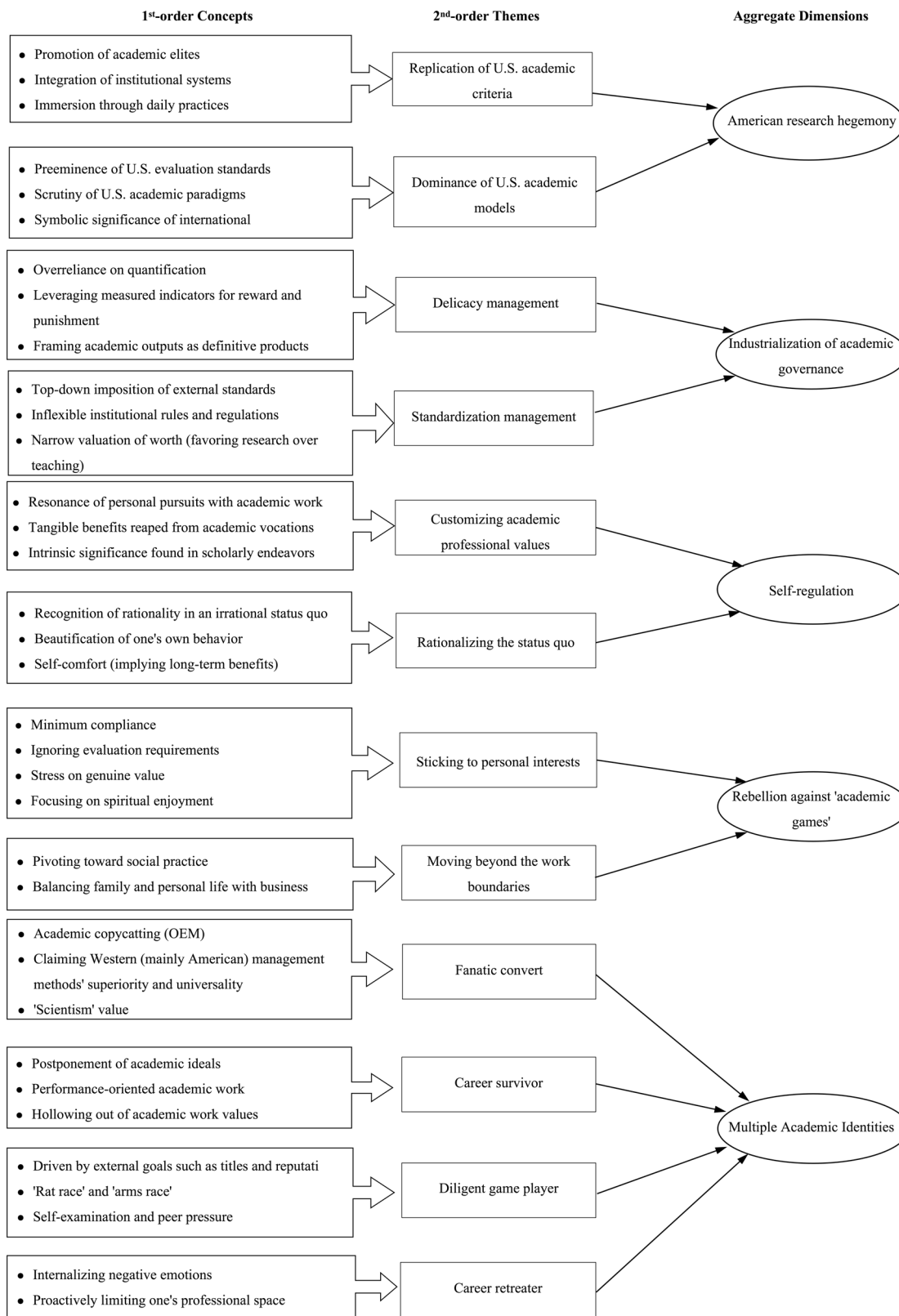


Fig. 3 Data structure. Diagram illustrating the hierarchical structure of concepts, themes, and dimensions that analyze the influence of power dimensions on the construction of Chinese academics' identities and the resulting multiplicity of these identities.

knowledge of management and economic laws be discovered (OD1).

This partial epistemology of Chinese management scholars is pervasive across aspects of academia, from research project

applications to paper publications and thesis evaluations. Consequently, other research approaches, such as interpretivism and critical perspective qualitative studies, are marginalized. As one Chinese qualitative researcher laments:

They subtly coerce you to conform to their rules, your social constructivism works are seen as inferior and informal...they talk to their PhD students like, get serious, get rid of case studies, do positivism research! (AP6)

Industrialized academia: careerist survivor

Industrialization of academic governance. Academic institutions are governed by organizational norms that embody managerial control exerted through the institution itself, a concept described as ‘power in organization’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). In the context of Chinese business schools, there is a prevalent practice of employing standardized, precise, and quantifiable criteria for assessing academic performance, a process akin to ‘industrial management.’ This approach tends to oversimplify, standardize, and streamline the inherently complex nature of academic endeavors.

Chinese business schools have increasingly embraced standardized systems for evaluating research, where assessment is primarily based on quantitative metrics or key performance indicators (KPIs). The typical benchmarks used for this purpose encompass the number of publications, citation frequencies, journal rankings, and the amounts of grant funds received (MS9). The way an academic scores on these quantifiable parameters plays a crucial role in determining their salary, prospects for promotion, and overall job security (OD1):

We are formally and informally forced to apply for research fundings, even if we don't really always need fundings for doing research with certain methodologies. It's not about the research no more, just checking off that box of evaluation form. Doing research is like growing crops—applying for funds is like farmers getting chemical fertilizer, ironically, getting chemical fertilizer (or the funds) becomes the goal, not growing crops or doing research. (L2)

Strict guidelines in academic institutions dictate the type of research and publications that are deemed valuable for career progression. Yet, this uniform approach fails to account for the individual differences among scholars and the inherently unpredictable nature of academic research. ‘I get that we need some kind of system, but expecting the same number of publications and projects from everyone—that does not work. People have different skills and varying periods for research,’ observed an academic (L8).

In such a standardized environment, research tends to become homogenized. A professor described the outcome as methodical but mechanical, ‘like products on an assembly line.’ (FP9)

Even the specifics of academic work are standardized through various regulations and rules. Another scholar noted (A22): ‘It's like, when they're evaluating professional titles these days, they've got these set requirements for how many projects and papers you gotta have. But honestly, everyone's got their own unique strengths that might not show up in those numbers.’ Such a rigid, standardized environment in academia intensifies the risks associated with pursuing an academic career:

In the first half of the year, I was working on a paper that aimed to produce big impact. However, after two rejections, I decided to shift my focus to a more trivial problem. I wrote, submitted, and received acceptance for this new research in just four months, which was a smooth process. (NR7)

While research quality may not be accurately reflected by indicators alone, the academic KPI system facilitates managerial decision-making and value evaluation. The ‘Double First-Class’ initiative⁵ in China, for instance, has placed greater emphasis on

these metrics to promote the development of HEIs, enabling academic managers to enhance these measurable outcomes (MS15). Guided by government directives and implemented by educational institutions, this regulatory mechanism has evolved into a fundamental and unavoidable process for those seeking to exercise influence in academia. Within this framework, scholars are treated akin to components in an industrial system, being identified, scrutinized, selected, quantified, and supervised with the aim of fulfilling predetermined goals.

Career survivor. Academic institutions have long adhered to industrial management practices, prioritizing certainty and productivity. Academics often find themselves on a rigid career path, compelled to meet organizational demands for promotion and recognition. This pressure gives rise to a ‘career survivor’ mindset among many academics, where fulfilling institutional expectations becomes central to their academic identity.

Echoing this sentiment, one academic candidly shared, ‘I don't hate writing papers, and I'm not particularly passionate about teaching either. I just see it as a bread-earning job, so I do what I need to do.’ (AP5) This mindset lacks a genuine calling or enthusiasm for scholarship, instead, scholars readily accept constraints on their autonomy, taking external requirements as ‘part of the job.’ (AP5) Academia, in this view, becomes more about producing outputs than about upholding the ideals that define true scholarship.

The constant threat of job insecurity fuels this survivalist mentality. Job insecurity exacerbates this survivalist approach. Academics feel compelled to continuously ‘running’ just to stay on the track (ICS16). The common phrase ‘getting ashore (上岸)’ is frequently mentioned when discussing career progression:

They call it the ‘Eight-Year War’—become an associate professor in three years, and a full professor in five. Once you've accomplished that, you've earned your independence. After getting ashore, you can escape the academic games and pursue the real-value research. (AP4)

This mindset encourages scholars to focus on publications that are more likely to advance their careers rather than on research that makes significant contributions. A culture of opportunism and ‘flooding (灌水)’ publication, where academics chase ‘hot topics’ and ‘exhaust the database’ in order to publish as many and as fast as possible (L6), perpetuates this trend. Nonetheless, some academics view this as a necessary adaptation to existing constraints: ‘I don't have any issues with it...Academia is a game, I need to be realistic and align myself more to the rules of reality.’ (FP9)

Playing by the rules: diligent game player

Self-regulation. In organizational settings, understanding power dynamics is essential for grasping how individual behaviors are shaped. Central to this is Foucault's (1988) insightful concept of ‘technologies of the self.’ These empower people to ‘transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 18). These technologies are introspective, focusing on ‘power in organization’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2014), in contrast to technologies of power designed for external control. In Chinese business schools, however, the application of self-technologies blurs the boundaries between personal power and self-transformation, leading to contradictions and complexities.

The academic world is rife with various justifications for the inherent challenges of the profession. Some academics rationalize the demanding aspects of their work by pointing to the relative advantages academia holds over sectors like finance and

technology, such as more lenient overtime policies (AP11). They also frame practices like key performance indicators within broader industry contexts, as these are common in fields like logistics and manufacturing (L5), suggesting that such management techniques are not exclusive to the academic realm. Others remain hopeful that the current difficulties in academia will diminish as institutions evolve. One academic encapsulates this viewpoint by stating:

Developing nations need firstly focus on ‘basic needs’ such as economic growth, similarly, Chinese scholars in management subject need ‘quantity’—get as many publications as possible. (AP4)

A complex duality emerges in how academics justify their actions. While they speak of lofty academic goals, they often engage in mediocre trivial work for professional advancement, with some even labeling such endeavors as ‘garbage’ (L1, AP3, FP9, DS7). Younger academics justify their sacrifices by focusing on the potential long-term benefits, immersing themselves in the academic game with the hope of doing meaningful work after securing tenure. However, path dependency often hinders realizing these visions (WR4). In essence, academics often internalize and magnify organizational narratives to rationalize behaviors that diverge from their higher academic purposes. Additionally, Chinese academia particularly reinforces a culture of compliance, where enduring challenges is seen as a virtuous act that fosters character and resilience.

Diligent game player. During the process of self-regulation, external evaluation standards evolve into spontaneous internal motivations. The meaning and self-worth of academic work are no longer the spiritual content of academic aspirations but rather the ability to climb the prescribed path of the academic profession. It is undeniable that diligent game players pursue academic knowledge with sincerity. However, from enlightenment in academic work to the doctoral stage, writing proposals and publishing papers have become their habitus. They lack a reflective perspective and consider applying for various projects and publishing in journals listed by the school as the true value of academic research. They earnestly strive for this value, constantly ‘leveling up and defeating bosses in a video game’ (FP9). They focus on strengthening their reputation and personal image, aspiring to institutional titles such as ‘academic elite’ and hoping to achieve the ‘prestigious status,’ ‘remarkable reputation,’ ‘generous benefits,’ and ‘special privileges’ that come with it.

Diligent game players embrace a ‘publish or perish’ mentality; competition has become their second nature, and they believe that only the most productive and competitive can survive in the ‘rat race.’ In their relentless pursuit of status, they imbue sacrificing their physical health and leisure time for academic work with a moral significance, believing that work is life and life is work, and take pride in this. Even though they understand the negative impact of this self-perpetuating cycle of excessive competition, these academics still find themselves deeply involved in it. As one academic expressed:

Work seems endless. But the idea of ‘involution’ has already been deeply ingrained in us, and we just keep doing it... This kind of work must be done continuously. (L7)

While striving for professional success, diligent game players are also prone to the emotional state of failure, which stems not from external factors but from harsh self-evaluation. They tend to attribute all problems to themselves:

The reason you didn’t pass the assessment is because you didn’t spend enough time or make enough effort... you

failed to adjust your strategy for publishing articles, didn’t handle the sudden epidemic situation well, or didn’t deal with messy family affairs. In short, you take the whole responsibility of your failure. (SMD25)

Resisting the academic game: career retreaters

Rebellion against ‘academic games’. In their daily routines, academics often engage in subtle forms of resistance to organizational norms, a phenomenon described as ‘power against organization’ (Fleming and Spicer, 2014). By engaging in these mundane acts, they carve out alternative spaces that allow for independent practices, creating what can be described as a hidden transcript (Scott, 1985) —an undercurrent of critique against conformity.

Chinese academic professionals display varying levels of resistance to both the explicit and implicit rules. A common method observed among academics is the adoption of minimal compliance. As detailed in AP6’s account, ‘I focus on meeting the minimum requirements. Passing evaluations is sufficient, and I prioritize pursuing what I enjoy at my own pace.’ This approach involves strategically choosing when to comply with certain procedures while quietly integrating their own agendas, thereby finding autonomy within the constraints of their environment.

Others reject the standardized norms that impinge on academic freedom, opting to conduct research driven by scholarly curiosity. As noted by FP9, ‘As scholars, we should not see ourselves as mere tools.’ Such academics carve out their own paths, ‘I completely overlook the university’s rules and requirements. I refuse to force myself to change, to engage in work I perceive as meaningless just to produce quickly publishable articles.’ (L7) Their identity as researchers motivates them to explore areas that genuinely interest them, irrespective of external pressures.

Instead of participating in ‘academic games,’ some individuals seek out alternative avenues for professional fulfillment. They leverage their autonomy to align their work with personal identity and values, engaging in social practice to address real-world problems (ICS14) or using social media to share their ideas (AP10). However, resistance in academia can also be passive, reflected in discussions about ‘career fatigue’ and ‘work–life balance.’ (ICS11) These narratives show academics seeking solace in family and non-work activities. Leaving the academic system is the most extreme form of resistance:

I’m fed up with the current academic system, the way research is evaluated, and how incentives are structured. I also can’t stand the so-called ‘academic super-stars’ or those just clawing their way to the top. I don’t want to run with that crowd anymore. I can’t change academia or other people, but I can change myself—by getting out. (SMD18)

Nonetheless, it is essential to acknowledge that such cases are infrequent. This highlights that academic practitioners typically encounter a mild form of power suppression, which provides some margin for tolerance.

Career retreaters. While scholars may not be completely rule-bound at the individual micro-level, this article emphasizes that the underlying resistance to certain behaviors is primarily negative in tone. Contrary to the ‘heroic’ and critical attributes identified by Ren and Yu (2021), our study reveals a distinct ‘career retreaters’ aspect within the professional identity of academic professionals.

Academics who retreat mentality accept their position on the fringes of the academic system. In casual conversation, one such scholar remarked, ‘I do not expect anything from the Chinese

management community.’ When faced with negative emotions such as stress or disillusionment, they prefer to self-regulate rather than seek public resistance or meaningful change. One scholar comment:

I have no desire to influence the outside world; I just want to enjoy the beauty of life on my own small piece of land... When faced with something unpleasant in my work, I don't want to ruin my enjoyment of life. (A14)

They intentionally limit their physical and mental space, retreating into a zone they can control. Another scholar notes:

I have a lot of ideas, but when I realize that external rules don't align with my own beliefs, I tend to keep quiet. It's true that sometimes your ideals and reality don't match up, and some people get upset or start blaming others. But personally, I don't think that's necessary. The most important thing is to learn how to adapt and adjust yourself to the situation. (A17)

This retreat into a self-made ivory tower creates a gray zone of professional meaning, providing insulation from the uncontrollable external world.

The power embedded in the resistance of academics is a form of practical power (Gao, 2014), lacking institutional legitimacy and confined to the realm of practice, the magnitude of its influence rests entirely on the individual's exertions. While such resistance does carve out a measure of autonomous space, it does not alter the underlying structures and ideologies that dominate the academic field, which continue to wield symbolic power backed by legitimacy. Consequently, the autonomy academics derive through their resistance is largely limited to less visible backstage activities.

Interplay of multidimensional powers. Power operates not through a single axis but through the complex interplay of multiple forces. An intersectional analysis is insightful when exploring how four dimensions of power in Chinese academia—American research hegemony, industrialization of academic governance, self-regulation, and rebellion against ‘academic games’—intersect and interact.

Mutual reinforcement of industrialization and Americanization. The adoption of Western management standards by Chinese academic institutions has introduced new managerial tools and facilitated novel processes and interaction models. Notably, the AACSB certification has advanced the standardization and refinement of business school management, while the American-originated tenure system has unified personnel selection criteria. However, the embrace of industrial management approaches has also amplified American influence within Chinese academia. Efforts to achieve ‘Double First-Class’ status and promote internationalization have expedited the Americanization of professional and administrative standards. Moreover, the rigidly quantitative system limits diverse perspectives, thereby leaving little space for groundbreaking research. Consequently, American theories have maintained their monopoly status under these evaluation regimes.

Integration of American norms and self-regulation. American academic standards have become an integral part of Chinese management scholars' professional identity, shaping their self-perception. This self-directed embrace is viewed as a sign of expertise, with scholars reinforcing these norms by underscoring their significance in achieving international standards. One academic expressed, ‘I learned a lot from collaborating with foreign

experts. Their research methods are more standardized in how they present, display, and interpret data.’ (AP1) This process subtly molds the identities of academics, perpetuating the dominance of American academic standards through soft power and decentralized internalization. The dynamic between personal adherence and broader institutional influence unveils the complex social processes by which academic norms become widespread and ingrained.

Co-constitution of managerial control and scholarly conformity. The industrial management of academic organizations and individual self-regulation are deeply interconnected. The industrialization of academia necessitates scholars' compliance with standardized methods, while self-regulation offers a path to professional recognition within this framework. Scholars adhering to these norms gain greater resources and influence, fueling the growth of an academic-industrial complex. This interaction demonstrates how the logic of industrial academia is maintained through dispersed, decentralized coordination rather than direct control.

Dualities of resistance within academic orthodoxy. Challenging the entrenched ‘academic game’ allows for a degree of independent action, yet this autonomy is circumscribed by complex power structures that promote adherence to academic norms. This predicament is highlighted by the words of AP9, who warns, ‘You have to know your limits when challenging entrenched realities—sometimes you need to stop.’ This sentiment is echoed by FP11, who notes that while scholars can defy conventional trends, ‘there are many things we cannot change ourselves’ within the boundaries of academic life. Adherence to one's own principles in academia often involves carefully balancing the risks associated with crossing uncharted lines. Thus, the decentralized nature of power within academia enforces conformity through subtle yet coordinated mechanisms. Consequently, resistance often becomes a symbolic gesture, overshadowed by the prevailing influence of American academic standards, the industrial approach to academia, and the norms of self-regulation.

Conclusion and discussion

Mapping multiple academic identities: a multidimensional power model. In the academic landscape, scholarship melds together broad (macro) and specific (micro) traditions, requiring scholars to recalibrate their expectations and skillfully navigate through entrenched norms to craft their professional identities. Prior studies have mainly concentrated on identity formation through processes of socialization or enculturation. However, it is important to recognize that academic identities are also profoundly influenced by the multidimensional structures of power. This involves a dynamic and intricate interplay between overarching systemic forces and the autonomy of the individual. This article, therefore, examines the processes through which academics construct their researchers' identities within this complex web of interrelated power dynamics. To conceptualize this, Fig. 4 presents the theoretical model underpinning our analysis.

In the dynamic context of higher education, where HEIs are navigating a complex array of stakeholder expectations, our study specifically maps four dimensions of organizational power in Chinese business schools. These include American research hegemony, representing discursive power ‘over’ organizations through the promotion of specific research norms; industrial management, indicating systemic power ‘through’ organizational bureaucracies via established policies and assessments; self-regulation, reflecting individual power ‘in’ shaped by personal values and research choices; and rebellion against ‘academic

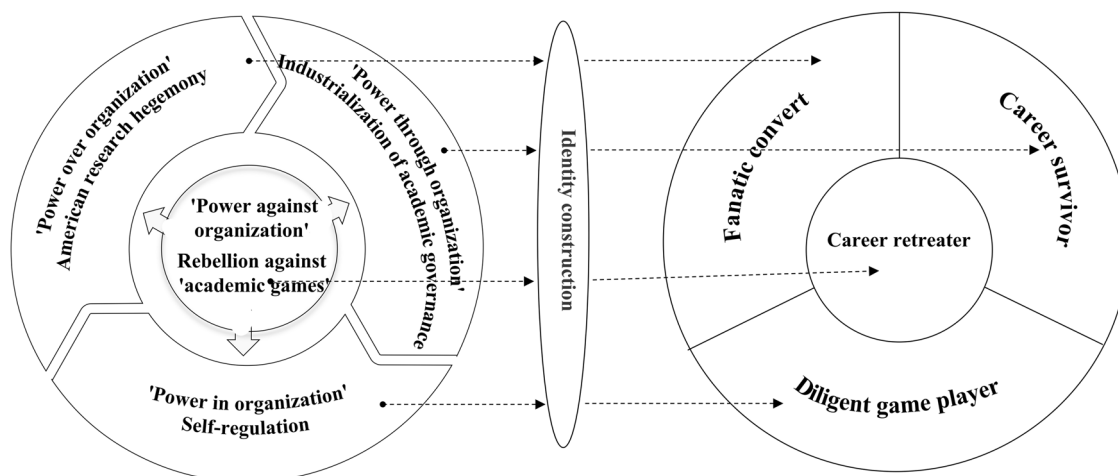


Fig. 4 Multiple academic identities under four dimensions of organizational power. The diagram depicts two circles: the left circle outlines four dimensions of organizational power, and the right circle shows academic identity modules influenced by these powers. Arrows indicate the directional impacts between and within the circles.

games', embodying counterpower 'against' institutional pressures such as publishing demands. Crucially, these power dynamics are fluid and non-dominant, with different dimensions of power coexisting and undergoing changes over time. These aspects are intertwined, forming a closed, cyclical system that promotes continuous interaction and influence.

The analysis shows that Chinese business schools are deeply influenced by the national agenda of higher education development. In the meanwhile, American research hegemony in China steers academic trajectories, reinforcing a policy-driven approach through a formalized management system that prioritizes efficiency and standardization. This top-down power structure not only promotes focused, goal-oriented research in key areas but also restricts scholars' autonomy and independence in their professional work. Green's (2023) concept of 'Higher Education with Chinese Characteristics' depicts China's higher education system as a complex, adaptive system that merges pragmatic modernization with a governance model balancing centralization and decentralization, offering insights into the control-autonomy interplay. In stark contrast, Western higher education institutions often depend on informal social networks and the self-regulatory mechanisms of the academic community (Enders et al., 2013), leading to more decentralized structures.

Our analysis further delineates four modules of academic identity: fanatic converts, career survivors, diligent game players, and career retreaters. These modules encapsulate the varied ways in which power dynamics mold academic identities. The relationships between these power dimensions and the resultant identity aspects are illustrated through arrows linking power sources to each identity module. These modules coexist within the broader professional identity, represented as an encompassing circle. Particularly during phases of retreat, academic professionals often gravitate towards their 'comfort zones', symbolized by the central region of the circle. In line with the contingency perspective, we propose that the significance of each identity module is contingent upon the relative influence of different powers, as well as the personal value each academic assigns to these aspects.

Numerous studies have examined resistance to managerialism and authority among academics in Western contexts, highlighting psychological, verbal, and behavioral opposition (Bristow et al., 2017; Kalfa et al., 2018; Lucas, 2014; Shahjahan, 2014). By comparison, our research within the Chinese academic landscape reveals a less systematic and pervasive resistance. Many

academics predominantly engage in 'compliance' and 'obedience' as strategies to navigate academic pressures, striving to meet escalating standards for achieving career security and success. Occasionally, this even involves the adoption of superficial tactics aimed at fulfilling quantifiable performance objectives. Furthermore, the ethos of new managerialism profoundly permeates the psyches of Chinese academics, mandating stringent self-management, self-audit, and self-discipline. This extensive control significantly hampers scholars' ability to detach from the constraints imposed by their reliance on institutional support. Such difference implies and highlights the impact of cultural backgrounds: in Anglo-American environments, individuals often view themselves as independent from the societal frameworks that define their roles and identities. In contrast, Chinese cultural norms do not generally perceive a conflict between individual and collective interests; rather, individual actions are considered integrations into the collective sphere (Marginson and Yang, 2022). Despite a strong inclination towards academic independence, Chinese scholars demonstrate a robust commitment to their academic communities (Han and Xu, 2019).

Academics operate under the influence of power structures while also being shaped by their cultural milieu. Consequently, it is impractical to pigeonhole an individual's professional identity into any single type identified in this study. Instead, identities tend to be multifaceted, blending various characteristics. For instance, a scholar who has recently embraced management studies often combines elements of survivalism and self-development, evolving into a 'game player' identity. Contrary to those who passively retreat from academic pursuits in search of value, game players actively engage in academic endeavors. However, they often focus less on the non-materialistic value of their work, preferring to produce well-crafted academic outputs akin to a 'McDonald's-style' production process, demonstrating a robust ability to survive and garner resources in the academic arena.

This article adopts a critical research approach rooted in the understanding that management studies, as a social science, and its researchers are influenced by values and their specific institutional context. From this critical viewpoint, the study uncovers a prevalent issue among academic practitioners: they either find themselves ensnared in a self-centered culture that overlooks values or faces an identity crisis, leading to a stoic disengagement from academic work. Unless there is a shift from the prevailing trend of insular academic discourse and hollow

valorization, the community of academic players who compromise the social value of the academic profession for personal gain will likely become more entrenched, further impeding the development of true academic vocations.

Theoretical contributions. This research demonstrates that the influence of power on identity construction in academia is dynamic and multifaceted, comprising various dimensions that collectively mold identity. Past studies have delved into academic identities through lenses like cultural norms and institutional management (Alvesson and Spicer, 2016; Boussebaa and Brown, 2017; Zawadzki and Jensen, 2020), yet a holistic analysis encompassing all pertinent factors has been missing (Ramarajan, 2014). Addressing this gap, our study employs a multi-dimensional framework of power structures, illuminating how power interplays with the construction of academic identities. This approach reveals prevalent issues within the Chinese academic context, such as an insufficient understanding of power dynamics, a tendency towards formalism driven by instrumental rationality, and misplaced value systems. Our comprehensive analysis offers deeper insights into the complexities of academic behavior.

While Fleming and Spicer (2014) have identified various forms of organizational power, our research adds to this by uncovering the interconnected nature of these power forms within academic institutions. Academics operating within such organizational structures face a wide array of expectations from diverse stakeholders. Through a power-focused lens, our research provides an expansive view of the intricacies of the higher education landscape. Particularly in China, management academia's development has been significantly influenced by its late entry into the global academic arena. This has spurred a trend of adopting established disciplinary standards for rapid international recognition, inadvertently reflecting global phenomena like Americanization and neoliberalism. The top-down nature of China's academic governance further exacerbates these trends, posing unique challenges and rendering the professional autonomy of management academics more vulnerable. The real-world dynamics of power in higher education often extend beyond theoretical models, being shaped by policy directives and stakeholder expectations. This underscores the fluidity of power in academia and the need for context-specific analyses to truly grasp how power shapes academic identities.

In contemporary academia, there's a discernible evolution in the professional identities of scholars. Traditionally, attributes like independence, autonomy, and initiative were seen as defining the academic profession (Albers et al., 2023). However, a shift towards secularization and a more utilitarian approach in academic work are increasingly evident (Aboubichr and Conway, 2023; Kalfa et al., 2018). Our research delves into this transformation, uncovering a hybridization in the way academic identities are constructed and revealing their multi-dimensional nature. Previous studies often focused on how academics respond to external environmental shifts, especially in the context of new managerialism, but they tended to offer generalized, archetypal responses (Brown et al., 2021; Sitaloppi et al., 2022). Our study addresses this gap, offering a nuanced examination of internal cognitive processes.

In our exploration of academic identities, we emphasize a nuanced complexity that transcends the impact of multiple roles (Borlaug et al., 2023; Currie and Logan, 2020; Luiz and Terziev, 2022). Our primary focus is on the intricate cognitive processes that unfold within identical roles, highlighting the depth and intricacy of thought patterns and perceptions inherent in the

same professional capacities. This resonates with Linville's (1987) concept of self—as a multi-dimensional cognitive structure comprised of various self-aspects like traits, relationships, goals, and skills, each with its unique attributes and emotional connections. Academics, we find, actively select and combine different academic paradigms and cultural norms. This selection process is influenced by myriad factors—the higher education environment, organizational culture, societal expectations, and personal life journeys, values, and goals. Our findings suggest that structuralist views and individual agency are not mutually exclusive but can coexist and enrich each other, providing a broader, more complex perspective for understanding intersectionality in academic identity.

Limitations and future research. First, future studies could benefit from using theoretical sampling to interview academics from various subgroups, including those with different academic ranks, job titles, and institutional affiliations. This approach would enable a comparison of these subgroups, potentially refining propositions and improving the external validity of the research findings.

Second, there are likely differences in power dynamics influencing academic identities in China compared to Western countries, due to divergences in cultural traditions, university governance models, and developmental timelines. Incorporating a comparative analysis between these different cultural contexts could yield a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of these variances.

Third, while this paper provides a descriptive analysis of how diverse expressions of power influence identity construction, subsequent research could delve deeper into this topic. Future studies should aim to uncover the specific mechanisms through which various dimensions of power shape academic identities. This would build upon the initial findings and contribute further to our understanding of the complex interplay between power and academic identity formation.

Data availability

The datasets used and/or analyzed during the current study are included in the supplementary information, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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Notes

- 1 In China, business schools can be referred to by various names such as School of Economics, School of Management, and School of Economics and Management. There is variation in the terminology used compared to the consistent label of 'business school' in some other countries.
- 2 See Table 2 and its note for an explanation of the notations we use to identify data sources referenced in the rest of the article.
- 3 https://www.cbead.cn/en/About_CBEAD/History.htm
- 4 The first-tier universities in Hong Kong include Hong Kong University, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Chinese University of Hong Kong, City University of Hong Kong, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, Baptist University of Hong Kong.
- 5 'Double First-Class initiative' was launched by China's central government and the Ministry of Education, aiming to ultimately build a number of world class Chinese universities and disciplines by the end of 2050.

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Author contributions

Conception/design of the work (all authors); acquisition of data (all authors); analysis of data (QL-H); interpretation of findings (QL-H); drafted and revised the work (all authors).

Ethical approval

Approval was obtained from the Business School of the Central University of Finance and Economics (Approval number: AC-SB-CUFE-2021-0013). The procedures used in this study adhere to the ethical standards and guidelines set by the institution.

Informed consent

All participants in this study, or their legal guardians, have freely given their informed consent for both participation and publication. Written consents confirming this are maintained on record. This includes separate approvals for the use of any case-related data in publications, ensuring that no data is published without explicit consent. Moreover, the study complies with ethical standards concerning confidentiality and respect for the wishes of participants, whether living or deceased, in accordance with the institutional guidelines. All procedures were carried out with the necessary approvals, guaranteeing that all ethical requirements set by our institution are met.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Additional information

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