Subordinate actors' institutional maintenance in response to coercive reforms

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Abstract:

Institutional work research shows how actors purposively create, maintain, and disrupt institutions. Failed or unintended consequences of institutional maintenance remain relatively unexplored, for two reasons. First, the role of coercive disruption actors (e.g., a state) has not been fully explored. Second, existing literature takes scant account of power, and disregards the resistance tactics of subordinate actors. Drawing on a longitudinal case study of a migrant workers' union in China, we show how subordinate actors were first able to maintain institutional arrangements followed by a maintenance failure under the disruption work performed by the authoritarian state. This study extends the institutional maintenance literature in two ways. First, subordinate actors can sustain institutions insofar as they collectively deploy superficial deference and hidden forms of resistance. Second, maintenance work is vulnerable in the sense that it is contingent on the systems of domination and the level of pressure exerted by the disruption actors.

Introduction

Institutional work, defined as "the practices of individual and collective actors aimed at creating, maintaining, and disrupting institutions" (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006, p. 215), has gained strong momentum since its coinage. The literature exploring the creation and diffusion of institutions through purposive action is relatively rich (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016; Maguire, Hardy, & Lawrence, 2004; Tracey, Phillips, & Jarvis, 2011), yet only a handful of recent work has focused on actors' efforts in ensuring the continuity of existing institutions (Bjerregaard & Nielsen, 2014; Hardy & Maguire, 2010; Taupin, 2012). Existing studies focus largely on successful instances of institutional work that keep institutional settings unaltered (Hardy & Maguire, 2008; Raviola & Norbäck, 2013). However, unsuccessful attempts at institutional maintenance, or disruption, remain relatively underresearched (Lawrence, Leca, & Zilber, 2013). A more detailed empirical investigation of institutional work and its consequences is necessary to paint a clearer picture of actors' roles in maintaining or disrupting institutions to better inform the theoretical premises of institutional maintenance (Singh & Jayanti, 2013).

There is, perhaps, no better context than transition economies when exploring institutional maintenance, as these countries rapidly undergo immense institutional transformations. In China's case, remarkable economic growth depends largely on marginalized migrant workers (Fang & Dewen, 2008). In this paper, we analyze China's Z' Migrant Workers' Union (ZMWU—pseudonym to ensure confidentiality), which comprises various actors, including the workers' body, managers, and other stakeholders, that support ZMWU's original purpose of attending to workers' needs. We regard ZMWU members as individual-level actors maintaining the institutional arrangements of ZMWU. Similarly, the O' Department of Z' Municipal Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC; OD—pseudonym to ensure confidentiality) is a government body that appoints officers as disruption actors.

This paper explores maintenance work performed by ZMWU members and their subtle resistance to the system of domination established by the state. Prior to 2013, ZMWU was one of the largest self-governing migrant workers' non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in B' city. ZMWU's potential for informally organizing a large number of migrant workers was deemed a threat to "social harmony" by the local government. As a result, OD officers realized it was necessary to keep an eye on ZMWU's flexible practices and make its operations more formalized. Consequently, in 2013, OD officers administered "surface-level" changes: the practices and procedures of ZMWU were to be formalized, particularly in managerial criteria, training, and entertainment programs, and prescribed strict requirements for collective events. However, because of ZMWU members' strategic maintenance work, ZMWU remained unchanged. Dissatisfied with the status quo in 2015, OD officers conducted a "deep-level" shift aimed at altering ZMWU's core values system, missions, and goals from a "community" to a "bureaucratic" ideology. The change emphasized obeying administrative orders, catering to national interests, and recognizing the leadership of the CPC. Facing this threat, ZMWU members attempted to, once again, subvert the change through the same maintenance activities. The efforts were futile, and the new policy led to a major transformation of ZMWU to a bureaucratic lever. The less overt forms of resistance of ZMWU members offer a case of how marginalized actors can maintain institutions under the hegemonic influence of governmental agencies. The central question guiding this research is how subordinate actors are able to maintain institutions against hegemonic powers of an authoritarian state.

In this paper, we outline the extant literature on institutional maintenance and briefly discuss the limitations of previous studies. We then further explain the methodology and introduce the case. Finally, we present findings and discussion of the efforts of subordinate actors to maintain institutional arrangements.

Theoretical premises of institutional maintenance through the power lens

Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) identified maintenance as part of institutional work, focusing on the ongoing and purposive actions that ensure the existing order remains unaltered. Developing this line of research, subsequent studies (Blanc & Huault, 2014; Heaphy, 2013; Lok & De Rond, 2013; Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Palmer, Simmons, Robinson, & Fearne, 2015) have primarily identified three forms of institutional maintenance work: (1) coercive work, (2) normative work, and (3) reparative work.

Coercive work comprises "enabling," "policing," and "deterring," which act in concert to underpin institutions (Greenwood, Diaz, Li, & Lorente, 2010; Holm, 1995; Thornton, 2002). Respectively, they refer to the creation of regulations and authority, manipulation of monitoring and punishment rules, and enforcement of powerful barriers aimed at sustaining formal and legitimate regulative systems. Palmer et al. (2015) demonstrated how a key actor in a value chain organized a workshop to legitimize its dominant position and assert regulations. The attendees had to conform to preserve valuable contracts. Dacin, Munir, and Tracey (2010) demonstrated how the University of Cambridge enforced its dining rituals through implementation of monitoring activities and the enforcement of protocols that are associated with disintegrating potential threats to institutional persistence of dining rituals.

Normative work includes "valorizing and demonizing," "mythologizing," and "embedding and routinizing" processes (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), thereby ensuring institutional continuity. An increasing body of research imbues institutional meaning and substance into actors' mundane activities and organizational operation (Maguire & Hardy, 2013; Trank & Washington, 2009). Bjerregaard and Nielsen (2014) illustrated how decision-makers recursively make sense of institutional rules and ascribe norms with legitimacy and authority within their day-to-day working practices to maintain institutions of international policy-making. This finding is in line with negotiation work, which demonstrates that "institutional rules are interpreted and negotiated rather than imposed or coerced" (Barley, 2008, p. 494).

Finally, reparative work includes a particular set of purposive enactments aimed at repairing or restoring the contradictions, cleavages, and conflicts inherent in institutional settlements, which are considered a potential source of institutional transformation (Sminia, 2011). Lok and De Rond (2013) illuminate the "plasticity" of institutions, meaning institutions can be "stretched" to temporarily restore and reverse divergent actions that hamper their principles. Heaphy (2013) argues that maintenance actors are able to skillfully resort to resources to repair and clarify fissures in rules, so that they can smooth out small-scale and everyday voids, which may create a "significant tear in the institutional fabric" (Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006, p. 994; see Table 1).

< Insert Table 1 here >

The above categories of institutional work generally associate maintenance work with intended and successful consequences of preservation, while downplaying or simply ignoring the failed or unintended outcomes (Lawrence et al., 2013). Two reasons can, perhaps, explain why unsuccessful or unintended consequences of maintenance work remain less explored.

First, the role of coercive disruption actors (e.g., a state) has not been fully explored. Previous studies have attributed successful institutional maintenance to maintenance actors' efforts (Heaphy, 2013), while neglecting the systems of domination exerted by the disruption actors. The disruptors include various forms of power elites, such as governmental agencies, the military, corporate elites, and social movement organizations (Clegg, 2010; Power, 1997). Among these, the government agency or delegates may be the most influential disruptors, because of their unique capability to combine normative instruments and coercive power in order to engage in a wide range of power projects (Courpasson, Golsorkhi, & Sallaz, 2012). Previous studies were mainly based on liberal economic contexts, where state reforms are generally aimed towards establishing more democratic and transparent institutional settings (Higgins & Hallström, 2007). Fewer studies have analyzed authoritarian environments, where governmental agencies exercise physical and ideological hegemony to construct systems of domination and surveillance (Gramsci, 1971). Analysis of an authoritarian state and its coercive power to realize institutional disruption in spite of the opposition of maintenance agents could theorize the role of the state in the institutionalization process (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2011), as well as enhance our understanding of unsuccessful outcomes of institutional maintenance.

Second, previous institutional analysis has taken scant account of power or routinely anchored power within the traditional agency-centric framework: power is *ontologically* conceived as a possession performed by a central agency (e.g., the coalition of institutional entrepreneurs) to pursue their interests despite opposition from marginalized actors who are less powerful (Micelotta & Washington, 2013; Rainelli-Weiss & Huault, 2016). Identifying different dimensions (Lukes, 1974) and levels (Fincham, 1992) of power as possessed, in stronger or weaker measure, by key agencies may unselfconsciously generate a presupposition that power is wielded like a sovereign weapon by the dominant class to repress the subordinate class. This type of framework depends implicitly on an elite stance (the "agency" and "interests" of heroic agents), which may downplay the unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences of institutional work (Khan, Munir, & Willmott, 2007).

An alternative conceptualization of power operating hegemonically, based on Foucault's (1977) influential power/knowledge treatise, calls for further attention (Heizmann & Olsson, 2015; Khan et al., 2007). In Foucault's (1977) work, the terminology of power has a series of characteristics. First, power is by no means an exclusive possession of the elite class. Rather, power is ubiquitous, omnipresent, and dispersed throughout institutional fields. Second, power is not necessarily deployed by central agents in a top–down direction; rather, power may flow in a bottom–up fashion. Foucault's influential assertion is that wherever there is power, there is also a multiplicity of forms of resistance (Stoddart, 2007). Third, power does not just operate repressively, by restricting, denying, and proscribing others' actions; power also works productively, by constructing and reproducing discourses and systems of knowledge, as well as domination-resistance relations (Hardy & Jobling, 2015). Taken together, power may be captured not only in the abstract theories of its *essence*; it may also be put into a particular power-resistance relation (Lughod, 1990). As Foucault (1982) states, resistance works "as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their points of application and the methods used" (p. 209). Therefore, we pay close attention to the resistance tactics of subordinate actors, rather than the "agency" or "interests" of dominant agents within the agency-centered framework.

Subordinate actors and their social struggles against elites took center stage in old institutionalist research, particularly micro-sociological institutionalism (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2011; Scott, 1985). Considering that the genealogy of institutional work has a rhizomatous relationship with traditional institutionalism, the ignorance of marginalized and

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subordinate actors in present-day research is striking. Subordinates are ever-present in our society, including the humble class of factory workers (Burawoy, 1979), peasants (Scott, 1985), and immigrants suffering from ethnic inequality (Hughes, 1943).

A seminal treatise on the resistance of subordinate groups represented by the majorities suggests that the "weak" are able to "defend" themselves through weapons that fall short of outright resistance (Scott, 1985); via actions including "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage . . . they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms" (Scott, 1985, p. 29). These defense mechanisms are "nearly always survival and persistence" (Scott, 1985, p. 301), indicating institutional maintenance that prevents further breakdown of the existent forms of production.

Heeding the call to bring power and conflicts back into the institutional theory (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006), we offer a case study of an increasingly relevant state of affairs that explores traditional institutionalist relationships of subordinates (maintenance actors) and the authoritarian state (disruption actors). Through examining the struggles of the oppressed minority rights institution against the government, we aim to cast light on the specific types of maintenance work performed by subordinates.

Research design and methods

The context of this research is the subtle resistance of ZMWU members to the systems of domination established by OD officers. More specifically, ZMWU has a long-standing community mission of serving migrant workers through prioritizing "fraternal relationships, reciprocal bonds, emotional and material support" (cited from ZMWU's principles). In keeping with this ideology, ZMWU members provide supportive practices for economically disadvantaged and marginally employed migrant workers, including training and entertainment activities, social network support, and financial assistance programs. OD officers, concerned with the growing influence of the ZMWU, aim to subvert the NGO, to force it to become a government enforcement body over migrant workers rather than its initial "support body."

An inductive case study allowed us to tease out the complex interrelations between ZMWU members performing maintenance work and OD officers counteracting the maintenance work. A grounded method was adopted for this study, because its "zigzag process" (Creswell, 1998, p. 56) guided us in traversing from theory, to field, to data, and then back to theory, which facilitated the subsequent theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). This provided us with confidence in delivering a robust account of events.

Interviews

The core source of data for this paper is two rounds of semi-structured interviews conducted over 2015–2016. In total, 71 informants were interviewed, with each interview lasting 20–120 minutes. The interviewees included those serving on the board of directors, department chairmen, managerial staff, and members from ZMWU, as well as OD civil servants, section chiefs, and designated transformation actors. In addition, migrant workers and the local media were interviewed. The broad range of informants ensured that the interview data included an array of actors that observed, performed, or negated maintenance work. Interviewees and other details are provided in Table 2.

< Insert Table 2 here >

A comprehensive interview protocol was designed that inquired into the nature of the maintenance work. In correspondence with theoretical sampling principles, an iterative

interview framework was developed that continuously added interviewees until the interview data were saturated (Miles & Hubermann, 1984) and a coherent response of the interaction between ZMWU members' maintenance work and OD officers' counterproductive maintenance work (disruption work) emerged.

Participant Observation

Over 2015–2016, the first author (FA from here) witnessed and attended numerous events that enabled firsthand observation of a set of activities that underpinned ZMWU members' maintenance work and OD officers' disruption work. FA sat in 51 formal meetings, including ZMWU's regular internal meetings, education programs, OD's task conventions, and routine sessions. Additionally, FA served as a part-time administrative assistant at ZMWU and OD for one year. FA assisted members at ZMWU to organize workshops and regular meetings with migrant workers. In addition, FA helped civil servants at OD to hold public meetings and write up reports. These observations helped FA to become familiar with ZMWU's and OD's daily routines. FA also took part in social events, both at ZMWU and OD. During observations, FA recorded extensive field notes with detailed accounts of ZMWU's and OD's formal expressions and informal interactions.

Archival Materials

In addition to the interviews and participant observations, we analyzed archival materials data collected from ZMWU and OD, including formal meeting minutes, annual reports, agendas for development, and public and internal documents. Taken together, this wealth of data enabled effective triangulation of information that offered significant background material on ZMWU and OD. Overall, the authors developed a fine-grained understanding of the relationship and workings between ZMWU and OD.

Data Analysis

The data analysis consisted of three stages. First, we utilized a grounded methodology (Langley, 1999) process to identify ZMWU's and OD's daily routines during the two change processes. Further, we established an event history dataset (Garud & Rappa, 1994) through the narrative accounts of interviewees, field notes, and archival documents. This brought forth a vivid picture of "what was going on" in every case (Wolcott, 1994, p. 16). This event history database was cross-checked by several key informants to ensure its consistency. Subsequently, we employed constant comparison techniques, which are the basis of the grounded methodology (Yin, 2009), to investigate the differences and similarities between ZMWU members' maintenance work and OD officers' disruptive work, and to discern what really transpired in the two change processes.

In the second stage, we analyzed the interview transcripts, field notes, and archival data, and then categorized informants' narratives into first-order codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In the third stage, axial coding was utilized to search for and distinguish relationships between and among first-order codes, which helped us to frame a more meaningful interpretation of ZMWU members' responses towards the coercive reforms. Specifically, we broke down the first-order concepts and aggregated similar categories into abstract, second-order themes. Finally, these themes were agglomerated into aggregate dimensions representing the types of maintenance work ZMWU members implemented. The data structure is presented in Figure 1.

<div align="center">**< Insert Figure 1 here >**</div>

In formulating mutually exclusive and exhaustive themes that synthesized the institutional work, we continuously moved back and forth between the empirical data and theoretical

literature on institutional work when performing this coding process (Miles & Huberman, 1984). To ensure the reliability of this coding process, three research assistants cross-checked the coding framework and recoded data separately. During this recoding process, the researchers and assistants discussed discrepancies and continuously updated this coding system until additional discrepancies disappeared.

Findings: Avoidance work and change demands

The first surface-level change demand

While the organizational mission of addressing migrant workers' needs and the nature of ZMWU as an NGO remained unchallenged by OD, several key surface-level institutional arrangements were required to be reformed in the intervention of 2013. As such, managerial selection criteria were changed from promoting volunteers and migrant workers to selection of professional staff and business elites. Diverse and customized entertainment and training activities were replaced by standardized and unified programs, and the liberal approach to collective activities was strictly regulated, planned and approved by OD section chiefs prior to commencement. Other activities such as assistance in labor disputes, poverty alleviation grants, and organized job fairs were subject to regular review procedures. More details are provided in Table 3. In summary, the government aimed to bureaucratize ZMWU to make its practices, processes, and functions more standardized and formalized, but its core nature as an NGO and its "community mission" to serve migrant workers were not targeted; hence, we utilize the "surface-level" changes terminology henceforth.

< Insert Table 3 here >

To avoid possible sanctions that may follow overt opposition, ZMWU members collectively engaged in skillful practices that involved subtle mixtures of superficial deference and less visible resistance. Our analysis reveals that ZMWU members abstained from institutional disruption through: (1) problematizing external pressure, (2) delay of compliance, and (3) concealing actual maintenance behind superficial changes.

Problematizing external pressure

To render ZMWU's working procedures more regularized, OD officers proposed the surface-level change project and exercised more control over ZMWU members' everyday practices. To legitimize the maintenance of the current institutions, ZMWU members strove to *subtly problematize the change project* and also *receive support from diverse stakeholders*.

First, ZMWU members euphemistically articulated the disadvantages of these changes in serving migrant workers. As one department chairman explained:

"Serving migrant workers might involve limited simple and useful activities. OD officers asked us to equip our support programs with many complicated regulations. These regulations were good but not suitable for us."

ZMWU ordinary members also muttered that the change project was "impractical" and "unrealistic". According to the surface-level changes, entertainment programs (i.e., sports games, spring outings, and social gatherings) should be regulated by policy; for example, ZMWU members were to submit a project plan, write a report, and travel notes to highlight the value of these activities. Most of the ordinary members did not dare to strongly criticize the change initiatives. Rather, they used an indirect way to endow *infeasibility* to the surface-level change project:

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"We did not directly challenge the change demand. We just mentioned that it was impractical for us to write a summary report after attending an entertainment activity. We were busy and exhausted . . . We did not have energy to send these documents to them [OD officers]."

In response to OD section chiefs' criticism that ZMWU's procedures lacked formal standards and regulatory control on practices, ZMWU leaders subtly explained that their creative means without strict discipline could flexibly facilitate the achievement of the institutional mission (serving migrant workers):

"Our volunteer work may not seem so well-regulated, but as long as our work perfectly matches the established mission, it doesn't matter whether these means are disciplinary . . . We received major support from the media, migrant workers and other NGOs."

A variety of stakeholders from multiple fields including local media and migrant workers recognized ZMWU's "community mission" and ability to creatively tackle migrant workers' problems, and supported ZMWU's informal and flexible functions. As one journalist of B' weekly magazine mentioned:

"I am impressed by the job fairs ZMWU organized for migrant workers. Their contributions to unemployed workers are innovative and flexible."

Support from stakeholders across fields could be associated with ZMWU members' tactics to bridge and develop strong relationships with diverse external actors. For instance, ZMWU leaders maintained intimate relationships with the media to obtain a high level of exposure and disseminate ZMWU's creative practices. In addition, a number of ZMWU members were migrant workers in manufacturing and service industries, and they created a tight network of ZMWU industry ties. These strong ties made external stakeholders empathize with what ZMWU members were going through and willing to work with ZMWU members to subtly problematize the surface-level changes.

In a democratic meeting held by OD officers, migrant workers voiced in a soft tone:

"ZMWU is a safe 'home' for us [migrant workers] . . . We appreciate your suggestion that ZMWU should select professionals or high-flyers as managers. But it could be better to give us the opportunity to manage ZMWU on our own."

To sum up, subtly problematizing state pressure was predominantly a *collective* process rather than a single-handed effort, as ZMWU members were engaged in seeking support from other constituents of the field. By informing OD officers that diverse stakeholders recognized ZMWU's previous practices and were opposed to the new changes, ZMWU members were able to point out the problematic nature of OD's change demands.

Delay of compliance

To resist the change demands, ZMWU members procrastinated over making a change in a less visible way. As such, ZWU members used a subtle method to delicately influence OD officers' expectation of timing, sequence, and duration of activities. During the period of field work at ZMWU, FA often heard a plethora of ordinary members' utterances, such as *"These tasks cannot be finished this quickly"* and *"We are very busy and need time to get it done."*

These narratives indicated that the changes were crystallized by ZMWU members as "non-urgent" and that both ZMWU members and OD civil servants needed more time to make sense of the current conditions and their future strategies.

Given that good preparation is important for standardizing ZMWU, most OD officers accepted ZMWU members' suggestion to procrastinate over immediate reforms. One of the OD transformation actors noted that:

"We constantly heard their [ZMWU members'] complaints. They requested more time to submit their work summaries . . . We took their requests on board and gave them extra time."

In addition to ZMWU members' deliberate procrastination narratives, they actively adopted everyday cunctation practices. ZMWU members boasted as to how they manipulated various strategies to placate the "imperialistic" change demands. For instance, ZMWU directors intentionally strengthened personal interaction with senior civil servants to gain a grace period:

"We often invited their [OD's] senior leaders for dinner and entertainment. At dinner, we would tell a story that ZMWU was understaffed. We entreated them to extend deadlines."

A few department chairmen tried to make the wide range of routine work (e.g., poverty alleviation programs) as the focus to distract OD officers' attention from the change projects. One department chairman stated:

"Chinese New Year was coming and we had to ensure that all the migrant workers in poverty received enough support to celebrate the festival. I told them [OD officers] that we had poured all our energy and time into the poverty alleviation programs and might start changing the procedures after the New Year."

Moreover, ZMWU members delayed compliance through deliberate underperformance of OD officers' formalized requirements. For example, some technical and financial managers occasionally disrupted important tasks (e.g., quarterly budgets and personal profile system) to extend the deadline. As a technical manager said:

"OD officers asked us to formalize our managerial selection criteria by setting up a personal profile system, which consisted of all of our members' personal information. We established that system. However, we occasionally missed crucial information, such as phone numbers and addresses. OD officers gave us more time to perfect the system."

Some ordinary members did not heed the change demand and even purposively forgot to attend sets of official meetings organized by OD officers:

"Before representing migrant workers for collective wage negotiation, OD officers asked us to get their approval and attend their official meetings. We disliked these hollow and formalistic meetings and, so, we avoided or didn't engage properly in these meetings."

Several members summarized this "underperformance technique" as an effective approach to conveying the meaning of "inability" to conform to standardized and inflexible tasks strictly stipulated in the change process. Seeing the failure in compliance, OD section chiefs arranged for a three-month education program, pointing out that:

"This valuable opportunity would equip ZMWU members with necessary skills to get rid of previously undisciplined institutions and adapt to the new institution as soon as possible."

However, this education program ultimately caused a temporary victory for ZMWU members as it slowed down the adoption of new institutional arrangements:

"We no longer needed to formalize our routine work. But OD officers seemed a little unhappy. It was possible that they'd strengthen scrutiny over our future activities."

Thus, ZMWU members needed to take precautions for the next period of changes.

Concealing actual maintenance behind an apparent change

In the first change attempt, OD officers attempted to displace previously unofficial practices with new formalized ones. However, ZMWU's informal practices were kept within everyday operations, while standardized ones were only implemented during OD officers' inspection periods.

To deflect OD officers' suspicion and maintain their elaborate façade, ZMWU members deployed multiple tactics. For example, before the assessment, middle-level managerial staff would draw up formal and detailed plans, including location choice, checklists of materials used, financial budgets, and potential problems, to make their work seem professional and standardized. When conducting participant observation at ZMWU, FA noted that these actions were not part of ZMWU's ordinary routines. For instance, after being notified that OD officers would inspect experience-sharing sessions for migrant workers, ZMWU managers worked extra hours to complete a professional session outline. This outline indicated that the session was hosted by business executives, who would share their successful experience with migrant workers. The actual instructor, however, was a ZMWU manager, as inviting business executives was significantly more challenging. Further, there were many standardized components throughout the session (e.g., assignments and group discussions), but the migrant workers were not actually able to complete these components because of busy schedules.

Ordinary members implemented formalized practices during the inspection periods, but returned to their actual unstandardized routines after the evaluations. An ordinary member who took charge of organizing job fairs for migrant workers emphasized that:

"If OD civil servants evaluate our work, I have to submit a formal report and a follow-up summary. But all these practices are not necessary if there is no assessment . . . Almost all the exhibitors are companies that are close to our organization, so we just need to make an informal call to ask them to join."

These practices of maintaining a façade of change were aimed to entice OD officers to reduce the frequency of inspections. As a senior member pointed out:

"We initiatively gave OD officers our internal documents with masquerade strategic plans, work summaries, and rules, all of which were well-organized and displayed our considerable determination to make routines standardized . . . They happily kept oversight to a minimum with this, as they picked out and read the documents, and were satisfied with our new functions. Consequently, we sometimes got exemptions from inspections."

To minimize the frequency of OD's inspections, ZMWU leaders were also engaged in demonstrating initiative. In doing so, OD officers were misled into thinking that ZMWU members were performing well and there was no need to carry out an inspection:

"Our delegation visits OD every now and then . . . We seek to show them how passionate we are to learn from OD's procedures so we can apply them at ZMWU. OD officers are happy that we are doing a good job."

In summary, to conceal actual institutional maintenance behind an apparent change, ZMWU members maintained a façade of reconfiguration to partially meet OD officers' expectations. Additionally, they used initiative tactics to minimize or even circumvent scrutiny. In other words, although ZMWU members apparently showed compliance to the minimum standard of the change request at the assessment time, they successfully kept ZMWU unaltered in terms of their day-to-day routines.

During the first change process, OD officers interpreted this surface-level change as a small-scale, minor transformation, which was not worth the effort to govern scrupulously. Civil servants at OD attached little importance to it; they scrutinized ZMWU members' performance perfunctorily, leaving much space for ZMWU members to implement the concealment or decoupling work. A senior civil servant from OD observed that:

"It seemed to us that these tasks were easy to accomplish since we had the ultimate authority and that ZMWU members should obey our policies. We were blind to their small and inconspicuous tricks. That failure was rooted in our cursory attitude."

Taken together, the three established strands of maintenance work (coercive, normative, and reparative) fail to fully explain how subordinate actors sustain institutions faced with an imposing external threat from the dominant state. The data examination found that ZMWU members subtly conformed to the minimum standards of the imposed change but with the concealed real intention of keeping the institutional setting unchanged. Engaging in (1) problematizing the external pressure, (2) delay of compliance, and (3) concealing actual maintenance behind superficial changes resulted in what we refer to as *avoidance work.*

The Second Deep-Level Change Demand

The surface-level changes failed to deliver intended results for OD officers. Determined to subvert ZMWU to the 'bureaucratic' ideology, OD officers carried out a "deep-level" transformation. Unlike the previous "surface-level" transformation, which aimed at standardizing the procedures and functions of ZMWU, the "deep-level" reform focused on changing the nature of ZMWU from an NGO to a government branch, and the institutional mission from assisting migrant workers to prioritizing the government's interests. As one section chief of OD recalled:

"We want them [ZMWU members] to prioritize the government's tasks. From this point, [ZMWU's] former missions are no longer valid . . ."

Specifically, the restructuring accommodated CPC members as senior management. The training procedures were changed to include ideological and political education aimed at propagating CPC's principles. The collective activities were outlawed and eliminated. These changes are outlined in Table 3.

Facing this deep-level institutional disruption, ZMWU members sought to, once again, conduct the *avoidance work* discussed above. These maintenance strategies, however, did not work in the second phase.

First, *problematizing the external pressure* failed to attain the desired outcome. For example, one middle manager at ZMWU *problematized* the changes in the managerial selection criteria, but the action was nullified by OD officers as it was deemed to conflict with CPC's dominant leadership:

"I suggested that some managers could be selected from non-CPC members, which could increase organizational diversity. However, they [OD officers] rejected my proposals immediately. They stressed CPC leadership as the bottom line."

Moreover, local media and migrant workers actively united with ZMWU members to prevent ZMWU from being transformed into a bureaucratic lever. Unfortunately, their active efforts to claim that ZMWU was an independent NGO were not accepted by OD leaders, in stark contrast to the first successful outcome. As a migrant worker explained:

"We [migrant workers] attended several meetings organized by OD officers . . . We tried our best to persuade the government to emphasize the role of ZMWU as a worker-oriented

union instead of a CPC branch. However, they rejected our suggestions . . . They stated that it was most important to conform to the governmental regulations."

Both *problematizing disruption actors' change demand* and *receiving support from diverse stakeholders across fields* were deemed unacceptable, as ZMWU's substantive values for serving migrant workers were not in line with the deep-level change demand to serve the government. Thus, we argue that *problematizing work* is highly contingent on the nature of the external pressure.

Second, *delay of compliance* was also actioned by ZMWU members to respond to the deep-level institutional disruption. However, neither *procrastinating over making a change* nor *intentionally failing the required tasks* was able to negate OD officers' disruption work. For example, ordinary ZMWU members postponed joining CPC groups by claiming that they were overloaded with work. However, their cunctation was deemed challenging by OD offices, and even threatening to the ideological core of CPC's authority. As a senior civil servant expressed it:

"Their [ZMWU members'] negative response to setting up CPC groups within ZMWU became a significant obstacle because their delay indicated they did not conform to our core [bureaucratic] ideology."

OD officers issued warnings to ZMWU members who did not attend CPC routine meetings. ZMWU could not oppose the state rule, and therefore, ZMWU members had no choice but to meet the deep-level demands. A ZMWU director in an annual meeting in 2016 stated:

"Our [ZMWU] members performed well in their daily work and actively joined CPC routine sessions."

Further, *intentionally failing the required tasks* proved ineffective in the second change phase as OD officers exerted more influence through greater accountability and reprisals. For instance, ZMWU members were ordered to establish an electronic monitoring system that consisted of personal information on all migrant workers who were involved in social movements. This monitoring system was aimed to increase surveillance of migrant workers and inhibit them from collectively engaging in protests. Given that this system went against ZMWU's mission of serving migrant workers, some members deliberately omitted migrant workers' personal identification numbers, rendering these workers untraceable to the government. Realizing ZMWU members' neglect in completing this important assignment, the OD section chief vehemently complained about the failure to record full data in a meeting. OD officers, hence, leveraged formal authority and imposed further control to overturn ZMWU members' resistance. As such, ZMWU managers faced disciplinary measures (e.g., warnings and sharp reprimands) from OD officers for obstruction. Consequently, ZMWU members were ordered to complete this task as soon as possible.

Third, faced with the institutional disruption work carried out by OD officers in 2015, ZMWU members, once again, employed *concealing actual maintenance behind an apparent change*. Much to their surprise, their efforts were unsuccessful in the second phase. For example, during the deep-level change phase, ZMWU members were required to extend entertainment and training courses with components of political education (e.g., teaching CPC's principles and constitution). To *maintain a façade of transformation*, ZMWU members planned to propagate CPC's constitution only at evaluation times while neglecting ideological education in their day-to-day courses. As the deep-level changes in training programs were *"necessary for people to understand CPC's advanced nature and purity,"* and *"crucial for*

disseminating CPC's ideology" (OD news releases, 2016), OD transformation actors recognized it as indispensable to devote more time to inspecting the actual training programs and smoothing out any breaches and breakdowns:

> *"Any misbehavior in the political education classroom might damage party cohesion . . . We had to be more meticulous in supervising them [ZMWU members] and increase the inspection frequency."*

The increasing number of sudden and unannounced evaluations breached the façade, leaving little room for ZMWU members to conceal actual content behind the apparent political tasks in advance. As a result, ZMWU's mission was transformed from "community-centric" to "bureaucracy-centric": the everyday routines clearly conformed to CPC's demands.

It is worthwhile to note, however, that part of older institutional scripts still existed after the deep-level changes. For example, there remain a few institutional arrangements that financially and morally support migrant workers (e.g., financial assistance programs, entertainment activities, and job fairs). However, when these programs threaten social harmony, they will be terminated immediately.

Discussion: Avoidance work and institutional maintenance

The literature presents diverse ways of institutional preservation—an active, skillful, and creative deployment of maintenance strategies. First, actors can enforce coercive pressure for obedience to existing rules and regulations (coercive work). Second, actors can reproduce the general normative systems necessary for institutional continuity (normative work). Third, actors can restore institutional cracks that threaten institutional stability (reparative work). Recent institutional maintenance studies are based on the perspective of dominant actors and their overt opposition to institutional disruption (Gawer & Phillips, 2013). In the institutional transformation literature, it is not uncommon to find subordinate maintenance actors in complete compliance with privileged institutional entrepreneurs (see, for example, Hardy & Maguire, 2010). All up, the extant literature has focused on maintenance actors' two extreme responses to institutional disruption—overt resistance or abject concession to external pressures (Rainelli-Weiss & Huault, 2016). What is largely unexplored is the considerable middle ground between the two polar opposites—that resistance is subtle and concessions are superficial, along the lines of Scott's (1985) weapons of the weak.

This paper contributes to the burgeoning literature on institutional maintenance work by highlighting maintenance work performed by marginal and/or weak actors (Marti & Mair, 2009) in the face of coercive state reforms. We identify three distinct but related forms of institutional maintenance work—problematizing the external pressure, delay of compliance, and concealing actual maintenance behind an apparent change—which are grouped into *avoidance work*—subtle mixtures of superficial deference and cautious resistance. Avoidance work falls within the bounds of weapons of the weak, in the sense that subordinate actors collectively disguise resistance tactics behind an apparent superficial deference, without engaging in direct confrontation against the state authority. Existing literature may bear some links with the types of maintenance work demonstrated above. For example, problematizing the external pressure is originally linked to normative work, which is a part of sensemaking processes to maintain institutions. Further, concealing actual maintenance behind an apparent change does resemble the decoupling response to institutional pressure (Oliver, 1991). We suggest, however, that *avoidance work* problematizes the extant research, which regards maintenance work as purposive activities primarily carried out by "proud" elite professions (Micelotta & Washington, 2013), and advances our knowledge regarding less familiar characteristics of institutional work required to maintain institutions in two ways.

13

Avoidance work: A collective and hidden form of resistance

Avoidance work is deployed collectively by subordinate actors whose vulnerability rarely allows them the luxury of overt and confrontational protest (Scott, 1985). Hence, it permits us to identify the disguised, low-profile, and hidden forms of institutional maintenance work, which have attracted insufficient attention.

Previous institutional studies primarily anchored power within the agency-centered framework, conceptualizing power as a possession of key change actors (Micelotta & Washington, 2013). Instead, we adopted Foucault's (1977) power/knowledge formulation, which highlights a particular power-resistance relation (Lughod, 1990). Specifically, our study contextualized maintenance work by discussing the coercive environment where the authoritarian state (disruption actor) utilizes hegemonic power to engage in institutional changes. Under the rigid surveillance by the dominant state, the direct confrontation of marginal maintenance actors is likely to be unconditionally sanctioned. The less-privileged maintenance actors resort to employing oblique resistance tactics. In this respect, our findings resonate with Scott's work on non-confrontational weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985).

Scott (1985) further examined some elementary forms of disguise, such as anonymity, euphemisms, and grumbling, as well as more culturally elaborate techniques of disguise, including symbolic inversion, folktales, and rituals of reversal. These complex yet inherently elementary resistance tactics are responses of the weak to opposition, at least in part because they require little coordination and can be implemented in small groups or individually. In our case, however, the day-to-day weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985) are collective and well coordinated, to avert the punishment that would have fallen on individuals' resistance.

In our study, the first resistance strategy of the subordinates was the problematization of external pressure. Subordinate actors used subtle and cautious ways to problematize disruption actors' untenable change demands and articulate their excellent achievements as a social organization with the mission of serving migrant workers. In doing so, they anchored themselves in a particular subject position and received support from diverse stakeholders (Maguire et al., 2004), including ordinary migrant workers, local media, and business elites. Multiple stakeholders across the field played an important part in the first-phase success of maintenance work as they were able to provide maintenance actors with abundant resources to weaken or even neutralize the disruption actors' change threats. In addition, by interacting with a range of actors across the field, maintenance actors disseminated the value of their daily practices and established the legitimacy of their institutional arrangements at the macro level (Tracey et al., 2011). These initiatives required collaborative planning, with the hope of collectively "probing for weaknesses and exploiting small advantages" (Scott, 1990, p. 184).

The second resistance tactic pertained to delays in compliance: subordinate maintenance actors purposively procrastinated over making changes while mismanaging disruption actors' demands, bringing transformation to a temporary halt. This type of manipulation work was a mild way to resist disruption actors' change demands in construction of non-urgent time norms to make sense of the "temporal boundaries for activities" (Granqvist & Gustafsson, 2016) instead of overtly dismissing or influencing the content and legitimacy of the change demands (Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury, 2011). The intention behind the delay was to depart from disruption actors' expectations and prescriptions for some time, without blatantly challenging the state's authority (Dunn & Jones, 2010). It is important to note that the delay of compliance was not implemented in small groups or individually. Rather, ordinary members and middle and senior managers worked in large groups to collectively pacify and appease disruption actors' pressures while making subtle efforts to resist disruption actors'

sense of urgency (Lundin & Soederholm, 1995). The cooperation among multiple actors may have minimized the government's sanctions, along the lines of a Chinese proverb: "the punishment cannot be enforced when everyone is an offender."

The third resistance tactic demonstrated how symbolic, partial or minimal compliance with the disruption actors' change demands reduced or even circumvented scrutiny. Neo-institutional theorists predict that deploying visible and symbolic structures while simultaneously decoupling the structures from actual processes can formally meet externally imposed regulatory requirements (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Oliver, 1991). Consistent with decoupling work, maintenance actors' concealment work creatively maintained a façade that was not integrated into the substantive nature of the institutions (Maclean & Behnam, 2010). As emphasized in the findings section, this sort of concealment work is by no means confined to small groups. Members across hierarchical levels require covert planning and preparation to shield themselves from being sanctioned by disruptors. From this vantage point, concealment work may be considered a coordinated and hidden form of resistance, which is a key part of avoidance work.

In sum, due to their greater exposure to strict censorship, subordinate actors are more likely to resort to subtle and hidden avoidance work, rather than the overt confrontation strategies (Scott, 1990). All of the resistance tactics were collectively conducted and required high levels cooperation to avoid individual-level sanctions.

Avoidance work: Vulnerable resistance to disruption actors' domination

Avoidance work allows us to explore the middle ground, where maintenance actors neither abjectly comply nor fiercely resist coercive institutional transformations. In this regard, *avoidance work* is contingent on the systems of domination and the level of pressure exerted by disruption actors, which points to the vulnerable and unsustainable characteristics of maintenance work.

To explain how the outcomes of maintenance work are largely subject to the disruption actors' domination system, we propose to theorize the role of the state in institutional theory (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2011). Institutional analysis has long regarded the role of the state and other regulatory agencies as influential actors of institutional transformation (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). To regulate and transform social orders in broad society and the economy, governmental agencies and other official bodies of governance combine normative instruments—including reasonable evaluation and rational standards—with coercive domination, such as the establishment of rules and the construction of formal sanctions (Rainelli-Weiss & Huault, 2016). This may explain why a large body of literature stipulates that the executive branch of the government, the traditional societal power center, dominates policy-making activities and introduces new regulatory reforms (Clegg, 2010). Empirical studies are largely based on the Western context; however, systems of domination vary between countries, especially those with authoritarian states.

While the ability of Chinese civil society to lobby the government is proliferating, China is still described as "strong state and weak society" (Lee & Shen, 2009). China's governance holds hegemonic power, exercising a high degree of domination and control over decision-making and prioritizing hierarchical chains of command to regulate and oversee civil society (Shih, Adolph, & Liu, 2012).

The authoritarian role of the state, in our case, led the marginalized maintenance actors to conduct a hidden form of maintenance work previously overlooked in the literature. The literature thus far has mostly depicted two polar opposites: (1) compliance and acquiescence of

less-privileged maintenance actors to coercive transformations, and (2) overt opposition of elite actors to state reforms. We believe it is naïve to focus narrowly on these two extreme responses. Given that government agencies have influential capacity to establish official policies, impose coercive standards, and propose formal rewards and sanctions, subordinate actors are too vulnerable to overtly oppose coercive state reforms. Thus, they have no choice but to work collectively and utilize different weapons of the weak (Scott, 1985) to circumvent state pressure and covertly keep institutional arrangements unaltered. These weapons cannot be viewed as traditional maintenance work, as they highlight the vulnerable middle ground where subordinate maintenance actors engage in a minor scope of cautious concession and compliance to subtly alleviate the dominant change. We therefore conceptualize it as *avoidance work*.

Although the documented *avoidance work* has some similarities with the decoupling work proposed by Oliver (1991), it bears specificities that highlight the vulnerable and unsustainable characteristics of institutional maintenance work, which have received less attention in past studies. The vulnerability of *avoidance work* means that different consequences (successful, failed or unintended) are possible when a disruptor exerts its hegemony to establish different systems of domination (surface-level or deep-level).

In conjunction with Lok and De Rond's (2013) argument that maintenance work is based on the substantive nature of a practice breakdown, this study finds that successful maintenance work is largely dependent on the level of change demands. On the one hand, *avoidance work* is effective against surface-level demands targeted at the practices, means, and functions of institutions, such as exogenous small-scale disruptions (Heaphy, 2013) and minor institutional wrinkles (Reay et al., 2006). These surface-level pressures can be smoothed by playing along or minimally complying through *avoidance work*. On the other hand, *avoidance work* is negated by deep-level external pressures. When exogenous deep-level demands (Lok & De Rond, 2013) are rooted in the nature, core values, and ideology of institutions (Pache & Santos, 2010; Purdy & Gray, 2009), the stricter control of subordinate actors' compliance causes *avoidance work* to fail. The dynamic and ongoing links between disruption actors' differential level demands and the varying outcomes of maintenance actors' maintenance work show the vulnerable and unsustainable aspects of maintenance work. We suggest that subversion of maintenance work performed by subordinate actors is dependent on the level of pressure exerted by the systems of domination.

In line with critiques of Scott's (1985) thesis (see, for example, Gutmann, 1993), subordinates are almost always constrained or "structured" by the dominant ideology and, hence, reduce social consciousness to the acceptance of a thoroughly tragic interpretation of contemporary reality. In other words, subordinates possess weapons that do not expect or explain change. When dominant groups are faced with resistance, they may, too, utilize coercive pressure to invoke deference of subordinates (Scott, 1985). However, we must be mindful of the persistence of the everyday struggles of subordinates, which cumulate continuously even after apparent disbandment. These weapons are too veiled to be documented until they reach the cause; in this case, institutional maintenance. For the purposes of this research, it was impractical to document the remains of the resistance past the consequences of the disruption work performed by the OD.

It is our intention to propose the notion of "avoidance work" to enrich our understanding of institutional work performed by subordinate actors as well as the system of domination established by the state, which are both increasingly relevant in institutional analysis (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2011; Zald & Lounsbury, 2010). As discussed before, prior research has paid

insufficient attention to the role of subordinate actors. One important exception is Marti and Mair's (2009) work explaining how the lower class employs a set of strategies (e.g., engaging in experimental projects, establishing provisional institutions, and navigating across different institutional logics) to alleviate poverty. Avoidance work, referring to the subtle mixtures of superficial concessions and cautious resistance, is different from extant categories of maintenance work, as it highlights two neglected but important issues. First, subordinate actors are likely to work collectively and resort to the subtle and hidden forms of avoidance work rather than overt confrontation strategies. Second, avoidance work is especially pressing in the context of authoritarian states and increasing sovereignty-protectionist stances of nations today. As authoritarian states exert their hegemonic influence on all aspects of society, the subject of avoidance work is particularly relevant.

Conclusion

Most of the extant literature focuses on successful consequences of institutional work; a more fine-grained picture would be gained through the exploration of failed or unintended consequences (Lawrence et al., 2013). The neglect of unsuccessful or unintended outcomes may originate from the scant attention paid to competition and conflicts between humble subordinates (maintenance actors) and proud power elites (disruption actors), the major theme in the micro-sociological institutionalist tradition (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2011).

This paper provides a nuanced understanding of both successful and unsuccessful outcomes of institutional work through exploring a case study of maintenance work carried out by subordinate actors in an authoritative context in China. The coercive change projects proposed by China's governmental agencies (OD officers) to establish systems of hegemony in NGOs profoundly disrupted the institutional practices and core missions underpinning ZMWU. Our longitudinal in-depth case study demonstrates how less-privileged maintenance actors—ZMWU members—were able to sustain the institutional arrangements in the first change but failed during the second transformation period.

This study contributes to the literature on institutional maintenance work by theorizing and underpinning the role of the state as well as subordinate actors. We illuminate a novel type of maintenance work, *avoidance work*, which comprises a subtle mixture of superficial deference and cautious resistance to coercive state reforms. In particular, *avoidance work* includes a set of collective and hidden types of resistance: problematizing the external pressure, delay of compliance, and concealing maintenance behind an apparent change.

Although extant literature may bear some links with these actions, *avoidance work* deepens our understanding of institutional maintenance by underlining the less explored aspects of institutional work in two ways. First, *avoidance work* is utilized collectively by subordinate actors to escape possible sanctions that may follow overt opposition. Second, *avoidance work* is contingent on the domination systems instilled by disruptors, thus underlining the vulnerable and unsustainable features of institutional maintenance.

Since this research is based on a single case study design, these types of maintenance work may not be generalizable. We do not claim that our findings represent the only ways in which subordinate actors in these or similar contexts resist. In fact, we do not believe that there is only one way to maintain institutions by weaker agents (Scott, 1985). Future research could use a more extensive study to test the generalizability of our findings or illustrate how the weapons of the weak remain minute and cumulative to the point that they provide a reason for disregard but nevertheless create a formidable force capable of dictating and structuring institutional arrangements.

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