# Unravelling the interplay between institutional logics, organizational identity, and the embeddedness of MNE subsidiaries in host countries☆

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A B S T R A C T

Amid growing scholarly interest in institutional perspectives on MNE subsidiary embeddedness, this study develops a theoretical framework to explain how longstanding MNE subsidiaries navigate competing institutional logics by constructing organizational identities to develop embeddedness strategies in host-country contexts. Drawing on a qualitative case study of a Chinese MNE subsidiary in Ghana, we identify three embeddedness strategies – active engagement, pronounced resistance, and deliberate avoidance – that reflect subsidiaries' ability, willingness and constraints in responding to competing institutional logics. The study contributes to current literature by highlighting how organizational identity serves as a strategic lens for aligning or preserving selected organizational identities and shaping the strategic choices of embeddedness pathways. In particular, we highlight the agentic capabilities of subsidiary managers who, by acknowledging the inevitability of institutional constraints arising from competing institutional logics, adaptively mobilize alternative embeddedness strategies to mitigate and bypass potential institutional frictions.

## 1. Introduction

Research on multinational enterprises (MNEs) has increasingly examined how longstanding MNE subsidiaries achieve and maintain embeddedness in host countries to sustain competitiveness and influence (Meyer et al., 2020; Oehmichen and Puck, 2016; Röell et al., 2024). Early studies, grounded in neo-institutionalism, conceptualized institutions as structural forces that shape behavioral patterns, requiring MNEs to adopt isomorphic practices to comply with host-country institutional contexts and secure legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Salomon and Wu, 2012). However, even longstanding subsidiaries remain subject to home-country institutional pressures (Li et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2010). Therefore, they often face the challenge of navigating multiple and potentially conflicting motivations and interests from home and host contexts (Mountford and Cai, 2023; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2016). The concept of institutional logics – defined as a set of "socially constructed, historical patterns of material practices, assumptions, values, beliefs, and rules" (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999: 804) – has emerged as a valuable lens to understand how MNEs manage competing home- and host-country logics and define appropriate behaviors to achieve longstanding embeddedness (Newenham-

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Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Röell et al., 2024). Moving beyond viewing institutions solely as constraints (Saka-Helmhout and Geppert, 2011), this perspective highlights the power of agency and practice (Cantwell et al., 2010; Meyer et al., 2011; Powell and Colyvas, 2008; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2016), underscoring MNE subsidiaries' capability to proactively shape and redefine the institutional landscape as a means of achieving embeddedness.

However, both perspectives appear overly optimistic about MNE subsidiaries' readiness to adapt to institutional pressures. The neo-institutional approach assumes that subsidiaries are entirely shaped by host-country institutional contexts (Salomon and Wu, 2012), while the institutional logics perspective views them as capable of influencing or even co-creating new institutions within the host countries (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Fortwengel and Jackson, 2016). In contrast, an alternative body of research, drawing on organizational identity as a strategic framework, highlights that MNE subsidiaries are often unwilling to shift away from inherited home-country logics, and may even cultivate and sustain identity duality in navigating the paradoxical and enduring global-local tensions (Ahworegba, 2018; Colman et al., 2022; Edman, 2016b; Feng et al., 2023; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017). However, these studies have offered limited insight into the practical pathways along which competing institutional logics are translated into MNE subsidiaries' corresponding embeddedness strategies and practices by purposely cultivating and sustaining their organizational identities. This opens up key avenues for our research: *What logic-driven mechanisms are developed by managers to navigate the construct of MNE subsidiaries' identities? And how do they mobilize their deliberate identities to develop embeddedness strategies and practices in the host countries?*

To address these research questions, this study employs a qualitative approach to capture the richness and interpretive complexity (Gioia et al., 2013a) inherent in the interplay between competing institutional logics, MNE subsidiaries' identities and their embeddedness strategies in the host countries. A case study on the divergent strategies and practices of a longstanding Chinese MNE subsidiary operating in Ghana was conducted to showcase three practical pathways through which MNE subsidiaries navigate embeddedness strategies and sustain longstanding operations.

This article makes three main contributions. First, by leveraging organizational identity as a means of translating macro-level institutional logics into organizational practices and strategies (Edman, 2016b), this study extends the institutional literature on MNE subsidiary embeddedness (Colman et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2011; Röell et al., 2024; Saka-Helmhout, 2020; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2016). Specifically, it develops a theoretical framework that delineates three practical pathways: (1) subsidiaries actively engage in embeddedness by developing a hybrid organizational identity when they can reconcile competing institutional logics; (2) subsidiaries pronouncedly resist embeddedness by reinforcing a home-centric organizational identity when home-country logics enable them to leverage advantages of foreignness; or (3) subsidiaries deliberately avoid embeddedness by cultivating a segmented organizational identity to distance from host-country contexts when incompatible logics are perceived as institutional constraints. These pathways illustrate how MNE subsidiaries balance integration and resistance through managerial practices and strategies that sustain a longstanding position in the host context.

Second, while prior research on MNE subsidiary embeddedness in local contexts predominantly emphasizes the malleability of subsidiaries, whether through isomorphic adaptation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Salomon and Wu, 2012) or through agentic efforts to shape the institutional landscape (Fortwengel and Jackson, 2016; Röell et al., 2024), this study advances academic understanding by examining why and how MNE subsidiaries may choose to resist and even avoid embeddedness in their host countries. While appreciating the ability of influential agents to translate field-wide institutional logic into firm-specific strategies, our study offers an alternative insight into how managers of MNE subsidiaries, leveraging their perceptive insights on competing institutional logics and their adaptive capabilities to mobilize various forms of identity mechanisms, actively make trade-offs between home- and host-country logics.

Third, while prior MNE identity-based studies illuminate subsidiaries' resistance to local adaptation as strategic actions and the maintenance of identity duality as a necessity for managing persistent global-local tension (Colman et al., 2022; Edman, 2016b; Feng et al., 2023; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017), our study extends this understanding by arguing that organizational identities may not necessarily serve as a meticulously crafted strategy, but rather as a self-constrained mechanism envisaging and actively devising constraints to bypass potential institutional frictions. We contend that managers of MNE subsidiaries, recognizing the inevitability of institutional constraints stemming from incompatible institutional logics, adaptively construct a segmented organizational identity, treating structural constraints as boundaries rather than challenges to be overcome.

## 2. Conceptual framework

### 2.1. *Embeddedness of MNE subsidiaries in host countries: an institutional logic view*

Early studies on subsidiaries' embeddedness, drawing on a neo-institutional perspective (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), viewed institutions as structural forces shaping organizational behavior, prompting firms to adopt isomorphic practices to effectively integrate into the local context (Regnér and Edman, 2014). For longstanding subsidiaries, securing legitimacy and host-country acceptance (Salomon and Wu, 2012) entails deep engagement with local governments and communities, increased reliance on local talent, and the adoption of localized strategies and operational practices (Li et al., 2023; Reimann et al., 2012). However, MNE subsidiaries also face pressures from their home countries, particularly concerning advancing geopolitical objectives or upholding global standards (Li et al., 2022; Sun et al., 2010). These dual pressures often raise the critical question of which sets of institutions should be prioritized in the subsidiary's embeddedness process (Kostova and Zaheer, 1999; Röell et al., 2024).

In response, scholarship has shifted increasingly towards an institutional logic approach, which views the challenges faced by MNEs as arising from the coexistence of multiple, often competing, home- and host country logics. These logics reflect divergent interests,

identities, values and assumptions held by organizations and their members (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999, 2008; Mountford & Cai, 2023). By recognizing competing institutional logics as both constraints on organizational behavior but also as catalysts for change (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Röell et al., 2024), this perspective highlights the role of agency in interpreting, negotiating, and at times reshaping institutional logics within multinational contexts (Greenwood and Suddaby, 2006; Glynn, 2008; Kraatz and Block, 2008). For example, Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens (2018) show that MNE subsidiaries may resist dominant local expectations and construct alternative logics to influence institutional change. Similarly, Röell et al. (2024) find that subsidiaries with longstanding host-country presence often adopt embeddedness strategies aimed at transforming host institutions, supported by local managers who mediate between competing logics to advance strategic objectives. Collectively, these studies underscore the malleability of MNE subsidiaries and highlight embeddedness as a dynamic, actor-driven process of institutional engagement, rather than a passive adaptation to external demands.

While previous perspectives offer valuable insights, they often present an overly optimistic view of MNE subsidiaries' adaptability and transformative potential. In contrast, a growing body of literature suggests that perfect embeddedness is, in fact, neither necessary nor always beneficial (Cuervo-Cazurra and Genc, 2008; Edman, 2016a) and that over-embeddedness can in fact have negative impacts such as constraining strategic flexibility and undermining competitiveness. In this regard, retaining elements of foreignness – through the maintenance of home-country practices or values – can serve as a source of differentiation and competitive advantage (Edman, 2016b). These contrasting views highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of embeddedness – one that focuses on how influential subsidiary actors flexibly engage with macro-level institutional logics to construct shared interpretations of their organization's core values, objectives, images, and positions in the local market (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Saka-Helmhout, 2020). These symbolic constructions, in turn, shape and guide embeddedness strategies at the organizational level. To advance this perspective, we draw on the concept of organizational identity as a way of unpacking institutional logic and embeddedness.

### 2.2. Unpacking institutional logic and embeddedness via organizational identity

Organizational identity, defined as "what an organization is, its goals, and the legitimate means it has to achieve those goals" (Edman, 2016a, p. 678), is manifested in an organization's internal cultures, structures, and practices, as well as its external market position and image (Gioia et al., 2013b). It thus offers institutional scholars a valuable lens for bridging micro-level agency and macro-level institutional logics (Pouthier et al., 2013; Powell and Colyvas, 2008). According to this view, organizational identities - as embodied in practices - make institutional logics actionable through dynamic, discretionary, symbolic, and proactive practices at the organizational level (Kostova et al., 2008; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017).

In MNE research, organizational identity is increasingly viewed as both shaped by and shaping institutional logics (Lok, 2010; Mohr and Duquenne, 1997), offering a powerful lens to understand how global-local tensions are interpreted by MNE subsidiaries in practice (Ahworegba, 2018; Edman, 2016a; Feng et al., 2023). Edman (2016b) demonstrates that while MNE subsidiaries can purposefully cultivate minority identities linked to home-country logics to introduce alternative practices and gain niche advantages in host markets, the trajectory of institutional change remains largely driven by majority identities aligned with dominant host-country logics. Moving beyond this, Pant and Ramachandran (2017) adopt a paradox perspective on identity duality, viewing MNE subsidiaries simultaneously maintaining and navigating two contradictory yet interdependent organizational identities that arise from persistent global and local institutional contexts. This perspective highlights the role of subsidiary agency in strategically constructing and preserving identity duality as a long-term response to competing institutional logics (Colman et al., 2022; Fortwengel, 2021; Saka-Helmhout, 2020), suggesting that MNE subsidiaries' resistance to full adaptation should not be seen as a failure or constraint to integration, but rather as a deliberate and necessary strategy.

While this identity-based view has deepened our understanding of MNE subsidiaries' agentic capabilities in navigating complex institutional contexts, existing research remains constrained by its predominant focus on espoused identity claims – that is, the outward-facing expressions of identity communicated to external stakeholders (Fortwengel, 2021; Grøgaard and Colman, 2016; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017). This leaves underexplored how identity work is conducted internally within MNE subsidiaries and embedded in day-to-day operations and management, shaping their long-term embeddedness strategies (Colman et al., 2022; Feng et al., 2023). Moreover, there is limited understanding of whether organizational actors can consistently leverage strategic opportunities from their institutional environments, and how they navigate identity work when those environments instead pose constraints that limit managerial discretion. Recognizing local embeddedness as a critical practice for longstanding MNEs (Röell et al., 2024), our study adopts organizational identity as an analytical lens to explore how managers of MNE subsidiaries navigate competing institutional logics to develop embeddedness strategies in host-country contexts, providing practical insights into the conditions under which MNE subsidiaries actively pursue embeddedness in some domains while resisting it in others.

## 3. Methodology

### 3.1. Research context

As China's global business presence has grown over the past two decades, state-led policies have driven the rise of Chinese state-owned multinational enterprises (SOMNEs), especially in construction and mining (Li et al., 2023). Our case study, HL, is a SOMNE whose parent company is one of the largest state-owned construction enterprises in western China, founded in 1953. It began overseas operations in the 1970s in response to Chinese government aid projects in Africa and gradually evolved into an MNE. HL was established in the early 2000s as a group subsidiary operating in Ghana. HL initially focused on construction projects in Ghana and

nearby countries, and then increasingly diversified its business in Ghana by entering a range of non-construction sectors, including pharmaceutical manufacturing, import and export trading and hospitality, making it one of the most influential Chinese MNE subsidiaries in western Africa over the past 20 years.

In managing their operations in Ghana, SOMNE subsidiaries such as HL often encounter pressure to conform to local demands (Minbaeva et al., 2014). However, when these subsidiaries are guided by strong home-country institutional logics rooted in home-country values, beliefs, and rules (Reddy and Hamann, 2018), conforming to local demands presents a significant challenge (Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018). Drawing upon existing literature that provides competing home- and host-country logics tables for MNE subsidiaries operating in local contexts (e.g., Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Röell et al., 2024), and the literature that presents competing institutional logics specific to Chinese MNEs including SOMNEs operating in African countries, we developed Table 1 by synthesizing insights from these studies to summarize the competing institutional logics in the context of Chinese SOMNE subsidiaries in Africa.

Based on Table 1, this paper aims to explore the navigation of embeddedness strategies at the intersection of competing institutional logics, strategies and practices, and organizational identity. To do so, data collected from HL offers an overview of the logic-driven organizational-level strategies and practices that enabled HL to become a longstanding company in Ghana. In this process, it is important to recognize and understand the uniqueness of the organizational identities of Chinese MNE subsidiaries that are mainly shaped by institutional logics and legitimacy from the home country. HL is controlled by the Chinese state, which is a common situation given that the previous centrally planned economic system prohibited construction projects from being taken over by private parties. Although HL has gradually transitioned to a stock-holding group to increase autonomy in strategizing and localizing its business activities in Ghana, state-owned characteristics remain embedded in its organizational structure, overseas expansion strategies, and management practices. This makes HL an appropriate case for understanding strategic choices and the ability to balance and navigate trade-offs between competing institutional logics, while formulating unique embeddedness strategies to become a longstanding subsidiary within the host market.

### 3.2. Data collection

A qualitative case study was conducted (Gioia et al., 2013a) to identify the organizational strategies and practices designed and implemented by HL to address the competing home- and host-country logics. With the consent of HL's managing director, fieldwork in Ghana was approved. Data were collected from semi-structured interviews with 37 individuals: 4 general managers, 13 departmental directors, and 11 mid-level managers from China, as well as 9 local Ghanaian managers (see Table 2). All the interviewees had worked at HL for at least three years and had a good understanding of corporate structures, values, strategies, and practices.

The interviews, each lasting 45–60 min, began with fixed questions and progressed to open-ended discussions. Interviews with Chinese expatriates first explored their general understanding of HL's history and operational context, followed by questions on the company's strategies and practices in Africa, particularly their perceptions of the rationales, interests, and motives behind these approaches in the local market. Subsequent open discussions focused on their views on HL's SOE background, the Ghanaian market, and issues of cultural adaptation, integration, and communication. Interviews with local participants similarly started with questions about their understanding of HL's organizational structure, management style, corporate values, and daily practices, before moving to open

**Table 1**
Competing institutional logics in the context of the Chinese SOMNE in Africa.

| Key characteristics | Home-country logics | Host-country logics |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Economic system | State capitalism (Driessen, 2019; Gu et al., 2016) | A mix of market and welfare capitalism (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Röell et al., 2024) |
| Source of identity | State agency (Li et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2022) | The land and community (Cooke et al., 2015; Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018) |
| Source of legitimacy | Consistency with home political tasks (Gu et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2015); Efficiency in managing state-owned resources (Cooke et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2022) | Local engagement, local community betterment and economic growth (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Kernen and Lam, 2014) |
| Basis of governance | State ownership and political connections (Driessen, 2019; Fan et al., 2024) | Compliance with local regulations, local representativeness in governance (Kamoche and Siebers, 2014; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017) |
| Focus of interest | Long-term gain and mutual benefits (Jackson and Horwitz, 2017; Xing et al., 2016); Economic and non-economic outcomes (Li and Soobaroyen, 2021) | Impactful projects and initiatives in lines with host-country need (Wang and Elliot, 2014; Röell et al., 2024) |
| Basis of strategy | Global impact and political expansion (Li et al., 2023) | Local responsiveness (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Röell et al., 2024) |
| Decision making process | Hierarchical and top-down, unilateral (Lam, 2016; Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018) | Consensus-oriented, inclusive (Jackson and Horwitz, 2017; Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018) |
| Human resources | Politically appointed expatriate managers (Shen, 2006; Li and Soobaroyen, 2021); Commands and discipline (Rui et al., 2017; Li et al., 2023) | Promotion of local employees, senior management consists of home country nationals (Cooke, 2011; Röell et al., 2024) |
| Religion and belief | Secularity, separation between business and religion (Auffray and Fu, 2015; Driessen, 2019); Family orientation (Xing et al., 2016; Jackson, 2014) | Strong sense of religion (Driessen, 2019; Xing et al., 2016); Communal social orientation (Li et al., 2023; Jackson, 2014) |

**Table 2**
Interview overview.

| Interviewee code | Job position | Length of service in HL | Nationality |
|---|---|---|---|
| CN1 | Managing Director | 24 | Chinese |
| CN2 | General Manager | 24 | Chinese |
| CN3 | General Manager | 13 | Chinese |
| CN4 | Deputy General Manager | 15 | Chinese |
| CN5 | Deputy General Manager | 22 | Chinese |
| CN6 | Chief Engineer | 24 | Chinese |
| CN7 | Chief Financial Officer | 19 | Chinese |
| CN8 | Director - Operations | 15 | Chinese |
| CN9 | Director - Procurement | 12 | Chinese |
| CN10 | Director - Marketing and Communication | 8 | Chinese |
| CN11 | Director- Human Resource | 20 | Chinese |
| CN12 | Director - Engineering | 18 | Chinese |
| CN13 | Director - Project | 17 | Chinese |
| CN14 | Department Director | 6 | Chinese |
| CN15 | Department Director | 4 | Chinese |
| CN16 | Department Director | 7 | Chinese |
| CN17 | Department Director | 9 | Chinese |
| CN18 | Department Director | 8 | Chinese |
| CN19 | Department Director | 10 | Chinese |
| CN20 | Project Manager | 5 | Chinese |
| CN21 | Project Manager | 3 | Chinese |
| CN22 | Project Manager | 3 | Chinese |
| CN23 | Accountant | 6 | Chinese |
| CN24 | Accountant | 3 | Chinese |
| CN25 | Secretary General | 6 | Chinese |
| CN26 | PA to General Manager | 4 | Chinese |
| CN27 | Middle Manager - Human Resource | 3 | Chinese |
| CN28 | Middle Manager - Operation | 3 | Chinese |
| GH1 | Middle Manager - Human Resource | 5 | Ghanaian |
| GH2 | Middle Manager - Human Resource | 3 | Ghanaian |
| GH3 | Middle Manager - Marketing | 4 | Ghanaian |
| GH4 | Middle Manager - Marketing | 6 | Ghanaian |
| GH5 | Middle Manager - Accounting | 12 | Ghanaian |
| GH6 | Middle Manager - Accounting | 9 | Ghanaian |
| GH7 | Middle Manager - Project | 3 | Ghanaian |
| GH8 | Middle Manager - Project | 5 | Ghanaian |
| GH9 | Project Appraiser | 8 | Ghanaian |

discussions about their motivations for working at HL, local market needs, and perceptions of their Chinese colleagues.

### 3.3. Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted in three steps to develop a nuanced understanding of the interplay between institutional logics, organizational identity, and the strategies and practices employed to navigate institutional embeddedness and perform over the long term – insights that are applicable to broader contexts (Gioia et al., 2013a).

*Step 1: Identifying the logic-driven strategies and practices.* Based on the process of open coding, the interview data were summarized, categorized, and coded to identify the Chinese SOMNE's organizational-level strategies and practices in the development of this longstanding local subsidiary in Ghana. Throughout the data analysis process, we remained mindful of the substantial impacts of competing home- and host-country logics on the development and implementation of these strategies and practices (Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Röell et al., 2024). Building on the distinct competing institutional logics identified in Table 1 for Chinese SOMNE subsidiaries in Ghana, we referred to Röell et al.'s (2024) methodology to pinpoint HL's embedding strategies and practices, deriving their underlying logics from our interviewees' descriptions of the company's long-term management strategies. The result was the generation of 19 first-order codes from interview quotations (see Table 3 for sample quotations), providing insights into HL's logic-driven strategies and practices.

*Step 2: Deriving organizational identities.* Building on the analysis of the 19 logic-driven strategies and practices identified in Step 1, we adopted an approach similar to that of Pant and Ramachandran (2017) to develop our coding process. Their study identified similarities in identity claims based on alignment with institutional logics, and examined the relationships of first-order codes to overarching themes related to organizational identities. Following this approach, and drawing on Thornton et al. (2012)'s theoretical framework linking institutional logics, logic-driven practices and organizational identity, we grouped first-order codes with shared underlying logics into five subgroups. These subgroups informed the development of five categorized themes representing HL's organizational identities (see Fig. 1). This analytical process enabled us to understand how competing institutional logics shaped HL's strategies and practices and contributed to the construction of its distinct organizational identity.

**Table 3**

Sample quotation table.

| Codes | Sample quotations |
|---|---|
| Long-term dedication | - I wear local clothes, eat local food, and speak Akan the local language, which has helped me make many friends during my 20 years in Ghana. When you see yourself as Ghanaian and do things their way, there are no barriers. That's why I support localized management. (CN1) <br> - The intensive involvement in non-construction industries actually represents our determination to develop a long-standing local company. In the long run you need to build a reciprocal relationship with local people and we plan to do it through diversified operations. (CN2) |
| Extensive local recruitment | - For each work permit issued to Chinese expatriate managers, we must recruit a specific number of local employees. (CN11) <br> - We also helped with the recruitment process. We tell our siblings, friends or clansmen about the job opportunities and they will further spread the message. This approach accelerates the progress of local recruitment. (GH2) |
| Expatriate training and learning programs | - It's not about dictating managers' behaviors through rules; instead, we aim to instill in expatriates the idea of considering local perspectives, acting like the locals, and using methods that are friendly to the local culture in their management practices. (CN5) <br> - First, we provided on-the-job training to help managers address emerging local situations, particularly issues arising from local political upheaval. Second, we encouraged managers to hold seminars to exchange ideas and offer suggestions on localization. Finally, we included localized management practices as a criterion in the managers' performance evaluations. (CN6) |
| Engagement in political networking | - HL's political networking strategy was well-designed. We built this big leisure complex with a restaurant, hotel, and all kinds of recreational facilities. It was mostly used for public events and community activities, and we always invited local government officials to participate and strengthen our 'guanxi' (relationship). (CN3) <br> - Many local government officials are good friends of mine, we respect each other, and help each other when needed. It is not only about work, actually most of the networking is done during off work time. (CN2) |
| Reshape public image | - We saw that Ghana was really lacking in medicine and everyday essentials, so we decided to get into the pharmaceutical and trading business. Our thinking was that by providing these much-needed products, we could meet people's demands and gain their acceptance. (CN5) <br> - We have a community center in our leisure complex which is open to the public and they can rent space at a low cost for their gatherings. Local people are very happy about what we provide. (CN28) |
| Fulfill local needs | - I love to see that [HL] opened a hotel and restaurant to offer local people quality service. The hotel is a top choice for business trips and the locals enjoy dining on Chinese cuisine at our restaurants. (GH4) <br> - A massive display center was opened [by HL] within the biggest local shopping mall. Since we are a top franchisee for Chinese brands, we can provide the most demanded and popular products to the locals. (CN22) |
| Empower local managers | - I'm excited to be part of the [HL]'s HR team. It's great to see so many locals joining [HL] now, and I am even happier because I can support them when they need help. (GH1) <br> - Local managers have a language advantage. They can translate and convey information much clearer than we do. A single experienced Chinese supervisor can handle 5 local workers, but local supervisors can effortlessly oversee 10 workers under similar conditions. (CN12) |
| Improve the employability of local employees | - In construction works, our technicians have no hesitation in sharing their knowledge and experiences with locals, and we do it under the old Chinese doctrine: 'teaching fishing is better than giving fish'. Therefore, instead of telling them what to do, we prefer to teach them how to do it. We are willing to help them get skills so they will be more confident in technical jobs, which is beneficial to both sides. (CN18) <br> - I'm here to get experience with a foreign company, which I believe will be valuable for my future career because more and more foreign companies choose Ghana to open a subsidiary. (GH3) |
| Centralized command and unified discipline | - As I have emphasized repeatedly, the discipline and adherence to rules inherent in military management are crucial for our business operations. Construction sites are not suited for democratic processes, they require a leader who can make accurate judgments and swift decisions during emergencies. (CN20) <br> - …Military management principles demand a high level of focus, swift and precise actions, significantly increasing the workload for managers. For instance, they must frequently communicate with the logistics department, monitor and guide construction progress, and ensure the project stays on schedule. (CN6) <br> - We aim for the locals to view us as a cohesive and dedicated team. We want to show our willingness to take on responsibilities and always work together for the same goal. (CN7) |
| Unidirectional communication and compliance | - Although the director will examine the report that I make monthly, I don't know whether the report has any impact on the future operation because we won't be told. (GH5) <br> - If your superiors assign you additional tasks, even if they are outside your usual responsibilities, you must prioritize and complete them. This practice is very common in Chinese SOEs, as you always follow what your boss says. In any case, being part of a Chinese multinational and state-owned enterprise means adhering to the Chinese way of doing things is unavoidable. (CN23) |
| Legacy and venerable tradition | - We have a long tradition of strict, military-style management. This approach enables us a tremendous cohesion to overcome all kinds of difficulties and challenges in Africa. (CN19) <br> - Military management instills the essential discipline of collective consciousness and solidarity, which is crucial for operating our SOE. (CN17) |
| Ideological works | - We cannot succeed without government support, so in addition to satisfying our shareholders, it's even more important for us [SOE managers] to meet the government's needs. (CN6) <br> - As an SOE, we must always ensure that our operations are consistent with government regulations and recommendations. Consequently, we begin studying new government policies as soon as they are released and display these policies in our factory windows. (CN10) |
| Cohesion at the workplace | - In a foreign country, I believe that only by working together can we have the confidence to deal with the difficulties we encounter. (CN15) |

**Table 3** (*continued*)

| Codes | Sample quotations |
|---|---|
| Safety of the national assets | - The strong sense of unity and mutual support within the community during difficult times is a key factor in persuading them to extend their stay. (CN20)<br>- We inevitably face political pressure to make sure our practices align with government directives and prioritize national asset protection in the host market. It ensures the success of our overseas projects and protects the government's investments from potential risks. (CN3) |
| Reservation towards local managers | - We must prioritize Chinese staff for key decision-making roles. We have concerns that local managers and employees may not prioritize our home country's interests. That's why for key positions, we still preferred using Chinese staff due to trust and familiarity. (CN4)<br>- We are often excluded from the final bidding process. Of course, I understand their concerns including potential conflicting interests, the need for consistency in decision-making… however I still feel a bit frustrated as I feel a lack of trust, undervaluing our contributions, and a sense of professional disrespect. (GH9) |
| Different working attitudes | - Honestly, working and living here [in Ghana] is much harder than in my hometown [in China]. I don't want to stay for long, and from what I know, many of my colleagues from China feel the same way. (CN21)<br>- Chinese workers are very dedicated and responsible in their jobs, rarely missing work or leaving early. In contrast, local workers value their freedom more, often arriving late or leaving early. They don't seem to mind being absent for several days, and it's generally accepted that work is not their top priority. This attitude is hard to understand in China. (CN27) |
| Family commitments | - I would prefer working in China for a lower salary because it allows me to be closer to my family. The language barrier, the complexity of daily life, and the stressful work environment here are burdensome for me, and no amount of money can make up for it. (CN28)<br>- Many of our expatriates are less educated as they started working as construction workers at very young. They see the opportunity to work abroad as life-changing for themselves and, more importantly, their family. They cherish this job very much. (CN16) |
| Indifference to religions | - Generally, expatriate managers struggle to grasp the local culture, especially religious and cultural practices, in a short time. They often rely on their own perspectives and habits, sometimes finding cultural differences incomprehensible. This lack of understanding is a major cause of prejudice. (CN2)<br>- I don't believe that having an in-depth knowledge of local culture and customs will greatly benefit our business, but I do think it is important to respect the religious beliefs and practices of the local people. For instance, they need to attend church on religious holidays, we therefore avoid scheduling work on those days. This is a fundamental respect for our workers and a necessary step towards localization. (CN5) |
| Segregate expatriates and local employees | - We often got together in the cafeteria on Saturdays or Sundays, to share traditional food from home and watch traditional TV shows. We do not feel lonely when having time together and it helps with missing home. (CN13)<br>- My view on localization involves using experienced expatriates to run the company. These professionals live and work in Ghana for extended periods, becoming well-acquainted with the local culture and environment. While political restrictions are a factor, it's important to recognize that expatriates often bring more expertise and knowledge than local staff. Additionally, finding effective ways to encourage expatriate managers to extend their stay is crucial. (CN1) |

***Step 3: Summarizing the embeddedness strategies.*** In the final stage of the data analysis, we synthesized our themes into overarching theoretical dimensions by iteratively examining how HL leveraged its unique identities, and unpacking the relationship between logics and embeddedness. In this way, the five abstracted second-order themes were consolidated into three aggregate dimensions – active engagement in embeddedness, pronounced resistance to embeddedness, and deliberate avoidance of embeddedness. These dimensions summarize HL's ability to balance and trade off competing institutional logics of the home country and the host market, thereby navigating its embeddedness strategies in terms of the distinct organizational identities of this Chinese SOMNE subsidiary operating in Ghana.

## 4. Empirical findings

Our findings identify three embeddedness strategies implemented by HL in the host country, reflecting a nuanced balancing act between embeddedness and resistance shaped by competing institutional logics and deliberated organizational identities. First, HL pursued *active engagement in embeddedness*, strategically constructing its organizational identities as both a partner of local government and a promoter of localization. By adapting certain business practices to the local government's expectations and the community's needs, the company aimed to achieve an alignment of the home- and host-country logics, facilitating operational legitimacy. However, at the same time HL exhibited *pronounced resistance to embeddedness*, maintaining an approach dominated by the home logics to secure its foreign identity. This was most evident in its advocacy of a militarized management style and the reinforcement of a patriotic mindset, which underscored the company's state-centric governance model. HL viewed its foreign identity as a competitive advantage, deliberately resisting deeper embeddedness to safeguard its state affiliations and political benefits. When the home- and host-country logics were fundamentally incompatible, particularly regarding religion and belief, HL adopted a strategy of *deliberate avoidance of embeddedness*. Recognizing these irreconcilable differences as a structural constraint, the company saw full embeddedness as neither feasible nor desirable. Instead, HL preserved its organizational identities as a carrier of secular and family values, but only within the expatriate community, enforcing managerial and physical segregation to minimize conflict. This segmented organizational identity bypassed rather than resolved institutional frictions, reinforcing HL's foreign identity while treating this human-devised constraint as a boundary rather than a challenge to be overcome.
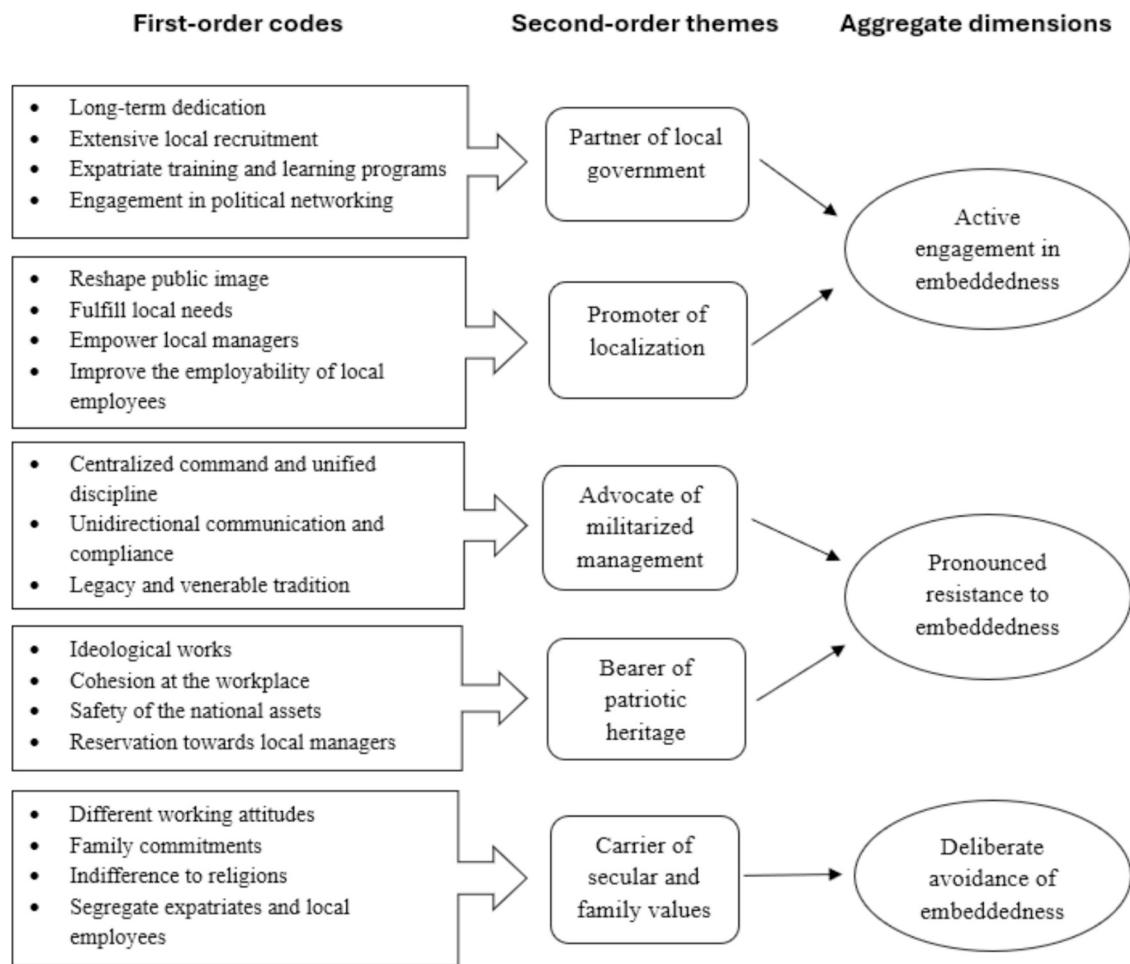
**Fig. 1.** Coding table.

## 4.1. Active engagement in embeddedness

***Partner of local government.*** In response to the Chinese government's geopolitical agenda of global expansion and economic influence, HL was designated by its parent SOE as a key player in advancing into African markets. Reflecting the home-country logic of long-term, mutually beneficial development, HL undertook a significant shift in its business strategy, as one deputy manager explained:

> Previously the business ran under a quite temporary and random mode, such as "conduct a project, make some money and leave". However, we [HL] were repositioned as the pioneer of the group in establishing overseas hubs in the 2000s, which prompted us to adopt a more sustainable approach in Africa.

(CN4)

Shifting HL's operation towards becoming a local business was regarded as a crucial step in the company's long-term planning. At the core of this transformation was the deliberate effort to shape HL's organizational identity as a foreign partner of the local government. Specifically, HL prioritized business practices that adhered to the host-country logic regarding international cooperation. A tangible example of this commitment was HL's workforce restructuring, in which over 95 % of its construction workers were replaced by Ghanaians. This strategic shift not only fulfilled local regulatory mandates, but also fostered reciprocal and sustainable development, as the director of the engineering department explained:

> *It (local recruitment) is the determinant of our long-term development as we need a stable team that can take root locally. More importantly, it is what the local government and community wanted to see, as they expect an overseas company to promote, rather than threaten local employment. Our willingness and execution in local recruitment have been widely acknowledged by the local government and preferential terms were granted because of it.*

(CN12)

Mirroring the state's governance approach, HL's top management actively pursued political connections in the host country, recognizing that "*most of the barriers we faced in Africa can be removed if we get along with the local government*" (CN5). To strengthen these partnerships, HL placed significant emphasis on cultivating "*a local view of Chinese managers*" through targeted staff training and learning programs offering "*pragmatic suggestions and guidance for self-adaptation in the African context*" (CN15). As one HR manager explained:

> …*Apart from the importance of compliance with local laws, regulations and authorities, we particularly targeted government-related information and networking. We hold monthly meetings for timely updates on emerging local news and policy changes and for managers to share experiences and explore opportunities for collaboration.*
>
> *(CN27)*

Moreover, HL's Chinese senior managers were required to actively build and maintain personal networks with key officials in local governments, authorities, and trade unions. As one project director explained:

> *Our managers need to get out of the office, develop our networks, seek opportunities to do them favors when needed and build a mutually beneficial relationship. In return, they will, by using their influence, broadcast our commitment to developing a local company to the masses.*
>
> *(CN13)*

HL's top managers explained that their government-centric approach was a deliberate and strategic decision, grounded in a careful assessment of their unique positioning as the overseas subsidiary of an SOE. They believed that they were in a privileged position to foster effective communication and strong partnerships with local governments. As HL's managing director explained:

> … *We are in a privileged position in bidding for construction projects that are initiated by the local government, because our political capital at home allows us to meet the construction standard at a lower price. Our SOE background works like an endorsement when dealing with local authorities. Therefore, our decision-makers (the Chinese) should bear in mind that we are also a representative of a state-owned entity in Africa and we should consider how to utilize our political affiliation to benefit business activities.*
>
> *(CN1)*

In this sense, HL strategically leveraged its business operations as a subtle form of intergovernmental collaboration, deliberately shaping its organizational identity as a local government partner. This approach was rooted in the fusion of the home-country logic, embedded in its geopolitical strategy, and the host-country logic of fostering international cooperation. In doing this, HL's government-centric approach created a self-reinforcing cycle, seamlessly integrating its business vision and the host country's political and societal agenda.

***Promoter of localization.*** Beyond direct engagement with political stakeholders, HL made substantial efforts to build trust and a strong reputation within local communities. The managers recognized that local acceptance was crucial to HL's long-term success, particularly given historical perceptions of Chinese companies in Ghana, as one director explained:

> *Over the last few decades, Chinese people have been accused of rampant illegal gold mining in Ghana. Although this had nothing to do with us, the negative impression of the Chinese created local reservations and even hostility towards our operations which were easily associated with resource exploitation.*
>
> *(CN25)*

In response, promoting HL's organizational identity as a localized company committed to "*focusing on practical and realistic operations that can bring real benefits to local communities and people*" (CN10). To reinforce this localized identity, the company replaced its Chinese company name with a catchy English one in Ghana, redesigned its construction sites and commercial venues to reflect local customs and preferences, and intentionally distanced itself from its governmental background to "*minimize misunderstandings and avoid politicizing business intentions*" (CN21).

Enhancing local employees' engagement and representation was another crucial element of HL's localized identity. Local managers were granted significant autonomy in HL's diversified operations, recognizing their irreplaceable ability to navigate market trends, customer relations, and community expectations. Their role extended beyond internal operations to maintaining relationships with local suppliers, lobbying government authorities, and expanding HL's pharmaceutical business. HL's chief engineer described this approach as "local manages local" and explained that it embodies the home-country logic of running a reciprocal multinational by reinforcing its commitment to local integration and community betterment. As he stated:

> *"Reciprocity" is a key principle in China's diplomatic policy and also guides our approach in local recruitment. The growing presence of local managers not only enhances our identity as a local company but also benefits the managers themselves. They appreciate their roles as they feel more confident and adept at engaging with locals, giving them greater opportunities to showcase their talents.*
>
> *(CN6)*

The idea of "reciprocity" was further emphasized through long-term career development initiatives for local young talent. The company partnered with Chinese universities to offer international study programs, sponsoring selected local managers for advanced learning opportunities. This initiative was described as a "win–win strategy," helping HL cultivate a long-lasting and highly skilled local workforce while enhancing local employability and contributing to sustainable community development. The program was widely praised by both employees and the local community:

*I am at the early stage of my career, and I believe chances for personal development are more important than rewards/salary. That's why I chose to join HL as I hope to learn more from my job… HL has left a very good impression among local graduates and has become one of their top choices because of the opportunities for better employability.*

*(GH3)*

From an operational perspective, HL significantly expanded beyond its core construction business by establishing shareholding companies in pharmaceutical manufacturing, import and export trading, and hospitality. While these targeted markets seem unrelated to its original expertise, the underlying logic remained consistent with HL's community-oriented approach to localization because "*in the long run, the opportunity to leave a positive impression on local people and the government is much more important than economic outcomes*" (CN3). This is further explained by the director of the operational department:

*It doesn't matter what market to enter…We kept asking the same questions when making decisions: will this project meet local needs, will it be welcomed by local people, and will it be permitted and supported by the local government? We will do whatever it is if the answer is yes.*

*(CN8)*

Therefore, by embedding itself within the local socio-economic landscape, HL not only facilitated its market expansion but also enhanced its reputation and trustworthiness from the local perspective. Moreover, the company's commitment to improving local benefits – particularly through employment growth and economic contributions – earned increased appreciation from the local government, which led to a more favorable business environment and policies, further reinforcing HL's embeddedness and long-term sustainability in the host country.

### 4.2. Pronounced resistance to embeddedness

**Advocate of militarized management.** The rapid expansion of HL's diversified operations and deepening engagement with local governments and communities did not signify a shift towards full embeddedness in the host-country logic. Instead, HL actively preserved and reinforced its foreign identities, particularly through its internal management and control practices. This was most evident in its adherence to a militarized management style, which embodied the home-country logic regarding governance with its emphasis on work efficiency, hierarchy, centralized decision-making, and strict discipline.

HL inherited a military-based managerial approach known as *Chengjianzhi*, a system originating in the Chinese army and widely adopted in China's construction industry, particularly in international aid projects since the 1970s. *Chengjianzhi* refers to a squad of soldiers with a complete set of specialisms and a clear division of labor who can independently carry out military missions under centralized command and unified discipline. Given HL's origins in Chinese aid projects in Africa, the company regarded this method as a venerable tradition and a core managerial philosophy. As a project manager commented:

*Military management drives our rapid expansion because it helps us maintain high production and morale and overcome difficult environments. A construction site for us is the same as a battlefield, where the key to success is to unite under disciplines, always be on standby, and quickly respond to commands and compliance.*

*(CN20)*

In practice, HL's military management style centered on "*centralized scheduling, resource allocation and strict progress control*" (CN17). In the management of construction workers, in particular, simplified but clear working orders and discipline were expected to streamline processes and maintain high productivity. However, when military ideas extended to HL's diversified subsidiaries, the company's "obsession" with "*command and compliance*" created tension with local managers, whose expectations were shaped by the host-country logic that highlights local responsiveness, inclusivity and consensus-oriented decision-making in the workplace. One local manager shared his frustration:

*Sometimes my job is very stressful because tasks can be assigned with tight deadlines but very brief instructions. Moreover, unexpected changes in assignments often happen without notice in advance. All we needed to do was to overcome difficulties and finish the work on time. There is little room for feedback or explanation from our side.*

*(GH1)*

These comments underscore the hierarchical and unilateral nature of HL's managerial style. Apart from the diktat on job assignments, changes in personnel, management and even operational procedures were imposed on local managers without prior consultation. Additionally, a "*result and punishment-driven*" approach to performance evaluation was widely criticized for its lack of transparency and objectivity. Local managers expressed concern that rewards and incentives were subjectively determined by Chinese supervisors without clear performance metrics. Further frustration stemmed from the frequent use of penalties, such as pay deductions and public warning notices, which were described as fostering "*a stressful workplace and a sense of oppression*" (GH7).

Despite the growing resistance, Chinese managers remained steadfast in their preference for militarized management, viewing it as a key identity marker that "*distinguished HL from other multinationals, which was also beneficial to their operations in navigating the complex and uncertain business environment in Ghana*" (CN22). Addressing local discontent, HL managers framed the cultural differences as temporary challenges that would diminish over time, as a department director explained:

> *We will carry on this (military management) because it defines who we are, and gives us our unique advantage. It is not rational to abandon our tradition and method, especially when they have been repeatedly tested as the better solution in Africa. I wouldn't say local managers are treated unfairly because the same rules apply to both Chinese and local employees. Complaints are common in foreign companies due to cultural differences, and they (locals) just need more time to understand, adapt and eventually appreciate the virtues of our approach.*
>
> *(CN16)*

Rather than revising its managerial system to align with the host-country logic, HL doubled down on its militarized approach, positioning it as a defining characteristic of its organizational identity as a Chinese SOMNE subsidiary managing in the Chinese way. Enforcing top-down command structures, strict discipline, and hierarchical decision-making was seen as a necessity for both operational efficiency and strategic differentiation from other MNEs, even at the cost of potential misunderstandings, dissatisfaction, and resistance from local employees.

***Bearer of patriotic heritage.*** HL's foreign identity was further solidified through its personnel appointment and expatriate management practices, which reinforced the home-country logic regarding governance and positioned HL as a state agency overseeing and managing state-owned resources abroad. HL's top management was politically appointed, with Chinese expatriate managers rotating between China and Ghana, carrying assigned political and economic responsibilities. As a result, an exclusive organizational identity of patriotism was actively reproduced and maintained, and was reinforced through mindset-building initiatives for Chinese expatriates such as routine seminars for policy study, themed workshops for patriotic education, and retrospective reviews of the company's SOE legacy and governance models. Much like militarized management, these "*ideological works*" (CN26) shaped the internal stakeholder dynamics by instilling in HL's expatriates a sense of mission-driven resilience, commitment, and dedication, key qualities which were seen as essential for fulfilling the company's state-mandated objectives abroad.

HL believed these exercises "*enhanced managerial morale and prepared them for overcoming difficulties and intensive workload*" (CN14). However, beyond motivation, they helped HL build a unified management team with shared values and identity, defining "*the principles and the boundaries for overseas operations*". However, this underlying home-country-driven logic was often incomprehensible to local employees who did not share the same ideological framework. As one local manager commented:

> *I think they (Chinese expatriates) are overly serious at the workplace as they often treat their jobs as some grand missions. Moreover, from their daily conversations to company meetings, they seem to have a very strong national identity and often put "country/state" as the priority. It makes us feel isolated.*
>
> *(GH6)*

This sense of detachment was further exacerbated by HL's restrictive approach to local managerial involvement, particularly in decision-making processes. While HL employed local managers in operational roles, strategic and financial control remained firmly in the hands of Chinese expatriates. For example, HL hired local appraisers to assist with project valuation and bidding, but excluded them from the actual bidding process and final decisions. Even senior local managers faced barriers to meaningful participation, as one senior local financial manager remarked:

> *I have been responsible for the company's financial and tax reports for over 10 years. However, I was told to prepare documents only for local government use, while our Chinese CFO independently prepared another set of reports for the board and decision-makers. While I see myself as an important part of the company, it is disappointing to realize that my work barely has a real impact on the business.*
>
> *(GH5)*

For HL's Chinese managers, however, this reserved approach was seen as a necessary safeguard to preserve the company's political legacy, which was not merely an issue of trust but rather an assertion of who HL was and who it ultimately served. As one department director explained:

> *You can say it is a matter of trust, but we need to convey a clear message inside our company and it is about who we are and where we come from. Although we have a great level of autonomy in making business decisions, we still need to put the national interests as our priority and ensure the safety and security of state investments.*
>
> *(CN9)*

Nonetheless, it is clear that HL was not forced to behave patriotically; rather, it was an active choice to consider the company's state affiliation as a strategic advantage. As one director explained:

> *It is important to understand that we can't and also don't want to be the same as other Western MNEs in Ghana, because our unique advantages come from our state affiliation so we must maintain rather than lose it. Introducing modern management systems and having more local managers in decision-making may improve our operations, but we are definitely getting much more resources and support from our political affiliations.*
>
> *(CN19)*

In this sense, HL's strategy of reinforcing expatriates' patriotic commitment while limiting local managerial influence reflected a deliberate trade-off in finding a balance between the competing home- and host-country logics faced by the company. The result was that HL strengthened expatriate cohesion and political backing, even as it risked alienation, suspicion, and potential distrust from local employees.

### 4.3. Deliberate avoidance of embeddedness

***Carrier of secular and family values.*** A deeper mutual incomprehension between the Chinese and local managers emerged in our findings, especially in how home- and host-country logics diverged over religion and values in the workplace. As foreigners from a country in which religion plays a minimal role in public and corporate life, a deeply ingrained emphasis on family obligations underpinned a distinct logic that prioritized a secular and duty-oriented approach to work. Many viewed their overseas assignments as a means of fulfilling their responsibilities as family providers, as illustrated by a Chinese manager:

> …*Working abroad means earning more, which is the primary motivation for most of us to stay in a less-developed region for years. However, we spend very little on ourselves and our salaries are often sent directly to our family in China. We cherish this job because it enables us to support our families, which is what truly matters.*
>
> *(CN23)*

This strong sense of family responsibility fosters a secular and result-oriented mentality, which is often misunderstood by local employees shaped by a more communal and religiously informed work ethic. Local managers frequently described their Chinese colleagues as "*being obsessed with material and economic demands*", and perceived their intense work habits as indicative of a "*lack of spiritual balance*" (GH8). As one local manager remarked:

> *They (Chinese) always work under pressure, accept extra workload and overtime as normal, and seem surprised when others don't feel the same. Yet, you rarely see them after work, and they hardly engage in social or recreational activities. I don't understand why they work so hard but don't enjoy life.*
>
> *(GH4)*

Conversely, Chinese managers often expressed frustration with what they perceived as a relaxed and emotion-driven approach to work among local employees. They noted that many locals "*see the job opportunities and benefits they received as god's merits - something they deserve because of their devotion*" (CN2). One manager further commented:

> *They (locals) have a very casual and feelings-based approach to work. Unfortunately, this often translates to a lack of discipline in the workplace. It is quite difficult to restrain their behavior by rules because they can abandon their tasks and leave immediately if they feel unhappy. This was shocking because such irresponsible behavior would be unthinkable among our Chinese employees.*
>
> *(CN11)*

Chinese managers acknowledged that, in the face of deep religious and value-based differences, "*respect and non-interference*" was the most they could offer (CN2). Consequently, they deliberately maintained a "*respectful distance*" from religious matters, explaining, *"we can't appreciate or empathize with something we don't believe"* (CN7). However, these deep rooted value incompatibilities inevitably reinforced structural divisions within the company and constrained HL's capability for deeper engagement with the local context. As one director acknowledged:

> *These [religious and value differences] are inevitable and incompatible, as long as the company remains under Chinese control. People (Chinese expatriates) can't adapt to these differences. The best solution is not to challenge the conflict but to bypass it altogether. If we can't solve the problem, we should avoid it.*
>
> *(CN18)*

In practice, the misalignment of logics regarding religion and values reinforced HL's segmented organizational identity through the separation of expatriates and locals, both physically and managerially. Consistent with this avoidance strategy, HL established a segmented localization approach. For examples:

> *The main office was built in a suburban area and operated as a self-contained, closed community for Chinese expatriates responsible for management and technical functions. In contrast, subordinate offices and branches were situated in city centers and primarily staffed by local employees in frontline and support roles … Training sessions for expatriates focused largely on operational procedures, rather than fostering deeper intercultural understanding. Although religious holidays and community events were acknowledged, they are not integrated into the company's core planning or leadership agendas.*
>
> *(CN8)*

In short, when religion and values proved fundamentally incompatible, the most practical solution was not integration but separation. HL therefore prioritized pragmatic coexistence over deep integration, limiting interactions between expatriates and local employees to a predefined operational framework. Engagement with local stakeholders was similarly constrained, largely confined to HL's senior managers and government representatives.

## 5. Discussion

On the basis of a case study of a Chinese MNE subsidiary in Ghana, this study aims to deepen our understanding of how MNE subsidiaries navigate home- and host-country challenges while sustaining and securing their long-term presence in the host country. By mobilizing the concept of organizational identity, we develop a theoretical framework (see Fig. 2) to showcase the interplay between competing home- and host-country logics, organizational identities, and embeddedness strategies in the host country. In this interplay,
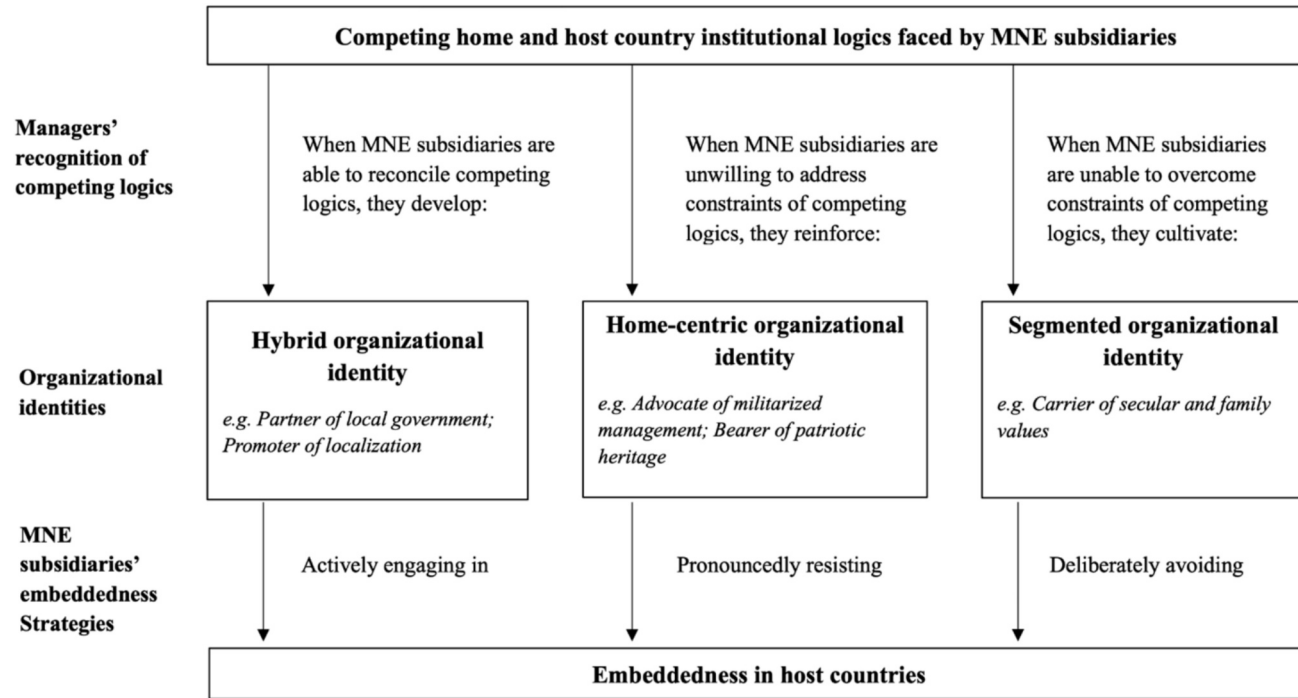
**Competing home and host country institutional logics faced by MNE subsidiaries**

**Managers' recognition of competing logics**

When MNE subsidiaries are able to reconcile competing logics, they develop:

When MNE subsidiaries are unwilling to address constraints of competing logics, they reinforce:

When MNE subsidiaries are unable to overcome constraints of competing logics, they cultivate:

**Organizational identities**

**Hybrid organizational identity**

*e.g. Partner of local government; Promoter of localization*

**Home-centric organizational identity**

*e.g. Advocate of militarized management; Bearer of patriotic heritage*

**Segmented organizational identity**

*e.g. Carrier of secular and family values*

**MNE subsidiaries' embeddedness Strategies**

Actively engaging in

Pronouncedly resisting

Deliberately avoiding

**Embeddedness in host countries**

**Fig. 2.** A logic-driven, identity-based framework of MNE subsidiary embeddedness pathways.

MNE expatriate managers demonstrate the ability to recognize competing home- and host-country logics, enabling them to make critical decisions regarding which logics can be reconciled and which are fundamentally incompatible (Edman, 2016a, 2016b). Consequently, these decisions contribute to a mixture of organizational identities derived from three logic-driven mechanisms: developing *hybrid identity*, reinforcing *home-centric identity*, and cultivating *segmented organizational identity*. These identities in turn serve as guidelines for the MNE subsidiary when it develops its corresponding embeddedness strategies in the host country. With a specific emphasis on how agentic dynamics interact with and are used to navigate the competing institutional logics encountered by MNEs (Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Regnér and Edman, 2014), Fig. 2 summarizes three distinct identity-based pathways guiding the adaptive implementation of an MNE's mixed embeddedness strategies in the host country, namely *active engaging in embeddedness, pronounced resisting embeddedness*, and *deliberate avoiding of embeddedness*.

First, when an MNE is able to reconcile competing institutional logics, it follows the pathway of developing *hybrid identity* that integrates elements from both institutional environments. This approach enables the subsidiary to adapt locally while adhering to its home-country logics, fostering legitimacy in both contexts, strengthening its active engagement in embeddedness, and enhancing its long-term viability. For example, in our case, HL achieved such a reconciliation by aligning home-country logics regarding collaboration, sustainability, and reciprocity with host-country logics pursuing economic growth, local representativeness, and employability. HL constructed and projected hybrid identities as both a partner of local government and an advocate of localization, securing legitimacy, acceptance, and support in the host country. Furthermore, it is noticeable that HL actively engaged in embedding itself in selected host institutions in which the interests and motives of external stakeholders such as the host-country government and local communities were aligned with its home logics. In this sense, rather than seeing these isomorphic behaviors as passive responses to host-country logics, our findings underscore expatriate managers' agentic ability to strategically exploit institutional settings as opportunities for competitive advantage (Jonsson and Regnér, 2009; Regnér and Edman, 2014) and to determine where, what, and how to embed themselves in local contexts.

Second, when an MNE is unwilling to address the constraints posed by competing institutional logics, it usually reinforces *home-centric identity*, prioritizing strategies and practices that align with its home-country logics. These identities are reinforced by the MNE as its inherent strengths, facilitating ongoing international expansion and long-term viability, and this is further regarded as a mitigation of the potential negative effects of constrained embeddedness within the host-country context. For example, in our case, HL highlighted its home-centric identities by embracing non-conformity in managerial practices (Edman, 2016b), promoting the superiority of its traditional militarized management style to distinguish itself from its competitors. It also cultivated a patriotic identity, promoting a unified political mindset among expatriate managers through "ideological and political" work driven by the home logic (Edman, 2016b; Gioia et al., 2000; Nag et al., 2007). In dealing with potential local resistance to such identity claims, expatriate managers played the central role in controlling the degree of foreign identity reinforcement, selectively navigating when and for whom these identities were manifested (Morgan and Kristensen, 2006; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017). As a result, HL confined these identities to internal stakeholders, minimizing potential image risks in relation to external stakeholders. Therefore, our findings suggest that expatriate managers, who have restricted autonomy under the constrained institutional environment of the MNE (Glynn, 2008; Thornton and Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012), balance and make trade-offs between competing institutional logics to formulate home-centric identities and resist embeddedness when this is deemed to be necessary.

Third, when an MNE is unable to overcome the institutional constraints stemming from incompatible home and host country logics, it cultivates *segmented organizational identity* by deliberately preserving its home-country logic and segregating these foreign identities from local stakeholders, thereby avoiding potential conflicts arising from these incompatibilities. For example, our findings shed light on a relatively understudied institutional paradox in which the home- and host-country logics are incompatible and immutable, being deeply rooted in the cognitive level of institutions, such as religious beliefs and family values (Nag et al., 2007). Rather than creating new logics or transposing existing ones (Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Regnér and Edman, 2014), or pursuing a strategy of local isomorphism to be embedded in the local context (Salomon and Wu, 2012), HL, recognizing the incompatibilities between the competing institutional logics, adopted a self-constrained approach by deliberately avoiding being embedded in the local context. While secularity and family commitment represented an indispensable element of HL's organizational identities, these Chinese values and priorities were intentionally silenced for any non-Chinese groups in the host country through a segmented approach in daily operation. Again, this human-devised constraint depended on expatriate managers' ability to discern the boundaries of compromise, determining which sets of competing home- and host-country logics could be sustainably maintained within their strategy of avoiding embeddedness.

## 6. Conclusion

### 6.1. Theoretical contributions

This study makes three main theoretical contributions to the current literature. Firstly, by mobilizing the concept of organizational identity (Edman, 2016a, 2016b; Glynn, 2008) as a lens to translate macro-level institutional logics into organizational practices and strategies, we develop a theoretical framework showcasing three practical pathways for MNE subsidiaries to sustain a longstanding position in host countries. These pathways are shaped by organizational identities actively constructed by expatriate managers in response to the perceived alignment, reinforcement, or incompatibility of competing institutional logics, offering a practical lens to understand how MNE subsidiaries enhance adaptability and resilience in embedding themselves in complex environments. Therefore, our framework, on the one hand, extends prior research that mainly views organizational identity as symbolic management of competing institutional contexts (Edman, 2016a; Grøgaard and Colman, 2016; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017) by demonstrating its

practical relevance in guiding the implementation of MNE subsidiaries' embeddedness strategies and managerial practices. On the other hand, we complement the literature on the process of identity work in forming embeddedness strategies and practices (Colman et al., 2022; Lopez-Vega et al., 2025; Feng et al., 2023; Fortwengel, 2021) by providing a grounded explanation of how MNE subsidiaries manage competing institutional logics in their daily operation. This theoretical framework thus serves as a valuable foundation to contribute to the institutional literature on MNE subsidiary embeddedness (Colman et al., 2022; Meyer et al., 2011; Röell et al., 2024; Saka-Helmhout, 2020; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2016) through exploring the interplay between competing institutional logics, organizational identity, and embeddedness strategies.

Secondly, building on this identity-based framework, we advance the literature on MNE subsidiary embeddedness by offering insights into why and when subsidiaries pursue embeddedness in some areas while resisting or even avoiding it in others. While recent work using the institutional logic lens (Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Röell et al., 2024; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2016) challenges the isomorphic assumption of traditional institutional theory (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Salomon and Wu, 2012), it often overemphasizes the malleability of subsidiaries and their agentic capabilities to reshape or recreate institutional logics in the host context (Fortwengel and Jackson, 2016; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Röell et al., 2024). In contrast, our study suggests that longstanding subsidiary presence is not solely dependent on the depth of embeddedness (Röell et al., 2024) or the ability to overcome institutional frictions (Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Stevens and Shenkar, 2012). Instead, we highlight how subsidiary managers, by making trade-offs between competing institutional logics and mobilizing corresponding identity mechanisms, adopt coexisting but sometimes contradictory embeddedness pathways to selectively align with different stakeholders in the host context.

Thirdly, while we align with existing identity-based MNE research that highlights the ability of influential agents to translate field-wide institutional logic into firm-specific strategies via the purposeful construction of organizational identities (Colman et al., 2022; Edman, 2016b; Feng et al., 2023; Lopez-Vega et al., 2025), our study offers an alternative perspective on subsidiaries' resistance or unwillingness to local adaptation. Rather than viewing subordinated home-country logics and the associated foreign identity as temporary barriers to be overcome (Edman, 2016b; Feng et al., 2023; Fortwengel, 2021), we emphasize the inevitable institutional constraints that arise from irreconcilable and competing institutional logics. In such contexts, instead of treating identity duality as a necessary dynamic for ongoing strategic exploitation, whether through logic integration or logic prioritization (Colman et al., 2022; Pant and Ramachandran, 2017), subsidiary actors may adopt alternative approaches by implementing a self-constraining mechanism to deliberately cultivate specific identities that segment the organization from host institutions, thereby avoiding potential clashes between fundamentally incompatible institutional logics.

### 6.2. Practical implications

This study has two main practical implications. Firstly, it contributes to the practical understanding of agency in institutional embeddedness (Cantwell et al., 2010; Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2016; Marquis and Raynard, 2015; McGaughey et al., 2016; Newenham-Kahindi and Stevens, 2018; Regnér and Edman, 2014; Saka-Helmhout et al., 2016) by demonstrating that the sustained presence of MNE subsidiaries is not solely reliant on local managers. Instead, expatriate managers can assume a dominant role in strategically navigating embeddedness strategies by leveraging various organizational identities to secure long-term viability. This insight implies that MNEs may benefit from recognizing the dominant agents within their specific contexts and providing them with context-specific training and greater decision-making autonomy to effectively navigate between the home and the host contexts for long-term viability.

Secondly, our research suggests that it is crucial for subsidiaries to clearly communicate with relevant stakeholders not only regarding their practices (what they do or do not do) but also regarding the underlying motivations behind these practices (why they do or do not do it). This can be achieved by articulating specific organizational identities tailored to corresponding stakeholders (who we are to you). Leveraging organizational identity as a communication tool can benefit MNE subsidiaries in two ways: first, it enhances legitimacy and acceptance among external stakeholders such as government authorities and local communities in the host country; second, it fosters recognition and support from internal stakeholders by reinforcing shared values and unified objectives among shareholders, managers, and employees.

### 6.3. Limitations and avenues for further research

While we assert that our study makes a significant contribution to the understanding of how organizational identity serves as a strategic framework for aligning or preserving selected organizational identities and influencing the strategic choices of embeddedness pathways, we acknowledge its limitations, particularly its reliance on a single case study of a Chinese SOMNE subsidiary. Despite this constraint, the case study allowed us to develop a meaningful theoretical framework for examining the interplay between competing institutional logics, organizational identity, and embeddedness strategies, thereby paving the way for future research.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized the flexible and dynamic nature of organizational identity, suggesting that subsidiary identities can be (de)coupled from those of the parent MNE in response to host market conditions (Liou and Rao-Nicholson, 2021; Reilly et al., 2023). Identity work, therefore, is a fluid and iterative process shifting between multiple identity positions as institutional demands evolve (Colman et al., 2022). We encourage future empirical research to extend our theoretical framework by examining the applicability of the three embeddedness pathways across different types of MNEs, particularly those with limited state affiliation. For example, longstanding Western MNEs often operate with greater autonomy from state influence and are likely to stick to institutional logics that emphasize market liberalism, transparency, and shareholder value (e.g. Colman et al., 2022; Fortwengel and Jackson, 2016). Given these distinct characteristics, further research is needed to explore the extent to which longstanding MNEs

construct and manage their organizational identities differently across varying institutional contexts, and how these identities shape strategic responses and confer competitive advantages to meet different stakeholders' demands. This includes examining how various types of institutional agency within MNEs (Saka-Helmhout, 2020) navigate competing institutional logics in host countries using the same identity-based framework, particularly whether MNEs engage with, resist, or avoid embeddedness in similar ways, or whether they exhibit new or hybrid pathways shaped by their distinct ownership structures, institutional heritages, and corporate governance models.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Xinxiang Li:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Noelia-Sarah Reynolds:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Le Bo:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology.

## Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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