

## A Transition Perspective for Business School Research and Education in China

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**ABSTRACT** In this perspective article, I draw on transition research that has been developed to account for the transitions in many socio-technical systems within human society, such as energy, water, and food. I argue that many ideas developed in transition research can be applied to the ecosystem of contemporary business schools in China for its transformation. Using the multi-level perspective (MLP) from transition research as an analytic framework, I examine the socio-technical system of business schools in China for understanding the main forces that may shape a potential transition of the sector. I also draw on transition management theory and insights from research on the politics of transitions for important conditions that are required to enable a transition in this specific context.

**KEYWORDS** Chinese business schools, reform in Chinese higher education, research impact, responsible research, sustainability transition

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### INTRODUCTION

The dominant practices and philosophy in business schools have faced criticism for some time, from the modest criticism that calls for a change in approaches to management education (Mintzberg, 2004) to recent more radical attacks that have fundamentally questioned the model of business schools around the world (Parker, 2018). In particular, there are growing concerns about the gaps between business school research and education on the one hand, and management practices on the other (Tan, 2017). Some management scholars have even argued that ‘our discipline is in crisis’ (Tourish, 2020: 99).

In the context of business education and research in China, the challenges facing business schools seem more complex. On the one hand, although tremendous progress has been made in this sector during the past thirty years, business school research and education in China is still catching up with international

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practices and standards, especially in pursuit of scientific rigor under an empirical research paradigm (Zhang & Wu, 2019). On the other hand, some leading management scholars suggest that the disconnection of Chinese business schools with management practices may have become more severe than their international peers (Li, Yang, & Chen, 2018). The widening gap in China between business school research and education on the one hand and business practices on the other can be attributable to several distinctive forces in the country, such as the rapidly changing economic environment (Zhang, Chen, Chen, & Ang, 2014), a strong political culture (Zhang, Zheng, & Xi, 2020), and the tensions between indigenous business research and education in China and mainstream academia in the West due to their different focuses and agendas (Li, 2012). In short, business schools in China face dual pressure of catching up and transitioning. As new entrants to the global management research community, Chinese business schools are striving to align their research and teaching activities with those of top business schools in the West to gain legitimacy (Tsui, 2013). However, as business schools elsewhere, Chinese business schools also need to move away from many established norms and practices in order to effectively meet the expectations of their stakeholders, including business students, managers, and entrepreneurs. Their responses to these pressures need to be understood in light of the unique context.

The urgency, goals, and possible actions to transform business schools worldwide and those in China specifically have been extensively discussed in the literature.<sup>[1]</sup> Numerous initiatives have also been undertaken by academics and business schools. Aiming to promote useful and credible business research, a group of leading management scholars formed the Responsible Research in Business and Management (RRBM) community in 2014, which has now been joined by a large number of management academics and institutions, including those from China. In its position paper, RRBM (2017: 2) envisions that, by 2030, business schools worldwide will become ‘widely admired for their contributions to societal well-being’ and that management scholarship will be ‘central to solving society’s challenges’. In July 2019, 62 senior scholars, deans, journal editors, university and association leaders joined the first Global Responsible Research Summit held by RRBM, in which various ideas and action plans for moving toward this vision were discussed. In this journal, new editorial policies have been introduced in an effort to promote research of quality, integrity, and practical significance (Lewin et al., 2016). Many leading business schools and management scholars in China have not only actively participated in and contributed to these global initiatives but also taken actions locally. For example, in December 2019, the C9+ Business School Alliance formed by ten top Chinese business schools announced their commitment to management research that better serves the interest of society.

Laudable as they are, many of the initiatives introduced by business schools, journals, and academics are limited to specific areas or organizations. Yet, the

problems facing business schools both worldwide and in China seem systemic in nature. Their root causes are complex and intertwined (RRBM, 2017), and the solutions to these problems require deep, structural changes that go beyond business schools and academics. While the goals of transforming business research and education and their 'eco-systems', such as those laid out by RRBM and the C9+ Business School Alliance, are inspiring, two critical questions are less explored in the current debate: What forces are shaping the transition of the Chinese business school sector under the dual pressure of catching up and transition? And, what conditions are required to enable an effective transition of the sector?

Drawing on transition research (Geels & Schot, 2007; Markard, Raven, & Truffer, 2012), I propose in this article a transition perspective for business school research and education in China, to complement important discussions that have taken place on this topic (e.g., Li, Yang, & Chen, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020). Transition research focuses on the processes of 'fundamental shift[s] in socio-technical systems' (Markard et al., 2012: 956). The socio-technical systems under study in transition research may be human society as a whole or, more frequently, its subsystems, such as water, food, and energy. These systems face tremendous challenges in their transitions to a more sustainable future. To understand and inform transitions, transition scholars have developed a range of theories, concepts, and analytical tools over the past two decades. For example, as one of the most widely adopted analytic frameworks in transition research, the multi-level perspective (MLP) conceptualizes transitions as a result of interactions of forces at three different levels and delineates the major transition pathways accordingly (Geels & Schot, 2007).<sup>[2]</sup> Transition management theory focuses on potential interventions to steer and accelerate the transition (Bosman, Loorbach, Rotmans, & van Raak, 2018; Rotmans, Kemp, & van Asselt, 2001). Finally, research on the political dimensions of sustainability transitions highlights the messy and conflictual nature of transition, involving contests and cooperation of different interests, institutions, and ideas (Lockwood, Kuzemko, Mitchell, & Hoggett, 2017; Meadowcroft, 2009, 2011).

In this article, I argue that these ideas developed in transition research can shed important light on our understanding on the transition of business schools in China if they are collectively viewed as a socio-technical system. I use MLP as an analytic framework to examine the socio-technical system of business schools in China for understanding the main forces that may shape a potential transition of the sector. I also draw on transition management theory and insights from research on the politics of transitions for important conditions that are required to enable a transition in the specific context. Notwithstanding its usefulness, I also discuss several limitations of this transition perspective for business school education and research.

## TRANSITION RESEARCH

Transition research is focused on the transformations of socio-technical systems toward sustainability. Here, sustainability mainly refers to sustainable modes of

production and assumption for addressing grand societal and environmental challenges faced by humanity, such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, and resource depletion (Markard et al., 2012). As such, transformations of this nature are long-term, multi-dimensional, and multi-scale. A transformation of this kind is usually a result of the coevolution of multiple forces, such as technologies, institutions, markets, policies, networks, culture, organizations, and individual behaviors (Loorbach, van der Brugge, & Taanman, 2008). One of the key frameworks developed in the research to account for the processes of transitions is the multi-level perspective (MLP). The MLP explains a transition process in terms of the interplay of dynamics at three different levels: landscape, regime, and niche (Geels & Schot, 2007; Rotmans et al., 2001). ‘Landscape’ at the macro-level refers to the exogenous environment in which a transition takes place. It involves such elements as political culture and coalitions, social values, worldviews and paradigms, the macroeconomy, and material infrastructure. ‘Regime’ at the meso-level relates to the dominant practices, rules, and shared assumptions in the socio-technical system. Finally, ‘niches’ are ‘protected spaces’ in which radical innovations (termed ‘niche innovations’ in transition research) can be developed against mainstream technologies and practices.

The MLP distinguishes four transition pathways according to the interactions and alignments of factors at the three abovementioned levels (Geels & Schot, 2007; Geels et al., 2016). A *transformation* pathway occurs when changes in the landscape place moderate pressures on the regime, while niche innovations are yet to be sufficiently developed. In this circumstance, the regime may be reorientated in an evolutionary manner by importing external knowledge, adding niche innovations, and adjusting the relationships among existing actors. At the end of the transformation, the actors of the old regime survive and the basic architecture remains largely the same.

A *reconfiguration* path differs from a transformation path in that a reconfiguration path is primarily driven by niche innovations developed within. Those niche innovations are initially adopted by the regime actors to solve local problems. However, their adoption and diffusion lead to further innovations gradually becoming established as variations of and deviations from the status quo, which, in the end, result in substantial changes in the regime’s basic architecture. A transition along either a transformation or reconfiguration path is gradual and cumulative in nature.

By contrast, the other two pathways are more revolutionary. A *substitution* pathway occurs where niche innovations gain momentum at a time when disruptive changes in the landscape exert significant pressure on the regime. This creates a window of opportunity for niche-innovations to compete and eventually replace practices in mainstream markets. Consequently, the incumbents are replaced by newcomers. Finally, in a *de-alignment and re-alignment* pathway, the regime becomes untenable due to large, sudden changes in the landscape. In such a case, regime actors no longer defend the regime and the regime de-aligns.

However, no niche innovations are yet ready to function as clear substitutes. Potential niche innovations compete and coexist, leading to chaos for a long period of time before a dominant system eventually emerges, around which a new regime is developed and formed.

While the MLP is concerned with describing and analysing transition processes, transition management is focused on active interventions to accelerate a transition. Transition management research outlines a number of principles, including a requirement of long-term thinking (at least 25 years) to determine short-term policies, the leadership of frontrunners to create space for niche innovations, openness, and flexibilities in accommodating different actors' perspectives and various options, and a focus of the multi-domain, multi-actor, and multi-level context of the transition (Bosman et al., 2018; Rotmans et al., 2001). Transition management further introduces a governance framework in which four types of activities, including strategic, tactical, operational, and reflexive activities, inform each other in a cyclical model, as a prescriptive tool to guide the transition (Fig. 1).

Recent research on sustainability transitions has emphasized the role of politics, for two reasons. First, unlike many historical transitions that were emergent and largely driven by private actors, sustainability transitions studied in this literature are generally purposeful and intended, which require interventions and support of political actors and civil society (Geels, 2011; Markard et al., 2012). Second, politics play critical roles in interpreting the performance of technologies,



Figure 1. The transition management cycle  
Source: Loorbach, van der Brugge, & Taanman (2008)

mobilizing the resources, and building alliances for the reform of key institutions, all of which have profound impacts on the directions and processes of transitions (Raven et al., 2016). For these reasons, scholars argue that '[sustainable transitions] are profoundly political in nature' (Lockwood et al., 2017: 313). According to Meadowcroft (2011), the politics of sustainability transitions can be understood through three inter-related domains, including interests, institutions, and ideas. While still a work in progress, this stream of research highlights that desired transitions are not inevitable development (Geels, 2018). The prospects of transitions are largely shaped by power struggles or coalitions among different interest groups, the formation or destruction of relevant institutions, and contests and interactions of political ideologies.

## **LANDSCAPE, REGIME, AND NICHE-INNOVATIONS OF THE BUSINESS SCHOOL TRANSITION IN CHINA**

Business school research and education took off in China in the early 1990s. As new entrants to the global management community, Chinese business schools and management scholars have since made significant progress. By 2018, the number of publications by management scholars from mainland China in journals included in the Sciences Citation Index (SCI) or Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI) ranked No. 2 in the world, second only to the United States (Zhang & Wu, 2019). Meanwhile, more than 770,000 students graduate from undergraduate programs in Chinese business schools every year. About 40,000 MBA and Executive MBA (EMBA) students enroll in business schools in China annually, and a total of 258,000 students had been awarded MBA or EMBA degrees by 2016.<sup>[3]</sup> For the purpose of this article, I focus on manifestations of landscape, regime, and niche-innovations in this specific context to understand forces within and beyond the sector that may shape a possible transition of business school research and education in China.

### **Landscape**

In this analysis, a landscape refers to the most significant economic, political, and social environments relevant to the transition of business school research and education. Specifically, I delineate three distinctive forces and their dynamics at the macro-level in the context of Chinese business schools. These forces include the country's rapid economic growth and recent economic slowdown, a strong role of the state that seems to have further intensified in recent years, and globalization and its recent setbacks.<sup>[4]</sup>

First, the rapid growth of the Chinese economy during the past decades has been a fundamental driving force of the development of business school research and education in China. The growing Chinese market has not only supported the expansion of Chinese business schools, but also attracted strong interests from business schools and management academics worldwide. However, the Chinese economy is entering

a new normal, with growth at its slowest pace in nearly 30 years. While China is likely to continue to be one of the fastest-growing economies in the world, the slowdown of its economy reflects a significant shift in the macro-economic environment of business school research and education in China.

Second, whereas the strong government has always been a key feature in China's political, economic, and social systems, many observers of China believe that the penetration of the state in society and the economy has intensified in recent years (Economy, 2018). Under the call for a great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation by the current leadership, the enhanced role of the state is reflected in the centralization of power and authority, tighter control of the information flow both within and to China, and a more ambitious agenda for China's role in global affairs supported by projects such as 'One Belt One Road'. Specifically, both scholars overseas and within China have expressed concerns over the challenges to academic activities in China arising from the restrictions of information flow.<sup>[5]</sup>

Third, the integration of China into the global economy has been one of the most important drivers as well as outcomes of globalization, especially since the country joined the WTO in 2001. Globalization has not only significantly shaped the economic landscapes of China and the world but also resulted in institutional convergence as a result of dissemination of norms and practices across countries. Despite the considerable political, commercial, financial, and social interdependencies among nations as a result of globalization, a trend of deglobalization seems to be on the rise, which has been fuelled by recent events such as the trade war between the US and China.

## Regime

A regime in this analysis refers to the dominant practices, rules, and cultures in business schools in China. To a large extent, the current practices in Chinese business schools reflect international norms in the sector. Tsui (2018) highlights three deep-rooted practices in business school research worldwide. First, business schools' reputations and accreditations are largely based on quantity rather than quality of publications. Second, academic journals overly emphasize theoretical contributions and novelty of the research, whereas replicability and practical significance of the research is less valued. Finally, the performance of academics in business schools is evaluated narrowly by their scholarly publications rather than creation of knowledge that would benefit organizations and society in a broader sense. Models of business research and education from developed countries have been prevalent in China thanks to institutional convergence (Tsui, 2013). For example, echoing these observations, Zhang et al. (2020) note that many business schools in China have adopted the tenure-track structure, according to which the promotion and salaries of academics are predominantly based on their performance in publishing academic papers.

Meanwhile, the regime of business school research and education in China is also featured with a few distinct characteristics. Just like other sectors in an



emerging economy, the business school sector in China is a latecomer, which entails both advantages and disadvantages. Since contemporary business research and education in China began from a limited knowledge base, a majority of management theories have been imported from developed countries. This enables a fast catch-up of the sector with international peers but also creates path dependence. Nevertheless, the sector is still relatively young; many dominant practices in the sector seem to be more fluid than that in the West. In addition, the Chinese business context has been consistently in transitions during the past decades, first from a planned economy to a more market-based economy, and more recently experiencing a slowdown economy which starts placing pressures on the demand of business school education and research.<sup>[6]</sup> Although programs offered at business schools are still among the most popular academic programs at Chinese universities, many professionals are beginning to embrace new approaches to acquire management knowledge and skills through other avenues.

Another distinct feature of business schools in China relates to the strong government control and intervention of the sector. As part of a highly centralized higher education system, Chinese business schools are strongly subject to the policies and management of the government (Xia, Zhu, Fan, & Zhang, 2020). The government manages and influences business schools through numerous measures, such as requiring research and education activities to align with national strategies; approving business schools, programs, and research projects; evaluating the performance of academic disciplines and programs; and taking initiatives such as Project 985 and Project 211 with significant funding implications (Zhang et al., 2020). Therefore, in addition to academic and professional obligations for students, academic community and managerial practitioners that are expected for business schools in general, Chinese business schools need to fulfil political obligations to the government as a key stakeholder (Zhang et al., 2020).

Finally, the regime of Chinese business schools and its transition is also characterized by the tensions between indigenous management research and education on the one hand and the mainstream academia in Western business schools on the other. The rise of the Chinese economy and the success of numerous Chinese firms provides legitimacy to indigenous management practices. Against this backdrop, the applicability of management theories developed in Western countries to business contexts in China has been questioned. The opportunities and challenges for research on indigenous management in China have been extensively discussed in the recent literature (Barney & Zhang, 2009; Li, Leung, Chen, & Luo, 2012; Li, Sekiguchi, & Zhou, 2016; Whetten, 2009).

### **Niche-Innovations**

In this analysis, niche-innovations refer to initiatives that have the potential to challenge various aspects of the *status quo* (i.e., regime) in business school research and education in China. Various initiatives have been implemented by business schools



in China – including those in public universities as well as private business schools – as the incumbents of the sector, or jointly by business schools and industries, or by actors outside of the sector (non-regime actors).

According to the data from the Ministry of Education (MoE) of China, there are currently 607 business schools in public universities in China (Wei, 2018). As the main incumbent of the regime of business school research and education in China, many leading Chinese business schools in public universities have been critically reflecting on the current practices and put forward a number of promising reforms in their organizations. For example, leveraging on the reputations of their respective universities and the extensive alumni networks, many leading Chinese business schools have built industry mentoring programs, explored study opportunities overseas in top foreign business schools, and introduced company visits and industry-based projects, cross-disciplinary courses or seminars jointly with other parts of the university in their curriculum and programs. To promote context-specific, practice-relevant business education, the Guanghua School of Management in Peking University has committed to evaluate and improve the ‘China index’ in its MBA courses, based on the relevance of course content to the China’s context. In Tsinghua University, the School of Economics and Management has led the development of a university-wide platform, Tsinghua X-lab, to enable the engagements of students with faculty members from other disciplines, alumni, investors, and experienced entrepreneurs in order to develop their entrepreneurship skills and generate business innovation opportunities. Zhejiang University business school has recently introduced a so-called ‘Business +’ curriculum in its MBA program, which is designed to go beyond the traditional professional and technical training and to develop students’ leadership skills and broader knowledge base.

Many Chinese leading business schools have made efforts to improve practical relevance of their research. For example, many of them have established thinktanks and research institutes to align research activities more directly with expectations of industries and governments. Examples include the ‘industry research institutes’ recently launched in the Antai College of Economics and Management within Shanghai Jiaotong University with a focus on issues specific to individual industries, or the Belt & Road Institute established in the Guanghua School of Management in response to the grand strategy of the Chinese government. Deans and senior scholars in many of these business schools have also actively engaged with each other by establishing platforms, such as the ‘Management in China’ conferences and the Chinese Management Scholars 50 Forum, in order to exchange ideas on innovative teaching and research practices and jointly lobby the governments for policy changes.

Besides those in public universities, business schools that are independent or have been jointly established between foreign business schools and their Chinese partners also play important roles in the transition of the sector. Unlike business schools in public universities, these independent or foreign business schools do

not rely on public funding, and therefore generally have a greater level of flexibility in their operations. These business schools usually have sizable portions of faculty members with international backgrounds and draw heavily on international experiences in their research and education activities. Nevertheless, many of these business schools have been also championing on the development of locally relevant teaching and research capabilities. For example, the China-Europe International Business School (CEIBS) has not only heavily engaged with China-based teaching cases in their courses, but also taken a lead since 2013 to develop a large database of teaching cases from the Chinese business context, the Global Platform of China Cases. Similarly, the International Business School of Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University has established several practice-oriented research centres supported by the government of the Suzhou Industrial Park, to undertake projects for and with companies in the region which is one of the main manufacturing hubs in China.

Recent years have also seen initiatives jointly undertaken by business schools and companies in creating and sharing management knowledge. Here, I take the Chinese Management Model Research (CMMR) as an example. This is an initiative first suggested by Cheng Siwei, an economist and a former vice chairperson of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress in China. It was jointly developed by five Chinese business schools and a large Chinese corporation in 2008. Since then, the main activity of CMMR has been the evaluation and selection of a set of companies for the annual 'Chinese Management Model Awards'. Based on self-reporting, corporate visits, and desk research, over 100 companies have received the awards since 2008. However, the goal of CMMR seems to go beyond merely recognizing the achievements of a few Chinese companies, and involves the objectives to discover, theorize, and disseminate distinctive Chinese management practices. Through this exercise, the experiences and business practices of exemplary Chinese companies have been reported in the *Decoding Chinese Management Model* book series. CMMR is now jointly overseen by 25 senior management scholars and 25 leading entrepreneurs.

Finally, there are non-regime operators that are not typical business schools, but their moves are making impacts on the sector. For example, in 2015, the former CEO of Alibaba, Jack Ma, and several other entrepreneurs co-founded Hupan School of Entrepreneurship, in which new entrepreneurs are taught by experienced practitioners. New business education institutions have also been transformed from popular online learning websites or mobile learning applications. These new business education organizations have started not only providing their members online and face-to-face business lectures, overseas study tours, forums, and annual conferences, but also leveraging the knowledge and resources of their members to facilitate mutual corporate visits and consultations, especially among those members who are from the same industries or cities, or with similar professional interests. Finally, many large Chinese companies, such as Huawei and Lenovo, have transformed their in-house training centers into corporate

universities that provide more comprehensive and structured training activities not only for their employees but also for their suppliers and customers. Many of these non-traditional business education models recently emerged in China have limited connections with existing business schools.

## DISCUSSION

I have offered a preliminary analysis of the Chinese business school sector based on the MLP as a starting point to understand the sector from the transition perspective in the last section. Given a transition of the Chinese business school sector is at best yet in its infancy, a detailed empirical description of the transition process, as has been undertaken in previous studies of transitions in other sectors, is not possible at this stage.<sup>[7]</sup> However, a transition perspective that applies ideas from transition research to this sector can generate useful insights for the sector's transformation.

For a start, among the potential transition pathways identified in the transition research, a pathway of an evolutionary nature, such as a *transformation* pathway or a *reconfiguration* pathway, is arguably preferable for the sector. In such transition pathways, business schools and management academics as incumbents of the regime continue to play important roles during and after the transition. However, in a revolutionary transition pathway, such as a *substitution* or '*de-alignment and re-alignment*' path, these actors may encounter considerable risks because their skillsets may no longer be compatible with the dominant practices in the new regime. Drawing on the transition research, a number of conditions seem necessary for a more effective and smoother transition of business school research and education in China.

First, from the transition perspective, substantial policy changes are required to guide and drive the transition process. Similar with transitions of this nature in other sectors, a transition of the business school sector is likely to be purposive and cannot be accomplished by market forces alone. Nor is the transition likely to be automatically emergent from the goodwill and innovations of regime actors (existing business schools) (Geels, 2011). Policy reforms are of particular relevance to business school transition in China given the strong political culture at the landscape level, the direct government control and intervention of the sector at the regime level, and the predominant role that business schools in public universities play in niche innovations.

The recent reform of research policy in China reflects a significant change of the landscape of business schools in China. According to two prescriptive policy documents recently issued by the Ministry of Education<sup>[8]</sup> and the Ministry of Science and Technology<sup>[9]</sup>, metrics-based indicators, such as those based on publications and citations in journals covered by the Science Citation Index (SCI), will be less emphasized in research assessments, funding allocation, faculty recruitment, and academic promotion. An academic's research performance will be judged by a limited set of representative work, as an attempt to place more emphasis on quality

rather than quantity of the research outcomes. Peer judgement will play an increasingly important role, and publishing in domestic journals is strongly encouraged in the new policy. Universities in China have been required to revise their assessment policies accordingly.

The policy change can be seen as a modest pressure from the landscape on the regime of business school research and education in China, which is one of the conditions for embarking a transformation pathway of the transition. In response to the pressure, Chinese business schools and management academics are likely to adjust their research strategies by pursuing publications in top management journal on the one hand, or research activities that are locally relevant on the other, while those who continue to publish a large quantity of papers of less theoretical or practical significance may be disadvantaged in the future. However, an emphasis on domestic journals and peer opinions in the new policy may also entail unintended consequences, such as a lower incentive for international research collaboration, a decline of international rankings of Chinese business schools, and a risk of favouritism in research assessment (Mallapaty, 2020).

Second, the transition perspective to Chinese business school research and education places a great emphasis on leadership of business school deans, senior management scholars, and professional bodies in the field, because the transition requires proactive actions that are ‘off-track’ rather than ‘on-track’ (Li, Yang, & Chen, 2018). In this regard, the transitional management research provides useful resources. The four types of active interventions (strategic, tacit, operational, and reflexive) as suggested in transition management research can be applied. Organizations such as RRBM and the C9+ Business School Alliance have already taken a number of strategic activities, such as developing their visions for the transition. As the premier professional body of management scholars related to China, the International Association for Chinese Management Research (IACMR) can also play a strategic role in this aspect. The IACMR has acted as a significant force in the past in supporting the internationalization of business school research and education in China since its establishment in the early 2000s through a range of activities, such as building a vibrant management research community, undertaking research training and providing resources to improve research quality and rigor, and facilitating collaborations and engagements of Chinese management academics with their international peers (Zhang et al., 2016). Recently, some have raised concerns over whether the success of the IACMR may have unintentionally led to a compromise of the local relevance of Chinese management research (Cai, 2016). To move forward, organizations such as the IACMR should facilitate a core network for the transition, which should involve not only business school leaders and management scholars but also other stakeholders, such as governments, industries, business students, and the public. As studies from the transition management literature suggest, the core network is not meant to serve as an administrative platform nor a consultative body, but rather a group of committed individuals with a focus of creating a ‘transition arena’ (Loorbach, 2010).

At the tactical level, a broader coalition needs to be developed despite different interests of its participants. For example, to gain supports from a wide range of stakeholders and to reduce resistance of incumbent regime actors, an add-on approach can be considered, through which new practices can be developed or selectively adopted in addition to current practices. Specifically, other types of research output should be recognized in performance evaluation of business schools alongside scholarly journal articles as long as they create value for society. These non-traditional research outputs, such as practitioner-focused articles (Fisher, 2020), presentations at practitioner conferences or op-eds in media (Toffel, 2016), or industry-commissioned research reports (Sharma & Bansal, 2020), are not to overshadow or replace academic publications but rather to complement them. At the operational level, experiments, projects, and programs that help promote more responsible and relevant business school research and education need to be developed by individual business schools. The exemplary practices in the Chinese business school sector should be tested, transferred, and scaled up. In addition, qualitative measures, such as impact case studies and engagement narratives that have been used in research assessments elsewhere<sup>[10]</sup>, should be considered as potential components of the assessments at business schools in China. For individual researchers, an investment in flexible capabilities in terms of developing research skills and expertise that meet expectations of different stakeholders should be encouraged. Finally, reflexive activities, such as monitoring, assessment, and learning from experiences and lessons, are essential for continuous adjustments of the direction and process of the transition. As all these activities are to challenge the norms and to establish new practices in the sector, leadership from and role models of senior scholars are critical in order for these activities to succeed (Harley, 2019).

Third, more niche innovations need to be developed by actors both within and outside the sector, and existing niche innovations need to scale up to enable the transition. From the transition perspective, many of the initiatives undertaken by business schools as incumbents are largely related to provision of incremental solutions, while initiatives that fundamentally change the assumptions and frames of the regime are rare. Similarly, most joint projects by business schools and companies, such as CMMR, are limited to specific areas. Co-creation of rigours and relevant knowledge by business schools and industries for business research and education remains as a considerable challenge (Sharma & Bansal, 2020). Many innovations by non-traditional players, such as new business education models developed by non-regime operators, are relatively small in their scope and scale, and their services are yet to be tested. In sum, from the transition perspective, most of these initiatives by various actors are at an early stage.

Transition researchers have suggested potential mechanisms to upscale a successful initiative developed in a niche, including: 1. continuously attracting more participants to the experiment; 2. replicating the experiment in other locations; 3. linking the experiment with other experiments; and 4. shaping wider

institutional changes (Naber, Raven, Kouw, & Dassen, 2017). Possible approaches to upscale niche innovations can be explored along these lines for the transition of Chinese business school sector. For example, to help replicate successful experiments across business schools, government agencies (such as the National Natural Science Foundation of China) and professional bodies (such as IACMR) can consider developing case studies based on experiments from individual business schools in order to accumulate and share the knowledge. Current niche innovations by different types of actors, whether they are by traditional business schools, jointly by business schools and industry, or by new business education providers, are largely operated in parallel and there seems to be little interactions among them. However, since some leading Chinese management scholars have been involved in all these types of experiments, they can possibly serve as key agents to bridge actors across organizations, locations, and sectors for fostering linkages and replications of the experiments. Further, individual experiments can inspire wider institutional changes. For example, in CMMR, management academics work together with business leaders to collectively review and select companies for the Chinese management model awards, which seems to be an effective niche innovation in academic-practitioner collaborations. Such collaborations can be further applied for evaluations of not only management practices of companies but also academic research of business schools. Specifically, practitioners can be invited for inputs in research assessments and provide their views in particular on practical relevance and significance of the research outcomes.

Fourth and finally, any serious analysis of business school transition in China should take roles of politics into account, which is reflected in at least two aspects. First, participants in the socio-technical system of business schools have diverse interests and motivations, which will be contested in the transition. Although it seems to be widely agreed that a transition of business school sector in China is needed, the rules and potential outcomes of the transition are subject to interpretations of different actors. Recently, Li & Ma (2020) discuss two tendencies in Chinese management research, one characterized by a lack of self-confidence of Chinese researchers resulting in blindly following the American mainstream in choosing their research topics and publication strategies, and another driven by the overconfidence of researchers leading to an overemphasis of indigenous research while overlooking the China-West similarities. However, the issues seem to go beyond the mindsets of individual academics. The different behaviours of management researchers and business schools appear to be also due to their different interests, skillsets, and power statuses. Second, political sensitivity plays sometimes implicit yet critical roles in the sector and its transition. For example, there have been numerous calls in the field for phenomenon-based management research in China, with a goal to 'know China better' (Chen, Friedman, & McAllister, 2017: 4). Whereas many excellent studies have provided insights on business phenomena in China, management scholars in China have largely been silent on some important developments in Chinese business sectors because of



their political sensitivities.<sup>[11]</sup> This situation imposes a limitation on the transition of business school research and education in China towards in-depth understandings and meaningful explanations of Chinese business phenomena. In short, without academic independence, initiatives put forward by business schools and academics in the name of transitions may be less genuine but rather quasi-resolutions of the challenges (March & Simon, 1958).

### Limitations and Future Research Directions

A transition perspective to business school research and education drawing on transition research is not without limitations. Therefore, caution needs to be taken for their boundary conditions. First, the transition literature tends to focus on more fundamental challenges than these facing the business school sector. For the past twenty years, transition research has been mainly concerned with sustainability challenges in domains such as energy, water, transportation, and food. These challenges, such as climate change, rapid depletion of natural resources, water scarcity, and local air pollution, are causing significant risks to the continued survival and prosperity of humanity. Therefore, a main assumption underpinning transition research is that drastic shifts are needed to tackle these challenges because incremental changes would be too little, too late (Markard et al., 2012). However, it is a highly contentious subject whether a fundamental shift in the current business school research and education system is absolutely necessary. The contributions of the sector to economic development and social well-being are widely recognized. In China, while challenges facing business schools have caused concerns, many argue that the discipline's pursuit for scientific rigor under an empirical research paradigm is largely on the right direction (Zhang & Wu, 2019).

Second, transitions in these socio-technical systems, such as energy, water and food, tend to be more complex. These transitions usually involve intensive interactions and feedback effects among various elements, such as technology, user practices, infrastructure, industry structure, culture, science, and policy (Holsgens, Lubke, & Hasselkub, 2018). Originally developed in the field of innovation studies, transition research traditionally has a focus on the roles of technologies. However, a transition in business school research and education would be arguably more affected by factors such as power and politics, market competitiveness, and governance (Mori, 2018), than technology *per se*, albeit potential impacts of new technologies in the sector.

Third, MLP has been criticized for being barely a 'heuristic device' (Genus & Goles, 2008: 1442), in a sense that some consider the framework only offering limited insights on the causal relationships between different variables involved in the transition. Further, business schools can vary substantially in their practices, even within the same country. As such, an analysis of business school research and education based on transition research in general and MLP in particular can risk presenting the regime and its actors as 'too homogeneous or monolithic' (Geels, 2011: 31), and somehow static.



Nevertheless, this perspective article has demonstrated that transition research can provide useful ideas and resources for business school transitions, including that in China. Although MLP is not regarded as a precise model, as a heuristic device, it is particularly suitable for 'guid[ing] the analyst's attention to relevant questions and problems', especially when studying transitions that involve broad and multi-dimensional dynamics, and for providing 'narrative explanation' (Geels, 2011: 34). In regard to differences across Chinese business schools in their practices, Peng et al. (2012) argue that Chinese business schools are in fact highly homogeneous. The homogenization of Chinese business schools is due to a number of factors, ranging from requirements from the governments and accreditation bodies, competition of business schools in rankings, an increasing presence of academic programs offered by foreign business schools or Sino-foreign joint business programs, to internationalisation of faculty members in Chinese business schools (Peng et al., 2012). As such, the heterogeneous characteristics of different business schools in China seem to be constrained at the operation level, rather than at the strategic level.

## CONCLUSION

Five decades ago, Simon (1967) argued that business schools should themselves be interesting subjects of study by organization and management scholars. Fifty years on, business schools worldwide have expanded considerably. However, many believe the sector needs a hard look at its dominant practices. In the context of Chinese business schools, many have provided insightful discussions and well-thought recommendations for the transition, such as those arguing for responsible research in business and management (Tsui, 2018), for engaged indigenous scholarship (Van de Ven, Meyer, & Jing, 2018), or for combining the approaches of Drucker and March in business school research (Li, Yang, & Chen, 2018). The purpose of this article is not to compete with these excellent perspectives, nor to discount many effective initiatives and experiments that have been undertaken in the sector, but rather to add to them. From the transition perspective introduced in this article, Chinese business schools may find inspirations and ideas from transition research and transition practices in other areas useful for their own transformation.

## NOTES

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- [1] The discussion can be traced back to the 1960s when Herbert Simon laid out his vision for business schools, drawing on both his research on organizations as well as his experience in helping found the Graduate School of Industrial Administration, which has now evolved into the Tepper School of Business in Carnegie Mellon University (Simon, 1967). (I thank the editor for suggesting this point.) For a list of recent articles, books, reports, and opinion pieces on this topic in general, see <https://rrbm.network/#readings>. For the discussions specific to the context of China, for example, see Jia, You, and Du (2012), Tsui and Zhang (2011), Li, Leung, Chen, and Luo (2012), and numerous articles published in the ‘Management in China’ section in *Chinese Journal of Management* during recent years.
- [2] See Geels (2019) for a list of studies that have applied MLP to various sectors or systems, such as water, electricity, transport, agro-food, and heating.
- [3] See the official website of the Ministry of Education, China at [http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb\\_xwfb/s271/201604/t20160406\\_236785.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/jyb_xwfb/s271/201604/t20160406_236785.html)
- [4] Indeed, Zhang and Zhong (2016) note two fundamental factors that have driven the growth of Chinese companies in the past. Termed as ‘eating the market’ and ‘eating the government’ in Zhang and Zhong (2016), these two factors relate to the growing demand in the Chinese market and a close connection with the government. These factors seem consistent with the first two forces that we identify here.
- [5] For example, Wong and Kwong (2019) discussed academic censorship in China using the experience of an academic journal, *The China Quarterly*, as a case study. Within China, it has been reported that the obstacles caused by the Internet control to research were discussed in a recent joint annual meeting of the Chinese Academy of Science and the Chinese Academy of Engineering <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-06-01/doc-ifsqxqu4874793.shtml>
- [6] I thank one of the reviewers for suggesting this point.
- [7] See Geels (2019) for a list of studies that have applied MLP to various sectors or systems, such as water, electricity, transport, agro-food, and heating.
- [8] See [http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A16/moe\\_784/202002/t20200223\\_423334.html](http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A16/moe_784/202002/t20200223_423334.html) (in Chinese)
- [9] See [http://www.most.gov.cn/kjzc/zdkjzcjd/202003/t20200305\\_152137.htm](http://www.most.gov.cn/kjzc/zdkjzcjd/202003/t20200305_152137.htm) (in Chinese)
- [10] For example, see the recent practices in using these measures in the UK. (<https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/>) and Australia (<https://www.arc.gov.au/engagement-and-impact-assessment>) to assess impacts of research and engagement of researchers beyond academia.
- [11] For example, to my best knowledge, few academic studies have been reported on the phenomenal rise and fall of some high-profile companies, such as Anbang Insurance Group and Dalian Shide, despite the relevance of these cases for business research and education in China. For relevant news reports on these companies, see e.g., <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/23/business/what-is-anbang-a-primer-on-chinas-fallen-deal-maker.html> and <https://www.scmp.com/article/997401/bo-linked-tycoon-spirals-grace>

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