Isomorphism Across International Borders: Why College University Basketball Association in China wants to adopt the structure of U.S. college sport?

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Similar to the National College Athlete Association (NCAA), the governance association for college sport in China is called the Federation of University Sports of China (FUSC). In 1998, FUSC created the Chinese University Basketball Association (CUBA), which is a college basketball tournament for universities all over China. CUBA has been trying to imitate the structure of the NCAA basketball tournament in order to promote Chinese college sport and help improve the comprehensive development of college students (Constitution of FUSC, 2009). Due to the differences in the higher education systems of China and the United States, the institutional environment is not homogeneous between the college sport structures in the two countries. However, the FUSC and CUBA seem intent on mimicking U.S. college sport structures. Research has shown that isomorphism can occur in a dissimilar institutional environment (Alvarez et al, 2005; Kraatz & Zajac, 1996). However, research has yet to fully address the causal relationships between institutional isomorphism and field heterogeneity (Greenwood, Oliver, Lawrence, & Mayer, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to understand why college sport in China is adopting the structure of NCAA in the United States. This inquiry was guided by the following research questions: What factors influenced CUBA adopting the NCAA's institutional structures? What challenges has CUBA faced when adopting the NCAA’s institutional structures? To answer these questions, we employed a comparative case study methodology of four universities in China. Data collection entailed semi-structured interviews with faculty, athletes, and government officials. In addition, we also collected data from various resources such as documents from FUSC and CUBA. Data analysis followed the grounded theory approach, wherein researchers identified concepts, second order themes, and aggregate theoretical dimensions (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012).

Preliminary findings have suggested that isomorphism is the result the pressures from governments at all levels, the market reform of universities, students’ needs, and the college sport departments’ desire to improve their athletic performance. They are likely adopting NCAA structures because NCAA structure is seen as legitimate. In China, NCAA is seen as the benchmark of college sport for its longest history and advanced management strategies. However, lack of funding sources, uncompleted legal guarantees for CUBA, policy conflict among different departments at multi levels were the challenges that CUBA faced when adopting NCAA’s structure. This study provides insight into the relationship between isomorphism and field heterogeneity. Second, this research outlines how an institution can mimic, and decouple during the development process.