

Transformation of the Structural Functionalism of Cultural Heritage and the Sustainable Development of Historic and Cultural Cities

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To cite this article: Ji-Jiao Zhang and Yue Wu (2020). Transformation of the Structural Functionalism of Cultural Heritage and the Sustainable Development of Historic and Cultural Cities. *Malaysian Journal of Chinese Studies* 9(2): 51–62. [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9\(2\).0004](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9(2).0004)

To link to this article: [http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9\(2\).0004](http://doi.org/10.6993/MJCS.202012_9(2).0004)

Abstract

The traditional culture of cities has to be innovatively adapted to respond to the increasingly demanding needs of the modern world in order that its inherent value may function as a resource. The state-designated historic and cultural cities of China have a rich heritage which, if readapted appropriately in the modern context, may be exploited to promote the sustainable and endogenous development of these cities. By taking the flower fairs of the three historic and cultural cities of Guangzhou, Zhongshan and Luoyang as examples, this paper analyses the role of cultural heritage in urban socio-economic development from the perspective of neo-classical “structural functionalism.” The study demonstrates that innovative and high-quality adaptations of the traditional culture of Chinese cities can bring about a trajectory of tradition-modernity transformation of urban centres in a sustainable manner.

Keywords: Chinese traditional culture, historic and cultural city, flower culture, neo-classical “structural functionalism,” structural heritage

Introduction

The recent official policy of promoting the creative transformation, innovation and development of traditional culture provides broad guidelines on the conservation and utilisation of cultural heritage. There are two empirical approaches to the realisation of the objectives of the guidelines. The heritage conservation and museum circles advocate the promotion of the mass appeal of cultural heritage through innovating tangible cultural heritage. An example is the creation by the Imperial Palace of a staggering 10,000 kinds of cultural and creative products

(Shan, 2008). The folklore, anthropology, ethnology and other academic circles stress the idea of protecting the authenticity of intangible cultural heritage and associated crafts and master craftsmen and showcasing intangible culture in the schools and museums (Ruan & Lin, 2003).

In the fall of 2019, in a field study in Luoyang city, Henan Province, we found that the Luoyang Peony Show had been upgraded to a national festival. In several recent investigations in Haikou, Hainan island, we found that the local Lantern Festival held in the middle of each lunar month was a day when the exchange of flowers used to be a popular traditional practice. This practice and the warm scenes of mutual blessings have faded. The Festival may still be popular but has done nothing to stimulate the development of a modern flower industry. In contrast, the Spring Festival flower fair in Guangzhou and the Chrysanthemum Show of Xiaolan town near Zhongshan City have reaped benefits from their successes.¹ It is necessary then to unravel the factors behind the success of different cultural festivals in the list of historic and cultural cities of China.

The national list contains 130 historic and cultural cities of distinct characteristics and traditional cultures.² This study is focused on the long-established flower festivals of Guangzhou, Zhongshan, and Luoyang with the purpose to uncover the factors that have and are driving the processes of the urban endogenous development and to identify their roots, approaches, and outcome.

Analytical Framework

Historic and cultural cities are characteristically rich in cultural heritage. While being designated as such is a stimulus to further development, some cities have failed to take advantage of their favoured position to inject innovative and creative elements into their traditional culture to sustain the process of urban rejuvenation. In the contemporary socio-economic transformation of Chinese society, all cultural cities are faced with the dualistic problem inherent in the “tradition-modernity” transformation process. What is critical is to ensure that both traditional and modern elements could contribute to the sustainable development of their urban economies and not one giving way to the other. This is more than an academic issue but of general significance to the general interest of the inhabitants.

Many studies have concentrated on aspects of the authenticity and protection of cultural heritage, or on its value and significance of associated activities. In fact, cultural heritage research can be dealt with at three levels: the first level is research on the cultural heritage itself; the second is concerned with the value and significance of cultural heritage; and the third is focused on the dynamic and comprehensive analysis of the tradition-modernity transformation of cultural heritage in the economic and social structural context of urban development, in what may be termed as a form of neo-classical “structural functionalism.” In relative terms, the economic and social analysis method observes how tangible and intangible cultural heritage is made to adapt to the development process of the entire city (J.J. Zhang & Yang, 2017).

The economic revival of historic and cultural cities requires a policy that targets the integration of the objectives of urban rejuvenation and industrial renewal. It is an urban development model initiated in the backdrop of a new round of social and economic transformation. As a matter of fact, any urban development process is a history of localised political, economic and social change. This history would show different features at different stages, and it is these features that would help to shape the structure and functions of a city's cultural heritage. It is thus imperative to examine the dynamic relationship between structure and functions so that the relevance of cultural heritage could be analysed in the context of the entire social and economic framework of the city.

New Research Paradigm: Neo-classical “Structural-Functionalism”

Previous studies of the relationship between cultural heritage and the urban revival process have pointed out that this relationship is not a simple one of “dualistic opposition,” but that of multiple dimensions of “coexistence” and “connectedness,” based on which they have named it “neo-classical functionalism” (J. Zhang, 2019). What is meant is that during the socio-economic transformation arising from the city revival process, the cultural heritage must embrace new functions to demonstrate its values to the development process. This theory is a further exploration of Malinowski's (1987) static and classical “cultural functionalism” and Fei Xiaotong's (2001) dynamic investigation of “cultural development and utilisation.”

In subsequent studies, the authors have combined five concepts, namely “neo-classical functionalism” and “cultural development and utilisation” cited above, together with that of “another invisible hand” of Li Peilin (1992), “endogenous development” of UNESCO (1988), and that of “competitive advantage” of Porter (2012), to propose a neo-classical “structural-functionalism” model as a basis to study cultural heritage and urban characteristics. To be specific, this model places emphasis on the assumption that socio-cultural factors are both structural and functional, forming a new structure-function in the economic and social transformation of cities.

Based on our analysis, socio-economic activities in the form of organised festivals and customary practices in cities with rich cultural heritage are both structural and functional. The cultural heritage of historic and cultural cities is not merely an endogenous resource that is relevant for local economic development, but also an asset that is capable of becoming a localised or even regional brand when it is creatively transformed and innovatively developed (J.J. Zhang & Wu, 2019).

This study shows that Chinese historic and cultural cities whose ornamental and cultural heritage such as the flower culture and its derivatives, have great potential to contribute to their development and reshape their cultural traditions. The flower culture, in particular, will play a unique and an irreplaceably endogenous role in this respect. In the transformation of a city's economic and social structure, the flower culture, with its inherent aesthetic qualities and

values, is capable of contributing to the more equitable redistribution of resources and to yield specific competitive advantages in promoting the endogenous development of the cities.

Flower Culture as a Structural Heritage: The Past and Present

Historically, the role of flowers has changed from their ornamental and even medicinal values to become cultural products that inspire human thoughts and feelings. Flower festivals consequently have become an important part of China's valuable traditional culture and is being built into the sustainable development agenda of the urban economy and culture.

The Spring Festival Flower Fair of Guangzhou City

With its mild sub-tropical climate, Guangdong province is the habitat of a variety of exotic flowers and animal species. The capital city of Guangzhou is located in the Pearl River Delta region where flowers have been cultivated on a commercial basis since the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC-AD 24). During the Song Dynasty (960–1127), full-time flower farmers made a living in the region by planting and peddling flowers and supporting a flower market. During the Ming and early Qing dynasties (1368–1736), Guangzhou's established flower markets were found in the Huashi (Flower Market) and Hua Dukou (Flower Ferry Jetty) localities. During the middle and late Qing Dynasty (1736–1911), the flower market held on each New Year's Eve had evolved into the embryonic form of today's popular Spring Festival flower fair.

The tradition of the flower fair in ancient Guangzhou and associated folk activities, with their mass appeal and air of festivity and cheerfulness, have created a flower-based economic sub-sector in the city. Over time, the fair was held more regularly throughout the year and began to exhibit many other goods and toys. During the era of the Republic of China (1912–1949), the Spring Festival flower fair, also popularly known as the New Year's Eve Flower Market, assumed its current form and function. The New Year has become a festival in which flowers are used for decoration as well as for their symbolic significance. The Spring Festival flower fair is thus driven by a deep-rooted practice of consumption among the common people that boosted trade and economic exchanges as an integral part of the local economy. In turn, the growing market for flowers encouraged large-scale production and operation.

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 witnessed a dramatic change in the flower market fair. The scattered flower markets were relocated and designated as the "Spring Festival flower fair." Other flower markets were set up successively in different parts of Guangzhou city. In the 1960s, the Spring Flower Market was busiest during the lunar New Year celebrations and took place in a broad pedestrian street adorned with rich and unique festive decorations.

With China's reform and opening-up policies introduced in 1978, Guangzhou's flower fair began to feature a variety of flower species introduced from the West. Market expansion saw the addition of festive activities and entertainment. In 1982, Guangzhou was recognised as one

of China's historic and cultural cities. In 2007, the Spring Festival flower fair became known as the Guangdong Provincial Intangible Cultural Heritage under the folklore category and its celebration was upgraded according to a "3+15" model.³ This flower fair has now become a cultural benchmark and an iconic brand of the city.

In 2019, the Guangzhou Spring Festival flower fair boasted 11 flower markets with 2,717 flower stalls, attracted over 5 million local and foreign visitors, and resulted in a transaction value of 147 million yuan. The vast flower market has enabled Guangzhou not only to preserve a cultural heritage but also to create a commercial market that generates substantial economic benefits. The flower industry has enhanced the touristic appeal of Guangzhou as a "city of flowers." As an economic activity, the flower market is assuming the role of a growth stimulus of the tourism industry and a substantial source of income for a range of flower-related businesses.

From the perspective of neo-classical structural-functionalism, the Spring Festival flower fair has gradually matured into its present role as a cultural force that contributes to the expansion of the urban economy. With official sponsorship and public participation, the flower fair has steadily evolved into a domestic and international leisure industry integrating business, festivals, and entertainment.

Xiaolan Chrysanthemum Show of Zhongshan City

Zhongshan City is located on the western bank of the Pearl River mouth of Guangdong province and Xiaolan is one of the towns in its vicinity. The chrysanthemum culture in Xiaolan traced its origin to the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279) when refugees from the north fled from the invading Jin armies. During the Ming Dynasty, the literary circle of Xiaolan took up the planting and appreciation of chrysanthemums as a pastime and a source of pleasure. This marked the beginning of chrysanthemum art that evolved into a popular folk event in the form of the Xiaolan Chrysanthemum Show. This show began to be organised and held in the clan halls where officials and literati would provide enthusiastic support and to strengthen social relations. The local folks and flower peddlers took advantage of the event to increase their income. Despite differences in the social background of the local inhabitants and the visitors, the show served to build up ties of shared interests and social networks.

With the reform and opening-up of China, the Chrysanthemum Show steadily emerged from a localised and clan-based event to cast its influence and market to a wider audience of the well-to-do as well as the common folks. The Show has since assumed the role of a driving force in the town's reform and opening-up efforts. Each successive Show has led to new opportunities to deepen the economic and social benefits of the locality.

The Fourth Chrysanthemum Show of 1994 sponsored by the Xiaolan municipal government exhibited 1,568 varieties of chrysanthemums. The show attracted 6 million visitors and racked in a handsome volume of business contracts. In the following year, the GDP of Xiaolan reached 3.22 billion yuan. The revenue enabled the municipal government to invest substantially to carry out ecologically-friendly and high-quality projects in the town. Ten years later in 2004

the Chrysanthemum Show was presented together with tourism events to reflect the economic restructuring of the local economy (Li, 2016). Through a series of momentous changes, the benefits generated by the Chrysanthemum Show were well acknowledged for their positive impacts on the local economy.

In 2006, the Xiaolan Chrysanthemum Show was officially listed as one of China's first batch of intangible cultural heritage. In 2011 Zhongshan City, together with Xiaolan town, was listed as a historic and cultural city of China, and Xiaolan was thus placed in an excellent position to elevate its rejuvenation and transformation efforts to a new level.

The long history of chrysanthemum planting and appreciation tradition in Xiaolan have led on to the introduction of other art and cultural activities such as poetry contests and cultural exhibitions (Zeng, 2011). With the support of the local clan associations, business sector and municipality, Xiaolan begins to raise the quality of the Chrysanthemum Show and to diversify its socio-economic functions. Judging from the perspective of neo-classical structural-functionalism model, the Chrysanthemum Show has demonstrated the positive influence derived from local folk traditions as well as from the communal role of the clan associations. In the current socio-economic context, the development of the Chrysanthemum Show has facilitated Xiaolan's transition from an agricultural to a modern society, and in which the demand pattern of flowers has shifted from ritual to popular daily consumption. In effect, the Chrysanthemum Show has moved from a clan-related activity to become a large-scale commercial event that engages the participation of local and overseas kinship groups as well as to brand itself as a tourism event to showcase the local cultural heritage and arts to an international audience.

The Peony Culture Festival of Luoyang City

The planting of peony began in the Luoyang area of Henan province in the Sui Dynasty (581–618), flourished in the Tang Dynasty (618–907), and reached its apogee in the Song Dynasty (960–1279). During its heyday, the Peony Festival held in April each year drew in large crowds to view the unequalled number of peony varieties and elicited a large number of poems and songs in praise of the blooms. For more than 1,600 years, the celebration of the peony with literary works has become a deep-rooted tradition among the Chinese.⁴ This tradition suffered a serious setback when Luoyang lost its central political and economic position during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties from 1271 to 1911. It was not until the reform in 1982 that the flower fair was revived to restore the historic and cultural city status of Luoyang. With recent urbanisation campaigns giving due emphasis to the role of traditional culture, the peony fair has become a primary commercial event that helps to drive Luoyang's endogenous development.

The government's "visible hand" plays a key role in the contemporary preservation and development of cultural heritage. In 1982, the Luoyang municipal government designated the peony as the city flower, and the Peony Culture Festival was organised as an annual event from

the following year. It took close to two decades until 2001 for the locally organised event to attain significance of national import (X. Zhang, 2016).

In 2008, the Luoyang peony festival received its national intangible cultural heritage accreditation. Building upon this gathering momentum, the city administration further expanded the festival in scale and functions by integrating the flower festival, tourism, and business consultations to create a more comprehensive economic and cultural platform (N. Zhang, 2007). The annual event has nurtured a unique supply and demand environment and an information exchange platform for many Luoyang enterprises to attract greater interest and investments, and to display their local products and cultures.

Back in 1983, the first Luoyang Peony Festival had attracted 2.5 million local and foreign tourists. By 2019, the figure had ballooned to 29 million visitors and the event was generating a total tourism-related revenue of 27.43 billion yuan. These statistics confirm that the Peony Festival has become an iconic event among many tourists. Besides, the festival also provides a platform for the display of peony products and to build up a consumption pattern that benefits low-income groups. The related “first village of Chinese peony painting” or the Luoyang Pingle Peony Painting Industrial Park founded in the 1980s has developed a unique market-oriented path of peony painting under the “company+park+artist” model (Yan, 2015).

The restructuring of the peony painting industry and its online sales and training courses have changed the employment structure of local farmers. Pingle has also provided one-stop services to answer the needs of painting, packaging, and logistics activities of more than 1,000 peony painters and over 5,000 other practitioners. Their total annual revenue has exceeded 100 million yuan.

Social changes and the restructuring of the peony culture have stimulated greater consumption and opening up new markets. The multiplier effects of new developments have spilled over to related activities in catering, entertainment, and hotel accommodation and at the same time reinforcing the competitive edge of Luoyang’s urban economy. As in the case of Xiaolan, government support and market mechanism have provided the driving force behind the consolidation of the sustainability of Luoyang’s endogenous development.

The commercialisation of flowers and their associated traditional culture have branded Guangzhou as the “city of flowers”, Xiaolan as the “city of chrysanthemums” and Luoyang as the “city of peony culture”. The annual events held in each of these cities are testimonies to the commercial value of flowers and their associated cultural heritage. Each city has taken a considerable amount of time to develop and gain competitiveness in their flower economy. These flower fairs have demonstrated the possibility of local initiatives in development and innovations to produce new economic functions to drive the socio-economic transformation of cities.

Results and Discussion

Traditional culture has the potential to contribute to the development of the urban economy. A major concern is how it may be optimised and integrated into the socio-economic transformation process through innovations to become sustainable. The flower festivals of Guangzhou, Zhongshan and Luoyang have evolved through time to open up avenues by which cultural and ornamental values of flowers have been commercialised to uplift the economy and to enrich the quality of modern life (Table 1). The success of these cities indicates that it is possible for other cities, through innovative means of presentation and management, to infuse fresh values and meanings to their unique cultural heritage and to chart a path appropriate to their development agenda.

Table 1

Contrast of Flower Culture in Guangzhou, Zhongshan and Luoyang

Structure-Function and Driving Force		Spring Festival Flower Fair of Guangzhou	Xiaolan Chrysanthemum Show of Zhongshan	Peony Culture Festival of Luoyang
Location	Past	Folk-led: local farmland	Local organisation: Ancestral temples and clan associations	Folk: Peony farms and literary circles
	Today	Government-led: all districts in Guangzhou	Government-led: the entire Xiaolan Town	Government-led: Targeting major peony gardens
Time of Origin		Song Dynasty	Ming Dynasty	Song Dynasty
Structure-Function at Its Origin		The planting and business communities	Development of chrysanthemum art by the wealthy, literati and officialdom	Peony gardens and the market and flower lovers
Structure-function during ancient times		Flower market to promote trade and economic exchanges		
Structure-function during the Late Qing Dynasty and the Republic of China		New Year's Eve flower market integrating festival and entertainment	The display of influence of the landed class	Briefly interrupted from 1111 to 1117
Formation of Structural Heritage		Spring Festival flower fair, the Flower City	Xiaolan Chrysanthemum Show	National flower show
Structure-function in the Early Days of the People's Republic		Government-led: local culture and folklore, promotion of mass consumption		None

Structure-Function and Driving Force	Spring Festival Flower Fair of Guangzhou	Xiaolan Chrysanthemum Show of Zhongshan	Peony Culture Festival of Luoyang
Structure-function after Reform and Opening-up	Government-led and market-participation: a large-scale cultural event and a branded product, stimulating a broader structure of industries, markets, and tourism		Large-scale comprehensive economic and cultural activities
Innovation and Development after Reform and Opening-up	1. “3 + 15” celebration model 2. Integration of local flower fairs by government plans 3. Combining with international tourism 4. Enhancing the connotation of traditional flower market: combining with South Chinese traditional cultures	1. Building a cultural and creative industrial park 2. Becoming the pioneer of Zhongshan culture and art tourism 3. Revitalising cultural heritage: Chrysanthemum Show, lantern-making skills, traditional folk embroidery, and traditional culinary arts	1. Peony industry derivatives and related tertiary industries 2. Luoyang Peony Cultural Tourism 3. Government promotion: peony flower → local festival → provincial festival → national grand event
Current Structure-function	Leisure tourism with “commerce, trade, festivals, and entertainment” as its theme	Local cultural display, gathering of kin forces at home and abroad, cultural tourism art	Leisure tourism, prominent market significance, and peony cultural industry

Source: Compiled by the authors

The success of the flower festivals in the three cities is the outcome of public and private initiatives enacted in the context of the “umbrella society” and the “beehive society” (J.J. Zhang, 2016, 2018).⁵ The former is characterised by the central role of the government in resource allocation and the latter is led by private efforts in self-resource allocation. Together, these initiatives give rise to a top-down and bottom-up approach in development (J.J. Zhang & Dang, 2019). Each episode of change produces ripple effects on the entire local economy and society in the form of new industries, products, and markets. Hence, the innovative development of traditional culture is no longer a pipe dream, and it is possible for modern cities to guide the urban economy and industrial clusters towards the goal of sustainable development.

Based on the development models of the flower festival cities, the possession of a rich cultural heritage becomes an asset when it is utilised to produce a virtuous circle of development incorporating the elements of historical heritage, development, and cultural innovations. One may ask whether these development models are applicable to the development of other historic and cultural cities. A study on “endogenous” and “exogenous” development models carried

out by UNESCO (1988) had concluded in favour of the latter mode of development. The core meaning of endogenous development is to show respect for cultural identity and the local community's right to enjoy its unique culture, and to pursue development through local initiatives.

History suggests that historic and cultural cities need to set up modern industries by incorporating features of their unique cultural heritage and giving priority to the interests of the local people, rather than to rely on the exogenous development model that lacks a local orientation and focus. At the same time, it is essential that the development process does not lead to the destruction of local culture and the environment. Cultural heritage is "another invisible hand" to add to the distinctive and competitive advantages of the local area. This new economic structure and function may become a new driving force for the advancement of historic and cultural cities, and to promote the transformation of the city and its cultural heritage from the traditional to the modern, and thus to embark on a road of high-quality sustainable development.

Conclusion

Historic and cultural cities which encompass rich cultural heritage enjoy special advantages in competition for high-quality and high-value activities if their potentials are well exploited and optimised. This study examines how selected historic and cultural cities in China have been able to create higher values from their cultural heritage resources and at the same time to meet the criteria of environmentally sustainable development. Indeed, creating more values in the modern sense out of cultural heritage suggests that, at a deeper level, working towards sustainability of cities is a crucial objective of modern development. This implies that leveraging on the cultural heritage of cities as a resource for modern and sustainable development to drive the process of "tradition-modernity" transformation is an achievable objective.

The success of the Spring Festival flower fair of Guangzhou, the Chrysanthemum Show of Xiaolan, and the Peony Culture Festival of Luoyang demonstrates that these cities have not only restored the vitality of their cultural heritage, but have also played a leading role by building themselves into internationally famous cities through self-innovative measures and the optimum utilisation of the tradition of flower fairs. In Haikou, despite the functional switch of the festival from the original "incense exchange" to that of "flower exchange," the change has been superficial and with little significance. The alteration in name has not injected any economic value to the city's cultural heritage to embark on the endogenous development of the city as a historic and cultural city. Without serious commitments to translate its cultural heritage into a factor in modern development, Haikou would not replicate the success stories of the three other cities.

Constant rejuvenations and additions of multi-sectoral functions to urban centres in China portend well for the future prospects of cities that are well-endowed with diverse forms of cultural heritage. The rapid physical transformation of cities demands the upgrading of socio-

economic functions and developmental objectives to meet the modern requirements of the community and the economy. Comprehensive studies of historic and cultural cities are required to decide on such issues as the identification of the types of projects to safeguard and rejuvenate the urban culture and cultural heritage, and how may the city be branded or its distinctive characteristics be recognised regionally. The objective is to build up the mass appeal of historic and cultural cities, and to win national as well as international repute. The structural and functional transformation of cities are intertwined with modern innovations of urban development, and this demands constant explorations on the means of optimising the unique and endogenous cultural heritage of cities. By building up a brand name unique to each historic and cultural city, the lofty goals of sustainable development are distinctly achievable.

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This study is part of the research project of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences on “Traditional-Modernity Transformation from the Perspective of Social Anthropology” funded by Grant No. 2019MZSCX002, and led by Ji-Jiao Zhang.

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Notes

- 1 The senior author, Ji-Jiao Zhang, visited the Guangzhou Spring Festival flower fair in 1987 as a student studying at the Sun Yat-Sen University then and was deeply impressed by the event.
- 2 China introduced the idea of protecting “state-designated famous historic and culture cities” in 1982. Three sets of cities were published by the State Council in 1982, 1986 and 1994. As of May 2, 2018, 135 cities have been listed as historic and culture cities. These cities may be divided into seven categories: historic ancient capital cities, traditional style cities, general relic type, scenic cities, regional characteristic cities, modern relic type, and special function cities.
- 3 The “3+15” model refers to the first three days of Spring Festival as the traditional flower market days, the next 15 as the innovative flower fair days, which include the 15th Day lantern fair, the floating flower market, the temple fair and a series of other folk activities.
- 4 On September 20–21, 2019, the authors carried out fieldwork in Luoyang on its peony flower show. Luoyang was the capital city of six dynasties in Chinese history, as alluded to by a popular saying that “one Luoyang City, half of the Chinese history.”
- 5 There are five levels of the “umbrella society” from the national, provincial to the township levels. Its three functions include those of “parental shelter” to affiliated enterprises, “relative shelter” to joint ventures, and “friendship shelter” to private enterprises. There are also five types of “beehives” from the employment and management perspectives. They include the chain-type and net-type “beehive” of employees, and the family, value-chain and ethnic “beehive” of managers (see J. Zhang, 2016, 2019).