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In or Out? The Role of Boundary Work in Transgressive Institutional Reform

Mia Raynard, Thomas B. Lawrence, Madeline Toubiana and Giuseppe Delmestri

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Abstract

As political, economic, and natural environments change, institutions need to be adapted to maintain their relevance and legitimacy. Such adaptations can, however, be especially difficult when they involve the incorporation of ideas or practices previously conceived of as inconsistent with the moral standards and value commitments of the institution—a situation we refer to as “transgressive institutional reform”. Drawing on an inductive longitudinal analysis of political, legal, and historical documents, we examine the work of the Chinese government to reintroduce the private sector into the Chinese economy after decades of strident and violent suppression. We find that this protracted process depended significantly on boundary work that helped make highly controversial changes less threatening. We develop a model that shows that boundary work in transgressive institutional reform unfolds through nested cycles of concretization and abstraction, where an institutional boundary is made and remade more specific and explicit and then more abstract and implicit. These cycles of boundary work transform what appears from a distance to be a solid boundary into a multi-dimensional arrangement of distinctions that are “yoked” together to sort ideas, practices, and people “into” and “out of” institutions. By exploring the role of boundary work in effecting transgressive institutional reform, we aim to extend understanding of how actors work to negotiate and construct the meanings of an institution by virtue of distinctions between what is “in” and what is “out”.

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ACADEMY OF Management

Academy of Management
100 Summit Lake Drive, Suite 110
Valhalla, NY 10595, USA
Phone: +1 (914) 326-1800
Fax: +1 (914) 326-1900

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