

**Strategic practices of high-tech firms in China and Poland**

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**ABSTRACT**

We tested the impact of institutional environment, in different stages of transformational development, on firms' strategies by studying small and medium high-tech (software and hardware) firms in Poland and China. In particular, we confirmed that Chinese high-tech firms follow more proactive, incremental, growth-oriented strategies than Polish firms. We also hypothesized that Chinese firms invest more in upstream activities (R&D, new technologies), while Polish firms invest primarily in downstream activities (marketing and service). Finally we found that team orientation and dynamics of TMTs in both countries are very similar, in spite of different strategies followed by firms.

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## **Introduction**

Within the field of strategic management and international business, there are two major conflicting perspectives on choice of management practices in the process of firm's adaptation – organizational and institutional. Organizational perspective underlines the importance of internal organizational factors like different top management characteristics (Hambrick and Mason, 1984; Man et.al.,2002), power and influence games (Cyert and March, 1963), norms and values (Schein, 1985) and also pressures from task environment (...). Strategic management practices that proved to effective will be learned and repeated according the laws of operant conditioning (Prahalad and Bettis, 1986). The relationship between firm adaptation and routines is posited to be causal: particular adaptive choices becomes codified in organizations via rules and routines (Nelson &Winter, 1982; Walsh, 1995). If the technical environment and internal configurations of organizations are similar they should develop relatively similar strategic management practices.

Relatively recently, the institutional perspective contested this view and has gained prominence in explaining the importance of cognitive, regulatory and normative structures on adoption of different management practices (Scott, 1995; Bruton and Alsthom, 2003). This view states that institutional environment is so important that even firms in relatively similar technical environment and with similar internal configurations might choose different strategies and management practices responding to different institutional pressures (Delmas and Toffel, 2008).

In this article we follow the institutional theory lead and ask a question if organizations that face similar technical environment but different institutional environment will have convergent or divergent pattern of management choices and practices. In other words, which forces will exhibit stronger influence on strategic practices of the firm – institutional or technical? In order to test this question we studied high tech firms in China and Poland. The choice of industries and countries reflect the main research question. Our choice of high tech firms in hardware and software industry was driven by the fact that they are especially influenced by global standards and they are exposed to strong technical pressures to conform to the dominant practices in their industries (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) and industrial recipes (Spender, 1989), i.e. common choices and management practices. Our selection of China and Poland enables us to compare business environments that have similar high velocity dictated by global standards of new computer technologies, but very different

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institutional frameworks. We consider Poland as representative of drastic, ‘cold turkey’ approach to transformation of political, economical and institutional environment (Kolverid, Obloj, 1994). Poland started to build appropriate to market economy and political democracy institutional framework immediately after 1989, when drastic austerity program was introduced in order to transform the economy. The immediate results of the implementation of this program received high praise from World Bank, IMF, and Western economists that treated it as an exemplary, fast and holistic transformation (Slay, 1994). China is a representative of the evolutionary approach to transformation of its political, economic and institutional environment (Bottlier, Fosler, 2007). As a result its institutional environment is a mix of political, legal and organizational pressures that are less structured and predictable than in Poland. Similarity of technical environment and differences of institutional environment provides a good testing ground. If high tech firms follow primarily path advocated by organizational adaptation perspective we should observe relative homogeneity of management practices. However, if they follow primarily adaptation path advocated by institutional view we should observe adoption of different management practices. The article is structured as follows. We first review briefly institutional theory, then develop hypothesis that describe expected differences in choice and execution of strategic management practices of high tech firms in Poland and China. In the following section we describe our sample and methods and provide the results of the data analysis. We conclude with discussion of implications and limitations of our findings.

### **Institutional environment and management practices – hypothesis development**

The major premise of institutional theory is that well-developed and structured institutional environment lowers turbulence of an environment and transactions costs of doing business from managerial perspective because it generally increases casual predictability of doing business thanks to structurization of organizational field. Scott (1995: 33) notes that ”institutions consist of cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior”. The cognitive structures consists of scripts that define social actors identities and help them to pursue meaningful choices and actions in particular situations. Normative structures include norms and values that specify how things should be done, what are appropriate means of actions (Scott, 1995). Regulative systems are

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mainly formal rules of the game imposed by law and governance institutions. Emerging economies are a good testing ground to study potential impact of institutional environment of business practices because they are heterogeneous group from institutional perspective (Hoskisson et.al. 2000; Meyer and Peng, 2005). A good example of such differences is China and Poland. Poland chose shock therapy and fast development of all institutions of developed market economy. The state impact on economy was drastically limited in the 90s (more than 90% of state owned firms were privatized) and ideology of all subsequent governments since 1989 was based upon premise that state should not intervene directly into economic affairs. Typical regulative institutions like Central Bank, Stock Exchange, commercial code were put in place since the very beginning of transformation and made independent from state interventions. Accession to EC in 2005 forced final overhaul and adaptation of institutional system in 2001-2004.

China chose a gradual path of transformation. Political control is still held by a communist party. Central and regional governments still are influenced strongly by communist ideology and actively control and influence economic affairs. Privatization is balanced by on-going control of the state of most of the firms, even those that went public (China Statistical Yearbook, 2004; Lau et al., 2007). Legal system is mixed with political influences (Li, Atuahene-Gima, 2001). Additional institutional turbulence is inflicted by rapid growth of the economy (more than 10% per year during last 20 years), and massive inflow of FDI (Bottelier, Fosler, 2007). These contingencies make institutional environment of Chinese economy much more complex and dynamic than Polish economy, and we would expect that it would be reflected in different strategic choices and actions of managers in these economies. The most important on-going debate in the field of strategy and international business is dealing with the question if firms primarily use synoptic or incremental approach to strategy. Synoptical approach that encompasses strategic planning, positioning and fashionable recently Blue Ocean approach (Kim and Mauborgne, 2005) represents consistent, structured, analytical approach to strategy advocated by Porter (2001) even in high velocity environment. Incremental approach to strategy is less rigorous and systematic and stresses emergent and path dependent development of organizational strategic choices and actions. Strategy according to advocates of this approach is crafted not designed (Mintzberg and Waters, 1981; Mintzberg, 1994; Chakravarthy and White, 2006) and managers only partially control its execution in practice. The long lasting conflict between these approaches can be at least partially resolved by taking into account the concept of high-velocity environment (Li and Atuahene-Gima, 2001). Synoptic approach to strategy makes a perfect sense in a relatively

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stable and predictable environment, in which a firm can design a strategy that leverages lasting opportunities and neutralize threats. Incremental approach to strategy makes more sense in a very competitive and turbulent environment where flexibility, speed and responsiveness are key success factors (Wirtz, Matheiu and Schilke, 2007). We would expect that dynamics of institutional environments matter, as institutional theory stresses that decision-makers are embedded in a subtle but pervasive way in the institutional environment that influences their decisions and actions (Granovetter, 1985; Scott, 2001, Lau et al., 2002). As a gradual and fuzzy transformation path of China makes its institutional environment much more complex and dynamic than Polish, we will expect that Chinese firms will be developing strategies in more incremental way than Polish firms as this approach is better suited to their complex institutional environment. Also, because of complexity and unpredictability of their environment we will expect higher level of proactiveness (flexibility, responsiveness, opportunity-seeking, alliances) in Chinese firms' strategies execution.

*Hypothesis 1a. Chinese firms will be more inclined to use incremental strategies than Polish firms.*

*Hypothesis 1b. Chinese firms will execute incremental strategies more proactively than Polish firms.*

Another impact of institutional environment on high tech firms that we should observe will be related to the different strategic orientation of Polish and Chinese firms. As the theory of real options stresses increased uncertainty and turbulence of environment should lead rational decision-makers to behaviors that increase future flexibility of choices (McGrath and Nekar, 2004). A natural way to do it in high tech firms is to invest in research and development and new technologies. Strategic activities in these parts of the value chain increase firms' flexibility and speed (Burgelman and Grove, 2007) necessary in unpredictable environments. If the institutional, technological and generally business environment stabilizes we should observe greater concentration of firms on those part of value chain that produces immediate results i.e. product modifications, sales and service. These orientations should also impact operational and financial performance of the firm in particular institutional environments (Ebben and Johnson, 2005). In relatively stable Polish environment, institutional pressures (from owners, banks etc.) on operational and financial performance should be higher than in more turbulent Chinese environment.

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*Hypothesis 2a. Chinese firms will concentrate more than Polish firms on activities and investments related to research and development of new technologies.*

*Hypothesis 2b. Polish firms will concentrate more than Chinese firms on activities and investments related to modification of products, sales, marketing and post sale service.*

*Hypothesis 2c. Polish firm will have on average higher operational and financial performance than Chinese firms.*

The third important aspect of strategic practices of high tech firms relate to the operations of top management teams (TMT) that are responsible for formulation and execution of strategy. ( Mintzberg, Waters 1981; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). Early research by Bantel and Jackson (1989) indicated that greater variety of TMT (in terms of age, education, experience etc.) results in more creative and innovative thinking and actions of managers. Other research (Amason, 1996; Jehn, 1997) underlined that high variety of TMT generates also conflicts that can limit effectiveness of TMT operations and firm performance. The presence of such conflicts should not be seen as a negative feature only. Conflicts can generate difficult questions, fuel strategic debate and results in formulation of greater variety of strategic options as long as top management team interacts with one another productively as a team. . In spite of the institutional and cultural differences between China and Poland, we believe that we will observe similar dominant logic of Polish and Chinese TMTs operations (Bettis, Prahalad, 1995). The main roots of this similarity is a phenomena of stable ‘industrial recipes’ (Kogut, Zander, 1996; Spender, 1989) , i.e. common choices and solutions, that should be especially strong in the high tech industries influenced by global standards. Software and hardware industry share industry recipe across the world because of high homogeneity of products and standards (e.g. programming languages, computer parts). Managers and employees have similar education, they share common language (English) and professional jargon that makes migration of best practices and solutions especially easy. These are some of the reasons why this is truly global industry where one can source products and services almost equally easily in Brazil, China, India or Poland. Hence we hypothesize that will observe similar team orientation and dynamism of top management teams in China and Poland.

*Hypothesis 3: Top management team orientation and dynamics will be similar in high-tech firms in China and Poland*

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### **Sample and methods**

This study focuses on SMEs with 500 or less employees from high tech (hardware and software) firms in China and Poland. We chose hardware and software industry because we searched for an industry that operate in business environment influenced by global players and standards. In this way we wanted to marginalize impact of possible differences of business environment and focus on impact of institutional environment. Chinese sample was drawn from a survey of firms in four provinces and cities - Guangdong, Beijing, Shanghai and Sichuan in 2003. These provinces and cities were chosen in order to ensure sampling from different location. We collected answers from 124 high tech firms and utilized in the analysis 51 observations (group 1 in the tables) that operated in software and hardware sector. Polish sample was drawn from two surveys performed on the largest Polish database of over 800 software and hardware firms. After two mailings we collected over 80 answers and we utilized in this analysis 76 observations (group 2 in tables). Both in China and Poland the questionnaire was addressed to the CEO of the firm. We utilized in our questionnaire several validated scales and measures, and a few developed by ourselves. The strategy variable were developed with 17 items that related to the strategic behaviors of relatively new start ups. These items were measured (as others) on a 5 – point scales in the areas of improvement, innovations, human resource management and growth orientation. The proactiveness of strategy execution was measured by nine items and respondents were asked whether they undertake bold, risky moves, initiate actions to which competitors respond, search for new opportunities and first mover advantages, focus on long term. Actions and investments in particular parts of the value chain were measured by 45 items. These items were selected in such way to cover strategic moves analyzed in earlier studies: investment in R&D, new technologies, new products, new markets, new ventures, internationalization and general management improvement. The set of 22 items were included to measure strategic orientation under the current market situation. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree to which they would follow particular actions, and the questions were taken from Davis and Schul (1993). Team orientation and dynamics of top management were borrowed from O'Reilly et.al. (1995).

To reduce the number of analyzed items we created several variables corresponding to our research goals and hypothesis. They have very good Cronbach alpha (between 0,7-0,87) which indicated validity of our variables and scales. As our research goals were primarily exploratory and focus on similarities and differences between populations of two samples we

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used t-Student test of significance of mean scores from respondents from each country. The zero hypothesis was formulated in the form of lack of significant difference between means in two samples.

### Results

The results are presented in the order of which our research questions and hypothesis have been posed. We asked what are the differences between firms in the two countries with regard to: 1) strategies they follow 2) focus on upstream or down stream of the value chain; 3) performance, and 4) team orientation and dynamics of top managers.

*Strategies of Chinese and Polish firms:* table 1 presents the results of a mean comparison t-test for firms' commitment to incremental strategies. T-statistic of 5.01, significant at 0.01 level, supports the proposition that the commitment of Chinese firms to incremental strategies is greater than Polish firms.

Table 1. Incremental strategies of Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	3.477124	.1117322	.7979276	3.252703	3.701545
Poland	75	2.742222	.0913854	.7914205	2.560133	2.924312
Combined	126	3.039683	.0774922	.8698477	2.886316	3.193049
Difference		.734902	.1441179		.4496523	1.020152

Results from Table 2 indicate that Chinese firms are prepared to execute incremental strategies in a much more proactive ways than Polish firms. The t-statistic obtained with this test was 1.79 and was significant at 0.05 level.

Table 2. Proactiveness of Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	3.007157	.0972685	.6946361	2.811787	3.202526
Poland	76	2.781776	.0798537	.6961488	2.6227	2.940853



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Combined	127	2.872283	.0622571	.7016024	2.749078	2.995489
Difference		.2253805	.1259026		-.0237963	.4745574

As shown in previous tables there are clear and statistically significant differences between Chinese and Polish firm in the types of strategies they follow. Chinese firms focus to much greater degree than Polish firms on the very proactive development of incremental strategies that are growth oriented that is consistent with their institutional environment.

*Value Chain:* the second set of hypothesis dealt with concentration of efforts and investments in Polish and Chinese firms. Tables 3 and 4 indicate that Chinese firms invest in research and development and new technologies significantly more effort and money than Polish firms which is consistent with hypothesis 2a, and also indicates more long term orientation of Chinese firms. T-statistics for R&D mean comparison test and Technology were 2.07 and 3.75 respectively were significant at 0.02 and 0.01 level.

Table 3. Research and development investments in Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	2.503791	.1331915	.9511773	2.236268	2.771314
Poland	76	2.160132	.1022859	.8917074	1.956368	2.363895
Combined	127	2.298136	.0823345	.9278623	2.135199	2.461074
Difference		.3436593	.1658005		.0155194	.6717991

Table 4. Technology development in Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	2.888477	.12547	.8960348	2.636463	3.140491
Poland	76	2.289035	.0999676	.8714974	2.089889	2.488181
Combined	127	2.529756	.0821813	.9261358	2.367122	2.69239
Difference		.599442	.1595439		.2836848	.9151992

Tables 5 and 6 depict marketing and service orientations of Chinese firms and their Polish counterparts. The analysis indicates that Polish firms generally invest more in the downstream

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activities but the differences are not statistically significant. T-values of -0.25, -1.14 and 0.8 were not significant at conventional levels. Hence, the hypothesis 2b is not confirmed.

Table 5 Marketing in of Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	3.300654	.140418	1.002785	3.018616	3.582691
Poland	76	3.497807	.105108	.9163104	3.288421	3.707193
Combined	127	3.418635	.0845661	.9530112	3.251281	3.585989
Difference		-.1971534	.1722961		-.5381488	.143842

Table 6 Service in of Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	4.073529	.115956	.8280914	3.840625	4.306434
Poland	76	3.958947	.0862261	.7517013	3.787176	4.130718
Combined	127	4.004961	.0693978	.7820738	3.867624	4.142297
Difference		.114582	.1417608		-.1659801	.3951442

Hypothesis 2c stated that firms operating in the more mature institutional environment will seek or will be pressured to show higher effectiveness in order to legitimize operations and ensure on-going institutional support. The t-value for financial effectiveness mean comparison test was -1.3 while for operational efficiency: 1.17. Both are not significant at 0.05 confidence level. The explanation might be twofold. On one hand the lack of differences might be a result of the perceptual measures of performance. On the other hand answers might indicate that institutional pressures on effectiveness of private firms are limited and therefore we did not detect significant differences in average performance in Polish or Chinese firms.

Table 7. Financial effectiveness of Chinese and Polish high tech firms

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Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	2.759804	.1220657	.8717236	2.514628	3.00498
Poland	76	2.966842	.0958953	.8359956	2.775809	3.157875
Combined	127	2.883701	.0757085	.8531918	2.733876	3.033526
Difference		-.2070382	.1539456		-.5117157	.0976393

Table 8. Operational effectiveness of Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	3.152941	.1082609	.7731372	2.935493	3.37039
Poland	76	3.013947	.0636148	.5545811	2.88722	3.140675
Combined	127	3.069764	.0578452	.6518818	2.95529	3.184238
Difference		.1389938	.1178161		-.0941789	.3721665

Strong support was found for the last hypothesis. We hypothesized that team orientation and dynamics of top management firms should be similar in high-tech firms in both environments because of similar dominant logic of operations resulting from industry relative global homogeneity. Tables 9 and 10 show that team orientation and dynamics of TMT are very similar in both samples of firms. T-statistic for the mean comparison test between Polish and Chinese firms' team orientation was 0.56 while for team dynamics 0.16. both were not significant at 0.5 confidence level.

Table 9. Executive team orientation in Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	3.941176	.0898335	.6415393	3.760741	4.121612
Poland	74	3.868726	.0858639	.7386289	3.697599	4.039852
Combined	125	3.898286	.0625088	.6988696	3.774563	4.022008
Difference		.0724506	.127538		-.180003	.3249042

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Table 10. Executive team dynamics in Chinese and Polish high tech firms

Country	N	Mean	s.e.	s.d.	95% confidence interval	
China	51	3.584967	.0804904	.5748164	3.423298	3.746637
Poland	74	3.567568	.065402	.562609	3.437222	3.697913
Combined	125	3.574667	.0505687	.5653749	3.474577	3.674756
Difference		.0173998	.1032996		-.1870755	.221875

## Conclusions

When examining our findings, four trends are apparent. First, our findings indicate that high-tech firms in the emerging economies follow primarily incremental strategies that allow for faster and more flexible adaptation to the environment than synoptic strategies. Differences in Chinese and Polish firms strategies are consistent with institutional theory. In more complex, dynamic and turbulent environment firms act more proactively than in more mature, well-structured environments.

Second, our expectations that Chinese firms will be more focused than Polish on the upstream activities were confirmed. Chinese firms invest significantly more than Polish in research and development of new technologies. Our prediction that Polish firms will have symmetrical strategic orientation by being more focused than Chinese on the downstream activities was only partially confirmed. The research results indicate that such tendency exist but is not statistically significant. In practice it means that Chinese firms have more systemic approach and try to balance research, new technologies with investments in product modifications and service which should result in high innovativeness in the future.

Third, contrary to our expectations Chinese firms are not less effective than Polish. We expected that relatively mature Polish institutional environment will force firms to be more effective than turbulent Chinese institutional environment where it should be easier for firms to trade short term effectiveness for other goals like growth, innovation etc. Our results indicate that Polish firms are marginally higher financial effectiveness and lower operational effectiveness than their Chinese counter-partners but neither of these results is statistically significant.

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Finally, our analysis indicate similar dominant pattern of behaviors of Polish and Chinese top management teams. It might mean that there are universal values, norms and ways of actions in high-tech firms worldwide and it support hypothesis of industrial recipes existence.

When interpreting the results reported above, the limitations of this snapshot survey and methods should be noted. First, the target samples in both countries were relatively small and not fully representative because of different data sources. Second, respondents were asking to a set of questions , therefore like in many other studies we measured their perceptions and not factual differences in TMT operations, investments patterns and strategies, proactiveness and effectiveness. Third, due to small samples and perceptual measures we decided to test for simple, statistical differences between two samples and treat our study as exploratory insight of possible differences. We understand that some of the differences between Chinese and Polish firms might result from differences in institutional environments and some might be caused by different reasons that we do not analyze or could not test for, therefore we caution readers against far reaching generalization of our findings. In the same time we think that this first study comparing Chinese and Polish firms can offer some insight and become a building bloc of a future research.

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