

Reputation management by Chinese universities: Primary profile and comparative features

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Abstract

We use data from 176 Chinese universities to examine the use of reputation symbols in official websites. We find that Chinese universities prefer professional and performative symbols more than moral ones. Reputation symbols are mostly presented in teaching, research, history, and strategy, while their expression in internal operations and external environment is limited. A comparison with the US and Nordic samples suggests that they are rather different in the use of reputation symbols, with relatively more emphasize on professional and moral symbols respectively, which can be attributed to divergent national cultures, higher education regimes, and globalization forces. We discuss the implications of our findings to reputation management of universities in a globalized world.

Keywords: Reputation management; university; China; United States; Nordic countries

Introduction

During the last decades, reputation management or branding, imitated from private organizations, has become increasingly important for public organizations (Wæraas and Maor 2015). With a more globalized and complex world, with more ‘wicked issues’ reaching across levels and sectors (Head and Alford 2015), public leaders have more problems of instrumental actions and therefore are more relating to the ‘institutional environments’ where ideology and ideas are more important than instrumental action (Meyer and Rowan 1977). This leads to more ‘talk’, as Brunsson (1989) labels it, either as a substitute for action or to supplement action. In reality, public leaders must balance talk and action, trying to gain more support and legitimacy from stakeholders in the environment or from citizens at large, but also internally in own organizations.

Olsen (2007) sees universities as a community of scholars, a representative democracy, an instrument serving the public interest, or a service enterprise embedded in a competitive market. He thinks that the latter two have gained strengths, in particular the last one, reflecting the so-called New Public Management reforms (Christensen and Laegreid 2007). This seems to be increasing the use of university branding.

Universities in US have a long tradition of reputation management, and now European universities and the rest of the world is following suit, like China, that is the focus in this article. The top US universities are seen as the global template of excellence to imitate, which is further underscored in the growing emphasis on the broad global social and cultural processes that lead universities to become more standardized and formalized (Ramirez 2006; Christensen *et al.* 2019). Universities increasingly relate to global markets of researchers, research projects and students, not to mention global rankings or ‘league tables’.

This way of thinking about university branding is reflecting neo-institutional theory on the development of higher education (Meyer *et al.* 2006). Reputation management of universities is leading to isomorphism or convergence, meaning they become more similar, at least on the surface, which is reflected in their self-presentation (Boer *et al.*

2007). Kosmützky (2012, p. 60) sees mission statements as a well-established organizational tool. Drori *et al.* (2013, p. 143) are focusing on what is called disembedded icons in the field of higher education. One can see whether isomorphism will encompass the whole reputation profile or just some parts of it, and whether it deals with just types of reputation or also more content.

But, university systems differ regarding structure and culture, reflecting more national variety (Hood 1996), which may lead to *divergence*. This is the main result in (Morphew and Hartley 2006, p. 467) and their study of mission statements of American universities and colleges. Kosmützky (2012, pp. 70-1) also found large variety in the mission statements of German universities, something that was explained by organizational features. Delmestri *et al.* (2015, pp. 122, 30) also found a lot of variation between countries in the use of university icons as branding.

A third view would be a balance of convergence and divergence in reputation management. Delmestri *et al.* (2015, p. 130) says that seen from a world society approach, the influence of corporate and market logic could be uneven, but also the same goes for the importance of organizational actorhood and institutional logics. Bleiklie *et al.* (2011) argue that national university profiles may both reflect and filter global trends, which is reflecting a broader institutional argument from Olsen (1992).

Of importance for reputation management at the universities all over the world is also how they are changing organizationally over time, both internally and related to the environment. First, universities are more 'socially embedded' than before, i.e. they interact more with stakeholders in the environment and those actors have more influence (Ramirez and Christensen 2013). This is related both to a more proactive university policy of the central authorities, but also reflecting the need to find extra resources from public or private actors (Hemsley - Brown 2006).

Second, the internal decision-making system, historically totally dominated by professors, has changed in two contradictory ways in many countries. Decision-making bodies are more democratized, with a wider selection of types of actors and comprising a decreasing number of professors (Christensen 2011). But, rehierarchyization with more

power to the top leaders and more close and exclusive decision-making processes is also happening.

Third, university administrations have been growing, become more professional and more influential compared with the academic staff, and the academic and administrative hierarchies are closer connected than before (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004; Bleiklie *et al.* 2011; Enders *et al.* 2013). This gives a stronger potential for the professionalization of communication and branding.

Fourth, universities are generally more catering to students' needs than before. It is more innovative teaching methods and more feedback to students, but also more and better services and facilities (Ramirez and Christensen 2013). The universities use branding to tell about all these attractive features, which also includes being open, multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, gender sensitive, etc.

This article is focusing the reputation management of Chinese universities, in a comparative perspective. Chinese universities have increasingly tried to internationalize and through the Double World Class University Program, strongly supported by the Ministry of Education, they try to strengthen the quality of research and teaching, not to mention increase the exchange and collaboration with Western universities. As part of a research collaboration, the websites of Chinese universities have been compared with US and Nordic universities reputation types used for branding the universities. The comparison is done using three of Carpenter's (2010) types of symbols, namely the performative, professional and moral ones.

The research questions are posed accordingly:

- What is typical for the reputation management of the Chinese universities, as reflected by their websites? What are the core symbols and does the use of the symbols vary with university features?
- More specifically, how much do universities focus on their performance record, their moral symbols and professional qualities?
- What are the similarities and differences in the reputation management of Chinese, US and the Nordic universities, and how can they be explained?

In this article, we use the case of Chinese universities to depict the key reputational symbols used in organizational communications. We also compare the findings with reputational profiles of the US and Nordic universities to see to what extent Chinese universities are converging with or diverging from global trends in reputation management. We find that university rank and age matter in the presentation of reputation symbols, while university size and type work marginally.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. First, the theoretical basis is outlined, followed by the context regarding Chinese universities. Then some main results from US and Nordic universities' reputation are presented, followed by some theoretical expectations to be tested. Data and methods are then presented, followed by main results, analyses, and conclusion.

Theoretical basis

Reputation and reputational dimensions

Carpenter (2010, p. 33) defines organizational *reputation* as 'a set of beliefs about an organization's capacities, intentions, history, and mission that are embedded in a network of multiple audiences'. In our context this means that leaders of universities have to use reputational symbols to appeal to diverse audiences or stakeholders (Wæraas and Maor 2015). *Reputation management* is the organized and systematic use of the reputational symbols. Major stakeholders for universities are internal actors, the superior ministry, regional/local authorities, private funding actors, and national and international communities of universities, scholars, research councils/funding agencies, students, etc. The effects of reputation management are intended to be either 'diffuse' support, building goodwill and slack in general, or more specific support leading to the provision of more resources (Cyert and March 1963; Easton 1965). Reputation

management at universities are supposed to be important for efficiency, position in a political-administrative system and their ability to act effectively (Carpenter 2010).

Reputation symbols for a university may both reflect a historical path but also future aspirations and involve presenting core mission, main resources and competences, and outputs and outcomes. This helps external stakeholders to understand its activities, but are also guide-lines for internal actors (Morphew and Hartley 2006, p. 457). The impact of the universities' 'the presentation of self in everyday life' (Goffman 1959), depends, however, also on how the branding is received by diverse audiences.

Morphew and Hartley (2006, pp. 456-7) state that reputation management may be characterized by 'rhetorical pyrotechnics – pretty to look at but of little structural consequence' or often strikes a balance between being 'excessively vague or unrealistically aspirational or both'. Having a rather broad reputational profile, a 'polyphony' (Christensen 2005) catering to a range of internal and external stakeholders, may have what Røvik (2002) calls a 'bridging effect'. The disadvantage is that an ambiguous isomorphic set of symbols may not say anything to anyone. Alternatively, universities may rather formulate a rather narrow, integrated, and specific profile, with the advantage that internal and external stakeholder knows what the organization stands for (van Riel and Fombrun 2007). The disadvantage is that the profile does not reflect the complexity and heterogeneity of the university (Wæraas and Solbakk 2009, p. 459), which often may lead to conflicts (Ind, 2004).

Carpenter (2010) divides public organizations' reputation into four dimensions: performative, moral, technical/professional and procedural.¹ First, the *performative* dimension focuses on whether leaders manage to create the impression among the various stakeholders that their own organization is delivering instrumentally on outputs and outcomes (Chapleo *et al.* 2011, p. 27). If it is very difficult to assess the

¹ The procedural dimension, which reflects Carpenter's focus on public agencies, is less relevant for the reputation of universities and hence is excluded in this study.

performance, the persuasiveness of the symbols is particularly important, i.e. to create the perception of rationality, innovativeness and success (March 1994).

Second, the *moral* dimension, related to whether a public organization is emotionally appealing and furthering moral and appropriate values, i.e. whether it is perceived as ‘compassionate, flexible, and honest’ (Carpenter and Krause 2012, p. 27). Creating a feeling of following high ethical standards is always an advantage, as is seen as integrating or protecting different stakeholders or the public at large. This dimension has a typical cultural-institutional flavor to it (Selznick 1957).

Third, the *technical/professional* dimension deals with symbols scoring high on professional capacity, knowledge, and competence that are required to deal with complex tasks and environments, which is very important for public organizations (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot 2012). Support for an organization is easier to achieve when a strong sense of competence is prevailing. This could both be related to recruiting new groups or reconfirming an existing competence profile. This dimension combines both instrumental and professional-cultural aspects.

Organization theory perspectives.

Three different perspectives on the forces that drive reputation management can be formulated (Christensen *et al.* 2007). First, based on a neo-institutional or constructivist perspective, where reputation is related to a wider global cultural and social context, organizations may either be heavily influenced by the macro-environment or else be able to utilize this context (Meyer *et al.* 2006). Accordingly, reputation management is all about myths and symbols rather than about reality and is therefore a case of ‘hypocrisy’ or ‘double-talk’ (Brunsson 1989). Intermediary actors in organizational fields – for example, international organizations, global consulting firms, monitoring and certification organizations, the media and non-governmental organizations – provide ‘objective’ information (for example, rankings, ‘recipies’, and standards) that

influence reputation management (Elsbach and Kramer 1996). It can combine maximal institutional flexibility and legitimacy (Morphew and Hartley 2006, p. 458).

Secondly, reputation management can be seen as a rational or instrumental process whereby, as seen in political science-related branding studies, central leaders in public organizations, or their communication experts or ‘spin-doctors’, will use systematic strategies to position their organizations vis-à-vis internal and external stakeholders to further their basic goals and interests (Wæraas and Maor 2015, p. 5). This means that reputation symbols may be a special type of means to instrumental ends. A rational interpretation of reputation management contains either an economic or a more bounded rationality perspective (Simon 1957; Rindova and Martins 2012).

Third, the reputation image may mainly reflect traditional cultural informal values and norms of the organization, i.e. its core institutional features. The leaders carry and further the ‘necessities of history’ in their branding (Selznick 1957) Path-dependency is reflected in the reputation symbols, i.e. they represent the essence of the ‘roots’, which heavily determine the ‘routes’ or trajectories followed (Krasner 1988). The cultural path reflected in the symbols may be linked either to a macro-institutional context, to systemic cultural features or else to the micro-cultural features of a country (Fombrun 2012).

One can expect some dynamics related to the different aspects of reputation management. At one extreme, leaders that successfully master branding may position the organization’s reputation firmly in its cultural trajectories and combine instrumental effects and positive symbolic effects when catering to internal and external stakeholders. At the opposite extreme, leaders’ attempts to manage reputation could be undermined by lack of instrumental abilities, cultural resistance, bad handling of symbols, or even the emergence of ‘counter-symbols’ (March and Olsen 1976).

Context

The higher education system in China has evolved significantly over the past four decades. Modern universities were established in the late 1890s, and they directly copied the modes of Western universities. The founding of People's Republic of China (PRC) by the sole ruling party Communist Party of China (CPC) installed from 1949 socialist ideology in university administration and curriculums, and the central planning economy restructured the operations of universities. China imitated the former Soviet Union mode of higher education, and universities were reorganized by similar disciplines. Students' tuition fees were waived, and they were assigned to government agencies and state-owned enterprises after graduation.

The Reform and Opening-up since 1978, particularly the embrace of the market economy in 1994, has substantially transformed the higher education system. Universities became more market-driven in student enrollment and faculty recruitment, and they have to compete for government funding (Williams *et al.* 1997). All good universities are publicly owned, but private universities have been encouraged since the later 1990s.

To boost top universities' research competitiveness, the government has implemented many programs to finance the higher education system, and the 985 and 211 programs are the most important ones. To expand the scope of key universities, the Ministry of Education implemented the 211 program in 1995, which aimed to develop about 100 key universities and key disciplines in the 21st century. Totally 116 universities were covered in the 211 program, and they received special funding from the government. The then China's president Jiang Zemin proposed the 985 program in May 1998 to prioritize a few key universities, which were expected to be the Chinese version of Ivy League. Initially only nine universities were included, and later on 39 universities were covered. The universities of the 985 and 211 programs are China's best universities, and they earn the highest academic reputation in the country.

In 2016, the central government implemented the World-Class Universities and Disciplines (or Double World-Class) program to replace the former 985 and 211 programs (Yang and You 2018). With generous funding from the government, China's leading universities have been catching up with world-class research-intensive universities in other countries (Mohrman 2013). For instance, in the 2019 QS World University Ranking, six Chinese universities are among the Top 100 (Tsinghua University (no. 17), Peking University (no. 30), Fudan University (no. 44), Shanghai Jiao Tong University (no. 59), Zhejiang University (no. 68), and University of Science and Technology of China (no. 98), competing with well-known world-class universities.² Chinese universities are both competing and cooperating with universities in other countries (Li 2010). The best students of Chinese universities often go to universities in the US and other countries to pursue their graduate degrees and academic careers (brain drain), but have been increasingly returning to China to work in Chinese universities (brain gain) during the last decade (Zweig and Wang 2013).

Academic and employer reputation is critical to universities, and it is also highlighted in mainstream university rankings. For instance, the QS World University Ranking have two categories related to reputation, academic reputation from global survey (40%) and employer reputation from global survey (10%).³ Given the paramount importance of reputation to universities, Chinese universities are keen on maintaining and building organizational reputation (Ma and Christensen 2019). Chinese universities recognize that research performance gauged by the quantity, quality, and impact of academic works is pivotal to their reputation and rankings, and they invest heavily in scientific research (Mok 2015). Overseas talents are recruited with preferential remunerations to help strengthen research capacities, and the pay-for-performance instrument is widely used to incentivize the faculty to generate more high-quality research outputs.

² See <https://www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/2019>.

³ See <http://www.iu.qs.com/university-rankings/world-university-rankings/>.

Research performance is more emphasized than teaching quality and academic integrity in faculty appraisal and promotion decisions, which makes moral decline a big concern in Chinese universities. Professors put most of their time and energy into producing academic papers, while they pay little attention to improving teaching quality. Plagiarism is ubiquitous among researchers, and frequent scandals make the international community skeptical of their research integrity (Jia *et al.* 2019). The “MeeToo” campaign also hit Chinese universities in 2018, and dozens of notorious professors in top universities were exposed by students and graduates for sexual harassments. These ethical challenges suggest that Chinese universities have to rebalance their attitudes towards the moral dimension of their reputation, which has not been well established and maintained over the past decades.

Expectations about convergence and divergence

Expectations regarding domestic Chinese features

Our research question indicate describing and analyzing two aspects of convergence and divergence, both a domestic one regarding China, and one related to a comparison with US and the Nordic countries. Regarding the domestic features, we expect that rank, organizational mission, size, and history matter in the configurations of reputational profiles of universities in China (Christensen, Gornitzka & Ramirez, 2019).

High-ranked universities are well established in the field, and they mainly use their performance to persuade external stakeholders. By using performative symbols in reputation management, they can legitimize their performance. Low-ranked universities have to use their professional and moral characteristics to present themselves, because usually they do not have good performance to do so.

H1: High-ranked universities use performative symbols, while low-ranked universities primarily use moral and professional symbols.

Chinese universities, like in other countries, differ in their foci of disciplines and fields, which may affect their use of reputational symbols. Some universities are comprehensive in the coverage of disciplines, and they have diverse reputational profiles to present (Ma & Christensen, 2019). Some universities specializing in a few hard science disciplines (e.g., engineering, natural sciences, medicine), and they are probably more inclined to present professional symbols underscoring their typical features, and probably most in history, research, and teaching. Also, some universities are very strong in humanities and social sciences, and they may prefer both more moral and professional dimensions than others.

H2: Comprehensive universities have a varied reputational profile, typical science-dominated universities more focus on professional symbols, and more typical humanities and social science universities focus more on both moral and performative symbols.

Organizational size may also influence universities' reputational profiles. Large universities with many subunits are usually complex structures, and they are capable of presenting themselves to both internal and external stakeholders. Large universities often perform well in research and teaching, partially due to their large amount of faculty and students, and they prefer performative dimensions in managing reputation (Wæraas and Byrkjeflot, 2012). Small universities rely more on the external environment to derive resources, and they are under strong pressures to manage their reputation. Given their small size and narrow coverage, these universities usually highlight their professionalism and morality.

H3: Large universities are more likely to use performative symbols, while small universities prefer professional and moral dimensions.

Organizational history is related to reputation management, because old universities have more to say in presenting themselves. Universities with a long history do not have to use their performance to manage reputation, and they often highlight their morality and professionalism established during a long period of time. In contrast, young universities have to use their performance to convince external stakeholders that they are performing well (Christensen and Gornitzka 2017). For instance, the QS Top 50 Under 50 Ranking only lists universities with age of less than 50 years, and these universities often emphasize their research performance in reputation management.

H4: Old universities prefer moral and professional symbols, while young universities focus on performative symbols.

Expectations regarding external comparative convergence or divergence

Comparing the three university systems in China, the US and the Nordic countries, there are obvious both differences and similarities among them, in different patterns. First, US universities have a very long tradition of branding their universities (Gavrila and Ramirez 2019). This tradition is much shorter in China and the Nordic countries, where it has slowly emerged the last two decades. China seems, however, to try rather hard to catch up. Some of their top universities are now much more modernized in their structure, with more units for development, communication and international collaboration, trying to imitate the US universities (Christensen and Ma 2019).

H5: The US universities overall score highest on all reputational symbols, with China and in particular the Nordic universities scoring lower overall.

Second, in China, with its one-party state and strong ministry of education, the initiatives for university establishment and development often has come from the central government, although the provinces and municipalities have been involved in the establishment of some universities (Ying *et al.* 2017). The Nordic countries have a centralized state system with a strong ministry and most universities are public, so they are more like China, but on a much smaller scale (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004). Historically the birth and development of the American university system was much more decentralized, drawing on regional and local initiatives and resources, whether from private or public stakeholders, and the central education ministry was established late (Ramirez and Christensen 2013).

H6: Chinese universities, but also the Nordic ones, tend to have a more uniform reputational profile than the US ones.

Third, in China, diversity is rather politically sensitive, even though, for example, China has 56 minorities that are getting some preferential higher educational treatment. The diversity aspects China's higher education system focuses the most is related to the rural/urban dimension and international students (Christensen and Ma 2019). Quite differently, diversity is very important in the US universities, whether gender, racial, or religious diversity, and has many connotations with what Carpenter (2010) labels the moral dimension of reputation. Being inclusive and integrating everyone in a friendly and open learning environment is strongly valued in the US universities (Gavrila and

Ramirez 2019), as it is in Nordic universities, but more for collective reasons (Christensen and Gornitzka 2019).

H7: Chinese universities are less preoccupied with moral symbols than the US and the Nordic universities.

Fourth, similarities between Chinese and US university systems are also evident. They are both huge, with about the same number of universities and colleges, and have experienced strong growth in the last decades. They both have more or less official university ranking systems. The so-called 985 in China and the Ivy League universities in the US are similar top university groups, but the Chinese have more formally allotted ranks (Ying *et al.* 2017). Adding to this, Chinese top universities are increasingly focusing on competition in the university sector, international rankings, and imitating the US as the global template of excellence. In contrast, the Nordic universities much more cater to equality.

H8. Chinese and the US universities use more performative symbols than the Nordic ones.

Data and Methods

Sample and data sources

To test the above hypotheses, we select all the universities covered in the 985 and 211 programs. To compare them with ordinary universities, we also draw a random sample of 61 universities. There are 31 provincial units in mainland China (four municipalities, 22 provinces, and five autonomous regions), and we randomly sample two universities

from each province to have geographically diverse universities (only one university is sampled from Ningxia because it only has two universities). In total we have a sample of 177 universities. Because we include all elite and high-ranked universities in China (the 985 and 211 programs), the sample of the elite universities is actually the population. For the case of lower-ranked universities, they are representative of the remaining population of higher education institutions because we randomly sample two universities from each province. One university website was inaccessible during the period of data collection and the final sample varies due to missing data about some variables.

We follow prior studies in Nordic universities (Christensen and Gornitzka 2017, 2019) to collect our data of reputation management, a method also used for the US universities. We access the official web portals of the sampled universities, and coded the three reputational dimensions (performance, professionalism, and morality) in the following way: scoring high (3) means not only mentioning the different types of symbols, but also emphasizing them strongly; scoring medium (2) means mentioning these types of symbols without elaborating; and scoring low (1) means not mentioning them directly. A zero score was given in cases where there was no content found that was relevant for the particular reputation category. The scores in the tables are the average scores, on a scale from 0-3 on all three dimensions over six pragmatic categories. The coding was related to these six pragmatic empirical categories found on the websites: history, strategy, research, academics/teaching, internal (related to ethical guidelines, academic freedom, work environment, etc.) and external. We collected the data of university size, age, type, and rank from the Ministry of Education and annual reports of the sampled universities.

The sample of the US universities is structured differently, but we would argue that the two are comparable. The elite samples in the two countries are comparable because all elite universities are included in the US and Chinese samples. The national sample in the US includes more lower-ranked universities than the Chinese sample, but we can treat some elite universities in China (covered in the 211 program but not the 985

program) as tantamount to the US lower-ranked universities because China lags behind the US in higher education competitiveness. We thus argue that the two samples can be compared.

Compared to China and the US, with each around 3000 universities and colleges, there are only about 80 in Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden. Even though some few of these universities are the dominant, one does not really talk about an elite sample of universities in these countries. The sample in the Nordic countries was therefore slightly different, i.e. it was sample one university from each country in five different categories: old general universities, general, specialized, '68-universities', and young universities, all together 20 universities. Looking at the three first categories would be the closest one can come to an elite sample in China and the US.

Variables

University size is measured by the amount of students, which is highly related to other indicators of organizational size (e.g., the amount of faculty and staff, total revenue, total spending). We classify the universities into three groups by the amounts of students.

University age is simply gauged by the number of years since its founding, and we use 1949, the founding of PRC, as the cut-off point to divide the sampled universities into two categories, young (founded after 1949) and old universities (founded before 1949). There are 84 universities (47.5%) founded after 1949 and 93 (52.5%) before 1949.

We classify universities into three types, including comprehensive or general, science and engineering, and others (e.g., humanities and social sciences, finance and economics, jurisprudence). Among the sampled universities, 60 (33.9%) are comprehensive, 54 (30.5%) are engineering, and 63 (35.6%) are others.

University rank is gauged by the programs, and universities of the 985 program (39, 22.0%) are regarded as high-ranked, universities of only the 211 program medium-ranked (77, 43.5%), and other universities low-ranked (61, 34.5%).

Results

Reputation profiles of Chinese universities

As shown in Table 1, Chinese universities mainly use professional symbols (1.86), followed closely by performative symbols (1.77), while the use of moral symbols are rather limited (1.29). Among the six categories, reputation symbols are mostly presented in teaching (2.07), research (1.83), history (1.78), and strategy (1.61), while their expression related to internal factors (1.39) and external environment (1.20) is limited. Performative symbols are mainly presented in the categories of teaching and research, and it is reasonable because there are many quantitative indicators to measure teaching and research performance. Moral symbols are primarily expressed in the categories of history and strategy, probably because universities' history and missions can help present their moral dimensions. Professional symbols are especially manifested in the categories of teaching and research. All three reputation symbols are seldom presented in the fields of internal operations and external environment.

<<<Insert Table 1 about here. >>>

The three reputation dimensions are not highly interrelated, suggesting these reputation symbols are distinct and universities use them differently. Performance dimension is positively related to moral ($r=0.27$, $p<0.01$) and professional dimensions ($r=0.18$, $p<0.05$), while professional dimension is not significantly related to moral dimension ($r=-0.12$, $p>0.1$).

The variations across universities

The use of reputation symbols vary across different ranks of universities, suggesting our independent variables matter in reputation management. We find that high-ranked universities are more likely to use moral and professional symbols than low- and medium-ranked universities, while there is no significant difference in terms of performative symbols (see Table 2). This means that H1 is not confirmed, i.e. we find almost the opposite as expected.

We find that high-ranked universities are more likely to present reputation symbols in the categories of research, history, and strategy than low- and medium-ranked universities. Low-ranked universities prefer using reputation symbols in the category of external environment to attribute their low performance to external and objective circumstances (Christensen and Gornitzka, 2019).

<<<Insert Table 2 about here. >>>

It is interesting that the three types of universities are quite similar in the use of the three reputation types (see Table 3). So H2, with its expectation of a differentiated pattern according to types of university, is not confirmed.

<<<Insert Table 3 about here. >>>

Also, university size does not seem to differentiate that much in the use of the three reputation symbols (see Table 4). There are some small tendencies that large universities emphasize more performance symbols in history and research, but the overall picture is lack of differentiation. So H3 is not confirmed.

<<<Insert Table 4 about here. >>>

We find that old universities overall score higher than younger ones on most types of symbols, but the differences are relatively small. The differences are largest regarding history and research for performative symbols, and history and strategy for moral symbols. H4 is only partly confirmed and we do not find the overall differentiated pattern as expected.

<<<Insert Table 5 about here. >>>

A comparison with reputation management in US and Nordic universities

The results reported from the US and the Nordic countries are, as indicated, from the same comparative research project, using the same three types of reputation dimensions, the same six pragmatic categories to sort the presentations on the websites, and relatively similar ways to select the universities included.⁴ To discuss the hypotheses H5-H9 comparing China with US and the Nordic countries, table 1 (China), A1 (the US), and A2 (Nordic countries) are condensed in Table 6.⁵

First, H5 predicts that the US universities overall will score highest on all reputations symbols, which is clearly confirmed. This is an indication of a rather well developed system of branding, which is historically based, so it's culturally related. Further, the prediction that China would score somewhat higher than Nordic universities on the reputation symbols is confirmed for two of the three types of symbols.

<<<<< Insert table 6 here >>>>>

⁴ See Christensen, Gornitzka and Ramirez (2019, 22-29) for details of the methods and data.

⁵ To get some indications on the importance of ranking in the Nordic countries, we refer to Table 2.1 in Christensen and Gornitzka (2019), as alluded to.

If we look further into differences in patterns, based on the underlying tables indicated, Chinese universities score relatively lowest concerning internal affairs (like academic freedom, ethical guidelines, work environment) and external aspects (reaching out to external stakeholders). But, there is also considerable distances regarding history and research, while strategy and teaching are the closest scores. China scores clearly higher than the Nordic countries in teaching symbols, but clearly lower related to externally-related symbols.

The expectation of H6 is that that China and the Nordic countries will tend to have a more uniform reputation profile than the US. Looking at Table 6, this is obviously not the case, based on the level of scores on the three reputation dimensions. The US universities score much more evenly, while the Chinese and Nordic scores show more variety, so H6 is not supported.

H7 predicts that China, of different reasons, will score low on moral symbols and that is exactly what Table 6 shows. Lack of moral symbols is the most typical feature of Chinese universities, as professional symbols are for the US and moral symbols for the Nordic countries.

H8 expects that Chinese and the US universities will use more performative symbols than the Nordic ones, because of differences in competitive culture and egalitarian attitudes, and the results indicate this clearly, but the US also scores clearly higher than China.

<<<<<< Insert table 7 here >>>>>>

The overall pattern in Table 7 shows that none of the hypotheses regarding domestic features of the reputational profile of Chinese universities are fully confirmed, while 3 out of 4 are confirmed regarding the comparison with the US and Nordic universities.

Discussion and conclusion

Our study of the use of reputational symbols of 176 Chinese universities shows that using such symbols is now part of everyday life of those universities. Overall, this seems to be a reflection of imitation of a global university template, basically inspired by the US university model of excellence (Meyer *et al.* 2006; Ramirez 2006). But this is with Chinese structural and cultural characteristics, which is shown in the more detailed results. Chinese universities use professional symbols relatively more, which has similarities with the US, but use performative almost as often, which is slightly different from the US (Gavrila and Ramirez 2019).

We dig into convergence and divergence in a domestic way, focus on the sample of Chinese universities as such, but also in an external way, comparing with the reputation management of the US and the Nordic countries. First, regarding the domestic part, we tried to analyze whether a set of independent variables differentiating the Chinese universities – rank, type, size, and age – have an importance for the scores on the reputational symbols. The answer to that was clearly no. We found very little of differentiation based on these variables. We interpret this primarily as an effect of the one-party state, a strong Ministry of Education, and strong control in practice urging standardization (Ma and Christensen 2019). This means that any universities are urged to further reputation management in the same way, whether it is related to type of information on the websites, new administrative units reflecting this, like communication or international offices, or in furthering international collaborations and exchange between universities.

This internal national convergence and standardization is very Chinese and definitely very different from the US and the Nordic countries. According to Table A1 in the appendix, based on Gavrila and Ramirez (2019), the Ivy League elite universities scores clearly higher on all three reputation dimensions than the national sample, and this is more the case for the pragmatic categories of history and research. This differentiation based on rank is also evident in the US concerning the development

diversity, development and legal offices, all connected to increasing emphasis on reputation management (Furuta and Ramirez 2019; Kwak *et al.* 2019; Skinner and Ramirez 2019). Not only are the elite universities more often having these units than lower ranked ones, but there are also differentiation among the universities based on whether they are public or private, and based on geography. Concerning the Nordic countries, there is also a lot of internal divergence (see Table 2.1 in Christensen and Gornitzka 2019). Old general and specialized universities are overall using reputational symbols much more than ‘68-universities’ and young universities, especially regarding performative and professional symbols, while the latter ones focus more on moral symbols.

Second, focusing on convergence or divergence between the countries, taking the national profile of the country as a point of departure, we mostly got our hypotheses confirmed regarding Chinese universities in comparative perspective. China, like the Nordic countries, have obviously not developed their reputation management as much as the US universities and score lower on all reputation dimensions and pragmatic categories.

H6 and H7 could be seen together. We did not find that China, and the Nordic countries, had a more uniform reputation profile overall than the US, but got confirmed that China put much less emphasis on moral symbols than the US and the Nordic universities. So, what is typical for China and making the national profile less uniform is the lack of focus on moral symbols. The explanation for this, alluded to, is that moral symbols are politically problematic in China, like seen for the administrative development of the universities (Christensen and Ma 2019). Generally, moral symbols relates to individualism and diversity in the US, and more collectively motivated tolerance and openness at the Nordic universities. More specifically, the moral symbols in our study, for example in the category of internal factors, relate to academic freedom, ethical guidelines, and work environment. These are all factors that are seen differently in China. Diversity at universities in China is not well established and deals mostly with rural/urban challenges and international students. And, freedom and diversity is

challenging in a one-party state. The balance between talk/symbols are also more demanding.

Our expectation that Chinese and the US universities would use more performative symbols than the Nordic universities was confirmed. Reasons for this could be structural and cultural factors related to hierarchy, competitiveness and acceptance of inequality that is evident in China and US, but lacking in the Nordic countries (Ying *et al.* 2017). A last observation that is interesting is that Chinese universities score so low on reputation symbols related to external contacts and stakeholders, and lowest of all pragmatic categories. This must partly mean, that despite a lot of emphasis on globalization, international contacts and resources allocated, rather few Chinese universities are actually deeply involved in this. Another aspect of this is lack of use of reputation symbols towards domestic stakeholders.

Summing up, what is typical Chinese regarding reputational symbols of universities is very much reflecting structural and institutional factors (Ma & Christensen, 2019). Strong standardization among universities is reflecting a long cultural tradition under a one-party state and formal directives from the ministry. So, the national convergence is obvious. Comparatively we see a mixture of convergence and divergence. China imitate US and has some of the same type of focus on performative and professional symbols, but is divergent regarding lack of moral symbols, which has clear symbolic connotations (cf. Delmestri *et al.* 2015).

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Tables

Table 1 Reputation profiles of Chinese universities

Dimension	History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment	Total
Performance	1.93	1.87	2.18	2.28	1.19	1.20	1.77
Moral	1.56	1.53	1.09	1.28	1.28	1.01	1.29
Professional	1.84	1.41	2.22	2.64	1.70	1.38	1.86
Total	1.78	1.61	1.83	2.07	1.39	1.20	

Note: $N=176$

Table 2 Attributes of universities and use of reputation symbols (by rank)

Rank	Dimension	History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment	Total
985 (N=38)	Performance	2.08	1.92	2.32	2.16	1.11	1.26	1.81
	Moral	1.74	1.66	1.13	1.32	1.29	1.03	1.36
	Professional	1.92	1.53	2.42	2.76	1.76	1.34	1.96
	Total	1.91	1.70	1.96	2.08	1.39	1.21	
211 (N=77)	Performance	1.97	1.88	2.12	2.23	1.13	1.12	1.74
	Moral	1.52	1.60	1.08	1.23	1.23	1.00	1.28
	Professional	1.83	1.27	2.22	2.65	1.81	1.25	1.84
	Total	1.77	1.58	1.81	2.04	1.39	1.12	
Others (N=61)	Performance	1.79	1.82	2.16	2.41	1.33	1.26	1.80
	Moral	1.49	1.38	1.08	1.33	1.34	1.02	1.27
	Professional	1.80	1.52	2.08	2.56	1.52	1.56	1.84
	Total	1.69	1.57	1.78	2.10	1.40	1.28	

Table 3 Attributes of universities and use of reputation symbols (by type)

Type	Dimension	History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment	Total
General (N=60)	Performance	2.03	1.85	2.18	2.22	1.15	1.15	1.76
	Moral	1.62	1.62	1.07	1.23	1.15	1.00	1.28
	Professional	1.78	1.47	2.28	2.67	1.70	1.35	1.88
	Total	1.81	1.64	1.84	2.04	1.33	1.17	
Engineering (N=53)	Performance	1.94	1.89	2.32	2.38	1.17	1.17	1.81
	Moral	1.47	1.55	1.13	1.32	1.40	1.04	1.32
	Professional	1.94	1.34	2.32	2.53	1.66	1.36	1.86
	Total	1.79	1.59	1.92	2.08	1.41	1.19	
Others (N=63)	Performance	1.83	1.87	2.05	2.25	1.25	1.27	1.75
	Moral	1.57	1.44	1.08	1.30	1.32	1.00	1.29
	Professional	1.81	1.43	2.06	2.71	1.73	1.41	1.86
	Total	1.74	1.58	1.73	2.09	1.43	1.23	

Table 4 Attributes of universities and use of reputation symbols (by size)

Type	Dimension	History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment	Total
Small (N=58)	Performance	1.78	1.95	2.00	2.21	1.29	1.19	1.74
	Moral	1.53	1.57	1.10	1.29	1.41	1.02	1.32
	Professional	1.83	1.48	2.17	2.60	1.72	1.43	1.87
	Total	1.71	1.67	1.76	2.03	1.48	1.21	
Medium (N=58)	Performance	1.95	1.79	2.26	2.41	1.10	1.28	1.80
	Moral	1.53	1.52	1.10	1.34	1.28	1.02	1.30
	Professional	1.86	1.40	2.21	2.67	1.72	1.40	1.88
	Total	1.78	1.57	1.86	2.14	1.37	1.23	
Large (N=58)	Performance	2.07	1.86	2.28	2.22	1.19	1.14	1.79
	Moral	1.62	1.53	1.07	1.21	1.17	1.00	1.27
	Professional	1.86	1.38	2.26	2.66	1.67	1.31	1.86
	Total	1.85	1.59	1.87	2.03	1.34	1.15	

Table 5 Attributes of universities and use of reputation symbols (by age)

Type	Dimension	History	Strategy	Research	Teaching	Internal	Environment	Total
Young (N=83)	Performance	1.84	1.82	2.08	2.24	1.18	1.18	1.72
	Moral	1.47	1.45	1.08	1.34	1.31	1.01	1.28
	Professional	1.82	1.37	2.20	2.59	1.60	1.41	1.83
	Total	1.71	1.55	1.79	2.06	1.37	1.20	
Old (N=93)	Performance	2.01	1.91	2.26	2.31	1.20	1.22	1.82
	Moral	1.63	1.61	1.10	1.24	1.26	1.01	1.31
	Professional	1.86	1.45	2.23	2.69	1.78	1.34	1.89
	Total	1.84	1.66	1.86	2.08	1.42	1.19	

Table 6 Comparing overall scores for universities in China, the US, and Nordic countries on reputation dimensions

Dimension	China	US	Nordic countries
Performative symbols	1.77	2.19	1.54
Moral symbols	1.29	2.30	2.09
Professional symbols	1.86	2.43	1.83

Source: Christensen, Gornitzka & Ramirez (2019).

Table 7 Hypothesis and the main results

Hypothesis	Main expectation	Result
H1	High-ranked Chinese universities use performative symbols, while low-ranked use more and professional	Not confirmed High ranked use more moral and professional symbols
H2	Differentiated pattern of reputation profiles between comprehensive, science-based and other (humanities/social science-based) universities	Not confirmed
H3	Large universities use more performative symbols, while small use more professional and moral ones	Not confirmed overall, some tendencies for history and research
H4	Old universities prefer moral and professional symbols, while young ones prefer performative	Partly confirmed
H5	The US universities score highest on all reputation symbols, while China will score slightly higher than the Nordic countries	Confirmed
H6	Chinese universities will have a more uniform reputation profile, partly also the Nordic ones, than the US	Not confirmed
H7	Chinese universities less preoccupied with moral symbols than the US and Nordic ones	Confirmed
H8	Chinese and the US universities will score higher than the Nordic ones on performative symbols	Confirmed

Table A1 Reputation profile of the US universities – elite and national samples

Sample	Dimension	Hist.	Strat.	Research	Academ. /teaching	Intern.	Extern.	Tot.
Elite	Perform	2.88	1.50	2.59	2.61	2.66	2.38	2.43
	Moral	2.86	1.57	2.64	2.75	2.82	2.54	2.53
	Profess.	2.80	1.61	2.73	2.84	2.77	2.61	2.56
	Total	2.85	1.56	2.65	2.73	2.75	2.51	
National	Perform	2.06	1.65	1.59	2.10	2.12	2.10	1.94
	Moral	2.29	1.82	1.64	2.19	2.26	2.21	2.07
	Profess.	2.33	2.02	1.71	2.56	2.64	2.46	2.29
	Total	2.23	1.83	1.65	2.28	2.34	2.26	

Table A2 Reputation profile of the Nordic universities – stratified samples

Dimension	Hist.	Strat.	Research	Academic/ teaching	Internal	External	Tot.
Performative	1.58	1.68	1.83	1.35	1.00	1.80	1.54
Moral	2.00	2.43	1.90	1.97	2.08	2.15	2.09
Professional	2.10	2.17	2.15	1.68	1.00	1.90	1.83
Total	1.89	2.07	1.96	1.67	1.36	1.98	