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Constructing an organizational identity with political ideology: The case of Huawei, 1987–2020

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Abstract

Leveraging archival data, we study how Huawei used Chinese communist political ideology to construct its organizational identity. Covering the time from its founding in 1987 to 2020, we show how Huawei appropriated *Fen Dou* as a core idea-element of the Chinese communist political ideology to develop its identity as a "national industry revitalizer," neutralized it as it internationalized and claimed to be an "international corporate citizen," and then repurposed it as it sought to help advance all of humankind—akin to a "global technology leader." By mapping the historical evolution of Huawei across different junctures and processual periods, we develop middle-range theory on the role of political ideology in identity construction. We contribute to the literature by introducing political ideology as a resource for identity construction, mapping the process of identity construction with ideology across different contexts, and articulating a resonant theoretical narrative whereby political ideology emerges as a double-edged sword. Our study reveals how political ideology helps create resonance with certain stakeholders, but how the commitment to a particular ideology carries meaningful risks.

Keywords

archival data, geopolitics, history, institutions, organizational identity, political ideology, qualitative case study

Introduction

A key task for organizations is to develop and continuously reflect on the answer to the question of "who we are"—or their organizational identity (Gioia et al., 2013). To answer this important question, organizations often draw on locally available resources or elements to construct their organizational identity, such as symbols, narratives, and stories (Gioia et al., 2013; Glynn, 2008; Glynn

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and Abzug, 2002; Phillips et al., 2016). However, prior research has left unexplored the option of using political ideology during this process. This is surprising because political ideology has become an important characteristic of many organizations, and in today's age of politicization and polarization, organizations often find themselves under scrutiny for their ideological stances. Furthermore, the empirical world provides many examples of companies that exhibit strong ideological views. For example, Chick-fil-A, Black Rifle Coffee Company, and Hobby Lobby are known for their conservative stances on issues such as same-sex marriage, gun laws, and health care regulations. And Ben & Jerry's and Patagonia are examples of companies that frequently voice liberal values and positions, for example, in the areas of immigration and climate change. Given this real-world relevance, it is surprising that we still know little about how political ideology can evolve to become core to who an organization is, and what the implications are.

Addressing this lacuna promises to help make important theoretical advancements. While it is well established in the literature that organizations can draw on a variety of institutional and cultural resources to develop an organizational identity (Glynn, 2008; Glynn and Watkiss, 2012), the use of these resources is generally unproblematic, as they tend to be symbols and meanings largely void of political or socio-historical connotations. For example, Sasaki et al. (2020) explore how Japanese family firms use old mottos or philosophies to create contemporary identity statements, which are fairly generic and lack reference to the socio-historical or political context of Japan. In this article, we argue that leveraging political ideology for the purpose of identity construction introduces an added tension: it creates an elective affinity with a political party, system, or world view that may carry long-term risks and constraints. While offering the promise to resonate with a certain group of stakeholders who share or even promote the ideology, organizational commitment to an ideology may become costly if the environment and associated demands and pressures change. For example, it may alienate customers, employees, or investors holding different views. However, research is yet to articulate these frictions and to explore how an organization may try to balance the positive and negative effects of political ideology. We therefore ask the following research question in this article: *How do organizations use political ideology in constructing their organizational identity, and what are the implications thereof?*

To answer this question, we study another organization widely considered ideological: Huawei, a Chinese technology company. Utilizing substantial archival data, we adopt a historical approach and trace the evolution of Huawei over time (Decker, 2022), since its founding in 1987 to 2020. We show how it incorporated the Chinese communist political ideology by drawing on *Fen Dou* as a crucial idea-element. *Fen Dou* describes "struggling," involving some personal sacrifice, typically in the sense of struggling for the nation (Fumian, 2021). It is a core component of the Chinese communist political ideology. Correspondingly, Schurmann (2022 [1968]) observes that "the central value of Chinese [c]ommunist ideology is the notion of struggle" (p. 41). We unearth how Huawei embedded *Fen Dou* as a key idea-element into the organization, sought to neutralize it as it internationalized and realized that *Fen Dou* was not as resonant with new stakeholder groups, and finally, repurposed it, in order to instill a fighting spirit in the light of newly emerging headwinds. Based on our case insights, we theorize that while using political ideology can create important fit with the home environment and ensure stakeholder support, it also generates an elective affinity with the dominant political system that may be difficult to escape later on. Our key tenet is that appropriating, neutralizing, and repurposing constitute mechanisms through which Huawei leverages political ideology as a resource over time, with shifts occurring at particular inflection points. Abstracting away from our case, we contend that utilizing political ideology early on in the evolution of an organization sets in motion a trajectory that creates a commitment to that political ideology (Selznick, 1957, 1996). This gives rise to a "commitment problem" (Kraatz and Block, 2008: 248), as it holds the organization "hostage to [its] own history" (Selznick, 1992: 232; cited in

Kraatz and Block, 2008: 248). While such commitment constitutes a powerful resource, it may become a burden, as organizations will find it hard to shake it off, even if they experience a "cost of ideology" (Simons and Ingram, 1997), for example, when facing an environment where the ideology is less resonant or even provokes criticism. From a practical standpoint, in today's polarized and divisive world, political ideology can be an important vehicle for organizations to associate with one particular "camp" (Swigart et al., 2020), yet establishing such elective affinity carries risks—that may not be fully anticipated or appreciated at the beginning of the process but only realized at certain junctures or inflection points.

With these findings, our study makes a set of contributions to research on organizational identity at the intersection of management and strategy. First, we position political ideology as a resource that can be used by organizations for the purpose of identity construction. This changes the way we think about political ideology, away from mostly looking at it as a variable that affects a variety of meso- and macro-level outcomes, and toward viewing it as an important organizational component (Marquis and Qiao, 2024). As such, we complement the growing stream of research on political ideology by studying how an organization becomes ideological over the course of identity construction. Second, we map the process through which political ideology becomes dominant and maintains its dominance in an organization. We reveal how, in the case of Huawei, this involved appropriating, neutralizing, and repurposing political ideology, and how these processual periods evolved across distinct junctures (Marquis and Qiao, 2024). Notably, our historical case analysis reveals how using political ideology creates expectations on the part of important stakeholders to honor a particular commitment (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Selznick, 1996), which constrains the organization in important ways and may result in suffering a "cost of ideology" (Simons and Ingram, 1997). We theorize that it is through this commitment that the internal identity-construction process and the external perception from stakeholders become linked. More concretely, appropriating a political ideology sets in motion a trajectory that is difficult to fully anticipate and escape; as a result, the political ideology of an organization becomes deeply engrained, and an elective affinity emerges between the focal organization and the political system the ideology is associated with. From a practical standpoint, using political ideology for identity construction thus emerges as a double-edged sword: while it helps create resonance with certain stakeholders, it comes with the risk of association with the political system and of being categorized as belonging to a certain camp, which can limit the organization in important ways. While our main insight—that political ideology is double edged—is developed on the basis of a historical case study, we argue that it is particularly relevant in today's age of polarization and divisiveness; in the current (geo-)political climate, the double-edged sword is particularly sharp.[1]

Theoretical background

Organizational identity construction

Organizational identity describes what is central, enduring or continuous, and distinctive about an organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia et al., 2013). It is a self-descriptive concept, capturing essentially "who we are" as an organization. Questions of identity come to the fore at particular points in the life cycle of an organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985). For example, a key task in the founding phase is to construct an espoused organizational identity.

Constructing an organizational identity involves organizational identity work (Oliver and Vough, 2020) or the "effort engaged in by organization members individually or collectively to form, repair, maintain, strengthen or in other ways influence understandings of the central, distinctive[,] and enduring characteristics of a specific organization" (Basque and Langley, 2018: 1687).

Research suggests that this organizational identity work is often performed by founders or members of the top management team (Pant and Ramachandran, 2017; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011). For example, Gioia et al. (2013: 164) establish that "founders articulate identity claims on behalf of the organization, effectively giving sense to both insiders and outsiders about the mission of the organization and how it intends to achieve that purpose."

To make identity claims, organizations draw on a variety of resources, ranging from product offerings (Navis and Glynn, 2010; Ravasi and Canato, 2010), discourse and narratives (Vaara and Tienari, 2011), technological capabilities (Tripsas, 2009), organizational practices (Canato et al., 2013; Nag et al., 2007; Stigliani and Ravasi, 2012), office buildings, office layouts, and artifacts (Elsbach, 2003; Ravasi et al., 2019) to history and collective memories (Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Oertel and Thommes, 2018; Schultz and Hernes, 2013; Suddaby et al., 2016), including corporate mottos or phrases (Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Sasaki et al., 2020).

A reservoir of resources that are readily available to be deployed for the purpose of identity construction is the institutional environment. The institutional environment offers a wide range of "possible and legitimated meanings and symbols that constitute the 'raw materials' which organizations appropriate to construct their identities" (Glynn, 2008: 414; quotation marks in original). Such a process is complex, and it "requires a clear understanding of the nature of the institutional context in which the organization is embedded and how these resources can be drawn upon in the processes of social construction that underpin organizational identities" (Phillips et al., 2016: 366). Leveraging existing institutional resources can be particularly apt in the context of new ventures, which have limited firm-level practices or artifacts to draw on for the purpose of identity construction (Oliver and Vough, 2020). One resource offered by an institutional environment is political ideology.

Political ideology as a resource for organizational identity construction

Political ideology constitutes one possible element with which an organization may construct its sense of self. It describes the "interrelated set of attitudes and values about the proper goals of society and how they should be achieved," and it "helps to explain why people do what they do; it organizes their values and beliefs" (Tedin, 1987: 65; cited in Marquis and Qiao, 2020: 797). Political ideology is thus a "set of idea-elements that are bound together, that belong to one another in a non-random fashion" (Gerring, 1997: 980). One advantage of using political ideology for identity construction is that it constitutes a resource that is readily available to be tapped into—thereby helping to solve a critical challenge that nascent firms face: because of their limited history, they do not have many firm-level resources, such as narratives or mottos (Hatch and Schultz, 2017; Sasaki et al., 2020), to construct their organizational identity with (Oliver and Vough, 2020).

Prior work in strategy has studied the role of political ideology in a variety of outcomes, such as relative openness to activists (Gupta and Briscoe, 2020), adoption of organizational practices in the fields of human resources (Simons and Ingram, 1997) and corporate governance (Gupta and Wowak, 2017), executive pay (Kalogeraki and Georgakakis, 2022), corporate entrepreneurship (Chin et al., 2021), firm inventiveness (Kiss et al., 2024), and the formation of fields and entire industries (Maclean et al., 2018). However, these works provide little insight into the process through which an organization becomes dominated by a particular political ideology.

As Simons and Ingram (1997: 784) observe, ideologies are "manufactured within organizations from materials created within them or imported from other levels." In our research, we are interested in understanding how an ideology is "manufactured" by importing a particular idea-element. Founders and other organizational members play an important role in this "manufacturing" process as they are "selecting and incorporating historically specific elements that may remain for decades

or even centuries as fundamental features of the organization in question" (Johnson, 2007: 97). Political ideology can be such an element that is "selected and incorporated" in an organization. However, political ideology adds an important tension: by utilizing it for the purpose of identity construction, organizations establish an elective affinity with the underlying political system or world view. While this can create social fitness and resonance with important stakeholders in the founding environment (Glynn and Watkiss, 2012; Pratt, 2012), it may be much less suited to navigating changing environmental conditions. In this article, we are interested in unearthing these complexities, their evolution over time, and how an organization seeks to navigate the upsides and downsides of using political ideology to answer the question "who we are."

Methods

Research context: Fen Dou *as an idea-element of the communist ideology*

Before delving into our research design and the process of data collection and analysis, we first describe the term *Fen Dou*, a core ideological keyword of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) that our case company, Huawei, utilized as a resource to construct its organizational identity. Although the word *Fen Dou* hardly had any significance in traditional China, "it rose to prominence in the very early years of the twentieth century, and eventually became one of the most persistent shibboleths of the [CCP]" (Fumian, 2021: 1268). Representing a specific world view and a distinct set of attitudes and behaviors that distinguishes members and supporters of the CCP from others, *Fen Dou*, sometimes known as *Jian Ku Fen Dou*, has become a key part of the vocabulary that every Chinese state leader uses to mobilize Chinese people to work for the rejuvenation and prosperity of the Chinese nation (Fumian, 2021).

For Chairman Mao, *Fen Dou* was the key to the Party's success in the revolution: "Were it not for the *arduous struggles* [*Jian Ku Fen Dou*] of the [CCP] in the last fifteen years, it would be impossible to save China in the face of the new menace of subjugation,"[2] he said in 1936. His successors, Jiang Zemin and Deng Xiaoping, urged Chinese people to embrace *Fen Dou* to realize an "all-around well-off society" and to achieve the Four Modernizations, respectively (Fumian, 2021). China's current President, Xi Jinping, has also emphasized the importance of *Fen Dou* on numerous occasions. On the 110th anniversary of the Revolution of 1911 in 2021, he remarked: "[o]n this special occasion, we gather here [. . .] to inspire and rally the sons and daughters of the Chinese nation at home and abroad to *work together* [*Fen Dou*] to realize the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation," and "[t]he past 110 years have shown us that to realize national rejuvenation, the Chinese people must rely on our own heroic *efforts* [*Fen Dou*]."[3]

What does *Fen Dou* mean, exactly? It is important to note that the term *Fen Dou* has an ambiguous meaning and can be subject to various interpretations. As exemplified by the above-quoted translation of Xi's speech in *China Daily*, the CCP's English-language newspaper, the same term—*Fen Dou*—was translated differently across different contexts. According to Fumian (2021: 1270), *Fen Dou* requires individuals to "introject a specific ideological world view, a distinct complex of attitudes, a particular frame of behavior, so as to become fit to carry out the specific type of struggle envisioned by the state in that particular time." Therefore, "[i]t is a word that, in the terms of the Party, speaks of top-down state sermonizing, of socialist duties and patriotic responsibilities, and even evokes sacrifice and collectivist self-sublation" (Fumian, 2021: 1270). President Xi has stated that *Fen Dou* means upholding "the spirit of fighting and being not afraid of difficulties during the revolutionary war" and carrying forward "the communists' spirit that notes 'our minds grow stronger for the martyrs' sacrifice, daring to make the sun and the moon shine in the new sky.'"[4]

This emphasis on enduring hardship and making a sacrifice is made more explicit in a commentary published in the Party's *People's Daily*, which states:

> [T]he spirit of *Fen Dou* includes the spirit of selfless sacrifice. It is this spirit of sacrifice that makes the spirit of *Fen Dou* more great and precious. In the years of the revolutionary war, countless revolutionary ancestors gave their precious lives for the liberation of the people. In the period of peace building and reform and development, although the environment has changed, the spirit of selfless sacrifice has not been outdated. Especially in the new era, to realize the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation, the spirit of selfless sacrifice must be promoted.[5]

In sum, *Fen Dou* constitutes a core idea-element of the Chinese communist political ideology, in essence capturing the idea of "struggle" (Schurmann, 2022 [1968]). We are interested in exploring how *Fen Dou*, as a critical idea-element of the communist political ideology, became an important resource for identity construction and what the implications are. Studying this case promises to help us generate novel insights into the role of political ideology in identity construction.

Research design and case selection

We adopted a qualitative research design and chose a single-case study approach to provide a contextualized explanation (Welch et al., 2011). We selected Huawei because we felt that, in the case of this organization, the phenomenon of interest should be transparently observable (Pettigrew, 1990). This is because Huawei is often described as an organization that holds communist ideology and promotes the values of the CCP. For example, Marquis and Qiao (2022: 11) establish in their book that Ren Zhengfei, as the founder, "ingrains CCP values in Huawei." As such, we selected Huawei as a revelatory case, which should enable us to develop middle-range theory on the role of political ideology in identity construction. Furthermore, Huawei is a relatively young organization, founded in 1987. Huawei's publicly accessible comprehensive collection of archival documents allowed us to trace the company's evolution and its process of identity construction over more than three decades, from Huawei's founding onward, thus enabling us to extend the theoretical understanding of identity construction in organizations from a more historical standpoint (Israelsen and Mitchell, 2023).

Data collection

Because we are interested in tracing Huawei's identity construction over time, we study Huawei longitudinally. Tracing patterns over long periods of time is difficult. For example, semi-structured interviews—a common method of data collection in studies on identity—have weaknesses (Golden, 1992); in particular, if the observation period is long, the risk that respondents engage in retrospective sense-making is heightened. We therefore decided to collect and analyze organization-level archival data. While archival data have limitations and weaknesses as well—for example, the limited ability to offer insights into the processes and possible contestations preceding the writing of archival documents—prior work on organizational identity and organizational identity work has illustrated the value of archival data (Basque and Langley, 2018; Fortwengel, 2021; Golant et al., 2015). Specifically, Pant and Ramachandran (2017: 670) establish that "[a]n organization's principal self-authored documents provide valuable insights into that organization's conceptualization of the self." The use of archival data fits our research objective to trace identity work in an organization over about 30 years (Anteby and Molnár, 2012). The main advantage of archival data is that they offer an uninterrupted account stretching the entire time period from 1987 through 2020.

We collected the following company-level documents: 351 issues of *Huawei People*, the company newspaper published in Chinese language; 170 issues of *Huawei People*, the company magazine published in English language; 120 e-mails to employees from the *Executive's Office*, published in Chinese language and available in the company's employee discussion forum *Xin Sheng She Qu*; and a collection of the company's *Annual Reports* and *Sustainability Reports* available online, published in both English and Chinese languages. The *Huawei People* newspaper (hereafter referred to as the Newspaper) whose publication commenced in May 1993 in the form of normal four-page broadsheets, mostly publishes 9–13 issues every year, with each issue containing about 20–25 articles. However, from August 2016 through December 2020, it was transformed into a bi-monthly magazine, each issue containing 50–60 pages with around 16 articles. We, nevertheless, refer to the Chinese publication consistently as the "Newspaper" to distinguish it from the English publication (hereafter referred to as the "Magazine"). The Magazine, with its first accessible issue published in July 2004, was subsequently released mostly on a monthly basis. It has maintained the same format since, with each issue containing 40 pages with 18–28 articles. Both publications primarily target internal employees as readers. This is evident in the Newspaper, which consistently features phrases such as "Internal material, free of charge" on its first page. Similarly, the Magazine states "Available In-house Free of Charge" on its Table of Contents page. In addition, the Magazine's consistent appeal on the Table of Contents page to employees, throughout the 2010–2020 issues, further emphasizes its internal nature:

> An informative and inspiring *Huawei People* magazine needs your continual contributions and feedback. Please feel free to submit your department's news & events, achievements of your BU [business unit], stories of your team and your co-workers, photos, prose and poetry, and your comments, to the editors.

We complemented our firm-level data with books on Huawei (Harwit, 2008; Wen, 2020; Zhou, 2020). This helped us specifically to trace the early period not covered by the Newspaper, when Huawei was still a relatively small domestic player at the fringes of the telecommunications sector in China. To understand the wider socio-historical context of Huawei's identity construction, we relied on several books as additional data sources, including those of Schurmann (2022 [1968]), Wang (2014), Schell and Delury (2013), and Bakken (2000) on Chinese politics, history, and collective memories; Naughton (2007) and Harwit (2008) on China's economic reform and telecommunications sector; Doshi (2021) on the US-China rivalry; and Marquis and Qiao (2022) on the relationship between communist ideology and enterprises in China. For example, we found the work of Wen (2020) particularly useful because it not only traces the entire history of Huawei but also embeds its discussion within the trajectory and development of China's information and communication technology (ICT) sector and shows how Huawei represents "the powerful force of 'globalizing China' and China's endeavor of climbing up the global value chain in the strategic telecommunications sector" (Wen, 2020: 3; quotation marks in original). These books were particularly important for our study because they capture China's socio-historical context, the CCP's political ideology, and associated values and dominant discourses in China—constituting "idea-elements" (Gerring, 1997) available to Huawei to develop conceptualizations of its organizational self. Table 1 provides an overview of our data and how we used the data in our analysis.

Data analysis

We analyzed our large corpus of archival data, spanning about three decades, in three main and interrelated steps. First, we built an event history database. This involved reviewing our data and documenting specific events and milestones that appeared significant for our study. We compiled

Table 1. Data overview.

Type of data	Amount of data	Use in analysis
Archival data	- Newspaper (351 issues) - Magazine (170 issues) - including a collection of speeches and articles by senior executives which were published on the front page of the Newspaper or/and as cover story of the Magazine (142 contributions) - Executive e-mails (120 e-mails) - Company annual reports (30) and sustainability reports (26)	- Generate event history including junctures - Identify organizational identity claims - Unearth how political ideology is used to make identity claims - Identify patterns over time
Additional data	- Three books on Huawei - Eight books on China's politics, history, telecommunications sector, and economic reform	- Develop insights into the socio-historical context - Identify "idea-elements" of Chinese communist ideology - Contextualize Huawei's identity work

the database of Huawei's history, milestones, key achievements, and financial performance, in chronological order, to generate an overview of the company's development. The building of this event history database was informed and contextualized by our reading of the aforementioned books and our evolving understanding of the historical contexts in which Huawei conducted business and constructed its organizational identity. For instance, we noted that, in 2000, Huawei held a large Oath-taking Rally for 400 employees sent overseas to open up the international market. This event marked the first time Huawei deployed a significant number of employees overseas to "shoulder the vital responsibility of the company's survival" and to "shed our tears and sweats in the five continents, in Europe, America, Asia, Africa, and Latin America" (from the speech of the company's founder at the Rally; Newspaper, Issue 113: 1; January 2001). Consequently, we identified internationalization as a critical juncture that, as we later realized, coincided with a shift in Huawei's identity claims—away from claiming to be a "national industry revitalizer" to becoming an "international corporate citizen." More broadly, building the event history database provided us with a holistic view of Huawei's business and development. This was important because, in our analysis, we were particularly interested in situating Huawei's identity-construction process within its socio-historical context (Israelsen and Mitchell, 2023).

Second, we undertook first-order coding of our data. Similar to Becker (2025), our study is informed by historical research methods but anchored in established traditions in organization theory involving data analysis through coding. In our coding exercise, our objective was to examine how Huawei perceived itself as an organization and how it utilized *Fen Dou* as an idea-element of communist ideology during its organizational identity construction. To decipher the intricacies of organizational identity work, we began by searching for identity statements. These are text fragments that directly or indirectly assert "who we are" as an organization, and more specifically, "what the organization 'is' and what it stands for" (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2020: 1202; quotation marks in original). For instance, direct declarations such as "Huawei is now the world's largest ICT solutions provider" (Magazine, Issue 302: 4; May 2019) and "Huawei is now a global industry leader" (Magazine, Issue 280: 5; July 2017) contrast with more indirect ones highlighting unique cultures, special missions, or significant achievements. Examples of these latter statements are "Dedication, effort, continuous self-learning and teamwork are values that prevail in our working

group of Network Solutions from Huawei Mexico" (Magazine, Issue 234: 18; October 2011), and "Huawei's operations span across the globe. Even in war-torn countries, Huawei people stand firm every day, ensuring communication equipment functions seamlessly and allowing people worldwide to enjoy the right of staying connected" (Newspaper, Issue 349: 46; July 2020). As Cloutier and Ravasi (2020: 1202) point out, these identity statements constitute what Whetten (2006: 220) calls "organizational identity-referencing discourse."

Our analysis of Huawei's identity-referencing discourse illuminates Huawei's self-definitions (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) and the pivotal role of the political ideology in its identity construction. This compelled us to delve deeper into how Huawei used this ideology when making identity statements. For example, we found that the aforementioned statement, "Dedication, effort, continuous self-learning and teamwork are values that prevail in our working group of Network Solutions from Huawei Mexico," reflected how Huawei, while presenting itself as an international company offering career opportunities, sought to translate the ideological idea-element into "dedication" and to remove the specific element of sacrifice.

By comparing and contrasting identity statements, we began to detect themes. Typical of qualitative research, this exploration was an iterative process. This step helped us to unearth an evolution in Huawei's identity claims and its utilization of *Fen Dou*. Leveraging the meticulous mapping made possible by archival data, we were able to connect these themes to the timeline we had developed in an earlier step. We employed what Pratt et al. (2022) refer to as "methodological bricolage," combining inductive coding with temporal bracketing of our data (Langley, 1999). We discerned three distinct periods: 1987–2000, 2001–2011, and 2012–2020. Our temporal bracketing was based on our identification and interpretation of a number of temporal markers, including key events, important developments in the company's socio-historical environment, and shifts in Huawei's identity claims and *Fen Dou* utilization. The analytical exercise of temporal bracketing was important for us as it laid the foundation for a more focused and comparative analysis of Huawei's identity construction in each period, which was critical for "the exploration and replication of theoretical ideas" (Langley, 1999: 703).

Marquis and Qiao (2024: 3) distinguish two different kinds of phases: junctures, which are "short spans of time when organizations develop certain components that carry the influence of the past", and processual periods, in which organizational components "evolve and the resulting historical influence changes over time" (Marquis and Qiao, 2024: 5). We used these terms to make sense of and structure our data. Specifically, we identified three key junctures—founding, internationalization, and national security allegation—which constitute inflection points from one processual period to the next. Processual period 1 involved appropriating political ideology, resulting in identity elaboration; processual period 2 was characterized by attempts at neutralizing political ideology, describing a period of identity broadening; finally, processual period 3 involved repurposing political ideology, resulting in identity elevation. Throughout its history, Huawei thus purposely leveraged political ideology to make different identity claims, seeking to carefully navigate changing conditions and ensure resonance across an increasingly complex set of stakeholders.

We analyzed the subset of all speeches and articles by executives to paint a quantitative picture, complementing our qualitative evidence. Specifically, we analyzed these 142 contributions for keywords, which we then mapped across the three processual periods. This yielded additional evidence substantiating our key insights into how Huawei used *Fen Dou* differently over time, and how it sought to create resonance with varying stakeholders across the three processual periods.

As Israelsen and Mitchell (2023) argue, the goal of history-based research is not necessarily generalizability in the classical sense, but, rather, to generate insightful knowledge that has "resonance." Our middle-range theory of the role of political ideology in identity construction delivers resonant theoretical arguments involving the purposeful appropriation of an idea-element (juncture

1), the discovery of the "cost of ideology" (Simons and Ingram, 1997) which the company tries to counter by neutralizing ideology (juncture 2), and the doubling down on the use of political ideology by repurposing it in order to fight for survival (juncture 3). Figure 1 presents the data structure as it emerged from our analysis. In the following Findings section, we present our data historically to map how the components of this data structure evolved over time and across contexts. We submit that the case of Huawei has wider implications in that it illustrates the upsides and downsides of political ideology and, further, that it demonstrates how the fateful decision to opt for ideology to construct organizational identity sets in motion a process that cannot be fully appreciated in the beginning—rather, the implications are realized at certain junctures or inflection points.

Findings

In this Findings section, we unpack how Huawei utilized *Fen Dou* as a key "idea-element" (Gerring, 1997) of the Chinese communist ideology to construct its organizational identity. We pinpoint three distinct processual periods (Marquis and Qiao, 2024), each presenting a unique socio-historical context for Huawei that compelled the company to make varying claims underpinned by different usages of political ideology.

These periods saw Huawei's evolution from a "national industry revitalizer" into an "international corporate citizen" and, finally, into a "global technology leader." Despite *Fen Dou*'s consistent connotation of "struggle against" and "struggle for" (see Fumian, 2021: 1285), Huawei's usage of this ideological element varied across these phases. From 1987 to 2000, *Fen Dou* symbolized a battle against the West, who was seen as a detractor to China's national rejuvenation, emphasizing Huawei's struggle for the Chinese nation. Between 2001 and 2011, *Fen Dou* encapsulated a more neutral struggle against challenges and a pursuit of success. This portrayed Huawei as an international company committed to local community contributions and individual career advancement, rewarding those exhibiting "dedication." From 2012 to 2020, *Fen Dou* was repurposed to instill a fighting spirit against the US, perceived as an oppressor hindering technological advancement, and for survival. This resistance was championed as a noble endeavor for the betterment of humanity, underscoring Huawei's technological supremacy and its mission to foster and safeguard technological progress for all.

Period 1 (1987–2000): appropriating the communist ideology to elaborate identity

Socio-historical context. Huawei's initial identity construction coincided with China's economic reform project in the late 1980s and 1990s, which aimed to establish a socialist market economy. Notable shifts during this period included diminished government interference in private enterprises and the privatization of state-owned businesses (Naughton, 2007). A significant step in this transformation was the designation of Shenzhen, formerly a quiet southern town, as the pioneering special economic zone in 1980—a move to test economic reforms by welcoming foreign direct investment and endorsing private enterprises. Parallel to these economic changes, China harbored aspirations of bolstering its science and technology sectors. An illustrative policy was the 1995 *kejiao xingguo* development strategy, or "revitalizing the country through science, technology, and education" (Liu et al., 2011: 920).

This backdrop of economic reform and emphasis on technological advancement significantly impacted Huawei's trajectory. Established in 1987, Huawei strategically chose Shenzhen, the frontline city of China's economic reforms, as the location for its headquarters. It also formulated its strategic focus on indigenous technological research and development. Huawei began its journey as a sales agent for private branch exchange systems. By 1990, it had initiated its own research

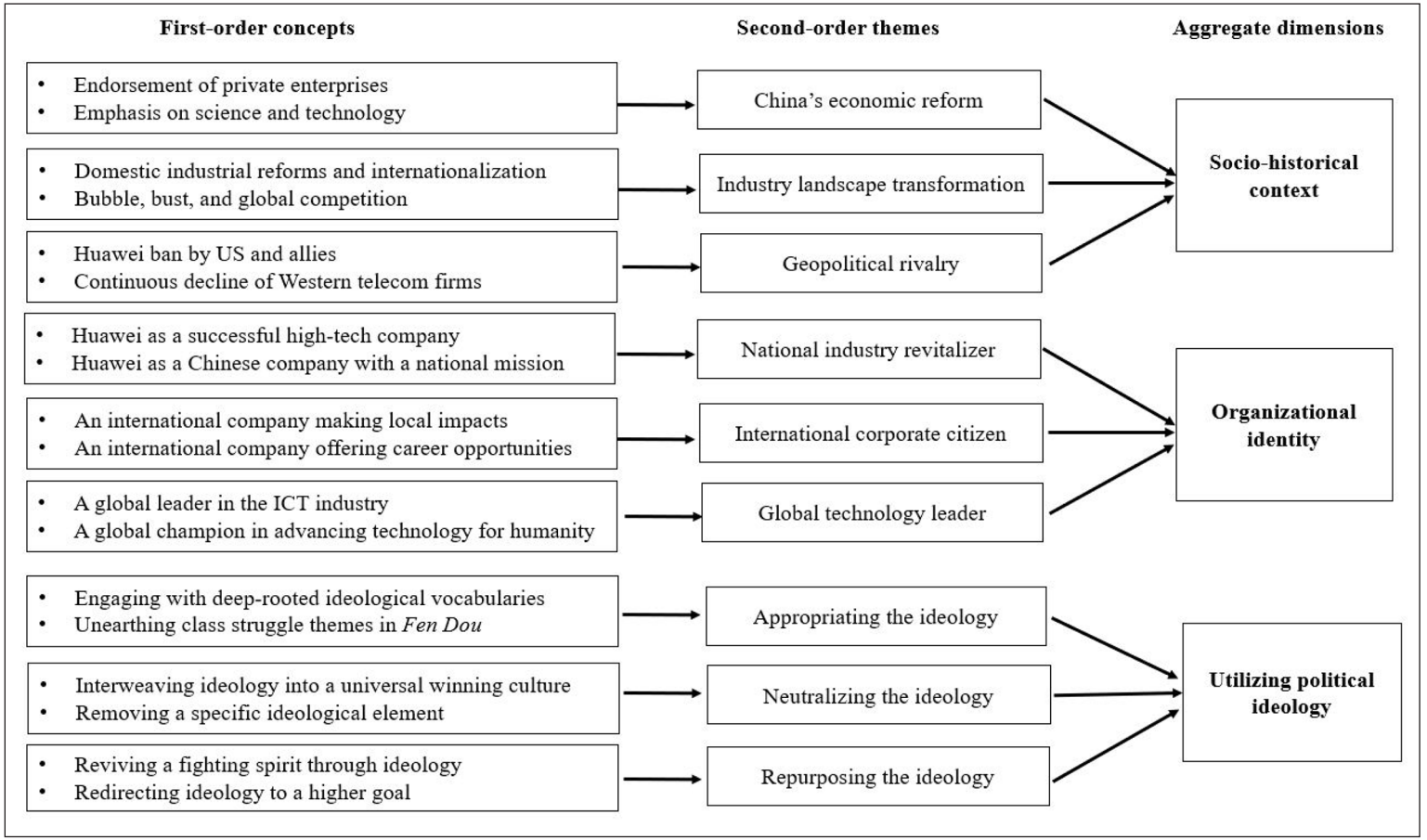

Figure 1. Data structure.

and development (R&D) endeavors, leading to the creation of its debut product, a 2000-gate digital switchboard, in 1993, which marked its beginnings as a telecommunications equipment provider. Huawei's commitment to homegrown R&D, combined with its initial triumphs, garnered significant attention from both local and central Chinese governments. This is evident from the many news articles documenting visits by government officials to the company. For instance, a 1993 report noted that the then-mayor of Shenzhen "personally" spearheaded a delegation of over 10 leaders from various bureaus to Huawei. During this visit, the mayor remarked, "Huawei is a treasure of our own, representing the direction of industrial development and the direction of China's technological industry development" (Newspaper, Issue 3: 1; July 1993).

Organizational identity claims. During period 1, Huawei was primarily "a high-tech company" (Newspaper, Issue 11: 1; December 1994). However, what truly set Huawei apart from other companies was its unwavering commitment to the Chinese nation and the pivotal role it sought to play in the nation's grand pursuit of rejuvenation. This is exemplified by the following statement:

> Huawei is a high-tech company, with the responsibility of serving the country through industry. It has the mission of researching and developing new technologies, producing cutting-edge products, and carrying the flag of the national industry. (Newspaper, Issue 82: 2; January 1999)

Huawei sought to portray itself as an accomplished high-tech company, adept in proprietary technological research and development. Thus, it carved a niche in China's nascent telecommunications and high-tech sectors, contributing significantly to the nation's grand cause. For instance, it asserted: "Huawei, through self-sufficiency, has charted its unique trajectory in China's high-tech industry development" (Newspaper, Issue 24: 3; January 1996). The company also viewed itself as "the beacon of our national industry and a luminary within our national telecommunications enterprises" (Newspaper, Issue 41: 4; January 1997). To underscore its commitment, Huawei consistently elaborated on its perceived duties to the Chinese nation. Statements such as "Huawei's mission is to revitalize the nation's communications industry" (Newspaper, Issue 82: 2; January 1999) were frequent.

Our analysis of executive speeches and articles reveals that in the 32 contributions published in this period, there were 54 mentions of "Chinese nation," 53 of "motherland," and 17 of "national industry." In contrast, in the 25 articles published during period 2, the corresponding figures are 15, 2, and 0; meanwhile, in a total of 85 articles in period 3, they were only 7, 4, and 0, respectively.

The utilization of political ideology. In its quest to construct an identity as a national industry revitalizer, Huawei strategically appropriated *Fen Dou* as a key idea-element of communist ideology. This was achieved through two underlying mechanisms: engaging with the rich, ideology-laden vocabularies associated with *Fen Dou*, and unearthing and leveraging the element of class struggle inherent in the term. Through this approach, Huawei showcased its dedication to the Chinese nation and underscored its role in driving national rejuvenation. The integration of *Fen Dou* also allowed Huawei to synergize its organizational goals with national aspirations, thereby elaborating its espoused identity as a "national industry revitalizer."

Engaging with deep-rooted ideological vocabularies. As Fumian (2021) points out, the CCP utilized *Fen Dou* to instill a sense of moral duty among individuals, urging them to contribute to China's modernization and reforms. This mobilization yielded an array of vocabularies imbued with ideological nuances. *Fen Dou* became the nexus that "hinged together" these vocabularies, bestowing

upon them "a common perspective" and pragmatic application (see Fumian, 2021: 1274). Huawei astutely chose *Fen Dou* as a resource for its identity-construction efforts. This is evident not only in its explicit adoption of the term—as seen in Huawei's early Code of Conduct, which listed *Fen Dou* as one of its core "working principles" (Newspaper, Issue 29: 2; June 1996)—but also in its recognition and utilization of the plethora of Party-affirmed vocabularies.

Examples of such vocabularies include the "Iron Man" spirit, embodied by a model drilling worker named Wang Jinxi, who led a team to open up China's Daqing oil field—enabling China to become self-sufficient in oil—despite fatigue, injuries, and difficulties, while shouting what became his famous slogan "I would give up 20 years of life so China can produce oil on its land" (Jin, 2020: 83). Then, there is the spirit of the "Two Bombs," which refers to a series of qualities such as hard work, selfless dedication, and solidarity that helped Chinese scientists successfully develop China's first atomic bomb and hydrogen bomb in the 1960s, despite the tough prevailing domestic and international environment. Such narratives and lexicons, inspired by exemplary Chinese workers, scientists, politicians, and army soldiers, were prominently featured in Huawei's discourse. A case in point is an article highlighting an exhibition:

> This exhibition not only showcases the company's new product development, new market service network and the company's overall image and corporate culture in recent years, but also Huawei's *Jian Ku Fen Dou* and entrepreneurial spirit, which is a learning from the spirit of 'production first, life later' of Daqing [oil field]. The patriotism and collectivism embodied by the company have also attracted the attention of everyone. (Newspaper, Issue 23: 4; November 1995; quotation marks in original)

This usage of *Fen Dou* underscores perseverance in the face of adversity and an unyielding pursuit of success, mirroring principles championed by the CCP. Embodying these tenets often entails enduring hardship and making personal sacrifices for collective welfare. Ren Zhengfei, the founder of Huawei, in discussing the company's trajectory to success, highlighted the embodiment of *Fen Dou*:

> Without their hard work and hard fight, without their 'handful of fried noodles, a handful of snow' [as their food], without their *Jian Ku Fen Dou* in the mountains of Yunnan, in the desert of the northwest, and in the wind and snow in the Da Hinggan Range; without them being far away from their families back in the Motherland, and their *Jian Ku Fen Dou* in Europe and Africa; without them immersing themselves in study and research while being in the big cities and facing the colorful world, there would be no Huawei today. (Newspaper, Issue 42: 1; January 1997; quotation marks in original)

Unearthing class struggle themes in Fen Dou. Analysis of the company's archives reveals a pronounced anti-Western sentiment during this period. The West, especially the US, was often depicted as an oppressor attempting to thwart the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Within this context, Huawei positioned itself as a national industry revitalizer, battling against Western influence to ensure the Chinese renaissance. Its usage of *Fen Dou* resonated with its Maoist connotation, where it "was often intertwined with the 'class' struggle against those who were considered to be obstructing state-led plans for building a socialist nation" (Fumian, 2021: 1306; quotation marks in original).

In this narrative, *Fen Dou* underscored a perceived class struggle between China and the West, and, by extension, between Huawei and foreign enterprises. This positioned China and Huawei as the underdogs and the West and its firms as the dominators. Corporate objectives and national interests became inextricably linked, reframing firm-level competitions as national rivalries. For

instance, Western businesses' expansion in the Chinese market was viewed as an "economic invasion by the West" (Newspaper, Issue 88: 4; May 1999), jeopardizing China's aspirations:

> If the United States wants to dominate the world, its biggest obstacle is China. From the Gulf War to the Kosovo conflict, it was backed by strong economic and military strength. In today's world, the essence of competition between countries is competition between enterprises. Therefore, we should develop more high-tech products and occupy more markets to enhance China's international competitiveness. (Newspaper, Issue 88: 4; May 1999)

This deep-seated sentiment mirrored the Party's stance. For example, in 1999, following North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO's) bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Yugoslavia, the Party declared:

> We have maintained stability and development, and made achievements that the enemy forces in the West could no longer tolerate. That is why they attempt to disquiet us, so as to take action against us in a time of chaos and with menace (Wang, 2014: 174).

Huawei frequently alluded to China's "century of humiliation" to emphasize the need to resist foreign domination. This paralleled the CCP's call for the Chinese people to never forget national humiliation, as evidenced by slogans such as "'Restore the nation and erase the stain of humiliation!' [or] 'Endure humiliation to carry out our important task!'" (Schell and Delury, 2013: 7; quotation marks in original). Huawei routinely referenced China's tumultuous past, especially events such as the First and Second Opium Wars, as a reminder of past subjugation due to economic and industrial vulnerabilities. Ren Zhengfei, for instance, recalled the aftermath of the First Opium War, which resulted in the colonization of Hong Kong by the United Kingdom:

> In a few days, Hong Kong will return [to China], and it was after 157 years. The smoke of the Opium War has dissipated, but the ghost of the Opium War is still snarling. The one hundred years of humiliation tell us one truth: there is no such thing called 'right thing' for a weak country; when a wolf wants to eat a sheep, it can also find good reasons [. . .]. Huawei has set its sights on moving closer to those world-class companies, but the gap is currently so large that it urgently needs heroes—the kind of heroes who *Fen Dou*, who are brave and selfless. All sons and daughters who are passionate and ambitious should be willing to sacrifice themselves for the rejuvenation of China. (Newspaper, Issue 54: 1; June 1997; quotation marks in original)

By the end of this period, Huawei had clearly defined itself as a national industry revitalizer, a company that was "working hard for the prosperity of our great nation" and "for the revitalization of the Chinese nation" (Newspaper, Issue 23: 2; November 1995).

Period 2 (2001–2011): neutralizing the communist ideology to broaden identity

Socio-historical context. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, China's telecommunications sector experienced a series of industrial reforms and restructurings. This created uncertainty, leading major telecom operators—Huawei's primary customers—to cut back on infrastructure investments and, consequently, their purchases from Huawei (Harwit, 2008). Facing stagnation in the domestic market, Huawei made a pivotal shift in 2001, turning its attention from local to international markets. This strategic redirection was marked by two significant events: in 2001, Huawei dispatched a team of 400 employees abroad to open up the international market, following an Oath-taking Rally on 27 December 2000. In that same year, Ren Zhengfei gave a seminal speech titled

Huawei's Winter.[6] He recognized the company's challenges, declared the onset of a corporate "winter," and stressed the need to boost overseas sales as a means to "survive the winter." As such, internationalization constitutes an important juncture (Marquis and Qiao, 2024) in the process of Huawei's identity construction.

Huawei's initial foray into international markets coincided with important dynamics in the global telecommunications equipment industry during the 2000s. This period was marked by the Internet bubble bursting in 2000, the telecoms bust in early 2000s, and a prolonged phase of recovery and stagnation lasting until the early 2010s (Ulset, 2007; Wigmore, 2021). This downturn in demand for telecommunications equipment meant that many global firms in the industry faced decline or even closure. Against this backdrop, Huawei, like many Western corporations, grappled with the aftermath of the market crash. Years later, the company's founder recalled in an interview with the German broadcaster ARD: "When the IT bubble burst, we also faced a huge crisis, and we were on the brink of collapse. We faced trouble both internally and externally."[7] However, being relatively small in the global market compared to its Western counterparts at the time, Huawei successfully identified and capitalized on unique business opportunities in less competitive markets, such as Russia, Africa, and the Middle East, which enabled the company to bounce back quickly. By 2005, a significant milestone was achieved as Huawei's international revenues surpassed its domestic earnings for the first time.

Organizational identity claims. During this period, Huawei's organizational identity claims reflected its changing circumstances. The company's expansion into international markets and continued success in global ventures compelled it to construct a revised identity that more accurately represented its global presence and ambitions. Huawei positioned itself as an international company that possesses characteristics in common with other multinational enterprises. On numerous occasions, Huawei highlighted the positive impacts it had on local communities through its products, services, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) activities:

> As a responsible corporate citizen, Huawei is actively committed to environment protection and the sustainable development of local societies. (Magazine, Issue 212: 1; August 2009)

Under the broad umbrella of being an "international corporate citizen," identity claims that centered around empowerment, growth, and career development were particularly prevalent. Numerous articles published in the Newspaper and the Magazine portrayed Huawei as a company that offered abundant opportunities for employees, as exemplified by statements such as "Huawei is a big stage; as long as you have talent, you have room to showcase it" (Newspaper, Issue 122: 3; October 2001) and "Huawei, as an organization, has proved time and time again that it is willing to take the risk if its employee(s) show the right potential and commitment. It is a platform for the best in the industry to showcase their talent and potential" (Magazine, Issue 170: 25; January 2006).

The utilization of political ideology. As Huawei transitioned from being a "national industry revitalizer" to an "international corporate citizen," it grappled with how to integrate the communist ideology embodied in *Fen Dou*, which emphasizes enduring hardships and personal sacrifice for the greater good, into its new identity. During a short period of introspection and reflection in the early 2000s, Huawei questioned whether "the spiritual power" could be transferred "into the company's ability to survive and compete in the market" (Newspaper, Issue 120: 1; August 2001) and whether the "narrow national pride" would "hinder the company's march toward internationalization" (Newspaper, Issue 123: 1; November 2001). It realized that core meanings and associated

connotations would have limited resonance with new stakeholders, including foreign employees in overseas subsidiaries. Huawei was faced with the option of either abandoning *Fen Dou* entirely and trying to find a new resource or adjusting the application of *Fen Dou* in line with the new context. Our analysis shows that Huawei chose the latter approach, a strategy we term neutralizing. Huawei selectively adapted some aspects of *Fen Dou*—struggle against hardship and struggle for success—and integrated it into articulating a more universal, winning culture, in the process broadening its identity. Notably, it also dispensed with the connotations of personal sacrifice inherent in *Fen Dou* by translating it as "dedication."

Interweaving ideology into a universal winning culture. Our analysis of Huawei's historical records reveals the company's extensive efforts to present *Fen Dou* as an integral part of its winning culture. Although *Fen Dou* originated as an idea-element of communist ideology, over time, it has been interwoven so deeply into the company's fabric that it has come to represent its "core values," "culture," and "corporate spirit." For instance, a senior HR manager from China mentioned, "Huawei advocated 'Collective *strife* [*Fen Dou* in the Chinese version], solidarity, and cooperation' as its corporate spirit" (Newspaper, Issue 170: 1; November 2005; Magazine, Issue 170: 12; January 2006; quotation marks in original). Another employee noted, "I sometimes wonder what my reason for working so hard is, and I find my explanation—'Fen Dou.' It is difficult to translate 'Fen Dou' to English but that is one of the most prominent features of Huawei's culture" (Magazine, Issue 213: 8; September 2009; quotation marks in original). In essence, *Fen Dou* evolved into a significant verbal cultural artifact for Huawei.

As Ravasi and Schultz (2006: 437) highlight, organizational culture, manifested as unique values, beliefs, rituals, and (visual, verbal, and material) artifacts, "may serve as an important source of self-other distinction" and "help organizational members substantiate their identity claims and express their perceived uniqueness." Huawei leveraged *Fen Dou*, now a central artifact, to delineate its identity and substantiate its identity claims about the company's global success. This discourse accentuated *Fen Dou*'s core themes of struggling against hardship and in the pursuit of success, as illustrated by remarks made by a British senior manager:

> It is the spirit of 'Fen Dou' that enables the team to come together and achieve what would be impossible for many others. It is this spirit that will ensure our continued growth and success. It is this spirit that ensures that we can continue to satisfy our customers' expectations. (Magazine, Issue 217: 8–9; January 2010; quotation marks in original)

Notably, Huawei also leveraged the political ideology to substantiate its identity claims about the provision of opportunities by emphasizing the strong correlation between career progression and adhering to the principles embodied by *Fen Dou*. A series of articles, featured in both the Newspaper and Magazine, focused on themes of growth and professional development. These articles bore titles such as *Growing with Huawei*, *Developing a Remarkable Career in Huawei*, *A Journey toward Success*, and *My Fruitful Life in Huawei*. As expected, such accolades were contingent upon employees' unwavering commitment and dedication. A Chinese expatriate manager, for example, shared his experience: "The company recognized my long-term *Fen Dou* in challenging areas and in 2003 appointed me as the head of the Yemen representative office, where I began overseeing its operations." He went on to vividly narrate his embodiment of *Fen Dou*:

> Under the scorching sun, a power outage occurred, making the unbearable heat even more torturous. We had to sleep in the underground cellar. At night, the desert temperature plummeted, and the cold became

> unbearable. Together with colleagues and clients, we buried ourselves in the sand. (Newspaper, Issue 208: 3; January 2009)

Removing a specific ideological element. While Huawei continued to use *Fen Dou* as a resource for its identity construction, an important decision it made during 2001–2011, after a period of trials and adjustments, was to translate *Fen Dou* to "dedication." This experimenting was illustrated in an editorial by Huawei University where *Fen Dou* was variously translated as "to work hard," "teamwork," and "a culture of strife" (Newspaper, Issue 164: 1; June 2005; Magazine, Issue 164: 23–26; July 2005). By 2007, the company had officially adopted "dedication" as the preferred translation. For instance, it stated in its English Annual Report that "dedication is at the very core of our corporate culture" (2007: 29). Furthermore, it emphasized that "with our customer-centric approach and dedicated employees, Huawei has continuously created value for our customers, while achieving sustained growth" (English Annual Report, 2010: 5). In both instances, the terms "dedication" and "dedicated" were derived from *Fen Dou* in the Chinese Annual Reports. Our quantitative analysis of executive speeches and articles further illustrates this shift toward dedication, given these terms appeared 30 times in the 25 contributions during period 2.

Choosing "dedication" as the translation of *Fen Dou* marked a pivotal step in Huawei's identity construction. "Dedication" was perceived to resonate more broadly with a diverse, global workforce. Importantly, it deemphasized elements of sacrifice while expanding the potential interpretations of *Fen Dou*. Our analysis unveils a range of interpretations of *Fen Dou* presented in company publications, emphasizing how *Fen Dou* served as a means to drive the company's becoming of an "international corporate citizen," one that contributed to the socio-economic development of local communities. For instance, *Fen Dou* was defined as "being fearless in the face of difficulties" (Magazine, Issue 227: 24; January 2011), "perseverance, diligence, & dedication" (Magazine, Issue 221: 28; June 2010), "hard working and dedication to work" (Magazine, Issue 187: 22; July 2007), and a "never give up attitude" (Magazine, Issue 214: 32; October 2009). A recurring theme in many articles was "challenge," highlighting stories of employees surmounting obstacles ranging from technical issues to client demands and market competition. This is exemplified by a typical story:

> [. . .] our team passed through many different adventures along those four years and it is getting clear that the success we now enjoy comes from a smart combination. A combination of perseverance, of continuity, of team work, of passion and, last but not least, of good products. To get [the contract for a product], we had to demonstrate its character to reach the final objective. Our perseverance and continuity played a key role in building the credibility required by the customer to make such a decision in favor of Huawei. (Magazine, Issue 223: 12; August 2010)

This quote illustrates the evolving meaning of *Fen Dou* presented by the company. Its initial emphasis on sacrifice has been notably toned down. Instead, *Fen Dou*, rooted in communist ideology, transitioned to signify a struggle against challenges (not against the US and the West) and a struggle for organizational and individual success (not that of the Chinese nation).

Period 3 (2012–2020): repurposing the communist ideology to elevate identity

Socio-historical context. The period between 2012 and 2020 was marked by controversy for Huawei, which found itself caught in the ensuing geopolitical rivalry between the US and China. Mascitelli and Chung (2019: 2) identify 2012 as the year when the US government began its "commercial and cold war standoff with Huawei." This stance emerged after the Intelligence Committee of the

House of Representatives of the US Congress concluded, after investigation, that Huawei was susceptible to Beijing's influence. This potential influence raised concerns that Huawei might undermine US security, leading to its designation as a security threat. Such security-related allegations persisted in the ensuing years, reaching a crescendo in 2018 and 2019 (Lai, 2021). In 2018, the US banned the use of Huawei products. Furthermore, in 2019, Huawei was added to the US Entities List, restricting its purchase of American products, including US-made chips and other components (Friis and Lysne, 2021). The US's stringent stance against Huawei compelled other nations to pick sides, which was often described as feeling "forced to choose between Huawei/China and the US" (Moore, 2023: 153). As a result, US allies such as Australia, New Zealand, and the UK banned the use of Huawei products in the development of their 5G networks (Mascitelli and Chung, 2019).

These national security concerns arose in parallel with Huawei's significant business achievements. By 2012, Huawei had surpassed Ericsson, the then-leading telecommunications equipment manufacturer, claiming the top spot globally. For instance, before the Huawei ban, the company reported a revenue of 92,549 million USD in 2017. This figure dwarfed the combined revenues of Nokia and Ericsson, which stood at 28,564 million USD and 24,156 million USD, respectively (Bicheno, 2018). Furthermore, a recent article in *The Economist* (2024) argues that Huawei continues to excel despite these ongoing headwinds. Importantly, the arising national security concerns constitute an important juncture (Marquis and Qiao, 2024), triggering a new processual period in which Huawei further adapted its organizational identity claims and the underpinning usage of the communist political ideology.

Organizational identity claims. Centered on its identity as a "global technology leader," Huawei, in this period, sought to showcase its market leadership and technical supremacy. This was illustrated by various declarations such as "Huawei is the global leader in optical transmission. We're number one" (Magazine, Issue 287: 5; February 2018) and "Huawei has established the industry's leading capabilities in technological advancement and technological innovation in IT and optical transmission fields" (Newspaper, Issue 259: 1; May 2013). Correspondingly, our quantitative analysis shows that the terms "global" and "science" or "technology" were mentioned 297 and 458 times, respectively, in the 85 contributions published during period 3; in contrast, these terms were mentioned 32 and 47 times, respectively, in 25 contributions during the previous period.

Huawei expressed particular pride in its 5G advancements, frequently projecting itself as "the earliest global company to initiate 5G R&D" (Newspaper, Issue 301: 3; June 2015) and "the leader of the 5G era" (Magazine, Issue 299: 21; February 2019). The following excerpt also illustrates this overarching theme:

> Huawei was already a global player in 3G. By the time of 4G, we became an important participant and contributor. When it came to 5G, we had already become the leader. (Newspaper, Issue 335: 5; March 2018)

Based on such market leadership and technical supremacy, Huawei further highlighted its capacity to impact the industry on a global scale, aiming to advance technology for the greater good of humanity. Reflecting this sentiment, one statement read, "Huawei has always been an active builder and continuous contributor to the ICT industry" (Newspaper, Issue 349: 12; July 2020). Another statement also speaks to Huawei's ambition to elevate its identity: "As a communication solutions provider serving one-third of the global population, Huawei has made significant contributions to human communication and connection" (Newspaper, Issue 334: 47; November 2018).

The utilization of political ideology. To construct the elevated identity of "global technology leader," Huawei continued to use *Fen Dou* as a resource, but it repurposed it during this period. *Fen Dou*'s element of class struggle was revived to ignite a fighting spirit against the US. Furthermore, the identity of "global technology leader" was sculpted from a blend of tech leadership and the pursuit of technological progression for humanity, indicating a redirection of ideology toward a higher goal.

Reviving a fighting spirit through ideology. Amid growing national security concerns since 2012, Huawei depicted its situation as being in "wartime." The company regularly acknowledged the adversities this scenario presented. Rotating CEO Guo Ping's New Year Message, for example, cited "an investigation into cyber security allegations by a particular committee of the US Congress" as one of the reasons for the company having "another turbulent year" (Magazine, Issue 244: 3; 2013). The company's founder demanded that "[e]very employee at Huawei should do their work well. This is what I expect of you during this 'wartime' period" (Magazine, Issue 307: 5; October 2019; quotation marks in original).

The Chinese communist ideology, through the core idea-element *Fen Dou*, was particularly influential in igniting a fighting spirit during this period. Although *Fen Dou* had been previously translated as "dedication" and associated with qualities such as diligence, between 2012 and 2020, it took on a more concrete meaning—"fighting." Our analysis of company records reveals numerous instances where *Fen Dou* was translated this way. For example, in his New Year Message in 2018, Rotating CEO Ken Hu stated: "We have to breathe new life into that collective fighting spirit that we hold so dear. Always remember: We are united as a team, in both good times and bad" (Magazine, Issue 286: 4; January 2018). Similarly, the founder Ren suggested, "[t]o seize a strategic high ground, commanders should first 'have their heads shaved' and vow to fight till death" (Magazine, Issue 292: 4; July 2018; quotation marks in original). In both instances, "fighting" and "fight" referred to *Fen Dou* in their Chinese versions. The founder's article also serves as an example of how the meaning of fighting was explicated even when *Fen Dou* was translated as "dedicated":

> In extremely difficult situations, we must work courageously and remain dedicated. We must not wait around like a sick cat with the illusion that we will be given a special pardon. We will have a future only when we have the courage to fight, and we will succeed only when we can fight effectively. (Magazine, Issue 305: 3–4; August 2019)

Our quantitative analysis reveals that "fight" or "fighting" appeared 70 times in the 85 contributions by executives published in period 3, which stands in stark contrast to the three times these terms are mentioned in the 25 contributions published in period 2 (in period 2, 11 out of the 25 contributions were in English, and in period 3, 58 of the 85 contributions were in English, with the remaining in Chinese language).

A distinct Chinese communist discourse also emerged within Huawei during this time, emphasizing self-sacrifice for the collective good. There was an evident surge in translated speeches by the founder and other Chinese executives that were laden with militarized terms, Mao-style idioms, and references to Chinese history and the CCP. For instance, Ren suggested employees should watch *Last Battle in Zhijiang* because "[t]his TV series showed how the determination of Chinese soldiers during the Second Sino-Japanese War led to victory. We must move forward with these three forces to win our own battle" (Magazine, Issue 304: 4–5; July 2019).

Unlike in the previous period, *Fen Dou* in this processual period represented a more singular, unified interpretation, emphasizing the element of sacrifice. The company frequently asserted that

the spirit of sacrifice was an essential quality of its leaders. This sentiment was echoed in statements such as "commanders must have a strong desire to fight and win, and a firm belief to carry on, along with iron willpower and a spirit of sacrifice" (Magazine, Issue 292: 4; July 2018), and that "we will continue to select managers from among people with successful track records [. . .]. They must also have complete command over the playing field, advocate a fighting spirit, and have a spirit of sacrifice" (Magazine, Issue 288: 6; March 2018).

Redirecting ideology to a higher goal. Interestingly, the usage of *Fen Dou* in this period mirrors its use during 1987–2000. Both periods leaned on the definition of "struggle against oppressor" and showcased confrontational relations between Huawei and the US. Yet, in the latter period, with Huawei's aspiration to become a "global technology leader," the company redefined its objective. Now, it aimed to challenge the US, which was portrayed as a technology "oppressor," and to safeguard technological advancements for humanity's greater good.

Within Huawei's narrative, accusations of posing national security threats were seen as calculated attacks by the US. Senior VP Chen Lifang perceived this as "a series of political repressive actions against Huawei" and asserted "[f]or more than ten years, the United States has never stopped suppressing Huawei" (Newspaper, Issue 344: 29; September 2019). The company's chief legal officer, Song, emphasized a perceived irregularity of the US's approach: "Politicians in the US are using the strength of an entire nation to come after a private company [. . .]. This is not normal. Almost never seen in history [. . .]. The US government has provided no evidence to show that Huawei is a security threat. There is no gun, no smoke. Only speculation" (Magazine, Issue 304: 17; July 2019). The attack from the US was viewed by Huawei as an attempt to "suppress the development of leading technology," as described by Rotating Chairman Eric Xu (Magazine, Issue 310: 3; January 2020). As a "global technology leader," Huawei consistently advocated its mission "to serve all of humanity and strive to reach the pinnacle of science" (Newspaper, Issue 345: 4; November 2019). Thus, any attack on the company was seen as a broader assault on technology and human progress as well as Huawei's mission:

> Huawei will bring digital to every person, home, and organization for a fully connected, intelligent world. This is the vision that keeps us fighting, the mission we have chosen. (Magazine, Issue 286: 6; January 2018)

Huawei's redirecting of ideology to a higher goal was epitomized by its founder, Ren, who likened Western advancements in science and technology to a guiding "beacon." He conveyed Huawei's ambition to innovate in the realm of 5G and its intention to give back to the global community. However, these aspirations were met with resistance from the US:

> We have accumulated a certain amount of technology, and want to learn how to light a 'beacon' in the uncharted territory of 5G, illuminating the path forward for everyone. We want to make our due contributions to the world, in return for the guidance others have provided us. As we took our first step, struck a match, and tried to light a 'beacon,' we were misunderstood by the US, and they hit us with a stick without reason. At the beginning, we thought we might have made some mistakes in compliance, so we began self-examination and self-correction. After being hit a second and then a third time, with each hit even harder than the last, we came to realize that they simply wanted to beat us to death [. . .]. The desire to survive inspired us to rise up. We at Huawei have made it clear that we would rather die on our feet than live on our knees. (Newspaper, Issue 351: 3; November 2020; Magazine, Issue 324: 4; March 2021; quotation marks in original)

Huawei's redefined identity as a "global technology leader" hinged on leveraging the ideological idea-element *Fen Dou* to foster a fighting spirit against the US, which was deemed an "oppressor" sabotaging technological evolution. Consequently, this struggle was framed as a noble cause for humanity. This narrative contrasts with the one from the 1987–2000 period, when *Fen Dou* symbolized a battle against the West, who were perceived as oppressors undermining China's national revival. It also diverges from the 2001–2011 period, when *Fen Dou* encapsulated a neutral struggle against challenges and the pursuit of success.

Discussion

Tracing the evolution of Huawei from its founding in 1987 through 2020, our historical case study enables us to show how it utilized a particular resource—*Fen Dou* as an idea-element (Gerring, 1997) of Chinese communist political ideology—to construct different organizational identities over time: from being a "national industry revitalizer" to an "international corporate citizen" and, finally, a "global technology leader." To construct these identities, Huawei appropriated, neutralized, and repurposed *Fen Dou*. Based on these findings, our article makes a set of important contributions to the literature on organizational identity at the intersection of management and strategy. Specifically, we position political ideology as a resource in identity construction, map a theoretically resonant process of identity construction with political ideology across socio-historical contexts, and theorize the implications for the focal organization in today's age of politicization and polarization.

Political ideology as a resource for identity construction

We contribute to the literature by discussing political ideology as a resource that can be used by organizations for the purpose of organizational identity construction. While many organizations use internal resources to define their sense of self (Ravasi et al., 2019), this option is typically not available to newly founded enterprises that lack history (Oliver and Vough, 2020). Leveraging resources from outside the organization is an alternative feasible pathway. While prior work has studied a host of resources or materials provided by the institutional environment that organizations can tap into as they construct their identity, such as symbols, stories, and traditions (Glynn and Watkiss, 2012), political ideology has not yet been explored and theorized as one such resource offered by the environment.

Many resources that organizations use are relatively unproblematic in that they constitute broad umbrella terms without significant associations or connotations. For example, Hatch and Schultz (2017) describe how Carlsberg utilized *Semper Ardens*—meaning always burning—as the cornerstone of its organizational identity. Crucially, *Semper Ardens* does not carry any significant sociohistorical or political connotations; rather, it is a "generic phrase," as one of Hatch and Schultz's (2017) interview respondents calls it. As such, *Semper Ardens* proved effective in fostering a shared identity across the Carlsberg Group in a relatively unproblematic way.

Using symbols or values that have deep political connotations, however, creates an additional complication, because their resonance varies significantly across different stakeholder groups and environments. While there thus are many parallels between leveraging different kinds of cultural resources on the one hand and political ideology on the other, such as the critical task to choose a particular element and embed it in the organization with the help of stories and other discursive and non-discursive materials, the added tension introduced by the use of political ideology has not been explored in prior work. Our study opens up the possibility to broaden our thinking about different kinds of institutionally available resources, and how their use may present distinct challenges and

have different implications for the focal organization. Specifically, the commitment to political ideology creates an elective affinity with the political system or world view, suggesting that opting for choosing political ideology from the menu of available resources will be fateful—with associated risks and benefits (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Ocasio and Radoynovska, 2016).

While commitment to a particular political ideology can serve as a powerful tool for establishing legitimacy and for constructing a distinct identity that is resonant with a specific audience, organizations may find themselves constrained by their past ideological alignment, making it difficult to pivot if the external environment shifts, stakeholders' expectations change, or the ideological alignment becomes a liability. Organizations become "hostage to their own history" (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Selznick, 1992), and while this may be desirable under certain conditions, it carries meaningful risks because the political ideology can become very divisive and thus may limit access to markets, customer groups, and employees.

Prior work in management and strategy has conceived of political ideology largely as an independent variable that affects a host of important firm- and more macro-level outcomes. For example, it has been shown that political ideology influences a firm's CSR engagement (Gupta et al., 2017) and that it can help explain why firms vary in their openness to social activists (Gupta and Briscoe, 2020). Furthermore, Maclean et al. (2018) show how political ideology can be instrumental in driving the formation of an entire field or industry. Yet, what these prior works have left largely unanswered is how a political ideology becomes dominant in an organization. This is an important lacuna because, without this part of the story, we have an incomplete understanding of the role of political ideology in organizational life. Our study complements prior literature by focusing on political ideology as a resource for identity construction, and by unpacking the process through which it becomes dominant in an organization. While there is an increasingly sophisticated understanding that some organizations are liberal and others conservative (see Gupta and Briscoe, 2020: 531), prior work has been unable to articulate how exactly organizations become political in that sense. Our study helps fill this gap in our knowledge by introducing political ideology as an element or resource that can be used for identity construction—or answering the question of "who we are."

The process of identity construction with political ideology

A second and related contribution lies in unpacking the process through which an organizational identity relying on political ideology can evolve. Various organizational life-cycle events, such as growth or internationalization, or significant crises situations (Jacobs et al., 2021) lead an organization to revisit its identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). We leverage our historical approach to map the process through which Huawei espoused different organizational identities over time and across different socio-historical contexts. Prior work on identity has made the useful distinction between a normative organization and a utilitarian organization, and one main observation is that normative organizations tend to evolve into more utilitarian organizations as they develop and grow over time (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Our case provides insights into how a normative organization can retain its character. Specifically, our empirical case material shows how a particular resource—*Fen Dou* as an idea-element of the Chinese communist political ideology—was used purposely and creatively by Huawei to navigate changing environments: in period 1, set in motion when the organization was founded (juncture 1), appropriating *Fen Dou* helped Huawei to present itself as a "national industry revitalizer," thereby ensuring social fitness with domestic constituents; in period 2, Huawei neutralized the political ideology, which was deemed appropriate as the organization had embarked on an aggressive internationalization trajectory (juncture 2), thus presenting the need to strip *Fen Dou* of its "Chinese" connotations; finally, in period 3, and as it faced

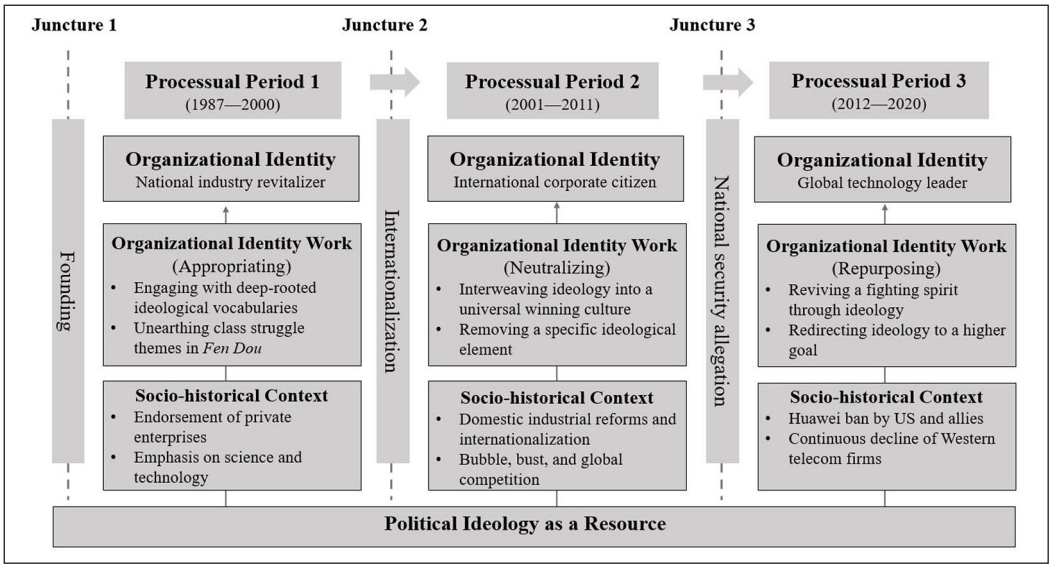

Figure 2. Conceptual model.

a significant crisis (juncture 3), Huawei repurposed *Fen Dou* in order to stir up a fighting spirit within the organization, and it redirected political ideology toward supporting the advancement of global technology rather than national industry. Appropriating, neutralizing, and repurposing, as mechanisms, create the links between the political ideology as a resource and the organizational identity claims over time, and the shifts from one period to another are driven by certain junctures. Although these inflection points take particular forms in the case of Huawei—namely founding, internationalization, and national security allegation—the process logic involving junctures and processual periods to describe identity construction over time should be broadly resonant with other cases (Israelsen and Mitchell, 2023). Specifically, we suggest that it is at these junctures that the downsides or risks of political ideology become apparent, provoking a creative yet somewhat constrained response along the lines of the ongoing trajectory of the focal organization. We illustrate our conceptual model, anchored in our historical case study, in Figure 2.

Our theorization suggests that the use of political ideology sets guardrails for the trajectory of the identity-construction process. Our case of Huawei reveals a particular challenge for organizations: how to navigate a shifting landscape when political ideology is core to the organization? Some prior work has shown that, generally speaking, "ideology can be flexed and subtly refined in response to changing circumstances" (Maclean et al., 2014: 561). Maclean et al.'s (2014) insights are based on a historical case study of Procter & Gamble, and the ideology is largely organization-level and comprises more or less organization-specific narratives. In cases of political ideology, however, the ability to "flex and refine" ideology appears more limited. Similar to how an organization infused with value (Selznick, 1957) needs to honor some commitment in the eyes of important stakeholders, aligned with the character and purpose of the organization, so too does the use of political ideology appear to both enable and constrain the trajectory of organizational identity construction. This insight cuts in between prior work that has often tended to view organizational identity as either intrinsically enduring or adaptable (Cloutier and Ravasi, 2020). We present an account of organizational identity construction as oscillating between involving a strategic intent and purpose on the one hand and being more emergent on the other. This echoes the classic insight

that organizations need to navigate the need for integrity with the need for adaptability (Ocasio and Radoynovska, 2016; Selznick, 1957).

At the same time, we suggest that the changes introduced over the course of organizational identity work can, over time, slowly create a requisite variety that has the potential to accommodate different political ideologies, host multiple identities, and possibly cater to varying audiences (Kraatz and Block, 2008; Pratt and Kraatz, 2009). If this is true, the consistent yet creative use of a political ideology over time for the purpose of identity construction can, paradoxically, facilitate increasing heterogeneity. While this notion remains to be confirmed, rejected, or qualified in future work, we would encourage research to look at multiple kinds of political ideologies. In this regard, our research setting enables us to add nuance to the way we look at political ideology. So far, research in this space has been largely limited to the conservative-liberal dichotomy, which has little relevance outside a small set of Western countries. By looking at communist political ideology, which has significant relevance in Chinese firms (Liu et al., 2022; Marquis and Qiao, 2020), we add to the growing stream of research studying non-Western contexts for theorizing (Muzio, 2022).

Practical and managerial implications

Our study has important practical and managerial implications. For one, our study suggests that using political ideology for identity construction carries risks. For example, Huawei had to try to neutralize the political ideology during processual period 2, as it internationalized its activities, because it came to realize that the original meaning of *Fen Dou* would not resonate with foreign employees in overseas operations to the same degree. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that its heavy reliance on political ideology may have contributed to the labeling of Huawei as a national security threat. We therefore suggest that using political ideology for identity construction may have unintended consequences and a long shadow. More broadly, we posit that our findings have important implications in today's world of multi-polarity and geopolitical tensions. This is because using political ideology to make identity claims signals membership in a particular "camp" or "pole," which likely limits the ability to do business in countries of the other "camp."

Crucially, an ideology can be dominant in an organization even when there is no ideological homogeneity among its members (see Simons and Ingram, 1997: 787). This is likely to be the case in Huawei and many other organizations, where a dominant political ideology or identity may not be shared or fully endorsed by every single organizational member (Corley, 2004; Lai et al., 2020). Notwithstanding different degrees of ideological alignment across its members (McKean and King, 2024), as a whole, an organization may pay a certain price for its ideology, under particular conditions. A key observation in prior work is that there can be a "cost of ideology" (Simons and Ingram, 1997). Our historical case study of Huawei further substantiates this idea and provides evidence of how an organization becomes aware of such impeding cost and tries to minimize it—through neutralizing—while still benefiting from the advantages of using political ideology.

Limitations and research frontiers

As is the case for every empirical work, our study is not without limitations, which open up exciting frontiers for future research. For example, it would be interesting to explore the extent to which the use of political ideology for identity construction may affect an organization's ability to attract and retain different kinds of employees (Jost et al., 2009). Furthermore, organizational identity literature has long argued that there is a relationship between the self-descriptive identity of an organization and its image in the eyes of important stakeholders and constituents (Gioia et al.,

2000), and our study opens up a number of interesting avenues to explore how political ideology usage is interpreted and made sense of by diverse constituents.

Finally, our study on organizational identity could be complemented by research on the kind of public image Huawei sought to communicate over time, and with what effect. For example, in a *CBS* interview in 2012, Bill Plummer, former VP External Affairs, stated that "Huawei is Huawei, Huawei is not China." Future research could study these attempts at crafting a public image, compare how they relate to the self-referential organizational identity, and evaluate the extent to which they resonate with important stakeholder groups. For example, trying to present Huawei as "non-Chinese" speaks to the importance of national identity (Edman et al., 2024).

Conclusion

In today's age of politicization and polarization, we believe that studying the role of political ideology for identity construction holds considerable potential and has obvious practical relevance. Our article, based on a historical case study of Huawei, is a step toward focusing on political ideology less as an independent variable, as prior work has done, and more as a phenomenon of interest in its own right. We hope that the theoretical narrative developed in this article is resonant, and that the core insight—that opting for a political ideology to construct an organizational identity has upsides as well as downsides, and that organizations need to carefully navigate the ensuing trajectory—will inform additional research and deliver actionable insights for practice in the future.

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Notes

1. We thank the editor for this phrasing.
2. We use italics to indicate the exact translation for the term *Jian Ku Fen Dou*. This matching was based on Chinese texts and English translation from www.marxists.org (last access: 15 December 2023).
3. We use italics to indicate the exact translation for the term *Fen Dou*. This matching was based on the English translation published in *China Daily*, titled: "Full text of President Xi's speech at meeting marking 1911 Revolution." https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202110/13/WS6166e9afa310cdd39bc6ebcd.html (last access: 15 December 2023).
4. Xi's quotes are based on an article published in *People's Daily* (6 November 2021: 1), which commented on Xi's "important statements on the Party's major achievements and historical experiences in a

century of *Fen Dou*." http://politics.people.com.cn/n1/2021/1106/c1001-32275075.html (last access: 15 December 2023; quotation marks in original).

5. Article published on 12 February 2019. http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2019/0212/c1003-30623204.html (last access: 15 December 2023).
6. Although the transcript of the speech was not published in the Newspaper or Magazine, it was cited by many employees in their later articles. The speech was also widely circulated in Chinese media outlets. The translation we provide here is based on the full transcript published in *China Entrepreneur* magazine in the April issue (pp. 48–50) of 2001.
7. This quote stems from the English version of the interview transcript published on the employee discussion forum on 23 September 2019.

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