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INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO DEVELOPMENT-INDUCED TENSIONS: COMPETITION, HARMONY, AND ORGANIZATIONAL STABILITY IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

This study examines how organizations respond institutionally to development-induced pressures by comparing harmony-based and competition-based evaluation regimes in Taiwanese workplaces. Using data from the 2022 Global Labor Market Status Survey and a causal inference framework incorporating S-Learner, T-Learner, X-Learner, and Doubly Robust Learner, the analysis estimates the effects of alternative evaluation systems while addressing high-dimensional confounding through a structured selection procedure combining logit/ordered-logit screening and Causal Forest DML. The findings reveal a clear institutional asymmetry. Harmony-oriented evaluation—defined as valuing individuals who prioritize relational balance—consistently enhances perceived organizational stability, with statistically robust causal effects across all estimators (ATE ≈ 0.13–0.19). In contrast, competition-based evaluation—characterized by performance comparison and differentiation—produces small and heterogeneous effects (ATE ≈ 0.02–0.03) that are sensitive to estimation strategy. These results suggest that development does not simply introduce efficiency-enhancing mechanisms but reorganizes relational structures within organizations. Competition generates differentiation without consistently strengthening stability, while harmony functions as an informal institutional mechanism that contains tension and sustains cooperation. The study contributes to development and conflict scholarship by providing causal evidence that organizational stability under development pressures depends not only on performance-based reforms but also on relational governance mechanisms that mediate their social consequences.

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1. Introduction

Across late-industrializing societies, organizational life is increasingly shaped by tensions between market-driven competition and relational forms of coordination. Economic development, globalization, and digital restructuring have transformed workplaces into sites where performance-based evaluation systems coexist with culturally embedded expectations of cooperation and social harmony. These tensions are not merely managerial challenges; they represent deeper institutional dynamics associated with development, social cohesion, and latent conflict.

Development processes often introduce new mechanisms of competition, differentiation, and performance comparison. While these mechanisms may enhance productivity and efficiency, they can also generate insecurity, inequality, and relational strain within organizations. Such tensions frequently remain latent rather than manifesting as overt disputes, emerging instead through declining trust, perceived unfairness, and fragmentation of cooperative norms. Understanding how development-driven institutional change reshapes these dynamics is central to the study of development and conflict.

In East Asian contexts, this tension is particularly salient. Organizational systems historically grounded in relational governance, collective responsibility, and Confucian moral frameworks are increasingly intersecting with market-oriented performance regimes. Taiwan provides a compelling case of this institutional transition. As a late-industrializing economy deeply embedded in global value chains, Taiwan has experienced rapid shifts toward competitive evaluation, merit-based reward systems, and performance accountability. At the same time, longstanding norms emphasizing harmony, interpersonal balance, and cooperative stability continue to structure workplace interaction. The coexistence of these institutional logics creates a context in which development-induced pressures may generate both productive adaptation and latent forms of conflict.

Competition within organizations, in this developmental context, should not be understood solely as a motivational or managerial tool. Rather, it functions as an institutional mechanism that can produce differentiation, status hierarchies, and uneven distribution of opportunities. Performance-based evaluation may intensify social comparison, reinforce stratification, and weaken relational trust, thereby generating latent conflict even in the absence of open confrontation. From a development perspective, the key issue is not whether competition exists, but how it reshapes social cohesion and organizational stability.

Conversely, harmony-oriented norms can be interpreted not merely as cultural values or psychological resources, but as informal institutions that regulate conflict and sustain cooperation. By emphasizing relational balance, face preservation, and collective responsibility, harmony can suppress overt disputes while maintaining organizational cohesion under conditions of structural change. In transitional economies, such informal institutions may play a stabilizing role, allowing organizations to adapt to competitive pressures without escalating social conflict.

Despite the importance of these dynamics, existing research has largely examined competition and harmony through the lens of organizational behavior and human resource management, focusing primarily on individual motivation, performance, or job satisfaction.

While valuable, this perspective underestimates their broader institutional significance. From a development and conflict standpoint, competition and harmony represent alternative mechanisms of governance—one emphasizing differentiation and performance discipline, the other emphasizing relational stability and conflict containment. Their interaction reflects how organizations negotiate developmental pressures and manage potential social tensions.

Empirical research that treats these dynamics as institutional responses to development remains limited. Most studies rely on correlational approaches and rarely examine how competition and harmony function as mechanisms shaping latent conflict, social cohesion, and organizational adaptation. Moreover, the distributional consequences of performance-based evaluations such as inequality, exclusion, and stratification—have received insufficient attention within causal empirical frameworks.

To address these gaps, this study examines how competition-based and harmony-based evaluation systems influence employee outcomes within a developmental and institutional context. Using nationally representative survey data from Taiwan and a causal inference framework that integrates S-Learner, T-Learner, X-Learner, and Doubly Robust Learner, the analysis estimates how this evaluation regimes operate as institutional mechanisms shaping workplace stability and perceived well-being.

Rather than treating competition and harmony as alternative management styles, the study conceptualizes them as development-related institutional responses. Competition is understood as a mechanism that can generate differentiation and latent conflict, while harmony is conceptualized as an informal institution that buffers tensions and stabilizes cooperation. By estimating both average and heterogeneous causal effects, the study reveals how these institutional logics affect employees differently across contexts.

This approach contributes to the development and conflict literature in three ways. First, it provides causal empirical evidence on how institutional responses to development pressures influence social cohesion within organizations. Second, it reframes workplace competition as a potential source of latent conflict and inequality rather than solely a productivity-enhancing mechanism. Third, it highlights the role of harmony as an adaptive institutional form that mediates the social consequences of market-oriented transformation.

By situating organizational cultural dynamics within broader processes of institutional change and development, the study demonstrates how workplaces function as micro-level arenas where economic transformation, social cohesion, and latent conflict intersect. Organizational culture is essential in shaping employee behavior, motivation, and overall mental health. As a system of shared norms, values, and expectations, culture influences how employees interpret workplace situations, interact with colleagues, and assess their work environment. In East Asian societies—especially those influenced by Confucian traditions—cultural norms that focus on harmony, respect for hierarchy, and collective responsibility have long guided social and organizational life. These values often lead to cooperative team dynamics, avoiding open conflict, and prioritizing smooth interpersonal relationships. Therefore, workplace cultural values significantly impact job satisfaction by influencing employees' sense of belonging, security, and fairness.

In recent years, however, organizations across Asia have undergone significant institutional transformations due to globalization, digitalization, and competitive pressures. Taiwanese firms, in particular, have increasingly adopted performance-driven management practices, competitive evaluation systems, and individualized reward mechanisms. These developments raise important questions about how traditional harmony-oriented norms interact with emerging competitive cultural expectations. Competitive norms may stimulate ambition, enhance efficiency, and motivate high performers, yet they may also elevate interpersonal tension, stress, or feelings of inequity among employees who prefer relational stability. Harmony norms, conversely, are broadly beneficial in promoting cohesion and psychological comfort, but the magnitude and direction of their effects may differ across individuals depending on their personality, career goals, and work context.

A substantial body of prior literature has documented the association between organizational culture and job satisfaction. For example, supportive and collaborative cultures have been linked to stronger commitment and lower turnover intentions (Belias & Koustelios, 2014; Azeem et al., 2021). Research has also shown that cultural norms shape affective responses, perceptions of justice, and trust in management (Mali et al., 2022). However, the vast majority of these studies rely on correlational analyses or regression-based designs, making it difficult to disentangle causal effects from mere associations. Such approaches typically assume homogeneous relationships across employees, fail to adequately account for confounding factors, and cannot precisely estimate how cultural values influence different subgroups of workers. As a result, the true causal impact of specific cultural orientations—particularly competitive versus harmony-oriented cultures—remains insufficiently understood.

To address these limitations, the present study employs a modern causal inference framework to estimate both the average and heterogeneous causal effects of cultural values on job satisfaction. Leveraging large-scale survey data from Taiwanese employees, the study focuses on two contrasting value orientations: competition-oriented culture and harmony-oriented culture. To ensure methodological rigor, five complementary meta-learner approaches are used—S-Learner, T-Learner, X-Learner, Doubly Robust (DR) Learner, and Causal Forest DML. These techniques incorporate flexible machine learning models, adjust for confounding variables, and uncover individual-level variation in treatment effects, thereby overcoming key limitations in previous research.

By integrating theoretical perspectives on East Asian cultural values with advanced causal inference methods, this study makes three primary contributions. First, it provides a more credible estimation of the causal impact of cultural norms on job satisfaction than existing correlational studies. Second, it identifies heterogeneous effects across employee subgroups, offering nuanced insights into when and for whom harmony or competition enhances workplace well-being. Third, it advances empirical understanding of cultural change in Taiwanese organizations by examining how traditional values interact with contemporary performance-oriented practices. Collectively, these contributions offer a more comprehensive understanding of how organizational culture shapes employee satisfaction in evolving East Asian work environments.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Organizational Culture, Institutional Stability, and Job Satisfaction

Organizational culture is commonly defined as a system of shared values, beliefs, and behavioral norms that guides how employees perceive, think, and act within their organization (Schein, 2010). Culture provides employees with implicit rules that shape expectations about communication, conflict management, risk-taking, and the meaning of success. It encompasses formal structures as well as informal practices and deeply held assumptions.

A substantial body of research has linked organizational culture to job satisfaction. Supportive, open, and participatory cultures are associated with higher satisfaction across sectors (Belias & Koustelios, 2014). Cultures characterized by trust, fairness, and collaboration positively shape employees' affective responses to work (Azeem et al., 2021). Conversely, rigid or mistrustful climates undermine satisfaction and commitment.

Beyond its psychological dimensions, culture can also be understood as an institutional structure that stabilizes organizational life. Institutional theory conceptualizes institutions as formal and informal rules that structure behavior and expectations (North, 1990). Similarly, organizations are sustained by regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive elements that shape legitimacy and coordination (Scott, 2014). From this perspective, organizational culture functions as an institutional mechanism that influences how conflict is managed, how authority is exercised, and how stability is maintained.

Culture interacts with both individual and structural conditions. A cultural norm may be interpreted positively by some employees and negatively by others depending on personal preferences, job autonomy, or perceived fairness. This highlights the importance of analyzing not only average cultural effects but also heterogeneous ones.

2.2. Competition-Oriented Cultural Values

Competition-oriented cultural values emphasize ranking, social comparison, and differential rewards based on relative performance. In the organizational behavior literature, such values are often captured by the notion of a performance climate, in which success is defined by outperforming one's colleagues rather than by absolute standards of learning or cooperation (Nerstad et al., 2020; Zhao et al., 2023). When performance-based systems are perceived as fair, transparent, and predictable, competition can sharpen employees' goals, strengthen effort, and in some cases enhance creativity or task performance (Niu et al., 2022; Ricciardi et al., 2022). However, a growing body of research highlights that competitive psychological climates can also function as a job demand that increases strain. Studies link competitive climates to heightened job stress, burnout, and performance pressure (Spurk et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2022; Oki, 2014).

Excessive or poorly designed competition may foster envy and interpersonal conflict (Yıldız et al., 2023), weaken cooperation in teams (Caniëls et al., 2019), and erode trust (Kuipers, 2022). These findings suggest that competition-oriented cultural values operate as a "double-edged sword": they can enhance motivation and performance under fair conditions but may undermine cooperation and psychological well-being when competition becomes intense or perceived as unjust.

From an institutional perspective, competition can be interpreted as a mechanism that reorganizes recognition, incentives, and authority within organizations. By emphasizing differentiation and performance comparison, competitive systems reshape organizational hierarchies and social relationships, potentially generating both efficiency gains and relational tension. Moreover, prior work indicates that the consequences of competition are heterogeneous. Competitive climates tend to be more beneficial for employees who thrive on challenge and social comparison, while they may be detrimental for those who prioritize relational harmony or psychological security (Spurk et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023). This heterogeneity underscores the need to examine not only average effects but also distributional consequences across organizational members.

Moreover, prior work indicates that the consequences of competition are likely heterogeneous. Competitive climates tend to be more beneficial for employees who thrive on challenge and social comparison, while they may be detrimental for those who prioritize relational harmony, psychological security, or long-term cooperative relationships (Spurk et al., 2021; Guo et al., 2023). This heterogeneity underscores the need for causal, employee-level analyses that move beyond simple average effects and investigate for whom competition-oriented cultural values increase or decrease job satisfaction.

2.3. Harmony-Oriented Cultural Values

Harmony-oriented cultural values emphasize relational balance, emotional moderation, and the avoidance of overt interpersonal conflict. In East Asian cultural traditions, harmony (he) is regarded as a foundational moral principle guiding social life and shaping expectations for respectful communication and relational stability (Leung, 1997; Yeh, 1999).

Within organizations, harmony values encourage cooperative behavior, indirect conflict management, and adherence to collective norms (Farh et al., 1997; Cheng, 2020). These features contrast with competition-oriented cultural values, which emphasize differentiation and comparative achievement. Whereas competition highlights individual performance and ranking, harmony emphasizes relational maintenance and group cohesion.

Research demonstrates that harmony-oriented climates are positively associated with interpersonal trust and reduced conflict (Tjosvold et al., 2001; Chen et al., 2005). Harmony norms promote indirect communication, face-saving behavior, and interpersonal sensitivity, thereby discouraging open confrontation (Bond, 1996).

Harmony-oriented environments also strengthen psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Carmeli & Gittell, 2009), facilitating open communication and learning. At the behavioral level, harmony values encourage mutual support, information sharing, and cooperative problem solving (Chow et al., 2000; Chen & Tjosvold, 2007; Lam, 2012).

Importantly, the mechanisms associated with harmony—trust, supportive communication, and collective identity—are well-established predictors of job satisfaction. Meta-analytic evidence shows that relationally supportive environments significantly improve job satisfaction and affective commitment (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Studies of East Asian organizations report that harmonious leadership, team cohesion, and cooperative climates strongly predict higher job satisfaction (Kim & Lee, 2010; Choi & Kim, 2013; Wong et al., 2012). From an institutional standpoint, harmony functions as an informal governance mechanism that stabilizes social relationships and mitigates conflict. It supports coordination not through formal enforcement but through shared norms and relational expectations, thereby sustaining cooperation even in environments characterized by performance pressure.

3. Theoretical Framework: An Institutional Conflict Model

Economic development reshapes organizational life by introducing new institutional logics, redistributing opportunities, and altering patterns of cooperation and authority. Within organizations, these processes often generate tensions between market-oriented mechanisms of performance differentiation and relational systems of coordination rooted in social norms and collective expectations. Rather than treating these dynamics as purely managerial or psychological, this study conceptualizes them as institutional processes that can produce latent conflict, social adaptation, and organizational stabilization.

3.1. Development, Institutional Change, and Latent Conflict

Development is not a neutral process of economic expansion; it involves structural transformations that reorganize authority, incentives, and social relations. As organizations integrate into global markets and adopt performance-based evaluation systems, they introduce new forms of differentiation, competition, and accountability. These mechanisms redistribute recognition, rewards, and opportunities, thereby reshaping internal hierarchies and perceptions of fairness.

Such transformations frequently produce latent conflict. Latent conflict does not necessarily manifest in overt disputes or organizational breakdown but emerges through subtle processes: declining trust, perceived inequity, social comparison, and weakening collective norms. In development contexts, these tensions are often embedded in institutional change rather than interpersonal antagonism. The introduction of performance-based evaluation may therefore function as a mechanism that reorganizes social relations, generating both productivity gains and social strain.

From this perspective, organizational competition represents not merely a motivational system but an institutional response to development pressures. It reflects the adoption of market-oriented governance mechanisms within organizational settings, emphasizing measurable performance, differentiation, and accountability. While these mechanisms may improve efficiency, they can also intensify inequality, reinforce status hierarchies, and fragment relational cohesion.

3.2. Competition as an Institutional Generator of Differentiation and Conflict

Performance-based competition reorganizes organizational life by institutionalizing comparison, ranking, and unequal reward distribution. These processes can create stratification within organizations, separating high-performing individuals from others and shaping perceptions of status and recognition. Such differentiation may produce adaptive outcomes, such as increased effort and innovation, but it may also generate relational tension and perceived injustice.

Importantly, the conflict associated with competition is often latent. Employees may not openly contest evaluation systems, yet they may experience insecurity, reduced trust, or diminished willingness to cooperate. Competitive environments may weaken informal support networks, discourage knowledge sharing, and foster social comparison. Over time, these dynamics can erode social cohesion and increase organizational fragmentation, even when productivity indicators improve.

Development scholarship highlights that market-oriented reforms frequently generate uneven outcomes. Some individuals benefit from new opportunities, while others experience marginalization or exclusion. Within organizations, competition-based evaluation may reproduce inequality by reinforcing existing advantages linked to education, occupation, or institutional position. Thus, competition should be understood as both a developmental mechanism and a potential source of internal conflict.

3.3. Harmony as an Informal Institutional Mechanism of Conflict Containment

In contrast to competition, harmony-oriented norms operate as informal institutional mechanisms that regulate social interaction and contain conflict. Harmony emphasizes relational balance, mutual respect, and the avoidance of open confrontation. Rather than eliminating tension, it manages it by preserving face, maintaining social ties, and sustaining cooperative expectations.

Within transitional economies, such informal institutions play a stabilizing role. They allow organizations to absorb the social strain generated by development-driven reforms without escalating into overt conflict. Harmony fosters trust, emotional security, and collective identity, reinforcing cooperation even when formal evaluation systems introduce differentiation.

From an institutional perspective, harmony functions as a governance mechanism parallel to market-based competition. While competition disciplines performance through differentiation, harmony stabilizes relationships through relational norms. These two institutional logics coexist and interact within organizations undergoing development.

3.4. Institutional Interaction: Competition, Harmony, and Organizational Adaptation

The coexistence of competition and harmony reflects the broader institutional duality present in many late-industrializing societies. Organizations simultaneously adopt market-oriented evaluation systems while retaining relational governance structures rooted in cultural traditions. This duality generates both tension and adaptation.

Competition may intensify differentiation and latent conflict, while harmony may buffer these tensions by preserving social cohesion. When harmony is strong, competitive pressures may be interpreted as legitimate and manageable rather than threatening.

Conversely, when harmony weakens, competition may exacerbate insecurity, distrust, and organizational fragmentation.

This interaction suggests that institutional outcomes depend not only on the presence of competition or harmony individually but on how they operate together. Harmony may mediate the social consequences of competition, while competition may reshape the meaning and function of harmony within organizations. Understanding this dynamic is essential for analyzing how development reshapes organizational stability.

3.5. Institutional Mediation and Uneven Development within Organizations

Development processes often produce uneven effects across individuals and groups. Organizational members differ in their access to resources, skills, and institutional protection. As a result, institutional mechanisms such as competition and harmony do not affect all employees equally.

Competition may advantage individuals with higher human capital or stronger alignment with performance norms while marginalizing others. Harmony, in contrast, may provide relational protection and support for those less advantaged by competitive systems. These dynamics create internal patterns of stratification, inclusion, and exclusion within organizations.

From a development and conflict perspective, organizations thus become micro-level arenas where broader societal processes—market integration, institutional change, and social differentiation—are enacted. Institutional mechanisms shape how tensions are distributed, buffered, or intensified across organizational members.

This framework positions competition and harmony not as alternative management styles but as institutional responses to development-induced pressures. Competition generates differentiation and potential conflict; harmony contains and mediates these tensions. Their interaction shapes organizational adaptation, social cohesion, and the stability of development processes.

4. Hypotheses: Institutional Conflict, Mediation, and Uneven Development

Building on the institutional conflict framework developed above, this study reformulates the role of competition and harmony as mechanisms shaping latent conflict and organizational adaptation under conditions of development-driven change.

Rather than treating job satisfaction merely as an individual psychological outcome, we interpret it as an indicator of perceived institutional stability and relational cohesion within organizations. Lower satisfaction may signal rising tension, perceived unfairness, or weakening social integration, while higher satisfaction may reflect institutional equilibrium and cooperative stability.

4.1. Competition as a Generator of Latent Conflict

In late-industrializing economies integrated into global markets, performance-based evaluation systems represent institutional adaptations to competitive pressures. By emphasizing ranking, comparison, and differential rewards, these systems institutionalize differentiation within organizations.

While such differentiation may enhance efficiency, it also risks generating latent conflict. Competitive evaluation can intensify social comparison, reinforce hierarchical stratification, and heighten perceptions of insecurity. These mechanisms may not produce overt disputes, yet they can erode trust and weaken informal cooperation.

Importantly, development processes produce uneven outcomes. Employees differ in skills, resources, and institutional position. Consequently, competition-based evaluation is unlikely to affect all individuals uniformly. Some may benefit through upward mobility and recognition, while others may experience marginalization or exclusion.

Accordingly:

H1 (Conflict Generation Hypothesis):

Competition-based evaluation increases latent organizational tension and produces heterogeneous effects across employees, reflecting uneven institutional impacts of development-driven differentiation.

This hypothesis reframes competition not as a purely motivational tool but as an institutional mechanism capable of generating internal stratification and conflict dynamics.

4.2. Harmony as an Informal Institution of Conflict Containment

Harmony-oriented norms function as informal institutional mechanisms that regulate social interaction and suppress overt conflict. By emphasizing relational balance, mutual respect, and collective identity, harmony can stabilize cooperation in contexts of structural change.

In transitional economies, such informal institutions are especially significant. They allow organizations to absorb the strain introduced by market-oriented reforms without escalating into visible conflict. Harmony preserves face, sustains trust, and reinforces social cohesion.

Therefore:

H2 (Conflict Containment Hypothesis):

Harmony-oriented evaluation functions as an informal institutional mechanism that reduces latent conflict and enhances organizational cohesion under conditions of development-driven change. In empirical terms, higher harmony should be associated with greater perceived institutional stability.

4.3. Institutional Mediation: Harmony as a Buffer of Competitive Tension

Development rarely replaces one institutional logic with another; instead, it produces institutional coexistence. Organizations may simultaneously adopt competitive evaluation systems while retaining relational norms.

The interaction between these mechanisms is central to understanding conflict dynamics. Where harmony is strong, competitive differentiation may be interpreted as legitimate and socially bounded. Where harmony is weak, competitive pressure may intensify insecurity and distrust.

Thus:

H3 (Institutional Mediation Hypothesis):

Harmony moderates the effects of competition by buffering the latent conflict and social strain generated by performance-based evaluation systems.

This hypothesis shifts the analytical focus from isolated cultural values to institutional interaction.

4.4. Uneven Development and Distributional Consequences

Development processes often generate inequality and stratification. Within organizations, performance-based evaluation may advantage individuals with higher human capital, stronger networks, or better alignment with dominant norms.

Competition-based systems may therefore reproduce or amplify inequality, while harmony-based systems may mitigate exclusion by reinforcing collective belonging.

Accordingly:

H4 (Uneven Development Hypothesis):

The institutional effects of competition and harmony vary systematically across demographic and organizational subgroups, reflecting distributional consequences of development and internal stratification.

This hypothesis situates organizational dynamics within broader patterns of uneven development and social differentiation.

5. Methodology

In this study, job satisfaction is interpreted not merely as a psychological outcome, but as an indicator of perceived institutional stability and relational cohesion within organizations. To operationalize institutional responses to development-induced tensions, we construct two alternative binary treatment variables representing competition-based and harmony-based evaluation regimes, and estimate their causal effects using four meta-learners (S-Learner, T-Learner, X-Learner, and DR-Learner).

The first treatment specification uses the item “Outperforming colleagues in competition is a basis for evaluation” as an indicator of performance-based differentiation within organizations, capturing the extent to which competitive comparison is institutionalized as a governance mechanism.

The second specification uses the item “Those who prioritize harmony are valued more than those who act selfishly” as an indicator of relational governance, capturing the extent to which harmony functions as an informal institutional mechanism for stabilizing cooperation.

For each specification, the treatment variable is set to one when respondents report that the practice is present, and zero otherwise. By estimating causal effects under both definitions of T, we examine how competition-based and harmony-based institutional logics shape perceived organizational stability, social cohesion, and relational tension within development contexts.

5.1. Data

This research is based on "Global Labor Market Status Survey (Data for 18 countries and regions), 2022," provided by the Social Science Japan Data Archive, Center for Social Research and Data Archives, Institute of Social Science, The University of Tokyo.

The target countries are China, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, India, Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, and Sweden. The sample size is about 1,000 persons from each country/region. This research selects Taiwan. We mainly use the variables related to corporate cultures, working days per week, working hours per day, and job satisfaction.

5.2. Measures

5.2.1. Treatment: Performance-Based Competitive Evaluation

The treatment variable T indicates whether respondents are subject to performance-based competitive evaluation systems at their workplace. In the original questionnaire, several items ask about specific competitive evaluation or performance comparison practices being used. Based on our understanding of competition-focused practices, we define the binary treatment indicator T as follows: T equals one if at least one item shows that the practice is in place, and zero otherwise.

5.2.2. Outcomes: Cultural Values and Job Satisfaction

To examine how cultural values and competitive practices jointly influence employee attitudes, we analyze several outcome variables from the corporate culture battery and from job-related evaluations. Specifically, we concentrate on two main cultural dimensions that correspond with our theoretical framework.

We use an item that captures competition-oriented cultural values, which measures how much the organization emphasizes competition, ranking, or performance comparisons. Second, we use an item that captures harmony-oriented cultural values, which measures how much the organization emphasizes interpersonal harmony, mutual respect, and conflict avoidance. Each item is measured on an ordered response scale (Likert-type). During the confounder screening stage, these outcomes are treated as ordinal variables and modeled with an ordered logit model. In the meta-learner estimation stage, they are treated as approximately continuous to support tree-based regressors and the calculation of individual-level treatment effects.

Additionally, we include standard job satisfaction items from the survey as supplementary outcomes in robustness checks (not shown in the code listing above but conceptually similar). These items ask respondents to rate their overall satisfaction with their job conditions on an ordered scale.

5.2.3. Covariates and Potential Confounders

As potential confounders, we include a comprehensive set of demographic, occupational, and cultural variables that may jointly influence both exposure to competitive evaluation and the outcomes. The initial pool of candidate covariates comprises three main groups: (1) Corporate culture items encompass the full range of culture-related questions and reflect various organizational norms and values. (2) Demographic and human capital variables include gender, marital status, parental status, age, educational attainment, days worked per week, hours worked per day, and income. (3) Structural and organizational context factors cover employment status, industry, and occupation. Sex, marital status, age, educational level, employment status, industry, and occupation are transformed into dummy variables using one-hot encoding. Before creating dummy variables, missing values are explicitly coded to preserve non-response information rather than omit it. This process results in a high-dimensional feature space that is then reduced through a structured confounder selection process described in the next subsection.

5.3. Confounder Selection Strategy

Because observational data can include many potential covariates, we use a two-stage confounder selection process designed to approximate a minimal sufficient adjustment set while preserving predictive richness.

5.3.1. Stage 1: Logit and Ordered Logit Screening

In the first stage, each candidate covariate is evaluated separately for both the treatment and the outcome. For each variable, we perform two types of models. First, we estimate a logistic regression of the treatment indicator T on the single covariate, plus a constant term. From this model, we record the p-value for the covariate coefficient, which we refer to as the p-value for the treatment equation. This p-value indicates whether the covariate is statistically associated with exposure to competitive evaluation.

Second, we estimate an ordered logit regression of the ordered outcome (such as the competition- or harmony-oriented value) on the same covariate. From this model, we record the p-value for the covariate in the outcome equation, which indicates whether it is statistically associated with the outcome.

A variable is considered a first-stage confounder candidate if it is significantly associated with both the treatment and the outcome at the ten percent level, meaning both p-values are below 0.10. This results in a set of variables that are empirically linked to both the treatment and the outcome and are therefore potential confounders.

5.3.2. Stage 2: Causal Forest DML and AUC-Based Variable Selection

In the second stage, we further refine the confounder set using Causal Forest, DML, and propensity score predictive performance. The procedure is as follows: (1) Using the first-stage candidates, we construct a dataset with complete cases for the outcome, the treatment, and the selected covariates. (2) We fit a Causal Forest, DML estimator (with discrete treatment, 500 trees, and tuning parameters chosen to avoid overfitting) to obtain variable importance scores for each covariate. These importance scores indicate how strongly each variable contributes to explaining treatment effect heterogeneity in the forest model. (3) We sort variables by their importance and consider nested models that use the top k variables, where k ranges from three up to the full number of candidates. For each value of k, we proceed as follows. We select the k most important variables, fit a logistic propensity score model using Gradient Boosting Classifier to predict T from these variables, and evaluate the predictive performance by computing a five-fold stratified cross-validated area under the receiver operating characteristic curve, or AUC. (4) We choose the value of k that maximizes the cross-validated AUC, and define the resulting subset of variables. In other words, we retain the smallest set of variables that yields the best out-of-sample discrimination between treated and control units. This procedure yields a compact set of covariates that both behave as confounders in the first-stage screening and provide strong predictive power for the treatment assignment mechanism.

5.4. Causal Effect Estimation with Meta-Learners

Given the high-dimensional covariate space and the likely nonlinearity of the relationships, we adopt a meta-learner approach to estimate the causal effects of competitive evaluation on cultural values and job satisfaction. Specifically, we implement S-Learner, T-Learner, X-Learner, and DR-Learner using flexible tree-based models, and we use CausalForestDML primarily for confounder selection rather than as the final estimator.

5.4.1. Propensity Score and Outcome Models

For all learners, we use standard nuisance models. First, we estimate the propensity score model, which predicts the probability that the treatment indicator T equals one given the covariates X. This model is implemented as a Gradient Boosting Classifier with default hyperparameters and the random_state parameter set to zero. The fitted model produces an estimated propensity score for each observation, denoted e_hat. The estimated propensity scores range from values close to zero to approximately 0.90, with AUC values of 0.80 to 0.95, implying substantial, though not perfect, separability between treated and control units. To prevent numerical instability in subsequent steps, propensity scores that are extremely small or large are clipped to the range 0.001-0.999.

Second, we estimate two outcome models: one for treated units and one for control units. Both models use a Gradient Boosting Regressor with a random state set to zero. The first model, denoted m1 in the code, approximates the conditional expectation of the outcome given the covariates among treated units. The second model, denoted m0, approximates the corresponding expectation among control units. For each observation, we obtain two predicted outcomes: the one under treatment and the one under no treatment. These predictions are used directly in the T-Learner and indirectly in the X-Learner and DR-Learner to construct pseudo-outcomes.

5.4.2. S-Learner

The S-Learner estimates a single outcome model that incorporates both covariates and the treatment indicator. Concretely, we train a Gradient Boosting Regressor on the augmented feature vector that stacks X and T as predictors and uses the observed outcome as the dependent variable. Once this model is fitted, we compute the individual treatment effect for each observation by generating two predictions: one with the treatment indicator set to 1 and one with it set to 0, holding the covariates X fixed. The individual effect is then obtained as the difference between the predicted outcomes under treatment and no treatment.

5.4.3. T-Learner

The T-Learner uses separate models for treated and control units. In our implementation, these models correspond to the outcome regressions described above. For each observation, we compute the predicted outcome under treatment from the model estimated on treated units and the predicted outcome under no treatment from the model estimated on control units. The individual treatment effect is defined as the difference between these two predicted values. This learner is particularly transparent but can be sensitive to imbalance if the treated sample is relatively small, as is the case in our data, where only about 16 percent of observations are treated.

5.4.4. X-Learner

The X-Learner exploits imputed counterfactuals to improve estimation under treatment imbalance. The procedure involves two main steps.

First, we construct pseudo-outcomes for each group. For control units, we compute the difference between the predicted outcome under treatment, based on the model estimated among treated units, and the observed outcome. This difference represents how much higher or lower the outcome would be if the control unit had been treated. For treated units, we compute the difference between the observed and predicted outcomes under no treatment, based on the model estimated from control units. This difference represents how much higher or lower the outcome is compared with what would be expected in the absence of treatment.

Second, we fit two new regression models to these pseudo-outcomes: one using control units and one using treated units. These models estimate how the pseudo-effects vary as a function of the covariates. Finally, for each observation, we combine the two model-based effect predictions into a single individual treatment effect. The estimated propensity score determines the combination weights: when an observation has a high probability of being treated, more weight is placed on the model estimated among treated units; when the probability is low, more weight is placed on the model estimated among control units.

5.4.5. DR-Learner

The DR-Learner constructs a doubly robust estimate of the treatment effect by combining outcome regression and inverse propensity weighting. The procedure starts from the predicted outcomes under treatment and control for each observation and then adjusts these predictions using residuals weighted by the inverse of the propensity score.

In words, the doubly robust estimate for each individual is given by the following three components. The first component is the difference between the predicted outcomes under treatment and no treatment. The second component is an adjustment term for treated observations that adds the residual, defined as the observed outcome minus the predicted outcome under treatment, divided by the estimated propensity score. The third component is an adjustment term for control observations that subtracts the residual, defined as the observed outcome minus the predicted outcome under no treatment, divided by one minus the estimated propensity score. When either the propensity model or the outcome models are correctly specified, this construction yields a consistent estimate of the individual treatment effect, providing a robustness advantage relative to the S-Learner and T-Learner.

5.4.6. Estimation of Average Treatment Effects and Uncertainty

For each learner, we summarize the estimated individual treatment effects by computing the sample average treatment effect. This average is simply the mean of the individual effect estimates across all observations. We compute the standard error of this average as the standard deviation of the individual effects divided by the square root of the sample size, and construct 95 percent confidence intervals using a normal approximation.

The heterogeneous individual treatment effects obtained from the X-Learner and DR-Learner are further used in subsequent sections to examine effect variation across demographic and organizational subgroups, thereby directly linking the empirical results to Hypotheses 1 through 4.

Because development processes often produce uneven institutional outcomes, the meta-learner framework is particularly appropriate for this study. By estimating heterogeneous treatment effects, the analysis captures how competition and harmony generate differentiated experiences across employees, revealing potential patterns of latent conflict, institutional buffering, and internal stratification within organizations.

6. Findings

We examine two institutional evaluation regimes—harmony-based evaluation and competition-based evaluation—and estimate their individual and average causal effects using S-Learner, T-Learner, X-Learner, and DR-Learner. Rather than interpreting outcomes solely as psychological responses, we treat perceived job satisfaction as an indicator of institutional stability and relational cohesion within organizations undergoing development-driven transformation.

6.1. Descriptive patterns and identification quality

The analysis is restricted to 1,001 respondents in Taiwan with complete data. The average level of job satisfaction is approximately 4.95 on a 7-point scale, indicating moderate but variable perceptions of organizational stability and well-being.

Harmony-based evaluation is reported by approximately 83% of respondents, while competition-based evaluation is reported by 74%. Estimated propensity scores demonstrate adequate overlap between treated and control groups, with AUC values of approximately 0.93 (harmony) and 0.80 (competition). These results indicate that evaluation regimes are systematically patterned across observable characteristics but maintain sufficient comparability for causal estimation.

From an institutional perspective, these descriptive patterns suggest that both competitive differentiation and relational governance are widely embedded within Taiwanese organizations, reflecting the coexistence of market-oriented and relational institutional logics.

6.2. Harmony-based evaluation and institutional stabilization

Across all four meta-learners, harmony-based evaluation exhibits a consistently positive and statistically significant effect.

Estimated average treatment effects range from approximately 0.13 (S-Learner) to 0.19 (DR-Learner), with all confidence intervals excluding zero. The magnitude of these effects suggests that relational governance mechanisms substantially enhance perceived institutional stability.

Interpreted through the institutional conflict framework, harmony functions as a conflict-containment mechanism. Organizations that explicitly reward relational balance and non-selfish behavior appear to generate stronger perceptions of cohesion and trust, indicating reduced latent tension and greater social integration.

The robustness of these findings across learners reinforces the interpretation that harmony operates as a stabilizing informal institution within development contexts.

6.3. Competition-based evaluation and differentiated institutional effects

In contrast, the effects of competition-based evaluation are small and statistically fragile. Estimated average treatment effects are approximately 0.02–0.03, and confidence intervals frequently include zero depending on the learner. While the S-Learner indicates a modest positive effect, the T-Learner, X-Learner, and DR-Learner suggest limited and statistically imprecise impacts. From an institutional perspective, these results imply that performance-based differentiation does not systematically enhance organizational stability. Instead, competition appears to generate differentiated and uneven effects across employees.

The weaker and inconsistent estimates are consistent with the hypothesis that competition produces heterogeneous institutional consequences. For some individuals, competitive regimes may be interpreted as legitimate and motivating; for others, they may intensify insecurity or social comparison pressures. The absence of strong average stabilization effects suggests that competition alone does not function as an effective conflict-management mechanism within transitional organizational settings.

6.4. Comparative institutional interpretation

A clear asymmetry emerges between the two institutional regimes. Harmony-based evaluation consistently strengthens perceived stability and cohesion, while competition-based evaluation yields limited and heterogeneous effects. This asymmetry supports the institutional conflict model developed earlier. In development contexts characterized by increasing market pressure, competitive evaluation introduces differentiation and potential stratification. However, without complementary relational governance, such differentiation does not translate into stronger perceived stability.

Harmony, by contrast, appears to buffer latent tensions generated by development-driven transformation. It provides a relational infrastructure that sustains cooperation even under performance pressure. These findings indicate that organizational adaptation to development pressures depends not solely on competitive efficiency mechanisms but also on informal institutional capacities to contain conflict and preserve cohesion.

7. Discussion

This study sets out to examine how institutional responses to development-induced pressures shape organizational stability and latent conflict within workplaces. By comparing harmony-based and competition-based evaluation regimes, the analysis provides causal evidence on how different institutional logics operate under conditions of economic and organizational transformation. The findings reveal a clear asymmetry between the two evaluation regimes. Harmony-oriented evaluation consistently strengthens perceived institutional stability, while competition-based evaluation generates weaker and more heterogeneous effects.

7.1. Competition, differentiation, and latent institutional tension

Hypothesis 1 proposed that competition-based evaluation produces heterogeneous effects reflecting development-driven differentiation. The results provide meaningful support for this claim. Average treatment effects of competition are small and statistically fragile, suggesting that performance-based differentiation does not uniformly enhance institutional stability. However, the dispersion in individual treatment effects indicates that employees experience competition differently.

For some, competitive evaluation may function as a motivational mechanism; for others, it may intensify insecurity, comparison pressure, or relational strain. From an institutional conflict perspective, these patterns indicate that competition generates differentiation rather than stabilization. It reorganizes organizational hierarchies and recognition structures, producing uneven institutional outcomes across employees. Such differentiation represents a form of latent conflict: tension embedded in institutional arrangements rather than expressed through overt confrontation.

7.2. Harmony as an informal mechanism of conflict containment

Hypothesis 2 predicted that harmony-oriented evaluation would enhance organizational stability. The results strongly support this expectation. Across all estimation strategies, harmony-based evaluation exhibits robust and substantively meaningful positive effects.

These findings suggest that relational governance mechanisms function as informal institutions that contain conflict and stabilize cooperation. Rather than eliminating structural tensions, harmony appears to regulate them by sustaining trust, mutual respect, and relational continuity. In development contexts where market-oriented reforms introduce differentiation, such informal institutional mechanisms become critical for maintaining organizational cohesion.

7.3. Institutional mediation: buffering competitive pressure

Hypothesis 3 argued that harmony moderates the social consequences of competition. Although this study does not estimate an explicit interaction term, the comparative results provide indirect support. Competition alone produces limited stabilization effects, while harmony-based evaluation generates consistent improvements in perceived stability. This asymmetry suggests that competitive differentiation is more likely to be accepted and socially embedded when supported by relational governance. Harmony thus functions as an institutional buffer. It mitigates the relational strain generated by performance-based systems and enables organizations to adapt to development pressures without escalating internal conflict.

7.4. Uneven institutional outcomes and stratification

Hypothesis 4 anticipated that institutional effects would vary across employees. Although subgroup analyses are not presented here, several empirical signals support this interpretation. High predictive accuracy in the treatment assignment models indicates that exposure to evaluation regimes is systematically structured by demographic and organizational characteristics. In addition, the dispersion of individual treatment effects—particularly for competition—suggests that development produces unequal institutional experiences within organizations.

These patterns are consistent with the broader literature on uneven development, where institutional reforms generate both opportunities and vulnerabilities across social groups. Organizations thus become micro-level arenas in which broader development dynamics—stratification, adaptation, and conflict containment—are enacted.

7.5. Implications for development and organizational governance

Overall, the results reveal a broader institutional dynamic. Development does not simply introduce competitive efficiency; it reorganizes social relations within organizations. Performance-based differentiation may improve accountability, but it does not automatically produce stability or cohesion. Instead, relational governance mechanisms such as harmony remain central to institutional adaptation. They provide the social infrastructure that enables organizations to absorb tension and maintain cooperation amid structural change.

This study therefore contributes to development and conflict scholarship by demonstrating that organizational stability depends not only on formal institutional reforms but also on informal mechanisms that mediate their social consequences. Competition generates differentiation and potential tensions, whereas harmony contains these tensions and sustains collective functioning. In this sense, organizational culture should be understood not merely as a psychological environment but as an institutional field in which development pressures, conflict dynamics, and governance mechanisms intersect.

8. Conclusion

This study examined how competition-based and harmony-based evaluation regimes operate as institutional responses to development-induced pressures within organizations. Using causal inference methods and meta-learner frameworks, the analysis demonstrated that these institutional logics produce markedly different consequences for organizational stability and latent conflict.

The results reveal a consistent asymmetry. Harmony-oriented evaluation strengthens perceived institutional stability and relational cohesion, while competition-based differentiation generates weaker and more heterogeneous effects. These findings suggest that development does not simply introduce efficiency-enhancing mechanisms; it restructures social relations and redistributes institutional experiences within organizations.

From a development perspective, organizations function as micro-level arenas in which broader structural transformations are enacted. Market-oriented reforms introduce performance differentiation and accountability, but they do not automatically generate stability. Instead, informal institutional mechanisms—such as relational norms and harmony-oriented governance—play a crucial role in containing tension and sustaining cooperation.

8.1. Policy implications

The findings carry important implications for development policy and organizational reform. First, institutional change driven by market-oriented reforms should not be evaluated solely in terms of efficiency or productivity. Policymakers and organizational leaders must recognize that such reforms also reshape social relations and may generate latent conflict if relational governance mechanisms are weakened.

Second, institutional reform strategies should incorporate mechanisms that sustain trust, cooperation, and social cohesion. In transitional economies, relational governance norms are not merely cultural artifacts but functional institutions that stabilize organizations during periods of structural change. Policies that neglect these mechanisms risk undermining organizational resilience and increasing internal fragmentation.

Third, development governance should consider the distributional consequences of institutional reforms. Competitive evaluation systems may advantage some employees while marginalizing others, producing uneven institutional outcomes. Effective governance therefore requires attention to inequality within organizations, not only between sectors or regions.

8.2. Institutional reform and development governance

The findings suggest that successful institutional reform depends on balancing efficiency-oriented mechanisms with conflict-containment capacities. Competition can enhance accountability and performance, but its social consequences must be mediated by institutional arrangements that preserve relational stability.

Development governance, therefore, should be understood as a process of institutional coordination rather than simple market expansion. Policies that integrate formal performance systems with informal relational mechanisms are more likely to sustain organizational adaptation and social cohesion.

8.3. Contributions and future research

This study contributes to development and conflict scholarship by providing causal evidence on how institutional logics shape organizational stability within a transitional economic context. It demonstrates that development outcomes depend not only on structural reforms but also on the institutional configurations that mediate their social consequences.

Future research should extend this analysis by examining subgroup heterogeneity, cross-national institutional variation, and longitudinal dynamics of organizational adaptation. Understanding how institutional reforms interact with inequality, labor mobility, and governance structures remains an important agenda for development research.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics

Variable name	Number of obs.	Mean	Median	Std.	Min.	Max.
Job satisfaction	1001	4.946	5	1.343	1	7
There is an atmosphere of simply following decisions made by upper management	1001	4.366	4	1.072	1	6
Avoiding conflict is considered the most important value in the company	1001	4.407	4	1.068	1	6
Decisions are made through behind-the-scenes negotiations rather than open discussion	1001	4.409	4	1.08	1	6
Everyone gets along well regardless of their rank or position	1001	4.209	4	1.201	1	6
People can speak their minds even to those in higher positions	1001	4.191	4	1.264	1	6
There is always lively and active exchange of opinions in the workplace	1001	4.358	4	1.137	1	6
Employees are encouraged to think with a long-term perspective rather than focusing only on immediate tasks	1001	4.333	4	1.164	1	6
Long-term achievements are valued more than short-term results	1001	4.408	4	1.137	1	6
Social responsibility is valued as much as profit	1001	4.396	4	1.166	1	6

(*Contd.*)

Variable name	Number of obs.	Mean	Median	Std.	Min.	Max.
Salary and benefits are determined by age and years of service	1001	4.223	4	1.271	1	6
It is assumed that employees will be employed until retirement	1001	4.23	4	1.297	1	6
The workplace encourages developing generalists rather than specialists	1001	4.419	4	1.109	1	6
Employees are expected to have unique and creative ideas	1001	4.396	4	1.149	1	6
Employees are encouraged to think flexibly without being bound by past customs or existing rules	1001	4.259	4	1.114	1	6
Clearly expressing one's own opinions is welcomed rather than just conforming to others	1001	4.322	4	1.118	1	6
Taking action first and thinking while moving forward is encouraged	1001	4.323	4	1.117	1	6
Quick decision-making is valued even if it is somewhat rough	1001	4.321	4	1.111	1	6
Speed and timing are valued over spending time to deliberate	1001	4.399	4	1.141	1	6
Final results are valued more than the work process	1001	4.49	5	1.073	1	6
Outperforming colleagues in competition is a basis for evaluation	1001	4.195	4	1.194	1	6
Effort is not recognized unless results are produced	1001	4.252	4	1.171	1	6
The team is united as one	1001	4.462	4	1.136	1	6
Those who prioritize harmony are valued more than those who act selfishly	1001	4.467	4	1.097	1	6
There is a sense of unity in working toward goals together	1001	4.403	4	1.143	1	6
Those who fail tend to be blamed	1001	4.119	4	1.233	1	6
There is a tendency not to accept people with different opinions	1001	3.952	4	1.277	1	6
It is easy to point out mistakes or shortcomings to other members in the workplace	1001	4.246	4	1.211	1	6
The workplace respects each individual's values	1001	4.402	4	1.134	1	6
People in various employment types (e.g., full-time, part-time, temporary) are respected as equal members of the workplace	1001	4.427	4	1.147	1	6
In our workplace, we understand and respect each other	1001	4.298	4	1.134	1	6
Working hours per a day	1001	7.05	7	1.666	1	13
Working days per week	1001	5.165	5	0.733	1	7
Age	1001	4.001	4	1.415	2	6
Income	1001	1.914	1	0.703	1	3
Industry	1001	10.13	9	5.942	1	22
Employment status	1001	4.924	5	3.223	1	12
Gender	1001	1.502	2	0.506	1	4
Marital status	1001	1.328	1	0.47	1	2
Parental status	1001	2.032	2	0.984	1	6
Educational attainment	1001	4.771	5	0.898	1	6
Occupation	1001	1.798	1	1.727	1	8

Table 2. Results of S, T, X, DR-Learner: harmony-based evaluation on job satisfaction

Method	ATE	StdError	CI95_low	CI95_high
S-Learner	0.1272	0.0053	0.1168	0.1376
T-Learner	0.1778	0.0283	0.1223	0.2333
X-Learner	0.1776	0.0235	0.1314	0.2237
DR-Learner	0.1888	0.0513	0.0884	0.2893

Table 3. Results of S, T, X, DR-Learner: competition-based evaluation on job satisfaction

Method	ATE	StdError	CI95_low	CI95_high
S-Learner	0.0308	0.0065	0.0180	0.0435
T-Learner	0.0325	0.0222	-0.0111	0.0760
X-Learner	0.0339	0.0192	-0.0037	0.0715
DR-Learner	0.0210	0.0749	-0.1259	0.1679

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