

Research on the Mechanism of City-level Industry-Education Consortium Empowering Key Elements of Vocational Education: A Multi-field Embeddedness Perspective

Feng Wu¹, Jie Lou^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages and Business, Shenzhen Polytechnic University, Shenzhen, China

*Correspondence: Jie Lou

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Abstract:

The city-level industry-education consortium (CIEC) represents China's flagship institutional innovation for deepening industry-education integration in vocational education. However, the mechanisms through which CIECs empower the five key pedagogical elements-major construction, curriculum systems, textbook development, faculty teams, and training bases-remain insufficiently theorized. This paper proposes a multi-field embeddedness framework, arguing that CIECs are simultaneously embedded in five fields: policy, economic, industrial, educational, and social. Within each field, distinct institutional logics operate-public governance logic (government), market profit logic (enterprises), industry agglomeration logic (industrial parks), industry-education integration logic (institutions), and social norm logic (the public). The paper further delineates five empowerment mechanisms through which these logics operationalize: policy chain extension, capital chain profit-seeking, industry chain through-linkage, talent chain coupling, and value chain enhancement. This framework contributes a novel theoretical lens for understanding CIEC governance and offers practical implications for strengthening vocational education's foundational elements.

Keywords:

City-Level Industry-education Consortium, Multi-Field Embeddedness, Institutional Logics, Vocational Education Key Elements, Industry-education Integration, China

1. Introduction

Vocational education in China has entered a phase of systemic transformation. The Ministry of Education's landmark Document No. 1 of 2026 explicitly identifies five key pedagogical elements-major construction (zhuanke jianshe), curriculum systems (kecheng tixi), textbook development (jiaocai kaifa), faculty teams (shizhi duiwu), and training bases (shixun jidi)-as the foundational pillars of vocational education reform [1,2]. These elements constitute the 'production function' of vocational education: majors define what is taught, curricula structure how it is taught, textbooks codify

teaching content, faculty deliver instruction, and training bases provide the authentic learning environments essential for skill formation [3].

Concurrently, the city-level industry-education consortium (shiyu chanjiao lianheti, hereafter CIEC) has emerged as the primary governance vehicle for operationalizing industry-education integration at the municipal scale. Anchored in industrial parks and mandated to bring together government agencies, vocational institutions, enterprises, and industry associations, CIECs are designed to create structural alignment between talent cultivation and regional industrial development [4,5]. By early 2026, multiple batches of national-level CIECs had been designated, covering major industrial regions across China [6].

Despite this dual policy push, a significant theoretical gap persists: how exactly do CIECs empower the five key pedagogical elements? Existing research has predominantly examined CIECs through conceptual innovation [5], symbiotic ecosystem configurations [6], and lenses of governance structure [7], yet the specific mechanisms linking CIEC operations to pedagogical element improvement remain undertheorized. Three limitations characterize the current literature. First, studies tend to treat CIECs as monolithic governance entities rather than as organizational forms simultaneously embedded in multiple social fields with distinct operating logics [8,9,10]. Second, the five key elements are frequently discussed in policy discourse but rarely analyzed as an integrated set within a coherent theoretical framework [1,3]. Third, the institutional logics driving different stakeholder participation in CIECs—government, enterprises, industrial parks, vocational institutions, and the broader public—are seldom systematically differentiated [11,12].

This paper addresses these gaps by posing the central research question: Through what mechanisms does the CIEC, as a multi-field embedded organizational form governed by multiple institutional logics, empower the five key elements of vocational education? To answer this question, the paper develops a multi-field embeddedness framework grounded in Granovetter's embeddedness theory [13], Bourdieu's field theory [14], and the institutional logics perspective [15,16]. The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 analyzes the five-field embeddedness of CIECs. Section 3 identifies five institutional logics operating across these fields. Section 4 elaborates five empowerment mechanisms, each mapping one logic onto the five key elements. Section 5 concludes with theoretical contributions and policy implications.

2. The Multi-field Embeddedness of City-level Industry-Education Consortia

The concept of embeddedness, originally articulated by Polanyi (1944) and substantially developed by Granovetter (1985), posits that economic action is embedded in ongoing networks of social relations [13]. Bourdieu's field theory extends this insight by conceptualizing society as composed of relatively autonomous fields—each with its own logic, stakes, and forms of capital—where actors compete for position and resources [14]. Lingard and Rawolle (2004) further developed the notion of cross-field effects to analyze how logics from one field (e.g., economy) permeate and reshape another field (e.g., education) [17]. This paper applies these theoretical resources to argue that the CIEC is not a self-contained organization but a cross-field nexus simultaneously embedded in five distinct fields, each contributing a specific 'chain' of resources, norms, and constraints.

2.1. Embeddedness in the Policy Field: The Policy Chain

The CIEC's primary embedding occurs in the policy field, structured by hierarchical administrative authority and public mandate. At the national level, the central government issues strategic directives-such as the 2022 Opinions on Deepening Modern Vocational Education System Reform and the 2024–2035 Education Powerhouse Plan-that authorize CIECs as legitimate governance instruments [4]. At the provincial and municipal levels, local governments translate these directives into operational frameworks, allocate fiscal resources, and establish performance evaluation systems. The 2026 Document No. 1 further specifies that provincial pilot regions must develop specialty planning aligned with industry, publish annual matching analysis reports, and implement 'traffic light' systems for major adjustment [1]. This policy chain (zhengce lian) connects national strategy to local implementation, providing CIECs with regulatory legitimacy, public funding, and accountability mechanisms. Critically, CIECs embedded in this field are subject to what the five-element integration theory terms 'strategic standards' set by the Party-state and 'progressive standards' set by education authorities [3].

2.2. Embeddedness in the Economic Field: The Capital Chain

CIECs are also embedded in the economic field, governed by market competition, profit maximization, and capital efficiency. Enterprises participate in CIECs not primarily out of educational philanthropy but as rational economic actors seeking returns on investment-whether through skilled labor supply, technological collaboration, tax incentives, or reputational enhancement [5,6]. This economic embedding generates a capital chain (ziben lian) flowing from enterprises to vocational institutions in the form of equipment donations, training facility co-investment, apprenticeship stipends, and R&D partnerships. The 2026 policy explicitly encourages enterprises to 'open technical standards, production resources, and occupational scenarios' and establishes mechanisms for 'cost-sharing and benefit-sharing' between enterprises and institutions [1]. However, as the five-element integration theory notes, enterprises occupy an auxiliary rather than dominant position in the vocational education system, and their participation is shaped by a calculus of 'comprehensive compensation' across talent acquisition, policy benefits, and platform access [3].

2.3. Embeddedness in the Industrial Field: The Industrial Chain

The third embedding field is the industrial field, structurally organized around industrial parks (chanye yuanqu) that serve as the spatial and functional anchors of CIECs [5]. Industrial parks concentrate enterprises along value chains, creating economies of agglomeration in technology, logistics, and labor markets. This industrial chain (chanye lian) embedding provides CIECs with three distinctive resources: first, spatial proximity between educational facilities and production sites, reducing the transaction costs of school-enterprise collaboration; second, demand aggregation, where clustered enterprises generate coherent, large-scale skill demand signals that are more actionable than fragmented firm-level requests; and third, technological spillovers, where innovations diffuse rapidly within the park ecosystem and can be absorbed into vocational curricula. The 2026 policy mandates that CIECs 'focus on key technology areas and construct industry-education integration practice centers within industrial parks' [1], institutionalizing this industrial embedding as a core CIEC function.

2.4. Embeddedness in the Educational Field: The Talent Chain

The educational field constitutes the CIEC's core operational domain, structured by pedagogical norms, accreditation standards, and professional communities. Vocational institutions embedded in this field are responsible for knowledge production and talent cultivation according to educational rather than purely economic criteria. This talent chain (rencai lian) embedding positions CIECs at the critical junction where industrial skill demands must be pedagogically translated into coherent learning progressions, assessment frameworks, and competency standards [3,11]. The 2026 policy's emphasis on 'linking specialty planning, curriculum reform, textbook development, faculty capacity enhancement, and training base construction according to the logic of skill formation and educational principles' [1] exemplifies the educational field's insistence that pedagogical integrity not be sacrificed to market responsiveness. Vocational institutions within CIECs thus navigate the tension between being 'implementers of training standards' (as per the five-element integration theory [3]) and autonomous professional actors.

2.5. Embeddedness in the Social Field: The Value Chain

The fifth and most diffuse embedding is the social field, encompassing community norms, public perceptions, family aspirations, and cultural valuations of vocational education. In China, vocational education has historically suffered from status deficits relative to academic education, with persistent perceptions of it as a 'second-tier' pathway [3,18]. This social embedding shapes CIEC effectiveness through two channels: demand-side effects, where family preferences and social norms influence student enrollment choices and thus the talent pool entering vocational programs; and legitimation effects, where public recognition (or its absence) affects the willingness of enterprises, faculty, and local governments to invest in CIEC initiatives. The 2026 policy's call for 'a comprehensive atmosphere supporting reform' [1] implicitly acknowledges that CIEC success depends partly on transforming the social valuation of vocational education—a task that transcends any single institutional actor.

3. Institutional Logics of CIEC Empowering Key Elements of Vocational Education

While the five-field embeddedness framework identifies the structural positioning of CIECs, the institutional logics perspective specifies the normative and cognitive frameworks through which actors in each field interpret their interests and guide their actions [19,20]. This section identifies five institutional logics corresponding to the five embedding fields and five key stakeholder groups within CIECs.

3.1. Government-end: Public Governance Logic

The public governance logic, primarily carried by central and local government agencies, frames vocational education as a public good essential for national human capital accumulation and economic competitiveness. This logic operates through three mechanisms: (a) standard-setting, where government establishes the regulatory architecture [19] for vocational education quality, exemplified by the 2026 Document No. 1's specification of criteria for major adjustment, curriculum design, and training base standards [1]; (b) resource allocation, where public funding, policy incentives, and administrative coordination are deployed to steer CIEC development; and (c) accountability systems, including performance evaluation, inspection regimes, and the

‘red-yellow card’ warning system for underperforming majors [1]. Within this logic, the five key elements are evaluated primarily by compliance with national standards, alignment with strategic industry priorities, and measurable outputs such as employment rates [19].

3.2. Enterprise-end: Market Profit Logic

The market profit logic positions human capital as a factor of production whose quality directly affects enterprise productivity and competitiveness. Enterprises participating in CIECs operate under this logic, evaluating their engagement through a return-on-investment calculus. The logic manifests through: (a) demand articulation, where enterprises specify skill requirements, technical competencies, and occupational standards that should inform vocational education design; (b) resource co-investment justified by anticipated returns in the form of qualified graduates, technological solutions, or policy benefits; and (c) competitive benchmarking, where CIEC outputs are measured against industry performance standards rather than educational metrics. Critically, the 2026 policy’s provisions for enterprise participation-‘opening technical standards, production resources, and occupational scenarios’ and ‘cost-sharing and benefit-sharing mechanisms’ [1]-represent attempts to align market profit logic with educational public good objectives through incentive-compatible institutional design.

3.3. Industrial Park-end: Industry Agglomeration Logic

The industry agglomeration logic is specific to the industrial park context that anchors CIECs. Unlike the firm-level market profit logic, agglomeration logic operates at the ecosystem level, prioritizing cluster competitiveness, supply chain integration, and regional industrial upgrading. Industrial parks under this logic function as collective actors seeking to: (a) secure a stable, high-quality skilled labor supply for the entire park ecosystem rather than any single enterprise; (b) attract investment and talent through enhanced regional innovation capacity and infrastructure; and (c) facilitate technology diffusion and industrial upgrading across firms within the park. The 2026 policy’s mandate for CIECs to ‘construct industry-education integration practice centers within industrial parks’ and to ‘focus on key technology areas’ [1] reflects this logic’s emphasis on shared infrastructure and collective benefits over firm-specific interests.

3.4. Institution-end: Industry-Education Integration Logic

The industry-education integration logic is carried primarily by vocational institutions and embodies the pedagogical imperative to synthesize industrial relevance with educational quality. This logic insists that: (a) industry engagement must serve pedagogical purposes, not merely provide labor or equipment; (b) curriculum and textbook development must transform industrial knowledge into cognitively appropriate learning sequences; (c) faculty development must cultivate ‘dual-qualified’ (shuangshi xing) teachers who command both pedagogical expertise and industry competence; and (d) training bases must scaffold progressive skill development from simulation to authentic production [1,3]. The 2026 policy’s introduction of a ‘three-leader’ organizational mechanism-where heads of leading enterprises, high-level institutions, and industry organizations jointly design and oversee reform [1]-represents an institutional innovation for operationalizing this integration logic within CIEC governance.

3.5. Public-end: Social Norm Logic

The social norm logic operates through the broader public sphere, encompassing cultural valuations, social expectations, and the perceived status hierarchy between academic and vocational education. This logic shapes CIEC effectiveness through: (a) enrollment effects, where negative social perceptions of vocational education reduce the quality and quantity of the applicant pool; (b) labor market signaling, where employer valuation of vocational credentials affects graduate employment outcomes and thus reinforces or challenges social perceptions; and (c) political legitimacy, where public support for vocational education investment depends on societal recognition of its value. The 2026 policy's emphasis on 'cultivating great-country craftsmen, skilled craftsmen, and high-skilled talent' and creating 'a comprehensive atmosphere supporting reform' [1] reflects recognition that institutional and policy interventions must be complemented by transformations in the social valuation of vocational education—a domain where formal policy instruments have limited direct reach.

4. Mechanisms of CIEC Empowering the Five Key Elements of Vocational Education

This section integrates the multi-field embeddedness framework and the five institutional logics to articulate the specific empowerment mechanisms through which CIECs strengthen the five key elements: major construction, curriculum systems, textbook development, faculty teams, and training bases. Each mechanism maps one institutional logic onto all five elements, revealing how different logics generate distinct empowerment pathways for each element.

4.1. Policy Chain Extension Mechanism

The policy chain extension mechanism operates through the hierarchical transmission of government authority from national strategy to municipal implementation, channeling public governance logic into pedagogical improvement. For major construction, this mechanism enables data-driven dynamic adjustment: provincial authorities, as mandated by the 2026 policy, compile and publish annual analyses of specialty-industry alignment and 'three lists' of priority majors, upgrade-needed majors, and restricted majors, providing CIECs with evidence-based guidance for major portfolio optimization [1]. For curriculum systems, the mechanism operates through standards-guided modularization: national and provincial curriculum standards, developed through CIEC-coordinated committees incorporating industry input, establish competency maps that translate occupational standards into learning outcomes, enabling the curriculum to 'follow industrial upgrading and technological iteration' [1].

For textbook development, the policy chain extension mechanism institutionalizes the 'three-editor' collaborative model where enterprise technical experts, institutional academic leaders, and industry authority experts jointly develop teaching materials, ensuring simultaneous policy compliance, industrial relevance, and pedagogical quality [1]. For faculty teams, public governance logic empowers through systematized professional development: the policy-mandated establishment of school-enterprise teacher development centers, coupled with competency inventories disaggregated into theoretical knowledge, practical skills, teaching ability, and research capacity dimensions, provides the institutional infrastructure for continuous

faculty improvement [1]. For training bases, the mechanism enables coordinated infrastructure investment: using budgetary allocations, local government special bonds, and ultra-long-term special government bonds, CIECs can pool resources across institutions and enterprises to construct shared, standards-compliant training facilities that individual schools could not independently afford [1].

4.2. Capital Chain Profit-seeking Mechanism

The capital chain profit-seeking mechanism channels enterprise market profit logic into vocational education investment through incentive-compatible institutional arrangements. For major construction, this mechanism operates through enterprise-driven specialty co-design: leading enterprises within CIECs participate in forecasting skill demand for emerging sectors (e.g., low-altitude economy, AI, advanced manufacturing) and co-develop new specialty proposals, with the 2026 policy allowing ‘distinctive specialties to carry the name of schools, enterprises, or regions in brackets’ [1]-effectively allowing enterprises to brand co-developed majors, generating reputational returns on their investment.

For curriculum systems, enterprises contribute through task-based curriculum decomposition: CIEC-facilitated partnerships enable enterprises to open their ‘typical production tasks’ for occupational analysis and job-shadowing, allowing curriculum developers to ‘decompose and map corresponding skill points and knowledge points’ and ‘construct curriculum competency maps’ [1]. For textbook development, the profit-seeking mechanism manifests in enterprise resource conversion: enterprises contribute technical manuals, process documents, quality inspection handbooks, and equipment specifications that are pedagogically transformed into ‘project-based, case-based, and modular textbooks’ with accompanying ‘work plans, quality inspection manuals, and process document checklists’ [1]-materials whose development costs are partly offset by the enterprise's interest in shaping graduate competencies.

For faculty teams, the mechanism operates through bidirectional talent circulation: enterprises provide technical experts as part-time instructors (*chanye daoshi*), gaining access to institutional research capabilities and a pipeline for recruiting graduates, while institutional faculty undertake enterprise placements that enhance their industry currency-the ‘dual-qualified teacher pipeline’ [1,5]. For training bases, market logic drives co-investment models: enterprises contribute equipment, production lines, and technical personnel to shared training facilities, motivated by the prospect of training future employees on enterprise-standard equipment and identifying high-potential recruits through extended apprenticeship interactions [1].

4.3. Industrial Chain Through-linkage Mechanism

The industrial chain through-linkage mechanism leverages the spatial concentration and ecosystem characteristics of industrial parks to create coherent alignment between vocational education and regional industrial structures. For major construction, this mechanism enables cluster-responsive specialty portfolios: rather than individual enterprises dictating isolated specialties, CIECs embedded in industrial parks can design integrated specialty clusters that map onto the park's full value chain-for instance, a new energy vehicle industrial park supporting linked specialties in battery technology, electric drive systems, intelligent control, and after-sales service, creating complementary rather than competing programs.

For curriculum systems, agglomeration logic generates cross-enterprise curriculum integration: the concentration of multiple enterprises along a value chain within the park enables curriculum designers to synthesize skill requirements across firms, identifying common foundational competencies while accommodating firm-specific specializations through modular course structures. The 2026 policy's advocacy for 'comprehensive, modular, and project-based curriculum development' [1] aligns with this approach. For textbook development, the mechanism enables multi-enterprise case libraries: industrial parks provide multiple real-world cases, production scenarios, and technological applications that can be compiled into rich, diversified teaching materials reflecting the full spectrum of industry practice rather than a single firm's perspective.

For faculty teams, agglomeration logic supports park-wide faculty development ecosystems: CIECs facilitate cross-enterprise rotation programs where faculty gain exposure to multiple firms' technologies and processes, developing broader industry literacy than single-enterprise placements allow. For training bases, the mechanism is perhaps most powerful: industrial parks enable 'shared infrastructure governance' where training facilities-such as advanced manufacturing workshops, testing laboratories, and digital simulation centers-are constructed as park-level public goods serving multiple enterprises and institutions simultaneously, achieving economies of scale and equipment utilization rates impossible for individual school-enterprise dyads [1,5].

4.4. Talent Chain Coupling Mechanism

The talent chain coupling mechanism represents the educational field's distinctive contribution: ensuring that industrial inputs are pedagogically transformed rather than mechanically adopted, coupling knowledge production and talent cultivation to industrial needs while maintaining educational integrity. For major construction, this mechanism operates through competency-based specialty design: vocational institutions within CIECs translate industrial skill demands into coherent professional competency frameworks specifying the knowledge, skills, and dispositions graduates should possess, ensuring that new specialties represent genuine educational programs rather than narrow training packages.

For curriculum systems, the coupling mechanism manifests in learning progression design: institutional faculty structure curricula as developmental sequences where students progress from foundational concepts through simulated practice to authentic production tasks, with the 2026 policy's mandated practice ratios (no less than 50% for secondary and higher vocational programs, 60% for vocational undergraduate programs [1]) operationalized through pedagogically scaffolded rather than merely time-based arrangements. For textbook development, the logic insists on pedagogical translation: the 'three-editor' model ensures that enterprise technical documents are not simply reproduced but transformed into didactically appropriate materials that build conceptual understanding alongside procedural competence [1].

For faculty teams, the coupling mechanism prioritizes integrated professional identity: CIEC-facilitated faculty development cultivates educators who are neither pure academics nor industry technicians but 'dual-qualified' professionals capable of bridging theory and practice, with the 2026 policy's faculty competency inventories disaggregating practical ability, teaching ability, and research ability as distinct but interdependent dimensions [1]. For training bases, the mechanism emphasizes

pedagogical functionality: CIEC-coordinated training facilities are designed as learning environments that scaffold progressive skill development, with clear articulation between simulation-based training (for safety-critical or high-cost operations), campus-based production workshops (for routine skill practice), and enterprise-based apprenticeships (for authentic work experience)-the 2026 policy's 'virtual simulation training base' initiative exemplifies this pedagogical design principle [1].

4.5. Value Chain Enhancement Mechanism

The value chain enhancement mechanism addresses the social and cultural dimension of vocational education empowerment: transforming public perceptions, correcting cognitive biases, and enhancing the social valuation of vocational pathways. Unlike the previous four mechanisms that operate primarily through institutional and organizational channels, this mechanism works through symbolic, cultural, and discursive interventions. For major construction, the mechanism manifests through prestige signaling: CIECs co-branded with leading enterprises and high-profile industrial parks can elevate the perceived status of vocational specialties, countering the 'second-tier' stigma. The 2026 policy's provision allowing specialties to carry enterprise or regional names [1] serves this signaling function, associating vocational programs with recognized industrial brands.

For curriculum systems, social norm logic shapes content through responsiveness to societal values: CIEC-facilitated curriculum development incorporates not only technical competencies but also professional ethics, civic responsibility, and innovation capacity-competencies that align vocational education with broader societal expectations of holistic human development rather than narrow skill acquisition. The 2026 policy's requirements for 'ideological-political elements reflecting industry characteristics and professional features' and 'general education courses in STEM, cultural foundations, and AI' alongside 'humanities and social science courses for production and engineering specialties' [1] exemplify this broadening of vocational curriculum.

For textbook development, the mechanism operates through quality signaling and accessibility: CIEC-produced textbooks that visibly demonstrate industry collaboration (e.g., co-branded covers, authentic case studies, enterprise-endorsed competency frameworks) serve as tangible evidence of vocational education quality for students, parents, and employers, gradually reshaping perceptions. For faculty teams, social norm logic drives professional recognition: CIEC mechanisms that elevate enterprise technical experts to recognized instructor status-with the 2026 policy calling for 'teacher qualification recognition mechanisms for enterprise personnel, especially great-country craftsmen and skilled masters with teaching experience, and inclusion in the teacher title evaluation system' [1]-enhance the social status and professional legitimacy of vocational educators.

For training bases, the mechanism generates demonstration effects: CIEC-sponsored open days, skills competitions, community engagement events, and media coverage of state-of-the-art training facilities challenge negative stereotypes by making visible the technological sophistication and career opportunities within contemporary vocational education [1,3]. Collectively, these interventions constitute a value chain enhancement that, while the slowest to materialize among the five

mechanisms, is arguably the most consequential for the long-term sustainability of CIEC-empowered vocational education.

5. Conclusions

This paper has developed a multi-field embeddedness framework to theorize the mechanisms through which city-level industry-education consortiums empower the five key elements of vocational education: major construction, curriculum systems, textbook development, faculty teams, and training bases. The framework posits that CIECs are simultaneously embedded in five distinct social fields-policy, economic, industrial, educational, and social-each governed by a specific institutional logic (public governance, market profit, industry agglomeration, industry-education integration, and social norm, respectively) and each generating a distinctive empowerment mechanism (policy chain extension, capital chain profit-seeking, industrial chain through-linkage, talent chain coupling, and value chain enhancement).

Three theoretical contributions emerge from this analysis. First, the framework advances beyond single-logic or dual-logic accounts by demonstrating that effective CIEC governance requires the simultaneous operation of five logics, each contributing irreplaceable resources and constraints. Second, the framework specifies the elemental mechanisms through which macro-level institutional logics translate into micro-level pedagogical improvement, bridging the persistent gap between policy design and classroom practice in vocational education research. Third, by incorporating the social field and social norm logic, the framework recognizes that vocational education reform is not solely a technical or organizational challenge but fundamentally a cultural one requiring transformation of public perceptions and social valuations.

Practically, the framework yields differentiated policy implications. For CIECs in regions with strong industrial bases (e.g., the Yangtze River Delta), policy should emphasize mechanisms 2 and 3 (capital chain and industrial chain), leveraging existing enterprise density and agglomeration economies. For regions with weaker industrial bases, mechanism 1 (policy chain extension) assumes greater importance, requiring targeted government investment in infrastructure and incentives. For all CIECs, mechanism 5 (value chain enhancement) demands sustained attention, as social perception change operates on generational rather than policy-cycle timescales. The 2026 Document No. 1's comprehensive reform agenda provides the policy architecture for implementing these differentiated strategies; the multi-field embeddedness framework provides the theoretical architecture for understanding them.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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