

Too attached to speak up? It depends: How supervisor–subordinate guanxi and perceived job control influence upward constructive voice



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ABSTRACT

In general, reciprocal supervisor–subordinate relationships (high leader–member exchange relationships) provide a supportive context for employees to speak up. In China however, supervisor–subordinate relationships or *guanxi* are characterized by affective characteristics and hierarchical characteristics which may respectively facilitate and inhibit employee voice. We draw on Guanxi Theory to develop a model of differential effects of two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* (affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor) on voice. Results of a multi-source, lagged field study demonstrated that the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of *guanxi* facilitated and the deference to supervisor dimension of *guanxi* inhibited voice, when employees experienced low job control. We discuss ways these findings extend our understanding of the nature of supervisor–subordinate relationships, *guanxi*, and their impact on voice.

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1. Introduction

Upward constructive voice is the voluntary expression of ideas, information, or opinions that aim to benefit the organization (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995). Upward constructive voice is important because suggestions for change that are directed at the supervisor can contribute to organizational effectiveness and build competitive advantage (Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013) by facilitating innovation (LePine & Van Dyne, 1998; Nemeth & Staw, 1989), learning (Edmondson, 1999, 2003), and decision making (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Unfortunately, employees are often reluctant to speak up (Milliken, Morrison, & Hewlin, 2003; Perlow & Williams, 2003; Pinder & Harlos, 2001), and so scholars have examined different ways to promote upward constructive voice (hence referred to as “voice”).

Research demonstrates that the quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships is a key predictor of voice (for a review, see Morrison, 2011). Specifically, empirical work consistently shows that leader–member exchange (LMX; Liden, Wayne, & Stillwell,

1993), which represents a reciprocal and mutually beneficial supervisor–subordinate relationship, facilitates speaking up (e.g., Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008; Detert & Burris, 2007; Van Dyne, Kamdar, & Joireman, 2008). These positive effects occur because LMX reduces employee fears about the negative consequences of voice and strengthens employee expectations that supervisors will be responsive to voice and their suggestions will make a difference.

Regrettably, our current understanding of the effects of supervisor–subordinate relationships on voice is based primarily on social exchange arguments about contributions and reciprocity from a prototypically Western perspective. This is problematic because different cultures tend to develop different types of supervisor–subordinate relationships (Chen, Friedman, Yu, Fang, & Lu, 2009; Hui & Graen, 1997; Khatri, 2011). Specifically, indigenous Chinese theory argues and empirical work demonstrates that supervisor–subordinate relationships in Chinese cultural contexts are based on *guanxi*, defined as the “informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bound by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norm of *guanxi* such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation” (Chen & Chen, 2004, p. 306).

Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* relationships are guided by two sets of rules and obligations that differ from LMX norms and are

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particularly salient in Chinese cultural contexts (Chen, Chen, & Huang, 2013; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009).¹ One dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes affective connections (i.e., affective attachment to the supervisor). In this case, subordinate and supervisor are affectively involved with one another and they accept the obligation to abide by the rules of mutual care, understanding, and altruism (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). A second dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes the hierarchical nature of the relationship (i.e., deference to the supervisor) (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). In this case, subordinate and supervisor emphasize different but reciprocal obligations toward one another. The subordinate accepts the obligation to exhibit deference, obedience, and loyalty, and the supervisor accepts the obligation to show paternalistic consideration. Focusing on these affective and hierarchical dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi is important because guanxi is very influential in Chinese cultural contexts (for initial evidence, see Chen, Friedman et al., 2009) and differs from typical conceptualizations of LMX supervisor–subordinate relationships (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009; Khatri, 2011). Also, as we posit in more detail later, the rules and obligations associated with these two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi may have paradoxical implications for employee voice.

Our purpose in this article is to address the question of when, how, and why the emphasis an employee places on these dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi influences voice in Chinese cultural contexts. We draw on Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) as the theoretical framework for our model. Guanxi Theory posits that the nature of a dyad's guanxi determines the rules and obligations that govern dyadic interactions (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Hwang, 1987). Specifically, we expect that the rules of mutual care, understanding, and altruism associated with the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi facilitate employee voice. In contrast, we expect that the rules of obedience and loyalty associated with the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi inhibit employee voice. Furthermore, guanxi theorizing argues that the favor exchange that characterizes guanxi can function as a mechanism to gain information, influence, and resources (Hwang, 1987; Park & Luo, 2001; Xin & Pearce, 1996), and so guanxi is especially salient when individuals (or organizations) lack influence and the environment seems uncertain (Bian, 1997; Guo & Miller, 2010; Li, Poppo, & Zhou, 2008). Building on this theorizing, we propose that the nature of supervisor–subordinate guanxi more strongly influences voice behavior when employees experience low (rather than high) job control, defined as the extent to which employees think that they can control issues and events that influence their work (Karasek, 1979; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008). Fig. 1 displays our conceptual model.

The present study aims to contribute to the voice and guanxi literatures. First, by contrasting indigenous Chinese perspectives on supervisor–subordinate relationships (i.e., guanxi) with prototypical perspectives adopted in Western cultural contexts (i.e., LMX), we expand our understanding of the impact of supervisor–subordinate relationships on employee voice. Second, drawing on indigenous Chinese guanxi theorizing (Bian, 1997; Li et al., 2008; Xin &

Pearce, 1996), we identify job control as an important boundary condition for understanding when supervisor–subordinate guanxi dimensions affect voice in Chinese cultural contexts. Finally, we also contribute to the guanxi literature by expanding the nomological network of guanxi and by demonstrating that supervisor–subordinate guanxi can have both positive and negative effects on employee behavior (i.e., employee voice) (Chen et al., 2013). Taken together, the overarching objective of this study is to employ the Chinese indigenous perspective of guanxi to contextualize the link between supervisor–subordinate relationships and voice and to contribute to a more global (rather than mostly Western) understanding of this linkage (Chen, Leung, & Chen, 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2006; Whetten, 2009).

In what follows, we first introduce Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) and argue that using this framework as a theoretical lens provides a deeper understanding of when, how, and why the different dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi are related to employee voice. We then present the justification for our predictions, followed by the method and results. We conclude by discussing the implications of our results for theory and practice, with an emphasis on how the unique patterns in our findings change our understanding of the linkage between supervisor–subordinate relationships and voice in Chinese cultural contexts and beyond.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

2.1. Guanxi theory

Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) specifies the cultural origins of the Chinese indigenous construct of guanxi and elaborates on the rich and complex nature of guanxi. Specifically, Chen and Chen (2004) defined guanxi as an “informal, particularistic personal connection between two individuals who are bounded by an implicit psychological contract to follow the social norms of guanxi such as maintaining a long-term relationship, mutual commitment, loyalty, and obligation” (p. 306). Guanxi originates in Confucianist thought, which posits that people fundamentally exist in relationship to others (King, 1991; Liang, 1988) and need to fulfil guanxi rules and obligations to maintain harmony in hierarchically structured relationships (Chen et al., 2013). Guanxi ties are modelled according to family relationships (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009) and emulate the degree of closeness and hierarchical ordering in the five traditional relationships (*wu lun*: emperor–subject, father–son, husband–wife, elder brother–younger brother, and friend–friend) which are central to Confucianist thought (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Chuang, 1998; Hong, Zhu, & White, 2013). Specifically, guanxi relationships can be characterized horizontally based on affective attachment and closeness to the self as well as hierarchically based on relative social prestige and position (Chen et al., 2013; Hwang, 1987).

Drawing on this Confucianist heritage, Chen, Friedman et al. (2009) conceptualized supervisor–subordinate guanxi as a multi-dimensional construct that has both affective and hierarchical dimensions. Specifically, the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi is defined as the degree of emotional connection, understanding, and willingness to care for the supervisor across varied circumstances (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). This dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes rules and obligations of mutual care, understanding, and altruism. The more affectively close the relationship between supervisor and employee, the more each feels obliged to care for the other, tries to understand the other, and grants favors requested by the other (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009).

¹ We acknowledge a third dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi identified by Chen, Friedman et al. (2009) who defined personal-life inclusion as the degree to which subordinates and supervisors include each other in their private or family life. Personal-life inclusion emphasizes sharing meals, paying regular visits, and exchanging gifts. Given that our research focuses on the implications of guanxi for voice behavior at work, the personal-life inclusion dimension of guanxi has less relevance to our research because it focuses primarily on relationships outside of work (Smith et al., 2014). For the same reason, our approach differs from leader–member guanxi (LMG; Law, Wong, Wang, & Wang, 2000) which also emphasizes non-work social exchanges based on gift giving and dinner invitations (Chen et al., 2013; Law et al., 2000).

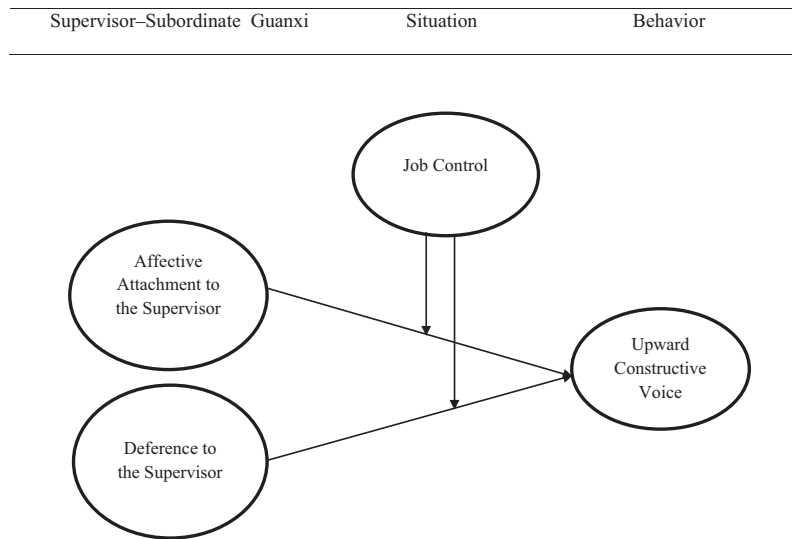


Fig. 1. Hypothesized model.

In contrast, the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi is defined as the degree of obedience and devotion toward the supervisor (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). This dimension of supervisor–subordinate guanxi emphasizes obligations based on the role in the relationship, such that the subordinate is obliged to exhibit deference and the supervisor is obliged to offer paternalistic consideration. The more employees characterize their guanxi as hierarchical in nature, the more they feel obliged to show loyalty and the more they expect their supervisor to provide paternalistic consideration in return (Chen et al., 2013). Each of these two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi is different from the Western emphasis on tit-for-tat and balanced supervisor–subordinate relationships as represented by LMX.

Having elaborated on the cultural origins of supervisor–subordinate guanxi, a key remaining question is: Why do people regulate their behavior based on guanxi rules and obligations, and when is this most likely? Guanxi theorizing sheds light on this issue by discussing guanxi in terms of two other essential features of Chinese interpersonal interaction: face and reciprocity norms (Hwang, 1987). Face (or *mianzi*) refers to the social prestige or respectability gained by properly fulfilling role obligations (Ho, 1976). Reciprocity norms (or *renqing*) refer to the reciprocal interactions necessary for getting along in Chinese cultural contexts (Hwang, 1987; Liu, Friedman, & Chi, 2005). Scholars have suggested that Chinese individuals abide by guanxi rules and obligations because this allows both parties to save face (*mianzi*) through the proper exchange of affect and deference (Hwang, 1987; Luo, 1997). In addition, following guanxi rules and obligations builds mutual indebtedness based on anticipated reciprocity (*renqing*) that can be called on in the future. Closer guanxi connections make it more likely that the guanxi relationships emphasize obligation (*renqing*), as well as affection and emotional understanding (*ganqing*) (Chen & Chen, 2004; Guo & Miller, 2010).

The favor exchange that characterizes guanxi facilitates the accumulation of social capital (e.g., face, *renqing*) and also provides information, influence, and resources that give people a sense of control during times of uncertainty and limited access to resources (Chang, 2011; Hwang, 1987; Peng & Luo, 2000; Tsui & Farh, 1997). Honoring guanxi rules and obligations facilitates relational and economic certainty (Hong et al., 2013), and guanxi ties are especially salient when individuals lack personal influence in uncertain environments (Bian, 1997; Luo, 1997).

2.2. Supervisor–subordinate guanxi and upward constructive voice

Upward constructive voice is the voluntary expression of ideas, information, or opinions directed at the supervisor and aimed at effecting organizationally functional change (Maynes & Podsakoff, 2014; Van Dyne et al., 1995). In Chinese cultural contexts, the affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor dimensions of guanxi should be especially important predictors of voice behavior because “Confucius advised that social interaction should begin with an assessment of the role relationship between oneself and others” (Hwang, 2000, p. 168). Consistent with this emphasis, we argue that the nature of supervisor–subordinate guanxi should predict employee voice, because guanxi rules and obligations influence employee beliefs about the appropriateness and interpersonal risks of speaking up with suggestions for change and whether speaking up will be effective. According to Morrison (2011, 2014), these beliefs about voice are key to whether employees speak up to their supervisor. Below we develop different arguments for how the two dimensions of guanxi will be related to voice. We first consider how and why the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi is related to voice.

Overall, we expect a positive relationship between the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and employee voice behavior. This is because the guanxi rules and obligations of mutual care, understanding, and altruism (affective attachment to the supervisor) should give employees confidence that they can maintain the face of the supervisor while expressing their suggestions and that the supervisor will respond favorably (Chen & Chen, 2004; see also Hwang, 1999: “favoring the intimate”). These positive expectations are essential for employees to be willing to speak up (Morrison, 2011). Furthermore, those who emphasize the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi should think that voice entails limited interpersonal risks to the supervisor–subordinate relationship because their guanxi obliges the supervisor to show respect and consider the employee’s perspective (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). The mutual care, understanding, and altruism that characterize affective attachment to the supervisor create a sense of understanding and trust between the two members of the dyad and help both individuals save one another’s face (Hwang, 1987). Accordingly, even though voice behavior can trigger fear and a sense of (inter)

personal risk (Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009), the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi should help employees to feel comfortable sharing their opinions, concerns, and ideas.

Consistent with the above theoretical arguments, research demonstrates that relational closeness, genuine care, and cooperative interdependence—core attributes of the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi—facilitate constructive confrontation and controversy in Chinese cultural contexts (Leung, Brew, Zhang, & Zhang, 2011; Tjosvold, Hui, & Sun, 2004; Wang, Leung, & Zhou, 2014). For example, Tjosvold and Su (2007) demonstrated that Chinese employees discuss issues openly when their goals and needs are compatible with those of others (i.e., cooperative interdependence). In addition, affect-based trust—a key component of Chinese affective ties (Chen & Chen, 2004) and communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 1979; McAllister, 1995)—allows employees to share their ideas because their level of interpersonal anxiety is low and they have a sense of open communication (Chua, Morris, & Ingram, 2010; Chua, Morris, & Mor, 2012). Thus, we predicted:

Hypothesis 1. The affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi is positively related to employee upward constructive voice.

Overall, we expect a negative relationship between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and employee voice behavior. This is because guanxi rules and obligations in hierarchical relationships require employees to emulate, obey, and defer to the supervisor in return for support and resources (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). These guanxi obligations of obedience and “respecting the superior” (Hwang, 1999, 2000) suggest that voice is inappropriate and disrespectful when directed upward to a superior in a hierarchical relationship. In this relationship context, speaking up to the supervisor threatens a harmonious supervisor–subordinate relationship and jeopardizes the face of the employee as well as the face of the supervisor (Chang & Holt, 1994). Thus, voice is risky because it can suggest a lack of respect for the supervisor’s standing or status (Burris, 2012) and may violate the guanxi rules of obedience and loyalty. This is especially problematic because employees in deferential guanxi relationships receive support and resources from the supervisor only when they exhibit ongoing obedience (Brew & Cairns, 2004). Thus, employees who emphasize the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi not only believe that voice is futile and interpersonally risky, but they are also likely to believe that voice would undermine their opportunities to obtain support and resources from their supervisor. In sum, we expect a negative relationship between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice behavior because the proactive and change-oriented nature of voice behavior is risky (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009) and incompatible with the rules and obligations of this guanxi dimension.

Empirical research provides indirect support for these arguments. When employees value asymmetric relationships, such as when they have high power distance beliefs, they are less likely to participate proactively in decision making and they are less likely to engage in voice (Li & Sun, 2015; Zhang, Huai, & Xie, 2015). For example, compared to employees who endorse low power distance beliefs, employees who endorse high power distance beliefs react less negatively when they are denied the opportunity to speak up and participate in decision making (Brockner et al., 2001). This is because they assume that they should not question the supervisor or make suggestions. In addition, recent investigations demonstrate that Chinese employees are less likely to offer their change-oriented ideas to supervisors who are viewed as authoritarian in their leadership (Li & Sun, 2015; Zhang et al.,

2015) and this negative relationship is especially likely when employees endorse high power distance beliefs (Li & Sun, 2015). Thus, we predicted a negative relationship:

Hypothesis 2. The deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi is negatively related to employee upward constructive voice.

2.3. The moderating role of job control

Throughout Chinese history, periods of bureaucratic control have curtailed individual’s access to resources (e.g., state control of job assignments, Bian, 1997) and rapid economic transformations have created uncertainty about the path to success (e.g., restricted institutional support, Xin & Pearce, 1996). During times of uncertainty and limited access to resources, the favor exchange that characterizes guanxi can provide information, influence, and resources that give people a sense of control (Chang, 2011; Hwang, 1987; Peng & Luo, 2000; Tsui & Farh, 1997). As a result, even though Confucius originally envisioned a society where individuals cultivate relationships based on face and *renqing* (for the sake of the relationship), guanxi relationships also function as mechanisms for obtaining “resources or protection not otherwise available” (Xin & Pearce, 1996, p. 1641). Because guanxi allows individuals to secure access to resources and gain a sense of control, individuals are especially likely to reinforce their guanxi relationships and rely on them (e.g., respectively by honoring guanxi rules and obligations and by calling upon reciprocity and understanding; see Chen & Chen, 2004) when such access and control is curtailed. In other words, when confronted with uncertainty and limited access to resources, individuals are acutely aware of the importance of their guanxi for “survival” and are more likely to regulate their behavior so it is consistent with the nature of their guanxi relationships.

Consistent with these historical arguments, empirical work demonstrates that the utility of guanxi is more salient when contextual factors constrain personal or organizational influence (e.g., Bian, 1997; Guo & Miller, 2010; Luo, Huang, & Wang, 2012; Xin & Pearce, 1996). For example, research shows that managerial ties in China (i.e., guanxi) have stronger implications for firm performance when firms face environmental uncertainty and constraints, presumably because executives can call upon these ties for information, influence, and resources (e.g., Li et al., 2008; Peng & Luo, 2000). As another example, Bian (1997) demonstrated that strong guanxi ties were especially important for job search success in China during the 90’s when job seekers had little influence over the bureaucratic system of job assignments by the state. Similarly, Xin and Pearce (1996) showed that executives at private companies—which typically encounter more uncertainty and receive less institutional support compared to state-owned enterprises—were especially likely to recognize the importance of guanxi as a buffer against threats and were more likely to reinforce their guanxi (e.g., by engaging in unreciprocated gift giving). Furthermore, Guo and Miller (2010) showed that Chinese entrepreneurs—who lack influence and face uncertainty—relied heavily on guanxi to gain access to resources that were essential for their business. Taken together, the above theorizing and empirical evidence show that when individuals or organizations experience uncertainty or sense a lack of influence, they become highly aware of the importance of guanxi. Because of this increased salience of their guanxi relationships, they are especially likely to regulate their behavior according to the nature of their guanxi (e.g., by means of gift giving, calling upon favors) as a means of strengthening and capitalizing on their guanxi relationships.

Building on the above guanxi theorizing and empirical results, we argue that employee perceptions of job control, defined as the extent to which employees think that they can control issues and events that influence their work (Karasek, 1979; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), moderate the effects of supervisor–subordinate guanxi on voice. When job control is low and employees lack information, influence, and resources (Karasek, 1979), they are highly aware of the value of their supervisor–subordinate guanxi and should be especially likely to regulate their voice behavior in a manner that is consistent with the nature of their guanxi relationship and this should strengthen the relationship between supervisor–subordinate guanxi and voice.

As argued in our prior hypotheses, we expect that the nature of the employee's supervisor–subordinate guanxi determines how they regulate their voice behavior. Those who emphasize the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi should generally feel confident that their supervisor will respond favorably to their change-oriented suggestions. When these employees are faced with low job control, they are especially likely to speak up and call upon their supervisor's support and understanding (i.e., capitalizing on their guanxi). Similarly, those who emphasize the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi should generally be hesitant to speak up because this violates their guanxi rules of obedience and loyalty. When these employees experience low job control, they are especially unlikely to speak up (i.e., reinforcing their guanxi). Refraining from speaking up allows these employees to strengthen their mutual obligations and secure commitment to future favor exchanges (Hwang, 1987) which help them deal with the lack of personal influence due to low job control (Hong et al., 2013; Luo, 1997).

Conversely, when job control is high, employees feel they can cope with their work (Schaubroeck & Merritt, 1997). Accordingly, their guanxi with their supervisor is relatively less important to accomplishing the work and they need not rely on their guanxi as the basis of whether or not they engage in voice behavior. Thus, we expect that when job control is high, the relationship between supervisor–subordinate guanxi and voice behavior will be weaker (than when job control is low). Regulating behavior according to guanxi (e.g., by adhering to rules of obedience, by calling upon reciprocity and understanding) demands energy and incurs reciprocal obligations so employees are less likely to do this when their supervisor–subordinate relationship is less important for accomplishing their job, such as when they experience high job control. Prior empirical work provides indirect evidence for this dynamic. For example, Li et al. (2008) showed that when firms did not experience environmental uncertainty, managerial ties (i.e., guanxi) were not important for performance. Similarly, Guo and Miller (2010) reported that when entrepreneurs experienced high control over the resources and inputs that were necessary for their business, their guanxi relationships with government officials were less consequential for their activities.

Consistent with the above arguments, we expect that an employee's sense of job control will function as a moderator of the guanxi–voice relationships advanced in *Hypotheses 1 and 2*. Specifically, we argue that job control will moderate the positive relationship between the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice, such that this relationship is stronger when job control is low, and weaker when job control is high. Whereas the mutual care, understanding, and altruism that are characteristic of the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi generally create a safe environment for employees to speak up (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009), we expect that employees are especially likely to capitalize on this dimension of guanxi and engage in voice, when they lack job control. This is because the lack of perceived job control means they cannot personally influence important events and issues at work

and they need to rely more heavily on their affective tie with their supervisor to enable them to speak up and alter their situation (Bian, 1997; Guo & Miller, 2010).

Indeed, Chen and Chen (2004) argued that the use of guanxi—by means of a favor request, such as when asking the supervisor to consider voice—“is saved for most needy times, when there are non-routine problems and difficulties that one cannot resolve by oneself through normal channels” (p. 318). Thus, we expect that employees are especially likely to rely on their affective tie when they most need it, such as when they experience low job control. In contrast, when job control is high, and employees feel they can cope with issues and events at work, it will be less important for them to rely on the affective attachment dimension of their supervisor–subordinate guanxi and the relationship between guanxi and voice will be weaker.

Existing empirical work provides initial evidence supporting this argument. For example, Wang et al. (2014) demonstrated that Chinese employees with a tendency to promote mutually beneficial relationships were more likely to believe that communicating their concerns was safe and they were more likely to engage proactively in creative performance when job autonomy was low. These authors reasoned that low autonomy makes employees consider and act upon the beneficial opportunities of their connections with others. In sum, we predict that the positive relationship between the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice is stronger when job control is low (than when job control is high).

Hypothesis 3. Employee perceptions of job control moderate the positive relationship between the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and upward constructive voice, such that the relationship is stronger when job control is low and weaker when job control is high.

We argue that job control will also moderate the negative relationship between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice, such that this relationship is stronger when job control is low, and weaker when job control is high. Whereas the obedience and loyalty that characterize the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi discourage voice in general (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009; Kish-Gephart et al., 2009), we expect that employees in deferential guanxi relationships are especially likely to avoid speaking up, when they experience low job control. This is because these employees expect to receive support and resources from their supervisor only when they exhibit ongoing obedience (Brew & Cairns, 2004). Thus, when they lack job control and feel that they cannot personally influence important events and issues at work, strongly adhering to the guanxi rules and obligations of obedience and loyalty should reinforce the relationship so their supervisor will offer continued support and paternalistic care. In contrast, when job control is high, and employees feel they can cope with issues and events at work, deferential guanxi relationships will be less salient and have fewer implications for voice.

Empirical research provides indirect support for this argument. For instance, Wei, Zhang, and Chen (2015) demonstrated that power distance beliefs negatively predicted voice efficacy and subsequent voice of employees, but this occurred only when employees lacked personal influence and supervisor delegation was low. These authors reasoned that lack of supervisor delegation makes employees with strong power distance beliefs especially likely to feel they need to obey and show loyalty to their supervisor, and hence refrain from voice. In sum, we predict that the negative relationship between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice is stronger when job control is low (than when job control is high).

Hypothesis 4. Employee perceptions of job control moderate the negative relationship between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and upward constructive voice, such that the relationship is stronger when job control is low and weaker when job control is high.

3. Method and results

3.1. Participants and procedure

The sample for this study comprised relatively new sales employees and their supervisors at a large Hong Kong-based telecommunications company. Following prior work, we focused on relative newcomers to the organization because they have varied expectations for control (Ashforth, 1989) and are motivated to develop an understanding of what they can and cannot influence in their jobs (Ashford & Black, 1996). In addition, sales people are paid for their output and are expected to influence sales and customer satisfaction (Miao & Evans, 2013), but their daily workflow can be variable and is difficult to influence (e.g., client variability in service settings, Chowdhury & Endres, 2010). Therefore, job control is especially salient to them and we expected that perceptions of job control would be relevant to the effects of guanxi on voice.

We translated and back-translated the questionnaires into Chinese (Brislin, 1980). We collected data from employees (with at least one month of tenure) and their supervisors, in two waves, over six weeks. At time 1, 360 employees (86% response rate) completed online questionnaires on supervisor–subordinate guanxi, job control, demographic characteristics, and controls. At time 2, supervisors rated employee upward constructive voice. We obtained matched responses for 262 employees working in 90 stores—each operated by a single, unique supervisor (average number of employees rated by each supervisor: 2.91 ($SD = 1.30$)), for an overall response rate of 63%. The employee sample ($n = 262$) was 58% male and average age was 21 years ($SD = 2.43$). A minority of employees (22%) had a college degree and most were relatively new to the company: 86% had worked at their store less than one year. The supervisor sample ($n = 90$) was 88% male; average age was 25 years ($SD = 2.56$); and 46% had a college degree. Most supervisors (62%) had worked for the organization between one and two years, and 9% had more than 3 years of organizational tenure.

3.2. Measures

All measures were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). Table 1 provides descriptive statistics, correlations, and scale reliabilities.

3.2.1. Upward constructive voice behavior

Supervisors rated employee voice with five items from Maynes and Podsakoff (2014) adapted to fit our sales context. A sample item is “Makes suggestions for new and practical ways to improve [sales] performance” ($\alpha = 0.90$).

3.2.2. Supervisor–subordinate guanxi

Employees rated the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi with four items each (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009). A sample affective attachment to the supervisor item is “I would feel sorry and upset if my supervisor decided to work for another company” ($\alpha = 0.85$), and a sample deference to the supervisor item is “I am willing to give up my goals in order to fulfil my supervisor’s goals” ($\alpha = 0.85$). Smith et al.’s (2014) investigation of this multidimensional scale in Chinese (e.g., Taiwan) and non-Chinese

(e.g., United Kingdom) cultural contexts supports the validity of the affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor dimensions of guanxi. Their findings also suggest that the Chen, Friedman et al. (2009) supervisor–subordinate guanxi scale—originally developed in mainland China—can be valid in the Chinese cultural context of the current Hong Kong sample.

3.2.3. Perceived job control

Employees rated their sense of job control with three items from Ashford, Lee, and Bobko (1989), negatively worded. A sample item is “In this organization, I do not have enough power to control events that might affect my job” ($\alpha = 0.83$). For ease of interpretation, we recoded responses so that high scores reflected high job control.

3.2.4. Controls

As can be seen in Table 1, we investigated several variables that may systematically affect the relationships in our proposed conceptual model based on prior work (e.g., Burris et al., 2008; Tangirala, Kamdar, Venkataramani, & Parke, 2013; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998; Van Dyne et al., 2008). Following recent admonitions however, we only included those potential controls that correlated significantly with one or more substantive variables in the present study (Becker et al., 2016; Carlson & Wu, 2012). According to Becker (2005), omitting potential controls that are not related to substantive variables will not substantively influence the results,² but typically increases power and simplifies analysis, reporting, and interpretation. Specifically, we included the following control variables in our analysis: organizational tenure, job tenure, tenure with supervisor, and leader–member exchange. We measured each subdimension of leader–member exchange with three items from Liden and Maslyn (1998), except for the contribution subdimension which was measured with two items. A sample LMX-affect item is “I like my supervisor very much as a person” ($\alpha = 0.92$), a sample LMX-professional respect item is “I respect my supervisor’s knowledge and competence on the job” ($\alpha = 0.90$), a sample LMX-loyalty item is “My supervisor would come to my defense if I were ‘attacked’ by others” ($\alpha = 0.80$), and a sample LMX-contribution item is “I do work for my supervisor that goes beyond what is specified in my job description” ($\alpha = 0.65$). Controlling for demographics and LMX subdimensions sets a high standard for the incremental predictive validity of guanxi above and beyond the controls.

3.3. Analytical strategy

We used confirmatory factor analysis to evaluate the discriminant validity of the variables. The fit of the 8-factor measurement model (voice, affective attachment to the supervisor, deference to the supervisor, perceived job control, LMX-affect, LMX-professional respect, LMX-loyalty, and LMX-contribution) ($\chi^2 = 597.24$, $df = 296$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.06, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.92, SRMR = 0.06) was satisfactory (Bentler & Bonett, 1980; Hu & Bentler, 1999). A plausible alternative model that combined the guanxi scales ($\chi^2 = 936.60$, $df = 303$, $p < 0.001$, RMSEA = 0.09, CFI = 0.86, TLI = 0.83, SRMR = 0.07; $\Delta\chi^2 = 339.35(7)$, $p < 0.01$) had significantly poorer fit.

Given that each supervisor rated the voice behavior of multiple sales employees, we evaluated the level of non-independence of these supervisor ratings. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) with voice as the dependent variable showed that supervisors differed systematically in how they rated the voice of their sales

² The results presented in this paper are robust in a larger model that includes all of the conceptually relevant control variables as presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and correlations.

Variable	Mean	s.d.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
1. Age	21.37	2.43	–													
2. Organizational Tenure ^a	3.41	0.95	0.08	–												
3. Job Tenure ^a	2.88	0.94	0.12 [*]	0.55 ^{**}	–											
4. Tenure with Supervisor ^a	2.57	0.98	–0.00	0.29 ^{**}	0.21 [*]	–										
5. Education ^b	0.22	0.41	0.15 [*]	–0.08	–0.13 [*]	–0.04	–									
6. Gender ^c	0.42	0.49	–0.14 [*]	0.10	0.11	–0.05	–0.22 ^{**}	–								
7. LMX – Affect ^d	5.45	1.10	0.01	–0.02	–0.04	0.07	0.06	–0.15 [*]	(0.92)							
8. LMX – Professional Respect ^d	5.50	1.10	–0.10	–0.01	–0.07	0.10	0.03	–0.03	0.71 ^{**}	(0.90)						
9. LMX – Loyalty ^d	4.73	1.13	–0.06	–0.06	–0.05	0.05	0.08	–0.16 ^{**}	0.52 ^{**}	0.45 ^{**}	(0.80)					
10. LMX – Contribution ^d	5.05	1.04	–0.07	0.08	–0.04	0.03	0.10	–0.13 [*]	0.41 ^{**}	0.41 ^{**}	0.62 ^{**}	(0.65)				
11. Affective Attachment	5.49	1.01	–0.01	0.05	0.06	0.03	–0.02	–0.07	0.68 ^{**}	0.61 ^{**}	0.41 ^{**}	0.39 ^{**}	(0.85)			
12. Deference	4.40	1.21	0.05	0.19 ^{**}	0.12 [*]	0.01	0.11	–0.02	0.34 ^{**}	0.30 ^{**}	0.48 ^{**}	0.44 ^{**}	0.50 ^{**}	(0.85)		
13. Job Control	4.58	1.35	0.07	–0.03	–0.01	0.03	–0.02	–0.06	0.18 ^{**}	0.14 [*]	0.10	0.10	0.22 ^{**}	0.13 [*]	(0.83)	
14. Upward Constructive Voice ^e	5.45	0.90	0.06	–0.00	–0.03	–0.13 [*]	0.10	0.05	0.08	0.13 [*]	0.11	0.15 [*]	0.18 ^{**}	0.15 [*]	0.08	(0.90)

Note. $N = 262$. Internal consistency reliabilities appear in parentheses along the diagonal.

^a 1 = less than 1 month, 2 = 1–2 months, 3 = 3–6 months, 4 = 7–12 months, 5 = 1–2 years, 6 = 3–5 years, 7 = more than 6 years.

^b Dummy coded: 0 = no college degree; 1 = college degree.

^c Dummy coded: 0 = male; 1 = female.

^d Leader–Member Exchange dimensions.

^e Supervisor-rated.

^{*} $p < 0.05$.

^{**} $p < 0.01$.

Table 2
Results of multilevel path analyses on voice behavior.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4	
Organizational Tenure	0.01	(0.05)	0.04	(0.05)	0.05	(0.05)	0.05	(0.05)
Job Tenure	0.03	(0.05)	−0.02	(0.04)	−0.02	(0.04)	−0.03	(0.04)
Tenure with Supervisor	−0.09	(0.06)	−0.06	(0.05)	−0.06	(0.05)	−0.05	(0.05)
LMX – Affect	0.09	(0.06)	0.04	(0.06)	0.04	(0.06)	0.05	(0.06)
LMX – Professional Respect	−0.04	(0.07)	−0.06	(0.08)	−0.06	(0.08)	−0.06	(0.08)
LMX – Loyalty	0.01	(0.06)	−0.02	(0.06)	−0.02	(0.06)	−0.04	(0.06)
LMX – Contribution	0.11 [†]	(0.05)	0.10 [†]	(0.04)	0.09 [†]	(0.04)	0.09 [†]	(0.04)
Affective Attachment to the Supervisor			0.22 [†]	(0.12)	0.22 [†]	(0.12)	0.21 [†]	(0.12)
Deference to the Supervisor			−0.09	(0.08)	−0.09	(0.08)	−0.07	(0.07)
Job Control					−0.00	(0.03)	−0.01	(0.04)
Affective Attachment to the Supervisor × Job Control							−0.11 [*]	(0.05)
Deference to the Supervisor × Job Control							0.11 ^{**}	(0.03)

Note. $N = 262$. Estimates reflect unstandardized coefficients. The standard errors in the estimations are reported in parentheses.

[†] $p < 0.10$.

^{*} $p < 0.05$.

^{**} $p < 0.01$.

employees ($F[89, 172] = 3.40$, $p < 0.01$; $ICC[1] = 0.45$). To account for this non-independence in voice ratings, we utilized multilevel path analysis in Mplus 7 (Muthén & Muthén, 2012). Following common practice (e.g., Wang et al., 2013; Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Lee, 2016), we tested our hypotheses sequentially with a series of multilevel path analytical models. We first estimated a model including control variables only (Model 1). Then we tested main effects of the dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi on voice (Hypotheses 1 and 2; Model 2). Next, we included the main effect of the moderator (Model 3). Finally, in Model 4, we tested the full moderation model where the effect of the guanxi dimensions on voice changes as a function of job control (Hypotheses 3 and 4). Multilevel path analysis accounts for the hierarchical nature of the data and avoids inaccurate standard errors and biased statistical conclusions due to non-independence (Bliese, 2000). To estimate explained variance in upward constructive voice we followed the recommendations by LaHuis, Hartman, Hakoyama, and Clark (2014). Specifically, given that the focus of our model is on explaining level 1 variance in voice, we calculated the proportional reduction in the within-level residual variance of voice between the null and final model.

We group-mean centered predictors and moderators (Snijders & Bosker, 2012) based on supervisors.³ Group-mean centering was necessary because our focus was on level 1 substantive predictors (which, in our study, were the dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi and job control) and interactions between level 1 variables (which, in our study, were interactions between the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and job control, and between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and job control) (Enders & Tofghi, 2007; Ryu, 2015). Our theoretical model is situated at the individual level, so we specified all substantive structural relationships at the individual level. Following Zhang, LePine, Buckman, and Wei (2014), however, we allowed the unit-level variance portions of the central predictors, moderator, and outcome variable to freely correlate. We allowed the guanxi subscales (i.e., affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor) and the LMX subscales (i.e., LMX-affect, LMX-professional respect, LMX-loyalty, LMX-contribution) to covary. This is because prior empirical work demonstrates that guanxi and LMX measures are related (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009) and that the subscales within the guanxi and LMX measures are related (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009; Liden & Maslyn, 1998).

³ Because each supervisor supervised one store, this also corresponds to group-mean centering based on stores.

3.4. Results

Table 2 reports the unstandardized path coefficients for the series of multilevel path analytical models we estimated. Model 1 reports the results of a model including control variables only. Whereas the control variables were selected based on conceptual reasoning and correlational evidence, when added as a set, only LMX-contribution was significantly related to employee upward constructive voice.

Model 2 in Table 2 reports the results for the tests of Hypotheses 1 and 2. Hypothesis 1 predicted that the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi would be positively related to employee upward constructive voice. Results in Table 2 show that the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi was only marginally related to upward constructive voice, albeit in the expected direction ($B = 0.22$, $p = 0.07$). Thus, Hypothesis 1 did not receive support. Hypothesis 2 predicted that the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi would be negatively related to employee upward constructive voice. This hypothesis was not supported because deference to the supervisor was unrelated to upward constructive voice ($B = -0.09$, ns).

Model 4 in Table 2 reports the results for the test of Hypotheses 3 and 4. Hypothesis 3 predicted that perceived job control would moderate the relationship between the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice, such that the relationship would be positive when job control was low. Table 2 reports these results and shows a significant interaction ($B = -0.11$, $p < 0.05$). Fig. 2 illustrates the form of the interaction and shows a positive relationship when job control was low (simple slope = 0.33, $p < 0.01$) and not when job control was high (simple slope = 0.10, ns). Hypothesis 4 predicted that perceived job control would moderate the relationship between the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and voice, such that the relationship would be negative when job control was low. As reported in Table 2, the interaction was significant ($B = 0.11$, $p < 0.01$). Fig. 3 shows a negative relationship when job control was low (simple slope = -0.19 , $p < 0.01$) and not when job control was high (simple slope = 0.05, ns). In sum, results provide full support for Hypotheses 3 and 4.

We conducted a number of follow-up analyses to further assess the robustness and the relevance of our final model. First, we estimated the amount of variance in employee voice that the predictors in our final model explained. Following the recommendations of LaHuis et al. (2014) our results demonstrate that the final model (Model 4) explains 43% of the within-level variance portion in voice. Second, we evaluated the overall fit of our final

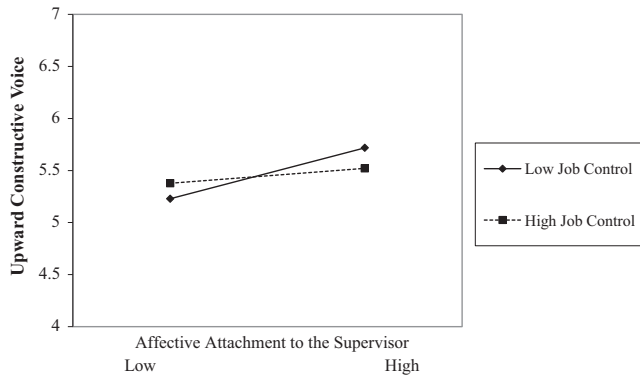


Fig. 2. Interaction of the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and job control.

model. Whereas our hypotheses were tested using random effects, fit statistics for multilevel models can only be obtained with fixed effects models (Muthén & Muthén, 2012), necessitating us to evaluate the overall fit of a fixed-effects model, including the control variables. This model exhibited acceptable fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 91.46$, $df = 50$, $p < 0.001$, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.90, RMSEA = 0.06, SRMR = 0.06).⁴

4. Discussion

In this paper, we drew on Guanxi Theory (Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen et al., 2013; Hwang, 1987) to develop a model of when, how, and why two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi (affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor) affect employee voice, contingent on employee’s perceived job control. Analyses of multi-source, lagged field data provide partial support for our hypotheses. Whereas we found no support for the hypothesized main effects of the supervisor–subordinate guanxi dimensions on voice, our results show that these effects depended on employee’s perceived level of job control. As predicted, the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi was positively related to voice only when job control was low. The deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi was negatively related to voice only when job control was low. Thus, results show that the effects of the two dimensions of guanxi differ—and can either help or hinder employee voice when perceived job control is low.

4.1. Theoretical contributions

4.1.1. Voice literature

The present paper sheds light on the meaning of two key concepts in the voice literature—the quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships and employee’s perceived job control—in a Chinese cultural context. We drew on Chen, Friedman et al.’s (2009) theorizing and scale development of supervisor–subordinate guanxi and overall Guanxi Theory (Chen & Chen, 2004; Hwang, 1987) to suggest a more nuanced and indigenous perspective on the quality of supervisor–subordinate relationships for understanding employee voice in Chinese cultural contexts. Prior research in Western cultural contexts has established that reciprocal, tit-for-tat LMX relationships encourage employees to speak up with change-oriented ideas. In contrast, our results show that when job control is low, two fundamentally different sets of relational

rules and obligations (i.e., affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor) have critical implications for employee voice in Chinese cultural contexts. Even though affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor are part of one multidimensional conceptualization of supervisor–subordinate guanxi, they had opposite effects on employee voice when job control was low. We suggest that these differences emerged because the two dimensions of guanxi provide contrasting rules and obligations for whether employee voice is appropriate.

Interestingly, our contrasting findings for the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi resonate with recent empirical evidence that different dimensions of paternalistic leadership can have opposing effects on employee voice in China (Chan, 2014; Zhang et al., 2015). Paternalistic leadership is a leadership style that “combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence” (Farh & Cheng, 2000, p. 91) and it consists of three dimensions: authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality (Aycan, 2006; Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Similar to supervisor–subordinate guanxi (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009), the concept of paternalistic leadership incorporates a hierarchical component (i.e., authoritarianism) as well as affective or relational components (i.e., benevolence, morality) (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2014). Accordingly, it is not surprising that prior empirical work demonstrates that authoritarianism is negatively related to voice, whereas research shows that benevolence and morality positively relate to voice (Chan, 2014; Li & Sun, 2015; Zhang et al., 2015). Furthermore, initial evidence shows that these leadership dimensions have stronger implications for employee reactions when employees feel dependent on their supervisor for resources (Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006). Thus, whereas supervisor–subordinate guanxi and paternalistic leadership belong to different leadership traditions,⁵ their Chinese indigenous foundation reveals similar implications for voice behavior in Chinese cultural contexts. This convergence in findings underscores the importance of future voice research that accounts for the nuanced complexity of hierarchical and affective supervisor–subordinate dynamics that sometimes act as a double-edged sword—with positive and negative implications for employee voice behavior.

Furthermore, our investigation of the effects of supervisor–subordinate guanxi on voice in Chinese cultural contexts is theoretically important beyond Chinese cultural contexts. This is because many cultural contexts distinguish and emphasize affective and hierarchical ways of relating to others. For example, in Latin and Middle Eastern cultural contexts personal relationships and hierarchical responsibilities are prominent (Aslani et al., 2016; Holloway, Waldrip, & Ickes, 2009; Osland, De Franco, & Osland, 1999; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). However, whereas scholars have begun to explore the dynamics of supervisor–subordinate relationships, leadership, culture, and voice in specific cultural contexts (e.g., Botero & Van Dyne, 2009 in Latin America; Raub & Robert, 2013 in the Middle East and Asia Pacific) systematic and in-depth examination of such patterns remain scarce (see also call by Morrison, 2014).

Furthermore, we contend that the dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi may be more broadly applicable to other non-Chinese cultural contexts. For example, Smith et al. (2014) demonstrated the relevance of supervisor–subordinate guanxi in

⁴ For a similar approach, please refer to Lim, Ilies, Koopman, Christoforou, and Arvey (2016).

⁵ Specifically, supervisor–subordinate guanxi—similar to LMX theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995)—takes a relationship-based approach to leadership whereby the emphasis is on the particularistic connection between supervisor and subordinate and the implicit guanxi rules and obligations that are forged within this relationship. In contrast, paternalistic leadership can be categorized as a behavioral approach to leadership whereby the focus is on the types of behaviors (e.g., authoritarianism, benevolence, morality) that the supervisor displays more generally (i.e., not necessarily vis-à-vis a particular employee).

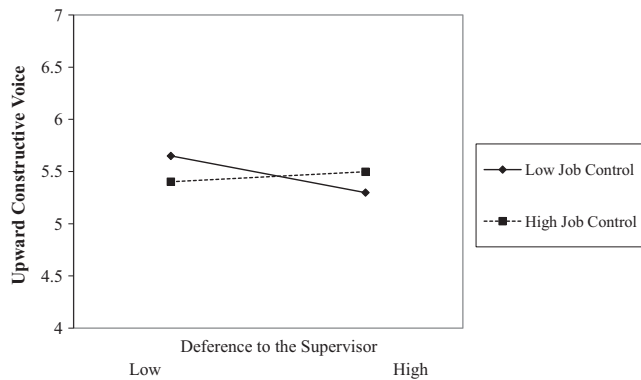


Fig. 3. Interaction of the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and job control.

the non-Chinese cultures of Saudi Arabia, Russia, Turkey, India, Brazil, and the United Kingdom. Thus, our results—combined with prior findings on the broader applicability of guanxi—should encourage researchers to capitalize on the patterns of supervisor–subordinate relationships in particular cultural contexts. Drawing on indigenous insights, scholars can diversify and enrich the way we conceptualize and think about supervisor–subordinate relationships and thereby push the boundaries of our current understanding and existing theoretical frameworks. According to several cross-cultural scholars this frame-breaking potential is the core reason why indigenous research is valuable and important (Chen, Leung et al., 2009; Tsui, 2004).

We also contribute to the voice literature by demonstrating that job control is a critical contingency factor that sheds light on when guanxi is related to voice in Chinese cultural contexts. Specifically, our results demonstrated that supervisor–subordinate guanxi had implications for upward constructive only when job control was low. Building on guanxi theorizing (Bian, 1997; Li et al., 2008) and observations of increased guanxi reliance during periods of uncertainty and limited personal influence (e.g., state control, rapid economic revolution; Bian, 1997; Xin & Pearce, 1996), we reasoned that individuals should be especially motivated to regulate their behavior (including voice behavior) according to their guanxi when they experience uncertainty and lack influence, such as in the case of low job control. This is because the favor exchange that characterizes guanxi can provide information, influence, and resources that give people a sense of control (Chang, 2011; Hwang, 1987; Peng & Luo, 2000; Tsui & Farh, 1997).

Our results suggest that low job control may in some instances (e.g., when employees emphasize the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi) serve as a facilitating—rather than an inhibiting—condition for employee voice. This possibility deserves additional discussion given the current state of the literature. Within the voice (Morrison, 2011, 2014) and proactivity (Parker, Bindl, & Strauss, 2010) literatures, low job control is generally considered an inhibiting condition that limits employee initiative (such as the initiative that characterizes voice or proactive behavior) because low job control suggests that employees have a low sense of personal efficacy. As Parker et al. (2010, p. 840) argued, “situations low in job control leave little scope for individual antecedents to influence behavior.”

Our findings however, demonstrate that low job control still leaves room for *relational* antecedents to influence voice behavior. Specifically, our results demonstrate that low job control combined with affective attachment to the supervisor positively predicted voice in a Chinese culture. Perhaps job control and the sense of *personal* efficacy are not necessary for proactive behavior in all cultural contexts. Instead, individuals in Chinese cultural contexts

can gain a sense of efficacy by being embedded in close relationship networks—such as guanxi that emphasizes affective attachment. This interpretation resonates with prior work on control beliefs in Chinese cultural contexts and East Asian cultural contexts in general (Menon & Fu, 2006; Spector, Sanchez, Siu, Salgado, & Ma, 2004; Yamaguchi, Gelfand, Ohashi, & Zemba, 2005). For example, Yamaguchi et al. (2005) showed that individuals in Japan perceived effectiveness in controlling the environment as a collective group capability. Thus, it seems that efficacy and control need not be predicated on personal control and low job control at the individual level may not inhibit proactive behavior because it still leaves room for dyadic and/or collective control (i.e., through relationships with others). Taken together, contrasting our findings with the Western literatures on voice and proactivity may trigger research that further expands our understanding of job control across cultures. This should lead to more nuanced theoretical models of different sources of control that have implications for employee initiative.

4.1.2. Guanxi literature

The present research responds to recent calls to expand our understanding of the implications of guanxi (Chen et al., 2013). Whereas prior research shows largely similar effects of the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi on a range of important outcomes (e.g., turnover intentions, affective commitment, normative commitment; Chen, Friedman et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2014), our findings show that these dimensions of guanxi can have opposite implications for employee voice when job control is low. More generally, by demonstrating differential consequences for these two dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi, we expand current empirical evidence supporting the conceptualization and operationalization of different dimensions of guanxi (Chen, Friedman et al., 2009; Smith et al., 2014) and confirm the value of multidimensional approaches to guanxi (Chen et al., 2013).

Our results also suggest that researchers should carefully consider whether it is appropriate to utilize the higher-order construct of supervisor–subordinate guanxi, or whether they should model the guanxi dimensions separately. In this regard, Wong, Law, and Huang (2008) recommend that researchers analyze multidimensional constructs at the dimension level when there is a conceptual rationale for expecting the dimensions to have opposing effects on the dependent variable. In that case, if researchers were to investigate the relationship at the construct level, the effects of one dimension on the dependent variable would be offset by the other dimension. Indeed, this is a pattern that has been repeatedly demonstrated in personality research (Moon, 2001; Moon, Hollenbeck, Humphrey, & Maue, 2003; Reiter-Palmon, Illies, & Kobe-Cross, 2009). For example, Moon (2001) showed that even though two facets of the broad trait of “conscientiousness” were correlated (0.56, $p < 0.01$) and the overall construct of conscientiousness was not related to commitment to an escalating decision, the “duty” facet was negatively related while the “achievement” facet was positively related to commitment to an escalating decision. Taken together, our findings should motivate guanxi researchers to consider the dimensionality of supervisor–subordinate guanxi especially when the dependent variable(s) may be differentially related to the guanxi dimensions.

We also contribute to the guanxi domain by contrasting supervisor–subordinate guanxi with LMX (see, Chen, Friedman et al., 2009) both conceptually and empirically. Empirically, this is important because it demonstrates that guanxi provides incremental insights above and beyond the more commonly researched relationship of LMX and voice. Conceptually, contrasting guanxi

with LMX allowed us to connect the relatively novel dimensions of supervisor–subordinate guanxi with the more familiar dimensions of LMX (i.e., making the novel appear familiar; Tsui, 2004, p. 499), and thereby build more global management knowledge regarding the impact of supervisor–subordinate relationships on voice (Tsui, 2004, 2006).

This approach should encourage future research on reciprocal, affective, and hierarchical dimensions of relationships as a way of acknowledging the complexity of relationships across different cultures. Indeed, as Pruitt (2004, p. xii) argued: “characteristics that are dominant in one culture tend to be recessive in another, and vice versa. By studying other societies where these features are dominant, they can develop concepts and theories that will eventually be useful for understanding their own.” For example, whereas peer-to-peer relationships are not usually conceptualized as hierarchical or deferential in nature, recent work has begun to examine the deferential nature that dyadic peer-to-peer relationships can take on (see Fragale, Sumanth, Tiedens, & Northcraft, 2012; Joshi & Knight, 2015). Joshi and Knight (2015) demonstrated that team members indeed habitually defer to one another and that the basis on which they do so (social affinity or task contribution) determines the implications of deference for team performance.

4.2. Practical implications

Our results also have implications for practitioners. First, our findings should help employees, managers, and organizations operating in Chinese cultural contexts to understand that high-quality relationships can sometimes paradoxically facilitate and inhibit speaking up behavior. Even if managers think they have excellent relationships with their employees, they may miss out on important improvement-related suggestions if employees emphasize deference and obedience in their guanxi relationships. Supervisors may view their interactions with employees as smooth and uneventful, but this does not guarantee that employee silence indicates they agree with the supervisor’s decisions, policies, and procedures. Thus, supervisors and organizations in Chinese cultural contexts need to be attuned to the subtle nuances of the affective attachment to the supervisor and deference to the supervisor dimensions of guanxi and how they can differentially influence voice behavior when job control is low.

Second, results showed that the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi inhibits voice when job control is low. Accordingly, managers who value employee suggestions should develop strategies for helping employees gain a sense of job control. This could include structuring reward systems, feedback processes, and leadership practices so they clarify the scope of employees work responsibilities and identify the types of events that are beyond employee control. Delineation of these boundaries should help employees take control and work independently—except under extenuating circumstances. These practices should be especially important in Chinese work contexts given the salience of guanxi (Chen et al., 2013) and the Chinese cultural imperative of showing deference to the supervisor (Huang, Van de Vliert, & Van der Vegt, 2005).

A final practical implication is that multinational companies operating in Chinese cultural contexts need to select and recruit Western expatriate managers carefully because they will need to use their cultural intelligence (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008) to encourage their Chinese colleagues to share change-oriented suggestions. They also need to make sense of seemingly paradoxical employee behavior, such as having favorable relationships with subordinates who are reluctant to speak up with suggestions. In addition, they may need to flex their leadership style to build guanxi with their

employees (Chen & Chen, 2004) and influence the emphasis employees place on affective attachment and deference.

4.3. Limitations and directions for future research

Notwithstanding the strengths of our culture-specific theorizing and rigorous design, limitations of our study have implications for future research. First, although we assessed predictors and criterion at different points in time according to their theoretically proposed causal ordering, this lagged design does not allow us to make causal inferences. Hence, future research should complement our field study with longitudinal and experimental designs. Such research designs may extend the current work by examining when and why employee voice alters the supervisor–subordinate guanxi relationship over time (see calls by Chen & Peng, 2008; Chen et al., 2013).

Furthermore, results did not support the predicted main effects of supervisor–subordinate guanxi on voice. Perhaps this was due to the limited tenure, age, and experience of the employees in our sample. Perhaps relationships need more time to develop in order for guanxi to have main effects on voice (Chen & Chen, 2004). This suggests the importance of future research that uses samples with more tenure and experience. Perhaps this lack of main effects is unique to limited tenure relationships or perhaps it is limited to those who are younger or have less work experience. Nevertheless, we note that many organizations and industries are characterized by young employees and high turnover so our results should have special relevance to these organizations and situations. For example, results shed light on job control as an important boundary condition that determines when guanxi is related to voice. This finding should apply to many retail and service organizations throughout the world.

Second, our model is necessarily incomplete and so future research should consider other theory-based moderators. This could include different boundary conditions that may amplify, reverse, or suppress the effects of supervisor–subordinate guanxi on employee voice. For example, given that guanxi dimensions reflect rules and obligations for interpersonal interactions, future research could build on Shteynberg, Gelfand, and Kim’s (2009) theorizing and explore the amplifying role of need for cognitive closure, the reversing role of low accountability, and the suppressing role of strong situations. Future research may also explore the moderating role of cultural values in guanxi–voice relationships. For example, cultural values that emphasize hierarchical differences and adherence to role responsibilities (e.g., power distance orientation, traditionality) may strengthen the guanxi–voice relationship, especially for the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi (see Cheng et al., 2004; Li & Sun, 2015).⁶ Another avenue for future research is the identification and examination of the mechanisms that mediate guanxi–voice relationships. For example, our theorizing suggests that affect-based trust—more than cognition-based trust—may explain the effects of the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi (see also Chen & Chen, 2004; Chen & Peng, 2008). A growing body of empirical work demonstrates that affect-based trust is key for employees to engage in challenging and innovative endeavors in Chinese cultural context specifically (e.g., Gong, Cheung, Wang, & Huang, 2012) and in general (e.g., Chua et al., 2010, 2012).

Third, taken as a whole, our results suggest that the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi has negative implications for employee voice when job control is low and that the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi has positive implications for employee voice when job control is low. However,

⁶ We thank an anonymous reviewer for this valuable suggestion.

the current pattern of findings does not imply that the guanxi dimensions invariably have such respective negative and positive influences on workplace outcomes. This is another important topic for future research.

We recommend that future research should consider other outcomes and other moderators that may shed light on when, how, and why the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi predicts positive workplace outcomes. For example, employees who are high on the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi may be especially conscientious and exert high levels of effort within the scope of their assigned work roles. Likewise, they may demonstrate high levels of affiliative organizational citizenship behavior, such as helping and loyalty. Furthermore, it would be interesting to manipulate role expectations (speaking up is or is not an expected role obligation; Van Dyne et al., 2008) and assess the extent to which the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi facilitates upward constructive voice when voice is internalized as a role expectation. Specifically, it is possible that deference to the supervisor combined with role expectations to speak up positively predicts voice behavior. This would shed light on ways to enhance upward constructive voice in organizations and societies that have strongly ingrained hierarchical norms. This sort of approach would be consistent with research in Taiwan that demonstrated that creativity expectations motivated creative behavior when employees integrated the expectations into their role identity (Farmer, Tierney, & Kung-McIntyre, 2003).

It would also be useful to consider situational factors that cause the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi—which is positively related to voice in our study when job control is low—to have negative implications for employee work behavior. For example, Hwang (1999, 2000) suggested that the principle of “favoring the intimate” may cause supervisors to allocate resources unfairly and this may, in turn, account for some of the negative effects of guanxi on third party observers and the larger organization (Chen & Chen, 2009; Chen, Friedman, Yu, & Sun, 2011). In sum, future research should examine additional outcomes and boundary conditions that shed light on potential negative outcomes of the affective attachment to the supervisor dimension of guanxi and potential positive outcomes of the deference to the supervisor dimension of guanxi.

A fourth limitation is our focus on the employee's perspective of supervisor–subordinate guanxi. Although our approach made sense for an initial study on guanxi, job control, and voice, we note the value of future research that considers the supervisor's perspective on guanxi relationships. This is important because individuals socially construct their relationships based on the reactions of others to their behavior (Stryker & Statham, 1985). Thus, the leader's perspective on guanxi may be especially important in Chinese cultural contexts. It also would be useful to consider the congruence between employee and supervisor perceptions of guanxi relationships because guanxi relationships are inherently reciprocal. They depend on the mutual exchange of affect and obligation (Chen & Chen, 2004) and research shows that employee and supervisor perceptions of voice are not necessarily congruent and have performance implications (e.g., Burris, Detert, & Romney, 2013). In sum, future research should model both supervisor and subordinate perceptions of guanxi to provide a more comprehensive and balanced view of the relationship and subsequent impact on voice behavior.

Finally, although our study provides insights into how different relationships can influence employee voice, our approach remains dyadic and subjectivist. It does not capture the structural aspects of social relationships that also facilitate and constrain employee behavior (Morris, Podolny, & Ariel, 2000). Thus, future research should go beyond the dyadic level and use cross-level and social network perspectives as another way of researching the complex

impact of different relationship types. For example, the extent to which the quality of supervisor–subordinate guanxi relationships differ within the team may be an important contextual factor that influences the roles of guanxi and perceived job control on voice (see the research on LMX differentiation; e.g., Liden, Erdogan, Wayne, & Sparrowe, 2006). In addition, as suggested by Morris et al. (2000), a more structuralist social network approach should further the understanding of guanxi by going beyond the perceptual approach. A structural approach would also extend existing research on guanxi (Chen et al., 2013) and voice (see Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010).

5. Conclusion

The introduction to this paper highlighted the observation that supervisor–subordinate relationships or guanxi in Chinese cultural contexts are guided by affective and hierarchical characteristics that can paradoxically help and hinder voice of Chinese employees. To elucidate this phenomenon, we noted that most prior research on the effects of supervisor–subordinate relationships has adopted a predominantly Western social exchange perspective and advanced arguments based on contributions and reciprocity. Although this research has been insightful, it emphasizes a tit-for-tat-like exchange model based on in-kind reciprocal exchanges and is more typically characteristic of Western relationships. We drew on Guanxi Theory (Hwang, 1987) to advance a model where supervisor–subordinate relationships are guided by affective ties and hierarchical deference with opposite implications for upward constructive voice when job control is low. Our model and results exemplify the value of adopting an indigenous cultural lens because it can contribute to a contextualized, in-depth understanding of specific phenomena (i.e., implications of indigenous affective and hierarchical ties). It also encourages research that goes beyond exchange models and shows the power of affective and hierarchical ties above and beyond the effects of reciprocal relationships such as typically represented by LMX (see Chen, Leung et al., 2009; Tsui, 2004, 2006; Whetten, 2009). We hope our model and results stimulate future research on when, how, and why different characteristics of supervisor–subordinate relationships (reciprocal, affective, and hierarchical) in Chinese and other cultural contexts influence upward constructive voice and other work behaviors.

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