

Leadership development in the Hong Kong Civil Service: Accessing social resources through guanxi networks

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Abstract

Drawing on *guanxi* and conservation of resources theory we explore how close personal ties between middle managers who participated in leadership development, constitutes an important social resource in an East Asian public sector context. We contribute to studies exploring the importance of *informal* leadership development opportunities and techniques, specifically utilised to overcome public sector structural barriers. We gathered qualitative data from 44 middle managers who had completed formal leadership development within the Hong Kong Civil Service. Our data revealed that high quality Superior-to-Subordinate Guanxi helped study participants to gain access to important development resources including further developmental opportunities, stretch assignments, developmental support and feedback. High quality Peer-to-Peer Guanxi helped them to gain access to peer tacit knowledge, participation in collaborative development projects and positive peer developmental feedback. Our findings inform future leadership development design and are relevant to East Asian public sector context's where guanxi ties are significant.

KEYWORDS

guanxi, Hong Kong, leadership development, public sector, resources

1 | INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong has undergone significant political change since the transition from a colonial administration to Chinese rule in 1997. Despite political turmoil and growing activism there is limited research exploring the operational challenges civil servants face and the leadership development activities designed to strengthen capability via expedient up-skilling. We build on research which positions context at the centre of the development debate in Hong Kong (Ongaro et al., 2021; Scott, 2021). Literature suggests that the ethos of new public management (NPM) is prevalent in the Hong Kong Civil Service (HKCS) and that management training opportunities are

decentralised and outsourced (Vyas, 2019; Vyas & Zhu, 2017). However, these studies, which highlight NPM as a 'hangover' from Hong Kong's colonial past, omit to focus on the uniquely collective values which influence the context of learning and development in the Hong Kong civil service.

Within the delivery of public services middle managers have been identified as playing a central role (Chen et al., 2017). The term *middle manager* refers to individuals who have responsibility for day-to-day supervision and policy implementation (Wooldridge et al., 2008). As their role in public sector organisations continues to grow they increasingly input into the development of public policy, programme leadership and the management of change processes

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(Bowman & Knox, 2008). The competencies and skills of middle managers are increasingly challenged by a complex work environment which adds pressure to role performance (Olshfski, 2008). In response public sector organisations implement leadership development programmes to prepare and upskill managers to take on these challenges and to develop their leadership capabilities (Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2006). Despite the pervasiveness of leadership development in public sector organisations (Jones et al., 2014; Tomlinson et al., 2013) there are limited theoretical insights and empirical research on leadership development for middle managers.

The cultural context of the study is also important as Hong Kong is influenced by a combination of Western values from its colonial past, in addition to Chinese and Confucian values. Confucian values are underpinned by a philosophy of 'harmonious relationships, reciprocity, face and collectivism' (Warner, 2010). Social exchanges are influenced by the Chinese value of 'guanxi', which is defined as a 'dyadic, particularistic and sentimental tie that has potential of facilitating favour exchanges' (Zhang et al., 2017, p. 1006). In the Hong Kong context power is devolved from Beijing, but local politicians are limited in their mandate, thus creating a distinct administrative system. In addition, the increased engagement and empowerment of a politically active public, places pressure on spending budgets, notably for housing services (Kaiman, 2014). Middle managers are increasingly tasked with policy implementation and demands to be more public facing, politically astute and connected. In Western society post-NPM reforms have seen internal networks supplement hierarchy (Christensen, 2012) to achieve collaborative goals. However, in Hong Kong, operational constraints are exacerbated by departments which do not coordinate easily with each other (Scott, 2022) and the predominance of departmental hierarchies mean that collaborative initiatives, even those with a political mandate, are often met with resistance (Scott, 2021) and piecemeal implementation.

The study seeks to address a gap in knowledge on public sector leadership development in complex polities through investigating the influence of close personal relationships (guanxi) with both superiors and peers on (a) access to development resources and (b) the desired outcomes of leadership development initiatives.

We conceptualise guanxi as personal relationships between a middle manager, superior and peers that have their origins in a non-work social context but extend into the workplace (Cheung et al., 2009). Guanxi is central to public administration in Asian countries where the emphasis is on the collective and inclusive (Nie & Lamsa, 2015) and where high quality relationships are more effective and preferable to weaker ties in achieving desired public outcomes (Horak et al., 2019). Superior to subordinate guanxi (SSG) is conducive to a variety of leadership development outcomes including increased job performance (Chen et al., 2015); enhanced career development (Wei et al., 2010) and skill development (Ren & Chadee, 2017). Less is known about the role of peer-to-peer guanxi (PPG) in the context of leadership development.

To gain insights into how different types of guanxi help middle managers access valuable development resources we utilise

conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) as a theoretical lens. Conservation of resources theory proposes that individuals strive to obtain, retain, foster and protect those things they centrally value, to limit stress and create work life balance and that this goes beyond material resource gain to include a positive sense of self (Hobfoll, 1989, 2011). We theorize that both types of guanxi act as personal social resources that enable middle managers to accumulate additional resources to develop and utilise leader and leadership competencies.

We make three important contributions to the theory on leadership development of middle managers in the East Asian public sector. First, we extend understanding of the role of guanxi in leadership development outcomes. Second, we extend the understanding of the role of PPG in leadership development in collective cultural contexts where the building of relationships is important for development opportunities (Hwang, 1987). Third we integrate guanxi with COR theory to understand how both types of guanxi help accumulation of other resources to achieve development outcomes. We utilise COR theory in a positive way and specifically explore the positive crossover of resources from superior to subordinate as well as the lateral transfer of resources between middle managers and their peers.

2 | THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 | Leadership development in the public sector

Leadership development is considered an important strategic priority for public sector organisations given that skilled leaders are necessary for the effective implementation of policy and strategy (Subramony et al., 2018). Public sector literature suggests that leadership development programmes enhance capability and performance (Jacobsen et al., 2022) despite the difficulties in measuring return in investment (Abner et al., 2021). It is argued that development requires mixed methods training techniques (Seidle & Fernandez, 2016) which focus on both formal and informal activities, that move away from traditional approaches focused on individual traits and competencies (Jones et al., 2014).

Day and Dragoni (2015) highlight that leadership development needs to be concerned with the development of both intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of a leader. Day (2000) distinguished between *leader* and *leadership* development with the former emphasizing the development of behavioural skills, cognitive and meta-cognitive components. The latter emphasized the development of skills to build relationships, engage in authentic leadership with followers and work as part of a team (Galli & Muller-Stewens, 2012). McGurk (2009) identified that this could be developed through collaborative learning activities such as networking, action learning sets and special projects. Specifically, in the public sector, researchers highlight the importance of developing social ties (Schanin & Gilad, 2023) which include building high quality relationships between managers and employees (Tummers & Knies, 2013); building emotional skills (Newman et al., 2009)

and collaborative working capability (Grant et al., 2020). This is often described as 'integrative leadership' which can bring diverse groups and organisations together, typically across sector boundaries, to remedy complex public problems and achieve common good (Crosby & Bryson, 2018). For the purposes of this paper, we use the term leadership development to include both leader and leadership components of development.

Leadership development outcomes may include enhanced individual human capital (Avolio et al., 2009), better coping with job demands, increased job performance (Theeboom et al., 2013), enhanced relationship building (Pless et al., 2011), improved boundary spanning skills (Christensen, 2012) and collective leadership capabilities (Raelin, 2006). However, research also highlights possible negative outcomes of leadership development. Edwards and Turnbull (2013) for example, argues that leadership development may embed oppressive organisational norms and Gagnon (2008) pointed out that leadership development may act as a mechanism to solidify oppressive power relations between managers and employees. Tomlinson et al. (2013) also contend that leadership development may be viewed as a form of 'symbolic violence' because it embeds a culture of competition and centralised control resulting from the development of human capital.

2.2 | Guanxi and development resources (conservation of resources)

Guanxi draws on Confucian principles to describe interpersonal bonds that create specific expectations and duties (Warner, 2010). Guanxi may facilitate the exchange of personal resources and valuable information (Yen et al., 2014). Guanxi's functional purpose is well known to transcend organisational boundaries, so when knowledge sharing is defective because of constricting regulations, accessing guanxi networks becomes an important way of bypassing bureaucracy and gaining help through social ties to overcome problems. As such, guanxi is significant when exploring the efficacy of leadership development in this context, as opportunities to build networks and utilise guanxi can be built into the design of leadership development programmes. Informal collaboration and emphasis on social ties are to some extent evidenced in Western examples of public sector talent management design (e.g see Grant et al., 2020), where collaborative leadership and relationship building also embrace the values of reciprocity, trusting relationships and emotional intelligence. These are however practiced and developed via small group work, committee's or working groups, simulations, collaborative problem solving and coaching environments (O'Leary et al., 2010) rather than informal socialising prescribed and encouraged as part of the training and development remit. Social networks 'within' government are additionally critiqued as creating 'silo's' (Schanin & Gilad, 2023) however, guanxi places relationship building both 'within' and 'out with' work networks and working time.

In the current study we focus on SSG and PPG or relationships between a middle manager and superior and peers. These can be

conceptualised as shouren guanxi (Yang, 1993) where the focus is on the exchange of favours and affection. Zhang et al. (2017) emphasises that as forms of social exchange they differ from leader-member exchange (LMX) in a number of important respects. First, guanxi is primarily developed through informal interactions outside of work whereas LMX is developed in the workplace. Second, in guanxi the exchange relationship is focused on a broad range of social and economic benefits whereas LMX is focused solely on work-related exchanges. Third, LMX has its roots in a fair exchange of effort-performance and reward whereas in the context of guanxi both parties have unequal rights and different obligations that are determined by their roles within a particularistic tie. Finally, guanxi primarily places emphasis on the relationship rather than the exchange but facilitates the opportunity for favour exchange (Zhang et al., 2016). The emphasis on *relationship* forms the basis of most arguments conceptualising and differentiating between more instrumental Western perspectives on informal social networks and more emotionally involved Eastern perspectives, such as guanxi (Li & Xie, 2019). Both forms of guanxi ties are conceptualised as social resources (Bian & Ang, 1997) that middle managers can develop and deploy to acquire development resources.

Development resources include social and organisational resources that assist middle managers to achieve development goals, apply newly acquired skills, stimulate personal development and enhance competencies (Demerouti et al., 2001; Guan & Frenkel, 2018). In particular, the 'resource investment' tenet of COR (Halbesleben, 2006) proposes that middle managers are motivated to gain new and additional resources to enhance their development and this is more likely to occur in work environments where work is highly relational (Blustein, 2011) such as in guanxi. Those middle managers within HKCS utilising both SSG and PPG may be more likely to successfully access developmental resources residing in these guanxi networks.

In the context of SSG, Hobfoll et al. (2018) proposed that access to one resource may cross-over to enable a middle manager to accumulate other linked developmental resources. This is described as 'caravans of resource' (Hobfoll, 2011). For example, middle managers with high quality SSG may access resources such as stretch assignments from superiors, more job autonomy and opportunities to participate in developmental projects. Shih and Lin (2014) highlighted that where superiors consider middle managers to be in-group members, they will feel a stronger sense of obligation to provide access to development resources. Additionally, where middle managers have high quality PPG they can gain access to developmental help, constructive peer developmental feedback, peer tacit knowledge and expertise and greater opportunities to collaborate on team development projects.

2.3 | Superior to subordinate guanxi, peer-to-peer guanxi, resources and leadership development outcomes

Leadership development is concerned with enhancing the fit of middle managers with the organisation in addition to the development of self.

Ren et al. (2015), for example, argue that Chinese Managers provided with additional knowledge, information and resources were more likely to demonstrate greater levels of proactivity and to undertake development activities as part of the job role. Ren and Chadee (2017) also proposed that leadership development will help develop the competencies required to function effectively within SSG and PPG networks. Where middle managers have enhanced leadership competencies, they are more likely to be perceived as beneficial to both networks because they can undertake managerial tasks effectively and without much monitoring and their development actions will confer benefit to peers. Middle managers will also be motivated and feel obliged to perform tasks outside of normal duties and will place strong emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships with co-workers (Lin & Ho, 2010). However, the socio-emotional obligations arising from high quality SSG and PPG can lead to negative outcomes including stress and lower job performance, work intensification (Gould-Williams, 2007), discretionary effort leading to spending too much time at work (Paillie, Grima and Dufour, 2015), low trust (Lau & Cobb, 2009) and enhanced intention to quit (Gibney et al., 2009).

From the key literature themes and gap in knowledge the following research questions were developed.

1. To what extent are middle managers able to access development resources utilising superior-to-subordinate (SSG) or peer-to-peer (PPG) guanxi relationships, established via HKCS leadership development training programmes?
2. To what extent are leadership development outcomes perceived as positive or negative in relation to strong or weak ties within SSG and PPG relationships?

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Context, sample and procedure

We conducted our study within HKCS between 2012 and 2014. It employs just under 165,000 employees, representing approximately 4% of Hong Kong's population. Hong Kong Civil Service emphasises the development of civil servants and has implemented different types of leadership development including a blended package of targeted Leadership and Management Development courses; a short seminar programme; attachment programmes; overseas courses and e-learning (CSB, 2014). For the purposes of this study we focus on participants who have attended one of three leadership development programmes: the Advanced Leadership Enhancement programme (ALEP); the Leadership in Action programme (LIA) and the Innovative Managers programme (IMP). These programmes target middle managers and are typically between 8 and 15 days in duration. They focus on developing leadership competencies and use a combination of formal talks/guest lectures combined with multi-team project assignments; role play scenario; problem solving activity and co-ordinated networking. Development topics covered in the courses include media handling; public sector leadership and management

skills; stress management; public engagement strategies; policy formulation and change management. Hong Kong Civil Service were particularly keen to give participants global perspectives and frequently invited prestigious guest speakers from high profile private sector organisations to share leadership insights.

In addition, they endorse and facilitate re-union dinners, outside working hours, for participants on completion of the leadership development courses. This provided an opportunity to consolidate networking, strengthen cross departmental relationships and create a leadership community through social interaction. We referred to published corporate literature on the HKCS website and completed several interviews with Human Resource personnel to understand the nature of training and development activities for middle managers.

3.2 | Study sample

The sample consisted of middle managers ($N = 44$), taken from a population of 200 who had attended these courses in 2012–13 and who had worked in HKCS before the 1997 handover. Participants have on average 20 years of organisational tenure and significant management experience. All study participants had tertiary education and spoke both Chinese (Cantonese/Mandarin) and English. Study participants were drawn from a variety of expertise and occupational areas within the civil service and included accountants, lawyers, IT professionals, architects and engineers.

We initially used a purposive sampling approach but then utilised snowball sampling where participants recommended other colleagues from the training course. Snowball sampling is a valuable method that has 'good estimability for studying hard-to-reach populations' (Heckathorn, 2011, p. 355) and specifically where group networks are difficult for outsiders to penetrate. Recommendations provided a 'warm' introduction and gave us an initial insight into the importance of relationships within HKCS. We did not set out with an ideal number of responses but rather concluded that the data collection was complete when the point of data saturation was reached, specifically where new data did not provide any new insights.

3.2.1 | Data collection

A qualitative approach is appropriate given our focus on 'what' and 'how' questions related to the way in which middle managers perceived their SSG and PPG relationships and how they influenced access to development resources (Birkinshaw et al., 2011). We utilised a combination of semi-structured interviews and on-line open surveys, posing the same questions and present this as a 'hybrid' form of qualitative research after Bryman (1992). We conducted ten (10) interviews using a traditional face to face format and thirty-four (34) written responses to open ended interview questions. The development of new technology has facilitated a growing use of open-ended responses in qualitative research (Poncheri, 2008) and as Flick (2014, p. 121) highlights "online research has become established as

an alternative design for doing qualitative research". Online responses affording greater anonymity allowed us to address potential response bias. Ensuring personal choice regarding how to disclose information, is particularly important where the focus of research is considered private, stressful or where there are perceptions or presence of political threat (Heath et al., 2018). As such, this technique allowed for greater candour, enabling participants to overcome social relationship power inequalities (e.g. critiquing one's peers or boss). We conducted the research in English with interviews lasting between 60 and 90 min. All study participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous. The interview questions explored various aspects of their development programme, their work and peer relationships, their development resources and outcomes.

3.2.2 | Data analysis

The transcribed interviews and survey responses were then analysed using the thematic analysis approach outlined by Gioia et al. (2012). We used NVivo 12.0 to code the data. Taking an inductive approach, the research team mutually agreed on the thematic structure. In first order coding we adhered to the terms used by study participants. This created over 100 potential categories which were reduced to 16 in our first order analysis (see Figure 1). We then analysed these first order codes using axial coding to identify similarities and differences in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This allowed a combining of categories into core themes. The combination facilitated the identification of second-order concepts affording a clear understanding of what was emerging in the data and allowing greater connections to theory. For example, in first order coding, we identified that participants spoke about their 'relationships' in terms of friendships; hierarchical relationships; internal and external networks and collaborations. In second order analysis we applied our theoretical construct of guanxi relationships and broke data down into high and low quality, superior-subordinate or peer-to-peer relationships. We also applied this technique using COR and leadership development constructs to determine positive and negative leadership development outcomes, which when aggregated lead to greater access to developmental resources and identifiable leadership development outcomes.

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Quality of relationships

4.1.1 | High quality Superior to subordinate guanxi relationships

Study participants provided accounts of high quality SSG relationships that they had prior to participation on the programme that facilitated both upwards and downwards relational exchange and provided opportunities for networking. All participants emphasised relationships with senior personnel throughout HKCS and opportunities for

knowledge sharing and further relationship building. In some instances, the leadership development programmes were opened up to external participants (notably the ALEP programme for more senior staff) allowing civil servants to network with industry experts and political leaders. One participant commented:

It was intense, but what I'm impressed most, I had a chance to learn this kind of thing with other, all colleagues on the ALEP course were senior, and you had a chance to share what other colleagues what you were doing in other depts. at your level.... also other classmates were senior VP's from other organisations like Toyota, so you learn what they are doing.

(Manager 1)

Relationship building evolved initially in a formal environment, but became less formal and off-site, meaning that participants engaged beyond the working environment and continued to build non-work relationships. Study participants described high quality SSG relationships as those that offered access to and insights from managers in positions of 'power', influential staff who were willing to share knowledge and provide friendship. Hong Kong Civil Service have a practice of holding reunion dinners, allowing attendees to gather socially to cement helpful friendships.

Even though we have reunions, after the course we meet the others, and establish further our network, and when you need to ask question of other department, you just give them a phone call.

(Manager 5)

After dinner we sit together, glass of beer.... we all respect each other's work... we work together

(Manager 9)

4.1.2 | Low quality Superior to subordinate guanxi relationships

Participants reported examples of low quality SSG relationships focused on interactions with their immediate supervisor. The quality of these relationships limits what they could achieve in terms of development. The following extracts illustrate these low-quality relationships.

I am a kind leader but not a tough leader. I may understand why they [subordinates] can't produce the result, so to a certain extent I know I should be more a tough leader, unfortunately I am just a middle manager, I have difficulties with the senior director, it's how to strike a balance and manage both. If my boss is very harsh, then I have to be harsh to my subordinates.

(Manager 3)

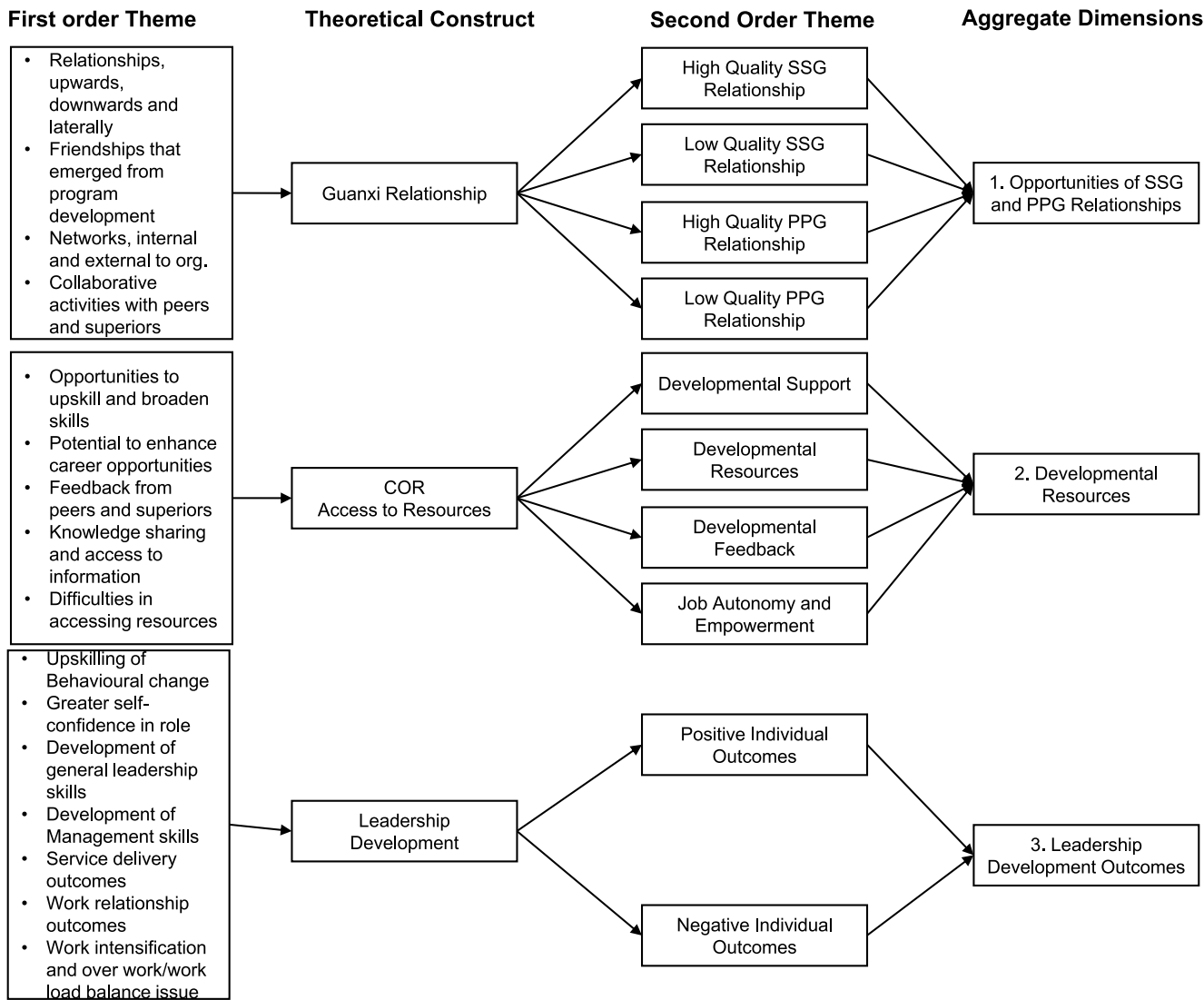


FIGURE 1 Data structure.

I think occasionally, there are things that I don't like very much and make me feel very depressed... when your boss makes a decision that's against my belief... the boss is always right. I hate it—I think ok, if you want to do this—ok I'll put everything in writing, I will do email according to your phone call 5 mins ago,

(Manager 9)

4.1.3 | High quality peer-to-peer guanxi relationships

Participants identified high quality peer to peer relationships, within and across departments. The benefits of PPG included the opportunity to speak more freely as friends; to have access to timely collaborative problem solving and the capacity to overcome

obstacles. Examples of these high-quality PPG relationships are revealed in the following extract.

That may be one of the most important gains, the networking and friendships are so important. I give them a call, after attending a course for a few weeks we could actually become friends.

(Manager 6)

You have to know people before you can do things more smoothly. It's always a matter of communication and trust if you know one another you can speak more frankly, know the bottom line more easily and strike a compromise more easily. It's very helpful to have good communication, or networking with different colleagues

(Manager 6)

4.1.4 | Low quality peer-to-peer guanxi relationships

Examples of low-quality PPG relationships primarily related to peer assessments and difficulties in resourcing projects.

For me and also my peers, my subordinates have a good assessment [of me], but my peers only a fair assessment [of me], so maybe I need to reflect and communicate more with my peers, maybe there is something threatening, or maybe been too aggressive.

(Manager 7)

But for others they will just produce what they can do, say they don't care what you really want, they give you things according to the contract, there is no personal touch.

(Manager 8)

These excerpts highlight the strength of relational ties in leveraging good outcomes that participants benefitted from at both superior-subordinate and peer to peer level. Opportunity to build ties does not however guarantee that high quality SSG or PPG will be developed, but it does represent an attempt to create better collaborative capacity.

4.2 | Access to developmental resources

4.2.1 | Superior to subordinate guanxi access to developmental resources

High quality SSG relationships were important in leveraging development opportunities. Examples include opportunities to 'act up' in a promoted role, access to tailored training opportunities and the creation operational space to practice complex skills.

Now she is earmarked from further development.... she has what it takes... it's an opportunity we think she should be given, to get to know other people from different parts of the world, at the same time, to actually train her up. For example, she has other tasks now through 'acting up' like writing the bi-annual report so it's the sort of thing we expect to see, the exposure and the opportunity to be able to develop herself for the next—the higher responsibilities.

(Manager 11)

Participants also considered that access to development resources could aid promotion and access to different career ladders.

It is the case that you must attend some courses before you are promoted, they ask you, 'have you attended this course' and maybe both. The department will feel

the course is suitable for you to develop your leadership style

(Manager 22)

Attending this course does not guarantee a promotion—but honestly I think about it—if senior management did not think I had the potential, then would I have had the opportunity? It's a benefit.

(Manager 21)

Whilst some participants highlighted the ease of developing relationships others emphasised the difficulties. For example, that it takes time to develop a network and relationships and moving department required managers to re-build guanxi ties.

From where I work in [the] department, it is a small department, so the opportunities are less, so we have to fight or ask to get it. In [a bigger department] our colleagues they have a lot of opportunities, it's more high profile department, because [their] project costs more and you have more resources, more resources in manpower as well as the funding resources especially the training part.

(Manager 6)

4.2.2 | Developmental support

Study participants provided examples of collective decision-making situations that offered opportunities for developmental support. For example, opportunities to take ownership of projects.

... It allowed people to contribute, to have ownership of a project or particular advice they are giving, what else are they doing in a team?

(Manager 3)

Normally our subordinates and colleagues are professionals, so it's easy for us to communicate so we try to discuss more before we make a decision and try not to be controlling.

(Manager 34)

4.2.3 | Developmental feedback

Examples of access to development feedback were numerous and highlighted the important role feedback plays in enabling future development. In this regard high quality guanxi provides a cyclical process of development-feedback-development.

I think most of all, I try to use some of the skills in being a manager or leader, to lead to performance, in fact I

was being commended by my boss for some of my ideas, never happened before, not the output but the outcome is good, the feedback is good. I don't take the credit, I give the credit to the boys, I say 'well done boys that was a good job' and things like that...boost morale, I say we have an efficient and effective team.

(Manager 9)

4.2.4 | Job autonomy and empowerment

Study participants provided accounts of job autonomy and empowerment as development resources. The first extract reveals how a middle manager utilised external networks and senior colleagues to get approval for an innovative housing project. The second extract reveals how middle managers are empowered to perform their jobs better, by developing their public engagement skill set.

I was struggling how to get approval at the first stage. If it was just me putting in a document to the housing management colleagues and the boss to look, they will say its rubbish we will not bother. But by drawing up support from [A University Professor]and colleagues in Estate management ... I am going one step further. I have to pick good friends who have similar thinking to me.

(Manager 10)

I think there are a few projects that we have to do, for me I deal with mostly the building works and I learn from the courses they talk a lot about public engagement...so I have realised that I must network. There are ways to do it, like district consultation, how do we behave, how can we get our message through at these types of difficult meetings, so I think I've learned a lot and after that I have attended quite a few district meetings.

(Manager 28)

Participants commented that empowerment as a resource was manifest in different forms. They emphasised the importance of forming a bond with others and reported that the sharing of knowledge and experiences, specifically from experienced, prestigious speakers, reduced feelings of isolation. Participant's accounts also reveal issues related to overcoming fear of failure, knowing that other people had walked this path. The sharing of vulnerabilities is also important here.

What I like about this course is that they get interesting leaders/speakers—Cathay Pacific talked about the ash clouds from Iceland—how they coped with the emergency situation—crisis management. So, it's good,

I think it helps, the speakers from experience—panicking alone doesn't help. When you go to LEGCO to answer questions—how you go about doing it. I still remember what they said.

(Manager 39).

However, a small, but significant sample of participants also revealed situations where there was a lack of empowerment and autonomy. Such situations may reflect the development of stronger operational hierarchies within HKCS.

The problem is once you've got the project moving then your boss will think everything is under control and they will try to move your colleagues, resources and team.... Especially for on-going projects you run into very difficult engineering conditions, the easy parts are done and then with the contract entering into a more difficult phase, you have to lead project teams to push the consultants/ contractors and to address all the difficulties we encounter. They sometimes don't have the autonomy.

(Manager 16)

4.3 | Peer-to-peer guanxi development resources

4.3.1 | Collaboration and access to tacit knowledge and information

The majority of study participants provided accounts that revealed the value of PPG to access collaboration opportunities and local knowledge and information. Middle managers reported examples of where they could access essential knowledge and information through peers.

Of course it's the reason to go, it's the networking, I actually got help from one of my classmates, I had a case that we have some chemicals/residue to be analysed by the government chemists, after 3 months nothing happened, reminder after reminder—so I contacted a government chemist through networking from the training. I got it sorted in 2 weeks..... its very useful, sometimes you get; sometimes you give... Always advantageous to know somebody

(Manager 5)

4.3.2 | Developmental support

Study participants also provided accounts of developmental support from peers. This developmental support was often couched in terms of coping with stressful situations.

Besides the skills learned from the course, the experience of other participants also gave me insight in handling the problematic personal issues and dealing with stress.

(Manager 17)

Many colleagues in their 40's and 50's felt the same, I need good health because I need to deal with problems stress every day. I could tell many colleagues were under immense stress, high blood pressure to the extent that it affected their leadership. So, we have to look at health before becoming a leader. Many colleagues sought out help to know more about how to deal with stress, arising from work, complaints, workload.

(Manager 7).

4.3.3 | Development feedback from peers

The majority of study participants provided accounts of the value of peer relationships for feedback. The following two extracts consider the role of developmental feedback.

We don't want to confront our colleagues, even if our subordinate's performance is not so good, we will use tactful or indirect way to let them know to give them some direct feedback.

(Manager 18)

I use the communication skills that I learned from the IMP [Innovative managers program] and disseminate positive thinking among peers and workmates to establish a healthy, trusting environment and work cooperatively.

(Manager 16)

The excerpts highlight that the social ties developed enabled participants to access a variety of developmental resources related to skills development, and enhanced power dynamics and agency.

4.4 | Leader and leadership development outcomes

4.4.1 | Positive leader and leadership development outcomes

All participants provided accounts of positive individual outcomes derived from the leadership development, SSG and PPG relationships and access to resources. The first extract emphasises overcoming fears and building confidence through developmental support.

I gained ... more positive perspectives on motivating and tapping the positive input of colleagues. After all, even we, middle managers from different departments/bureaux, are all different because of different professional or work background.... I had a very distinct fear about the pressure I am going to face at LEGCO, and I think the development helped.

(Manager 36)

The second extract reveals that by building relationships accessed on development programmes and gaining consensus for ideas and actions, participants believed they could more easily achieve co-operation and consensus.

Beforehand I already knew many of the colleagues and now I know another colleague from the transport department who is directly in charge of the project I am working on. As a result of this networking and after knowing him more, we have come to a closer relationship and things are getting easier. In terms of cooperation to get things done...through the relationship we have a consensus, easy to come to consensus.

(Manager 10)

The third extract reveals that access to leadership development helps performance and service delivery outcomes.

The programmes gave me a lot of material and the steps that you have to go through, including the staff consultation, which I think is quite successful for the changes I have made...Organisational change is most difficult. I've done 2 major changes involving 2,000 people, it took me about 2 years to implement from the preparation work to final implementation.

(Manager 2)

In this fourth extract a study participant revealed how the development process has helped to broaden leadership skills, with better service delivery outcomes.

I deal with mostly the building works, and I learned from the development they talk a lot about public engagement, how to get the idea through to the public and that's helped a lot in my work..... I tell you about the Shanghai Expo, there is a lot of interest. Even before the building was completed, they asked you lots and lots of questions. What is it going to be like? And some of this we could not release, so we needed to have some strategy and know the line to take, all the parties are important in this project, the government, the clients department.

(Manager 18)

4.4.2 | Negative leader and leadership development outcomes

Study participants also revealed negative leadership development outcomes. The first extract considers an unintended outcome of higher workload and work intensification resulting from promotion following the development programme.

These days' people don't want to be promoted, because they witness what a promoted colleague has to do and many of them want to be 'happy troupers'. We call them, you know 'leave me alone I'll do my work, efficiently, productively.... we don't want to be a part of promotion ...but because there is so much work to do, we feel sorry for those guys who get promoted. I'm not sure whether it is a reward as such.

(Manager 4)

The second extract shows that not all participants believed leadership development was beneficial. These individuals were less able to utilise developmental opportunities or access high quality SSG and PPG relationships.

I thought it was good thing to learn how public policy is made, how to deal with the media... but when you come back to the real world you have to deal with things in practical way. I think it prepared you to be a leader, so it's good in terms of preparation, but it cannot say it help you to deal with practical issues.

(Manager 7)

This last excerpt describes the participant's need to hide feelings of stress and pressure, whilst carefully managing the well-being of staff.

I cannot be seen by my colleagues that I am getting worn down, I have to be boosting up them, let them know that what they are now doing is right, so go ahead—otherwise if you say negative words, they will be morally affected.

(Manager 20)

The study provides a nuanced appreciation of the potential for more positive or negative leadership development outcomes, built around collaborative development activities, which go beyond formal workplace techniques and include informal social events which are culturally relevant. Much will hinge on the participants capacity to develop stronger social guanxi ties with colleagues and to enable new collaborative relationships across department. However, leadership development outcomes do suggest that not all participants can leverage relationships positively and that learning transfer is sometimes viewed with cynicism.

5 | DISCUSSION

The study draws on guanxi and COR theory to identify and understand how both SSG and PPG as social resources help middle managers access developmental resources and realise development outcomes from participation in leadership development. This is important for managers in a public sector context where competition for resources is a constant. Our key finding, that middle managers with both high quality SSG and PPG have access to more development resources, contributes to the understanding of factors that limit leadership development outcomes. The link between high quality SSG relationships and positive leadership development outcomes is well established in the literature however the synergistic importance of SSG and PPG is an emergent consideration.

5.1 | Theoretical implications

The study makes several timely contributions to the public administration human development literature and notably those exploring a combined method of formal and *informal* leadership development activities (Seidle et al., 2016) to improve performance and outcomes. First, from a theoretical and conceptual perspective we show that personal, work and non-work relationships embodied in guanxi are relevant to the development of middle managers in public sector organisations in an East Asian context. The finding of the multi-dimensional nature of middle manager relationships with their superiors and peers broadens the focus for the study of guanxi in the context of public sector human resource development. Second, the study demonstrates the usefulness of COR theory (Hobfoll et al., 2018) to the exploration of the impact of guanxi in accessing development resources and how these resources are related to individual outcomes. In contrast to the rationalising concept at the heart of NPM, COR theory helps provide insights into the role that development resources play in enhancing the skills and competencies of middle managers in the public sector. Third, the Chinese relational construct of guanxi is important in understanding access to public sector development resources in the East Asian context. The use of guanxi in exploring the effectiveness of leadership development complements traditional (and limiting) structural approaches to provide for considerations of agency. Where public management theory promotes individual's enacting agency to overcome the structural barriers of hierarchy and co-create meaningful outcomes, we observe the efficacy of 'group agency' via the dyadic guanxi networks of favour exchange. The bottom-up enablement via peer-to-peer and superior-subordinate social ties demonstrates one way of circumnavigating structure in traditional bureaucracies. Guanxi allows civil servants to informally access horizontal networks and provides some flexibility in organisational processes through informal development channels going forward.

5.2 | Implications for practice

Our findings suggest that to gain value from leadership development (from an organisational and individual perspective) organisations should not rely solely on formal, top-down controlled leadership development programmes. The more impactful development of middle managers takes place within and out with the workplace as part of day-to-day tasks, interpersonal interactions, influencing upwards and relationship building.

The importance of high quality SSG and PPG cannot be underestimated. Organisations should therefore leverage high quality SSG and PPG to reinforce learning derived from formal leadership development programmes and encourage middle managers to use social resources to gain access to other development resources. At a practical level, middle managers who have undertaken formal development should be provided with opportunities to meet with supervisors and peers to discuss their development. This can be facilitated through the promotion of a development climate. There will however be challenges in adopting this more 'hands off' approach to middle manager development for organisations with strong centralising cultures.

5.3 | Limitations and future research directions

The study has several limitations that suggest opportunities for future research. The first limitation is related to the data. Our data were derived from middle managers who undertook leadership development and was not longitudinal in nature. It would be desirable to collect data from middle managers' superiors and a sample of peers to obtain other perceptions of the quality of guanxi. A second limitation concerns the degree of transferability of the study findings. We conducted our study within a specific organisation thus learning may appear more abstract for some organisations within the public domain. Future research therefore should seek a more representative sample of public sector organisations in different Asian countries where guanxi is commonly practised. Further research may also broaden in scope to consider other constructs in the development landscape that may impact the quality of SSG and PPG relationships for example, organisational learning climate.

6 | CONCLUSION

The study findings suggest that *guanxi* enables middle managers to accumulate development resources in the workplace through superiors and peers. These development resources include development opportunities, development support, access to tacit knowledge and information, developmental feedback and collaborative development activities. Both SSG and PPG enable middle managers to access development resources that contribute to positive leadership development outcomes. For public organisations in this contextual setting *guanxi* is an important social resource in understanding leadership development and its outcomes. Consideration of such may offer

organisations and individuals development opportunities more likely to meet needs and achieve return on investment and expectations.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by these authors.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

PRACTICE IMPACT STATEMENT

This research impacts leadership development design and practice for middle managers in the East Asian public sector. We add to debates on leveraging social ties and networks to overcome hierarchical barriers and SILO's, via *guanxi* networks, which afford relational depth and favour exchange at both the superior-subordinate and peer-to-peer level.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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