Paternalistic leadership and employee voice in China: A dual process model ☆

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from social exchange and self-concept-based leadership theories, we investigate how paternalistic leadership — authoritarian, benevolent, and moral — affects employee voice from leader–member exchange (LMX) and status-judgment perspectives in the Chinese context. Data from 402 employees and their supervisors show that LMX and status-judgment mechanisms could work simultaneously in transmitting the influences of paternalistic leadership behaviors to employee voice. Authoritarian paternalistic leaders reduce employee voice by reducing their status judgment. Benevolent paternalistic leaders encourage employee voice by enhancing both LMX and status judgment. Moral paternalistic leaders positively influence employee voice mainly through LMX processes. We discuss theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

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Introduction

Employees' opinions, suggestions, and actions for improving organizational operations play an increasingly important role (Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010; Morrison & Phelps, 1999). Previous literature has consistently demonstrated that employees' willingness to make suggestions and solve problems improves organizational functioning, heightens the quality of managerial decisions (Morrison & Milliken, 2000), enhances organizational adaptation (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001), and provides developmental opportunities (Dutton & Ashford, 1993). However, many employees would rather keep silent even when they are aware of problems or have ideas for making improvements (Morrison, 2011). This phenomenon might be more salient in the Chinese context than in Western contexts such as the United States. China's traditional cultural emphasis on relationalism encourages harmonious social relationships (Bond & Hwang, 1986; Leung, Koch, & Lu, 2002) and discourages discord and disagreement. Furthermore, China's cultural emphasis on hierarchical order ordains that Chinese are likely to be more submissive to authority (Farh, Earley, & Lin, 1997). Thus, research on how to encourage Chinese employees to exercise their voice and to take corrective actions is particularly important to voice literature.

Among organizational contextual factors that affect employees' willingness to exercise voice, leadership is highly important (Detert & Burris, 2007), particularly in China. Leaders, as the main authority figures, play central roles in affecting employee behaviors and in determining whether employees feel that it is worthwhile or safe to voice concerns, make suggestions, and endeavor to improve operations (e.g. Detert & Burris, 2007; Edmondson, 2003; Saunders, Sheppard, Knight, & Roth, 1992; Zhou

& George, 2001). Previous research has found that subordinates feel free to voice when their leaders exhibit transformational leadership (Detert & Burris, 2007), ethical leadership (Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009), openness to voice (Detert & Burris, 2007), and consultation behaviors (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012). Such leadership behaviors may be universal, but in China, paternalistic leadership dominates. Paternalistic leadership, deeply rooted in the Chinese tradition of Confucianism, includes strong discipline, authority with moral integrity, and fatherly benevolence (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Differing from established Western leadership behaviors, its effectiveness depends heavily on the cultural context (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008; Pellegrini, Scandura, & Jayaraman, 2010). The dominance of paternalistic leadership in China prompts us to ponder its effects on employee voice in China. Under paternalistic leaders, will subordinates feel that they must follow obedience traditions and keep their criticisms and corrective actions to themselves? Will they fear that expressing their ideas to authority is too challenging? Thus our research purpose is to explore whether and how paternalistic leadership encourages or discourages employee voice in China.

Confucianism conveys two traditional cultural guidelines — *relationalism* and *hierarchy* — that may determine how paternalistic leadership affects employee voice behavior in China. Relationalism, based on reciprocity in relationships (Hwang, 2000), suggests a relationship-based mechanism. For example, paternalistic leaders may affect subordinates' behavior by increasing their trust in and satisfaction with their leaders (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, in press; Liang, Ling, & Hsieh, 2007), their perceptions of interactional justice (Wu, Huang, Li, & Liu, 2012), and their gratitude (Cheng et al., 2004). Supervisor/subordinate social exchange could determine how significantly paternalistic leadership affects employee voice. Accordingly, we examine leader–member exchange as the relationship-based mechanism linking paternalistic leadership dimensions and employee voice.

Hierarchy conveys that Chinese deeply revere power and status (Hwang, 2000). To our knowledge, researchers have overlooked status to explain leadership effects, although paternalistic leaders may affect how subordinates perceive their status in the group (Tyler & Blader, 2002). Indeed, when leaders cause subordinates to perceive that they have high status, subordinates then believe that supervisors and colleagues respect them and value their opinions. In response, they may feel obliged to take action to promote the group welfare and may even strongly desire to risk changing the status quo (e.g., Tyler & Blader, 2003; Tyler & Degoey, 1995). Those observations led us to investigate whether paternalistic leadership changes subordinates' status judgment and further affects their voice behavior. To examine the dual process model of paternalistic leadership and employee voice, we combine the forces of LMX and status judgment.

Our study extends the literature in several ways. First, previous studies have rarely assessed the influence of leadership behaviors on voice in the Chinese context. We draw on well-established paternalistic leadership theory and develop predictions about how specific paternalistic leadership behaviors affect Chinese employee voice. This extends understanding of the leadership–voice relationship and adds value to paternalistic leadership literature. Second, beyond advancing understanding of leadership behavior as a predictor of voice, we examine status judgment as an important self-concept-based cognition process linking leadership and voice and address how each of the three paternalistic leadership dimensions affects voice through subordinate status perception. Prior paternalistic leadership research has been confined to relational mechanisms regarding leaders, rarely considering leadership effects on subordinates' self-concept. We integrate the self-concept-based mechanism and relationship-based mechanism (LMX) in understanding paternalistic leadership influences. Third, we provide practical insights into international management for firms operating in China, pointing out specific ways leaders foster employee voice.

Theory and hypotheses

Paternalistic leadership in China

Paternalistic leadership (PL) has been defined as "a style that combines strong discipline and authority with fatherly benevolence" (Farh & Cheng, 2000: p. 91) in East Asia, with three distinct dimensions: authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality (e.g., Chen et al., in press; Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006). Authoritarianism in PL behavior refers to control, authority, and demands for submission and obedience from subordinates (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Benevolence in PL behavior delineates holistic and individualized concern for employees' well-being in work and non-work domains (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Farh, Liang, Chou, & Cheng, 2008; Wang & Cheng, 2010). Morality in PL behavior captures superior integrity and moral character, a leader's desire to behave unselfishly and to fulfill obligations (Chen et al., in press; Farh & Cheng, 2000). The three behavioral dimensions provide a holistic picture of paternalism. Within a moral framework, leaders are genuinely benevolent toward their subordinates, while exercising absolute authority over them (Jackman, 1994). Correspondingly, subordinates act as compliant "children."

Paternalistic leadership has deep cultural roots in Confucianism (Cheng et al., 2004; Pellegrini et al., 2010). The cultural tradition of Confucian politics directs that superiors have paternalistic control in the central, vertical relationship of authoritarian leadership, and that followers submit to their authority (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Niu, Wang, & Cheng, 2009; Zhang, Tsui, & Wang, 2011). The Confucian ideal of five cardinal relationships, the main cultural foundation underlying benevolent leadership in China, emphasizes mutuality and reciprocity in social relations (Cheng et al., 2004; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Confucianism also teaches that leaders restrain their behaviors through personal ethics, standards, and scruples (Farh & Cheng, 2000); they cultivate moral rules and adhere to monarchical and paternal principles and virtues (Farh & Cheng, 2000). These cultural roots indicate that PL might be more salient in the Chinese context, and that the concept differs from superficially similar but distinct Western-developed leadership concepts such as abusive supervision (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007), supportive supervision (Deci & Ryan, 1987), and ethical leadership (Brown, Trevino, & Harrison, 2005).