Face Values on Trust in Loyalty and Empowerment: A Study of Managers in China's Public Sector

Abstract

The practice in relation to face values reflects the large power distance and collectivism prevalent in Chinese societies. Members of such societies emphasize saving and enhancing of face of individuals who occupy higher organizational hierarchy. Despite the large number of studies on face from diverse disciplines, there is limited empirical evidence on how face values influence managerial behavior in manager-subordinate relationships in China's civil services. The current study examines the extent to which face values of Chinese managers moderate the relationship between trust in subordinate and their willingness to share information with subordinates and encourage their initiatives in China's civil service. The findings indicate that managers' values, which emphasize superior face-saving and face-enhancing, moderate the relationship between managers' empowerment behaviors and their trust in subordinate's loyalty.

Keywords: Face saving and enhancing; sharing information; encourage initiatives; trust in subordinate; China's civil service.

INTRODUCTION

Sharing information with subordinates and encouraging them to generate and use their initiative are strongly stressed in contemporary management (Rank, 2006). Leader Member Exchange (LMX) theory (Wofford *et al.*, 1975) suggests that leaders are willing to share important work-related information with followers and authorize them autonomy to be creative when they feel that their followers are trusted to be loyal to them. Although the uniqueness of role, psychological process and dimensions of trust has been well discussed in the literature (Doney *et al.*, 1998; Kohtamäki *et al.*, 2004; Lane, 1998; Mayer *et al.*, 2005; Mcallister, 1995), there is insufficient attention to how a manager's trust in subordinates influences their behaviours of empowerment (Wang *et al.*, 2007b).

At an interpersonal level, face (*mian-zi* in Mandarin) is the claimed sense of self-respect in an interactive situation and is a form of social status (Ting-Toomey, 1994). Face values play an influential role in the interaction of social relationships in the broad societies and workplace (Chen, 2001). While there have been studies of the influence of face on communication and negotiation (Fang, 1999; Ting-Toomey, 1994), how face values influence managerial behavior is under investigated, such as empowerment in manager-subordinate relationships. The changing face values and related behaviors in the private sector in China for the past three decades have been reported (Fang *et al.*, 2008; Faure *et al.*, 2008; Leung, 2008; Luo, 2008). However, little is known how face values influence on the relationship between trust in

subordinates and empowerment in China's civil service sector which is less involved in economic

activities and internationalization compared to the private sector. Research on public administration in

China is limited (Yu, 2006).

Our study seeks to fulfill these research gaps by investigating the adoption of face values and

managerial practices by a sample of managers in China's civil service. Specifically, we will examine how

manager's trust in their subordinates' loyalty is related to their willingness to share information with

subordinate and encourage initiatives from them. We will also test the moderation effect of "supervisor

face saving" and "superior face enhancing" values on the relationships between trust in subordinate

loyalty, information sharing and encouragement of initiative.

Our study makes two significant contributions to the literature. First, our study increases the

understanding of management practices and face values in the civil service in China. To our knowledge,

little research on these issues has been done about this sector in China. Secondly, our research contributes

to the face and leadership literature by examining the interactive effect of face values on the relationship

between trust in subordinate and empowerment in China's civil service within the emerging economy

context. **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES**

Trust in Loyalty and Empowerment in the Civil Service

The exchange between leaders and members provides a logical connection between managerial actions

and employee empowerment (Gómez *et al.*, 2001). LMX theory recognizes the link between managers'

trust in their subordinate's loyalty and the subsequent empowerment (Liden *et al.*, 1998; Wang *et al.*,

2008). A manager's trust in his/her subordinate's loyalty towards them refers to a manager's belief in

subordinates' benevolence, integrity, allegiance and commitment to the leader (Wang *et al.*, 2007a) and in

their no intention to harm their leader; and not to do so even when such opportunities arise. It stems from

attributions about subordinates' intentions and motives (Kelley, 1973; Wang *et al.*, 2008). The extent to

which supervisors share information with their subordinates and encourage their subordinates to be

initiative depends on their belief in their subordinate's loyalty towards them. LMX theory suggests the

subordinates who are considered part of a manager's in-group have a high-quality exchange (Dansereau, Graen, & Haga, 1975). Higher quality refers to greater exchange of valued resources between leader and member (Bass, 1990; Liden *et al.*, 1998). This implies that when managers trust their subordinates, they give these subordinates preferential treatment such as increased information, responsibility in job and autonomy in work (Gómez & Rosen, 2001).

It is found that the loyalty dimension of LMX is positively related to a supervisor's evaluation on the performance rating of subordinates (Wang *et al.*, 2008). It seems reasonable that the more the manager trusts a subordinate's loyalty, the more likely the manager will encourage his/her subordinate to initiate projects and ideas. Managers opt to ask loyal members to take on tasks that require independent judgment and/or responsibility (Liden *et al.*, 1980; Liden *et al.*, 1998; Scandura *et al.*, 1986).

The China's civil service in our study refers to the government organizations within the civic administration system. The civil service provides many services in China's current emerging economy which are usually run by the private sectors in the developed economies. China's civil service is traditionally based on a rigid hierarchical system. The system was previously criticized as over-centralized, inefficient, unresponsiveness, lack of innovation, inefficiency, authoritarianism, routines, shirking responsibility, nepotism, seeking special privilege, and overstaffed (Bing, 1992; Liou, 1997). In general, the development of the civil service in China in terms of efficiency is substantially lag behind to China's economic development (Lo *et al.*, 2006).

With the introduction of civil service reform since the 1980s, the current civil service system in China is argued to incorporate Western civil service systems while maintaining Chinese characteristics (Adams *et al.*, 2006; Liou, 1997). As a result, two major dilemmas are created in the current system. Apart from the merit-based appraisal, political influence still exists in promotion and recruitment (Adams *et al.*, 2006). Chinese civil service reform do not adopt the value of political neutrality, a major administrative principle of Western democracies (Adams *et al.*, 2006; Aufrecht *et al.*, 1995). Chinese civil servants have to adhere to the principle of being loyalty to the Communist Party. Consequently, loyalty to superiors is associated

with political influence and personnel decisions tend to be made by higher authorities on the case basis (Liou, 1997).

Chinese managers may share information with subordinates for their loyalty in support for the work goals and personal demands in the LMX dyad (Wang & Casimar, 2007). The reciprocity-oriented culture in China reinforces a manager's intention of awarding back to subordinates' loyalty with in-group treatment in China's civil service. Managers who trust their subordinates to be loyal towards them are likely to share company critical information with these subordinates and encourage them to be initiative. We hypothesized that in China's civil service:

> *Hypothesis 1: Managers who reported higher level of trust in their subordinates'*
> *loyalty towards them are more willing to share information with these subordinates***.**

> *Hypothesis 2: Managers who reported higher level of trust in their subordinates'*
> *loyalty towards them are more willing to encourage these subordinates to be initiative.*

Moderating effect of face values

Moderating effect of saving superior face

While trusting their subordinates to be loyal towards them may lead to managers' willingness to share information with these subordinates, their actual intention to do so is influenced by their values of social status in terms of self-face and the face of others in a particular cultural context (Chow *et al.*, 1999; Hwang *et al.*, 2002).

The Chinese culture is characterized by both a high level of collectivism and large power distance. Members of such cultures place greater emphasis on the maintenance of mutual face than do members of the small power distance cultures, which focus more on the maintenance of one's own face (Morisaki *et al.*, 1994). Social face values influence the willingness to allow participation within certain cultural contexts (Bond *et al.*, 1995; Chow *et al.*, 1999; Merkin, 2006; Ting-Toomey, 1994) and hierarchical organizations (Tynan, 2005). "Saving superior face" refers to a particular managerial preference that dissuades subordinates from challenging the ideas and decisions of their superior or publicly criticizing

them. In this study, we defined "enhancing superior face" as a particular managerial preference that encourages subordinates to praise and comment positively upon their boss.

From a cultural-universal perspective there are three types of face (Lim *et al.*, 1991). They are autonomy-face, fellowship-face and competence-face. Of the three types of face, this study focuses on competence-face values and their relationship with information sharing and initiative encouragement in an organizational context. Competence-face is the image of a person's ability. It is concerned with past accomplishments, current good reputation, and the capability to perform successfully in the future. When individuals claim these values for themselves, they want others to acknowledge their success and capabilities in these areas (Lim, 1991).

Face is not a self-defined image, but instead refers to the image that a person projects as reflected by the assessment of another (Lim, 1994). Face-saving attempts to avoid threats to the public image and sensitivity of others (Merkin, 2006). The face concern of managers is related to the desire to have a positive and consistent self-image that is appreciated by superiors, peers and subordinates alike (Lim, 1994). Within the high-context Chinese culture, the meaning of face value is sensitive to the context of social status. Increasing democracy is found to correspondingly reduce the role of face in the interactive relationships in China (Luo, 2008). This implies that face concern in relation to the tradition values of hierarchy is negatively related to empowerment.

Chinese managers working in the civil service are reported to be less democratic and more autocratic (Li *et al.*, 2001). In the restrictions of the system (Straussman *et al.*, 2001), managers' face values explain the psychological reasons for the bureaucratic-oriented management style prevalent in the public sector (Vidal *et al.*, 2007). On the one hand, Chinese managers in the civil service pay a great deal of attention to facework to gain favorable acceptance of their superior. As the existence and prosperity of the civil organizations in China are not based on how much profits are gained, thus satisfying one's superiors has become a crucial means of subordinates' gaining "merits" (Li *et al.*, 2001). On the other hand, to maintain and promote their own competence-face, Chinese managers may act on the idea that their subordinates should be discouraged from criticizing by not allowing them to have a chance to share

knowledge about what is going on in the organization and to actively raise initiatives in the management

process. Leader's self-confidence is related to sharing information with subordinates (Vidal *et al.*, 2007).

Information sharing with subordinates can be viewed by Chinese managers as a sign of poor leadership

(Hofsted, 1991). If Chinese managers believe that saving their competence-face is related to high power

control and autocracy, then it is likely that they will not choose to share information with their

subordinates. They also prefer to prevent subordinates from creatively participating in organizational

operation. Encouraging initiative can be perceived as that the manager lacks ideas and competence; and

that subordinates have a better notion of how to run the business. We thus hypothesize the following

about the civil service in China.

> *Hypothesis 3a: Chinese managers' value of saving superior face negatively moderates the*
> *relationship between the trust in their subordinates' loyalty and willingness to share*
> *information.*

> *Hypothesis 3b: Chinese managers' value of superior face saving negatively moderates the*
> *relationship between trust in subordinate loyalty and managers' encourage subordinates to be*
> *initiative.*

Moderating Effect of Enhancing face

As defined above, *enhancing face* refers to how supportive an individual is of the face concerns and social

esteem needs of others (Tynan, 2005) and plays a very strong role in the Chinese relational-oriented

culture and a more proactive way in an interactive relationship (Leung, 2003). Managers want their

competence-face to be publicly recognized and to be seen as the most knowledgeable and intelligent

members of the group (Lim, 1994; Tse, 1988). The expected approbation behavior of subordinates,

therefore, is characterized by efforts to minimize blame and maximize praise of their managers (Lim,

1994).

Entitlement of life-long employment in China's civil service engenders Chinese civil servants to perceive

that developing a positive and harmony relationship with superiors at higher levels is necessary for

personal career growth in a long run (Adams *et al.*, 2006). Additionally, although there is a personnel

procedures for promotion, salary increase, and allocation of various benefits, supervisors'

recommendation plays an influential role in the outcomes (Wang *et al.*, 2008). These contextual system

factors lure Chinese civil servants to take a matter of managers' face-enhancing very seriously and

practice it as often as possible in the civil service. Face values are closely related to reciprocity in

interactive relationships in China *(*Fang, 1999*;* Luo, 2008*).* Meanwhile, Chinese managers in the civil

service expect that their psychological need for the positive self-image should be satisfied by the

subordinates' enhancing competence-face. Instead of sharing information for high performance or

listening to inviting initiatives for future work improvement, managers in these government organizations

prefer to spend time hearing subordinates' praise on how they have done perfectly well and on what

effective leadership they have provided to subordinates' work. The managers also perceive that the

public recognition through subordinate face-enhancing would benefit to their own career within the civic

service system. Managers' preference of enhancing superior-face is likely to be a psychological reason

for unresponsiveness and lack of innovation in the public sector mechanism in China (Chow, 1993; Liou,

1997; Liou, 2001). Accordingly, we hypothesize the following:

> H4a: The value of enhancing superior-face adopted by Chinese managers in civil service
> negatively moderates the relationship between trust in loyalty and information sharing.

> H4b: The value of enhancing superior-face adopted by Chinese managers civil service negatively
> moderates the relationship between trust in subordinates' loyalty and their encouraging
> subordinates to be initiative.

METHOD

Sampling and procedure

Data were collected from a diverse sample of managers in China's public sector. The participants were

middle to senior level managers in diverse managerial functions from 10 different provinces across China.

The respondents were officials at various managerial levels in the civil service enrolling in a training

program in 2003. 135 completed and useful surveys were received. Table 1 shows the demographic

profiles of the participants. Most of them were senior and middle managers.

<u>**Insert Table 1 about here**</u>

Validity

The questionnaire was translated from English into Mandarin, as the original items were all derived from English-language research. To ensure face and content validity, the versions in Mandarin and English were rendered equivalent in meaning by refining the questions through backwards-forwards translation. To minimize the effects of socially desirable responses, the participants were promised anonymity and confidentiality. To ensure discriminant validity, we conducted factor analysis for detecting common method variance by using Harman's one-factor test (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003). The results of the factor analysis provide strong evidence that common method variance was not an issue.

Measures

Suitable existing measurement scales were identified through a review of previous research. The participants were asked to express their level of agreement with a set of statements on a seven-point Likert-scale that ranged from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Items with a negative meaning were reversed in the analysis.

Dependent variables

"Information sharing with subordinates" was measured using the scale developed by Wang and Satow (1994), which features items that measure the extent to which a manager shares company information with subordinates (Cronbach's alpha = 0.70). "Encouraging initiatives from subordinates" was measured adopting the scale from Hemphill and Coon (1957), which examines the extent to which managers encourage subordinates to initiate activities, practices, and ideas (Cronbach's alpha = 0.82).

Independent variables

Trust in subordinate loyalty. "Trust in subordinate loyalty" was measured using items from Rempel et al.'s (1985) trust scale. We examined how the respondents reported on the extent to which they trust their subordinates' loyalty. This measure demonstrated an acceptable level of internal reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.75).

Saving superior face and enhancing superior's face. Based on the literature on face and facework (Bond, 1991; Chow *et al.*, 1999; Lim, 1994) we developed two subscales which comprised of "saving superior face" and "enhancing superior face". "Saving superior face" assessed whether a manager held the value that

a superior's ideas and request should not be questioned or rejected by subordinates publicly (Cronbach's alpha = 0.80). "Enhancing superior's face" assessed whether a manager held the value that a superior should be flattered, praised, and respected publicly in the workplace. This measure has an internal reliability coefficient of 0.71.

Control variables

Gender and managerial position were controlled because research suggests that these variables affect the acquisition of social values (e.g. Triandis, 1995) and within a hierarchical organizational structure values and beliefs and their functions vary across position levels (Thomas *et al.*, 2001).

RESULTS

Results of the hierarchical regression are reported in Table 2 and show that "trust in subordinate's loyalty" has a direct positive relationship with "sharing information" ($\beta = 0.39$; $p < 0.001$) and with "encouraging initiative" ($\beta = 0.31$; $p < 0.001$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2 are fully supported.

The results of the hierarchical regression indicate that "saving superior face" positively moderates the relationship between "trust in loyalty" and "sharing information" ($\beta = 0.84$; $p < 0.05$), but has no moderate effect on the relationship between trust in loyalty and "encouraging initiative". Thus, H3a and H3b are rejected.

The results of the hierarchical regression show that "enhancing superior face" negatively moderates the relationship between trust in loyalty and "encouraging initiative" ($\beta = - 0.85$; $p < 0.05$) and but has no moderating effect on the relationship between "trust in loyalty" and "sharing information". H4a therefore is rejected and H4a is fully supported.

Insert Table 2 about here

DISCUSSION

Theoretical Implications

Drawing on face theory, the objective of this study was to examine whether the face values of managers predict their managerial behavior. Our findings contribute to the understanding of the values of face in the

interactive relationships in China's civil service which is facing the challenges of the emerging economy, and also extend the social psychology research on face (e.g., Ting-Toomey, 1994; Brett et al., 2007) to the managerial context at an applicable level.

Specifically, the findings of this study indicate that enhancing superior face negatively moderates the relationship between trust in loyalty and managers' desire to encourage subordinates' initiative. These findings extend the earlier work of Bond (1991) and Lim (1994) on the general link between face and status differences by our specifying aspects of the enhancement of superior face. Our study deepens the understanding of the application of face theory to management practice and extends Leung's (2008) research on face to the management area.

Importantly, we also found that saving superior face positively moderates the relationship between trust in loyalty and sharing information with subordinates, although which is opposite to our original hypothesis. Sharing company information with subordinates allows subordinates to have a chance to understand better and do a proper work for the company's operation and to criticize the management. The act of sharing company information satisfies the self-esteem and actualization needs of subordinates and creates the desired public face.

The findings of our study reflects a managerial change in China's civil service, that is, the face values in relation to the positive image is positively associated with the increasing level of empowerment after over decades' civil reform in the emerging economy (Straussman et al., 2001); and reflecting the change of a broader society which results from the influence of globalization (Faure et al., 2008; Leung, 2008). The favorable image of a leader in the contemporary management domain now is characterized with democracy. To save competence-face, Chinese managers in the civil service therefore start to use sharing information to demonstrate their leadership capability.

The findings of this study also contribute to the literature on management effectiveness, which defines the factors that affect and facilitate the initiative and participation of employees. The literature suggests that a positive work environment can be developed by providing employees with autonomy (Glynn, 1996; Geber, Boerner, & Lanwehr, 2003) and information (Glynn, 1996). The findings indicate that the degree

to which managers allow subordinate participation in management in China's civil service system is not only affected by external factors as position difference and internal factor as trust in subordinates, but also by the intention of the managers to honor their own face and to honor or dishonor subordinate's face desires.

Practical Implications

The smooth flow of information throughout the operational process and organizational ranks of a company has become a key factor contributing to the effectiveness and efficiency of organizations in the knowledge economy. First, specially designed training and other change management techniques need to be employed to neutralize the negative impact of face values. These change efforts should aim to sensitize managers to these behavior patterns and to make support available to them in the public sector in China.

Second, institutional systems could be launched to maximize the positive influence of face-related behaviors to improve management effectiveness in China's civil service.

Third, measures should be taken to establish an organizational culture that fosters initiative encouragement and participative behavior in China's civil service. In China's civil reform process, trust in subordinate should be the dominant behavioral pattern of managers and participation should be the rule of work. Managers in such environments will feel that it is natural to share information with subordinates and encourage them to participate in decision making.

Limitations

The approach adopted in this study deals mainly with the psychological processes leading to the development of face values among managers and their management practices in the context of the civil service in China. Unlike many earlier studies in this field, we introduce the important dimension of face into the analysis, but we do not deal extensively with the broader social processes that account for values about face.

Although we speculate on the role of face in the civil service in accounting for delegating behavior among Chinese managers, we have not looked in detail at how larger social institutions, such as corporate

governance, affect the extent to which Chinese managers share information with and encourage initiative among their subordinates. Our study of face values among Chinese managers only reflects a part of the complexity of values and attitudes in China's civil service, and should be extended to the examination of such issues as trust in subordinate commitment.

Future Research

A potential area of future research is the linking of face to particular leadership styles. Such research could also prove insightful in terms of micro-level practices and leadership effectiveness in the civil service in China.

Regional differences in China may result in different work values and orientations in China. Our study only investigated these issues in China's civil service. Further research could explore how the different ownership types interact with local variations to influence face values in China. The broader environment of the transition economy in China could also provide a useful context for further investigation of the dynamics of face in relation to changing human resource management practices.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study takes an important step in a complicated area of research, seeking to explain the development of management practices from the perspective of face. Our findings suggest that in the civil service, the face concerns of Chinese managers are a significant factor that must be taken into account in understanding managerial practice in a bureaucratic system.

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Table 1 Demographic Characteristics for Managers in Public Sector in China.

Variable				
Gender	**Male**	**Female**		
	116 (85.9%)	16 (12.1%)		
Age	**20-30 yrs**	**31-39 yrs**	**40-49 yrs**	**50 o yrs Over**
	8 (5.9%)	65(48.1%)	57 (42.2%)	5 (3.7%)
Education	**Elementary school**	**Jr. high or high school**	**Undergraduate or college**	**Postgraduate**
	1(0.7 %)	2 (1.5 %)	106 (79.1%)	25 (18.7 %)
Mgt. year	**Under 2 years**	**2-5 years**	**5-10 years**	**11-20 years; over 20 years**
	7 (5.2%)	18 (18.7%)	35 (26.1 %)	56 (41.8 %); 18(13.4%)
Mgt. position	**Top management**	**Senior leaders**	**Middle leaders**	**First-line leaders**
	8 (5.9 %)	56(41.5%)	43 (31.9%)	10 (7.4%)

Table 2. Hierarchical Regression Analysis of Saving and Enhancing Superior Face on Sharing Information with Subordinates (SIS) and Encouraging Initiatives of Subordinate (EIS) for Public Sector in China [a]

Variable	*SIS*			*EIS*		
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Controls						
Age	.11	.11	.08	.11	.10	.68
Education	.09	.83	.10	-.04	-.05	-.04
Years in Mgt.	-.01	-.02	-.01	.06	.57	.06
Main effects						
Trust in loyalty (TIL)		.39***	.08		.31***	.59*
Superior face – saving (SFS)		.28***	-.47		.06	.24
Superior face-enhancing (SFE)		.18*	.41		.24**	-.85*
Interacting effects						
TIL x SFS			.84*			.36
TIL x SFE			-.28			-.85*
R^2	.02	.34	.34	.02	.21	.24

Adjust R^2	.00	.30	.31	.00	.19	.20
F	.96	10.63***	8.95***	1.01	6.66***	5.52***
Observation number		135		135		

[a] Standardised coefficients are reported. [a][†] p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001 (2-tailed).

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