
Tokenism in Chinese work organisations? Subordinate–supervisor gender combination and worker’s organisational commitment in China

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Abstract: Using a unique dataset consisting of 343 supervisor–subordinate pairs from various workplaces in China, this study investigates workers’ organisational commitment in Chinese organisations. We juxtapose two lines of arguments on gender composition and work experiences for supervisors and subordinates: Rosabeth Kanter’s tokenism theory, and a collection of fruitful studies on leadership and gender. Our results support the tokenism theory: women working under female supervisors not only have the lowest levels of organisational commitment, but the difference between their organisational commitment and that of either men or women working under male supervisors is statistically significant. We attempt to account for such new findings with unique Chinese culture and institutional characteristics.

Keywords: gender composition; organisational commitment; tokenism.

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1 Introduction

This study investigates gender matching between supervisors and subordinates, and the effect of gender matching on subordinates’ organisational commitment (OC) in a diverse set of Chinese organisations characterised by their highly patriarchal underlying corporate culture, power structure, and concrete resource allocation. We review pertinent literatures, finding two lines of argument that are highly relevant to our research question. One is Kanter’s tokenism theory that provides a vivid account of how woman employees act in modern corporations that are male-dominated. Another is the literature on women and leadership (see Ayman and Korabik, 2010), which documents the unique challenges confronting women supervisors and leaders in current workplaces. We deduce testable hypothesis following each of these lines of argument. Our data analysis shows that Kanter’s tokenism theory applies to Chinese organisations despite its origin as a theory based on American corporations in the 1970s. Female subordinates with female supervisors have the lowest OC score, compared with that of the subordinates with other three types of supervisor–subordinate gender composition (e.g. male-male, male-female, female-male). We interpret this result with an emphasis on the patriarchal culture of the studied Chinese organisations, a culture that may restrict the actions of both female workers and their supervisors, engendering in such gender compositions a barrier to achieving high OC scores for female subordinates.

To the best of our knowledge, our research represents one of the first few attempts to investigate workers’ OC combining the features of the workers and their supervisors. Our central contention is that workers’ OC is not so much a function of who they are, or for that matter, who their supervisors are, but instead is a function of who they are and who they work for. We are investigating which pair configurations between supervisors and their subordinates leads to high/low OC for the subordinates. We particularly focus on the gender matching between supervisors and subordinates, and how different gender pairings affect the OC of workers. In the remainder of this paper we first review

literatures of OC, most of which are studies from North America, and literatures of OC in Chinese organisations. We then discuss the issue of gender pairs and workers' OC in China, developing a research hypotheses. We discuss our data, variables, statistical analysis, and major findings. The conclusion section discusses the implications of our research for future studies of OC.

2 Literature on organisational commitment

Previous decades have witnessed voluminous studies on organisational commitment (afterwards abbreviated OC), a subject that benefits from concerted efforts from diverse social science fields, such as management science, sociology, and industrial psychology (for a comprehensive review, see Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). OC reflects workers' identification with and involvement in their organisational goals and activities. It embraces at least three important components: (1) a strong belief in and acceptance of organisational goals and values, (2) a willingness to exert considerable efforts to help one's organisation, and (3) a strong desire to maintain membership in one's organisation. In Meyer and Allen's (1997) discussion on OC in workplaces, they distinguish between three types of commitment: (1) affective commitment, which is the same as our discussion above, (2) continuance commitment, which results from a need-based calculation to stay with a current employer, and (3) normative commitment, which results from a feeling of an obligation to stay with a current employer. Here, our measuring items are designed to capture workers' affective commitment to their organisations (e.g. workers' self-initiated motivation to act on behalf of their organisations, to contribute as much as they can, and to be loyal to their workplaces).

Often OC is analysed in the context of predicting or explaining workers' behavioural issues such as turnover and absenteeism (Mowday et al., 1982). At times, these studies thoroughly investigate both the antecedents and consequences of OC (Steers, 1977; Meyer et al., 2002). In this study, we treat organisational commitment as the dependent variable, trying to explain what type of supervisor-subordinate configurations leads to high organisational commitment in a diverse set of Chinese organisations.

Perhaps the development of affective OC is one of the most researched subjects from various social sciences, accumulating massive literatures on a wide array of antecedent factors leading to high OC (see Klein et al., 2009). However, elaborating on the immense literature on antecedent factors of OC goes beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we provide a brief sketch of what we already know about the factors that lead to the development of OC, especially affective OC.

The first stream of studies focuses on personal attributes and how they affect OC. Personal attributes include demographic features (sex, race, age, education, tenure, and marital status), and dispositional variables (values and personality studies). This line of study often finds some evidence of these factors impacts on OC, but those impacts are confounded with other underlying factors influencing the OC. For example, the effects of sex and race on OC or organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB) are largely attributable to differences in the work experience of different sexual and racial groups (Marsden et al., 1996). Education levels often tie-in with workers' expectations to affect their OC (Mottaz, 1986), marital status relates to family roles and strain (Chughtai and Zafar, 2006), and tenure and age co-vary in influencing OC (Cohen, 1993). Personal dispositional features are often tied in with Person-Job Fit or Met Expectations literature to explain variations in OC (Wanous, 1992). In other words, the individual attributes do

not exert independent non-spurious effects on OC, but rather their influences on OC are through certain mechanisms, which inspire many fruitful studies that look beyond the personal attributes to investigate job features, workplace policies and programs, workers' supervisors, and the complex interactions between those cross-level variables and how they jointly effect the development of OC.

At the organisational/workplace level, various organisational structural properties and Human Resource practices (HR) exert influences on OC. Organisational size decreases employees' OC, whereas decentralisation, measured by the extent to which organisations relegate various decision-making functions to diverse departments at lower levels, increases OC (Morris and Steers, 1980; Glisson and James, 2002). The new HR initiative of flexible work hours (flextime) is positively correlated with OC, and the association between flextime and OC is moderated by gender, in which the association is significantly stronger for women than it is for men (Scandura and Lankau, 1997). A large volume of organisational influence literature on OC is reflected in organisational justice and perceived organisational support. For example, perceived organisational justice is positively linked to OC in various organisations (Liden et al., 2003), and perceived organisational support is highly correlated with the affective OC (Rhoades and Eisenberger, 2002). Taking a cross-level approach, one study also documents that the effect of the internal labour market (ILM) on OC is contingent on workers' valuation of what the ILM offers. An ILM is conducive to the development of OC only for those workers who highly value job security and steady promotion with their current employers, which is what the ILM offers (Yang et al., 2004).

The job level factors, situated between the organisational level and individual level, contain several important explanatory factors of affective OC. For example, job challenges, degrees of job autonomy, and the variety of skills held by workers all enhance affective OC (Dunham et al., 1994). On the other hand, role ambiguity (workers not knowing what is expected of them), and role conflict (workers are expected to behave in ways that seem incompatible) are detrimental to employees' affective OC (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). One important line of research has been focusing on the relationship between supervisors and their subordinates and how such relationships affect the subordinates' OC. This line of study often ties in with organisational justice and perceived organisational support literatures to investigate how workers' OC is related to the way their supervisors implement various organisational policies and decisions (e.g. the fairness of policy implementations and perceived organisational supports) (Gellatly, 1995).

3 Organisational commitment in Chinese organisations

Literatures on OC in western countries commonly assume an atomic model: workers as atomic individuals whose OC is explained by their personal attributes (age, sex, race, human capital), job variables (tenure, and position), and workplace features (size, age, and various HR programs). In contrast, many studies on OC in Chinese organisations centre on interpersonal relationships to investigate how the quality, duration, and the context of these interpersonal relations (also known as *guanxi*) affects the development of OC (Cheung et al., 2009; Chen and Francesco, 2000; Hui et al., 2004; Wang et al., 2002) or how OC, in competing with interpersonal relations, accounts for variability in employees' job performance (Chen et al., 2002). Such centralisation of *guanxi* in studies of OC in Chinese organisation reflects that Chinese society is a relational, social

networking, or *guanxi* society which forms a stark contrast to the western individualistic societies. For example, one study (Hui et al., 2004) draws on the difference between traditional Chinese society and western society, noting that employees in Chinese organisations respond to good relationships with their supervisors by exhibiting greater increases in OC than do their counterparts with similarly good supervisor relationships in western organisations. That is: to the extent that good supervisor–subordinate relationships are conducive to greater OC, the correlation between such relationships and increased OC is much stronger for Chinese employees than it is for western workers. Another study (Cheung et al., 2009) demonstrates that the supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* exerts such a strong impact on subordinates' OC that the association between supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and OC cannot be explained completely by workers' job satisfaction. For subordinates, having a good *guanxi* with their boss creates a stabilising effect and serves to increase their commitment to the organisation that their boss represents (Chen and Francesco, 2000).

Even within a collectivist culture, individuals may exhibit variation in their personal orientation: some resemble western individualistic culture, adopting an individualistic orientation, others embrace a much traditional Chinese culture, remaining collectivistically oriented. One study links such cultural orientations with affective OC, reporting that in collectivists cultures such as east Asian countries, those with a collectivistic orientation embrace greater OC (are more likely to identify with the organisation, internalise organisational values, and link personal interests to organisational goals) than do their co-workers who hold individualistic orientations (Wang et al., 2002).

At the organisational level, scholars have found that the newly emerged high performance work systems in Chinese organisations serve to elicit greater OC from workers net of the effects of personal attributes, such as age, gender, marital status, and human capital (Qiao et al., 2009). Such findings correlate with a study (Yang, 2003) using a US worker and workplace sample that indicates high performance work organisations stimulate high OC through decentralisation, empowerment, and workplace democratisation. Another study focuses on family friendly programs and their impact on workers' OC in China, reporting a mixed and inconsistent relationship between various family friendly practices (child care, flexibility in work schedule and arrangements) and employees' OC (Wang and Walumbwa, 2007). The authors account for their findings with a cultural explanation that workers in collectivistic societies tend to view work and family as interdependent, thus while the family friendly programs increase workers' OC in western countries by alleviating work's interference with family life, such an impact is absent in China where work and family are inherently intertwined. An important distinction between Chinese organisations lies in the sectorial differences between work organisations that are State Owned Enterprises (SOEs) and organisations with other types of ownership. One study documents that because SOEs suffer from the decline in their economic prowess in China's national economy, workers in SOEs exhibit less OC than workers in Private Owned Enterprises (POEs): workers in SOEs tend to have a much lower emotional attachment to and value congruence with their workplaces (Wang, 2008).

4 Gender in supervisor–subordinate relations in Chinese organisations

Chinese society is characterised by the paramount importance of interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) and hierarchy, which is embodied not only in the legitimised

hierarchy of official titles in the rational west (Weber, 1947), but also in the traditional Chinese order between men and women, husband and wife, emperor and subjects (Yang, 1994). Consequentially, scholars of OC in Chinese organisations cast their focus on hierarchical relationships and how the quality and exchange of the parties involved in the hierarchical order affects the OC of workers (Hui et al., 2004; Peng et al., 2009). However, we found little study of the homogeneity or heterogeneity between supervisors and their subordinates and how that affects subordinates' OC. Supervisor-subordinate homogeneity/heterogeneity may exhibit in multiple dimensions, such as human capital (having the same level of education or graduating from the same school), work tenure (having been working for the current employer for the same amount of time), and gender homogeneity/heterogeneity. We assert that the issue of gender homogeneity in supervisor-subordinate pairs and how those pairings affect Chinese workers' OC demands serious scholarly scrutiny. First, as Chinese society is racially homogenous, gender is one of the most important socio-demographic markers that affects resource flows, relationships, and work attitudes such as OC. Second, gender combinations in the vertical ties in workplaces have significant implications on the quality of relationships and exchanges of resources, which in turn exerts influence on workers' OC. This study compensates for such deficiency by taking gender combinations into account in the analyses of workers' OC in Chinese organisations.

To start, we first review Rosabeth M. Kanter's (1977) classical work on tokens and tokenism – the work and life of a few women in a modern corporation with predominately male employees. The presence of female employees in a traditionally male majority corporation would transform the men's perceptions of themselves and of their relationships with the few women in the corporation. The difference between the men themselves becomes small and trivial, whereas the difference between the men as a group and the few women as a group becomes magnified. Consequentially, the few women lead a life in the limelight, and this newly bestowed high publicity is a truly double-edged sword. On the one hand, while male employees must do extra work to attract public notice, the few female employees can get attention and recognition of accomplishments without going the proverbial extra mile. On the other hand, women are also often used to propagate the corporate image, which creates sentimental strain on the women – they are being rewarded not so much by what they have done than for who they are. In addition, women's job performance, good or bad, tends to be magnified and seen as prototypical of all other women.

Under these performance pressures, as well as jealousy from unsympathetic male colleagues who can only see the benefits of token status, women commonly adopt three response strategies (Kanter, 1977). The first strategy, which we refer to as the politician, is to achieve both strong job performance and savvy political manoeuvring, a tactic that allows the women to dance delicately without arousing jealousy from their male colleagues. Such a strategy is suitable for women who are relatively older and have a longer tenure that bestows them with both job-related competency and political sensitivity within their companies. The second strategy, which we call the saboteur, capitalises on token status by seeking solo publicity, attracting the public spotlight, and developing camaraderie with the male dominants. Often, women pursuing such a strategy would undercut other women workers via excessive criticism. The ironic consequence of such a strategy is that without external pressures such as EEO/AA, it sustains the token status of women by maintaining a highly skewed gender distribution in workplaces, the very trend that is responsible for women's disadvantages in the first place. The third

strategy, what we call the low-profiler, focuses on becoming socially invisible, blending unnoticeably into the predominately male culture by maintaining a low profile. Women pursuing such a strategy avoid the limelight; they commonly credit men for achievements they have made themselves. Such a strategy results in the organisation concluding that women are not effective, ultimately perpetuating the skewed sexual distribution in the workplace.

We state that Kanter's (1977) seminal work on tokens and tokenism is highly instructive to our study of supervisor-subordinate gender combinations and workers' OC in China. Researchers have documented persistent gender inequalities in Chinese workplaces during the reform era (Bian, 1994; Lin and Bian, 1991; Shu and Bian, 2003): Chinese women have been subordinates to men in both the patriarchal society as well as contemporary workplaces that are hierarchical and patriarchal. Women in Chinese work organisations are not only a numerical minority, but also a minority in political power in that the higher the status of positions in the workplace (income, prestige, and power), the more the skewed distribution of gender in favour of men (Bian, 2002). More cogent, as the western countries have witnessed much progress in gender equality in workplaces (increasing female employment, and increasing numbers of women holding prominent position in corporations), gender inequality in Chinese workplaces has become more severe during the market reform than it was 20 years ago, which perhaps reflects the dwindled state intervention to alleviate gender inequality during the socialist marketisation process (Liu, 2007).

From the subordinate's perspective, working under male and female supervisors leads to very different experiences. Working under men feels nature, and provides ready access to organisational resources as the resources allocation is often gendered. In contrast, working under female supervisors brings doubts, wariness, and a lack of resources, either factual or perceived by the subordinates. The feeling could be much acute for female subordinates, as they themselves must endure the negative consequences of being corporate tokens. Such an assertion, combined with our prior discussion on the paramount importance of interpersonal relationships (*guanxi*) in China and the vertical relational effect on worker's OC, leads us to the following hypotheses

H1: Female employees with female supervisors have lower OC than do other gender pairs (e.g. male employees under male or female supervisors, female employees under male supervisors).

Another line of discussion pertaining to female supervisors comes from fruitful studies of leadership, with an emphasis on gender and culture (Ayman and Korabik, 2010). This line of study agrees with the Tokenism theory in that from a leadership perspective, men's roles are perceived to be more congruent with the leadership role than are those of women, resulting in discrimination against female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002). In particular, men are higher status and privilege and they are more likely to be in leadership roles that are congruent with their social-demographic gender. In contrast, women are perceived as having lower status and less privilege, and the leadership role is seen as being incongruent with their social-demographic gender (Eagly et al., 1995).

However, the literature on leadership and gender disagrees with the tokenism theory on how subordinates would respond to working with the same gender or different genders. The leadership literature suggests that from the subordinate perspective, subordinates commonly use three criteria to assess their leaders: trustworthiness, honesty, and supportiveness (Scandura and Dorfman, 2004). Those rating their leaders higher

often describe those leaders as trustworthy and transformational, as opposed to those rating their leaders low, describing them as transactional and contractual. Studies in this line documented that gender heterogeneity between supervisors and subordinates is detrimental to the quality of relationship between them (Vecchio and Brazil, 2007). Female subordinates may suffer a greater decline in their work experience when working under male supervisors than they do working under a female supervisor. Perhaps it is because male supervisors would have less sympathy to the issues uniquely confronting female subordinates (the strong needs of women for family friendly practices or flextime programs) than would female supervisors. Furthermore, a study suggests that a poor leader-member relationship is mostly likely to materialise for female subordinates with male supervisors, and such poor relationships are also more detrimental than any other combination (Ayman and Korabik, 2010). Following line of studies, we would expect the following research hypothesis,

H₂: Female employees with male supervisors have lower OC than do other gender pairs (e.g. male employees under male or female supervisors, female employees under male supervisors).

5 Data and measurement

The dataset comes from our questionnaire survey in 2008, using a convenient sampling frame of students participating in MBA and EMBA classes in the School of Management and Economics at the University of Electronic Science and Technology of China (UESTC). These students are employees in their workplaces, mostly coming from workplaces in different cities, such as Chengdu, Mianyang, and Pan Zhi Hua, within Sichuan Province, with a few exceptions coming from Hai Kou city in Hai Nan Province, and Harbin City in Hei Long Jiang Province. Though our sample is a non-probability sampling, we are not subject to great regional or sectorial restrictions in that our students tend to come from diverse workplaces and different regions. We do caution that our non-probability sampling is not nationally representative of Chinese organisations, and may contain other hidden biases. Because of our sampling approach, prospective studies on this topic with random probability sampling will need to rigorously assess the findings reported in our research.

We devised two sets of questionnaires, one for employees, and the other for their supervisors. The employee questionnaire targets worker's rank, tenure, sex, age, their perception of supervisorial supports, and items pertaining to organisational commitment. The supervisors' questionnaire covers supervisors' rank, tenure, age, sex, the type of the organisation they belong to, and their perception of workers' job performance. We sent out questionnaires to 675 pairs of employees and supervisors across 35 organisations. We received 349 pairs of responses, achieving a response rate of 51.7%. To ensure consistent use of data, we use the valid number of cases of 343 pairs, which pertains to the most restricted regression model with most variables.

The affective organisational commitment is the dependent variable, consisting of five measurable items. Respondents are asked to choose from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7) in the following statements: (1) I plan on working in my company long term, even when the profits decline, (2) I have strong emotional bonds with my company, (3) I would do anything for the success of my company, (4) I would contribute all I have to help my company, and (5) I would contribute my spare time for my company.

Reliability measure of Cronbach's α of those five items achieves a satisfactory level of 0.89. Thus, we add the response of those five items together and divided the results by 5, producing an average of 5.18 with a standard deviation of 1.39 – Chinese workers have a relatively high level of OC to their work units. However, because our instrument and scale are different from the ones devised by Lyman Porter (Porter et al., 1974), we will not be able to compare our results directly with similar studies of OC in other countries such as US and Japan (Lincoln and Kalleberg, 1996).

The key independent variable is the supervisor–subordinate combination, which is created as a multi-dummy variable with four groups: man supervises man, man supervises woman, woman supervises man, woman supervises woman. In addition, we also created a few other supervisor–subordinate matching variables (age, tenure, and title matching) as independent controls. The details of the variable construction are listed in the appendix.

6 Findings

We first conduct bivariate statistical analysis between supervisor–subordinate gender combinations and worker's OC score. Table 1 shows that the highest OC score appears in female employees under male supervisors, and the lowest OC score in female employees under female supervisors. The F-ratio examining the significance level between the gender combination and workers' OC fails to reach a significant level, with supervisor–subordinate gender combination explaining 2.2% of the variation in worker's OC.

Table 1 Mean score of worker's organisational commitment of different supervisor–subordinate combinations

<i>Worker's OC score</i>	<i>Different supervisor–subordinate gender combination</i>				<i>Total</i>
	<i>Man supervises man</i>	<i>Man supervises woman</i>	<i>Woman supervises man</i>	<i>Woman supervises woman</i>	
Mean score	5.33 (1.31)	5.34 (1.30)	4.90 (1.41)	4.88 (1.57)	5.18 (1.39)
<i>N</i>	135	92	45	71	N=343

Notes: $F = 2.60$; $df = 3, 339$; $p > .05$; $E_2 = 2.2\%$.

We further pursue a two mean *t*-test to determine whether the mean difference in OC between the four gender combination is significant (Knoke et al., 2002, pp.125–127). Table 2 shows the results of the pair-to-pair comparison in workers' OC under different gender combinations. The average OC scores of male and female workers under male supervisors are significantly higher than that of female workers under female supervisors by respectively 0.44 and 0.46 units. The mean OC score comparisons between the other three groups – men and women under male supervisors, and men under female supervisors, are not significant. Therefore, the bivariate statistical analysis provides some preliminary empirical evidence to support our H1 that female subordinates of female supervisors tend to have lower OC than do other gender pairs. The results do not support our second hypothesis that female employees under male supervisors have lower OC than do other gender pairs.

Table 2 Two-mean comparison of worker's organisational commitment score between different supervisor-subordinate gender combination

	<i>Man supervises man</i>	<i>Man supervises woman</i>	<i>Woman supervises man</i>	<i>Woman supervises woman</i>
Man supervises man		-.02 (.11)	.42 (1.82)	0.44 (2.14)*
Man supervises woman			.44 (1.81)	0.46 (2.05)*
Woman supervises man				.02 (.07)

Notes: Numbers in parenthesis are t-test score; * $p < .05$.

To rule out the spuriousness of the bivariate statistical analysis between supervisor subordinate gender combination and workers' OC, we conducted a series of multivariate regression of OC with workers' profiles (Model 1 in Table 3), their supervisors' profiles (Model 2), and the supervisor-subordinate matching variables (Model 3). Model 1 in Table 3 shows that compared with the workers between 20 and 39, workers 40 years old or older have greater OC score. Workers in their 20s appear to have the lowest level of OC, which may reflect a higher career aspiration associated with young workers that may hinder their OC. Model 2 shows that none of the supervisors' profiles exerts significant impact on workers' OC. Company type is the only significant predictor of OC – those working for private companies have significantly greater OC than those for other type of companies (e.g. not state-, foreign, or private-owned companies). Such finding echoes Wang's (2008) study that reveals a significant gap in workers' OC between state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private-owned enterprises (POEs), leading him to conclude that SOEs not only lose ground in market dominance to POEs, but also suffer declining work attitude and organisational loyalty.

To account for the OC gap between women who work under a male supervisor (high OC score) and women who work under a female supervisor (low OC score), we created Model 3, which regresses workers' OC on the variables matching the profiles of supervisors and their subordinates in age, ranking, tenure, gender, and workers' perception of the managerial supports that they receive. Model 3 shows that, quite strikingly, both men and women under male supervisors have higher OC scores than women working under female supervisors. Compared with the female employees under female supervisors, on the average, male employees under male supervisors have higher OC scores by 0.405 units, and female employees under female supervisors have higher OC scores by 0.453 units. And managerial support shows highly significant impact on workers' OC – each unit of increase in managerial support increases workers' OC by 0.458 units. It appears that putting a woman under direct supervision by another woman is detrimental to the female worker's loyalty and commitment to her organisation, whereas putting her under a male supervisor provides a boost to her commitment. Such results support the first hypothesis that female employees under female supervisors have the lowest OC score, but they contradict the second hypothesis that female employees under male supervisors have lower OC scores than do male employees under male or female supervisors. In fact, this group of workers – female employees under male supervisors has the highest OC score among the other groups in Chinese firms.

Table 3 OLS regression of worker's organisational commitment

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Employee model</i>	<i>Supervisor model</i>	<i>Subordinate-supervisor model</i>
Constant	5.968***(.256)	5.583***(.248)	2.792***(.683)
Employee model			
gender (male = 1/female = 0)	-.132(.161)		
age(<20)	.210(1.419)		
age (20<=age <= 29)	-.774**(.260)		
age (30<=age <= 39)	-.561*(.225)		
age (>=40: REF)	—		
tenure (< 6 months)	-.646(.335)		
tenure (6 months<tenure<1 year)	-.352(.286)		
tenure (1 year <tenure<3 years)	-.014(.197)		
tenure (>3 years: REF)	—		
title (high level PT)	-.253(.545)		
title (median level PT)	.277(.231)		
title (basic level PT)	-.285(.181)		
title (rank and file: REF)	—		
Supervisor model			
gender (male = 1/female = 0)		.298(.164)	
age(<20)		.504(.997)	
age (20<=age <= 29)		-.468(.266)	
age (30<=age <= 39)		-.322(.174)	
age (>=40: REF)		—	
tenure (< 6 months)		-.686(.453)	
tenure (6 months<tenure<1 year)		-.398(.281)	
tenure (1 year <tenure<3 years)		-.082(.184)	
tenure (>3 years: REF)		—	
title (high level MG)		-.358(.219)	
title (median level MG)		-.307(.168)	
title (basic level MG: REF)		—	
company type (state-owned)		-.114(.158)	
company type (foreign-owned)		-.666(.373)	
company type (other)		-1.956*(.795)	
company type (private-owned: REF)		—	
Subordinate-supervisor model			
Gender match (man supervises man)			.405*(.201)

Table 3 OLS regression of worker's organisational commitment (continued)

<i>Independent variables</i>	<i>Employee model</i>	<i>Supervisor model</i>	<i>Subordinate-supervisor model</i>
Gender match (man supervises woman)			.453 (.200)
Gender match (woman supervises man)			011(.239)
Gender match (woman supervises woman: REF)			—
Age match (Supervisor much younger than subordinate)			.968(.598)
Age match (Supervisor younger than subordinate)			.043(.427)
Age match (Supervisor the same age as subordinate)			-.132(.294)
Age match (Supervisor older than subordinate)			-.214(.293)
Age match (Supervisor much older than subordinate: REF)			—
Tenure match (Supervisor much shorter than subordinate)			-.158(.459)
Tenure match (Supervisor shorter than subordinate)			.173(.274)
Tenure match (Supervisor the same as subordinate)			.179(.246)
Tenure match (Supervisor longer than subordinate)			.174(.273)
Tenure match (Supervisor much longer than subordinate: REF)			—
Title match (supervisor title much lower than subordinates)			-.416(.468)
Title match (supervisor title lower than subordinates)			-.596(.461)
Title match (supervisor title the same as subordinates)			-.865(.476)
Title match (supervisor title higher than subordinates: REF)			—
Managerial support			.458***(.051)
Model statistics			
R-square/adjusted R-square	7.8%/5.1%	8.4%/5.1%	24.5%/21.1%
Total number of cases	343	343	343

Notes: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

7 Conclusions

The unique feature of Chinese society being a “guanxi” society suggests that interpersonal relationships (guanxi) exert extreme influences on various spheres of social life. This research uses a unique supervisor–subordinate matching dataset to investigate what configuration of supervisor–subordinate profile matching would lead to greatest OC. It reveals that the atomic models, either at the workers' level or at their supervisors' level, have limited utility in explaining workers' OC in Chinese organisations. Rather, the joint model that matches the characteristic of workers and their supervisors sheds significantly novel findings regarding workers' OC. That is: different gender combinations exert significant impact on workers' OC – female workers under female supervisors have the lowest OC, whereas female workers under male supervisors exhibit

the highest OC. Such a finding establishes the importance of having a combined view of both workers' personal traits and their supervisor's attributes, as opposed to treating workers' personal characteristics and their supervisors' features as two separate spheres when examining their distinctive influence on workers' OC. It also supports Kanter's tokenism theory (Kanter, 1977) that the female-female combinations adds to the performance pressure for female subordinates in contemporary Chinese organisations that are patriarchal. Further, we also rule out the possibility of managerial support as the explanatory factor of the OC gap – compared with women under male supervisors, women's low OC when they work under female supervisors is not because of the low managerial support they receive from their female supervisors.

Our findings contrast starkly with similar studies in western countries that favour the "similarity attraction model" (Goldman et al., 1980) or "social categorisation theory" (Turner et al., 1987) that dominate explanations of inter-group interactions in social psychology. For example, Wharton and Baron (1987) reveal that male workers strongly favour homogenous work settings (either male-dominated or female-dominated work environments), as oppose to mixed work settings. And studies of job evaluation and supervisor-subordinate racial matching suggest that supervisors favour in-group members when conducting job evaluations, regardless of workers' actual productivity and other demographic features. White supervisors favour white subordinates, whereas black supervisors favour black subordinates. Black workers receive lower job evaluations than do white workers because most black workers work under white supervisors who favour white subordinates over black subordinates (Elvira and Town, 2001).

Instead, our finding closely aligns with Kanter's theory of tokenism, that female employees, being corporate tokens because of their small number and weak political power, face added pressure. They respond with the three defence mechanisms that were discussed in our previous sections: the politician strategy – achieve strong job performance but endeavour to reduce jealousy from male co-workers through political manoeuvres, the saboteur strategy – form alliances with male co-workers, while sabotaging other female co-workers, and the low-profile strategy – become socially invisible by giving undue credit to male co-workers for achievements made by the female token employee. None of these strategies is facilitative to relational development between female colleagues, with the saboteur strategy unequivocally leading to strained relations between women workers. However, assuming that the saboteur strategy is embodied in low levels of managerial support from female supervisors to their female subordinates, our statistical analysis suggests that saboteur strategy is not taking place and cannot explain the low OC for female subordinate under female supervisors.

Perhaps female employees are waging a popularity contest to win the favouritism from their male colleagues by pursuing the politician strategy, staying out of sight via the low-profile strategy, or any other strategies that do not precipitate direct undercutting between the female employees, but do lead to competitiveness/over-competitiveness between them. Adding a hierarchical relation to the competitive pairs of female employees only exasperates the experiences of the women. Especially the female subordinates would feel mounted pressure to deal with not only the issue of tokenism, but also the issue of making peace with their female supervisors. Dealing with the issue of tokenism requires the female subordinates to dance delicately in the male-dominated work environments to avoid jealousy or irking from their male colleagues, whereas dealing with their female supervisors requires them to defend their gender line, a move that undermines their ability to use the politician strategy or the low-profile strategy.

Such added pressures and challenges are unique to female subordinates under female supervisors, as male subordinates do not have to worry about drawing jealousy or excessive attention from their male colleagues, and female subordinates under male supervisors do not have to concern themselves with irritating their supervisors when use various tactics to deal with their male colleagues.

Besides the social psychological aspect of the relationship between female subordinates and their female supervisors, the female-female pair may also encounter resource constraints. For example, female workers being put under female supervisors may be holding dead-end jobs, with limited horizons for career expansion. It may also reflect the limits of their female supervisors' ability to garner corporate resources to support and to promote their female subordinates. In this regard, our finding that female subordinates are receiving more, not less support from their female supervisors does not necessarily mean that their female supervisors can collect sufficient corporate resources to promote their female subordinates. Rather it may reflect the female supervisors' willingness to provide managerial supports. The actual corporate resources (training, promotion prospective, family friendly programs) bestowed to the female workers under female supervisors could be less than other workers, hurting the female workers' loyalty to their employers. Such a finding also implies that our results, despite their support of tokenism theory, do not necessarily falsify the central contention of gender and leadership (Ayman and Korabik, 2010), which asserts that female subordinates tend to receive greater managerial support from their female managers. It is just that such managerial supports do not translate into an influencing factor for the OC of female subordinates. More studies are needed to understand the intricate relationship between gender pairs, supervisor-subordinate supports and exchanges, and the work experiences of subordinates (OC, job satisfaction, stress, and alienation etc.).

Admittedly, our research does not have the empirical data to reflect the important job characteristics (dead-end jobs or jobs with full developmental potentials), organisational structures (personal control, bureaucratic control, or high performance work practices), and social psychological issues (tokenism, women's responses to tokenism). Hypothetically, those are important factors influencing workers' OC levels (see our previous literature review on OC). We contend that job characteristics and/or the social psychological considerations may disadvantage female workers with female supervisor with limited corporate resources or added pressure to perform without irking their male co-workers or their female supervisors, which are detrimental to their OC development. In any events, gender combinations may contain many intricacies that need to be identified and discussed, leaving an important topic for future studies to advance our understanding of workers' OC in China.

We must caution our audience that our research relies on a non-probability sampling frame, which may restrict the generalisability of our finding. Future research with a more representative dataset could provide more confident results in this line of research. Nevertheless, with the supervisor-subordinate matched data of 343 pairs in China, we establish the importance of investigating the profile-matching between workers and their supervisors in explaining workers' OC variations. Workers' variability in their OC levels is not only a function of their personal traits, but also a result of how they are matched with different supervisors. Our major finding that gender combination matters in affecting worker's OC is not a statistical fluke, but rather an important discovery awaiting confirmation and explanation of its mechanisms in future studies with more pertinent datasets. Our empirical approach of emphasising relational issues (explaining

OC with a supervisor–subordinate matching model), as opposed to the atomic models (explaining OC with the individual or their supervisor’s attributes) may reflect the vast importance of relationships in Chinese society in general, and in Chinese organisations in particular.

Indeed, as the old saying goes “to get anything done in China, one needs ties, relationships, and social networks.” One may argue that in western individualistic and egoistic societies, relationships will yield to individual or positional attributes that affect worker’s OC. This should begin an important topic of cross-culture examination of workers’ OC and its explanatory models, both the atomic model and the relational model. We assert that relationships function differently in individualistic societies and in collectivist societies. Individuals in individualistic societies may purposively construct their relationships for their instrumental purposes. Relationships (the secondary) are constructed to serve individual interests (the primary). Individuals in collectivistic societies must have the talent to manage the relationships that are bestowed by the society, rather than constructed by the individuals themselves. Individuals need to effectually manage the relationships for collective gains, which may carry individual benefits. Workers’ OC in different cultures may reflect the extent to which they construct or manage workplace relationships to advance self-interests or collective interests. We are hopeful that future studies can shed more light on this proposition.

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Appendix: Construction items for variables

<i>Variable names</i>	<i>Subordinates (individuals)</i>	<i>Supervisor (individuals)</i>	<i>Subordinate-supervisor (unit of analysis: pairs)</i>
Gender	Men = 183 Women = 164	Men = 233 Women = 116	Men - men = 138 Men - women = 93 Women - men = 45 Women - women = 71
Age	Age <20 = 120 <age <29 = 150 30<age<39 = 140 age 40 = 56	Age <20 = 220 <age< 29 = 63 30<age<39 = 160 Age >40 = 124	Mg ¹ much younger than sub = 6 mg younger than sub = 17 mg and sub the same = 164 mg older than sub = 139 mg much older than sub = 21
Tenure	tenure < 6 months = 22 6 months<tenure< 1 year = 34 1 year <tenure<3 years = 96 tenure > 3 years = 194	tenure < 6 months = 10 6 months<tenure< 1 year = 31 1 year <tenure<3 years = 93 tenure > 3 years = 215	Mg much shorter than sub = 11 Mg shorter than sub = 59 Mg the same as sub = 186 Mg older than sub = 56 Mg much older than sub = 34
Title	High level PT ² = 7 Median level PT = 62 Basic PT = 138 Rank and file = 140	High level MG = 65 Median level MG = 149 Basic MG = 135	Mg much lower than sub = 70 Mg lower than sub = 199 Mg the same as sub = 70 Mg higher than sub = 8
Company type	State-owned = 159 Foreign-owned = 15 Private owned = 172 Other = 3		
Managerial support	<p>My supervisor understands my difficulties and personal needs</p> <p>My supervisors will assist me as much as s/he can</p> <p>When I encounter difficulties, my supervisor will help me, even though it means s/he will sacrifice her/his interests. Responses to each item are from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The responses to the three items are summed up, producing an aggregated scale from 1 to 7. The Cronbach's alpha of the three items reaches 0.85. The mean/median/st.d. of the aggregated scale is 5.07/5.33/1.34 respectively, indicating the general inclination to agree to receiving the managerial supports from the respondents.</p>		

Notes: 1: Mg: management/supervisor; 2: PT: professional/technical.