

An Exploratory Study of Chinese Motives for Building Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi*

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Received: 5 October 2012 / Accepted: 15 September 2013 / Published online: 25 September 2013
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Abstract Despite the growing number of studies on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* in Chinese society, there is a paucity of research on its antecedents. The purpose of this study was to determine Chinese people’s motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. We interviewed 60 Chinese employees and found evidence that most of the respondents attached importance to building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Their motives for building this *guanxi* spanned a wide range of issues, from personal benefits to other-oriented and organizational concerns. From the data we collected, we developed a preliminary model of the decision to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*.

Keywords China · Impression management · Leader–member exchange · Motives · Social identity · Social exchange · Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*

Introduction

The last decade has witnessed a growing number of studies on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* in China. Because of the profound and lasting impact of Confucianism that underscores relationship orientation, power distance, and group

harmony (Zhang et al. 2006), supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* “is still seen as corresponding to the ruler–subject *guanxi* of old, and it is the most critical interpersonal relationship in various Chinese organizational settings” (Wei et al. 2010, p. 438). Indeed, Chinese managers intend to classify their subordinates into different groups based on *guanxi* with them (Cheng et al. 2002), and make managerial decisions accordingly (Law et al. 2000). The subordinates, in turn, may adjust their behaviors in such a way that they can develop and make best use of *guanxi* with their supervisors. To a certain extent, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* functions as an alternative to formal organizational system that gets things done (Luo et al. 2012; Xin and Pearce 1996). Unfortunately, there is no clear line of demarcation between informal, unofficial relations of *guanxi* and formal, official work relations for the parties involved (Han and Altman 2009). People are thus likely to take advantage of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* to exchange organizational resources for personal gains (Fan 2002; Warren et al. 2004). This raises serious ethical concerns about supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*.

Researchers have conducted numerous studies that help assess the ethics of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. However, a careful review of research in this domain reveals a serious contradiction and a bewildering omission. First, conflicting arguments and findings about the ethics of *guanxi* prevail. On the one hand, many scholarly works believe supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* to be ethical and a source of competitive advantage for businesses and individuals (Han and Altman 2009) because of its positive impacts on various desirable organizational outcomes such as organizational citizenship behavior (Lin and Ho 2010) and conflict resolution (Chen et al. 2011a). On the other hand, however, negative consequences of *guanxi* practices have also been well documented. For example, when

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employees perceive that the management group often uses *guanxi* to make human resource decisions, their justice perception suffers (Chen et al. 2011b).

Second, although there is ample evidence that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* exerts a considerable influence over human resource management and business operations (e.g., Law et al. 2000; Hom and Xiao 2011; Chen et al. 2011b), the antecedents of *guanxi* in general, as well as those of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* in particular, have been heavily under-researched. Nevertheless, two recent studies clearly illustrated the importance of those antecedents. One investigated into the cultural roots of Chinese *guanxi*, which found that power distance and collectivism lead to a strong perception of *guanxi* (Dunning and Kim 2007); The other provided evidence that interpersonal incidents change the closeness in Chinese coworker *guanxi* (Chen and Peng 2008).

Given that examining the antecedents of *guanxi* yields insights that may help to resolve the contradiction among the arguments and findings about the ethics of *guanxi*, this paper conducts an exploratory study to determine the motives why Chinese people build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Two questions guide our exploration: First, what are the major types of motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*? Second, given that the *guanxi* literature has almost exclusively focused on the consequences on those who build *guanxi*, do other-oriented motives play a role when people decide to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*?

This paper contributes to the current literature in several ways. First, Chinese motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* have largely been ignored and under-researched. By focusing on these motives, we can better understand the various consequences of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* that have been well documented in previous studies (e.g., Tatlow 2011; Hom and Xiao 2011). Second, we examine the motives from both the supervisor and subordinate perspectives, which is distinct from previous studies that took either the supervisor or subordinate perspective. Since supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* specifies different role obligations and privileges for supervisors and subordinates (Hwang 2012), they may build such *guanxi* due to different motives. In this regard, our approach can guarantee a full evaluation of these motives. Finally, our study will provide some practical implications for organizations and managers to implement appropriate human resource policies in managing the relations between supervisors and subordinates.

This study starts by defining supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and reviewing the relevant literature on the reasons for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*; then turns to the data, research methods, and the results; and finally, presents a discussion of the empirical findings, implications, and limitations.

Theoretical Background

The Definition of Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi*

Guanxi is an indigenous Chinese concept that refers to “a quality relationship that determines the appropriate behaviours and treatment of each other” (Chen and Tjosvold 2006, p. 1730). It is a personal relationship that is driven by personal interests as well as needs to belong, can be built on either relationship by birth or blood (e.g., relatives and neighbors) or through social interactions and acquaintance, is maintained and reinforced through long-term reciprocal exchanges, and can be transferred through a third party as a referral (Luo 2000; Chen and Tjosvold 2006, 2007).

Drawing on Bian (1994), we define supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* as a dyadic, particular, and sentimental tie that has potential of facilitating favor exchanges between the person and his/her immediate supervisor connected by the tie. In the following sections, we also use two related terms: *guanxi* with supervisor and *guanxi* with subordinate. The former refers to supervisor–subordinate from the subordinate perspective; the latter refers to supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* from the supervisor perspective.

As a type of *guanxi*, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* has the typical features of general *guanxi*. For example, different aspects of *guanxi* such as feelings, norms, obligations, inequitable status and resources, and repaying others’ kindness are also embedded in supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* (Farh et al. 1997). This *guanxi*, however, also has its own unique features that distinguish it from other types of *guanxi*. First, although it is informal and unofficial, just like general *guanxi*, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is based on formal, official work relations. Organizational policies and practices thus influence to what extent and how supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* affects organizational outcomes (Chen et al. 2011b). Second, whereas *guanxi* usually indicates the existence of particularistic ties such as relatives, former classmates, former colleagues, former neighbors, same last name, same natal origin, and teacher/student (Farh et al. 1998; Wong et al. 2010), such ties are not prerequisites for building and developing supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Farh et al.’s (1998) survey, for example, found that supervisor–subordinate dyads with these ties are quite rare for both mainland China and Taiwan samples. Third and finally, according to Hwang’s (1987) classification of *guanxi*, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* falls into the mixed *guanxi* category, which means that the two parties involved keep both expressive and instrumental components in this relationship. This mixed nature distinguishes supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* from both expressive (e.g., family *guanxi*) and instrumental *guanxi* (e.g., *guanxi* between salesmen and customers).

Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is similar to leader–member exchange (LMX), a Western concept concerning the supervisor–subordinate relationship, in that both highlight the importance of quality relationships between managers and employees (Law et al. 2000). In addition, the two concepts are both grounded in social exchange theories (Blau 1964), and thus the obligations on the individuals involved are unspecified and unguaranteed (Warren et al. 2004). Empirical studies showed that there is a medium to high correlation between these two concepts (Law et al. 2000; Chen and Tjosvold 2007; Chen et al. 2009), and they both have a tremendous impact on supervisory decisions (e.g., bonus allocation and performance ratings; Law et al. 2000) and subordinate’s affective commitment, turnover intention, and procedural justice perceptions (Chen et al. 2009).

Beyond these similarities, however, the two concepts differ in their bases at the very basic level (Law et al. 2000). The LMX theory is strictly restricted to work-related exchanges in the workplace. Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, however, is primarily developed through informal interactions between a subordinate and his/her supervisor after work and the exchanges involved cover a wide range of social and economic benefits. Chen et al. (2009) further argued that although supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and LMX are based on social exchanges, they require different reciprocity rules. LMX is grounded in the fair exchange of effort–performance and reward between a subordinate and his/her supervisor. The parties involved in supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* have unequal rights and different obligations as required by their respective roles in the particularistic, relationship-based ties. Indeed frequently the exchange relationships in *guanxi* tend to favor the weaker party, for example, the subordinate within a supervisor–subordinate dyad (Dunning and Kim 2007). Going beyond these formulations, we argue that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and LMX suggest different steps and methods to get the job done. A *guanxi*-oriented person believes that one should build the relationship first; if successful, exchanges will follow (Hwang 1987). In contrast, LMX theory puts the job first. Relationships between the parties involved in the LMX are regarded, at most, as a pleasant but secondary consequence of the exchanges.

The above definition of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* lays a necessary foundation for addressing the core research question of this paper, i.e., why Chinese build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Our investigation is based primarily on the functional approach of behaviors (Snyder 1993), which maintains that people consciously choose to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* because it fulfills certain functions or meet their needs. We apply research on social identity, social exchange, and impression management and argue that they are among the critical functions of

supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, and thus motivate Chinese people to build such *guanxi*. We also review two other perspectives on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* (i.e., the cultural and attributes perspectives), which hold that *guanxi* behaviors are reactions or responses to other factors, such as Chinese culture or personal characteristics.

Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi* and Social Identity

Tajfel (1972, p. 292; quoted from Hogg and Terry 2000, p. 122) first introduced the concept of social identity and defined it as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership.” In the classic statement of social identity theory, people intend to form their social identity through social categorizations that seek to establish or confirm distinctiveness between in-group and out-group, motivated by the need for self-esteem (Tajfel and Turner 1979). Turner and his colleagues (Turner 1985; Turner et al. 1987) further extended this theory through the development of self-categorization theory, which explained in detail how social categorization produces prototype-based depersonalization of self and others and, thus, generates social identity phenomena. Later on, Ashforth and Mael (1989) systematically introduced the social identity phenomena to organizational psychology. Subsequently published empirical papers proved that social identity theory has important implications for various organizational issues, such as newcomer’s turnover (Mael and Ashforth 1995) and employee performance (Tsui et al. 2002).

In social identity theory, the self is reflexive in that it can be categorized in particular ways in relation to certain social groups (Stets and Burke 2000). Although most people are members of various different groups, not all of these groups are meaningful in terms of how people define themselves. Stets and Burke (2000) suggested that the nature of relations between groups (e.g., status and stability) influences the way that individuals seek social identity. Ashforth and Mael (1989) further specified four factors that increase the tendency to identify with particular social group: (1) the distinctiveness of the group’s values and practices in relation to those of comparable groups, (2) the prestige of the group, (3) the salience of the out-groups, and (4) the set of factors traditionally associated with group formation.

In Chinese organizations, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is of relevance to employees pursuing social identity because it closely relates to the above four factors. First, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is widely used to distinguish the in-group from the out-group (Cheng et al. 2002). Managers tend to treat employees differently based on *guanxi* with them (Law et al. 2000), and vice versa (Song

et al. 2012). Of particular relevance is that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* seems to be a deep-level characteristic indicative of distinctions between groups (Harrison et al. 1998), such that it is more potent than relational demography in classifying the self and others into different social groups (Farh et al. 1998). Second, related to the above reason that *guanxi* entails differential treatment on people, strong supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* facilitates the job and thus may translate into a successful career (Wei et al. 2010). In this way, a group connected through strong supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is likely to generate more successful persons than that with no such *guanxi*, thus establishing and enhancing its prestige as a group composed of “winners.” This increases the tendency to identify with this group because people “often cognitively (if not publicly) identify themselves with a winner” (Ashforth and Mael 1989, p. 25). Third, strong supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* implies frequent interpersonal interactions, long-term cultivation, common history, reciprocal exchanges, and so on. Although these factors associated with *guanxi* group formation are not required for social identification to occur, they may immediately cue the psychological grouping of managers and employees, and thus can be catalysts for social identification (Ashforth and Mael 1989). Finally, although the social groups based on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is informal and implicit in the workplace, they are remarkable and can be felt by members of both the in-group and the out-group. For example, Chen et al. (2011a) found that Chinese employees enjoy the personal favors of managers’ *guanxi* practices on one hand, and feel unfair when *guanxi* is often used to make human resource decisions on the other hand.

There are several empirical studies that provide evidence on *guanxi* as an important source of social identity. Li (1993) focused on the family *guanxi*. In his experiment, two groups of students in Taiwan and the U.S., respectively, were asked to assess the fairness of a driver’s behavior. The driver caused a chain accident and fled the scene. Each subject was randomly assigned as the driver, the son of the driver, or a stranger. Results showed that Chinese subjects displayed similar favoritism toward their fathers and themselves in relation to strangers, whereas U. S. subjects displayed favoritism only to themselves. A follow-up experiment showed that the more distant the relationship of the subjects to the driver was, the less favoritism the subject displayed (i.e., spouse favored most, followed by brother/sister, classmate, and stranger).

Farh et al. (1998) tested the effect of *guanxi* on identification processes in the Chinese employment context. Since trust among members of the in-group and distrust among members of the out-group is one of the strongest characteristics of interpersonal relations in China, they expected that *guanxi* leads to mutual trust between Chinese

people. They used two samples: one included 560 vertical dyads between employees and their supervisors from a large company in Taiwan; the other included 205 horizontal dyads between business executives and their important business connections. The results based on these two samples showed that *guanxi* reinforces the social identification process of the respondents, which, in turn, promotes their trust in supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and business connections, respectively.

Based on the above arguments and empirical evidence, we have some confidence that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* helps Chinese employees pursue positive social identity by categorizing the self and others into the in-group and the out-group. Accordingly, they may treat those in the in-group more favorably than those in the out-group. Such discrimination in treating others is highlighted in social exchanges between supervisors and subordinates.

Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi* and Social Exchanges

Social exchanges are prevalent in the organization—between individuals, groups, and subunits, between individuals and organizations, individuals and groups, and so forth. They entail exchanges of various contents (e.g., money, information, loyalty, and commitment) between the parties involved (Montada 2003; Blau 1964). Social exchange theory suggests that any human relationship is formed with the purpose of gaining resources by the use of a subjective cost–benefit analysis and the comparison of alternatives (Ridgeway 2001). Social exchanges have to be fair and just, or people will not intend to engage in them. Although different standards of justice may be operating in different conditions, the principle of reciprocity is the standard for appraising the fairness of exchange relationships (Montada 2003). If reciprocity is established, social exchanges are regarded as just.

Extending social exchange theory to the case of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, people consciously choose to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, because such *guanxi* fulfills certain functions or meet their needs through social exchanges between the supervisors and the subordinates involved. The principle of reciprocity also applies to the *guanxi* exchanges within the supervisor–subordinate dyads. However, we believe that such principle should deviate from Parsons’ (1951) equal-mutual-advantage assumption for reciprocal social roles, which holds that people should exchange on the basis of equal and mutual benefits in the role-bound exchanges (e.g., employer–employee, leader–member, and teacher–student). The reasons are threefold. First, supervisors are usually more powerful and resourceful than their subordinates. It is conceivable that the exchange relationships in supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* tend to favor the subordinate, the weaker party

(Dunning and Kim 2007). Thus, the equal-mutual-advantage assumption is mostly illusory in the case of the exchanges between supervisors and subordinates. Second, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is informal and implicit. It is not established through a contract. Instead, it is formed and developed through ongoing personal interactions and long-term cultivation. Most of its aspects cannot be explicitly articulated. Finally, as Hwang (2012) concluded, Chinese follow different norms in treating various partners. In particular, in the context of acquaintances, as in the supervisor–subordinate dyad with strong *guanxi*, Chinese people have a greater preference for the equality rule with friends, rather than the equity rule, “especially when their own contribution is higher than that of the friends” (Hwang 2012, p. 199).

There are numerous studies that have documented social exchanges between supervisors and subordinates. These studies showed that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* helps subordinates socialize into the organization (Chen et al. 2011a), advance their careers (Wei et al. 2010), and get bigger bonuses and more promotional opportunities (Law et al. 2000). In return for their supervisors’ favor, the subordinates will be more likely to trust their supervisors (Farh et al. 1998), have high fit perception with the supervisors (Van Vianen et al. 2010), and be obedient and devoted to the supervisors (Chen et al. 2009).

Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, however, do not necessarily cause these benefits. On the contrary, *guanxi*-related exchanges in nature are indefinite and unguaranteed (Hwang 1987). Many researchers thus argued that the function of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is to facilitate favor exchange rather than favor exchange itself (e.g., Bian 2006; Hwang 1987). Indeed, many empirical studies found that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* affects various “processual” outcomes that facilitate favor exchanges. These outcomes include procedural justice perceptions (Chen et al. 2011b), perceived positive attitudes (Han and Altman 2009), job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Cheung et al. 2009), organizational citizenship behavior (Lin and Ho 2010), constructive controversy (Chen and Tjosvold 2006, 2007), and intention to stay in the organization (Hom and Xiao 2011) on the subordinates’ side, and the willingness to engage in participative leadership (Chen and Tjosvold 2006), participatory management (Cheung et al. 2009), and joint decision-making (Chen and Tjosvold 2006) on the supervisors’ side. Empirical studies also show that if a supervisor and a subordinate maintain strong *guanxi*, they are more likely to engage in open-minded dialogue (Chen and Tjosvold 2007) and conflict resolution (Hwang 1997–1998; Chen et al. 2011a).

It is noteworthy that many of these outcomes are other-oriented and conducive to business operations and human resource management. It is highly conceivable that other-oriented motives, as well as self-oriented motives, play a

significant role in driving Chinese people toward supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Han and Altman (2009), however, proposed that when we lauded the power of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* in effecting key organizational outcomes, we might have neglected impression management as a function of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*.

Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi* and Impression Management

Impression management refers to the process through which people try to make a positive impression on others (Jones and Pittman 1982). According to impression management theory, people must establish and maintain impressions that are congruent with the perceptions they intend to convey to their public because these perceptions become the reality from which others develop ideas and basis for intended behaviors (Schlenker 1980). In this regard, impression management helps people meet their instrumental (e.g., to influence others and gain rewards) and expressive needs (e.g., to pursue personal identity and present oneself in a manner that is in line with the image) (Schlenker 1980). Jones and Pittman (1982, p. 83) summarized impression management tactics into five categories: “(1) ingratiation, where individuals seek to be viewed as likable; (2) exemplification, in which people seek to be viewed as dedicated; (3) intimidation, where individuals seek to appear dangerous or threatening, (4) self-promotion, in which individuals hope to be seen as competent; and (5) supplication, where people seek to be viewed as needy or in need of assistance.” Impression management has proved to be useful for managers and employees in effecting certain desired outcomes (e.g., Westphal et al. 2012; Grant and Mayer 2009).

As far as supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* concerned, it is sometimes viewed as impression management (Han and Altman 2009). In an exploratory study, Han and Altman (2009) asked respondents in mainland China to give example(s) of *guanxi* with their subordinates or supervisors. Their results showed that some respondents considered supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* as ingratiation, exemplification, and/or false pretense for authority. As mentioned, ingratiation and exemplification have been considered among the major tactics of impression management since decades ago (Jones and Pittman 1982). False pretense for authority, however, is a newly extended tactic of impression management under Chinese background.

Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* as impression management is quite important because Chinese culture underscores relationship orientation, power distance, and group harmony (Hwang 1987). The hierarchical Confucianism traditions suggest that supervisors should take care of their subordinates, and in turn, the subordinates should respect and defer to their supervisors. If these role obligations are met, *guanxi*

is cultivated, and harmony will be obtained within the vertical dyads. In this regard, *guanxi* can be considered as “the moral principles regarding interactive behaviours of related parties” (Chen and Chen 2004). Persons as supervisors are expected to build *guanxi* with their subordinates, and vice versa. If proper *guanxi* within a supervisor–subordinate dyad is not established or maintained, doubts may well arise in the mind of the parties involved (e.g., Have I done something wrong?) as well as that of a third party (e.g., Are the two guys friendly or cooperative?).

In spite of its practical importance, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* as impression management has sometimes been considered negative and unethical in that “Chinese employees’ impression management is more likely to falsely underscore loyalty, selflessness, respect for authority, a strong work ethic, and concern for common good” (Han and Altman 2009, pp. 93–94). A recent empirical study seemed to lend credence to this viewpoint by showing that national culture and *guanxi* significantly impact organizational citizenship behaviors (Lin and Ho 2010). We, however, argue that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* functioning as a form of impression management is not necessarily unethical. First of all, using *guanxi* to impress others sometimes may be just a response to Chinese culture (Dunning and Kim 2007), rather than a deliberate intent to mislead others. In addition, even if instrumental motives are highlighted when Chinese people try to impress their subordinates or supervisors through *guanxi*, emotional motives may also play an important role in their self-presentation (Schlenker 1980). As suggested by Lin and Ho (2010), when Chinese people pay attention to face and affect in *guanxi* building, their identification, altruism toward colleagues, and conscientiousness in organizational citizenship behavior will all be promoted. Therefore, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* as a tactic of impression management involves not only instrumentality and rational calculation, but also sociability and personal affection. Even though it is primarily driven by personal interests, it may objectively help effect desirable outcomes such as preserving personal face and facilitating social exchanges between supervisors and subordinates.

So far, we mainly use the functional approach of behaviors (Snyder 1993) to explain supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Our literature review showed that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is interwoven with Chinese people’s social identity, social exchanges, and impression management. Complementing but in stark contrast with this approach, two other perspectives offer additional reasons why Chinese people build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*.

The Cultural Perspective of *Guanxi*

According to the cultural perspective of *guanxi*, Chinese people engaging in *guanxi* behaviors may be just a reaction

or a response to their perceptions of the Chinese culture. For example, Dunning and Kim (2007) found that Chinese *guanxi* behaviors are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Their empirical analysis based on Chinese Singaporean, non-Chinese Singaporean, and mainland Chinese found that two cultural dimensions (i.e., power distance and collectivism) lead to a strong perception of *guanxi*. Similarly, organizational behaviors somehow are cognitively aggregated to create the organizational environment (Turner 1984), which may in turn shape Chinese employees’ *guanxi* behavior. A recent study lent credence to this point of view by showing that interpersonal incidents interact with prior *guanxi* to affect the closeness of Chinese coworker relationship (Chen and Peng 2008).

The Attributes Perspective of Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi*

The attributes perspective claims about the importance of individuals’ attributes as causes of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Han and Altman (2009) gave several examples to illustrate the importance of personal attributes in developing supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. One of those examples is as follows:

Wang is a perfect supervisor with good attributes. In the organization, people prefer to work under his supervision. After work, people tend to party with him (Han and Altman 2009).

The importance of individuals’ attributes as causes of *guanxi* behaviors closely relates with the mixed nature of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Since such *guanxi* is relatively stable and long-term oriented (Hwang 1987), it implies an obligatory affective component, which serves to define the responsibility that one of the *guanxi* parties involved has toward the other (Chang and Holt 1991). It is highly conceivable that people are cautious about choosing the “right” subordinates or supervisors with whom to develop *guanxi*. No matter they describe the “right” subordinates or/and subordinates as persons who are similar or dissimilar to themselves, psychological attributes such as cognitive base and values serve as suitable criteria because of their reliability as indicators of peoples’ attitudes and behaviors (Hambrick and Mason 1984). Psychological attributes, however, are not convenient to observe or measure, which is particularly relevant for two persons who are not familiar with each other. Using observable characteristics to predict behaviors thus finds favor when people decide whether to build *guanxi* with others. Indeed, background characteristics such as last name and natal origin have long been taken as a basis for developing *guanxi* (Farh et al. 1998). This can also be applied to supervisor–subordinate situations. There is evidence from research on organizational demography

showing that executives' preference for their subordinates can be partially predicted by demographic dissimilarities between them (Zhang et al. 2011). Thus, it can be seen that individuals' attributes are among the key factors that affect *guanxi* behavior.

Method

Sample

To the best of our knowledge, there is no study that directly examined Chinese motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Given the exploratory nature of the present investigation, we felt that it was most appropriate to conduct an interview-based study in which participants share with us their thoughts about reasons for which they choose to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. We interviewed 60 full-time Chinese employees working in a variety of industries including manufacturing, financial services, information technology, consulting, retailing, education, electric power, and public service. Their employers were located in the south Jiangsu Province, including Nanjing, Suzhou, Wuxi, Changzhou, and Zhenjiang. Thirty respondents (50.0 %) were from foreign investment enterprises, 16 respondents (26.7 %) were from private enterprises, 7 respondents (11.7 %) were from state-owned enterprises, and the rest 7 respondents (11.7 %) were from government departments and institutions. Their average age was 35.1 years, with an average of 5.9 years of organizational tenure. Twenty-two respondents (36.7 %) were female. Among them, there were 11 top-level managers (18.3 %), 34 middle-level managers (56.7 %), 12 low-level managers (20.0 %), and 3 first-line employees (5.0 %).

We obtained the sample by soliciting students in two part-time MBA classes at a large university located in Nanjing, China. We described the study as one that focused on why Chinese people want to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. As an incentive to participate, we informed the participants that they would receive extra credit in the course from which they were recruited.

Data Collection and Interview Protocol

Each respondent was interviewed by one of the authors. The interviews, which lasted 20–30 min each, were all conducted at school during two consecutive 4-day periods scheduled 1 month apart when the respondents attended classes. Since the topic of *guanxi* is sensitive, conducting interviews at school helped make the respondents feel free to share their opinion on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. All the 60 interviews were recorded electronically using a computer by a

skilled research assistant. To assure the accuracy and completeness of these records, the interviewer, immediately after each interview, asked the respondent to read the documentation and remove any discrepancy between what was recorded and what he/she meant.

We began each interview by describing briefly the study and assuring the respondent that all information would be kept confidential. We then asked the respondent whether and why he/she built *guanxi* with his/her immediate supervisor. Following these questions, we also asked the respondent whether and why he/she built *guanxi* with his/her immediate subordinate(s).

Like other qualitative studies that have explored social dynamics at work, we wanted to capture the richness embedded in personal stories (e.g., Detert and Edmondson 2011; Milliken et al. 2003). Therefore, we asked respondents to tell us, in detail, about one or more situations in which they choose to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* through effective behaviors. Since we were interested in the motives for building *guanxi*, we probed for some of the reasons for respondents' *guanxi* behavior, either in general or in specific situations, and encouraged them to elaborate.

Content Coding

During each interview, one of the authors asked a respondent the following four main questions: (a) whether he/she attached importance to building *guanxi* with his/her immediate supervisor, (b) the reasons for building *guanxi* with his/her immediate supervisors if his/her answer to Question (a) was yes, (c) whether he/she had any immediate subordinate and attached importance to building *guanxi* with his/her immediate subordinate(s), and (d) the reasons for building *guanxi* with his/her immediate subordinate(s) if his/her answer to Question (c) was yes.

All respondents answered Question (a) and (c) with a clear-cut yes/no, although they indicated slightly different levels of importance they attached to building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. However, Question (b) and (d) did not allow a clear-cut yes/no answer. We needed to make judgments about how to code these responses appropriately. Therefore, for Question (b) and (d), we employed standard practices for qualitative content analysis (Krippendorff 2004). We engaged in a directed inductive process of developing and refining a coding scheme (Hsieh and Shannon 2005), by which we generated a preliminary list of motives for *guanxi* behaviors based on a careful review of research mainly on *guanxi* functions at the beginning of data analysis. Guided by this initial list of coding categories, two authors reviewed the interview records independently and generated a list of all of the motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor that respondents mentioned as well as a list of all of the motives for building *guanxi* with subordinate. Then the

two authors discussed and refined the two lists by splitting categories where more fine-grained distinctions were needed and combining categories that reflected the same underlying ideas. To ensure that the coding categories were internally as homogeneous as possible and externally as heterogeneous as possible, we employed the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Next, to verify the clarity and consistency of the coding scheme, we conducted a preliminary coding of the data to classify the motives into categories and revised the coding rules if needed. The above iterative process of coding text, checking coding consistency, and revising coding rules did not stop until we were able to come up with a coding checklist that we felt captured all the motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and sufficient coding consistency was achieved (Krippendorff 2004). We then applied the coding rules to the original interview records. We used Krippendorff (2004) alpha coefficient to assess the inter-rater reliability. The alphas we got were 91.4 % for motives for building *guanxi* with subordinate and 96.7 % for motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor, respectively. We discussed the disagreements and resolved them.

Results

Among the 60 respondents, each had an immediate supervisor, but 3 were first-line employees, thus having no immediate subordinate.

The interviews showed that building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is an extremely common practice for Chinese people. Fifty-eight out of 60 respondents gave a “yes” when asked whether they attached importance to building *guanxi* with their immediate supervisors. Fifty-five out of 57 respondents with at least one subordinate gave a “yes” when asked whether they attached importance to building *guanxi* with their immediate subordinates. In particular, 20 respondents clearly indicated that the importance they attached to building *guanxi* with their immediate supervisors was “very high,” and 25 respondents clearly indicated that the importance they attached to building *guanxi* with their immediate subordinates was “very high.” These data are summarized in Table 1.

Motives for Building *Guanxi* with Supervisor

Respondents reported a variety of motives for building *guanxi* with their immediate supervisors. We conducted several iterations of sorting these motives into five overarching categories. Table 2 lists these categories, sample motives in each category, and the number and percentage of respondents who mentioned motives within each category. These percentages add to more than 100 % because

Table 1 Frequency data on the reported importance attached to building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*

Question and answer	Number of respondents	% of respondents
Do you attach importance to building <i>guanxi</i> with your immediate supervisor?		
Yes. Very high	20	33.3
Yes	38	63.3
No	2	3.3
<i>N</i>	60	100.0
Do you attach importance to building <i>guanxi</i> with your immediate subordinate(s)?		
Yes. Very high	25	43.9
Yes	30	52.6
No	2	3.5
<i>N</i>	57 ^a	100.0

^a Three respondents were first-line employees, thus having no immediate subordinate

most respondents mentioned more than one motive. On average, the motives they gave involved 2.5 categories.

The most frequently mentioned concern for building *guanxi* with supervisor was related to the purpose of enhancing job performance (81.0 % of the sample). Respondents expressed concerns about understanding their supervisors’ expectations and getting support from their supervisors. A few respondents also anticipated that if they had strong *guanxi* with their supervisors, they would be in a favorable position when their supervisors allocate resources. The following quotes illustrate this concern:

Strong *guanxi* with supervisor brings me more support from my supervisor. This is especially relevant when I want to get my job done with a new approach, because applying a new approach will not only involve risk, but also demand more support from my supervisor (female, foreign-owned manufacturing firm).

My boss is high-demanding but unwilling to point out our faults. Developing *guanxi* helps me to better understand her requirements (male, state-owned manufacturing company).

The second most commonly expressed motive had to do with personal benefits. Many respondents (65.5 % of the sample) said that they expected building and developing *guanxi* with supervisor to yield a set of benefits (e.g., opportunity to be recognized, pay increase, and annual bonus). Several respondents also expressed their fear that bad *guanxi* with supervisor would do harm to their work and life. They seemed to agree that their supervisors exercised a substantial impact on their career advancement as well as their compensation and benefits. Very few respondents

Table 2 Motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor

Motive categories and sample motives within each	Number and percentage of respondents who mentioned this category of motive	
	Number	%
Job concern	47	81.0
To get support from my supervisor		
To create a harmonious environment for my work		
To know my boss’s expectations		
Personal benefits	38	65.5
Because I need a raise		
To get a pay increase		
To get opportunities to perform and be recognized		
Communication concern	23	39.7
To feel free to speak upward		
To get more information or feedback from supervisor		
Because I believe it necessary to keep my boss posted about my work and plan		
Impression management	23	39.7
To impress my boss		
To get my boss’s trust		
Because I feel it necessary to have an emotional connection with my supervisor		
Organizational concern	18	31.0
To keep up with the latest developments in the organization		
Because I want to contribute to teamwork		
To improve team efficiency		

mentioned other benefits that might arise from strong *guanxi* with supervisor, for example, involvement in decision-making (1 respondent, 1.7 %) and balance between work and life (1 respondent, 1.7 %). The quotes below are examples of this concern:

I maintain strong *guanxi* with my boss. After he knew that my husband and I had to take care of our son by ourselves, I found that he gave me more freedom in terms of work time. For example, when I had to ask for leave, he’s always happy to approve it, on condition that I finished my job in time (female, foreign-owned manufacturing company).

Strong *guanxi* with supervisor no doubt will bring more opportunities to demonstrate my abilities, which may further create more opportunities and possibilities for career advancement and pay increase (male, privately owned medical equipment company).

The third most frequently mentioned concern had to do with communication between supervisors and subordinates. Twenty-three respondents (39.7 % of the sample) discussed motives of this nature. A large percentage of respondents who mentioned this concern (16 out of 23) said that strong *guanxi* with supervisor would make them communicate

with their supervisors more freely and frequently. Some respondents (7 out of 23) stated that they felt it necessary to keep their supervisors posted about their work and plan. One respondent hoped that strong *guanxi* with supervisor could help to prevent or mitigate possible conflict between him and his supervisor. The following quotes are examples of this motive:

Guanxi is quite noteworthy with respect to daily communication with my supervisor. It helps me better understand my boss’s real thoughts (male, state-owned auto manufacturing company).

If you maintain strong *guanxi* with your supervisor, you have an informal channel to keep your supervisor informed of your actions and thoughts. You can also use this channel to stay informed of upcoming meetings, deadlines, and other notable events (female, joint venture).

Impression management was also raised by 23 respondents. These respondents hoped to be looking favorable to their supervisors. These respondents worried that if they were cast into a negative identity or image by their supervisors, they might lose both their face and advancement opportunities. However, 2 respondents mentioned

organizational climate that affected their desire to maintain an approving image. Since they felt that *guanxi* practices were prevalent in their organizations, they feared to be viewed negatively if they refused to follow such practice. Two respondents explained this concern as follows:

Developing *guanxi* with supervisor is an emotional investment. If I'm viewed as a friend, my boss won't do something that is detrimental to me. He will hesitate to do that, to say the least (male, law firm).

My boss plays a critical role in my career progress. I have to create, maintain, and develop *guanxi* with her. I have to impress her in daily interactions. If I want to prove myself when a desired position opens up, that's too late (female, government department).

An additional concern had to do with a respondent's desire to be involved in the organization or a desire for a better organization (18 respondents, 31.0 % of the sample). Respondents said that strong supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* helped to unify supervisors and subordinates into a smooth-running, productive team, thus improving team and organizational performance. They expressed their desire to be involved in the organization and team through building *guanxi* with their supervisors. This other-oriented concern can be seen in the following quotes:

I'm quite concerned with my company. I also know the importance of *guanxi* in my company. In the past few years, strong *guanxi* facilitated collaboration between my boss and me. That is terrific for the company (male, private investment firm).

Strong supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* helps to create a harmonious work environment. My colleagues and I will certainly do our jobs more efficiently and effectively under such favorable conditions (female, state-owned sales and trading company).

When discussing why they chose to build *guanxi* with supervisor, our respondents also referred to reasons other than the aforementioned motives, including (a) their own characteristics such as young age, short tenure, and low rank; (b) immediate supervisors who were friendly or *guanxi*-oriented; and (c) organizational characteristics such as a culture encouraging interpersonal harmony and human resource practices in which *guanxi* is taken into account in decision-making.

Motives for Building *Guanxi* with Subordinate

Respondents also reported a variety of motives for which they attached importance to building *guanxi* with their immediate subordinates. Again, we conducted several iterations of sorting these motives into overarching

categories. Table 3 lists the final group of five categories, sample motives in each category, and the number and percentage of respondents who mentioned motives within each category. On average, the motives these 55 respondents gave involved 2.5 categories of motives.

The most frequently mentioned concern was labeled organizational concern (44 out of 55 respondents, 80.0 % of the sample), because it had to do with respondents' desire to improve their organizations or teams. Common issues that were mentioned focused on team cohesion, organizational goal, or team performance. The following quotes illustrate this concern:

Good *guanxi* with subordinate is a tremendous morale booster and a great thrill to use. It motivates my subordinates to achieve goals of the department (male, state-owned electric power company).

Maintaining strong *guanxi* with subordinate helps to create a harmonious work environment. Happy subordinates are more motivated and effective in reaching goals of their own and my work unit (male, state-owned electronic company).

The second most commonly expressed motive had to do with respondents' desire to do their own jobs well (31 out of 55 respondents, 56.4 % of the sample). Thus, this concern was labeled job concern motives. Many respondents (18 respondents) believed that strong supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* would make their subordinates ready to support their work. In particular, two respondents pointed out that strong *guanxi* with subordinate might make their subordinates volunteer for extra job assignment if needed. However, as a few respondents mentioned, if they did not maintain strong *guanxi* with their immediate subordinates, these subordinates would likely to stand by with folded arms even when help was badly needed. This motive is illustrated by the following quotes:

Those subordinates with whom I maintain strong *guanxi* seem to be faithful to me. When I have a work-related problem, they are highly likely to lend a hand (female, private trading company).

Maintaining strong *guanxi* with my subordinates makes my job easier. For example, compared with those with whom I do not maintain strong *guanxi*, my preferred subordinates are more willing to accept the work I assign. This is especially true when the assigned work is hard (male, foreign-owned semiconductor corporation).

The third most frequently mentioned concern related with a desire to help subordinates to do their jobs well. About half of the respondents (28 out of 55, 50.9 % of the sample) discussed motives of this nature. It seemed that

Table 3 Motives for building *guanxi* with subordinate

Motive categories and sample motives within each	Number and percentage of respondents who mentioned this category of motive	
	Number	%
Organizational concern	44	80.0
To create a harmonious work environment		
Because supervisor–subordinate <i>guanxi</i> is essential to team cohesion		
To achieve team goals		
Job concern	31	56.4
To get support from my subordinate		
To improve my work efficiency		
Because I want my subordinate to be willing to help me if needed		
Supporting subordinate	28	50.9
Because <i>guanxi</i> is indispensable to boost the morale of my subordinate		
To keep an eye on my subordinate’s performance		
To provide guidance and support to my subordinates if needed		
Communication concern	10	18.2
To stay current with news and events in my team		
To get valuable feedback from my subordinate		
To better communicate organizational goals and strategies to my subordinate		
Impression management	8	14.5
Because I feel it necessary to be trusted by my subordinate		
Because I want to look friendly and approachable		
Because I want to improve the friendship with my subordinate		

these supervisors took mentoring and developing their subordinates as an indispensable part of their responsibility. To fulfill this responsibility, they needed to know about their subordinates’ personalities and background, assign duties properly so that the subordinates would be willing to take the assignment, keep a close eye on their subordinates’ performance, and even promote their subordinates’ job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The following quotes illustrate this concern:

As a supervisor, I want to train and develop my subordinates. Because people are more willing to share their thoughts and problems with a boss they trust, I believe building and maintain strong *guanxi* with my subordinates is a prerequisite for employee development (male, foreign-owned manufacturing company).

Personal *guanxi* with subordinate provides opportunities to know about my subordinates. The more I know my subordinates, the better and easier I give on-the-job training (female, state-owned banking corporation).

Communication concern was raised by 10 respondents (18.2 % of the sample). These individuals wanted to stay current with news and events in their teams, to get valuable feedback from their subordinates, or to communicate

organizational goals and strategies to their subordinates. Below are two quotes from this category of motive:

Supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* facilitates two-way communication (male, state-owned educational institution).

Personal *guanxi* provides a convenient means to share information with my subordinates. I have more information from higher levels, and they have more grassroots news (male, private software company).

An addition concern was labeled impression management motives (8 out of 55 respondents, 14.5 % of the sample), because the motives falling into this category involved a desire to look favorable to subordinates and to obtain rewards in the future. These respondents stated that an approving image would encourage possible social exchanges between them and their subordinates. One respondent, however, mentioned that it was the ubiquitous *guanxi* practices in his company that forced him to engage in *guanxi* behaviors. The following quotes are examples of this category of motive:

Personal *guanxi* with subordinate helps me get trust and support from my subordinates (female, government department).

I often have dinner and play badminton with my subordinates after work. I hope to look friendly to my subordinates and make friends with them. You know, strong *guanxi* with them may prove to be a valuable resource in the future (male, foreign-owned manufacturing company).

When discussing why they chose to build *guanxi* with subordinate, respondents also made reference to reasons other than the above motives, including (a) their own characteristics such as approachability and long tenure, (b) their immediate subordinates' characteristics such as being loyal to the supervisors and working hard, and (c) organizational characteristics such as a *guanxi*-oriented culture and a less-developed formal organizational system.

Discussion

As an indigenous Chinese concept, supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* exerts substantial influence on various positive and negative outcomes. This not only gives conflicting evidence about the ethics of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* but also implies different motives underlying such *guanxi*. Through interviews with 60 employees in mainland China, we identified Chinese motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Our findings supported our expectation by showing that most of the people we interviewed were concerned with supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and reported several motives for building such *guanxi*.

At the beginning of this paper, we proposed to study supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* with a motivational approach. Although the functions of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* have attracted considerable attention over the past decade (e.g., Hom and Xiao 2011; Chen et al. 2011b; Law et al. 2000), there are few studies focusing on the implicit *guanxi* theories, with only one exception (Han and Altman 2009), to the best of our knowledge. Therefore, our study enriched the perspective on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* by examining how Chinese people consider its functions, which, in turn, may help understand why and how supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* affects various organizational outcomes.

The motives we identified verified some theoretical points of view on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. For example, some of these motives are expressive, and others are instrumental in nature. This confirmed Hwang's (1987) point of view that supervisor–subordinate is a form of mixed *guanxi* because it contains both expressive and instrumental components. Also, compatible with Hwang's (1987) suggestion that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* as a type of mixed *guanxi* primarily serves as an instrumentality, respondents in our interview were more ready to mention

instrumental motives rather than expressive motives. In this regard, although the motives we identified were empirically rather than “rationally” derived, they overlapped considerably with previous conceptualizations of the reasons why Chinese might engage in *guanxi* behaviors (e.g., Hwang 1987, 2012; Fan 2002). However, these motives may be more elaborate and complex than earlier conceptual approaches suggested. For example, communication concern motives for building *guanxi* with subordinate seem to have multiple interrelated components: a desire to communicate organizational goals and strategies to the subordinate, a desire to stay current with news and events in the team, a desire to get valuable feedback from the subordinate, and so forth.

These motives also echoed earlier studies that focused explicitly on the functions of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. For example, previous studies showed that supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* helps subordinates gain a bigger bonus (Law et al. 2000) and advance their careers (Wei et al. 2010). This may satisfy subordinates' personal benefits motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor. Since there is clear evidence of a strong association between individuals' motives and behaviors, such as that between the citizenship motives and organizational citizenship behaviors (Rioux and Penner 2001), we have some basis to call for research into how *guanxi* motives affect various organizational behaviors in Chinese organizations. Given that previous studies on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* usually explained their findings with social exchange theory (e.g., Warren et al. 2004; Han and Altman 2009) or the traditional elements of Chinese culture such as *minzi* and *renqing* (e.g., Lin and Ho 2010; Tan and Snell 2002), the motivational approach may be fruitful in terms that it offers a new avenue to understand Chinese people's *guanxi* behavior. Comparing these motives we identified and the functions previous studies examined also shed light on some future directions for research on explicit theories of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. For example, our respondents highlighted communication concern motives in our interviews. However, how and why supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* affects communication issues (e.g., employee voice and silence) is under-researched.

Our findings also clearly showed that although supervisors and subordinates attach importance to supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, they are driven by different motives. The motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor were coded into job concern, personal benefits, communication concern, impression management, and organizational concern categories, whereas the motives for building *guanxi* with subordinate were coded into organizational concern, job concern, supporting subordinate, communication concern, and impression management categories. Although some of the motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor were labeled with the same tags as those for building *guanxi* with

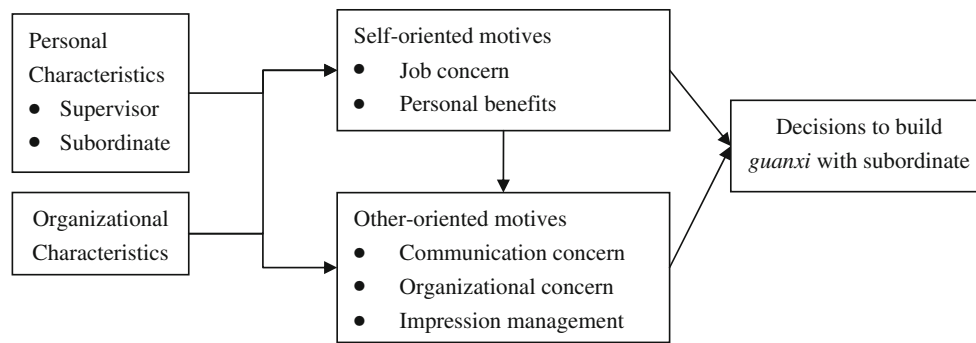


Fig. 1 A model of decisions to build *guanxi* with supervisor

subordinate, they differed in content. For example, in terms of the frequency a motive was mentioned, communication concern was most likely to mean “to feel free to speak upward” to subordinates, whereas it was most likely to mean “to stay current with news and events in the team” to supervisors. Such difference is not surprising considering the distinct role obligations and privileges for the parties within supervisor–subordinate dyads (Tan and Snell 2002). However, it implies that supervisors and their subordinates may hold different views about their *guanxi*. The same supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* thus may have different implications in terms of its effect on employee behaviors. This may in part contribute to the small effect size of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* on organizational outcomes (e.g., Cheung et al. 2009; Lin and Ho 2010). Given that most studies on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* took either the supervisor’s or the subordinate’s perspective, the present study recommends that future research should comprehensively evaluate supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*.

A Preliminary Model of the Decision to Build Supervisor–Subordinate *Guanxi*

Our primary goal in conducting this study was to see whether we could gain a richer understanding of why Chinese people want to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. Although previous research on *guanxi* has assumed, either explicitly or implicitly, Chinese people are quite sophisticated in calculating the potential benefits and costs related with building *guanxi* (e.g., Hwang 1987; Chen and Chen 2004), our work, we believe, provides deeper insight into the reasoning process that Chinese people use to determine whether to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. We explain this reasoning process in the following paragraphs.

Figure 1 illustrates the motives that seem to play a crucial role in decisions to build *guanxi* with supervisor. The most frequently mentioned motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor are related to getting the job done. Over four fifth of the respondents expressed a desire to understand their bosses’ expectation, a desire to get support

from their supervisors, and so forth. The importance of job concern supports previous findings from the network resources literature (Wei et al. 2012; Hom and Xiao 2011). Yet other prominent self-oriented motives also surfaced. For example, many respondents expressed a need to get promoted, a need to get a pay increase, a need to be recognized, or other personal benefits motives. These self-oriented concerns aggregated to support previous theoretical studies (e.g., Hwang 1987; Fan 2002) and empirical findings (e.g., Wei et al. 2010; Law et al. 2000) that highlighted the instrumental aspects of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*.

Other-oriented motives also surfaced in our study. For example, many respondents expressed a concern about improving team efficiency and keeping up with the latest developments in the organization. Others expressed a desire of making a positive impression on their supervisors and getting their bosses’ trust. Respondents also expressed a concern about effective communication with their supervisors, a concern that has also been noted in the literature on organizational voice and silence (Detert and Edmondson 2011). The importance of other-oriented motives supports previous studies that found a significant relationship between supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* and pro-social behaviors, such as organizational citizenship behavior (Lin and Ho 2010) and constructive controversy (Chen and Tjosvold 2006).

Based on our data, we would argue that even though self-oriented motives and other-oriented motives may exert their influence independently, they are highly likely to interact with each other. For example, some respondents pointed out that if they wanted to be promoted, they should help their supervisors to achieve the team goals. Some other respondents reversed this logic and mentioned that if they succeeded in helping their supervisors achieve the team goals, they would be more likely to be promoted. This poses an intriguing question about why Chinese people highlight other-oriented motives when they intend to meet their personal needs. One potentially popular explanation is that Chinese people are motivated to be concerned with the

organization and/or other people so that they can impress their supervisors, which, in turn, creates favorable conditions to make the best use of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. This explanation is in line with the subjective expected utility calculus that people use to decide whether to engage in any work behaviors (Vroom 1964). Extending this framework to the case of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, we expect that the intensity of other-oriented motives is partly dependent on to what extent other-oriented behaviors help people achieve personal goals.

Using a subjective expected utility framework to consider the other-oriented motives in the decision to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, however, underestimates the influence of traditional Chinese culture. Brew and David (2004, p. 30) suggested that in Chinese collectivist settings, “the ‘self’ is interlaced and networked with ‘other’ in that public expression of ‘self’ is also an extension of ‘other.’” For example, a Chinese person is usually defined as a son/daughter, a brother/sister, a boss/member, and the like, rather than an independent human being. The famous Confucian teaching requires that “the man of the perfect virtue, wishing to be established himself, seeks also to establish others; wishing to be enlarged himself, he seeks also to enlarge others” (夫仁者，己欲立而立人，己欲达而达人). Such notion about the “self” is also embodied in the other-oriented reciprocity rule that governs interpersonal interactions in supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. This rule requires that either party involved should have ample knowledge of and concern for the others’ need and well-being so that what is reciprocated will be indeed of considerable value to the receiver, rather than just try to relieve oneself of the burden of indebtedness by returning a favor with no consideration of its value to the receiver (Chen and Chen 2004). In this regard, other-oriented motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* are more than tools that just aim to achieve personal interests.

Respondents also pointed to some personal and organizational characteristics that affected their motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. As shown in Fig. 1, we consider personal and organizational factors not only as exogenous to the decision process but also as affecting how Chinese people will think of the potential function of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. The frequently mentioned personal characteristics included characteristics indicating subordinates’ relatively low status (e.g., young age, short tenure, and low rank) and those indicating supervisors’ approachability (e.g., friendliness and *guanxi* orientation). With regard to organizational characteristics, *guanxi*-oriented organizational culture was the most frequently mentioned. Some respondents strongly believed that private *guanxi* should be as important as performance and merit, if not more, in their career development. A few respondents with working experiences in different organizations also

paid attention to organizational ownership structure and pointed out that *guanxi* appeared to be more useful in locally owned organizations than in foreign ones.

Besides the respondents’ discussions, statistical analyses revealed that employees’ motives may differ as a function of the characteristics of their own and their organizations. For example, when our respondents talked about *guanxi* with supervisor, 6 out of 30 respondents from foreign investment companies mentioned organizational concern. However, 7 out of 15 respondents from private enterprises mentioned this motive. The binomial test showed that assuming the probability that respondents from private enterprises mentioned this motive is 0.2 (6/30), the probability that at least 7 out of 15 respondents from private enterprises mentioned this motive will be only 0.02. In other words, the respondents from private enterprises were more likely to mention organizational concern than those from foreign investment companies if we settle on a value $\alpha = 0.05$ as a cutoff point for the above probability. Following the same procedure as described above, we found that compared with male respondents, female respondents are more ready to mention communication concern motives ($p < 0.10$) and less ready to mention personal benefits motives ($p < 0.10$). Compared with the respondents with no more than 5 years of organizational tenure, those with more than 5 years of organizational tenure are less ready to mention impression management motives ($p < 0.10$). Compared with top-level managers, middle-level managers are more ready to mention job concern ($p < 0.05$), communication concern ($p < 0.01$), and impression management motives ($p < 0.01$).¹ Despite these significant results, however, we have to make a note of caution. That is, these results were based on a convenient and small sample, their robustness may be in doubt, and thus they should be interpreted with caution.

Similarly, Fig. 2 portrays a reasoning process of supervisors in decisions to build *guanxi* with subordinate. For the interest of brevity, we forgo detailed discussion of this model because the general proposition of this model is similar to that of the model in Fig. 1. Specifically, this model proposes that Chinese people’s motives affect their decisions to build *guanxi* with subordinate and their motives are influenced by individual and organizational characteristics.² In particular, supervisors’ self-oriented motives affect their other-oriented motives.

¹ Detailed data are available upon request from the corresponding author of this paper.

² Following the same procedure that we used to analyze the group differences in motives for building *guanxi* with supervisor, we tested the group differences in terms of motives for building *guanxi* with subordinate. The results show that compared with the respondents from foreign investment companies, those from private enterprises are more ready to mention job concern motives ($p < 0.01$) and less ready to mention supporting subordinate ($p < 0.01$) and impression

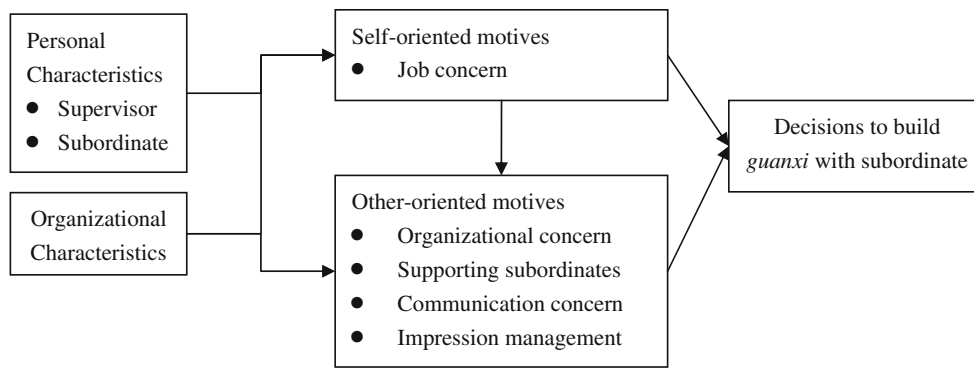


Fig. 2 A model of decisions to build *guanxi* with subordinate

Practical Implications

It is clear that almost all of our respondents, including those serving foreign investment companies, attached importance to supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. No matter whether we attribute the importance of *guanxi* to a lack of formal institutional support (Xin and Pearce 1996) or the influence of Chinese culture (Dunning and Kim 2007), our results remind managers that *guanxi* still have a significant impact on Chinese employees’ behaviors, and thus should be taken into consideration in the daily management practices and policy making.

With respect to the motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, various types of motives appear to play an important role in people’s decisions to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. This provides an opportunity as well as poses a challenge for managers and organizations about how to manage *guanxi* practices in the organizations. In terms of the opportunity, it is potential for managers to properly guide employees’ motives and make the best use of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* by rewarding desirable behaviors and punishing undesirable behaviors. In terms of the challenge, it is difficult to discern employees’ *guanxi* motives. Yet organizations are required to introduce appropriate policies to balance employees’ *guanxi* motives by managing the behaviors driven by these motives, so that “employees who reap the rewards commonly associated with being perceived as a good organisational citizen (e.g.

higher performance appraisal ratings, bigger raises) are truly going beyond the call of duty and not just managing an impression of good citizenship” (Bolino et al. 2006).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As with other empirical studies, our findings are subject to limitations. First, we base the conclusions on a relatively small sample. Although our respondents came from a variety of organizational background, they were relatively young and short-tenured. It is possible, for example, that older, longer-tenured people can share more insights on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* than the people we interviewed. After all, older and longer-tenured people may have a deeper understanding of supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* because *guanxi* takes root in Chinese culture (Dunning and Kim 2007) as well as daily interactions (Chen and Peng 2008).

Another possible limitation of this study is closely related with the research topic. Since supervisor–subordinate *guanxi* is a sensitive issue in China, the respondents we interviewed may feel uncomfortable talking about how they decide to build *guanxi* with their supervisors and/or subordinates. In addition, because instrumental and mixed *guanxi*, including supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*, is often viewed in a negative light (Hwang 1987; Fan 2002), there may have been a social desirability bias operating that caused respondents to try to portray themselves in positive ways. Such bias would most likely have created an over-reporting of motives that are desired by the society (e.g., job-related concern) and an under-reporting of motives that are viewed negatively (e.g., personal benefits concern).

We also have to point out that our sample of MBA students may have incurred biases in the results. As aforementioned, the sensitivity of *guanxi* topic may be a source of the under-reporting of socially undesirable motives and the over-reporting of socially desirable motives. Besides that, our sample of MBA students may be another source for such biases. MBA students belong to a selected group who knows cognitively through studies what are desirable

Footnote 2 continued

management motives ($p < 0.05$). Compared with male respondents, female respondents are less ready to mention communication concern motives ($p < 0.10$). Compared with the respondents with no more than 5 years of organizational tenure, those with more than 5 years of organizational tenure are less ready to mention supporting subordinate motives ($p < 0.10$). Compared with top-level managers, middle-level managers are more ready to mention communication concern motives ($p < 0.01$) and less ready to mention job concern motives ($p < 0.01$), and low-level managers are less ready to mention organizational concern motives ($p < 0.01$). Detailed data are available upon request from the corresponding author of this paper.

motives theoretically and what are not. They thus would tend to avoid revealing undesirable motives, especially in a face to face survey conducted by people related to their teachers.

Despite the above limitations, this study reveals several directions for research on supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. First, although this study is exploratory in nature, it preliminarily illuminated the importance of motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. An essential and fruitful next step is to develop a measurement scale of Chinese motives for building supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. This scale can serve as a basis for investigation into how *guanxi* motives affect various forms of individual and organizational outcomes. A second area for future work would involve empirically testing the reasoning process of Chinese decisions to build supervisor–subordinate *guanxi*. In particular, the research community should pay enough attention to the impact of individual characteristics and organizational policies on people’s motives. We believe that either the motivational approach or the attributes perspective will further research on Chinese *guanxi* that is currently dominated by the exchange perspective (Han and Altman 2009).

Acknowledgments The authors thank Dr. Deborah C. Poff and the anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions. This research received support from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Fund of the Ministry of Education of China (11YJC630285), Jiangsu Province Social Sciences Fund of China (12GLC005), and the Outstanding Innovative Talent Program of Hohai University.

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