

## **Investigating Reciprocity Dynamics in Chinese SOEs: Contextual Impacts on Social Support, HRM Practices, and Employee Attitudes Toward Organizational Change**

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This study aims to investigate the relationship between employee attitudes toward organizational change, human resource management (HRM) practices, and social support in Chinese State-owned enterprises (SOEs). It also explores how the SOEs context impacts the above relationships. Quantitative research was conducted using 143 participants from Chinese SOEs. A hierarchical regression model was built to test how social support and HRM practices impact employee attitudes toward organizational change. The results indicate that social support and most HRM practices in SOEs are not statistically significant predictors of an employee's positive attitude. This finding suggests that contextual influences of SOEs limit the effectiveness of HRM practices. This research contributes to our understanding of the Chinese government's impact on employee attitudes in SOEs and the complexity of multi-party reciprocity dynamics.

Organizations may change their working methods to respond to crises or fit an ever-changing environment (Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). According to Powell and Posner (1978), change efforts in organizations usually focus on three areas: organizational (procedures, authority, rules), technological (problem-solving solutions), and people (employees' attitudes and behaviors). Employee attitude is a critical area for measuring organizational effectiveness because attitude will ultimately determine a person's performance (Tosi et al. 2000). Attitudes towards change, according to Vakola & Nikolaou (2005), are composed of an employee's "cognitions about change, affective reactions to change, and a behavioral tendency toward change" (p. 162) and may range from positive intentions to negative responses to organizational changes (Vokala et al., 2021). Chih et al. (2012) argue that an employee's positive attitude toward organizational change (PATOC) is related to high performance. Many researchers add that employees' positive attitudes can help employers attain reform goals successfully because employees with positive attitudes will embrace something new or try an innovative approach to adapt to the ever-changing business environment (Eby et al., 2000; Gilmore and Barnett, 1992; Heim & Sardar-Drenda, 2020; Kotter, 1996).

Just like the companies in Western countries, Chinese SOEs have experienced many organizational changes, especially after inherent inefficiencies stalled them in the late 1990s. To combat these slowdowns, the Chinese government initiated economic reform by adopting a more Western-styled governance philosophy over SOEs (Tenev

et al., 2002), both locally owned and centrally owned. Provincial or local governments own locally owned SOEs, while centrally owned SOEs report to the central state government, specifically to the State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) (Jin et al., 2022; Lin & Milhaupt, 2020). Most SOEs experienced dramatic organizational changes and substantial downsizing, transforming them into a more market-oriented mechanism in the 1990s (Sun & Alas, 2007). Also, the local SOEs were granted more autonomy by the government, and private companies were encouraged to obtain ownership of those SOEs (Peng & Heath, 1996).

While abandoning its role in managing smaller locally owned SOEs (Sun & Alas, 2007), the Chinese government has reasserted its authority over centrally owned SOEs since the early 2000s. Unless otherwise mentioned, the abbreviation SOEs will refer to centrally-owned Chinese SOEs throughout this paper. Not only has this reassertion been focused on strategic management, but also in operation areas as well. The central government exclusively makes most of the decisions regarding the organizational change. There are no considerations of employees' attitudes toward those changes, even though the literature suggests that positive employee attitude is critical to successful organizational changes and high performance (Avey et al., 2008; Chih et al., 2012; Elias, 2009; Piderit, 2000; Staw et al., 1994).

To understand employees' attitude and how it is associated with other management elements, there is a need to

study the relationship between employers and employees, human resource management (HRM) practices, and other social anecdotes because they strongly impact employees' attitudes (Triandis, 1967). Since there is typically a disconnect in priorities between top executives and line employees in any organization (Legge, 1995), it is HRM practices that mainly motivate employees and impact their attitudes and behaviors (Veth et al., 2019). However, much of the extant literature on organizational change and conditions is based on a Western mindset and does not consider the national and corporate cultures (Edgar & Geare, 2005; Guest, 2002; Kuipers et al., 2014). Of particular interest are SOEs employees' attitudes and reactions to organizational changes, a topic that has been neglected thus far (Sun & Alas, 2007).

The objectives of this paper are twofold: first, we investigate whether social support systems and human resource management (HRM) practices predict an employee's positive attitude toward organizational change; second, we explore how the SOE context impacts the above relationship. In the following pages, we first explore the pertinent literature, develop a theoretical framework, and present research hypotheses. We then detail our research methodology and survey sample. Next, survey results and statistical analysis are examined, followed by a discussion. Finally, we draw conclusions, discuss the contributions and limitations of this study, and suggest further research opportunities.

## Literature Review

### Reciprocity Norm

In social psychology, the reciprocity norm is mutually reinforced by the parties involved through exchanging positive or rewarding kind actions (Ekeh, 1974). The reciprocal process starts when one actor initiates a friendly "move," and the other party responds with supportive and cooperative actions. This triggers a chain reaction to build continuing relationships and exchanges between those participants.

According to Cropanzano & Mitchell (2005), reciprocity takes various forms and can apply to individuals and organizations alike. The form is not limited to a transactional pattern, and it can be "a moral norm" (p. 877) or "folk belief" (p. 876) between interdependent parties. In other words, individuals may adopt positive attitudes toward an organization in response to supportive organizational actions toward individuals. Research conducted by Saks (2006) provides an example of how employees' positive attitude is generated when they receive economic and socioemotional support from their employers. Saks (2006) used the reciprocity norm to explain "a two-way relationship" (p. 603) built between the individual and the organization wherein employees choose to repay the employer through engagement.

In organizations, reciprocity plays a critical role in shaping employees' PATOC and increasing productivity (Blau, 1964; Flynn, 2003; Haynie et al., 2019; Ullah et al., 2020). Over time, perceived organizational support leads

to a reciprocal exchange providing employees a number of advantages as well as intellectual and emotional benefits (Saks, 2006). These benefits increase job satisfaction for employees, even if they lack hierarchical authority (Flynn, 2003). Such a reciprocal process also benefits the organizations because, theoretically, employees will reciprocate with positive attitudinal responses. Resources obtained in the mutual relationship will be devoted to their job duties and increased productivity (Settoon et al., 1996). Therefore, understanding how to bolster employee PATOC would be fruitful. To do that, we need to investigate how the reciprocity norm functions in SOEs and identify organizational antecedents that affect employee attitudes and behaviors.

### Social Support

According to Giauque (2015), one antecedent affecting employee attitude is the perceived social support or work relationship with colleagues and supervisors. Newman et al. (2011) found this perception to be a major factor in an organization's effectiveness. Improving the exchange quality between employees and the organization will strengthen an employee's organizational commitment and contribute to their positive attitude towards the organization (Hassan 2012; Jang & Kandampully (2018). Saks (2006) also claims that an employer's failure to provide material or immaterial support may induce an employee's unfavorable attitude toward the organization. This can lead to withdrawal of cooperation in the workplace as social support is a key to the general well-being of individuals (Newman et al., 2011).

Since relationships between employees and the organizations are a matter of reciprocal exchange reflected in coordination and cooperation in the workplace (Giauque, 2015), both parties trust each other to reciprocate in the future (Flynn, 2003). Analyzing social support from colleagues and supervisors in SOEs will help to clarify how it affects employee PATOC through the lens of reciprocity.

Although the reciprocity norm is accepted in many countries, national or organizational cultures may impact how people apply the concept (Zafirovski, 2005). According to Flynn (2005), Asian cultures are considered to be the most in tune with the reciprocity norm. Hui et al. (2004) further claim that Chinese culture can be characterized as having a solid reciprocal and personal relationship with colleagues and supervisors. Therefore, we expect that reciprocity is accepted as a social norm in SOEs as much as in other cultures.

Given the above literature, we posit the following hypotheses:

**H1:** Satisfaction in work relationships with supervisors in SOEs is related to PATOC.

**H2:** Satisfaction in work relationships with colleagues in SOEs is related to PATOC.

### Human Resource Management Practices

The second category of antecedents affecting employee attitude is supportive HRM practices, i.e., compensation,

training programs, employee voice and participation, information sharing policy, internal promotional opportunities, and job security (Giauque, 2015; Xia et al., 2019). Literature such as Allen et al. (2003), Chan & Snape (2005), Gould-Williams & Davies (2005), and Newman et al. (2011) shed light on the impacts of HRM practices on employees' responses based on the reciprocity norm. They suggest that organizations utilizing supportive HRM practices such as caring for employees' well-being, valuing their contributions, and providing participative work environments will elicit desired employee attitudes and better align their job performance with organizational goals (Buono & Subbiah, 2014; Cheng et al., 2004).

In the pre-reform era, the objectives of HRM practices in SOEs that emphasized controlling behavior were to improve organizational efficiency while lowering personnel costs. These practices could be described as a mixture of paternalistic HRM with benevolent management. Employers and employees enjoyed the open-ended reciprocal exchange, and SOEs attempted to create a moral bond with employees (Zhu et al., 2012). However, faced with increased competition, HRM practices in SOEs have moved towards so-called "transactional or differentiated" (p. 3964) practices to boost employees' performance (Zhu et al., 2012) and develop positive attitudes toward changes (Miao & Ji, 2020). These HRM practices include performance-based pay (Kehoe & Wright, 2013; MacDuffie, 1995), promotion, and increased competition among individuals (Miao et al., 2003).

Despite organizational changes in SOEs, the benevolent dimension from the pre-reform era is still partially present in the transactional HRM system because developing participative work environments, showing consideration and granting favors to generate employee gratitude, and maintaining loyalty and commitment toward the organization are still critical (Cheng et al., 2004; Miao, 2011); information sharing and communication are also related to organizational commitment and positive attitude toward change (Combs et al., 2006; Fadzil et al., 2019). In addition, SOE employees continue to enjoy relatively high benefits from significant fringe benefit packages not available to those in the private sector, which makes SOEs a popular option with newly minted college graduates entering the job market (Miao et al., 2013).

Training/professional development is another factor in HRM practices that can promote employees' job satisfaction (De Cuyper et al., 2009). Newman et al. (2011) argue that employees perceive training and development as a sign that their employer not only improves their work skills, but also desires to enter into a reciprocity exchange with them. This creates a psychologically solid bond between the two (Newman et al., 2011). When an employee receives additional organizational training, they infer that the organization appreciates them and sense that they are part of reciprocal exchange (Chambel, 2011); therefore, training and professional development can help generate a positive attitude toward the organization (Bartlett, 2001; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). A survey by Allen and Katz

(1995) showed that employees are less motivated by traditional rewards but are more interested in work-related knowledge.

In addition to the benefits employees receive from their organizations, organizational career paths, internal promotion opportunities, and job security are critical to employee attitude. El-Sabaa (2001) defined an employee's career as an advancing development of work and positions over the course of their life. Hölzle (2010) distinguished the career path as the framework in which career opportunities exist, and highlighted the organization's role in defining and planning career paths for employees. According to Carden et al. (2008), organizational career paths and internal promotion opportunities are paramount to employees' job satisfaction. As individuals perceive that the organization assures job security and career path, they will focus their career management on doing well at their current employer (Demers, 2001), leading to a positive work attitude (Gould-Williams & Davies, 2005; Kehoe & Wright, 2013) and improved performance (Carden et al., 2008). Otherwise, as Crawford (2002) argued, a lack of career advancement opportunities will cause job dissatisfaction and turnover.

The above conclusion is true of SOEs where a hierarchical line of authority is predominant (Naoum, 2001). Based on such a hierarchical organizational structure, the notion of an organizational career path in SOEs presents a clearly prescribed ascendancy (Rosenbaum, 1979). Career success can be evaluated via the rate of upward mobility within the organizations. As a result, employees were most interested in advancement and focused primarily on the organization's internal job market for long-term employment (Cappelli, 2001).

Based on the preceding literature, supportive HRM practices may build a positive relationship between employees and their organizations, enhancing employee PATOC. Therefore, we further propose the following hypotheses:

**H3:** Satisfaction with employees' voices and participation in SOEs is related to PATOC.

**H4:** Satisfaction with remuneration in SOEs is related to PATOC.

**H5:** Satisfaction regarding information sharing and communication in SOEs is related to PATOC.

**H6:** Satisfaction regarding training and professional development programs in SOEs is related to PATOC.

**H7:** Satisfaction with job security in SOEs is related to PATOC.

**H8:** Satisfaction regarding internal promotion opportunities in SOEs is related to PATOC.

In the following pages, we seek to better understand how social support and HRM practices function in SOEs by investigating how the hypothesized independent variables are associated with PATOC.

In the Figure below, we present a modified conceptual research framework based on Giauque (2015), who studied the organizational antecedents of individual attitudes

toward reform in public sector organizations.

### Research Methodology

#### Participant and Procedures

A sample was collected through an online survey questionnaire. The authors developed the questionnaire and built a survey instrument in Qualtrics software. Then, while one of the authors was presenting research in China, he collaborated with two of his faculty colleagues at an advanced training center for SOE employees. This training center is used by workers at the operational level of SOEs. They are therefore not at the strategic level of responsibility and are appropriate subjects for this study.

These instructors invited their current and former professional development students to voluntarily participate in the study. The link for the Qualtrics instrument was then distributed via WeChat to these students.

The online survey started with a research consent question. Selecting Yes indicated that the subject agreed to participate in the survey. A total of 206 participants from SOEs responded to the survey. Out of those 206 responses, 143 were usable (surveys were completed). Data were stored on a password-protected university platform. Only the research team of this study had access to the confidential data.

Given that all participants were Chinese, all survey questions were presented in both Mandarin and English. To ensure the questionnaire was conceptually equivalent

in the Chinese language/culture, an expert panel was established comprising two bilingual speakers and one English language speaker (the two bilingual speakers were native Mandarin speakers and English was their second language). The committee strived to formulate the English and Chinese translations using clear, natural, and acceptable terms for a general audience.

All study subjects were employees of oil and petrochemical SOEs in China. As one of the seven strategic sectors categorized by the Chinese government, oil SOEs is a pillar of China's economy that dominates the energy sector and employ more than two million people.

#### Measures

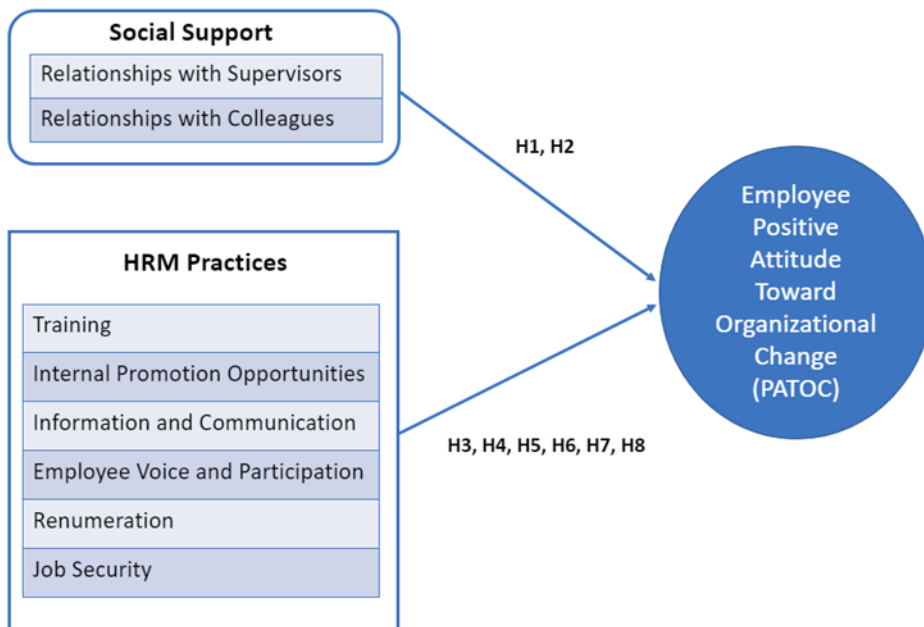
A total of 25 items, including three demographic questions, were used for this study. Likert-type items were employed to measure three dimensions: positive attitude toward change (PATOC), work relationships and social support, and HRM practices.

Positive attitude toward organizational change (PATOC). Using six items from previous research (Giauque, 2015), employees' attitudes toward organizational change were measured through their perceptions of how recent organizational changes impacted working conditions. The items on respondents' attitudes toward organizational change were rated on a five-point Likert-type scale.

Work relationships and social support. Two variables were considered to measure employees' perceptions of

### Figure

*Research Framework Model*



work relationships and social support: the relationship with supervisors and colleagues. Based on Giauque (2015), three items were used to measure the relationship with supervisors by assessing to what extent the employees were satisfied with their supervisors and the level of support they received from their supervisors in the workplace. Similarly, two items were applied to measure the relationship with colleagues by evaluating the extent of employees' satisfaction with their colleagues and the support received from them. The items on the respondents' social support perception were measured by five-point Likert-type scales anchored on strong dissatisfaction (1) and strong satisfaction (5).

**HRM Practices.** To measure the respondents' perceptions concerning organizational support, the authors selected items regarding HRM practices and their impacts on employees' working conditions from previous literature (Daley & Vasu, 2005; Giauque, 2015; Gould-Williams, 2003). The perceptions of organizational support primarily include six aspects: 1) training (measured by two items), 2) internal promotion opportunities (measured by three items), 3) information and communication (measured by two items), 4) employees' voice and participation (measured by two items), 5) remuneration (measured by one item), and 6) job security (measured by one item).

**Control variables.** Previous research suggests that employees' gender, age, and tenure status were associated with work outcomes (Giauque, 2015; Meyer et al., 2002). Consequently, age, gender, and tenure status were considered the control variables in this study.

## Results

### Demographic Description

There were 206 responses to the online survey; 143 respondents who completed the survey were used in this study. Among the completed responses, 82 are male, and 61 are female, accounting for approximately 57% and

43%, respectively. Around 12% of participants are under 25, and 5% are above 50 years old. The majority are between 25 and 50 years old (about 83%). The distribution of tenure status shows that approximately 24% of respondents working experiences were reported as equal or less than three years, 34% between 4 and 10 years, 19% between 11 and 20 years, 19% between 21 and 30 years, and around 4% as more than 30 years. Sample characteristics are displayed in Table 1.

### Reliability Analysis

A hierarchical model was built in this research, and multiple linear regression analyses were conducted using R software. The dependent variable is PATOC. The predictors include: 1) Relationship with supervisors, 2) Relationship with colleagues, 3) Training, 4) Internal promotion opportunities, 5) Information and communication, 6) Employees' voice and participation, 7) Remuneration, and 8) Job security. Employees' Gender, Age, and Tenure status are control variables. Due to the non-normal distribution of the dependent variable, bootstrapping was used to ensure the robustness of the results.  $n=1000$  iterations were applied in bootstrapping, and the seed was set at 19,800.

Before conducting the multiple regression analyses, the reliability, indexed by Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ), was tested. Cronbach's alpha is a coefficient of reliability, and it is used to measure internal consistency. Excluding the demographic questions, the survey contains 22 items. It shows relatively high reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .95$ ). The variable PATOC, Relationship with supervisors, Internal promotion opportunities, and Employees' voice and participation have a coefficient of reliabilities of .82, .88, .86, and .81, respectively, indicating strong reliability. For the other predictors, such as Relationship with colleagues, Training, and Information and communication, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was .77, .72, and .73, respectively, which are acceptable. Since the variable Remuneration and Job

**Table 1**

*Sample Characteristics*

| Demographic Variables | Characteristics   | N (percentage) |
|-----------------------|-------------------|----------------|
| Gender                | Male              | 82 (57.34%)    |
|                       | Female            | 61 (42.66%)    |
| Age Categories        | Under 25          | 17 (11.89%)    |
|                       | 26 - 30           | 42 (29.37%)    |
|                       | 31 - 40           | 42 (29.37%)    |
|                       | 41 - 50           | 35 (24.47%)    |
|                       | Over 50           | 7 (4.89%)      |
|                       |                   |                |
| Tenure Status         | 3 years or less   | 34 (23.78%)    |
|                       | 4-10 years        | 48 (33.57%)    |
|                       | 11 - 20 years     | 27 (18.88%)    |
|                       | 21 - 30 years     | 28 (19.58%)    |
|                       | 31 years or above | 6 (4.19%)      |

security are only measured by one item, a reliability calculation is not needed. The number of measured items and summative indexes of reliability are shown in Table 2.

### Multiple Linear Regression Analysis

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients of all paired variables in this study. Correlations between all predictors are not relatively strong. The variance inflation factor (VIF) scores for all the predictors are less than 10, indicating that multicollinearity is not a concern (Neter et al., 1989). However, Age and Tenure status are highly correlated ( $r=.89$ ), indicating multicollinearity. In this research, Age is selected as a control variable.

The results for the multiple regression analyses with bootstrapping are displayed in Table 4. For the regression Model 1 to predict PATOC by Gender and Age, adjusted  $R^2=.027$ . That is, 2.7% of the total variance is explained by the control variables Gender and Age. In Model 1, Age is a statistically significant predictor of PATOC when controlling for Gender ( $p=.60$ ), while Gender is not a statistically significant predictor of PATOC after controlling for Age ( $p=.32$ ).

After controlling for Gender and Age, the overall regression Model 2 with bootstrapping is statistically significant,  $F(10, 132) = 10.77$ ,  $p<.001$ . In this Model,  $R^2=.45$ , adjusted  $R^2=.41$ , and change is .41, indicating that 41% of the total variance in PATOC can be predicted by all the predictors. The estimated effect size of this study is .41, which demonstrates a medium effect size. Results show that the predictor Internal promotion opportunities is a statistically significant predictor of PATOC after controlling for the other variables ( $p=.008$ ). The positive standardized coefficient ( $\beta=.33$ ,  $SE=.084$ ) exhibits that the employees with higher internal promotion opportunities are more likely to have stronger positive attitudes toward organizational change. The other predictors: Supervisor Relationship ( $p=.78$ ,  $\beta=.012$ ,  $SE=.074$ ), Colleague Relationship ( $p=.19$ ,  $\beta=.11$ ,  $SE=.081$ ), Training ( $p=.25$ ,  $\beta=.12$ ,

$SE=.058$ ), Information and communication ( $p=.50$ ,  $\beta=.097$ ,  $SE=.089$ ), Employee voice and participation ( $p=.92$ ,  $\beta=.022$ ,  $SE=.089$ ), Remuneration ( $p=.12$ ,  $\beta=.014$ ,  $SE=.051$ ) and Job Security ( $p=.73$ ,  $\beta=.028$ ,  $SE=.052$ ) are not statistically significant predictors of PATOC. Also, the control variables Gender and Age are not statistically significant predictors of PATOC when controlling for the other variables ( $p=.30$ ,  $\beta=.065$ ,  $SE=.074$  and  $p=.084$ ,  $\beta=.12$ ,  $SE=.034$ ).

### Discussion

To examine the relationship between employee PATOC and their perceptions of social and organizational support, we tested the research model based on reciprocity norms, as shown in the Figure. Our literature review assumes that HRM practices and social support in SOEs are positively associated with employee PATOC as presented in Hypotheses 1-8.

Contrary to previous literature conclusions (Chan & Snape, 2005; Giauque, 2015; Newman et al., 2011; Saks, 2006; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005), our analysis only found a statistically significant relationship between Internal Promotion Opportunities and PATOC. The rest of the variables tested did not predict employee PATOC in SOEs. These differences in findings may reflect the cultural distance between SOEs and research on the subject based on Western cultures. In other words, although the concept of reciprocity is innately understood and practiced in many places around the globe, its importance and centrality are more significant in some cultures (Smith et al., 2015). It also suggests a need to consider the complexity of reciprocity dynamics involving multiple parties.

### Impacts of National Culture

From a national cultural context perspective, the reciprocity relationship between individuals and organizations must be contrasted between Western and Chinese cultures on two levels: how they view the employer-

**Table 2**

*The Number of Measured Items and Reliability*

| Variables                          | Number of Items | Reliability |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|
| PATOC                              | 6               | .82         |
| Relationship with supervisors      | 3               | .88         |
| Relationship with colleagues       | 2               | .77         |
| Training                           | 2               | .72         |
| Internal promotion opportunities   | 3               | .86         |
| Information and communication      | 2               | .73         |
| Employees' voice and participation | 2               | .81         |
| Remuneration                       | 1               | NA          |
| Job Security                       | 1               | NA          |
| Overall                            | 25              | .95         |

**Table 3***Pearson Correlations of Paired Variables*

| Variables                              | 1     | 2     | 3      | 4      | 5      | 6     | 7     | 8     | 9     | 10    | 11    |
|--|-------|-------|--------|--------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. PATOC                               | -     |       |        |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 2. Gender                              | .025  | -     |        |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 3. Age                                 | -.20* | .072  | -      |        |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 4. Tenure status                       | -.19* | .005  | .89    | -      |        |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 5. Supervisor relationship             | .47** | -.062 | -.18*  | -.17*  | -      |       |       |       |       |       |       |
| 6. Colleague relationship              | .36** | .023  | -.068  | -.069  | .58**  | -     |       |       |       |       |       |
| 7. Training                            | .47** | -.042 | -.12   | -1.00  | .41**  | .28** | -     |       |       |       |       |
| 8. Internal promotion opportunities    | .62** | -.021 | -.10   | -.12   | .59**  | .35** | .62** | -     |       |       |       |
| 9. Information and communication       | .57** | -.027 | -.17*  | -.17*  | -.65** | .53** | .50** | .55** | -     |       |       |
| 10. Employees' voice and participation | .52** | .024  | -.085  | -.084  | .54**  | .38** | .55** | .80** | .70** | -     |       |
| 11. Remuneration                       | .48** | -.16  | -.082  | -.078  | .49**  | .24** | .37** | .64** | .58** | .56** | -     |
| 12. Job security                       | .41** | .09   | -.27** | -.24** | .40**  | .30** | .42** | .49** | .52** | .42** | .36** |

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ **Table 4***Multiple Linear Regression Analysis*

|                                      | Model 1<br>B (SE) | Model 2<br>B (SE) |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| <i>Step 1: Control Variables</i>     |                   |                   |
| Gender                               | .047 (.092)       | .073 (.074)       |
| Age                                  | -.11 (.047)*      | -.055 (.034)      |
| <i>Step 2: Independent Variables</i> |                   |                   |
| Supervisor relationship              |                   | .018 (.074)       |
| Colleague relationship               |                   | .11 (.083)        |
| Training                             |                   | .068 (.058)       |
| Internal promotion opportunities     |                   | .21 (.084)*       |
| Information and communication        |                   | .060 (.089)       |
| Employees' voice and participation   |                   | -.011 (.089)      |
| Remuneration                         |                   | .078 (.051)       |
| Job security                         |                   | .020 (.052)       |
| R <sup>2</sup>                       | .041              | .45               |
| Adjust R <sup>2</sup>                | .027              | .41               |
| R <sup>2</sup> change                | .041              | .41               |
| F Change                             | 2.96              | 12.25***          |
| F Statistic                          | 2.96              | 10.77***          |

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ 

employee relationship, and to whom they tend to show their attachment: interpersonal relationships or the organization itself?

Literature assumes that the norm of reciprocity has particular salience in Chinese society, where favors made by one person are generally expected to be responded to by the other person that received the support (Flynn, 2005; Hui et al., 2004). However, such a norm might not necessarily apply between persons and their work organizations. According to Gamble and Huang (2008), Chinese

and Westerners tend to be committed to different constituencies in organizations. Westerners tend to consider the organization and its infrastructure to be the object of commitment (e.g., policies, rules, and procedures) and view interpersonal relationships within the organizations as a "means to an end" (p. 903) type scenario. On the contrary, Hui et al. (2004) argue that the Chinese tend to view the employment relationship from an interpersonal rather than organizational standpoint. Chinese typically show attachment to interpersonal networks and regard the organiza-

tion itself as faceless and conceptual.

In practice, Chinese employees tend to approach employers via personal relationships with their supervisors or colleagues (Kirkbride et al., 1991). Therefore, social support is perceived as coming from personal relationships between employees and their supervisors, rather than creating a shared obligation to care for the organization's welfare or reach its strategic goals (Aryee et al., 2002). As a result, we should not expect that social support in the workplace would predict reciprocity between organizations and employees as much as personal relationships do.

The above assumption is especially true of SOEs because they do not have "personal" shareholders in place, but rather a "dummy" owner: that is, the Chinese state. Contrary to what was proposed in Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2, employees in SOEs, who tend to exhibit stronger commitment as a form of reciprocity to their supervisors or colleagues than to the dummy-owned organizations, are unlikely to consider presenting positive attitudes toward organizational strategies or change initiatives in return for the support they receive from their supervisors and colleagues.

### **Central Control and Its Impacts on the Reciprocity Dynamics in SOEs**

Just as social support is not responded to by the employees, most supportive HRM practices do not win positive responses from their employees in SOEs. This finding is contrary to Hypotheses 3-7, which we proposed based on past literature. This is a surprising finding because, unlike social support, which might be considered to come from supervisors and colleagues, employees' welfare and benefits are the direct results of the organization's HRM practices. We believed that favorable HRM practices in the SOEs should have driven employees' enthusiasm and positive attitudes toward their employers. We explain this divergence as follows by referring to the government's central role in reshaping the reciprocity dynamics.

Since the early 2000s, SASAC had retained state control over 96 large SOEs and thousands of their divisions, while retreating from small- and medium-sized enterprises (Sun & Tong, 2003) to focus on political considerations, development of strategic and prospective industries, and the provision of public services (Zhao & Zhang, 2015). As a result, as a third party SASAC has intervened excessively in the decision-making in SOEs (Jin et al., 2022; Zhao et al., 2019) and changed the one-to-one reciprocal relationship between SOEs and their employees to complex multi-party dynamics. They have done so by making the first "move" in making standard HRM policies for SOEs and providing the employees with welfare and benefits such as lifetime employment, relatively high compensation, and a participative working environment. As such, the employees in SOEs will reconsider whether, how, and with whom to develop reciprocal relationships.

Being tightly controlled by the SASAC through stand-

ard policies and formalized procedures, management teams in the SOEs and their divisions act more like state administrators than business executives (Miao & Ji, 2020). Their focus is obedience to SASAC rules and efficiency-based coordination to keep the organization functioning smoothly (Ralston et al., 2006). Therefore, there is little way for managers or employees to look for avenues of improvement or change (Zhao & Zhang, 2015). For example, contrary to private-owned companies, SOEs and their divisions are not authorized to experiment with progressive HRM practices (e.g., equity-based incentives, laying off employees) to improve efficiency or employee performance due to the central government's concerns with social stability.

Having identified the critical role of SASAC in shaping a favorable working environment, employees in this study tended not to feel indebted to their immediate employers (the SOEs). They did not reciprocate in the usual manner of establishing a "two-way" relationship with SOEs. They did not consider the SOEs they work for as key, but instead saw the SASAC as the important reciprocal partner. This corroborates the conditions leading to reciprocity, as argued by Blau (1964), i.e., "it must be oriented towards ends that can only be achieved through interactions between partners" (p. 98). When employees decide to engage in reciprocal sequences, they are looking for some relational partner who can provide them with the social support or employment benefits they need. Our results indicate that in the three-party-involved reciprocal process at study (the employee, the SOE, and SASAC), employees may instead turn to their personal networks within the workplace as a reciprocity partner and do not consider the needs of their employer. In this situation, the heretofore important reciprocity function with superiors has all but disappeared because the SASAC is too far removed up the hierarchy chain for employees to reach and participate in reciprocity.

The above analysis of the central controls by SASAC also helps explain employees' indifferent attitudes regarding the participative working environment. Because they believe that in a centrally controlled hierarchy with authoritarian culture, even the management teams of SOEs cannot make a difference...let alone give credence to an employee's voice or participation. In addition to the multi-party reciprocal dynamics, cultural distance can also explain the testing results, particularly on Hypothesis 3 and Hypothesis 5. According to Tadesse et al. (2017), unlike societies that place greater emphasis on self-expression values, China is characterized as more survival-oriented with authoritarian political outlooks. Therefore, employees' emphasis is not on self-expression values, but on economic accumulation and individual achievement.

Although we found a departure from our hypotheses (H3-H7) regarding how employees respond to their SOEs, there is one exception in Hypothesis 8. Results support that internal promotion opportunities are positively associated with PATOC. There are at least two possible explanations for this finding.



The first is that, unlike other standard HRM policies that are determined from on high by the SASAC across all the SOEs, decisions about promotions of employees to median or low-level positions are left to the individual SOE through an internal competition process (Jin et al., 2022). Therefore, study subjects may have felt they have some influence over promotion through reciprocal exchange with their employers. They likely consider promotional opportunities as an essential acknowledgment of support from their employers. Thus, facilitating the development of reciprocity with employers is vital in this instance. Promotion to higher ranks is particularly pertinent to the political identity of employees in SOEs because the positions are quasi-official and are directly related to their social status, which is highly respected in China (Jin et al., 2022; Tadesse et al., 2017). It is interesting to note that this notion is also in line with Confucian philosophy which says one who does well in their studies should be involved in official careers (Ames & Rosemont, 1999).

The second reason Hypothesis 8 has some support may be that employees tend to believe organizational changes, as part of SOEs' economic reforms, would provide them with more internal promotional opportunities. A key tenet of SASAC's strategy is that China will step up improved distribution, structural adjustment, and strategic reorganization for SOEs to ensure state assets maintain and increase their value. As SOEs continue to be reformed, employees see the potential for more career advancement.

### Conclusion and Limitations

This research centered on the relationship between Chinese SOEs employees' positive attitude toward organizational change and their perceptions of social and organizational support. The findings contribute to our understanding of the Chinese SOEs from the perspective of contextual impacts on the above relationship. The theoretical model and discussion were grounded in the appropriate literature dealing with reciprocity norms in a different cultural context.

One contribution of this paper is the finding that social support in Chinese SOEs does not predict employees' positive attitudes as it does in Western cultures (Giauque, 2015; Newman et al., 2011; Saks, 2006; Vakola & Nikolaou, 2005). It seems that traditional Chinese culture (i.e., individual-oriented reciprocity) limits the applicability of the reciprocity norm. This finding reveals the importance of considering the impacts of national culture on the reciprocity relationship. Also, it suggests that although a widely accepted norm among the Chinese people, the reciprocity norm is not necessarily applicable in the social exchange between individuals and the organizations for which they work.

Secondly, this study contributes to our understanding of multi-party reciprocity relationship dynamics, a relatively unstudied area of reciprocity research. Based on the findings that most of the HRM variables tested do not predict employees' positive attitudes toward organizational change in SOEs, this study highlights the importance of

the conditions leading to the reciprocity relationship. In other words, employees will likely identify their real reciprocal partner to exchange within a complicated multi-party relationship (Blau, 1964). In this case, the absence of a reciprocity relationship between employees and SOEs can be explained by the involvement of a hierarchically central authority (SASAC) that eliminates the possible reciprocal exchanges between employees and SOEs, thus transforming a one-to-one reciprocal relationship into a complicated three-way dynamic.

Thirdly, by distinguishing between central SOEs and local SOEs, this research contributes to our understanding of a central-controlled hierarchy with an authoritarian culture and its impacts on central SOEs in China. This study suggests that such contextual influences limit the efficacy of HRM mechanisms. Although 30-plus years of economic reform have led to considerable changes in SOEs, the government-dominated hierarchical lines of authority and the influential culture of hierarchical values among the population are still considered a significant concern in China's SOEs reform and is one of the potential stumbling blocks to the country's social stability (Kong et al., 2020; Ralston et al., 2006). Therefore, our findings provide implications for hierarchical changes in the Chinese state sector. Enterprise autonomy of SOEs should be emphasized by bringing HRM policy control down from SASAC to the SOE level to help create a more robust reciprocity environment. This would improve the efficacy of the HRM mechanism as employees establish a direct reciprocal partnership with their employers.

There are some limitations to this research. Given that the sample was collected from 143 employees in the oil and petrochemical sector, such industry's unique characteristics could impact the results, even though over 2 million employees work in petrochemical SOEs. This limitation might be somewhat mitigated in the future, however, by surveying employees from SOEs of industries other than the oil and gas sector would make for interesting future studies.

### Future Research

Although the current quantitative research has revealed several statistically insignificant correlations among the tested variables, future research could qualitatively explore the impacts of centralized control by the government and reciprocity dynamics in these SOEs. In addition, the limitation noted above of only surveying oil and gas SOEs could be mitigated by extending this research to other areas of industry. Statistical analysis outside the oil and gas sector may provide different results.

Another avenue of future research might look at privately owned companies in China to see if HRM factors have different effects on employees' positive attitudes. Since they share the same Chinese culture, removing the SASAC influence may show statistically different results.

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