

Is subordinate's loyalty a precondition of supervisor's benevolent leadership? The moderating effects of supervisor's altruistic personality and perceived organizational support

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Based on Cheng's differential leadership theory, we investigated the relationship between a subordinate's loyalty to a supervisor (SLS) and the supervisor's benevolent leadership in Chinese organizations. We also explored two moderators of this relationship, *the supervisor's altruistic personality* and *perceived organizational support* (POS). Using survey research, we collected data from supervisor-subordinate dyads in Taiwan and made 167 valid observations. The results showed that SLS positively relates to the supervisor's benevolent behaviours; however, this relationship is diminished by the supervisor's altruistic personality and POS. That is, when the supervisor has a high level of altruistic personality or POS, the association of SLS with the supervisor's benevolent leadership is weaker.

Key words: altruistic personality, benevolent leadership, perceived organizational support, subordinate's loyalty to supervisor.

Introduction

A subordinate's loyalty to a supervisor (SLS) refers to the behaviours in which a subordinate engages for the benefit of the supervisor, including the subordinate's initiative accommodation, task assistance, obedience, and sacrifice for supervisor (Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002; Jiang, Cheng, Jen, & Riley, 2005; Jiang, Cheng, Cheng, & Chou, 2007). SLS is of interest in a Chinese organizational context because it is rooted in the patriarchal tradition of Chinese cultural values, which emphasize social hierarchy and the obligation to obey authority (Hamilton, 1990; Hsu, Cheng, Kuo, & Hu, 2006). Such cultural values are quite different from those of Western society, which focus on social equality and mutual reciprocal exchange relationships between people and authority figures. Although China has experienced a dramatic value transition due to rapid economic growth and globalization (Wang & Cheng, 2010), traditional Chinese cultural values still apply to modern Chinese organizations and are reflected in the hierarchical relationship between supervisors and subordinates (Farh & Cheng, 2000). In fact, past literature on Chinese businesses has suggested that SLS is considered to be the most important obligation for subordinates in Chinese enterprises (e.g. Silin, 1976), helping to

maintain the harmony of the group and the order of the organization (Hsu *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, exploring SLS has significant cultural and practical implications for studying Chinese organizational management.

Based on Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory, SLS, as perceived by the supervisor, is an important criterion in determining supervisors' differential treatment for subordinates in Chinese organizations. Specifically, the supervisors provide more *individualized and holistic care* to those who show loyalty to them. Such care is *not only limited to the work domain, but also extends to the non-work domain* (Cheng, 1995; Hsu, 2004). Farh and Cheng (2000) refer to such care as *benevolent leadership behaviours*. By showing differential benevolent leadership depending on SLS, the supervisor may gain higher status and power to control the subordinates. That is, benevolent leadership in response to SLS may serve as a tactic to strengthen a supervisor's power as a manager, which helps maintain the hierarchy and order in supervisor-subordinate relationships (Aycan, 2006; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Indeed, previous studies have supported the notion that SLS leads to a supervisor's benevolent leadership behaviours (e.g. Cheng, Farh, Chang, & Hsu, 2002; Hsu, 2004; Hsu, Cheng, & Huang, 2002). However, previous studies also indicate that differential leadership may undermine group effectiveness (Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010). As such, it is important to explore the conditions that may diminish the benefits of differential leadership. In other words, under what conditions will supervisors show benevolent leadership behaviours to subordinates regardless of SLS? By investigating these conditions, the disadvantages of differential leadership can be identified and avoided.

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In the current study, we identified two variables, the supervisor's altruistic personality and perceived organizational support (POS), as the moderators of the relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership. Altruistic personality is an individual difference variable, defined as *a tendency to empathize with others, to care for the well-being of others, and to act in a way that is beneficial to others* (van Emmerik, Jawahar, & Stone, 2005). POS is a perceived situational variable, defined as individuals' *global beliefs concerning the extent to which the organization values their contributions and cares about their well-being* (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986, p. 500). We argue that these two variables may diminish a supervisor's intention to maintain power status and further reduce the effect of SLS on differential leadership behaviours. Specifically, we propose that the supervisor's altruistic personality and POS moderate the relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership such that the relationship is weaker for supervisors with either a highly altruistic personality or high POS.

Our study contributes to the existing literature in two ways. First, by adding two moderating variables on the relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership, we shed light on the boundary conditions of differential leadership theory (Cheng, 1995). In doing so, we respond to Hsu *et al.* (2006), who call for clarification of the roles of individual differences and situational moderators in the differential leadership model. Second, we consider the supervisor's intention to gain status and power as an important mechanism underlying the association between SLS and benevolent leadership, which helps to maintain the hierarchy and order of the organization (Aycan, 2006; Farh & Cheng, 2000; Hsu *et al.*, 2006). Therefore, examining the moderating effect of altruistic personality and POS, which are assumed to reduce the supervisor's intention to gain power and status in our study, provides an avenue to test whether such a mechanism is plausible. Our attempt responds to the notion of Hsu *et al.* (2006) that the theoretical mechanism behind differential leadership is under-investigated and needs further research. Our study contributes to Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory through 'theory elaboration' as proposed by Wagner and Berger (1985).

Theoretical background and hypotheses

SLS and supervisor benevolent behaviours

According to Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory, Chinese leaders categorize their employees and interact with each category of employees in different ways. By doing so, the leader may reduce the cognitive load as well as simplify the complexity of the external world. The criteria used for employee categorization include relationship (guanxi),

loyalty, and competence. Although all three criteria are associated with a leader's differential treatment and employees who are categorized as high on any of the criteria receive more benevolent treatment from the leader (Cheng *et al.*, 2002; Hsu *et al.*, 2002), subordinate loyalty is considered to be the most important criterion leaders use to act on benevolent behaviours (Cheng & Jiang, 2000; Silin, 1976). Therefore, our study focuses on the role of SLS in benevolent leadership.

Regarding the mechanism underlying the relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership, Cheng (1995) suggests that a leader in the Chinese context often serves as a centre of power and authority and thus expects the followers to be loyal. Due to this expectation, SLS becomes an important standard for categorizing employees; it is also a critical basis for judging whether a subordinate's behaviours fit the supervisor's expectations (Hsu, 2004). In addition, when a supervisor perceives a subordinate as loyal, the supervisor will reinforce and shape such loyal behaviour by giving the subordinate more personal consideration, beyond the role of a supervisor (Moss & Martinko, 1998; Podsakoff, Todor, Grover, & Huber, 1984). Such 'loyalty-contingent' benevolent leadership (Peng & Peterson, 2008; Yammarino, Dubinsky, Comer, & Jolson, 1997) helps to ensure the power status of the supervisor, to control and manage the subordinates more easily, and thus to maintain the hierarchy and order between supervisors and subordinates specified in Confucian ethics (Aycan, 2006; Hsu *et al.*, 2006). In fact, Cheng *et al.* (2002) found that a supervisor's perception of subordinate loyalty was the strongest predictor of benevolent leadership among all predictors examined, which provides the evidence for the positive association between SLS and supervisor benevolent behaviours. Taken together, we propose that SLS is positively related to the supervisor's benevolent leadership.

Hypothesis 1: SLS is positively related to supervisor's benevolent leadership.

Supervisor's altruistic personality as a moderator

Altruistic personality has long been recognized as an important dispositional determinant of prosocial behaviours (Batson, Bolen, Cross, & Neuringer-Benefiel, 1986; Krebs, 1970), particularly in organizational settings (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). Because supervisor's benevolent behaviours constitute a form of prosocial behaviours in organizations, it is reasonable to expect that altruistic personality leads to more benevolent leadership behaviours. In the current study, we further explore whether altruistic personality may weaken the relationship between SLS and supervisor's benevolent behaviours.

Altruistic personality is the tendency to help others because of a genuine concern for others' well-being, rather

than for a selfish motive, such as personal power (Krebs & Miller, 1985; Romer, Gruder, & Lizzadro, 1986). Supervisors who have higher levels of altruistic personalities may display benevolent leadership behaviours for promoting subordinates' well-being, not for reasons of control or status. Therefore, we expect that supervisors' altruistic personality will reduce supervisors' intentions to gain power and status in their relationships with subordinates. As such, the positive relationship between differential benevolent leadership in response to SLS may be weaker for supervisors with a highly altruistic personality. That is, supervisors with a highly altruistic personality are willing to display benevolent behaviours to subordinates regardless of whether subordinates show loyalty to them, which reduces the association between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent behaviour. On the contrary, supervisors with a low altruistic personality are willing to display benevolent behaviours to subordinates only when subordinates show loyalty to them. Consequently, the association between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent behaviour may be stronger for supervisors with a low altruistic personality.

Our argument is similar to Aycan's (2006) typology of benevolent and exploitative paternalism. In *benevolent paternalism*, supervisors are genuinely concerned for subordinates' well-being. In *exploitative paternalism*, supervisors still display benevolent behaviours toward subordinates, but their motive is to have control over subordinates (Aycan, 2006; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). In line with Aycan's idea, we infer that supervisors with highly altruistic personalities will treat every subordinate with consideration for the benefit of subordinates (benevolent paternalism). These supervisors will not use differential treatment to reinforce SLS through the 'loyalty-contingent' benevolent leadership process. Therefore, the association between SLS and benevolent leadership is weaker. On the contrary, supervisors with low altruistic personalities will treat subordinates with consideration not because these supervisors care much about the subordinates, but to gain control and power over them (exploitative paternalism). That is, these supervisors may use 'loyalty-contingent' benevolent leadership as a control tactic to maintain subordinates' loyal behaviours as well as the social hierarchy and order. Their treatment of subordinates will be differentiated depending on SLS. Therefore, the association between SLS and benevolent leadership is stronger. Taken together, we propose that the supervisor's altruistic personality will weaken the association between SLS and benevolent leadership.

Hypothesis 2: The supervisor's altruistic personality moderates the relationship between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent behaviours such that this relationship is weaker for highly altruistic supervisors than for low altruistic supervisors.

Supervisor's perceived organizational support as a moderator

A body of research has shown that when employees feel supported by an organization, they will reciprocate by demonstrating positive work attitudes and behaviours toward the organization (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002), including prosocial behaviours toward other members in the organization (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986). In a similar vein, when supervisors perceive organizational support, they will feel obligated to repay the organization by increasing their support toward the subordinates. This is because promoting the benefits of subordinates can be considered as a form of return to the organization (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). Such phenomena is observed not only in empirical studies conducted in Western organizations (Tepper & Taylor, 2003; Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), but also in Chinese organizations (Wu, Hu, Yang, & Hsu, 2010).

Our study investigates whether a supervisor's POS may further weaken the relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership. We argue that supervisors with higher POS may be concerned more with how to repay the organization for its support (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006; Tepper & Taylor, 2003), and less with how to gain power and status to control subordinates. This sense of obligation to reciprocate the organization's support reduces a supervisor's intention to use benevolent leadership as a tactic to maintain power and status over subordinates. Therefore, high supervisor POS will reduce the differential nature of benevolent leadership and lead to a weaker association between SLS and benevolent leadership. On the contrary, supervisors with lower POS are less likely to feel obligated to repay the organizational support through benevolent leadership. They may feel more comfortable displaying benevolent leadership behaviours to maintain the power status in their relationships with subordinates, as these supervisors are less constrained by a sense of obligation to the organization. Therefore, low supervisor POS will lead to a stronger association between SLS and benevolent leadership. Based on the above inferences, we propose that a supervisor's POS will weaken the association between SLS and benevolent leadership:

Hypothesis 3: Supervisor's POS moderates the relationship between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent behaviours such that this relationship is weaker for supervisors with high POS than for supervisors with low POS.

Method

Procedure and participants

Data were collected with the assistance of 24 MBA students who took a course in Business Research Methodology at a

public university located in northern Taiwan. Because the study concerns the relationship between an employee and his or her immediate supervisor, we instructed students to distribute the survey package only to employees who have direct supervisors. After two months of the data collecting period, we received 175 subordinate and 174 supervisor questionnaires. After excluding questionnaires that had either missing data or that did not match subordinate and supervisor form using the match codes, the number of dyads for analyses totaled 167. The average age of subordinates was 30.26 years ($SD = 7.73$), the average tenure in their current organization was 4.40 years ($SD = 5.56$), the average length of the working relationship with the supervisor was 2.93 years ($SD = 3.53$), and 68 (40.5%) of the subordinates were men. The average age of the supervisors was 39.72 years ($SD = 8.13$), the average tenure in their current organization was 9.64 years ($SD = 7.51$), and 127 (64%) of the supervisors were men. The industries where participants worked included information technology (28.43%), service sector (22.84%), finance (19.80%), manufacturing (11.68%), transportation (3.05%), and others (14.21%).

Measures

Because Traditional Chinese was the native language for all respondents, items that measure altruistic personality and POS were translated from English into Traditional Chinese using the back-translation approach suggested by Brislin (1980). The first author translated the survey items from English to Traditional Chinese. The second author, who is bilingual, translated the Traditional Chinese items back to English. If there was any discrepancy between the translations, these two authors discussed and revised the translation until an agreement was reached. Unless otherwise indicated, all items were measured on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*).

Benevolent behaviours. Subordinate participants responded to the 4-item version of the Benevolent Leadership Scale (Jiang *et al.*, 2007) to indicate the extent of benevolent leadership received from their supervisors. This 4-item scale is a shortened version of the 11-item Benevolent Leadership Scale developed by Cheng, Chou, and Farh (2000), including the items, 'Beyond work relations, my supervisor expresses concern about my daily life', 'My supervisor takes very thoughtful care of me', 'My supervisor ordinarily shows a kind concern for my comfort', and 'My supervisor encourages me when I encounter arduous problems at work'. These four items were selected because they have the highest factor loadings among the 11 items in the study of Cheng *et al.* (2000) (see Jiang *et al.*, 2007, for details). To make sure that the 4-item scale can accurately capture the full construct as measured by the 11-item scale,

we adopted Claes, Beheydt, and Lemmens' (2005) procedure by calculating the correlation between full-version scale and short-version scale. We administered the 11-item scale of benevolent leadership to 323 employees in Chinese organizations [48.4% were male; the average tenure 7.43 years ($SD = 8.93$)] and computed its correlation with 4-item scale. The high correlation coefficient ($r = 0.97$, $p < 0.01$) implies that the 4-item scale can represent the full scale of benevolent behaviour. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the 4-item scale was 0.91.

Subordinate's loyalty to supervisor. Supervisor participants responded to a 15-item Chinese Loyalty to Supervisor Scale (Jiang *et al.*, 2007) to indicate the extent to which the supervisor perceived that the subordinate's behaviour was loyal. The scale includes four subscales measuring behaviour loyalty: initiative accommodation (three items, e.g. 'I would finish the task assigned by my supervisor as soon as possible'), task assistance (four items, e.g. 'I would provide my supervisor with the information unknown to him/her in order to assist him/her'), obedience (four items, e.g. 'I completely obey my supervisor's instructions'), and sacrifice for supervisor (four items, e.g. 'I take responsibility for what my supervisor has done wrong'). Because SLS should be rated by supervisors, not self-rated by subordinates, we slightly changed the wording of the items to fit the current study. For example, we changed the item 'I completely obey my supervisor's instructions' to 'This subordinate completely obeys my instructions'. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the construct (15 items) was 0.90.

Altruistic personality. To measure the supervisor's altruistic personality, supervisor participants responded to the 8-item Altruism subscale under the Agreeableness dimension in the Revised NEO Personality Inventory. According to Costa and McCrae (1992), altruism is conceptualized as an active concern for another individual's welfare by showing consideration and willingness to help others. This conceptualization is consistent with the definition of the altruistic personality trait in the altruism literature (Batson *et al.*, 1986; Carlo, Eisenberg, Troyer, Switzer, & Speer, 1991; van Emmerik *et al.*, 2005). Therefore, the Altruism subscale will not be confused with the concept of agreeableness. In addition, the Altruism subscale has been used in other studies and showed acceptable internal consistency (Ames, 2008) and had significant correlations with the supervisor's employee-relations leadership style, which included behaviours such as showing consideration and regard for employees (Kognor & Nordvik, 2004). Example items include 'I go out of my way to help others if I can'. In the current study, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was 0.80.

Perceived organizational support. Supervisor participants responded to a 6-item POS scale (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001). This 6-item measure is a short version of the Survey of Perceived Organizational Support developed by Eisenberger *et al.* (1986). Example items include ‘This organization takes pride in my contributions’. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.86.

Control variables. Previous research suggests that demographic background and length of working relationship are often related to benevolent leadership behaviours. Relevant demographic indicators include sex of subordinate and supervisor, subordinate tenure, length of working relationship, and age of subordinate and supervisor (e.g. Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004; Farh, Cheng, Chou, & Chu, 2006). These background variables were included as control variables in the regression analyses.

In addition, past research has shown that people with positive affect will receive more positive interpersonal treatment (Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994). Therefore, we also control for subordinate positive affect by using Watson, Clark, and Tellegen’s (1988) 10-item measure of positive affect scale. The scale ranges from 1 (*never*) to 4 (*strongly*). Example items include ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘interested’. In the current study, the Cronbach’s alpha coefficient was 0.77.

Results

Assessment of measurement model

Before we proceeded to hypothesis testing, we examined the construct validity of our study variables using

confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). Because the sample size of our study is less than 200 and the ratio of our sample size to the item number was not large (Little, Cunningham, Shahar, & Widaman, 2002), we used four item parcels (subordinate’s initiative accommodation, task assistance, obedience, and sacrifice for supervisor) to reflect SLS. The result of the 4-factor CFA of SLS suggested that each parcel reflects only one latent factor (the sub-dimension of subordinate’s loyalty) and that the model fit the data well (see Table 1 Model MSLS). Also, the result of the higher order CFA suggests that each parcel reflects the same higher order factor (i.e. subordinate’s loyalty) and that the model fit was also acceptable (See Table 1, Model MSLSH).

Based on the above information, we conducted CFA on the 4-factor model (parceled SLS, altruistic personality, POS, and benevolent behaviours), in which SLS was measured by four item parcels instead of 15 items. The model fit was acceptable (see Table 1 Model M). Following the procedure suggested by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), convergent and discriminant validities were both supported. We further compared five competing nested models with Model M (Table 1). None of the nested models had acceptable model fit, and the results of chi-square difference tests indicated that our measurement model was better than any of the five nested models.

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients, and intercorrelations among study variables.

Table 1 Results of confirmatory factor analyses

Model	χ^2	<i>d.f.</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta d.f.$	NNFI	CFI	SRMR	RMSEA
The sub-dimensions of SLS								
MSLS (4 factor model of the SLS)	201.23	84			0.95	0.96	0.07	0.09
MSLSH (higher order factor model of SLS)	216.28	86			0.94	0.95	0.08	0.09
All study variables								
M (4 factors of all study variables)	446.26	203	–	–	0.90	0.91	0.08	0.09
M1 (1 factor model; collapse the 4 constructs into 1 factor)	1325.08	209	878.82**	6	0.57	0.61	0.18	0.22
M2a (2 factor model; loyalty, POS, and altruism were combined into 1 factor.)	930.83	208	484.57**	5	0.72	0.75	0.15	0.18
M2b (2 factor model; BL, loyalty, and POS were combined into 1 factor.)	1138.22	208	691.96**	5	0.64	0.67	0.18	0.20
M2c (2 factor model; BL, loyalty, and altruism were combined into 1 factor.)	931.89	208	485.63**	5	0.72	0.74	0.15	0.17
M2d (2 factor model; BL, POS, and altruism were combined into 1 factor.)	1248.87	208	802.61**	5	0.59	0.63	0.19	0.22

** $p < 0.01$, each of the chi-square difference tests indicates the comparison between the model specified in the row (e.g. M1) and the model M.

Table 2 Means, standard deviations and correlations of the study variables ($N = 167$)

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
1. Supervisor sex†	0.41	0.49											
2. Subordinate sex†	0.59	0.49	0.34**										
3. Subordinate tenure‡	4.40	5.56	-0.22**	-0.14									
4. Subordinate tenure with supervisor‡	2.93	3.53	-0.17*	-0.18*	0.73**								
5. Supervisor age	30.26	7.73	-0.22**	-0.17*	0.74**	0.59**							
6. Subordinate age	39.67	8.13	-0.29**	-0.09	0.34**	0.34**	0.37**						
7. Subordinate positive affect	2.35	0.46	-0.03	-0.08	0.10	0.10	0.13	0.14	(0.77)				
8. Loyalty	4.22	0.67	0.00	-0.01	0.09	0.16*	0.11	0.05	0.08	(0.90)			
9. Supervisor altruistic personality	4.61	0.62	0.03	-0.10	0.03	0.06	0.03	0.21**	0.14	0.27**	(0.80)		
10. Supervisor POS§	4.40	0.79	-0.04	0.01	0.05	0.12	-0.06	0.14	0.00	0.30**	0.23*	(0.86)	
11. Supervisor benevolent leadership	4.13	1.05	0.09	0.02	0.10	0.14	0.01	-0.01	0.12	0.26**	0.30**	0.18*	(0.91)

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. Values on the diagonal are Cronbach's α . Phi correlation was computed for two dichotomous variables related to gender. †Sex: 0 = male, 1 = female. ‡Tenure is calculated in years. §POS: perceived organizational support.

Results of hypothesis testing

We used hierarchical regression to test the hypotheses. To avoid the problem of multicollinearity when testing the moderating effects, we followed Aiken and West's suggestion (1991) to centre the means of the predictor (SLS) and the moderators (supervisor's altruistic personality and perceived organizational support) before creating the two product terms for testing moderating effects. If the moderating effects were statistically significant, we used Aiken and West's (1991) procedure to draw figures to demonstrate the interaction patterns.

Results of hierarchical regression analyses (Table 3) revealed that Hypothesis 1 was supported, as SLS significantly and positively predicted supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = 0.24$, $p < 0.01$, M2). In addition, Hypothesis 2 was supported, as the supervisor's altruistic personality moderated the relationship between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = -0.24$, $p < 0.01$, M4). Hypothesis 3 was also supported, as the supervisor's POS moderated the relationship between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = -0.16$, $p < 0.05$, M4). Furthermore, the negative beta coefficients suggested that the relationships were in line with our predictions specified by Hypotheses 2 and 3.

Figure 1 presents the moderating effect of supervisor's altruistic personality. For supervisors with low altruistic personalities, the relationship between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent leadership was stronger than that of highly altruistic supervisors. In addition, we split the sample by median supervisor's altruistic personality and conducted a simple slope analysis of the interaction. The

results supported Hypothesis 2 and were consistent with Figure 1. As shown in Figure 1, for supervisors with highly altruistic personalities (above median), SLS did not significantly predict supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = 0.17$, *n.s.*). For supervisors with low altruistic personalities (below median), SLS positively and significantly predicted supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = 0.32$, $p < 0.05$).

Figure 2 presents the moderating effect of supervisor's POS. For supervisors with low POS, the relationship between SLS and the supervisor's benevolent leadership was stronger than that for supervisors with high POS. In addition, we split the sample by the median of supervisor's POS and conducted a simple slope analysis to further examine the interaction effect. The results supported Hypothesis 3 and were consistent with Figure 2. As shown in Figure 2, for supervisors with high POS (above median), SLS did not significantly predict supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = 0.07$, *n.s.*). For supervisors with low POS (below median), SLS positively and significantly predicted supervisor's benevolent leadership ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between SLS and supervisor's benevolent behaviours as well as explore the boundary conditions of the relationship between SLS and supervisor's benevolent behaviours. We proposed that, although SLS relates positively to supervisor's display of benevolent behaviours, this relationship also depends on other factors. That is, under the conditions that a supervisor has a highly altruistic tendency or

Table 3 Hierarchical regression results of the main effects and moderating effects ($N = 167$)

Variable	Supervisor Benevolent Leadership			
	M1	M2	M3	M4
Controls				
Supervisor sex†	0.10	0.10	0.07	0.12
Subordinate sex†	0.01	0.00	0.04	0.04
Subordinate tenure‡	0.11	0.14	0.13	0.10
Subordinate tenure with supervisor‡	0.17	0.12	0.13	0.18
Supervisor age	-0.15	-0.17	-0.13	-0.16
Subordinate age	-0.04	-0.04	-0.11	-0.13
Subordinate positive affect	0.12	0.10	0.08	0.13
Predictors				
Loyalty		0.24**	0.15	0.13
Moderators				
Supervisor altruistic personality			0.25**	0.30**
Supervisor POS§			0.06	0.07
Interaction				
Loyalty X altruistic personality				-0.24**
Loyalty X POS				-0.16*
<i>F</i>	1.38	2.48**	3.19**	4.28**
<i>d.f.</i>	7, 159	8, 158	10, 156	12, 154
<i>R</i> ²	0.06	0.11	0.17	0.25
ΔR^2	0.06	0.05	0.06	0.08
Adj <i>R</i> ²	0.02	0.07	0.12	0.19

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Values on the Table are standardized β . †Sex: 0 = male, 1 = female. ‡Tenure is calculated in years. §POS: perceived organization support.

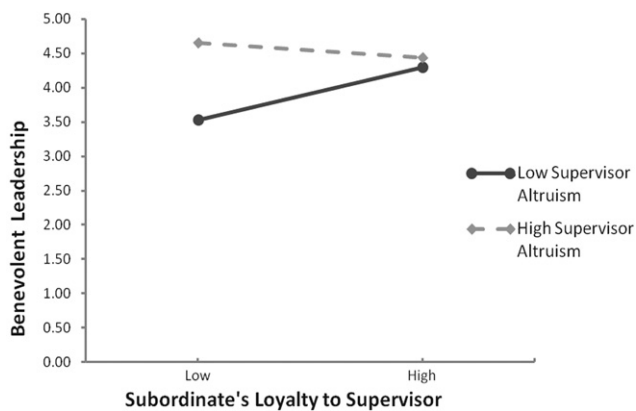


Figure 1 The moderating effect of supervisor’s altruism on the relationship between subordinate loyalty and benevolent leadership.



Figure 2 The moderating effect of supervisor’s perceived organizational support on the relationship between subordinate loyalty and benevolent leadership.

perceives abundant organizational support, the relationship between SLS and supervisor’s benevolent behaviours was reduced.

As expected, we found that SLS positively predicted supervisor’s benevolent leadership. This result is in accordance with the prediction of Cheng’s (1995) differential

leadership theory, which contends that SLS serves as an important criteria for supervisor’s differential leadership. Those categorized as highly loyal employees will receive more benevolent treatment from supervisors. In addition, we found that a supervisor’s altruistic personality and POS moderate the relationship between SLS and the

supervisor's benevolent behaviours such that this relationship was weaker for supervisors with highly altruistic personalities or POS than for supervisors with low altruistic personalities or POS. Our findings support the prediction that both highly altruistic personality and high POS can reduce supervisors' intention to gain power and status in their relationship with subordinates, which was manifested in the reduction of the association between SLS and benevolent leadership.

Theoretical implication

Our study contributes to the extant literature in three ways. First, both loyalty to supervisor and benevolent leadership are meaningful constructs in indigenous Chinese organizational behaviours (Cheng & Jiang, 2000; Chen *et al.*, 2002; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Although previous studies have attempted to integrate these two constructs by investigating the direct association between SLS and benevolent leadership (e.g. Cheng *et al.*, 2002, 2004; Jiang *et al.*, 2007), they pay relatively little attention to the role of supervisor-related variables in the relationship of SLS-benevolent leadership. This is an overlooked yet important issue because past leadership literature has pointed out that leaders' disposition (Tepper, Duffy, Henle, & Lambert, 2006) as well as their relationship with the organization (Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006; Tepper & Taylor, 2003) will impact how they treat their subordinates (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Shanock & Eisenberger, 2006). We believe that this line of research can also be applied to the SLS-benevolent leadership relationship. In the current study, we incorporate supervisor's disposition (altruism) and relationship with organization (POS) into the SLS-benevolent leadership relationship. To our knowledge, this is the first study linking supervisor-related variables to SLS-benevolent leadership in a Chinese context.

Second, as previously mentioned, Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory considered SLS as an important criteria for supervisor's categorization of employees. However, the mechanism linking SLS and benevolent leadership is not fully clarified (Hsu *et al.*, 2006). To fill this research gap, we demonstrated that supervisors instrumentally display benevolent leadership in response to SLS. In doing so, supervisors may build their power status over the subordinate and maintain the social hierarchy and order implied in Confucian ethics. That is, supervisors' intention to gain power to control subordinates is one potential mechanism to explain why SLS is associated with benevolent leadership. Although we did not directly test this mechanism in the current study, we identified two moderators (a supervisor's altruistic personality and POS), which are supposed to diminish a supervisor's intention to gain control and power. The findings of our study revealed that a supervisor's altruistic personality and POS did weaken the

association between SLS and benevolent leadership. We extended Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory by identifying the boundary conditions that help to clarify the mechanism underlying the relationship of SLS to benevolent leadership. That is, when supervisors have a higher tendency to take care of people (altruistic personality) or a higher motive to reciprocate organizational support (POS), supervisors' intention to maintain power status and social hierarchy imposed by Confucian ethics is reduced and thus the differential leadership in response to SLS becomes less significant.

Third, although the studies of Cheng *et al.* (2004) and Jiang *et al.* (2007) have examined the association between loyalty and benevolent leadership, their studies measure both SLS and benevolent leadership by subordinate self-ratings. Therefore, their research findings may not be free from common method bias. Our study tried to avoid that limitation by obtaining measures of the predictor and criterion from different sources (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). In doing so, we believe that our research finding reveals a more accurate relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership instead of a potentially spurious relationship.

Managerial implications

Because differentiated leadership may diminish group effectiveness by inducing discrepancy in subordinates' leader identification and self-efficacy (Wu *et al.*, 2010), providing differential treatment to different subordinates may not be an effective group management technique (Hill, 2007). Our findings that a supervisor's altruistic personality and POS can lessen the association between SLS and differential leadership have important implications for managing the liabilities of differential leadership. That is, organizations need to put effort into preventing a workplace environment in which a supervisor can bestow a personal favour on a subordinate by SLS. Based on our findings, a company can do so by carefully selecting altruistic supervisors who genuinely care about subordinates, rather than aiming to satisfy their own selfish motives (Kanungo & Conger, 1993). Because highly altruistic supervisors are less likely to provide differential leadership behaviour based on subordinates' SLS, subordinates are less likely to develop divergence in their identification with the supervisor and thus group cohesion and effectiveness can be retained. In addition, organizations can include altruism-related characteristics as one of the managerial competency systems (e.g. interpersonal understanding, developing others) and incorporate such competency in their management development or succession plans (Spencer & Spencer, 1993).

A second approach is that organizations should provide supervisors with sufficient support such as more rewards,

greater autonomy, more decision-making power, and increased training on leadership so that supervisors feel more obligated to repay the organization by taking good care of their subordinates (Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). This sense of obligation will reduce the supervisor's intention to show differential treatment as a way of gaining power and status among subordinates. Thus, association between SLS and benevolent leadership will be weakened.

Future research directions

Our findings provide several directions for future research. First, benevolent leadership in the Chinese context is not only limited to job-related support but also extends to the personal domain outside the work context. Therefore, benevolent behaviours are considered as the supervisor's individualized and holistic care for subordinates (Cheng *et al.*, 2000) rather than work-related support. It would benefit the literature of social support and leadership to identify how different types of supervisory social support relate to employee effectiveness. In fact, on-the-job support can be perceived as a part of a supervisor's job responsibility (Ng & Sorensen, 2008). Under this rationale, even if a subordinate does not show loyalty to the supervisor, the supervisor may still provide the subordinate with job-related support in order to complete role tasks assigned by the organization. However, supervisors' off-the-job personal consideration is clearly not a part of their work responsibility and therefore can be perceived as extra-role behaviour. Therefore, a supervisor may show such personal consideration based more on the personal relationship with the subordinate than on the role of a supervisor. Accordingly, SLS can increase the close relationship between the supervisor and the subordinate (Cheng, 1995; Jiang, 2009). It may serve as a stronger predictor for supervisors' off-the-job personal consideration than for supervisors' on-the-job support. However, our study did not differentiate on-the-job support from off-the-job personal consideration. Future studies that distinguish supervisor's benevolent behaviours into different aspects will be able to examine the above proposition.

Second, as we only examined moderators that weaken the positive relationship between SLS and supervisor benevolent behaviours, future studies may attempt to identify potential moderators that *strengthen* such a relationship. A potential moderator is reciprocity ideology, the degree to which an individual believes in norms of reciprocity (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). When individuals have a strong reciprocity ideology, they affirmatively believe that when other people receive favour, they are obligated to return the favour and even return the favour to a greater amount (Eisenberger, Cotterell, & Marvel, 1987).

Previous studies found that employees with strong exchange ideology felt a higher sense of obligation to return the favour to the organization when they perceived the organization did them a favour (Eisenberger *et al.*, 2001). Similarly, it is possible that the greater a supervisor's exchange ideology, the more likely the supervisor feels obligated to show benevolent behaviours in return. The above moderators, which can expand the possible relationship between SLS and supervisor benevolent behaviours, deserve further research attention.

Limitations

Although our study extends differential leadership theory (Cheng, 1995) by incorporating the moderating effect of supervisor's altruistic personality and POS, three limitations should be noted. First, we operationalize SLS by measuring the perceived loyalty reported by supervisors rather than the loyalty reported by subordinates. However, given that there may be discrepancies between the perceived loyalty by the supervisor and by the subordinate (Jiang, 2009), the use of perceived subordinate's loyalty reported by the supervisor may be unable to capture fully the actual loyal behaviour by subordinates. In spite of this, the focus of our study is to exam how a supervisor categorizes subordinates based on the perceived subordinate's loyalty. Therefore, our operationalization of SLS was consistent with our research question and the psychological mechanisms identified by Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory. However, future studies can examine the roles of the discrepancy between the subordinate-reported loyalty and the supervisor-perceived loyalty and their interaction in supervisors' benevolent behaviours.

Second, although we collected data from supervisor-subordinate dyads to prevent the problem of common method variance, the cross-sectional design of our study is not free from the threat of causal confusion. However, as previously mentioned, Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory suggests that supervisor's benevolent leadership is based on SLS. Therefore, the starting point of differential leadership lies in subordinates' behaviours, and it is reasonable to treat perceived subordinate's loyalty as the antecedent of supervisor's benevolent behaviours rather than the other way around. In spite of this, helpful future research would be to conduct a longitudinal study or experiment to rigorously explore the causal relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership.

Finally, we distributed 300 packs of questionnaires and obtained 174 matching data, with a return rate of 58%. Such a return rate was not high compared to other loyalty or paternalistic leadership research that collected supervisor-subordinate dyad data (e.g. Wang & Cheng, 2010, 76%;

Hsu, Hu, Ling, Cheng, & Chou, 67%; Jiang *et al.*, 2007, 68%). In our study, the MBA students who helped to collect data reported that some supervisors were reluctant to participate in the study and thus did not return the questionnaire. If this is the case, those supervisors who were willing to fill out the questionnaire may have a higher altruistic personality and this tendency may result in the weak association between altruistic personality and benevolent leadership behaviour. However, when examining the results of hierarchical regression on Table 3, the supervisor's altruistic personality has the highest predictive effect on benevolent behaviours among all predictors. Therefore, we believe that the relatively low return rate of the current study will not lead to the problem of range restriction.

Conclusion

The current study investigated the relationship between SLS and benevolent leadership as well as the boundary conditions on this relationship in Chinese organizations. The results revealed that SLS is positively related to the supervisor's benevolent leadership. However, this relationship was weakened by the supervisor's altruistic personality and POS. Our study contributes to Cheng's (1995) differential leadership theory by demonstrating that subordinate's loyalty is not always a prerequisite for supervisor's benevolent behaviours. When a supervisor has high altruistic tendency or high POS, he or she still provides benevolent treatment to subordinates regardless of SLS.

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