

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Does Loyalty Protect Chinese Workers from Stress? The Role of Affective Organizational Commitment in the Greater China Region

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## Summary

The aim of this research was to test the direct and moderating effects of affective organizational commitment (AOC) on the work stressors—job satisfaction relationship among employees in the Greater China Region. A self-administered survey was conducted to collect data from three major cities in the region, namely Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei ( $n = 380$ ). Three most important work stressors were assessed: heavy workload, lack of work autonomy and interpersonal conflict. We found that both work stressors and AOC were related to job satisfaction. Specifically, heavy workload, lack of autonomy and interpersonal conflict were negatively related to job satisfaction; whereas, AOC had a positive relation with job satisfaction. Furthermore, AOC moderated the interpersonal conflict—job satisfaction and the lack of autonomy—job satisfaction relationships. The present study thus found joint effects of work stressors and AOC (as buffers) on work attitudes among Chinese employees in the Greater China Region, encompassing three sub-societies of mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. Copyright © 2009 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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## Keywords

work stressors; affective organizational commitment; job satisfaction; Chinese employees

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## Introduction

In a comprehensive literature review, Cooper, Dewe and O'Driscoll (2001) argued that almost all of the occupational stress theories are developed and empirically tested in Western, industrialized countries.

Hence, a major limitation in this literature is its decidedly Western focus. As the Greater China Region has 20 per cent of the world's population and represents an ever increasing economic power; it is valuable to obtain data from Chinese employees to contribute to the work

stress research. We thus chose three important industrial cities in the region, Beijing (the capital of mainland China), Hong Kong and Taipei (the capital of Taiwan) to represent a wide variety of Chinese workers. Although historical development differ in the three sub-societies, recent empirical research revealed, somewhat contrary to common belief, that contemporary Chinese employees in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan had similar work experiences (Lu, Kao, Zhou, & Siu, 2001; Lu, Cooper, Kao & Zhou, 2003; Kao, Lu & Lu, 2008) and endorsed similar levels of Chinese cultural values, such as collectivism, specifically valuation of loyalty and duty to the group in one's self-identity (Lu, Kao, Chang, Wu, & Zhang, 2008). We thus set out to explore whether work stressors and affective organizational commitment (AOC), similar to the Chinese value of loyalty to the group, would affect job satisfaction for all employees in the Greater China Region.

### Salient work stressors for Chinese employees

Summarizing results of work stress studies in Taiwan, Lu (1997) concluded that heavy workload, lack of work autonomy and interpersonal conflict are the three most prevalent stressors for Taiwanese workers, and each was related to job dissatisfaction. Findings from a recent focused-group discussion study in Taiwan (Chang & Lu, 2007) further corroborated the above conclusion. Across the wider Greater China zone, comparative study found that heavy workload and interpersonal conflict are common work stressors for employees in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, and again each was related to job dissatisfaction (Lu *et al.*, 2001). It thus seems that *heavy workload*, *lack of autonomy* and *interpersonal conflict* may be salient work stressors for all Chinese workers, which have detrimental effects on work attitudes such as job satisfaction.

These three stressors fit well into the comprehensive 'demand-control-support' work stress theory (Theorell, 2000), with heavy workload reflecting the quantitative demands, lack of work autonomy reflecting the dearth of perceived control, and interpersonal conflict reflecting the lack of support in the work environment. While these three stressors may be universal, interpersonal conflict at work has specific relevance to Chinese workers due to the heavy emphasis that Chinese culture places on harmonious relationships

in social life, including work (Kwan, Bond, & Singelis, 1997). So far, however, no study has compared the effects of these stressors in multiple samples from different regions in the Greater China zone. We thus attempted to replicate and extend previous findings to all Chinese workers by testing the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1:* Work stressors will negatively relate to job satisfaction.

### Organizational commitment of Chinese employees

The importance of organizational commitment, a state in which an individual identifies with a particular organization and its goals and wishes to maintain membership in the organization (Robbins & Judge, 2009), has been widely recognized in recent years. Organizational commitment correlates negatively with various work-related stressors (Jamal, 1990; Lu, Kao, Chang, Wu, & Cooper, 2008), positively with job satisfaction (Leong, Furnham, & Cooper, 1996), and negatively with intention to leave (Cohen, 1993). Organizational commitment has also been studied as a mediator of the relationship between role stressors and withdrawal behaviours (Bakker, Demerouti, de Boer, & Schaufeli, 2003; Glazer & Beehr, 2005). Thus far, organizational commitment has been established as a psychological outcome of work stressors, and as a mediator of stressor-strain relationships. However, results testing its role as a moderator in the work stress context remain inconclusive.

In a panel study, Begley and Czajka (1993) found strong evidence of organizational commitment moderating the relationship between a response to a stressor, i.e. a response to organizational change and a composite index of job displeasure (including job dissatisfaction, intention to quit, and work-related irritation). Since this study, numerous scholars (e.g., Donald & Siu, 2001; Glazer & Kruse, 2008; Leong *et al.*, 1996; Reilly, 1994; Siu, 2002) have gone on to study organizational commitment as a moderator of *stressor-strain* relationships and failed to find support. Glazer and Kruse (2008) conjecture that the problem was at the operationalization of the predictor variable, that is stressor versus first-level strain. They indeed found evidence of organizational commitment moderating the relationship between job-related anxiety (first-level strain) and intention to leave in a sample of Israeli

nurses. However, we believed that cultural context may also play a role in the inconclusive results of other studies, and therefore, test the moderating role of organizational commitment on the stressor–strain relationship among a sample of Chinese employees in three Chinese societies.

Specifically, the affective component of the multi-dimensional construct of organizational commitment (Meyer & Allen, 1991) may buffer stressor–strain relationships for Chinese workers. AOC reflects an individual's desire to remain a part of the organization; it also reflects a willingness to exert effort, and a belief in and acceptance of the values and goals of the organization. Our reasoning was based on the theoretical perspective that views organizational commitment as a coping resource (Begley & Czajka, 1993; Leong *et al.*, 1996). This perspective is also consistent with the mainstream thinking about stress and coping. Kobasa (1982) argued that commitment protects individuals from the negative effects of stress because it enables them to attach direction and meaning to their work. Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) too claimed that organizational commitment can provide people with a sense of belongingness and stability. This bolstered sense of security and belongingness can buffer the negative effects of stress on job attitude and health. Begley and Czajka (1993, p. 552) concurred with such a view: 'employees committed to their company can be expected to benefit from the results of the tension resistance such commitment provides.' Accordingly, organizational commitment is an adaptive resource that helps one make sense of the work situation, thus buffering the harmful effects of work stressors.

Further to the sense-making function of organizational commitment, affectionate attachment to the organization, that is, AOC may have specific implications for Chinese workers, going back to their Confucian cultural roots. In Confucianism, there is a saying 'Be patriotic and loyal to the throne.' This traditional value now means that once a worker is employed by the company, he should be devoted to the job, work diligently and take full responsibility for the job. In keeping with the Confucian tradition, loyalty and commitment to group goals is the central feature of Chinese collectivist values (Triandis, 1995), and pivotal to self-identity for Chinese across the Taiwan Strait (Lu *et al.*, 2008b). In the work domain, such an emphasis on group loyalty results in strong identification with the values and goals of the organization, devotion to the job

and willingness to serve the organization. In mainland China, 'love your factory as your family' is a popular slogan of party propaganda, whereas in Taiwan, voluntarily working overtime for no compensation is a show of loyalty to the organization (Chang & Lu, 2007). Empirically, Chinese employees reported higher commitment than their South Korean and Canadian counterparts (Cheng & Stockdale, 2003), possibly because they identified the organization as an important 'group'.

Will this heightened commitment to the organization act as a defence for Chinese employees when the going gets tough? We purport that loyalty to the organization is not only a strong social imperative for the Chinese workers, but may also enable them to maintain psychological attachment and exert more efforts in time of stress. An important feature of the Chinese value of loyalty is paying back: the employer provides guarantee of jobs and livelihood, in return, employees pay back with their devotion and continued service. When things get tough, the employer would refrain from laying-off workers, and in return, employees pay back with their increased efforts and unwavering loyalty. Accordingly, for the Chinese workforce, AOC produces devoted and responsible workers who will double their efforts particularly in time of heightened stress.

It needs to be noted that in Chinese culture affective commitment, an emotional attachment to the organization and a belief in its values overlaps to a large extent with normative commitment, an obligation to remain with the organization for moral or ethical reasons. This is because the Chinese emphasis on loyalty to the collective (e.g., family, group, organization) operates mainly through cultivating strong emotional attachment to the group, identification with and internalizing the group values (Cheng & Stockdale, 2003; Lu, 2009). Thus, the idea of loyalty and obligation for Chinese workers is synonymous with emotional attitudes towards the organization (acting from one's heart), rather than contractual forces or ethical imperative to remain service. Although the majority of existing studies found little evidence of the moderating effect of organizational commitment, Siu and Cooper (1998) did obtain some support for AOC as a moderator in a Hong Kong sample. Existing literature has also shown that in general, affective commitment relates to organizational outcomes more strongly than the other two dimensions, namely, normative and continuance commitment (Dunham, Grube, & Castafieda, 1994). We thus focused on AOC and tested its protective effects on work attitude

as well as its moderating effects on the stressor–strain relationship by drawing a more representative sample from all three major Chinese societies in the Greater China Region.

*Hypothesis 2:* AOC will positively relate to job satisfaction.

*Hypothesis 3:* AOC will moderate the work stressors–job satisfaction relationship, such that the relationship will be more negative for individuals with low AOC than those with high AOC.

## Method

We used a self-administered structured questionnaire to collect data from employees in Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei. We adopted a quota sampling method to recruit equivalent numbers of participants from both sexes and from various ranks of various departments in various organizations. Respondents were invited to participate through the personnel manager or a contact person known to the researchers in each organization. The survey was conducted in Chinese. Questionnaires were distributed in booklet form, along with a cover letter assuring anonymity and voluntary participation, and a postage-paid return envelope. A reminder letter was sent 7 days after the initial invitation to boost the response rate. Questionnaires were mailed back to the researchers directly. The overall response rate was 68.6 per cent.

The combined sample ( $n = 380$ , Beijing: 128; Hong Kong: 105; Taipei: 146) consisted of 202 men and 175 women (three unidentified), with a mean age of 34.64 years [standard deviation (SD) = 6.40]. About 69 per cent of the participants were managers, 65 per cent were married and 33.9 per cent were single (four unidentified). The mean of current job tenure was 7.27 years (SD = 6.85).

Main research variables were measured using the following scales:

- *Work stressors:* workload [five items (Spector & Jex, 1998), e.g. ‘How often is there a great deal to be done?’], interpersonal conflict [four items (Spector & Jex, 1998), e.g. ‘How often are people rude to you at work?’] and lack of autonomy [three items (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) e.g. ‘I decide on my own how to go about doing the work’, reversed score], were rated on 6-point scales (1 = *less than once per month or never*, 6 = *several times per day*).

- *AOC:* Six items from Meyer and Allen’s (1997) scale (e.g. ‘I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career in this organization’) were rated on 6-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*).
- *Job Satisfaction:* The Job Satisfaction Scale [three items (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979), e.g. ‘All in all, I am satisfied with my job’] was used (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*).

All the above scales have established Chinese versions with proven reliability when administered to Chinese employees in previous research (e.g. Lu, 1997; Siu, 2002; Siu & Cooper, 1998). We opted to use 6-point rating scales to attenuate the observed response tendency of centring among Chinese participants (Diener, Suh, Smith, & Shao, 1995).

## Results

We have shown in the literature review that work stress was experienced similarly in all three sub-regions within the Greater China zone. We have also previously found empirical evidence that Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and loyalty to the group were upheld universally across the three sub-regions studied here (Lu *et al.*, 2008). However, preliminary analyses were conducted as a further check. We used one-way analysis of variance to compare the three samples. Table I presents the means, SDs and internal consistency alpha coefficients of main variables. Scale reliabilities were acceptable. Employees in Hong Kong generally reported more stressors. However, as we expected, the level of AOC did not differ among the three samples.

Separate correlation analysis among main variables was conducted in each of the three samples and revealed generally similar patterns, with a small number of correlations being significant in one sample but not in another (these data may be obtained from the author). We thus decided to pool the data for further analysis and present the correlation matrix in Table II. Work stressors and organizational commitment significantly correlated with job satisfaction in the expected direction.

Given that there were differences in mean scores of stressors across the three Chinese societies, we further controlled these effects in correlations. To do so, we created two dummy variables to represent the three societies [Dummy 1 (DUM1): 1 = Taiwan (TW), 0 = Hong Kong (HK) or China (CN); Dummy 2 (DUM2): 1 = HK, 0 = TW or CN], and recomputed partial correlations controlling for DUM1 and DUM2

**Table I.** Descriptive statistics of main variables for the Beijing, Hong Kong and Taipei sample

Variables	Beijing ( <i>n</i> = 129)			Hong Kong ( <i>n</i> = 105)			Taipei ( <i>n</i> = 146)			<i>F</i> <sub>(df)</sub>	Post-hoc Scheffe test
	M	SD	$\alpha$	M	SD	$\alpha$	M	SD	$\alpha$		
WL	11.53	4.84	0.89	15.26	6.72	0.92	14.41	6.55	0.94	12.56*** <sub>(2369)</sub>	2 > 1 = 3
AUTO	8.45	3.10	0.89	9.04	3.20	0.75	7.26	3.06	0.87	10.75*** <sub>(2374)</sub>	1 = 2 > 3
IC	6.14	2.16	0.70	8.96	4.22	0.82	7.08	3.10	0.78	22.84*** <sub>(2375)</sub>	2 > 1 = 3
AOC	23.02	6.02	0.80	22.91	6.05	0.80	23.16	6.15	0.83	1.54 <sub>(2367)</sub>	—
JS	12.63	2.98	0.82	11.79	3.47	0.81	12.40	3.41	0.82	1.95 <sub>(2374)</sub>	—

Notes: WL: workload; AUTO: lack of autonomy; IC: interpersonal conflict; AOC: affective organizational commitment; JS: job satisfaction.

\*\*\**p* < 0.001.

**Table II.** Intercorrelations among main variables for the pooled sample (*N* = 380)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Sex	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Age	0.41**	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Marital	0.26**	0.46**	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Seniority	0.19**	0.60**	0.31**	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Manager	0.28**	0.39**	0.21**	0.19**	—	—	—	—	—	—
WL	0.00	-0.01	-0.10*	-0.05	0.07	—	—	—	—	—
AUTO	-0.17**	-0.15**	-0.07	-0.04	-0.11*	0.13*	—	—	—	—
IC	0.04	0.05	-0.01	-0.03	0.02	0.51**	0.18**	—	—	—
AOC	0.10*	0.27**	0.18**	0.26**	0.19**	-0.13*	-0.34**	-0.23**	—	—
JS	0.07	0.17**	0.09	0.12*	0.20**	-0.14**	-0.34**	-0.20**	0.61**	—

Notes: WL: workload; AUTO: lack of autonomy; IC: interpersonal conflict; AOC: affective organizational commitment; JS: job satisfaction; Sex: 1 = male, 0 = female; Marital: 1 = married, 0 = single; Manager: 1 = manager, 0 = non-manager.

\**p* < 0.05; \*\**p* < 0.01.

simultaneously. However, the resulting partial correlations were almost the same as those reported in Table II, in terms of magnitude, direction and statistical significance. Thus, it seems that the three Chinese societies share similarities in relations among work stressors, AOC and job satisfaction.

Following Cohen, Cohen, West and Aiken's (2003) suggestion for testing and reporting moderating effects, we conducted four steps to predict job satisfaction. Firstly, we entered demographic variables of sex, age, marital status, tenure and managerial role in the first step of regression. Secondly, we entered work stressors. Thirdly, we entered AOC. Finally, we entered the interaction terms (work stressors  $\times$  AOC), after each was standardized.

Similar to what we did for correlations, we attempted to control for contextual factors (i.e. regional differences) in the moderated regressions too. We entered the two dummy variables (DUM1 and DUM2) to control for regional effects, before all other predictors. Again, these two dummy variables did not account for a significant amount of variance ( $\Delta R^2 = 0.01$ , not

significant), and Betas for all other predictors did not change when they were in the regression equation. Thus we report results without these controls in Table III.

As can be seen in Table III, all work stressors had negative relations with job satisfaction, thus, *Hypothesis 1* was supported. AOC had a strong positive relation with job satisfaction, thus *Hypothesis 2* was supported. In addition, AOC interacted with two work stressors (interpersonal conflict and lack of autonomy) to jointly determine job satisfaction, thus *Hypothesis 3* was partially supported. These two interactions are plotted in Figure 1a and b.

## Discussion

The main purpose of the present study was to test the direct and moderating effects of AOC on the work stressors-job satisfaction relationship among employees in the Greater China region, while taking all three salient work stressors into consideration. We found that lack of autonomy, interpersonal conflict, and heavy workload

**Table III.** Hierarchical regression predicting job satisfaction for the pooled sample ( $n = 380$ )

Predictors	Job satisfaction	
	$\beta$	$\Delta R^2$
<b>Step 1</b>		0.05**
Sex	0.04	—
Age	-0.02	—
Marital	-0.02	—
Seniority	-0.03	—
Manager	0.12*	—
<b>Step 2</b>		0.17***
WL	-0.08	—
AUTO	-0.13*	—
IC	-0.13*	—
<b>Step 3</b>		0.20***
AOC	0.51***	—
<b>Step 4</b>		0.03*
WL $\times$ AOC	-0.03	—
AUTO $\times$ AOC	-0.14**	—
IC $\times$ AOC	-0.16**	—
$R^2$	0.46	
$F_{(df)}$	12.27*** <sub>(14295)</sub>	

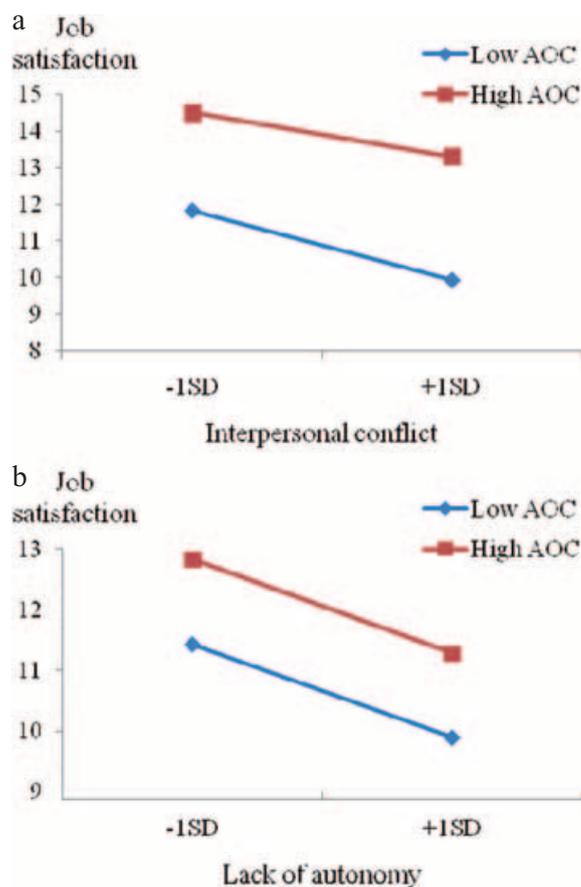
Notes: WL: workload; AUTO: lack of autonomy; IC: interpersonal conflict; AOC: affective organizational commitment; Sex: 1 = male, 0 = female; Marital: 1 = married, 0 = single; Manager: 1 = manager, 0 = non-manager.

Standardized coefficients  $\beta$  and  $F$  are taken from Step 4.

\*  $p < 0.05$ ; \*\*  $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

were all negatively related to job satisfaction. These results were largely similar to previous findings obtained in one or two Chinese sub-regions (e.g., Lu, 1997; Lu *et al.*, 2001). We can now conclude that stressors related to the 'demand-control-support' framework (Theorell, 2000) indeed have detrimental effects on work attitudes for all Chinese workers. Accordingly, organizations should pay special attention to these elements in the work environment in any practical interventions of work stress management.

More importantly, we found that AOC, as a show of loyalty to the organization, is a strong correlate of Chinese workers' job satisfaction. This show of loyalty towards the organization also buffered some of the noxious effects of stress on job satisfaction, specifically, those caused by interpersonal conflict and lack of autonomy. It needs to be noted that these interactive effects were not large, explaining 3 per cent of the total variance, though they were statistically significant (Table III). Siu and Cooper (1998) found similar results in their Hong Kong sample, concerning different stressors (though they did not plot the interactions).

**Figure 1** The moderating effects of affective organizational commitment (AOC) on the relation between work stressors and job satisfaction. SD: standard deviation

Although controversies regarding the moderator role of organizational commitment in work stress context still exist, the convergence of our results with Siu and Cooper's (1998) at least underlines the potential protective value of loyalty to the organization for Chinese workers.

As argued earlier, Chinese cultural values such as collectivism and loyalty to the group manifest as work-related Confucian values and are still prevalent among contemporary Chinese employees, whether they work in the mainland China, Hong Kong or Taiwan. We indeed found that these three groups of employees are not at all different in their AOC which closely resembles Chinese cultural values of loyalty to the group (see Table I).

Western scholars (e.g. Kahn, 1979) have asserted that Confucian work values played a pivotal role in the economic take-off of countries in the so-called 'Confucian circle', mainly covering the Greater China

Region. In a recent qualitative study (Chang & Lu, 2007), Taiwanese employees claimed that traditional values such as loyalty, paying back and group cohesion helped them to combat work stress. Taken together, AOC or loyalty to the organization may indeed be an adaptive resource and a potential stress moderator for Chinese employees. Our results thus support the theoretical perspective which places organizational commitment in the work stress context and views it as a moderator between the stressor–strain relationships.

However, the workload–job satisfaction relationship was not moderated by AOC. It seems that the psychosocial (interpersonal conflict) and organizational (lack of autonomy) aspects of stressful work are more likely to be ameliorated by this personal quality of devotion and commitment to the organization. Heavy workload as an intrinsic aspect of work may provoke spontaneous negative reactions which are too strong to be countered by mere devotion and loyalty to the organization. Nonetheless, AOC may still play a role in ameliorating the negative effects of such initial reaction on subsequent consequences, such as intention to leave. Glazer and Kruse (2008) argued for the placement of organizational commitment as a moderator between two strain variables and provided initial support for their assertion. This proposition is certainly worth of further testing.

To summarize, we found that AOC has both direct and moderating effects on work stressors–job satisfaction relationship for Chinese workers. As such moderating effects were rarely reported in the literature, and loyalty is a highly regarded virtue in Chinese culture, the protective role of organizational commitment deserves more research especially in a Chinese business context.

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