

Interpersonal Relationships in the Chinese Workplace: A Comprehensive Review and Future Directions

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Interpersonal relationships are a crucial concept in the field of organizational behavior, and they have accumulated a rich body of research to date. However, relationship theory encompasses various perspectives, and these divergent viewpoints have led to fragmented discussions, making it challenging to integrate and impeding the progress of research. The primary objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on relationships in the context of the Chinese workplace, aiming to understand the current state of research achievements and challenges. Firstly, this paper reviews the publication trends of relationship studies in TSSCI journals within the fields of industrial psychology and management. Next, it synthesizes several significant Western relationship theories and elucidates their research outcomes in the context of the Chinese workplace. Thirdly, this paper examines relationship theories unique to Chinese culture and related research. Fourthly, it attempts to propose two organizing frameworks based on content and process perspectives to summarize current theories. Finally, based on these organizing frameworks, the paper discusses future research directions in the field of relationship studies. Through this comprehensive review and synthesis, this paper aspires to provide a coherent overview of relationship research in the Chinese workplace, serving as a valuable reference for future studies.

Keywords: Chinese organizations, Chinese relationships, guanxi, interpersonal relationships, relationship quality

Extended Abstract

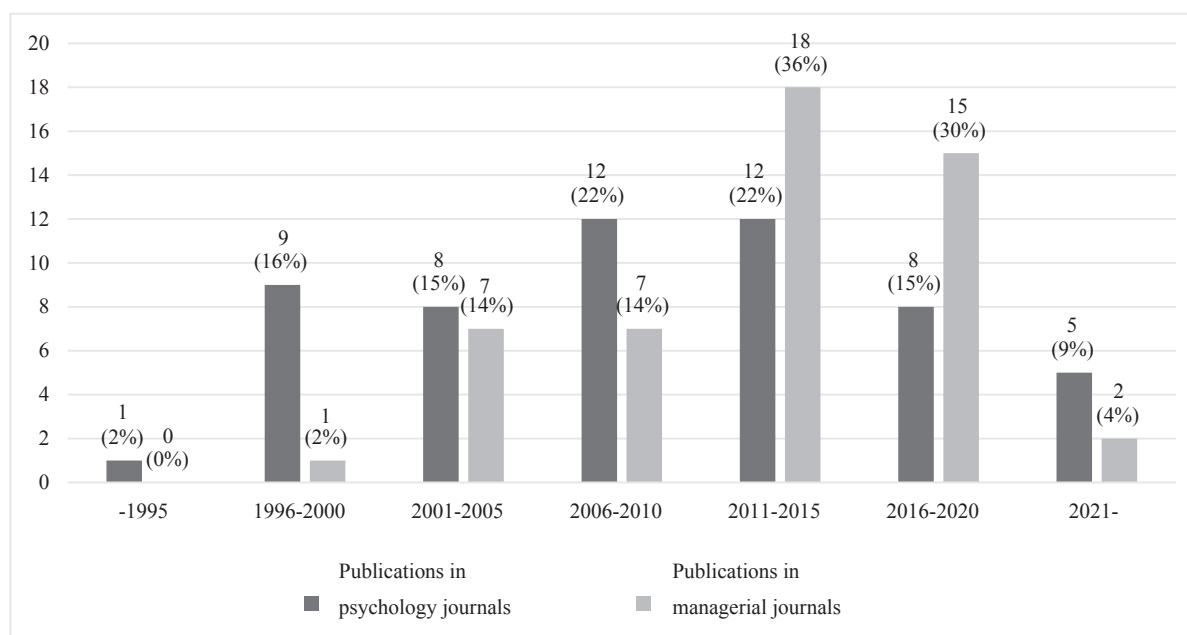
Relationships hold significant importance in both Eastern and Western cultures. Although enhancing interpersonal interactions between coworkers is generally not the primary goal of organizations, strong relationships between colleagues and with supervisors promote employee retention, job satisfaction, performance, commitment, and dedication (Berman et al., 2002; Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Thus, interpersonal relationships have been studied not only in psychology but also in management studies. Nevertheless, the study of interpersonal relationships began earlier in psychology than in management studies. The publication trends for the topic in the two fields are shown in Figure 1. As indicated in the figure, there was a significant growth in research on interpersonal relationships starting around 1996 in psychology, whereas management studies began to focus on the topic around 2001. In both fields,

discussions on relationships peaked between 2011 and 2015 and gradually decreased thereafter. This paper provides a systematic review and synthesis of research regarding relationships in the Chinese workplace, clarifies the evolution of the research, and presents an integrated model for effectively organizing theories on the topic.

Relationship Theories in Western Culture

Between 1960 and 2000, relationship theories received significant attention among researchers in the West. The key theories that emerged during this period are outlined and categorized by the perspectives they adopted in Table 1. During this period, significant paradigm shifts occurred approximately every 10 years. The development of relationship theories over the past four decades exhibited several important characteristics.

Figure 1
The number of publications in relationship research over the years



First, the focus of relationship theories shifted from broad relationship principles to specific contextual interactions. Early discussions primarily focused on general interpersonal interactions, and later discussions turned their attention toward organizational contexts. Second, their focus transitioned from the classification of relationships along static dimensions to viewing them as being shaped by dynamic interaction processes. Early theories mainly categorized relationships, or aspects of relationships, along a single dimension, whereas subsequent theories considered dynamic relationship processes. Third, the theories evolved from focusing on single relationship elements to incorporating multiple components. Early theories typically adopted a single perspective and considered fewer factors, whereas later theories encompassed richer content.

Relationship Theories in Chinese Culture

Research on relationships in the Chinese context became prevalent around 1990, and the evolution of this research from then until the present can be roughly

divided into three decade-long periods. The key theories that emerged during these periods and the perspectives that they adopted are outlined in Table 2. In Chinese culture, which is rooted in collectivism and relationalism, numerous implicit norms govern social interactions. Scholars have focused on identifying relationship dynamics that are unique to Chinese culture based on these cultural foundations. Chinese relationship theories exhibit several characteristics. First, Chinese workplace relationships are closely linked to the traditional cultural concepts of intimacy, reciprocity, and *guanxi*, which refers to the network of one's relationships. These concepts serve as a foundation for Chinese workplace relationship theories, which have been adapted to the organizational context while considering the uniqueness of the Chinese culture. Second, these theories emphasize the diversity of the functions of relationships in Chinese society. Relationships manifest in various forms in Chinese workplaces and influence Chinese organizations in multiple and substantial ways. Third, Chinese relationship theories often specify who "others" are and apply different rules based on the individuals involved.

Table 1
Western Relationship Theories

| Relationship typology and dimensions | |
|--|---|
| Blau (1964) | Economic exchange, social exchange |
| Clark & Mills (1979) | Exchange relationship, Communal relationship |
| Triandis et al. (1968) | Biaxial dimensions |
| Fiske (1991) | Relationship dimensions |
| Interpersonal similarity and relationship process | |
| Byrne (1971) | Similarity attraction theory |
| Levinger & Snoek (1972) | Three-stage of relationship development |
| Altman & Taylor (1973) | Social penetration theory |
| Social network and relational schema | |
| Knoke & Kuklinski (1982) | Social network |
| Planalp (1987) | Relational schema |
| Sluss & Ashforth (2007) | General relational identity, Specific relational identity |
| Exchange quality | |
| Graen (1976) | Leader-Member Exchange |
| Seers (1989) | Team-Member Exchange |
| Sherony & Green (2002) | Co-worker exchange |
| Workplace friendship | |
| Winstead et al. (1995) | Mutual care and interest, Voluntary interdependence |
| Feeley & Barnett (1997) | network of relationships |
| Sias & Cahill (1998) | The process from co-worker to friend |
| Nielsen et al. (2000) | Friendship opportunity, Friendship prevalence |

Fourth, in the Chinese context, research on the topic of relationship theories has frequently intersected with that on various other topics. Given the fundamental role of relationships in Chinese organizations, relationship theories have been referenced in various domains. For example, in organizational research, leadership studies have referred to the closeness of the relationship between supervisors and employees as an intermediary mechanism in explaining supervisors' leadership behavior.

Integrated Model of Relationship Theories

This paper integrates Western and Chinese relationship theories into a two-dimensional framework composed of theoretical scope and orientation (static vs. dynamic). The first dimension refers to the scope of the theories, categorizing them into macro, meso, and micro levels (Merton, 1967; Mills, 1959). The second dimension pertains to whether the theories adopt a static or dynamic perspective. Static relationship theories focus on relationship content, whereas dynamic theories emphasize the processes involved in the development of

Table 2
Chinese Relationship Theories

| broad interpersonal beliefs | |
|--|---|
| Yang (1992) | Relational orientation |
| Yu (1984) | The Five Cardinal Relationships |
| Huang (2002) | Relation-centered-oriented, Relational-rationality-oriented |
| Huang (1998) | Theoretical model of Face and Favor |
| Jacobs (1979) | Social tie |
| Chiao (1982) | Social tie |
| Zhai (1993) | Ren-Yuan Ren-Qing Ren-Lun |
| Hu (1994) | Established relationships, Genuine relationships |
| Tsui & Farh (1997) | Existence of direct particularistic ties |
| Yang (1999) | Innate relationship, Experiential relationship |
| Relationships in Chinese leadership | |
| Fei (1984) | Group dynamics and Hierarchical patterns |
| Cheng (1995) | The classification criteria |
| Jiang & Cheng (2014) | Differential leadership |
| Cheng & Farh (2000) | Paternalistic leadership |
| Chi & Lin (1993) | Confidant phenomenon |
| Jiang et al. (2007) | Chinese loyalty to supervisor |
| New Chinese relationships | |
| Chen & Chen (2004) | Chinese Guanxi |
| Tsai et al. (2015) | Leader-Subordinate Relational Identity |
| Law et al. (2000) | Chinese private relationship |
| Kao & Cheng (2019) | Interpersonal stressors |

relationships. The integrated framework for organizing relationship theories based on their scope and orientation is presented in Figure 2.

The framework presented above organizes relationship theories based on the aspects of relationships that they focus on. However, considering the enduring nature of relationships, a process-oriented framework is necessary to obtain a clearer understanding of each theory's involvement in different stages of interactions. A process-oriented framework is therefore presented in Figure 3.

Future Research Directions in Relationship Theories

In-Depth Exploration of Issues

Definition and Effects of Personal Relationships. Several fundamental issues regarding personal relationships have not yet been resolved in the literature. First, there has been a lack of consensus on the definition of personal relationships and whether they are based on interaction domains or content. Establishing an academically agreed-upon definition of, developing reliable measurement tools for, and clarifying the

Figure 2
Content model of Chinese relationship

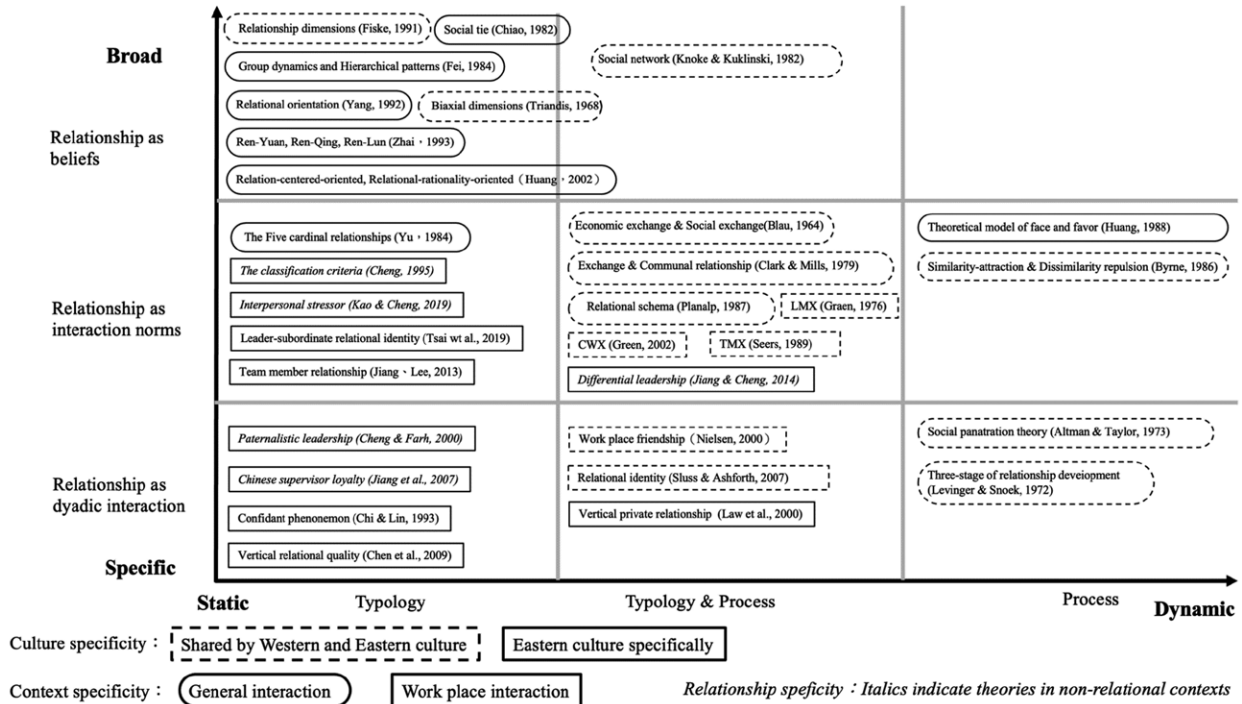
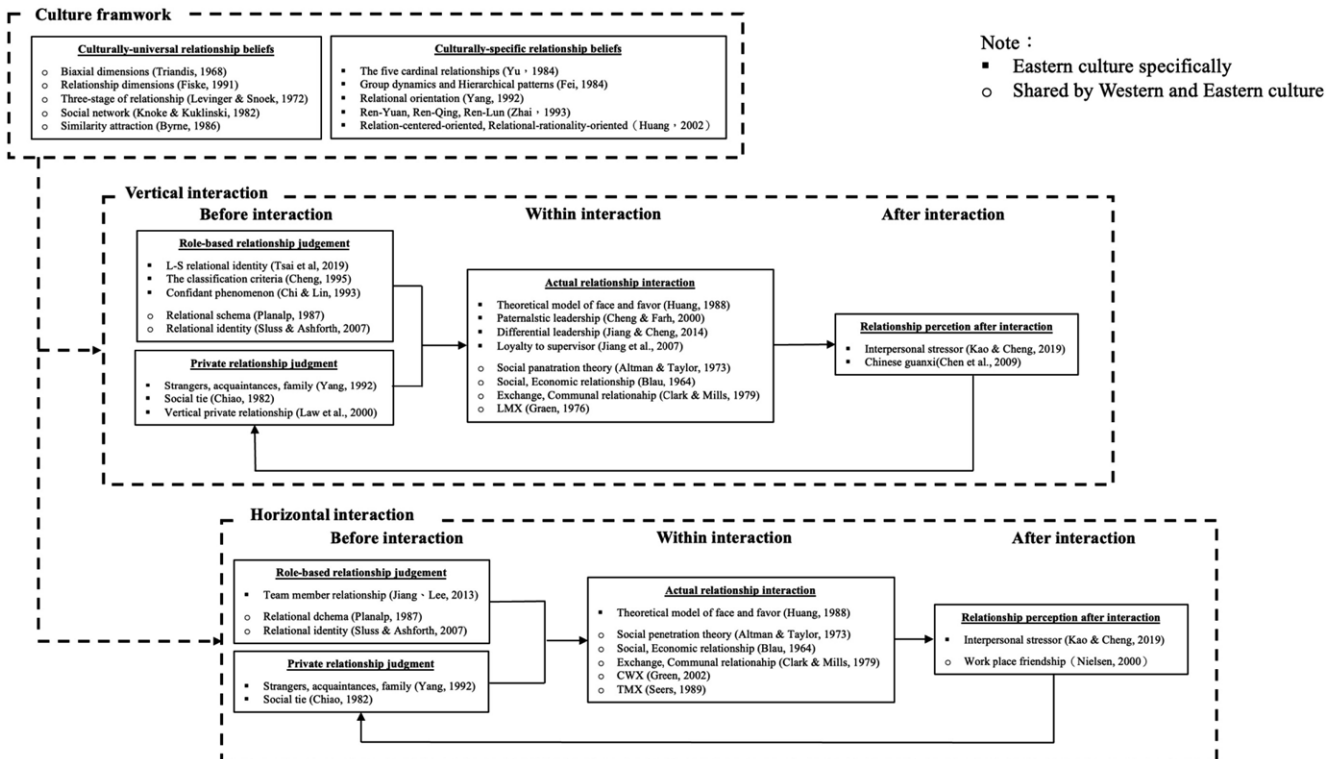


Figure 3
Process model of Chinese relationship



antecedents and consequences of personal relationships are essential. Second, in Chinese society, interactions in both the public and private spheres hold significance, and work and private relationships frequently intersect. However, there has been only limited discussion of how work and private relationships influence each other.

Research on Workplace Relationships Between Colleagues. Discussions on relationships between colleagues have been largely restricted to the Western context and have focused on colleague exchange quality (Sherony & Green, 2002) and workplace friendships (Berman et al., 2002). There is a paucity of research on relationships between colleagues in the Chinese context, and there is therefore substantial scope for exploring colleague relationships within Chinese organizations. Many relationship theories can be refined to explain horizontal relationships, which refer to relationships between colleagues on a similar level within the organizational hierarchy. Future research can therefore develop theories that are specifically tailored to horizontal relationships.

Dynamic Processes in Workplace Relationships. Research on the dynamic aspects of relationships can proceed in at least two directions. First, research adopting the dynamic perspective commonly involves identifying significant stages in the evolution of relationships and explaining the key defining elements at each stage. It then addresses transitions between the stages and identifies the conditions facilitating these transitions. Second, subsequent research could quantitatively examine segments with process implications after understanding the process-oriented nature of relationships. Thus, future studies can examine the relationships between the stages presented in different relationship theories and verify relationship processes through segmented quantitative analyses.

Emerging Issues

Establishment and Nature of Virtual Relationships. As interpersonal interactions transition from face-to-face communication to virtual environments, the methods for establishing relationships may differ. The shift to remote work may especially affect how relationships are formed in Chinese society, which values face-to-face interactions

and the role of *guanxi* (Kim et al., 1998). Factors such as the characteristics of communication platforms, differences in time, space, and communication culture between interacting parties, the purpose of relationship building, online anonymity, and impression management could all influence what constitutes the fundamental components of interpersonal relationships and how they are established. It is therefore important to explore how the essential aspects of Chinese relationships evolve in virtual work environments.

Exploration of Negative Effects of Interpersonal Relationships. Whereas most of the research on relationships has emphasized its positive aspects, the negative effects of relationships, both at the organizational and dyadic levels, have not been well explored. At the organizational level, it could be valuable to explore toxic relationships within organizations, their consequences, and how they affect Chinese workplaces. At the dyadic level, individuals in the workplace who disagree or perceive an imminent conflict may manipulate their relationships as a competitive strategy to avoid open conflict. Future research could therefore delve into toxic relationships in Chinese organizations and their negative effects.

Integration of Chinese Relationship Theories with Emerging Issues. Today's workplace environment differs significantly from that of the past, leading to many new directions that relationship research could pursue. In such a workplace environment, qualities such as the ability to multitask, flexibility, and readiness for change are highly valued. Furthermore, organizational flattening, outsourcing, and flexible working hours are common practices adopted by organizations to adapt to the external market environment. Future research could focus on interpersonal relationships in the context of these emerging work trends. Moreover, Chinese workplace relationships are closely tied to traditional Confucian values, but these values may no longer be the guiding principles in contemporary society. In this context, it is essential to examine how the fundamental aspects of relationships evolve. Additionally, considering that the building of relationships also involves costs, future research should examine the costs incurred in establishing strong relationships.

