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# Effects of Work Ethics on Job Involvement: Evidence from Chinese State-Owned Enterprises

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## Abstract

This study examines Protestant Work Ethic (PWE) as a moderator of the relationship between Confucian Dynamism and job involvement of 304 employees in Chinese State-Owned Enterprises (SOEs). A positive relationship was found between Long-term orientation of Confucian Dynamism (LCD) and job involvement. A negative relationship was found between Short-term orientation of Confucian Dynamism (SCD) and job involvement. The results further show that PWE was significantly and positively associated with job involvement. The results of a hierarchical regression analyses indicated that PWE moderates the relationship between LCD and job involvement. Specifically, the study found evidence that LCD yielded stronger relationships with job involvement among high PWEs than among low-PWEs. Finally, the implications for future studies and for organizational practice were discussed.

## 1. Introduction

Among the various types of companies in China today, state-owned enterprises (SOEs) undoubtedly play a unique and pivotal role in the process of economic development. However, Chinese SOEs are usually found to be operating inefficiently as compared to the non-SOEs [1] [2] [3]. There is a large body of theoretical and empirical literature in economics that attempts to understand the factors influencing efficiency of Chinese SOEs. Nevertheless, the discussions about efficiency of Chinese SOEs are so far dominated by some dimensions both at the micro-level and at the macro-level while the dimension of their employee's work ethic and work attitude at the individual-level is being barely addressed explicitly. Work ethic and work attitudes are, actually, an inevitable part of productivity [4]. Among work attitudes, job involvement is considered by many researchers to be a primary determinant of organizational effectiveness and success [5] [6] [7] [8] [9]. This effectiveness and success is especially important for Chinese SOEs.

Job involvement is one of those fundamentally important factors in most people's work lives, implying being positively absorbed in fundamental aspects of the job [10]. It has positive organizational implications, influencing the degree to which the person supports organizational goals, and thus advancing productivity and efficiency [11]. A positive state of intense psychological identification with one's job also leads to positive personal results of motivation, goal directed behavior, personal growth and work satisfaction [12] [13] [14] [15] [16]. Job involvement is defined as "psychological identification with a job" [17]. This definition implies that jobs "define one's self-concept in a major way" [17]. On the basis of the meta-analysis by Brown (1996) [11], it can be concluded that persons with high job involvement feel that their job is motivating

and challenging. They are committed to their work in general, including their specific job as well as their organization.

Although the concept of job involvement, its antecedents, and outcomes have been researched extensively by organizational researchers [18] [19] [20] [21], little attention has been devoted to exploring what exactly fosters organization members' job involvement.

Joel et al (1988) [22] study indicates that work ethic was positively related to job involvement. Also Brown (1996) [11] reported a strong corrected correlation ( $r=0.449$ ) between work ethic and job involvement in his meta-analysis. Additionally, Wang et al (2010) [23] found that work ethic was positively correlated with the employee's job involvement in China. Further, some researchers suggested that the ultimate determinant of job involvement should be the value of one's work in life [24] [25] [26] [27] [28]; hence, employees with a strong work ethic level should devote a significant amount of time and involvement to their job [29] [30]. The objective of this study is to examine the possible interactive effects of work ethics on employee's job involvement in Chinese SOEs.

## 2. Research Hypotheses

### 2.1. Main Effects of Confucian Dynamism on Job Involvement

Confucian Dynamism has already been identified as Confucian work ethic by some researchers [31] [32], which stems from Hofstede and Bond's (1988) [33] work. Confucian dynamism not only was akin to the Chinese culture but also proved valid subsequent large-scale cross-cultural studies [34] [35]. As a new cultural dimension, Confucian Dynamism is added to the four already established in Hofstede's (1980) [36] seminal work, namely (a) individualism–collectivism, (b) uncertainty avoidance, (c) masculinity–femininity, and (d) power distance [32]. According to Hofstede (1993) [37], Confucian Dynamism deals with “time orientation” and consists of two contrasting poles: “long-term orientation” versus “short-term orientation”. Based on the thesis of Hofstede and Bond, Robertson (2000) [38] divided Confucian Dynamism items into two dimensions, which are four positive or “future-oriented” items and four negative or “past/present-oriented” items.

Although micro-level empirical analysis using Confucian Dynamism is rare, extant studies suggest that employees with stronger Confucian values reported higher levels of organizational commitment, as well as higher work performance, than those who did not subscribe to Confucian value and Confucian Dynamism were significant predictors of organizational attitudes [31] [39].

According to Hofstede (1991) [40], long-term orientation of Confucian Dynamism (LCD) refers to a positive, dynamic, and future oriented culture linked with four ‘positive’ Confucian values: “persistence (perseverance)”; “ordering relationships by

status and observing this order”; “thrift”; and “having a sense of shame”. Therefore, individuals who subscribe to LCD tend to emphasize the values of thrift and hard work, harmony and cooperation, respect for educational achievements and reverence for authority [32]. Also these individuals would: (a) save enough money as availability of capital from reinvestment and obvious asset to economic growth [33] [32] [41] [42], (b) meet person's commitment to doing their duty in society because the shared value of “ordering relationship by status and observing this order” lies at their heart [33] [42]; (c) adhere to pursuit whatever goals they select for themselves, including economic goals and (d) accumulate wealth, prestige, status, power and so on in order to gain respect from others. In addition, Hui (1992) [43] suggested that “people favoring these values are characterized by a strong entrepreneurial spirit, wanting to succeed, and that a whole society that adopts such values has a high growth potential”. It should be no surprise that LCD is strongly correlated with one's positive work attitude. These individuals would think their major satisfaction in their life come from their job.

Based on above discussion, this study puts forth the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1a:* LCD will be positively associated with job involvement.

Also according to Hofstede (1991) [40], short-term orientation of Confucian Dynamism (SCD), however, represents a negative, static and traditional and past oriented culture associated with four “negative” Confucian values: “personal steadiness and stability”; “protecting your face”; “respect for tradition”; and “reciprocation of greetings, favors and gifts”. Individuals who subscribe to the ethic of SCD tend to detract their attention from getting on with the business and enhancing their work performance because they concern their face widely. Furthermore, they would be likely to respect traditional Chinese etiquette and custom widely and overstress personal steadiness and stability leading to discourage their initiative, risk seeking, and changeability required of entrepreneurs trying to exploit the opportunity to develop their business and career [33]. In addition, these individual tend to concern social activity-guanxi with more good manners than with good performance. Lu, Rose and Blodgett (1999) [44] noted that such individuals are more likely to confine themselves within social norms, and also to avoid feelings of guilt which may arise from nonconformity to local teachings, customs and traditions. Hence, individuals who endorse the work ethic of SCD may have negative impact in their attitudes toward work. Therefore, the above discussion leads this study to put forth the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 1b:* SCD will be negatively associated with job involvement.

### 2.2. Main Effects of Protestant Work Ethic on Job Involvement

The Protestant work ethic (PWE), the belief that hard work leads to success, has long been discussed in the literatures in social psychology, social work, sociology, and political

science. Mirels & Garrett (1971) [45] suggested that, as the PWE holds that hard and steady work is worthy and unwillingness to work is seen as a symptom of absence of grace or as sinful, high PWE scorers would perform better on tasks designed to provide low motivation and interest levels. As predicted, they found high PWE scorers spent significantly more time participating in a boring repetitive task than did low PWE scorers. A number of researchers examined the factor structure of the Protestant Work Ethic scales [41] [46] [47] [48] [49] [50] [51]. The dimensions of the scales which were found by researchers are: belief in hard work, anti-leisure, religious and moral beliefs, independence from others, asceticism, internal motive, success, work as an end in itself, saving in money and time, internal locus of control, self-reliance, delay of gratification, reward of work and disdain for indolence. Different researchers found that the PWE was significantly positively related to internal locus of control [52], realistic, enterprising, conventional and artistic types [53], being obedient, polite, responsible and clean [54], personal responsibility, greater expected success [55], work centrality [56], life and job satisfaction [57], academic job involvement [58], work loyalty [59], productivity [60], the belief that everyone has equal ability to succeed life [61], satisfaction [51]. On the other hand, the PWE was associated negatively with the leisure ethic (Furnham, 1984), social loafing [50], the belief that people are responsible for their disadvantage [61], Workplace Ostracism [51]. People, who strongly approved of PWE, stressed negative individualistic explanations for unemployment [62]. From the above review it is apparent that most research on the PWE has concerned the relationships of PWE beliefs to work, values, habits, or satisfaction.

Turning to job involvement literature, some attempts have been made to examine PWE in conjunction with work attitudes [28] [58]. Findings from Edwards and Waters' (1980) [58] studies generally suggested that PWE was significantly and positively related to job involvement. As a dimension of PWE, internal locus of control was pointed out by a number of studies to be a significant positive relationship with job involvement [7] [58] [63] [64] [65] [66] [67]. In addition, PWE is defined as the extent to which one believes that hard work is important and that leisure and excess money are detrimental [57] [53] [19]. Individuals who possess a high PWE level consider the virtue of work as an end in itself. Similarly, job-involved persons perceive work as a very important aspect of their lives [68] [69]. Therefore, the ultimate determinant of job involvement should be, according to this logic, the value of one's work in life [27] [28]; hence, employees with high PWE should devote a significant amount of time and involvement to their job [29] [30].

Based on this discussion, this study puts forth the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2:* PWE will be positively associated with job involvement.

### **2.3. Interaction Effects of Confucian Dynamism and Protestant Work Ethic**

As already discussed, PWE is a personality trait that is said

to represent "the degree to which individuals place work at or near the center of their lives" [70]. From a psychological perspective, Furnham (1987) [54] has defined the PWE as "a dispositional variable characterized by a belief in the importance of hard work, rationality, and frugality which acts as a defense against sloth, sensuality and religious doubt". Thus, job involvement is consistent with the natural tendencies of high PWE employees. Individuals who subscribe to PWE are motivated to displaying job involvement for their own sake. Thus, high PWE is likely to enhance the positive effects of LCD on job involvement and reduce the negative effect of SCD on job involvement. Low PWE employees, on the other hand, are unlikely to be very much involved personally in their work, because the focus of these individuals is not in job. Low PWEs has less likely to enhance or reduce the effect of LCD or SCD on job involvement. Consequently, this leads this study to put forth the following hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 3a:* PWE will moderate the relationships between LCD and job involvement. Specifically, LCD will yield stronger positive relationships with job involvement for individuals who are high in PWE than for individuals who are low in PWE.

*Hypothesis 3b:* PWE will moderate the relationships between SCD and job involvement. Specifically, SCD will yield weaker negative relationships with job involvement for individuals who are high in PWE than for individuals who are low in PWE.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1. Sample and Procedures**

Data were collected via questionnaire surveys. Respondents comprised managers and operatives in Chinese SOEs randomly selected from various field in several provinces in China, such as Shanxi, Hebei, Beijing, Shanghai, Liaoning, and etc. We obtained permission from the selected organizations to distribute the survey packages to a group of their employees. The liaison persons at the respective organizations randomly selected a group of respondents to be surveyed. During the process of our investigation, respondents were informed of the objectives of our study and then they were asked to complete the questionnaire. We distributed a total of 500 survey packages. Of these, 304 usable questionnaires were returned, thus yielding a response rate of about 60.8%. Forty percent of the 304 respondents were women. Majority of respondents (80%) was employed in the manufacture and mining industry, while the remaining 20% were employed in the finance, construction, transport and information technology industries.

### **3.2. Instrumentation**

#### **3.2.1. Job Involvement**

Job involvement was measured by using seven items which were taken from Kanungo's Job Involvement Questionnaire [10] [17]. Kanungo (1982) [10] [17] reported this 10-item

scale to be a unidimensional variable yielding a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.81. The items were: “The most important things that happen to me involve my present job role”; “Most of my interests are centered around my job”; “I am very much involved in my job role”, and etc. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (I absolutely agree) to 5 (I absolutely do not agree). The Principal Factor Analysis carried out in the present study indicated a one-factor solution with the scale having a Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.86.

### 3.2.2. Confucian Dynamism

This study measured this variable with scales adapted from Robertson and Hoffman (2000) [71]. The scale included eight items and was originally developed by a group of Chinese researchers named The Chinese Culture Connection (1987) [72]. The first four items relate to Hofstede’s long-term orientation of Confucian Dynamism (LCD) while the remaining four items are the basis for short-term orientation scores. The scale was translated into Chinese and back translated independently for accuracy of measurement. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (I absolutely agree) to 5 (I

absolutely do not agree). Then four items in long-term orientation were added in scoring and four items in short-term orientation were reversed in scoring because greater agreement corresponded with greater short-term orientation.

### 3.2.3. Protestant Work Ethic

Protestant Work Ethic was measured by using 16 items which were taken from the Mirels-Garrett (1971) [45] Protestant Work Ethics Scale. The scale was translated into Chinese and back translated independently for accuracy of measurement. Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (I absolutely agree) to 5 (I absolutely do not agree). After deleting item 9, 13, and 15, which were reverse-scored, PWE had reasonable reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alpha = .77).

## 4. Analyses and Results

### 4.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents the inter-correlation matrix for the variables in this study.

*Table 1. Descriptive statistics, reliabilities, and correlations for study variables.*

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Gender	0.60	0.49	-							
2. Age	2.83	1.07	0.12*	-						
3. Education	1.46	0.63	0.06	-0.19**	-					
4. Position	2.37	0.74	-0.23**	-0.41**	0.21**	-				
5. Long-term dimension	15.07	2.62	-0.06	-0.03	0.09	0.01	(0.63)			
6. Short-term dimension	11.80	2.64	-0.00	-0.10	0.02	0.02	-0.14*	(0.51)		
7. PWE	52.75	7.68	0.08	-0.05	0.08	0.01	0.35**	-0.24**	(0.77)	
8. Job Involvement	23.37	5.13	0.04	0.05	0.05	0.05	0.26**	-0.37**	0.44**	(0.86)

Note: N = 304. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed. Alpha reliabilities are in parentheses and reported on the diagonal. Gender: female = 0, male = 1; age: 17–24 = 1, 25–34 = 2, 35–44 = 3,  $\geq 45$  = 4; education: diploma and lower = 1, undergraduate = 2, graduate = 3; position: upper = 1, middle = 2, low = 3.

### 4.2. Hypotheses Testing

#### 4.2.1. Tests of Main Effects of Confucian Dynamism and PWE on Job Involvement

Descriptive statistics, scale reliabilities, and correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1. As shown in the table, Hypothesis 1a, 1b and Hypothesis 2 were all supported. Specifically, LCD and PWE were significantly positively associated ( $p < .01$ , respectively) with job involvement ( $r = .26$ ,  $r = .44$ , respectively), and SCD was significantly negatively associated ( $p < .01$ ) with job involvement ( $r = -.37$ ).

#### 4.2.2. Tests of Interaction Effects of Confucian Dynamism and Protestant Work Ethic on Job Involvement

Hypothesis 3a predicted that PWE would moderate the relationships between LCD and job involvement. More specifically, it was predicted that LCD would yield stronger relationships with job involvement for individuals who were high rather than low in PWE. This study used hierarchical

regression analyses to test the postulated hypotheses in our study. As extant studies in job involvement suggest that job involvement might be derived from personal factors such as gender, education, tenure, age and years of service [7] [69], this study controlled for the possible effects of demographical variables in the first step of the regression. The main effects of Confucian Dynamism and PWE (step 2) were controlled in the two initial steps. The LCD-PWE interaction terms were then added to each regression equation (step 3). Because the hypotheses regarding these interactions were a priori, directional, and based upon theory, one-tailed tests were adopted for the moderated regression analyses [73]. That is, the hypotheses are supported only when a significant interaction indicated that the LCD –job involvement relationship was stronger for workers who endorse PWE highly than for those who endorse PWE lowly. One-tailed tests have been used in previous studies testing interaction effects [74] and have been recommended as an approach for combating the low power of moderated regression [75].

**Table 2.** Hierarchical Regression Results for Hypotheses 3a and 3b.

Step and variable	B		R <sup>2</sup>	R <sup>2</sup> change
	At step	Final		
Hypothesis 3a				
1			0.017	0.017
Gender	0.010	-0.011		
Age	0.007	0.060		
Education	0.016	0.009		
Position	-0.120	-0.046		
2			0.203***	0.186
Long-term dimension (A)	0.106	0.130*		
PWE(B)	0.390***	0.387***		
3			0.219***	0.016
A*B		0.131*		
Hypothesis 3b				
1			0.017	0.017
Age	0.010	-0.007		
Gender	0.007	0.048		
Education	0.016	0.032		
Position	-0.120	-0.036		
2			0.270***	0.253
Short-term dimension (A)	-0.287***	-0.292***		
PWE(B)	0.360***	0.372***		
3			0.272***	0.002
A*B		0.043		

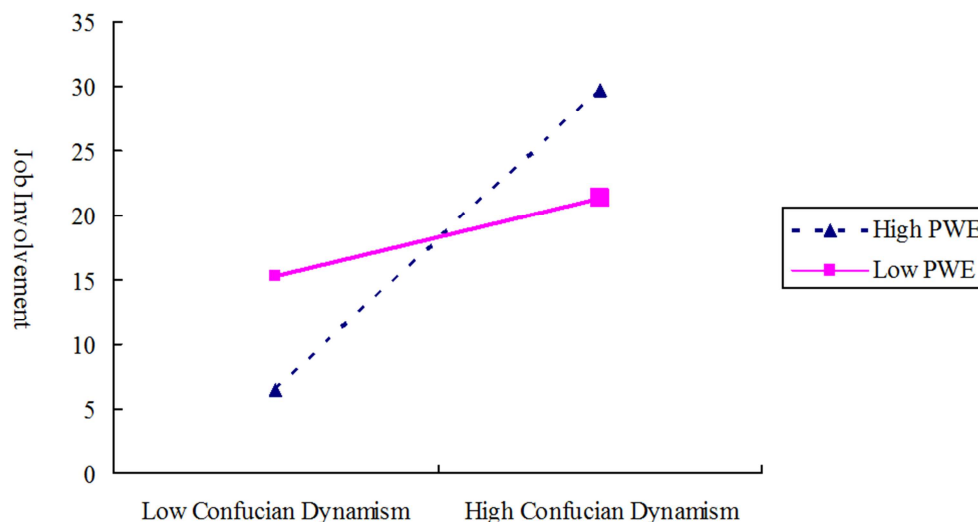
Note:  $N = 304$ . Beta ( $\beta$ ) is the standardized regression coefficient.

Increments for variables entered at the  $R^2$  change significance levels are based on  $F$  tests for that step.

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

As presented in Table 2, the addition of the LCD interaction term explained incremental variance in job involvement ( $R^2$  change = .016,  $p < .05$ ). Aiken and West's (1991) [76] method was used to examine the directional nature of this significant interactions (see Figure 1). Specifically, using the unstandardized regression coefficients, this study separately

plotted the relationships between LCD and job involvement for participants who scored one standard deviation or more above the mean and one standard deviation or more below the mean on the PWE measures. As can be seen in Table 2, the results of this study regression analysis supported hypothesis 3a.



**Figure 1.** Follow-up analyses for PWE as a moderator of the relationship between LCD and job involvement.

Figure 1 shows a strong positive relationship between LCD and job involvement for high PWE individuals ( $b = .30$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This same relationship, however, was very weak for individuals low in PWE ( $b = .08$ , n.s.). Hypothesis 3a thus received full support.

Similar analyses performed with SCD failed to find any significant interaction effects (see Table 2). The addition of

the SCD interaction term explained incremental variance in job involvement ( $R^2$  change = .002, n.s.). Thus, Hypothesis 3b was not supported.

## 5. Discussion

The purpose in conducting this study was to learn whether

in fact Confucian Dynamism and PWE affect job involvement. This objective was partly accomplished using a heterogeneous sample. The first significant aspect of our findings, then, is simply that Confucian Dynamism does impact job involvement. As Brown (1996) [11] suggested, that we are in need of further research to clarify how job involvement is related to other job attitudes, and thus this finding helps to address this gap. As the breakdown of the Confucian Dynamism construct into sub-categories is a viable extension of earlier work by some theorists [33] [38] [71], this study tested LCD and SCD main effect on job involvement respectively. LCD was expected to be positively associated with job involvement and SCD would be negatively associated with job involvement. The results indicate that individuals who endorse the value of LCD tend to display high job involvement. One possible explanation for this relationship is suggested by Wang (1981) [77], who describes the traditional Confucian work ethic as instilling beliefs that people should revere and enjoy their work. Reverence to one's work involves devoting one's effort to a task with diligent concentration and a lack of distraction until the job is completed. It may be that individuals with high levels of LCD experience greater job involvement because the Confucian ethic emphasizes employees can and should be satisfied with the work they perform. On the other hand, those who support the value of SCD are not easy to devote themselves into their work. This result could be interpreted as suggesting that these individuals would detract from getting on with the work and be more concerned with good manners than with performance [33] [42] [49].

Consistent with expectations, PWE was found to be a stronger predictor of job involvement in this study. Previous research involving PWE has primarily focused on the relationship between PWE and organizational outcomes like job satisfaction, equity beliefs, competitiveness, and the desire to work hard, organizational commitment, job satisfaction [31] [46]; job involvement has received scant attention, although Carmeli (2005) [28] has hypothesized that PWE might be positively related to job involvement. However, the result of Carmeli's study did not support a direct relationship between PWE and job involvement, but did show a connection through normative commitment. That is, normative commitment mediated the relationship between PWE and job involvement [28]. On the other hand, some theorists argued that employees with a strong work ethic level should devote a significant amount of time and involvement to their job [29] [30]. Additional support for this possibility is offered by Brown (1996) [11], who reported a strong corrected correlation between work ethic and job involvement. Moreover, Boas (1986) [78] indicated that the correlation between work involvement and PWE was 0.53.

The current analyses also examined whether PWE moderated the relationships between LCD and job involvement. Specifically, it was expected that LCD would yield stronger positive relationships with job involvement for high PWE rather than low PWE individuals. As expected, high PWEs tended to increase the positive effect of LCD on

job involvement than did low PWEs. According to Zhang et al., (2012) [49] suggestion that PWE are positively related to LCD, it is plausible that individuals who are proclivity to LCD may develop high involvement in his/her job more increasingly among high PWEs than among low-PWEs. Additionally, findings from a related stream of research in PWE suggest that individuals who endorsed PWE highly tend to being "work centrality" [56], academic job involvement [58] and work loyalty [59]. In line with such compelling evidence, therefore, it is plausible that people who endorse LCD highly may be more natural tendencies to be consistent with job involvement among high PWEs than among low-PWEs.

This study also examined whether PWE moderated the relationships between SCD and job involvement. Specifically, it was expected that short-term dimension would yield weaker negative relationships with job involvement for individuals who are high in PWE than for individuals who are low in PWE. Inconsistent with expected, the result shows that high and low PWEs don't differ in impacting on the relationship between SCD and job involvement. Give that the value of SCD endorses "personal steadiness and stability"; "protesting your face"; "respect for tradition"; and "reciprocation of greetings, favors and gifts"[40] and that the culture of Chinese SOEs, in which low workforce mobility compels employees to protect their "face", avoid direct confrontations, and maintain good relationships for the sake of survival [79], fosters their leaders to be favoritism, to give special care to those they are more familiar with, and perhaps to gain or give promotion relying on guanxi more than on performance, it is plausible that individuals, while displaying highly PWE score, are likely to develop natural resistances to job involvement. Therefore, high and low PWEs don't differ in impacting on the relationship between SCD and job involvement in Chinese SOEs. Future research will be conducted to investigate whether PWE moderated the relationships between SCD and job involvement in Chinese private enterprises.

## 6. Limitations of Study and Directions for Future Research

This study extends the literature on job involvement by examining the effect of PWE and Confucian Dynamism on influencing individuals' attitudes towards work in Chinese SOEs context. While the findings are interesting, several limitations are inherent. First, given the cross-sectional nature of our collected data, our results remain suggestive at best. It is difficult to unequivocally determine the direction of causality about the relationships among the variables in our study. While qualitative data obtained from respondents may help to mitigate this problem to some extent, future replications of our study should employ the longitudinal methodology in order to lend confidence to the ability to make causal inferences about the relationships among the variables. Hence, conclusions of our study are preliminary in nature and are in need of further corroboration and extension by future research.

Additionally, although the focus of our study was on the effects of PWE and Confucian Dynamism on job involvement to Chinese SOEs employees, it would be interesting to examine the generalizability of our findings to individuals in other Chinese organization, such as Chinese private enterprises, Chinese university and government organization. Hence, attempts to examine this topic in the future could be directed towards using samples from other organizations. Moreover, research is needed to further examine the moderating effects of PWE. Using the same reasoning that was the basis for the current interaction hypotheses, for instance, one might expect that the effects of Confucian Dynamism on other dependent variables could be moderated by PWE. PWE, for example, could moderate the effects of Confucian Dynamism on OCB, job performance, commitment. Future research should also examine potential moderating effects of personality characteristics other than PWE.

Despite the inherent limitations, the results of this study are instructive in that they help the managers in Chinese SOEs take the results into consideration in the design of HRM packages. Given that job involvement potentially has important effects on organizational functioning, this study has important practical implications. First, the results suggest that organizations could increase job involvement by screening out job applicants who score poorly on PWE measures. Second, organizations may be able to encourage the individuals who are in job involvement by improving their perspective of LCD. Perhaps even more interestingly, the interaction effects suggest that attempts to influence the extent of job involvement by improving LCD are most likely to be effective among high PWEs employees.

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