



A model of task adaptation, relational integration, and ethical alignment for upward management

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Abstract

Upward management functions as an essential workplace behavior which directly impacts both employee career advancement and organizational decision quality. The relevant research stems from Western organizational environments which focus on rational communication methods and influence strategies and role-based working methods. Existing theories base their explanations on contract-based rationality and low power distance which makes them unsuitable for organizations that follow Chinese relational ethics and hierarchical organizational structures. The practical application of upward management in Chinese enterprises has developed into a practice known as "currying favor with superiors" and "relational maneuvering" which creates behavioral problems and ethical conflicts and reduces organizational performance. The research employs a conceptual method which combines Western organizational behavior theories with Chinese cultural theories through Fei Xiaotong's "differential mode of association" to build a new framework for studying upward management in Chinese organizations. The study identifies upward management in Chinese companies through three interconnected dimensions which extend beyond basic task-oriented and relationship-focused behaviors to include "task adaptation" and "relational integration" and "ethical alignment" that operate within specific cultural frameworks. The theoretical framework developed in this study examines cultural elements which previous research has overlooked while showing Western theories' boundaries in Chinese organizations and delivering a culturally appropriate framework for future empirical studies and management practice evaluation.

Keywords: Upward management, differential mode of association, Chinese enterprises, cultural embeddedness, paternalistic leadership

Introduction

With the increasing dynamism of organizational environments and the complexity of decision-making, the traditional one-way management model of "superiors directing subordinates and subordinates obeying superiors" in bureaucratic systems can hardly meet the modern organizational demands for information integration and rapid feedback. Organizational behavior research has gradually pointed out that subordinates are not passive executors but can actively communicate, influence, and collaborate to assist superiors in improving decision quality, reducing risks, and thereby enhancing overall organizational effectiveness (Kotter, 1982; Drucker, 1985) [6, 18]. In this context, upward management has gradually transformed from a marginal concept to a key competency affecting individual career development and organizational performance.

Existing empirical studies have shown that appropriate upward management behaviors are significantly positively correlated with employees' promotion speed, salary growth, performance evaluations, and career satisfaction (Ferris *et al.*, 2005; Wayne & Kacmar, 2019) [10, 26]. The ability of subordinates to communicate effectively with their superiors and deliver feedback impacts both decision quality of superiors and the operational success of cross-hierarchical teamwork at organizational level (Wayne *et al.*, 1997) [24]. However, it is noteworthy that these studies are mostly based on Western organizational contexts, implying cultural premises of low power distance, role equality, and rational persuasion, which may not fully explain the interactive phenomena in Chinese enterprises characterized

by the interweaving of high relational orientation and hierarchical ethics.

Chinese society shows that organizational relationships develop through the combination of Confucian moral principles and personal relationships and formal leadership systems. The "differential mode of association" theory by Fei Xiaotong (2008) [11] demonstrates that Chinese social conduct emerges from relationship-based behavioral rules instead of following formal regulations. Cheng Bor-Shyh (2005) establishes through his paternalistic leadership theory that Chinese leaders display three fundamental leadership dimensions which include authoritarianism and benevolence and moral integrity. The cultural framework of Chinese enterprises enables upward management to function as a work-related influence behavior which also determines social status and ethical decision-making and helps build long-term trust.

However, in practice, there are two extremes in the understanding of upward management: on the one hand, some employees equate it with relational opportunism and currying favor with superiors, leading to the marginalization of professional competence; on the other hand, some employees mechanically apply Western rational communication models, ignoring the emphasis on hierarchical order and face ethics in Chinese organizations, which instead results in interactive failure. These phenomena indicate that without a theoretical understanding of cultural embeddedness, upward management can hardly exert positive functions and may even evolve into a negative source of organizational politics.

Based on this, this paper raises the following core questions: How should upward management be reunderstood in the

Chinese cultural context? How does the differential mode of association shape the behavioral boundaries and mechanism of upward management? What are the applicable limitations of existing Western theories in Chinese contexts, and how should theoretical revisions be made? To address these questions, this study adopts a conceptual research method, integrates Western organizational behavior theories with Chinese indigenous cultural theories, and attempts to reconstruct the theoretical framework of upward management in Chinese contexts from the perspective of the differential mode of association.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Limitations of Upward Management

Research on upward management can be traced back to Kotter's (1982) ^[18] qualitative study on the behavior of senior managers, which pointed out that one of the key competencies of high-performance managers is the ability to effectively "manage their superiors" by integrating information and providing early warnings to assist superiors in achieving goals. Drucker (1985) ^[6] further emphasized that the core of upward management lies not in pleasing authority but in establishing a complementary cooperative relationship, enabling superiors and subordinates to form a functionally complementary collaborative unit.

With the development of organizational politics research, scholars have begun to operationalize upward management as a series of observable influence tactics. Ferris *et al.* (2005) ^[10] proposed strategic dimensions such as rational persuasion, relationship building, impression management, and resource exchange, enabling quantitative research on upward management. Subsequent studies have further indicated that upward management is not a single behavior but a highly contextualized and strategically selective interactive process (Wayne *et al.*, 1997) ^[24].

The theoretical construction of upward management is rooted in classic theories of organizational behavior, sociology, and psychology. The three main theoretical bases for upward management include Social Exchange Theory and Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory and Resource Dependence Theory which together explain human conduct and organizational processes and their limits. Social Exchange Theory serves as the fundamental theoretical basis for upward management studies according to Blau (1964) ^[3]. The organizational theory asserts that workplace relationships operate through reciprocal exchange systems which form the basis of all human interactions. Social exchanges operate differently from economic transactions because they lack clear terms and develop through mutual exchanges which unfold over extended periods. The practice of upward management requires employees to deliver exceptional work performance and volunteer for extra duties and provide emotional backing to gain trust from their bosses who then advance their careers and allocate resources thus creating a positive exchange pattern according to Wayne *et al.* (1997) ^[24].

Blau (1964) ^[3] pointed out in *Exchange and Power in Social Life* that the core of social exchange lies in "the accumulation of trust." The behaviors of subordinates who manage their superiors through relational investment lead to the development of lasting trust capital which results in future resource support. The research findings from later studies have validated this perspective. Farh *et al.* (2007) ^[7] studied Chinese companies to show that employees who

help their bosses with work problems and give emotional support through social exchange behaviors build trust which leads to better promotion opportunities and access to resources. The research by Farh *et al.* (2008) ^[8] demonstrated that Social Exchange Theory manifests differently within Chinese settings through "renqing (human favor) exchange" which results when subordinates perform personal tasks for their superiors and join their non-work social activities. The exchange system operates most strongly in societies which maintain high levels of power distance between different social classes.

Leader–Member Exchange (LMX) Theory provides an important perspective for understanding the differences in upward management effectiveness (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) ^[12]. The theory states that workplace relationships between managers and their employees start from equal footing but develop into different exchange patterns through their work interactions and their mutual trust and role understanding. The foundation of high-quality LMX relationships exists in mutual trust and respect and shared responsibility which enables subordinates to gain extra information and support and career growth possibilities but low-quality LMX relationships restrict themselves to basic work duties with minimal interaction flexibility and resource sharing potential. In the context of upward management, the quality of LMX relationships directly affects subordinates' willingness to adopt influence behaviors and their strategic choices. When the superior-subordinate relationship is based on a stable foundation of trust, subordinates are more likely to expect that their suggestions or influence behaviors will be regarded as organizational-oriented rather than personal calculations, thus being more willing to actively participate in upward communication (Wayne *et al.*, 1997) ^[24]. The way subordinates interpret their actions depends on their relationship quality with their leaders because what seems normal to a high-quality LMX relationship might seem like authority testing to someone with a low-quality LMX relationship.

Research in Chinese contexts has further shown that the formation and operation of LMX relationships are deeply influenced by relational ethics and role expectations in culture. Cheng (2005) pointed out that in Chinese enterprises, the superior-subordinate relationship not only covers work interactions but also often extends to emotional and ethical levels, making LMX relationships more "differential" in nature. The study shows that researchers need to use relational positioning and ethical analysis to interpret LMX operations in Chinese settings because traditional methods based on exchange frequency and resource acquisition do not capture the full picture.

Resource Dependence Theory explains the structural motivations of upward management behaviors from the perspective of power and dependence relationships (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978) ^[21]. The theory explains that organizational power emerges from resource control rather than positional authority. Since promotion opportunities, key information, and task assignments are mostly controlled by superiors, subordinates are often in a resource-dependent position and must reduce asymmetry through strategic interactions.

The framework shows upward management as a method which employees use to boost their value as essential team members and critical information sources. Subordinates who

actively share feedback and problem warnings and performance data become vital resources for their leaders which decreases their need to follow formal institutional protocols (Kotter, 1982; Ferris *et al.*, 2005)^[10, 18].

Research on Chinese organizations has shown that resource dependence relationships are often embedded in relational networks rather than operating solely through formal institutions. Redding (1990)^[22] pointed out that resource allocation in Chinese enterprises often combines formal power and informal relationships, making upward management behaviors possess both institutional and relational characteristics. The study shows that Chinese upward management success depends on both resource system performance and management ability to follow ethical and social norms. Upward management research has incorporated various supplementary theories alongside the three main core theories. The Theory of Planned Behavior serves as a model to understand how people choose their actions when they work their way up in management. Ajzen (1991)^[1] established that three factors determine when employees choose to manage their superiors: their personal attitude towards it and their awareness of social expectations and their sense of control. Research by Zhang *et al.* (2022)^[28] reveals that Chinese employees base their subjective norms on both hierarchical and relational norms when deciding to manage their superiors. Social Cognitive Theory studies how self-efficacy shapes the methods people use to manage their way up through the ranks. According to Bandura (1986)^[2] research subordinates with high self-efficacy will show greater confidence in their ability to direct their superiors which leads them to use proactive upward management strategies (Zhang *et al.*, 2021)^[29]. The Ethical Theory functions as a framework which demonstrates how to establish moral boundaries within the practice of upward management. It is found that Chinese people base their ethical decisions on a mixture of loyalty and face and role obligations instead of following formal rules (Huang, 2019)^[15]. The evaluation method for upward management ethics functions as a built-in system which determines if the behavior matches the established relationship framework. The view presented here addresses the gap in Western research because Western studies focus on individual motivation and consequentialism when studying ethical issues yet Chinese upward management requires ethics as a fundamental element for understanding (citation needed).

Existing research indicates that occurrence of upward management behaviors results from multiple elements which include personal characteristics and organizational settings and relationship quality (Ferris *et al.*, 2005; Wayne *et al.*, 1997)^[10, 24]. Recent studies show that upward management functions as a complex social practice which depends on cultural elements and relationship frameworks instead of being a basic strategic decision.

The individual level values political skill as a fundamental ability which determines how well upward management functions. Ferris *et al.* (2005)^[10] found that people who develop political skills tend to understand others better and interpret their needs and situations which helps them to influence others without resistance thus making their upward management behaviors more acceptable. Emotional intelligence enables employees to sustain good interaction quality during high-power-distance exchanges because they use this ability to express opposing views which maintains

emotional comfort and rational explanation (Jordan & Troth, 2021)^[17]. Organizations need to understand that power distance together with cultural value orientation create essential limits for how upward management operates. Hofstede (2010)^[13] found that people in high-power-distance cultures accept authority differences yet they need to use subtle and careful methods when trying to influence their superiors. The GLOBE study revealed that various cultural groups maintain distinct perspectives about when it is suitable to speak up and when it is okay to challenge authority figures (House *et al.*, 2004)^[14]. These findings indicate that the effectiveness of upward management strategies must be understood in specific cultural contexts.

Existing upward management research operates mainly through three theoretical frameworks which include Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964)^[3] and Leader-Member Exchange Theory (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995)^[12] and Resource Dependence Theory (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978)^[21]. These theories together establish that employees exchange their resources and assistance to gain trust and resource feedback from their managers which results in better organizational standing. The existing theories base their analysis on the premise that exchange relationships involve defined role boundaries and rational decision-making processes yet they fail to consider how "renqing," "face," and ethical obligations create unequal relationships within Chinese organizations.

Research on cross-cultural studies demonstrates that cultures which emphasize power distance and focus on relationships create distinct effects on how people accept and how well upward management approaches work (Hofstede, 2010)^[13]. Chinese society views direct confrontation with superiors and the use of strategic manipulation as actions that breach ethical standards instead of being constructive recommendations (Farh *et al.*, 2007)^[7]. However, existing research mostly regards culture as a contextual variable and does not incorporate it into the core of the theory, leading to fragmented explanations of upward management behaviors in Chinese contexts. Therefore, it is necessary to introduce a theoretical perspective that can reflect the relational structure of Chinese society to conduct localized reconstruction of upward management. The "differential mode of association" serves as the fundamental framework for this study to explore how Chinese managers define behavioral limits and moral principles in their leadership approach toward superiors.

The Model of Task Adaptation, Relational Integration, and Ethical Alignment

Fei Xiaotong's (2008)^[11] "differential mode of association" theory reveals the relational operation logic of Chinese groups centered on the self and linked by renqing. In Chinese organizations, this pattern evolves into a "workplace differential mode of association" centered on supervisors, who classify subordinates into "in-group members" and "out-group members" based on their loyalty performance, personal friendships, and ethical alignment (Huang, 2019)^[15]. This grouping directly affects the strategic choices and effectiveness of upward management: "in-group members" can adopt more intimate strategies (such as proactively caring about superiors' lives and expressing loyalty), while "out-group members" who excessively adopt such strategies will be regarded as

"overstepping boundaries" and arouse supervisors' resentment (Clarke, Alshenaifi, & Garavan, 2019) ^[5]. In addition, in-group members often have access to more informal resources, while out-group members rely more on formal rules to obtain resources (Huang, 2019) ^[15].

If the differential mode of association is introduced into organizational analysis, it can be found that although Chinese enterprises operate on modern bureaucratic systems on the surface, the actual interaction logic is still deeply influenced by relational structures. When taking actions, organizational members often consider both formal role responsibilities and informal relational ethics, forming an operational model of "institution-relational dual track." This phenomenon is particularly obvious in upward management behaviors, because upward management itself involves interactions across power boundaries. Without appropriate relational positioning, it is likely to be interpreted as overstepping authority, offending, or political maneuvering. Therefore, the differential mode of association is not only a description of social structure but also an implicit rule system for behavioral judgment and ethical evaluation. The system establishes rules about who can speak to whom and which social positions authorize certain influence methods to be acceptable thus determining the success of management actions directed at higher levels.

Mainstream upward management theories are mostly based on role rationality and exchange logic, assuming that superior-subordinate interactions mainly depend on the exchange efficiency of work-related resources. The differential mode of association shows that exchange activities extend beyond basic operational actions because they establish ethical standards which people uphold through their existing social relationships. The results of influence behaviors tend to hinge more on "the actor's position in the relational network" instead of the value created by a single interaction. Western theories view upward influence through rational persuasion as a professional duty but Chinese organizations see this behavior as a challenge to authority when trust between parties remains insufficient. This difference indicates that simply transplanting Western upward management strategies will face significant cultural mismatch problems if the relational hierarchy and ethical expectations shaped by the differential mode of association are ignored.

Cheng Bor-Shyh's (2005) three-dimensional theory of paternalistic leadership holds that the leadership style of Chinese supervisors consists of three dimensions: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and moral leadership, which together shape the framework of subordinates' upward management behaviors. Under authoritarian leadership, subordinates' upward management must be based on obedience, avoiding open challenges to authority, and preferring indirect strategies such as private suggestions or written reports (Cheng *et al.*, 2004) ^[4]; under benevolent leadership, subordinates' upward management tends to be emotional reciprocation, maintaining good relationships by expressing gratitude and taking the initiative to assume additional tasks (Farh *et al.*, 2007) ^[7]; under moral leadership, subordinates' upward management tends to be value identification, gaining recognition by proactively imitating supervisors' behaviors and supporting supervisors' moral decisions (Cheng, 2005). Cheng *et al.*'s (2004) ^[4] cross-cultural research confirmed that the characteristics of paternalistic leadership have a

significantly greater impact on upward management in Chinese enterprises than in Western enterprises.

Yang Zhongfang's (2015) ^[27] theory of renqing and face reveals the core interaction logic of Chinese upward management. "Renqing" refers to the exchange of emotions and resources based on the principle of reciprocity, and "face" refers to the respect and recognition an individual obtains from others in social interactions (Lu, 2015). In Chinese organizations, upward management is essentially an interactive process of "giving face" and "repaying renqing": subordinates must maintain superiors' face in public and avoid open questioning; accumulate "renqing" by proactively undertaking tasks not explicitly stated by superiors, and can "repay renqing" when needed to obtain superiors' resource support (Hwang, 1987) ^[16]. This kind of renqing exchange is long-term and ambiguous, not an immediate equivalent exchange but a reciprocal expectation based on long-term relationships (Blau, 1964) ^[3].

The Model of Upward Management in Chinese Contexts

It is argued that upward management in Chinese contexts should not be simplified as a single influence strategy by the aforementioned analysis. However, it should be understood as a multi-dimensional and culturally embedded behavioral system. We propose a three-dimensional theoretical model of "task adaptation–relational integration–ethical alignment" to reconstruct the operational logic of upward management in Chinese organizations. This model holds three interdependent core dimensions: (1) task adaptation, (2) relational integration, and (3) ethical alignment, in which it presents a hierarchical dependent relationship of "foundation–key–guarantee". First, task adaptation is the foundation to ensure the instrumental value of upward management. Second, relational integration is the key to providing communication channels for task collaboration. Finally ethical alignment is the guarantee to provide boundary constraints for the interaction process. The interaction between the three dimensions is manifested as following: task adaptation provides a value foundation for relational integration, relational integration provides a communication channel for task adaptation, and ethical alignment provides boundary constraints for both, together forming the complete structure of upward management in Chinese enterprises.

Task adaptation refers to whether subordinates can take professional competence and task contributions as the source of legitimacy for influence behaviors in upward interactions. Under the differential mode of association, professional competence is a "minimum threshold of legitimacy." The way Western theories focus on role responsibilities and performance orientation matches this dimension yet Chinese settings use it for two purposes to both show performance and build a "trustworthy" image. Under the differential mode of association, professional competence is a "minimum threshold of legitimacy." The way Western theories focus on role responsibilities and performance orientation matches this dimension yet Chinese settings use it for two purposes to both show performance and build a "trustworthy" image. Relational integration refers to whether subordinates can gradually establish interactive relationships based on trust and emotional connection beyond formal role interactions. In Chinese organizations, relationships are not a negation of institutions but an important lubricating mechanism for institutional

operation. Through relational integration, subordinates can expand the interaction space without violating hierarchical order, making upward communication more flexible. The differential mode of association sets specific limits on how relational integration can be applied. The practice of manipulating relationships before their natural time point leads to disorganized conduct which destroys trust between people. The concept of relational integration extends beyond basic quantity because it requires behavioral skills that adapt to different relationship contexts.

We identify ethical alignment as the main element which determines Chinese management practices at higher organizational levels. The concept of upward management behavior alignment with Chinese cultural ethical standards exists through three core elements which include *fenji* (interpersonal boundaries) and loyalty and hierarchical order. Chinese ethical alignment functions as an internal standard which determines behavior acceptance instead of following Western models which see ethics as external limitations. Under the differential mode of association, ethics not only regulate behaviors but also define the meaning of behaviors. The same influence strategy, if interpreted as "sharing worries for superiors," is highly legitimate; if interpreted as "taking credit or overstepping authority," it may arouse resentment. The success or failure of Chinese upward management depends on the moral interpretation of behavioral motivations rather than the behaviors themselves according to this dimension.

Discussion

From the perspective of the differential mode of association, this paper is able to propose three revisions to existing upward management theories. First, this paper points out that the effectiveness of influence behaviors does not depend solely on strategic choices but is deeply influenced by relational positions and ethical interpretations. Second, this paper supplements the limitation of Social Exchange Theory in insufficient consideration of long-term relationships and moral obligations. Third, this paper argues that the quality of Leader–Member Exchange relationships in Chinese contexts needs to add the mediating mechanism of ethical alignment to fully explain the differential effects of upward management behaviors.

Taking the differential mode of association as the core analytical perspective, this paper attempts to conduct a culturally embedded reconstruction of existing upward management theories. Compared with mainstream Western research that regards upward management as a set of operable and selectable influence strategies, this study points out that in the context of Chinese organizations, upward management is closer to a behavioral system intertwined with "relationships–ethics–tasks," and its operational logic is profoundly shaped by cultural structures. First, this paper points out that upward management is not a value-neutral management technology but a social action highly dependent on situational interpretation. Under the differential mode of association, whether a behavior is considered legitimate depends on whether it conforms to the existing relational positioning and ethical expectations. This view supplements the overly instrumental tendency of Western theories towards "influence effectiveness," explaining why the same upward management strategy may produce completely different results in different cultural contexts.

Second, this paper proposes a three-dimensional model of "task adaptation–relational integration–ethical alignment," revealing the internal structure of Chinese upward management behaviors. Compared with single-dimensional models, the three-dimensional model can better explain the dynamic adjustment process of upward management behaviors: task adaptation provides professional legitimacy, relational integration regulates interaction boundaries, and ethical alignment serves as the ultimate criterion of meaning. None of the three is dispensable, and their relative importance will change with relational positions and organizational contexts. Furthermore, through the introduction of the differential mode of association, this paper also responds to the long-standing issue of theoretical localization in indigenous organizational behavior research. Compared with only regarding culture as a moderating variable, this study places cultural structures at the core of the theory, enabling the explanation of upward management to go beyond superficial differences and deeply illustrate the normative foundation and ethical logic behind behaviors.

Conclusions

The theoretical contributions of this paper are mainly reflected in the following three aspects. The first part of this study broadens the cultural scope through which upward management theories can be applied. Research studies up to this point have treated rational persuasion and exchange relationships as universal concepts but this study shows that Chinese settings require influence behaviors to align with ethical frameworks which result from their relational orientation and power distance and differential mode of association. Second, this paper proposes a three-dimensional upward management model with indigenous theoretical implications, supplementing the insufficiency of existing research on the internal structure of upward management. The model operates independently from strategy categorization because it concentrates on behavioral legitimacy and ethical interpretation which establishes a functional base for future empirical studies. Third, this paper demonstrates how to transform classic indigenous social theories (differential mode of association) into organizational behavior analysis tools, responding to the long-standing problem of "theoretical transplantation rather than theoretical generation" in the field of management. The method advances Chinese management research through its development from basic observation to complete theoretical frameworks.

At the practical level, this paper has multiple implications for the management and talent development of Chinese enterprises. For organizations, upward management should not be simplified as political behavior or personal skills but should be regarded as a cultivable relational governance competence. When promoting an upward communication culture, enterprises should attach equal importance to professional competence, relational trust, and ethical boundaries, avoiding taking performance orientation or relationship orientation as the sole evaluation criterion. For supervisors, understanding the cultural logic of upward management helps distinguish constructive suggestions from disorderly behaviors. If supervisors can clearly define interaction boundaries and respond to subordinates' professional efforts with moral integrity and benevolence, it will help form a positive cycle of superior-subordinate interaction. For employees, this paper points out that

effective upward management is not about currying favor with authority but based on long-term professional accumulation and ethical awareness. Excessively instrumental relational manipulation may yield short-term benefits but will damage the foundation of trust and career development in the long run.

As a conceptual paper, this study mainly proposes an analytical framework through theoretical integration and cultural interpretation, and has not conducted empirical testing. Future research can verify the relative influence of each dimension of the three-dimensional model and their interaction through quantitative research or qualitative interviews. In addition, there are still differences in institutional environments and cultural practices among different Chinese societies (such as Taiwan, Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Southeast Asian Chinese communities). Future research can further compare the specific manifestations of the model in different contexts to improve the external validity of the theory.

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