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## Abstract

This study explores the factors influencing the dissent behavior and perceptions of workplace freedom of speech among young Chinese professionals who are intra-urban migrants. It attempts to grasp the role of the Chinese household registration system, referred to as *Hukou*, in migrants' professional and everyday life. Fourteen interviews were conducted with young, well-educated intra-urban migrants who possessed middle-income jobs, but did not possess a Shanghai registration (Hukou). This study reveals that traditional Confucian values are significant in shaping Chinese migrant workers' expressions of dissent and perceptions of workplace freedom of speech. Findings from this study demonstrate that further attention to professional migrants is warranted to understand their unique position in Chinese society. Internal migration is a global phenomenon particularly prominent in developing countries. This study is an attempt to shed light on internal migrant's social and organizational life in developing economies.

*Keywords:* Organizational Dissent, Workplace Freedom of Speech, Intra-urban Migrants, Hukou, China

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## An Exploration of Organization Dissent and Workplace Freedom of Speech among Young Professional Intra-Urban Migrants in Shanghai

A considerable body of research has explored organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech. In these studies, researchers have shown how an employee's tendency to express disagreement (dissent) is positively associated with the workplace's democratic climate (Croucher, Parrott, Zeng, & Gomez, 2014; Garner, 2007; Kassing, 2000b, 2006). One limitation of current research is that few studies have explored organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech in non- U.S. settings. A few studies in other contexts have concluded that various factors, such as national culture and socioeconomics are significant in shaping individual's organizational behaviors and thus results generated from U.S. samples cannot be generalized to other countries (Croucher et al., 2014; Gorden, Holmberg, & Heisey, 1994; Kang & Berger, 2010). To understand dissent and workplace freedom of speech in a global context, scholars have called for further studies conducted in non-U.S. cultures. Thus, this study attempts to answer this call by exploring dissent and workplace freedom of speech in China, a place where people adhered to different values and beliefs. More specifically, this study focuses on a group that is economically and socio-politically unique in China: intra-urban migrant workers.

An intra-urban migrant is defined as a resident originally from rural areas moving to urban areas with the hope of obtaining better employment and living standards (Cui, Rockett, Yang, & Cao, 2012). One of the results of globalization throughout developing countries, and over the last two decades, has been intra-urban migration on a massive scale (Kumar & Li, 2007). China's economic reforms have triggered the largest labor migration in human history, with more than 270 million rural-origin migrants living and working in urban areas;

they contribute to China's economic miracle (Looney & Rithmire, 2016). Due to their enormous socio-economic impact, Chinese intra-urban migrants have received increasing scholarly attention (Bao, Bodvarsson, Hou, & Zhao, 2011; Cai, 2003; Chan, 2010; Li, 2016; Wong, Chang, & He, 2007). Most studies have focused on public policies and public administration (Ngok, 2012); yet the organizational behaviors of migrants have received less attention. Working life is essential to migrants, as a primary goal in urban areas is material gain (Shi, Zheng, Sun, & Jia, 2013). Therefore, the aim of this study is to shed light on the organizational life of Chinese intra-urban migrants.

In Chinese urban areas, locals (i.e., those who are not migrants and possess a local Hukou registration) often hold negative stereotypes of migrants (Wong et al., 2007). Moreover, rural-urban migrants are discriminated against on an institutional basis. According to the Chinese household registration system, Hukou, residents without local citizenship are restricted from receiving many benefits, such as free compulsory education, subsidized medical services, and right to purchase real estate (Chan, 2010). Both social and institutional discrimination has significant negative impacts on migrants' mental well-being and life satisfaction (Ming & Wang, 2009), which might make migrants more vulnerable in organizations and alter their organizational behaviors. This study explores how the status of rural-urban migrants is linked to their dissent choices and perception of workplace freedom of speech.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Organizational Dissent***

Employees regularly confront dissatisfying conditions and readily express their disagreement in organizations (Kassing 2008; Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell,

2012). Organizational dissent denotes the expression of disagreement or opinions opposed to organizational policies and operations (Kassing, 1998). Dissent as a form of organizational communication has received much scholarly attention. Historically, dissent research has fallen into two categories: the nature of dissent messages and the audiences of dissent. In regard to the former, Graham (1986) suggested dissent expression is either to address personal-advantage issues (e.g., individual's working hours or salaries) or issues of principle (e.g., ethical business conducts). Scholars focused on the recipients of dissent classified dissent messages into internal and external organizational audiences: boat-rocking and whistle-blowing (Sprague & Ruud, 1988; Stewart, 1980). While integrating these dualistic classifications of dissent, Kassing (1997, 1998) developed a model of organizational dissent that consists of three parts: upward dissent to the management, latent dissent to colleagues of a similar rank, and displaced dissent to family members or friends who are not part of the organization. As expressing contradictory opinions in organizations can be rewarded, ignored or punished (Graham, 1986; Kassing, 2002), employees take great caution when contemplating dissent. Employee's dissent behavior is influenced by numerous organizational, relational, and personal factors. Employees who hold management positions (Kassing & Armstrong, 2002; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999), are more argumentative (Croucher, et al., 2009; Kassing & Avtgis, 1999), have high levels of organizational-based esteem (Payne, 2007), have high levels of work engagement, perceive high quality subordinate-supervisor relationships (Kassing, 2000a), report an internal locus of control orientation (Kassing & Avtgis, 2001), and tend to express more upward dissent and less latent dissent. Generally, employees who have longer job tenure express dissent more frequently (Kassing 2006, 2008); employees who suffer from burnout syndrome (i.e.,

emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and feelings of failure) rarely express voice in organizations (Avtgis, Thomas-Maddox, Taylor, & Patterson, 2007). Thus, the amount of dissent expression can be seen as an indication of one's organizational status and job satisfaction level.

While these studies have approached dissent from a quantitative perspective with an emphasis on dissenters, Garner (2013) pointed out dissent studies should also pay attention to the interaction between dissenters, recipients, and audiences, because dissent is essentially a co-constructed event. Thus, this study aims to complement previous work by employing a qualitative approach to the study of dissent, to grasp how employees understand and enact dissent strategies.

### ***Workplace Freedom of Speech***

Workplace freedom of speech refers to the organizational climate in which employees are free from retaliation when expressing opinions that are critical (Kassing, 2000b). Employees tend to become more productive, satisfied, and committed to an organization when perceiving a higher level of workplace freedom of speech. Due to the positive link between democratic workplace climate and organization performance, modern organizations are more willing to invite employees to voice their opinions, including criticism and disagreement (Kassing, 2006). As workplace freedom of speech has a direct impact on an organization's tolerance for different opinions, a number of studies of the link between workplace freedom of speech and organizational dissent found that higher levels of perceived workplace freedom of speech lead to more articulated dissent and less latent dissent (Garner, 2007; Kassing 2000b, 2006). However, one major limitation of such studies of organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech is that most have taken place in

the U.S. (Croucher et al., 2014; Kassing & Avtgs, 1999). Research has demonstrated results from studies conducted in U.S. settings cannot be generalized to non-U.S. samples.

Croucher et al. (2009) reported that Americans tend to express more dissent than Indians.

Furthermore, Kang and Berger (2010) found Korean public relations practitioners favor risky tactics such as sabotaging and leaking information out more than Americans regarding unethical organizational conducts. A cross-cultural study in five European countries further demonstrated the relationship between organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech varies greatly across different cultures (Croucher et al., 2014). Thus, scholars have called for exploring organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech in different cultures (Croucher et al., 2009, 2014). This study aims to explore employees' expression of disagreements and perceptions of workplace freedom in Chinese organizations.

### ***Work Relationship in China***

The work relationship in Chinese organizations is distinctive and often seen to be the most important determinant in working lives (Lu & Alon, 2004). Chen, Tsui, and Farh (2002) found it is more important for Chinese subordinates to be loyal to supervisors (the person) rather than the organization (the system). Many employees feel they are obliged to be dedicated and faithful to their supervisors. Additionally, the leadership in the Chinese organizational context has a unique meaning. The hierarchical relationship is influenced by factors such as age, education, title, thrift, and moderation (Chatterjee, 2001). Leaders in work organizations are worshiped and have strong personal power. They are father figures who are expected to take control not only of work-related issues, but also personal issues. Few would consult their subordinates and involve them in important decision-making processes (Martinsons & Westwood, 1997).

Although organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech have not been directly examined in the Chinese context, a number of scholars have explored employee voice behaviors and organizational silence in Chinese organizations. Chinese typically have high respect for power and status; and thus employees in China are more reluctant to express their opinions than individuals in Western countries (Zhang, Huai, & Xie, 2015). Xu, Van de Vliert, and Van der Vegt (2005) suggested organizations in China need to take extra efforts to solicit employee opinions, due to the large power distance between leaders and subordinates. Furthermore, research has demonstrated individuals in more disadvantaged economic situations tend to express less dissent of fear of losing a job. For example, in a comparative study of five European countries, Spain, with the highest unemployment rate, scored significantly lower than all other countries on organizational dissent (Croucher et al., 2014). In addition to economic influence, and under the pressure of maintaining a harmonious working environment in Chinese organizations, intra-urban migrants may withhold contradictory opinions as dissent expression is often associated with retaliation. That is, migrants who are more vulnerable in the job market and more concerned about their job security are less likely to enact risky organizational behavior-dissent. This in turn, may influence migrants' perception of workplace freedom of speech. Hence, we pose the following research questions:

*RQ1:* How do young professional migrant workers perceive workplace freedom of speech?

*RQ2:* What strategies do young professional migrant workers use to dissent?

*Intra-urban Migrant and the Hukou System*



Hukou, the household registration system, was first launched in 1958 with the aim of regulating internal migration (Zhang & Treiman, 2013). Chinese citizens are required to register in one residence/place and inherit their Hukou status from their parents either as agricultural (rural) or non-agricultural (urban). Until the late 1980s, a permission letter was required from the government for persons who wished to cross provincial borders within China (Zhang & Treiman, 2013). Since adopting free market economic policies in 1978, and opening up the economy to the world, the labor needs of rapid economic development meant urban areas in China began to face a severe labor shortage (Chan, 2010). In response, the Hukou system restriction was loosened, allowing large number of rural citizens to move to urban areas. More than 10 million rural residents annually migrated to urban areas, and China's population, which formerly was primarily rural, by 2014 exceeded 749 million, and accounted for 54.8% of the total population in China (Andreas & Zhan, 2016). Under the Hukou system, while rural migrants may live and work in urban areas, they are restricted, meaning they do not have access to public schools, medical services, subsidized housing and food, and unemployment and retirement benefits (Chan, 2010; Zhang & Treiman, 2013). This system even impacts their children, as the children of rural migrants—lacking an urban Hukou—are denied free public education in urban areas (Mackenzie, 2002). Consequently, many migrant parents must either pay to send their children to private schools—if they have enough money—or as is more likely, send them to sub-standard schools in rural areas that may lack qualified teachers, or sufficient resources and teaching materials. Moreover, Wong et al. (2007) found that seven percent of migrant parents, due to the high cost of education, decided not to send their children to school.

Considering the benefits associated with possessing an urban Hukou, rural residents are highly motivated to obtain one. This is consistent with China's plan to integrate migrants into urban areas to have a more productive and socially inclusive society (Bosker, Deichmann, & Roberts, 2015). Since the mid-1990s, various reforms to the Hukou system have been launched by the Chinese government, that facilitate the process of Hukou conversion (i.e., rural to urban) for migrants (Farrer, 2010; Lei & Li, 2012). However, these reforms have been found susceptible to bias, since those who achieve Hukou conversion are typically rich, highly educated, or have immediate family members in urban areas (Fan, 2009). As urbanization pressures continue to increase in China, scholars argue it is both an economic and political imperative to intensify Hukou reform (Fan, 2009).

Studies of rural-urban migrants predominantly focused on blue-collar workers who are less inclined to stay in urban areas for a long time (Wong & Song, 2008). Thus far, little attention has been paid to young professional migrants, who typically possess high-paid job positions, are more educated, and are often eligible and willing to change their Hukou status. Therefore, Shanghai is chosen as a site to study these kinds of migrants for the following reasons. First, as one of the largest destinations for intra-urban migrants, the city has a floating population of 9.6 million, accounting for 40% of the population (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau, 2013). Second, social divisions between locals and migrants are highly evident, both in daily and professional life (Ming & Wang, 2009). Third, Shanghai initiated a number of Hukou policy reforms in recent years, making it an ideal site to see the impact of these changes.

In 2009 the city of Shanghai began a new round of Hukou reforms; this included a residential permit system to attract talented workers and investment from outside the city

(Zhao & Courtney, 2010). Migrants in Shanghai who hold residential permits have access to more social benefits and stand a better chance of converting Hukou status. Then in 2013, Shanghai further introduced a point system for Hukou conversion, under which applicants are evaluated based on age, education, amount of tax payment, scarcity of the profession, job position, and other social contributions (Hukou Shanghai, 2016). Under this reformed system, young professional migrants with high scores are more likely to obtain a Shanghai Hukou. However, the impact of a higher probability of acquiring a local Hukou on migrant's life in Shanghai remains little researched. To address this issue, we pose the following question:

*RQ3: What is the relationship between residential status and professional migrant's professional life and daily life in Shanghai?*

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

After receiving appropriate university ethical approval, 14 participants were recruited for online interviews through a convenience, snowball sampling method. Eight interviewees were female, and six were male. Participants were randomly coded from R1 to R14. Criterion for inclusion in this study was that respondents were well educated intra-urban workers who were 25-31 years old possessing a middle-income job without local citizenship in Shanghai. This study focuses on this young age group as migration typically takes place during young adulthood (Nauman, VanLandingham, Anglewicz, Patthavanit, & Punpuing, 2015). Six participants had Bachelor's degrees and the other eight had Master's degrees. They were all in their early and mid-career. The job tenure of participants in their current positions varied from six months to 6 years with an average of 2.9 years. Among the 14

participants, seven said they intended to stay in Shanghai for the long term; six planned to stay in Shanghai at least for the short term; and one planned to return to their place of origin. Participants came from nine different home provinces: Anhui, Beijing, Guangxi, Henan, Hubei, Hunan, Liaoning, Shanxi, and Zhejiang, and held a variety of professions, including engineer, designer, quality assurer, computer programmer, manufacturing supervisor, marketing director, language teacher, and financial validator. Seven participants worked in private-owned enterprises, five in foreign-invested enterprises, and two in stated-owned enterprises.

### ***Procedure***

Semi-structured interview questions were based on Kassing's (1998) Organizational Dissent Scale and Gorden and Infante (1991)'s Workplace Freedom of Speech Scale (with two additional items added by Kassing, 2000b). The principal investigator consulted two other Mandarin-English speakers to design the interview questions and translate important concepts from English to Mandarin. This process involved discussion between all three individuals over the meanings and translations of the Kassing (2000b) and Gorden and Infante's (1991) items. At the beginning of each interview, Kassing's (1998) classification of dissent types was explained to participants: articulated dissent, latent dissent, and displaced dissent. Interview questions were designed to probe three main areas: 1) dissent strategy; 2) perceived workplace freedom of speech; 3) intra-urban migrant identity in workplaces and daily life. Interviews ranged in length from 25 to 90 minutes, with an average of 42 minutes. Questions asked in a semi-structured interview help produce a wealth of detailed information and serve as a guide to stimulate discussion (Merrigan & Huston, 2009). The first author conducted all interviews in Mandarin Chinese. As there is

no corresponding translation for “organizational dissent” in Chinese, “dissent” was explained to respondents as expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement (*biaoda bu man huo yiyi* 表达不满或异议). Thus, three types of organizational dissent were described as expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement to supervisors (*xiang shangji biaoda bu man/yiyi* 向上级表达不满/异议), expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement to coworkers (*xiang tong shi biaodao bu man/yiyi* 向同事表达不满/异议) and expressing dissatisfaction or disagreement to family members or friends who are not part of the organization (*xiang gongzuo changsuo wai de jia ren huo pengyou biaoda bu man/yiyi* 向工作场所外的家人或朋友表达不满/异议).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis drew on Owen’s (1984) analytical scheme, which focuses on three criteria: 1) recurrence, 2) repetition, and 3) forcefulness. This study followed the six steps of conducting thematic analysis identified by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarizing with data, generating initial codes searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming theme, and producing the report. Responses were first analyzed and summarized using open coding. These summaries were compared to each other to reduce the amount of codes and generate final themes. The themes were generated in Chinese, then translated into English for inclusion in this article,  $\kappa = .91$ .

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Perception of Workplace Freedom of Speech***

#### *The Importance of Leadership Style*

When asked to express their perception of workplace freedom of speech, half of the respondents spoke of the leadership style of their direct supervisors. For example, R7 said: “Our company is very open. Our leader would often invite us to tell what we thought, and we

could tell him anything.” R10 explained in her company that everyone was being watched “Our boss is like a local despot (土皇帝, Pinyin: *tu huang di*). He will find out whatever it is that you say; [for example] maybe it will be the cleaning lady who eventually tells him.” In addition, R1 shared his opinion of how workplace freedom of speech is linked to leadership style:

This thing (workplace freedom of speech) depends completely on individuals (leaders). For example, our previous leader, when he was here, our freedom of speech was very open. Now that the leader has changed, whether [we are talking about] technical issues, or human resource issues, or other arrangements, [the new leader] always puts [himself] at the center.

The importance of the leader was highlighted in R1’s response as a new leader, as a different leadership style can completely change the working climate. Thus, it is hardly surprising that most of the respondents directly associated workplace freedom of speech with the leadership style of their supervisors.

#### *Official Channels for Voicing Opinions*

Several respondents directly associated “workplace freedom of speech” with official channels for voicing opinions in the organization. For example, when asked about the situation of freedom of speech in the workplace, R11 answered “I am basically satisfied with the situation; we have many channels available to express our voices.” For the same question, R8 responded “I think my company is rather open because we would regularly have meetings or receive emails and surveys, where we are asked to express our opinions.” To understand the importance and effectiveness of channels for voicing dissent or contrary opinions, a further question was asked of all respondents, whether they had ever expressed

themselves through these channels. Interestingly, the majority of participants said no, and expressed distrust in using these channels. For example, R11 noted there were “many channels available” in her company and afterwards she added “we do have these channels, but we are still suspicious of the confidentiality of using these channels.” Similarly, R4 was also critical of such channels in his organization:

Actually whether there is a place to voice opinions or not, it is more or less the same for us. Because you, relatively speaking, few people would voice opinions through this channel. The leader may organize some meetings which allow employees to express their opinions, or complaints, or the things that need to be improved [pause]. But in fact the effectiveness is not as big as you think, he only wants to know what these subordinates have in mind. And the available place to voice opinions is more of a show.

From responses by R11, R8, and R4 above, it appears Chinese workers’ understandings of workplace freedom of speech do not refer to a genuine democratic working climate, but rather to opportunities offered by their supervisors or the organization for expressing opinions, ideas, or dissent. In China, employees are typically confined to their specific tasks so they usually do not have a complete picture of the organizational climate (Cheung & Wu, 2014). Consequently, official channels could be perceived by employees as evidence that opinions are encouraged in the organization even though the safety of using these channels remains questionable. On the other hand, safety has been always highlighted in the definition of freedom of speech in Western literature: “citizens should not suffer retaliation or disenfranchisement for speech (Gorden & Infante, 1991, p. 146). In this sense, Chinese employees’ understanding of workplace freedom of speech is

more linked to the organizational structure rather than to an open organizational climate. Furthermore, freedom of speech in China is perceived as a passive act, where employees can express opinions only when they are invited to. This may have to do with the long history of little employee participation in Chinese organizations. Among 10 indicators of total quality performance for organizations, Hua, Chin, Sun, and Xu, (2000) surveyed 71 Chinese firms and found employee involvement received the lowest rating. In a study exploring total quality management practices, Lee (2004) discovered less than half of Chinese firms had employee involvement programs. Thus, in a non-participative working environment, it would be rare for employees to actively express their opinions.

The role of the immediate leader appeared to be significant in employee's perceptions of workplace freedom of speech. On the other hand, the safety and effectiveness of expressing opinions through official channels remain suspicious. A possible explanation is that Chinese employees deem opinions from supervisors to be more important than the official organizational policies. Chen et al. (2002) reported Chinese employees' performance is more strongly linked with loyalty to supervisor than with organizational commitment. In other words, for Chinese employees, being loyal to supervisor is more important than being loyal to the organization. The role of the immediate supervisor could be the most influential factor in one's professional life in China.

Employee's perceptions of workplace freedom of speech in China diverges from the definition used in western organization literature. With the poor employee participation culture and safety concern for voicing opinions, employees may still withhold their opinions even when they perceived workplace freedom of speech is high. To truly facilitate employee voices in the workplace, organizations need to focus on building a democratic discourse by,



for example, involving employees in decision makings, educating leaders to be more open to employee opinions, and ensuring the safety of voicing channels.

### ***Dissent Strategies***

#### *Upward Dissent*

The majority of participants disclosed that their primary motivation for expressing dissent was to solve problems and bring about changes. For example, R2 explained his dissent strategy: “Firstly I would talk to my colleagues, like complaining. Then if you want to solve problems, you still need to talk to your supervisor.” A similar statement was made by R13: “Talking to your supervisor is the most direct way to get things done.” While some like R2 and R13 noted the importance of upward dissent in solving problems, others suggested they would withdraw expressing upward dissent when they perceived their opinions cannot change anything. R3 responded to the question if she would dissent to the management: “It is not that I don't dare to dissent, it's just the feeling I have, it doesn't make sense to say it. That can't change the situation.” Thus, upward dissent is mainly used to solve problems and employees do not favor it when the perceived effectiveness is low. While the effectiveness of upward dissent has been widely studied (Gossett & Kilker, 2006; Kassing, 1998, 2001), the conceptualization of upward dissent among Chinese employees nevertheless appears to diverge from other studies which see employee voice as a constitutional right to freedom of speech, and vital to the defense of human rights (Redding, 1985).

A modern definition of dissent came from Graham's (1986) principled organizational dissent, which looked at objections based on conscientious or moral principles. However, upward dissent is mostly used in a pragmatic way to bring organizational change among

Chinese employees. One possible explanation for the difference is that dissent may carry a negative connotation in Chinese organizations. Dissent which involves contradictory opinions might be intuitively seen as detrimental to group harmony which is a central value in Chinese society. Previous literature on conflict styles suggests Chinese predominantly favor avoiding and obliging strategies to preserve interpersonal relationships and group harmony (e.g., Brew & Cairns, 2004; Wang, Lin, Chan, & Shi, 2005). To maintain a harmonious working environment, Chinese employees highly value forbearance and patience which could lead to turning a blind eye to organizational problems (Leung, Brew, Zhang, & Yan, 2011). Missing moral aspects in dissent can be potentially dangerous for the organizations because dissent, the antecedent of whistle blowing, serves as a watching mechanism that brings organizational misconduct into light before escalating. Thus, organizations in China need put extra effort to embracing dissenters as constructive employees.

In organizations, employee voices are often ignored or not taken seriously. However, employees may seek out ways to be heard. Circumvention, bypassing the immediate leader and dissenting directly to higher management, was enacted by some interviewees when they deemed necessary to solve problems. Such a strategy is often associated with negative consequences because the authority of the immediate leader is threatened in the circumstance (Chang & Holt, 1996). For example, R1 felt he was constantly picked on by his immediate supervisor after he expressed his disagreement directly to the CEO:

I complained once; actually it was not complaining. I just had a bad feeling about the whole development of our department. Then I bypassed the head of our department; directly wrote an email to the CEO [pause]. I also told the CEO what should be done.

Of course he was being nice, “I have considered this already, and I will talk to the head of your department about it” [pause]. Before this, he (the head of department) was always smiling at me. After this happened, I felt that he was picking on me. R1 was retaliated against for dissenting directly to higher management. Such retaliation was also observed by R6. Not directly involved in a circumvention event, R6 witnessed one in her department, where an anonymous employee directly sent complaining letters to the top manager:

Someone from our department did it once. In the meeting our factory director was blamed so badly (by the top manager). It was done anonymously, and the person could not be identified. The following week was all about finding this person out. The factory director was *furious!*

To express dissent directly to higher management makes the immediate leader lose face. In Chinese organizations, face-threatening dissent strategy may have more severe consequences. This is expressed in a Chinese proverb: A person needs face like a tree needs bark.

Respondents noted that circumvention is considered highly inappropriate because the behavior can be interpreted that the dissenter questions the immediate leader’s competence. Furthermore, a higher-level manager may think that the immediate leader fails in managing his/her subordinates. Chinese face can be measured, altered and traded. People are likely to employ the strategies of shaming and retribution when the face conventions are violated (Cardon & Scott, 2003). This may explain R1 experienced retaliation because the immediate leader wanted to restore the lost face by punishing him. In this case, R1 obviously learned his lesson as he added later he would “discuss ideas within the department first” before voicing up to a higher management.

### *Latent Dissent*

Many respondents noted they would share their work related concerns with their colleagues, otherwise known as latent dissent, however with great caution because the dissent audiences may potentially snitch on dissenters. R3 explained: “I never expressed my concerns to my coworkers; actually I did not have the guts to, what if they just snitch on you.” Similarly, R2 was being very cautious with whom he shares latent dissent “I would express to colleagues a bit, not too much though, mostly just to those I am very close with.” Intuitively, it makes sense that employees would share their concerns to the people with whom they are more emotionally connected.

Garner (2009) discovered that employees are often motivated to obtain emotional support through dissent expression. In this regard, latent dissent particularly serves the function to share information and build social support among coworkers. Latent dissent in previous literature has been predominantly portrayed as a negative act. For example, employees tend to express more latent dissent: when they possessed lower quality relationships with their supervisors (Kassing, 2000a), when they perceive less workplace freedom of speech (Kassing, 2000b), when they have less job satisfaction and commitment (Kassing, 1998), and so forth. In this sense, latent dissent expression is the result of the suppression of upward dissent. However, this does not seem to be the case in the Chinese context. Discussing critical issues with colleagues could potentially facilitate trust and interpersonal relationships in Chinese organizations (Wasti, Tan, & Erdil, 2011). Chinese employees are more likely to express ideas to peers and not to supervisors, when identifying themselves as members of an organization or group (Liu, Zhu, & Yang, 2010). Thus, latent dissent expression in Chinese organizations could be a crucial means to build and maintain

co-worker relationships, which may take place regardless of the suppression of upward dissent.

### *Displaced Dissent*

Regarding communicating work issues with families, migrants' responses were highly consistent: "reporting only good things and hiding unpleasant things." Dissenting to family members means to share negative issues from the workplace with them. The majority of respondents chose not to express displaced dissent to their family members back home.

For example, R4 noted:

I rarely say much to family members, because they do not understand much about your work. After all, you are in a foreign place, you would always tell them the good things and hide the unpleasant things.

It is perceived in Chinese culture that sharing negative information with family members may only cause anxiety (Sandel, 2014, 2015a). R4's intention to protect family members from the negative news could be rooted in filial piety. Filial piety, one of the pillars of Confucianism, requires young generations to repay their parents by not only supporting them physically and financially but also providing emotional support and treating them with respect and gratitude (Bryant & Lim, 2013; Qin, 2013). To make family members worry is obviously contradictory to filial piety norms. Thus, the majority of migrants choose to report only positive things of their lives to family members and discuss the negative feelings rather with other audiences. Studies have reported intra-urban migrants score low on psychological well-beings and life satisfaction (Ming & Wang, 2009). Not being able to share their concerns with family members might be worsening the situation.

Chinese employees express dissent very strategically. Upward dissent is employed for problem-solving and latent dissent is mainly to release frustration and gain rapport from coworkers. Displaced dissent is consciously avoided by migrants in order to protect family members back home.

***Perceived Differences from Locals in Professional and Social Life***

*Division in Organizational and Daily Life.*

One issue that appeared in most responses was that the local dialect creates divisions between locals and migrants in the workplace. Shanghainese is a dialect or “*fangyan*” of Wu Chinese, which is not mutually intelligible with Mandarin or other Chinese dialects (Tang & van Heuven, 2007; Sandel, 2015b). The majority of the migrant workers in Shanghai are not able to understand the local dialect. In this study, all respondents noted the local dialect was used mainly in casual talks in their workplaces. R10 explained:

Locals have some advantages in terms of language. Relatively speaking, the management is basically all Shanghainese persons; when you report to him/her, normally you use Mandarin. But in private or talking about everyday life issues, they will switch to Shanghainese to communicate.

The role of the local dialect in social bonding was evident in R10’s comments. The social meaning of the local dialect was also expressed in R8’s response:

When they communicate in Shanghainese, I don’t understand much. Then, uh that feeling (not being able to participate in their conversations) is very upset.

Managers do not normally speak Shanghainese; but (local) colleagues will sometimes use Shanghainese. Maybe they do not mean to do it, but when they are

discussing something, in the beginning it is Mandarin, then they switch to Shanghainese. I surely wish I could understand them!

R8 expressed her upset feelings about the fact that she could not understand Shanghainese in her workplace. She also articulated her wish to learn the dialect in the future. However, locals may not communicate with migrants in Shanghainese even when migrants can understand Shanghainese. There are hundreds of diverse Chinese dialects and many of which are unintelligible (Sandel, 2015b). Shanghainese belongs to the “Wu Chinese” group, which refers to the varieties of dialects spoken in Zhejiang province, Shanghai and South Jiangsu Province (Tang & van Heuven, 2007). R7 is from Zhejiang province and his home dialect is very similar to Shanghainese. Thus, he can understand Shanghainese very well and his local colleagues are aware of that fact too. However, he noted that locals never communicated with him in Shanghainese: “I can understand Shanghainese. But no one ever communicated with me in Shanghainese, always in Mandarin.”

Accents and dialects represent individual’s geographical membership and social class (Li, 2016; Sandig & Selting, 1997). The majority of the respondents stated the use of dialect in workplaces mainly took place in informal settings. Carnavale, Fainer, and Meltzer (1990) found casual talk in workplaces is crucial in fostering rapport and work relations. Thus, migrants are likely to have weaker work relations with local workers. R7 in the study, whose home dialect is similar to Shanghainese, has never been offered to communicate in Shanghainese. One possible explanation is that despite the fact he understands Shanghainese, locals may still see him as an outsider and refuse to speak Shanghainese with him. Wang, Cui, Cui, Wei, Harada, Minamoto and ... Ueda (2010)

reported non-native dialect is strongly linked to the identity of outsider in Shanghai. In this context, the Shanghainese dialect is likely to be employed as a tool for locals separating themselves from migrants in workplaces.

When asked about interactions with locals, all respondents stated they did not have many local friends and felt distant from locals. This we see, for example, in how R3 described the social division between migrants and locals:

I rarely interact with any locals. For outsiders [migrants], it does not matter whether you are from the north, south, or coast, you will always see yourself as outsiders; and then you can make a group together [easily become friends with other outsiders]. But probably you can never enter a local Shanghainese group.

R3 noted that migrants tend to form their own groups and interact little with locals. The in-group identity is highly evident in R3's response as she referred the migrants as "outsiders" (外来人, *wai lai ren*). Ming and Wang (2009) reported migrants are commonly perceived as poor, dirty, ignorant, violent, greedy, and irresponsible by local residents and locals are also not trustworthy in the eyes of migrants in Shanghai. The negative perceptions, mistrust and hostility held by locals and migrants toward each other may further deepen the division between the two groups. This social division may ultimately hinder organizational performance and employees' general life satisfaction, thus organizations and government are urged to take actions to decrease the gap between migrants and locals.

*Impact of Hukou Status on Daily Life.*



The majority of the participants thought local citizenship in Shanghai became less important to them. The new round of Hukou reform in Shanghai in 2009, the fourth adjustment since 1994, introduced the residential permit system which entitled migrants a number of social benefits which were once only available for locals (Fan, 2009). Regarding the importance of Hukou, R2 explained: “the difference between migrants and locals is lessened; then it does not matter if you get local Hukou or not.” R6 expressed similar sentiments, however with an emphasis on Hukou’s importance on the next generation:

Actually I do not think local Hukou is that important, it only makes it easier for children to go to school. If it is not that I have to consider for the next generation for the future, I do not think Hukou means anything to me.

Just like R2 and R6, professional migrants in this study who all possessed residential permit noted the urban Hukou became less important to them. The fact that cities have the flexibility to introduce the residential permit system is a sign of China’s intent to diminish social gaps between migrants and locals. However, further reforms of hukou are still under debate. Smaller cities and towns are likely to experience a higher degree of hukou liberalization while large cities with a population greater than 5 million will continue to be under strict Hukou control (Bosker et al., 2015). Thus, it might still take a long time for migrants to have equal rights in a metropolis like Shanghai.

The Hukou system does not only make settlement in cities difficult for migrant workers, but also creates barriers when migrants return to their home of origin ~~retreat~~. Many benefits like pension and medical insurance are geographically restricted and cannot be transferred to another place (Dong 2009). In other words, those who have been

paying taxes to Shanghai government can only enjoy their benefits in Shanghai. R4, a Beijing citizen, considered this as the main reason of leaving Shanghai permanently:

Every month I pay for the medical insurance, I cannot take it with me, I can only use it here in Shanghai. Once I go back to Beijing, I have nothing. So you cannot give up your home Hukou and live here. This was also the main reason everyone was trying to persuade me [not to leave Beijing] when I first decided to go [to Shanghai].

R4's response indicated that the social insurance system has a direct impact on migrant's intention to stay in urban areas. The fragmented social insurance program of poor portability makes it costly for migrants to move to other places (Li, 2008). Nielsen, Nyland, Smyth, Zhang, and Zhu (2005) reported the main factor Chinese migrant workers are reluctant in participating in urban social insurance schemes is the fear not being able to collect the benefits once they move back home or to other places. Thus, more intensive Hukou reform is needed in order to further protect migrants' rights.

### **Conclusion**

The current study adds to the literature by exploring the perception of workplace freedom of speech and organization dissent among professional migrants in China. While workplace freedom of speech refers to the organizational climate, Chinese employees tend to associate workplace freedom of speech with the organizational structure. Moreover, upward dissent is more associated with problem solving rather than seen as an employee right or moral obligation among Chinese employees. Due to the hierarchical organizational structure and the need to preserve group harmony, rank-and-file employees in China have little organizational power and are extremely cautious when

voicing their opinions to the management. Thus, soliciting authentic employee opinions in Chinese organizations might be more challenging as Chinese employees might be less willingly to rock the boat. Chinese organizations are encouraged to foster an aura of democracy in which employees are free to express their opinions without being perceived as harmful to the organizational harmony. Another finding of the study is latent dissent in Chinese organizations is not necessarily a negative act. Sharing work related concerns with colleagues could be an essential way to bond with each other in China. In sum, this study argues Chinese employees have unique perceptions of organizational dissent and workplace freedom of speech. Thus, to apply results generated from previous U.S. studies to the Chinese setting warrants great caution.

A few clear limitations of the study are worth noting. First, the small sample size could be a limitation of the study from reaching saturation. Second, only migrants were recruited in the study. Future studies should also take local citizens' perception into consideration in exploring social division in urban areas.

Although not the focus of this study, rural-urban migrants in China as a unique co-cultural group adopted different communication strategies. For instance, many interviewees expressed their intention of learning Shanghainese, which is clearly a non-assertive assimilation strategy. Future studies on domestic migrants in China are encouraged to draw on co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1996) to generate more fruitful results. Additionally, this study provided many insights into the social division between migrant workers and local Shanghainese in professional and social life. The Hukou system has segregated people from rural and urban areas geographically, socially, and economically for almost 60 years (Bao et al., 2011). Due to the recent Hukou reform, which is in favor

of an educated and skillful labor force, professional migrant workers in Shanghai are entitled to many social benefits and are more willing to stay in Shanghai for long term (Zhao & Courtney, 2010). Future studies on Chinese migrants are encouraged to distinguish blue-collar workers and professional workers because their social status and intention to stay in urban areas are vastly different.

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