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Abstract Differences in culture, history, economy, and political and management systems may lead to differences in employee job attribute preferences across countries. To the extent that this is true, managers and designers of motivation systems must understand the preferences of local employees. This study provides information on the job attribute preferences of Chinese employees at a major international hotel in Shanghai. Employee preference data were compared to published results from other nations. The pattern of preferences in China was unique compared to Russia, Taiwan and the United States. Chinese employees felt that good wages were most important, followed by good working conditions and personal loyalty from the boss and organization. Interestingly work was relatively unimportant, especially to older employees, and ‘being in on things’ was not at all important. Supervisors at the hotel also provided information on the preferences which they believed characterized their subordinates. Unlike US managers who often badly misperceive the preferences of their US subordinates, Chinese supervisors accurately reported their subordinates’ preferences. Expatriates in the hotel were much less accurate in ranking local subordinate preferences. Implications for motivating and managing Chinese employees are discussed.

Keywords China, motivation, human resource management in China, reward preferences

Introduction
There is a long history of research which asks employees to rank the importance of job attributes or rewards. Jurgensen’s (1978) report of thirty years of data collection from 57,000 job applicants at the Minnesota Gas Company is the largest-scale example of such research. Applicants were asked to rank the importance of ten job characteristics to themselves, and then to rank them again in importance to ‘others who are in your type of work’. Jurgensen found differences in preferences for attributes such as advancement, pay, supervision, and type of work across age groups and between men and women. He also found striking differences in the preferences reported for one’s self and those ascribed to others, particularly with respect to pay. Applicants reported that pay was fifth in importance to them, but felt that it was first in importance to other people. Security and interesting work topped the list of self-rated preferences for the total sample.

A number of researchers have used a slightly different list of ten job attributes pioneered by Lindahl (1949) to collect preference data from US employees and often from their superiors as well (cf. Kovach, 1994, 1995; Nevis, 1983; Silverthorne, 1992). (See Table 1 for a list of the items.) Employees are asked to rank their own preferences for the list, and superiors are asked to rank the list as they believe their employees would. Like Jurgensen, Kovach found age differences in employees’ preferences, with middle-aged employees ranking ‘being in on things’ as the most important job attribute.
Kovach and most other researchers also found differences between superiors and subordinates which parallel Jurgensen’s findings for self and other ratings. Employees tended to rate ‘interesting work’ as most important or second most important for themselves, while their superiors consistently guessed that good wages would be most important. Across studies, US employees usually ranked good wages fifth in the list of ten. Their superiors also tended to underestimate the importance of ‘being in on things’, interesting work, and appreciation of work done compared to subordinates’ rankings.

These studies suggest that, even within a single culture and nation, selective perception or stereotyping may occur, such that individuals report that their own needs and motives are higher, more honourable, or at least different from those of their peers and subordinates. There are numerous practical implications of studies like these. First, it is useful to know exactly what employees say they value, and whether subgroups of employees have differing preferences, so that reward systems can be appropriately targeted. Second, it is interesting to see how superiors misperceive the relative importance of various job characteristics for their employees. To the extent that they do, they may adopt less than optimal motivation strategies because they misunderstand employees’ needs and wants. For instance, Kovach suggests that providing information and some opportunities for consultation would be greatly appreciated by middle-aged employees who value being in on things, yet would be very low in cost for the organization.

**Reward preferences in China**

In moving across cultures, job attribute preferences become even more interesting. One would expect to find that the preferences of employees differ across nations and cultures. If expatriate managers import unexamined beliefs about employee reward preferences from their home country, they may miss the mark in the host country. In this study, the preferences of a sample of Chinese employees at a Western-managed hotel in Shanghai are assessed, and several research questions are explored:

- What are the preferences of these Chinese employees, and how do preferences differ by age and gender?
- How do the preferences of this sample of Chinese employees compare to those of samples from selected other nations?
- To what extent do Chinese and expatriate supervisors accurately predict the preferences of their local employees?
- What potential implications do the preferences of Chinese employees have for management practices in joint ventures in China?

There are many reasons to believe that reward preferences will be somewhat different in China than elsewhere. First, past research has shown a wide variety of preference patterns across nations in which data have been collected (cf. Silverthorne, 1992). In the present study, previously published data from Russia, Taiwan, and the US will be used for comparison. Second, cultural values, culturally expected leadership practices, societal experience and traditions with respect to different types of rewards, and level of economic development all may contribute to varying reward preferences across cultures.

To facilitate comparison, a list of ten job attributes/rewards used in past research was adopted. The items, which were ranked on desirability by respondents, included: tactful discipline from superiors, sympathetic help with personal problems from superiors,
interesting work, a feeling of being ‘in on things’, high job security, good wages, good working conditions, full appreciation of work done, personal loyalty to employees from superiors and the organization, and promotion and growth in skills within the organization.

Hofstede (1993) describes Chinese culture as high in power distance, low in individualism, moderate in uncertainty avoidance and masculinity, and high in long-term orientation. Consistent with the first two of Hofstede’s dimensions, Child and Markoczy (1993: 619) emphasize the importance of the following attributes of Chinese culture:

- respect for hierarchy;
- orientation towards groups;
- preservation of face;
- importance of relationships.

The following paragraphs propose some tentative hypotheses about the likely importance of the ten job attributes in the present sample, based on the literature on Chinese culture and management.

**Sympathetic help with personal problems and personal loyalty from superiors and the organization**

Much has been written about China’s collectivist orientation, the importance of social relationships, and the obligations that attend hierarchical relationships in Confucian ideology (Hofstede and Bond, 1988; Tsui and Farh, 1997; Yeung and Tung, 1996). In the workplace, this seems to play out in the form of managerial paternalism, with superiors developing warm relationships with their employees (Osigweh and Huo, 1993; Wall, 1990). This may be done for both instrumental as well as emotional reasons (Tsui and Farh, 1997; Wall, 1990). Obligations incurred through good treatment and doing favours for subordinates ensure that employees will cooperate when needed and in ways that the formal system may be unable to demand. State-owned employers are usually responsible for providing housing, medical care, and education to employees’ families. Until recently, they also provided life-time employment, though a contract system is now in place for many employees. These cultural and economic bonds between employee and employer suggest that ‘sympathetic understanding of personal problems’ and ‘personal loyalty to employees’ by superiors will still be seen as very important, even in a foreign-managed enterprise.

**Tactful discipline**

This item is usually very low in importance to US employees. Given the importance of face in China, it would certainly be necessary that any discipline be tactful in the extreme, but it may be more likely that discipline is rare to non-existent in order to avoid loss of face, making this item seem relatively unimportant to Chinese employees.

**Being ‘in on things’**

Studies of Chinese managers suggest that leaders keep their plans and intentions closely held and share little information or decision-making power with employees (Kent, 1992; Laaksonen, 1988; Wang and Heller, 1993). This is quite consistent with the high
power distance characteristic of Chinese culture (Hofstede, 1993), and the passivity of lower-level workers noted by Zhao (1994). In consequence, one might expect that lower-level Chinese employees would not value or expect to be involved, consulted, or ‘in on things’.

**Full appreciation of work done**

Appreciation is ranked first or second in importance by US employees, but there is reason to believe that it will be considerably less important in China. Redding and Wong (1986: 288) note that ‘superiors regularly play down or deny the contributions of subordinates’. Nevis (1983: 252) suggests that a central value in post-1949 Chinese society has been ‘the avoidance of personal credit for accomplishment’, often observed in the form of employees demurring thanks from others with statements like ‘I’m only doing my job’ or ‘It is my duty’. Shenkar and Ronen (1987: 572) state that ‘Chinese tradition is overwhelmingly opposed to individual glorification’. This strong cultural value for modesty suggests that Chinese subordinates may not view receiving ‘full appreciation of work done’ as necessary or important.

**Good wages**

The importance of ‘good wages’ is an intriguing subject for speculation, especially as this item displays such an interesting pattern in US research (fifth for self, attributed first for others). Pay might not have been a highly salient variable in China 25 years ago when entrepreneurial and performance-based rewards were largely unavailable and pay differentials were small. During the Cultural Revolution, an egalitarian wage policy was strongly enforced. Since 1978, however, performance-based bonuses have come to be relatively more accepted (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1995), and the government has promoted the idea that ‘It is glorious to be rich’ (Zhao, 1994). Today, with an end to the security of the ‘Iron Rice Bowl’, increased variability in income, high inflation in the early 1990s, and strong competition for qualified employees by joint-ventures in major cities, employees may see good wages as being an extremely important and attainable job attribute. The importance of wealth and materialism to Overseas Chinese has been well documented, as has their willingness to speak openly about money (Redding, 1993). This may suggest that pay will be important to Chinese employees, and that respondents will not be hesitant to admit its importance (as they perhaps are in the US).

**Job security**

Job security was ranked first or second in Jurgensen’s data between 1949 and 1975. In the 1990s it seems to be hovering at around third or fourth place in the US. One might expect that it would have less importance in China for several reasons. First, until recent reforms, jobs in the state-owned sector in China were absolutely secure, and it is still difficult to discharge an employee before the end of their contract. Second, at the time the data in this study were collected (1996), employees qualified to work in Western-managed joint-ventures in Shanghai were a scarce commodity and had many employment opportunities (Sensenbrenner and Sensenbrenner, 1994). Finally, the employees in this sample were relatively young (mean age 30.3), and have better prospects of employment or reemployment in China (personal communication, Zhao, 1997). Thus, job security is expected to be relatively unimportant in this sample.
Working conditions

It does not seem possible to make specific predictions about the relative importance of this factor based on cultural grounds. However, working conditions in Western-managed hotels are likely to be quite good compared to state-owned or manufacturing settings. Whether this will reduce their importance or increase their salience as a desired job characteristic is unclear.

Promotion and growth, interesting work

Interesting work is quite important to US employees at present, and promotion and growth are moderately important. The importance of these attributes is borne out by the large number of articles on job redesign and enrichment published in the Western management literature in the past few decades. References to such issues in China seem to be very few and far between, suggesting perhaps that the majority of non-managerial employees are not attuned to meeting ‘higher level’ needs in the work setting. Perhaps the ‘luxury’ of interesting work is more of a prerogative or expectation of workers in highly developed countries. In reviewing the history of US work psychology, pay was considered the primary motivator at the start of the century, social relations and job satisfaction came to the fore in the 1930s, and interesting work was not ‘discovered’ as an important variable for rank and file employees until the 1950s. It would be interesting to explore whether such a progression occurs over time in other nations as industrialization and living standards increase.

Most organizational researchers in China qualify their work by noting that things are changing very rapidly, and that work values cannot be expected to be stable when the economic system is undergoing tremendous change (Chen, 1995). Predictions such as those above, which are based on existing literature, may or may not be accurate in the immediate present or future. It also seems likely that value changes would be embraced most readily by younger employees less steeped in traditional culture or the repression of the Cultural Revolution. Thus, one might expect that preferences would differ between older and younger employees, with the former reporting more traditional social and economic preferences and the latter embracing intrinsic and achievement oriented items to a greater extent.

Method

Preference rank data were collected by questionnaire from the employees of a large hotel in Shanghai in April 1996. The hotel is owned by a state-owned company, but branded and managed by a major Western hotel chain. Lindahl’s (1949) widely used items were adopted in order to facilitate direct comparison with published data sets. However, it was felt that this list of ten might not include all of the most important job attributes for Chinese employees. Thus, after ranking the standard ten items, respondents were asked about one other currently important benefit: employer assistance with housing (Sensenbrenner and Sensenbrenner, 1994). They were asked to assign this factor a rank from 1 to 10 as if it had been an option in the preceding list of job rewards.

Although all respondents had some English skills, it was decided that they would be more comfortable responding in their own language, so the survey was translated into Chinese by the second author and one of her bilingual colleagues. Surveys were distributed to all 1100 employees of the hotel, and 857 surveys were returned, for a
response rate of 77.9 per cent. Some surveys were filled out incorrectly, with items apparently rated rather than ranked, so the number of useable responses was 785.

There were two versions of the questionnaire: one for non-supervisory employees to indicate their own ranking of the ten job factors, and one for higher-level employees to rank the importance they believed these factors had to non-supervisory staff in the hotel. Non-supervisory employees returned 565 useable surveys indicating their own preferences. Higher-level staff comprised three levels: immediate supervisors of the focal respondents (159 useable responses), managers who indirectly supervised focal employees (55 useable responses), and top-level expatriate staff (six useable responses from a population of eight expatriates representing seven nationalities). The expatriates received the survey in English.

The non-supervisory employee sample was 52% male; 18% had a middle school education, 75% had a high school education, 6% had attended college, and 1% had completed university. The mean age of non-supervisory respondents was 30.3: 54% of the sample were under age 30, 31% were between 30 and 40, and 15% were older than 40 years of age. Turnover among these employees was less than usual in the area, with 17.6% leaving in 1995, compared to an industry average in Shanghai of 30–70%. The percentage of respondents that had been with the hotel less than one year was 11%, 1–2 years 19%, 3–5 years 30%, and more than five years, 40%. As a successful foreign-managed enterprise, the organization paid more in both wages and benefits than state-run hotels. Employees receive wages, bonuses, allowances, full medical care, group incentives, individual incentives, pensions, and a housing subsidy.

Results

The results will be discussed in three sections. First, comparisons within the Chinese employee sample will be presented, to explore whether different subgroups of employees have different preferences. Second, comparisons will be made between the overall Chinese employee preferences and those of samples from other countries. Third, agreement between the responses of employees and their superiors, both in the Chinese and US samples, will be assessed.

Table 1 shows the mean ranks given to each job characteristic by male and female and older and younger Chinese employees. There are very few differences between male and female employees. All agree that good wages are by far the most important job attribute. Differences on other job factors appear when the sample is broken down by age, as was expected. Employees under age 30 saw promotion and growth in their skills as second in importance, compared with seventh for those 30 and older. Older employees ranked job security higher (fourth versus eighth), and sympathetic help with personal problems higher (sixth versus ninth), while younger employees felt that interesting work was more important (sixth versus ninth). Chinese employees uniformly rated the housing subsidy as extremely important.

Table 2 displays the overall ranks for the Chinese sample as well as the ranks reported in recent surveys of US, Russian and Taiwanese employees. There are some striking differences in preferences. The two US samples are similar to each other (Spearman Rho = .85, p < 0.001), but both differ from the Chinese sample (Rho with Silverthorne sample = 0.27, n.s., Rho with Kovach sample = −0.04, n.s.). Chinese employees rated interesting work as much lower in importance (seventh versus first or second), and being in on things as least important (tenth versus seventh or third). They also saw full appreciation of work done as less important (fifth versus first or second),
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Male employees</th>
<th>Female employees</th>
<th>Under 30</th>
<th>30 and over</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tactful discipline from superiors</td>
<td>6.60 (9)</td>
<td>6.72 (9)</td>
<td>6.62 (7)</td>
<td>6.69 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathetic help with personal problems from superiors</td>
<td>6.10 (8)</td>
<td>6.30 (8)</td>
<td>6.82 (9)</td>
<td>5.53 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting work</td>
<td>6.03 (7)</td>
<td>6.07 (6)</td>
<td>5.45 (6)</td>
<td>6.77 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feeling of being ‘in on things’, being well informed and involved</td>
<td>7.47 (10)</td>
<td>7.66 (10)</td>
<td>7.66 (10)</td>
<td>7.51 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High job security</td>
<td>5.58 (6)</td>
<td>6.24 (7)</td>
<td>6.64 (8)</td>
<td>5.10 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good wages</td>
<td>2.42 (1)</td>
<td>2.43 (1)</td>
<td>2.60 (1)</td>
<td>2.30 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>4.85 (2)</td>
<td>4.66 (2)</td>
<td>4.65 (3)</td>
<td>4.76 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full appreciation of work done – others show appreciation of my work</td>
<td>5.41 (5)</td>
<td>5.04 (5)</td>
<td>5.28 (5)</td>
<td>5.11 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal loyalty to employees from superiors and the organization</td>
<td>5.02 (3)</td>
<td>4.80 (3)</td>
<td>4.79 (4)</td>
<td>5.08 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion and growth in my skills within the organization</td>
<td>5.12 (4)</td>
<td>4.95 (4)</td>
<td>4.38 (2)</td>
<td>5.88 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing subsidy (as a separate item)</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>2.37</td>
<td>1.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of responses</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>282</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item</td>
<td>Chinese employees</td>
<td>US employees (Silverthorne, 1992)</td>
<td>US employees (Kovach, 1994)</td>
<td>Taiwanese employees (Silverthorne, 1992)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tactful discipline from superiors</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathetic help with personal problems from superiors</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting work</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feeling of being ‘in on things’, being well informed and involved</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High job security</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good wages</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full appreciation of work done – others show appreciation of my work</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal loyalty to employees from superiors and the organization</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion and growth in my skills within the organization</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
but rated good wages most important (versus fifth). Finally, Chinese employees saw personal loyalty to the employee from superiors and the organization to be quite important (third) compared to very unimportant (eighth) in the US samples.

Chinese employee responses were quite different from those of Russian employees (Rho = −0.45), and also different to those of ethnic Chinese employees in Taiwan (Rho = 0.38, n.s.). The main differences between PRC and Taiwanese employees were that the former saw personal loyalty as much more important (third versus ninth), working conditions as more important (second versus seventh), and job security as less important (sixth versus first). The discrepancies with Taiwanese results suggest that Chinese culture is only one contributor to reward preferences. National economic and political considerations also play a large role, a conclusion consistent with that of Child and Markoczy (1993).

Table 3 shows the mean ranks given to each job characteristic by Chinese subordinates, by Chinese supervisors, by Chinese managers, and by expatriate managers in the hotel. There was stunning agreement between the two levels of Chinese management (rho = 0.99), with both believing that wages were most important to their employees, followed by personal loyalty from superiors, promotion and growth, appreciation, working conditions, job security, interesting work, tactful discipline and/or help with personal problems in eighth or ninth place, and being ‘in on things’ tenth. These answers were quite different from those of the Western expatriate managers, who felt that working conditions were most important (versus fifth), interesting work was second (versus seventh), and wages were third (versus first). While Chinese superiors felt that loyalty was second in importance to their subordinates, expatriates felt it was ninth. The rank correlation between local and expatriate managers on the ten items was 0.33, not significant. Expatriates also underestimated the importance of a housing subsidy, ranking it about fourth while local management correctly indicated that housing would be more important to their employees than any other item.

There was great agreement between Chinese superiors and their subordinates, with Rhos above 0.90. Chinese superiors were much more accurate at anticipating employee preferences than US superiors were at anticipating US subordinates’ preferences. In Kovach’s sample, the employee-superior Rho was 0.05, n.s., and in Silverthorne’s sample, it was 0.53, p < 0.10. The impressive level of agreement in the present study may flow from an homogeneous and strongly inculcated culture which clearly specifies what is important, and/or from closer contact and friendship between superiors and subordinates at work which results in better understanding of the needs of the other party. Chinese subordinates’ willingness to be honest in ranking the importance of pay may also have contributed. The expatriate managers were much less accurate in predicting the preferences of Chinese employees in the hotel (Rho = 0.51, p < 0.10). This may be a function of their own cultural baggage, or due to their relatively short length of service (less than two years) at the property.

Discussion

One could criticize this study on several grounds, including the choice of sample and survey items. While we do not claim that this group of employees is representative of all Chinese workers, it should be fairly typical of the young non-supervisory urban workforce employed by Western joint-ventures in the service sector. Another survey of a different group would be needed if the preferences of more highly trained professional or managerial employees were of interest. The present survey also had the advantage of
**Table 3** Mean ranks by focal employees, supervisors, managers and expatriates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Employees</th>
<th>Supervisors</th>
<th>Managers</th>
<th>Expatriates</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tactful discipline from superiors</td>
<td>6.66 (9)</td>
<td>6.78 (9)</td>
<td>6.49 (8)</td>
<td>6.68 (8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sympathetic help with personal problems from superiors</td>
<td>6.19 (8)</td>
<td>6.19 (8)</td>
<td>7.29 (9)</td>
<td>8.67 (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interesting work</td>
<td>6.04 (7)</td>
<td>6.17 (7)</td>
<td>6.42 (7)</td>
<td>3.67 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A feeling of being ‘in on things’, being well informed and involved</td>
<td>7.56 (10)</td>
<td>7.94 (10)</td>
<td>7.56 (10)</td>
<td>6.17 (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High job security</td>
<td>5.89 (6)</td>
<td>5.76 (6)</td>
<td>6.16 (6)</td>
<td>5.83 (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good wages</td>
<td>2.43 (1)</td>
<td>3.04 (1)</td>
<td>3.05 (1)</td>
<td>4.17 (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>4.77 (2)</td>
<td>5.26 (5)</td>
<td>6.02 (5)</td>
<td>2.83 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full appreciation of work done – others show appreciation of my work</td>
<td>5.24 (5)</td>
<td>4.81 (4)</td>
<td>4.40 (4)</td>
<td>5.33 (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal loyalty to employees from superiors and the organization</td>
<td>4.92 (3)</td>
<td>4.34 (2)</td>
<td>3.64 (2)</td>
<td>7.17 (9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion and growth in my skills within the organization</td>
<td>5.04 (4)</td>
<td>4.65 (3)</td>
<td>3.96 (3)</td>
<td>5.00 (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing subsidy (as a separate item)</td>
<td>2.13</td>
<td>2.15</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>4.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of responses</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a very high response rate. It was unabashedly a convenience sample, but so too were the US, Taiwanese and Russian employee samples pulled from the literature for comparison purposes. The high convergence between two recent US convenience samples suggests that preferences are relatively robust to sampling variation. However, periodic surveys of larger and more representative groups of employees would be of interest, especially to monitor changes in work preferences as social and economic changes continue in China at a rapid rate. The findings of a 1980 survey of Chinese worker preferences (reported in Nevis, 1983) are now clearly dated: the researchers found that ‘realizing the four modernizations’ was ranked first in importance, pay was second, and ‘belief in communism’ was third.

There is probably Western cultural bias in the choice to use ten items from US research, though it was necessary for comparability. Possibly there are other aspects of work life which are salient to Chinese employees and which would have been highly ranked had they appeared on the survey. For instance, a reward traditionally used by Chinese managers in the state-owned sector is time off for personal business during slack periods (Wall, 1990). Another possibility would be an item about friendly relationships with one’s peers or work group. This would be consistent with the heavy emphasis on work units, brigades, and collectives in recent Chinese history, together with the collectivist culture and the presence of group incentives in the hotel (Shenkar and Ronen, 1987). Osigweh and Huo (1993) note that Chinese are much more likely to view co-workers and friends as highly overlapping groups, though American workers have no problem with separating friendships from work relationships. The one extra item we did choose to add, employer assistance with housing, was seen as extremely relevant and important to these respondents.

Many of the predictions made in the introduction were supported. Employees unashamedly indicated that pay was very important to them, as was loyalty from supervisors. Interesting work, appreciation of work done, and especially being ‘in on things’ were much less important than in the US samples. Promotion and growth was important to younger employees but much less important for older employees. Surprisingly, Chinese employees ranked sympathetic help with personal problems as relatively unimportant, in eighth position.

Breaking the ten items down into categories may shed additional light on intercultural dynamics. Past researchers have generally discussed the items in terms of Herzberg et al.’s (1959) two categories: motivators versus hygiene factors. Although Herzberg has gone out of favour, a similar dichotomy has continued to be important in management thinking in the form of intrinsic versus extrinsic rewards. This is a quintessentially Western approach to what matters in life: individual achievement, growth, and recognition, versus everything else. Chinese life is much more centred around relationships and groups (Bond and Hwang, 1986), so it may be more appropriate to divide the ten items into three classes: security/material rewards, social factors, and intrinsic/achievement themes. When the item ranks are combined this way, the Chinese sample comes out clearly highest on material concerns, and equally and moderately low on social and intrinsic factors. The two American samples come out clearly highest on intrinsics, substantially lower on material concerns, and very low on social concerns.

In terms of superior/subordinate agreement, the data showed that Chinese superiors are far better attuned to their subordinates’ desires than are US superiors. Expatriate managers in the hotel were not particularly accurate in perceiving the preferences of their local Chinese subordinates. Because of the likelihood of misunderstanding,
explicit data on employee preferences would potentially be useful to human resource managers of multinational organizations with ventures in China and to individual expatriates undertaking assignments in China. The implications for expatriate managers of non-supervisory employees are clear: remember that basic and material needs are very important. Financial bonuses and wage raises will be greatly appreciated. Increased housing subsidies, or, better yet, employer-provided housing, are highly valued. Employee share ownership is another financial benefit which is growing in popularity. Loyalty to subordinates is important, and can be displayed by renewing employment contracts, doing favours, and showing concern for employees’ families. On the other hand, intrinsic needs for interesting work, growth, and involvement tend to be lower, especially among older staff, than in the West.

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Note
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References


