Power Imbalance and Employee Silence: The Role of Abusive Leadership, Power Distance Orientation, and Perceived Organisational Politics

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Employee silence is a costly but omnipresent phenomenon in modern organisations. In this study, we focus on two forms of silence: defensive silence based on fear and acquiescent silence based on resignation. Given the power imbalance in supervisor–subordinate relationships, we hypothesise that abusive supervision is an antecedent of subordinates’ defensive silence and that a subordinate’s power distance orientation affects acquiescent silence. We investigate the interaction effects of abusive supervision and power distance orientation on these two types of silence. Perceived organisational politics may also aggravate such interactive effects. Based on data collected from 159 junior employees in China in two periods, we find that abusive supervision is associated with employee defensive silence and moderates high-power-distance employees’ tendency to engage in acquiescent silence. When perceiving high politics in the organisation, high-power-distance employees are more sensitive to abusive supervision and engage in more defensive silence. A highly political organisational context also accentuates abusive supervision’s moderating effect on the relation between employees’ power distance orientation and acquiescent silence. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications for the silence literature.

Employee silence, referring to employees’ deliberate and conscious withholding of potentially important information, usually from leaders who are in positions to receive and address it (Morrison, 2014), is a universal phenomenon in modern organisations. While research has acknowledged the potential benefits of employee silence, such as reduced information load for management (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008) and the prosocial reasons employees sometimes withhold information (Van Dyne, Ang, & Botero, 2003), both academia

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and the media have uncovered stronger evidence that silence has a widespread detrimental impact on organisations (e.g., failure to detect serious problems, lack of ideas for innovation) (see Morrison, 2014; Perlow & Williams, 2003). Several well-known organisational tragedies (e.g., the Challenger disaster in the United States, the Sanlu milk powder incident in China, the Fukushima nuclear radiation disaster in Japan) have been attributed to employee silence.

Given the adverse consequences of silence, understanding why it happens in the workplace is crucial (Harlos, 2016; Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Yet, as Morrison (2014) concluded, prior research has mostly focused on the conditions encouraging employees to speak up rather than factors that suppress their willingness to share potentially useful information (e.g., Liang, Farh, & Farh, 2012; Morrison, Wheeler-Smith, & Kamdar, 2011; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009). Among the few empirical studies of employee silence, investigation has taken a largely individual perspective involving factors such as affect and belief (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Madrid, Patterson, & Leiva, 2015). The dearth of research in the latter area is unfortunate not just because of organisational tragedies due to employee silence. Given that silence is the dominant employee response within many organisations, Morrison and Milliken (2000) proposed contextual rather than individual factors as the more probable reasons why people refuse to speak up. Without knowing the contextual factors of why employees choose not to share their opinions (Timmig & Johnstone, 2015), leaders run the risk of not recognising whether or how their organisations may have gone wrong and miss the opportunity to take necessary and timely actions (Detert & Treviño, 2010; Donaghey, Cullinane, Dundon, & Wilkinson, 2011). As particular situations can also have strong influences on behaviours (Johns, 2006), an empirical examination regarding the contextual influences (e.g., leader and organisational characteristics) on silence is germane.

In this study, we focus on two silence types that may stem from negative work contexts and harm organisational effectiveness (Pinder & Harlos, 2001; Wang & Hsieh, 2013): defensive silence based on fear and acquiescent silence based on deeply held resignation (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Defensive (or quiescent) silence results from employees’ active reactions to external threats to self-protection, whereas acquiescent silence occurs when employees are deeply disengaged and passively accept an organisation’s status quo (Pinder & Harlos, 2001). Consistent with the theoretical underpinnings of power imbalance (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), we first propose that a leadership style that exercises “power with hostility” (Tepper, Carr, Breaux, Geider, Hu, & Hua, 2009, p. 156)—or abusive supervision—is a possible antecedent of employee defensive silence. Second, we expect power distance orientation, which captures cultural influence of power and authority differentials in organisations (Farh, Hackett, & Liang, 2007), to affect employees’ tendency to remain silent because of acquiescence. Third, we explore whether abusive
supervision and power distance orientation interact to explain why employees withhold information in organisations. Finally, organisational politics in a work environment can reflect power imbalance (Chang, Rosen, & Levy, 2009). Following the power imbalance perspective, we expect that in organisational contexts characterised by high politics, the interactive effects of abusive supervision and power distance on defensive and acquiescent silence will become more salient. Figure 1 presents our hypothesised relationships.

This research aims to offer valuable insights into the silence literature. First, by empirically examining two forms of employee silence, we investigate whether people are motivated by contextual factors to withhold information and offer practical implications for organisations to prevent such a phenomenon (Harlos, 2016; Van Dyne et al., 2003). By considering the interactive effects of an individual cultural value (i.e., power distance orientation), leadership (i.e., abusive supervision), and organisational context (i.e., perceived organisational politics) on silence, we also answer Morrison, See, and Pan's (2015) call for research to explore the interplay of individual and situational factors in triggering silence. Second, Pinder and Harlos (2001) were among the first to suggest using power asymmetry and dependence to study silence. By adopting the power imbalance perspective to understand silence (Keltner et al., 2003; Morrison & Rothman, 2009), we thus enhance the theoretical

FIGURE 1. Conceptual model.
foundations of the silence literature. As organisational factors (e.g., perceived organisational politics) are important to understand why silence occurs, we evaluated antecedents of silence among junior employees working for different organisations in China. Doing so advances current understanding of the silence phenomenon with respect to the work context influence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Whereas silence in general refers to information withheld because individuals fail or refuse to speak their minds (Morrison, 2014), research in organisational psychology and behaviour literature has conceptualised voice as deliberate and proactive employees’ behaviour to verbally express ideas and opinions to those who are in positions to act on their suggestions (Morrison et al., 2011; Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). While voice is a broad term, such that its definition can differ across disciplines (Wilkinson & Fay, 2011), there is general agreement that voice and silence are two distinct constructs with different antecedents (Brinsfield, 2013; Morrison, 2014). Empirical findings on voice have largely supported the notion that such proactive behaviour is more common when organisations have positive voice and safe climates (Morrison et al., 2011; Walumbwa & Schaubroeck, 2009) and a variety of voice mechanisms (Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004). Employees’ willingness to raise suggestions and engage in upward problem solving is also more likely when leaders encourage two-way communication (Wilkinson, Dundon, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004) and are ethical and open-minded (Ashford, Sutcliffe, & Christianson, 2009; Burris, Detert, & Chiaburu, 2008; Detert & Burris, 2007; Lam, Loi, Chan, & Liu, 2016; Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Vakola & Bouradas, 2005). Employees’ motivation and obligations can also contribute to their upward expression of voice, including prosocial motivation (Lebel, 2012), impression management (Fuller, Barnett, Hester, Relyea, & Frey, 2007), organisational identification (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012), and feelings of responsibility for constructive change (Liang et al., 2012).

Research on silence dates back to workplace abuse literature on victims’ responses to deliberately violent acts such as bullying and mobbing (e.g., Davenport, Schwartz, & Elliott, 2002; Leymann, 1990). In general, that research shows that workplace abuses have detrimental effects on recipients, including depression, anxiety, feelings of humiliation, and reduced self-esteem (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Sloan, Matyók, Schmitz, & Short, 2010). Recipients of workplace abuse, however, have limited ability to fight back, as they may need to maintain their current employment. As such, their silence is a common response (Parker, 2014). Observers
of workplace abuse may also engage in silence because of the risk of being targeted themselves (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002).

In the organisational psychology literature, Morrison and Milliken (2000) and Pinder and Harlos (2001) were among the first to investigate why employees withhold useful information from top management. In their study on organisational silence, Morrison and Milliken (2000) described a paradoxical phenomenon in which most employees are aware of certain organisational problems, have knowledge on how to resolve them, but dare not communicate their ideas to leaders. Pinder and Harlos (2001) later identified employee silence as individuals’ response to injustice in organisations; they refuse to speak up out of fear or a deep state of resignation.

Since the publication of these two conceptual studies, a small but growing research has explored employee silence. Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin (2003) revealed that fear and futility explain why people withhold their opinions; they worry that speaking up will be received negatively and also believe that doing so will make little or no difference. The fear of being isolated can also be why minority members rarely express their opinions in work groups (Bowen & Blackmon, 2003). Relying on prior literature and anecdotal examples of why people were hesitant to speak up, Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, and Edmondson (2009) further showed that fear is the most pervasive and common reason, due to possible repercussions. These findings are consistent with Pinder and Harlos’s (2001) description of defensive and acquiescent silence. In addition to these two forms of employee silence, Van Dyne et al. (2003) postulated a third kind of silence in which employees withhold information with the intent to protect organisational interests. As it is based on altruistic motives, Van Dyne et al. described this form of silence as prosocial.

Despite scholarly efforts to advance the silence construct, a dearth of empirical research on employee silence remains, especially regarding its antecedents. Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008) showed that employee silence is inversely related to individual perceptions such as professional commitment and work-group identification, especially under high procedural justice climates. Detert and Edmondson (2011) proposed that many employees hold the implicit belief that speaking up is risky and inappropriate (e.g., embarrassing bosses in public). Such self-censorship can account for employee silence. A combination of affective (e.g., depression) and cognitive (e.g., rumination) states can also increase employee silence (Madrid et al., 2015). Morrison et al. (2015) and Knoll and Van Dick (2013) indicated that subordinates’ sense of power (i.e., powerlessness) and personal authenticity explained their tendency to withhold input to resolve work problems. With the exception of Tangirala and Ramanujam (2008), all these empirical studies have shown that, by and large, individual factors are drivers of employee silence in organisations.
However, understanding of whether and which situational and contextual factors may inhibit employees’ willingness to share opinions is still lacking. 

**THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT**

Morrison and Rothman (2009, p. 112) suggest that the “power imbalance inherent in organisational roles is perhaps the most important factor that makes employee silence such a common experience”. As supervisors and subordinates assume different hierarchical positions, the power imbalance between them is inherent because supervisors control more resources than subordinates (Anderson & Brion, 2014; Sturm & Antonakis, 2015). There is also a general belief that in employment relationships, employer and employee power is rather asymmetric (e.g., Hyman, 1975; Offe & Wiesenthal, 1980). Employers have more power to adjust wages and are also less affected by turnover of any particular employee (Frege & Kelly, 2013). However, scholars suggest that employees also have power over employers (e.g., Hogbin, 2006; Olsen, 2016); for example, through collective bargaining, employees can exercise power over employers during contract negotiation.

Keltner et al.’s (2003) approach–inhibition theory of power explains that while a higher position endowed with more power elevates individuals’ positive emotions, it also activates their approach behaviours (e.g., aggression). By contrast, individuals with lower positions and power attend more to threats and pursue more avoidant and inhibited behaviours (e.g., silence). To understand how power imbalance between supervisors and subordinates influences subordinates’ communication of ideas, as Figure 1 shows, we developed a conceptual model of silence involving interactions of three factors: leaders who express hostility to subordinates (i.e., abusive supervision), subordinates who are submissive to those of high authority and status (i.e., power distance orientation), and organisations in which power is a defining characteristic (i.e., organisational politics). As these factors are rather common in organisations, our model has the potential to inform Morrison and Milliken’s (2000) question of the organisational context under which people withhold their opinions. In what follows, we explain why supervisors’ abusive behaviour and subordinates’ power distance orientation serve as antecedents of subordinates’ defensive and acquiescent silence, respectively. In addition to their main effects, we also propose the moderating effects of abusive supervision and power distance orientation. Specifically, employees with a high-power-distance orientation may appraise supervisory abuse as more threatening, thus making the occurrence of defensive silence more frequent. Similar to a personality trait, power distance orientation may need external stimuli to have an effect on acquiescent silence (Tett & Burnett, 2003). Therefore, the presence of supervisory abuse may make the power-relevant
issues more salient, in turn activating more acquiescent silence in high-power-distance employees. Finally, we explain why the moderating effects of abusive supervision and power distance orientation are more salient in organisations characterised by high rather than low politics.

**Defensive Silence Due to Abusive Supervision**

Defensive silence occurs when individuals feel fearful in an environment and thus try to protect themselves from potential threats (Van Dyne et al., 2003). In particular, employees deem supervisors abusive when the latter display hostile behaviours, such as ridiculing and humiliating employees, calling them derogatory names, criticising them publicly, and intimidating them through threats such as job loss (Tepper, 2000). Abusive supervision is a form of aggression, such that leaders may use abusive behaviours to wield their power over followers (Aryee, Chen, Sun, & Debrah, 2007; Ashforth, 1994). Because of the power imbalance between supervisors and subordinates, employees are reluctant to take aggressive and direct action against their abusive supervisors out of the fear of losing valued resources, such as promotions and career opportunities (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007), or receiving reprimands to their defiant behaviour (Tepper et al., 2009). Fear of future aggression is a common emotional response to hostility, especially if the act is inflicted by someone powerful in the hierarchy (Kish-Gephart et al., 2009). The emotion of fear activates employees’ self-protection mechanisms and makes defensive silence (i.e., to “lay low”) more likely (Van Dyne et al., 2003; Xu, Loi, & Lam, 2015). Abused employees may fear that confronting supervisors verbally will provoke them further, resulting in more mistreatment. Thus:

**Hypothesis 1:** Abusive supervision is positively related to defensive silence.

**Acquiescent Silence Due to Power Distance Orientation**

Acquiescent silence occurs when individuals believe that their voice has little impact on organisational decisions and thus are disengaged from contributing ideas (Van Dyne et al., 2003). Thus, we reason that the individual orientation of power distance, which captures individuals’ beliefs about the extent to which superiors are entitled to power and privilege and also the extent to which they themselves have power to affect what is happening around them (Farh et al., 2007; Hofstede, 1980, 2001), is a likely antecedent of employees’ acquiescent silence. High-power-distance individuals believe that people have different social classes and statuses, with those with higher status assuming more power because of their abilities and knowledge.
Respect and submission to authority are also defining characteristics of individuals with a high-power-distance orientation (Li, He, Yam, & Long, 2015). Such a belief is likely to be more salient in the supervisor–subordinate relationship because of its inherent power imbalance. Accordingly, high-power-distance subordinates are likely to accept the power inequality because of the pervasive assumption that the more competent individuals (i.e., supervisors) end up at the top of organisational hierarchies (Li et al., 2015; Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Raghuram & Fang, 2014). Thus, high-power-distance subordinates tend to suppress their opinions to those with higher status (Wang, Hinrichs, Prieto, & Howell, 2013). At the bottom of hierarchies, high-power-distance subordinates also tend to take the work situation for granted and may not have the desire to develop alternatives to challenge the status quo in front of supervisors (Khatri, 2009). High-power-distance subordinates also tend not to believe that speaking up to supervisors will make a difference in a situation and are more likely “to restrict their verbal and behavioral expressions as a means to minimize interpersonal conflict” (Morrison & Rothman, 2009, p. 126). High-power-distance individuals have become accustomed not to challenge authority, leading Morrison (2014) to contend that power distance and silence are related. Timming and Johnstone (2015) also postulated an anti-democratic personality to characterise individuals who choose not to speak up because they value obedience and respect for authority. Prior research has shown that those in less powerful positions (e.g., subordinates) express submissiveness when interacting with dominant figures (e.g., supervisors) (Grant, Gino, & Hofmann, 2011). Thus:

**Hypothesis 2:** Individual power distance orientation is positively related to acquiescent silence.

**Interactive Effects of Abusive Supervision and Power Distance Orientation**

As we argued previously, out of fear of future aggression, employees may engage in defensive silence more under abusive supervision. We expect this relationship to be more pronounced among high-power-distance subordinates because of their belief that power is unequally distributed in organisations (Farh et al., 2007). As such, these subordinates also value status and power as means of advancement in organisations (Daniels & Greguras, 2014). Jaw, Ling, Wang, and Chang (2007) found empirical evidence that among Chinese workers, those high in power distance expressed stronger awareness of and preference for power. When interacting with abusive
supervisors, high-power-distance subordinates will thus be more aware that their superiors have power over them. Because power is associated with the control of desirable resources, by viewing their supervisors as more powerful, high-power-distance may further appraise supervisory abuse as more threatening than low-power-distance subordinates. In addition, high-power-distance employees are likely to realise their relative powerlessness in such situations. As such, they may become more concerned with threats and punishment in the environment (e.g., supervisory abuse) because, according to the power imbalance perspective, emotional states of low-power individuals include anxiety and heightened vigilance (Galinsky, Magee, Gruenfeld, Whitson, & Liljenquist, 2008; Keltner et al., 2003). Daniels and Greguras’s (2014) review shows that power distance exacerbates some of the effects of leadership on followers’ behaviours. Empirically, Lian, Brown, Ferris, Liang, Keeping, and Morrison (2014) demonstrate that when abused subordinates perceive their supervisors as having greater punishment power, they are less willing to directly confront with them. These reasons lead us to advance the following hypothesis:

**Hypothesis 3a:** Individual power distance orientation moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence, such that the relationship is stronger among employees with high- than low-power-distance orientations.

We further contend that the linkage between employees’ belief in power distance and their tendency to adopt acquiescent silence manifests more under supervisors’ abusive treatment. Trait activation theorists suggest that the connection between certain traits and behaviours only emerges when the external environment delivers trait-relevant cues (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). For example, Premeaux and Bedeian (2003) found that the environment of managerial openness induced low-self-monitoring employees to voice more than high-self-monitoring employees. In a similar vein, we argue that abusive supervision may constitute an adverse working environment that leads high-power-distance employees to remain silent. Supervisory abuse (e.g., public put-downs) delivers cues that supervisors are not open to input from subordinates and that subordinates’ suggestions are inferior (Tepper, 2000). Although high-power-distance individuals have learned to be submissive in front of authority, power-relevant situational stimuli may further motivate them to be even more disengaged and make them more aware of their inability to make a difference in the status quo; as such, acquiescent silence based on resignation is more likely to emerge. Thus:
Hypothesis 3b: Abusive supervision moderates the relationship between individual power distance orientation and acquiescent silence, such that the relationship is stronger when abusive supervision is higher rather than lower.

Impact of Perceived Organisational Politics on the Interaction between Abusive Supervision and Power Distance Orientation

In Hypotheses 3a and 3b, we explained that abusive supervision and power distance have moderating effects because they deliver contextual cues of power asymmetry to subordinates during their interaction with supervisors. By contrast, interactions between supervisors and subordinates can occur in different organisational contexts, such that the latter may either amplify or inhibit the moderating effects of abusive supervision and power distance. In organisations in which power is a defining characteristic, we expect the moderating effects of abusive supervision and power distance to be amplified (Galinsky et al., 2008).

Power dependence and power-relevant situational stimuli are more salient in workplaces characterised by high organisational politics (Hall, Hochwarter, Ferris, & Bowen, 2004; Kiewitz, Restubog, Zagenczyk, & Hochwarter, 2009; Madison, Allen, Porter, Renwick, & Mayes, 1980). Highly political organisations often contain coalitions acting in their own self-interests, and obtaining more powerful positions will give individuals more opportunities to maximise their interests (Ferris, Adams, Kolodinsky, Hochwarter, & Ammeter, 2002). When individuals perceive organisations as having high politics, they tend to believe that people will “acquire, develop, and use power and other resources to obtain … preferred outcomes” (Pfeffer, 1981, p. 7) and engage in self-serving behaviours (Ferris et al., 2002). As such, individuals view a political work environment as uncertain because of conflicts among coalitions and the inability to gauge whether their work efforts will lead to desirable outcomes (Kacmar & Carlson, 1997). The consideration of organisational politics has led to extensive research on how perceptions of work environments with self-serving activities influence workplace attitudes and behaviours (for a review, see Chang et al., 2009). These reasons lead us to expect that perceived organisational politics, defined as “employee perceptions of the degree to which their immediate work environment is characterized by high levels of political behavior” (Rosen, Ferris, Brown, Chen, & Yan, 2014, p. 1028), will amplify the moderating influence of abusive supervision and power distance on the two types of employee silence.

Previously, we proposed that power distance would moderate the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence because
high-power-distance individuals are more aware of unequal power distribution. In organisations in which political activities are common, individuals high in power distance will become more attentive to what power can do (Jaw et al., 2007). Thus, we expect the moderating effect of power distance to become stronger in organisations with high politics. Specifically, under such an organisational context, we expect high-power-distance individuals to be more mindful that achievement of preferred outcomes (e.g., promotion) is less likely to depend on their ability and efforts and more likely to be influenced by the person’s power and connections with powerful coalitions. Within a political context, employees high in power distance may appraise abusive supervision as even more threatening and be more concerned about actions of abusive supervisors out of fear of losing valued resources and receiving punishments (Treadway, Hochwarter, Ferris, Kacmar, Douglas, Ammeter, & Buckley, 2004). In support of our conjecture, prior research has shown that politics are often appraised as negative situations with uncontrollable threat (Cropanzano, Howes, Grandey, & Toth, 1997), resulting in perceptions of low psychological safety (Ferris et al., 2002; Li, Wu, Liu, Kwan, & Liu, 2014).

We thus expect that when high-power-distance employees perceive organisations as political, they will adopt a more defensive silence under abusive supervision to protect their interests. Thus:

**Hypothesis 4a:** Perceived organisational politics moderates the moderating effect of power distance orientation on the positive relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence. Specifically, the relationship is the strongest at high perceived organisational politics and high-power-distance orientation.

As noted previously, trait-like behaviours are more likely to be activated in contexts that are more relevant to a given trait (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000). Following the logic of trait activation theory, we proposed that abusive supervision would moderate the effect of power distance orientation on acquiescent silence. This is because employees have heightened awareness that abusive leaders are less receptive to subordinates’ opinions, and being submissive is the expected subordinate role. Extant research on trait activation theory has shown that when individuals’ traits are activated, they exhibit a higher tendency to adjust themselves to the demands and characteristics of the work environment (e.g., Ozcelik, 2017). This conjecture leads us to postulate that a work environment characterised by high organisational politics will exacerbate the moderating effect of abusive supervision. Specifically, when subordinates perceive organisations as having high politics, the presence of abusive supervision further reminds them that their supervisors are even less open to their inputs due to their
power differences. Such power-relevant stimuli further reminds high-power-distance employees to be obedient. As such, we expect a stronger tendency to engage in acquiescent silence among high-power-distance employees when they are confronted with abusive supervisors in organisations with a highly political environment. Thus:

**Hypothesis 4b:** Perceived organisational politics moderates the moderating effect of abusive supervision on the positive relationship between power distance orientation and acquiescent silence. Specifically, the relationship is the strongest at high perceived organisational politics and high abusive supervision.

**METHODS**

**Sample and Data Collection Procedures**

We recruited 360 junior employees through the alumni associations of a comprehensive, public university in Southeast China that offers degree programmes in various areas (e.g., social sciences, law, business administration). To increase the representativeness of our sampling frame, we approached the six major alumni associations of the university to distribute our questionnaires. For each association, 10 officers agreed to support our research study by contacting and distributing the questionnaires to 60 alumni (i.e., six contacts per officer). The participants were junior employees, as the officers approached only those who had graduated from the university no more than 5 years previously. We targeted junior employees because they are new to organisations and may believe they can contribute novel ideas for improvement. Nevertheless, their junior positions also make them more susceptible to power imbalance, and thus they may refrain from speaking up in organisations (Milliken et al., 2003). As such, investigating the silence phenomenon among junior employees is both theoretically and practically meaningful.

The surveys were distributed to the alumni both by e-mail and face-to-face (hard copies). No incentives were offered as the association officers knew the respondents well. Respondents received reminder e-mails and follow-up telephone calls to boost the response rate. The cover letters explained the purpose of the study and assured respondent confidentiality. At Time 1, 218 of the 360 alumni responded to our survey, for a response rate of 60.56 per cent. Six weeks later (Time 2), we carried out a second survey among these 218 alumni, 159 of whom returned the completed questionnaires, for a response rate of 72.94 per cent. Overall, the effective response rate was 44.17 per cent (i.e., 159 of 360 respondents). To mitigate concerns about common method variance,
we assessed abusive supervision and power distance orientation at Time 1 and the two types of silence (i.e., defensive and acquiescent) at Time 2. Of our final sample, 42 per cent were men, and 41 per cent had tenures between 7 and 24 months with their employers. Most of our respondents (83.5 per cent) were aged from 23 to 27. The employing organisations were of different sizes, ranging from fewer than 10 employees to more than 1,000 employees (with an average of 200 employees), and resided in various industries, including public service, finance, tourism, commerce, insurance, information technology, real estate, gaming, education, professional, service, manufactory and others.

As we conducted the study in China, the surveys were in Chinese. Following Brislin’s (1986) suggestion, we translated the English items into Chinese and then back-translated them into English (see the Appendix for the complete list of original items). Unless otherwise indicated, all variables were measured on a 6-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 6 = strongly agree).

Measures

**Defensive and Acquiescent Silence.** We used three items with the highest loadings on Van Dyne et al.’s (2003) scale to measure both forms of employee silence. Prior research has also used this scale (e.g., Wang & Hsieh, 2013). In terms of defensive silence, respondents reported whether they had withheld information out of the fear that expressing their ideas was personally risky (e.g., “I withhold relevant information to the job out of fear”). In terms of acquiescent silence, respondents reported whether they had passively withheld information because of a sense of detachment (e.g., “I passively withhold ideas, based on resignation”). Cronbach’s alphas of these two scales were 0.93 and 0.87, respectively.

**Abusive Supervision.** Participants reported the frequency (1 = never, 5 = always) with which their direct supervisors engaged in abusive behaviours on Mitchell and Ambrose’s (2007) five-item scale. Two sample items were “My supervisor makes negative comments about me to others” and “My supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid.” Cronbach’s alpha was 0.93.

**Power Distance Orientation.** Prior research indicates that both societies and individuals have considerable variations in their cultural beliefs (Farh et al., 2007). Consistent with previous work in management, we measured power distance orientation at the individual level (e.g., Farh et al., 2007; Loi, Lam, & Chan, 2012). We employed the five-item scale of Zhang and Begley (2011). Two sample items were “People at the entry level in an organization
should carry out the requests of people at higher levels without question” and “In work-related matters, managers have a right to expect obedience from their subordinates.” The coefficient alpha value was 0.74.

**Perceived Organisational Politics.** We assessed perceived organisational politics (POP) with Kacmar and Carlson’s (1997) 15-item scale. The same scale has been used considerably in the literature to capture employees’ perceptions of organisational politics (e.g., Chang, Rosen, Siemieniec, & Johnson, 2012; Eldor, 2017; Meisler & Vigoda-Gadot, 2014). Two sample items were “There has always been an influential group in this department that no one ever crosses” and “Agreeing with powerful others is the best alternative in this organization.” The coefficient alpha value was 0.79.

**Control Variables.** We controlled for age and organisational tenure because prior research indicates that individuals who are more experienced and senior may be more familiar with the work environment, such that they tend to speak up rather than keep silent (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008, 2012). We also controlled for gender because of its plausible effect on silence (Morrison, 2014). We measured age in years with six categories (1 = 18–22, 2 = 23–27, 3 = 28–32, 4 = 33–37, 5 = 38–42, and 6 = 43 and above), organisational tenure in months with five categories (1 = no more than 6, 2 = 7–12, 3 = 13–24, 4 = 25–36, and 5 = more than 36), and gender (0 = male, 1 = female). In addition, considering the possibility that employees’ perceived risks and efficacy associated with speaking up may vary systematically across industries and companies, we controlled for these two variables in our analyses. We modelled industry effects as dummy variables and measured company size in terms of number of employees. We expect size to be negatively related to silence as larger companies are more resourceful in terms of idea implementation.

**RESULTS**

We used confirmatory factor analyses to assess the distinctiveness of our focal constructs. Given the relatively small sample size in relation to the number of indicators, we reduced the number of observed indicators to three for each construct, based on Brooke, Russell, and Price’s (1988) procedure. Specifically, we averaged items with the highest and lowest loadings on the construct to form the first indicator. Items with the next highest and lowest loadings were combined next, and so on, until all items were assigned to one of the three indicators for each construct. The five-factor measurement model (i.e., abusive supervision, power distance orientation, acquiescent silence, defensive silence, and POP) performed better ($\chi^2(80) = 100.65, p < 0.1; CFI = 0.99; IFI = 0.99; RMSEA = 0.042$) than either the four-factor
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<tr>
<td>4  Industry</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.94</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>5  Gender</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.50</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6  Abusive supervision</td>
<td>1.70</td>
<td>0.78</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<td>7  Power distance</td>
<td>3.76</td>
<td>0.76</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.00</td>
<td>-0.16</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.74</td>
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<td>8  Perceived organisational politics</td>
<td>3.52</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.03*</td>
<td>0.21**</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>-0.07</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.36**</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.79</td>
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<td>9  Defensive silence</td>
<td>2.89</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.06</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.14*</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.15</td>
<td>0.17*</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.07</td>
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<tr>
<td>10 Acquiescent silence</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>0.91</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.16*</td>
<td>0.27**</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.22**</td>
<td>0.61**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Cronbach’s alphas are reported on the diagonal in bold. 
N = 159. *p < 0.05, **p < 0.01, one-tailed.

*aAge was measured in years using 6 categories (1 = 18–22, 2 = 23–27, 3 = 28–32, 4 = 33–37, 5 = 38–42, and 6 = 43 above).

*bOrganisational tenure was measured in months with 5 categories (1 = no more than 6, 2 = 7–12, 3 = 13–24, 4 = 25–36, and 5 = more than 36).

*cCompany size was assessed in terms of number of employees (1 = 20 or below, 2 = 21–50, 3 = 51–100, 4 = 101–200, 5 = 201–500, 6 = 501–1,000, 7 = 1,001 or above).

*dTwelve dummy variables were created to represent 13 industry categories (1 = Public service, 2 = Finance, 3 = Tourism, 4 = Commerce, 5 = Insurance, 6 = Information technology, 7 = Real estate, 8 = Gaming, 9 = Education, 10 = Professional, 11 = Service, 12 = Manufactory, 13 = Others). For the sake of simplicity, we only reported its overall correlations with other variables.

*Gender was coded with 0 (male) and 1 (female).
### TABLE 2
Hypotheses Testing: Multiple Regressions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Defensive silence</th>
<th>Acquiescent silence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Controls</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Agea</td>
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<tr>
<td>Organisational tenureb</td>
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<td>−0.08</td>
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<tr>
<td>Company sizec</td>
<td>−0.17*</td>
<td>−0.18*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Industryd</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gendere</td>
<td>−0.17*</td>
<td>−0.15*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Abusive supervision (AS)</td>
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<td>0.17*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Power distance orientation (PD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Perceptions of organisational politics (POP)</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction terms</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>AS × PD</td>
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<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS × POP</td>
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<td>0.12</td>
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<tr>
<td>PD × POP</td>
<td>0.13</td>
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TABLE 2  
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<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Defensive silence</th>
<th>Acquiescent silence</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Model 1</td>
<td>Model 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS × PD × POP</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
<td>0.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
<td>0.07*</td>
<td>0.08*</td>
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<tr>
<td>$\Delta R^2$</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>0.01*</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standardised coefficients were reported. $\Delta R^2$ was calculated relative to baseline model (i.e., Model 1 and Model 5).

N = 159. * p < .05, ** p < .01, one-tailed.

a Age was measured in years using 6 categories (1 = 18–22, 2 = 23–27, 3 = 28–32, 4 = 33–37, 5 = 38–42, and 6 = 43 above).
b Organisational tenure was measured in months with 5 categories (1 = no more than 6, 2 = 7–12, 3 = 13–24, 4 = 25–36, and 5 = more than 36).
c Company size was assessed in terms of number of employees (1 = 20 or below, 2 = 21–50, 3 = 51–100, 4 = 101–200, 5 = 201–500, 6 = 501–1,000, 7 = 1,001 or above).
d Twelve dummy variables were created to represent 13 industry categories (1 = Public service, 2 = Finance, 3 = Tourism, 4 = Commerce, 5 = Insurance, 6 = Information technology, 7 = Real estate, 8 = Gaming, 9 = Education, 10 = Professional, 11 = Service, 12 = Manufactory, 13 = Others). For the sake of simplicity, we did not report 12 regression coefficients. Specific results are available from the authors upon request.
e Gender was coded with 0 (male) and 1 (female).
model with the two silence items loaded together ($\chi^2(84) = 240.72, p < 0.001; \ CFI = 0.91; \ IFI = 0.91; \ RMSEA = 0.114$) or the one-factor model with all items loaded onto the same factor ($\chi^2(90) = 771.13, p < 0.001; \ CFI = 0.58; \ IFI = 0.58; \ RMSEA = 0.18$). The significant chi-square differences between the five- and four-factor models ($\Delta \chi^2(4) = 140.07, p < 0.001$) and the five- and one-factor models ($\Delta \chi^2(10) = 670.48, p < 0.001$) provide evidence of the discriminant validity of our study constructs.

Table 1 lists the descriptive statistics for the study variables. We conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regressions to test our hypotheses in relation to defensive and acquiescent silence separately.\footnote{Other approaches, such as structural equation modelling, also could be used to test some of our hypotheses (Cortina, Chen, & Dunlap, 2001). We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this possibility.} Table 2 reports the results for the main, two-way, and three-way interaction effects. All hypotheses are directional, and one-tailed tests were used to evaluate their statistical

\[\text{FIGURE 2. (a) The moderating effect of power distance orientation on the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence, (b) The moderating effect of abusive supervision on the relationship between power distance orientation and acquiescent silence.}\]
significance. Model 2 shows that abusive supervision is positively associated with defensive silence ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.05$), in support of Hypothesis 1. The positive relationship between power distance orientation and acquiescent silence, however, is not statistically significant (see Model 6: $\beta = 0.04, \text{ns}$). Thus, Hypothesis 2 is not supported.

To evaluate Hypothesis 3a, we added a product term of abusive supervision and power distance on defensive silence. To avoid multicollinearity, we mean-centred abusive supervision (AS) and power distance orientation (PD) before calculating their product term (Aiken & West, 1991). A moderating effect is evidenced if the beta coefficient of the product term (AS $\times$ PD) is significant. As Model 3 shows, the product term was statistically significant ($\beta = 0.16, p < 0.05$). The whole model accounts for an additional 3 per cent of the variance in acquiescent silence when compared with the baseline model (i.e., Model 1). With this significant result, we then followed Aiken and West’s (1991) procedures to plot the interaction pattern in Figure 2a and conducted simple slope tests at high (i.e., one standard

![Figure 2a](image-url-a)

**Figure 2a**. The moderating effect of power distance orientation on abusive supervision and defensive silence, under perceptions of high organisational politics.

![Figure 2b](image-url-b)

**Figure 2b**. The moderating effect of power distance orientation on abusive supervision and defensive silence, under perceptions of low organisational politics.

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deviation above the mean), mean, and low (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean) levels of power distance orientation. The relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence is positive and significant at the high and mean levels of power distance orientation ($\beta = 0.40$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$, respectively). At the low level of power distance orientation, such relationship is not statistically significant ($\beta = 0.00$, ns). Thus, Hypothesis 3a is supported.

Similarly, to test Hypothesis 3b, we added the product term of $AS \times PD$ on acquiescent silence. The results indicate that the product term is statistically significant (see Model 7: $\beta = 0.17$, $p < 0.05$). We plotted the interaction pattern in Figure 2b and conducted simple slope tests at high and low levels of abusive supervision (i.e., one standard deviation above and below the mean level of abusive supervision). The relationship between

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FIGURE 4. (a) The moderating effect of abusive supervision on power distance orientation and acquiescent silence, under perceptions of high organisational politics, (b) The moderating effect of abusive supervision on power distance orientation and acquiescent silence, under perceptions of low organisational politics.
Power distance orientation and acquiescent silence is positive and significant only at a high level of abusive supervision ($\beta = 0.30, p < 0.05$). At the low or mean level of abusive supervision, such relationship is not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.14$ and 0.08, respectively, $ns$). Thus, Hypothesis 3b is supported.

To test our three-way interaction hypotheses (i.e., Hypotheses 4a and 4b), we followed Aiken and West’s (1991) suggestions and regressed defensive silence and acquiescent silence, respectively, on the three independent variables (i.e., AS, PD, and POP), their two-way product terms (i.e., AS × PD, AS × POP, and PD × POP), and the three-way product term (i.e., AS × PD × POP). The three-way product term is positive and significant on both defensive silence (Model 4: $\beta = 0.20, p < 0.05$) and acquiescent silence (Model 8: $\beta = 0.20, p < 0.05$). We followed Lam, Chuang, Wong, and Zhu’s (2018) suggestion and plotted the moderated relationship of abusive supervision and power distance orientation on defensive silence and acquiescent silence, respectively, under high and low POP (one standard deviation above and below the mean score for POP). The simple slope tests showed that under high perceived organisational politics, the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence is only positive and significant when the respondents hold a high rather than a low level of power distance beliefs (Figure 3a: $\beta = 0.54, p < .001$ vs. $\beta = -0.21, ns$). The relationship is also not significant at the mean level of power distance orientation ($\beta = 0.17, ns$). Following Dawson and Richter’s (2006) suggestion, we further compared the difference between the simple slopes at high and low power distance. Consistent with Hypothesis 4a, the slope difference is statistically significant ($t = 3.16, p < .01$), suggesting that power distance has a moderating effect under a high political context. Under a low political context, the relationship is not significant at either high- or low-power-distance orientation (Figure 3b: $\beta = 0.15$ and 0.46, respectively, $ns$). This empirical evidence offers additional support for Hypothesis 4a.

Similar three-way results also emerged for acquiescent silence. Under high perceived organisational politics, the relationship between power distance orientation and acquiescent silence is positive and significant when respondents experience a high rather than a low level of supervisory abuse (Figure 4a: $\beta = 0.38, p < .05$ vs. $\beta = -0.28, ns$). The relationship is also not significant at the mean level of supervisory abuse ($\beta = 0.05, ns$). Consistent with Hypothesis 4b, the two slopes at high and low supervisory abuse statistically differ from each other ($t = 2.68, p < .01$). Under the context of low organisational politics, however, such relationship is not significant for those who experience either a high or low level of supervisory abuse (Figure 4b: $\beta = -0.27$ and 0.16, respectively, $ns$). Thus, Hypothesis 4b is supported.
DISCUSSION

Silence is a costly but ubiquitous phenomenon in modern organisations. Through the lens of power imbalance, this study examines the antecedents of two forms of employee silence that may have detrimental impacts on organisations (Wang & Hsieh, 2013). The results show that abusive supervision is positively and significantly related to employee defensive silence, and this relationship is more pronounced among high- than low-power-distance employees. In addition, we found that employees’ power distance orientation is positively related to acquiescent silence at high levels of abusive supervision. Finally, we obtained empirical evidence that perceived organisational politics further influences the moderating effect of abusive supervision and power distance on the two forms of silence.

Theoretical Implications

This study is among the few studies to advance understanding of the antecedents of defensive and acquiescent silence, by investigating the influence of subordinates’ power distance beliefs, leaders’ abusive supervision, and organisations’ political environment (Harlos, 2016; Morrison, 2014). While prior research has predominantly focused on individual factors as precursors of employee silence (e.g., Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), our study extends this line of research by considering both situational and individual factors as well as their interactive roles as antecedents of employee silence (Morrison et al., 2015). Although previous studies have made some progress toward understanding the silence phenomenon, silence researchers suggest that “it may be among the least understood of proverbial black boxes in organizational studies” (Harlos, 2016, p. 348). Our findings reveal the potential of using the power-imbalance perspective to understand why employees remain silent in organisations (Morrison & Rothman, 2009; Pinder & Harlos, 2001).

Specifically, power imbalance in the form of abusive supervision is related to defensive silence. Our findings show that when supervisors engage in abusive behaviours to demonstrate their power over subordinates (Aryee et al., 2007; Ashforth, 1994; Lian et al., 2014), subordinates tend to engage self-protection in the form of defensive silence. In the silence literature, researchers have identified the fear of being labelled negatively as among the most important reasons employees choose to be silent (Milliken et al., 2003). Additional analyses show that power distance moderates the relationship between abusive supervision and defensive silence, and the moderating effect of power distance is more salient at a high rather than a low level of perceived organisational politics. Our findings suggest that when high-power-distance employees work in organisations characterised by high rather than low politics, they
may feel particularly fearful of the undermining behaviours exhibited by abusive supervisors. Such state of mind may have accounted for their tendency to proactively hide their feelings. By considering the influence of power through organisational politics, our study’s findings enrich the silence literature by revealing the organisational context in which employees are likely to intentionally withdraw their opinions (Morrison & Rothman, 2009).

In contrast, while scholars expect silence to occur more often among high-power-distance individuals (Morrison, 2014), we find that, by itself, power distance orientation is not directly associated with silence. Instead, we find that individuals’ power distance orientation is positively related to acquiescent silence only when their supervisors are also abusive. Our analyses also show that the moderating effect of abusive supervision is more pronounced at high than low levels of perceived organisational politics. These results corroborate with trait activation theory (Tett & Burnett, 2003; Tett & Guterman, 2000), which argues that traits such as power distance orientation might only be activated by situational and cultural cues (Botero & Van Dyne, 2009; Koo & Park, 2017). High-power-distance individuals may not perceive themselves as having low status and power per se. Nevertheless, when situational cues remind them otherwise, such as demonstration of power by their supervisors in highly political contexts, they may believe that they have little power to alter what happens in the organisation and become acquiescent. The political context can further remind high-power-distance employees that their suggestions will likely not be heard, explaining their tendency to engage in acquiescent silence (Ozcelik, 2017). Some researchers examining perceived organisational politics have argued that employees’ reactions to politics will vary depending on their power distance orientation (Vigoda, 2001). In response, our study shows how perceived politics shapes the potential influence of power distance on acquiescent silence.

Finally, our findings highlight the importance of examining the work consequences of abusive supervision. Specifically, our study shows that abusive supervision has both main and moderating effects on defensive and acquiescent silence. A recent meta-analysis (Mackey, Frieder, Brees, & Martin-Ko, 2017) reveals that while prior research has examined many aggressive forms that employees may adopt to retaliate against their abusive leaders, researchers have paid relatively little attention to the passive reactions of abused employees. These reactions are important to know because employees’ aggressive behaviours resulting from supervisory abuse may eventually lead to the disintegration of the supervisor–subordinate relationship, a situation that many employees would like to avoid (Tepper et al., 2007; Whitman, Halbesleben, & Holmes, 2014; Xu et al., 2015). As such, resorting to less obtrusive reactions such as silence may be the more feasible way for abused employees to act.
Practical Implications

Given the large hidden costs embedded in employee silence (e.g., Morrison, 2014; Morrison & Milliken, 2000), our findings offer several insights into managerial practice. First, because abusive supervision negates employees’ ideas both directly and indirectly, it is important for organisations to inhibit abusive supervisory behaviour. To do so, organisations can closely monitor their working environments to detect any sign of supervisors’ non-physical hostility. Organisations can also consider providing leadership training to coach supervisors on more positive leadership practices and less hostile behaviours. In addition, ethics training should be offered to employees at all levels, to induce moral concern in supervisors to avoid engaging in abusive conduct toward their subordinates and to arouse moral courage among employees to report plausible abuse in the workplace.

Second, considering that power imbalance may make employees refrain from speaking up, organisations may want to consider additional interventions such as mentoring programmes and social support groups, especially if the workplace has considerable politics. Mentors or colleagues can then play a more active role in providing psychosocial support and protection to make their mentees or peers feel more safe and comfortable in speaking out (Snoeren, Raaijmakers, Niessen, & Abma, 2016). Supervisors should also avoid demonstrating political behaviours given the importance of employee voice for organisational success. Human resource departments should promote civilised behaviours in the workplace and offer incentives for employees to share their opinions in organisations.

Finally, the findings reveal that the trait of power distance orientation is activated in power-asymmetry contexts (e.g., high abusive leadership and high organisational politics), reminding subordinates of their inferior power to supervisors. In China, employees in general have high respect for their leaders’ competence and expect them to lead them with guidance. Doing so is also consistent with the political environment in China. Thus, leaders with high-power-distance followers should pay particular attention to their leadership behaviours so as to avoid being abusive and political. While junior members are the fresh blood of an organisation, they are also those with relatively low power. Thus, organisations should pay special attention to these issues when socialising newcomers; otherwise, they may lose important and critical inputs from this group of employees.

Limitations and Avenues for Research

This study has some limitations that should be noted for future research. First, we chose to study employee silence in China because power distance is one of the predominant cultural beliefs in this country (e.g., Lian, Ferris,
& Brown, 2012). However, because we collected our data from junior employees in China only, any generalisability of our results to other countries with different cultural backgrounds should be made with caution. We highly recommend additional cross-cultural studies to enhance our findings. Furthermore, replicating our models with other samples (e.g., broader range of age, organisational tenure, and power distance orientation) would help address potential concern with sample-based range restriction effects (which may explain why we found no main effect of power distance on acquiescent silence) and strengthen the generalisation of our findings. Second, following the practice of prior research to minimise common method bias (e.g., Mitchell, Vogel, & Folger, 2015; Ostroff, Kinicki, & Clark, 2002), we collected data on independent and dependent variables within a six-week interval. Yet, as all our study items were rated by subordinates, we cannot entirely rule out the potential threat of common method bias (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee, & Podsakoff, 2003). Future research could conduct experiments to decrease any self-report bias. Nevertheless, researchers indeed have shown that common method variance rarely inflates the interaction effects (Siemsen, Roth, & Oliveira, 2010). Thus we have confidence that our findings on interactive relationships are unlikely to be results of common method bias.

In addition, although we base our arguments on the theoretical underpinnings of power imbalance, we measure it indirectly through perceived organisational politics. Future research could take note of our study findings to further validate our theoretical arguments by using a more direct proxy of power imbalance, such as dispersion of power among organisational or group members (Greer & Van Kleef, 2010). Alternatively, researchers could consider directly examining the mediating mechanisms underlying our moderating arguments, such as fear and powerlessness (e.g., Sturm & Antonakis, 2015; Tarakci, Greer, & Groenen, 2016). Given the detrimental impact of silence, we further encourage researchers to explore what organisations can do to break the silence among the abused and/or high-power-distance employees (e.g., strategies to minimise power differences, establishment of a direct channel of communication to protect those who report mistreatment) (Harlos, 2016). Finally, while correlation did not reveal significant relationships between most demographic variables and the two types of silence, our results show that women in our sample were less likely to remain silent due to acquiescence ($r = -0.16, p < 0.05$). It is possible that junior female employees no longer accept their traditional gender roles to remain silent in the workplace. We encourage future research to further explore the potential interaction effect of gender and age on employee silence (Morrison, 2014).
CONCLUSIONS

Subordinates can offer ideas for organisations to respond more timely to situations. However, contextual factors such as abusive supervision may make subordinates keep silent on ideas both directly and indirectly, especially if they hold a high-power-distance orientation and work in a highly political organisation. Future research could take note of our results to explore the influence of power imbalance on employees’ tendency to withhold information in different organisational contexts. Doing so might help organisations prevent serious failures and problems from occurring.

REFERENCES


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**APPENDIX: MEASUREMENT ITEMS FOR OUR STUDY VARIABLES**

**Defensive silence**
1. I do not speak up and suggest ideas for change, based on fear.
2. I withhold relevant information to the job out of fear.
3. I withhold solutions to problems because of fear.

**Acquiescent silence**
1. I passively withhold ideas, based on resignation.
2. I am unwilling to speak up with suggestions for change because I am disengaged.
3. I passively keep ideas about solutions to problems to myself.

**Perceived organisational politics**
1. People in this organisation attempt to build themselves up by tearing others down.
2. There has always been an influential group in this department that no one ever crosses.
3. Employees are encouraged to speak out frankly even when they are critical of well-established ideas. (reverse coded)
4. There is no place for yes-men around here; good ideas are desired even if it means disagreeing with superiors. (reverse coded)
5. Agreeing with powerful others is the best alternative in this organisation.
6. It is best not to rock the boat in this organisation.
7. Sometimes it is easier to remain quiet than to fight the system.
8. Telling others what they want to hear is sometimes better than telling the truth.
9. It is safer to think what you are told than to make up your own mind.
10. Since I have worked in this department, I have never seen the pay and promotion policies applied politically. (reverse coded)
11. I can’t remember when a person received a pay increase or promotion that was inconsistent with the published policies. (reverse coded)
12. None of the raises I have received are consistent with the policies on how raises should be determined.
13. The stated pay and promotion policies have nothing to do with how pay raises and promotions are determined.
14. When it comes to pay raise and promotion decisions, policies are irrelevant.
15. Promotions around here are not valued much because how they are determined is so political.

**Abusive supervision**
1. My supervisor ridicules me.
2. My supervisor tells me my thoughts or feelings are stupid.
3. My supervisor puts me down in front of others.
4. My supervisor makes negative comments about me to others.
5. My supervisor tells me I’m incompetent.
Power distance orientation
1. People at lower levels in the organisation should not have much power in the organisation.
2. People at lower levels in organisation should carry out the requests of people at higher levels without questions.
3. People at higher levels in organisations have a responsibility to make important decisions for people below them.
4. Once a top-level executive makes a decision, people working for the company should not question it.
5. In work-related matters, managers have a right to expect obedience from their subordinates.
6. A company’s rules should not be broken, not even when the employee thinks it is in the company’s best interest.