

# How triple-role conflicts of Chinese enterprise trade unions impact employees' satisfaction: rights expectation as moderator

Triple-role  
conflicts and  
employees'  
satisfaction

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper aims to explore the extent to which unionized employees are dissatisfied in Chinese Enterprise Trade Unions (CETUs) when they perceive high levels of the triple-role conflicts, as well as whether rights expectations will moderate these relationships. The authors define CETUs' triple-role conflicts as the extent to which CETUs and their cadres prioritize fulfilling the roles of preserving social stability ("peace") and/or maintaining the production order ("production") over protecting worker's rights and interests ("workers' rights").

**Design/methodology/approach** – Pilot study developed the scales via both qualitative and quantitative studies, which include item generation using the transcript of individual interviews with 36 informants, and exploratory factor analyses with 106 respondents. The study used a sample of 327 employees from more than 20 firms in North and Southwest China.

**Findings** – Results indicate high reliability and validity of the scales and provide largely consistent supports for our hypotheses: three dimensions of triple-role conflicts are negatively related to employees' satisfaction in CETUs, and rights expectations moderate these relationships.

**Originality/value** – This study developed three scales to respectively measure CETUs' triple-role conflicts, rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. More importantly, the findings shed light on the moderating mechanism of rights expectation in the relationships between triple-role conflicts and satisfaction in CETUs.

**Keywords** CETUs, Triple-role conflicts, Rights expectation, Satisfaction in CETUs, Scales development

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In recent years, the scale of labour disputes is continually increasing in China (Chawla *et al.*, 2018; Cooke *et al.*, 2019; Lyddon *et al.*, 2015; Pflueger and Enssner, 2017). The total number of workers involved in labour disputes was 8.63 million between 2009 and 2017 (NBS website, 2019). Chinese Enterprise Trade Unions (CETUs), the grassroots organizations of the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), have been criticized for failing to stand up for workers (Wang, 2016; Chang and Cooke, 2018). CETUs were established in enterprises, with

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the main purpose of representing and protecting workers' rights as stipulated by the [Chinese Trade Union Law \(2009\)](#) (TUL). The inaction of CETUs has caused great dissatisfaction among the workers ([Chan and Hui, 2012](#); [Wheatcroft, 2016](#)).

Why do CETUs often fail to protect workers' rights? Previous work has identified several reasons, attributing their inefficacy to the lack of organizational resources, structural independence and political will ([Chang and Cook, 2018](#)). Specifically, some scholars highlighted "classic dualism" theory, which contends that trade unions in communist states have dualist institutional identities, being state instrument and labour organization ([Chen, 2003](#); [Friedman and Lee, 2010](#)). Others analyzed their "constrained agency" (e.g. [Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011](#)). It is clear that CETUs, as subsidiary organizations of the ACFTU, are required to fulfill two dominant functions: preserving social stability (hereafter "Peace") and protecting worker's rights and interests ("Workers' Rights"). Moreover, as outlined by [Clarke \(2005\)](#), under the assumption of "non-adversarial industrial relations", trade unions in a socialist market economy are supposed to fulfill a third role of representing the interests of enterprises by maintaining the production order ("Production"). Given CETUs' "subsidiary" positions ([Pringle, 2011](#); [Taylor and Li, 2007](#)), we contend that CETUs often find themselves at the center of conflicts storm in concurrently fulfilling their three roles: peace, workers' rights and production, especially when dealing with labour disputes.

After a thorough search of existing studies, few (e.g. [Chen et al., 2016](#)) have focused on the conflicts between CETUs' triple roles and how such conflicts affect employees' satisfaction. What remains unknown is whether the relationship between triple-role conflicts and employees' satisfaction in CETUs will be moderated by some factors, such as expectation of CETUs' role of workers' rights. Specifically, we define rights expectation as the extent to which employees expect CETUs to fulfill their role of workers' rights. Since the institutional environment has endowed CETUs with triple roles, some workers may not conceive workers' rights as their core function, and thus no longer "count on" CETUs, but instead turn to some non-government organizations (NGOs) ([Chen and Yang, 2017](#)). It is reasonable to propose that employees who endorse different levels of rights expectation may form various degrees of satisfaction in CETUs when they perceive high-levels of triple-role conflicts. Furthermore, we need to develop the scales for the variables of triple-role conflicts, rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs, respectively, as until now, no quantitative research has measured these variables.

The primary goals of this study are to explore the extent to which unionized employees are dissatisfied in CETUs when they perceive high-levels of triple-role conflicts, whether rights expectation moderates these relationships and to develop the scales of these variables. To fulfill these goals, the paper begins with a thorough analysis of CETUs' triple roles and triple-role conflicts based on previous literatures and proposes several hypotheses. Then we describe the process for a pilot study to develop the scales. Next, the main study, with a large-sample field survey, is presented to examine our hypotheses. Finally, we discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our findings and acknowledge the limitations as well as future directions.

## **Theoretical background and hypotheses**

### *CETUs' triple roles*

The distinctiveness of Chinese trade unions compared with those in capitalistic economies has been well documented in previous studies. For instance, [Chen \(2003, 2009\)](#) and [Clarke \(2005\)](#) drew on "classic dualism" theory to understand the position of trade unions in the communist states. They stated that these trade unions face a dilemma: to represent members to secure their status, but if they do so, they risk undermining legitimacy. Other scholars (e.g. [Xu and Wu, 2011](#)) are skeptical about the adoption of this approach. They argued that the constraints largely impact on union autonomy, forcing them to act as

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government instrument instead of workers' defender (Chang and Cooke, 2018). Research on CETUs further revealed their dual roles of performing managerial functions for the enterprise and safeguarding workers (Chan *et al.*, 2017; Cooke, 2011), and even the monopoly of enterprise management over the union (e.g. Clarke *et al.*, 2004). In terms of the dual role of CETU leaders, Chang and Cooke (2018) found that although some CETU leaders may still be able to protect workers, their dual roles of union representative and manager prove uncomfortable.

Considering that it is Chinese laws and regulations which underpin the roles of Chinese trade unions, Chen *et al.* (2016) analyzed CETUs' roles in that context. Specifically, they underscored Article 6 of TUL (2009) to illustrate CETUs' dual roles of peace and workers' rights. Similarly, they drew on Article 7 and 27 of TUL (2009) to demonstrate CETUs also bear responsibility, as a part of management, for production in addition to their duties of peace and workers' rights. Meanwhile, the main source of CETUs' funds depends on the enterprises to which they are affiliated (Article 42). It is quite clear that CETUs have to concurrently fulfill three different roles: peace, workers' rights and production.

### *CETUs' triple-role conflicts*

Although previous studies have identified the diverse roles of CETUs by analyzing their "dualist functions" as preserving stability and protecting workers' rights (Chen, 2003; Clarke, 2005) and criticizing their "subordination" to enterprise management (Chen, 2009), few have touched upon the topic of how to conceptualize and measure the conflicts among CETUs' multiple roles. In this study, we focus on CETUs' triple roles of peace, workers' rights and production, and define CETUs' triple-role conflicts as the extent to which CETUs and their cadres prioritize fulfilling the roles of peace and/or production over workers' rights in dealing with labour disputes.

Before we expand on the conceptualizations of CETUs' triple-role conflicts, it is worth noting that triple roles of CETUs can coordinate with and even benefit each other in general situations. For example, Fang *et al.* (2018) found that multinational manufacturing enterprises in which trade unions are present reported higher productivity. However, when a labour dispute occurs, CETUs will inevitably fall into the dilemma caused by the conflicts among its triple roles. As observed in real practices, CETUs usually prioritize peace over workers' rights and refuse to support workers' strikes for the sake of legitimacy (Wang and Cooke, 2016). Moreover, given that maintaining the production order (i.e. production) is actually a way to preserve social stability (i.e. peace) and, more importantly, because the enterprise provides main funds to CETUs when a labour dispute occurs, CETUs often side with its employers and become alienated from workers (Chan, 2014; Chen, 2010; Qiao, 2009; Taylor and Li, 2007).

Not only do CETUs, as whole organizations, confront role conflicts, so do the individuals, such as CETUs' cadres. Article 41 of TUL (2009) stipulates that the full-time personnel of CETUs have their wages, rewards and bonuses paid by the enterprises. Further, the appointment of chairpersons is often recommended or delegated by enterprise management, especially for those in state-owned enterprises (Qiao, 2009). In addition, many CETU cadres serve as managers in enterprises (e.g. Chang and Cooke, 2018). An empirical analysis of Qiao (2009) demonstrates that 78.9% of CETU chairpersons concurrently hold other positions, and of these, 19.2% have administrative roles, such as of a deputy manager. These facts result in high-levels dependency of CETUs' cadres on enterprise management (Clarke *et al.*, 2004). When labour disputes occur, some cadres may be able to protect workers (Chang and Cooke, 2018), while others often prioritize enterprises' interests (Chen, 2003; Wang, 2016). For those who choose to safeguard workers, they will most likely suffer negative consequences (Chen, 2003).

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In sum, we identify a three-dimensional concept of CETUs' triple-role conflicts: CETU favours peace, CETU favours production and CETU cadre favours enterprise. The first two describe the manifestations of role conflicts of a CETU as a whole organization, while the third refers to those of individuals: CETU cadres.

#### *CETUs' triple-role conflicts and employees' satisfaction in CETUs*

Most previous studies on Chinese trade unions "have predominantly been critical about their inefficacy in representing workers as a formal institutional actor in industrial relations" (Chang and Cooke, 2018). That said, CETUs' performance in protecting workers is poor. Some scholars, on the contrary, argued that the concurrent diverse roles of CETUs advance positive influence in mediating between enterprise and workers, thus leading to positive outcomes such as employees' engagement (Yang *et al.*, 2018) and enterprise productivity (Fang *et al.*, 2018). This study aims to investigate how CETUs' triple-role conflicts impact on unionized employees' satisfactions in them.

We define employees' satisfaction in CETUs as their perception of how well the CETUs fulfill their functions in general. According to Chen *et al.* (2016), CETUs' functions can be categorized in five dimensions:

- (1) "Assistance to employees" by helping increase their wages, benefits, job security and social insurance, representing and protecting their rights and interests and taking care of their needs and difficulties, particularly female employees' special concerns.
- (2) "Participation in democratic management" by participating in enterprise management's decision-making, processing employees' reasonable proposals and organizing employees' general assembly.
- (3) "Coordination between employees and employers" through signing collective contracts with enterprises on behalf of employees, providing guidance to employees when signing their labour contracts, handling employees' grievances, disseminating knowledge of labour disputes and mediating in labour disputes.
- (4) "Offering training and education" to employees to improve their vocational capability and work skills and organizing work skills competition and recreational activities.
- (5) "Organizational development" for unions by attracting employees to join trade unions and managing unions' funds and assets.

A closer look at the five categories of CETUs' functions suggests that all of them focus on CETUs' role of workers' rights, rather than the other two roles (i.e. peace and production). This is because as "an organization formed by the working classes", the fundamental function of all trade unions should be protecting workers' interests as stipulated by Article 2 of TUL (2009). While as we explained above, in addition to workers' rights, CETUs are also required to act on behalf of the nation for peace and of the enterprises for production. In dealing with labour disputes, CETUs often side with the employers in terms of strong dependency and with the government for maintaining political legitimacy, leading to a failure to protect employees. This failure, in turn, will negatively affect employees' satisfaction in CETUs. Taken together, we predict that all three dimensions of CETUs' role conflicts, that is, CETU favours peace, CETU favours production and CETU cadre favours enterprise, will be negatively related to employees' satisfaction in CETUs.

H1. CETU favours peace is negatively related to employees' satisfaction in CETUs.

H2. CETU favours production is negatively related to employees' satisfaction in CETUs.

H3. CETU cadre favours enterprise is negatively related to employees' satisfaction in CETUs.

*The moderating effect of employees' rights expectation*

Due to the complexity of CETUs' roles in Chinese industrial relations, people are likely to hold various understandings of what is the most important role that CETUs should play, resulting in different levels of expectations of CETUs' role of workers' rights. In this study, we define rights expectation as the extent to which an employee holds the expectation that the CETU should act on behalf of them and take workers' rights as its paramount role. This study hypothesizes the moderating effect of employees' rights expectation.

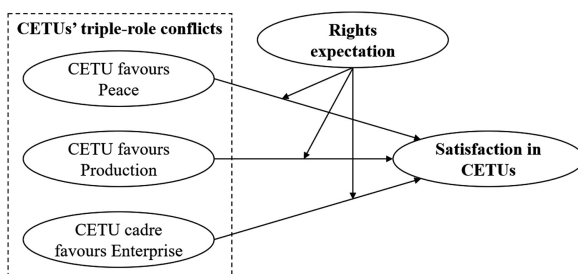
There are two cognitions that an employee holds towards a CETU: one is the rights expectation and the other is the perception of CETUs' triple-role conflicts. Accordingly, if an employee, on the one hand, expects that the CETU should take workers' rights as its core function, and on the other, perceives that the CETU, in reality, has high levels of triple-role conflicts, this employee will hold a more negative evaluation of its performance (i.e. lower satisfaction). In contrast, when an employee holds a low level of expectation of CETUs' role of workers' rights, the negative relationship between triple-role conflicts and satisfaction in CETUs will be more likely to be weakened. Hence, we predict that:

- H4a. Employees' rights expectation moderates the negative relationship between CETU favours peace and satisfaction in CETUs, such that this negative relationship is strengthened when rights expectation is higher.
- H4b. Employees' rights expectation moderates the negative relationship between CETU favours production and satisfaction in CETUs, such that this negative relationship is strengthened when rights expectation is higher.
- H4c. Employees' rights expectation moderates the negative relationship between CETU cadre favours enterprise and satisfaction in CETUs, such that this negative relationship is strengthened when rights expectation is higher.

The theoretical framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.

**Methodology**

The methodology includes two main parts: pilot study and main study. The purpose of pilot study was to develop the scales of CETUs' triple role conflicts, rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. The main study aimed at using these scales to collect data in a field survey to test hypotheses. In the pilot study, we first generated the items of CETUs' triple role conflicts by conducting a qualitative study comprising 36 interviews and designed the measures of rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. Then we conducted a survey to obtain responses to the original questionnaire. Next, we ran a series



**Figure 1.**  
Theoretical framework

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of statistical tests including item analyses and factor analyses to exclude the unqualified items in each scale.

### **Pilot study**

#### *Item generation of CETUs' triple role conflicts*

*Sample and procedure.* The items to measure CETUs' triple-role conflicts were generated from the interviews conducted in our previous study and from the literature reviewed (e.g. [Chen, 2003](#); [Clarke, 2005](#); [Friedman and Lee, 2010](#); [Howell, 2003](#)). The interview data were collected from 36 Chinese participants from nine enterprises. As suggested by [Yin \(2013\)](#), we selected three enterprises from each category of state-owned, private-owned and foreign-funded enterprises to ensure representativeness ([Han, 2010](#)). The average years since the selected enterprises established were 21.8. Five of them had more than 500 employees, and 33% were in the manufacturing industry. Second, a total of 36 respondents were selected, consisting of three groups: 12 trade union cadres, 11 managers and 13 employees. Among them, 61% were male, and their average age was 33. We obtained a total of 65 statements describing CETUs' role conflicts.

*Item screening.* A three-stage process of item screening was implemented according to the procedures outlined by [Farh et al. \(1997\)](#). First, we carefully combined very similar items describing the same construct in one category. Vague items in which their relationship with the target constructs was unclear were eliminated: 43 items were left. Next, three researchers, through discussion, reached consensus about grouping 43 items of role conflicts into four sub-categories:

- (1) Outcomes of CETUs' role conflicts
- (2) CETU favours peace
- (3) CETU favours production and
- (4) CETU cadre favours enterprise. Considering the first category did not help us understand what CETUs' role conflicts were, we discarded it. Finally, we selected the most frequently mentioned items from each sub-category and retained 12 items to measure CETUs' role conflicts.

#### *Measures design of employees' rights expectation and of satisfaction in CETUs*

*Employees' r expectation.* Following the practice of [Shore et al. \(2006\)](#), we designed four items in the employees' rights expectation measure to be consistent with its conceptual definition. The four items were

- (1) "The basic function of CETU is to protect legal rights and interests of workers"
- (2) "Protecting legal rights and interests of workers is the core function of the CETU, and is the foundation of the harmonious labor relations"
- (3) "The CETUs' primary duty is to speak for, handle affairs for, and protect the workers, so as to realize the interests of the workers" and
- (4) "Protecting legal rights and interests of workers is the basis of CETU obtaining workers' trust and is the foundation of CETUs' existence and development". We asked the participants to indicate how strongly they disagreed or agreed with these items (5-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree).

*Satisfaction in CETUs.* Considering that CETUs' functions are explicitly stipulated by the related Chinese laws and regulations, we selected 20 statements mainly from [TUL \(2009\)](#) and the [Constitution \(2013\)](#) to measure CETUs' performance. We asked the participants to



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indicate how good the CETUs' performance in regard to each item was (1 = very poor, 5 = very good).

### *Exploratory factor analyses (EFAs)*

*Sample.* We obtained responses to the original questionnaire, which contained the scales of CETUs' triple role conflicts, rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. A survey was conducted in three MBA classes. All the MBA students had at least three years' working experience. A total of 106 valid questionnaires were collected, with an 88.3% response rate. Respondents had an average age of 29 years and an average organizational tenure of five years; 59% of them were male and 45.7% were non-supervisory employees.

The principal component analysis with varimax rotation resulted in three factors for role conflicts, one factor for rights expectation and four factors for satisfaction in CETUs, with eigenvalues greater than 1 and accounting for 71%, 76% and 72% of the total variance, respectively. The items with cross-loadings on factors of role conflicts and of satisfaction in CETUs were deleted. The EFAs results (shown in Tables 1–3) indicated that we should retain nine items for CETUs' triple-role conflicts (three items for each dimension), four items for rights expectation and 16 items for satisfaction in CETUs. It is worth noting that, inconsistent with the five-category model of CETUs' functions, as we mentioned in the theoretical part, the second and the third categories combined into one dimension. This may be explained by the possibility that in the employees' view, CETUs' participation in democratic management (i.e. the second) serves as a way to coordinate the relationship between employees and employers (i.e. the third).

### *Construct validity of the multidimensional scales*

We performed confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs, shown in Table 4) with the data collected in our main study to examine the construct validity of the multidimensional model of CETUs' triple role conflicts and of satisfaction in CETUs. Both the three-factor model of CETUs' triple-role conflicts ( $\chi^2/df = 3.18$ , SRMR = 0.041, RMSEA = 0.082, CFI = 0.956, IFI = 0.956, TLI = 0.934) and the four-factor model of satisfaction in CETUs ( $\chi^2/df = 3.89$ , SRMR = 0.059, RMSEA = 0.094, CFI = 0.924, IFI = 0.925, TLI = 0.907) fitted the data well and provided substantial improvement in fit indices over their alternative models.

### *Discussion*

In the pilot study, we developed a three-dimensional measure of CETUs' triple-role conflicts and a unidimensional scale of rights expectation, as well as a four-dimensional measure of satisfaction in CETUs. Using a sample of 106 respondents, we conducted item analyses and EFAs to exclude the unqualified items in each scale. The final versions of the three scales contain 9, 4 and 16 items, respectively. Next, we used these three scales in our main study to collect data to examine our hypotheses.

## **Main study**

### *Sample and procedure*

A total of 327 employees from more than 20 firms participated in our main study, with a 91.3% response rate. The questionnaires were distributed to the employees with the assistance of human resources managers in these enterprises. To assure confidentiality, each questionnaire was enclosed within an envelope, and participants were informed that immediately after completing the questionnaire, they should put it back in the envelope, seal it and then give it to their human resources manager. Respondents had an average age of 31.6 years and an average tenure of 6.3 years; 48.3% were male, 76.8% were college or university graduates and 74.9% were non-supervisory employees. Of the respondents' enterprises, 53.5% were from state-owned enterprises, 31.5% were from private sectors and 10.7% were

**Table 1.**  
EFAs results of 12  
items of CETUs'  
triple-role conflicts in  
pilot study

Items	CETU favours peace	CETU favours production	CETU cadre favours enterprise	<i>Reason for Exclusion</i>
<i>Retained items</i>				
1. If labour dispute involves collective action (e.g. strikes, petitions), CETU will take evasive attitude and dare not to represent workers	0.594	0.274	0.241	
2. The role of CETU is to ease tensions caused by workers protest action, rather than standing at workers' side and speaking for them	0.837	0.277	0.067	
3. When a street protest (e.g. strikes, petitions) occurs, CETU should try their best to convince workers to withdraw, at the first instance, to avoid big impact	0.840	0.084	0.197	
4. When there is a contradiction between enterprise and workers, CETU tends to represent the enterprise to coordinate workers, rather than standing for them	0.293	0.742	0.261	
5. When there is an interest conflict between the enterprise and workers, CETU will certainly stand for the enterprise and cannot protect workers	0.307	0.766	0.303	
6. CETU often carries out the decisions of the enterprise, which may affect the benefits of workers	0.176	0.787	0.176	
7. If CETU cadre violates the will of the enterprise management to support workers, s/he is likely to be fired or forced take part in re-election	0.268	0.286	0.704	
8. When workers are unreasonable, CETU cadres will definitely stand on the enterprise's side	0.069	0.207	0.822	
9. CETU cadres cannot negotiate with the enterprise, otherwise he might be fired	0.284	0.221	0.761	
<i>Excluded Item</i>				
10. In labour disputes, CETU often chooses to stand on the government's side, rather than on behalf of the workers	0.719	0.436	0.253	Crossing
11. When there is an interest conflict between the enterprise and the workers, CETU tends to protect benefits of the enterprise	0.629	0.467	0.362	Loading
12. When dealing with labour disputes, CETU cadres choose to support the administration for the sake of his career development	0.385	0.549	0.432	
<b>Note(s):</b> <i>n</i> = 106				



from foreign-funded enterprises. Of the respondents' industries, 34.9% were in traditional industries such as manufacturing and construction, 30.3% were in service and financial industries and 15.3% were in the high-technology industries.

### Measures

We used the five-point Likert-type scales for each measure of the variables, as we developed in the pilot study. Specifically, we asked participants to indicate how strongly they disagree or agree with the nine items of CETUs' triple-role conflicts and four items of rights expectation (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree). To get the participants' satisfaction in CETUs, we asked them to indicate how good they thought CETUs' performance in regard to the 16 items was (1 = very poor, 5 = very good). The Cronbach's alpha values of the three dimensions: CETU favours peace, CETU favours production and CETU cadre favours enterprise were 0.684, 0.830, and 0.743, respectively. That of rights expectation was 0.898. And those of four dimensions (i.e. assistance to employees, participation and coordination, training and education and organizational development) of CETUs' performance were 0.894, 0.914, 0.815, and 0.839, respectively.

*Control variables.* We included individual's demographic information, such as gender, age, organizational tenure, education and position in the organization, as well as organization's ownership and industry, as control variables. Education was measured using four categories: middle school or below, high school, college or university and postgraduate. Organizational tenure was measured as the number of years worked in the current company. Position in the organization was measured using four categories: employees, first-line manager, middle manager and senior manager. The organization's ownership was measured using four categories: state-owned, private-owned, foreign-owned and others. Industries included five categories: IT/communication/high-tech, traditional manufacturing/ construction/extractive, financial/ insurance/banking, service industry and others.

### Results

*CFA and common method variance (CMV) Caution.* A series of CFAs were performed to examine the discriminant validity of the variables: CETUs' triple-role conflicts (three dimensions), rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs (four dimensions). Three alternative models were compared with the baseline eight-factor model 1. As shown in Table 5, model 1 fit the data well ( $\chi^2/df = 2.45$ , SRMR = 0.068, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.916, IFI = 0.917, TLI = 0.902) and provided substantial improvement in fit indexes over the alternatives. The standardized loadings of all indicators on their specified constructs were significant at the 0.01 level.

As suggested by Podsakoff *et al.* (2003), we used "Harman's single-factor test" to detect the CMV. We contrasted the goodness of baseline eight-factor model fit to several alternative

Items	Rights expectation
<i>Retained items</i>	
1. The basic function of CETU is to protect legal rights and interests of workers	0.833
2. Protecting legal rights and interests of workers is the core function of CETU, and is the foundation of the harmonious labour relations	0.897
3. The CETU' first priority is to speak for, handle affairs for and protect the workers, so as to realize the interests of the workers	0.882
4. Protecting legal rights and interests of workers is the source of CETU to obtain workers' trust and is the foundation of CETU to exist and develop	0.867

**Note(s):**  $n = 106$

**Table 2.**  
EFAs results of four  
items of rights  
expectation in  
pilot study

**Table 3.**  
EFAs results of 20  
items of satisfaction in  
CETUs in pilot study

Items	Assistance to employees	Participation and coordination	Training and education	Organizational development
<i>Retained items</i>				
1. Promoting employees' wages and benefits, job security and social insurance	0.788	0.329	0.148	0.086
2. Taking care of employees' needs and difficulties	0.803	0.288	0.189	0.205
3. Taking care of female employees' special concerns	0.719	0.313	0.321	0.320
4. Signing collective contracts with enterprise on behalf of employees	0.130	0.644	0.382	0.177
5. Providing guidance to employees in signing their labour contracts	0.218	0.632	0.304	0.199
6. Handling employees' grievances	0.291	0.836	0.108	0.053
7. Disseminating knowledge of labour disputes	0.300	0.821	0.125	0.053
8. Mediating labour disputes	0.268	0.758	0.140	0.214
9. Participating in decision-making of enterprise management	0.103	0.705	0.146	0.335
10. Processing employees' reasonable proposals	0.397	0.555	0.349	0.212
11. Organizing work skills competition	0.207	0.294	0.790	-0.020
12. Organizing recreational activities	0.230	0.024	0.712	0.391
13. Carrying out ideological and political education	0.141	0.401	0.647	0.197
14. Attracting employees to join trade unions	0.055	0.200	0.289	0.801
15. Managing union's funds and assets	0.242	0.066	0.144	0.862
16. Managing union members' profiles	0.175	0.369	-0.005	0.738
<i>Excluded Item</i>				
17. Representing and protecting employees' rights and interests 2	0.788	0.455	0.187	0.043
18. Organizing employees' general assembly 12	0.181	0.470	0.482	0.209
19. Inspecting the implementation of employees' general assembly 13	0.413	0.545	0.270	0.307
20. Improving workers' vocational capability and work skills 14	0.200	0.567	0.626	0.094
<b>Note(s):</b> <i>n</i> = 106				

*Reason for Exclusion*  
Crossing Loading

Triple-role conflicts and employees' satisfaction

Measurement model	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	TLI
<i>Results of nine items of role conflicts</i>								
1. Three-factor baseline model: CFPE, CFPR, CCFE	76.31(24)	3.18**	—	0.041	0.082	0.956	0.956	0.934
2. Two-factor model: CFPE = CFPR	129.98(26)	5.00**	53.67**	0.057	0.111	0.912	0.913	0.878
3. One-factor model	144.18(27)	5.34**	67.87**	0.059	0.115	0.901	0.902	0.868
<i>Results of 16 items of functions</i>								
1. Four-factor baseline model: AE, PC, TE, OD	381.20(98)	3.89**	—	0.059	0.094	0.924	0.925	0.907
2. Three-factor model: PC = TE	532.94(101)	5.28**	151.74	0.072	0.115	0.884	0.885	0.863
3. Two-factor model: AE = PC TE = OD	671.49(103)	6.52**	290.29**	0.073	0.130	0.848	0.849	0.823
4. One-factor model	896.72(104)	8.62**	515.52**	0.082	0.153	0.788	0.789	0.755

**Table 4.** CFA results of CETUs' triple-role conflicts and satisfaction in CETUs in pilot study

models. The findings in Table 5 indicated that the baseline model provided an acceptable fit for the data ( $\chi^2/df = 2.45$ , SRMR = 0.068, RMSEA = 0.067, CFI = 0.916, IFI = 0.917, TLI = 0.902). The fit indices were superior to any other alternatives combining the theoretical variables. When combining all variables into one factor, the model revealed an unacceptable goodness of fit ( $\chi^2/df = 7.92$ , SRMR = 0.138, RMSEA = 0.146, CFI = 0.568, IFI = 0.570, TLI = 0.534). The results of Harman's single-factor test revealed that CMV was not a significant concern in the present study.

*Hypotheses testing*

Table 6 presents means, standard deviations, reliabilities and correlations of all variables involved in the study. We conducted a series of hierarchy regression analyses to test our hypotheses as shown in Table 7. We found significantly negative relationships between

Measurement model	$\chi^2$ (df)	$\chi^2/df$	$\Delta\chi^2$	SRMR	RMSEA	CFI	IFI	TLI
1. Eight-factor model	854.72(349)	2.45**	—	0.068	0.067	0.916	0.917	0.902
2. Three-factor model (3 dimensions of role conflicts = 1 factor, 4 dimensions of satisfaction = 1 factor)	1472.00(374)	3.94**	617.28**	0.080	0.095	0.818	0.819	0.802
3. Two-factor model (rights expectation and 3 dimensions of role conflicts = 1 factor, 4 dimensions of satisfaction = 1 factor)	2244.38(376)	5.97**	1389.66**	0.127	0.123	0.690	0.692	0.665
4. One-factor model	2984.17(377)	7.92**	2129.45**	0.138	0.146	0.568	0.570	0.534

**Table 5.** CFAs results of the full model in main study

Note(s): n = 327, \*\*p < 0.01, \*p < 0.05

**Table 6.**  
Means, standard deviations, correlations and scale reliabilities of all variables involved in main study

Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
1 Age	31.57	7.41															
2 Gender	1.51	0.50	-0.162**														
3 Education	3.00	0.535	-0.243**	0.012													
4 Tenure	6.30	7.63	0.799**	-0.069	-0.171**												
5 Ownership	1.63	0.83	0.009	0.023	-0.133*	-0.107											
6 Industry	2.52	0.97	0.072	0.214**	-0.054	0.030	0.120*										
7 Rights expectation	3.83	1.04	-0.029	0.105	-0.002	0.028	-0.109*	0.047	(0.898)								
8 CETU favours peace	2.90	0.98	0.106	-0.008	-0.041	0.099	-0.046	-0.058	-0.210**	(0.684)							
9 CETU favours production	3.01	1.08	0.160**	-0.084	-0.046	0.100	-0.008	-0.034	-0.266**	0.561**	(0.830)						
10 CETU cadre favours enterprise	3.23	1.06	0.192**	-0.109	-0.015	0.147**	-0.064	-0.013	-0.135*	0.535**	0.704**	(0.743)					
11 Assistance to employees and coordination	3.40	1.10	0.000	0.023	-0.010	0.059	-0.154**	-0.048	0.401**	-0.218**	-0.345**	-0.284**	(0.894)				
12 Participation and education	2.99	1.01	0.073	0.046	-0.054	0.155**	-0.151**	0.020	0.429**	-0.205**	-0.311**	-0.261**	0.736**	(0.914)			
13 Training and education	3.62	1.05	0.059	0.016	0.028	0.118*	-0.204**	-0.004	0.346**	-0.103	-0.135*	-0.145**	0.647**	0.701**	(0.815)		
14 Organizational development	3.82	1.03	0.112*	0.042	0.037	0.132*	-0.111*	0.043	0.325**	-0.111*	-0.148**	-0.120*	0.591**	0.550**	0.681**	(0.839)	
15 Satisfaction in CETUs	3.34	0.90	0.072	0.040	-0.015	0.143*	-0.178**	0.007	0.446**	-0.196**	-0.292**	-0.250**	0.856**	0.928**	0.854**	0.766**	(0.944)

**Note(s):**  $n = 327$ . Coefficient alpha values are in parentheses on the diagonal. \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \* $p < 0.05$ ; two-tailed tests

Variables	Satisfaction in CETUs									
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
<i>Control variables</i>										
1 Age	-0.092	-0.079	-0.018	-0.024	-0.027	0.014	0.001	-0.041	0.015	-0.002
2 Gender	0.045	0.044	0.020	0.033	0.026	0.009	0.011	0.018	-0.002	0.011
3 Education	-0.057	-0.071	-0.051	-0.051	-0.064	-0.048	-0.050	-0.058	-0.043	-0.042
4 Tenure	129	0.148	0.096	0.103	0.116	0.079	0.093	0.136	0.091	0.118
5 Ownership_1 <sup>a</sup>	0.172	0.245	0.187	0.204	0.221	0.179	0.199	0.227	0.189	0.243
6 Industry_1 <sup>b</sup>	0.083	0.082	0.051	0.057	0.074	0.048	0.041	0.071	0.042	0.034
<i>Independent variables</i>										
7 CETU favours peace		-0.213**	-0.128*	-0.124*						
8 CETU favours production					-0.303***	-0.209**	-0.207**	-0.278**	-0.227**	-0.213**
9 CETU cadre favours enterprise										
<i>Moderating variable</i>										
10 Rights expectation			0.389**	0.412**		0.362**	0.374		0.387**	0.409**
<i>Interactions</i>										
11 CETU favours peace × rights expectation				-0.140**			-0.068			-0.139**
12 CETU favours production × rights expectation										
13 CETU cadre favours enterprise × Rights expectation										
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.050	0.091	0.229	0.246	0.137	0.254	0.256	0.122	0.263	0.279
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.081	0.043	0.179	0.018	0.087	0.202	0.004	0.073	0.211	0.018
ΔF-value	2.611**	14.644**	35.708**	7.376**	31.235**	41.785**	1.800	25.587**	44.174**	7.517**
<b>Note(s):</b> n = 320; *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; two-tailed tests. Standardized coefficients are reported. <sup>a</sup> Regressions include controls for ownership (3 dummies) and industry (4 dummies). For simplicity, we only reported Ownership_1 (state-owned enterprises) and Industry_1 (traditional industries)										

**Table 7.**  
Hierarchy regression  
results of hypotheses in  
main study

satisfaction in CETUs and three dimensions of triple-role conflicts: CETU favours peace ( $\beta = -0.213, p < 0.05$ , model 2), CETU favours production ( $\beta = -0.303, p < 0.01$ , model 5), CETU cadre favours enterprise ( $\beta = -0.278, p < 0.01$ , model 8). Thus, [Hypotheses 1, 2 and 3](#) were supported.

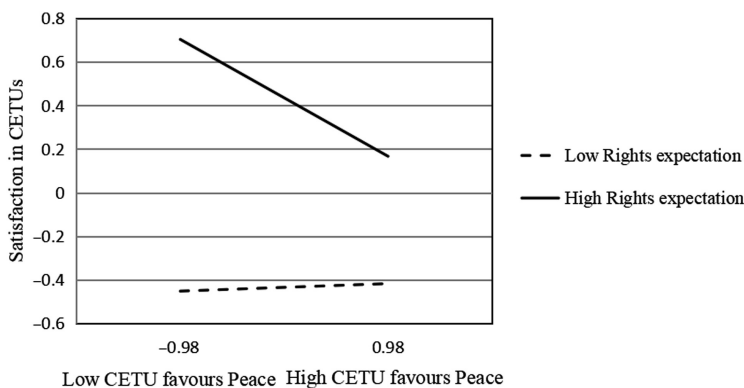
[Hypotheses 4a, 4b and 4c](#) predicted the moderating effect of rights expectation in the relationships between three dimensions of triple-role conflicts and satisfaction in CETUs, respectively. As shown in [Table 7](#) (models 4, 7 and 10), the results indicate that the interaction of CETU favours peace and rights expectation ( $\beta = -0.140, p < 0.01$ ) and that of CETU cadre favours enterprise and rights expectation ( $\beta = -0.139, p < 0.01$ ) had a significant effect on satisfaction in CETUs, lending initial support to [Hypothesis 4a](#) and [4c](#). While inconsistent with our hypothesis, the interaction of CETU favours production and rights expectation is not significantly related to satisfaction in CETUs ( $\beta = -0.068, n.s.$ ); therefore, [Hypothesis 4b](#) was not supported.

To explicate the interaction of CETU favours peace and rights expectation and that of CETU cadre favours enterprise and rights expectation, we drew separate plots for individuals whose scores were one standard deviation below and above the mean of rights expectation ([Cohen and Cohen, 1983](#)). Following [Aiken and West's \(1991\)](#) suggestion, we conducted simple slope tests. [Figure 2](#) shows the interaction effect between CETU favours peace and rights expectation on satisfaction in CETUs; the relationship between CETU favours peace and satisfaction in CETUs was significant and negative for the individuals with higher rights expectation ( $\beta = -0.256, p < 0.01$ ), while this relation was weakened and not significant for the individuals with lower rights expectation ( $\beta = 0.009, n.s.$ ), further supporting [Hypothesis 4a](#).

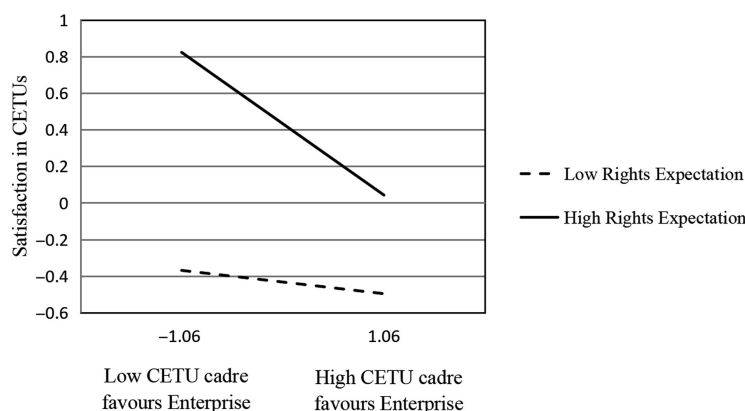
Similarly, [Figure 3](#) shows the interaction effect between CETU cadre favours enterprise and rights expectation on satisfaction in CETUs; the relationship between CETU cadre favours enterprise and satisfaction in CETUs was significant and negative for the individuals with higher rights expectation ( $\beta = -0.345, p < 0.01$ ), while this relation was weakened and not significant for the individuals with lower rights expectation ( $\beta = -0.080, n.s.$ ), further supporting [Hypothesis 4c](#).

## General discussion

The aims of this study were to explore how CETUs' triple-role conflicts impact employees' satisfaction as well as the moderating roles of rights expectation, and to develop reliable and valid scales to measure these variables. Results from the pilot and main study show that the



**Figure 2.** Interaction of CETU favours peace and rights expectation with satisfaction in CETUs



**Figure 3.**  
Interaction of CETU  
cadre favours  
enterprise and rights  
expectation with  
satisfaction in CETUs

three-dimensional CETUs' role conflicts scale has a high reliability and good convergent and discriminant validity, and so does the scale of rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. More importantly, we found that all three dimensions of triple-role conflicts negatively related to satisfaction in CETUs. Moreover, rights expectation moderates in the relationships between two dimensions of triple-role conflicts – CETU favours peace and CETU cadre favours enterprise – and satisfaction in CETUs, while it does not in that between CETU favours production and satisfaction in CETUs. Specifically, we found that employees with high levels of rights expectation tend to perceive a stronger negative impact of CETU favours peace (or CETU cadre favours enterprise) on their satisfaction in CETUs.

The results of the non-significant moderating effect of rights expectation in the relationship between CETU favours production and satisfaction in CETUs indicate that the main effect of CETU favours production remains significant no matter how much rights expectation is. That said, even with a low rights expectation, employees' perceptions of CETU favours production still significantly negatively relate to their satisfaction. A plausible explanation of this result may be related to the fact that in employees' view, CETUs are actually subsidiary of enterprise's management rather than worker's organizations as supposed to be (Chen, 2003, 2009). It is CETU favours production that acts as the paramount negative antecedent in employees' satisfaction. This can be identified using the regression analyses when all three dimensions of triple-role conflicts together enter the equation. The results showed that only CETU favours production showed its significant relationship with satisfaction, while the other two did not.

#### *Theoretical contribution*

The findings of our study make two major theoretical contributions to the literatures of CETUs. Most importantly, it is among the first that develops the measure of CETUs' triple-role conflicts, rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs and study their relationships. We confirm that CETUs' triple-role conflicts are three-dimensional, while satisfaction in CETUs includes four dimensions. All the measures we developed show high reliability and good validity. The original development of these measures provides empirical instruments for future studies. More importantly, our study of CETUs' triple-role conflicts leads to a more comprehensive understanding of the dilemmas that CETUs have to confront when dealing with labour disputes and provides a reasonable explanation of why do CETUs often fail to protect workers. In particular, our results illustrate that unionized employees will be greatly



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dissatisfied with CETUs if they retreat from their role of workers' rights, and instead prioritizes peace and production over it.

Second, our findings demonstrate the moderating mechanisms underlying CETUs' role conflicts, rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. Specifically, this study identifies negative relationships between three dimensions of triple-role conflicts and employees' satisfaction; this helps to advance the current understandings of what hinders CETUs from fulfilling their functions. Our study provides theoretical and empirical insights to explain the contradictory findings of CETUs' performance in current studies, for some have criticized their "inefficacy" (Pringle, 2011; Wang, 2016), while others have argued their "positive influence" in improving employees' engagement (Yang *et al.*, 2018) and enterprise's productivity (Fang *et al.*, 2018). Our findings offer empirical evidence to support the observations of many scholars (e.g. Chan and Hui, 2012; Chen, 2009) that role conflicts faced by CETUs have hindered their function of protecting workers, especially in dealing with labour disputes. Moreover, we found that employees' rights expectation serves as a moderator in the relationships between two dimensions of triple-role conflicts (i.e. CETU favours peace and CETU cadre favours enterprise) and satisfaction in CETUs. These results demonstrate that for those employees with high rights expectation, the negative impact of triple-role conflicts on satisfaction in CETUs appears to be strengthened.

#### *Practical implications*

First, to improve employees' satisfaction, CETUs' role conflicts should be relieved. In the transition to a market-driven economy in China, each major actor in industrial relations should only focus on performing its own function. That is, the government should preserve stability, enterprises' management should maintain production and CETUs should protect workers. In doing so, some institutional rearrangements should be considered, such as allowing employees to elect union chairpersons and abolishing the dual-role position of union chairpersons. Moreover, the relevant laws, regulations and policies need to be revised and adjusted to reinforce CETUs' role in protecting workers, rather than require them to assume responsibilities of peace and production.

Second, regulations should be proposed to ensure that if trade unions and union cadres ignore enterprises' infringements of employees' legal rights, they should be held accountable for dereliction of duty. According to reported incidents of violation of employees' legal rights, CETU chairpersons and cadres have seldom been held accountable for their inaction or dereliction. A typical example reported was a dust explosion of a metal manufacturer in Kunshan, which caused 146 fatalities, mainly workers. Subsequently, 18 government officials and company managers were accused and another 35 officials received administrative penalties, but no one was a union cadre. This was unfair, because one major cause of the disaster was trade union's long-standing neglect of the hazardous work environment.

#### *Limitations and future research*

First, employees were the only data source. We recommend future research to incorporate multi-wave survey design with multiple data sources. Second, we assessed all variables at individual level. However, CETUs' triple-role conflict is supposed to be at an organizational level. Future research should employ a multilevel analysis. Third, this study has treated employees in one group. In reality, the composition of employees in Chinese enterprises has become quite complex. For instance, many enterprises prefer to employ "dispatched-employees". This type of employees does not have direct labour contracts with enterprises resulting in their non-membership of CETUs. Chinese peasant workers are often hired in this way, which may result in increased insecurity and militancy (Smith and Pun, 2018). Therefore, future research could distinguish this group of employees from others.

## Conclusion

CETUs have long been criticized for failing to stand up for workers in labour disputes. This study gives a reasonable explanation by highlighting the moderating mechanisms among CETUs' triple-role conflicts, employees' rights expectation and satisfaction in CETUs. We presented three scales to, respectively, measure three-dimensional role conflicts, rights expectation and four-dimensional satisfaction in CETUs, and demonstrated their high reliability and validity. The findings advance our understandings of the negative impacts of CETUs' triple-role conflicts on employees' satisfaction, as well as the moderating effect of rights expectation. Given the importance of CETUs' role in establishing and maintaining harmonious labour relations, this research offers direct implications on how the role conflicts of CETUs can be lessened.

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### Further reading

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