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Chinese Implicit Leadership Theory

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ABSTRACT. In a 1st attempt to identify an implicit theory of leadership among Chinese people, the authors developed the Chinese Implicit Leadership Scale (CILS) in Study 1. In Study 2, they administered the CILS to 622 Chinese participants from 5 occupation groups, to explore differences in perceptions of leadership. Factor analysis yielded 4 factors of leadership: Personal Morality, Goal Efficiency, Interpersonal Competence, and Versatility. Social groups differing in age, gender, education level, and occupation rated these factors. Results showed no significant gender differences, and the underlying cause for social group differences was education level. All groups gave the highest ratings to Interpersonal Competence, reflecting the enormous importance of this factor, which is consistent with Chinese collectivist values.

Key words: Chinese leadership, factors, group difference

LEADERSHIP has been examined in explicit and implicit theories. The explicit theory is based on observation and evaluation of the overt behavior of leaders. The implicit theory explores the covert conceptual structure of leadership. The latter approach assumes the existence of a conceptual structure regarding the definition of a leader and what a leader should be in the minds of people. Consequently, one's experience with a leader and description and evaluation of a leader are greatly influenced by one's implicit leadership theory. In several explorations of the relationship between implicit and explicit leadership theories, researchers

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have found similar factor structures among U.S. participants (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Lord, Binning, Rush, & Thomas, 1978; Rush, Thomas, & Lord, 1977).

Implicit leadership traits are based on personal characteristics and attributes that followers expect of their leaders. These traits exist as cognitive structures and represent a potential, or tendency, for behavior (Bresnen, 1995; Kenney, Schwartz-Kenney, & Blascovich, 1996; Kraus & Gemmill, 1990). Offermann, Kennedy, and Wirtz (1994) pointed out that implicit leadership theory can serve as the foundation for the study of leadership, as well as provide a conceptual structure for developing explicit leadership theories. Those researchers explored the content of implicit leadership theory for U.S. participants and identified eight major factors: Sensitivity, Dedication, Tyranny, Charisma, Attractiveness, Masculinity, Intelligence, and Strength.

In the last two decades, many researchers have paid attention to the generalizability of implicit leadership theory (Bryman, 1987), especially the role of culture in leadership. Hofstede (1980) pointed out that many of the differences in leadership style, employee motivation, organizational structure, and so forth can be explained through the mental programming within different cultures. Bass (1990) indicated that cultural differences exist not only in terms of leaders' goals and limits of authority but also in leadership style and the conditions necessary for leadership. Ayman and Chemers (1983) studied leadership behavior of Iraqi managers and found different factor structures for Iraqi, European, and U.S. samples. They concluded that the evaluation of leadership behavior was a function not only of overt leadership but also of the evaluator's cultural background. The authors warned that applying Western leadership theories, measures, and research designs in other cultures may lead to inaccurate conclusions.

Social–cultural environment, therefore, has a profound impact on leadership. Implicit leadership theory is based on the culture in which one lives; therefore, the content and factors of implicit Chinese leadership theory probably differ from those of Western theories. If this is true, then an understanding of the implicit Chinese leadership theory should be the first step in future examinations of Chinese leadership behavior (Ling, 1989). Thus, the goals of the present study were to explore how Chinese people think about a leader, to identify the dimensions of the implicit Chinese concept of leadership, and to examine whether different social groups within China differ in their perceptions of implicit leadership traits.

Recruitment

Although we recruited Chinese participants from Beijing, their places of origin may have been in different parts of China. Their native dialects differed, but, fortunately, there is only one written Chinese language. (The Chinese in Taiwan use the traditional writing; the Chinese in China use the simplified writing, but it is the same written language.) In addition, all the participants were living in Beijing when the data were collected; consequently, whatever differences they had may have been somewhat leveled by their current abode.

STUDY 1: SCALE DEVELOPMENT

Method

Participants

The participants were all Chinese recruited from two universities, a government training class, a factory, and an agency that deals with international affairs. The 133 participants (statistics for age not available) included cadres (civil workers for the government), students, and factory workers.

Procedure

In group settings, each participant received a sheet of paper with the following instructions printed on the top: "Please write 25 words or phrases describing leader characteristics." We provided no definition of leader and set no time limit.

Analysis

We obtained a total of 2,546 descriptive terms from the 133 participants, approximately 19 items per participant. We eliminated redundant words and phrases and counted frequencies for the remaining 690 items. We kept only those mentioned at least two times. Last, we combined some items with very similar meanings, leaving a total of 163 items.

Scale

The final Chinese Implicit Leadership Scale (CILS) includes those 163 items, which we randomly ordered and placed on a Likert-type format (1 = *totally uncharacteristic of a leader,* 10 = *very characteristic of a leader*).

STUDY 2: SCALE ADMINISTRATION

Method

Participants

We recruited a total of 622 participants (statistics for age not available) from Beijing, including cadres, factory workers, teachers, college students, and technicians (for a description of the demographics of the participants, see Table 1).

Procedure

We administered the CILS in group settings. Each participant received the CILS, along with the following verbal instructions: "The list you just received

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristic	*n*	%
Gender		
Male	363	63.0
Female	213	37.0
Age (in years)		
< 25	174	29.9
26–35	174	29.9
36–45	127	21.8
46–55	89	15.3
> 55	18	3.1
Occupation		
Cadre	133	22.7
Worker	140	23.9
Teacher	152	25.9
Technician	21	3.6
College student	140	23.9
Education level		
Elementary	15	2.6
Junior high	71	12.3
Senior high	123	21.4
Community college	131	22.7
University	236	41.0

Note. The totals are inconsistent because some participants did not complete items.

contains many descriptive items. For each one of them, please evaluate how typical it is for a leader." Again, we did not provide a definition of leader. There was no time limit, but the participants usually took 30–60 min to complete the CILS.

Results

Identification of Factors

We deleted some incomplete and erroneous data, and the final sample consisted of 597 completed CILSs. We conducted a factor analysis; by using SAS statistical system and reviewing different factor solutions, we decided on a four-factor solution. With the factor loading of .40 as the decision point, each item loaded on only one factor. Thus, the factors were clearly separate from each other. Combined, the four factors for Chinese implicit leadership explained 91.28% of the total variance.

Table 2 contains the four independent dimensions of Chinese implicit leadership as indicated by the four factors: Factor 1, Personal Morality; Factor 2,

Goal Effectiveness; Factor 3, Interpersonal Competency; and Factor 4, Versatility. Factors 1 and 2 consisted of more than 40 items with loadings of .40 and higher; Factor 3 had 30 items with loadings higher than .40; and Factor 4 had 13 items with loadings higher than .40. For each factor, the 10 items with the highest loadings appear in Table 2.

The coefficients to check the factor validity (see Table 2) were all quite high (α = .89–.96), suggesting that the items within each factor represented a coherent measure of that dimension.

Relationship of Social Groups to Factors

Our second goal in the present research was to examine whether implicit leadership traits varied among different social groups. Because the sample size was too small in some groups, we made the following changes: We eliminated the technician group (n = 21), leaving only four different occupational groups—

TABLE 2
Factor Structure of Chinese Implicit Leadership

Factor/Item	Loading	% variance explained	α
1: Personal Morality		35.79	.96
Willing to be public servant	.73		
Honest	.73		
Genuine	.73		
Pragmatic	.72		
Receptive to criticism	.71		
Impartial	.71		
Trustworthy	.71		
Self-disciplined	.70		
Incorruptible	.70		
Use self as model	.69		
2: Goal Effectiveness		23.88	.94
Fortitude	.66		
Visionary	.66		
Decisive	.64		
Deliberate	.63		
Perceptive	.62		
Scientific	.62		
Competent	.62		
Insightful	.61		
Far-sighted	.60		
Open-minded	.59		

(table continues)

TABLE 2—Continued

Factor/Item	Loading	% variance explained	α
3: Interpersonal Competency		18.17	.89
Seasoned	.70		
Cautious	.60		
Socially skilled	.59		
Mature	.59		
Charming	.57		
Glamorous	.56		
Elegant	.55		
Verbal skill	.55		
Cheerful	.54		
Steadfast	.54		
4: Versatility		13.44	.92
Multitalented	.56		
Cheerful	.55		
Psychologically knowledgeable	.54		
Entrepreneur	.52		
Sense of humor	.52		
Appreciates arts	.52		
Well read	.51		
Multilingual	.46		
Imaginative	.43		
Many interests	.41		

cadres, factory workers, teachers, and college students. For the age groups, we combined the participants older than 55 years with those between 46 and 55. For the education levels, we combined the participants with an elementary education level and those with a junior high level to form one category—elementary/junior high. Using gender, age, occupation, and education level as the four independent variables, we conducted a multivariate analysis of variance. According to the results, the effects of age, $F(12, 1239) = 3.5$, $p < .001$, occupation, $F(12, 1207) = 5.79$, $p < .001$, and education level, $F(12, 1228) = 4.28$, $p < .001$, were all significant, but the effect of gender was not significant.

We then conducted four separate analyses of variance on each of the four factors for Chinese implicit leadership (for results, see Table 3).

There were significant differences on all four implicit leadership trait factors among three social groups (age, occupation, and education level) but not between the two gender groups. Therefore, we presented only the results for the three social groups (Table 4).

TABLE 3
Results of Analysis of Variance on Chinese Implicit Leadership Factors

	Age		Occupation		Education level		Gender	
Factor	$F(3, 471)$	p	$F(3, 459)$	p	$F(3, 467)$	p	$F(1, 470)$	p
PM	4.72	.003	2.66	.048	9.33	.001	0.05	.829
GE	6.68	.000	10.08	.000	27.61	.001	1.66	.198
IC	2.65	.049	9.62	.000	7.11	.001	2.78	.096
V	4.11	.007	4.90	.002	18.35	.001	0.00	.966

Note. PM = Personal Morality. GE = Goal Effectiveness. IC = Interpersonal Competency. V = Versatility.

TABLE 4
Mean Ratings on Chinese Implicit Leadership Factors by Age, Occupation, and Education

Variable	PM	GE	IC	V
Age (in years)				
< 25	5.33	6.15	6.43	4.98
26–35	4.53	5.10	5.94	4.26
36–45	5.54	5.63	6.25	4.87
> 46	5.12	5.36	5.96	4.82
Occupation				
Worker	4.79	4.85	5.50	4.20
Cadre	4.87	5.74	6.39	4.79
Teacher	5.31	5.39	6.07	4.64
College student	5.53	6.33	6.61	5.16
Education level				
Elementary/junior high	4.97	4.94	5.63	4.32
Senior high	4.71	5.24	5.90	4.36
Community college	4.43	4.99	5.93	4.29
University	5.72	6.28	6.53	5.22

Note. PM = Personal Morality. GE = Goal Effectiveness. IC = Interpersonal Competency. V = Versatility.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Content of Chinese Implicit Leadership Theory

The results revealed distinct factors (Table 2), suggesting that one can use four separate dimensions to describe Chinese people's conceptualization of leadership. The present outcome is quite different from the eight factors of leadership that Offermann et al. (1994) found for U.S. participants.

The first factor is Personal Morality, accounting for 35.79% of the variance, suggesting that the Chinese participants expected the leader to be willing to be a public servant, to have integrity and honesty, to be consistent in thought and word, to be willing to search for truth, to be fair, to serve as a model, and to be willing to accept criticism from others and from him- or herself. The present Chinese participants, thus, considered virtue as the most important feature of leadership. In the eight factors mentioned earlier (Offermann et al., 1994), there seems to be nothing among the U.S. participants that resembles the factor Personal Morality among the present Chinese participants. Perhaps the U.S. factor Dedication comes closest to the Chinese factor Personal Morality. This finding indicates that, even today, 2,500 years after the time of Confucius, his traditional ethics continue to have tremendous influence over Chinese people. In contrast, people in the United States seem to concentrate on task ability and individual characteristics such as intelligence, attractiveness, masculinity, and strength.

The second factor is Goal Effectiveness, accounting for 23.88% of the variance. The Chinese participants expected the leader to have a broad vision and the ability to plan strategically for the future, to have a keen sense of perception, to keep an open mind, to have the willpower to do what is right, to be decisive, to be deliberate, to have outstanding ability, to appreciate scientific methodology, and to be insightful in maximizing the ability of others. Among the U.S. factors, Intelligence, Masculinity, and Strength seem to come close to the Chinese factor Goal Effectiveness.

The third factor is Interpersonal Competence, accounting for 18.17% of the variance and associated with the skill of dealing with the social environment. The Chinese participants expected the leader to be mature, sophisticated, straightforward, good in social skills, and effective in persuading others; they seemed concerned with not only the leader's interpersonal skill but also his or her external charm. Therefore, they also expected the leader to have grace, to have good form, and to be elegant. These traits make the leader more attractive to others and, in turn, may be helpful to the leader in any interpersonal relationship. Sensitivity, Attractiveness, and Charisma are the U.S. factors that seem to parallel the Chinese factor Interpersonal Competence.

The fourth factor is Versatility, accounting for 13.44% of the variance. The Chinese participants expected the leader to have command of knowledge, to be multitalented, to have broad interests, to be imaginative and willing to take risks, to have a sense of humor, and to be easily approachable. These characteristics represent the breadth of the leader's talent and enable the leader to be flexible and versatile, gaining advantage in both helping the organization reach its goal and fostering interpersonal relations and, thus, in strengthening the effectiveness of leadership. We found no correspondence among the eight U.S. factors (Offermann et al., 1994), but other researchers have identified flexibility and versatility as important leadership traits (Hendrick, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Locke, 1991; Yukl, 1989).

Differences Among Social Groups on Implicit Leadership Factors

The results indicate that social groups that differed in age, occupation, and education level also differed in their perceptions of implicit leadership traits; however, men and women did not differ. The following discussion addresses each social group that showed significant differences on CILS factors.

Age differences. The participants younger than 25 years of age gave the highest rating on almost all CILS factors, reflecting the idealistic nature of youth. This age group also had the largest proportion of college students (140 of 174 participants); therefore, education may also have been a contributing variable. The 26–35-year age group gave the lowest rating. This finding seems puzzling, but if one thinks of historical events, this group grew up during the cultural revolution when chaos ruled, and the cultural revolution is openly admitted by most Chinese today as an "error." Therefore, this group may have become very disenchanted with "leaders." Also, this group missed the most years of schooling because of the cultural revolution; therefore, their lower level of education may be another variable contributing to their lower ratings of leadership traits. An examination of the ratings for each of the four factors shows that all age levels gave the highest ratings to Interpersonal Competence, which reflects the importance given to interpersonal harmony in a collectivist culture.

Occupational differences. There were occupational differences for the factors Goal Effectiveness, Interpersonal Competence, and Versatility, but not for Personal Morality. The college students gave the highest ratings on all these three factors, whereas the factory workers gave the lowest ratings. Again, within each occupational group, Interpersonal Competence was rated the highest.

Education differences. Groups that differed in education level showed significant differences on the factors Personal Morality, Goal Effectiveness, Versatility, and Interpersonal Competence. The college participants gave the highest ratings on all CILS factors, whereas the other three education groups did not differ from each other. This finding may indicate that the participants with more education tended to be more idealistic and wanted their leaders to have higher standards. At each education level, Interpersonal Competence was again rated the highest among all four factors.

An examination of the social group differences taken together suggests that education level may be the common underlying major effect. There seems to be a positive linear relationship between education level and higher ratings given to the CILS factors. The participants younger than 25 years of age were mainly college students. Those in the 26–35-year range were mostly factory workers, who had the lowest level of education. Thus, education level seems to have been the one major source of difference. Differences among the other three social groups

(age, occupation, and education) were caused primarily by education variations. The higher the participants' education level, the higher were their ratings on each factor.

The finding that all social groups gave the highest ratings to the factor Interpersonal Competence suggests that, although the factor Personal Morality explained the largest amount of variance, the Chinese participants rated the factor Interpersonal Competence as a most important leadership trait. This finding is quite consistent with the Chinese collectivist value.

Chinese people constitute 25% of the world's population, and China is increasing contact with the rest of the world, as evidenced by Premier Jiang Zemin and President Bill Clinton's visits to each other's countries. Chinese tradition, values, and perceptions are so different from those in the West that there is an urgent need to better understand each other. Western theories of leadership cannot be very effective when directly transposed onto Chinese people. The results of the present study suggest the ways in which Chinese people view a leader and the meaning attached to a leader. They also show that there are differences in implicit leadership theories not only between Chinese people and people in the United States but also among the social groups within China. Previous researchers on Chinese leadership have used mostly Western theories and have concentrated on the description of overt leadership behavior. Future researchers must continue to explore deeper into the hearts and minds of the Chinese to find out the true Chinese meaning of leader.

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