**ANALYSING THE EVOLUTION OF BUSINESS LEADERSHIP PRACTICES IN CHINESE CORPORATIONS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW**

**Abstract**

The primary purpose of the study is to examine the evolution of business leadership practices within Chinese corporations, considering various leadership styles. The research has significantly utilised a systematic literature review (SLR) to select 10 specific peer-reviewed journal articles based on leadership practices within Chinese organisations. The findings of the study highlighted that the leadership practices within Chinese organisations are driven by multiple important factors that include psychological flexibility, empowering leadership, employee retention, training and development programs and the letting-go approach. The result of the study has expressed that the democratic leadership style is the most effective leadership style that strongly supports the leaders in engaging the employees within the decision-making power not only improves their motivation but also increases innovation within their performance outcomes.

***Keywords:*** *Business leadership, Chinese corporations, Transformational leadership, Transactional leadership, Empowering leadership, Authoritarian leadership, Democratic leadership, Paternalistic leadership, Innovation, Performance*

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# Introduction

In recent times, leadership evolution has been observed across Chinese business organisations leading to better workflow. The organisations are focused on evolving their authoritative leadership style towards mobilising and transformational leadership (Meirinhos et al., 2023). This leadership style enables the leaders to set a clear mission and vision and motivate the subordinates with the freedom to achieve innovation and better performance outcomes. Previously, most Chinese organisations preferred aligning bureaucracy and hierarchy within their operational practices. Moreover, the hierarchy within the organisational structure significantly assists the organisations in safeguarding the issues associated with corporate governance (Liu et al., 2022). The evolution in the Chinese business organisations is mainly influenced by the Western workplace cultures and it is the reason the firms across China are actively involved in solving the issues encountered by their subordinates. Additionally, the influence of Western culture has enabled Chinese leaders and managers to invest their time in interacting with their subordinates and listen to their concerns to improve their workplace experiences and facilitate workflow (Petersen and Goodall, 2025). It has been identified that Chinese Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) essentially prioritise the satisfaction of the employees with alignment to transformational leadership style. For example, Huawei significantly focuses on implementing transformational leadership within its operations, supported by inclusive workplace culture, and collaboration that further leads to increased employee engagement and satisfaction (Zurong et al., 2025). The integration of supportive and collaborative workplace culture effectively leads to improved performance outcomes, supported by employee satisfaction. This research paper is effectively focused on exploring the evolution of the leadership practices observed in Chinese business organisations.

## Research and objectives

This particular research is aimed towards exploring and analysing the evolution of business leadership practices in Chinese firms by observing different leadership styles.

* To explore various leadership styles observed within Chinese business firms in shaping and regulating management practices.
* To evaluate the main factors driving leadership practices in Chinese firms over the past decades.
* To determine the effectiveness of the varied leadership styles applied by different Chinese leaders in managing innovation and change operations in the organisation.

# Literature Review

Based on exploring past studies, it has been observed that Chinese organisations are highly influenced by Eastern and Western management practices. The influence from the Western and Eastern regions has further resulted in the integration of traditional paternalistic and transformational leadership within Chinese organisations and both leadership styles are also preferred by the employees (Lin and Sun, 2018). Moreover, the knowledge or understanding among international and domestic managers regarding the preferences of the employees effectively helps in choosing the appropriate leadership styles for promoting employee welfare and satisfaction. Chinese firms focus on setting their corporate governance based on improving workplace cultures, increasing the confidence of the stakeholders, and decreasing the fraudulent activities that improve corporate governance (Guluma, 2021). Additionally, the managers of the organisations also try to inspire and motivate the workforce to utilise their abilities based on the improvement of the performance outcomes. It has been observed that in Chinese organisations, multiple leadership styles are prevalent which include moral, benevolent and authoritarian leadership (Rowley and Oh, 2020). The leadership effectiveness of benevolent and moral leadership styles is significantly higher than that of low authoritarian leadership. Nevertheless, the potentiality of low authoritarian leadership is greater than high authoritarian leadership. This is because lower authoritarian leadership leads to more prioritisation of the well-being of the employees resulting in improved performance outcomes. In addition, transactional and transformational leadership styles are also observed within Chinese business corporations that help in regulating the employees efficiently to achieve the organisational goals. The transactional leadership style significantly helps businesses in achieving innovation through enhancing the payment of the employees. The transactional leadership style mainly prioritises extrinsic rewards as the motivation factors that influence employees towards task completion (Cui et al., 2022). On the other hand, transformational leadership strongly contributes to improving the skills and abilities of the employees to achieve innovation and gain a positive impact on technological innovation performance. For example, the renowned e-commerce giant, Alibaba effectively focuses on providing rewards to its employees for boosting their morale and organisational commitment to perform better (Jiang, 2024). Thus, it can be stated that the leadership style is similar to that of transactional leadership, as it mainly regulates the employees towards achieving the organisational goals by providing them with higher pay and rewards.

Apart from the aforementioned benefits of the leadership styles in China, some challenges are also observed in the organisations, which include gender discrimination. For example, the 2019-2020 report of the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM) highlights only 9.3% of women are involved in entrepreneurial practices in China (Franzke et al., 2022). Following this statement, it can be stated that the women employees are underrepresented in the Chinese corporations which excluded them from getting involved in the top managerial positions. On the other hand, Colovic (2022) expressed that business leaders across Chinese organisations typically adopt a command-and-control, hierarchical leadership style that allows them to manage the employees in an up-to-down way. The utilisation of a hierarchical leadership style supports the leaders in managing the employees in a linear way to get the organisational commitment fulfilled. It has been observed that leadership practices are influenced by different factors within Chinese SMEs including organisational culture, transformational leadership, teamwork, employee empowerment, capital management and so on (Srisathan et al., 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the performance outcomes of Chinese organisations have been effectively improved through the integration of different leadership styles. The key leadership styles that have been observed within Chinese business firms include autocratic leadership, democratic leadership, transformational leadership, and transactional leadership (Arshad and Ming, 2023). The autocratic leadership style has effectively supported Chinese organisations in managing operations based on solely made decisions, whereas democratic leadership has managed the operations by empowering the employees and engaging them within the decision-making practices. On the other hand, the study by Zhou et al. (2023), has highlighted the challenges like cultural issues confronted by the leaders in the Chinese organisations in managing the operations efficiently. The prevalence of cultural variations between the leaders and the subordinates creates difficulties for them in setting a strong interaction and that also negatively impacts their performance outcomes. On the contrary, it has been identified that the integration of an empowering leadership style positively helps leaders share power with their subordinates strategically contributes to raising intrinsic motivation and leads to better performance outcomes (Wu and Peng, 2020). Thus, it has been observed that Chinese business organisations utilise different leadership styles in managing the subordinates positively to improve the overall performance outcomes.

## Theoretical underpinnings

***Agency Theory***

Agency theory highlights the relationship between the principals and agents based on the delegation of work to get its objectives accomplished. The alignment to the agency theory expresses that the agents within a workplace have the utility maximisation logic that helps them to achieve the best for themselves, even though it is not in favour of the organisation (Khandelwal et al., 2023). The assistance to the agency theory supports the leaders in prioritising the conflicts among the objectives, generated by different individuals and leads to the best outcomes for both the organisation and the agents associated with it. For example, the management cognitive capability of Xiaomi is based on three important factors such as perception, problem-solving and reasoning, and language and communication (Cao et al., 2020). Moreover, the mentioned factors effectively support the managers in addressing the issues associated with the organisation through establishing strong communication with the employees that not only improves employee satisfaction but the performance outcomes also. Therefore, the alignment to the agency theory can be considered as important because that supports the leaders in working responsibly to fulfil the interests of both the organisations and target members associated with it.

## Literature Gap

The past literature has limitedly investigated real examples of Chinese organisations concerning different leadership styles. Moreover, the previous literature has also focused on less alignment to specific leadership approaches mostly observed within the Chinese organisations, thus it can be stated as a gap within the existing literature. Therefore, in order to address the gaps, the study has emphasised real examples of Chinese companies like Alibaba, Huawei and Xiaomi with consideration of specific leadership styles.

# Methodology

This research has effectively used a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to collect and analyse the appropriate information based on meeting the objectives of the study. The SLR allows the research to evaluate the studies based on the leadership evolution within Chinese corporate organisations. The study has effectively focused on using the PRISMA framework to screen the relevant studies and choosing the most appropriate one to carry out 10 papers for review in this study. The keyword search strategy that has been used within the study comprises 'leadership' OR 'leadership practices' OR 'leadership approaches' AND 'Chinese firms’ OR ‘Chinese corporations’ OR ‘Chinese firms’ AND ‘corporate governance’. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting the most appropriate studies have been highlighted in the table below.

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| --- | --- |
| **Inclusion criteria** | **Exclusion criteria** |
| Peer-reviewed journal articles | Books, blogs, and newspaper articles |
| Journal articles published after 2020. | Journal articles published before 2020. |
| Peer-reviewed journals in English | Journals other than English language |
| Fully accessible sources. | Premium and no access sources |

**Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria**

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**Figure 1: PRISMA framework**

**Findings**

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| **Author’s name** | **Country** | **Aim of the study**  | **Methodology** | **Main Findings** |
| Xuecheng et al. (2022) | China | The key aim of this research is to identify the factors affecting employee retention with alignment to situational leadership and Social Exchange Theory. | Survey | The factors such as work environment, training and development, and job satisfaction effectively support Chinese organisations in supporting employee retention.  |
| Lei, et al. (2021) | China | This study is aimed towards exploring the relationship between competency development, empowering leadership, organisation-employee connection, career success and psychological flexibility in the Chinese hotel industry.  | Survey | It has been found that factors like empowering leadership and psychological flexibility support improving employee potentiality and lead to career progression and success.  |
| Zou et al. (2020) | China | The key aim of the study is to investigate how and why spiritual leadership has a positive impact on the well-being of employees.  | Survey | The findings of the study highlight that spiritual leadership within Chinese hospitals effectively focuses on satisfying the psychological needs of the nurses along with their well-being.  |
| Wang and Huang (2022) | China | This study is aimed towards examining how corporate flexibility and control culture influence sustainable outcomes by integrating innovation capabilities and evaluating the role of leadership style. | Survey | The finding of the study highlights that the corporate culture has a positive or negative impact on corporate social performance based on innovation capability. Higher transformational leadership within organisations leads to a positive relationship between flexibility culture and innovation capability.  |
| Dai et al. (2022) | China | The main aim of the study is to explore the impact of corporate social responsibility (CSR), and transactional and transformational leadership on sustainable performance.  | Cross-sectional surveys | The findings of the study highlight that CSR, transformational and transactional leadership are positively linked to sustainable performance, supported by green practices that improve organisational leadership.  |
| Li et al. (2020) | China | The key aim of this study is to investigate the influence of Daoist perspective of leadership within the Chinese small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) | Narrative and semi-structured interviews | The leaders across the Chinese SMEs follow nothingness by continuous prioritisation of the letting-go approach which fosters reputation-building within the organisations. |
| Liu et al. (2020) | China | The main aim of the research is to explore the influence of leader empowerment behaviour on enhancing employee creativity.  | Survey | The findings of the study express that cognitive flexibility and leader empowerment are the main factors driving employee creativity and performance.  |
| Wang et al. (2022) | China | The research is aimed towards exploring the connection between authoritarian leadership and the safety behaviour of the employees. | Survey | The prevalence of authoritarian leadership is significantly and negatively associated with the safety compliance behaviour and safety participation behaviour of the employees. |
| Son et al. (2020) | China | The main aim of the study is to examine the effects of transformational leadership and knowledge-sharing on the operational and financial performance of Chinese firms.  | Interviews and Surveys | Transformational leadership and knowledge sharing contribute to enhanced trust and understanding among the employees leading to improved operational and financial performance outcomes.  |
| Wei and Vasudevan (2022) | China | The main aim of the research is to analyse the relationship between leadership styles and company performance outcomes within the Chinese manufacturing industry.  | Surveys | The findings of the research expressed that dictatorial leadership, paternalistic leadership, autocratic leadership and laissez-faire leadership are insignificantly correlated with company performance in China, however, the alignment of autocratic leadership is significant. |

**Table 2: Data Summary**

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# Analysis and Discussion

In this section, three specific themes have been made in alignment with the research objectives for analysing the gathered collected data from the 10 peer-reviewed selected journal articles. The themes have been analysed and discussed below to identify the evolution of leadership styles in Chinese corporations and analyse the effectiveness of the leadership practices observed in the businesses.

**Different leadership styles prevalent in Chinese corporations for shaping and regulating management practices**

Chinese corporations are associated with different literature styles that include spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, authoritarian leadership and so on for managing and regulating their leadership practices. Workplace spirituality effectively helps Chinese hospitals prioritise the subjective well-being of the nurses by satisfying their psychological needs with the Self-Determination Theory (Zou et al., 2020). The self-determination theory highlights that nurses have three fundamental needs autonomy, competence and relatedness. The mentioned components effectively support improving the satisfaction of the nurses by improving their will-being which also improves the performance outcomes in the Chinese organisations. Authoritarian leadership is highly observed within the Chinese firms which prioritise hierarchical structure within the organisation where the leaders hold the overall power and they are not emotionally connected to their subordinates (Wang et al., 2022). Apart from that, transformational and transactional leadership styles are also observed in Chinese SMEs in terms of regulating and managing operational practices. The inclusion of transformational leadership supports the leaders in establishing clear goals and vision along with motivating the subordinates towards their fulfilment and increases innovation in performance outcomes with consideration to idealised influence, intellectual stimulation, inspirational motivation and individual consideration (Wang and Huang, 2022). Additionally, transactional leadership supports the leaders in motivating the employees towards the organisational goals by providing them with rewards in terms of the work done. Similarly, the study by Dai et al. (2022), expressed that CSR and transformational and transactional leadership are the key drivers of sustainable performance within the organisations. CSR within the Chinese hospitality and tourism industry effectively supports the managers and leaders in considering the interests of stakeholders, as well as environmental and financial factors that further lead to competitive advantage. Similarly, the integration of transactional and transformational leadership supports prioritising the intrinsic and extrinsic factors that improve the satisfaction of the employees and lead to improved performance outcomes. Therefore, it can be stated that Chinese organisation follows leadership styles like spiritual leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership and authoritarian leadership that support them in shaping and regulating management practices.

**Key factors driving leadership practices in Chinese firms over decades**

The leadership practices in Chinese organisations are driven by multiple factors like organisational culture, employee retention and performance outcomes. The leaders within the Chinese firms are strongly focused towards prioritising employee retention by providing them with training and development programs that help increase the abilities of the organisation based on the organisational commitment (Xuecheng et al., 2022). Following past studies, it has been observed that the leaders across Chinese organisations are highly influenced by Western cultures that support them in applying transformational and transactional leadership. Important factors such as psychological flexibility and empowering leadership have also been identified as the key factors shaping Chinese firms over the years. For example, empowering leadership and psychological flexibility effectively assist leaders in improving the potential of the employees through sharing decision-making power with them (Lei et al., 2021). Moreover, the psychological flexibility among the employees also supports being fully aware of their emotions to manage them effectively for fulfilling the organisational commitments. The prioritisation of empowering leadership and psychological flexibility positively helps Chinese leaders in making the employees valued facilitates their satisfaction and improves performance outcomes. Based on the Daoist perspective on leadership, it has been observed that Chinese leaders in SMEs continuously prefer the letting-go approach that effectively supports fostering reputation-building (Li et al., 2020). It has been observed that the nothingness or the letting go approach supports improving the abilities of the employees to perform better, supported by the interference of the leaders. Therefore, it can be stated that employee retention, training and development programs, psychological flexibility, empowering leadership and a letting-go approach are the key factors driving leadership practices in Chinese firms over the years.

**Effectiveness of various leadership styles implemented by Chinese leaders and managers in managing innovation**

Numerous leadership styles such as empowering leadership, transformational leadership, transactional leadership and so on are implemented by Chinese leaders in terms of managing innovation in operations. Empowering leadership enables leaders to empower their subordinates by providing autonomy and sharing decision-making power with the employees (Liu et al., 2020). The provision of power to the employees within the Chinese SMEs effectively helps in increasing their abilities to perform operations efficiently which further leads to achieving innovation and competitive advantage. Moreover, empowering leadership allows the leaders to emphasise the intrinsic and extrinsic factors for enhancing the motivation of the employees and increasing their organisational commitment. Transformational leadership and knowledge-sharing approaches are the key contributors to enhanced innovation within the performance outcomes of Chinese organisations. Transformational leadership efficiently supports the leaders in motivating the employees through achieving the best operational and managerial performance outcomes (Son et al., 2020). Additionally, knowledge-sharing is identified as an important aspect that allows leaders to provide an essential set of skills and knowledge to their subordinates to work effectively and achieve the best organisational goals. The leaders across the Chinese manufacturing industry utilise different leadership styles for managing innovation which include dictatorial leadership, paternalistic leadership, autocratic leadership, democratic leadership and laissez-faire leadership (Wei and Vasudevan, 2022). Nevertheless, it has been observed that democratic leadership is observed as the most effective leadership style that effectively contributes to innovation in performance. Democratic leadership effectively helps the leaders engage the employees within decision-making practices to gain their opinions regarding the organisational welfare and leads to innovative decision-making and it also increases the employee motivation. Therefore, it can be stated that the leadership styles utilised within Chinese organisations are quite effective in improving innovation management in business organisations.

# Conclusion

The research has effectively analysed the leadership evolution within Chinese organisations with consideration of different leadership styles. The study has effectively used the SLR method to select and analyse 10 peer-reviewed journal articles associated with leadership within Chinese organisations. The result of the study has highlighted that Chinese leaders use different leadership styles such as empowering leadership, transactional leadership, transformational leadership, spiritual leadership, authoritarian leadership, democratic leadership and so on for managing and shaping leadership practices. It has been observed that multiple factors help in driving leadership practices within the Chinese organisation which include employee retention, psychological flexibility, empowering leadership, and letting-go approach. Moreover, based on exploring the different leadership styles in Chinese organisations, democratic leadership has been identified as the most appropriate one as it effectively helps the leaders promote employee motivation by engaging them in the decision-making power and making them valued within the organisations.

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