

LEADERSHIP EFFECTIVENESS IN CHINA: THE MODERATING ROLE OF CHANGE CLIMATE

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Owing to the rapid and unpredictable changes in emerging markets, it has become critical for managerial agendas to understand leadership effectiveness in a climate of change. We examined change climate as a potential contingency in effectiveness of authoritarian and visionary styles of leadership. A multilevel analysis of the data collected from 235 Chinese employees and their supervisors revealed that change climate had significant cross-level moderation effects. In a context of a climate of a low level of change, authoritarian leadership style was positively related, and visionary leadership style was negatively related, to follower outcomes. We offer insights into follower and organizational contingencies that affect leadership effectiveness in Chinese business organizations.

Keywords: authoritarian leadership, visionary leadership, change climate, follower outcomes, Chinese enterprises.

Enterprises in emerging markets today face rapid and unpredictable changes in a dynamically changing environment. For instance, China has undergone extensive and thorough changes in the process of large-scale reform from a socialist planned economy to a market economy (Hempel & Martinsons, 2009). Therefore, a prevalent and most important organizational contingency

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for numerous Chinese enterprises is the constant need for innovation, in areas including social, political, market, and technological structures (Phan, Zhou, & Abrahamson, 2010).

It has become extremely challenging in emerging markets to lead intense organizational changes to achieve effectiveness and success (Sadri, Weber, & Gentry, 2011). The resultant climate and pressure for change may favor particular styles of leadership, such as transformational or visionary, and discourage others, such as authoritarian (Charbonnier-Voirin, Akremi, & Vandenberghe, 2010). However, to our knowledge, no empirical study has been conducted in which scholars have examined the effectiveness of different styles of leadership in varying degrees of change climate in emerging markets. In the present study, we investigated the way that organizational change climate in China modifies the effectiveness of authoritarian and visionary styles of leadership. Specifically, we explored the effects of authoritarian and visionary leadership on two follower outcomes, that is, helping behavior and task performance, both of which take different forms depending on the group-level moderating role of change climate.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Authoritarian leadership is one of three components of Chinese traditional paternalistic leadership (Chen, Eberly, Chiang, Farh, & Cheng, 2011). The authoritarian leader *extrinsically motivates followers using absolute authority and control, and demands unquestioning obedience from them* (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). A second critical style of leadership among Chinese managers is that of *visionary leadership* (Tsui, Wang, Xin, Zhang, & Fu, 2004; Wang, Tsui, & Xin, 2011). The visionary leader *intrinsically motivates employees to satisfy higher order needs, such as competence, self-determination, and self-fulfillment, by creating and communicating an inspiring vision* (Stam, Van Knippenberg, & Wisse, 2010a, 2010b). As visionary leaders intrinsically motivate followers, this leadership style is transformative (Fu, Tsui, Liu, & Li, 2010), whereas the leader who uses the extrinsically-based authoritarian style forces employees into the desired transformational situation (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). An examination of these two contrasting styles of leadership offers the opportunity to enrich understanding of leader-related dynamics in emerging markets.

Authoritarian and Visionary Leadership

Authoritarian leaders dominate decision making in the workplace, show little respect for the opinions of followers, limit communication and information flows, and control follower behavior (Zhang, Tsui, & Wang, 2011). These leader behaviors are likely to degrade the self-appraisal of followers' competence and contribution by limiting their opportunities to contribute task-related input and by constraining their job autonomy. Such a situation gives rise to negative

feelings among followers, such as powerlessness, perception of exploitation, and doubt, resulting in negative self-evaluation and an impaired sense of self-worth (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Consequently, these followers become passive in their work engagement and, in both in-role and extrarole performance, their goal is only to meet the minimum evaluation standard instead of pursuing excellent output.

In contrast, visionary leaders foster followers' personal commitment to collective goals by providing a vivid vision, which the followers aspire to achieve (Fu et al., 2010). These leaders also cultivate the self-efficacy of followers by expressing confidence in their competence to achieve the collective vision (Shamir et al., 1993). Thus, visionary leaders develop followers' intrinsic motivation, leading to followers' improved extrarole and in-role performance (Wang et al., 2011). Thus, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1a: Authoritarian leadership will be negatively related to the helping behavior and task performance of followers.

Hypothesis 1b: Visionary leadership will be positively related to the helping behavior and task performance of followers.

Change Climate as a Group-Level Moderator

Change climate refers to *employee perceptions of organizational policies, practices, and procedures that support, encourage, and value organizational change activities* (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010). In a change climate the message is delivered to employees that the organization encourages them to adapt to new ways of thinking and to carry out their tasks to contribute to organizational change (Bouckennooghe, Devos, & Van den Broeck, 2009). A change climate often emerges through social interaction at the group level and has been found to influence leadership effectiveness (Howell & Avolio, 1993). In this study, we proposed that the group-level change climate would moderate the individual-level relationship between leadership style and follower outcomes.

We proposed that, in the context of a climate of a high level of change, authoritarian leaders might fail to convince followers of the value of new directions. Authoritarian leaders discourage followers from expressing novel and risky ideas that could be used to implement and improve organizational change (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). Followers are likely to feel that there is a discrepancy in this behavior in the context of a high change climate. This situation, therefore, discredits the legitimacy of authoritarian leaders and induces disorientation and powerlessness among followers (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004). However, this does not apply in a low change climate context. In this context, the authoritarian leadership style signals that the organization encourages procedures that are consistent with the control and directive behavior of the authoritarian leader (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010). Therefore, the style of authoritarian leaders is legitimized in a low change climate context, and this

should diminish negative effects of their leadership style on follower behavior and performance.

Visionary leaders exhibiting transformative behaviors are highly effective in uncertain and changing situations (Cheng et al., 2004). When the managers in an organization endorse changes and efforts to improve the status quo, followers are likely to view the behavior of the visionary leader as legitimate and appropriate and, thus, will accept their leader's vision. In contrast, in a low change climate context, in which stability is valued and challenging the status quo is not encouraged, followers may doubt their visionary leaders and may not value their vision. Therefore, we proposed the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 2a: The type of change climate in an organization will moderate the negative relationship between authoritarian leadership and helping behavior and task performance in that organization, such that the relationship will be more negative when change climate is high than when it is low.

Hypothesis 2b: The type of change climate in an organization will moderate the positive relationship between visionary leadership and helping behavior and task performance in that organization, such that the relationship will be more positive when change climate is high than when it is low.

Method

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from 40 supervisors enrolled in an executive education program in a Chinese university. We excluded from our analysis employee data with missing ratings, employees with less than one year of company tenure, and teams with fewer than three members to ensure reliable responses based on sufficient organizational experience. This screening procedure resulted in a final analysis sample of 235 employees from 35 work teams. The team size ranged between 3 and 14 members, excluding team leaders, with a mean membership of 6.71 ($SD = 3.85$). Of the participants, 51% were men, with an average age of 30.2 years and average organizational tenure of four years. The education level of the participants was diverse: high school graduate (11%), two years of college (33%), bachelor's degree (51%), and master's degree (5%).

Measures

The follower group of participants reported on their perception of leadership style and change climate variables, and the participant group of supervisors evaluated the extrarole behavior and task performance of the followers. All items were assessed on a 5-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*).

Authoritarian leadership. We measured authoritarian leadership using three items ($\alpha = .87$) from the scale developed by Cheng et al. (2004). The items were

as follows: (a) “My supervisor asks me to obey his/her instructions completely”, (b) “My supervisor makes all decisions in our team whether they are important or not”, and (c) “My supervisor always has the last say in meetings”. To control for the group-level effect of authoritarian leadership when testing our cross-level moderation hypotheses involving change climate, we aggregated authoritarian leadership to group level and labeled it as mean authoritarian leadership as follows: group-level reliability ($\alpha = .80$), within-group agreement ($r_{wg} = .91$), and intraclass correlations (ICC) were $ICC(1) = .12$ and $ICC(2) = .60$, $F = 2.11$, $p < .001$. These aggregation statistics justified the inclusion of authoritarian leadership at group level.

Visionary leadership. Adapting items from Greer, Homan, De Hoogh, and Den Hartog (2012), we used a three-item scale ($\alpha = .80$) to assess visionary leadership. The three items were as follows: (a) “My supervisor articulates and arouses our enthusiasm for a shared vision and mission”, (b) “My supervisor provides a compelling vision of our future”, and (c) “My supervisor gets us to work together for a shared vision and mission”. This scale exhibited sufficient levels of group-level aggregation statistics to justify the use of mean visionary leadership at group level: group-level reliability ($\alpha = .85$), within-group agreement ($r_{wg} = .92$), and $ICC(1) = .14$ and $ICC(2) = .65$, $F = 2.25$, $p < .001$.

Change climate. We measured change climate using three items ($\alpha = .82$) from the scale developed by Patterson et al. (2005): (a) “Our company is always searching for new ways to solve problems”, (b) “Our company is quick to respond when changes are needed”, and (c) “Our company is very flexible and can quickly change procedures to meet new conditions and solve problems as they arise”. We checked group-level reliability ($\alpha = .81$), within-group agreement ($r_{wg} = .93$), and intraclass correlations, $ICC(1) = .11$ and $ICC(2) = .66$, $F = 2.23$, $p < .001$. These statistics justified the aggregation of member ratings to create the group-level measure of change climate (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010).

Helping behavior. Adopting three items from a scale developed by Moorman and Blakely (1995), we measured helping behavior ($\alpha = .90$) as follows: (a) “This employee goes out of his/her way to help colleagues with work-related problems,” (b) “This employee shows genuine concern and courtesy toward coworkers even under the most trying business or personal situations,” and (c) “This employee frequently communicates to coworkers suggestions on how the group can improve.”

Task performance. We adopted Van Dyne and LePine’s (1998) scale for the construction of a three-item measure ($\alpha = .85$) to evaluate the task performance of followers as follows: (a) “This employee fulfills the responsibilities specified in his/her job description”, (b) “This employee adequately completes his/her responsibilities”, and (c) “This employee meets the performance expectations for his/her job”.

Control Variables

To control for the effects of demographic factors, we included a series of demographic variables in our analysis: age in years, gender (male = 0, female = 1), tenure with the company in years, and education level (high school = 1, two years at college = 2, bachelor's degree = 3, master's degree = 4).

Results

To examine the empirical distinctiveness of the study variables, we conducted two sets of confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). CFA results show that, as calculated by comparative fit index (CFI), root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), and Akaike information criterion (AIC): (a) the three-factor model for variables reported by followers provided a significantly better model fit than either the two-factor or the one-factor model χ^2 ($df = 24$) = 58.88, $p < .001$, CFI = .96, RMSEA = .069, AIC = 118.88. Results for the two-factor model that combined visionary leadership and authoritarian leadership were: $\Delta\chi^2$ ($df = 2$) = 439.05, $p < .001$. Results for the one-factor model were: $\Delta\chi^2$ ($df = 3$) = 616.08, $p < .001$. Results also showed that (b) the two-factor model for helping behavior and task performance rated by the supervisors also resulted in a significantly better model fit, χ^2 ($df = 8$) = 10.34, *ns*; CFI = .99, RMSEA = .035, AIC = 48.34, than the one-factor model, $\Delta\chi^2$ ($df = 1$) = 214.89, $p < .001$. The means, standard deviations, and interscale correlations for all study variables are presented in Table 1.

Because of the nested structure of the data with 235 employees from 35 work teams, we employed a multilevel analytic approach, that is, hierarchical linear modeling (HLM; Raudenbush & Bryk 2002) to examine the shared variance among employees from the same team. Hofmann and Gavin (1998) pointed out that the cross-level interaction, without controlling for the corresponding group-level interaction, represents both cross-level and group-level interactions, thus confounding the results. Zhang, Zyphur, and Preacher (2009) also indicated that the confounding of individual-level variance with group-level variance could lead to erroneous results. To accommodate these recommendations, we tested our hypotheses involving cross-level moderation effects by controlling for the corresponding interaction terms at the group level (Du & Choi, 2010).

Main Effects of Leadership on Helping Behavior and Task Performance

We hypothesized a negative effect for authoritarian leadership and a positive effect for visionary leadership on the helping behavior and task performance of followers. As shown in Models 1 and 3 in Table 2, the effects of authoritarian leadership on the helping behavior and task performance of followers were significant after controlling for age, gender, education, and organizational tenure. Thus Hypothesis 1a was supported. However, visionary leadership was not

Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, and Interscale Correlations: Individual-Level Data

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	10
1. Age	30.22	5.23	--								
2. Gender	0.51	0.50	.10	--							
3. Education level	4.32	1.07	-.09	-.08	--						
4. Organizational tenure	4.02	4.49	.43	.04	-.16	--					
5. Authoritarian leadership	3.17	0.80	.02	.07	-.05	-.06	--				
6. Visionary leadership	3.82	0.74	-.06	.05	-.19	.02	-.20	--			
7. Change climate	3.91	0.57	.01	.05	-.23	-.01	.01	.33	--		
8. Helping behavior	3.96	0.58	-.04	-.10	-.10	.01	-.08	-.01	-.06	--	
9. Task performance	3.96	0.60	-.03	-.07	-.15	.09	-.15	.06	-.02	.68	--

Note. *N* = 235; ^a Male = 0, Female = 1; $r < -.14$, $p < .05$; $r < -.18$, $p < .01$; $r > .32$ and $r < -.22$, $p < .001$.

significantly related to helping behavior and task performance (Table 3). Hence, Hypothesis 1b was not supported.

Table 2. *Hierarchical Linear Models for Authoritarian Leadership Style*

	Helping behavior		Task performance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Individual-level predictor				
Age	.01	.01	.01	.01
Gender	-.11	-.11	-.02	-.02
Education level	.05	.05	.06*	.06*
Organizational tenure	.01	.01	.01	.01
Authoritarian leadership	-.07*	-.07*	-.10**	-.09*
Cross-level moderator				
Change climate		-.40*		-.07
Group-level predictor				
Size		-.01		-.01
Mean authoritarian leadership		.05		-.07
Change climate		.01		.05
Mean authoritarian leadership × Change climate		-1.03		-1.31*
Sigma squared	.19	.19	.21	.21
Tau	.18	.17	.18	.17
Pseudo R^2	.05	.10	.03	.07

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Table 3. *Hierarchical Linear Models for Visionary Leadership Style*

	Helping behavior		Task performance	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Individual-level predictor				
Age	.01	.01	.01	.01
Gender	-.11	-.10	-.03	-.03
Education level	.04	.04	.06	.05
Organization tenure	.01	.01	.01	.01
Visionary leadership	.02	.02	.03	.03
Cross-level moderator				
Change climate		.27**		.15
Group-level predictor				
Size		.01		.01
Mean visionary leadership		.02		.21
Change climate		-.10		-.21
Mean visionary leadership × Change climate		.33		.23
Sigma squared	.19	.19	.20	.19
Tau	.18	.17	.19	.18
Pseudo R^2	.05	.11	.03	.03

Note. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.

Cross-level Moderation by Change Climate

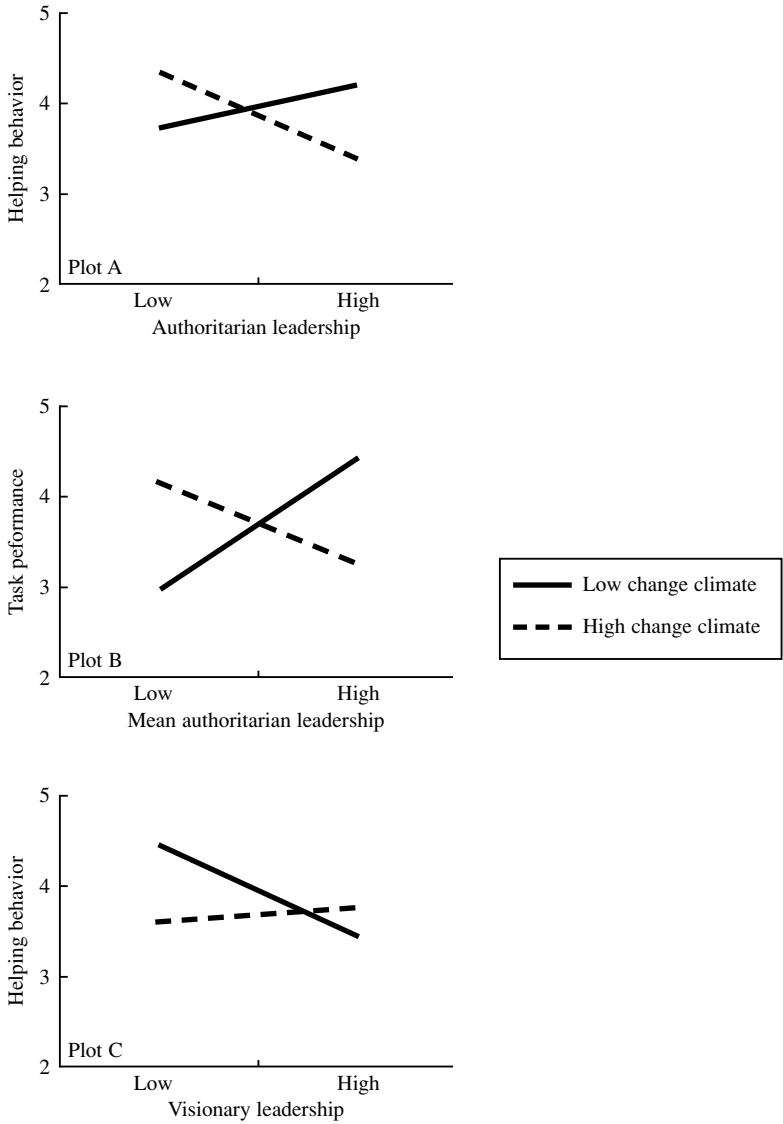


Figure 1. Interaction of leadership style with change climate.

To examine Hypotheses 2a and 2b, we tested cross-level moderation by change climate with group-level control of the corresponding interaction to control for confounding effects between cross-level and group-level interactions (Hofmann & Gavin, 1998). As shown in Models 2 and 4 in Table 2, the cross-level interaction between change climate and authoritarian leadership significantly predicted helping behavior but failed to predict task performance. The hypothesized interaction effect between change climate and authoritarian leadership on task performance occurred at the group rather than at the cross level. We plotted the significant interaction following the simple slope analysis procedure (Aiken & West, 1991). Plot A in Figure 1 shows that in a low change climate context, the effect of authoritarian leadership on helping behavior was positive, although insignificant ($\beta = .12, ns$), but it became significantly negative ($\beta = -.24, p < .05$) in a high change climate context. At the group level, mean authoritarian leadership was positively related to task performance ($\beta = .36, p < .05$) in a low change climate context. However, mean authoritarian leadership became a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.22, p < .001$) in a high change climate context (Plot B in Figure 1). Thus Hypothesis 2a was partially supported.

As shown in Models 2 and 4 in Table 3, the cross-level interaction between visionary leadership and change climate was significantly related to helping behavior but not to task performance. The significant cross-level interaction depicted in Plot C in Figure 1 indicates that the relationship between visionary leadership and helping behavior was close to neutral in a high change climate context ($p = .06, ns$). However, the relationship became negative in a low change climate context ($p = -.25, p < .05$). Hence, Hypothesis 2b was partially supported.

Discussion

We tested the effectiveness of authoritarian and visionary leadership styles in a Chinese business context. We identified change climate as an important contextual factor in Chinese organizations, and focused on the cross-level moderating role of change climate in regard to individual-level leadership processes. Our analysis indicated that visionary leadership can elicit negative reactions from followers in the context of a low change climate. In contrast, we found that authoritarian leadership engenders favorable outcomes at both individual and group levels in the context of low change climate.

A leadership phenomenon in China that researchers in this field have found of interest is the paradox of authoritarian leadership. Although scholars have reported that this leadership style generates negative consequences, it is still accepted by Chinese employees and also by those in other countries with emerging market economies (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008; Tsui et al., 2004). In a culture of order, tradition, and seniority, Chinese employees are likely to have a

general organizational perception or preference for a stable and unchanging work context (Zhang et al., 2011). Such a setting legitimizes and favors authoritarian leaders. However, the results of our multilevel analysis revealed that authoritarian leadership is not necessarily ineffective, and can even result in desirable follower outcomes in a low change climate context. Authoritarian leadership may also be effective during crises, in industries that are labor-intensive and in which employees work at low-skill tasks, and in situations in which followers expect quick decisions and clear rules and directives (Tsui et al., 2004). However, authoritarian leaders still need to engage in behaviors that are not authoritarian, such as showing benevolence, to reduce potential negative implications. For example, Cheng et al. (2004) demonstrated that paternalistic leaders are effective when they exhibit both authoritative and benevolent behavior.

According to our findings, a visionary leader may not always enjoy success in motivating followers in organizations in which there is a low change climate. In this situation, followers are more likely to accept the legitimacy of leaders who have strict control and who give directive orders. Followers in this type of work situation may feel that there is a discrepancy between the organizational routine of the workplace and the inspiring vision advocated by the visionary leader, thus weakening the relationship between visionary leadership and follower attitudes and behavior. Our findings in the current study clearly indicate that leaders need to behave in a manner that fits the context (Charbonnier-Voirin et al., 2010).

There are several limitations in this study. First, as the sample included only Chinese employees, the results cannot be generalized. Future researchers may pursue further validation of our findings in other East Asian regions and emerging economies (e.g., Hungary, Poland, Brazil, and Colombia). Second, our cross-sectional data did not provide clear causal inferences and temporal dynamics involving the proposed relationships. It is possible that the willingness of followers to accept leader authority reinforces authoritarian leadership over time. Similarly, managers may be urged to alter their leadership style and to employ change-oriented and visionary behavior in a change climate.

Nevertheless, we have made a meaningful contribution to international literature on leadership style with our investigation of the organizational context in which leader effectiveness is shaped in the emerging market conditions that currently prevail in China. Future researchers can extend our study by identifying and investigating additional dimensions of organizational climate, such as leader behavior, that shape employee interpretations of how an organization operates.

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