

Benevolence and Repayment: A Theoretical Review of Benevolent Leadership and Future Directions

Tzu-Ting Lin¹, Yu-Chi Lin², and Chung-Jen Chien³

Department of Psychology, National Chengchi University¹

Department of Business Administration, National Chengchi University²

College of Management, Yuan Ze University³

Influenced by family characteristics and pan-familism in Chinese organizations, Chinese leaders tend to treat their subordinates as family members and give them care, opportunities, and believe that taking care of subordinates is a duty-bound obligation. According to the cultural tradition of Chinese relations, scholars interpret the possible impact of the relationship between leaders and subordinates in Chinese business organizations from the perspective of “the interactive dual model of the benefactor and the beneficiary.” They called it “benevolent leadership,” which means that the leader cares for the personal well-being of subordinates individually, comprehensively, and for a long time. Benevolent leadership is rooted in paternalistic leadership theory. There have been many review articles or meta-analysis papers on paternalistic leadership. It is not difficult to see the importance and significance of benevolent leadership. However, there has yet to be a paper that specifically and systematically reviews benevolent leadership and explores its particularity and effectiveness. Given this, this article attempts to re-examine the past achievements, current situation, and future directions of benevolent leadership theory with a longitudinal investigation and a thematic analysis. To sum up, this article would review and discuss the research results of benevolent leadership in the order of the following key points. First, it would review the concept and cultural roots of benevolent leadership. Second, it would present the theoretical development, definition, and dimension evolution of benevolence. Third, it would analyze benevolent leadership theory from different perspectives. Fourth, it would clarify and compare the similarities and differences of benevolent leadership with similar leadership theories. Fifth, it would examine the relevant research results of benevolent leadership in the context of the triad model of paternalistic leadership, including the direct effects on subordinate attitudes and behaviors, as well as the mediating and moderating variables. Finally, after systematically reviewing the research on benevolent leadership, this paper would propose future research prospects to clarify unresolved issues further and comprehensively present the validity and importance of benevolent leadership theory.

Keywords: *Benevolent leadership, Chinese culture, Chinese leadership, Life-oriented consideration, Work-oriented consideration*

Extended Abstract

Scholars who have investigated Chinese organizational behavior have posited that the distinctiveness of Chinese management and organization is encapsulated in its emphasis on interpersonal relations and “guanxi.” Rooted in the pronounced familial underpinnings of Chinese organizations (Cheng, 2005)

and the pervasive influence of extended kinship (Yang, 1998), Chinese leaders often gravitate toward viewing their subordinates as kin. Consequently, Chinese leaders extend care and opportunities to subordinates, perceiving these behaviors as an inescapable responsibility (Cheng, 1995). Stemming from this relational cultural tradition

intrinsic to the Chinese ethos, researchers have elucidated the potential dynamics between leaders and subordinates in Chinese business entities using the interactional dyad model of benefactor and beneficiary, dubbing it benevolent leadership. This conceptual framework is anchored in paternalistic leadership theory. While numerous reviews and meta-analyses have underscored the salience of paternalistic leadership, spotlighting the pivotal role of benevolent leadership, a comprehensive exploration that delves into the essence, efficacy, and empirical facets of benevolent leadership remains absent. Addressing this lacuna, the present article endeavors to furnish a longitudinal analysis of benevolent leadership, revisiting its evolution, contemporary nuances, and prospective trajectories.

The caring behavior exhibited by Chinese managers toward their subordinates was first documented by Redding and Hsiao (1990) and Westwood (1997). Their research elucidated that within Chinese contexts, which are marked by pronounced hierarchical structures and individual power distance, benevolence is not uniformly extended to all subordinates but exhibits variations across individuals. Farh and Cheng (2000) pioneered the notion of benevolent leadership, embedded in China's distinctive cultural context, and articulated it as a leader's sustained, holistic commitment to the subordinate's well-being. Building on this foundation, Farh et al. (2008) delved deeper into the nuances of benevolent leadership. Aiming to fortify the linkages among benevolent leadership, altruistic gestures, and pan-familism, while also distinguishing benevolent leadership from Western leadership paradigms, the authors proposed two behavioral dimensions: work-domain considerations and non-work-domain considerations. Expanding this conceptual framework, Lin and Cheng (2012) bifurcated benevolent leadership behaviors into work-oriented and life-oriented considerations. Within the ambit of work-oriented considerations, leaders fashion a conducive environment that allows their subordinates to learn from their errors, shields them from public chastisement, facilitates tailored education and mentorship, and harbors a genuine interest in their career trajectories. Life-oriented considerations include leaders extending familial

bonds to subordinates, proactively assisting with their personal adversities, and displaying genuine interest in their personal spheres.

Cheng (1995) delineated several distinct features that characterize benevolent leadership, including (1) acts of goodwill, which surpass the professional sphere and encompass the personal lives of subordinates; (2) a forward-looking perspective, in which leaders envisage extended career paths for their team members; (3) a foundational essence of tolerance; and (4) the variance in the application of benevolent acts, which are contingent on individual circumstances and particularly pronounced in environments with marked leader-subordinate power imbalances. Amid the evolving modern landscape and the proliferation of higher education, the traditional bureaucratic organizational structures of corporations are increasingly supplanted by organizational flexibility and the specialized division of labor. Additionally, the newer generation of employees hold divergent perspectives regarding their work interactions and relationships with their superiors, emphasizing individual awareness and an egalitarian atmosphere. Due to these shifts in organizational paradigms and societal values, Confucian cultural tenets are no longer deeply entrenched, with current organizational expectations of manager-subordinate roles significantly differing from past organizational expectations. Recently, Lin et al. (accepted) reexamined the essence of benevolent leadership across its dimensions to discern whether the benevolent leadership paradigm, which was constructed based on traditional Chinese culture and derived from interviews with organizational founders, has undergone changes in recent years. Their findings identified 10 behavioral categories that could be divided into a work-oriented dimension (talent cultivation, problem elimination, voices of followers, inspiration, and coordination with listening) and a life-oriented dimension (life assistance, life guidance, daily care, family concerns, and relief of suffering). The newly identified aspects closely relate to the sample of leaders spanning lower- to mid-level managerial positions and the shifting values of the new generation. In summary, the cultural norms in traditional societies, where those in power show care

for their subordinates, have not diminished with modern organizational evolution (Farh et al., 2008). While the essence of the dual facets of benevolent leadership (work-oriented and life-oriented considerations) has remained consistent, the expression of care by leaders now manifests in a more egalitarian manner, with the specifics of caring actions emerging in a more nuanced and multifaceted fashion.

While benevolent leadership is deeply intertwined with Chinese cultural nuances that distinguish it from Western leadership paradigms, numerous scholars have drawn parallels between benevolent leadership and similar leadership constructs. These include supportive leadership (Cheng, 1995), individual consideration as seen in transformational leadership (Cheng et al., 2004), servant leadership (Lin & Cheng, 2012), and authentic leadership (Lin et al., 2012). Although these leadership paradigms underscore the importance of attending to the individual emotional and practical needs of subordinates, benevolent leadership maintains a distinct identity. Two salient distinctions have emerged. First, benevolent leadership tends to flourish in environments characterized by notable power differentials. Second, the caregiving ethos of benevolent leadership is not solely confined to work-related aspects but also delves deeply into the personal lives of subordinates (Lin et al., forthcoming). Moreover, paternalistic leadership postulates a symbiotic relationship between leaders and their subordinates (Cheng, 1995). The effectiveness of benevolent leadership is predicated upon the subordinates' sense of gratitude and their willingness to reciprocate. In essence, a subordinate's affirmative response becomes pivotal to the successful enactment of benevolent leadership. This dynamic can be traced back to the Confucian underpinnings of benevolent leadership, which accentuate the demarcation of power relations and well-defined roles in interpersonal exchanges. Such ethical mores, such as the expectation of benevolence from leaders and unwavering loyalty from followers, when transposed to the organizational milieu, capture the cultural core and unparalleled nature of benevolent leadership.

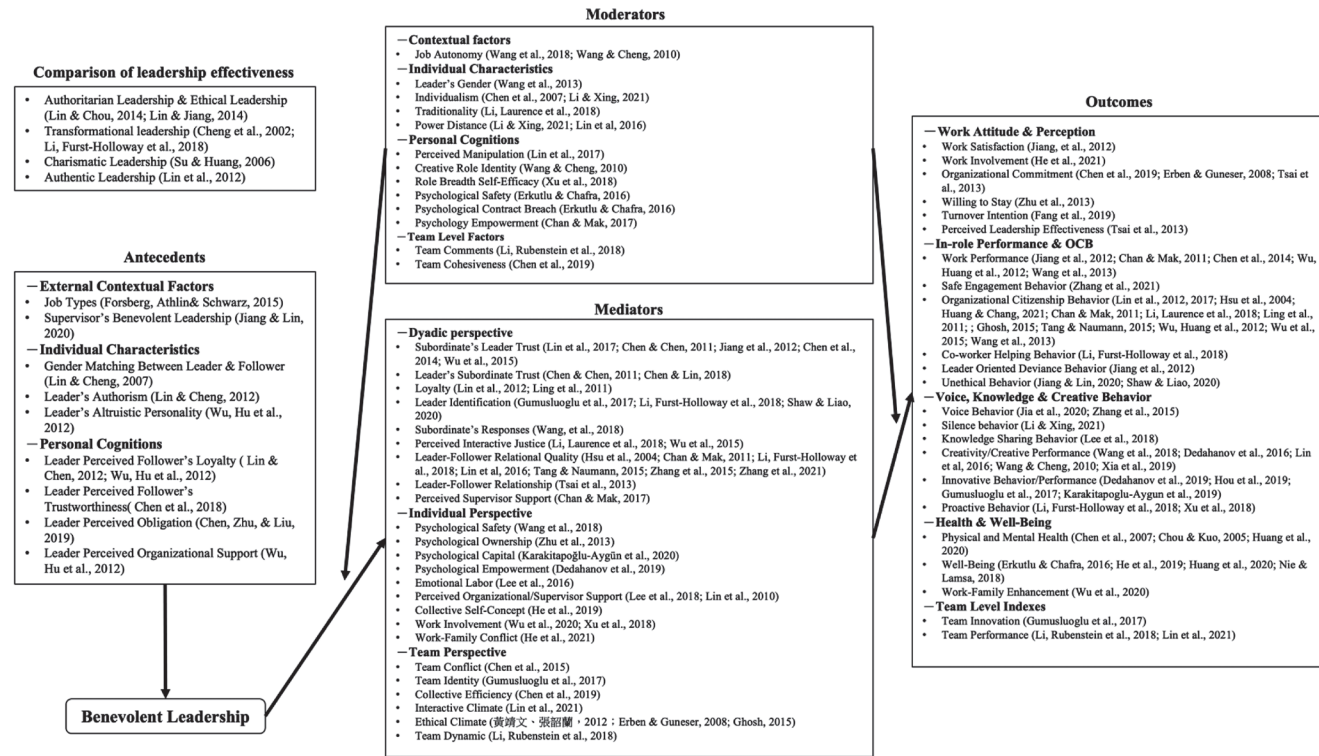
Empirical research on benevolent leadership has shown that it is a pivotal element of paternalistic

leadership. Historical discussions of paternalistic leadership have often touched upon the unique effects of benevolent leadership in the triad of or interaction between benevolent leadership, authoritarian leadership, and ethical leadership. Most of this literature has focused on the outcomes of benevolent leadership, noting its benefits or its capability to mitigate negative factors. Although scholars have validated the efficacy of benevolent leadership at different levels, most empirical studies have still focused on the individual or dyadic level due to its theoretical foundation in leader-follower interactions. The outcomes related to benevolent leadership can generally be categorized into work attitudes, job performance, and workplace well-being, with overall findings suggesting that benevolent leadership offers benefits. For current research findings on benevolent leadership, please refer to Figure 1.

Although many studies on benevolent leadership have been published, the aforementioned findings have highlighted several future research directions. The first research direction entails revisiting benevolent leadership theory, such as "examining mediators that closely align with the original essence of benevolent leadership," "associating benevolent leadership with gender roles," and "modern transformations of benevolent leadership." The second research direction is cross-cultural research on benevolent leadership, such as "comparing benevolent leadership under Chinese perspectives with that under Western perspectives," "evaluating the effects of benevolent leadership across Confucian cultures," and "comparing effects under collectivist and individualistic cultures." The third research direction is benevolent leadership in team contexts, such as "the relationship between benevolent leadership and team effectiveness," "the situational impact of benevolent leadership on team composition or team processes," and "the influence of the centralization degree and differentiation magnitude of benevolent leadership." The last research direction is the dark side of benevolent leadership, such as "insincere benevolent leaders," the "potential negative effects of benevolent leadership," and the "effects of benevolent leadership under generational value shifts."

In summary, the development of benevolent

Figure 1
Studies of benevolent leadership



leadership has spanned two decades, accumulating substantial research findings. Through a systematic theoretical review and thematic analysis, this paper re-examines the past achievements, present conditions, and future directions of benevolent leadership theory. The

goal is to integrate existing research results, propose significant theoretical re-examination, and present a comprehensive view of benevolent leadership, thus consolidating scholarly consensus and encouraging continued in-depth future research.