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## **Gender and paternalistic leadership in a Chinese cultural context, a critical review, and future research trajectories**

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**Martin Sposato**

Middlesex University,  
Dubai Knowledge Village, Block 17, Dubai, UAE  
Email: A.Sposato@mdx.ac.ae

**Abstract:** This article critically reviews paternalistic leadership in Chinese cultural societies. This paper highlights the omission of gender elements in the conceptualisation, consequently leading to a male bias understanding of leadership in a Chinese cultural context. A critical review of the literature is presented, based on historical developments of the indigenous Chinese model of paternalistic leadership, a conceptualisation with roots in Confucian doctrine, and on the traditional gender roles in society but that ultimately does not account for social changes. This review summarises the main contributions to the literature and its findings, critically analysing its limitations. Research trajectories are suggested as a way to further research on paternalistic leadership, most notable being the gender bias problems that the paternalism has and its need for a modern update. A post-colonial feminist approach is suggested as a complement for the limitations of paternalistic leadership, as well as for its contextualisation in non-western societies.

**Keywords:** paternalistic leadership; China; leadership; post-colonial feminism; female leadership.

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**Biographical notes:** Martin Sposato is a Senior Lecturer in Human Resources Management at the Middlesex University, Dubai Campus. He holds a PhD in Leadership, and his research interests include leadership, post-colonialism as a theoretical lens, indigenous (Chinese) theories and conceptualisations of HRM, gender in organisations, and reflexivity in the research process. He is also a CIPD academic member.

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### **1 Introduction**

Paternalistic leadership is a leadership style whereby subordinates are willing to reciprocate the care and protection of the leaders who portray themselves as a paternal authority by displaying loyalty and conformity, these two characteristics being exhibit by both actors (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008). The emphasis of the working relationship is the place in the featherlike relationships established by leaders whose main expected behaviours are: to create a family atmosphere in the workplace, to establish a close and

individualised relationship with subordinates, to get involved in the non-work domain, to expect loyalty and to maintain authority and status. On the other hand, subordinates are expected to exhibit: acceptance of authority, involvement in non-work domains, loyal and deference and considering the workplace as a family (Aycan, 2006). Yet, as the term ‘paternalistic’ suggests, there is a strong male bias in the conceptualisation of paternalistic leadership, overlooking potential relevant gender issues.

Paternalistic leadership is a phenomenon more complex than it has been considered to be in western literature which linked it to authoritarianism and had given it a negative connotation (Aycan, 2006). Paternalism in the West makes no clear distinction between authoritarianism and paternalism, as is evident in the conceptualisation presented by Northouse (2012), which describes paternalistic leaderships as ‘benevolent dictatorship’.

More recent research, however, showed that paternalistic leadership is a popular leadership style in many non-western countries (Aycan, 2006; Martinez, 2005; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008). Research has been conducted in different countries such as Mexico (Martinez, 2005), Turkey (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2006), India (Pellegrini et al., 2010) and East Asia (Cheng et al., 2014), among other examples, where it has been argued subordinates prefer a more paternalistic style of leadership because fits into their cultural context better (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2006).

Jackson (2016) has argued that even though paternalistic leadership is widely present as a leadership style in non-western cultures, its conceptualisation is notably missing from the academic literature. In agreement with this view, and also advocating for the utilisation of paternalistic literature in non-western research, this article critically reviews paternalistic leadership in Chinese cultural societies, arguably a segment of the paternalistic literature that has attracted the most attention and shows how gender elements of leadership in a Chinese cultural context have been completely ignored. Leading to Peus et al. (2015, p.58) to wonder: ‘to what extent paternalistic leadership generalises to female leaders’. Therefore, the relevance of the male-biased theory of paternalistic leadership demands scrutiny in contemporary society, where women are becoming more prominent in managerial roles.

Building on previous work, Farh and Cheng (2000) have developed an indigenous Chinese model of paternalistic leadership. This conceptualisation, far from perfect, opens the door to further research on paternalist leadership in a Chinese cultural setting. The following article reviews the historical development of the model, summarises some of the main findings of studies that have utilised it and criticises its limitations. Finally, within this article, research trajectories are suggested as a possible way for further research on paternalistic leadership, most notable being the gender bias problems that paternalism has. These trajectories are not only for the Chinese cultural context, but also the paternalistic literature in general.

## **2 Historical development of paternalistic leadership in China**

The study of paternalistic leadership has been evolving since Silin (1976) started researching Taiwanese family business and its dynamics in the early 1970s. Farh and Cheng (2000) have arguably produced the most influential review in the field. This is because they produced a study that works as a unifier of concepts previously identified.

Here the authors present, among other findings, three relevant conceptualisations of the theory that will be the basis for the current study: a model of paternalistic leadership

as the basis for the theory; the establishment of a relationship between paternalistic leadership and Chinese cultural roots; and finally, the establishment of the relationship between leaders' behaviour and subordinates' responses.

The development of a theoretical model builds on the ideas and findings of a number of influential researchers in the field, including Silin (1976), Redding (1990), moving on to Westwood (1992, 1997) and Cheng (1995a, 1995b, 1995c), who led the research on leadership in Chinese cultural settings.

Farh and Cheng's model uses the three previously identified dimensions of paternalistic leadership, morality, authoritarianism, and benevolence, as their starting point for their model, very eloquently presenting the arguments that link the model's different parts to subordinates' responses. This is achieved by making historic reference to Chinese culture, tradition and custom and identifying similarities and differences with the western cultures to create linkages and justifications for the use of Chinese socio/cultural factors, leader behaviours and organisational factors presented in the model. This is probably the best currently existing model, explaining and relating paternalistic leadership in a broader Chinese context. The main merit of the model is that it presents and combines most of the accumulated knowledge available in the field up to the date it was created.

The model presents subordinates' responses to each of the dimensions of paternalistic leadership. For the morality dimension, the corresponding responses are respect and identification. In terms of the authoritarianism dimension, the corresponding responses are dependence and compliance. Finally, for benevolence, the corresponding responses are indebtedness and obligation to repay. It is assumed that such responses are rooted in traditional Chinese culture. Within the model, the authors assign external factors to leaders' behaviours in the model such as *familism*, respect for hierarchy, *personalism/particularism*, the norm of reciprocity, interpersonal harmony and leadership by virtues. In the same way, they assign organisational factors to the subordinate responses such as family ownership, uniting of ownership with management, entrepreneurial structure, and simple task environment and stable technology.

Further empirical research aimed at testing the model (e.g., Cheng et al., 2004) has also presented the model as a valid framework to conceptualise paternalistic leadership with Chinese culture in mind. Even though the model has been positively received, there are some clear reservations towards the socio-cultural and organisational factors presented, which should be taken into account.

It could be argued these factors are also the most dynamic part of the model, due to whether they exist or not tending to change from one study to the next. Some factors are present in a limited number of cases; for instance, family ownership may not necessarily be relevant in all cases as a large number of enterprises in Mainland China are state-owned and run. Stable technology is another characteristic that may not necessarily be relevant since much of the current Taiwanese economy is based on the production of components for high-tech devices in an industry where there is hardly any stable technology.

These institutional factors highlight an opportunity that is open to testing the model to understand how different organisational factors might impact the overall model of paternalistic leadership. This is extremely relevant in a context like the Chinese, which has been under a continuous economic and social development since the late 70's (Dana,

2002). In addition to a boom in entrepreneurship and small business that has shaped society, culture and consequently leadership (Dana, 1999a, 1999b, 2014).

### *2.1 Criticism and limitations of the model*

Soon after the model was presented, empirical tests were carried out to evaluate its accuracy, concluding that the model is a viable framework for the study of paternalistic leadership in a Chinese context (Chen and Farh, 2010). Yet, these tests also exposed several problems regarding three dimensions of paternalistic leadership: moral, authoritarian and benevolent. Problems were also highlighted within the proposed subordinate responses: respect and identification of moral leadership, indebtedness and obligation to repay for benevolence, and dependency and compliance concerning authoritarian leadership (Wu and Xu, 2012).

Cheng et al. (2004) concluded it was not possible to find a correlation between authoritarian leadership and compliance, but a significant correlation was established with the other two dimensions: moral and benevolent. In contrast, a later study (Farh et al., 2006) established a correlation between compliance and authoritarianism, employing fear of the leader as a mediator of this relationship. Additionally, a stronger correlation between benevolent leadership, moral leadership and compliance emerged than for authoritarian leadership and compliance.

For example, Cheng et al. (2002) found that authoritarianism has a negative correlation with morality and benevolence, creating a problem with the entire concept of a leadership style based on these three dimensions. Furthermore, morality and benevolence leaderships have shown positive outcomes regarding subordinate behaviours and attitudes, while authoritarian leadership has failed to produce these positive outcomes (Farh et al., 2008). Based on these problems, Wu and Xu (2012) speculate on a possible overlap of psychological mechanisms.

However, Chen and Farh (2010) argue for a reconstruction of the concept of authoritarian leadership, based on the Confucian ideal of authoritative leadership, and to rename the authoritarian dimension, 'authoritative dimension'. Considering the evidence (presented above), current scholars has concluded that paternalistic leadership is not a unified construct and that each dimension should be considered separately (Aycan, 2006; Farh et al., 2006; Pellegrini and Scandura, 2008).

In addition to the theoretical problems the model might have, there is a need to contextualise studies on paternalistic leadership and highlight that research in the field began more than 40 years ago, in highly traditional enterprises. Yet, Chinese societies in general, and Hong Kong specifically, have undergone extraordinary social changes that have seen the social role of women change progressively. In retrospect, the empirical studies which have led to the establishment of paternalistic leadership as a theory and the model presented by Farh and Cheng (2000) more than ten years ago are extremely male-oriented, as Chinese societies were.

Empirical research, the theory and the model have not acknowledged the role that Chinese women might play in leadership, and it is not clear how relevant this conceptualisation is for women (Peus et al., 2015). Consequently, it is clear that there are opportunities for contributions to the literature based on the evaluation of the relevance of the conceptualisation of paternalistic leadership when applied to women in leadership positions. Finally, Smith (2012) and Smith et al. (2012) speculate that paternalistic

leadership is culturally related rather than culturally specific to the Chinese context, providing further questioning of its Chinese distinctiveness.

## 2.2 Cultural roots

To conceptualise the model presented by Farh and Cheng (2010) better, in their chapter, an extensive section is dedicated to the establishment of links between the three dimensions of the theory authoritarianism, benevolence and moral, and their cultural roots which cement them as the cultural contextual background for the model. In this section each of the dimensions of paternalistic leadership is analysed as a separate entity, establishing their relationship to Chinese culture and contextualising the theory in the Chinese culture.

For the authoritarian leadership dimension, the authors established a link between Chinese culture with its over 3,000 years of uninterrupted history, and its core social organisation, the family. Within the family, a male acts as the head of the group/family in taking unchallenged decisions, which affect as much of the family members' lives as the general group affairs. This behaviour is reinforced by the teaching of Confucius and its cardinal relationships. The four relationships relevant to this case are; ruler and subject (君臣), father and son (父子), husband and wife (夫婦), elder and younger brother (兄弟). In all of these types of relationship, there is an expectation that the first person will behave in a direct, authoritarian way. These inequalities in relationships are based on an unequal distribution of power among people.

It is argued that this kind of social organisation was also present in Mediterranean societies at the time of the Greek and classical Roman cultures. Yet, the power of the head of the family was somehow diluted in those cultures because of the influence of Christianity and its monotheistic beliefs and organised religion. For instance, in Chinese traditional societies, ancestors are worshipped and the head of the family directs the ceremony. In contrast, in Christianity, or in most monotheistic religions in the West, this activity has been delegated to the clergy, creating a special class of people who take care of these responsibilities, shifting the responsibility from the head of the family. However, Chinese culture has not been impacted by the influence of other monotheistic religions and therefore the idea of basing a society on a single unit, as a family with a head, a father figure, who takes all the decisions has not been socially challenged by any foreign belief system.

In addition to the cultural concept of authoritarian leadership, the school of legalism, which was contemporary to Confucius and one of the most influential philosophical movements in China, developed its main doctrines (Farh and Cheng, 2000). It advocates the centralisation of powers by the ruler and the attitude of never trusting or delegating functions to the ministers. This remains one of the most influential schools of thought in China. At this point, it is important to mention that when this ideology was developed, China was submerged in a civil war during the Warring States Period, which triggered centralised solutions such as those postulated by the Legalistic School. Based on these ideas, the authors postulate that Chinese people go through a process in which they generalise experiences and habits that were learnt in the family and apply them to other social groups, engaging in a process of *pan-familism* or *general familism*. As a result, the entire social structures in Chinese society are a reflection of the family and its most relevant characteristics. Thus, if Chinese people are brought up in a family led by a head

who tends to take decisions for the entire member of the family without prior consultation or delegation, it is only normal that any other social structures that Chinese people create reflect this dynamic.

The benevolent leadership dimension is culturally based on two main concepts: Human-Heartedness (Ren) and Norm of Reciprocity (Bao). The idea of human-heartedness is also based on Confucianism and the main idea behind the concept is that people who hold a higher position in any relationship, such as fathers, elder brothers, husbands and rulers, should exercise their rules, displaying benevolence and rightness among other positive attitudes. Therefore, having a position of power also includes a responsibility to care for the followers (Westwood et al., 2004). Whereas people on the opposite side of the relationship should display loyalty and obedience, bearing in mind that even if the people in the position of power do not display the mentioned human qualities, followers are still expected to behave in accordance with this social expectation. If a person in a social interaction does not behave as expected, by no means could this be used as an excuse for the other person not to fulfil his/her social role.

The norm of reciprocity (Bao) is the other main cultural root of benevolent leadership, as well as Guanxi. Bao could also explain why Chinese leaders exhibit benevolence towards their subordinates. In Chinese culture, people are expected to reciprocate, especially when a person does a favour to another (Westwood et al., 2004). Therefore, if a leader shows a benevolent attitude toward his/her subordinate, this person is establishing a precedent, forcing the subordinate to replicate what has been done to him/her.

Finally, moral leadership is also based on Confucian philosophy. In his teachings, Confucius advocated for the idea that a government should be based on virtue, projecting the virtues from the people who were in power to the people who were ruled. The Analects, a compilation of Confucian doctrine, has a clear example of this: "He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it" [Huang, (1997), p.53].

In Chinese culture, there is the social expectation that the government should set a moral example, Confucius believed that laws and punishments were not good enough for ruling a country. The proper way to rule a country is based on the previously mentioned two propositions: to rule by virtues and by setting a moral example to the ruled. These two ideas go further than laws and the threat of punishment. Not only do they affect the behaviour of the people; they also affect their way of thinking (Farh and Cheng, 2000).

Additionally, it is important to take into account that until very recently, China had not established an independent and reliable legal system. Traditionally in China, justice was administered by what is called 'the rule of man', as opposed to the rule of law, as is the current case in modern western countries (Farh and Cheng, 2000). In essence, the rule of man was the justice administered by the bureaucrat who happened to be in power in the territory, and its only aim was to deliver benefits to the people in power. By no means was it an instrument for delivering fairness across society. Because the distribution of justice in traditional China was delivered in such an arbitrary way, Confucius advocated for the moral character of the people in power who were in charge of administering justice, aiming at creating a fairer judiciary system. Confucianism is not the only factor to influence leadership values in China. It is evident that Confucian values are still relevant to Chinese culture today, but new ideologies with new values systems are gaining ground, challenging traditional ideas and concepts of Chinese culture and behaviour (Fu and Tsui, 2003).

The entire Chinese version of paternalistic leadership theory takes a pyramid shape, divided into three equal sections, representing each of the three dimensions that conform to the theory, authoritarian, moral and benevolent. This pyramid is divided into two sections, an upper and a lower. The upper section represents the paternalistic leadership behaviours that are observable and measurable and is sustained by the second lower section, comprising the cultural roots of the theory which are not so easily observable. Yet, these are the ones that sustain and shape the visible arguments of the theory and also those that give the Chinese version of paternalistic leadership its emic (culturally specific) components.

### **3 Paternalistic leader behaviour and subordinate response**

Considering subordinate responses are central to the model of paternalistic leadership previously presented, Farh and Cheng (2000) developed this relationship further, including a chart that analyses the relationship of leadership behaviour and subordinate response in more depth.

For each leadership behaviour exhibited, there is a subordinate response. For instance, for the authoritarian dimension, even if the leaders keep relevant general information to themselves and are unwilling to share it with their subordinates as is common for paternalistic leaders, subordinates still display clear public support for their leader, even if because of this information secrecy they are not really aware of the situation. As part of paternalistic leadership, leaders are not expected to share information, yet subordinates are expected to show public support (loyalty) towards them at all times.

For the benevolent dimension, leaders take employees as family members, and not only interact with them in work-related issues, but also show a holistic concern for the people and their private (non-work related) affairs. As a consequence, employees respond to this behaviour by sacrificing self-interest in the interest of that of the leader, for instance, by helping the leader with private issues even if it is their day off, as a loyalty retribution. Wang et al. (2018) have expanded knowledge, providing more evidence on the relationship and impact of the benevolent and authoritarian leadership styles and effectiveness.

Finally, for the moral dimension, the leader is expected to act as a moral example in setting the standards in the moral field, and subordinates are expected to internalise these values and apply them to the work and life context.

### **4 Review of domains**

Farh et al. (2006) reviewed the research conducted on paternalistic leadership once more and focused their analysis on the three main domains that are the basis for the theory. After their review, the authors presented an updated version of the domains, which fit the current Chinese environment better. In this review, the authors began their analysis from the original domains presented in Farh and Cheng (2000) and advanced the knowledge by presenting a revised version of these central domains. Here, even where the original concepts of authoritarian, benevolent and moral leadership are still present, the content of each has been reviewed and updated.

Some of the changes put forward by the authors have been the change from image building to reputation building for authoritarian leadership, the main difference between these two components of the domain being that the first is just general and broad and does not have to be substantiated by actions or facts; all that a person has to do to create an image is actually to act. In contrast, when the leader aims at building a reputation, as is the case in the revised domain, the reputation must be built on actions and facts, shifting the emphasis from an image which is rather static to a reputation which requires action and accomplishments.

For the benevolent dimension, job security is part of the old and new domains; yet, new elements have been added which upgrade the concept of job security to a certain degree. These new elements are: concern about career development, and provision for feedback, coaching and mentoring. These two new elements show how leaders are not only concerned about providing employees with a job, a rather basic need; they are also concerned about the satisfying higher needs of their employees by developing their skills, supporting them professionally and taking their professional career into account.

Finally, for the moral dimension, new elements are also added which provide a more in-depth view of what the behaviour displayed by the leader is. These elements are: personal integrity, honesty; keeping promises, self-discipline and kindness. Unfortunately, these changes to the basic conceptualisation of paternalistic leadership still do not take into account any gender issues.

This article so far has critically reviewed the foundational literature on paternalistic leadership in Chinese cultural contexts. However, Chinese societies have seen dynamic feminist developments take shape in the last three decades. Traditionally, female members of the family were relegated to carrying out domestic chores, but women in Chinese cultural societies are increasingly attaining a formal education and entering the workforce as educated employees (Tang et al., 2010). Consequently, women in Chinese cultural societies are gaining more formal positions of power, which were conventionally occupied by men (Leung and Chan, 2012). This traditionally male-oriented society is changing in the light of women not only entering the workforce, as has happened throughout most of the 20th century, but due to also the rise of women to positions of power and influence inside and outside the workplace (Chow, 2005). The following section will present suggestions for further research trajectories which take into account the gender aspects of leadership in a Chinese cultural context.

## **5 Future research trajectories**

Arguably the most evidential shortcoming of paternalistic leadership is its male bias conceptualisation. Paternalistic leadership, from its name, denotes a male style of leadership that does not account for women in leadership positions, consequently, remaining 'linguistically and conceptually gendered' [Jackson, (2016) p.6]. This allows researchers to further the knowledge by addressing 'to what extent paternalistic leadership generalises to female leaders' [Peus et al., (2015), p.58] or whether a new, gender-neutral conceptualisation is needed.

To research further in the field and to enrich paternalist leadership, a post-colonial feminist approach may be used in conjunction with it, as a means to make up for the gender bias of paternalistic leadership, but also as an avenue to contextualise the non-western environments where paternalistic leadership is utilised.



Post-colonial feminism, advocated for a departure from western-centred conceptualisation that does not take into account the singularities of the local cultures, to decolonise feminist strategies (Golnaraghi and Dye 2016) and also to give a voice to those in society who have been voiceless (Özkazanç-Pan, 2008), in this case, by incorporating the views and perspectives of women in leadership positions to the entire conceptualisation of paternalistic leadership, in China or any other cultural context where paternalistic practices take place.

As Jackson (2016) has argued, within non-western societies; such as Africans, there is a need for research which considers paternalism in leadership studies. Clearly, more research is needed on paternalistic leadership across cultures (Chen et al., 2018) Yet, researchers should also acknowledge the dominant influences within leadership that western practices also have in non-western settings. At this intersection is where post-colonial feminism can aid the research process, by creating a framework where paternalism can be critically analysed, but also by accounting for the inclusion of western influences. A post-colonial feminist approach to research acknowledges the creation of 'hybrid identities' which are the result of colonial, dominant discourses, and indigenous cultures (Bhabha, 1994).

From a cross-cultural perspective, research on paternalistic leadership could also address the differences and/or similarities that paternalistic leadership, or any name that might replace it as a new non-gender bias conceptualisation, has across cultures. Quite often researchers incur strategic essentialism (Spivak, 1988), for example, treating all countries in Africa as a single cultural unit or as has been the case in this article, uniting all the different Chinese cultural societies under one generic umbrella, omitting clear differences. Yet, further research could focus on similarities and differences on paternalistic attitudes in several non-western countries and how concepts and attitudes change and adapt, depending on cultures and invitational differences, taking into account also gender social dimensions. Cheng et al. (2014) present an example of a cross-cultural use of paternalistic leadership.

## **6 Conclusions**

The current article has presented a critical review of the literature on the Chinese version of paternalistic leadership and exposed its gender bias, starting with its historical development and the introduction of the conceptualisation presented by Farh and Cheng (2000). The article has also acknowledged the criticism and limitations that this conceptualisation of paternalistic has received and its most prominent problem, that paternalistic leadership is clearly a male-biased conceptualisation. Further research avenues are suggested for the advancement of knowledge in paternalistic leadership. It has been argued in this article that a post-colonial feminist approach is a possible complement to paternalistic leadership as it could aid in its gender limitations and better-contextualised research in non-western countries.

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