
Historical developments in paternalistic leadership in China

Martin Sposato

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

Abstract: This article critically reviews the historical development in the literature that provided the basis for the establishment of the Chinese version of paternalistic leadership, the most popular, well researched and better established indigenous Chinese theory of leadership. This article centres on the earlier theoretical and conceptual developments of the theory to establish how the current conceptualisations of paternalistic leadership originated. Furthermore, suggestions for further research avenues are presented for scholars to address and further advance the knowledge in the field of leadership in a Chinese cultural environment; arguably, the main limitation of the current conceptualisations of paternalist leadership is that it does not account for the roles of women in leadership positions.

Keywords: leadership; paternalistic leadership; historical development; business; management; China.

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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.

1 Introduction

Within the study of leadership in China from a Chinese perspective, currently paternalistic leadership is the most developed and studied by scholars. Additionally, the theory of paternalistic leadership is the one which has been more systematically researched (Sposato and Rumens, 2018). Arguably, this is because paternalistic leadership is the only one which takes a truly indigenous approach to China (Chen and Farh, 2010; Farh et al., 2008; Wu and Xu, 2012).

This article aims to conduct a critical review of the literature on paternalistic leadership in China with a focus on an understanding of the earlier theoretical and conceptual developments of the theory and to clarify how the current conceptualisations of paternalistic leadership originated, providing a debate on the genesis of the ideas, and

historical developments that led to the formation of paternalistic leadership in China, whilst also suggesting potential future research trajectories that scholars interested in paternalistic leadership in a Chinese context could take.

2 The basis for the theory

2.1 The work of Silin (1976)

Arguably, the first serious study of leadership in a Chinese cultural setting and on paternalistic leadership, even if the author did not use this term, was that conducted by Silin (1976) in the mid-1970s. To a certain extent, this study takes a Chinese cultural perspective. Here, the author, an anthropologist who spent more than a year in Taiwan, studied large private enterprises in the region. During his fieldwork, Silin (1976) collected more than 100 hours of interviews with top managers, most of the time with owners of the enterprises, middle managers and ordinary workers, in addition to observation notes and pictures, from several businesses in Taiwan.

It is relevant to understand that at the same time as the author was doing field work in Taiwan which, according to the Beijing communist government, is a rebel province, the Cultural Revolution was finishing in Mainland China. During this period, Mainland China was closed to the western world and undertook a large revisionist period that challenged traditional Chinese ideas and values, mostly Confucian. In contrast, in Taiwan, a movement stressing these mentioned values was gaining momentum to define what it meant to be Chinese and to redefine Chinese culture (Dana, 2002). The most relevant outcome of Silin's (1976) project is that it set the basis for the study of paternalistic leadership in Chinese culture.

Silin (1976) generally saw the characteristics of what was later to become paternalistic leadership from a negative perspective. The author even mentions that these characteristics would be impediments for the future economic development of the island. It is mainly clear that Silin (1976) carries within his work and analysis a large cultural bias with regards to what constitutes 'good leadership'. Some of the characteristics found by Silin (1976) can be categorised as follows:

2.1.1 Moral leadership

It is socially implicit that the leader has a moral superiority towards the followers. This moral superiority is given to them because of their position as leaders, and there are two ways in which this fact is manifested: firstly, because of his ability to transform abstract ideas and concepts into realities that can be commercialised; and secondly, for his ability to put his personal interest to one side and make the right decisions, seeking a greater good for all the employees. This second point makes it evident that the leadership position requires a temperament that will make personal interests second, and shows how leaders care for the general interest of the employees.

2.1.2 Didactic leadership:

One of the main functions of leaders is to transmit the way in which things should be done to achieve success for the followers. This means success at the personal level and

overall success for the enterprise. Part of the task of followers is to be able to understand the thought pattern of the leader, therefore not just engaging with the leader on a professional level but also taking a more holistic view of the person, aiming at grasping what he is trying to express, as well as what he means. Here as well, it is assumed that the leader transmits the messages and instructions using the right words and methods and therefore, it is up to the receiver to be able to understand and interpret the message in the correct manner: shifting the responsibility for understanding the message from the sender (leader) to the receiver (follower). This is in clear contrast to what happens in the West where, if the receiver does not understand the instructions, it is automatically assumed to be the fault of the person who sent the message because the sender has not expressed himself correctly.

2.1.3 Centralised authority

Silin (1976) emphasises the high level of centralisation of the leadership position found in his research. At this point, it is relevant to point out that most of the Taiwanese enterprises that were studied for his book were managed by the owners, who ran them as a family business. In these enterprises, family relationships were more important than competence at the job. Here the issue of loyalty starts to emerge. This will be re-examined by subsequent researchers. The centralised authority and decision-making was not delegated or shared by the leader; orders and ideas flow from the top of the organisation downwards and are followed without being questioned or discussed. Consequently, it is clear that within this organisational structure, there is a large degree of power distance, observed by Hofstede et al. (1991), with regards to Chinese culture in general. One of the advantages of the centralisation of the authority is the clear advantage of the time to implement strategies.

This is because orders are not questioned by subordinates; they are just executed. However, as a downside, the centralisation of authority limits the number of people who could input on the decisions, therefore limiting the number of potential ideas and overall creativity.

2.1.4 Keeping distance

In considering the Chinese culture has a large degree of power distance (Hofstede et al., 1991), it is predictable that part of Silin's (1976) finding gravitates towards the relationship between leaders and followers, and the concept of keeping a social distance among the actors. To a certain extent, this could be a contradiction because as Pellegrini and Scandura (2008) mentioned, paternalistic leadership involves a closer relationship between leaders and followers; that is part of the reason why this type of leadership is called paternalistic. Nonetheless, the interesting fact about this phenomenon is that even the line between personal life and the professional is difficult to draw. As part of the leader-follower interaction, there is always a distinction made between who gets involved in whose own life. For the leader's side, it is expected as part of his duty in taking care of his followers to be included in the personal issues of his subordinates. However, for the subordinates, the only occasion they are expected to get involved in the private life of the leader is when they are told to do so, in an explicit manner.

2.1.5 Leaders and situations being vague and diffuse

As has been referred to previously, this type of leadership is based on a highly centralised authority. Therefore, as a way of keeping control of the decisions, or because the decisions are highly centralised, the leaders tend not to give largely written instructions. Generally, instructions are provided orally. Only in rare cases are these written down, and for these rare cases, instructions tend to be short and not very precise. As part of the leadership style, job descriptions, responsibilities and duties tend not to be well defined, leading to a more flexible workforce. However, the problem with this attitude towards leadership is the lack of personal accountability, especially when things do not go according to plan. It is essential to remark at this point that the ultimate responsibility for any action that does not go as planned resides with the leader. For this style of leadership, individual responsibility is much less relevant in contrast with the case in the West; in paternalistic leadership, subordinates will be judged more on loyalty than on accountability.

2.1.6 Leadership and subordinate relationship

One of the characteristics leader/follower relationships found by Silin (1976) is that the boss never expresses confidence and/or support for any of his subordinates in public. However, this might be done in private. This is in line with the previously expressed idea of keeping a vague working environment. If the leader were to express open and public support for any of his subordinates, he would be signalling preference. Another characteristic expressed by the author, with regards to the mentioned relationship, is that the leader encourages competition among his subordinates as a strategy to make them contend with each other and strengthen their loyalty towards him.

Here again, paternalistic leadership works in favour of the leader, where job descriptions and roles are not well established, thereby creating a diffuse environment where subordinates work hard to gain favour from the leader. Nevertheless, one evident weakness in this style of leadership and organisational structure is that in such an environment, it is highly unlikely that subordinates will cooperate or share information and resources. Consequently, this limits the synergies that diversely talented subordinates could create.

2.2 The work of Redding (1990)

The following study increasing the knowledge of paternalistic leadership in China is that conducted by Redding (1990). In contrast to Silin, Redding was a business scholar and not an anthropologist, and in addition to he conducted fieldwork in some other territories where Chinese culture is predominant. Redding added territories such as Hong Kong and Singapore to his study.

Taking the work of Silin (1976) and Redding (1990, p.130) identified seven main characteristics behind the paternalistic leadership phenomenon in Chinese cultural settings:

- 1 dependency of the subordinates as a mindset
- 2 personalised loyalty, leading to subordinates being willing to conform
- 3 authoritarianism modified by sensitivity to subordinate views

- 4 authoritarianism not divisible when it comes to being clearly identified with a person
- 5 an aloofness and social distancing within the hierarchy
- 6 allowance for the leader's intentions to remain loosely formulated
- 7 the leader as exemplary and teacher.

Nonetheless, the most significant contribution of this study, building on the findings of Silin (1976), is that it acknowledges the findings of the previously mentioned studies. In those studies, two dimensions of paternalistic leadership style are identified: authoritarian leadership and moral leadership. Redding's (1990) contribution is centred on how these are different from each other. Moreover, the author added a third category, the benevolent component, establishing the three basic elements of paternalistic leadership: authoritarian, moral and benevolent leaderships. The three subcategories within paternalistic leadership will subsequently be the foundation for other studies. The development of a model and even the establishment of an instrument of measurement for this style of leadership is the one developed later by Cheng et al. (2009).

In addition to the third dimension, Redding (1990) identified some positive points such as strategic flexibility and the quick implementation of strategies as central components of paternalistic leadership. This is because ideas and orders flow from the top of the hierarchy to the bottom without being questioned, i.e., from the leader to the subordinates. Questioning superiors' orders would be perceived as disloyal.

By the same token, Redding (1990) mentions some problems within his study that are present in this style of leadership: the lack of cooperation that might generate continuous competition among the subordinates, and the lack of creative input. This is because there is no real input to the organisation from anyone but the leader. This last point has a relative relevance. Most of the enterprises studied by Redding were in traditional sectors and they did not require much creativity and/or innovation, therefore making this criticism a relative issue for the industry where the enterprise operates.

2.3 The work of Westwood (1992, 1997)

Westwood (1992, 1997) advanced the knowledge of paternalistic leadership by first questioning the idea of leadership itself. Westwood (1992, 1997) acknowledges the concept of paternalistic leadership and makes explicit references to the previously mentioned authors. However, Westwood questioned the idea of leadership applied to the Chinese cultural setting and concluded that such idea is a purely Western concept based on a society with a low power distance among its members and a notion of egalitarianism. Among other problems, the central one is that these concepts are not transferable to the Chinese cultural context; therefore, Westwood (1997, p.452) changed the concept of a leader and leadership to headships, stating that "traditionally, in Chinese contexts a person is born into a headship position and he thereby is expected to display leadership by virtue of that background and position."

Westwood marginally contributes to the debate which questions whether a leader is born or made. It is important to state that to contextualise his research, Westwood conducted his fieldwork mostly on family owned and ran businesses. In these, traditionally, the first-born male is expected to take the top managerial position once the older generation retires.

Nevertheless, this distinction was highly influenced by the type of enterprises that the author studied and it might not be very applicable to other types of enterprises. Some enterprises where this might not be applicable might be state-owned companies in today's Mainland China (Ng et al., 2009). Still, this is relevant for a more in-depth analysis of leadership in Chinese culture. Up to now, the difference between the type of enterprises and how they influence the leadership style in China has not yet been investigated by any researcher.

Westwood's findings are summarised in the model of paternalistic headship that he created and discussed in his paper. First, a distinction is made between the general structural context and the general relational context.

For the general structural context, the organisation's structure and organisations are laid out, with the following components: centralisation, low/selective; formalisation and non-complexity.

For the general relational context, where guidance on conducting personal relationships is shown, it is possible to find harmony building, relationship maintenance and moral leadership. All of this connected with strong personalism that acts as a link between the two.

For the general structural context, it is essential to bear in mind that the type of enterprises that Westwood studied were small and medium enterprises (SME's), mostly in the primary stages of industrialisation. Therefore, the idea of a centralised structure with low formalisation and not much complexity is not just a consequence of the leadership's style, but more a consequence of the type and environmental circumstances of the industry where these were taking place.

Subsequent studies do not mention these factors; nonetheless, the general relational context, with harmony building, relationship maintenance and moral leadership, can firmly be attributed to the leadership style and its characteristics. This is the most relevant part of the model and strictly linked to the Confucian values which run deeply in Chinese people and culture (Dana, 1999).

These two general contexts, as mentioned before, are linked by a strong paternalism that in effect is the main subject of the study. The person who leads and displays the paternalistic behaviours is the centre of the enterprise, as well as the centre of the model. The interaction of the previously discussed factors leads to the specific stylistic elements. Here it is clear how the previously mentioned authors influenced Westwood, as many of them are just a repetition of the findings of Silin (1976) and Redding (1990).

2.4 The work of Cheng (1995a, 1995b, 1995c)

Cheng (1995a, 1995b, 1995c), a native Taiwanese scholar, conducted a series of case studies in Taiwanese family owned and managed enterprises and generated some findings relevant to the present analysis. To start with, Cheng confirms most of the findings from the previously mentioned studies, yet adds his finding on the dynamics between paternalistic leadership and subordinate responses to the discussion (Cheng, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c).

Until his studies were published, there was a gap for understanding the tactics that paternalistic bosses used to lead subordinates and how they responded to them. Also, Cheng offers a categorisation and explanation for 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' within the Chinese enterprises which were found to be present in the organisation, but not understood. His final contribution to analysis is on the way in which leaders treated

different subordinates in different ways, and how these subordinates reacted. Cheng's studies addressed these important questions and produced a series of findings. The main finding is the development of two concepts: *Shi-en* (to grant favours) and *Li-wei* (to inspire awe or fear).

For each of these concepts and in different situations the author identified a specific action taken by the leader and a specific subordinate response. Nevertheless, there is an element that is surprisingly missing in his model and analysis: moral leadership. This element was mentioned by previous authors and currently constitutes one of the three basic elements of paternalistic leadership. Farh and Cheng (2000) attributed this to Cheng being a native Taiwanese who conducted research and published in the Chinese language, and because he was a 'native' to the culture, he lacked the cultural perspective to visualise this missing element. Arguably, Cheng could not make the distinction between what was a cultural condition reflected in the style of leadership and what was not.

Li-wei consists of the action taken by the leaders in relation to their authority and dominance projected over their subordinates. Such actions are control and combination, underestimating subordinate ability, building a lofty image for the leader, and instructing subordinates in a didactic style. Some of the examples provided by the author for the case of control of dominance are: unwillingness to delegate responsibilities from part of the leader and top-down communication (Sposato, 2016).

In contrast, the subordinates' responses to these actions are compliance, obedience, fear and sense of shame. Some of the examples provided by Cheng regarding, for instance, compliance and obedience are: demonstrating public support for the leader, accepting the leader's directives unconditionally and exhibiting loyalty and trust to the leader.

Shi-en deals with the attitudes displayed by the leader which are associated with showing personal favours and or generosity. According to Farh and Cheng (2000), there is a degree of similarity for this idea with the previous concept developed in the leadership literature of 'leadership consideration' and 'supportive leadership'; yet in this cultural setting, the idea of *Shi-en* has some remarkable differences such as the fact that this support goes beyond professional matters and includes personal issues that the subordinated might have in his or her private life that are not work-related.

Another example would be that the leader might keep subordinates who are no longer efficient but still intensely loyal to him working for the company; this attitude might be understood as a reward for their loyalty. Furthermore, the leader protects the face and reputation of his subordinates when they have committed mistakes, again as part of the loyalty consideration mentioned before. The last characteristic of this behaviour is that the leader never stops acting as such, always displaying his position and authoritarianism, stressing a significant power distance.

In one of his studies, Cheng (1995b) mentions a remarkable finding: at no time do leaders treat all the subordinates in the same way. Therefore, creating in-groups and out-groups, in which the two mentioned concepts of *Li-wei* and *Shi-en* take different dynamics, depends on where the subordinates stand in this regard. Cheng identified three factors that determine whether a subordinate belongs to an 'in-group' or 'out-group', the first being *Guanxi*, a specific type of relationship and indigenous to Chinese culture that stresses specific ties between people which cannot be classified either as friendship or a purely commercial relationship. Second is the level of loyalty that subordinates

exhibit towards the leader, and the third is a form of actual competence that the subordinate displays at the time of performing his duties.

Thus, the more a subordinate demonstrates the three mentioned characteristics, the more likely he or she is to be included in the 'in-group'. Remarkably, the concept developed by Cheng of in-groups and out-groups is very similar to the Western theory of leadership called leader-member exchange (LMX) (Pellegrini and Scandura, 2006; Uhl-bien and Maslyn, 2005; Uhl-bien et al., 1990).

Overall, it is important to identify why paternalistic leadership is so appealing to the study of leadership in China. Farh and Cheng (2000) mentioned a direct link between the notions that cement the concept of paternalistic leadership and the way in which this style of leadership is exercised, deeply rooted in Chinese values and Confucian philosophy. Here, not all the power is distributed equally, and there are five cardinal relationships, in which power is unequally distributed and this must be respected.

3 A preliminary model of paternalistic leadership in China

Farh and Cheng (2000) begin their chapter on paternalistic leadership, one of the most influential in the current field, by reviewing what has been researched in the field since Silin (1976). Their main contribution is the development of a theoretical model that builds on the ideas and findings mostly of Silin (1976), Redding (1990), Westwood (1992, 1997) and Cheng (1995c). The model takes as a starting point the three previously identified and discussed dimensions of paternalistic leadership: morality, authoritarianism, and benevolence.

As part of the chapter, the cultural roots of these three factors forming paternalistic leadership are discussed in depth. The authors very eloquently presented the arguments that link the different parts of the model, making historical references to Chinese culture, traditions and customs, and its correspondence or lack of correspondence to Western civilisation, eventually creating a link and a justification between Chinese socio/cultural factors, leaders' behaviours, and the organisational factors presented in the model. This aims at explaining paternalistic leadership in a broader Chinese context.

The model presents a subordinate response to each of the components of paternalistic leadership. For morality, it would be dependence and compliance, for authoritarianism respect and identification, and for benevolence indebtedness and obligations to repay, these subordinate responses being assumed as rooted in traditional Chinese culture.

The authors assigned external factors to leader behaviour, in this case, socio-cultural such as familism, respect for hierarchy, personalism/particularism, norm of reciprocity, interpersonal harmony, and leadership by virtue. In the same way, organisational factors are assigned to subordinate responses, and these are: family ownership, uniting of ownership with management, entrepreneurial structure and simple task environment, and stable technology.

The main merit of the model is that firstly, it reduces and relates all the accumulated knowledge created in the field until the point it was created, the year 2000. Secondly, it provides a model to be used as the basis for further research in paternalistic leadership. Further empirical research aimed at testing the model (Cheng et al., 2002; Cheung et al., 2010) has presented it as a valid framework to conceptualise paternalistic leadership as part of Chinese culture.

Having mentioned that, it is important to stress that even if the model has been positively received, some clear reservations should be taken towards the socio-cultural factors and organisational factors presented. Consequently, these factors are the weakness in the model, since they tend to change from one study to the next across culturally Chinese societies. Some elements are present in a limited number of cases, for instance, family ownership of the organisation, a large number of enterprises in Mainland China are state-owned and run; or stable technology, as most of the current Taiwanese economy, is based on the production of components for high-tech devices, in this industry there is hardly any stable technology. This fact highlights the lack of homogeneity across the subjects of study. Consequently, further research should be conducted to understand how the organisational factors affect the model and overall style of leadership, and to identify new potentially relevant socio-cultural and organisational factors.

Arguably, the main contribution from Farh and Cheng (2000) is the fact that it had presented a unifying conceptualisation on paternalistic leadership that been the bases for most the future studies, this conceptualisation constitutes a landmark in the historical development of the theory and a starting point for anyone interested in its basic ideas from an indigenous perspective (Sposato, 2015). So far this study has focused on the historical development that has led to the conceptualisation of paternalistic leadership. Many empirical studies have been conducted on the conceptualisation of paternalistic leadership in China, and mediators and moderators have been identified in addition to new concepts. However, these are beyond the scope of this article; which aims at critically analysing on the genesis of the ideas, and historical developments that have led to the establishment of paternalistic leadership in China. For a more updated discussion of the current debates on paternalistic leadership, please refer to Si et al. (2017) and for a more detailed analysis of the empirical development of the theory refer to Wu and Xu (2012).

3.1 Paternalistic leadership in China, future research trajectories

Possibly, the most under-researched area of paternalistic leadership in a Chinese cultural context has been studies that directly addressed the way in which ethnic Chinese women lead in a Chinese cultural environment. As Peus et al. (2015, p.58) state, “the question to what extent paternalistic leadership generalises to female leaders is yet to be answered.” This occurs, even though every year more and more women enter the workforce in Chinese cultural societies and move to managerial/leadership roles; for instance; Alon et al. (2011) have provided a very relevant account of a female leader in China and her leadership characteristics. Consequently, future research could address the many aspects of leadership that are affected by gender norms and factors (Jeffrey, 2017); and the potential implications of these on paternalistic leadership in general and subordinates and supervisors in particular.

4 Conclusions

The current article has addressed the historical developments that are the foundation of the most popular indigenous Chinese theory of leadership, paternalistic leadership.

This has been done by conducting a historical, critical review of the literature on paternalistic leadership in China. This literature review has focused on the earlier theoretical and conceptual developments of the theory to establish how the current conceptualisations of paternalistic leadership originated. In addition, suggestions for future research trajectories have been suggested as currently, paternalist leadership does not account for the roles of women in leadership positions.

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