



Visionary leadership effectiveness: Moderating roles of power distance and middle-way thinking

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In existing studies on leader effectiveness, scholars have focused on the significance of the power distance orientation of followers for transformational leadership. In this study we identified middle-way thinking as a critical contingency for the effectiveness of leaders in China that reflects idiosyncratic Chinese values. Participants were 304 Chinese employees and their supervisors. Multilevel modeling revealed that middle-way thinking of followers accentuated the positive effect of visionary leadership, the core component of transformational leadership, on the organizational citizenship behavior of followers. The results also indicate that the power distance orientation of followers had a relatively limited moderating effect on the relationship between organizational citizenship behavior and visionary leadership. In the context of Chinese organizations, our findings provide insight into the emic middle-way thinking of followers as a meaningful contingency that affects the effectiveness of leadership.

Keywords

visionary leadership;
transformational
leadership; middle-way
thinking; power distance
orientation;
organizational citizenship
behavior; leadership
effectiveness;
leader–follower
relationship

An army of a thousand is easy to recruit, but how difficult to find a general.
— Chinese proverb

Visionary leadership motivates employees to contribute to the realization of a vision by communicating an image of a future for the team and organization (Griffin et al., 2010; Stam et al., 2014). As a core component of transformational leadership, visionary leadership intrinsically stimulates employees to satisfy higher order needs, such as self-fulfillment, by creating an inspiring vision (Bass, 1999; Greer et al., 2012; Kearney et al., 2019; Stam et al., 2010a, 2010b). In addition to enhancing performance at both individual and group levels (Greer et al., 2012; Stam et al., 2010a), visionary leadership creates high levels of cohesion, commitment, trust, and motivation; thus, it heightens organizational effectiveness at the organizational level as well (Taylor et al., 2014).

Researchers have advocated for the universality and benefits of transformational and empowering practices across cultures and countries (Schaubroeck et al., 2016; Z.-X. Zhang et al., 2014). However, scholars have also highlighted the need to consider culture-specific characteristics that provide a more powerful explanation of organizational phenomena than generalistic etic values do (Cai et al., 2017; Farh et al., 2007), because of the historical significance and social embeddedness of such idiosyncratic values. To extend previous studies regarding the moderating effect of cultural contingencies (Kirkman et al., 2009), in this study we introduced an emic characteristic that is specific to China as a critical contingency for Chinese leaders. Middle-way thinking (Zhongyong), is a core cultural component of Confucianism, which has been a

dominant part of Chinese mentality for thousands of years. *Middle-way thinking* was proposed by Zisi, the grandson of Confucius, who advocated for the value of the relationship between people and their surroundings, that is, people should be congruent with their surroundings to achieve harmonious nature–human integration. Decisions and actions should be reviewed in a holistic manner and be guided by a congruence strategy if no conflict exists, or through a moderate strategy and willingness to compromise, rather than by excess, if the decisions and actions impede those of others (Cai et al., 2017; Chiu, 2000; Chou et al., 2014; Wu & Lin, 2005; Yao et al., 2010).

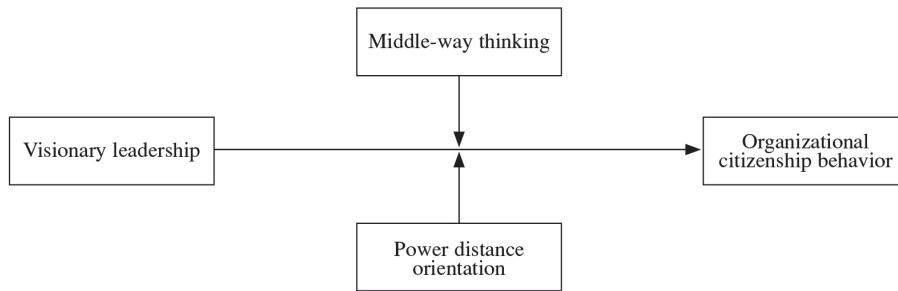


Figure 1. *Theoretical Research Model*

We compared middle-way thinking with the power distance orientation of followers in relation to their moderating roles in the relationship of visionary leadership with organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). Among etic values, power distance orientation has significant implications for individual followers’ reactions to leadership, because this orientation directly relates to beliefs concerning status, authority, and power (Farh et al., 2007).

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Visionary Leadership

On the basis of previous study findings, we expected that a visionary leadership style would have a positive relationship with the OCB of followers. Visionary leaders improve follower outcomes by intrinsically motivating them via three mechanisms: First, visionary leaders foster personal commitment to collective goals among followers through a vivid vision, arousing the aspiration of followers to pursue this vision (Greer et al., 2012). Second, in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1985) it is suggested that sharing an ideological vision and linking the efforts of followers to collective goal accomplishments enhances followers’ sense of belonging (Shamir et al., 1993). These processes result in strong social identification, which invigorates the willingness of followers to prioritize collective interests over self-interest and thereby be proactive in the collective effort. Third, visionary leaders nurture the self-efficacy of followers by expressing confidence in their competence (Shamir et al., 1993); therefore, followers develop intrinsic motivation owing to their strong commitment to collective goals, social identification, and self-efficacy, and will perform extrarole behaviors (Greer et al., 2012). Therefore, we proposed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Visionary leadership will be positively associated with organizational citizenship behavior.

Power Distance Orientation as a Moderator

Cultural values shape the reactions of individuals to leader behavior, because these values affect the ways in which individuals define the follower–leader relationship, and the extent and types of influence they are willing to accept from leaders (Kirkman et al., 2009). *Power distance orientation* is particularly relevant because this concept pertains to the extent to which people accept unequal status differences as legitimate

(Hofstede, 2001). Followers with a high power distance orientation internally legitimize unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 2001); thus, high power distance orientation may serve as a barrier to visionary leadership effects (Kirkman et al., 2009). Further, followers with a high power distance orientation prefer top-down information flow and short-term, reward-based motivation, whereas visionary leaders tend to develop two-way information flows, as well as long-term social exchanges and intrinsic motivation (Z.-X. Zhang et al., 2014). In a situation where followers prefer top-down information flow and reward-based motivation, visionary leaders may fail to enhance the self-efficacy and commitment of followers to carry an inspiring vision (Greer et al., 2012). Therefore, we anticipated that a high power distance orientation would impair the positive effect of visionary leadership on follower behavior and performance.

Empirical patterns involving employee attitudes that are consistent with our expectation have been reported in previous studies. Kirkman et al. (2009) indicated that the relationship between transformational leadership and procedural justice perception is more positive when the power distance orientation of followers is low than when it is high. We further extended these findings to attitudinal outcomes and formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Power distance orientation will moderate the association between visionary leadership and organizational citizenship behavior, such that the association will become stronger when power distance orientation is low than when it is high.

Middle-Way Thinking as a Moderator

Individuals with a high level of middle-way thinking actively regulate their actions to achieve congruence with their surroundings, and employ a moderate rather than excessive strategy when their actions impede those of others (Du & Yao, 2015). Through this strategy, people can achieve goals systematically and encounter few obstacles and potential setbacks. Although China has been moving from being a traditional society to a modern one, middle-way thinking is still frequently observed in contemporary Chinese society (Cai et al., 2017; Du et al., 2014; Fernandez, 2004).

We proposed that middle-way thinking would shape follower reactions to the leadership style. As middle-way thinking sustains congruence within a situation, and encourages avoidance of excessive actions (Chiu, 2000), followers whose mode of thinking is strongly middle-way are likely to carefully assess the demands and style of their leaders to achieve these goals, and then regulate themselves to secure compatibility with the values and behavior of the leaders (Wu & Lin, 2005). When visionary leaders articulate a vision and cultivate the commitment and self-efficacy of followers to achieve such a collective goal, followers whose thinking mode is strongly middle-way are likely to be highly sensitive to the demands of the situation and to accommodate the expectations of their leaders (Chou et al., 2014). Thus, followers with strong middle-way thinking are likely to be inspired by visionary leaders and to become willing to exert energy, enthusiasm, and extra effort toward achieving collective goals (Greer et al., 2012). In summary, we formed the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Middle-way thinking will moderate the association between visionary leadership and followers' organizational citizenship behavior, such that the association will become stronger when middle-way thinking is high than when it is low.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Data were collected from staff of two companies in China. Company A is in the real estate service business, and Company B is in the consumer product industry. The executives of these companies gave their approval and support for our study. Initial data were collected from 170 employees of Company A and their supervisors (92% response rate), and from 199 employees of Company B and their supervisors (95% response rate). Samples without supervisor ratings were excluded. This screening procedure resulted in a

final sample of 304 employees from 43 work teams (140 employees in 22 teams at Company A and 164 employees in 21 teams at Company B). The teams in the final sample comprised a mean of 7.07 members ($SD = 3.56$, range 3–18). Among the participants, 63% were women and 47% were men, the average age was 30.2 years ($SD = 5.6$, range = 21–39), and the average organizational tenure was 5.1 years ($SD = 5.7$, range = 1–15). As regards education level, 10% had graduated from high school, 38% had a college degree, 49% had a bachelor's degree, and 4% had a postgraduate qualification.

Measures

All leadership and moderator variables were reported by the employees, and follower outcomes were evaluated by the supervisors. To reduce the burden on participants and ensure their responses were reliable (Choi, 2007), the human resources manager of each of the two companies proposed that we shorten the survey. After a group discussion with the two managers, for each variable we selected three items from scales developed in previous research (Gong et al., 2009). A 5-point Likert-type scale was utilized to assess all items, where 1 = *strongly disagree* and 5 = *strongly agree*.

Visionary Leadership

Visionary leadership was assessed using three items ($\alpha = .89$) from the scale developed by Greer et al. (2012): “My leader arouses our enthusiasm for a collective vision and mission,” “My leader delivers a fascinating vision of our future,” and “My leader lets us to work together for a collective vision and mission.” Following the recommendations of Z. Zhang et al. (2009), we controlled for visionary leadership and its corresponding interaction terms at the group level when testing for individual-level effects. Visionary leadership was included in the group-level equations and labeled as mean visionary leadership (a similar label was used for other variables). To justify the inclusion of visionary leadership at the group level, we calculated within-group agreement ($r_{wg} = .96$), intraclass correlations (ICC) of $ICC(1) = .18$ and $ICC(2) = .63$, and F statistics ($F = 2.94$, $p < .001$), all of which demonstrate satisfactory results for aggregation.

Power Distance Orientation

Power distance orientation was measured by three items ($\alpha = .84$) from the scale developed by Dorfman and Howell (1988): “Leaders should make most decisions without consulting subordinates,” “Leaders often need to use authority and power to deal with followers,” and “Leaders should not disagree with supervisors’ decisions.” Aggregation results were acceptable, $r_{wg} = .96$, $ICC(1) = .52$, $ICC(2) = .90$, $F = 10.14$, $p < .001$.

Middle-Way Thinking

To assess middle-way thinking, we selected three items ($\alpha = .77$) with high factor loadings as reported in previous studies (Chiu, 2000; Du & Yao, 2015; Wu & Lin, 2005): “Actions should be moderate and undertaken in a holistic manner rather than rash and extreme,” “Taking action should not only be fair and rational but should also be considerate of the emotions of and propriety toward other people,” and “Taking action should be made with consideration of holistic harmony.” Aggregation results were acceptable, $r_{wg} = .97$, $ICC(1) = .13$, $ICC(2) = .52$, $F = 2.09$, $p < .001$.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior

We measured OCB using three items ($\alpha = .88$) from the interpersonal helping dimension of the scale developed by Moorman and Blakely (1995): “The staff member engages in assisting colleagues to improve work,” “The staff member shows sincere concern and courtesy toward coworkers,” and “The staff member often talks with coworkers to offer suggestions regarding work-related problems.”

Control Variables

Scholars have found that demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, organizational tenure, and level of education) exert an influence on employees’ OCB. For example, meta-analytic results based on data from 158 independent studies ($N = 101,071$) reveal that women tend to demonstrate OCB more frequently than men do (Mackey et al., 2019). Ng and Feldman (2013) proposed that as the length of job tenure increases,

employees are more likely to become bored and less motivated at work. Differentiation by age and education level have consistently been demonstrated to impact on interpersonal OCB (Berry et al., 2007; Choi & Sy, 2009). More recent findings have revealed that these individual differences play a role in moderating the relationship between employees' characteristics and interpersonal OCB (Kang & Ryan, 2016; Liu et al., 2020). Thus, in line with previous work, we controlled for the demographic variables of age, gender, company tenure, and level of education (high school = 1, college = 2, bachelor's degree = 3, postgraduate qualification = 4). We also controlled for organizational membership by including a company dummy variable (Company A = 0, Company B = 1).

Results

To examine the empirical distinctiveness of the study variables, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. The results, as summarized in Table 1, show that the four-factor model had a significantly better fit to the data than either the one-factor or three-factor model did.

Table 1. *Confirmatory Factor Analyses of Measures*

Model	χ^2 (df)	<i>p</i>	NNFI	CFI	RMSEA	AIC
One-factor model	1,434.40 (54)	< .001	.25	.25	.290	1,482.40
Three-factor model (combining power distance orientation and middle-way thinking)	304.17 (51)	< .001	.84	.86	.128	358.17
Four-factor model (visionary leadership, power distance orientation, middle-way thinking, and organizational citizenship behavior)	79.18 (48)	.003	.98	.98	.046	139.20

Note. NNFI = nonnormed fit index; CFI = comparative fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation; AIC = Akaike information criterion.

Table 2 shows a summary of statistics and interscale correlations for all variables. We employed a multilevel hierarchical linear modeling analytic approach (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002) for hypothesis testing because this approach allows for consideration of both the shared variance in the same team and the nonindependence of employee ratings offered by the same team leader.

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Interscale Correlations for Study Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Individual-level variables (<i>N</i> = 304)											
1. Company ^a	0.55	0.50	—								
2. Age	3.19	5.58	.73***	—							
3. Gender ^b	0.46	0.49	.01	.04	—						
4. Education level	2.41	0.80	.08	-.10	-.04	—					
5. Organizational tenure	5.05	5.68	.41***	.55***	-.04	-.18	—				
6. Visionary leadership	3.86	0.71	.09	-.05	.09	-.15	.05	—			
7. Power distance orientation	3.59	0.94	-.71***	-.08	.08	-.09	-.30***	.09	—		
8. Middle-way thinking	4.14	0.49	.03	-.02	-.01	.08	-.01	.09	.12*	—	
9. OCB	3.87	0.66	-.19**	.02	-.07	-.03	-.01	.01	.12*	.13*	—
Group-level variables (<i>N</i> = 43)											
1. Team size	7.07	5.44	—								
2. <i>M</i> visionary leadership	3.85	0.38	.10	—							
3. <i>M</i> power distance orientation	3.55	0.72	-.05	.15	—						
4. <i>M</i> middle-way thinking	4.16	0.28	.25	.00	-.15	—					

Note. ^a Company A = 0, Company B = 1; ^b male = 0, female = 1. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

Main Effects of Leadership

As Model 1 of Table 3 shows, the effect of visionary leadership on followers' OCB was nonsignificant after controlling for individual demographic characteristics and group size. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Table 3. *Hierarchical Linear Modeling Results for Visionary Leadership*

	OCB	
	Model 1	Model 2
Individual-level predictors		
Company	-.18	.01
Age	.10	.01
Gender	-.09	-.08
Education level	.06*	.05*
Organizational tenure	.01	.01
Visionary leadership	.02	.02
Power distance orientation		-.05
Middle-way thinking		.09
Visionary leadership × Power distance orientation		-.08*
Visionary leadership × Middle-way thinking		.15**
Group-level predictors		
Team size	.01	.01
<i>M</i> visionary leadership		.08
<i>M</i> power distance orientation		.19
<i>M</i> middle-way thinking		.22
<i>M</i> visionary leadership × <i>M</i> power distance orientation		-.41
<i>M</i> visionary leadership × <i>M</i> middle-way thinking		.34
Pseudo <i>R</i> ²	.05	.11

Note. OCB = organizational citizenship behavior.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Moderation by Power Distance Orientation

In Hypothesis 2 we proposed that the power distance orientation of followers would attenuate the effects of visionary leadership on follower OCB. We tested this hypothesis in Model 2 of Table 3, in which power distance orientation and its interaction with visionary leadership were added to individual-level equations. The corresponding interaction terms were included in the group-level equations to reduce the confounding effects between individual- and team-level interactions (Z. Zhang et al., 2009).

The results show that the interaction of visionary leadership with power distance orientation was significantly related to OCB ($\beta = -.08, p < .05$). Following simple slope analysis (Aiken & West, 1991), as shown in Figure 2, the relationship between visionary leadership and OCB was positive when the power distance orientation was low ($b = .46, p < .01$) and neutral when the power distance orientation was high ($b = -.01, ns$). This pattern supported Hypothesis 2.

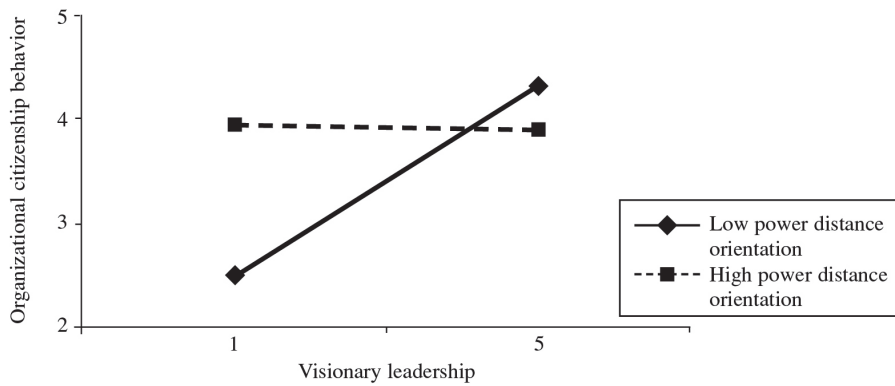


Figure 2. *Interaction of Visionary Leadership With Power Distance Orientation*

Moderation by Middle-Way Thinking

In Hypothesis 3 we anticipated that middle-way thinking would enhance the positive effect of visionary leadership. Model 2 of Table 3 illustrates that middle-way thinking was a positive moderator of the relationship between visionary leadership and OCB ($\beta = .15, p < .01$). We plotted this significant interaction in a graph (see Figure 3) and found that visionary leadership was positively related to OCB when followers' middle-way thinking was at a high ($b = .11, p < .10$) but not a low ($b = -.16, ns$) level. Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported.

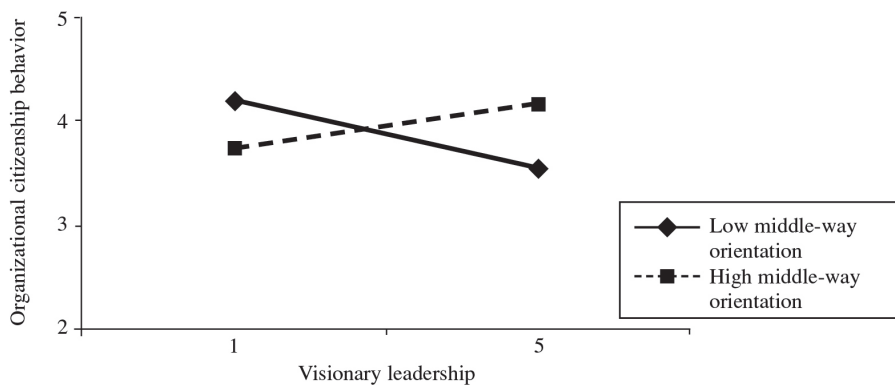


Figure 3. *Interaction of Visionary Leadership With Middle-Way Thinking*

Discussion

Drawing on recent developments related to the issues of international and cross-cultural leadership in emerging markets, in this study we isolated and tested the theoretically meaningful boundary conditions of leadership effectiveness in the cultural context of China, specifically focusing on the moderating effects of follower values on visionary leadership effectiveness. The results indicate that the effectiveness of leadership depends on cultural values among the employees.

Theoretical and Practical Implications

We found that power distance orientation reduced the effect of visionary leadership on followers at both individual and group levels. These findings extend the work of Kirkman et al. (2009), who demonstrated that the positive association between transformational leader and procedural justice is stronger when individual power distance orientation is low. In line with Kirkman et al., we found that followers with a low power distance orientation were more receptive to visionary or transformational leadership because they do not automatically accept leadership. Instead, they carefully assess the qualities of leaders to determine if they will respond positively, and then they develop differentiated, leader-specific reactions. By contrast, followers with a high power distance orientation endorse unequal power distribution (Daniels & Greguras, 2014; Farh et al., 2007); thus, they accept the legitimacy of their leaders without a careful assessment of the personal qualities of the latter. These followers may maintain a relatively undifferentiated attitude toward their transformational leaders, which diminishes the relationship between leader character and follower attitude and behavior (Kirkman et al., 2009). The possibility that followers engage in different levels of cognitive appraisal of leaders requires further theoretical and empirical development.

We also explored the influence of the less familiar but deep-rooted emic construct of Chinese employees' middle-way thinking in regard to the effectiveness of leadership. Our results confirm that middle-way thinking was a potent driver of employee behavior in contemporary Chinese organizations. Middle-way thinking reflects the Chinese traditional cognitive schema whereby proper actions undertaken in a holistic manner are encouraged to actively maintain the balance between a person and their surroundings (Chou et al., 2014; Du et al., 2014). This active adjustment promotes the process of reducing the discrepancy between personal action and social surroundings (Du et al., 2014; Wei & Wang, 2020); such a process functions differently from the unidirectional etic value of power distance. Therefore, followers with a high level of middle-way thinking are more likely to actively take proper and moderate actions to accommodate the intentions, behavior, and style of their leaders (Cai et al., 2017; Wu & Lin, 2005). Our results verify the positive moderating role of middle way thinking, such that followers with a high level of middle-way thinking respond more positively to visionary leadership.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. First, the sample included only two enterprises in China; therefore, given the increasing diversity in China and other countries, the sample limited the generalizability of the results (Weber et al., 2018). Future researchers could study numerous enterprises in various countries. Second, the middle-way thinking construct is new in international studies. Further research should be directed to examining how the distinct role of middle-way thinking over other emic (e.g., traditionality) and etic (e.g., power distance) values shapes employee reactions to various styles of leadership. Third, we utilized cross-sectional data and, therefore, cannot draw clear causal inferences regarding the outcomes. Thus, future studies could investigate potential organization- or group-level dynamics between emerging collective values and leadership processes that unfold over time. Finally, we adopted three-item scales from previous research to measure all variables, which limits interpretation of our findings. In future studies full scales should be employed to enhance the validity of measurement and demonstrate the full content of OCB and visionary leadership.

Despite the limitations, this study contributes to the international leadership literature regarding follower values that shape leader effectiveness in emerging markets, with China as the empirical setting. The consistently favorable effect of middle-way thinking on visionary leadership style reveals the adaptability of Chinese employees to various social surroundings. Future researchers could extend this work to identify other country-specific emic values and investigate the interplay between emic and etic values to shape employees' interpretations of organizational events, including leader behavior.

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