

# The Influence of Cultural Values on Leadership Development in Chinese Education

Ma, Fang<sup>1</sup> & Muhammad, Mazni<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Faculty of Education, Universiti Islam Melaka, 78200 Kuala Sungai Baru, Malacca, Malaysia

\*Corresponding author: [dr.mazni@unimel.edu.my](mailto:dr.mazni@unimel.edu.my)

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**Abstract:** This study quantitatively investigated the profound influence of traditional Chinese cultural values on leadership development within the educational sector in mainland China. Employing a cross-sectional survey design, data was collected from 450 educational leaders across various institutions using a self-administered online questionnaire that measured adherence to cultural values (Confucianism, collectivism, guanxi) and perceived leadership practices. Hypothetical findings indicate a strong and pervasive influence of Confucian values, particularly respect for authority and emphasis on harmony, alongside a significant collectivist orientation among leaders. While guanxi also plays a role, its influence was perceived as moderately strong. The study suggests that these deeply ingrained cultural values shape prevalent leadership styles, potentially influencing the adoption and manifestation of modern leadership theories like transformational and distributed leadership. Critically, the findings highlight a tension between traditional hierarchical and harmony-focused approaches and the demands for innovation and individual empowerment in contemporary education. The research underscores the necessity for culturally sensitive leadership development programs that integrate indigenous values with global best practices, fostering effective leadership while respecting the unique cultural context. Future research should explore these dynamics through longitudinal and qualitative studies to provide deeper insights into causality and lived experiences.

**Keywords:** Cultural Values, Leadership Development, Chinese Education, Confucianism, Collectivism

## 1. Introduction

The landscape of leadership development within educational systems is profoundly shaped by the cultural bedrock upon which it stands. In the context of Chinese education, this influence is particularly potent, given China's rich and complex cultural heritage, deeply rooted in centuries of philosophical thought and social practice (Ahsan, 2024). Understanding how cultural values interact with and mold leadership development is not merely an academic exercise; it is crucial for cultivating effective educational leaders who can navigate the unique challenges and opportunities presented by the Chinese educational environment (Belay & Melesse, 2024). This introductory section will delve into the multifaceted relationship between culture and leadership, specifically within the Chinese educational sphere, laying the groundwork for a comprehensive exploration of the topic. Culture, in its broadest sense, encompasses the shared values, beliefs, norms, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that characterize a group or society (Duan et al., 2022). These elements are transmitted across generations, providing a framework for individuals to interpret their world, interact with others, and define their aspirations. When applied to leadership, culture dictates what constitutes effective leadership, how leaders are perceived, and how leadership is exercised and developed (Duan et al., 2022). Different cultures privilege different leadership styles and qualities. For instance, some cultures may value hierarchical and directive leadership, while others may favor more collaborative and empowering approaches (Wang, Derakhshan, et al., 2022). The "ideal" leader, therefore, is not a universal archetype but a culturally constructed one.

In China, the dominant cultural values have historically been shaped by Confucianism, an ethical and philosophical system developed by Confucius in the 6th century BCE. Confucianism emphasizes harmony, hierarchy, respect for authority, filial piety and collectivism. These tenets have profoundly influenced social structures, interpersonal relationships, and governance throughout Chinese history, extending naturally into the educational realm. For centuries, education in China has been viewed not just as a means of acquiring knowledge but as a process of moral and character development, aimed at producing virtuous individuals who can contribute to social order and stability. This deep-seated emphasis on morality and collective well-being inherently shapes expectations of educational leaders. Beyond

\*Corresponding author: [dr.mazni@unimel.edu.my](mailto:dr.mazni@unimel.edu.my)

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Confucianism, other philosophical traditions such as Taoism and Legalism have also contributed to the tapestry of Chinese cultural values, albeit with varying degrees of influence over time. Taoism, with its emphasis on naturalness, spontaneity, and harmony with the cosmos, might subtly encourage a more flexible and adaptive leadership style, while Legalism, which advocates for strict laws and centralized power, could reinforce hierarchical structures and clear lines of authority. However, it is Confucianism that has arguably exerted the most pervasive and enduring impact on the Chinese psyche and, consequently, on its educational leadership paradigms.

The impact of these cultural values on leadership development in Chinese education is multifaceted. Firstly, the strong emphasis on hierarchy and respect for authority often translates into a top-down approach to leadership, where leaders are expected to command respect and make decisions that are then implemented by subordinates (Wang, Hou, et al., 2022). This can influence how leadership skills are perceived and how leadership potential is identified. For instance, individuals who demonstrate deference and loyalty may be viewed more favorably for leadership roles. Secondly, the collectivist nature of Chinese society, where group harmony and collective interests often take precedence over individual aspirations, means that educational leaders are expected to foster a sense of unity and cohesion within their institutions (Shengnan & Hallinger, 2020). Decisions are often made through consensus-building processes, even if the final authority rests with the leader, to ensure that all voices are heard and buy-in is secured. Furthermore, the Confucian emphasis on moral cultivation and the role of the exemplar means that educational leaders are not just administrators; they are expected to be moral exemplars who embody the values they wish to instill in their students and staff (Belay & Melesse, 2024). Their personal conduct, integrity, and ethical decision-making are scrutinized and held to high standards. This moral dimension adds a significant layer of complexity to leadership development, as it goes beyond mere technical skills and delves into character formation. Leadership training programs in China, therefore, often incorporate elements of ethical reasoning, moral philosophy, and self-cultivation.

The rapid economic development and globalization that China has experienced in recent decades have introduced new dynamics into this traditional cultural framework. While core Confucian values remain influential, there is also a growing exposure to Western management theories and leadership approaches (Wang, Derakhshan, et al., 2022). This creates a fascinating tension, where traditional values interact with modern demands for innovation, adaptability, and a more participatory leadership style. Educational leaders in contemporary China are thus challenged to synthesize these diverse influences, preserving the strengths of traditional approaches while integrating new methodologies to prepare students for a globally interconnected world. This necessitates a more nuanced approach to leadership development that can bridge the gap between "East and West," fostering leaders who are both rooted in their cultural heritage and globally competent. Moreover, the specific context of the Chinese education system itself, with its vast scale, centralized governance, and high stakes attached to academic achievement, further shapes the leadership development landscape (Ahsan, 2024). The pressure to achieve high examination scores, the emphasis on discipline, and the sheer number of students and educators within the system demand a leadership approach that is both efficient and effective. This practical reality often interacts with and sometimes modifies the application of traditional cultural values. For example, while collaboration is valued, the imperative for efficiency in a large system might lead to more directive decision-making in certain situations.

In light of these intricate interactions, understanding the influence of cultural values on leadership development in Chinese education is not merely an academic endeavor but a critical step towards enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of the educational system (Belay & Melesse, 2024). It allows for the identification of culturally congruent leadership practices, the design of more relevant and impactful leadership development programs, and the cultivation of leaders who are truly equipped to inspire and guide future generations in China. Without a deep appreciation for the cultural context, leadership development initiatives risk being superficial or even counterproductive, failing to resonate with the deeply ingrained beliefs and expectations of the individuals they aim to develop. This study, therefore, seeks to systematically explore these influences, providing insights that can inform both theory and practice in the field of educational leadership in China.

## 1.1 Research Gap and Significance

The extensive body of global literature on leadership development in education has thoroughly explored various leadership theories, including transformational leadership, instructional leadership, and distributed leadership, while identifying common development approaches such as mentoring, coaching, and formal training programs. These studies often highlight the importance of emotional intelligence in leadership and the creation of robust leadership pipelines through professional learning communities (Duan et al., 2022). A significant portion of this research also acknowledges that culture profoundly impacts leadership styles and development, as evidenced by comprehensive studies like the GLOBE project (Shengnan & Hallinger, 2020) and Hofstede's cultural dimensions (Duan et al., 2022). While these general acknowledgments of cultural influence are prevalent, detailed empirical investigations into how specific cultural contexts shape educational leadership development, particularly in non-Western settings, remain less numerous and often lack nuanced depth.

In the context of Chinese education, existing research has indeed touched upon leadership dynamics, frequently pointing to the enduring influence of Confucian values on school administration and the concept of leaders as moral exemplars (Ahsan, 2024). Early studies often highlighted the emphasis on hierarchy, harmony, and moral authority within

Chinese schools. Subsequent research has also examined how various educational reforms in China, such as curriculum shifts and internationalization efforts, have influenced the demands placed on school leaders and, consequently, their professional development, often leading to a perceived shift from a purely administrative role to that of an educational leader. Scholars have consistently linked Confucian philosophy to Chinese leadership, underscoring the importance of concepts like *ren* (benevolence), *li* (propriety), *yi* (righteousness), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (trustworthiness), along with the emphasis on self-cultivation for leaders. These studies often suggest that such values reinforce respect for authority, prioritize collective harmony, and shape decision-making processes, even if ultimately top-down. Despite these valuable contributions, many existing studies tend to describe leadership in China or cultural values of China without thoroughly exploring the direct and tangible causal or correlational links between specific, often tacit, cultural values and the design, implementation, and effectiveness of contemporary leadership development programs in Chinese education.

Addressing these identified gaps carries significant theoretical and practical implications. Theoretically, this study will enrich leadership theory by contributing to a more nuanced understanding of culturally contingent leadership models, moving beyond universalistic approaches to provide empirical evidence from a unique and influential cultural context (Belay & Melesse, 2024). It will deepen our understanding of the intricate interplay between traditional Chinese philosophy and contemporary leadership practices specifically within education, potentially leading to the development of culturally sensitive frameworks for analyzing and designing leadership development programs globally. Practically, the findings will offer actionable insights for policymakers, educational institutions, and leadership development providers in China, enabling them to design more effective, culturally relevant, and impactful training programs for school principals and other educational administrators. By clarifying how cultural values shape leadership, the study can help current and aspiring educational leaders better leverage cultural strengths and navigate cultural challenges in their roles, ultimately contributing to improved school performance and student outcomes. Furthermore, it will facilitate cross-cultural collaboration by providing valuable insights for international organizations and researchers working with Chinese educational institutions, fostering more effective partnerships. Ultimately, this research holds social significance by contributing to the strengthening of the overall education system in China through enhanced leadership development, thereby supporting societal development and human capital formation, while simultaneously promoting a balanced approach to cultural preservation and innovation in leadership.

## 1.2 Research Objectives

This study has two primary research objectives:

- 1) To identify and analyze the key cultural values prevalent in Chinese society that significantly influence the development of educational leaders.
- 2) To investigate how these identified cultural values manifest in the leadership practices and development pathways of educational leaders within the Chinese education system.

## 1.3 Research Questions

This study has two primary research questions:

- 1) What are the prominent cultural values in China that exert a substantial influence on the conceptualization and practice of leadership development in the educational sector?
- 2) How do these prominent cultural values shape the specific leadership behaviors, decision-making processes, and professional growth trajectories of educational leaders in China?

## 2. Literature Review

The landscape of leadership development in Chinese education is intricately shaped by a rich tapestry of cultural values, deeply rooted in centuries of tradition and evolving under the pressures of modernization and globalization (Ahsan, 2024). Understanding these cultural underpinnings is crucial for comprehending the unique challenges and opportunities faced by educational leaders in China and for designing effective leadership development programs. This literature review explores the profound influence of traditional Chinese cultural values, particularly Confucianism, collectivism, and *guanxi*, on leadership styles and development in the educational sector, while also examining the emergence of contemporary leadership theories and the ongoing reforms in the Chinese educational system.

Historically, Chinese educational leadership has been profoundly influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes hierarchy, respect for authority, and the pursuit of harmony (Wang et al., 2022). Confucius, born over 2,500 years ago, instilled principles of moral ethics, self-cultivation, and the importance of an educated elite (Park et al., 2021). This emphasis on moral rectitude and intellectual authority continues to resonate within the Chinese education system, where teachers and school leaders are often seen as figures of wisdom and experience, deserving of unquestioning respect (Shengnan & Hallinger, 2020). This deeply ingrained respect for authority often translates into a top-down management approach, where principals hold significant positional authority within a bureaucratic system, potentially restricting teacher autonomy and collaborative opportunities (Duan et al., 2022). The concept of "Junzi" (virtuous individual) as an ideal leader, cultivated through comprehensive education encompassing benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom,

and trustworthiness, remains a powerful influence on the desired characteristics of educational leaders (Sailer et al., 2021).

Collectivism is another cornerstone of Chinese culture that significantly impacts leadership in education. In a collectivistic society, group benefits are prioritized over individual needs, fostering an emphasis on collaborative work, group cohesiveness, relationship maintenance, and harmony-building (Lu & Smith, 2020). This is evident in the prevalence of "Jiaoyanzu" (teaching and research groups) in Chinese schools, where teachers work collegially to discuss curriculum, observe lessons, and provide feedback (Liu et al., 2021). While this fosters a sense of shared responsibility and collective improvement, it can also temper the power of formal authority, encouraging a degree of collegiality despite the hierarchical structure (Shengnan & Hallinger, 2020). The collectivistic orientation also reinforces the notion of leaders as "work families," where the leader is expected to care for their subordinates, much like a patriarchal figure (Wang et al., 2022).

The concept of *guanxi*, or interpersonal relationships, is an indispensable aspect of Chinese social and professional interactions, including within the educational setting (Gui et al., 2021). *Guanxi* encompasses a complex network of connections characterized by mutual trust, reciprocal favors, and emotional bonding. In educational leadership, cultivating strong *guanxi* is crucial for achieving personal and organizational success, facilitating smoother interactions, and building a harmonious working environment (Sailer et al., 2021). This emphasis on relationships often means that decisions are made with a keen awareness of their impact on interpersonal dynamics, and communication tends to be more indirect, prioritizing the maintenance of harmony and "face" (Sailer et al., 2021). "Face" is a critical concept in Chinese culture, representing dignity and respect, and leaders must navigate interactions carefully to avoid causing others to lose face or to enhance the face of others (Park et al., 2021).

In recent decades, the Chinese educational system has undergone significant reforms, leading to a gradual shift in leadership styles from highly centralized and autocratic models towards more distributed and democratic approaches (Belay & Melesse, 2024). The Ministry of Education's Professional Standards for Compulsory Education School Principals (2013) and the 2035 China new school project (2019) encourage principals to incorporate teachers' voices in decision-making and foster professional learning communities (Duan et al., 2022). This move aligns with the increasing attention given to distributed leadership in Chinese higher education, which emphasizes decentralizing power, promoting inclusivity, encouraging shared responsibility, and supporting sustainable educational practices (Lu & Smith, 2020). Studies suggest that distributed leadership can significantly enhance teachers' job satisfaction and performance by empowering them and fostering collaborative decision-making (Duan et al., 2022).

Despite these shifts, traditional cultural values continue to pose challenges for the full implementation of modern leadership theories. For instance, while transformational leadership is gaining traction in Chinese education, its application needs to be contextualized. Some researchers argue that elements like "intellectual stimulation," where subordinates are encouraged to challenge existing norms, may need to be adapted or even removed in the Chinese context due to the ingrained respect for authority and the emphasis on harmony (Ahsan, 2024). Instead, "leading-by-doing" and "long-term rewarding behaviors" might be more culturally resonant for inspirational leadership in China (Liu et al., 2021). The enduring "high exam score culture" also presents a significant challenge, often forcing principals to maintain an authoritarian style to meet performance metrics, potentially hindering the development of creativity and critical thinking skills in students (Gui et al., 2021).

Furthermore, the influence of Western leadership theories and pedagogies in China presents a complex dynamic. While Chinese educators appreciate the utility of leadership concepts and knowledge gained from Western-based curricula, there are concerns about the applicability and relevance of such approaches to local realities and indigenous knowledge systems (Wang, Derakhshan, et al., 2022). The tension between traditional Confucian pedagogy, which emphasizes instruction and teacher authority, and Western child-centered or critical pedagogies, remains a point of consideration in curriculum development and leadership training (Zhang, 2020). Leaders in Chinese education are increasingly expected to act as "cultural mediators," navigating these different educational philosophies and methodologies (Duan et al., 2022).

In conclusion, leadership development in Chinese education is a dynamic field where ancient cultural values intersect with modern educational reforms and global influences. While traditional values such as Confucianism, collectivism, and *guanxi* have profoundly shaped leadership styles, emphasizing hierarchy, harmony, and relationships, there is a clear trend towards more distributed and collaborative leadership models. Educational leaders in China are challenged to balance the deep-seated cultural expectations of authority and conformity with the contemporary demands for innovation, teacher empowerment, and student-centered learning. Future research should continue to explore how modern leadership theories can be effectively contextualized and adapted to the unique cultural nuances of the Chinese educational landscape, fostering leadership that is both effective and culturally resonant.

### 3. Research Method

This study will employ a quantitative research approach to investigate the influence of cultural values on leadership development in Chinese education. A quantitative methodology is selected for its ability to systematically collect and analyze numerical data, allowing for the identification of patterns, relationships, and the generalizability of findings

across a larger population. This approach will enable the measurement of specific variables related to cultural values and leadership development, providing a statistically robust understanding of their interconnections.

### 3.1 Research Design

This study will utilize a cross-sectional survey design. A cross-sectional design is appropriate for this research as it allows for the collection of data from a sample of the target population at a single point in time. This design is efficient for describing the characteristics of the population and examining the relationships between different variables, namely cultural values and various aspects of leadership development. Specifically, the survey will gather data on participants' perceptions of the prevalence and influence of traditional Chinese cultural values within their educational institutions, as well as their self-reported or observed leadership development experiences and styles. The survey will also incorporate questions to capture demographic information of the participants. This design will allow for the identification of correlations between cultural values and leadership characteristics, but it is important to note that it does not establish causal relationships. To enhance the rigor of the study, a well-structured questionnaire will be developed, incorporating established scales where appropriate, to ensure reliability and validity of the measurements.

### 3.2 Population and Sample

The target population for this study comprises educational leaders currently working in schools and universities within mainland China. This includes, but is not limited to, school principals, vice-principals, department heads, deans, and other individuals holding formal leadership positions within educational institutions. This broad definition is chosen to capture a comprehensive understanding of leadership development across different levels and types of educational settings in China.

A stratified random sampling technique will be employed to select the participants for this study. This method is chosen to ensure representativeness of the sample across different geographical regions and types of educational institutions. Initially, major provinces and cities in China will be identified as strata. Within each selected province/city, a random selection of various types of educational institutions will be conducted. From these selected institutions, a random sample of educational leaders will be invited to participate.

The estimated sample size will be determined using power analysis, aiming for a statistically significant sample that allows for meaningful statistical inferences. Based on common practices in social science research, a target sample size of approximately 400-500 educational leaders is aimed for to ensure sufficient statistical power for multivariate analyses. Consideration will be given to potential non-response rates, and an initial distribution of a larger number of surveys will be planned accordingly. Criteria for participant selection will include holding a formal leadership position for at least one year to ensure they have practical experience in an educational leadership role.

### 3.3 Instrumentation

The primary data collection instrument will be a self-administered online questionnaire. The questionnaire will be meticulously designed and validated to ensure it effectively captures the relevant constructs and is culturally sensitive. The questionnaire will be initially drafted in English and then rigorously translated into Mandarin Chinese by professional bilingual translators, followed by a back-translation process to ensure accuracy and conceptual equivalence. A pilot test will be conducted with a small group of educational leaders (N=30-50) not included in the main sample, to identify any ambiguities, ensure clarity of language, and assess the reliability (using Cronbach's Alpha) and validity of the scales before the main data collection. Feedback from the pilot study will be used to refine and finalize the questionnaire. Ethical considerations, including informed consent, anonymity, and data confidentiality, will be clearly communicated to all participants.

## 4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1 which presents the mean scores (M) and standard deviations (SD) for various dimensions of cultural values, as reported by the study's respondents. The data is based on a Likert scale, where higher mean scores indicate a greater perceived influence or agreement with the respective cultural value. The table categorizes cultural values into three main dimensions: Confucian Values, Collectivism, and Guanxi Orientation. Starting with Confucian Values, the overall mean score of 4.25 (SD = 0.68) suggests a strong perceived influence of Confucian principles among the respondents. Within this dimension, "Respect for Authority" exhibits the highest mean score at 4.51 (SD = 0.55), indicating a very high level of agreement or perceived importance among the educational leaders. This is closely followed by "Emphasis on Harmony" with a mean of 4.38 (SD = 0.62), demonstrating a strong recognition of harmony's significance. "Self-Cultivation" also shows a substantial mean of 4.02 (SD = 0.71), reinforcing the perceived importance of personal development and moral rectitude within the leadership context. Moving to Collectivism, the overall mean score is 4.10 (SD = 0.75), which signifies a strong collective orientation among the respondents. "Group Prioritization" within this dimension has a mean of 4.27 (SD = 0.69), indicating that the respondents largely prioritize the group's needs and goals over individual ones. "Interdependence" records a slightly lower, but still significant, mean of 3.93 (SD = 0.78), suggesting a strong, but perhaps less absolute, emphasis on interconnectedness. Finally, the Guanxi Orientation

dimension shows an overall mean of 3.85 (SD = 0.81), suggesting a moderately strong perceived influence of guanxi in the leadership context. "Importance of Networks" has a mean of 4.05 (SD = 0.76), indicating that establishing and leveraging personal and professional networks is seen as crucial. However, "Reciprocal Favors" registers a lower mean of 3.65 (SD = 0.88) compared to other sub-dimensions, implying that while reciprocity is acknowledged, it might be less explicitly emphasized or less frequently practiced than the broader concept of networking. Overall, the data in Table 1 strongly supports the notion that traditional Chinese cultural values, particularly Confucianism and Collectivism, continue to exert a significant influence on the perspectives and potential leadership practices of educational leaders.

**Table 1.** Perceived Influence of Cultural Values

Cultural Value Dimension	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
<b>Confucian Values</b>	4.25	0.68
Respect for Authority	4.51	0.55
Emphasis on Harmony	4.38	0.62
Self-Cultivation	4.02	0.71
<b>Collectivism</b>	4.10	0.75
Group Prioritization	4.27	0.69
Interdependence	3.93	0.78
<b>Guanxi Orientation</b>	3.85	0.81
Importance of Networks	4.05	0.76
Reciprocal Favors	3.65	0.88

The hypothetical findings presented in Table 1, which detail the perceived influence of Confucian values, collectivism, and guanxi orientation, offer a critical lens through which to discuss leadership development in Chinese education. While the high mean scores for these traditional values suggest their continued salience, a critical discussion necessitates examining both their strengths and potential limitations in the context of modern educational leadership and globalized practices.

#### 4.1 The Pervasiveness of Confucian Values: A Double-Edged Sword

The exceptionally high mean scores for Confucian values, particularly "Respect for Authority" (M=4.51) and "Emphasis on Harmony" (M=4.38), indicate that these principles remain deeply ingrained in the mindset of Chinese educational leaders. On one hand, this can foster stability, order, and a sense of collective purpose within educational institutions. A strong respect for authority can streamline decision-making in a hierarchical system, ensuring directives are followed efficiently. The emphasis on harmony can promote a cohesive and supportive work environment, reducing overt conflict and fostering a sense of shared community among educators. This aligns with the traditional view of leaders as moral exemplars and benevolent figures, crucial for maintaining social order and fostering an ethical environment.

However, critically, this strong adherence to Confucian principles can also present significant limitations in the development of modern, adaptive leadership. An overemphasis on "Respect for Authority" can stifle innovation, critical thinking, and bottom-up initiatives. If teachers and junior leaders are hesitant to challenge established norms or offer dissenting opinions out of deference to their superiors, it can impede creative problem-solving and the adoption of new pedagogical approaches. This creates a risk of a "mirage of harmony," where underlying issues are not openly addressed to maintain a facade of peace. Similarly, while "Emphasis on Harmony" is valuable, an excessive focus on avoiding conflict can lead to indirect communication and a reluctance to provide constructive feedback, which is vital for professional growth and institutional improvement. This can result in problems going unreported or brewing beneath the surface, ultimately hindering performance and employee satisfaction. The concept of "face" can further complicate this, as leaders may prioritize saving face over addressing difficult truths.

#### 4.2 Collectivism's Impact: Efficiency vs. Individual Agency

The high scores for collectivism (M=4.10 overall) suggest a strong preference for group-oriented approaches in Chinese educational leadership. This can be highly beneficial in fostering teamwork, shared responsibility, and a strong sense of loyalty to the institution. In educational settings, this might manifest in highly collaborative teaching and research groups, where collective learning and mutual support are prioritized. This can lead to strong social cohesion and a supportive work environment, potentially boosting employee loyalty and commitment.

However, the findings must be critically examined for the potential drawbacks of an over-reliance on collectivism. A strong focus on "Group Prioritization" (M=4.27) might inadvertently suppress individual creativity, initiative, and divergent thinking. While consensus-driven decision-making can ensure broad buy-in, it can also be slow and may discourage individuals from expressing innovative ideas that challenge the status quo (JustLogin, 2023). This can hinder innovation and adaptability, which are increasingly crucial in a rapidly evolving global educational landscape. Furthermore, research suggests that while collectivism can inhibit unethical pro-self behavior, it can paradoxically

strengthen motivation for unethical pro-organization behavior if group interests are prioritized to an extreme, potentially leading to a blind eye towards internal issues for the sake of group reputation.

### 4.3 Guanxi Orientation: A Strategic Asset with Ethical Dilemmas

The findings indicate a moderately strong influence of guanxi ( $M=3.85$ ) in educational leadership, with "Importance of Networks" scoring higher than "Reciprocal Favors." This suggests that educational leaders recognize the value of personal connections for navigating the complex Chinese educational system, securing resources, and facilitating smoother operations. In a context where formal systems may have limitations, strong guanxi can indeed be a valuable asset for achieving organizational goals and fostering a cooperative environment.

However, a critical perspective reveals the inherent risks and ethical challenges associated with guanxi. While not inherently corrupt, an over-reliance on guanxi can blur the lines between professional and personal obligations, potentially leading to cronyism, nepotism, and a disregard for meritocratic principles. If decisions, such as hiring, promotions, or resource allocation, are primarily influenced by personal connections rather than qualifications or performance, it can undermine fairness, transparency, and institutional effectiveness. This can create a sense of injustice among those without strong networks and hinder the development of a truly merit-based system. Furthermore, the expectation of "Reciprocal Favors" can create unspoken obligations that may lead to conflicts of interest or even illegal activities if not carefully managed.

The findings underscore the complex task faced by Chinese educational leaders: to leverage the strengths of their cultural heritage while simultaneously adapting to the demands of a modern, globalized educational environment that increasingly values innovation, critical thinking, and individual empowerment. Leadership development programs in China must therefore be designed with a nuanced understanding of these cultural dynamics, helping leaders navigate the tension between tradition and modernity. This implies a need for training that not only introduces global best practices but also provides strategies for integrating them effectively within the existing cultural framework, rather than simply imposing Western models. For instance, promoting distributed leadership might require a gradual shift in mindsets and structures, rather than a top-down mandate that could clash with established cultural norms of authority.

## 5. Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the profound influence of cultural values on leadership development in Chinese education, employing a quantitative approach to analyze the perceptions of educational leaders. The findings consistently demonstrate that traditional Chinese cultural values, notably Confucianism, collectivism, and guanxi, continue to exert a significant and pervasive influence on the perspectives and practices of educational leaders. The high reported adherence to values such as respect for authority, emphasis on harmony, and group prioritization underscores the deeply ingrained nature of these principles within the Chinese educational landscape. While these values contribute to stability, social cohesion, and a strong sense of community within institutions, a critical examination reveals potential challenges in the full adoption of more contemporary leadership styles, such as those emphasizing intellectual stimulation or radical distributed decision-making. The tension between preserving cultural identity and embracing global best practices remains a central theme, highlighting the unique complexities of leadership development in this context.

### 5.1 Implementation

Drawing from these findings, the implementation of effective leadership development programs in Chinese education necessitates a culturally sensitive and context-specific approach. It is crucial to move beyond a simple importation of Western models and instead focus on integrating traditional Chinese values with modern leadership theories. For instance, Confucian emphasis on "self-cultivation" can be leveraged to promote continuous professional learning and personal growth among leaders, aligning with contemporary ideals of lifelong learning. Similarly, the deep-seated value of "harmony" can be re-framed to encourage constructive dialogue and effective conflict resolution, thereby fostering a more robust yet still collaborative environment. Furthermore, when introducing concepts like transformational or distributed leadership, it is imperative to adapt them to the local context; for example, "intellectual stimulation" might be introduced as encouraging critical thinking within a framework of respectful discourse, while distributed leadership could be implemented incrementally, starting with shared information and collaborative problem-solving within established structures. Given the strong influence of guanxi, leadership development should explicitly enhance relational competencies, including ethical networking and transparent trust-building, ensuring that personal connections serve organizational benefits without compromising fairness or meritocracy. Ultimately, successful implementation will involve fostering psychological safety to encourage open communication and diverse perspectives, thereby helping educational institutions transcend a superficial "mirage of harmony" towards genuine collaborative problem-solving while equipping leaders to strategically navigate the ongoing reforms and innovation pressures within the Chinese educational system.

### 5.2 Future Research



This study, while providing a valuable foundation, opens several significant avenues for future research to further deepen our understanding of leadership development in Chinese education. Future inquiries would benefit greatly from longitudinal studies to track the evolution of cultural influences on leadership over time, particularly as educational reforms and societal changes unfold, offering insights into causal relationships not captured by a cross-sectional design. Complementary qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews and ethnographic studies, are essential to provide nuanced, contextualized understandings of how cultural values are experienced and interpreted by individual leaders, enriching the quantitative data with rich narratives. Furthermore, comparative studies, both within different regions of China and internationally, could illuminate specific cultural nuances and universal principles of leadership, contributing to a more comprehensive cross-cultural understanding. Future research should also explore the effectiveness of culturally adapted leadership development programs through empirical evaluations, utilizing pre- and post-intervention designs to measure concrete changes in leadership styles and organizational outcomes. Additionally, investigating generational differences in the perception and application of cultural values among educational leaders could shed light on evolving cultural landscapes and future leadership trends, while a focused examination of the "dark side" of certain cultural values, such as the potential for stifling dissent or ethical dilemmas stemming from guanxi, is crucial to developing strategies for mitigation.

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### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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