

# Travel Industry Leadership in Italy and China

## — A Biographical Comparison

### Abstract

Entrepreneurial leadership has been important in developing the global travel industry with implications for both organizations and people. This comparative biographical analysis of two travel industry leaders and their respective contexts in Italy and China documents and evaluates these dimensions and applicable leadership constructs. The subjects are an Italian tour operator leader, Ermanno Chizzali (Founder of Ignas Tour SpA), and a Chinese tour operator leader, Ms. Xiaojuan Yin (Founder of Chengdu Harmony International Travel). Information was collected, analyzed, and compared about the two leaders, their organizations and leadership styles. Reference was made to their backgrounds, characteristics, values, and strategies. It was observed that entrepreneurial and innovative leadership offers evident advantages in the creation and development of Small and Medium-Sized Tourism Enterprises (SMTEs). The authors conclude that SMTE leaders should engage in continuous learning and training to a) adapt their leadership skills and practices and b) capitalize on scholarly insights and perspectives. This will involve addressing geopolitical and socio-cultural tensions by leveraging corporate legacies involving cross-border stakeholders to enhance competitiveness, collaboration, and agility.

**Keywords:** Leadership; tour operator; entrepreneur; travel industry; Chinese outbound tourism

## **1. Introduction**

The international travel industry involves a complex network of economic ties across different countries and cultural backgrounds. Ever-changing and unpredictable international circumstances demand that travel entrepreneurs should exercise strong leadership, including entrepreneurial and innovative spirit, adaptability in a multilingual and intercultural context, crisis management and quality risk-taking (Naipaul and Wang, 2009). This applies notably in China's outbound tourism industry which has experienced explosive growth over the past decade. Industry dynamics have been shaped by outstanding entrepreneurial leaders in both source markets and destinations. Prior to the pandemic, the subjects of this paper achieved success with a stable and ever-growing market share. The two founders are important stakeholders in the Europe-China tourism market and thus are well suited for a case study and biographical comparison.

Mr. Ermanno Chizzali is the founder of Ignas tour, a large tour operator based in South Tyrol, northern Italy, which is mainly engaged in the business of inbound tour operators and hotel distribution, providing travel services for more than 600,000 tourists annually. Ms. Xiaojuan Yin is a Chinese entrepreneur who created a tour operator - Chengdu Harmony International Travel - specializing in wholesale across southwestern China, based in Chengdu, Sichuan Province.

This case study of entrepreneurial and innovative leadership compares the leaders of two tour operators – one an Italian male and the other a Chinese female – and considers their encounters with entrepreneurial opportunities and challenges.

Their real-time leadership insights and entrepreneurial stories may provide practitioners and students with an enhanced understanding of the role of entrepreneurial spirit and innovative ability in a rapidly changing business environment. Table 2 provides a brief introduction to the two organizations. The case study makes a potential contribution to the literature on entrepreneurial and innovative leadership in EU-China tourism.

This case study has significance for theory and practice. Firstly, the authors note the limited scholarly discussion of Chinese outbound tourism to Italy, a leading global destination (Jørgensen et al., 2018). Furthermore, most previous investigations have focused on destination marketing or on Chinese tourist perceptions, with minimal consideration for tourism operators in their capacity as industry stakeholders. The current case offers fresh perspectives from travel industry leaders. A detailed and comparative study of individual leaders is particularly timely, given the potential market opportunities emanating from the China outbound tourism phenomenon. The study findings are particularly relevant for industry stakeholders in source markets and destinations and for European SMTEs cooperating with China.

## **2. Literature review**

The current case study addresses the issue of travel industry leadership, a phenomenon that has been placed in the spotlight during the disrupted mobility of the COVID-19 pandemic. The leader is essentially a conventional role in business society

(Caldwell and Karri, 2005). As leaders of all forms, travel industry leaders should have a variety of competencies and skills, one of which is very important is leadership. In the leadership competency model, leadership includes six aspects: development of others, embracing change, perseverance, cultivating motivation, leadership, and teamwork awareness (Chung-Hererra et al., 2003). While management is more inclined to coordination and planning, leadership extends to be more complicated based on several leadership constructs such as transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, consideration, initial structure, and leader-member exchange (LMX) (Rowold, 2014). Each leadership construct exhibits different characteristics in specific organizational behaviors.

### ***2.1 Entrepreneurship and SMTEs***

Many travel agencies and tour operators have been created by entrepreneurs who were neither former employees of larger tourism enterprises nor from the wider tourism sector. The definition of entrepreneurial leadership has evolved from demonstrating a visionary position (Gupta et al., 2004) to a capacity for innovation and adaption in high-speed and uncertain environments (Surie and Ashley, 2008). It has been proposed as an individual ability (Cunningham and Lischeron, 1991) which is developed in specific ways to influence others (Ireland et al., 2003). Consequently, entrepreneurship which is both recognized and exploited, influences the performance of team members and the achievement of organizational goals (Renko et al., 2015).

The entrepreneurial leadership construct is widely viewed as being more prevalent amongst corporate founders.

Previous researchers have observed that the particularities of the tourism sector demand distinct entrepreneurial characteristics, thereby posing particular research challenges, compared with examinations of entrepreneurship more generally. Industry characteristics such as seasonality, geographic dispersal and the prevalence of intuitive entrepreneurs lead to different allocations of human and financial resources, compliance amongst destination suppliers, and co-creating intangible value and sustainable development (Solvoll, Alsos & Bulanova, 2015). Wang, Hung and Lin (2018) also found that the primary entrepreneurial motivations amongst those establishing small and medium sized tourism enterprises (SMTEs) are business and lifestyle considerations, depending on the stage of tourism development. More research is needed to explore the multi-level relationship between individual entrepreneurs, companies, and destinations, and to consider differences in typologies by type of venture and entrepreneurial diversity (Fu et al., 2019). Entrepreneurial SMTEs must handle complex business rules which have been associated with the progressive privatization of China's travel industry with reduced state ownership. It is evident that further discussion is needed about leadership constructs such as entrepreneurship, ethics, innovation, and creativity in the tourism industry context (Kamisan and King, 2013). Entrepreneurial leadership in business involves the role of behaviours and attitudes in the start-up and growth period with entrepreneurs and leaders exhibiting both similarities and differences (Ensley, et al., 2006; Peterson et

al., 2009; Renko et al., al., 2015). In one study of tourism business leaders, respondents argued that entrepreneurship includes dreams and the ability to challenge reality, taking account of the values of diligence, self-confidence, and keen judgment on business intelligence (Naipaul and Wang, 2009). However, in the SMTE context, it has been commonplace to overlook the communication and career planning problems faced by younger employees (Peters, 2005).

## ***2.2 China's outbound tourism and Italy***

Increasing bilateral cooperation between the tourism sectors in Italy and China has drawn upon deep and longstanding cultural ties and political and economic connections (Dameri et al., 2019). Specifically, the deep state-to-state friendships date back to the travels of Marco and Niccolo Polo to China in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. Travel and tourism has emerged subsequently and particularly since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, as a key cooperative sphere between the two countries, based on the business potential and rich cultural and natural resources of each country. Dall'Ara's (2018) study of Chinese tourism and Italy gathered applicable scholarly and industry perspectives. The designation of 2022 as ***Italy-China Year of Culture and Tourism*** provides evidence of a political agenda to promote a stronger bilateral relationship.

Pre-pandemic Italy had substantial appeal for Chinese tourists as a popular long-haul destination (Tse, 2015). The strong association that was established with relaxation, comfort, art and culture has been a solid basis of destination appeal (Gravili & Rosato, 2017). Italy has been promoted actively within the Chinese

tourism market in alignment with the Government's "Belt and Road" initiative (BRI). Despite such initiatives, Italy has continued to attract relatively fewer Chinese tourists than its European competitors (Corigliano, 2011). Furthermore, Italy's system of tourism management exhibits poor organization and insufficient investment in emerging international markets. For example, there is a mismatch between the products and services offered by Italian suppliers and the needs of Chinese tourists (Gravili & Rosato, 2017). Meanwhile various private companies and consultants seek to overcome such limitations, by offering training services assisting SMTEs with China market access. Nevertheless, studies have shown that Italian entrepreneurs struggle to enter and manage the Chinese market because of different political, cultural and social values. Prejudicial and stereotypical images of China were an ongoing problem across Europe pre-pandemic, despite the heterogeneity of this fast-growing market (Jørgensen et al., 2018). Though many Italian companies have pursued opportunities in the China market, communication problems and misunderstandings have been persistent. The perspective offered by the current case study should progress mutual understandings between the two cultures about entrepreneurial leadership, particularly concerning tourism interests in Italy and China. The choice of Italy and China is also a consequence of the backgrounds of the co-authors, with both having lived in Italy and China and speaking Italian. A certain cultural and language understanding can enhance interpretations when investigating "behind the scenes".

Noting the extensive history of biographical studies that have documented the contributions of significant persons (notably Giorgio Vasari's 1550 publication *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*), it is timely to record the lives of entrepreneurs and their venture-creating journeys from the perspective of contemporary social realities. Such an approach might generate insights based on the experiences of entrepreneurial dreamers and managers within the tourism industry. Comparative leadership biographical analyses have been undertaken previously within tourism (Kamisan and King, 2013; Chu and King, 2019). However, travel leadership has been inadequately studied, especially in the context of China's outbound tourism in Europe (Jørgensen, Law & King, 2016). In addressing this gap, the current case study compares two founding tour operators with a view to providing in-depth analyses of their leadership experiences, considering both their pros and cons. The current choice of individual entrepreneurs with multinational businesses and their international market activities will fill a current research gap by exploring the relationship amongst individuals, companies, and destinations. The study highlights the particularity of entrepreneurship reflected through individuals involved in creating SMTE ventures.

Weber and Ladkin (2010) observed that while China is increasingly prominent in international tourism, it remains unclear how cultural and political differences influence perceptions of leadership and leader skills and characteristics. This case study seeks insights about such differences by examining perceptions of leadership and how change occurs when engaging in international business within



unfamiliar cultural and political contexts (Weber and Ladkin, 2010). The pace of mergers and acquisitions projects epitomize the internationalization of Chinese tourism companies. Some have sought to locate their ventures “upstream” of the industrial chain to reduce the profit margin obtained by the integration of resources of intermediate suppliers, to achieve the maximum competitive advantage of direct procurement. This allows the securing of more favourable prices and the exercise of direct control over tourism assets and resources in destinations. Such investment is two-way, and internationalization must accord with local legal and financial systems, consumption habits and cultural conditions, as well as adopting changes that help build brand effect and customer loyalty, thereby expanding market share (Zhao and Zhang, 2020). Due to national policy restrictions, China’s outbound tourism has limited openness to foreign investors. Only a few Western companies have obtained licenses to run tourism businesses in China, notably JTB, TUI, and American Express (Huang, 2019). In recent years, joint ventures such as MSC Cruises, Thomas Cook, and Wancheng (Shanghai) have been approved to operate outbound travel agency business in the Shanghai Free Trade Zone (Huang, 2019). The EU-China bilateral investment agreement has added more bilateral investment plans that bring future optimism (Yilmaz, 2020). The plan can promote cross-border business, which makes tourism investment projects more international and integrated into the overall Sino-European political and economic system.

As the world recovers from COVID-19, Western countries and China are equally interested in innovation and entrepreneurship. An increasingly global shift is

evident from the West to Asia as Chinese companies such as Fosun have taken over Western tourism companies e.g., Club Med and Thomas Cook for purposes of international expansion (Zhao and Zhang, 2020). European and Chinese leaders will need to learn from one another and about their respective organizations. This is an important rationale for conducting comparative work on Chinese and non-Chinese (in this case Italian) tourism sector ventures and leaders.

The present case study proposes the following research question based on the above-mentioned considerations. ***With many new entrants coming from other sectors of the economy, what role does entrepreneurial and innovative leadership play in the disrupted travel industry?***

### **3. Methodology**

This case study uses the method of comparative biographical analysis based on grounded constructivist theory. Grounded theory is commonly used in qualitative research. It serves to a) establish new interpretations and b) propose theoretical propositions for further research (Matteucci & Gnoth, 2017). Constructivism holds subjective positions that are relative, contextual, and dynamic, explaining changing social reality from an *emic* view. A comparative biographical case study approach was identified as the chosen qualitative research method and allows data collection and analysis. Two prominent leaders were interviewed to undertake a subjective and comparative interpretation of their storytelling, experiences, understandings and explanations. Since the interviewers and interviewees already possessed a trust-based

professional network relationship, the latter were more inclined to disclose industry-specific information and detailed professional practices and opinions to supposed ‘insiders’. Less information would likely have been forthcoming if the interviews had been undertaken by anonymous strangers. The authors intended to assemble high-quality data requiring extended discussion time (Saunders et al., 2012). The preceding reasons evidence the merits of conducting a comparative biographical analysis.

The use of self-ethnography as a qualitative research method allowed respondents to reflect individual experiences about participating in the travel industry. The corresponding author has been an "internal member" of the selected tour operators and drew upon seven years of industry experience in China and Italy to contribute anecdotal evidence based on observations and reflections. A comparative biographical approach allowed the authors to evaluate similarities and differences between the two leaders and their organizations within distinct cultural contexts. The authors extended a broader understanding of social and cultural contexts by directly comparing the biographical interactions of the two research subjects and their first-hand storytelling (Marechal, 2010). Data collection was facilitated using a semi-structured interview framework that included the administration of 18 questions. The chosen interview questions were open-ended, exploratory and complex, cognizant of the seniority of the respondents. The researchers adapted, adjusted, or added questions according to respondent reactions or to the content of the conversations. The first respondent - Mr. Chizzali – opted to be interviewed via MS Teams. He was previously the supervisor of the corresponding author in his (then) capacity as sales

and marketing manager for the selected Italian tour operator. Ms. Yin was interviewed via Wechat and was chosen as the second respondent because she had a long-term and trust-based business relationship with the corresponding author as a client. Both respondents are respected entrepreneurs with significant market achievements who meet the researchers' selection criteria, namely leaders of SMTEs in the Italy-China travel industry. They were each provided with the questions (Appendix 3) in advance and participated in the interviews during late November in 2020. The interview recordings of one hour each were transcribed and translated into English with permission. Both interviews were conducted online in the respondent's native language, namely, in Italian with Mr. Chizzali, and in Chinese with Ms. Yin. Each interviewee shared their life story and valuable leadership experience.

Jørgensen's (2017) conceptual framework for the analysis of tourism distribution helps explain the rationale of comparative content analysis through inductive interpretation of the storytelling of entrepreneurial leaders. Tourism distribution is viewed as a continuous and changeable dynamic mediation process that occurs within a network of complex activities, consistent with the operating mechanism of the industry chain and the role of outbound and inbound tour operators in the tourism distribution system (Jørgensen, 2017). Following transcription, the interviewers first used open coding to extract important content from the interviews. Second, axial coding was used to perform keyword and content analyses to identify the relationships between categories. Finally, the interviewers applied selective coding

for a clearer interpretation of the final results. This selective coding process identified more responses for inclusion in the findings section (Saunders et al., 2012).

The authors subsequently cross-checked the empirical analysis, and the case study concluded with implications for how future leaders might be inspired by the applicable entrepreneurial stories.

#### **4. Ermanno Chizzali**

Ermanno Chizzali lost his father when he was three, so he grew up in another poor peasant family. At the age of 14, he already became independent, working to support his study. In college, he studied sports physiology in Innsbruck, Austria before starting his career. He speaks fluently Italian, German, and English.

At the age of 24, he changed his profession from teacher to hotel manager. Subsequently, he started managing 5 hotels at the same time. Because he was talented in sales, he had more clients than available rooms, so he started moving groups or even individuals to other hotels as a broker. At that point, the idea of tour operator stimulated him to create the current company- Ignas Tour. Tour operator activity inspired him the most, as it opened many new avenues and markets for his career. The company has continuously increased in revenue and profits over the past 2 decades. In 2019, Ignas tour provided travel services to over 600,000 tourists, collaborating with large outbound tour operators and supermarkets such as Lidl and Eurospin around the world. It employs nearly 100 staff with headquarter in South Tyrol in Italy and

branches in Hungary, Slovakia, China, and Portugal. In addition, he bought a lot of lands, so he also owns a farm and a real estate agency. Recently, he invested in an innovative start-up that produces indoor fresh air through seaweed bulbs. As he explained: *"My strategy is to stay 100% behind a 360-degree company, which is my core business, and then delegate other commercial activities."*

In his spare time, he plays a lot of sports, such as ice hockey and golf, which help him go beyond limits at work. As he said, *"Sport gives you strength. When a normal person thinks he cannot take it anymore, in the sport we know there's still a chance."*

Richard Branson is his idol, whom he followed on LinkedIn for 15 years. Branson is one of the best entrepreneurs in the world. He admires particularly his ability to convince his employees to enjoy working. As he explains, *"He has a volcano of ideas that he also realizes them, such as the shuttles into space, testing a train going at 1000 km per hour, etc. He is futuristic but he also looks at current events. He has the companies that produce, then a good part of them then being invested for the future to realize his futuristic visions. He is a true leader, a great entrepreneur from my part I only admire."*

In addition, he thinks that the succession plan must go to the most deserving person. If one of the family members does not have the competence to run a business, he prefers an external person who can drive the company forward.

## 5. Xiaojuan Yin

Xiaojuan Yin was raised by a poor family in Dujiangyan, a city near Chengdu. She studied computer science and accounting and later settled in Chengdu.

She started her career as a salesperson and receptionist for a travel agency. *“At that time, I was not clear about the industry chain of tourism. Later I realized that there were wholesalers and distribution channels. In 2008, I created my own company - Chengdu Harmony International Travel. I started the first business by winning the bid for a construction company of around 500 people who want to travel every year, and then developed a team of a hundred employees, engaging in different markets. We engaged in the wholesale business of Europe, America, and Australia. In 2012, even the capital market proposed mergers and acquisitions and listing in the stock market.”*

As an entrepreneur, she engages in constant learning to help her to face new challenges. She took various skill-enhancing courses at Tsinghua University, including NEEQ, EDP, EMBA, finance and 5G, digital marketing. She believes that lifelong learning is necessary to keep up with market trends. *“Nowadays, technology and new business models are changing and updating rapidly. You cannot use the old management methods and ways of thinking to operate. There may be some useful tools, but you cannot apply them mechanically. Many theories are out of date and cannot be used in current operations. I take a humble heart to study so that I can achieve my goal on the path I want. I know clearly who I am, where I come from,*

*where I want to go, and whom I can work with. These basic questions must be thought through first.”*

She emphasizes the importance of being valuable to society as a good citizen. She has one son, and her husband also supports her work a lot. They often spend time together with grandparents on weekends in order to set an example for the son in conducting filial piety.

Her admired leader is a Swiss watch seller - Kirchhofer in Interlaken. *“He was particularly enthusiastic when I visited Europe. Although we could only communicate with simple words or gestures, he received me with careful and meticulous hospitality. Many details made me feel sincere and warm. I think this kind of relationship has impressed me until now. I can't forget them. When I start to sell Europe again, I will consider putting their watch shop on the itinerary first. We should not forget our customers and partners in times of crisis. At this time, we must maintain our relationship and support each other for a better future. We are also good friends for many years.”*

She prefers to consider the business partner as a potential successor, depending on the person's skills and business experience.

## **6. Comparative analysis of leadership characteristics**

Entrepreneurship and innovation are important characteristics at various stages in the management and leadership of corporations. Both currently identified leaders have



demonstrated outstanding entrepreneurship and have embraced the role of innovation in strategic management when establishing their respective companies. SMTEs typically deploy an autocratic style of leadership, thereby increasing employee turnover. By contrast more democratic approaches, whether transformational or transactional leadership styles, may enable employees to work independently and participate in decision-making, thereby enhancing loyalty (Rao and Zaidi, 2020). This illustrates that despite their importance, human resources are often overlooked in leading SMTEs. Cultural and gender perspectives offer a unique perspective for investigating the differences between European male leaders and Chinese female leaders. Additionally, since the pandemic is ongoing, it is useful to analyze the insights and evolving solutions adopted by the two leaders to keep pace with the anticipated post-pandemic tourism recovery. Based on the above considerations, this case study focuses on exploring these five aspects of leadership style in different stages of managing SMTEs. Table 1 presents a summary of the applicable results.

### ***6.1 Entrepreneurial and innovative leadership***

Both leaders presented innovative and entrepreneurial leadership qualities albeit in different contexts. When Ermanno Chizzali's background is analyzed, it is evident that he was self-sufficient and showed talent in management and sales since his teenage years. He developed his entrepreneurial spirit and international vision in the tourism sector from a strong desire to get rid of poverty and had the choice to do what

he likes. He started by buying land to have life-long financial preparation to live a rich life. The persistent, hardworking, and forward-looking attitude truly reflects the entrepreneurial leadership that is inherent in him. He is a leader with innovative ideas and then realizing them in practice that has made his company a success over the past two decades. Furthermore, good sportsmanship helped him act as a competitive and fair influencer in the workplace (Marinova et al., 2015). His accounting background also allows him to perform accurate financial calculations towards enumeration achievements in business.

Ermanno Chizzali is an innovative entrepreneur who has successfully implemented innovative business ideas. For instance, he invented the "3 + 4" model, which allows the hotel to provide the same price for three nights (Friday-Sunday) and for four nights (Monday-Thursday). His model has attracted many customers, thereby filling empty rooms during weekdays. This system has been copied by large tour operators like TUI Europe. Another invention is to sell trips to supermarkets. He convinced supermarkets to outsource their travel division to his company. In this way, he starts large-scale distribution around Europe. A recent innovative leadership can be shown from his investment in a start-up, which develops an innovative product to produce indoor fresh air through light.

Xiaojuan Yin has also demonstrated her entrepreneurial and innovative leadership traits by establishing her company and engaging in transformation through the crisis. As she explains: *"Due to the impact of the epidemic, I had to transform our company to confront financial burden, selling from medical supplies to everyday*

*goods via a new online business model that requires light assets and light operation."*

She provides end customers with high-quality products of famous brands at competitive prices to ensure that the team can remain unified for survival. In addition, the company culture is very friendly, warm, and united, as she sets innovative rules to maintain an equal, fair work environment. *"All people should abide by the same rules. We regularly organize some team building activities. In today's company, there are more relationships of collaboration than relationships of superior subordination. Everyone contributes to each other and then shares the benefits. "*

Both leaders also addressed the importance of "leading by example". Ermanno Chizzali shows up every morning and afternoon in front of the company and greets the staff. Xiaojuan Yin is always the first person to enter the office and the last to leave. Both of them agree that it is important that other employees see a leader who sets a good example. A leader should be consistent with words and deeds.

## ***6.2 Human resource management***

Employees in the hotel and restaurant industry have often left the sector due to a lack of human resources management (Peters, 2005). A previous study found that young employees and interns have low job satisfaction and lack of motivation in SMTES hotels in South Tyrol, due to the lack of communication and planning for long-term career development (Peters, 2005). The issue was also reflected in the interviews with Ermanno Chizzali.

Ermanno Chizzali classifies employees into three types: *“The first category is the type of people that needs a salary to make a living. The second category is that of employees who try to get more things done, but their motivation is to get more financial rewards. The third category is the type of employees who dedicate themselves to any work. Such employees usually have leadership skills. Their talents can turn ideas into reality, and this automatically rewards them. Of course, the greater their responsibilities, the more they will earn”*.

This third type of employee described by Ermanno Chizzali is "taking charge" of the organizational behavior of citizenship (Marinova et al., 2015). To focus his efforts, he has devoted most of his time to the third type of employee, also expecting them to be entrepreneurial. *“I talk a lot with people who can work with me for the future. The best teaching is when they follow my positions and my decisions and understand why I decide so... I try to convey to them my mentality and my philosophy of making decisions both for good and for bad.”*

Xiaojuan Yin views employees as collaborative partners. As she wrote in a post on social media: *“Each of us is a person in his or her life story, each has his own gaze and his own life vicissitudes. No matter where we are in the world, we practice every step every day. There are always a few pages of desolation in each person's life notebook, and there are always a few pages of brilliant glory!”*

Both leaders adopt an employee-friendly style. In terms of leader-member exchange, the two leaders mix high-quality and low-quality styles. For mid-level managers and sales staff who have loyalty to the organization, "mutual support,

common goals, mutual influence, and more challenging job assignments" are shaping a leader-member exchange relationship of high quality, whereas for temporary workers and collaborators, they are contract-based resource exchange relationships involving fewer interactions, different goals and greater value gap (Douglas & Zivnуска, 2008).

The implementation of standardized human resource management can help companies to achieve their ultimate business objectives by avoiding legal risks in crisis situations and maintaining effective communications (Chung-Herrera et al., 2003). However, though both organizations are SMTEs, their HR management is more of a leader-based selection process without a competence model and/or management guidelines. As Ermanno Chizzali said: *"In my opinion, if you talk to each person in the company at a time, you already understand who has the talent to be a leader and who can never become one."* In contrast with Yin who continues to learn new courses, Ermanno Chizzali believes that the university teaches how to organize oneself. However, *"the real master is putting it into practice. In practice, it means not only taking care of what you are doing but also taking responsibility, especially when you make a mistake. If the company pays for your mistake, you are not a real leader."*

### ***6.3 Gender perspective***

The two leaders share common views on gender equality, namely that both men and

women are capable of leadership. However, they also outlined some differences between female and male leadership. Ermanno Chizzali said that *“Women are even more tenacious, perhaps eviler. They have more precision, care of the mind, more leadership qualities than men. This can be an advantage or a disadvantage because if there is a quarrel, the woman will hardly take a step back, the male instead tries to mediate to find an agreement until the end that is good for both.”*

Research has found that female managers tend to adopt indifferent and laissez-faire leadership more than their male counterparts (Oshagbemi & Ocholi, 2006). However, this does not apply in the case of Xiaojuan Yin. *“As a woman, I must not only do an excellent job but also take on multiple roles, such as wife, mother, sister, daughter-in-law, etc. Outstanding entrepreneurs are great both in the workplace and at home and can coordinate various relationships.”*

#### **6.4 Eastern and Western Culture**

The interview included a question about cultural differences. Ermanno Chizzali shared his perspective as follows: *“Although I am an atheist, in general, there is a religion in which people believe in a certain faith and have other values in mind in Europe. In China, I perceive that people think that success equates to money. In business, this is a big advantage because if you only have one goal, it will become easier than if you had three or four goals. It's hard to achieve a perfect one when you want more.”*

Xiaojuan Yin mentioned her intercultural experience: *“Some foreigners may have a clear distinction between work and life and will not go beyond business contacts. This is vastly different from Chinese culture. I was surprised when an American business partner gave me his family photo. The family photo is something private in China, but Americans think it's a way to express friendship.”*

### **6.5 Crisis management**

In contrast to hotel industry leaders who have prioritized responding to pandemic emergencies through practices relating to pricing, maintenance and human resources, travel industry leaders must stop all activities immediately consistent with government instructions (Lai and Wong, 2020). Both industry practitioners were forced to cut labour costs or seek other solutions to transform the activities of the team. When governments are compared, support from China's authorities were insufficient to cover normal company expenses, thereby prompting Ms. Yin to adopt a commission-based business model. By contrast Italian companies could receive emergency help from the government with solidarity funds to allay layoffs.

A successful example is Mr. Chizzali's vision of predicting risks through an investment strategy of multiple and diverse markets. This vision reduced the level of company dependence on the performance and debt problems of a unitary market or company. Coupled with investments in other industries, the company's relatively secure financial situation and the receipt of support from government relief measures,

enabled the company to overcome the disaster engulfing the industry as a result of the pandemic conditions.

However, Mrs. Yin's outbound tourism wholesale business was captive to the Chinese government's industry-wide policy to stop outbound tourism. This caused companies whose primary business was outbound tourism to face a heavy financial burden and work pressures. Given that embracing domestic tourism would be insufficient to allay the problem in such circumstances, Ms Yin adopted a new business model to transform the company team by engaging in selling tangible products online. The compounding circumstances have meant that the remedy was insufficient and has not solved the company's heavy financial and operational problems.

Additionally, the outbound travel wholesale business is characterized by payment terms which mean that those large payments are usually effected some months after the service has been provided. This practice meant that many travel agencies did not make timely payments to the outbound tour operators following the COVID-19 outbreak. Meanwhile, wholesalers were also unable to pay overseas suppliers on time, because of insufficient cash flow or else legal and financial problems such as the blocking of bank accounts by the courts after failing to execute a lawsuit. The inter-organizational comparison reflects the fragility and complexity of tourism SMTEs which have been severely impacted by the pandemic.



## 7. Conclusions

This comparative biographical case study of two entrepreneurs notes that entrepreneurial and innovative leadership plays a vital role in the creation and development of SMTEs, particularly exploring new market segments and creating a network of business partners. However, it is also attributable to strong creativity, energy levels and sense of responsibility on the part of entrepreneurs who tend to engage in the direct management of employees with high expectations.

In this case study, both selected leaders have demonstrated some characteristics of entrepreneurial and innovative leadership. Ermanno Chizzali considers success as his priority and wealth as secondary. This is consistent with the "value for money" characteristic of entrepreneurial leadership (Jones and Crompton, 2009). He applies the principles of turning ideas into reality in his daily work life, which shows his high energy level and confidence in his ability to succeed. He likes immediate feedback and prefers moderate risks while emphasizing that organizational skills, responsibility, creativity, ambition, forward-thinking, and the expression of confidence are important characteristics for successful leadership, which can be achieved either through commitment and dedication or talent in DNA. Furthermore, he believes in diversification and ethics. He does not want his company to depend on one market, type of business or customer. He has therefore structured the company to appeal to a diversity of business segments with a view to minimizing risks. As he explained: *"It is a fixed rule that you cannot have more than 10% of business with one client. Because you will depend a lot on that customer."*

Xiaojuan Yin emphasizes the importance of "guanxi" and Confucian cultural values such as filial piety, consistent with previous research findings (Cheung et al., 2018). She emphasizes the importance of improving customer relationships and thereby establishing prestige in the industry. She believes that a successful leader should always react energetically and positively with high emotional intelligence, contributing to society, and creating certain values (Marinova et al., 2015). Moreover, she emphasized the importance of taking responsibility, sacrificing personal goals for collective benefits. *"The leader should be responsible for the followers, especially during the crisis"*. In addition, to be entrepreneurial and innovative, she also behaves with a transactional leadership style in guiding the team to focus on tasks and results (Gill, A., et al., 2010).

The preceding case study can offer potential to strengthen business cooperation through insights and suggestions about leadership styles and constructs to companies that cooperate with European travel industry stakeholders and Chinese SMTEs. This said, the study has been limited to two SMTEs creators who conduct B2B business in the EU-China tourism market. Furthermore, the two selected biographies only epitomise the entrepreneurial contexts of SMTEs within China and Italy tour operations and cannot represent the entire sector globally. Future researchers might consider using larger and more representative samples and other methodologies to investigate the complexity of multi-level leadership in other travel markets, comparing the biographies of large enterprise creators in the industry.

It has recently been noted that " ... quality leadership defines the future of our industry" (Chon and Zoltan, 2019). Many travel entrepreneurs have faced unprecedented challenges through the disruptions of COVID-19. Only a few solid companies will stand out and survive the pandemic. If a similar crisis were to occur in future, the preceding reflections about SMTEs can provide an inspirational source for tourism entrepreneurs in preparing for post-crisis recovery. A true storytelling-based comparative biographical case study is a timely contribution about the role of entrepreneurial and innovative leadership in the turbulent and dynamic travel industry.

This paper concludes that SMTE leaders should engage in continuous learning and training to a) adapt their leadership management and skills and practices and b) capitalize on scholarly recommendations and insights. The importance of intercultural and transpositional considerations will increase post-pandemic, as a means of transforming traditional reasoning and locally oriented thinking. It will be timely for EU-China tourism enterprises to intensify their cooperation for the exploration of common interests and construction of stable and reliable strategic and multilevel networks. Secondly and in the face of intensifying internationalization, SMTE leaders should acknowledge the potential for scholarly knowledge transfer. Thirdly, when China - Europe travel bounces back, SMTE leaders will need to adjust their leadership of both organizations and associates. This will involve leveraging corporate legacies with cross-border stakeholders to enhance competitiveness, collaboration, and agility in response to global geopolitical and socio-cultural tensions. In this complex operating environment the conduct of innovative and in-depth comparative

biographical research offers potentially important implications for industry stakeholders in both source markets and destinations, and for cooperation between SMTEs in China and the EU.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Appendix

Table 1 Comparison between the two leaders

	<b>Ermanno Chizzali</b>	<b>Xiaojuan Yin</b>
Nationality	Italian	Chinese
Title	Founder - Ignas Tour S.p.A- European tour operator, entrepreneur	Founder - Chengdu Harmony international travel
Languages	Italian, German, English	Chinese, English
Core business/Company	Tour operator/ travel agency	Tour operator/ wholesaler
Other business activities	Real estate, agriculture, start-up investment, land and property	International trade/ e- commerce/ stock trade
Family	miserable childhood  Self-made success  Married without children	Poor family background  Self-made success  Married with one child
Hobby	Sport (ice hockey, golf)	Not mentioned
Education	Sport physiology  (University of Innsbruck)  Accounting	Computer science and accounting  EMBA

Career path	Teacher - hotel manager - hotelier - tour operator founder- entrepreneur	Salesperson- company founder - e-commerce leader
Core values/ philosophy	Success, wealth, ethics	Filial piety, responsibility
Admired leader (s)	Richard Brandson	Fritz Kirchhofer
Characteristics	Forward-looking Hardworking Ambitious Charismatic Sportsmanship Competition Self-interest Ego-censtic Strategic and practical Direct and open-minded Proactive	Adaptive and creative Taking charge Lead by example Fairness and equality Collaborative Enthusiastic Vigorous Humble Eager to learn Warm and sincere Reactive
Human resource management	3 categories: salary-driven reward-driven, future leader	As collaborators Win-win Lead by example
Organizational culture	Diversity Freedom	Warm family Do not leave anyone behind

	Equality	Cooperation
Leadership style	Entrepreneurial and innovative	Entrepreneurial and innovative Transactional
Entrepreneurship/creativity	Product innovation Work with big brands	Business model innovation Light asset, light operation
Succession plan	Based on merit	Business partner
Gender perspective	Women have more leadership qualities	Women play multiple roles both in workplace and at home
Cultural perspective	Catholic religious values, success first, money second	Confucian: Family and filial piety are important; Collective achievement
Crisis management	Diversify markets and business scope Realistic plan based on financial calculation	Broaden business scope; Lead the team to transform company
Suggestions to future leaders	Courage, work hard, independent thinking, learning by doing	Know clearly who you are, where you want to go, with who you want to do what.
Quote	“You must have a great vision, an innovative	“Position yourself accurately and balance work and life.

	business model, and a well-prepared financial plan to start a business”.	You must convince yourself and be clear about who you are, where you want to go, and what you want to do”.
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**Table 2 Company profile**

<p>Ignas Tour was founded in 1997 in South Tyrol, Italy, with branches in Hungary, Slovakia, China, and Portugal. As a leading tour operator in Italy, it provides travel products and services for more than 600,000 tourists in collaboration with European and international outbound tour operators with an annual turnover of 70 million euro, covering group travel, FIT (Free Independent Travellers), cruises, tickets, travel supermarkets, accommodation distribution channel, LGBT travel, outbound travel and b2b online booking system, etc.</p>
<p>Chengdu Harmony International Travel Service is headquartered in Chengdu, focusing on the southwest market of China. It engages in European and American outbound wholesale business and private customized tourism business. The European wholesale business receives more than 10,000 customers annually and enjoys the reputation of high-quality European wholesalers at home and abroad. The tourist destinations involve all areas of Europe, North America, South America, North and South America, Australia, Middle East, and Africa. The company became</p>

the designated strategic partner of the Spanish National Tourism Administration in July 2018, providing south-western China region with European products and services.

### **Appendix 3: List of interview questions**

Q1: Could you please tell us about you? For example, childhood, education, career path, family, and hobbies?

Q2: Could you please share the story about how your companies were created?

Q3: What are your businesses? You may talk more about your philosophy, business model, entrepreneurial experience, your perspectives on tourism and hospitality, etc.

Q4: Could you please explain your organizational culture? How is this organizational culture related to your personality and characteristics as a leader?

Q5: Who are your admired leaders? Why?

Q6: Could you please share us some stories about your successful leadership and characteristics that you think had led your leadership to effectiveness?

Q7: How has your personal life (childhood, family, hobbies, etc.) influenced your leadership?

Q8: The definition of leadership has evolved over time and varies by industry. There are several theories about leadership, do you think that one or more of these theories apply to you according to your lifetime events and activities?

For example,



- i. A leader should have the ability to lead and induce obedience, respect, loyalty, and cooperation amongst followers.
- ii. Situational leadership: An effective leader's behaviours and attitudes as changing according to the needs of followers.
- iii. Transactional leaders tend to be more ego-centric, rational, and analytical.
- iv. Transformational leaders extend beyond this and are more inspirational with idealized influence.
- v. Leaders should consider of societal changes and stress the importance of ethics and morality.
- vi. Authentic leadership: 'self-aware, process positive and negative ego-relevant information in a balanced fashion, achieve relational transparency with close others, and are guided in their actions by an internalized moral perspective's.

Q9: What were the most challenging things happened to you as a leader? How did you lead your company go through the most challenging time? For example, in the time of SARS, terrorist attack, COVID-19, etc.

Q10: What characteristics do you think a leader in the tourism industry should have?

Q10-1: In your opinion, what are the differences of leadership between a European and Chinese leader?

Q10-2: What are the differences between male and female leaders?

Q11: Could you please share your leadership succession plan, if any? Do you prefer to trust a family member as the future leader of your company?

Q12. What suggestions will you give to young people to become a leader in the tourism industry. In other words, how future leaders may learn from your inspirational stories?

Specific questions about leadership:

1. When associates are inspired by their leaders, they are more confident, know what is expected, and feel empowered to make decisions and work towards their goals. Based on your industry experience, how do you empower and inspire those around you to make decisions and to motivate others?
2. Do you have a specific set of core values, either personal or company specific?
3. In your capacity as leader how do you hold others accountable to those values and standards? Do you provide your associates with specific tools or methods to help them work towards that unified goal?
4. Noting that leaders obviously need to be confident, do you think it is also important to show vulnerability? (Being visible to others around you, taking risks, being vocal and clear about your specific goals as leader).
5. Creativity is essential to entrepreneurship in early business development and sustains the best companies once they have scaled up. Is creativity a focus of your attention as a leader and do you consider the trait of creativity to be manageable?
6. How do you stay adaptable in an age of rapid change? (e.g. technological advances, the pandemic, and emergence of the millennial “mindset”). What are the key components to having an adaptable mindset?