

Leadership assessment tools in different Chinese contexts

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Abstract

Leadership research in different Chinese contexts is growing rapidly with plentiful assessment tools emerging in the field. Using a cross-cultural study framework, this paper provides an overview of contemporary leadership assessment tools used in different Chinese contexts. The leadership assessment tools developed by the etic approach, emic approach and combined etic-emic approach all contribute to the knowledge advancement of leadership, yet their limitations should also be noted. This paper ends with a critique of Chinese leadership assessment tools and recommendations for future directions.

Keywords: Leadership assessment tools, culture, indigenous leadership, Chinese contexts

Introduction

Contemporary leadership theories commonly define leadership as a dynamic and reciprocal process in which one influences a group of people to achieve a collective goal (1, 2). Leadership has been regarded as a universal human behavior that has an evolutionary function for solving adaptive problems (3, 4). However, the relationship between leadership and culture is not uniform. On the one hand, some scholars believe that there are some fundamental components of leadership shared by different cultures (5). Additionally, the growing globalization over the world makes the leadership conceptualization and practices in Western and Eastern organizations become increasingly aligned over time (6). On the other hand, some scholars believe that how people understand and practice leadership may vary across cultures (7, 8). Cultural values may define what an ideal leader is in a specific culture, which influences how people practice their leadership in the organization and develop their leadership. Depending on their theoretical perspectives, researchers used

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different assessment tools to measure leadership in a particular culture.

There are three approaches to the inquiry of leadership in the Chinese contexts: the etic approach, the emic approach, and the combination of etic and emic approach (7). First, researchers translated and validated the existing scales developed in Western cultures in order to test the generalizability of the existing leadership theories and models to Chinese contexts (i.e., etic approach). Second, researchers developed an indigenous leadership scale based on the Chinese leadership construct in order to capture psychological constructs that are not present in Western cultures (i.e., emic approach). Finally, researchers developed and validated a new scale based on both Western and Chinese concepts (i.e., etic-emic approach).

In this article, we reviewed the commonly used leadership assessment tools in Chinese contexts with reference to the related studies conducted in mainland China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. In the organizational realm, assessment tools of leadership usually measure leadership qualities including attitudes, beliefs, behavior and styles of people who take up a leadership post, using measures such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ; 9), Authentic Leadership Inventory (10), and Paternalistic Leadership Scale (11). In addition, in the realm of leadership development and education, based on the assumption that everyone has potentials and capacities to develop leadership (12), several scales have been developed to capture the leadership capacities of ordinary people regardless of their positions, such as Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS; 12) and Leadership Practices Inventory (13). This review covers leadership assessment tools for “positional” leaders and “ordinary” leaders. In particular, based on the scales reviewed, we identified the gaps and problems of the existing literature on leadership assessment tools in different Chinese contexts.

Assessment tools based on the etic approach

One of the major inquiries in Chinese leadership study is to test whether the imported assessment

instruments measure the same construct across cultures. Therefore, validating the existing leadership measures developed in Western contexts is an initial step of leadership study in the Chinese academia. With validation evidence, researchers could test whether the Western leadership theories and models are applicable to Chinese contexts, and further extend the theories by examining the mechanism underlying the effects of a certain leadership practice or investigating the conditional boundary of these effects. This approach is called etic approach.

The characteristics of etic approach are top-down and Western in origin (14). Guided by a Western leadership theory or model, researchers usually translate the assessment tools with literal adaption following a translation-back translation procedure (15). For example, Chen and Farh (16) translated the transformational leadership scale developed by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Moorman, and Fetter (17), and found it well applied in Taiwan organizations. This scale assesses six features of transformational leadership practices, including identifying and articulating a vision, providing a role model, fostering the acceptance of collective goals, expecting high performance, offering individualized support and intellectual stimulation (17). This translated version has been successfully used in many Chinese studies. For instance, Wang, Law, Hackett, Wang, and Chen (18) successfully validated the six-dimension structure via confirmatory factor analysis (CFA), and used it to examine the mediator that explained the associations between transformation leadership and positive performance and organization citizenship behavior of followers in mainland Chinese organizations. Another example is Chan and Mak's (19) study that translated the 28-item servant leadership scale developed by Liden, Wayne, Zhao, and Henderson (20) to examine the moderating effect of subordinates' organizational tenure in the association between servant leadership and subordinates' trust in leader and job satisfaction in Hong Kong organizations. This scale has seven factors – emotional healing, creating value for the community, conceptual skills, empowering, helping subordinates grow and succeed, putting subordinates first, and behaving ethically with good factorial validity. Additionally, Sun and Wang (21) translated the 23-item servant leadership scale developed by

Barbuto and Wheeler (22) and examined the construct of servant leadership in mainland Chinese organizations. The original scale included five dimensions – wisdom, persuasive mapping, organizational stewardship, altruistic calling, emotional healing. This translated version demonstrated satisfactory reliability and similar internal structure (i.e., 5-factor structure) via exploratory factor analysis (EFA) and CFA, but there were slight differences in the number of items in each factor because some items were removed due to under loading.

In addition to leadership research in organizational settings, Chinese scholars also investigated leadership capacities of ordinary people, especially young people regardless of their leadership background. Therefore, similar to the case of leadership measures for positional leaders, Chinese translated versions of existing scales that assesses leadership capacities are available in the literature. For example, based on the social change model, Dugan and Komives (12) developed the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS) and its shortened version (SRLS-R2). These scales assess eight core values of consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, courage, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship. Leung, Ha, and Yeung (23) translated the SRLS-R2 and tested it in Hong Kong university students. Results showed adequate evidence for the eight-factor structure, and the reliability for each subscale (factor) was satisfactory except for the change and controversy with civility dimensions. Additionally, Chan (24) created a Chinese version of 26-item self-reported Roets Rating Scale for Leadership (RRSL) (25) to measure three leadership capacities (i.e., leadership, ambition and desires) of Hong Kong students in grades 7-12, which showed satisfactory reliability and convergent validity with other leadership measures based on behavioral indicators reported by parents and teachers.

Because of the rapid development in psychology and organizational behavior in China, Chinese translated version of Western leadership scales are common. Besides the scales mentioned above, there are many other examples in the literature, such as the Chinese version of Authentic Leadership Questionnaire (26) translated by Qian, Lin, and Chen (27), the Chinese version of Leadership-Member Exchange Scale (LMX-MDM; 28) translated by

Wang et al. (18), and the Chinese version of Ethical Leadership Scale (29) translated by Walumbwa et al. (30).

The application of Western assessment tools has made an important contribution to leadership knowledge development. Theoretically, it helps to advance the scientific understanding of general leadership process. The use of same assessment tool makes it possible to compare the findings derived from different cultures so as to identify cultural similarities and differences in the leadership process. Practically, it enables Chinese scholars to quickly catch up with the current trend of leadership research. It also facilitates the communication between Chinese scholars and Western scholars as they would have shared language. However, there are some intrinsic limitations of the etic approach (see 14), which constrain the development of leadership research in Chinese contexts. Primarily, these scales overlook the cultural component in leadership process (i.e., substantive limitation). For example, some cultural practices of leadership relevant to the Chinese context are not present in Western experience, and thus would not be included in the Western assessment tools. For example, the Leader-Member exchange (LMX) theory that focuses on the exchange within work domain was developed in the Western context. However, Chinese type of leader-member interaction goes beyond work issues and permeates into personal domains (31). Hence, simple reliance on Western assessment tools leaves a large gap in understanding Chinese leadership and hinders researchers from a deep inquiry into the cultural variation in the field of leadership. It also constrains the initiative of Chinese scholars to construct leadership theories and models.

Assessment tools based on the emic approach

In response to the limitations of the etic approach that transplants Western leadership measures, some Chinese scholars proposed to focus on indigenous Chinese leadership (32, 33). In contrast with the top-down orientation adopted in the etic approach, the emic approach tends to be bottom-up and to study leadership process from laypersons' perspectives. They usually construct leadership theories and

leadership assessment tools according to local phenomena and experiences, and interpret the data using Chinese concepts, such as Confucian ideas.

Paternalistic leadership is an indigenous leadership style that has been well-studied in Chinese culture, which was proposed by Farh and Cheng (32) based on the Chinese history and the traditional ideologies (i.e., Confucianism and legalism). It refers to a leadership style with strong discipline and authority accompanied with fatherly benevolence and moral integrity (32). Accordingly, Cheng, Chou and Farh (11) developed the 42-item Paternalistic Leadership Scale (PLS), which includes three unique components of Chinese leadership style – authoritarianism (i.e., “very strict with his/her subordinates”), benevolence (e.g., “encourages me when I encounter difficulties in work”), and morality (e.g., “sets an example for me”). The PLS demonstrated satisfactory reliability and consistently showed a three-factor structure across Chinese societies, including Taiwan (34), mainland China (35), and Hong Kong (36). It has become the most widely used scale that measures indigenous leadership style and demonstrated validity in predicting a wide range of leadership effectiveness indicators, such as employee’s trust in and satisfaction toward leaders (11), employees’ performance (34), and employees’ voice behaviors (37). In particular, Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, and Farh (38) found that paternalistic leadership demonstrated a unique effect on employees’ responses above and beyond the effect of transformational leadership, which confirmed its cultural uniqueness in influencing leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, with revision on the items of morality, Cheng et al. (39) developed the global paternalistic leadership scale (GPLS), and successfully validated it across four Asian societies, including Taiwan, mainland China, Japan and South Korea.

In addition, several other scholars also attempted to construct a cultural-specific leadership style that can well describe the leadership features and predict leadership effectiveness in Chinese culture (40). For example, Wang, Xin, and Xu (41) asked the participants of senior managers to articulate the leadership behavior of their CEO, upon which they developed a CEO leadership scale to understand the CEO leadership behavior during the economic

transformation of China. This scale includes six dimensions of leadership behavior, including making innovation, coordination and communication, caring about subordinates, identifying visions, demonstrating authority, and monitoring operations. These dimensions were positively related to enterprise profit and employees’ attitudes (41).

The use of indigenous leadership assessment tools helps to explore and understand some culturally specific experiences in the leadership process. Indigenous leadership research makes a significant contribution to a growing body of literature documenting human behavior from a local perspective. Although many researchers are interested in developing a scale to capture Chinese specific leadership, not all of them provided adequate validation evidence. A rigorous emic approach requires evidence for the incremental validity of the indigenous scale. In other words, the indigenous construct should explain more of the leadership effectiveness than other existing scales, but this is often missing in the scale development. Furthermore, the indigenous leadership construct may not be totally specific to a certain culture. Instead, it may be a culturally specific manifestation of a general leadership concept. For example, paternalistic leadership does not only exist in Chinese culture. Indeed, it reflects a hierarchical leader-follower relationship, in which leaders are obliged to create a family-like environment and provide protection and guidance to their followers in both the work and non-work domain, and the followers are expected to show obedience and loyalty toward the leaders, which can be observed in multiple cultures (42). However, people’s prototypical understanding of paternalistic leadership varies across culture. For example, Chinese people perceived typical paternalistic leadership incorporating more authoritarianism than Western people (43). Therefore, simple reliance on indigenous leadership assessment tools may fail to capture the common component in leadership shared by different cultures. It also hinders the communication between Chinese researchers and Western researchers due to a lack of shared framework. In order to advance the field of leadership, we need to address both culturally universal and specific aspects of the leadership process.

Assessment tools based on the etic-emic approach

In different Chinese societies, an emerging effort has been made to study leadership by using a combined etic-emic approach. Researchers usually develop a leadership assessment tool based on Western literature theories, cultural theories, indigenous concepts and local leadership experiences (44). This approach is able to link the indigenous leadership understanding with the so-called mainstream leadership understanding derived from Western research, and provide a more comprehensive framework to understand both the culturally universal and specific components in the leadership process.

The operationalization of transformational leadership in Chinese context can exemplify this approach. Transformational leadership refers to a leadership style, in which leaders strive to inspire followers to work toward common goals through setting up a role model for followers, showing individualized consideration toward followers, stimulating cognitive transformation of the followers, and inspiring their motivation to achieve higher (45). However, Chinese researchers (44) argued that Chinese leaders may demonstrate different practices in order to reach the transformational goal due to the larger power distance between leaders and followers and stronger concern for interpersonal relationship. Thus, they asked Chinese managers to provide leadership behavior examples, upon which they worked out a new scale to measure Chinese transformational leadership. This scale contains four dimensions – moral modelling, charisma, visionary, and individualized consideration. The inclusion of moral modelling, which is missing in Bass's MLQ, shows the importance of moral modelling in Chinese people's understanding of good leadership. Additionally, in the dimension of individualized consideration, behavior of caring about the family and personal lives are included, which suggests the range of leader-follower interaction is expected to be broader than that in Western contexts.

A similar case was found in the construct of authentic leadership. There are at least two scales developed in the Chinese contexts to measure this leadership style (46, 47). Taking Wang and Chen's (46) scale as an example, they developed this scale based on the previous scales developed in the Western

contexts (e.g., 48) and their qualitative studies in Chinese organizations which examined employees and leaders' views toward authentic leadership. With this scale, they found the common components of authentic leadership shared by Chinese and Western cultures, including self-consciousness and internalized moral values, and an additional Chinese component on value-behavior congruency.

The use of combined etic-emic approach to develop leadership assessment tool has several merits. First, it is grounded in a larger body of literature and more integrated view about leadership, which likely provides a more comprehensive understanding on a certain leadership construct. Second, it helps to explicate both universal and cultural aspects of leadership process. It may provide generalizability evidence for a certain leadership theory and culturally unique findings that complement the theory. Finally, with a common conceptual framework, Western and Chinese researchers can better communicate their research findings and jointly endeavor to advance the field. However, the development of this combined approach in the leadership research in Chinese contexts is still in its infancy. Much more studies are needed to show the validation evidence, especially incremental validity of these scales.

Unsolved questions and future directions

The history of leadership assessment tools in Chinese contexts resembles that of many psychological assessment tools such as personality assessment (14). It starts with an etic approach, an emic approach, and then a combined etic-emic approach. However, the etic approach still dominated the field of leadership, probably because of its ease of implementation. Obviously, this would hinder the contribution of Chinese experience to the leadership research and the initiative of Chinese scholars in the leadership theory construction. Emerging research has informed us that leadership is an integration of universal human nature and cultural influence (5). For example, based on a study of 62 countries and areas, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Project found that some leadership qualities are universally desirable (e.g., charismatic and value-

based leadership), while others are more culturally sensitive (e.g., participative leadership; 49). Hence, to cover both universal and cultural elements of leadership, using a combined etic-emic approach to develop leadership assessment tools is an ideal direction. By doing this, researchers need to incorporate cultural variations by using samples from multiple cultural origins when developing and validating a scale (6). The current validation of Chinese original leadership scales is often limited in one single culture, and thus requires more replications.

Additionally, there is an obvious lack of leadership assessment tools for ordinary people in Chinese contexts. The majority of the leadership scales were developed in an organizational context to assess leadership qualities or practices of formal leaders or positional authorities. However, in the field of leadership development and education, more and more researchers and educators believe that everyone has the potentials and capacities that enable him/her to carry out effective leadership no matter whether he/she takes up a leadership position (12, 50). Increasing research has been conducted to understand how ordinary people develop their leadership capacities and how leadership program helps to enhance their leadership capacities (12, 51). The dearth of leadership assessment tools for ordinary people in Chinese contexts hinders the advance of research on leadership development and education as well as the improvement of leadership programs. Moreover, leadership development and education would benefit if a norm of leadership capacities can be built, so that people can know how well their leadership capacities are by referring to the norm. It is thus necessary to develop a scale that measures leadership capacities for a wide range of population in Chinese contexts.

Indeed, a leadership scale is an instrument to operationalize a leadership concept, and thus whether the initial conceptualization is clear matters. Nowadays, there are plentiful leadership theories that try to capture an effective leadership style in contemporary organizational or social settings, including, but not limited to, transformational leadership (52), authentic leadership (53), servant leadership (22), and service leadership (50). For the leadership development, theories and models are also

growing, including relational leadership model (54), social change model (12), and leadership identity development model (55). It remains a big challenge for Chinese researchers to synergize different perspectives and generate a suitable theoretical model of leadership that can well explain leadership experience in Chinese contexts but also contribute to the understanding of basic leadership process. Before developing a new assessment, Chinese researchers may need to adopt an integrated or cross-cultural view to conceptualize leadership. As suggested by Komives and Dugan (1), the contemporary leadership theories share three essential themes, including importance of leaders' self-awareness, morality and social responsibility in leadership, and shared leadership. Chinese leadership theory may need to integrate these three themes in the conceptualization of leadership, and develop the scales accordingly. In brief, we encourage future research to adopt an etic-emic approach in studying leadership and measuring leadership in Chinese contexts. We also call for developing reliable and valid assessment tools to measure leadership capacities of ordinary people. Addressing these unsolved questions requires a joint effort of Chinese scholars and collaboration of Western and Chinese scholars.

There are several recommendations regarding development of leadership scales in the Chinese contexts in future. First, a well-articulated conceptual model of leadership should be used. It could be a Western theory with or without adaptation, an indigenous theory derived from Chinese experience and/or theory, and integrated leadership model integrating Chinese and Western models of leadership. Second, validation is another task to be taken which includes several steps: a) development of an item pool; b) refinement of the pool by experts; c) empirical validation to ascertain the reliability and validity of the developed measures. For reliability, besides internal consistency (i.e., homogeneity of the items), there is a need to look at whether the scale is stable across time. For validity, besides examining content validity and criterion-related validities (such as concurrent validity and predictive validity), dimensionality of the measures based on the guiding conceptual model should also be tested to give support for the theory behind the measures.

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Ethical compliance

The authors have stated all possible conflicts of interest within this work. The authors have stated all sources of funding for this work. If this work involved human participants, informed consent was received from each individual. If this work involved human participants, it was conducted in accordance with the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki. If this work involved experiments with humans or animals, it was conducted in accordance with the related institutions' research ethics guidelines.

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