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A Review of the Mechanisms Underlying Paternalistic Leadership

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Abstract: *Paternalistic leadership is a leadership paradigm rooted in the indigenous Chinese cultural context. This paper reviews over 59 Chinese and English articles from the WOS database published in the last decade, aiming to clarify the research trajectory of its underlying mechanisms. The review finds that benevolent and moral leadership consistently yield positive effects on employee innovation, voice, safety behavior, and work engagement through pathways such as enhancing the quality of social exchange, boosting psychological capital, and fostering organizational identification. Authoritarian leadership, however, functions as a double-edged sword. Its negative impacts are often associated with psychological strain and silence behavior, yet it may serve order-maintaining functions in crisis situations or within high power-distance cultures. The mediating mechanisms encompass cognitive, affective, motivational, and social exchange pathways, while cultural values, organizational climate, and individual traits constitute key moderating factors. Current research still harbors debates regarding the contextual legitimacy of authoritarian leadership, its cross-cultural generalizability, and its dynamic evolution. Future research needs to the investigation into the dynamic effects of the combined application of authority and benevolence , expand the indigenous construction of the theory in non-Asian cultural contexts, and focus on the adaptation of leadership styles in new contexts such as digital transformation.*

Keywords: Authoritarian Leadership, Benevolent Leadership, Paternalistic Leadership, Mechanisms of Action, Moral Leadership; Mechanisms of Action

I.   INTRODUCTION

Since scholars such as Cheng Bor-Shiuan systematically defined paternalistic leadership as "a style that combines strong discipline and authority, fatherly benevolence, and moral integrity within an atmosphere of personalized management," this leadership style, rooted in Confucian tradition and familism, has gradually evolved into a highly explanatory indigenous construct in the field of organizational management research(Cheng, 2000; Farh & Cheng, 2000). Emphasizing leaders who act like family heads, wielding authority alongside benevolence and moral character, this style has not only been widely validated in Chinese societies but has also demonstrated cross-cultural presence and variation in cultures emphasizing hierarchy and collective loyalty, such as those in Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa (Ugarte & Barmeyer, 2025; Siebers, 2024; Foláyan et al., 2026). Over the past decade, research on paternalistic leadership has deepened from initial conceptual clarification and dimensional validation to a fine-grained deconstruction of its complex mechanisms of action. Scholars generally recognize that paternalistic leadership is not a unidimensional, linearly acting entity. Its three dimensions often produce differential, even contradictory, effects, collectively influencing individuals, teams, and organizations through intertwined mediating pathways and context-dependent moderating roles (Han et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2025). For instance, benevolent and moral leadership are typically viewed as positive forces stimulating employee proactivity, creativity, and organizational citizenship behavior (Wang, 2025; Liu, 2025), whereas authoritarian leadership has long been associated with employee silence, burnout, and turnover intention (Li, 2023; Potipiroon & Orisa, 2024). However, within specific cultural contexts or organizational crises, authoritarian leadership may also demonstrate the "rigid" value of enhancing efficiency and maintaining order (Gunasekara et al., 2022; Ehrnrooth et al., 2024), highlighting the highly contextualized nature of its effects.

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A Review of the Mechanisms Underlying Paternalistic Leadership

Despite the abundance of empirical studies, several issues in this field still require integration and deeper exploration. First, there is no clear and consistent theoretical framework regarding the boundary conditions for the "double-edged sword" effect of authoritarian leadership. Second, existing research predominantly focuses on the individual level, with insufficient discussion on the mechanisms through which paternalistic leadership influences organizational innovation, safety performance, and strategic adaptation across levels via team processes. Furthermore, in the context of globalization and digital transformation, the traditional paternalistic leadership style faces multiple challenges, including shifts in intergenerational values, flatter management models, and the application of artificial intelligence. Its evolutionary trajectory and adaptation mechanisms remain underexplored (Guo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2025). In light of this, this paper aims to provide a systematic review of research on the mechanisms of paternalistic leadership over the past decade. By analyzing and synthesizing literature from authoritative domestic and international journals, this paper seeks to: (1) clarify the core dimensions of paternalistic leadership theory and its evolutionary context; (2) conduct a descriptive analysis of the literature; (3) integrate the multiple impact pathways and dual effects of paternalistic leadership on employee attitudes, behaviors, and teams, and systematically summarize the mediating mechanisms and moderating factors; (4) identify core controversies in current research and future directions. This paper hopes to contribute to deepening theoretical research on paternalistic leadership and to provide empirical evidence and strategic insights for organizations to effectively apply this leadership style in multicultural and dynamic environments.

II. THEORETICAL EVOLUTION AND CORE DIMENSIONS OF PATERNALISTIC LEADERSHIP

1. Theoretical Evolution of Paternalistic Leadership

The theoretical development of paternalistic leadership has roughly traversed four stages: "cultural origin—structural validation—mechanism expansion—contextual deepening." This evolutionary trajectory reflects a progression from descriptive phenomenology to theoretical construction, and further to nuanced deconstruction and cross-cultural dialogue, as illustrated in Table 1.Stage 1: Cultural Origin and Conceptual Germination. Early research, primarily from a Sino-Western comparative cultural perspective, identified and described a paternalistic leadership style prevalent in Chinese business organizations. This style was characterized by the fusion of the leader's authority, benevolence, and role as a moral exemplar (Silin, 1976; Redding, 1990). This work laid the cultural groundwork for the subsequent proposal of the tri-dimensional model.Stage 2: Establishment and Validation of the Tri-Dimensional Model. Through systematic qualitative and quantitative studies, Cheng (1995) and Farh & Cheng (2000) formally proposed and validated the tri-dimensional model of paternalistic leadership—encompassing benevolence, morality, and authoritarianism—and developed measurement tools with sound reliability and validity. Research during this stage predominantly focused on validating the model's applicability within Chinese organizations and its fundamental impact on employee attitudes (e.g., satisfaction, loyalty).Stage 3: Expansion and Deepening of Mechanisms of Action. Following the establishment of the model, the research focus shifted towards exploring the mediating mechanisms and moderating conditions through which each dimension influences employee behaviors (e.g., organizational citizenship behavior, voice, and innovation). Social exchange theory, social cognitive theory, and conservation of resources theory emerged as dominant explanatory frameworks. Studies uncovered key mediating variables such as leader-member exchange, psychological safety, and self-efficacy, as well as the roles of moderating variables like traditionalism and power distance (Cheng et al., 2004).Stage 4: Integration of Dynamic, Dualistic, and Cross-Cultural Perspectives. Research in the past five years has exhibited three major trends: First, a focus on the dynamic combinations and interactive effects of the three dimensions, such as dualistic leadership modes like "balanced hard and soft approaches" and "integrating virtue and authority," and their differential outcomes (Wu, 2025; Zhao et al., 2022). Second, an in-depth examination of the "double-edged sword" effect of authoritarian leadership and its complex boundary conditions (Gunasekara et al., 2022; Ehrnrooth et al., 2024). Third, active engagement in cross-cultural comparative research, revealing the variations in the manifestation and efficacy of paternalistic leadership across different institutional and cultural contexts (e.g., Latin America, Africa, the Middle East) (Ugarte & Barmeyer, 2025; Safdar et al., 2024). This stage is propelling the theory's evolution from a "local distinctive feature" towards "cultural embeddedness."

Table 1 Theoretical Evolution of Paternalistic Leadership

Stage	Time Frame	Core Events & Theoretical Contribution	Key Scholars/ Representative Literature	Research Focus
Stage 1: Cultural Origin and Conceptual Germination	1970s – Early 1990s	Identifying and describing the prevalent paternalistic leadership phenomenon in Chinese organizations from a	Silin (1976) Redding (1990)	Focusing on phenomenon description and cultural interpretation.

Stage	Time Frame	Core Events & Theoretical Contribution	Key Scholars/ Representative Literature	Research Focus
		Sino-Western cultural comparative perspective.		
Stage 2: Establishment and Validation of the Triadic Model	Mid-1990s – Early 2000s	Systematically proposing and validating the tri-dimensional model (Benevolence, Morality, Authoritarianism) of paternalistic leadership; developing reliable and valid measurement tools.	Cheng (1995, 2000) Farh & Cheng (2000)	Conceptual operationalization, scale development, and model validation; combining qualitative exploration with quantitative verification.
Stage 3: Expansion and Deepening of Mechanisms	Mid-2000s – 2010s	Shift in focus to "how it influences"; in-depth exploration of the mediating mechanisms and moderating conditions for each dimension's impact on employee behavior.	Cheng et al. (2004) and numerous contemporary empirical studies	Focusing on mediating pathways (e.g., LMX, psychological capital) and moderating variables (e.g., traditionality, power distance).
Stage 4: Integration of Dynamic, Dualistic, and Cross-Cultural Perspectives	Recent Five Years (approx. 2020 – Present)	Three major trends: Focus on combinations and interactions of the three dimensions; Deepening the "double-edged sword" effect of authoritarian leadership; Expanding cross-cultural comparative and contextualized research.	Wu (2025) Zhao et al. (2022) Gunasekara et al. (2022) Ehrnrooth et al. (2024) Ugarte & Barmeyer (2025)	Integration of diverse methods, increase in cross-cultural comparisons, longitudinal and contextualized studies.

2. Core Dimensions of Paternalistic Leadership

The three dimensions of paternalistic leadership constitute its fundamental architecture for influencing organizational behavior. Each dimension is rich in connotation and interconnected. Benevolent Leadership refers to leaders demonstrating personalized, holistic care and concern for subordinates' work and personal well-being, encompassing "individualized consideration" and "tolerance and forgiveness." Its core lies in leaders proactively offering support and protection akin to a family head, aiming to establish deep emotional bonds and reciprocal gratitude. Recent research has expanded the connotation of benevolence. For instance, based on Confucian and Taoist thought, Bao (2024) proposed that benevolent leadership should possess traits of "self-restraint and selflessness" coupled with "altruism and public-mindedness." Benevolent leadership is a significant antecedent for stimulating employees' affective commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, and innovative behavior (Liu, 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Moral Leadership refers to leaders earning subordinates' admiration and emulation by demonstrating high personal integrity and moral character (e.g., incorruptibility, dedication to public service, and selfless exemplification). It transcends personal virtue, emphasizing the upholding of fairness and justice in organizational decisions and resource allocation. Moral leadership exerts a profound influence on subordinates through processes of social learning and moral identification. It is key to curbing organizational silence and enhancing employees' sense of calling and craftsmanship spirit (Li et al., 2025).

Authoritarian Leadership refers to leaders emphasizing their absolute authority, demanding unconditional obedience from subordinates, and maintaining control through methods such as centralizing power, didactic instruction, and withholding information. Its behaviors often include autocratic decision-making, close monitoring, and maintaining an aura of威严 and distance. Traditionally, authoritarian leadership has been predominantly linked to negative outcomes. However, recent research indicates that in contexts characterized by high task uncertainty, significant time pressure, or cultural norms that endorse authority, authoritarian leadership may exert positive effects by providing clear directives

and reducing role ambiguity (Ehrnrooth et al., 2024; Meng, 2025). Its effects are highly contingent upon its combination with benevolent or moral leadership, as well as subordinates' cognitive interpretations.

III.   BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

1. Overall Publication Analysis

1.1 Trend Analysis

According to Figure 1 (Trends in Annual Publication Count and Average Citation Count for Papers on Paternalistic Leadership, 2015–2025), both research activity and impact in this field show a significant upward trend. The annual publication count increased from 6 in 2015 to 9 in 2025, with a notable surge to 32 papers in 2018, indicating the field entered a phase of rapid growth. The average citation count grew from 2 in 2015 to 275 in 2025, rising sharply especially after 2018, signifying the field's sustained and growing academic influence. Figure 2 reflects the distribution of publication counts by country and the overall trend line, demonstrating that attention to this topic in the international academic community continues to increase, with the research scale expanding year by year. The country distribution map indicates that China has the highest research output in this field, followed by Pakistan, Taiwan region, Australia, and the United States, revealing a research landscape relatively concentrated in Asia. The overall upward trajectory of the exponential trend line corroborates that research interest and publication activity on this topic are both consistently strengthening on a global scale.

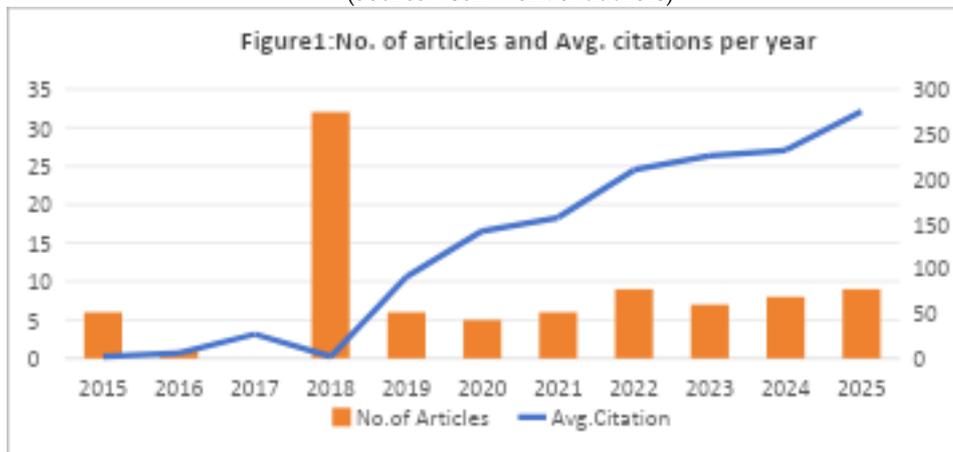Figure1: No. of articles and Avg. citations per year
(Source：self-work of authors)

Figure2: Publication trend of countries
(Source：self-work of authors)
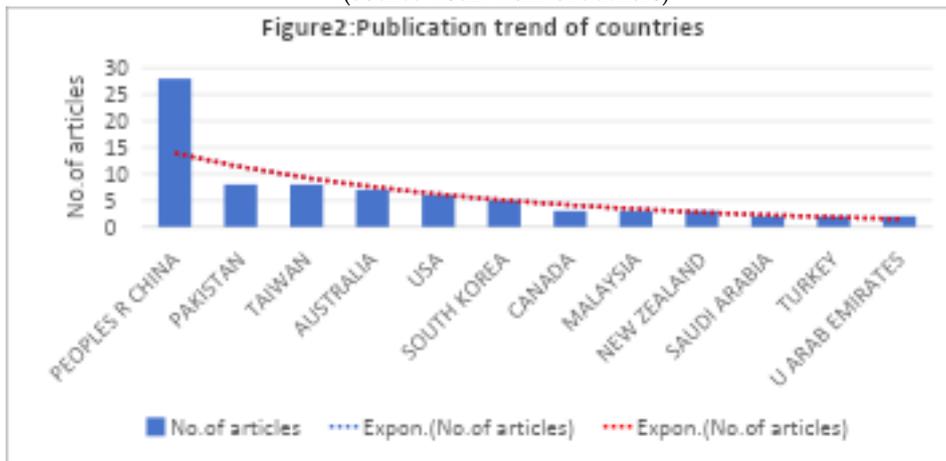
1.2 Most-Cited Countries

Data in Table 2 shows that China (including the Taiwan region) leads significantly in both total citations (TC=860) and H-index (H=12), indicating its research findings have garnered widespread attention and possess sustained influence. Both Pakistan and Australia have a total citation count of 264 and an H-index of 6, demonstrating the high quality of their published work. Research engagement from European and North American countries like the United States and Canada in this field is relatively limited. Overall, the Asian region exhibits high activity, with countries like South Korea and

Malaysia also making stable contributions. This suggests that research on paternalistic leadership presents a landscape centered in Asia and gradually diffusing globally, with China occupying a dominant position in the field.

Table 2: Most cited countries
(Source- self-work of authors)

Country	TC	H指数
PEOPLES R CHINA	860	12
PAKISTAN	264	6
AUSTRALIA	264	6
USA	185	5
SOUTH KOREA	271	4
CANADA	146	3
MALAYSIA	128	2
NEW ZEALAND	100	2
SAUDI ARABIA	17	2
TURKEY	65	1
U ARAB EMIRATES	55	1

2. Most Influential Authors

Table 3 reveals that the distribution of author influence in this field shows a degree of concentration, yet no single author stands out as exceptionally prolific. Pakistani authors Islam, Talat(2024) (H-index 37) and Maqsoom, Dr. Ahsen(2026) (H-index 29) demonstrate the most prominent individual academic influence, reflecting Pakistan's substantial accumulation in this research area. Chinese author He, Guohua(2022) (H-index 27) also exhibits considerable influence. South Korean author Dedahanov, Alisher Tohirovich(2016), despite publishing only 3 papers, achieves an H-index of 17, indicating strong influence per publication. Overall, research on paternalistic leadership presents an author influence pattern characterized by "Pakistan's dominance, with localized prominence from China and South Korea," and high productivity is not directly correlated with high impact.

Table 3: The most influential authors
(Source- self-work of authors)

Authors	Articles	Institution	Country	H-Index
Dedahanov, Alisher Tohirovich	3	Central Asian University	SOUTH KOREA	17
Maqsoom, Dr. Ahsen	2	Mohammed VI Polytechnic University	PAKISTAN	29
Islam, Talat	2	University of Punjab	PAKISTAN	37
Liu, Huaxing	2	Shandong University School of Political Science and Public Administration	China	6
Huang, Qing	2	Shandong University School of Political Science and Public Administration	China	4
Tuan, Luu Trong	2	Gomal University Faculty of Sciences	AUSTRELIA	7
Ali, Hafiz Fawad	2	Gomal University	PAKISTAN	7
Ashraf, Hassan	2	COMSATS University Islamabad (CUI)	PAKISTAN	8
He, Guohua	2	Shenzhen University College of Management	China	27
Lee, Michelle	2	Massey University	NEW ZEALAND	8
Jamil, Saqib	2	Government College University Lahore	PAKISTAN	9
Zahoor, Ifra	2	COMSATS University Islamabad (CUI)	PAKISTAN	1

ASADULLAH, Muhammad Ali	2	Univ Khorfakkan		AUSTRELIA	11

3. Most cited articles

Table 4 lists the highly cited literature in this field. Among them, the article "Paternalistic leadership and employee voice in China" published in LEADERSHIP QUARTERLY in 2015 has garnered a total of 232 citations, representing a foundational work in the area. The highly cited literature predominantly focuses on the mechanisms through which paternalistic leadership influences employee innovation, voice behavior, knowledge sharing, and organizational commitment. These studies are frequently situated within Asian cultural contexts, such as China, Vietnam, and Pakistan, highlighting the close integration of this research topic with specific cultural backgrounds. In terms of temporal distribution, the literature with higher citation frequencies remains concentrated in the period from 2015 to 2019. This indicates that earlier research has established a more sustained influence over time through cumulative impact.

Table 4: Most cited articles
(Source- self-work of authors)

Year	Title	Author	Journal	Total Citations
2015	Paternalistic leadership and employee voice in China: A dual process model	Zhang, Y; Huai, MY and Xie, Y-H	LEADERSHIP QUARTERLY	232
2015	The Mediating Effect of Ethical Climate on the Relationship Between Paternalistic Leadership and Team Identification: A Team-Level Analysis in the Chinese Context	Cheng, MY and Wang, L	JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ETHICS	102
2023	Can paternalistic leaders enhance knowledge sharing? The roles of organizational commitment and Islamic work ethics	Chaudhary, A (Chaudhary, Arooba) ; Islam, T (Islam, Talat)	GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE MEMORY AND COMMUNICATION	91
2021	Linking paternalistic leadership to follower's innovative work behavior: the influence of leader-member exchange and employee voice	Nazir, S (Nazir, Sajjad); Shafi, A (Shafi, Amina)	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INNOVATION MANAGEMENT	83
2019	Collective Efficacy: Linking Paternalistic Leadership to Organizational Commitment	Chen, Y; Zhou, XH and Klyver, K	JOURNAL OF BUSINESS ETHICS	76
2018	Driving employees to serve customers beyond their roles in the Vietnamese hospitality industry: The roles of paternalistic leadership and discretionary HR practices	Tuan, LT	TOURISM MANAGEMENT	72
2016	Entrepreneur's paternalistic leadership style and creativity The mediating role of employee voice	Dedahanov, AT (Dedahanov, Alisher Tohirovich)	MANAGEMENT DECISION	66
2019	Paternalistic leadership and innovation: the moderating effect of environmental dynamism	Hou, BJ (Hou, Bojun) ; Hong, J (Hong, Jin)	EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF INNOVATION MANAGEMENT	58
2019	Paternalistic Leadership and Innovative Behavior: Psychological Empowerment as a Mediator	Dedahanov, AT; Bozorov, F and Sung, S	SUSTAINABILITY	38
2021	Paternalistic leadership style, employee voice and creativity among entrepreneurs An empirical evidence from Pakistan	Soomro, BA; Memon, M and Shah, NM	MANAGEMENT DECISION	37
2020	Authoritarian-Benevolent Leadership, Moral Disengagement, and Follower Unethical Pro-organizational Behavior:	Shaw, KH; Tang, N and Liao, HY	FRONTIERS IN PSYCHOLOGY	35

	An Investigation of the Effects of Ambidextrous Leadership			
2020	Carrot or stick? The impact of paternalistic leadership on the behavioral integration of top management teams in megaprojects	Wan, JY (Wan, Jingyuan) ; Le, Y (Le, Yun)	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MANAGING PROJECTS IN BUSINESS	25
2022	Linking paternalistic leadership to work engagement among Chinese expatriates: a job demand-resource perspective	He, GH (He, Guohua) ; Wang, YF (Wang, Yanfei)	INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MANPOWER	21

4. Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis

This study employed VOSviewer software to conduct a keyword co-occurrence analysis for paternalistic leadership (Figure 3), which generated five clusters with distinct research emphases, clearly delineating the conceptual structure and knowledge evolution trajectory of the field. The overall network density is moderate, indicating certain interconnections between research themes while each cluster maintains a relatively independent focus.

Red Cluster (Cluster 1): Centered on keywords such as "authoritarianism", "benevolent leadership", and "moral leadership", and closely associated with "paternalistic leadership", "dimensions", and "model". This cluster predominantly reflects the core constructs and the tri-dimensional model of paternalistic leadership research, serving as the cornerstone of theoretical construction. A substantial body of research within this cluster focuses on the conceptual clarification, scale development, and foundational validation of the three dimensions (benevolence, morality, authority) (e.g., Cheng, 2000; Farh & Cheng, 2000). However, some studies also suggest that the theoretical deconstruction of authoritarian leadership's "double-edged sword" nature remains insufficient.

Blue Cluster (Cluster 2): Encompasses keywords such as "employee voice", "creativity", "innovative behavior", "performance", "extra-role behaviors", and "work engagement". This cluster reveals the core outcome variables of the research, i.e., how paternalistic leadership influences employees' proactive behaviors, innovation, and performance. The literature review confirms that benevolent and moral leadership are key antecedents for stimulating employee voice, innovation, and organizational citizenship behavior (Liu, 2025; Wang, 2025), while the impact of authoritarian leadership is complex and contradictory. This area has accumulated abundant empirical findings, but research largely focuses on the individual level. There remains room for deepening the exploration of cross-level transmission mechanisms affecting team and organizational innovation performance.

Green Cluster (Cluster 3): Primarily includes keywords like "justice", "commitment", "perceptions", "affective trust", "psychological safety", and "organizational citizenship". This cluster points towards the social-psychological and affective mediating pathways through which paternalistic leadership operates. It corresponds to the "social exchange and relational pathways" and "affective and emotional pathways" summarized in the literature, emphasizing that leadership behaviors drive employee attitudes and actions by influencing their perceptions of fairness, trust, psychological safety, and affective commitment (Habaza et al., 2025; Sürücü et al., 2024). Research within this cluster is relatively mature, with mechanisms explained more clearly.

Yellow Cluster (Cluster 4): Characterized by keywords such as "culture", "power distance", "moderating effect", "context", and "traditional values". It clearly represents the key moderator variable systems in the research, particularly cultural values and contextual factors. The literature notes that cultural variables like power distance, collectivism, and traditionalistic profoundly moderate the direction and strength of paternalistic leadership effects (especially authoritarian leadership) (Ehrnrooth et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2024). This cluster highlights the high contextual dependency of paternalistic leadership research and is also the current focus of cross-cultural comparative and localized studies.

Purple Cluster (Cluster 5): Relatively independent, containing keywords like "public service motivation", "antecedents", "mediation", and "mechanism". This cluster likely represents in-depth research within specific domains (e.g., the public sector) or at the methodological level. For instance, "public service motivation" links to research on the mechanisms of paternalistic leadership in the public service domain (Zhou & Xu, 2025). "Antecedents" and "mechanism" suggest this cluster focuses on the antecedents of paternalistic leadership or comprehensive models of its complex mechanisms.

A comprehensive analysis reveals logical connections between the clusters: The Red Cluster (leadership constructs) is the starting point; its influence is transmitted through the Green Cluster (psychological mechanisms) to the Blue Cluster (behavioral outcomes); and this entire process is bound by the moderating conditions of the Yellow Cluster (cultural context). The Purple Cluster reflects expansion into specific domains or more complex models. However, the network also shows that keyword nodes focusing on dynamic combinations (e.g., "balanced hard and soft approaches"), digital transformation contexts, and in-depth comparisons in non-Asian cultures are either not prominent or weakly connected,

corroborating the future research directions identified in the literature.

Overall, the keyword co-occurrence network confirms that research on paternalistic leadership has formed a relatively complete knowledge system spanning from conceptual models to mechanisms of action and then to boundary conditions. However, future efforts need to make further breakthroughs in theoretical integration (e.g., connecting different mediating and moderating pathways), contextual deepening (e.g., the digital era, crisis leadership), and methodological innovation (e.g., longitudinal, cross-cultural comparative studies) to enhance the theory's explanatory and predictive power for complex management phenomena.。

Figure3: Keyword Co-occurrence Analysis
(Source：self-work of authors)

IV. THE MECHANISMS OF PATERNALISTIC LEADERSHIP'S IMPACT ON INDIVIDUAL AND TEAM OUTCOMES

1. **Impact on Employee Attitudes and Behaviors: Multiple Pathways and Dual Effects**

1.1. The Positive Facilitation Pathways of Benevolent and Moral Leadership

A substantial body of empirical research consistently indicates that benevolent leadership and moral leadership have significant positive predictive effects on a range of positive employee attitudes and behaviors. At the attitudinal level, they effectively enhance employees' job satisfaction, organizational commitment, psychological safety, and perceived organizational justice (Habaza et al., 2025; Cai et al., 2024). At the behavioral level, both significantly promote employees' organizational citizenship behavior, voice behavior (especially promotive voice), innovative behavior, proactive change behavior, and safety behavior (Liu, 2025; Zhou, 2024). This impact is rooted in the norm of reciprocity within social exchange and the modeling effect of social learning. For instance, benevolent leadership fulfills employees' needs for emotional and instrumental support, thereby eliciting their willingness to reciprocate (social exchange). Moral leadership, by setting an ethical benchmark, prompts employees to internalize its values and emulate its altruistic behaviors (social learning).

1.2. The Complex and Contradictory Effects of Authoritarian Leadership

Most studies confirm that the impact of authoritarian leadership is more complex. Its autocratic and controlling characteristics readily trigger psychological reactance, face threat, and emotional exhaustion among employees, consequently leading to job burnout, organizational silence, decreased prohibitive voice, increased compulsory citizenship behavior, and higher turnover intention (Yuan et al., 2025; Li, 2023). However, some research has also identified non-negative or even positive contexts for its effect. For example, on construction sites facing safety risks, a foreman's moderate authority may directly enhance workers' safety compliance behavior by emphasizing rules and discipline (Wang et al., 2025). In Thailand's service industry, the negative impact of authoritarian leadership on full-time employees' service performance is partially mediated by work engagement, but not for part-time employees, revealing a boundary effect arising from differences in employment status (Thawornlamlert et al., 2026).

1.3. The Interactive Influence of Dualistic Combinations

Research is gradually shifting from examining each dimension in isolation to focusing on their combined effects. The "balanced hard and soft approach" (high benevolence–high authoritarianism) leadership style has been found to effectively reduce employee job burnout by enhancing their psychological safety, an effect moderated by employees' emotional intelligence (Wu, 2025). The "integration of virtue and authority" combination can promote employees' thriving at work by strengthening relational identification (Yang et al., 2025). Furthermore, the consistency of leadership styles is also crucial: when benevolent and authoritarian leadership are highly consistent (whether both high or both low), their impact on trust in leadership is superior to that of inconsistent combinations (Zhao et al., 2022).

2. Impact on Team and Organizational Outcomes: Cross-Level Transmission

The influence of paternalistic leadership can transmit from the individual level to the team and organizational levels, primarily achieved by shaping team climate, processes, and emergent states.

2.1. Impact on Team Processes and Performance

Benevolent and moral leadership help foster a team climate characterized by high psychological safety and trust, promoting team knowledge sharing, learning, and voice, thereby enhancing team innovation performance and decision quality (Fan, 2023; Gu, 2022). For instance, in R&D teams, benevolent and moral leadership can mitigate the inducement of knowledge hiding caused by team fault lines, consequently protecting team innovation performance (Fan, 2023). Conversely, authoritarian leadership tends to exacerbate subgroup differentiation (fault lines) within teams, triggering relationship conflict and task conflict, and inhibiting team voice behavior and psychological safety (Xie et al., 2025). In sports teams, a dual-leadership pattern of "authority + authority" (i.e., both the team leader and the coach exhibiting high authoritarianism) incites the highest level of team conflict (Xie et al., 2025).

2.2 Impact on Organizational-Level Outcomes

At the organizational level, paternalistic leadership is connected to organizational culture, strategy, and long-term performance. In family businesses, paternalistic leadership often merges with familism values, constructing unique governance and incentive models through "quasi-kinship" relationships (e.g., the shareholding system of Shanxi merchants), influencing business succession and sustainability (Hong, 2025). In educational institutions, principals' paternalistic leadership indirectly affects school effectiveness and student achievement by influencing teachers' organizational commitment and team cohesion (Bellibaş et al., 2024; Feng, 2025). Furthermore, paternalistic leadership can also influence strategic issues such as organizational green behavior and information security compliance (Zhu et al., 2023; Mi et al., 2023). However, research also cautions that over-reliance on paternalistic leadership may lead to over-centralization of organizational decision-making and suppression of grassroots innovation, posing adaptability challenges in the era of digital transformation (Guo, 2023).

3. Mediating Mechanisms

Paternalistic leadership influences outcome variables through a series of complex psychological and cognitive mediating mechanisms, which can be categorized into the following four pathways.

3.1 Social Exchange and Relational Pathway

Based on the principle of reciprocity, employees perceive the care, support, and ethical treatment provided by leaders as a form of "social favor," thereby generating a sense of obligation to reciprocate towards the leader and the organization. Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) quality is the most frequently validated mediating variable. High-quality LMX can translate leaders' benevolent and moral behaviors into higher employee engagement, creativity, and citizenship behavior (Maqsoom et al., 2026; Sürücü et al., 2024). Psychological ownership and perceived organizational support represent employees' sense of belonging and perceived support from the organization, serving as crucial bridges between benevolent/moral leadership and employee proactive behaviors (e.g., green behavior, voice, innovation) (Wang, 2025; Wang et al., 2023; Mi et al., 2023). Organizational identification is another significant mediator; employees, by identifying with the organizational values represented by benevolent or moral leadership, link personal success to the organization, consequently exhibiting more extra-role behaviors (Liu, 2022).

3.2 Cognitive and Self-Evaluation Pathway

Self-efficacy (including general self-efficacy and creative self-efficacy) is an important mediator. Benevolent and moral leadership enhance employees' belief in "I can do it" by providing successful experiences, positive feedback, and role models, thereby boosting their work engagement and innovation performance (Xie & Wang, 2025; Zhou & Xu, 2025). Psychological capital, as a composite positive psychological state encompassing hope, efficacy, resilience, and optimism, has also been confirmed to mediate the positive impact of paternalistic leadership (especially benevolence and morality)

on employee engagement and occupational well-being (Qiu, 2022; Ai et al., 2023). Organization-based self-esteem reflects employees' evaluation of their self-worth within the organizational context. Moral and benevolent leadership enhance employees' organization-based self-esteem through respect and recognition, subsequently promoting their proactive change behavior and green behavior (Huang, 2023; Wang et al., 2023).

3.3 Affective and Emotional Pathway

Psychological safety refers to employees feeling able to take interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences. Benevolent and moral leadership create a safe climate through non-threatening, supportive interactions, thereby encouraging employee voice, innovation, and knowledge sharing (Liu, 2022; Sürücü et al., 2024). Conversely, negative emotions (e.g., anxiety, anger) and emotional exhaustion often serve as mediating mechanisms through which authoritarian leadership leads to work procrastination, work-family conflict, and turnover intention (He et al., 2022). Emotional labor (e.g., surface acting) has also been found to be an important mediator in how principals' paternalistic leadership affects teachers' job burnout and turnover intention (Huang et al., 2025).

3.4 Motivational and Meaning-Making Pathway

Leadership styles influence behavior by shaping employees' work motivation and sense of meaning. Intrinsic motivation and work engagement often mediate the impact of benevolent and moral leadership on employee creativity and performance (Liu, 2025). Sense of calling and work meaningfulness explain why moral leadership can stimulate employees to engage in work that transcends mere utility and fosters a craftsmanship spirit (Li et al., 2025; Duan et al., 2024). Public service motivation, within the context of the public sector, is a key mediator through which paternalistic leadership influences the work engagement of selected graduates and others (Zhou & Xu, 2025).

4. Moderating Factors

4.1 Cultural-Value-Level Moderators

Employees with a high power distance orientation are more likely to perceive authoritarian leadership as legitimate or even necessary, thereby attenuating their negative reactions and potentially even enhancing their positive reciprocation to benevolent leadership (Ehrnrooth et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2024). Research also found that in high power distance countries (e.g., Pakistan), the facilitating effect of paternalistic leadership on nurse performance is more pronounced (Safdar et al., 2024). In organizations with strong collectivist cultures, paternalistic leadership emphasizing harmony, loyalty, and family-like care is more readily accepted and yields positive effects (Bellibaş et al., 2024). For instance, its impact on teachers' organizational citizenship behavior is stronger within the collectivist culture of Arab schools in Israel (Nassir & Benoliel, 2024). Employee traditionality (respect for authority, acceptance of one's position) positively moderates the relationship between authoritarian leadership and subordinate compliance behavior (Wang & Jia, 2022). Confucian cultural values also moderate the influence of paternalistic leadership on grassroots civil servants' public service motivation (Yu et al., 2023).

4.2 Organizational and Team Context-Level Moderators

An inclusive climate can enhance the positive impact of empowering leadership on employees' psychological ownership (Gao, 2025). An error management climate can weaken the negative effect of authoritarian leadership on organization-based self-esteem while strengthening the positive influence of benevolent/moral leadership (Huang, 2023; Bai, 2024). Team cohesion can enhance the positive effect of coaches' paternalistic leadership on athletes' feedback-seeking behavior (Feng, 2025). Perceived organizational support moderates the relationship between sense of work gain and task performance (Luo et al., 2024). In environments with institutional voids and weak regulation (e.g., Sub-Saharan Africa), the negative effects of paternalistic leadership may be amplified, highlighting the importance of external governance (Edeh et al., 2025; Zeng & Cohen, 2025). In crisis situations (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic), organizations may be more inclined towards, or in greater need of, leaders with clear authority (Gunasekara et al., 2022; Chaturong, 2023). In technology firms emphasizing innovation, the detrimental effects of authoritarian leadership may be more prominent (Guo, 2023).

4.3 Individual Trait-Level Moderators

Employees' age, gender, generational differences, etc., may moderate their responses to paternalistic leadership. For example, newer generation employees may have lower tolerance for authoritarian leadership (Liu, 2023). Research also found that gender congruence between leader and subordinate moderates the impact of paternalistic leadership on organizational citizenship behavior (Nassir & Benoliel, 2024). Employees' mental toughness can buffer the negative effect of authoritarian leadership on athletes' training satisfaction (Meng, 2025). Employees with high emotional intelligence can better handle leadership pressure, thereby weakening the negative effects of authoritarian leadership or enhancing the positive effects of a "balanced hard and soft approach" (Wu, 2025). Proactive personality strengthens the path through

which humble leadership (sharing commonalities with moral leadership) influences innovation via job crafting (Fan, 2023). Face concerns, as a cultural trait, mediate the relationship between paternalistic leadership and employee voice behavior, and are themselves influenced by leadership style (Liu, 2022).

V.   RESEARCH CONTROVERSIES AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Based on the analysis of literature from the WOS database (2015-2025), this section discusses the limitations in paternalistic leadership research and proposes future research directions.

The primary and most core controversy centers on the valence and legitimacy of authoritarian leadership. Traditionally, due to its autocratic and controlling nature, authoritarian leadership is closely linked to negative outcomes such as employee silence and burnout (Li, 2023; Potipiroon & Orisa, 2024). However, growing evidence indicates its impact cannot be simply labeled as "negative." In crisis situations (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic) or during highly uncertain tasks, authoritarian leadership may serve a "rigid" value in maintaining order and efficiency by providing clear directives and reducing role ambiguity (Gunasekara et al., 2022; Ehrnrooth et al., 2024). For instance, on high-risk construction sites, a foreman's moderate authority can directly enhance workers' safety compliance behavior (Wang et al., 2025). This raises a critical theoretical question: Under what specific conditions can authoritarian leadership transform from a "necessary evil" into a positive force? Future research urgently needs to move beyond a simple "good vs. bad" dichotomy and engage in more nuanced contextual deconstruction.

Second, the issues of cross-cultural universality and cultural specificity of paternalistic leadership are becoming increasingly prominent. Although its triadic model has been found to exist in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere (Ugarte & Barmeyer, 2025; Siebers, 2024), this merely proves its cross-cultural existence in form, not the homogeneity of its mechanisms. Existing research is largely concentrated in the Asian Confucian cultural circle, and the cultural boundaries of its conclusions are unclear. For example, while power distance orientation has been shown to significantly moderate the effects of authoritarian leadership in Eastern cultures (Islam et al., 2024), do such mechanisms hold equally true in individualistic cultures? Future research must strengthen genuinely cross-cultural comparative studies, employing a combined emic and etic approach. On one hand, delve into non-Confucian cultural contexts like Africa and Latin America to explore how paternalistic leadership interacts and integrates with indigenous cultural values such as Ubuntu (the African philosophy of "humanity towards others") (Foláyan et al., 2026). On the other hand, use large-scale cross-cultural samples to empirically test which mediating pathways (e.g., social exchange, psychological safety) are universal and which are culture-specific (e.g., the "face" mechanism), thereby clarifying the cultural roots and scope of variation of this theory.

Third, understanding of the dynamic balance and evolutionary mechanisms of the dualistic combinations of the three dimensions remains in its infancy. Research has begun to examine the unique effects of combinations like the "balanced hard and soft approach" (high benevolence–high authoritarianism) and the "integration of virtue and authority," finding they can yield positive outcomes by enhancing psychological safety or relational identification (Wu, 2025; Yang et al., 2025). However, how do subordinates perceive and integrate these seemingly contradictory leadership behaviors? The underlying cognitive processing mechanisms (e.g., paradoxical thinking, cognitive framing) urgently require deeper exploration. Future research needs to employ longitudinal designs to explore how leaders dynamically adjust the emphasis on benevolence, morality, and authority based on the context, and the conditions for the effectiveness of such dynamic adaptations, thereby revealing the procedural nature of paternalistic leadership as a dynamic capability.

Fourth, the digital and artificial intelligence (AI) era presents novel challenges and adaptation imperatives. In digital workplaces characterized by remote work and human-machine collaboration, the traditional face-to-face, close-interaction-based paternalistic care and authoritarian control may see their utility diminished or transformed. Future research needs to actively explore the integration of paternalistic leadership with emerging management models. For example, investigating how leaders' perception of AI opportunities influences their leadership behavior, which in turn moderates team members' trust in and innovative use of AI (Zhang et al., 2025).

Finally, more critical attention must be given to the potential negative effects and ethical issues of paternalistic leadership. The authoritarian dimension may breed power abuse and nepotism, while the benevolent dimension, if biased, can undermine procedural fairness (Habaza et al., 2025). In the long term, over-reliance on this "parent-child" type relationship may lead to psychological dependency among employees, suppressing critical thinking and autonomous innovation capabilities. Particularly alarming is that within a framework emphasizing hierarchy and obedience, marginalized employees such as women and sexual minorities may face systemic exclusion (Foláyan et al., 2026). Therefore, future research should not shy away from these "shadow sides" but proactively engage in dialogue and integration between paternalistic leadership theory and theories such as ethical leadership and inclusive leadership. The core goal is to explore how to retain and promote the valuable core of caring for subordinates and providing moral exemplars inherent in paternalistic leadership while, through institutional design, leadership development, and organizational culture building, effectively counterbalance the potential risks of injustice, rigidity, and exclusion brought by its authority. This will guide this ancient leadership wisdom towards truly healthy and sustainable application in modern organizations.

VI. CONCLUSION

In summary, paternalistic leadership is a leadership construct with deep cultural roots and complex mechanisms of action. Benevolent and moral leadership primarily serve as significant sources for promoting employee proactivity, innovation, and well-being by stimulating positive social exchange and enhancing employees' self-cognition and emotional safety. Authoritarian leadership plays a paradoxical role; its effects are highly sensitive to the interaction of cultural values, organizational contexts, and individual traits, functioning potentially as a destructive stressor or, under specific conditions, as a tool for maintaining order and efficiency. The mediating mechanisms encompass multiple pathways ranging from social exchange and cognitive appraisal to affective motivation, while the moderating factors weave a network of influence boundaries spanning from the macro-cultural to the micro-individual level.

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