

The effects of transformational leadership on organizational commitment of family employees in Chinese family business

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Abstract— Based on a sample of 186 family businesses in China, this study examined the transformational leadership behaviors of Chinese family businesses owners, and their influence on family employees' organizational commitment. Attitudinal and behavioral data were collected from both family business owners and family employees. With a China-specific version of leadership questionnaire, this study identified those owners in the sampled family businesses adopt a high level of transformational leadership. Results of multivariate analyses further indicated that the transformational leadership practiced in Chinese family businesses were effective in promoting family employees' value commitment and commitment to stay.

Keywords- transformational leadership; organizational commitment; family employee, Chinese family business

I. INTRODUCTION

Family firms are businesses in which ownership and management are controlled by a family or family clan[1, 2]. Irrespective of scale of operation, industrial activity, and level of socio-political and market development, family firms have been the backbone of socio-economic advancement across nations[3]. In these firms, as both employees and owners' family members, family employees have long been viewed as an important source of strength, who are highly committed and loyal to the firms, and generally provide firms with firm-specific tacit knowledge, quality social networks, and even financial and physical assets[4]. Therefore, the way of leading family employees in order to maintain or even increase their organizational commitment have always been an important concern of family business owners [5].

One significant development in understanding leadership in the past decade has been the emergence of transformational leadership theory [6-8]. Based on the book of Burn[9], leadership style were conceptualized in terms of transformational and transactional characteristics. Transactional leadership describes those who lead through social exchange, and concentrate on accomplishing tasks and promise rewards for good performance, while disciplining poor performance. In contrast, transformational leaders stimulate and inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes by raising the level of motivation and morality in

both themselves and their followers. More specifically, transformational leaders generate awareness and acceptance among followers of organizational goals by broadening and raising followers' interests and aligning these interests with organizational goals[10, 11]. Compared with transactional leadership, transformational leadership is believed to be advantageous in developing leaders and improving followers' loyalty, trust, self-esteem and self-efficacy[12, 13].

Relevant studies in other contexts have documented significant correlations between transformational leadership and employees' commitment[14, 15]. However, there has been a very limited study of transformational leadership and its possible consequences in the context of family business[16], particularly in Chinese family businesses (ref.). Regarding the applicability of transformational leadership in family firms, scholars in family business field have different opinions. Some scholars believe that family businesses provide a perfect ground for the exercise of transformational leadership. The leadership adopted in family businesses may actually be similar to transformational leadership[17, 18]. The other group of scholars argues that transformational leadership will be seen as threatens to the stability of the traditional family business structure, thus may not be welcomed by both family business owners and family employees [10, 14, 19]. Against this background, this paper aims to find out whether transformational leadership is practiced in family businesses from China? If yes, how will transformational leadership influence the commitment of family employees? Involving cross-sectional data from a sample of Chinese family businesses (CFBs), this study first empirically explores the practice of transformational leadership style in CFBs, and further examines its impact on family employees' organizational commitment. As one of the very few studies that empirically investigate the practice and effects of transformational leadership in Chinese family businesses, this paper has important academic and practical implications to both academics and practitioners in the field of family business.

The reminder of this paper first discusses the concept and various dimensions of transformational leadership style, and develops hypothesis accordingly. We then introduce the sampling and data collection procedure, followed by the discussion of results and implications. The final section concludes this paper with the limitations of key contributions of the study.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

The term 'transformational leadership' was first coined by Downton[20], and then emerged as an important approach to leadership research by Burns[9]. Based on these early works, several theories of transformational leadership [6, 10] were generated to advance this new leadership concept. These works broadened the traditional concept of leadership as a relationship of economic exchange that offers rewards or compensation for a desired behavior by viewing leadership as a change process and by exploring the impact of leader behavior on followers' values, beliefs and higher-order needs[11]. Specifically, Bass [6] described transformational leadership as leader behaviors that stimulate and inspire followers to achieve extraordinary outcomes by raising the level of motivation and morality in both themselves and their followers. Transformational leaders are effective in promoting organizational commitment by aligning goals and values of the follower, the group, the leader, and the organization[10, 12, 21]. Its strong, positive effects on followers' attributes and commitment will then motivate followers to reach their fullest potential and exceed expected performance[11]. Bass and his colleagues further conceptualized transformational leadership into four components: idealized influence; inspirational motivation; intellectual stimulation; and individualized consideration. Each of the components help build followers' commitment in different ways[6, 19, 22]. The following texts discuss these components and their impact on followers' organizational commitment in detail.

Idealized influence, also called charisma, describes transformational leaders who behave as role models for their followers. Followers usually perceive these leaders as having extraordinary capability, persistence and determination, as well as high standards of moral and ethical conduct. They deeply admire, respect and trust these leaders, and thus identify with leaders' goals, interests and values[19, 21]. *Inspirational motivation* occurs when leaders motivate and inspire those around them by providing challenges and meaning to their work. They provide visions of what is possible and how to attain these goals. More specifically, these leaders get followers involved in envisioning the future, and then they promote positive expectations about what needs to be done and demonstrate commitment to the shared vision[19]. With this dimension, leaders are able to promote followers' emotional commitment and excitement to a mission[11]. *Intellectual stimulation* encourages followers to be creative and innovative. In practice, transformational leaders help others to think about old problems in new ways, and to continuously question and develop their own beliefs, assumptions and values. These leaders also jointly work with their followers to deal with problems in innovative ways. The pride in actions of all those involved and joint success in overcoming obstacles will reinforce organizational commitment of followers[11, 19]. *Individualized consideration* means understanding and sharing others' concern and developmental needs, and treating each individual follower uniquely. Leaders act as coaches and

advisors to not only identify and satisfy each individual follower's current needs, but also to attempt to expand and elevate the needs in order to assist followers become fully actualized. By emphasizing on followers' personal career needs and providing them with a sense of increased competence to carry out duties, leaders could further enhance followers' commitment [10, 11].

A number of studies have empirically validated the positive effects of transformational leadership on followers' organizational commitment. For example, transformational leadership was found to be significantly related to organizational commitment and organizational citizenship behavior in a study of 864 teachers in Singapore[15]. Rai and Sinha [23] conducted a test of 261 middle managers from public banking sector in India, and identified that managers' score on transformational leadership accounted for significant amounts of variances in their commitment to the organizations. In a similar vein, positive relationships between all components of transformational leadership and followers' commitment were also identified with a total of 124 managers from banking and food industries in U.S. [14]. In the context of family business, however, little empirical evidence has been provided to support the positive relationship between transformational leadership and followers' organizational commitment[16]. As indicated in the introduction, family business scholars have different opinions about the applicability of transformational leadership in the family business context.

One school of thought claimed that owners and family employees in family businesses share certain vision, value and beliefs, and have high level of loyalty, commitment, trust and communication based on their long-term family relationship[17, 18]. These characteristics all serve as beneficial contextual factors for the exercise of transformational leadership. Therefore, the leadership adopted in family businesses may be similar to transformational leadership, and the exercise of transformational leadership will further reinforce those family business characteristics[16, 24, 25]. In CFBs, influenced by the dominant Confucian-orientated family culture, family employees are supposed to pay high level of filial piety, trust, respect and loyalty to their firms. In return, the CFB owners should show benevolence to their employees by taking care of their livelihood and growth[26-29]. Chinese also view high moral standard and personal charisma as important feature of good leaders[30]. These characteristics may further support the exercise of transformational leadership in CFBs and boost its impact on organizational commitment of Chinese family employees. Therefore, we hypothesize that:

H1: In CFBs, the exercise of transformational leadership will be positively associated with the family employees' organizational commitment.

In contrast, the other school of thought argued that family firms generally bound by family traditions and rules, and pay excessive attentions to the long-term continuity of the businesses. These firms are thus resistant to change, conservative, and stagnant[31-33]. Transformational leaders who question the status quo and seek continuous innovation

and change may receive less support and be viewed as too unsettling [10, 14, 19]. Moreover, in the context of CFBs, leaders traditionally lead their followers paternalistically through hierarchical family structure. Leaders generally give orders to followers and absolute obedience is expected. By maintaining such hierarchical family relationship, family harmony is achieved [29, 34]. Since transformational leaders focus on equal and innovative leading, exercising transformational leadership in CFBs may face further obstacles and even create negative impact on employees' organizational commitment. Thus, we predict that:

H2: In CFBs, the exercise of transformational leadership will be negatively associated with the family employees' organizational commitment.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Sample and Data Collection

In this study, we screened CFBs by asking their owners to indicate whether their firm is owned and managed by a family or family clan, and then under took the sampling in two stages. First, we selected seven cities for data collection (Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Harbin, Wuhan, Chengdu, and Xi'an). Second, we applied a guanxi-assisted 'snow-ball sampling' method to access samples in each city. Specifically, the researcher initially distributed questionnaire survey packages to intermediary CFBs through his guanxi network, who in turn enlisted and contacted other potential participants through their guanxi networks. This sampling method has been widely adopted in China-related studies, since it effectively addressed the difficulties of collecting empirical data in Chinese organizations that are very reluctant to supply information to outsiders[35, 36]. With each respondent CFB, its owner was invited to fill out our survey questionnaire A which targeting on their leadership style, one of its family employees was invited to rate their organizational commitment level in questionnaire B.

Through the sampling and data collection process, this study obtained 186 usable responses out of the 280 CFBs initially contacted, resulting a response rate of 66.4 per cent. Information on respondent characteristics is specifically provided in Table 1.

B. Measurement of Variables

This study adopted a shortened China-specific version of leadership style questionnaire which was developed and validated by Li and Shi [37] in China. Our leadership questionnaire included 20 items that covered four components of China-specific transformational leadership: moral modeling, vision articulation, individualized consideration, and leader charisma. These components are relatively consistent with the original transformational leadership style questionnaire (MLQ-5x short) [19], except that the component of intellectual stimulation is found to be irrelevant and is thus excluded[37]. We ask each CFB owners to rate their own exercise of transformational leadership in a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'). Further exploratory factor analysis was then conducted to group relevant items into their

corresponding components (Cronbach's alpha between 0.84 and 0.89).

We also employed the most commonly adopted measurement of organizational commitment [38] to assess the commitment level of our sampled family employees. For each of the 15 items included, one family employee was asked to rate their opinion in a 5-point Likert scale (1 = 'strongly disagree' and 5 = 'strongly agree'). Following the approaches of previous studies [22, 39], we conduct factor analysis to further group these commitment items. While excluding the cross-loading items, two sub-groups of organizational commitment were generated: value commitment (Cronbach's alpha = 0.87) and commitment to stay (Cronbach's alpha = 0.93).

In addition, this study also controlled several personal attributes for their potential effects on family employees' organizational commitment. These factors were: family employee's education (1=below high school to 6 =postgraduate), age (actual age), gender (0=male; 1=female) and position (1=lower management; 2=middle management; 3=top management).

TABLE I. RESPONDENTS CHARACTERISTICS

Attribute	Frequency (Percentage)	N
Age of Firm (years)		
1-5	29 (15.6%)	
6-10	63 (33.8%)	
11-15	56 (30.1%)	
16-20	17 (9.1%)	
> 20	21 (11.3%)	186
Firm Size (No. of employees)		
< 10	5 (2.7 %)	
11-49	66 (35.5 %)	
50-99	40 (21.5 %)	
100-499	61 (32.8 %)	
> 500	14 (7.5 %)	186
Industry		
Manufacturing	44 (23.7%)	
Trade	109 (58.6%)	
Service	33 (17.7%)	186
Age of Owner (years)		
20-30	16 (8.6%)	
31-40	66 (35.5%)	
41-50	69 (37.1%)	
51-60	31 (16.7%)	
> 60	4 (2.2 %)	186
No. of Family Managers		
1-5	129 (69.7%)	
6-10	38 (20.5%)	
11-20	16 (8.7%)	
21-40	2 (1.1%)	185

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive statistics of transformational leadership style adopted in CFBs are reported in Table 2. As shown, the owners of our respondent CFBs appeared to adopt transformational leadership style (mean = 3.88) quite heavily. Among the four components, the owners particularly focused on leader charisma (mean = 4.12) and moral modeling (mean = 4.04), while paying slightly less attention to vision

articulation (mean = 3.87) and individual consideration (mean = 3.85).

TABLE II. TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN CFBs

Transformational Leadership	N	Min.	Max.	Mean	SD
Moral Modeling	185	1	5	4.04	0.55
Visionary Articulation	185	1	5	3.87	0.69
Individualized Consideration	184	1	5	3.85	0.66
Leader Charisma	184	1	5	4.12	0.57
Overall Transformational Leadership	184	1	5	3.88	0.65

Before conducting multivariate analysis (Multiple Regression) to test impact of transformational leadership on followers; organizational commitment, we addressed potential multicollinearity problems between our variables. Both the correlation (all less than 0.7) and VIF (from 1.069 to 1.198) demonstrated that multicollinearity is not a concern in this study [40].

The results of multivariate analysis are provided in Table 3. Model 1 and 3 indicated the impact of our control variable on family employees' value commitment and commitment to stay. The results showed that family employees' age and position are positively related to family employees' commitment to stay. This indicated that family employees who are more senior in age and job position generally feel more attached to their job and have less intention to leave. The results in Model 2 indicated that all four components of transformational leadership are significantly, positively associated with family employees' value commitment. However, in terms of family employees' commitment to stay, the results of Model 4 showed that the components of vision articulation and individualized consideration do not have statistically significant impact. Therefore, our results partially support H1, since the variances of commitment to stay are not explained by all four component of transformational leadership.

In brief, our results indicate that the leadership style conducted by family business owners in China were indeed high transformational. These CFB owners generally behave as role model for their employees and pay specific attention to their own moral standard; inspire those around them by providing vision and meaning for work; and treat each employee uniquely by considering their specific work and life needs. By doing so, their family employees have higher commitment to the value of the family firm, and feel more attached to their job by having higher commitment to stay with the current company. However, one surprise finding is that vision articulation and individualized consideration have insignificant effects in improve family employees' commitment to stay. This is consistent with findings of other studies which indicated that transformational leadership has stronger influence on affective (moral and value) commitment, with normative commitment (obligation to stay) being more influenced by exchange-based leadership, such as transactional leadership [22]. Furthermore, the significant

results on the components of moral modeling and leader charisma may imply that Chinese employees have specific and high concern about leaders' charismatic attribute and capability while making their career decisions. China's collectivistic family culture may be one reason, since followers will have higher identity and self-concept under charismatic and moral leaders[11], and identity and membership with a social collective is critically important for Chinese under the collectivistic culture[29, 41].

TABLE III. RESULTS OF REGRESSION ANALYSIS ON VALUE COMMITMENT AND COMMITMENT TO STAY

Model	1	2	3	4
(Constant)				
Moral Modeling		0.32**		0.19*
Vision Articulation		0.26**		-0.07
Leader Charisma		0.24**		0.21**
Individualized Consideration		0.24**		0.04
<i>Controls</i>				
Family employee's Education	-0.02	-0.06	0.13	0.12
Family employee's Age	-0.10	-0.1	0.15*	0.2*
Family employee's Gender	0.07	0.03	0.13	0.12
Family employee's Position	-0.10	-0.08	0.19*	0.18*
F-Statistics	1.05	3.73**	4.01**	4.34**
R-square	0.02	0.15	0.09	0.17
R-square change	0.02	0.13	0.09	0.09

Standardized coefficients are reported.

** Significant at $p < 0.01$; * significant at $p < 0.05$; two-tailed; $N = 186$
 Education (1=below high school to 6 =postgraduate); Age (actual age); Gender (0=male; 1=female); position (1=lower management; 2=middle management; 3=top management)

V. CONCLUSION

This exploratory study aimed to find out whether CFB owners lead their family employees transformationally, and the influences of transformational leadership on family employees' organizational commitment (value commitment and commitment to stay). With a sample of 186 CFBs, we found that the leadership behavior of CFB owners is quite similar to transformational leadership style, and their transformational leadership behavior has positive impact on family employees' value commitment and commitment to stay. This study is one of the first to study the leadership style in CFBs. It empirically validates the transformational leadership theory in the context of China. Moreover, this study offers useful guidelines for managers or consultants who are looking for effective leadership to lead family business in China. However, with the cross-sectional nature of this study, we have not been able to ascertain the direction of leadership and outcome variable. Future studies involving longitudinal data are preferred. Moreover, this study only focuses on family employees in family business in China. Future research would have additional value by further including non-family employees, or making comparison

between family and non-family firms in China. Overall, given the rising economic significance of China and, in particular, family businesses in the country, this study have significantly contributed to the literature by enhancing our understanding leadership in and its impact on organizational commitment in CFBs, and also provided important practical implications.

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