

Can Paternalistic Leadership Promote Chinese College Teachers' Creativity? Understanding the Mediating Role of Creative Self-Efficacy

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Abstract

The purpose of the current study was to explore the effects of three dimensions of paternalistic leadership (i.e., authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and moral leadership) on the creativity of Chinese college teachers. Based on social cognitive theory, the mediating role of creative self-efficacy in the relationship between the three dimensions of paternalistic leadership and creativity was also investigated. A questionnaire survey methodology was adopted with data collected from a sample of 775 college teachers as participants in the Shandong province of China. The results revealed college teachers' perceived benevolent leadership and moral leadership had a significant positive impact on their creativity; perceived authoritarian leadership, however, demonstrated a significant negative effect on creativity; creativity self-efficacy was reported to partially or completely mediate between all three dimensions of perceived paternalistic leadership and creativity. These findings provided theoretical and practical insights for enhancing creativity among college teachers. College leaders are encouraged to exhibit benevolent and moral leadership behaviors while limiting authoritarian leadership behaviors. It is also recommended that colleges introduce management practices such as training and creative development tutorials to improve the creative self-efficacy of college teachers and enhance their creativity.

Keywords: perceived paternalistic leadership, creative self-efficacy, creativity, Chinese college teachers

1. Introduction

In contemporary education, cultivating creativity has emerged as a significant ability and essential attribute that educators actively pursue to foster the growth of inventive learners (Cheng, 2019). Moreover, creativity serves a crucial role in carrying out instructional practices by teachers (Han & Abdrahim, 2023). Creativity can be defined as the cognitive capacity to generate novel concepts as well as the ability to explore and produce innovation (Purnamasari, 2020). The promotion of creativity has emerged as a central objective for numerous higher education institutions globally (Shang et al., 2019) as a fundamental attribute for college teachers (Machali et al., 2021). According to Guaman-Quintanilla et al. (2023), the cultivation of creativity has a positive impact on teachers' problem-solving abilities and facilitates the process of knowledge construction. The creativity of Chinese college teachers has been constrained in recent decades due to a relatively insular educational environment and a dearth of educational activities focused on fostering creativity (Zhou, 2014). Recently, Chinese higher education institutions have implemented pedagogical and curricular changes prioritizing cultivating teachers' creativity, aligning with China's strong emphasis on educational innovation (Pllana, 2019). Hence, it is paramount to investigate the primary determinants influencing Chinese college teachers' creativity.

Among many factors influencing creativity, leadership style is a significant aspect that frequently receives attention (Chow, 2018; Zhou et al., 2018). According to Narullita (2022), leadership styles depend on traditional culture, which inextricably influences the connotations and effectiveness of leadership styles. Paternalistic leadership, as one of the leadership styles, differs from the well-established Western leadership philosophies, and its effectiveness depends largely on China's rich cultural heritage (Wu et al., 2012; Hiller et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2019; Nazir et al., 2020). Paternalistic leadership emphasizes the leader's severe discipline, moral authority, personal ethics, and paternal benevolence demonstrated in a personalized environment (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Most past empirical studies have found benevolent and moral leadership positively affects employee creativity, whereas authoritarian leadership negatively affects employee creativity (Gu et al., 2018, 2020). However, there are conflicting results. For instance, empirical studies by Zhang et al. (2021) and Hou et al. (2019) indicated authoritarian leadership could

enhance employee creativity. Although the aforementioned research has primarily focused on the paternalistic leadership of corporate employees within business settings, there has been a lack of investigation on the impact of teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership on their creativity in the higher education context. Hence, the current study aims to augment our comprehension of the impact of paternalistic leadership on promoting teachers' creativity within the Chinese higher education setting.

According to the empirical findings mentioned above, paternalistic leadership directly affects employees' creativity. However, it is unclear how this effect manifests itself. Based on social cognitive theory, the potential influence mechanism of teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership on their creativity has been proposed in the current study. The core of social cognitive theory is that behavior can be significantly influenced by both individual and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986). Based on social cognitive theory, Zainal et al. (2021) viewed teachers' transformational leadership as an environmental component and creative self-efficacy as an individual element. Their study demonstrated teachers' perceived leadership could impact creativity by enhancing self-efficacy. Xia et al. (2022) applied social cognitive theory to their study by regarding benevolent leadership as an environmental factor and creativity self-efficacy as an individual factor. Their research results concluded creative self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between benevolent leadership and the creativity of university researchers. Therefore, the current study was based on social cognitive theory to examine the relationship between perceived paternalistic leadership, creative self-efficacy, and creativity among college teachers by considering paternalistic leadership as an external environmental factor and creative self-efficacy as an internal individual factor.

Past empirical studies have found creative self-efficacy positively influences individuals' creativity (Cai et al., 2021; Puente-Diaz & Cavazos-Arroyo, 2020; Tantawy et al., 2021). Although benevolent leadership and moral leadership have been shown to positively influence employees' creative self-efficacy in some empirical studies (Wang et al., 2019; Wu, 2018), authoritative leadership has been shown to have a negative impact on employees' creative self-efficacy (Wang et al., 2019, 2022). In the educational literature, it has also been suggested the demonstration of moral behaviors by leaders has a positive impact on teachers' creative self-efficacy (Flores et al., 2020). Additionally, the exhibition of benevolent leadership behaviors by leaders facilitates the experience of positive emotions and effective trust among teachers, ultimately fostering creative self-efficacy (Xia et al., 2022). Thus, the current study inferred creative self-efficacy might be an essential mediating variable in the relationship between Chinese college teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership and creativity.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the current study would extend the past literature in several ways. First, few previous empirical studies have examined the effects of paternalistic leadership on creativity with college teachers as the research subjects in the Chinese context. The current study would enhance the understanding of creativity and leadership and enrich the literature on paternalistic leadership by estimating how Chinese college teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership impacts their creativity based on social cognitive theory. Besides, the current study would also discuss how each of the three dimensions of Chinese college teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership affected creativity through creative self-efficacy. Hence, by using a sample of Chinese college teachers, the current study would explore the relationship between Chinese college teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership and creativity and the mediating role of creative self-efficacy in this relationship.

2. Literature Review & Hypotheses Development

2.1 The Relationship between Perceived Paternalistic Leadership and Creativity

Paternalistic leadership, which has its roots in Chinese Confucianism (Hou et al., 2019), is a very distinct leadership style that formed in Western society (Lu et al., 2022). According to Gyamerah et al. (2022), paternalistic leadership is defined as a leadership style combining strict authority, fatherly kindness, and moral integrity with three dimensions: authoritarianism, benevolence, and moral leadership. Authoritarian leadership usually implies specific rewards, punishments, centralized power, and absolute control of leadership behaviors influenced by the ancient Chinese hierarchy (Chen et al., 2018). It manifests as leaders having strong authority and absolute power over others, keeping a distance from subordinates, and tending to hide true feelings and intentions (Gu et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2023). These behaviors provoke subordinates to be in awe or fear of authoritarian leadership, thus forcing them to obey (Hou et al., 2019). In education literature, authoritarian leadership refers to behaviors in which school leaders exercise strong authority and control over teachers and demand unquestioning obedience (Peng et al., 2001).

Benevolent leadership refers to behaviors in which leaders show holistic concern for individual employees and their families, manifested in individual care and compassionate tolerance (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Gyamerah et al., 2022). Leaders show genuine kindness and care for their subordinates, which creates gratitude and further enhances subordinates' compliance (Lee et al., 2023). In the educational literature, benevolent leadership refers to the

wholehearted and sincere behavior of school leaders toward their teachers; through such behavior, they assist teachers in fulfilling their job responsibilities and demonstrate holistic concern for the teachers' personal and family lives (Li et al., 2018).

Moral leadership is when leaders demonstrate superior moral character and integrity through altruistic behaviors and example-setting (Nazir et al., 2021). Leaders serve as role models for employees with superior personal virtues, high levels of integrity, self-discipline, and selflessness (Yuan et al., 2023). In the educational literature, moral leadership refers to the self-disciplined behavior of school teachers, treating teachers fairly, accepting responsibility for their work, and setting examples (Shi et al., 2020).

Creativity implies the ability to generate new ideas or solve problems effectively (West & Sacramento, 2023). Because creativity is domain-specific, educational creativity still faces significant challenges as an expanding field (Han & Abdrahim, 2023). According to Beghetto and Corazza (2019), a dynamic view of creativity is needed to understand its complexity, value, and significance in educational settings. Therefore, the current study explored how paternalistic leadership affected creativity from three perspectives: authoritarian leadership, benevolent leadership, and moral leadership.

Past research results on the relationship between authoritarian leadership and creativity are divergent. For instance, Tian and Sanchez (2017) found through an empirical study that employees showed fear and defensive silence when facing authoritative leadership, which ultimately inhibited employees' creativity. Dedahanov et al. (2019) stated authoritarian leadership was absolute and unchallengeable, contrary to the inclusive organizational climate needed for creativity, and employees' creativity was limited to a great extent. On the contrary, Hou et al. (2019) found through empirical research that authoritarian leadership positively affected employees' creative performance in an organization. The study by Zhang et al. (2021) showed authoritarian leadership could boost employees' perceptions of their personnel position, which favorably fostered their creativity. In education literature, Chinese educational researchers have long noted authoritarian leaders and an emphasis on obedience can undermine the free atmosphere supporting creativity in schools, and teachers are likely reluctant to try to innovate (Wang & Cai, 2016). Zhou and Hu (2022) found Chinese teachers' motivation and work engagement declined to a certain extent when their principals exhibited authoritarian leadership behaviors. According to the discussion above, the current study inferred Chinese college teachers could be less creative if they perceive increased authoritarian leadership.

The relationship between benevolent leadership and creativity has been consistently studied with consistent results. Lin et al. (2018) found empirical evidence to support benevolent leadership, which focused on providing employees with holistic care, promoted employees' creativity. Meanwhile, employees can feel more sympathetic under benevolent leadership at a high level (Peng & Chen, 2022), which is conducive to helping employees develop job skills and expertise, thus promoting their creativity (Lin et al., 2018). In education literature, Xia et al. (2022) found through empirical research that benevolent leadership played a crucial role in creative performance and was favorable to fostering graduate students' creativity in research teams. According to the discussion above, the current study inferred Chinese college teachers could be more creative if they perceive increased benevolent leadership.

Regarding the relationship between moral leadership and creativity, the results of past studies are also consistent. Wang et al. (2019) found moral leadership played a vital role in influencing the creative behavior of employees. The selflessness and dedication of moral leaders set an example for employees as standards; under the leaders' inspiration, employees will hold themselves to those standards and become more committed to their work (Chen et al., 2014). Empirical studies have found moral leadership promotes employees' creativity by setting examples and increasing employees' motivation to learn (Gu et al., 2015). According to the discussion above, the current study inferred Chinese college teachers could be more creative if they perceive elevated moral leadership.

Based on the aforementioned discussion, the current study proposes the following:

H1a: Perceived authoritarian leadership significantly and negatively affects creativity among Chinese college teachers.

H1b: Perceived benevolent leadership significantly and positively affects creativity among Chinese college teachers.

H1c: Perceived moral leadership significantly and positively affects creativity among Chinese college teachers.

2.2 Relationship between Paternalistic Leadership and Creative Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's confidence or belief in their capacity to attain behavioral goals in a specific domain (Bandura et al., 1997). Tierney and Farmer (2002) expanded the concept of self-efficacy by introducing creative self-efficacy and described it as the belief that a person could develop creative ideas. Differing from general

self-efficacy (Chen et al., 2001), creative self-efficacy reflects a belief in an individual's ability to perform in various areas. Individuals with higher creative self-efficacy are more confident in seeking and integrating diverse information while stimulating their behaviors and outcomes (Chen & Zhang, 2019).

Past studies have shown authoritarian leadership plays a crucial role in influencing teachers' self-efficacy (Eden, 1990). For example, Gu et al. (2018) found authoritarian leadership, which emphasized authoritarianism and obedience, gave individuals a sense of being controlled that hindered employee initiative, contradicting the freedom and support needed for innovation. Hou et al. (2019) discovered that, when leaders exhibited authoritarian behaviors, subordinates usually showed awe and obedience, negatively affecting their enthusiasm for work participation and creativity. According to Wu (2018), authoritarian leadership often highlights leaders' authority, rigidly regulates subordinates, and even suppresses subordinates' potential to boost employee self-efficacy. In education literature, authoritative leaders' control and command over teachers are found to be detrimental to teachers' development and affect their motivation and initiative (Shi et al., 2020). Therefore, the current study inferred college teachers' creative self-efficacy could decrease as their perceived authoritarian leadership increases.

Emilia and Mariola (2018) found benevolent leaders would help and encourage corporate employees when they encountered problems, promoting a supportive atmosphere and fostering a psychologically safe environment and stimulating employees to participate enthusiastically in tasks, thereby improving creative self-efficacy. Li et al. (2014) noted benevolent leaders treated their employees as family members, provided help and guidance, and created a good working atmosphere that motivates employees to generate creative decisions. Safdar et al. (2021) found supportive and caring behaviors of benevolent leaders could increase nurses' self-efficacy. It has also been shown in education literature that, if benevolent leaders express sincere concern and support, teachers are often motivated to work harder when they receive positive encouragement (Blasé & Blase, 2003). Therefore, the current study inferred Chinese college teachers' creative self-efficacy could increase with an increase to their perceived level of benevolent leadership.

Moral leadership is about respecting followers' dignity, humanity, and developmental needs, enabling followers to acquire job-related knowledge and learn new skills (Shafique et al., 2020). As a result of the respect demonstrated by moral leaders, employees often have a greater sense of creative self-efficacy (Ma et al., 2013). Li et al. (2012) found that, under moral leadership, employees might strive to improve their abilities and enhance their self-efficacy through constructive feedback from leaders. The education literature found moral leaders' personal virtues and self-discipline predispose teachers to identify with the leader's values and emulate the leader's exemplary behaviors, thereby promoting teachers' beliefs about their work (Wu et al., 2012). Teachers' work beliefs are closely related to creativity self-efficacy (Tierney & Farmer, 2002). Therefore, the current study inferred Chinese college teachers' creative self-efficacy could increase as their perceived moral leadership increases.

According to the aforementioned discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Perceived authoritarian leadership significantly and negatively affects creative self-efficacy among Chinese college teachers.

H2b: Perceived benevolent leadership significantly and positively affects creative self-efficacy among Chinese college teachers.

H2c: Perceived moral leadership significantly and positively affects creative self-efficacy among Chinese college teachers.

2.3 The Mediating Role of Creative Self-Efficacy

Past researchers have placed a significant emphasis on the role of leaders in encouraging teacher creativity through the development of creative ideas (Huang et al., 2019; Haase et al., 2018; Mittal & Dhar, 2015). Sarwat and Abbas (2021) suggested creative self-efficacy was an important variable in predicting creativity. The higher the employees' creative self-efficacy, the more they are able to generate high levels of creativity at work. Creative self-efficacy positively and significantly impacts employee creativity (Xu et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2020). Tierney and Farmer's (2002) study found creative self-efficacy predicted employees' creative performance. In education literature, Cayirdag (2017) showed elementary and secondary school teachers' creative self-efficacy positively affected their creativity because they are naturally creative and role models. Chang et al. (2016) demonstrated creative self-efficacy positively correlated with creativity among college and university physical education teachers. The aforementioned research shows consistent findings in the literature on education and management that creative self-efficacy is an essential predictive factor of teachers' creativity.

Based on the above research hypotheses and literature exploration, it is noted that not only does paternalistic

leadership impact creativity, but creative self-efficacy also impacts creativity. It can be inferred that the higher the perceived authoritarian leadership of college teachers, the lower the creative self-efficacy may be, and the decrease in creative self-efficacy could have a negative impact on creativity; the higher the perceived benevolent leadership and moral leadership of college teachers, the higher the creative self-efficacy may be, and the increase in creative self-efficacy could have a positive impact on creativity.

Therefore, based on social cognitive theory and the above discussion, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Creative self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived authoritarian leadership and creativity among Chinese college teachers.

H3b: Creative self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived benevolent leadership and creativity among Chinese college teachers.

H3c: Creative self-efficacy mediates the relationship between perceived moral leadership and creativity among Chinese college teachers.

The hypothesized model of the current study is displayed below in Figure 1.

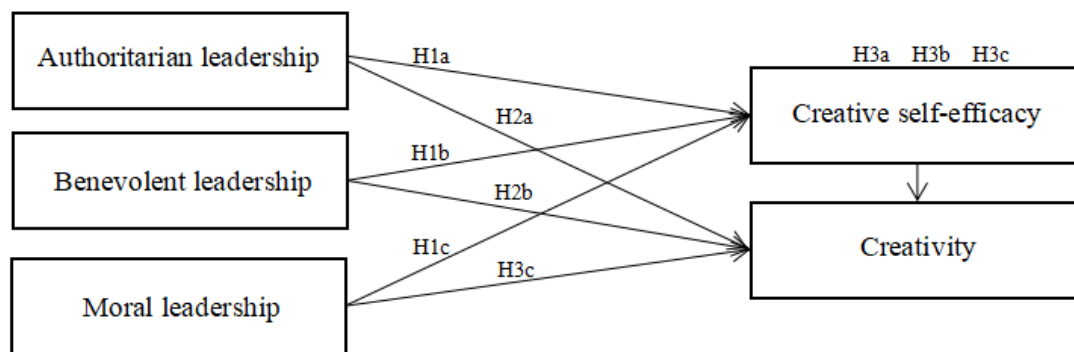


Figure 1. Conceptual model of the study

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Data collection for the current study was conducted using convenience sampling to collect a sample of 775 college teachers from the Shandong province of China. The data were collected by uniformly distributing the online questionnaire (www.wjx.cn) at the time of regular meetings held in the four universities. Participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. Before questionnaire administration, participants were informed the information was for research purposes only to eliminate participants' concerns and to obtain authentic data. In total, 800 questionnaires were distributed, and 775 valid questionnaires were collected, with a validity rate of 96.9%. The current study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Binzhou Vocational College, Shandong Province, China (BZ-2022-01).

3.2 Measures

3.2.1 Perceived Paternalistic Leadership

The current study defined Chinese college teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership as the paternalistic leadership of the direct leaders of secondary colleges (namely, the dean), which the faculty perceive. The Global Paternalistic Leadership Scale, developed by Cheng et al. (2014), was used. The scale comprised three dimensions with a total of 15 questions regarding authoritarian leadership (AL, five items), benevolent leadership (BL, five items), and moral leadership (ML, five items). All responses were scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (frequently).

The values of composite reliability (CR) for each dimension were as follows: CR = 0.846 for AL, CR = 0.895 for BL, and CR = 0.824 for ML, all of which exceeded the reference value of 0.6 and satisfied the criteria (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The values of average variance extracted (AVE) for each dimension were as follows: AVE = 0.528 for AL, AVE = 0.636 for BL, and AVE = 0.542 for ML, all of which were greater than 0.5, meeting the criteria and indicating good convergent validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The values of Cronbach's α for each dimension were as follows: Cronbach's α = 0.876 for AL, Cronbach's α = 0.919 for BL, Cronbach's α = 0.953 for ML, and Cronbach's α = 0.749 for the whole scale, all of which were greater than 0.7, thereby indicating good reliability of

the scale (Nunally & Bernstein, 1978).

3.2.2 Creative Self-efficacy

Referring to the literature on self-efficacy and creativity, we word-modified the question items of the general self-efficacy scale developed and validated by Chen et al. (2001) to measure creative self-efficacy. It was a unidimensional scale with eight items measured on a 6-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The CR value of the scale was 0.925, greater than the reference value of 0.6, thereby satisfying the criteria (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The AVE was 0.606, greater than 0.5, meeting the criterion and indicating excellent convergence validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The Cronbach's α value of the scale was 0.924, greater than 0.7, indicating good reliability.

3.2.3 Creativity

The current study adapted the subscale of the Kirton adaption-innovation inventory (KAI; Kirton, 1976) to measure the creativity of Chinese college teachers. This scale has been frequently used in previous studies to measure respondents' self-reported levels of creative behavior with good reliability and validity (Farmer et al., 2003). It was a unidimensional scale with eight items and measured on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The CR value of the scale was 0.751, greater than the reference value of 0.6, and met the criteria (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). The AVE was 0.394, which met the criterion proposed by Fornell and Laecker (1981) for an AVE value above 0.36 to be marginally acceptable. The Cronbach's α value of the scale was 0.743, greater than 0.7, indicating good reliability (Nunally & Bernstein, 1978).

4. Results

4.1 Common Method Variance

To test the problem of common method variance (CMV), the current study compared the CFA between the multi-factor model and the single-factor model (Podsakoff & Organ, 1986). The results showed the chi-square value of the multi-factor model ($\chi^2 = 1640.379$) was much lower than that of the one-factor model ($\chi^2 = 6453.319$), and the comparison results showed the multi-factor model was significantly better than the one-factor model in terms of model fitness ($\Delta\chi^2 = 4812.94$, $\Delta df = 12.965$, $p < 0.001$). The results showed there was a significant difference between the two models, and therefore it was inferred the CMV problem in the current study was not significant (Verhagen & Van Dolen., 2011).

4.2 Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

To test the normality of all the continuous variables that were analyzed statistically, the current study estimated skewness and kurtosis. The absolute values of skewness for all question items ranged from 0.054 to 1.616, and the absolute values of kurtosis ranged from 0.003 to 2.614. The results fulfill the criteria (absolute values of skewness less than 2 and absolute values of kurtosis less than 7), indicating the data has normality in the current study (Curran et al., 1996).

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics and correlations of the variables. The data suggested BL ($M = 4.317$, $SD = 1.007$), ML ($M = 5.142$, $SD = 0.778$), creative self-efficacy ($M = 4.344$, $SD = 0.814$), and creativity ($M = 4.317$, $SD = 1.007$) were all currently at a moderate to high level of current status, and AL ($M = 2.849$, $SD = 1.046$) was at a moderate-to-low level of current status. In addition, the results of Pearson's correlation analysis showed the correlations between perceived paternalistic leadership, creative self-efficacy, and creativity among Chinese college teachers were all statistically significant ($p < 0.01$), with correlation coefficients from -0.123 to 0.663 . The correlation coefficients were lower than 0.7, indicating no problem with collinearity (Dormann et al., 2013). The AVE square root was further estimated to test the discriminant validity. The results showed each variable's AVE square root value was greater than its correlation coefficient with other variables, which met Fornell and Larcker's (1981) criteria for evaluating the discriminant validity, thereby indicating a good discriminant validity between any two variables.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics and correlations for all variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	AL	BL	ML	CS	CT
AL	2.849	1.046	0.727				
BL	4.317	1.007	-0.434***	0.797			
ML	5.142	0.778	-0.380***	0.663***	0.736		
CS	4.344	0.814	-0.276***	0.384***	0.329***	0.778	
CT	4.317	1.007	-0.123**	0.307***	0.258***	0.565***	0.628

Note: ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; AL = authoritarian leadership; BL = benevolent leadership; ML = moral leadership; CS = creative self-efficacy; CT = creativity; the diagonal values (in bold) are the square root of the corresponding AVE.

4.3 Mediation Analysis

The current study explored the relationship between paternalistic leadership, creative self-efficacy, and creativity through structural equation modeling (SEM), with creative self-efficacy as a mediating variable. The fit indices were as follows: GFI = 0.822, IFI = 0.849, TLI = 0.833, CFI = 0.849, NFI = 0.827, all greater than 0.8 and meeting the criterion (McDonald & Ho, 2002); PNFI = 0.747, PGFI = 0.690, both greater than 0.5 and meeting the criterion (McDonald & Ho, 2002). The results of fit indices indicated a good model fit, suggesting creativity self-efficacy was critical as a mediator between perceived paternalistic leadership and creativity among Chinese college teachers. The mediation model is shown in Figure 2.

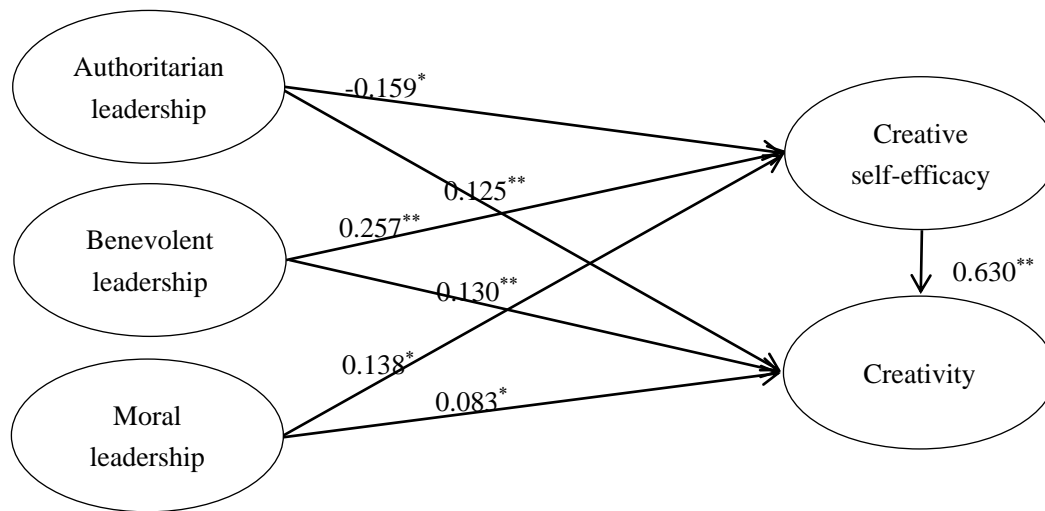


Figure 2. Mediation Model with Path Coefficients

Note: * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$; path coefficients are standardized path coefficients.

Table 2 shows the direct effect of the three dimensions of paternalistic leadership perceived by college teachers (AL, BL, and ML) on creativity and their indirect effect on creativity through creative self-efficacy. A significant direct effect of AL on creativity ($\beta = 0.125, p < 0.01$), a significant direct effect of BL on creativity ($\beta = 0.130, p < 0.01$), and a significant direct effect of ML on creativity ($\beta = 0.083, p < 0.05$) were observed. Therefore, H1a, H1b, and H1c were established. AL significantly and negatively predicted creativity self-efficacy ($\beta = -0.159, p < 0.001$), BL significantly and positively predicted creativity self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.257, p < 0.01$), and ML significantly and positively predicted creativity self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.138, p < 0.05$). As a result, H2a, H2b, and H2c were established.

Table 2. Direct and indirect effects and 95% confidence intervals

Path relationship	Estimate	<i>p</i>	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower	Upper
Direct effects				
AL→CT	0.125	0.002	0.050	0.206
BL→CT	0.130	0.005	0.035	0.229
ML→CT	0.083	0.016	0.027	0.190
AL→CS	-0.159	0.005	-0.266	-0.054
AL→CS	0.257	0.001	0.131	0.386
AL→CS	0.138	0.035	0.013	0.261
CS→CT	0.630	0.001	0.547	0.706
Indirect effects				
AL→CS→CT	-0.100	0.004	-0.171	-0.035
BL→CS→CT	0.162	0.001	0.084	0.247
ML→CS→CT	0.087	0.032	0.011	0.168
Total effects				
AL→CT	0.025	0.603	-0.081	0.129
BL→CT	0.292	0.001	0.172	0.414
ML→CT	0.170	0.018	0.034	0.301

Note: The path coefficient estimates are all normalized path coefficient estimates; AL = authoritarian leadership; BL = benevolent leadership; ML = moral leadership; CS = creative self-efficacy; CT = creativity.

AL has a significant indirect effect on creativity through creative self-efficacy ($\beta = -0.100$, $p < 0.01$, 95% CI [-0.171, -0.035]). The results suggested AL had a significant negative effect on creative self-efficacy, which could decrease teachers' creativity self-efficacy and inhibit their creativity.

Both BL ($\beta = 0.162$, $p < 0.001$, 95% CI [0.084, 0.247]) and ML ($\beta = 0.087$, $p < 0.5$, 95% CI [0.011, 0.168]) have significant indirect effects on creativity through creative self-efficacy. The results indicate BL and ML perceived by Chinese college teachers significantly and positively affected creative self-efficacy, which in turn would improve teachers' creativity self-efficacy and then teachers' creativity. Therefore, H3a, H3b, and H3c were supported.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Implications

Aiming to explore the impact of Chinese college teachers' perceived paternalistic leadership on creativity and examine the mediating role of their creative self-efficacy in the relationship between paternalistic leadership and creativity, the current study made the following theoretical implications.

First, the relationships between the three dimensions of perceived paternalistic leadership and creative creativity were found in the current study. We found teachers' perceived benevolent leadership positively affected creativity, similar to previous research, which suggested individuals' perceived benevolent leadership could promote creativity (Lin & Chen, 2021). According to Wang et al. (2019), college leaders who exhibit benevolent leadership behaviors often demonstrate personalized care and respect toward teachers, helping teachers recognize their significance not only as employees but also as crucial contributors and advocates for education, consequently fostering a stronger sense of belonging among teachers that stimulates their creative abilities. The concept of benevolent leadership finds its roots in Confucianism, a philosophical tradition that places significant emphasis on the interconnectedness of social relationships. Within this framework, the benevolent leader assumes a paternal role, mirroring the way a father treats his children with kindness and care; then, the children reciprocate this benevolence by expressing gratitude and displaying obedience toward their father (Farh & Cheng, 2000). Applying the Confucian principle of benevolent leadership to Chinese colleges may result in mutual obligations based on the performance of duties (Hackett & Wang, 2012). The current study's findings validate and build upon the research conducted by Lin and Chen (2021), which

explored the impact of benevolent leadership on the creativity of college teachers within the Chinese higher education setting.

We found Chinese college teachers' perceived moral leadership positively affected creativity, consistent with previous research that individuals' perceived moral leadership enhanced their creativity (Javed et al., 2017). In the context of higher education, the demonstration of moral behaviors by leaders plays a significant role. By exemplifying these behaviors, leaders establish themselves as role models and actively cultivate their character, thereby persuading others through virtuous conduct (Xia et al., 2022). Additionally, this practice fosters a sense of identification among teachers toward their leaders, leading to a tendency to align with, learn from, and emulate their moral exemplars, which consequently leads to engendering positive attitudes and promotes creativity among teachers (Lin et al., 2018). Moral leadership, like benevolent leadership, originates in traditional Chinese Confucianism's foundational roots (Cheng et al., 2004). As Hackett & Wang (2012) pointed out, Confucius believed morality is a leader's ability to fulfill their role better, emphasizing the leader's role as a moral exemplar. When the Confucian concept of moral leadership was implemented within the context of Chinese higher education, the phenomenon of role modeling based on moral identification became evident (Wang et al., 2021). The current study's findings validate and expand upon the study conducted by Javed et al. (2017) about the impact of moral leadership on the creativity of college educators within the Chinese higher education setting.

We found Chinese college teachers' perceived authoritarian leadership negatively affected creativity, consistent with the results of some previous studies that individuals' perceived authoritarian leadership inhibited their creativity (Beghetto, 2010; Wu et al., 2012). Teachers' creativity may be impeded when leaders exhibit authoritarian leadership behaviors (Wu et al., 2012), which may cause teachers to develop fear and uncertainty, thus inhibiting their creativity (Beghetto, 2010). However, the current study's results differed from some of the previous research findings, which concluded that authoritative leadership positively affected employee creativity (Gu et al., 2018; Hou et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). The reason may be that the aforementioned studies collected data from corporations, where employees tend to accept the unequal distribution of power and status in the organization in a corporate context (Hofstede, 1993) and obey such as situation without objection and accomplish tasks (Li & Sun, 2015). However, in higher education, managing highly talented teachers is a matter of spiritual attunement and intrinsic appeal rather than being based on unlimited power (Lu & Smith, 2022). Hence, the impact of an individual's perceived authoritarian leadership on their creativity may vary based on various national cultures or organizational situations. The current study's findings expand the examination of the impact of perceived authoritarian leadership on creativity within the context of Chinese higher education. Specifically, it reveals that Chinese college teachers' perceived authoritarian leadership significantly and negatively influences their creativity. Our findings offer theoretical backing for enhancing comprehension of authoritarian leadership within the Chinese higher education setting and contribute to future research endeavors within this domain.

Second, the relationships between the three dimensions of perceived paternalistic leadership and creativity self-efficacy were discovered in the current study. It was found that Chinese college teachers' perceived benevolent and moral leadership had a significant positive effect on creativity self-efficacy, whereas perceived authoritarian leadership had a significant negative effect on creativity self-efficacy. This discovery aligns with prior research indicating individuals tend to exhibit greater levels of creative self-efficacy when they perceive leadership behaviors characterized by benevolence and morality, whereas perceiving authoritative leadership behaviors tends to be associated with lower levels of creative self-efficacy (Chen & Zhang, 2019; Emilia & Mariola, 2018; Li et al., 2012). Specifically, college leaders with benevolent leadership behaviors often offer guidance, encouragement, and opportunities for correction even when faculty members encounter difficulties or make mistakes in their work (Nazir et al., 2021). Such a leadership style increases teachers' belief in implementing innovative ideas and their determination to accomplish many tasks creatively because they encounter decreased resistance (Xu et al., 2018). When college leaders demonstrate moral leadership behaviors, teachers identify with the leaders' values and are willing to emulate the leaders' dedication, which leads to a more positive work ethic and increases teachers' confidence in their ability to creatively solve problems and achieve innovative outcomes (Wu, 2012). In Chinese Confucian culture, benevolent leadership emphasizes the mutuality and reciprocity of social relationships, and moral leadership disciplines leaders' self-behaviors and cultivates moral rules through personal ethics and standards (Zhang et al., 2022). In contrast, college teachers are subject to strict requirements and tight control when facing authoritarian leaders, which make teachers unconditionally obey orders, accept assignments, and have lower work initiative, thus reducing creative self-efficacy (Guo et al., 2018). The current study further broadens the findings of the above studies.

Third, the mediating role of creativity self-efficacy in the relationship between perceived paternalistic leadership and

creativity self-efficacy was highlighted in the current study. The results of the current study highlighted that creativity self-efficacy mediated the relationship between paternalistic leadership and creativity as perceived by Chinese college teachers. This finding can be explained by social cognitive theory, which focuses on individual factors, environments, and behaviors that interact in a mutually causal relationship (Bandura, 1986). Specifically, the results of the current study found creativity self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between perceived benevolent leadership and creativity among Chinese college teachers. This finding aligns with the conclusions drawn by Xia et al. (2022) that individuals' perceived benevolent leadership behaviors positively influence their creative self-efficacy, thereby fostering their creative output. This could be because college leaders with benevolent leadership often care about teachers' professional development and personal health and therefore are recognized and obeyed by teachers (Chen et al., 2014), thus creating a Chinese organizational culture characterized by trust, care, and harmony, in which teachers are encouraged by their leaders' trust and care, and therefore are more willing to share their ideas and opinions and cultivate teachers' enduring passion for their work and enhanced creativity (Hou et al., 2019). The results of the current study provide empirical support to further deepen the understanding of the impact of creative self-efficacy on the relationship between perceived benevolent leadership and creativity among teachers in Chinese colleges.

The results of the current study found creativity self-efficacy partially mediated the relationship between Chinese college teachers' perceived moral leadership and creativity. This finding is consistent with the findings of Ma et al. (2013), indicating individuals' perceived moral leadership promoted their creative self-efficacy, thereby motivating their creativity. The reason for this could be due to the following factors: First, college leaders with moral leadership behaviors often focus on teacher ethics, self-discipline, and consistency between words and deeds, so that teachers feel the charisma of the leader and thus have trust in the leader and will consciously devote themselves to creative teaching and learning (Wang et al., 2019). Second, as Zhao et al. (2020) posited, college leaders with moral leadership behaviors often treat teachers fairly, foster open and reciprocal communication, actively listen to their concerns with sincerity and patience, and encourage them to express their thoughts freely. These actions effectively motivate teachers to generate innovative ideas and respond with positive behaviors.

The results of the current study found creativity self-efficacy completely mediated the relationship between perceived authoritarian leadership and creativity among Chinese college teachers. This finding is consistent with the findings of Wang et al. (2022), indicating individuals' perceived authoritarian leadership negatively impacts their creative self-efficacy and creativity. This may be because, when college leaders exhibit authoritarian behaviors, teachers are prone to distance themselves from the leader and show awe and obedience (Tian & Sanchez, 2017). Hence, the teachers may view work as a daily routine task with a lack of personal attachment to the leader and feelings of rejection toward the work and then generate a loss of identification, causing a decrease in creative self-efficacy and a subsequent decrease in creativity (Choi et al., 2021; Zhao et al., 2020).

In summary, the results of the current study provide insights for Chinese college leaders to understand the direct impact of dimensions of perceived paternalistic leadership on creativity and its indirect effect through creative self-efficacy among Chinese college teachers. Specifically, the results of the current study suggest Chinese college leaders who exhibit benevolent and moral leadership behaviors while limiting authoritarian leadership behaviors can increase teachers' creativity and, similarly, teachers' creative self-efficacy. Second, creativity self-efficacy partially or completely mediated the relationship between dimensions of perceived paternalistic leadership (i.e., benevolent, moral, and authoritarian leadership behaviors) and creativity.

5.2 Practical Implications

The current study provides some valuable practical contributions. First, leaders in Chinese colleges might want to consider minimizing their authoritarian control and constraints on teachers to build a harmonious superior-subordinate relationship. At the same time, leaders could lower their power status, solicit and listen to teachers' innovative suggestions, and provide teachers chances to perform their creative ideas and actions (Dess & Picken, 2000). Teachers may be more likely to accept creativity out of identification with the leader and fulfill the leader's expectations and requirements for teachers. Second, leaders in Chinese colleges should be benevolent toward teachers with personalized care, understanding, and support. Teachers may be willing to open up and express their creative opinions because their leaders' recognition may encourage them to work hard to stimulate their creativity. Third, leaders of Chinese colleges should be moral examples for teachers, treat them equally without discrimination, and pay particular attention to encouraging and coaching teachers' professional growth and meeting their developmental needs to promote more pedagogical innovations and attempts by teachers. Fourth, leaders of Chinese colleges could cultivate teachers' creative self-efficacy and facilitate conditions for stimulating creativity.

Leaders could personally demonstrate and coach teachers in skills related to teaching creativity and provide hands-on opportunities to apply these skills. Expert lectures and workshops on cultivating creativity could also be arranged to enhance teachers' creativity.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

The current study has some limitations. First, the sample was from the Shandong province of China, which by definition cannot represent other areas in China. Future studies are suggested to expand samples to other provinces in China to increase the inferability of our results. Second, we only used questionnaires to explore the relationship between the variables. Future researchers could conduct a longitudinal study to investigate the causal relationship between these variables. Third, the current study only explored the mechanisms of the influential relationships between perceived paternalistic leadership, creativity self-efficacy, and creativity among Chinese college teachers. There could be many factors influencing the creativity of Chinese college teachers. It is recommended that future researchers explore other mediating or moderating variables to extend the findings. For example, leader-member exchange and mindfulness could be examined as mediating variables (Emma et al., 2023; Nazir et al., 2021), and gender and age could be tested as moderating variables (Liao et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2013).

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