# PARENTAL LEADERSHIP, HUMILITY, AND EMPLOYEE INNOVATION: A MODERATION STUDY IN CHINESE STARTUPS

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## Abstract

New ventures in dynamic economies, particularly in China, critically rely on employee innovation to sustain performance and achieve competitive advantage. Understanding how leadership styles influence this innovative behavior, especially within the context of paternalistic leadership prevalent in Asian cultures, is crucial. This study explores the impact of parental leadership (benevolent, authoritative, and virtuous) on employee innovative behavior, examining leadership humility as a moderating variable. Grounded in Social Cognitive Theory and Social Exchange Theory, a quantitative research design utilizing moderation models was employed. Data were collected from 426 employees across various emerging startups in Henan Province, China. The findings reveal that leadership humility significantly strengthens the positive effect of benevolent leadership on employee innovative behavior. Conversely, humility significantly attenuates the negative impact of authoritative leadership. However, humility does not significantly moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee innovation, suggesting that ethical leadership inherently embodies core moral attributes, rendering humility's additional influence statistically redundant. Overall, the study refines the understanding of leadership-innovation dynamics in entrepreneurial settings, highlighting leadership humility as a strategic interpersonal asset. These insights offer practical implications for managers in high-risk, fast-changing new ventures, advocating for a nuanced, context-sensitive leadership approach to foster employee creativity and adaptability.
**Keywords:** Parental Leadership, Leadership Humility, Employee Innovative Behavior, New Ventures, Organizational Behavior

## Introduction

Rapid socioeconomic development has fueled entrepreneurial activities, with new ventures emerging as key drivers of regional economic growth and academic focus. A critical challenge for Chinese startups is identifying innovation-driven paths to enhance performance. While contributing to economic vitality and employment, startups face weak risk resilience and vulnerability to economic fluctuations. Most startups are team-founded, with team entrepreneurship offering resource, performance, and success rate advantages over individual efforts (Wiley & Kowske, 2011). For structurally immature, resource-constrained startups, managerial leadership is pivotal, with effective leadership ensuring entrepreneurial success and industry differentiation (Zaech & Baldegger, 2017), and leadership style is critical for competitive advantage (Chen et al., 2018). Innovation drives enterprise survival and growth (Pieterse et al., 2010), enhancing core competitiveness (Staniewski et al., 2016). Employee innovative behavior, as the core of corporate innovation, is vital for market competitiveness and sustained advantage (Yuan & Woodman, 2010), with stimulating such behavior key to sustainable development (Zhang et al., 2024).

Paternal leadership, rooted in Chinese culture, comprises three dimensions: authoritative (Confucian patriarchy/Legalist hierarchy), benevolent (Confucian reciprocity), and virtuous (Confucian moral education). Limited research on its mechanisms and boundaries motivates this study. Employee innovation, influenced by leadership style (Duah-Boateng, 2024), is shaped by reciprocal support (Social Exchange Theory) (Nazir et al., 2018) and personality-situation interactions (Social Cognitive Theory), enhancing company innovation (Elidemir et al., 2020). Integrating both theories, this study explores how the dimensions of paternal leadership mediate employee innovative behavior in startups.

## Literature Reviews

This study is anchored in a comprehensive exploration of the intrinsic psychological and relational mechanisms by which parental leadership influences employee innovation within the unique, high-stakes context of new ventures, drawing upon both Social Cognitive Theory and Social Exchange Theory. The primary aim is to furnish empirical evidence and a theoretical foundation that directly informs the optimization of managerial leadership styles, thereby strategically enhancing employee innovative behavior in nascent firms. The specific research objectives (SROs) are meticulously defined as follows: 1) To ascertain the differential direct effects of the three constituent dimensions of parental leadership, authoritative leadership, benevolent leadership, and ethical leadership (virtuous leadership) on employee innovative behavior. This objective seeks to empirically establish the directional (positive or negative) and significant impact of each distinct style on innovation outcomes. 2) To empirically validate the proposed moderating function of leadership humility. Specifically, this objective examines whether and how leadership humility, as a boundary condition, significantly influences the strength and direction of the relationships among the three dimensions of parental leadership and employee innovative behavior. This analysis aims to clarify the contextual conditions under which parental leadership styles are more or less effective in fostering innovation.

**Relationship between Benevolent Leadership and Employees' Innovative Behavior**

Benevolent leadership is a core dimension of the paternalistic leadership style, rooted in Chinese cultural values, in which the leader acts as a supportive, caring authority figure. This leadership style is characterized by holistic care and support, often extending beyond professional duties to encompass subordinates' daily lives and families. Key behavioral indicators include: offering guidance through personal and professional difficulties, demonstrating patience and tolerance for innovation failures, and explicitly valuing the subordinate's well-being. Studies confirm its positive impact. The study by Bai and Sun (2025) showed that it fosters psychological contracts and innovative behavior. Thus,

H1: Benevolent leadership significantly affects employees' innovative behavior.

**Relationship between Virtuous Leadership and Employees' Innovative Behavior**

Virtuous leadership, also referred to as Ethical Leadership in the context of parental leadership, represents the moral and exemplary dimension of the construct. This style is characterized by leaders who exhibit high moral conduct and set exemplary ethical standards that followers are inspired to emulate. The impact of virtuous leadership on employee innovative behavior is theorized to operate through the creation of a principled organizational environment and a robust social learning mechanism. It creates fair environments (Tang et al., 2025), reducing fears of innovation appropriation. Empirical studies show it correlates with creativity (Silvia et al., 2012). Zaech & Baldegger (2017) found that it encourages innovation through role modeling, knowledge sharing, and supportive attitudes.

H2: Authoritative leadership significantly affects employees' innovative behavior.

**Relationship Between Authoritative Leadership and Employees' Innovative Behavior**

Authoritative leadership emphasizes strict control and obedience, limiting autonomy. Leaders use reprimands for underperformance (Klonek et al., 2024), prioritize rigid task execution, and adopt one-way communication (Pellegrini & Scandura, 2008). This suppresses innovation: Li et al. (2020) found reduced identification and poor exchange quality hinder innovation.

H3: Virtuous leadership significantly affects employees' innovative behavior.

**Relationship between Paternalistic Leadership, Leadership Humility, and Employee Innovation Behavior**

Benevolent leadership, leadership humility, and corporate innovation behavior are interrelated constructs that play crucial roles in shaping organizational dynamics. According to Social Cognitive Theory, human behavior is determined by the reciprocal interaction among personal factors, behavioral patterns, and environmental influences (Bandura, 1986). Within this framework, leadership is a key environmental factor that shapes employees' cognitive appraisals and behavioral intentions through modeling and social learning.

Benevolent leadership, characterized by care, concern, and personalized support toward subordinates, fosters a psychologically safe environment that encourages employees to take initiative and engage in creative problem-solving. By demonstrating empathy and support, benevolent leaders strengthen subordinates' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation to contribute innovatively to organizational goals.

In parallel, leadership humility, defined as a leader's recognition of personal limitations, appreciation of others' strengths, and openness to new ideas, further enhances this process. Humble leaders cultivate an inclusive and learning-oriented climate that values collaboration and knowledge sharing (Exline & Geyer, 2004; Sakdapat & Ngamcharoen, 2025). Such humility reduces hierarchical barriers and encourages bidirectional feedback, allowing employees to express novel ideas without fear of negative evaluation.

When benevolent leadership is complemented by leadership humility, the resulting leadership style not only provides emotional support but also models intellectual openness and adaptive learning. This combination strengthens employees' cognitive appraisal of innovation as both achievable and valued, thereby reinforcing corporate innovation behavior. Consequently, leadership humility serves as a reinforcing mechanism within the social-cognitive process, amplifying the positive effects of benevolent leadership on employees' innovative engagement and providing interpersonal benefits (Davis et al., 2011). Humble, benevolent leaders make employees feel valued, stimulating gratitude (Huang, 2022) and extra effort, including innovation.

H4: Leadership humility significantly enhances the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior.

**Moderating Effects between Authoritative Leadership, Leadership Humility, and Employee Innovative Behavior**

Humble leaders aid employee growth and reduce uncertainty (Owens & Hekman, 2012), building trust. Authoritative leadership's strict control harms employees' emotions (Yao et al., 2023), but humility can reduce psychological distance, neutralizing the negative impacts of authoritarian leadership.

H5: Leadership humility will weaken the negative relationship between authoritative leadership and employees' innovative behavior.

**Moderating Effects between Virtuous Leadership, Leadership Humility, and Employee Innovative Behavior**

Humility fosters quality leader-employee relationships, encouraging innovation through social contagion (Owens & Hekman, 2012) and collective learning (Lam et al., 2011). Humble, virtuous leaders enhance role modeling (Frank, 2023), creating a positive innovation cycle.

H6: Leader humility will significantly enhance the relationship between virtuous leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Based on the literature review and hypotheses presented above, this research framework is illustrated in Figure 1.
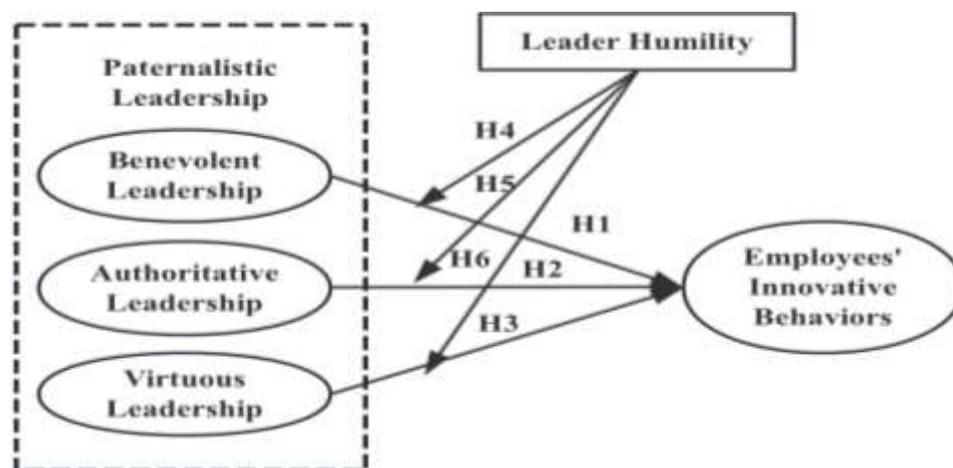


**Figure 1** Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

This study employs a quantitative research design, collecting data via Questionnaire Star and conducting statistical analysis using SPSS 26.0 and AMOS 24.0. First, reliability and validity analyses were conducted on three scales. Second, a common-methods bias test was performed, followed by descriptive and correlation analyses. Finally, a moderation effect test was used to analyze the moderating effect of leadership humility on the relationship between parental leadership and employee innovative behavior.

## Research Results

### Reliability and Validity Analysis

The Parental Leadership Scale comprises 25 items across three dimensions, including benevolent, authoritative, and moral leadership, using a 5-point Likert scale. Its reliability and validity are high, with Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.956, 0.948, and 0.867 (all > 0.7) for the dimensions, and fit indices: $X^2/df = 2.945$, RMSEA = 0.068, IFI = 0.940, TLI = 0.934, CFI = 0.940.

The 9-item Leadership Humility Scale (5-point Likert) demonstrates high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.953 > 0.7) and validity, with fit indices: $X^2/df = 2.921$, RMSEA = 0.067, IFI = 0.985, TLI = 0.980, CFI = 0.985.
The 6-item Employee Innovation Behavior Scale (5-point Likert) shows high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.889 > 0.7) and validity, with fit indices: $X^2/df = 2.678$, RMSEA = 0.063, IFI = 0.989, TLI = 0.981, CFI = 0.989. The above results indicate that the scale has high reliability and validity.

**Common Method Deviation Test**
The common-method bias was evaluated using the Haman one-way test, and an exploratory factor analysis was conducted on all measurement items without rotation. The results showed that 5 common factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were identified, and the first factor explained 34.48% of the total variance, which was below the standard of 40%. Therefore, there is no significant common method bias in this study.

**Table 1** Statistical and Correlation Analysis Results

|  | Mean | S.D. | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Benevolent Leadership | 3.309 | 1.014 | 1 |  |  |  |  |
| Authoritative Leadership | 2.936 | 0.974 | -.392** | 1 |  |  |  |
| Virtuous leadership | 3.602 | 0.958 | .294** | -.266** | 1 |  |  |
| Leadership Humility | 3.516 | 0.988 | .355** | -.260** | .306** | 1 |  |
| Employee Innovative Behavior | 3.366 | 0.935 | .478** | -.330** | .229** | .423** | 1 |

Note: ** represents P < 0.01

Table 1 shows that benevolent leadership, moral leadership, leadership humility, and employee innovative behavior are all significantly positively correlated, with correlation coefficients of 0.478, 0.229, and 0.423, respectively. However, authoritative leadership is significantly negatively correlated with employee innovative behavior, with a correlation coefficient of -0.330.

**Adjustment Effect Analysis**
Analysis of the moderating effect of leader humility on the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior

**Table 2** Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Leader Humility on the Relationship between Benevolent Leadership and Employee Innovative Behavior

|  | Non- standardized coefficient | | Standardized Coefficient | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | B | Standard error | Beta |  |  |
| (Constant) | 3.320 | 0.039 |  | 84.159 | 0.000 |
| Benevolent Leadership | 0.335 | 0.040 | 0.364 | 8.469 | 0.000 |
| Leadership Humility | 0.315 | 0.042 | 0.333 | 7.498 | 0.000 |
| Benevolent Leadership x Leadership Humility | 0.129 | 0.036 | 0.151 | 3.643 | 0.000 |
| $R^2 = 0.323$; adj-$R^2 = 0.318$; F = 67.203; P = 0.000 | | | | | |

Table 2 presents the results of the analysis of leadership humility's moderating effect on the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior (benevolent leadership as the independent variable, leadership humility as the moderator). After centralizing variables and generating interaction terms to avoid multicollinearity, results show that benevolent leadership positively impacts employee innovation ($\beta = 0.364$, P < 0.001). Its

interaction with leadership humility also has a significant positive impact ($\beta$ = 0.151, P < 0.001).

**Table 3** Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Leader Humility on the Relationship between Authoritative Leadership and Employee Innovative Behavior

| | Non-standardized Coefficient | | Standardized Coefficient | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Standard error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | 3.392 | 0.041 | | 83.198 | 0.000 |
| Authoritative Leadership | -0.208 | 0.043 | -0.217 | -4.880 | 0.000 |
| Leadership Humility | 0.334 | 0.042 | 0.353 | 8.024 | 0.000 |
| Authoritative Leadership x Leadership Humility | 0.103 | 0.040 | 0.112 | 2.589 | 0.010 |
| $R^2$ = 0.243; adj-$R^2$ = 0.238; F = 45.151; P = 0.000 | | | | | |

Table 3 presents the results of the analysis of leadership humility's moderating effect on the relationship between authoritative leadership and employee innovation (authoritative leadership as the independent variable, leadership humility as the moderator, employee innovation as the dependent variable). After centralizing variables and generating interaction terms to avoid multicollinearity, results show that authoritative leadership negatively impacts employee innovation ($\beta$ = -0.217, P < 0.001). The interaction term of authoritative leadership and leadership humility has a significant positive impact ($\beta$ = 0.112, P < 0.05).

**Table 4** Analysis of the Moderating Effect of Leader Humility on the Relationship between Ethical Leadership and Employee Innovative Behavior

| | Non-Standardized Coefficient | | Standardized Coefficient | t | P |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B | Standard Error | Beta | | |
| (Constant) | 3.380 | 0.042 | | 79.596 | 0.000 |
| Virtuous leadership | 0.098 | 0.045 | 0.101 | 2.159 | 0.031 |
| Leadership Humility | 0.362 | 0.044 | 0.382 | 8.244 | 0.000 |
| Virtuous leadership x Leadership Humility | -0.048 | 0.041 | -0.054 | -1.194 | 0.233 |
| $R^2$ = 0.193; adj-$R^2$ = 0.187; F = 33.638; P = 0.000 | | | | | |

Table 4 presents the results of the analysis of leadership humility's moderating effect on the relationship between ethical leadership and employee innovation (ethical leadership as the independent variable, leadership humility as the moderator, employee innovation as the dependent variable). After centralizing variables and generating interaction terms to avoid multicollinearity, results show that ethical leadership positively affects employee innovation ($\beta$ = 0.101, P < 0.05). However, the interaction term between ethical leadership and leadership humility is not significant ($\beta$ = -0.054, P > 0.05).

**Table 5** Hypothesis Test Results

| Hypothesis | Content | Result |
|---|---|---|
| H1 | Benevolent leadership is significantly correlated with employee innovative behavior. | Accepted |
| H2 | Authoritative leadership is significantly correlated with employee innovative behavior. | Accepted |
| H3 | Virtuous leadership is significantly correlated with employee innovative behavior. | Rejected |
| H4 | Humility in leadership enhances the significant relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior. | Accepted |
| H5 | Humility in leadership can significantly weaken the relationship between authoritative leadership and employee innovative behavior. | Accepted |
| H6 | Humility in leadership can significantly enhance the positive relationship between virtuous leadership and employee innovative behavior. | Rejected |

H1: Benevolent leadership is significantly correlated with employee innovative behavior.

In new venture managers' paternalistic leadership, benevolent leadership recognizes employees' characteristics and provides care that extends beyond work into daily life. This fosters employees' sense of being valued, cultivates gratitude toward leaders (Wiley & Kowske, 2011), and enhances work engagement and ownership. Managers' understanding, tolerance, and encouragement of work mistakes prompt employees' proactive participation in innovation.

H2: Authoritative leadership is significantly correlated with employee innovative behavior.

In a new venture, paternalistic leadership, authoritative leaders demonstrate absolute authority through pressure and control to secure unconditional obedience (Dughera, 2022). Specific behaviors include refusing authorization, controlling information, rejecting suggestions, belittling contributions, maintaining dignity, and demanding high performance (Hicks, 2018). Such leadership increases employee control, fostering a suppressed organizational atmosphere (Chiang et al., 2020).

H3: Virtuous leadership is significantly correlated with employee innovative behavior.

In the parental leadership style of new venture managers, ethical leadership differs from authoritative and benevolent leadership, highlighting the exemplary role of managers in upholding ethical norms (Maina, 2022). Moral leadership often leads by example at work and in life, and employees will correspondingly identify with the organization's values and goals, thereby gaining recognition and emulation from subordinates (Carmeli et al., 2011).

H4: Humility in leadership significantly enhances the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior.

This study finds that leadership humility positively moderates the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior. Individual humility, as defined by Fagley & Adler (2012), involves appreciating others, acknowledging their strengths, and learning from them—reflecting a shift from a self-to-other focus that yields interpersonal benefits (van Tongeren et al., 2014). Leader innovation initiative motivates employee effort toward company goals (Call et al., 2015), stimulating innovation enthusiasm and engagement.

H5: Humility in leadership can significantly weaken the relationship between authoritative leadership and employee innovative behavior.

Per social exchange theory, benefit recipients tend to reciprocate. Innovation involves challenges, requiring employees to have not only knowledge and initiative but also the courage to take risks. Leaders who show humility to employees provide psychological support for their growth and help solve individual development problems (Owens & Hekman, 2012).

H6: Humility in leadership can significantly enhance the relationship between virtuous leadership and employee innovative behavior.

This study confirms that leadership humility does not moderate the relationship between ethical leadership and employee innovative behavior, aligning with existing research findings. For instance, Smith et al. (2017) noted that, in exploring ethical leadership's impact on team innovation, ethical leadership inherently includes core traits such as integrity, fairness, and care. Additionally, Gu et al.'s (2015) research indicated that when a leader's moral performance is sufficiently outstanding, its positive impact on employee innovation tends to stabilize.

## Conclusion and Discussion

This study's findings offer a robust and nuanced understanding of how leadership humility acts as a critical boundary condition within the paternalistic leadership-employee innovative behavior relationship in new entrepreneurial ventures. The empirical results, grounded in Social Cognitive Theory and Social Exchange Theory, clarify the complex and differential influence of the three leadership dimensions on innovation, particularly when filtered through the lens of leader humility. The analysis confirmed that leadership humility plays a significant moderating role in the paternalistic leadership framework. The study found that leadership humility positively and significantly enhances the relationship between benevolent leadership and employee innovative behavior (H4 Accepted). Benevolent leadership, characterized by care and support, already fosters a sense of being valued and encourages reciprocity. When coupled with leader humility—which involves appreciating others' strengths and being open to learning —this synergy motivates greater employee effort and initiative toward company goals, thereby stimulating innovation, enthusiasm, and engagement (H4 Accepted). A particularly significant finding is that leadership humility significantly weakens the negative relationship between authoritative leadership and employee innovative behavior (H5 Accepted). Authoritative leadership, with its emphasis on strict control and obedience, inherently suppresses innovation and harms employee emotions. However, when an authoritative manager exhibits humility, it acts as an "interpersonal lubricant". By providing psychological support for employee growth and reducing uncertainty, humility mitigates the psychological distance caused by dictatorship, builds trust, and encourages employees to reciprocate with greater investment in innovation despite the strict control (H5 Accepted). In contrast, the study confirmed that leadership humility does not significantly moderate the relationship between ethical (virtuous) leadership and employee innovative behavior (H6 Rejected). This aligns with the existing literature, which suggests that ethical leadership already encompasses core traits such as integrity, fairness, and care. When a leader's moral performance is sufficiently outstanding, its positive impact on employee innovation tends to stabilize, rendering the incremental effect of humility statistically non-significant. In summation, this research clarifies that managerial leadership humility is a highly effective interpersonal strategy for promoting employee innovative behavior in new ventures. For new startups operating in uncertain environments, where innovation requires energy, resources, and risk-taking, humble leaders are essential for alleviating innovation fear by fostering growth and addressing development challenges.

For uncertain new startups where employee innovation demands energy, resources, and risk-taking, humble leaders alleviate innovation fear by aiding growth, solving development issues, and reducing uncertainty (Owens & Hekman, 2012), enhancing employee trust in facing challenges. For authoritative managers, humility acts as an interpersonal lubricant, complementing strictness by shifting focus to others, gaining interpersonal benefits and trust, fostering exchange relationships, and encouraging greater employee investment in innovation. This study comprehensively investigated the interaction between spiritual leadership, team communication quality, and team performance, emphasizing the mediating role of team

cohesion. The findings provide robust empirical evidence that both spiritual leadership and team communication exert significant direct and indirect influences on team performance, with team cohesion serving as a critical relational conduit. This outcome underscores the pivotal role of relational and affective mechanisms in shaping collective outcomes, offering valuable insights into how leadership and communication dynamics jointly cultivate high-performing teams within collectivist organizational contexts.

The validated structural model illuminates the multifaceted pathways through which leadership behaviors and communication processes translate into enhanced team performance. Specifically, spiritual leadership, characterized by vision, hope, and altruistic love, fosters a shared sense of meaning and purpose, thereby strengthening cohesion. Simultaneously, high-quality team communication fosters mutual understanding, trust, and transparency in feedback—factors that further reinforce collaborative synergy. The integration of these constructs within a unified framework advances the theoretical discourse by positioning team cohesion not merely as a mediating variable but as a dynamic relational mechanism that connects cognitive, emotional, and behavioral aspects of team functioning.

From a theoretical standpoint, this research contributes to the expansion of Spiritual Leadership Theory and team communication models by demonstrating that their integration yields a comprehensive explanatory framework for team effectiveness. The results confirm the dual mediating role of cohesion and extend the applicability of spiritually grounded leadership theories to collectivist and hierarchically structured organizational environments such as Chinese state-owned enterprises. This contextual validation enriches cross-cultural leadership research by evidencing that the relational dimensions of spirituality and communication are universally relevant, yet culturally contingent in their manifestations (Ngamcharoen et al., 2025).

Practically, the study offers several managerial implications. Organizations, particularly within emerging economies, should design leadership development programs that nurture spiritual competencies—such as articulating an inspiring vision, modeling ethical behavior, and fostering an atmosphere of trust and compassion. Concurrently, structured communication training emphasizing clarity, openness, and value alignment should be institutionalized to strengthen team cohesion and operational efficiency. Moreover, integrating spiritually inspired communication protocols into daily managerial practices can help align individual purpose with organizational mission, thereby sustaining engagement and innovation over time.

In conclusion, this study not only bridges the theoretical gap between leadership and communication research but also reaffirms the centrality of relational cohesion as the psychological and structural glue that binds individuals into high-performing teams. By linking spiritual leadership and communication quality within a cohesive framework, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how leaders can harness relational dynamics to drive sustainable team excellence in complex, collectivist organizational systems.

From a theoretical perspective, this study fills an important research gap by addressing the underexplored role of humility as a moderator—an element often neglected in leadership studies, which typically treats humility as a dispositional trait rather than a dynamic interpersonal mechanism. The results position humility as a "magnifying lens" that amplifies the relational effects of benevolent and virtuous leadership while attenuating the restrictive aspects of authoritative leadership. By integrating humility into the paternal leadership framework, the study expands existing leadership models that have predominantly emphasized Western paradigms, thereby contributing culturally grounded evidence from Chinese organizational settings. This approach refines the conceptual boundaries of Social Exchange Theory by demonstrating how humility fosters reciprocal trust, emotional safety, and cognitive openness—conditions conducive to employee creativity and proactive innovation.

In sum, this study advances both theory and practice by positioning leadership humility as a pivotal moderating force in the paternal leadership-innovation nexus. It not only bridges an existing theoretical gap by contextualizing humility within Chinese entrepreneurial ecosystems but also offers a practical roadmap for cultivating leadership practices that balance authority with empathy—ultimately fostering organizational adaptability, creativity, and long-term growth.

**Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research**

Despite its theoretical and empirical contributions, this study is not without limitations, which provide valuable avenues for future research. First, the research design adopted a cross-sectional quantitative approach, capturing data at a single point in time. While this method allows for efficient hypothesis testing, it restricts causal inference and limits understanding of the dynamic evolution of leadership-employee relationships and innovation behavior. Future studies should consider employing longitudinal or mixed-method designs to examine how paternal leadership and humility-driven mechanisms unfold and interact over time, particularly across organizational growth stages and environmental uncertainty.

Second, the study's sampling scope was geographically confined to Henan Province, with data collected exclusively from startups operating there. Although this focus enhances contextual relevance, it constrains the generalizability of findings to other regions or national contexts with different cultural, economic, or institutional environments. Subsequent research should expand the sample to include diverse provinces, industries, and organizational sizes to enhance external validity and enable comparative analyses across cultural and structural settings.

Lastly, the study invites further exploration into boundary conditions that might influence the strength or direction of the relationships examined. Factors such as organizational life-cycle stage, digital transformation level, or team diversity could offer fresh insights into how leadership humility interacts with structural and technological changes in the entrepreneurial ecosystem.

In summary, addressing these limitations through diversified methodologies, broader contextual sampling, and deeper theoretical integration would not only enhance the rigor of future investigations but also advance a more comprehensive and globally relevant understanding of how leadership humility operates within the paternal leadership-innovation nexus in new venture contexts.

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