

MACAU LEADERSHIP STYLES AND PRACTICES: EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS ON SINO-MACANESE MANAGERIAL PREFERENCES

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Abstract

This study maps the theoretical and nomological network around effective leadership styles in Macau. Since the return of the Macau peninsula to China in 1999, Europe's oldest rear window on China has undergone significant geo-economic and social transformation. Today, nearly half of the population comprise Mainland Chinese immigrants, while around seventy percent of tourists come from the inland. In light of the central government in Beijing's plans for the Greater Bay Area, the Belt Road Initiative and the Renminbi offshore centre in Macau, which, in turn, will increase the presence of mainland senior executives in Macau, it is of paramount importance to investigate the relationship between the prevailing leadership styles and practices in Macau and the socio-cultural leadership philosophies practiced in Mainland China. Below we discuss the implications of the substantive findings for our understanding of effective leadership practices for this Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China.

Keywords: Leadership, Culture, Leadership style, Macao, Macau, China, HRM, Chinese management

JEL Classification Code: F23

1. Introduction

The Macau peninsula is a small slice of Europe nestled in East Asia, which directly faces Hong Kong across the Pearl River estuary. With a population of a mere 650,000 and a total land mass of only thirty square km, Macau by most standards is incredibly small. Despite its size, the enclave nevertheless ranks at the very top of global rankings in terms of per capita nominal GDP, Human Development Index and population density (with an incredible twenty-thousand people per km²). What is perhaps less known about Macau is the fact that it has operated as the oldest and longest-standing rear window on China, from the sixteenth century up until 1999. Having been administratively ruled by Portugal, in 1999 the enclave was returned as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) to the People's Republic of China. Although in English it is officially known as Macao, this article adopts the Portuguese spelling Macau, which has become the standardised form. In contemporary Macau, Lusitanian (Portuguese) influences are evident in street signs or official documents. Despite Portuguese and Cantonese (Guangzhou version) being the official languages, English and, most notably, Mandarin have gained traction in recent years.

An interesting fact about Macau is that its liberalisation of gambling licenses in 2002 allowed it to overtake Las Vegas in terms of gambling-based income; indeed, it is estimated that Macau now generates seven times more gambling revenue than the so-called city of sin (Zhu, 2020). Such liberalisation is also evidenced in the fact that

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the Central Government's five-year plans have also sought to turn Macau into a 'World centre of tourism and leisure', in an attempt to help diversify its economy (Direcção dos Serviços de Turismo, 2020). The combination of gambling and the city's Europeanese flair means that it now attracts around sixty times more tourists, than it has actual residents. Consequently, the territory is now facing constraints in terms of limited land and the lack of human resources (Zhu, 2020). In the following sections we examine how leadership styles and practices in Macau are influenced by the prevailing political and socio-economic milieu within the sovereign territory of the People's Republic of China.

2. Characterising Macau leaders

In this section we investigate how Macau's multi-ethnic make-up impacts upon organisational leadership styles, practices and processes. For the purposes of this study, we conducted a quick search on the ProQuest scholarly journals database, which resulted in almost a million hits for 'leadership'. Notwithstanding the volume of literature on this topic, as noted by the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) Research Program: "to date, 90 percent of leadership literature reflects US-based research and theory". The American-centric nature of extant literature fails to account for how leadership theories, styles and practices operate in the Middle Kingdom. Notwithstanding the many good Western-centric leadership publications, what is invariably obfuscated in these texts is the local perspective. The need to address this lacuna in the field by prioritising localised perspectives became pivotal to our approach to investigating Macau-specific leadership styles and practices. This approach comprises gathering data from indigenous sources.

Macau SAR's workforce remains highly diverse and pluralistic, accommodating many different ethnic groups. It is important to be cognisant of the fact that the casino sector employs one-fifth of Macau's currently active workforce, which gives some sense of its importance to the enclave's economic development. Moreover, the foreign Direct Investment (FDI) flows into the gambling sector also engendered an influx of predominantly Western managers into the enclave, which, in turn, had a profound effect on the prevailing leadership styles and practices adopted in organisations (Gustafson, 2015). For example, when the Sands Casino, opened in Macau it became the first-ever gambling investment project developed by an American company in Asia. Except for some Australian operations, many of the corporations that opened up branches in Macau had little to no experience of running businesses outside of Las Vegas (Lam, 2020). The rapid growth in such foreign companies mostly led to the deployment of their domestic managerial processes, whose applicability and suitability for non-Western contexts has been called into question by scholars in the field of management (Lampo, 2011; Cheng and Lee, 2008). At the same time that it was undergoing rapid expansion as a result of FDI flows, the Lotus city also witnessed a significant increase in the numbers of settlers coming to the SAR enclave from mainland China. Indeed, today nearly half of the current population are Mainland Chinese immigrants. More specifically, there are 190,000 non-resident workers currently registered for work in Macau, about two-thirds of whom are from the inland, meaning the PRC. Since 2004, commuting workers from mainland China's Zhuhai have been able to simply take the bus to the customs checkpoint Posto Fronteiriço das Portas do Cerco, before proceeding to walk across the border. Macau's population has doubled between 1999 to 2020 and, from Carvalho's (2015) perspective, the community that has grown the most in the interim, both in terms of its size and influence, is the Fujianese. According to the most recent census in the territory, around one-quarter of Macau's population hailed from the Fujian province. It would not be controversial to argue that this demographic shift has had a profound impact, given the shifting political climate in Macau. Indeed, this position finds support from the majority of the respondents in the CCBS Survey (2020), who reported that the prevailing leadership styles and practices in Macau are indeed influenced by the socio-cultural context and leadership philosophies in China (CCBS Survey, 2020).

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Would leaders need to gain insight in a group that cannot be disregarded historically namely the ‘Macanese’ (Luso-Asians)? Indeed, these Portuguese-Eurasians epitomise the city’s culture and heritage, reflecting a legacy that has persisted for centuries. Despite this rich history, the president of the Macanese Association, Miguel de Senna Fernandes (2015), purports that the cultural distinctiveness of the Macanese community is under threat, and, indeed, now comprises only 8,000 individuals. Similarly, the longstanding legacy of Portuguese colonial rule has also diminished in the enclave’s collective memory, as evidenced by the fact that, according to the consul general of Macau, Paulo Cunha Alves, only 5,000 people from Portugal currently reside in Macau.

As mentioned above it is not only Chinese cultural norms values and leadership philosophies that shape the form that leadership takes in the Lotus-city; another contributing factor is the fact that many of the local executives studied in Western countries. As a result, their leadership styles and practices are steeped in traditional Chinese values, while, simultaneously, exhibiting specific characteristics that have been transplanted from Western business practices. This latter fact is exacerbated by the fact that the administrative region’s higher education sector tends to primarily use North American textbooks and draw upon US-based case studies to teach the next generation of business leaders in Macau. This philosophy is problematic in a number of respects, and, indeed, has been widely criticised by a number of scholars, including Chinese management scholars (Tsui et al. 2004). Tsui et al. (2004), in particular, have problematised the widespread application of leadership theories developed in a Western socio-cultural context within various Asian societies, including China and Macau. Above all, scholars such as Tsui et al. (2004) and Jiang and Cheng (2008) have questioned the relevance to the Chinese context of Christian humanistic cultural and ideological values, such as self-expression, individual freedom or psychological ownership. The non-applicability of these values to the Chinese context is problematic, when one considers the crucial role played by culture in terms of developing effective leadership practices (Jiang & Cheng, 2008). Here, it is instructive to highlight that the prevailing leadership style in Chinese societies historically has tended to be a paternalistic leadership style (Wu & Xu, 2012). Paternalistic styles of leadership emphasise the obedience of followers and seeks to discourage their autonomy and participation in decision-making processes (Cheng et al., 2004). The rather high-power distance score of Macanese people appears to testify to the continued predominance of this leadership approach (Hsu et al., 2010).

3. Local respondents polled

Besides Macau-specific literature searches, in peer reviewed academic journals and books, also an online survey on leadership was developed by the first author and was conducted with qualified respondents from Macau (CCBS Survey, 2020). Expert sampling was used to identify the survey respondents, in conjunction with snowballing techniques, which were subsequently introduced to target a population. The survey was drafted in both Chinese and English, and offered using both the Chinese survey platform Star (wjx.com) and the international Qualtrics survey platform. It was completed by a large number of Macau executives, whose extensive local knowledge and professional experience provide notable insight into organisational processes and systems, as well as the prevailing leadership styles and practices in Macau. The questionnaire comprised 27 items, both multiple-choice and open-ended questions, which provided descriptive information on national-based views on leadership. The respondents answered the psychometric multiple-choice questions on five or six-point Likert scales, which were anchored by terms ranging from ‘not at all’ to ‘a lot’. All the qualitative data provided comprehensive knowledge into the topic of local leadership styles and practices. The multinational survey and interviewing was conducted between 15 September and 20 December 2020. Respondents selected were those who could best provide meaningful input on the issues of leadership preferences. To recruit respondents, invitations were sent to selected experts in leadership, and HR and management drawn from the research, practice, and theoretical literature. The criteria for inclusion were (a) to have published books or peer-reviewed articles on leadership in a Macau context; and (b) to be actively involved in higher management (C-level). The list was drawn up by the first author after extensive research of related publications and public information. A total of 170 invitations were

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electronically mailed to potential participants to addresses found in the public domain (e.g., online websites, noted in research articles). A reminder was sent to all invited participants approximately two weeks after the initial invitation was made. A total of 26 people responded to the Qualtrics poll, and 6 to the WJX-survey, (19 from SAR Macau, 9 from the People's Republic of China, 3 from SAR Hong Kong, and 1 from Australia). There were 13 female participants, 18 male participants, and 1 participant's gender was undeclared.

The following section delineates the most notable findings emerging out of the survey. According to one of our respondents, Rico Lam (林朗為), who is a Professor of management at the University of Macau: "Leaders are not supposed to be challenged, and do not expect to be confronted [by their subordinates]". This statement was corroborated by a senior manager in the banking sector, who opined: "In Macao there is a tendency to follow orders. Asking questions in larger groups is difficult, as staff do not want to embarrass themselves." (CCBS Survey, 2020). The extent of hierarchy in Macau that was discussed in a previous section is also evidenced in our survey findings, which indicate that almost all of the Chinese Macau executives agreed that subordinates could not address their leaders by their first names (CCBS Survey, 2020). Rather, the prevailing norms and customs dictate that employees respectfully address their leaders by both their title and family name. A Chief Executive Officer in a consultancy firm reported that leadership in Macau is synonymous with respect and absolute obedience from one's employees, without any hesitation (CCBS Survey, 2020). Another notable finding that emerged from the survey pertains to the fact that half of the executives underscored that personal networks were of paramount importance if one wished to ascend the organisational hierarchy in Macau. As a leadership coach observed: "With its small geographical area, Macau exemplifies the notion of an acquaintance society, insofar as one's integrity [in the business sector] is maintained under the close supervision of a series of acquaintances."

4. Close-knit community nature

The well-known theory of six degrees of separation (the theory that posits that anyone is only six introductions away from being able to meet any other person) is actually closer to two degrees in Macau, insofar as everyone who matters knows everyone who matters in the enclave (Zhu, 2020). Macau's labour laws provide robust protection for workers, particularly in relation to local skilled workforce. When asked how the organisational culture and dynamics would be transformed if a larger number of home-grown executives entered the upper echelons of organisations in Macau, Zhu opined that it would reduce the distance between managers and subordinates that one sees now, by virtue of removing linguistic and cultural barriers. According to Zhu, if there were more home-grown executives in senior positions, then this would also strengthen the relationships between organisations and the local government, which is integral to Macau's long-term economic growth and socio-political development. While, historically, Zhu purports that managerial systems and processes have proven to be relatively steadfast and congruent with traditional cultural values and beliefs, in recent years they have taken on a more hybridised form as a result of more Chinese influence in the enclave. This trend is unsurprising when one considers that some 70% of casino clients or tourists in Macau come from Mainland China (Zhu, 2020). We interviewed Dr Leanda Care-Lee, a contributing editor at the Macau Daily Times, alongside being founder of the Macau HR Initiative. When asked about the differences between the management styles employed in American casinos and those in operation within the indigenous Sociedade de Turismo e Diversões de Macau, Care-Lee indicated that the latter are much more focused on filial connections and relations, whereas the Las Vegas-based management style attempts to circulate employees around departments to gain knowledge and skills of the whole operation. If similar practices were to be employed in the indigenous casinos, Care-Lee opined that most Macau people would feel: "You've just broken my trust relationship with my team, that keeps me connected to my community" (2 December 2020). From Care-Lee's perspective, a typical Macau manager exerts tremendous energy carefully crafting and building a team around them, who display loyalty to them and identify with their organisational vision, goals and objectives. In light of these close-knit bonds between managers and their teams,

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if a manager does make lateral or vertical moves within the organisation, then the likelihood is that they would take the entire team with them, which is made possible by the fact that organisational structures are a lot less individualistic than what one observes in other countries.

6. Understanding hierarchy in Macau

When examining the leadership styles that are deployed across Asian organisations, it is evident that the power distance orientation is of paramount importance, and Macau is no exception in this regard. Kirkman and Chen (2009) have exhaustively demonstrated both its historical and continuing influence on Chinese organisational behaviour. First and foremost, the collectivist culture and extensive power distance in Chinese societies are predicated on unquestioned obedience and loyalty from subordinates at a societal level. In conjunction with this, the country also promotes the following individual virtues: submission, humility, harmony, and hierarchy (Huang & Bond, 2012). This collectivist culture is grounded in a Confucian philosophy that predisposes Chinese leaders to act as paternalistic figures who practice absolute authoritarian control over their followers (Fu and Tsui, 2010). This is especially the case with respect to family-owned businesses in China, which are characterized by a profound hierarchical distance between family members and non-family members (Hwang, 1990). This family-based hierarchy manifests itself in manifold ways in Chinese organisations, chief among which is the fact that decision-making and management control are seen as the sole province of the core family members. It needs to be said that currently numerous SMEs in Macau tend to be operated by young entrepreneurs.

7. Achieving leadership empathy in Macau

This study furthermore addresses a specific people-oriented leadership requirement: empathic soft skills. Here, empathy is defined as a leader's capacity to relate to the feelings and experiences of their employees. Empathy is an altogether broader category than sympathy, and, in fact, several researchers consider empathy to be both a key part of emotional intelligence and a critical element of being an effective leader (Bar-On & Parker, 2000). Of course, the ability to successfully build and maintain relationships has long been regarded as a fundamental managerial skill; however, in accordance with the Center for Creative Leadership, in some cultures, empathy is more important to profession performance than other aspects of leadership (Gentry, Weber, & Sadri, 2016). In addition to this, the way empathic understanding is expressed varies dramatically from country-to-country. Above all, empathy touches upon a leader's understanding of role requirement. To understand its importance across different cultures, several questions in our online survey (CCBS Survey, 2020) pertained to the specific expectations that local leaders had towards empathy. It is well-established that how we connect with people is dependent on our cultural background, and, as such, the ability to be empathetic is especially important for leaders working across cultural boundaries (Alon & Higgins, 2005). The results of our CCBS survey (2020) reflect this, insofar as a large majority of the respondents from the different cultures examined in this book agreed with the statement that a manager should actively spend time on the personal wellbeing of their team members. When one compares the actual empathy country scores (Dell, Eriks, 2018), South Korea and Ukraine score significantly lower on empathy than countries such as Uruguay and Portugal, due, in part, to the fact that Ukrainian and South Korean leaders generally prefer to keep more personal distance from their employees. However, it is important to stress that having empathy for others is not the same as demonstrating empathy; this is because staff expectations may vary considerably across culture in terms of: (i) the amount of verbal attention employees require; (ii) the praise and encouragement expected by staff; or (iii) the daily routine of managers. When managers increase their awareness of the cultural context in which empathy takes place, it

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often has a direct impact on employee performance, the organisational climate, and the quality of the productive working relations between leaders and employees. There is a strong degree of cultural variance in the way that Chinese leaders communicate empathetic understanding in comparison to their Western counterparts. Although the previous section examining how hierarchy functions in organisations in Macau presents an image of authoritarian leaders who demand loyalty and absolute obedience from subordinates at all levels of the organisation, the embeddedness of Confucian values also means that leaders are duty-bound to be benevolent towards their employees and to foster prosocial behaviour within their organisations (Farh, Liang, Chou, & Cheng, 2005). It is instructive to note here that the distinct English words empathy, sympathy and compassion are all translated in Chinese as: tongqing 同情.

While Friedman and Chi (2006) have shown that refusing to recognise and respect the autonomy of one's subordinates, or failing to engage in open communication may not necessarily lead to negative consequences for leaders in Macau, research has consistently shown that morality has strong positive effects on perceived leadership empathy (Cheng et al., 2004). Moreover, another aspect that potentially impacts upon the way empathy is experienced and expressed in organizations is the fact that, when it comes to work-life balance, the locals lean towards an easy-going life and exude a certain laissez-faire attitude towards career development (Lampo, 2011). Given the geographic proximity and demographic similarities between Macau and Hong Kong Chinese, one would expect to see a strong degree of overlap in terms of how empathic understanding is achieved by leaders within organisations. However, this is not necessarily the case in practice; indeed, scholars such as Chan In Choi (2011) purport that in mixed Macau and Hong Kong Chinese teams, differences in the communication style between the two often operates as a major communicative barrier, which, in turn, has a deleterious impact on collaboration, decision-making and, ultimately, organisational success. Macanese historian, Gary Ngai (2005,) explicates that this aforesaid cross-cultural miscommunication derives from the essential differences between the 'Macau model' and the Anglo-Saxon Hong Kong model. Specifically, Ngai (2005) posits that there is a much stronger emphasis on reconciliation, mutual tolerance and stability maintenance within the Macau model. This is corroborated by the fact that the Macao Daily published a series of articles underscoring how people-oriented management helps enterprises retain employees, by inducing a greater level of employee investment in organisational goals and objectives. As well as this, the aforementioned series of articles in the Macao Daily about the importance of people-centred management also testifies to the dramatic shortage of qualified staff until recently in the territory. This provides an alternative lens through which to view the emergent focus on Macau leaders becoming more empathic-oriented in their day-to-day relations with subordinates.

8. Final considerations

It was Darwin who first showed us the supreme value inherent to diversity. With this in mind, both the increased cultural heterogeneity of Macau's workforce and the increasingly global footprint of contemporary Chinese corporations transforms the styles and practices through which we lead teams. There is extensive research informing us of how leaders' communication styles are profoundly influenced by the geographical region in which they are operating. Regrettably, some business leaders overlook local managerial and cultural practices, and instead acquiesce to management-styles that are grounded in Western concepts, which, in turn, undermines the performance of their organisation. Given that ineffective managers risk costing organisations notably large sums of money, there is an emergent trend among both human resource professionals and senior executives to adopt more localised leadership styles and practices. This calls for leaders with an ability to decode cultural nuances and adjust their leadership-style to fit the cultural milieu in which they are operating. In President Xi's speech in Macau on the 20th anniversary of the return to the Chinese sovereignty, mention was made that the comrades in Macau require Chinese wisdom to manage the 'one country, two systems' fruitfully. We hope that our findings contribute to increasing the affluence of extant leadership literature, alongside aiding Mainland leaders to

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recalibrate particular skills and mindsets in a manner advantageous to themselves, their employees, and, above all, the organisations they serve, in order to promote the progress of the Chinese renaissance.

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