Exploring Empowerment Across Different Organizational Structures and Countries: A Comparative Multi-Case Study of Chinese and Japanese High-Tech Companies

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Abstract. This study investigates empowerment implementation from Macro-perspective. By categorizing organisational structure into two types and examining companies in China and Japan, we adopted a multi-case study approach to explore empowerment in eight high-tech companies. Based on our two-by-two matrix, the finding revealed the unique features of empowerment across two countries. Meanwhile, based on our cases, we suggest four propositions for high-tech companies to explore the value of empowerment. This study contributes to understanding empowerment in diverse organizational and cultural contexts and offers practical propositions for managers to effectively implement empowerment in the future.

Keywords: Organizational Formalizations, Empowering Leadership Behaviors, high-tech Companies, Institution Theory.

1   Introduction

As the technology, capital, and trade flows have shifted and the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic, companies have transformed traditional business models and enhanced innovation capacity to embrace the rapidly changing world. Prior literature has suggested empowering leadership enables employees to have greater autonomy, a voice in decision-making, and creativity to outperform individual jobs. Empowerment entails power-sharing between leaders and subordinates, enabling subordinates to propose innovative ideas to promote the organisation's overall performance [1].

Existing literature found numerous advantages of empowerment; however, the implementation of empowerment is accompanied by specific contexts. Moreover, prior literature focused on the individual level and team level to examine the relationship between leaders and subordinates, and collective behaviors [2]. The purpose of this study is to identify key factors to affect the implementation of empowerment in organ-

izational and cultural contexts. The following section will discuss the theoretical foundation of empowerment, and present methodology to conduct the study. In addition, we will provide propositions for practitioners to apply empowerment to promote organizational performance.

2   Theoretical Foundations

The concept of empowerment is understood in two aspects: situational empowerment and psychological empowerment. Scholars have suggested that situational empowerment refers to the external circumstances and organizational elements that either support or restrict an individual's awareness of empowerment, whereas psychological empowerment refers to a feeling of control and reflects the personal perception of being empowered. Empowerment involves a dual process of granting authority to subordinates for greater autonomy as well as enhancing subordinates' intrinsic motivation by affirming individual value, effectively blending both situational and psychological aspects of empowerment [3]. Scholars conducted extensive research to examine fundamental factors and mechanisms that affect the effectiveness of empowerment.

2.1   Individual Level

Literature found a mixed relationship between empowerment and subordinate behaviors [4]. On one hand, Sun suggested that disparities in empowerment can raise an unbalanced power distribution, negatively affect the relationships among subordinates, and arouse negative emotions, such as jealousy and contempt [5]. Moreover, Mai et al. suggested empowering leaders may facilitate unethical behaviours under high-performance pressure [6]. On the other hand, numerous scholars found that empowerment can motivate subordinates' innovative behavior, enhance their job performance, and ultimately promote organizational performance [7]. Elsaied examined how work passion affects empowerment behaviors and found empowering leadership facilitates in- and extra-role behaviors among subordinates [8]. Additionally, Rohlfer argued that empowerment forces middle managers to leverage organizational resources which fostering managerial innovation [9].

2.2   Team Level

Extensive studies examined empowerment from the team level and found complex impacts of empowerment. For example, Harris et al. explored team risk-taking behaviors to moderate the relationship between empowerment and organizational innovation [10]. Fausing et al. found that the leader presents empowering leadership, team members tend to share knowledge, skills, and power, meanwhile, it fosters an optimistic attitude and capabilities among subordinates [11]. Moreover, the supportive behaviors of empowerment enable team-level collaboration and positively affect organizational performance [12].

Openness is a key factor in implementing empowerment. However, the openness of empowerment results in leaders being less responsible for outcomes, thus, it may lead to isolation and a lack of support for the team. Moreover, the openness could also result in failing to provide timely feedback to subordinates, leaving subordinates unaware of their job performance, greater uncertainty and missing learning opportunities [13].

2.3   Organizational Level

Some research explores the role of empowerment from the organizational level perspective. For example, Carmeli et al. found that empowerment facilitates organisational resources integration [14]. Other scholars found empowerment gives rise to organizational change [15].

However, few studies examined how organisational and cultural contexts collectively affect empowerment behaviors. To summarize, scholars have predominantly focused on the implementation of empowerment on individual and organisational performance, while there has been limited in-depth research examining how various organisational and cultural contexts affect the effectiveness of empowerment.

2.4   Institutional Theory

The institutional theory examines social and cultural factors collectively to explain organisational behaviours. Existing literature has extensively discussed the empowerment leadership from a micro-perspective, we intend to adopt institutional theory to explore how organisational and cultural contexts collectively affect the implementation of empowerment.

3   Research Questions

Subordinates actively respond to empowerment [16], and existing literature examined mechanisms of empowerment and organizational performance. Meanwhile, organisations cannot succeed through their isolated efforts, and they are socially constructed. There are limited studies examining the organisational and cultural factors that collectively affect the implementation of empowerment.

Research has found that structural formalization significantly influences the effectiveness of empowerment [17]. Structural formalization allows individuals to employ well-defined organisational systems to guide their behaviors, promotes internal resource coordination [18] and ultimately influences innovation as well as organizational performance [19]. Besides that, scholars suggested national culture might affect empowerment. For example, Fock et al., found high power distance inhibits empowering leadership and subordinates are reluctant to engage with empowerment [20]. Thus, our study aims to take structural formalization and national culture as two dimensions to examine how they collectively affect the implementation of empowerment.

4   Research Methodology

4.1   Methodology

We adopted a multi-case study approach for two reasons. Firstly, our study seeks to examine organisational and cultural factors that collectively affect the implementation of empowerment. The research question falls within the realm of "how" questions, which are well-suited for a case study approach [21]. The case study approach provides a comprehensive view to explain key factors of empowerment implementation [22]. Secondly, multiple case studies are designed to compare distinct cases, analyze patterns across multiple cases, conclude meaningful relationships, and formulate propositions by aligning research objectives [23]. Overall, we could adopt a multi-case study approach to address the research question.

4.2   Sample

Compared with Western culture, Asian countries are less engaged in empowerment. Therefore, we focus on the top two countries, China and Japan, to conduct this study. Moreover, we based on the following principles to select four high-tech companies in China and Japan respectively (see Table 1):

(1) All selected companies operate in the electronic information sector and perform empowerment practices in daily operations, ensuring comparability for the multiple case studies.

(2) The selected high-tech companies with high degrees of formalization have well-established organizational rules and processes. On the other hand, the selected high-tech companies with low degrees of formalization are fast-growing companies with small organisational sizes and flexible business models.

The selected cases could provide sufficient information for studying the implementation of empowerment.

Table 1. Basic information of the case companies.

Companies	Year of Establishment	Size	Business Scope
A	2006	570	Digital Electronic Musical Instruments
B	1995	1200	Health Care Products
C	1933	10992	Household Medical Equipment
D	1996	1342	Electronic Beauty Devices
E	2001	29	Electronic Equipment Manufacturing
F	2018	10	Electronic Component Sales
G	2013	50	Chip Research and Development
H	2016	25	Cosmetics Sales; E-commerce

5 Data Collection and Analysis

5.1 Field Research

Data was collected between May 2021 and October 2022, meanwhile, we used interviews supplemented with documentary archives and online news to provide a comprehensive perspective [24]. The study aimed to examine the implementation of empowerment in different organisational and cultural contexts. Eight high-tech companies were selected as shown in Table 2.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including CEOs, General Managers, Department Directors, and Employees, resulting in 30 pages of interview transcripts (see Table 3). Secondary data, such as company archives, online news, and public interviews, were also collected (120 pages) to provide a comprehensive understanding of the key elements of implementing empowered leadership.

Table 2. Classification of cases.

(1) Structural formalization high Chinese companies A&B	(2) Structural formalization high Japanese companies C&D
(4) Structural formalization low Chinese companies G&H	(3) Structural formalization low Japanese companies E&F

Table 3. Data sources.

Company	Interviewee	Length of interviews (min)	Internal documentations (pages)	Public documentations (pages)
A	General manager Department head	35 20	9	5
B	Department head	35	5	15
C	CEO Team manager Employee	28 25 20	8	13
D	Project manager	20	4	19
E	Production foreman	18	4	4
F	Sales manager	23	4	12
G	R&D director Administrative director	15 20	1	6
H	CEO Employee	25 20	3	10

5.2 Data Analysis

The data analysis involved three steps. First, we examine all data including interviews and other secondary data. It was important to understand the organisational and cultural

contexts and identify key behaviors of empowerment in our cases. Our coding process moved back and forth between data analysis and the literature to generate numerous first-order codes about empowerment behaviors between leaders and subordinates. Secondly, based on the first-order codes, we examined the properties of the first-order codes and integrated them into second-order concepts. Lastly, the second-order concepts were further abstracted to enhance and optimize the theoretical explanation. This process aimed to explore the theoretical framework of empowerment implementation and propose new directions for future research. By adopting a multi-perspective, our study provided an objective empowerment implementation process across organizational and cultural contexts.

6   Finding

Based on our proposed framework and within-case and cross-case analysis, we identify four types of empowerments and discuss them in the following session. This paper summarizes the empowerment approaches in different situations, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Summary of empowerment leadership types.

Empowerment Type	Structural Formalization	Nationality	Empowerment Approach
Type I	High	China	Comprehensive Empowerment
Type II	High	Japan	Institutional Empowerment
Type III	Low	Japan	Emergent Empowerment
Type IV	Low	China	Selective Empowerment

6.1   Type I: Comprehensive Empowerment

Chinese companies with a high degree of structured formality are large organizations, have clearly defined duties and responsibilities, and present result-oriented attitudes and deep trust between leaders and subordinates. In this case, we found they present "comprehensive empowerment". We will identify characteristics of comprehensive empowerment as follows:

Clearly Defined Duties and Responsibilities. Duties and responsibilities are relatively vague in organisations. In our cases, they clearly defined duties and responsibilities. Therefore, leaders and subordinates know the expectation of their work, meanwhile, they proactively initiate organisational citizenship behaviors to fulfil duties and responsibilities.

"I know our boss (Cai) has a high expectation for us, thus, I propose the idea of building the transparent factory. He provides freedom and resources for us to realize conceptualized ideas."

"The parking issue has troubled us for years, recently I handled it to them (subordinates). They represent different groups, and they will create tremendous solutions. Not

only the administration department in charge of it, but other departments also involve and contribute ideas."

Results Orientation. In these cases, leaders emphasize the importance of results.

> *"Always come to me with answers."*
> *"I prefer to ask quantitative questions to evaluate performance."*
> *"As long as the QCD goal is achieved, the supervisor will not ask me what resources I should use."*
> *"In our weekly meeting, we report the status and performance of projects. We have no time to be concerned about the details in the process."*

Long-term Cooperation and Trust. Leaders and subordinates collaborate for a long time and build deep trust. Based on the mutual understanding, subordinates enjoy a high degree of autonomy and foster self-management. In this case, communication is direct and efficient.

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> *"Most of them (subordinates) can take responsibility for themselves and are proactive. They follow me from Shenzhen to Zhuhai. We have worked together for over ten years. I could turn off my cellphone for ten days, they can manage their work well."*
> *"My leader trusted me; thus, I proposed many initiatives to coordinate with local managers, equipment manufacturers, and technicians to contribute to the project."*
> *"The long-time cooperation enables us (the leader and subordinate) to develop trust and understanding, and it is pleasant to cooperate. I am willing to take action to address our challenges without crossing the organisational line."*

Overall, comprehensive empowerment in these cases can be summarized as except for forbidden, anything else is encouraged. Leaders give power to subordinates, allow them to take initiative, and make decisions.

6.2   Type II: Institutional Empowerment

Compared with Chinese companies, two types of Japanese companies are less performing empowerment and only companies with a high degree of structural formality tend to engage with empowerment. In this case, we identify it as "institutional empowerment" which refers to organizations having the norms to guide preferred behaviors and the degree of empowerment greatly depends on the organizational contexts. We will illustrate the institutional empowerment in the following:

Normative Institution Drive. In our cases, Japanese companies have the norm to empower subordinates to take responsibility and undertake some work. For example, some Japanese companies have daily briefing routines to clarify work objectives and an open working environment.

"In our daily briefing, I encourage subordinates to address difficulties or ask them to undertake some projects."

"The performance appraisal has stated our objectives; thus, we just need to perform the work. Sometimes I could send emails without cc my leader."

"For some unimportant tasks; I could take responsibilities directly and I do not present the process to my leader."

"I told my subordinates they have my authority to handle difficulties, and I will be responsible for the whole result. They can go for it. The only condition is the autonomy should stay in my authority."

Micro Institutional Work. We found that Japanese companies engage empowerment within their specified authorized scope. Initiating behaviors are constrained by operational guidelines and subordinates only perform micro-institutional work.

"For some subordinates, they cannot perform their work without specified directions and detailed operational guidelines."

"I made a sale decision on my own, however, it was criticized by my leader since I do not have the right. The sale plan should be decided by the board of directors."

In summary, institutional empowerment depends on organizational norms to encourage leaders and subordinates to take initiative and engage in empowerment behaviors, however, the studies cases indicate that those Japanese companies perform empowerment behaviors in narrow scope and only initiate micro institutional work.

6.3   Type III: Emergent Empowerment

We identify Japanese companies with a low degree of structural formality perform "emergent empowerment". Emergent empowerment refers to leaders who are unintentional to empower subordinates and the empowerment behaviors are never explicitly listed in the organisations. In the following section, we will illustrate key characteristics of emergent empowerment.

Follow the Instructions. In our case, Japanese companies are small size or a small division of multi-national companies. They have limited resources to respond to the rapid market change. The paradoxical issue in this type of companies is they lack specified rules to guide empowerment behaviors, on the other hand, they have organizational pressure to deliver expected outcomes. We summarize behaviors of this type companies in every step followed by the handbook.

"No one would take risks to play as a leader, no one would receive the recognition, reward and payment as a leader."

"If I allow a subordinate to take a job and he fails the work, I have to take the responsibility, it is even worse."

"The problem in our company is that authority is not very clear, and if authority is not clear, it cannot be delegated, and the assignment of responsibility becomes unclear. There's a culture of reluctance to change in our company, and from people who

want to do new things and propose change, we occasionally hear things like 'Can you take responsibility?'"

Overall, this type of organization has heavy production pressure and has relatively low profit margin. They follow instructions and have low risk and mistake tolerance which inhibit empowerment.

6.4   Type IV: Selective Empowerment

Chinese companies maintain a less formalized structure and tend to perform "selective empowerment". In this type of company, the degree of empowerment depends on the evaluation of subordinates' competence, the willingness to take responsibility, and the alignment of individual goals. We will reveal selective empowerment in the following section:

Competence of Subordinates. Leaders mentioned that competence is the key factor for empowerment.

"They have worked in the media field for several years and have certain experience. they have the capabilities to handle each task. Meanwhile, I do not have time to check with each detail."

"They are professionals in the field, they have strong educational backgrounds and I trust their competence."

Willingness to Take Responsibility. Empowerment of tasks, they may be hesitant to take on additional responsibilities. The organizational culture may also resist change, and employees who propose new ideas or changes may be questioned about their ability to take responsibility.

"Some people have strong professional skills and less developed interpersonal skills, they address technical difficulties, however, they are not proactive, and they tend to take jobs passively. In this case, I never empower them, and I give specified directions to have better performance. People have different working styles."

"Empowerment leads to more pressure; however, it motivates me to pursue better performance."

Alignment of Individual Goals with Organisational Objectives. Employees in these companies may prioritize their interests and rewards from the work. If they perceive a lack of recognition or fair compensation, they may be reluctant to take on additional responsibilities.

"They are young and put greater emphasis on individual interest. their propositions and actions tend to benefit for individual interest rather than the company."

Overall, managers tend to adopt selective empowerment when they perceive subordinates tend to focus on personal interest and the organisation maintains imperfect authority.

7   Propositions

Analyzing our cases, Chinese companies tend to promote empowerment to take advantage of innovative behaviors and gain opportunities in the market. On the other hand, Japanese companies are less engaged with empowerment due to their organisational and cultural influences. We have four propositions and suggest organisations should take actions to promote empowerment leadership according to specific organisational contexts.

7.1   Proposition 1: Provide New Tasks and Challenges

Chinese organizations with high structural formalization need to provide subordinates with new tasks and challenges to exert the power of empowerment.

Employees, who are satisfied with their jobs, tend to be more motivated and present out-performance. Complex tasks, which offer a sense of accomplishment, autonomy, and self-efficacy, can significantly impact motivation. Employees are motivated to perform complex tasks as they perceive a higher level of challenge and recognition. Encouraging employees to take on novel tasks, meanwhile, breaks existing rules and procedures. Employees who engage in complex tasks gain a sense of achievement and self-efficacy, leading to increased motivation. Therefore, organizations with a well-established structure should offer more autonomy and opportunities for subordinates and encourage them to take on new tasks and challenges. This approach promotes empowerment by fostering a sense of accomplishment, autonomy, and self-motivation among employees.

By implementing this proposition, organizations can create an environment that supports and facilitates empowerment, leading to increased employee autonomy, motivation, and independent decision-making, ultimately enhancing overall organizational performance and success.

7.2   Proposition 2: Reform the Performance Appraisal System and Form Function Groups

The institution is a humanly devised constraint and structured human actions. Rules and shared meanings define social relationships, and guide interaction by giving actors cognitive frames of sets of meanings to interpret the behaviours of others (Fligstein, 2001, p.108). In group 2, Japanese companies having formal rules, laws and regulations could facilitate the behavior of individuals and firms. Leaders trust subordinates and empower them to make decisions. Meanwhile, subordinates undertake their tasks, as well as others' work based on intrinsic rewards, such as the need for recognition and a sense of accomplishment. Therefore, we suggest companies align the performance appraisal system to match the liabilities with the initiative behaviors. Consolidating the appraisal aligns with the views of leaders and subordinates.

Secondly, one unique issue in Japanese companies is freshmen enrolling into the company are apprentices and receive rotation in many departments. Theoretically, subordinates are channels to facilitate the information and knowledge exchange, however,

subordinates are shaped by the department rules. Moreover, under the current market environment, subordinates are more concerned about the stability of their job. Thus, they fail to break the department boundaries. We proposed organisations form function groups to provide more opportunities for employees to participate share information and become structurally empowered in themselves.

By implementing this proposition, both leaders and subordinates in Japanese companies could promote knowledge flow and directly leverage organisational resources.

7.3 Proposition 3: Refreeze the Innovative Culture to Guide Individuals to Recognize the Importance of Empowerment

The Nemawashi culture deeply affects managerial practices and organizational operations in Japan. Nemawashi refers to all decisions being made by group consensus, and it is an ongoing organizational process rather than a one-time discussion. Therefore, leaders often do not express their feelings and attitudes directly. This decision-making style is shaped by a culture which emphasizes teamwork and collective decision-making [25]. Luhmann (1976) has pointed out that responsibility plays a critical role to manage uncertainty and reduce risks [26].

Based on our case studies, we also found leaders and subordinates are worried about the responsibilities of empowerment, thus, both fail to intentionally engage with empowerment. According to the institution theory, Japanese companies should build the cognitive pillar to form the take-for-granted values and beliefs that guide leaders' and subordinates' behaviors and enable them to better implement delegated behaviors. Moreover, based on Group 3, leaders and subordinates should recognize the importance and necessity of empowerment and form a trial-and-error culture to motivate new ideas. Subordinates will worry that the leader will not be responsible for the work results after being authorized.

Secondly, an effective feedback mechanism can be established in the companies, so that members of the organization can provide advice and feedback to the leader without punishment. Leaders should actively participate in the feedback process and adjust their leadership style based on the feedback.

By implementing this proposition, Japanese companies with less formal structures could better leverage organizational resources to support empowerment behaviors.

7.4 Proposition 4: Clarify Responsibilities and Work Objectives

It is crucial to clarify responsibilities and work objectives to facilitate empowerment in organizations maintaining low levels of structural formalization and task complexity. Some of our interviews showed that empowerment was hidden because responsibilities and authority were implicit. To address it, organizations should establish clear responsibility, which provides a foundation for defining the boundaries. Implementing a clear division of labor in the organizational structure could reduce interdependencies, moreover, organisations should also simplify business strategy and vision, and translate the organisational goals into individual work objectives. Providing continuous internal

training will improve individuals' capabilities to align individual objectives with organisational performance and take on duties and responsibilities.

By implementing these propositions, organizations can enhance clarity and alignment in responsibilities with work objectives, provide a conducive environment for knowledge sharing and innovation, and empower subordinates to take ownership of their work and contribute to organizational growth and success.

8   Conclusion

In conclusion, this study conducted a multi-case study analysis of high-tech companies to examine empowerment under different organisational and cultural contexts. We have four propositions based on our cases. Rules, norms, and culture are reflected in some management policies and business procedures within the companies. In Japan, employees' sense of belonging to the company is reinforced through lifetime employment, which is characteristic of Japanese business management. Japanese companies are often considered to have a high level of group cohesion and empowerment is greatly influenced by organisational structure. On the other hand, the Chinese business environment has some institutional voids which provide tremendous opportunities for companies; thus, they actively engage with the empowerment to catch up with the economic growth of Chinese companies.

Our study highlights the importance for Chinese high-tech companies to enhance leaders' capabilities to clarify responsibilities and work objectives and promote new challenges and opportunities to explore innovative ideas. Secondly, our study suggests that Japanese high-tech companies should promote an empowerment culture and align organisational policies associated with empowerment to allow individuals to recognize the value of empowerment and be able to implement empowerment.

The theoretical contributions of this study include enriching the understanding of how organisational and cultural collectively affect the implementation of empowerment. However, there are limitations to this study that should be addressed in future research. Firstly, future research should consider other organizational and cultural factors that affect empowerment to expand the scope of inquiry in this area. Secondly, future research could examine the mechanism of organisation and culture in empowerment and provide an alternative perspective to facilitate the empowerment process.

Overall, this study provides valuable insights and propositions for high-tech organizations seeking to implement empowering leadership behaviors effectively, considering the nuances of organizational structure, and national culture.

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