



# Cultural Contexts and Leadership Styles: A Qualitative Study of Their Impact on Productivity in China and the United Kingdom

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**Abstract.** This qualitative study investigates the intricate interplay between leadership styles and cultural contexts and their profound influence on productivity, focusing on China and the United Kingdom. The research explores diverse leadership approaches, values, and management strategies in these nations, highlighting the pivotal role of leadership culture in shaping productivity outcomes. Additionally, it examines the detrimental consequences of toxic corporate cultures on resource allocation and workforce effectiveness, ultimately leading to decreased productivity.

Employing rigorous qualitative research methods, such as content analysis, thematic analysis, in-depth interviews, this study provides valuable insights into how leadership culture influences productivity within different cultural contexts. It aims to shed light on the dynamic relationship between cultural diversity in leadership and productivity, offering perspectives essential for sustainable organizational and national development in our ever-globalizing world.

**Keywords:** Leadership Styles, Cultural Contexts, Productivity, China and UK

## 1 Introduction

In today's rapidly evolving global landscape marked by economic interdependence, globalization, and dynamic shifts in business dynamics, the role of leadership in influencing productivity remains a critical factor. <sup>[5]</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has further accelerated these transformations, introducing unprecedented challenges such as widespread remote work adoption and economic fluctuations. Effective leadership plays a pivotal role in navigating these changes. However, the impact of leadership is profoundly shaped by cultural contexts influenced by factors like history, culture, geography, and societal norms. This study delves into the complex interplay between leadership and productivity within diverse cultural settings, with a primary focus on China and the United Kingdom.

Previous research has firmly established a robust positive correlation between leadership and economic performance. Effective leadership has the potential to enhance economic outcomes, while ineffective leadership may hinder them. Leadership is

unequivocally recognized as a primary driver of productivity in organizational settings. Skillful leadership instills critical values, reduces employee turnover, and facilitates the achievement of organizational goals.<sup>[1][2][3]</sup>

This research aims to provide profound insights into the relationship between leadership within diverse cultural contexts and productivity. These insights offer valuable perspectives for sustainable organizational development and the prosperity of nations in the globalized landscape. In an era marked by globalization and unprecedented challenges, this research holds significance for understanding and shaping the future of organizations and societies.

## **2 Methodology**

### **2.1 Data Collection**

This study utilizes qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews, focus groups, and literature review analysis. The selection of these methods is based on the scarcity of existing research data on the relationship between leadership in China and productivity. The need to gather new data, particularly through in-depth interviews, is to gain a deeper understanding of how leadership is perceived and its effects from different perspectives. This deeper understanding helps in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of current leadership in China, providing data support for future decision-making and changes.

Additionally, combining focus groups allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the different impacts of leadership on various segments of the population. As a qualitative research approach, these two methods are considered in-depth and efficient for data collection.

In the context of the United Kingdom, a literature review analysis is conducted because there is already a substantial body of research on similar issues that sufficiently demonstrates the significant impact of leadership on productivity in the UK. There is an abundance of literature data available for reference and comparison, which enables relevant analysis and summarization.

The criteria for selecting interviewees and focus group participants are designed with several aspects in mind. First, traditional enterprises that have been in operation for over 10 years, with leaders being older individuals whose knowledge and experience are rooted in traditional culture. Second, the focus is on emerging small businesses that employ markedly different leadership styles, making them a substantial contributor to China's current productivity landscape. It is expected that such economic contributors will continue to grow, making it necessary to conduct in-depth investigations into the development and composition of leadership in China. This can also serve as a basis for comparing the strengths and weaknesses of the two types of leadership, thereby facilitating a better understanding of which leadership style is more likely to become the core leadership in China's future development, ultimately leading to improved productivity.

In addition to in-depth interviews, the focus groups primarily concentrate on the perspective of employees under traditional authoritative leadership. Since traditional authoritative leadership remains predominant in China, it is necessary to gain a deeper

understanding of the effects of this leadership style from different perspectives. This deeper understanding will aid in analyzing how such leadership affects productivity, whether positively or negatively.

Participants were recruited through WeChat, China's largest social media platform, by seeking relevant individuals in group chats. The selection was not limited by industry or region. We chose participants to represent diversity. This included a 19-year-old male, a sophomore student at Beijing Geology University, currently a freelance entrepreneur with his own professional team, engaged in various campus-related work, with an annual income of approximately 350,000 RMB. We also selected a 20-year-old male, a junior student, and shareholder in a small education payment industry company in China, with a personal monthly income of around 50,000 RMB. Additionally, we included a 49-year-old male CEO who currently operates multiple limited companies, with an undisclosed annual income. Furthermore, we recruited 200 male and 120 female employees, currently employed by the CEO's limited companies. Finally, a 29-year-old male, a freelance entrepreneur running a small pre-employment education company with an annual income of around 3 million RMB, was also included. These participants were chosen to ensure diversity and representation.

This study adopted a qualitative research approach to investigate leadership styles in China and the United Kingdom and their influence on productivity. Data were collected through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Five in-depth interviews were conducted with leaders from various sectors, including entrepreneurs, managers, and business owners. Additionally, 22 focus group discussions were organized, involving participants from diverse professional backgrounds, to ensure a comprehensive range of perspectives.<sup>[6][7][10]</sup>

## **2.2 Participant Consent**

It is imperative to emphasize that all content obtained from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions was utilized with the explicit consent of the interviewees for research purposes.

The following statements from two interviewees who granted consent for the public disclosure of their insights contribute to the richness of the research.

### **2.2.1 Interviewer 1.**

In the capacity of an effective leader, I firmly believe in the principles of accountability and the willingness to undertake calculated risks. When it comes to my personnel selection process, I prioritize an individual's competence and stability over mere academic qualifications. The process of selection is a mutual one, where both parties could express their concerns and queries openly. This mutual relationship is fundamental. Moreover, it is vital that both parties complement each other; for instance, one individual may excel in output, while another in input. The choice primarily hinges on the specific demands of the project at hand. Within my team, traditional authoritative hierarchies are entirely absent. My leadership style can be traced back to the surge in popularity of short video content in 2018. Short videos have widened the scope of

recognition, with numerous short video platforms gaining traction. This phenomenon has created a vast blue ocean market with promising developmental prospects. It has provided diverse channels for recognition, as opposed to the past when information flow was largely one-sided. During this period, many individuals possessed the capability to become information sources, disseminating knowledge to others. Consequently, the demand for such roles escalated. Initially, the pioneers in creating their personal intellectual property (IP) were typically small teams or individuals, such as students and budding entrepreneurs, due to the early availability of platforms. Individuals could single-handedly handle tasks like editing and uploading, effectively transforming one person into an entire team. Given the initial scale, the traditional route of company expansion and extensive recruitment seemed superfluous. Furthermore, due to the modest scale, there was no necessity to adhere to conventional corporate structures. In contrast to past generations, where one had to establish a company structure first and then assess others' capabilities based on their own judgments, forming long-term, stable relationships. This is an abstract concept, akin to the present-day process of batch resume submission and screening in China, which is destined to evolve. In the later stages, the concept of knowledge payment and paid education doesn't necessitate adherence to traditional corporate structures either. Instead, the emphasis is on super-individuals, the development of personal IPs, advocating individual growth, and the stimulation of personal abilities. While leadership styles like mine may not become the mainstream in China's future, they are likely to dominate among small-scale enterprises and small to medium-sized businesses (SMEs). This leadership style affords me a sense of comfort. I do not wield substantial authority, possess large discretionary budgets, or possess boundless capabilities. Decisions are not infallible. Nevertheless, in the future, some major corporations might harness the power of AI for their operations, presenting a potential avenue for development. However, my leadership style does come with certain drawbacks. At times, individual issues within the team may become magnified, and finding like-minded individuals can prove challenging. Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that every facet of life carries both advantages and disadvantages. Presently, the advantages of my leadership style outweigh the disadvantages as it sparks the enthusiasm and innovation of team members. In the present era, leadership equates to innovation, rendering leadership an indispensable factor in enhancing productivity. Due to China's vast population, achieving decentralization proves arduous. Additionally, the Chinese populace tends to display a submissive disposition, with most individuals relinquishing independent thought and critical thinking capabilities. Centralization is easily achieved when a significant portion of the population is compliant. Although the government actively seeks change, many companies remain unresponsive, resulting in minimal transformations. At present, most of the China's involvement pertains to raw material provision. Should future adhere to this trajectory, leadership may necessitate minimal alteration. However, if innovation in technological development is on the horizon, modifications will undoubtedly be required.

### **2.2.2 Interviewer 2.**

Effective communication channels and dedicated time for interactions with subordinates are currently limited. This has contributed to a degree of apprehension among my

subordinates, who often feel hesitant to express themselves fully. Managing the extensive volume of daily documents and information leaves little room for extended communication. While I initially encouraged subordinates to share during meetings, the increasing workload necessitated a shift in focus towards summarizing recent performance and outlining future objectives to optimize meeting efficiency. In the context of employee engagement, occasional team-building activities, occurring annually, serve as opportunities for team members to socialize over meals, drinks, and music. These activities serve a dual purpose – to alleviate workplace stress and to motivate improved performance. However, concerning innovation, it appears that contributions from team members are somewhat limited in scope. As a result, my expectations for substantial innovation from this group are modest. Some individuals within the team struggle to fulfill their core job responsibilities, displaying limited motivation. Many young team members exhibit a high level of self-assuredness, which can complicate management efforts as their individual perspectives may conflict with the company's overarching interests. On the other hand, some long-serving employees, due to their extensive experience and tenure with the company, present challenges in terms of dismissal, given ethical considerations. Nevertheless, these employees might occasionally display signs of complacency or seek shortcuts, potentially influenced by factors such as age or other unknown variables. In sum, leadership unquestionably exerts a considerable influence on a company's performance, and I concur that an adept leader can substantially enhance productivity. However, implementation proves to be a formidable challenge. The allocation of management resources is inherently limited, and individual characteristics vary significantly. Presently, the baseline requirement for managing a team is error avoidance, as mistakes can lead to substantial losses. The prospect of substantial innovation remains distant, and its realization appears to be a distant goal. In the future, I may endeavor to enhance communication with team members, particularly at the grassroots level, although I anticipate encountering difficulties. Ideally, I hope team members will proactively approach me with any concerns. At times, I grapple with the dilemma of establishing authority; managing a sizable team is subject to national laws and corporate regulations. As the adage goes, "Without rules, there is no order." To ensure adherence to established rules, the exertion of pressure and the assertion of authority become necessary. However, it is not my intention for team members to fear me. Regrettably, the result has been a degree of apprehension among team members, inhibiting open communication. Presently, I can only assert that this management style can persist but may not flourish.

### **2.3 Summary of Interview Findings**

Two interviewees provided valuable insights into leadership styles and their impact on productivity.

#### **2.3.1 Interviewer 1.**

As an effective leader, the first interviewee emphasized the principles of responsibility and risk-taking in leadership. When selecting personnel, the interviewee prioritized an

individual's abilities and stability over academic qualifications. They viewed the personnel selection process as mutual, where both parties could openly express their concerns and doubts. This leadership style emphasized team complementarity and openness while rejecting traditional authoritative hierarchical systems.

### 2.3.2 Interviewer 2.

The second interviewee discussed challenges in communication with subordinates, citing increased workloads and limited time as contributing factors. They believed that employee team-building activities could alleviate workplace stress and motivate employees to perform better. However, the interviewee expressed caution regarding the contributions of team members to innovation. Some employees were seen as ill-suited for core tasks, and younger employees were perceived as having an overestimated self-assessment. In contrast, older employees, due to their experience and tenure, posed challenges regarding termination. Overall, both interviewees concurred that leadership style significantly influenced company performance but acknowledged the challenges in its implementation.

## 2.4 Literature Review

In the initial phase, an exhaustive literature review was systematically conducted to gather relevant scholarly articles, books, and research reports concerning leadership, leadership styles, and productivity in the United Kingdom and China. The search encompassed renowned databases such as Google Scholar and respected academic journals, with a specific focus on publications from 2013 to 2023.<sup>[8][9]</sup>

**Document Selection Criteria:** The selected literature underwent rigorous screening using predefined criteria to identify sources most pertinent to the research questions and objectives. The screening criteria included:

**1) Publication Date:** Preference was given to materials published within the past ten years (2013-2023) to ensure the inclusion of contemporary perspectives.

**2) Research Methodology:** Emphasis was placed on sources employing qualitative research methodologies, as they best facilitated an in-depth understanding of British leadership and its impact on productivity.

**3) Thematic Relevance:** Literature was selected based on its direct relevance to the study's core themes of leadership and productivity, as these topics align closely with the research focus.

## 2.5 Literature Review Summary

The comprehensive examination of the selected literature unveiled a profound connection between culture, leadership styles, and their consequential effects on productivity. The synthesized insights underscored the paramount significance of democratic leadership in the British context, particularly its salutary influence on productivity.

The literature review emphasized that British culture, characterized by traits such as individualism, independent thinking, and self-confidence, engenders an environment

conducive to entrepreneurship and the nurturing of talent. Consequently, British managers tend to prioritize soft skills and exhibit a broad perspective. This cultural inclination prioritizes pragmatism over professional qualifications, differentiating it from some other industrialized nations like Germany, where specialized expertise holds greater esteem. Britain's higher tolerance for uncertainty and adaptability to change endow it with a competitive edge in today's dynamic economic landscape.

Furthermore, the decentralized leadership style prevalent in the UK, which empowers subordinates to respond swiftly to evolving circumstances, has significantly facilitated innovation and economic development. This approach contrasts with countries such as China and Egypt, where centralized decision-making is more typical. The democratic leadership style, characterized by power decentralization, plays a pivotal role in propelling economic growth in the UK. Despite its cultural inclination toward conservatism, the adaptability of British leadership contributes to its outstanding performance in enhancing productivity.

In conclusion, the influence of culture on leadership in the United Kingdom, particularly the democratic leadership style, has played a pivotal role in the nation's transition from an industrial to a service-based economy. This transformation has not only fostered economic growth but has also spurred market development and heightened productivity.<sup>[4]</sup>

## **3 Result**

### **3.1 China**

The examination of leadership styles in China, based on insights garnered from in-depth interviews, reveals that the nation's current productivity landscape primarily emphasizes mass production of basic components. While China has embarked on an economic transformation journey, encompassing initiatives to promote technological innovation through reforms within the education system and the enactment of relevant legal and incentivizing policies at the corporate level, significant challenges persist.

At the national level, there remains a gap in the effective enforcement of laws, leading to systemic loopholes that hinder the seamless implementation of intended reforms at the grassroots level. Furthermore, deeply entrenched traditional beliefs within the education system have contributed to formidable knowledge barriers, severely constraining students' access to pertinent information and opportunities for skill development. Consequently, progress toward a knowledge-based economy has been sluggish. Additionally, at the corporate level, the proactive response to government policies has often been influenced by self-interest, leading to suboptimal alignment with broader national objectives.

In summary, the prevalence of traditional authoritative leadership in China has posed significant obstacles to productivity and economic transformation. The consequences include talent mismatches, talent attrition, elevated unemployment rates, exacerbated wealth disparities among urban centers, and uneven urban-rural development. The imperatives of economic equity and efficiency necessitate a profound ideological shift at

the grassroots level and a reformation of leadership styles to pave the way for successful economic transformation and the advent of a new era of sustainable economic growth.

### 3.2 United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's leadership landscape underscores a generalist approach that places interpersonal skills above technical expertise. At its core, effective leadership in the UK is predicated on building positive and collaborative relationships with subordinates. Leaders in this context tend to eschew direct orders, instead favoring indirect and suggestive communication methods, often framing instructions as polite requests rather than explicit directives. This approach not only encourages employee participation but also promotes the free exchange of information and collaborative decision-making, particularly within team dynamics. A spectrum of leadership styles coexists, encompassing transformational and transactional approaches, alongside vestiges of traditional authoritarian and bureaucratic leadership models. This diversity empowers organizations with the adaptability required to thrive in an era of globalization, thereby enhancing overall productivity. However, the UK does grapple with talent attrition challenges, partly attributable to the undervaluation of educational investments.<sup>[4][11][12][13][14]</sup>

## 4 Discussion

In summary, our study underscores the pivotal role of leadership in driving productivity, particularly in the context of innovation and economic development. We have demonstrated how cultural and historical factors exert profound influences on leadership styles, emphasizing that leadership cannot be divorced from its cultural milieu. While our findings suggest a need to reconsider traditional authoritarian leadership models considering global economic dynamics, we must also recognize the imperative for tailored approaches.

Our research illuminates the importance of crafting leadership styles that leverage the richness of each nation's culture while fostering innovation and productivity. It is paramount to recognize that one-size-fits-all leadership models fall short. Each country should embark on a journey to cultivate leadership in harmony with its unique values and aspirations, thus fueling progress and enhancing living standards.

To deepen our comprehension, future research should explore quantitative metrics for leadership qualities and their causal links to productivity. Such investigations promise valuable insights for policymakers, organizations, and societies seeking to thrive in a globalized economy.

Practically, our findings have far-reaching implications spanning government policies, corporate strategies, and societal values. They necessitate a thoughtful reconsideration of leadership paradigms that can effectively address the challenges and seize the opportunities of the future.

As we navigate a complex and interconnected global economy, leadership remains an indispensable determinant of our collective prosperity. By embracing and evolving



leadership within the context of culture and innovation, we can aspire to construct a more prosperous and sustainable future.

## 5 Conclusions

This study emphasizes the significant impact of leadership styles in China and the United Kingdom on productivity. China's traditional authoritative leadership style excels in execution but stifles employee creativity and engagement, and it faces issues of gender inequality and inefficient utilization of human resources. In contrast, the UK's diverse and inclusive decision-making style promotes innovation but grapples with talent attrition.

These findings hold important implications for leadership practices and productivity improvements. In China, it is recommended to enhance communication and feedback mechanisms, promote gender equality, and advocate competency-based education. In the UK, the emphasis should be on strengthening education and leadership development to better address talent attrition issues. Successful leadership styles should embody diversity, inclusivity, and adaptability to drive sustainable productivity growth.

Future research can delve into the specific impact of certain leadership styles, conduct cross-cultural comparative studies, and deepen our understanding of the relationship between leadership and productivity. By continuously advancing our research, we can better address challenges in the global competitive landscape and contribute to the prosperity and competitiveness of society.

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