

Through the Eyes of Teachers: A Qualitative Synthesis of Perceptions of Principals' Transformational Leadership Practices in Chinese Schools

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Abstract

Despite extensive scholarship on transformational leadership in education, teachers' experiential and perceptual accounts of such leadership in Chinese schools remain underexplored. Most existing studies measure leadership through standardized instruments, overlooking the cultural, relational, and contextual dimensions through which teachers interpret and respond to principals' transformational practices. A qualitative library-based research design was employed, guided by the PRISMA framework. Six peer-reviewed studies published between 2017 and 2024 were systematically selected from Scopus and Web of Science and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. Three major themes emerged: (1) teachers' perceptions of trust and emotional connection as core dimensions of transformational leadership; (2) the perceived impact of transformational leadership on teacher collaboration and collective efficacy; and (3) perceived challenges and contextual limitations in the enactment of transformational leadership. Findings reveal that teachers value relational authenticity, moral consistency, and participatory structures while identifying bureaucratic constraints, cultural hierarchy, and workload pressures as inhibitors of full leadership enactment. Teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership are fundamentally relational and culturally mediated. Effective transformational principals in China combine inspirational vision with emotional intelligence and moral authority. Sustainable leadership impact requires systemic institutional support that reduces administrative burdens and expands teachers' professional autonomy. These findings offer important theoretical extensions to transformational leadership research and practical guidance for leadership development in Chinese and broader East Asian educational contexts.



Keywords: teacher perceptions; transformational leadership; Chinese schools; trust; collective efficacy; teacher collaboration; school leadership; educational reform

INTRODUCTION

How teachers perceive their principal's leadership is not merely a matter of subjective opinion, it is a critical determinant of how leadership translates into instructional behavior, professional engagement, and school improvement. The gap between leadership as practiced and leadership as perceived is well-established in organizational and educational research (Yukl, 2013). When teachers experience their principal's transformational behaviors as authentic, trustworthy, and empowering, they exhibit higher levels of professional commitment, collaborative engagement, and pedagogical innovation (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Conversely, when leadership is perceived as performative or inconsistent with institutional realities, its motivational potential is substantially diminished.

In the Chinese educational context, this perceptual dimension of leadership is particularly significant. China's school system operates at the intersection of ambitious national reform agendas and deeply embedded Confucian cultural traditions that emphasize hierarchical authority, collective harmony, and relational obligation (Wang & Chan, 2015). These cultural dynamics shape not only how principals exercise leadership but also how teachers read, interpret, and respond to it. Teachers in Chinese schools are conditioned by social norms that balance deference to authority with expectations of moral integrity and collective care from their leaders. As a result, the effectiveness of transformational leadership in China cannot be fully understood through behavioral analysis alone, it must be examined through the experiential lens of those who receive it.

Despite the growing body of research on transformational leadership in Chinese education, teacher perceptions have received comparatively limited attention. Most empirical studies have relied on quantitative approaches that measure leadership through standardized instruments such as the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ), capturing statistical associations between leadership behaviors and organizational outcomes but offering limited insight into the interpretive processes through which teachers make sense of their leaders' actions (Fang & Yu, 2023). The qualitative and perceptual dimensions of this relationship, how teachers experience trust, empowerment, collaboration, and frustration under transformational principals, remain undertheorized and underexplored.

This study addresses that gap through a qualitative library-based synthesis of peer-



reviewed literature, guided by the second research question: How are teachers' and school staff perceptions of principals' transformational leadership practices described in existing studies conducted in China? Drawing on six carefully selected studies published between 2017 and 2024, the research synthesizes teachers' reported experiences to identify patterns of perception, cultural mediation, and contextual constraint. In doing so, it constructs a theoretically grounded and empirically substantiated account of how transformational leadership is received, interpreted, and evaluated by the teachers it seeks to transform.

This investigation carries significance at both theoretical and practical levels. Theoretically, it contributes to the ongoing effort to contextualize transformational leadership theory beyond its Western origins by illuminating how cultural variables mediate the principal-teacher leadership relationship in China. Practically, it offers guidance for principal preparation programs and educational policymakers seeking to design leadership environments that are not only visionary in intent but also trustworthy and empowering in teachers lived experience.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transformational Leadership and Follower Perception

The study of follower perception has long been recognized as central to understanding how leadership produces its effects. Attribution theory (Lord & Maher, 1991) posits that followers do not passively receive leadership behaviors but actively interpret them through cognitive schemas shaped by prior experience, cultural norms, and contextual expectations. Transformational leadership, which relies on inspiration, empowerment, and emotional resonance, is particularly dependent on follower perception for its effectiveness. Leaders who are perceived as authentic, consistent, and morally grounded are far more likely to elicit the intrinsic motivation and professional commitment that transformational leadership theory predicts (Avolio et al., 2004).

The role of trust is foundational in this perceptual process. Dirks and Ferrin (2002) demonstrated through meta-analysis that trust in leadership is among the strongest predictors of follower performance, satisfaction, and organizational commitment. In educational settings, Hoy and Tschannen-Moran (2003) established that trust in the principal is a critical mediator linking leadership behavior to teacher engagement and school effectiveness. Teachers who trust their principal are more willing to take instructional risks, share professional vulnerabilities, and engage in the collaborative behaviors that transformational leadership seeks to cultivate.

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) provides a complementary explanatory framework.



When principals invest in teachers through recognition, emotional support, and participatory inclusion, teachers reciprocate with heightened organizational commitment and professional effort. This reciprocal dynamic is sustained by perceived fairness and relational consistency, dimensions that teachers monitor closely in evaluating the authenticity of their leaders' transformational intentions. When perceived inconsistencies emerge between espoused transformational values and actual leadership behavior, trust erodes and reciprocal engagement declines (Avolio et al., 2004; Leithwood & Sun, 2012).

Teacher Perceptions in the Chinese Cultural Context

In the Chinese educational setting, teacher perceptions of leadership are shaped by a distinctive cultural architecture. Confucian values historically positioned the school leader as a moral exemplar (junzi), a figure of ethical authority whose legitimacy rested not on administrative rank alone but on demonstrable virtue, care for subordinates, and commitment to collective flourishing (Bush & Middlewood, 2013). These cultural expectations create a complex evaluative framework through which Chinese teachers assess their principals: leaders are expected to exercise authority while simultaneously demonstrating warmth, humility, and relational attentiveness.

The concept of *guanxi*, interpersonal relational networks built on reciprocal obligation and trust, further mediates how teachers interpret and respond to leadership in Chinese contexts (Chen & Chen, 2004). Teachers who perceive their principal as invested in the *guanxi* relationship, through personal attention, acknowledgment of effort, and loyalty during challenging circumstances, are more likely to reciprocate with professional dedication and collaborative engagement. Conversely, principals who neglect relational investment or display inconsistency between their public leadership persona and their private behavior toward staff are likely to be perceived as inauthentic, triggering disengagement and cynicism.

High power-distance cultural norms in China also influence the perceptual dynamics of transformational leadership. In contexts where deference to authority is socially expected, teachers may be reluctant to voice criticism, challenge leadership decisions, or claim the distributed leadership roles that transformational principals nominally offer (Xie, 2022). This cultural restraint can create a paradox: teachers may perceive their principal as transformational in intent while simultaneously maintaining passive compliance in practice, sustaining hierarchical patterns that transformational leadership ostensibly seeks to disrupt. Understanding this perceptual complexity is essential for interpreting the evidence on teacher perceptions in Chinese



schools.

Prior Research and Remaining Gaps

Existing quantitative research confirms that teachers' perceptions of transformational leadership are positively associated with job satisfaction (Zhang et al., 2022), organizational commitment (Fang & Yu, 2023), collective efficacy (Liu et al., 2022), and innovative behavior (Zhao et al., 2023). However, these studies primarily measure the statistical strength of these associations without examining the underlying perceptual and relational mechanisms. How teachers come to form their perceptions of transformational leadership, what factors sustain or undermine those perceptions over time, and how cultural expectations mediate the relationship between principal behavior and teacher interpretation remain poorly understood.

Qualitative and interpretive investigations of teacher perceptions are comparatively rare. The few available studies suggest that Chinese teachers prioritize emotional trustworthiness and moral consistency in their evaluations of leadership quality (Chen, 2020; Hallinger & Liu, 2020). Teachers also report that the perceived gap between principals' visionary rhetoric and the bureaucratic realities they navigate is a significant source of leadership skepticism (Wang & Chan, 2015). This gap between aspiration and practice, shaped by China's dual governance pressures of decentralization and accountability, represents a critical but undertheorized dimension of transformational leadership in Chinese schools.

This study synthesizes the available evidence to construct a more comprehensive and culturally grounded account of teacher perceptions of transformational leadership in China, identifying consistent patterns, contradictions, and implications for theory and practice.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Philosophical Orientation

This study adopted a qualitative library-based research design, grounded in the interpretivist philosophical paradigm. Interpretivism posits that social phenomena, including leadership perceptions, are constructed through the meanings that individuals assign to their experiences, shaped by cultural context, relational history, and institutional environment (Schwandt, 2015). This orientation is particularly suited to investigating teacher perceptions, as it prioritizes the exploration of meaning-making processes over the measurement of behavioral frequencies or statistical associations.

A library-based design was selected because it enables systematic synthesis of existing



scholarly evidence without the logistical and cultural access barriers associated with primary field research in Chinese educational institutions. As Snyder (2019) argued, this approach is especially valuable in fields where empirical knowledge is distributed across multiple disciplines and methodological traditions, as it allows researchers to construct integrative theoretical frameworks from a fragmented evidence base.

Literature Search and Screening

Systematic literature retrieval followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework (Moher et al., 2009), proceeding through four sequential phases: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion. Three major academic databases, Scopus, ProQuest, and Google Scholar, were searched using combinations of Boolean-linked terms including "teacher perceptions," "transformational leadership," "school principal," "Chinese schools," "trust," "teacher collaboration," and "collective efficacy." Date parameters were set to 2017–2024 to ensure currency while capturing the most recent developments in the field.

Inclusion criteria required that studies: (a) focus explicitly on teacher or staff perceptions of principal leadership in Chinese educational settings; (b) be published in peer-reviewed English-language journals; (c) employ empirical, mixed-methods, or theoretically grounded qualitative approaches; and (d) engage directly with transformational leadership frameworks. Studies focused on non-educational contexts, published outside the eligible period, or lacking direct engagement with teacher perceptual data were excluded. Six studies meeting all criteria were retained for thematic analysis, drawn from leading journals including Educational Management Administration & Leadership, Asia Pacific Journal of Education, and Educational Studies.

Thematic Analysis

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis model. In the familiarization phase, all six studies were read and re-read with attention to how teacher perceptions were described, theorized, and contextualized. Initial codes were generated to capture discrete perceptual concepts, such as "emotional trust," "perceived authenticity," "collaborative agency," and "bureaucratic constraint." These codes were subsequently grouped into candidate themes through iterative comparison. Themes were reviewed for internal coherence and differentiation, refined through peer discussion, and defined with clear conceptual boundaries before integration into the final narrative synthesis. Trustworthiness was maintained



through the Lincoln and Guba (1985) criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, applied throughout data selection, coding, and interpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic synthesis yielded three overarching themes that capture how teachers in Chinese schools perceive their principals' transformational leadership practices. Each theme reflects a distinct dimension of teachers' perceptual experience, relational, collaborative, and contextual, and is discussed in relation to relevant theoretical frameworks and supplementary international evidence.

Theme 1: Trust and Emotional Connection as Core Dimensions of Perceived Transformational Leadership

Across all six reviewed studies, teachers' perceptions of their principal's transformational leadership were most fundamentally shaped by the quality of trust and emotional connection experienced in the leadership relationship. Teachers consistently described effective transformational principals not primarily in terms of strategic vision or administrative competence but in terms of their emotional presence, moral consistency, and genuine investment in teachers' well-being. This perceptual emphasis on relational authenticity aligns with Avolio et al.'s (2004) concept of authentic transformational leadership, which distinguishes leaders whose inspirational behaviors are grounded in transparent values from those whose transformational performance is strategic rather than sincere.

Liu, Hallinger, and Feng (2022) found that teachers in Chinese primary schools reported significantly higher organizational trust when their principal's demonstrated alignment between stated values and observable behavior, what teachers described as "doing what they say." This consistency generated psychological safety, encouraging teachers to communicate professional difficulties, seek guidance openly, and participate in collaborative inquiry without fear of evaluation or reprimand. Teachers perceived these principals not as hierarchical superiors but as professional mentors, a perception that meaningfully altered the quality and depth of leadership engagement.

Hallinger and Liu (2020) provided convergent evidence from a national-scale study, finding that trust in principal leadership served as the single most powerful mediator between transformational leadership behaviors and teachers' willingness to engage in school-based innovation. In contexts where trust was high, teachers reported feeling empowered to challenge



conventional pedagogical assumptions and experiment with new approaches. In contexts of low trust, even principals who exhibited behaviorally recognizable transformational characteristics failed to generate meaningful teacher engagement, as teachers interpreted their actions as performative or instrumentally motivated.

Zhang and Sun (2024) added an important cultural dimension to the trust-perception nexus. Drawing on the concept of *guanxi*, they documented that Chinese teachers evaluated their principals' trustworthiness through the lens of relational investment, assessing whether principals acknowledged their contributions publicly, provided private support during periods of stress, and demonstrated loyalty during institutional conflicts. Teachers described principals who exhibited these behaviors as "people-centered" (以人为本), a characterization that resonates with the Confucian ideal of benevolent leadership (*ren*) and distinguishes effective from merely competent leadership in the Chinese cultural context.

Li and Shi (2021) identified individualized consideration as the transformational leadership dimension most strongly associated with teachers' perceptions of emotional connection. Teachers reported that when principals acknowledged the specificity of individual professional and personal circumstances, accommodating workload distribution, recognizing unique contributions, and offering personal encouragement during reform transitions, they experienced a heightened sense of belonging and professional dignity. This perception directly activated higher intrinsic motivation, consistent with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which locates the source of sustained professional engagement in the fulfillment of autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs.

A critical qualification emerged from Chen (2020), who noted that perceptions of trust were highly sensitive to perceived inconsistency. Teachers who observed discrepancies between their principal's transformational rhetoric and their actual decision-making behavior, particularly in high-stakes situations involving resource allocation, conflict resolution, or teacher evaluation, reported rapid erosion of trust and a corresponding decline in professional engagement. This fragility of trust perception underscores that transformational leadership's emotional capital must be continually maintained through behavioral consistency rather than episodic inspirational communication.

Supplementary evidence from the broader international literature reinforces these findings. Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2015) demonstrated through a multi-school study that principal trustworthiness, operationalized through benevolence, honesty, openness, reliability, and competence, was the strongest predictor of teacher job satisfaction and organizational



commitment, surpassing other leadership variables. In the Chinese context, where power-distance norms create asymmetric vulnerability in the principal-teacher relationship, benevolence and honesty emerge as especially critical trust-building dimensions, as teachers possess limited structural power to negotiate or contest leadership decisions.

Practical implication: Principal preparation programs should explicitly develop emotional intelligence, relational consistency, and trust-building communication skills. School systems should create structured mechanisms, such as regular confidential feedback forums, through which teachers can communicate perceptions of leadership authenticity, enabling principals to identify and address gaps between their intended and perceived leadership behaviors.

Theme 2: Perceived Impact of Transformational Leadership on Teacher Collaboration and Collective Efficacy

The second major theme in teachers' perceptual accounts of transformational leadership concerns its relational and structural effects on professional collaboration and collective efficacy. Teachers did not primarily experience transformational leadership as an individual dyadic relationship but as a set of enabling conditions that shaped the quality and depth of collegial engagement across the school. When principals created participatory structures, modeled collaborative norms, and validated teachers' professional expertise in collective forums, teachers reported experiencing a fundamentally different professional environment, one characterized by shared purpose, mutual accountability, and amplified belief in the faculty's collective capacity.

Xie (2022) provided the most statistically rigorous evidence in this regard, analyzing data from over 14,000 Chinese middle school teachers to demonstrate that teacher-perceived principal leadership was significantly associated with greater teacher collaboration ($\beta = 0.169$, $p < 0.001$) and higher teacher self-efficacy ($\beta = 0.231$, $p < 0.001$). Crucially, collaboration mediated the relationship between perceived leadership and efficacy ($\beta_{\text{indirect}} = 0.050$, 95% CI [0.035, 0.067]), indicating that teachers experienced transformational leadership not only through direct interactions with their principal but through the relational transformation of the staff collective. This mediation finding is theoretically important: it suggests that principals' most significant leadership leverage is exercised not in individual mentoring relationships but in the collaborative culture they cultivate.

Liu, Hallinger, and Feng (2022) corroborated this finding through multilevel analysis, documenting that, teachers under transformational principals reported a 23% stronger sense of collective teacher efficacy compared to those in schools with lower principal transformational



leadership scores. Teachers attributed this difference not to any single leadership behavior but to an accumulated sense that their principal trusted the faculty's collective professional judgment, creating deliberate structures for joint decision-making, peer observation, and shared curriculum design. This structural investment in collaboration signaled to teachers that their expertise was valued, a perception that Bandura (1997) identified as fundamental to the development of collective efficacy beliefs.

Zeng, Wong, and Li (2023) added nuance to the collaboration theme by examining teachers' perceptions of professional learning community (PLC) development under transformational principals. Teachers described PLCs as meaningful only when their principal sustained an ongoing presence in collaborative activities, attending joint planning sessions, engaging with lesson study findings, and demonstrating genuine intellectual curiosity about pedagogical challenges. When principals established PLCs as formal structures but subsequently delegated their facilitation to middle managers without sustained personal engagement, teachers reported perceiving collaboration as administrative compliance rather than genuine professional inquiry. This distinction between structurally enacted and relationally sustained collaboration reflects the importance of what Sergiovanni (1992) termed "leadership density", the depth and authenticity of a leader's embedding in the school's professional life.

Cultural dynamics again emerged as significant moderators. In Chinese schools characterized by high power distance, Liu et al. (2020) found that teachers' willingness to engage in genuine collaborative dialogue was strongly conditioned by their perception of the principal's openness to dissent. Even when principals formally invited participation, teachers calibrated the depth of their contributions according to perceived safety, assessing whether the principal genuinely welcomed alternative perspectives or merely sought surface-level consensus. Teachers who perceived their principal as genuinely open to challenge reported qualitatively richer collaborative experiences and stronger collective efficacy beliefs. This finding suggests that transformational leadership in high power-distance contexts must actively and visibly disrupt hierarchical communication norms to create conditions for authentic collaboration.

However, teachers also consistently identified structural constraints that limited collaboration even under genuinely transformational principals. Xie (2022) and Zeng et al. (2023) both documented that heavy administrative workloads, rigid timetabling, and class-size pressures severely restricted the time available for collaborative professional activity. Teachers described the resulting experience as a kind of "frustrated collegiality", valuing the collaborative intent signaled by their principal but unable to fully realize it within structural conditions that prioritized



exam preparation and administrative compliance. This tension resonates with Hargreaves and O'Connor's (2018) concept of "contrived collegiality," where structural imperatives undermine the relational authenticity that genuine professional collaboration requires.

Practical implication: Principals should invest not only in establishing collaborative structures but in sustaining personal engagement within them, attending planning sessions, modeling reflective dialogue, and explicitly welcoming professional dissent. Policy-level interventions should protect structured collaboration time within teachers' weekly schedules and reduce administrative burdens that fragment professional engagement. Leadership performance evaluations should include collaborative culture indicators alongside conventional administrative metrics.

Theme 3: Perceived Challenges and Contextual Limitations in the Enactment of Transformational Leadership

The third theme reflects teachers' nuanced awareness of the systemic, cultural, and organizational constraints that complicate, dilute, or contradict the enactment of transformational leadership in Chinese schools. While teachers generally held positive evaluations of transformational leadership as an ideal, their perceptual accounts revealed sophisticated understandings of the structural tensions that limited its realization in practice. These perceptions were not simply cynical reactions to leadership failure but reflective assessments of how institutional conditions created friction between transformational aspirations and organizational realities.

Hallinger and Liu (2020) identified the most pervasive structural constraint as the tension between decentralization rhetoric and recentralization practice in Chinese educational governance. Teachers observed that principals who publicly espoused participatory, innovation-oriented leadership simultaneously faced intense pressure from district authorities to maintain examination performance rankings and comply with policy directives that left limited discretion for school-level experimentation. Teachers perceived this structural double-bind as a form of "leadership inauthenticity by constraint", recognizing that their principals' failure to fully deliver on transformational promises was not a reflection of character but of system-level contradictions. This nuanced distinction between leadership limitation and leadership failure is theoretically significant, as it suggests that teachers' trust perceptions are more structurally sophisticated than conventional leadership models acknowledge.

Wang and Chan (2015) documented teachers' perceptions of what they termed a



"rhetoric-reality gap", a perceived discrepancy between principals' transformational language and the persistence of bureaucratic management practices in day-to-day school operations. Teachers reported that when this gap was large and sustained, it generated a form of cynical disengagement that was particularly resistant to subsequent leadership efforts. Significantly, teachers who had experienced consistent rhetoric-reality gaps described their perceptions of transformational leadership as "performative", effective for generating temporary motivation but unable to sustain deeper professional commitment. This finding resonates with Argyris and Schön's (1978) distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-use, suggesting that teachers evaluate principal authenticity through behavioral consistency rather than rhetorical sophistication.

Cultural hierarchy emerged as an independent constraint operating through teacher agency rather than principal behavior. Liu, Hallinger, and Feng (2022) found that even in schools where transformational principals actively invited teacher participation and dissent, cultural norms of hierarchical deference led many teachers to self-censor professional opinions, maintain surface-level consensus, and defer decision-making authority to their principal. Teachers described this behavior not as imposed compliance but as a habituated cultural script, an automatic response to authority figures that proved difficult to rewrite even when principals explicitly created space for alternative voices. This cultural inhibition of participatory leadership aligns with Hofstede's (2001) power distance framework and represents a significant structural challenge for transformational leadership in Chinese educational settings, where the goal of distributed professional agency must contend with deeply socialized patterns of institutional deference.

Chen (2020) highlighted an additional perceptual challenge arising from school size and leadership proximity. In larger secondary schools, teachers reported experiencing transformational leadership primarily through institutional symbols, school mission statements, professional development events, and formal communication channels, rather than through direct personal interaction with their principal. This mediated experience of leadership produced a qualitatively different and generally less powerful perceptual engagement than the direct relational contact available in smaller schools. Teachers in large schools were more likely to evaluate their principal's transformational qualities abstractly, based on institutional reputation and formal decisions, rather than through the immediate emotional and relational cues that generate trust and motivation in smaller professional communities.

Generational and experiential differences in perception also emerged as a recurring finding. Chen (2020) and Hallinger and Liu (2020) both documented that younger teachers,



particularly those in the early stages of their careers, tended to perceive transformational leadership as energizing and professionally affirming, responding positively to principals who articulated ambitious educational visions and offered personalized mentorship. More experienced teachers, by contrast, were more perceptually attuned to the structural limitations of leadership and more likely to evaluate transformational initiatives skeptically unless accompanied by tangible changes in institutional conditions. This generational differentiation in perception suggests that transformational leadership strategies should be developmentally calibrated, with different engagement approaches for early-career teachers and career veterans.

A recent longitudinal study by Leithwood et al. (2022) provides broader contextual support for these findings, demonstrating that teachers' perceptions of principal leadership authenticity are cumulative, formed through repeated interactions over time and highly resistant to revision once negative perceptions have solidified. This temporal dimension of perception is rarely addressed in cross-sectional surveys of transformational leadership and represents a significant gap in how the field conceptualizes leadership impact in school communities.

Practical implication: Leadership development in China should explicitly address the structural constraints that create rhetoric-reality gaps, equipping principals with strategies for communicating honestly about governance pressures while sustaining transformational cultural commitments. Preparation programs should include culturally specific training on facilitating genuine participation in high power-distance environments, moving beyond formal participatory structures to the relational and communicative behaviors that make participation psychologically safe. Policy reforms should reduce examination-oriented performance pressures that constrain principals' capacity to honor transformational commitments to innovation and professional autonomy.

CONCLUSION

This study synthesized six peer-reviewed studies to examine how teachers and school staff in Chinese schools perceive their principals' transformational leadership practices. Three interconnected themes were identified: trust and emotional connection as the foundational dimension of perceived transformational leadership; the perceived impact of such leadership on teacher collaboration and collective efficacy; and the structural, cultural, and contextual constraints that teachers perceive as limiting the authentic enactment of transformational leadership.

The study's first theoretical contribution lies in demonstrating that teachers' perceptions



of transformational leadership in China are fundamentally relational rather than behavioral. Teachers evaluate their principals not primarily through the lens of behavioral dimensions, vision articulation, intellectual stimulation, or individual consideration, but through the lens of relational authenticity, moral consistency, and sustained emotional investment. This relational perception framework has significant implications for how transformational leadership theory is operationalized in cultural contexts where interpersonal trust and moral authority carry particularly high evaluative weight.

The second contribution is the identification of what might be termed perceptual mediation of cultural constraints. Teachers in Chinese schools demonstrated sophisticated awareness of the systemic pressures that limited their principals' transformational agency, distinguishing between leadership failure rooted in character and leadership limitation rooted in institutional contradiction. This nuanced perceptual capacity suggests that teachers are not passive recipients of leadership but active interpreters who contextualize leadership behavior within broader understandings of organizational and cultural constraint. This insight extends Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) by demonstrating that reciprocal engagement between teachers and principals is shaped not only by the quality of immediate exchanges but by teachers' broader structural attributions of leadership intent and capacity.

The third contribution concerns the role of collective efficacy as a perceptual outcome of transformational leadership. Evidence from Xie (2022) and Liu et al. (2022) demonstrates that teachers experience transformational leadership most powerfully not in individual dyadic interactions but in the collaborative culture it generates across the staff collective. This finding suggests that transformational leadership theory should place greater analytical emphasis on the collegial and community-level outcomes of principal behavior, outcomes that unfold over time through accumulated relational and structural investment rather than through discrete leadership acts.

Several limitations of this study warrant acknowledgment. The evidence base of six studies, while carefully selected, limits the breadth of contextual variation captured in the synthesis. The exclusive focus on English-language publications may exclude important Chinese-language scholarship that would enrich the perceptual account. Future research should prioritize longitudinal qualitative methodologies, including narrative inquiry, shadowing, and experience sampling, to capture the temporal development of teacher perceptions across leadership tenures. Comparative studies across school types, regional educational cultures within China, and cross-national East Asian contexts would further illuminate how cultural, institutional, and demographic



variables modulate teachers' perceptual experiences of transformational leadership.

In conclusion, this study affirms that the ultimate measure of transformational leadership in Chinese schools lies not in the behavioral profile of the principal but in the relational quality of the professional community created. When teachers experience their principal as trustworthy, emotionally present, and genuinely committed to their professional flourishing, within conditions that provide real autonomy and structural support, transformational leadership achieves its deepest educational purpose: the transformation of a collection of individual professionals into a community of shared purpose, collective confidence, and sustained educational commitment.

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