

Ethical Leadership and Organizational Climate in Chinese Higher Education: A Conceptual Framework and Propositions

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Abstract

China's higher education system is undergoing a significant transformation, shifting from a phase of quantitative expansion to one focused on quality assurance and internal governance. Within this reforming context, the behavior of academic leaders has become a critical determinant of how faculty members perceive and navigate the changing professional landscape. While existing literature acknowledges the positive influence of ethical leadership on organizational outcomes, few studies have examined the boundary conditions of this relationship within the specific hierarchical and cultural dynamics of Chinese universities. Drawing on Social Learning Theory, this paper proposes a conceptual framework to explicate the mechanism linking perceived ethical leadership practices—communication of standards, fair decision-making, role modeling, and reinforcement—to organizational climate. Crucially, this study introduces a theoretical innovation by positioning academic leaders' demographic characteristics as pivotal moderators. We advance propositions arguing that the positive association between ethical leadership and organizational climate is not uniform but is strengthened by the leader's institutional legitimacy: specifically, the relationship is theorized to be stronger when academic leaders hold higher administrative ranks, possess longer tenure in their positions, and hold higher academic degrees. This framework offers a nuanced perspective on university governance, suggesting that the effectiveness of ethical signaling is contingent upon "who" the leader is in terms of authority and history. The paper concludes with implications for leadership selection and development in the pursuit of sustainable higher education development.

Keywords

Ethical Leadership; Organizational Climate; Chinese Higher Education; Academic Leaders; Social Learning Theory; Leader Demographics

1. Introduction

China's higher education system is currently navigating a profound period of transformation, shifting strategically from a phase of rapid quantitative expansion to-

ward a model prioritizing connotation development, quality assurance, and internal governance. This systemic evolution places unprecedented demands on universities to move beyond simple metric-based management and instead foster environments characterized by fairness, transparency, and academic integrity. Within this reforming landscape, the governance of academic units has become increasingly complex, as institutions strive to balance administrative efficiency with the collegial values necessary for innovation. As universities recalibrate their incentives and operational rules, the "human element" of governance—specifically the behavior of academic leaders—has emerged as a critical filter through which faculty experience these reforms. The manner in which leaders interpret policies, interact with staff, and model professional standards does not merely influence individual performance; it fundamentally shapes the collective organizational climate. This paper explores the theoretical nexus between ethical leadership and organizational climate in Chinese universities, positing that the specific demographic and professional attributes of leaders serve as pivotal boundary conditions in this dynamic.

1.1. Evolving Governance in Chinese Higher Education

Recent policy shifts in China have redefined the professional context for university teachers, moving evaluation criteria beyond narrow counts of papers and titles toward a more holistic appreciation of representative achievements and process integrity. These reforms implicitly ask universities to strengthen internal collaboration and ensure that promotion and appraisal systems are perceived as just. However, the translation of these high-level mandates into everyday practice—spanning workload allocation, mentoring, and resource distribution—often generates friction and ambiguity at the operational level. As institutions attempt to embed a "quality culture," they frequently encounter the tension between traditional hierarchical administration and the need for collegial support (Demissie & Egziabher, 2022; Nygren-Landgärds et al., 2024). In this environment, the legitimacy of governance relies heavily on whether immediate academic leaders can explain rationales clearly and apply standards consistently. When governance is perceived as purely managerial or inconsistent, it risks eroding the trust and collegiality that are essential for a thriving academic community (Cloete et al., 2023; Serpa & Sá, 2022). Thus, the success of these reforms depends significantly on the capacity of leaders to bridge the gap between policy intent and faculty experience.

1.2. The Imperative of Ethical Leadership

Against this backdrop of reform-induced uncertainty, ethical leadership serves as a vital stabilizing mechanism. Ethical leadership is defined not merely by the absence of misconduct, but by the demonstration and promotion of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships (Ahmed, 2023; Amir et al., 2023). In academic settings, faculty members scrutinize their leaders for signals of fairness, integrity, and care. When academic leaders successfully model

these behaviors and communicate standards transparently, they reduce the interpretive ambiguity surrounding new policies, thereby fostering an organizational climate marked by psychological safety and role clarity (Cakir et al., 2023; Tufan et al., 2023). Conversely, where ethical practices are weak, ambiguous, or seemingly disconnected from the leaders' own behavior, perceptions of procedural justice weaken, leading to cynicism or withdrawal (Al Halbusi, Ismail, & Omar, 2021). Consequently, ethical leadership functions as a central driver in shaping a positive organizational climate, converting abstract governance goals into tangible perceptions of support and justice.

1.3. Toward a Contextualized Framework

Although the link between ethical leadership and positive organizational outcomes is well-documented in international literature, substantial gaps remain regarding its operation within the specific context of Chinese higher education. Existing studies often draw from K-12 settings or Western corporate models, which may not fully capture the unique "dual power structure" of administrative and academic authority in Chinese universities (Chaiyasat et al., 2025). More critically, current research tends to treat leadership influence as a uniform force, overlooking how the leader's own professional and demographic attributes—such as administrative rank, tenure in position, and academic degree—condition their effectiveness (Alharthi, 2024; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). We argue that these characteristics are not mere background variables but are instrumental in determining the signal strength and legitimacy of ethical behaviors. This paper addresses this theoretical void by proposing a conceptual framework that integrates Social Learning Theory with an analysis of academic authority. We advance the proposition that the relationship between perceived ethical leadership practices and organizational climate is moderated by the leader's status and history, offering a more nuanced understanding of how governance is enacted in Chinese universities.

2. Theoretical Background

To construct a robust conceptual framework for ethical leadership in Chinese higher education, it is necessary to first situate the inquiry within the specific governance environment of the region and then explicate the behavioral mechanisms through which leadership influences collective perceptions. This chapter anchors the study in two complementary domains: the evolving context of university governance in China, which defines the structural constraints and opportunities for leadership, and Social Learning Theory, which provides the explanatory lens for understanding how faculty members observe, interpret, and emulate the ethical cues provided by their academic supervisors. By integrating these perspectives, we establish the theoretical basis for proposing that leadership effectiveness is not absolute but is contingent upon both the institutional setting and the leader's specific attributes.

2.1. The Context of Governance in Chinese Universities

Governance in Chinese universities is characterized by a unique dual power structure that intertwines administrative authority with academic autonomy. While recent reforms have sought to emphasize "quality culture" and internal quality assurance, the legacy of centralized administration often creates a tension between managerial efficiency and collegial values (Iqbal et al., 2023; Nygren-Landgårds et al., 2024). In many institutions, the organizational climate is shaped by this interplay; faculty members must navigate an environment that values academic freedom and innovation yet operates under strict performance evaluations and administrative hierarchies. The literature suggests that in such transitional contexts, "collegiality" is not a given but is a fragile state that must be actively cultivated through trust and shared decision-making (Cloete et al., 2023; Serpa & Sá, 2022).

However, the dominance of quantitative metrics in the past decade has, in some instances, eroded this trust, replacing intrinsic professional bonds with transactional relationships. Studies indicate that when governance becomes overly managerial or "metric-fixated," it can suppress the psychological safety required for innovation and open communication (Makaryan, 2023; Sadry et al., 2022). Consequently, the organizational climate in Chinese academic units is highly sensitive to the signals sent by local leaders. Whether a unit feels "bureaucratic and controlling" or "supportive and innovative" often depends less on university-level bylaws and more on how immediate academic leaders mediate these pressures. This dependency highlights the necessity of ethical leadership, which focuses on fairness and transparency, as a counterbalance to the potential alienation caused by rigid structural governance (Demissie & Egziabher, 2022).

2.2. Theoretical Lens

Social Learning Theory offers a compelling mechanism to explain how the personal conduct of academic leaders translates into the shared "organizational climate" of a university unit. Within this theoretical tradition, leaders are viewed as primary role models whose behaviors provide visible cues about appropriate conduct and valued norms (Ahmed, 2023; Amir et al., 2023). In the complex and often ambiguous environment of higher education, faculty members look to their leaders to reduce uncertainty. Through a process of observational learning, teachers monitor whether their leaders communicate standards clearly, make decisions fairly, and discipline consistent with stated values.

When leaders act as "moral managers"—explicitly modeling ethical behavior and using the reward system to reinforce it—they make ethics a salient feature of the work environment (Zhang et al., 2023). This process goes beyond mere imitation; it involves the internalization of observed values into a collective belief system. For instance, candid communication and the admission of mistakes by a leader can signal that the unit is a safe place for voice and risk-taking, thereby directly shaping the

"psychological safety" dimension of the organizational climate (Cakir et al., 2023; Liu & Yin, 2023). Furthermore, positive reciprocity suggests that when teachers experience fair treatment and genuine care (reinforcement), they are more likely to engage in knowledge sharing and collaborative behaviors, which are foundational to a collegial climate (Su et al., 2021; Wu, 2021). Thus, Social Learning Theory provides the causal logic for our framework: organizational climate is not randomly distributed but is, to a significant degree, a learned response to the consistent ethical modeling provided by academic leaders.

3. Conceptual Framework and Propositions

Building on the premise of Social Learning Theory, this study constructs a comprehensive framework to explicate the mechanism linking leadership behaviors to organizational climate in Chinese higher education. We posit that while ethical leadership provides the foundational cues for a positive climate, the transmission of these cues is not uniform; rather, it is contingent upon the leader's specific authority and history within the institution. Accordingly, the following sections delineate the direct relationship between ethical practices and climate, followed by an analysis of how academic leaders' demographic characteristics—specifically position, tenure, and educational attainment—function as critical boundary conditions that amplify or dampen this association.

3.1. The Direct Link

Organizational climate serves as the proximal lens through which university teachers interpret their work environment. We propose that ethical leadership practices—encompassing the communication of standards, fair decision-making, role modeling, and reinforcement—directly shape this lens by fulfilling teachers' psychological needs for clarity and justice. When academic leaders articulate values clearly and invite questions (Communication), they effectively reduce the information asymmetry and role ambiguity that often accompany governance reforms (Cakir et al., 2023). Simultaneously, by ensuring that decisions regarding workload and promotion are transparent and unbiased (Fair Decision-Making), leaders signal that the unit operates on principles of procedural justice rather than arbitrary power (Al Halbusi, Ismail, & Omar, 2021).

Furthermore, the consistency of these behaviors is crucial. Through the mechanism of reinforcement, where ethical conduct is rewarded and violations are addressed, leaders create a predictable environment. This predictability fosters a climate of "Organizational Glue," characterized by trust and cohesion, as teachers learn that collaboration and integrity are valued over political maneuvering (Guo, 2022; Serpa & Sá, 2022). Consequently, the cumulative effect of these observable practices is a shift in collective perception from uncertainty to psychological safety and engagement.

Proposition 1: Perceived ethical leadership practices are positively associated with a favorable organizational climate, characterized by higher levels of trust, role clarity, and participative decision-making.

3.2. The Moderating Role of Academic Leaders' Characteristics

While ethical behavior is universally desirable, its impact on organizational climate is likely conditioned by the "source credibility" of the leader. We argue that in the hierarchical and knowledge-intensive context of Chinese universities, a leader's demographic attributes—position, tenure, and degree—determine the weight and visibility of their ethical signals. These characteristics shape the authority, stability, and expertise that faculty members attribute to their leaders, thereby moderating the strength of the leadership-climate relationship.

3.2.1. Position and Rank

In university governance, administrative rank (e.g., Dean vs. Program Director) is a proxy for formal authority and resource control. Leaders holding higher positions possess a wider span of influence and greater capacity to convert ethical commitments into tangible structural changes, such as resource allocation or policy enforcement (Berhanu, 2025). When a high-ranking leader models ethical behavior, the signal "travels farther" and registers more profoundly across the unit, as teachers perceive the leader as having the actual power to enforce the standards they articulate. Conversely, ethical gestures from leaders with limited formal authority may be viewed as well-intentioned but structurally ineffectual, resulting in a weaker impact on the overall climate.

Proposition 2: The positive relationship between ethical leadership practices and organizational climate is moderated by the leader's position or rank, such that the association is stronger when the academic leader holds a higher administrative rank.

3.2.2. Tenure in Position

Trust and reputation are time-dependent constructs. The length of time a leader has served in their current position influences the perceived stability and consistency of their behavior. Long-tenured leaders have an established history that allows teachers to verify that ethical actions are a genuine trait rather than a temporary performance (Çevik & Doğan, 2025). This accumulated "relational credit" means that their communication of standards is received with greater acceptance, and their reinforcement of conduct is seen as predictable. In contrast, for leaders with short tenure, faculty members may remain in a "wait-and-see" mode; thus, even if the leader exhibits ethical behaviors, these actions may not yet fully translate into a stable organizational climate due to the lack of historical validation.

Proposition 3: The positive relationship between ethical leadership practices and

organizational climate is moderated by the leader's tenure, such that the association is stronger when the academic leader has served longer in the position.

3.2.3. Highest Degree

Universities are distinctive organizations where authority is derived not only from office but also from expertise. The highest degree held by a leader (e.g., Doctorate vs. Master's) functions as a marker of "cognitive authority" and academic legitimacy. In a community of scholars, leaders with higher educational attainment are often perceived as more credible regarding the core academic mission (Berhanu, 2025). When a leader with high academic credibility engages in ethical practices—such as fair evaluation of research—these actions are more likely to be internalized by faculty as professionally valid benchmarks. This "expert power" amplifies the effect of their leadership on the climate, whereas leaders perceived as lacking academic credentials may face skepticism, dampening the transfer of their ethical behaviors into shared norms.

Proposition 4: The positive relationship between ethical leadership practices and organizational climate is moderated by the leader's educational attainment, such that the association is stronger when the academic leader holds a higher academic degree.

4. Discussion

The conceptual framework developed in this study offers a nuanced perspective on the dynamics of governance in Chinese higher education by bridging the gap between individual leadership behaviors and collective organizational climate. While prior research has established the general efficacy of ethical leadership, our analysis suggests that in the specific context of university reforms, the impact of such leadership is not automatic but is significantly conditioned by the "source characteristics" of the leader. By integrating Social Learning Theory with an understanding of academic hierarchy, we argue that the transmission of ethical cues—fairness, integrity, and transparency—is amplified or dampened by the leader's administrative rank, tenure stability, and academic legitimacy. This section elucidates the theoretical advancements of this model, its practical imperatives for university administration, and the boundaries that future empirical work must address.

4.1. Theoretical Contributions

This study advances the literature on educational administration in two primary ways. First, it responds to recent calls for contextualized research by situating ethical leadership within the "dual power structure" of Chinese universities (Chaiyasat et al., 2025). Unlike corporate settings where authority is often linear, the academic environment requires leaders to navigate both administrative mandates and scholarly values. Our framework posits that organizational climate in this setting is a ne-

gotiated outcome, where ethical leadership serves as the critical mechanism that aligns these potentially conflicting logics. By defining specific pathways—such as how "communication of standards" reduces reform-induced ambiguity—we provide a granular explanation of how macro-level policies are translated into micro-level psychological safety (Cakir et al., 2023).

Second, and perhaps more significantly, this paper challenges the implicit assumption of "leader homogeneity" in existing ethical leadership models. By introducing demographic characteristics (position, tenure, degree) as moderators, we extend Social Learning Theory to account for the credibility of the role model. We theorize that in knowledge-intensive organizations, the "signal strength" of ethical behavior is dependent on the leader's status. A leader with a doctoral degree or high administrative rank possesses "cognitive authority," which makes their ethical modeling more visible and persuasive to faculty members (Berhanu, 2025). This aligns with and extends findings on "moral efficacy," suggesting that a leader's capacity to shape climate is a function of both their moral conduct and their institutional standing (Mohi Ud Din et al., 2025).

4.2. Practical Implications

The propositions advanced in this study hold actionable implications for policy-makers and university administrators striving to build "World-Class Universities." First, regarding leadership selection and appointment, the framework suggests that moral competence cannot be divorced from academic and administrative legitimacy. When appointing deans or department chairs, universities should prioritize candidates who not only demonstrate integrity but also hold sufficient academic weight (e.g., high degrees) and administrative rank to enforce ethical standards. An ethical leader without the requisite "expert power" may struggle to convert their personal virtues into a unit-wide climate (George & Rose, 2025).

Second, the moderating role of tenure implies a need to rethink rotational policies. Frequent leadership turnover may undermine the formation of a stable organizational climate, as teachers require time to verify the consistency of a leader's ethical signals. To foster trust and "organizational glue," institutions should consider longer appointment cycles or staggered terms that allow leaders to build the necessary relational history with their faculty (Bujang et al., 2025). Finally, leadership development programs should be differentiated. For younger or lower-ranked leaders, training must emphasize explicit communication and consistent reinforcement to compensate for their lower initial authority, helping them build legitimacy through behavior rather than status alone (Ahmed, 2023).

4.3. Limitations and Future Research

While this paper provides a robust theoretical foundation, it is limited by its conceptual nature. The propositions presented are derived from logic and literature

synthesis rather than empirical data. Consequently, the actual magnitude of the moderating effects of rank, tenure, and degree remains to be quantified. Future research should prioritize empirical validation of this model using survey-based designs, collecting data from a diverse sample of Chinese universities to test the statistical significance of the proposed interactions. Additionally, while we focused on demographic moderators, future inquiries could expand the framework to examine how "institutional types" (e.g., research-intensive vs. teaching-oriented universities) might further condition these relationships, potentially revealing distinct governance patterns across different tiers of the higher education system.

5. Conclusion

As Chinese universities continue their ambitious pursuit of world-class status, the focus of governance reform has irreversibly shifted from the accumulation of external indicators to the cultivation of internal quality and procedural justice. This study has argued that in such a transitional era, the abstract principles of policy are only as effective as the leaders who embody them. We have proposed a conceptual framework that positions ethical leadership not merely as a moral desideratum but as a functional necessity for establishing a constructive organizational climate. By reducing uncertainty and fostering trust, ethical leaders bridge the gap between rigid administrative mandates and the flexible, collegial environment required for academic innovation.

Crucially, this paper moves beyond a "one-size-fits-all" understanding of leadership influence. By integrating the demographic characteristics of academic leaders into our theoretical model, we have highlighted that the impact of ethical behavior is deeply intertwined with the leader's institutional legitimacy. The propositions advanced here suggest that the "signal strength" of integrity is significantly amplified when the leader possesses the authority of high rank, the stability of long tenure, and the cognitive credibility of a high academic degree. Consequently, university governance cannot be optimized simply by training leaders on how to behave; it must also strategically consider who is placed in these pivotal roles. Ultimately, for Chinese higher education to achieve its goal of sustainable, quality-oriented development, it must recognize that ethical leadership is a strategic asset, one that requires both the right behaviors and the right messengers to truly transform the organizational climate.

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