

The Influence of Paternalistic leadership on Employees Voice in China's SMEs: the Mediating Role of Employee Trust and the Moderating Role of Zhongyong Thinking

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Abstract. This paper takes SMEs in China as the research object and developed a conceptual model and established hypotheses based on analyzing the existing literature from the perspective of relevant theories of management. The aim of the study is to explore the influence of paternalistic leadership on employees voice by taking employee trust as the mediating variable and Zhongyong thinking as the moderating variable. By analyzing the data of 400 valid questionnaires issued by employees of SMEs in China. The results further verified the positive impact of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior, and employee trust positively influences employee voice, Zhongyong thinking has a significant positive moderating effect on employee trust and employee voice, and it was found that the moderating effect increases with a higher degree of Zhongyong thinking. Which contributed to the research in related fields, and put forward reasonable suggestions for encouraging employees' voice behavior in SMEs: leadership styles should be adjusted to encourage the voice of employees; trust signals should be released to enhance employee trust; employees should be cultivated with high Zhongyong thinking; a good atmosphere and multi-channel counseling mechanism should be established.

Keywords: Paternalistic leadership · Employee trust · Zhongyong thinking · Employee voice · SMEs

1. Introduction

China's small and medium-sized enterprises, which are weak in the foundation, are exposed to the dynamic competitive economic environment in the post-covid 19 period. In this context, SMEs need to adapt quickly to market changes and development trends to survive and expand. However, it is far from enough to rely on the strength of enterprise management alone. Therefore, attention has been shifted to employees' voice behaviors. Managers are encouraged to listen to their employee's voice and co-develop business strategies.

Employees' work competence can be reflected from their contribution of innovative capability, and thus their counseling behavior has become essential to the learning efficiency and innovation performance of enterprises. Employee voice is an effective way for employees to participate in enterprise management and decision-making, which is conducive to improving employees' sense of belonging, enthusiasm and organizational commitment.

At the same time, it is also conducive to enterprises to identify problems and make timely strategy adjustment to achieve scientific and effective business decision. A win-win situation can be achieved between employees and enterprises. However, China has a history of 5000 years and is deeply influenced by the Confucian ideology and culture. The Chinese people are characterized by keeping silent. Zhongyong thinking (the doctrine of mean) has an important impact on the Chinese people's behavior. Employees are less inclined to participate in making suggestions in the enterprise, and even refuse to make suggestions to avoid risks. When the enterprise requires employees to commentate and judge current situation or point out problems in the enterprise, the employees usually keep silent. They tend to think that advice means a change to the balance of the current situation, which may cause damage to other members' interests. Therefore, advice provider is regarded as a troublemaker and a saboteur of credibility. Faced with negative evaluation and other adverse impacts and risks of being isolated, employees often turn a blind eye to the existing problems or dare not express them. Therefore, how to create a trust and harmonious organizational atmosphere and stimulate employees' suggestions plays a vital role in the development of SMEs in China.

Scholars found that the leadership style in an enterprise exert an influence on employees' voice behavior, and different leadership styles produce different employees' voice behaviors. Chinese culture is featured by a deep-rooted Confucian ideology. The core concept of "benevolence" influences family ethical relationship. Under this background, the paternalistic leadership style is more suitable to analyze employees' work mode. The research on paternalistic leadership originated in the 1960s. Silin (1976) put forward the concept of "paternalistic leadership" for the first time after studying the leadership behavior of a large enterprise in Taiwan. Redding and Hsiao (1990) summarized the leadership behavior of "benevolent leadership" on the basis of Silin et al. and the field survey results of enterprises in Southeast Asia, and believed that the main feature of this behavior was "kindness". Cheng *et al.* (2000) and Pan (2022) believes that paternalistic leadership is promoting employees' voice behavior. paternalistic leadership is a common way of leadership in Chinese enterprises. Leaders in this way not only impose strict requirements on employees, but also care and condole for employees in life. They not only pay attention to employees' work performance, but also safeguard their interests, so as to gain employees' loyalty to their superiors and organizations.

Trust is essential in the management of an enterprise. Mayer *et al.* (1995) explained trust as a model, that is, the degree of trust in others and the level of risk perception jointly determine employees' willingness to take risks. McAllister (1995) summarized the definition of trust based on previous studies, and proposed employees decided whether to take risks on others' trust perceived from the language, will and behavior of others. Jones and George (1998) regarded trust as the result of the interaction of values, attitudes, emotions and emotions between people, and trust change over time. They also discussed the influence of trust on cooperation and team spirit. Shao (2018) believed that increasing trust contributes to achieving leadership goals and improving leadership efficiency. Wang Chao and

Wang Yifan (2022) defined employee trust as a positive expectation of leadership behavior in the workplace, and a willingness to undertake the risks of being dominated by leaders.

Confucius, an educator, first put forward the concept of Zhongyong thinking (the doctrine of mean). Confucius believed that Zhongyong thinking is a moral character, which changes over time. He emphasized that it is a flexible and appropriate way of dealing with people. Psychologists Yang and Chiu (1997) first carried out the research on the operational definition of Zhongyong thinking and put forward a metacognitive system of Zhongyong thinking. The core is "balance". The system consists of eight sub-concepts, namely, observing changes, taking harmony as precious, bipolar thinking, overall situation being important, being reasonable, retreating as progress, focusing on consequences, and not going to extremes. Wu and Lin (2005) defined the Zhongyong thinking as a way of thinking about the overall situation through comprehensive thinking. They think that the core of the Zhongyong thinking is "multi-way thinking"; secondly, it reflects the connotation of "harmony" and integrates the other two components of the doctrine of the mean: "integration" and "harmony". Yang and Lin (2012) believed that the doctrine of the mean is a macro thinking system that includes values, action goals, and plans. Sun *et al.* (2014) regarded the Zhongyong thinking as a way of thinking that integrates internal needs with external environment and considers the consequences. Huo (2022) thinks that employees with high Zhongyong thinking are more comprehensive and holistic in thinking. They tend to solve problems from the whole perspective and better understand leaders' intentions, seek support and conceive from leaders, and thus they have a better sense of responsibility.

Previous studies show Zhongyong thinking has three features. First, the Zhongyong thinking is seen as a dialectical thinking. Peng K (1999) stated that the Zhongyong thinking is commonly used way of thinking for Chinese people who hold the belief that all things have moderate rationality, and that all things includes dialectics and integrity. Second, Zhongyong thinking is a kind of rationality. Zhang *et al.* (2001) believed that Zhongyong thinking refers to the state of "going beyond is just as wrong as not going far enough", "being just perfect", or an action orientation to achieve this state. Similar to rationality, Zhongyong thinking is characterized by both adhering to principles. Third, Zhongyong thinking derives from wisdom. Chang *et al.* (2014) stated that the six dimensions of wisdom include: compromise, recognition of knowledge limitations, flexibility, replacement of views, recognition of change, and provision of conflict handling. This view is similar to the constructing elements proposed by Yang Zhongfang's conceptual framework to Zhongyong thinking. The two complement each other at the methodological level and the constructive level.

Voice behavior was first proposed by Hirschman in 1970. He stated that an employee may show two behaviors under low job satisfaction: resigning or voicing. Employees with high loyalty tend to offer advice while employees with low loyalty tend to resign. Hirschman(1970) defined the voice behavior as employees willingness to take some efforts to change the current unsatisfactory situation. Farrell (1983) proposed that the definition of employee voice behavior is to find solutions to problems and solve their own dilemmas by discussing their own ideas with leaders. Employees are willing to stay in the organization and find solutions to problems and solve their own difficulties. Ye (2011) also regarded voice as a category of organizational citizenship behavior, which is the behavior of voluntarily proposing countermeasures and corrective suggestions to leaders to optimize work processes or improve the accuracy of decision-making. Weiss and Morrison (2019) believed that voice behavior can effectively prevent various crises in enterprises, help managers identify and respond to threats and opportunities, and is of great significance for promoting innovation process and team learning.

As the smallest unit to promote the high-quality development of the national economy, China's SMEs urgently need to improve the quality of development and optimize the industrial development structure. Faced with complex domestic and international situations, it is not feasible to rely solely on the information held by managers to make decisions. Influenced by the traditional concept of Zhongyong thinking, employees are reluctant to disclose or even hide their true thoughts. This may lead

to the potential problems in the development of enterprises or the problems that have been highlighted. Silence may lead managers to fail to understand the problems in the development of enterprises in time, miss the opportunity of enterprise development and even make enterprises collapse. Zeng (2010) believes that: for the organization, the importance of employee advice and evaluation is self-evident. It can help find out the deep-seated hidden problems in the process of enterprise development and help enterprise innovation, reform and development. The leader's leadership style is important for employees' willingness to make voices to enterprise development and avoid deviations in the direction of enterprise development. Therefore, this study focuses on how to change and optimize the leadership style to gather employees' wisdom and opinion, help employees to make positive suggestions and suggestions, and promote the high-quality development of enterprises.

At present, there are few empirical studies on leadership behavior and voice behavior. Although in recent years, more and more scholars have analyzed and studied related issues, there are few studies on small and medium-sized enterprises. This study uses small and medium-sized enterprise samples, draws relevant conclusions through discussion and analysis, and develops and improves the application of existing theories in China.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the influence of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior in China's SMEs, and to analyze the mediating effect of employee trust and the moderating effect of Zhongyong thinking. Based on the unique background of China, especially in Shandong, which is deeply influenced by Confucianism, this paper studies the uniqueness of paternalistic leadership in small and medium-sized enterprises, and finds out the theoretical points through the correlation between paternalistic leadership and voice behavior, so as to further explore the mechanism of paternalistic leadership.

The innovation of this study is mainly reflected in the following three aspects: 1. In the past, there were few articles on the influence of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior in small and medium-sized enterprises, and most of the research only stayed in the stage of theoretical discussion. This paper uses empirical analysis methods to explore the impact of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior in SMEs, fills in the lack of empirical research in this area, and provides suggestions and countermeasures for promoting the development of SMEs in China. Therefore, this paper has an innovative research perspective. 2. This study takes employee trust as a mediating variable and Zhongyong thinking as a moderating variable to explore the internal influence mechanism and influence path of paternalistic leadership behavior on employee voice behavior, which has certain theoretical innovation. 3. On the basis of previous studies, combined with the characteristics of China's small and medium-sized enterprises, put forward a new dimension of the doctrine of the Zhongyong thinking, respectively is: taking into account the overall situation, integration, harmony. This provides new ideas and theoretical basis for future research.

2. Literature Review and Research Hypothesis

2.1. The Influence of Paternalistic Leadership on Employee Trust

Based on a review and verification of previous studies, Wang (2013) concluded that leadership behavior will certainly affect employee trust, and when paternalistic leadership is taken as a whole, it is significantly positively correlated with employee trust. Yu *et al.* (2017) found that paternalistic leadership has a positive impact on employee trust, among which benevolent leadership and moral leadership have a significant impact on cognitive trust. Benevolent leadership and moral leadership emphasize the emotional communication between leaders and employees, which has a positive impact on emotional trust. Li (2019) concluded that paternalistic leadership has a positive interaction effect on employees' cognitive trust based on the research of Chinese public management departments. Based on the above content, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Paternalistic leadership has a significant positive impact on employee trust.

2.2. The Influence of Employee Trust on Employee Voice Behavior

Duan and Tian (2011) showed that trust can improve employees' psychological safety, reduce employees' perception of risk, and think that their behavior will not get a bad impression of leaders, thus reducing employees' silence. Jiao *et al.* (2016) stated that when the cognitive trust of employees is high, trust in the leaders' decision-making ability will give employees confidence in an uncertain environment, that the leadership is fair and will not retaliate, and therefore conducive to voice behavior. Ma (2021) stated that employee trust positively affects employee performance, voice behavior and help behavior. With leader's efforts, subordinates in this trust relationship can better fulfill their role obligations, actively make suggestions, optimize work processes, thereby improving the work efficiency of the entire team. Based on the above content, this paper proposes the following hypothesis: **Hypothesis 2:** Employee trust has a significant positive impact on employee voice behavior.

2.3. The Influence of Paternalistic Leadership on Employee Voice Behavior

Janssen (1998) verified through empirical research that one of the influencing factors of voice behavior is the attitude feedback of leaders to subordinates. Enlightened leaders who are good at listening are better at encouraging employees to voice, while authoritarian leaders are not conducive to the occurrence of voice behavior. Cheng *et al.* (2000) found that paternalistic leadership may have a positive impact on employee voice behavior. Duan (2012) research shows that voice in the organization has the risk of offending the leadership, and the moral character of the moral leadership will weaken this risk to a certain extent, mainly through improving the psychological security so that employees actively voice. Jing (2015) believed that paternalistic leadership has a positive effect on both promotive voice and prohibitive voice. Based on the above content, this paper proposes the following assumptions: **Hypothesis 3:** Paternalistic leadership has a significant positive impact on employee voice behavior.

2.4. The Moderating Effect of Zhongyong Thinking Between Employee Trust and Employee Voice Behavior

Yang (2009) stated that individuals affected by Zhongyong thinking will focus on the influence of interpersonal interaction in different scenarios when planning the best action plan. Jinyun Duan and Ling (2011) pointed out that compared with employees with low Zhongyong thinking, employees with high Zhongyong thinking tend to adapt to the specific environment and correct behavior, better understand the intention of managers, and make less mistakes. Zhao (2019) found that employees' Zhongyong thinking is positively related to their active behavior, and employees with high Zhongyong thinking tend to take the initiative to make constructive behavior. Employees with a low level of Zhongyong thinking only focus on one aspect and lack the ability to see the problem from a global perspective. They have difficulty understanding of the leadership style and tend to produce dissatisfaction, which may reduce the employees' sense of constructive responsibility. Moreover, employees with low Zhongyong thinking are relatively poor in the ability of contradictory cognition and mastery, and are prone to tangle one side of paternalistic leadership style. Once employees feel that they are not integrated into the organization and feel the support of the organization, they will reduce their perception of constructive responsibility. Zhongyong thinking is the most typical cultural feature of China. It requires attention to the driving force of interpersonal relationships and the interaction between these elements. Therefore, Zhongyong thinking can explain individual behavior differences in the same situation (Yang, 2009). Zhongyong thinking emphasizes the harmonious view of 'balance' and requires a holistic approach to deal with conflicts on the basis of enhancing organizational cohesion. Secondly, 'going beyond is just as wrong as not going far enough' and 'holding the two and using the middle' are the core of Zhongyong thinking, opposing radical behavior and requiring to seek a moderate point in the 'excessive' and 'insufficient' continuum. Specifically, in terms of employee behavior, high Zhongyong thinkers will take into account the feelings of others in their voices, control emotions

through self-restraint, and consider the words and methods in the voice process (He, 2009). Finally, 'moderate contingency' emphasizes that dealing with people is consistent with their situation. High moderate thinkers tend to have the ability to adopt others' advice and understand the thoughts, intentions and feelings of others. They receive information from multi-channels including both the ex ante environment, the ex-post results, and the interpersonal relationships associated with them. They usually deal with problems flexibly according to the situation changes. The low moderate thinkers are slow to respond to this change, showing a rigid and stubborn view. Based on the above content, this paper proposes the following assumptions:

Hypothesis 4: Zhongyong thinking has a significant positive moderating effect on employee trust and employee voice behavior.

2.5. The Mediating Effect of Employee Trust Between Paternalistic Leadership and Employee Voice Behavior

Li *et al.* (2009) showed that trust is the core of social exchange and a measure of the reliability of leadership's personality and ability. The character and values of enterprise managers will affect the behavior of employees. Shi *et al.* (2012) found that a high degree of trust in leaders can significantly improve the efficiency and effectiveness of information sharing. Humanized management and a harmonious atmosphere are conducive to strengthening employees' sense of trust, and the sense of trust can enable employees to feel the leadership's authorization, and then be more willing to express opinions and reduce the level of silence. Chen (2016) found that leadership integrity positively affects employee trust and subordinate work performance, and employee trust plays a mediating role. Based on the above studies, this paper proposes the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 5: Employee trust has a significant intermediary effect between paternalistic leadership and employee voice behavior

Based on the above hypotheses, this paper proposes the following theoretical model as shown in Figure 1.

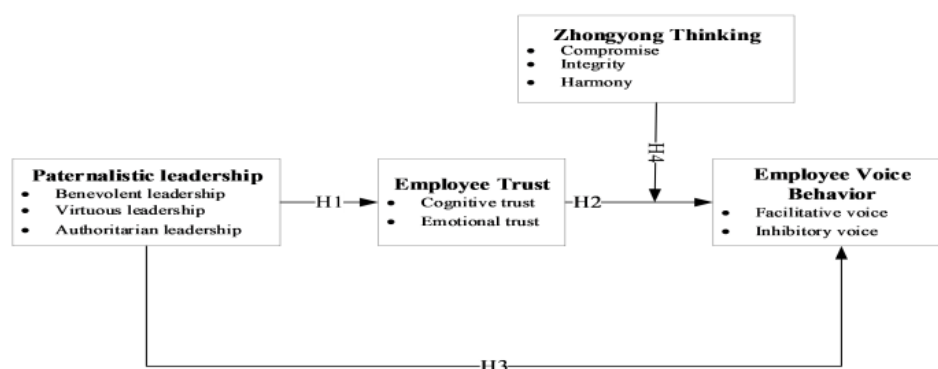


Fig.1: theoretical model

3. Research Design

3.1. Sampling

The survey objects of this study are mainly employees of small and medium-sized enterprises in China, hoping to explore the differences and effects of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior under the influence of employee trust and Zhongyong thinking. This study collects data through online questionnaires, selects the mature Likert five-point scale, and uses a simple random sampling method to distribute the questionnaires in Jinan, Tai 'an, Qingdao and other small and medium-sized enterprises in Shandong Province of China. The enterprises cover different industries, and the samples collected

are representative. From April 15, 2023 to June 15, 2023, a total of 400 questionnaires were distributed and 356 valid questionnaires were collected, with a questionnaire recovery rate of 89%.

3.2. Measuring Tools

3.2.1. Measurement of paternalistic leadership

Paternalistic leadership is a leadership style that gives temper justice with mercy. It emphasizes its own authority while caring for employees. It is a typical Chinese-style leadership. Many scholars have proved that it affects employees' voice behaviors. This study adopts the three-dimension definition by Cheng *et al.* (2000), which are benevolent, virtuous and authoritarian leadership. The measurement of paternalistic leadership mainly adopts the scale revised by Cheng *et al.* (2000) and Ju (2007). Benevolent, virtuous and authoritarian leadership each account for 5 question items, a total of 15 items. This scale has a higher reliability and validity and is applicable to the research of this paper.

3.2.2. Measurement of employee trust

Due to the different research angles of scholars, the measurement scales for employee trust are also different. In terms of the selection of trust scales, this study mainly focuses on the measurement of employees' trust in leaders. This study mainly uses Wang (2003) measurement scale, with a total of 8 items. The concept of employee trust is constructed two dimensions: emotional trust and cognitive trust. Emotional trust emphasizes emotional and subjective identification and judgment, while cognitive trust emphasizes rational judgment and the exchange of interests between the two parties.

3.2.3. Measurement of Zhongyong Thinking

Yang and Chiu (1997) constructed three levels to measure Zhongyong thinking (the doctrine of the mean thought): values, perception methods and action strategies. Chiu (2000) compiled a "Zhongyong thinking practical scale". Wu and Lin (2005) compiled a new "Zhongyong thinking scale" based on the research of Yang Zhongfang and Chiu Chi Yue and subdivided it into three parts: multi-party thinking, integration and harmony. Yang (2009) continued to improve the practice thinking system of the mean in follow-up research, and established a new three-level map of the practice thinking system of the mean. The measurement scale of Zhongyong thinking in this paper uses the three-dimensional scale designed by scholars Wu and Lin (2005), which contains 13 items. Zhongyong thinking is measured by three dimensions: compromise (taking the interests of the whole into account), integration and harmony.

3.2.4. Measurement of employee voice behavior

To measure employee voice behavior, this study adopted the scale compiled by Liang and Farh (2008), which contains 10 items and is divided into two dimensions: inhibitory voice and facilitative voice. Facilitative voice is an idea or suggestion put forward by employees based on improving the organization's operation and management. It is a kind of voice behavior that can directly improve organizational production efficiency; inhibitory voice means that employees point out existing problems encountered in their work. It is an act of advising by reducing the factors that hinder the productivity of enterprises. The scale is a measurement tool developed for the voice behavior of employees in Chinese enterprises, which can well reflect the characteristics of voice behavior in Chinese enterprises.

3.3. Statistical Analysis

This paper uses SPSS26.0 and AMOS24.0 software for data processing and analysis. First, the basic situation of the sample is examined through descriptive analysis; then, the internal consistency of the data and the discrimination between variables are tested by reliability and validity. Finally, the internal relationship between variables is studied by correlation analysis, structural equation path analysis, mediation test and moderating analysis.

4. Data Analysis Result

4.1. Demographic Information

The demographic characteristics of this survey mainly include gender, age, tenure, job level, company establishment years, company size, and company type. The gender distribution of the samples is relatively balanced, with men and women accounting for 53.7% and 46.3% respectively. The age is mainly middle-aged and elderly, and the cumulative proportion of 46-55 years old and over 55 years old is 45.6%. 10 years and above account for the highest proportion of tenure with 27.2% of the sample; the proportion of other tenures is relatively balanced. The top managers account for the first place in the job level, accounting for 32.0%. Most of the company's establishment years are 6-10 years, accounting for 22.5%; followed by the establishment of 3-5 years, accounting for 21.3%; the proportion of other choices is relatively low. According to the Chinese government's regulations on small and medium-sized enterprises, the company is mainly composed of 51-100 people, accounting for 23.0%; followed by the size of 101-300 people, accounting for 21.6%; the scale of more than 300 people is second, accounting for 20.8%; the proportion of other scales is relatively low. The company types involve various industries and are widely distributed; the top three are catering industry, real estate development and operation industry and retail industry, accounting for 7.3%, 7.3% and 7.0% respectively. On the whole, the sample covers all levels of enterprises and has good representativeness.

4.2. Reliability and Validity Test

Table 1 shows the reliability and validity analysis results of each variable. From the data in the table, it can be seen that the reliability of the paternalistic leadership scale, employee trust scale, Zhongyong thinking scale, and employee voice behavior scale are 0.930, 0.865, 0.919, 0.917, all above standard of 0.7, and the reliability of each sub-dimension of the scale is also above 0.7, indicating that the reliability is good and meets the research requirements.

In the measurement model test, $\chi^2/df=1.159$, between 1 and 3, RMR=0.018; RMSEA=0.021, both of which are less than their respective critical values of 0.08; GFI=0.982, AGFI=0.965, and the index fitting results are all greater than 0.9; NFI=0.973, IFI=0.996, TLI=0.994, CFI=0.996, the indicators are all greater than the basic requirement of 0.9; PGFI=0.518, PNFI=0.627, all greater than the standard of 0.5; indicating that the measurement model and the sample data match well, and it has good convergent validity.

The standardized factor loading of the measurement model ranges from 0.670 to 0.815, which meets the standard of being greater than 0.5, indicating that each variable measurement item has a strong explanatory power to the measurement model. The construct validity of the variables paternalistic leadership, employee trust, Zhongyong thinking, and employee voice behavior are 0.810, 0.704, 0.770, and 0.784, all greater than 0.7; the average variation extraction coefficients are 0.587, 0.543, 0.529, and 0.644, all greater than 0.5; Both reach the standard of convergent validity, and the degree of fit is also within an acceptable range, so the reliability and validity of the variables meet the statistical requirements.

Table 1: Reliability and validity test

Variables	Description of Items	Standardized Loadings	Cronbach's Alpha	CR	AVE
Paternalistic Leadership	Authoritarian leadership	0.754	0.887	0.930	0.810
	Benevolent leadership	0.792	0.901		
	Virtuous leadership	0.751	0.888		
Employee Trust	Cognitive trust	0.724	0.831	0.865	0.704
	Emotional trust	0.750	0.836		
Zhongyong Thinking	Comprise	0.711	0.863	0.919	0.529

	Integration	0.795	0.912			
	Harmony	0.670	0.891			
Employee Voice Behavior	Facilitative voice	0.790	0.887	0.917	0.784	0.644
	Inhibitory Voice	0.815	0.895			

Note: $\chi^2/df = 1.159$, GFI = 0.982, AGFI = 0.965, RMR = 0.018, RMSEA = 0.021, IFI = 0.996, TLI = 0.994, CFI = 0.996, PGFI = 0.518, PNFI = 0.627, NFI=0.973, REI=0.958

4.3. Correlation and Discriminant Validity

This study adopts AVE method to evaluate the discriminant validity. The square root value of each variable's AVE is greater than the correlation coefficient between variables, which can indicate that the variables have discriminant validity (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). The discriminant validity coefficients between the variables in this paper can be seen in Table 2

Table 2: Correlation and discriminant validity analysis results

	Mean	Std. Deviation	1	2	3	4
Paternalistic Leadership	3.701	0.745	0.766			
Employee Trust	3.703	0.622	.416**	0.737		
Zhongyong Thinking	3.783	0.705	.334**	.282**	0.727	
Employee Voice Behavior	3.680	0.778	.539**	.416**	.313**	0.802

* $p < 0.01$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.001$. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Note: 1–4 represent paternalistic leadership, employee trust, Zhongyong thinking, employee voice behavior.

It can be seen from the above table that the correlation coefficients between paternalistic leadership and employee trust and employee voice behavior are 0.416 and 0.539 respectively, which reaches the 0.05 significance level test, indicating that paternalistic leadership has a significant positive correlation with employee trust and employee voice behavior. The correlation coefficient between employee trust and employee voice behavior is 0.416, which reaches the 0.05 significance level test, indicating that there is a significant positive correlation between employee trust and employee voice behavior.

The correlation coefficients range between 0.282~0.539, and the AVE square root ranges from 0.727~0.802. It can be seen that the absolute values of the correlation coefficients between variables are all smaller than the AVE square root, indicating that the research variables in this paper have good discriminant validity, meeting the research requirements.

4.4. Structural Regression Model

The previous confirmatory factor analysis showed that the measurement model fit well, so path analysis was performed. The path coefficient and significance level results of this study are shown in Table 3.

It can be seen from the data in the table that paternalistic leadership has a significant positive impact on employee trust ($\beta=0.555$; $t=7.007$; $p<0.05$) and employee voice behavior ($\beta=0.531$; $t=6.470$; $p<0.05$); employee trust has a significant positive effect on employee voice behavior ($\beta=0.263$; $t=3.246$; $p<0.05$). Therefore, hypotheses H1-H3 are verified.

Table3: Structural equation path analysis result

Path	Standardized Coefficient	S.E	.C.R	.P
Paternalistic leadership → Employee trust	0.555	0.072	7.007	***
Employee Trust→Employee Voice Behavior	0.263	0.101	3.246	0.001
Paternalistic leadership→Employee voice behavior	0.531	0.093	6.470	***

*** p < 0.001.

4.5. Mediating Effect

This study used the Bootstrap program to test the significance of the mediating effect (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). It can be seen from Table 4 that the 95% confidence interval of the indirect effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior is [0.009,0.294], 0 is not included, so the mediating effect is significant. The 95% confidence interval of the direct effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior is [0.309,0.765], which does not include 0, so part of the mediating effect is significant. The indirect effect value is 0.146, the direct effect value is 0.531, and the total effect value is 0.677. The ratio of the indirect effect to the total effect is $0.146/0.677=0.216$, when paternalistic leadership affects employees' voice behavior, 21.6% of the variation is caused by employee trust. Hypothesis H4 is verified.

Table4: Mediating effect

Effect	Estimate	SE	95% CI		P
			Lower	Upper	
Standardized Total Effects	0.677	0.074	0.523	0.816	0.001
Standardized Indirect Effects	0.146	0.070	0.009	0.294	0.033
Standardized Direct Effects	0.531	0.117	0.309	0.765	0.001

4.6. Moderating Effect

In this study, the SPSS Process confidence interval macro program bootstrap method was used to analyze and test the moderating effect. It can be seen from Table 5 that the regression coefficient of the interaction item employee trust × Zhongyong thinking reaches the significance test at the level of 0.05, and the confidence interval [0.489, 0.759], which does not include 0. Therefore, Zhongyong thinking has a significant moderating effect on the relationship between employee trust and employee voice behavior effect. Therefore, hypothesis H5 is verified.

The employee trust × Zhongyong thinking coefficient is positive, indicating that Zhongyong thinking has a positive moderating effect on the positive relationship between employee trust and employee voice behavior, that is, if the Zhongyong thinking is high, the positive impact of employee trust on employee voice behavior will be strengthened.

Table 5: Moderation effect test of Zhongyong thinking between employee trust and employee voice behavior

	coeff	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
Constant	3.603	0.034	105.692	0.000	3.536	3.670
Employee trust	0.363	0.056	6.457	0.000	0.252	0.473
Zhongyong thinking	0.291	0.049	5.906	0.000	0.194	0.388
Employee trust×Zhongyong thinking	0.624	0.069	9.096	0.000	0.489	0.759
R	R-sq	MSE	F	df1	df2	p
0.604	0.364	0.388	67.215	3	352	0.000
	R2-chng	F	df1	df2	p	
X*W	0.149	82.734	1	352	0.000	

To further analyze the moderating effect of moderate thinking, this study set the Zhongyong thinking score higher than the mean plus one standard deviation as the high Zhongyong thinking group, and the score less than the mean minus one standard deviation as the low Zhongyong thinking group, and performed a simple slope test Table 6 and plotted a simple effects analysis (Figure 2).

Table 6: Simple slope in the moderating effect diagram

Moderating variable	Effect	se	t	p	LLCI	ULCI
M-1SD	-0.783	-0.126	-1.504	0.133	-0.291	0.039
M	0.140	0.055	8.121	0.000	0.341	0.559
M+1SD	0.678	0.067	11.755	0.000	0.655	0.918

The results of Table 6 show that for the group with high Zhongyong thinking, employee trust has a significant positive predictive effect on employee voice behavior : $B_{\text{simple}} = 0.786$, $t = 11.755$, $p < 0.001$, 95%CI[0.655,0.918]. For the group with low Zhongyong thinking, employee trust has no significant predictive effect on employee voice behavior: $B_{\text{simple}} = -0.126$, $t = -1.504$, $p > 0.05$, 95 % CI[-0.291,0.039].

The absolute value of the slope of the high Zhongyong thinking group is greater than that of the low Zhongyong thinking group. That is, for the high Zhongyong thinking group, the influence of employee trust on employee voice behavior is lower than that of the low Zhongyong thinking group. The positive impact of employee trust on employee voice behavior continues to strengthen with the improvement of Zhongyong thinking, that is, the Zhongyong thinking dimension has a positive moderating effect between employee trust and employee voice behavior.

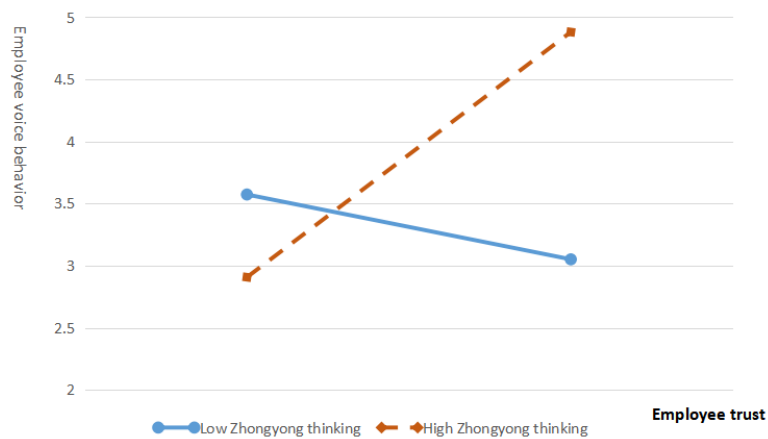


Fig.2: Effect diagram of moderating effect of Zhongyong thinking

4.7. Moderated Mediating Effect

In this study, SPSS Process confidence interval macro program bootstrap method was used to test the moderated mediating effect. This study set 5000 sample size and select 95% confidence interval (95% CI), if the confidence interval does not contain zero, the corresponding effect is significant. According to Hayes's (2013) suggestion, we first use the conditional indirect effect of Model 7 in Process program to analyze the moderated mediation effect. The results are shown in Table 7.

The conditional indirect effect analysis shows that when the moderation thinking is at a low level, the indirect effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior through employee trust is 0.051, the standard error is 0.030, and the confidence interval is [0.005,0.122]. The indirect effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior through employee trust is significant; when Zhongyong thinking is at a high level, the indirect effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior through employee trust is 0.112, the standard error is 0.035, and the confidence interval is [0.044,0.183]. The indirect effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior through employee trust is significant. In the analysis results, the determination index is 0.042, the standard error is 0.020, the confidence interval is [0.002,0.080], excluding 0, which further confirms the mediating role of Zhongyong thinking in moderating employee trust. In summary, it is verified that Zhongyong thinking significantly moderates the mediating role of employee trust.

Table 7: The results of the moderated mediation bootstrap test

Dependent variable	Moderating variable	Conditional indirect effect				Moderated mediation effect			
		Effect	Boot SE	95%CI		IND EX	SE	95%CI	
				BootL LCI	BootU LCI			BootL LCI	BootU LCI
Employee voice behavior	M-1SD	0.051	0.030	0.005	0.122	0.042	0.020	0.002	0.080
	M	0.090	0.030	0.034	0.153				
	M+1SD	0.112	0.035	0.044	0.183				

5. Conclusion and Implications

5.1. Research Conclusions

This paper adopted an empirical approach to collect data from SMEs in China and verified the established hypotheses. The research result can be summarized as follows.

Paternalistic leadership positively affects employee trust and employee voice behavior. Paternalistic leadership features emotional communication with employees, which has a positive impact on employee trust. High satisfaction with leader's attitude and respect to the employee will increase employees' degree of trust in the leader, thus affecting job satisfaction. At the same time, paternalistic leadership can motivate employees' voice behavior and motivate employees to participate in the construction of the organization. Paternalistic leadership also emphasizes the needs of employees when considering the needs of the organization. When employees make suggestions for problems in the organization, leaders can give support and encouragement, fully respect employees, positively motivate employees, and reassure employees to make suggestions.

Employee trust positively influences on employee voice behavior. Employees have the most contact with their direct leaders at work. Employees' trust in leaders can reflect employees' trust in their unit to a certain extent. When employees have a high level of trust, employees will increase their emotional engagement to work and voice behavior.

Zhongyong thinking has a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between employee trust and employee voice behavior, that is, if Zhongyong thinking is high, the positive impact

of employee trust on employee voice behavior will be strengthened. The employees with high Zhongyong thinking are more comprehensive and holistic in thinking, and will think from the whole aspect when looking at the problem. For employees with high Zhongyong thinking, they can well understand leadership behavior, feel the support and trust of leaders at a deeper level, and then improve their voice behavior. Employees with low Zhongyong thinking will lack overall thinking, may not understand the behavior of leadership, may have dissatisfaction and easily reduce employees' voice behavior. Therefore, attention should be paid to the cultivation of employees' Zhongyong thinking and motivate employees to enhance their voice behavior.

Employee trust has a partial mediating effect on the relationship between paternalistic leadership and employee voice behavior, and Zhongyong thinking significantly moderates the mediating effect of employee trust. It is found that the improvement of trust can have a positive impact on employee voice behavior, and the leadership style has an impact on employee trust. Paternalistic leadership affect employee voice behavior through employee trust. This paper further analyzed the moderated mediating effect. In the process of paternalistic leadership affecting employee voice behavior, employees with high Zhongyong thinking will adjust their behaviors and attitudes according to the specific environmental changes of the organization. Moreover, employees with high Zhongyong thinking will bring their own harmony to the workplace, which can drive the atmosphere of the whole organization more harmonious, stimulate the collective consciousness of interests of other people around them, and be more conducive to employees' voice behavior. Employees with low Zhongyong thinking will not consider the advantages and disadvantages of the environment. Even if they want to make suggestions, they may not grasp the opportunity to make suggestions, and the effect of suggestions will be greatly reduced. It can be seen that Zhongyong thinking positively moderates the mediating effect of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior through employee trust.

5.2. Management Implications

The results of this study verified the positive impact of paternalistic leadership on employee voice behavior, and the mediating and moderating effects of employee trust and Zhongyong thinking between them. According to the research results, the following suggestions are put forward, hoping to provide some suggestions and countermeasures for improving the employee voice behavior of Chinese SMEs.

First, adjust leadership behavior and promote employee voice behavior. The results of this study show that paternalistic leadership has a significant positive impact on employee trust. As a unique management style in Chinese enterprises, paternalistic leadership advocates the combination use of kindness and authority. Among them, benevolent leadership mainly reflects the concern and care for subordinates, and moral leadership mainly reflects the influence of the leader's own character on subordinates. The former will make employees perceive the care of the leader in the work process. Based on the theory of reciprocity, in order to repay this kind of favor, employees will respond to the problems in the organization or make suggestions to the leaders. The latter demonstrates fair and honest behavior in the management process, making employees believe that the leader can be relied on, thereby promoting their voice behavior. Both of these leadership behaviors will weaken the fear and insecurity that employees feel when speaking freely and actively, so they have a positive effect on voice behavior. Therefore, SMEs should encourage leaders to manage employees with benevolent and virtuous leadership to encourage employees to speak up. Leaders and subordinates should strengthen mutual communication, understand the characteristics of employees, and adjust their leadership behaviors to develop in a direction that is conducive to the occurrence of voice behavior. For example, the characteristic of employees is that they pay more attention to feelings. If they know how to repay their kindness, the leader should show more benevolent leadership. If employees think rationally and value the ability and quality of leaders, they should adopt moral leadership. If the leader was dominated by authoritarian leadership before, he should pay attention to reducing authoritarian behavior and adjust himself to increase benevolent leadership and virtuous leadership. At the same time, enterprise

managers need to be "people-oriented", adopt flexible management, and provide personalized humanistic care for employees. In addition, leaders need to distinguish between public and private, adhere to the principle of fairness, and improve and strictly implement the company's rules and regulations. When the emotional support and institutional arrangements provided by the leaders fit the internal values of employees, employees tend to make more voices.

Second, release the trust signal reasonably and strengthen employee trust. The results of this study show that employee trust has a significant positive impact on employee voice behavior and has a partial mediating effect between paternalistic leadership and employee voice behavior. Therefore, when improving the voice environment and employee behavior in the organization, managers should focus on improving employees' trust in superior leaders. Leaders need to adopt more benevolent leadership and moral leadership. Leaders should maintain consistent decision-making in the management process. Leaders' intentions and behaviors need to be predictable, not elusive, which helps to build employee trust in leaders. In addition, giving employees full freedom of speech, giving employees greater autonomy under organizational rules and regulations, and flexibly grasping centralization and authorization can win employees' respect and trust in leadership and organization. Finally, the psychological safety of employees in the organization is the basis for building trust. Enterprises can use anonymous suggestions and other measures to ensure the safety of employee voice. After employees make comments, regardless of whether to benefit the organization, managers should give recognition and encouragement, and should not criticize or ridicule employees, and create a safe atmosphere for making advice.

Third, cultivate employees with high Zhongyong thinking. The results of this study show that Zhongyong thinking has a significant positive moderating effect on the relationship between employee trust and employee voice behavior. That is, if Zhongyong thinking is high, the positive impact of employee trust on employee voice behavior will be strengthened. At the same time, Zhongyong thinking significantly moderates the mediating role of employee trust. Employees with a higher Zhongyong thinking have a higher tendency to make suggestions. Therefore, when selecting talents, enterprises should not only consider professional knowledge, but also pay attention to employees' thinking pattern and cognitive level of dealing with problems. Enterprises should increase the evaluation of new employees' Zhongyong thinking as a reference, and enable the organizational environment to recruit talents with high Zhongyong thinking. Employees with high Zhongyong thinking solve problems from multiple perspectives, integrate various elements and act in a harmonious way. For old employees, enterprises can regularly carry out employees' self-assessment or other assessment, timely understand the cognitive state of employees' thinking, help improve employees' self-awareness and effectively carry out enterprise activities to enhance employees' voice behavior.

Enterprises need to form an atmosphere to tolerate failure, especially for employees with high Zhongyong thinking, which is more significant. Employees with high Zhongyong thinking are capable of solving comprehensive issues and making diverse decision. Therefore, an organizational atmosphere with harmony should be established as the goal and tolerance as the principle to evaluate the psychological state of employees' Zhongyong thinking and stimulate their enthusiasm for innovative behavior. From the perspective of employees' Zhongyong thinking, employees should be given more opportunities to be trained with high Zhongyong thinking, and face the modern value of excellent traditional culture. Zhongyong thinking is not only one of the representative ways of thinking of Chinese people, but also has a wide range of practical basis in enterprises. This study has verified that Zhongyong thinking is positively moderating employee trust and employee voice behavior, which is conducive to managers' correct understanding and viewing of traditional culture, and attaching importance to and encouraging employees with high Zhongyong thinking.

Fourth, establish a good voice atmosphere and multi-channel voice mechanism. Influenced by traditional culture, Chinese employees tend to be silent in the organization and respect the

organizational system and superior leadership, so the organizational system and leadership behavior have a great impact on employees. Therefore, leaders should show that they are willing to listen to employees and accept reasonable opinions, show more kindness and moral behavior, and strengthen employees' good impression of leaders. Employees are supported by the organizational system and leadership, coupled with the return based on the principle of reciprocity and their own concern for organizational development, which can strengthen the willingness of employees to take the initiative to make suggestions.

Voice in an enterprise is a bottom-up communication behavior, which needs to build a suitable communication medium. Enterprises should have a channel to communicate and a platform to collect suggestions. Enterprises can hold seminars to collect employees' opinions and suggestions through various participation methods such as forums, e-mails, and text messages. In addition, the company needs to give feedback to employees' suggestions, interact with employees in a timely manner, and improve the effectiveness of suggestions. In general, attention should be paid to employees' suggestions and give positive feedback in time to form an effective communication mechanism.

5.3. Limitations and Prospects

This paper empirically examined the relationship between paternalistic leadership and employee voice behavior and the mediating and moderating mechanisms, and has achieved certain results. However, due to the limitations of resources and time, there are still some limitations as follows.

First, aspect of sample collection, the questionnaire is distributed through the network survey method. Limited by the actual situation, the samples are mainly distributed in individual cities in Shandong Province, the investigation scope is not large enough, and the scope of investigation can be expanded in the future.

Second, in cross-sectional study, the results of this study may change as time changes. Longitudinal analysis can be conducted to obtain a more in-depth investigation on the relationship between the research variables in the follow-up research.

Third, the conceptual model is need to be supplemented. This paper attempts to use employee trust as a mediating variable, and Zhongyong thinking as a moderator variable for research, and the impact of leadership style on voice may also be affected by other variables. For example, variables such as psychological safety, employee sense of belonging, and organizational harmony can continue to be explored in the future to improve the research model.

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