

## Employee Motivation Mediating Servant Leadership and Work Outcomes in China's Higher Education

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|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
|                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Received        | Revised     | Accepted    | Published    |
|                                                                                                                                                                                                             | 16 March 2026   | 20 May 2026 | 31 May 2026 | 30 June 2026 |

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationships among leadership styles, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment across twelve private higher education institutions in Guangxi Province, China. The research aims to identify how leadership directly affects these indicators and influences them through employee motivation. Incorporating Confucian values, this investigation contextualizes leadership dynamics in China's private university sector. This study used quantitative methods and collected data from academic and administrative personnel at twelve private higher education institutions through online surveys. The survey tool includes a tested scale measuring leadership ability, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, based on a 7-point Likert scale. To analyze the data and evaluate direct and mediating effects, we recommend using structural equation modeling (SEM). This research advances theoretical understanding of leadership dynamics by examining the interplay among leadership practices, employee motivation, and work outcomes, while clarifying their cultural significance in higher education settings. Practical experience and lessons learned may help develop leadership plans that focus on employee growth and well-being. This study also aims to inform future work on leadership in specific cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** *Servant Leadership, Employee Motivation, Organizational Commitment, Higher Education and Leadership Styles*

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| Wei, Y., Saludin, M. N., Kamaljeet Kaur, & Omar, M. (2026). Employee motivation mediating servant leadership and work outcomes in China's higher education. <i>The Asian Journal of Professional &amp; Business Studies</i> , 7(1), 266–278.<br><a href="https://doi.org/10.61688/ajpbs.v7i1.502">https://doi.org/10.61688/ajpbs.v7i1.502</a> | Published by Universiti Poly-Tech Malaysia. This is an open access article under the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY 4.0) license:<br><a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode</a> |

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the rapidly changing higher education sector, leadership approaches critically determine organizational effectiveness and workforce performance outcomes. Among these, servant leadership — characterized by humility, empathy, empowerment, and a commitment to serve others — has garnered increasing scholarly interest for its potential to foster meaningful work relationships and enhance organizational outcomes. Within China's higher education sector—currently undergoing profound structural reforms and pursuing international competitiveness—clarifying the dynamics between leadership approaches and workforce outcomes is critically important.

Work outcomes—including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, enhanced performance, and employee retention—constitute fundamental determinants for academic institutions pursuing sustained excellence. However, the pathways through which leadership influences these outcomes remain complex and multifaceted. One promising explanatory mechanism is employee motivation, which refers to the intrinsic and extrinsic drivers that prompt individuals to exert effort toward organizational goals. Motivation is not merely a byproduct of leadership behavior but a critical psychological process that can mediate how leadership translates into tangible performance outcomes.

Although extensive international scholarship has examined the impact of servant leadership on work outcomes, the mediating mechanism of employee motivation remains underexplored empirically—particularly within China's academic milieu, where cultural dimensions such as collectivism, power distance, and Confucian principles may shape leadership perceptions and efficacy. Furthermore, universities in China face increasing pressure to internationalize, innovate, and improve quality—all of which require motivated academic and administrative staff.

This research addresses the identified gap by examining the mediating mechanisms through which employee motivation links servant leadership to work outcomes within China's distinctive higher education environment. Grounded in Self-Determination Theory and Social Exchange Theory, this investigation empirically assesses whether servant leaders cultivate motivational climates that foster workforce engagement, thereby improving performance, satisfaction, and retention. By doing so, it offers both theoretical contributions and practical insights for leadership development and policy formulation in Chinese universities.

### 1.2 Background

Leadership represents a pivotal determinant of organizational effectiveness and performance outcomes, fundamentally shaping institutional achievement. Among leadership styles, transformational leadership is receiving increasing attention for emphasizing service and prioritizing employee needs (Samsir & Muis, 2023). This approach is based on the belief that leaders must motivate employees to achieve personal and professional development, ultimately improving organizational efficiency. Good leadership encourages trust, collaboration, and positivity, creating a supportive environment that positively impacts employee motivation and performance (Forson et al., 2021).

Employee motivation represents a fundamental driver of performance outcomes. A motivated workforce typically shows higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment—critical precursors that enhance both individual productivity and organizational efficiency (Khuzwayo et al., 2022). However, the specific mechanisms by which leadership influences these outcomes, particularly through motivating employees, have not been fully studied. Understanding these connections can provide valuable information on how organizations can utilize leadership practices to increase employee engagement and overall success (Zayed et al., 2022).

Work outcomes—particularly job satisfaction and organizational commitment—constitute fundamental indicators of organizational health (Akoto et al., 2022). Higher job satisfaction demonstrably enhances workforce productivity and reduces turnover, while organizational commitment strengthens employee loyalty and sustains long-term engagement (Sonnenschein et al., 2022). Given the importance of these findings, it is necessary to examine how leadership affects them, particularly through employee motivation.

### 1.3 Research Problem and Objectives

Higher education institutions face challenges in improving employee productivity and job satisfaction, such as low employee motivation, high employee turnover rates, and increased training costs. Research shows that appropriate leadership styles, especially transformational leadership, can effectively improve employee

motivation and performance (Aboramadan et al., 2020). However, existing research mainly focuses on organizational-level impacts, with insufficient attention to individual experiences. Furthermore, the mediating pathways through which employee motivation connects leadership approaches to performance outcomes remain insufficiently examined within China's higher education context. This empirical investigation addresses this gap by examining how servant leadership influences key work outcomes—including job satisfaction and organizational commitment—through its motivational mechanisms. This study offers theoretical insights and practical recommendations for improving management practices in higher education institutions (Ahmed et al., 2022).

This research seeks to analyse the relationship between servant leadership approaches and multidimensional work outcomes, with primary emphasis on delineating employee motivation as the mediating mechanism within Chinese higher education institutions. This study will be conducted among staff at twelve private higher education institutions in Guangxi Province, China. The twelve participating institutions are Guangxi University of Foreign Languages, Nanning University, Xiangsihu College of Guangxi Minzu University, Shiyuan College of Nanning Normal University, Nanning College of Technology, Faculty of Chinese Medicine Science at Guangxi University of Chinese Medicine, Beihai University of Art and Design, Beihai College of Beihang University, Guilin University, Guilin Institute of Information Technology, Liuzhou Institute of Technology, and Guangxi City Vocational University. This investigation establishes two primary objectives: first, to empirically examine the direct effects of servant leadership on employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment; second, to assess the indirect effects of leadership on these work outcomes via motivational mechanisms (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023). The specific research objectives (RO) are as follows:

- i. RO1: To determine the influence of servant leadership on employee motivation among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- ii. RO2: To determine the influence of servant leadership on job satisfaction among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- iii. RO3: To determine the influence of servant leadership on employee organizational commitment among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- iv. RO4: To determine the influence of employee motivation on job satisfaction among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- v. RO5: To determine the influence of employee motivation on employee organizational commitment among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- vi. RO6: To determine the indirect influence of servant leadership on job satisfaction under the mediation of employee motivation among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.
- vii. RO7: To determine the indirect influence of servant leadership on employee organizational commitment under the mediation of employee motivation among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

Aligned with these objectives, the study also poses a set of research questions (RQ) to guide the inquiry:

- i. RQ1: What influence does servant leadership have on employee motivation of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- ii. RQ2: What influence does servant leadership have on job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- iii. RQ3: What influence does servant leadership have on employees' organizational commitment in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- iv. RQ4: What influence does employee motivation have on job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- v. RQ5: What influence does employee motivation have on employee organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China?
- vi. RQ6: What indirect influence does servant leadership have on job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China under the mediation of employee motivation?
- vii. RQ7: What indirect influence does servant leadership have on employees' organizational commitment in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China, under the mediation of employee motivation?

## 1.4 Structure of the Paper

The remainder of this article proceeds as follows: Section 2 synthesizes foundational and contemporary scholarship on servant leadership, employee motivation, and work outcomes, delineates the theoretical framework (Self-Determination and Social Exchange Theories), and identifies critical research gaps within Chinese higher education institutions. Section 3 delineates the research methodology, encompassing the conceptual model, formal hypotheses, and survey instrumentation design. Section 4 articulates the anticipated theoretical advancements and practical implications. Section 5 consolidates key empirical findings and proposes future research trajectories.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1 Theoretical Foundations of Servant Leadership

Rooted in Greenleaf's (1977) seminal conceptualization, servant leadership prioritizes follower welfare over leader self-interest. Core behavioural manifestations include empathetic engagement, demonstrated humility, and active stewardship of follower development. Empirical evidence confirms that such leaders cultivate psychologically supportive climates that enhance workforce satisfaction and institutional efficacy (Liden et al., 2008). This leadership principle closely aligns with Confucian values, which are deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of benevolence(仁), humility(谦), and the responsibility of leaders to serve and educate followers. These values align with key leadership characteristics, making them especially important in the Chinese context. In this cultural paradigm, leadership is not only about power, but also about creating harmony and ensuring the collective success of the team. This connection suggests that leadership may be particularly effective in Chinese organizations such as higher education institutions (Zhang et al., 2012). This study was conducted among employees of 12 higher education institutions in China. University is a unique environment where collaboration, trust, and employee development are key to achieving academic and organizational goals (Ahmed et al., 2022). In this context, the research focuses on leadership, which is particularly relevant for understanding how leadership practices affect employee performance in such environments.

### 2.2 Employee Motivation: Theories and Role

Motivation is the psychological catalyst that shapes behavioural patterns and performance outcomes. Contemporary frameworks classify it dichotomously: intrinsic motivation arising from inherent task satisfaction, and extrinsic motivation propelled by instrumental rewards. In organizational contexts, empirical evidence shows motivated workforces demonstrate significantly higher productivity, greater satisfaction, and stronger organizational commitment (Forson et al., 2021). Scholarly investigations have rigorously established linkages between leadership paradigms and motivational processes. Specifically, servant leaders cultivate intrinsic motivation through purpose-driven meaning-making and psychological belongingness. This research centers on employee motivation as the mediating mechanism that transmits leadership influence to performance outcomes, thereby addressing the leader-outcome discontinuity identified in extant literature (Su et al., 2020).

### 2.3 Work Outcomes: Job Satisfaction and Organizational Commitment

Job satisfaction constitutes an affective-cognitive evaluation of role fulfillment derived from work experiences. Empirical evidence consistently shows that leadership approaches significantly predict satisfaction levels, with servant leaders' altruistic service orientation fostering enhanced work engagement through psychological empowerment mechanisms (Song et al., 2021). Community leaders promote open communication, support, and care, which positively affect staff attitudes toward work. Organizational commitment represents a psychological bond characterized by affective attachment and normative loyalty toward the institution. Higher commitment demonstrably correlates with lower turnover rates and stronger organizational citizenship behaviors (Miao et al., 2014). Empirical research shows that servant leadership cultivates relational trust and fiduciary loyalty by strengthening affective commitment dimensions. In higher education institutions, job satisfaction and organizational commitment are particularly important because they promote the overall efficiency of academic and administrative staff. By studying these findings in Chinese universities, this study aims to provide insiders with information on how leadership practices affect employee well-being and organizational success (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023).

## 2.4 Research Gaps

While extant scholarship acknowledges the positive association between leadership competencies and work outcomes, the underlying mediating pathways—particularly the psychological and behavioral mechanisms translating servant leadership into performance gains—remain critically underexplored. In particular, few studies have considered the mediating role of employee motivation in linking leadership to job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Understanding this intermediary mechanism is crucial to developing and applying leadership theory (Song et al., 2021). Furthermore, empirical research on culturally embedded manifestations of servant leadership in Chinese higher education institutions remains scarce, particularly regarding how Confucian values and institutional structures moderate leadership efficacy. Leaders' behaviour is often shaped by cultural values, combining Confucian principles such as benevolence and harmonious relationships with leadership theory to provide a culturally relevant approach to studying leadership effectiveness (Pang & Wang, 2017). This research addresses these gaps by empirically investigating how servant leadership—culturally resonant with Confucian principles of moral stewardship and hierarchical harmony—cultivates intrinsic motivation and improves work outcomes (job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance, and retention) within China's distinctive higher education context.

Scholarly consensus now acknowledges servant leadership as a distinct transformative paradigm centering fundamentally on follower development, holistic well-being, and dignity elevation. By systematically addressing both intrinsic psychological needs and extrinsic workplace requirements, such leadership catalyses motivational pathways that generate positive organizational consequences—notably enhanced job satisfaction and strengthened organizational commitment. This research is theoretically anchored in the complementary frameworks of Social Exchange Theory (reciprocity norms) and Self-Determination Theory (psychological needs satisfaction), which collectively elucidate the servant leadership-motivation-outcomes nexus (Miao et al., 2014; Ryan et al., 2022; Su et al., 2020).

## 2.5 Theoretical Framework

Social Exchange Theory (SET) posits that organizational relationships function through reciprocal transactions. When leaders demonstrate supportive behaviours and prioritize staff welfare, they establish environments characterized by mutual trust and fidelity (Miao et al., 2014). This relational dynamic consequently motivates employees to engage in organizationally constructive behaviours, thereby enhancing job satisfaction and strengthening organizational commitment (Miao et al., 2014; Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023).

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that intrinsic motivation serves as a fundamental driver of optimal employee functioning. Effective leadership fulfills three core psychological needs: autonomy (self-direction), competence (mastery), and relatedness (meaningful connections) (Ryan et al., 2022). By meeting these needs, leaders not only enhance internal motivation but also increase employees' sense of purpose and belonging, thereby improving job performance (Hudecek et al., 2024).

This study integrates leadership theory with Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to establish a robust theoretical framework that explains the sequential mechanisms through which leadership behaviors influence employee motivation, which in turn shapes job satisfaction and organizational commitment. This model treats employee motivation as a mediator, providing a foundation for the hypotheses and research directions (Su et al., 2020; Ryan et al., 2022).

# 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Research Framework and Hypotheses

This study investigated the relationship between servant leadership, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among employees at twelve private higher education institutions in Guangxi Province, China. This conceptual model includes both direct and mediating effects to analyse these connections. Assuming the following:

## 3.2 Hypotheses for Direct Effect Model

H1: Servant leadership has a strong and positive impact on the motivation of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H2: Servant leadership has a strong and positive impact on the job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H3: Servant leadership has a strong and positive impact on the organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H4: Employee motivation has a strong, positive impact on employees' job satisfaction in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H5: Employee motivation has a strong and positive impact on the organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

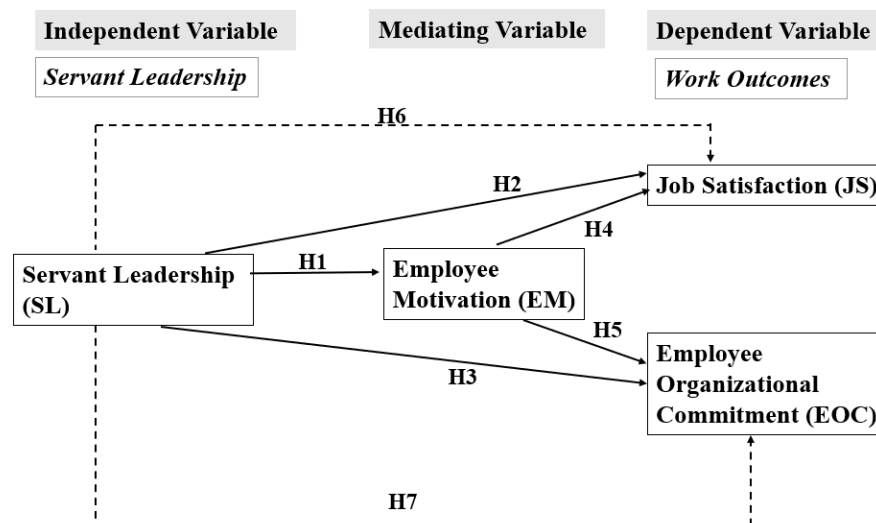
### 3.3 Hypotheses for Mediating Effect Model

H6: Employee motivation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and job satisfaction of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

H7: Employee motivation mediates the relationship between servant leadership and organizational commitment of employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China.

Figure 1 graphically illustrates the relationships among the dependent variable, mediating variable, independent variables, and study hypotheses.

Figure 1 illustrates the interactions of the independent variable, the mediating variable, the dependent variable, and the research hypotheses.



### 3.4 Research Design

This study used quantitative methods of online surveys to collect data from employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. The emphasis on higher education organizations provides valuable insights into leadership practices in academic contexts.

#### *Population and Sample*

The target audience is academic and administrative personnel at selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. We will use stratified random sampling to ensure the representativeness of different departments and positions. Researchers use the Raosoft calculator (available at <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>) to determine the appropriate sample size. According to the modelling requirements of Total Population and Structural Equation (SEM) (Bougie & Sekaran, 2019), the expected sample size is 303 respondents.

### 3.5 Instrumentation

The survey instrument consists of four sections, measuring the key variables of the study using a 7-point Likert scale, where 1 = "strongly disagree" and 7 = "strongly agree." The details are as follows:

1. Section 1: Servant Leadership (Independent Variable)  
Measured using the Servant Leadership Scale (SLS) by Fields and Winston (2010) and Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011).
2. Section 2: Employee Motivation (Mediator)  
Measured using the scale developed by Wardiansyah et al. (2024).
3. Section 3: Job Satisfaction (Dependent Variable)  
Measured using the Job Satisfaction scale adapted from Spector (1994).
4. Section 4: Organizational Commitment (Dependent Variable)  
Measured using the Organizational Commitment scale developed by Mowday et al. (1979).

### **3.6 Data Collection**

Data will be collected only through online surveys distributed to employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. The survey will be developed using online platforms to ensure availability and convenience. Before full release, the tool will undergo pilot testing with a small group of respondents to ensure clarity and reliability. Participation in the survey is voluntary, and responses will be anonymous to promote integrity and privacy protection (Ishtiaq, 2019).

### **3.7 Data Analysis**

The collected data will be analyzed using IBM SPSS v. 29 and SmartPLS v.4.1.0.9. The analysis will include the following steps: Descriptive Statistics: Summarize respondents' demographic characteristics and general data trends. Reliability and Validity Testing: Ensure consistency and accuracy of measurement scales. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM): Evaluate the relationship between leadership, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, and validate the mediating role of employee motivation (Hiebl, 2021).

## **4. EXPECTED CONTRIBUTIONS**

### **4.1 Theoretical Contributions**

This study advances theoretical and empirical understanding by systematically examining motivation as the critical mediating mechanism linking servant leadership to core work outcomes—specifically job satisfaction and organizational commitment—within China's higher education context. Although previous studies have considered the direct impact of leadership, this study extends the theoretical framework by integrating employee motivation as a key intermediate variable (Su et al., 2020). By situating the study in higher education in China, it highlights how leadership aligns with Confucian cultural values, thereby enriching the cultural applicability of leadership theory (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023). In addition, it is expected that the research findings will help fill existing literature gaps and provide empirical data on the impact of leadership abilities in academic institutions, which are a relatively unknown organizational context. Furthermore, this research elucidates the cultural contingency of leadership efficacy by demonstrating how servant leadership practices are contextualized within China's unique higher education ecosystem (Forson et al., 2021).

### **4.2 Practical Contributions**

This study provides practical recommendations for managers and administrators of higher education institutions, especially in China. By demonstrating how leadership promotes employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment, this study provides a roadmap for cultivating supportive and effective leadership practices (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Higher education institutions can use research findings to develop leadership courses that emphasize leadership principles, including ethical behaviour, emotional support, and employee empowerment. These practices can boost employee morale, reduce turnover, and build a more loyal and proactive workforce (Aboramadan et al., 2020). In addition, the findings may help academic institutions develop policies that

encourage managers to adopt leadership styles aligned with organizational goals and cultural values. Such policies foster organizational climates characterized by interpersonal harmony and operational efficiency, thereby enhancing institutional effectiveness in both academic and administrative domains (Hudecek et al., 2024).

### 4.3 Contextual Contributions

This study focuses on the unique environment of universities in Guangxi Province, China, and explores the background factors that affect leadership effectiveness in higher education in China. It provides localized insights into how leadership interacts with cultural elements, such as Confucian principles of benevolence and harmonious relationships, to influence employee outcomes (Zhang et al., 2012). In addition, the results of this study can serve as a reference for other institutions with similar cultural or organizational backgrounds, providing recommendations for implementing appropriate leadership to achieve expected outcomes (Samsir & Muis, 2023).

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the relationship between leadership, employee motivation, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment among employees in selected universities in Guangxi Province, China. By analysing direct and indirect effects, this study seeks to explain how leadership affects performance through employee motivation as a key mediating variable (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023). The study's conceptual model combines theoretical perspectives on leadership and motivation in the literature, situating the research within the cultural and organizational context of higher education in China. This approach advances scholarly understanding of leadership efficacy in academic settings while addressing critical gaps in the literature through culturally contextualized insights (Forson et al., 2021).

Although this study is expected to make significant contributions, it has limitations that need to be acknowledged: Sample Size and Scope: This study focuses only on employees in twelve private higher education institutions in Guangxi Province, China, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other backgrounds or industries.

Cross-sectional Design: Data will be collected at a single point in time, which may not reflect the dynamic nature of the relationships between variables. Self-reported Data: Relying on self-report surveys may introduce bias due to participants' subjective perceptions or a desire to comply with social norms (Hudecek et al., 2024).

To address these limitations, future research could consider the following methods: expanding the sample to include other universities or organizations from different cultural or industrial backgrounds to improve comparability of results. Application of longitudinal research design: Conducting temporal studies to better understand causal relationships and temporal dynamics between variables. Integrating multiple sources of data collection methods: utilizing evaluations from colleagues or managers to reduce self-report bias and improve the reliability of results (Su et al., 2020).

This study generates actionable insights regarding performance optimization in higher education institutions by elucidating motivation's mediating role between leadership and outcomes. The findings underscore the dual imperative of fulfilling employees' psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) and cultivating empowering work environments. These evidence-based conclusions contribute to both leadership theory refinement and practical organizational interventions, creating mutual value for institutions and their workforce (Aruoren & Erhuen, 2023).

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