

Enhancing Interest in Leadership Roles among Chinese Students in a Thai University Context

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Abstract

The cultivation of leadership interest among Chinese students in Thai universities is crucial for developing future leaders and ensuring the sustainable development of student organizations. This study investigated the complex internal and external factors influencing leadership motivation among this student population. Employing a qualitative case study methodology informed by participatory action research principles, the study conducted in-depth interviews with 14 Chinese MBA students at a Thai university.

The findings revealed that students' willingness to assume leadership positions resulted from a dynamic interplay between motivating and hindering factors: internal drivers such as self-discovery and career investment were counterbalanced by self-doubt and lack of vision, while external motivators including recognition and cultural responsibility contended with academic pressures, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and insufficient institutional support. The study further identified a notable "hierarchy of reluctance" phenomenon, wherein leadership willingness decreased as responsibility levels increased, significantly influenced by cultural norms.

This research concluded that enhancing student leadership interest required systematic resolution of these competing factors rather than mere encouragement. Accordingly, the study proposed comprehensive strategies including: integrating leadership roles into academic credit systems, optimizing administrative processes, establishing robust support mechanisms, and implementing culturally responsive initiatives. These recommendations aimed to collectively foster a supportive environment that effectively stimulated student leadership development.

Keywords: Leadership Motivation, Chinese Students, Thai Higher Education,
Cross-Cultural Context, Qualitative Research, Student Leadership Development

Introduction

Leadership transitions in university student organizations represent an essential process for cultivating future leaders and sustaining organizational continuity (Garrity et al., 2016). However, these transitions often present significant challenges, particularly within business schools, where identifying suitable successors for leadership roles remains a recurring concern (Giambatista et al., 2005). Although student leadership positions are typically regarded as rewarding (Törrönen, 2014), prior research indicates that many students do not associate such engagement with potential career development (Rice, 2014). As a result, hesitation and limited willingness to pursue leadership responsibilities are commonly observed (Ford & Wargo, 2007).

This reluctance among students, especially business undergraduates, to assume leadership positions raises both academic and practical concerns. From a scholarly perspective, it underscores the need to further investigate motivational dynamics behind student leadership engagement (Cadenas & Bernstein, 2020). From a practical standpoint, understanding these dynamics can assist universities in designing leadership development strategies that effectively promote student participation, strengthen organizational continuity, and enhance civic engagement (Cheung, 2011).

This study is situated within the unique context of Thai higher education, a system characterized by its distinct institutional culture and value system. The learning environment in Thailand often emphasizes social harmony, respect for seniority, and collective well-being, which can profoundly shape students' approaches to leadership and public participation (Bryson et al., 2013). Furthermore, the specific site of this research, an international college within a Thai university, features a significant cohort of Chinese international students. This provides a compelling cross-cultural dimension, as the leadership motivations and perceptions of these students are informed by their own cultural backgrounds, interacting with the host country's educational environment. Examining this context is crucial, as it illuminates how institutional culture and cultural background intersect to influence leadership development, thereby reinforcing the study's contextual and cross-cultural relevance.

Addressing this issue requires examining not only the individual and contextual factors that discourage students from seeking leadership roles but also the potential benefits of active involvement in student organizations. While some evidence points to personal, interpersonal, and structural barriers that limit student participation (Luykx & Heyman, 2013), other studies highlight how student organizations can serve as valuable platforms for fostering leadership traits and relational skills aligned with workforce expectations (Savitz-Romer et al., 2015).

Building on these insights and situated within the distinctive cross-cultural context of Thai higher education, this study moves beyond exploration to establish a clear analytical framework. It aims:

1. To analyze the interplay of cultural, educational, and psychological factors influencing Chinese students' motivation to assume leadership roles within Thai higher education institutions.

2. To examine how the perceived career relevance of leadership roles mediates students' engagement amidst these influencing factors.

3. To identify and theorize the distinct patterns of leadership motivation that emerge at this unique cultural and institutional interface.

Through in-depth interviews with Chinese business students in Thailand, this research endeavors to generate nuanced theoretical insights and propose contextually actionable recommendations, thereby contributing to the discourse on student leadership development in an increasingly globalized educational landscape (Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 1997)

Literature Review

The declining interest in leadership roles among university students is a multifaceted issue documented across diverse cultural and educational contexts. Scholarly inquiry reveals that this trend is driven by a confluence of factors spanning cognitive, educational, socio-cultural, and individual dimensions. A synthesis of literature from China, the Philippines, and Thailand reveals both universal challenges and context-specific dynamics that shape student leadership development.

Misconceptions about Leadership: A primary barrier is students' fundamental misunderstanding of leadership itself. As noted in emerging scholarship, leadership is often misconceived as a position of mere authority or status, rather than a compound capability involving charisma, collaboration, decision-making, and execution (Owen, 2015) This reductive view can render leadership roles unappealing, as students perceive them as an administrative burden rather than a transformative opportunity. This is corroborated internationally by Horng (2022) in the Thai context, whose findings indicate that students often fail to connect the values and skills developed through leadership with their future career trajectories. The Thai dimension is further elaborated by Kaewpijit & Srisa-ard (2023), who identified that cultural norms like 'Kreng Jai' (a deference to avoid imposing or causing trouble) reinforce passive attitudes toward leadership, as students hesitate to assert themselves for fear of being perceived as disruptive or disrespectful.

The Theory-Practice Gap: The structure of leadership education itself can inadvertently stifle interest. Limitations within higher education systems, including a disconnect between theoretical leadership curricula and practical application, weak faculty mentorship, and insufficiently innovative learning environments, leave students unprepared and uninspired (Wang, 2025) These structural barriers are a consistent theme globally. Pedroso et al. (2023)

identified "structural" factors such as inefficient organizational processes and a lack of institutional support as key deterrents in the Philippines. In the Thai context, Sangkhanan & Jitpreedasook (2024) conducted a gap analysis revealing that leadership development policies in international colleges often fail to translate into practical, well-supported programs. This institutional shortcoming creates a significant barrier to student engagement, as noted in a descriptive study where students viewed officership as burdensome due to the additional workload and lack of adequate support (Houdmont et al., 2012).

A Risk-Averse Climate:The broader socio-cultural context significantly influences student attitudes. A societal intolerance for failure can cultivate an aversion to the inherent risks and responsibilities of leadership (Helstad & Møller, 2013). In Thailand, the cultural emphasis on social harmony and respect for seniority, as highlighted by Kaewpijit & Srisa-ard (2023), creates an environment where assuming leadership is seen as a high-risk, low-reward endeavor. This contrasts with contexts where a perceived erosion of collectivist values may lead students to prioritize individual advancement. Instead, in Thailand, collectivism manifests in ways that can discourage individual assertiveness, reinforcing a "wait-to-be-nominated" approach rather than proactive pursuit of leadership.

Pressures and Resiliency:At the individual level, students face significant pressures that curtail their appetite for leadership. Academic workload, career anxieties, and concerns about mental and physical health are frequently cited personal barriers (Pedroso et al., 2023). Effective leadership demands not only intellectual capacity but also moral compass and emotional resilience (Wang, 2025). Research by Boonrugsa & Puthisiri (2023) in the Thai context provides a crucial psychological lens, confirming that self-efficacy—a student's belief in their own capability—is a powerful mediator of leadership motivation. Many students lack the psychological resilience to navigate the multifaceted demands of leadership, leading them to retreat from such roles to avoid potential stress and burnout.

Collectively, the literature paints a coherent picture of a problem driven by interdependent factors. However, a significant gap remains in understanding how these factors—particularly self-efficacy (the internal psychological dimension) and collectivism (the external cultural dimension)—interact to influence the decision-making of specific student populations in cross-cultural settings. While studies like Boonrugsa & Puthisiri (2023) establish the importance of self-efficacy in Thailand, and Kaewpijit & Srisa-ard (2023) detail the impact of Thai cultural norms, little research has examined how these forces intersect for international students, such as Chinese MBAs, navigating this environment. This study, therefore, builds upon this foundation to explore how the perceived career relevance of leadership roles mediates the complex interplay between these established internal and external factors.

Methodology of the Study

This study employed a qualitative case study design to conduct an in-depth investigation into the leadership motivations of students at Pathumthani University in Thailand. A total of 14 first-year Chinese Master's students in Digital Business were purposively selected, all of whom were current student leaders. The exclusive focus on Chinese students was a deliberate strategic choice, allowing for a nuanced examination of how a specific cultural group navigates and interprets leadership within a distinct Thai institutional context, rather than aiming for generalizability to the Thai student population.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative analysis, this study implemented several key strategies: data triangulation by collecting insights from students in different organizations; member checking, whereby preliminary findings were shared with participants to verify accuracy; and a systematic thematic analysis process involving multiple cycles of coding to identify consistent patterns.

The research was informed by the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR), treating the interview phase as the foundational “planning” and “observation” stages of the PAR cycle (McTaggart, 2007). This positions the study not only as an inquiry but as the first step in a process that could inform future institutional action and support strategies tailored to the needs of an international student body.

The interview questions were grouped into two parts:

The use of a semi-structured interview protocol allowed for consistency across interviews through a set of open-ended core questions, while also providing flexibility to probe interesting or unexpected responses.

The interview protocol was divided into two thematic sections:

Part 1: Leadership Experiences and Perceptions

This section was designed to draw upon participants' personal histories, internal motivations, and deeply held beliefs. The source of information here is the students' own direct experiences and internal reflections, allowing them to narrate their leadership journey and articulate their personal conceptualizations of leadership.

Part 2: Influencing Factors and Barriers

This section was structured to elicit information about the external pressures and internal conflicts that shape leadership decisions. The source of information shifts to participants' perceptions of their environment and their personal vulnerabilities, uncovering the contextual and psychological factors that either enable or inhibit their willingness to lead.

Results and Discussion

Respondents were addressed by number to maintain anonymity, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 *Respondent Demographics and Leadership Experiences*

Respondent	Gender	Academic Status	Nationality	Student Organization
1	Female	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
2	Female	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
3	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
4	Female	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
5	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
6	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
7	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
8	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
9	Female	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
10	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
11	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
12	Female	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
13	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government
14	Male	MBA	Chinese	Student Government

The research findings are organized according to the sequence of research questions, with participant responses revealing diverse perspectives. Through thematic analysis, the researcher identified several key patterns in the data.

1. Internal Drivers: Between Self-Construction and Career Pragmatism

At the level of internal drivers, student motivation presents self-construction and career pragmatism.

Several participants emphasized leadership roles as a journey of personal discovery. Respondent 9 vividly described: “Each leadership position is like a mirror, showing me potential and resilience I never anticipated. It's not just about leading others; it's about leading a constantly growing self.” This pursuit of intrinsic growth is a core driver.

Simultaneously, in an uncertain job market, leadership experience is seen as a direct career investment. The statement from Respondent 3 represents this prevalent view: “In today's job market, substantial leadership experience is no longer a highlight but a baseline requirement. It proves to employers that you not only understand theory but can also manage teams and deliver results.” This utilitarian mindset, directly linking leadership to résumé building, is particularly pronounced among business school students.

2. Internal Barriers: The Vicious Cycle of Lack of Vision and Lack of Confidence

These strong internal drivers are counterbalanced by equally significant internal barriers, primarily manifested as self-doubt and a lack of personal vision.

The candid admission from Respondent 13 reveals a widespread crisis of confidence: “I often ask myself late at night: 'Do I really have what it takes? Will I let the team down?' This self-questioning is the biggest psychological struggle before deciding to run.”

More critically, many students lack a clear picture. Respondent 14 pointed out: “Many classmates cannot see what specific, positive change they could bring as leaders. When they can't visualize a picture of success in their minds, their passion naturally extinguishes.” This lack of vision leads them to prefer channeling their energy into personal endeavors with clearer objectives, such as academic performance. Notably, this mindset fosters a culture of 'passive participation'. According to Respondent 12's observation, “Out of a hundred students, only about ten have the passion to become leaders. And among those ten, about seven prefer to wait for an invitation or nomination rather than stepping forward proactively.” This data vividly illustrates how internal barriers manifest as concrete avoidance behaviors.

3. External Incentives: Recognition, Networks, and Cultural Responsibility

Institutional incentives and cultural values constitute the main pulling forces.

Formal recognition mechanisms, such as awards, are important motivators. Respondent 8 emphasized: “The university's leadership award isn't just a piece of paper; it's public validation of our efforts. This recognition makes us feel the hard work is worthwhile.” Furthermore, the interpersonal networks built through leadership positions are also seen as direct bridges to career opportunities.

For international students, cultural values provide a powerful drive. Respondent 11 explained: “In our culture, ability implies responsibility to the community. If you are seen to have leadership potential, then serving the collective is not an option, but an obligation.” This reflects the profound influence of collectivist culture on individual behavioral choices.

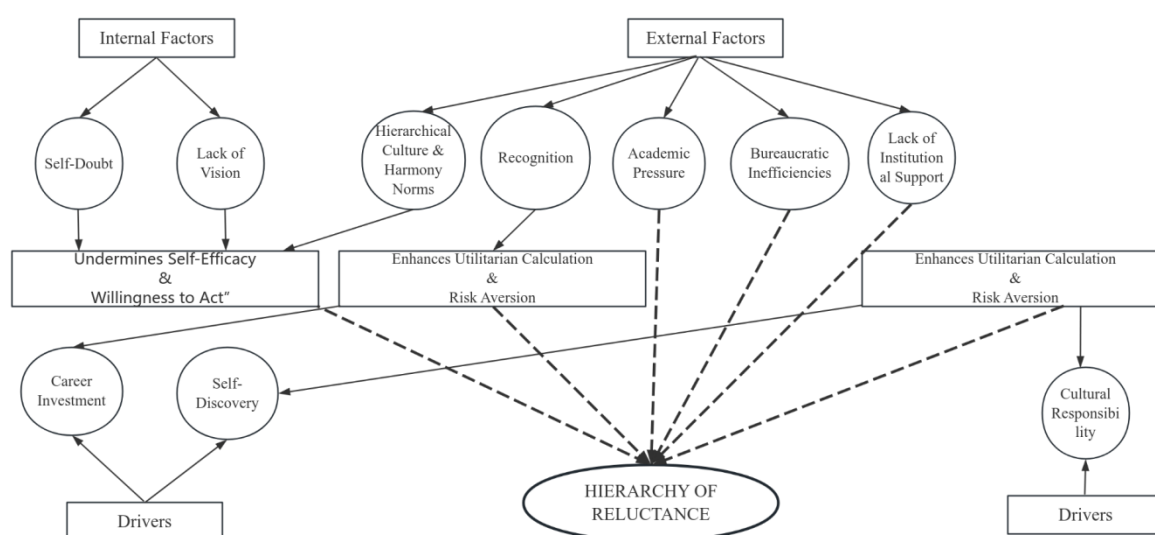
4. External Barriers: The Compounding Effect of Institutional Constraints and Cultural Inhibition

External barriers are equally clear and potent, mainly reflected in institutional constraints and cultural inhibition.

Academic pressure is the most frequently cited source of conflict. Respondent 3 faced a typical dilemma: “I had to choose between maintaining my 4.0 GPA and serving as club president. It’s a very real trade-off of time and energy.”

Bureaucratic inefficiency drains student enthusiasm. Respondent 1 complained: “Even the smallest procurement or decision needs to go through three layers of approval. This directly undermines our motivation to be efficient.” Accompanying this is a lack of support systems. Respondent 12 felt: “We invest a great deal of time and emotion, but when encountering real difficulties, we often feel isolated and unsupported, receiving very limited institutional support.”

These barriers are further amplified within a cultural context that emphasizes harmony and respect for seniority. As noted by Respondent 12, in Asian educational environments, direct competition and self-promotion are often discouraged, making students more hesitant. Ultimately, these factors collectively lead to a pronounced “hierarchy of reluctance” phenomenon. Respondent 8 summarized: “A harsh reality is that the higher the position, the fewer people are willing to take responsibility. Finding students willing to be department members is hard enough; finding someone to be chairperson is even more difficult.”



PICTURE 1 Logical Diagram of Factors Shaping Leadership Motivation

The logical relationships within the framework illustrate a dynamic process of student decision-making. The analysis begins with the systematic processing of raw qualitative data, which is coded and categorized into distinct themes. These themes are subsequently structured into a force field of opposing factors: Drivers, representing positive forces that pull students toward leadership roles, and Barriers, constituting negative forces that push them away. Two key pathways particularly contribute to leadership reluctance. Firstly, the convergence of Internal Barriers, such as self-doubt, and specific External Barriers, notably hierarchical cultural norms, directly undermines students' self-efficacy, fostering a perception of incapability. Secondly, while career investment and recognition serve as motivators, they simultaneously promote a utilitarian calculus where the perceived risks of high-level positions begin to outweigh the benefits, thereby heightening risk aversion. Consequently, the core phenomenon of the "Hierarchy of Reluctance" emerges from this interplay. For entry-level roles, the aggregate drivers are typically sufficient to overcome the barriers. However, as the level of responsibility escalates, barriers especially risk, pressure, and cultural constraints intensify disproportionately, while drivers remain relatively constant. Eventually, the collective barriers overwhelm the drivers, resulting in the observed decline in willingness to lead.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to investigate the internal and external factors that shape the motivation of business students to engage in leadership roles. The findings reveal a complex interplay of forces that either propel students toward or deter them from these positions, largely confirming and adding nuance to the existing literature.

1. Reinterpreting Self-Efficacy within a Cross-Cultural Arena

The data reveal that self-efficacy operates not as a fixed trait but as a fluid construct highly sensitive to the cultural context. The "self-doubt" and preference for "passive recruitment" are not merely indicators of low self-efficacy in a universal sense. Instead, they represent a culturally-informed assessment of risk and appropriateness.

Bandura's theory (1997) posits that self-efficacy beliefs are built through mastery experiences and social persuasion. In this Thai context, however, the pathway to "mastery" is complicated by cultural norms. A student's reluctance to self-nominate, interpreted through a Western individualistic lens as a lack of confidence, can be reinterpreted here as a strategic adherence to local hierarchical norms (Hofstede, 2001) and the Thai principle of 'Kreng Jai'—a deference to authority to maintain social harmony. Therefore, what appears as a lack of internal drive may be a highly efficacious decision to avoid social transgression. This suggests that for Chinese students in Thailand, leadership self-efficacy must be reconceptualized to

include the efficacy to navigate cross-cultural social dynamics, not just the efficacy to perform leadership tasks.

2. Cultural Adaptation vs. Hierarchical Power Dynamics: A Blurred Line

A central question is whether student reluctance stems from a process of cultural adaptation or is a direct response to hierarchical power structures in the academic setting. The evidence suggests these forces are mutually reinforcing rather than distinct.

The observed "hierarchy of reluctance" where willingness to lead decreases as formal authority increases—cannot be solely attributed to the Chinese students' cultural background. It is amplified by the convergence of Thai and Chinese cultural logics, both of which emphasize respect for seniority and institutional hierarchy. This creates a double-layered constraint. The students are not merely adapting to Thai culture; they are operating within an institutional environment where the pre-existing power dynamics resonate with and reinforce their own cultural predispositions. Consequently, their hesitation to assume high-level positions is a rational response to this reinforced structure, a form of "defensive hesitation" to avoid overstepping invisible but powerfully felt cultural-institutional boundaries.

3. The Instrumental Motivator: Career Relevance as a Cross-Cultural Bridge

In this complex environment, the perceived career relevance of leadership emerges as a crucial cross-cultural motivator. It functions as a legitimizing force that can override both internal doubts and external cultural barriers. While Owen (2021) found students often miss this connection, our participants, as business students, leveraged it strategically.

The drive for “résumé-building” and “professional investment” provides a universally accepted, performance-based rationale for pursuing leadership. This instrumental motivation creates a “cultural bypass” it allows students to frame their leadership pursuit in terms of career pragmatism, a justification that is intelligible and respected across both Chinese and Thai academic cultures, thereby reducing the perceived social risk of self-promotion. This finding extends the literature by highlighting how a powerful extrinsic motivator can facilitate engagement in contexts where intrinsic motivations or communal calls to service may be stifled by cross-cultural uncertainties.

Recommendations:

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance student leadership engagement within the cross-cultural context of Thai higher education.

Practical Implications:

To effectively enhance student leadership engagement, higher education institutions should adopt the following integrated strategies: formally integrate leadership experiences into the credit-bearing system and record them on official transcripts to enhance their career relevance; streamline administrative procedures by establishing a centralized digital management platform to reduce institutional barriers to participation; and build a structured support system comprising mentorship and skills training to help students develop necessary confidence and competencies. On a cultural level, leadership should be reframed as community service, and proactive nomination of promising students by faculty should be encouraged. Furthermore, ensuring stable funding and establishing formal recognition mechanisms are crucial for sustaining student motivation.

Theoretical Implications:

This study refines self-efficacy theory by showing that for students in cross-cultural contexts, efficacy must include cultural navigation skills, not just task performance. Findings also reveal that cultural adaptation can involve strategic deference consciously moderating leadership assertiveness to align with host-country norms like Thai hierarchical structures rather than full behavioral assimilation.

Future Research Directions:

Future research should explore several promising avenues. First, comparative studies of leadership motivation among international student groups from different national backgrounds within Thai universities could help disentangle the unique influence of cultural origin. Second, there is a need to develop a dedicated multicultural student leadership model based on cross-cultural perspectives. Third, longitudinal tracking of the evolution of students' leadership motivation would provide valuable dynamic insights. Finally, in-depth investigation into how institutional power structures, such as student-advisor relationships, facilitate or inhibit the emergence of student leadership is strongly recommended.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that a business student's decision to pursue leadership is not a simple calculation but a dynamic negotiation between internal drives and external pressures. The findings suggest that the perceived career relevance of leadership can act as a crucial mitigating factor against both internal doubts and external barriers .

Theoretically, this research bridges several models. It connects the internal psychological framework of Bandura's self-efficacy with the external, structural barriers

highlighted in the literature. It also shows how broader cultural dimensions (Hofstede) interact with immediate institutional practices to either suppress or encourage leadership emergence. For practice, this implies that interventions must be multi-pronged, simultaneously working to build students' internal confidence and competence while reforming the external structures and cultural narratives surrounding leadership on campus. Simply offering roles is insufficient; universities must create an ecosystem that makes leadership engagement a accessible, supported, and clearly valuable component of a business student's educational journey.

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