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**The influences of transformational leadership on employee employability: Evidence from China**

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## Introduction

Introduced by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985), transformational leadership has gained legitimacy over the last three decades and proved to be an effective and influential enabler in changing employees' attitudes and behaviors, ultimately resulting in better performance of organizations (García-Morales *et al.*, 2008; Katou, 2015; Para-González *et al.*, 2018). While there is more of an exchange relationship in transactional leadership behavior with contingent rewards (Burns, 1978), the transformational type requires that the leader encourages employees to alter their attitudes, beliefs and values (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004). Transformational leadership is premised on provision of individualized support and enhancement of the intellectual capabilities of employees resulting in better task performance (Lowe *et al.*, 1996; Judge and Piccolo, 2004) or overall improved efficacy of organizations (Avolio, 1999; Avolio *et al.*, 1999; DeGroot *et al.*, 2000; Dumdum *et al.*, 2002; Boerner *et al.*, 2007).

Empirical research in the field suggests that transformational leadership may also enhance employability (Camps and Rodríguez, 2011; Van der Heijden and Bakker, 2011; Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2014) and well-being of employees (Nielsen *et al.*, 2008). Following the general definition of employability – the ability to retain a job or apply for a new desired one (Forrier and Sels, 2003; Fugate *et al.*, 2004; Rothwell and Arnold, 2007) – and in line with the more specific perceived (subjective) employability concept (Berntson *et al.*, 2006; De Cuyper *et al.*, 2011) we base our study on employees' perceptions of their potential and capabilities, which are believed to be necessary to secure a new job and make the necessary labor market transitions.

A number of key researchers in the realm of employability (Berntson *et al.*, 2006; De Cuyper *et al.*, 2008; Van Emmerik *et al.*, 2012) have pointed out the shift towards subjective or perceived employability due to a person-centred adaptation construct, which predisposes

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2  
3 individuals to change, proactively emphasizing the high degree of autonomy (Crant, 2000;  
4 Pruijt, 2013). The authors of this paper adhere to the assumption that in current conditions  
5 employees are more likely to adopt a course of action based upon their own perceptions  
6 rather than any objective reality as the dynamic nature of employability requires  
7 consideration of both contextual and individual factors such as willingness to change jobs,  
8 skills, physical and cognitive suitability and adaptability.  
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16 As employability is seen as advantageous to both employees and employers (Day, 2000;  
17 De Vries *et al.*, 2001) by virtue of deteriorating job security, increased flexibility and greater  
18 individualization of employees (Berntson *et al.*, 2006), the factors influencing employability  
19 require research attention. One of them is transformational leadership, the influence of which  
20 can potentially be observed on employees' attitudes and behaviors resulting in better  
21 performance of organizations through higher productivity (Fugate *et al.*, 2004) and  
22 improvement of the health and well-being of employees (Berntson and Marklund, 2007; De  
23 Cuyper *et al.*, 2008).  
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33 There is a small body of empirical research focusing on the relationship between  
34 transformational leadership and self-perceived employability, along with the development of  
35 mediating models, hence our focus is underpinned by a number of reasons.  
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39 First, due to drastic changes in the policies of the Chinese government aimed at  
40 attracting foreign direct investment and encouraging the growth of the domestic private  
41 sector, the roles of company leaders become more significant (Newman and Butler, 2014). In  
42 this regard, a transformational leader by exertion of a greater influence on employees and  
43 through participation and involvement in both individual and team-focused tasks is able to  
44 challenge those employees intellectually and encourage creative thinking, thus ultimately  
45 enhancing their employability (Purvanova and Bono, 2009).  
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54 Our research has been developed to introduce several new elements of job characteristics  
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3 and social exchange theory to the studies of transformational leadership and employability.  
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5 Thus, our second reason (linked to job characteristics theory) for choosing transformational  
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7 leadership is that these leaders encourage motivated behavior, through which employees are  
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9 required to use and be capable of using a variety of skills. A transformational leader ensures  
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11 that tasks are clearly identified and can be accomplished from start to finish and are  
12  
13 significant to a variety of stakeholders, with greater autonomy assigned to the employee and  
14  
15 feedback being provided upon the completion of the task.  
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18 Third, besides job characteristics theory, transformational leadership is connected to  
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20 social exchange theory (Wang *et al.*, 2005), at the heart of which there is an interaction  
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22 between two agents: individuals and organizations (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). We take  
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24 into consideration three types of social exchange: perceived organizational support, leader-  
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26 member exchange and team-member exchange.  
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29 For these reasons, the main aim of our paper is to examine the mediating role of job  
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31 characteristics and social exchange in transformational leadership and employability  
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33 relationships. The study also opens up a debate around the employability of employees as it  
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35 stands apart from the performance measurement. We believe that this new mediating model  
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37 can provide an insight into complex mechanisms of employability enhancement from the  
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39 perspective of leader development.  
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## 45 **Theoretical background and hypotheses**

### 46 47 *Transformational leadership and employability*

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50 Given the drastic transformations observed across countries and intensified by  
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52 globalization processes and technological advancement (Beck, 2000; Zhiwen and Van der  
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54 Heijden, 2008; Smith, 2010), the established parity on the job market has changed, pointing  
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3 to the lack of job security in the first instance for employees and ambiguity over where to  
4 invest time, financial resources and physical energy, while undergoing training, acquiring  
5 new skills or searching for jobs (De Grip *et al.*, 2004).  
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9 As jobs became volatile, employees' concerns accumulate in their abilities to offer  
10 marketable skills in order to secure a job and thus employability as a means to derive job  
11 security has been highlighted by numerous researchers in the field (Rothwell *et al.*, 2008;  
12 Scholarios *et al.*, 2008; Brown *et al.*, 2010; Van Emmerik *et al.*, 2012; Pruijt, 2013).  
13 Researchers appealed for the need to consider the mutual interest in investment into  
14 employability from the employer and employee sides, bringing about the 'new psychological  
15 contract' (Pruijt, 2013) between parties with continuous investment expected from the former  
16 and commitment from the latter. A significant proportion of employers are able to recognize  
17 the need for such investments leading to achievement of competitive advantage and thus  
18 contributing to the success of organizations (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2011; Van den Broeck *et al.*,  
19 2014).  
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33 According to the transformational leadership stream of research, the norms and values of  
34 employees are transformed as a result of the behavior of the leader aiming for the  
35 amplification of followers' performance, which eventually results in increased performance  
36 of the organization (Bass, 1985; Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Tims *et al.*, 2011). The main aspect of  
37 transformational leadership is that through the facilitator (leader) it can convey an  
38 organization's clear vision to followers, inspire and shape others with the provision of energy,  
39 passion, enthusiasm, and determination in the workplace (Bass, 1985; Yukl, 1989).  
40 Correspondingly, a transformational leader possesses a wide spectrum of attributes: friendly  
41 and supportive manner of acting, inspirational motivation, intellectual influence, and  
42 individualized consideration (Bass, 1985).  
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3 Charismatic behavior is at the center of this concept and is performed through the  
4 diffusion of the emotional behavior of the employees into the broader visionary aspect  
5 (Rafferty and Griffin, 2004). Transformational leadership is seen to be in high demand at a  
6 time of austerity, when the organizational context is changing (Zhang *et al.*, 2012) and there  
7 is a widespread view among researchers that this leadership style has impact on the bottom-  
8 line performance of an organization (Koene *et al.*, 2002). Thus the effectiveness of the  
9 organization is enhanced as a result of changes in followers' performance and individual  
10 effectiveness (Li and Hung, 2009; Zhang *et al.*, 2012). Therefore the utilitarian behavior of  
11 employees can be observed as they are prepared by the transformational leader to act for the  
12 good of larger groupings, for instance teams or entire organizations revealing the  
13 collectivistic orientation of the leader (Dvir *et al.*, 2002; Jung *et al.*, 2009). Thus the  
14 fulfilment of the followers' current needs are reoriented toward motivating them to perform  
15 beyond their contractual obligations by arousing dormant needs of the employees (Dvir *et al.*,  
16 2002; Miao *et al.*, 2012)

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33 One of the unique aspects of transformational leadership is the anxiety of the leader  
34 about followers' development, with efforts made to evaluate their potential in order to match  
35 existing and future requirements (Dvir *et al.*, 2002). This consequently requires continuous  
36 development of the employee as a result of the need to satisfy self-actualization criteria thus  
37 revealing their dormant needs (Bass, 1985; Dvir *et al.*, 2002). In this regard the research on  
38 trust, work engagement and well-being is transfused into transformational leadership studies  
39 (Nielsen *et al.*, 2008; Tims *et al.*, 2011; Shih *et al.*, 2012).

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48 In the same vein, very few experts engaged with the research on employability and  
49 transformational leadership (Camps and Rodríguez, 2011; Van der Heijden and Bakker,  
50 2011). Thus Camps and Rodriguez (2011) touched on the aspect of organizational learning  
51 culture as the mediating factor, appealing for continuous learning, and therefore competency  
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3 improvement. Here transformational leadership could trigger the need for learning and the  
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5 results suggest that worker-perceived transformational leadership can both affect followers'  
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7 employability perception, and their actual employability. The requirement to enhance  
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9 employability by the 'continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal  
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11 use of competences' (Van der Heijde and Van der Heijden, 2006) can be met through the  
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13 transformational leadership approach. In a similar vein, Van der Heijden and Bakker (2011)  
14  
15 pointed out that transformational leadership has an indirect relationship with supervisor  
16  
17 ratings of employability through work-related flow. In order to find out how empirical  
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19 evidence fits the theoretical framework, we aim to explore the relationship between  
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21 employees' perceptions of their managers' transformational leadership style and their self-  
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23 perceived employability.  
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27 Therefore the following hypothesis is proposed:

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29 Hypothesis 1: Employees' perceptions of transformational leadership style inside the  
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31 organization positively affect their self-perceived employability.  
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### 34 35 *The role of job characteristics*

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37 The job characteristics approach introduced by Hackman and Oldham (1975) and job  
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39 strain model developed by Karasek (1979) are based on the notion of separation of job  
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41 demands and decision latitude. Job demand refers to the psychological factors involved in  
42  
43 accomplishing the workload, unexpected tasks, and job-related personal conflicts, while job  
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45 decision latitude refers to the extent of influence that employees can exert over their work  
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47 routine. Influencing factors include opportunities to use various job-related skills (i.e. skill  
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49 discretion) and the authority to make decisions over work (i.e. decision authority).  
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53 Van den Broeck et al. (2014) provided evidence that high job demand negatively  
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55 influences employees' job performance because employees may feel exhausted and worn out  
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3 in the face of high pressure coming from high job demands (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004;  
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5 Schaufeli *et al.*, 2009). However, if the job is accomplished, it may have a positive effect on  
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7 employees (Van Emmerik *et al.*, 2009).  
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10 The role of transformational leadership is important in developing positive feelings of  
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12 accomplishment, resulting in better job performance. The leader not only provides the  
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14 required resources and support, but also exerts pressure on followers in order to help them  
15  
16 perform better. Leaders can use verbal persuasion emphasizing the organization's mission as  
17  
18 a means to guide their followers towards making better judgments about the work  
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20 environment (Shamir *et al.*, 1993). Transformational leaders are able to develop an  
21  
22 understanding of job demands for employees, and to motivate their followers through job  
23  
24 characteristics. Besides, employees would be motivated to acquire knowledge and skills  
25  
26 necessary for the completion of the task, minimizing the stress. Therefore, the authors  
27  
28 propose the hypothesis that appropriate job demands are helpful to employees' employability.  
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31 Skill discretion and decision authority could be considered as work-related resources, and  
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33 they have been found to be positively associated with staff dedication and work engagement  
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35 (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, employees may benefit from job resources even  
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37 when working under demanding conditions (Van den Broeck *et al.*, 2011). This is because job  
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39 resources may buffer the impact of job demands on burnout. A significant degree of control  
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41 and discretion over work may help employees to perform better in the face of high job  
42  
43 demands. This environment provides employees with autonomy and flexibility on when and  
44  
45 how to deal with their job demands. Apart from the above advantages, job resources also  
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47 stimulate personal growth, learning, and development (Van Emmerik *et al.*, 2012).  
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51 Van Emmerik *et al.* (2012) found the association between resources and employability  
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53 was mediated by extrinsic motivation. This present study proposes that more job resources  
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55 (skill discretion and decision authority) are directly good for employability. Transformational  
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3 leadership encourages employees in continuous learning, developing skills and provides them  
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5 authority, which is doubtless favorable to their skill discretion and decision authority. Leaders  
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7 who engage in individualized consideration by coaching and teaching should have followers  
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9 who see more autonomy and feedback in their jobs (Piccolo and Colquitt, 2006).  
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11 Furthermore, transformational leadership supports followers by offering them more  
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13 work-related resources, thus followers can feel less stress and process tasks as smoothly as  
14  
15 possible. Transformational leadership is more likely to promote employees' employability  
16  
17 through skill discretion and decision authority.  
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19 This leads us to the following hypotheses:  
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23 Hypothesis 2: Job characteristics will play a mediating role in the relationship between  
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25 transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.  
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28 Hypothesis 2a: Job demands will play a mediating role in the relationship between  
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30 transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.  
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33 Hypothesis 2b: Skill discretion will play a mediating role in the relationship between  
34  
35 transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.  
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38 Hypothesis 2c: Decision authority will play a mediating role in the relationship between  
39  
40 transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.  
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#### 42 43 *The role of social exchange* 44

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46 Seen by many researchers as one of the most influential conceptual paradigms in  
47  
48 organizational behavior, social exchange is based upon trust, kindness, and respect (Hofmann  
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50 and Morgeson, 1999; Cole *et al.*, 2002; Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005; Lavelle *et al.*, 2007).  
51  
52 The interaction between two agents (individuals or organizations) is central to social  
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54 exchange theory (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005). In the workplace, most workers form their  
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3 social exchange relationships with their organizations, supervisors and coworkers. This study  
4 takes into consideration three types of social exchange. Perceived organizational support  
5 (POS) refers to the “quality” of the social exchange that takes place between an employee  
6 and organization (Cropanzano and Mitchell, 2005), while leader-member exchange (LMX)  
7 and team-member exchange (TMX) have been viewed respectively as the exchange  
8 relationships that take place between an employee and the supervisor (Gerstner and Day,  
9 1997), and between an employee and team members (Seers, 1989).

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18 POS is valued as assurance that aid will be available from the organization when it is  
19 needed to carry out one’s job effectively and to deal with stressful situations (Rhoades and  
20 Eisenberger, 2002). Employees with a sense of POS feel that in circumstances where they  
21 need work or life support, the organization is willing to help (Hashemi *et al.*, 2012).  
22 Supervisors always act as agents of the organization, responsible for directing and evaluating  
23 subordinates’ performance, so employees would view their supervisor’s favorable or  
24 unfavorable orientation toward them as indicative of the organizational support (Eisenberger  
25 *et al.*, 1986). Transformational leadership supports and encourages employees whose work or  
26 lives require help, therefore employees would feel strong support from the organization,  
27 which then generates their level of responsibility to the organization. A study has found that  
28 perceived supervisor support leads to perceived organizational support (Eisenberger *et al.*,  
29 2002). POS can strengthen employees’ sense that an organization recognizes and rewards  
30 their achievements. High POS represents employees’ self-perceived support from the  
31 organization, meaning that employees view their job or task more positively and have more  
32 resources to deal with a dilemma, contributing to employees’ employability.

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50 LMX theory has long been recognized as an important leadership theory capturing  
51 dyadic relationships in organizations (Ozer, 2008). The relationally oriented nature as one  
52 factor of Chinese culture makes LMX an important type of exchange relationship in the  
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3 workplace (Loi *et al.*, 2009). In general, leaders count on their followers to provide them with  
4 assistance whenever needed, and followers rely upon their leaders for support,  
5 encouragement, and career investments. Exchanges between leaders and followers can occur  
6 at any time. Idealized influence and individualized consideration can catalyze employees'  
7 behaviors to strengthen the relationship with supervisors (Deluga, 1994). Gerstner and Day  
8 (1997) proposed to carry out conceptual and empirical research focusing on the relationship  
9 between transformational leadership and LMX. The review of the literature led the authors to  
10 believe that there is a positive association between transformational leadership and LMX  
11 (Wang *et al.*, 2005; Asgari *et al.*, 2008). Further, high quality LMX symbolizes support,  
12 acceptance, and security, and it can empower and motivate employees to try new things,  
13 which is of benefit to one's ability and working skills. When employees have high quality  
14 LMX relationships, they value this personal relationship, and reciprocate by responding  
15 positively to demanding work expectations (Kamdar and Van Dyne, 2007). During this  
16 process, they must improve their capacity in all aspects for not letting leaders down.  
17 Therefore, transformational leadership can influence followers' employability through LMX.  
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35 Transformational leadership articulates a compelling vision of the future of the  
36 organization, encourages team collaboration and offers work-related assistance. Under such  
37 circumstances, team members work together and provide conditions necessary for enhanced  
38 perceptions of TMX. High quality TMX involves exchange of resources and support that  
39 goes beyond what is required for task accomplishment (Tse and Dasborough, 2008). A team  
40 member having high TMX shares information and knowledge with other members, and in  
41 turn he/she can get much more knowledge and novel thoughts from others. Liu et al. (2011)  
42 have found that work unit TMX increases the intention to share knowledge. It is  
43 understandable that one way to improve employees' employability is to promote information  
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3 sharing and reinforce learning. Similar to LMX, TMX can act as the mediator between  
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5 transformational leadership and employability. This leads us to the following hypotheses:

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7 Hypothesis 3: Social exchange will play a mediating role in the relationship between  
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9 transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.

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12 Hypothesis 3a: Perceived organizational support will play a mediating role in the  
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14 relationship between transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.

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17 Hypothesis 3b: Leader-member exchange will play a mediating role in the relationship  
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19 between transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.

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22 Hypothesis 3c: Team-member exchange will play a mediating role in the relationship  
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24 between transformational leadership style and self-perceived employability.

## 25 26 27 28 29 30 **Methodology**

### 31 32 *Sample and procedure*

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35 The sample is composed of 760 participants (49.9% male, 48.0% female and 2.1%  
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37 unspecified) employed in Yangtze Delta and Pearl River Delta in China. The participants  
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39 have worked under their line manager for more than one year. Most participants are  
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41 between 25 and 35 years old (57.8%), with the remaining participants under 25 years old  
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43 (24.7%) and more than 35 years old (17.5%). Education levels of these participants  
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45 included 'below the high school education level' (12.6%), 'high school education level'  
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47 (17.6%), 'junior college education level' (29.3%), 'college education level' (41.7%), and  
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49 'master education level' (5.1%). They were employed on a full-time basis in general staff  
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51 (54.5%), supervisor (15.1%), middle manager (16.2%) and senior manager (6.3%)  
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53 positions.  
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3 In order to avoid possible common method bias, two waves of surveys (in 2014) on a  
4 stratified sample, included a mix of industries, such as construction, manufacturing,  
5 finance, insurance and communications, were used to investigate the proposed relationship  
6 between transformational leadership, job characteristics, social exchange and  
7 employability. In the first wave, employees completed a survey assessing control  
8 variables, transformational leadership, job characteristics and social exchange. Of 956  
9 individuals invited, 925 returned the first-wave survey, of which 890 were valid. The  
10 second wave survey assessing employability took place after one week with the 890  
11 employees. This wave of survey returned 825 responses, 760 of which were valid. The  
12 total response rate for the two waves was 82.15% (760 out of 925 responses).  
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### 25 *Measures*

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27 Since the instruments used in the study were developed in English, careful forward-  
28 back translation procedures (Behling and Law, 2000) were used. A bilingual translator  
29 translated these scales into Chinese, and another bilingual translator having no knowledge  
30 of the original English scales back-translated them into English. Then, a group of HR  
31 scholars discussed the ambiguity of the translated script, making it clearer.  
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38 Transformational Leadership (TFL) was assessed using a 20-item scale from  
39 Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) (Bass and Avolio, 1995), including five sub-  
40 dimensions: Idealized Influence - Attribute, Idealized Influence - Behavior, Inspirational  
41 Motivation, Intellectual Stimulation, and Individualized Consideration. Responses were  
42 designed on a 5-point scale: 0 ('Not at all') and 4 ('Frequently, if not always'). Sample  
43 items are as follows: 'Articulates a compelling vision of the future', 'Gets me to look at  
44 problems from many different angles'.  
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53 Job Characteristics were measured in three dimensions — Job Demands (JD), Skill  
54 Discretion (SD), Decision Authority (DA) (Karasek, 1979). JD included seven items, with  
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3 answers ranging from 1=never to 5=extremely often. An example item is: ‘To what extent  
4 does your job require you working fast?’ SD and DA are separately assessed with two 4-  
5 item scales. Items are scored on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1=never to 5=extremely  
6 often. A sample item of SD reads ‘To what extent is high skill level required?’, while a  
7 sample item of DA reads ‘To what extent do you have the freedom to decide how to  
8 organize your work?’  
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16 Three Work-Related Sources of Social Exchanges were included: Perceived  
17 Organizational Support (POS), Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) and Team-Member  
18 Exchange (TMX). To assess POS, we used the same six items developed in previous  
19 studies (Shanock and Eisenberger, 2006). An example item reads ‘My work organization  
20 strongly considers my goals and values’. Respondents indicated the extent of agreement  
21 with each statement on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 7=strongly  
22 agree. As the item-total correlation was low and significantly reduced the scale’s  
23 reliability, we removed a reverse item to increase reliability. LMX was measured with a  
24 seven-item scale (Scandura and Graen, 1984). Sample items are, ‘How would you  
25 characterize your working relationship with your leader?’ (1=‘extremely ineffective’,  
26 5=‘extremely effective’) and ‘How well does your leader understand your job problem and  
27 needs?’ (1=‘not a bit’, 5=‘a great deal’). TMX was measured with a 9-item scale (Seers,  
28 1989). Items were rated on a 7-point scale, ranging from 1=very unlikely to 7=very likely.  
29 A sample item reads ‘My coworkers have asked for my expertise in solving a job-related  
30 problem of theirs’.  
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48 Employability (EA) was assessed with a 10-item scale developed in a seminal work  
49 by Rothwell and Arnold (2007). It contains two sub-dimensions: Internal Employability  
50 and External Employability. Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with  
51 each of the 10 statements on a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree).  
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3 Sample items are, 'Among the people who do the same job as me, I am well respected in  
4 this organization' (internal employability), 'The skills I have gained in my present job are  
5 transferable to other occupations outside this organization' (external employability).  
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9 Moreover, we included control variables in order to isolate the test effects (Boselie *et*  
10 *al.*, 2005) and followed Anand, Vidyarthi, Liden and Rousseau (2010) with an intention to  
11 use individual level control variables in testing the hypothesized leadership-employability  
12 social relationship. Specifically, the tests were controlled by gender (0=female, 1=male),  
13 age (1=below 25 years, 2=26-35 years, 3=36-45 years , 4=46-55 years, 5=above 55 years),  
14 education level (1 = below senior high school, 2 = senior high school, 3 = college, 4 =  
15 bachelor's degree, 5 = master's degree, and 6 = doctorate or above) and position level (1 =  
16 operational employee, 2 = first line manager, 3 = middle manager, and 4 = senior  
17 manager).  
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### 32 **Data analysis and results**

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34 We followed the approach suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003) to control and test  
35 common method bias. First, in addition to using the translation-back-translation method  
36 and panel discussion to ensure the quality of the items, we also provided detailed  
37 instructions about the research purpose and assured the anonymity of participation on the  
38 first page of the questionnaire. Second, the results of an exploratory factor analysis (EFA)  
39 on all the measures showed there were 11 factors with eigenvalues greater than one. In  
40 addition, the Harman's one-factor test did not identify any general factor that accounted for  
41 most of the variance among all the items, because the first factor explained only 35.89% of  
42 the total variance.  
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54 [Table 1 here]  
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3 Third, the patterns of the scale variables were assessed. Table 1 presents means,  
4 standard deviations, reliability coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) and correlations among all variables.  
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7 Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed to evaluate the measurement of the  
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9 scales (Tabachnick and Fidell, 2007). As illustrated in Table 2, The hypothesized CFA  
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11 model (M1) specified 2 second-order scales (TFL and EA) and 6 first-order scales (JD,  
12  
13 SD, DA; and POS, LMX and TMX). An acceptable model fit indices were found in the  
14  
15 hypothesized model (M1): the  $\chi^2$  statistic was 4862.944 (d.f.=1952), Root-Mean-Square  
16  
17 Error of Approximation or RMSEA (0.044) and Standardized RMR or SRMR (0.057)  
18  
19 were below the cut-off levels of 0.05 and 0.08 respectively (Schumacker and Lomax,  
20  
21 2004); and Comparative Fit Index or CFI (0.913) and Tucker-Lewis Index or TLI (0.904)  
22  
23 were also above the threshold level of 0.9 (Byrne, 2010). Therefore, the hypothesized CFA  
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25 model (M1) was selected, as it resulted in better goodness of fits compare to alternative  
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27 models (M2-M6).  
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31 [Table 2 here]  
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35 Finally, we tested our hypotheses via structural equation modeling (SEM) in AMOS  
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37 (Arbuckle, 2006), assessing model fit via  $\chi^2$  and the  $\chi^2/df$  ratio, as well as with absolute  
38  
39 (RMSEA) and relative indices (NFI, CFI, IFI) to evaluate the goodness of fit of the model.  
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41 AMOS provides five SEM procedures for parameters estimation. Unweighted-least  
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43 squares (ULS), Weighted-least squares (WLS) and Asymptotic-distribution free (ADF)  
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45 require a sample  $> 1000$ , but make no distributional assumptions (Wu, 2009); Maximum  
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47 Likelihood (ML) and Generalized Least Squares (GLS) require smaller samples. ML  
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49 generates significantly less bias than GLS if the path model is correctly specified and the  
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51 data are continuous and normally distributed (Olsson *et al.*, 2000). We tested our  
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53 hypotheses by ML. The hypothesized path model (P1) in which Job Characteristics (JD,  
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3 SD and DA) and Social Exchanges (POS, LMX and TMX) mediated between  
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5 Transformational Leadership and Employability. As illustrated in Table 2, this model (P1)  
6  
7 showed acceptable fit to the data: the  $\chi^2$  statistic was 5456.779 (d.f.=2218), RMSEA  
8  
9 (0.044) and SRMR (0.068) were below the cut-off levels of 0.05 and 0.08 respectively  
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11 (Schumacker and Lomax, 2004), and Comparative Fit Index or CFI (0.904) and Tucker-  
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13 Lewis Index or TLI (0.896) were also approaching the threshold level of 0.9 (Byrne,  
14  
15 2010). Therefore, the data-to-model fit is at a satisfactory level.

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18 Bootstrapping Analysis in AMOS was employed to estimate the bias and aid the path  
19  
20 estimations (Shrout and Bolger, 2002). The Bollen-Stine bootstrap analysis (sample size  
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22 set to 2000) was used to evaluate bootstrap p-value, overall model fit and to validate and  
23  
24 to compare each of the path estimates and their standard errors (Loehlin, 2004). The ML  
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26 bootstrap analysis revealed that all the samples were useable (Byrne, 2010) and indicated  
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28 that the data-to-model fit was good i.e. accept the modified model. As illustrated in Table 3  
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30 the bootstrap result indicated that the paths and estimates in the modified model were also  
31  
32 significant and acceptable.

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35 [Table 3 here]

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38 Figure 1 depicts the model P1 which Job Characteristics (JD, SD and DA) and Social  
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40 Exchanges (POS, LMX and TMX) partially mediated the effect of Transformational  
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42 Leadership on Employability. The coefficient of the path from Transformational  
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44 Leadership to three types of Job Characteristic (JD, SD and DA) and three types of Social  
45  
46 Exchange (POS, LMX and TMX) were positive and highly significant. Additionally, the  
47  
48 standardized effects of Transformational Leadership, three types of Job Characteristic (JD,  
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50 SD and DA) and two types of Social Exchange (POS and TMX) on employability were  
51  
52 significant, LMX was the exception. Therefore, all the hypotheses were supported except  
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54 hypothesis 3b, which states that Leader-Member Exchange will play a mediating role in  
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3 the relationship between transformational leadership style and self-perceived  
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5 employability, was not supported.

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7 [Figure 1 here]  
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## 10 11 12 13 14 **Discussion and conclusion** 15

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17 A considerable amount of research attention has been devoted to transformational  
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19 leadership body of literature. In our research we empirically tested the relationship between  
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21 transformational leadership and employability and the study made a number of important  
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23 contributions. First, this study enriches the literature through the exploration of the mediating  
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25 factors and illustration of the significance of indirect effects. To the best of our knowledge,  
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27 this is the first study applying job characteristics theory (Hackman and Oldham, 1975) and  
28  
29 social exchange theory (Homans, 1958) to explain the effect of transformational leadership  
30  
31 on employability. Consistent with previous findings (Camps and Rodríguez, 2011; Van der  
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33 Heijden and Bakker, 2011), the data supported our hypothesis in that transformational  
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35 leadership had a positive effect on employees' employability.  
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39 Second, besides the direct effect, the results of our study showed that transformational  
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41 leadership could also improve employees' employability through job demands, skill  
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43 discretion, decision authority, perceived organizational support and team-member exchange,  
44  
45 but not leader-member exchange. This is consistent with our research hypotheses and is  
46  
47 beneficial for understanding of the mediating mechanism between transformational  
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49 leadership and employee employability. It shows that transformational leadership can  
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51 positively affect employees' employability by means of job characteristics and social  
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53 exchange. With respect to job characteristics, the transformational leader is able not just to  
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55 influence the employees to work harder and accomplish tasks faster, but rather stimulate the  
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3 followers to be more efficient and effective. Similarly, the transformational leader can enrich  
4 job resources, so the employees may feel that their work is non-repetitious, creative and  
5 skillful. This approach aims for greater freedom of employees, their control over their own  
6 decisions and autonomy in task accomplishment, which in turn forms a conducive  
7 mechanism of enhancement of employees' employability. In terms of social exchange, a  
8 transformational leader can facilitate the creation of a specific organizational climate (i.e.  
9 perceived organizational support) and team climate (i.e. team-member exchange), thus, the  
10 employees have a sense of being respected, recognized and supported by the organization, in  
11 which cooperation among team members, friendship and sharing are embedded in its values.  
12 Good social climate is also conducive to the employees' motivation to further enhance their  
13 employability.  
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26 Third, the study contributes to the broad notion of universal applicability of  
27 transformational leadership concept (Bass, 1997). Previous research has portrayed Chinese  
28 culture as more collectivist compared to most western cultures (Oyserman *et al.*, 2002) and as  
29 rather inclined towards autocratic and command-based leadership styles (Newman and  
30 Butler, 2014). Given the recent opening-up to foreign direct investment, aiming to reform the  
31 largely inefficient state-owned enterprises, our research also addressed the calls made by  
32 professionals as to how to proceed with such needed drastic transformations in organization  
33 management, but also benefitting its employees. Transformational leadership exerts greater  
34 influence on the latter through participation and involvement, resulting in earning the  
35 required organizational commitment of the younger generation of employees, who are  
36 individualistic and value more self-enhancement, interest and creativity in the job (Fu and  
37 Tsui, 2003).  
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52 Fourth, the study findings show that, although followers in high-quality leader-member  
53 exchange relationships are more open to the social influence of transformational leaders and  
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3 it is easier for the former to achieve the goals set by the latter, the assumption that  
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5 transformational leadership can improve leader-member exchange and then improve  
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7 employees' employability was not supported by the results. The main cause of this is that  
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9 LMX does not make a unique prediction of employability. Firstly, because of the close  
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11 relationship between them, the other variables shared the effect of leader-member exchange  
12  
13 on employability. For instance, on one hand the effect of LMX on employees' employability  
14  
15 could be further mediated by other variables; as indicated by previous studies LMX can  
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17 influence POS and TMX. On the other hand, POS and TMX include the element of LMX  
18  
19 because a leader is the agent of an organization while also acting as the core member of the  
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21 team. Secondly, there is a possibility that because of traditional Chinese culture high quality  
22  
23 LMX may relate more to Guanxi and Renqing characteristics. Therefore top management  
24  
25 care more about employees' salaries and promotion opportunities, while putting less  
26  
27 emphasis on developing employees' creativity and their ability. Supervisor support is an  
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29 important type of supervisor-subordinate Guanxi which is an indigenous Chinese construct  
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31 (Cheung and Wu, 2011). Supportive supervision has a positive effect on the motivation and  
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33 resultant performance of subordinates (Jin-liang and Hai-zhen, 2012). Job demands, skill  
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35 discretion and decision authority are job characteristics. Transformational leadership gives  
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37 employees jobs that require a variety of activities and appropriate demands, and encourages  
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39 them to decide how their jobs should be done. These behaviors are all useful to promote  
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41 employees' employability.  
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#### 46 47 *Implications for management practice*

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49 Our study has important practical implications for leaders in the workplace who are  
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51 interested in finding ways to stimulate employees' employability in China. There is an  
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53 indication that managers should show more transformational leadership behaviors, caring  
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55 more about followers' capacity and career development, thus establishing good relationships  
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3 with employees. Then, they should encourage employees to develop more skills to handle  
4 challenges at work. Similarly, by being given decision authority, employees can feel  
5 themselves more worthy and better control their work. Moreover, the impact of job demands  
6 cannot be ignored. Employees may lose their skills and employability if they are always  
7 asked to perform routine simple tasks. Transformational leadership can give followers  
8 appropriate pressure and the right level of job demands which can improve employees'  
9 ability.  
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18 Besides, Chinese leaders should encourage followers' communication and cooperation  
19 as employees obtain 80% of their knowledge at work by informal learning, such as learning  
20 from cooperation with coworkers (Weintraub and Martineau, 2002). By offering work-related  
21 assistance, team members can provide conditions necessary for enhanced perceptions of  
22 TMX (Tse and Dasborough, 2008), which is important for employability enhancement. It is  
23 necessary for Chinese organizations to give employees more support, such as offering them  
24 monetary rewards, protecting their labor rights, listening to their needs and providing formal  
25 and informal on the job training. Some evidence indicates that employees with high levels of  
26 POS judge their jobs more favorably and are more invested in their organizations (Chen *et*  
27 *al.*, 2009). These actions are all favorable to employees' development.  
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#### 40 *Limitations and future studies*

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43 This study is subject to a number of limitations that need to be addressed. First, the data  
44 were based on self-reports and there was only a week interval between the first and second  
45 surveys. In all contexts, employees' self-reported data is unlikely to be free of social  
46 desirability bias (Ma and Qu, 2011). Future research may consider collecting data from  
47 different sources and allowing more time between surveys, however the focus of our study is  
48 on the cross-sectional, not a longitudinal data analysis, and therefore the two-wave survey  
49 interval is not mainly designed here to provide a reasonable time for inferring causality, but  
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rather to better prevent data from possible common method bias.

Secondly, this study has not explored the relationships between five dimensions of transformational leadership and employability. In the future, we need to examine the specific relationships in order to provide the targeted guiding opinions for management practice. Moreover, different leadership may have different effects on employees' employability. It will be meaningful to connect different types of leadership styles to employees' employability and explore which leadership style is more effective in improving employability. The results of this research also revealed that only the respondent's work position was a significant control variable, therefore this variable deserves further research attention.

In conclusion, the present research opens a new direction for research concerning how transformational leadership influences employees' employability. Thus, we suggest that more mediating factors (e.g. work autonomy, feedback and variety, intrinsic and extrinsic job opportunities, employability orientation, self-regulatory processes, development program participation) and moderating factors (e.g. core self-evaluations, career orientation, employability culture) can be incorporated in future studies. More research attention can also be paid to the leadership theories, which have in them a common underpinning concept of altruism (Sosik *et al.*, 2009). We suggest examining the potential impact of altruistic leadership on employability, given a widely recognized trend of promoting positive change through ethics, social entrepreneurship and community volunteerism.

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Table 1. Means, standard deviations, reliability coefficients ( $\alpha$ ) and correlations among all variables

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Gender	0.51	0.50	—											
2. Age	1.97	0.77	.13**	—										
3. Education level	3.32	0.94	-.03	-.16**	—									
4. Position level	1.72	0.98	.09*	.29**	-.21**	—								
5. TFL	2.53	0.71	.00	.09*	-.15**	.22**	$\alpha=0.938$							
6. JD	3.43	0.79	.06	.08*	-.09*	.14**	.41**	$\alpha=0.886$						
7. SD	3.59	0.69	.08*	.07*	-.09*	.13**	.52**	.68**	$\alpha=0.711$					
8. DA	3.57	0.80	.09*	.12**	-.14**	.25**	.63**	.44**	.61**	$\alpha=0.859$				
9. POS	5.03	1.17	-.03	.12**	-.10*	.09*	.63**	.45**	.47**	.54**	$\alpha=0.930$			
10. LMX	3.79	0.70	.00	.08*	-.17**	.15**	.60**	.41**	.38**	.46**	.67**	$\alpha=0.855$		
11. TMX	5.25	1.16	-.02	.13**	-.01	-.06	.50**	.44**	.47**	.42**	.73**	.57**	$\alpha=0.946$	
12. EA	3.70	.62	.05	.09*	-.06	.15**	.62**	.50**	.55**	.58**	.65**	.50**	.63**	$\alpha=0.882$

Note. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ ; The Employability (EA) data was from wave 2; the others were from wave 1.

Reliability coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) are in parentheses along the diagonal

Table 2. Results of Confirmatory Factor Analysis and SEM Path Analysis

Models	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI	SRMR
<b>M1: Hypothesized</b>	<b>4862.944</b>	<b>1952</b>	-	-	<b>0.044</b>	<b>0.913</b>	<b>0.904</b>	<b>0.057</b>
M2: Loading items of POS, LMX, TMX into a factor SE	6302.477	1965	1439.533	13	0.054	0.870	0.858	0.064
M3: Loading items of JD, SD, DA into a factor JC	5649.011	1965	786.067	13	0.050	0.890	0.879	0.061
M4: Loading items of POS, LMX, TMX into a factor SE, and loading items of JD, SD, DA into a factor JC	7058.119	1974	2195.175	22	0.058	0.848	0.834	0.067
M5: One higher-order factor model (Combining TFL, EA, SE, JC into a higher-order factor)	7100.663	1976	2237.719	24	0.058	0.846	0.833	0.066
M6: One factor model (Loading all items into a factor)	10116.113	1987	5253.169	35	0.073	0.756	0.737	0.080
<b>P1: Hypothesized Path model</b>	<b>5456.779</b>	<b>2218</b>	-	-	<b>0.044</b>	<b>0.904</b>	<b>0.896</b>	<b>0.068</b>

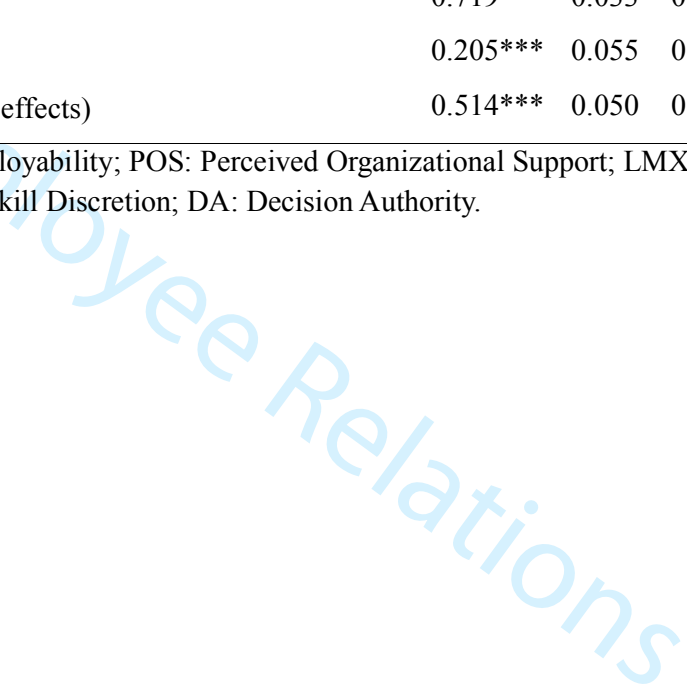
Note. TFL: Transformational Leadership; EA: Employability; POS: Perceived Organizational Support; LMX: Leader-Member Exchange; TMX: Team-Member Exchange; SE: Social Exchange; JD: Job Demands; SD: Skill Discretion; DA: Decision Authority; JC: Job Characteristics.

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Table 3: Results of Mediation Tests Predicting Employability: Standardized Total, Direct and Indirect Effects of TFL through the Six Mediators

Paths	BC 95% CI			
	Estimate	SE	Lower	Upper
TFL→EA(Total effect)	0.719***	0.033	0.653	0.780
TFL→EA(Direct effect)	0.205***	0.055	0.103	0.317
TFL→EA through: (Indirect effects)	0.514***	0.050	0.417	0.611

Note. TFL: Transformational Leadership; EA: Employability; POS: Perceived Organizational Support; LMX: Leader-Member Exchange; TMX: Team-Member Exchange; JD: Job Demands; SD: Skill Discretion; DA: Decision Authority.



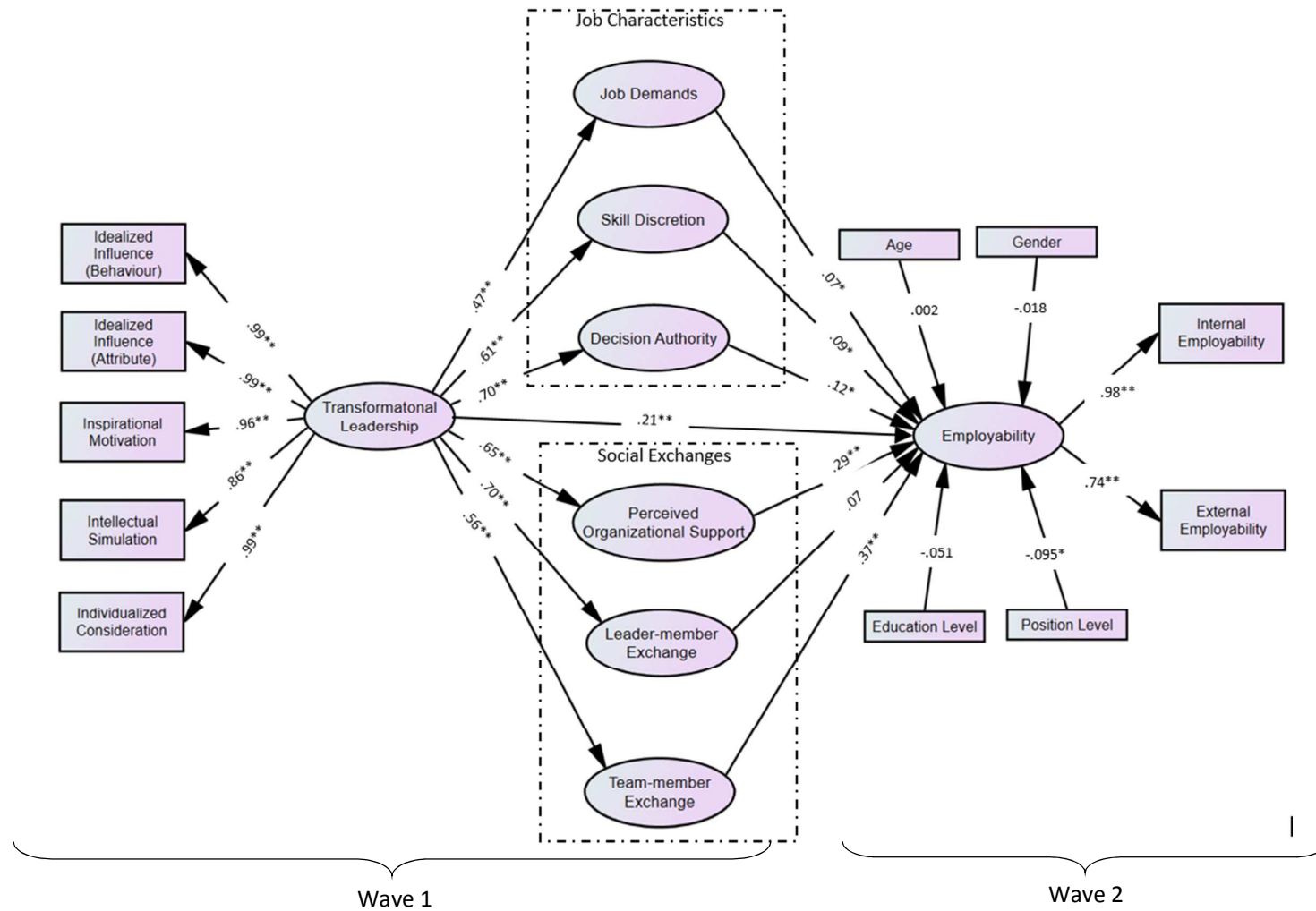


Figure 1. The structural model P1 with standardized coefficients (\*\*: significant at P<.01; \*: significant at P<.05).