

Leadership in the Chinese Philosophical Tradition: A Critical Perspective

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1 Introduction

This chapter critically examines conceptions of leadership drawing on the Chinese philosophical tradition of the two dominant schools of thoughts: Confucianism and Legalism (Fung 1948; Chan 1963; Hsiao 1979; De Bary and Bloom 1999; Yao 2003a, b; Mou 2009). From the time the First Emperor of China united China (221 BC) to the demise of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912), both schools had been vital sources for furnishing ideas and sustaining practices of rulership for emperors in imperial China over two millennia. Confucianism and Legalism offered divergent visions about how a state should be ruled, with opposing assumptions about human nature, spawning contrasting conceptions of leadership. Simply put, Confucianism advocated a morality-guided government led by moral elite motivated by compassion and moral appropriateness, buttressed with ceremonial rituals and rites. In contrast, Legalists, in contrast, championed a law-governed state which relied on legal punishment and reward as behavioural motivator operated with effective techniques of deploying power. Integral to these two visions of government are two conceptions of leadership which is the focus of this chapter. After examining the key concepts of leadership of Confucianism and Legalism, we identify both their strengths and weaknesses. A third notion is conceived by assimilating the strengths while severing the weaknesses of these two schools. Though the original discourses focused primarily on political rulership, the ideas elaborated could however be generalizable as generic ideas of leadership that go beyond the political domain. We thus presume that it would hopefully serve as a notion of leadership applicable not only in the political realm but in business and other domains as well.

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In what follows, the terms ruler-ship and leadership are used interchangeably, and we assume that the principles and techniques of rulership in government can, given proper adaptations, be translated as principles and techniques of leadership in business or organizations. Rulership is thus conceived as proxy of leadership. There are a host of different conceptions of leadership in the literature: transactional, transformational (Burns 1978; Bass 1998; Bass and Steidlmeier 1999), authentic (Rhode 2006; Price 2003), and ethical (Treviño et al. 2000; Treviño and Brown 2007). We presume that insofar as a notion is consistent with either one school, we could say that such a notion can be derivable from that school. For example, Confucian leadership may contain transformational, authentic or ethical implications, if it has the respective elements. This chapter takes a broad notion of leadership, which is defined here as a process, relationship or state between leaders and followers, as well as the agents and their conducts of leading (Ip 2011). Thus, leadership means more than individual leaders as agents, their attributes and behaviors. Leaders constitute only a part of the complex process, relationships, and system that the concept of leadership covers.

2 The Confucian Conception of Leadership

Confucius (551–479 BC) and his followers Mengzi (372–289 BC), and Xunzi (312–230 BC) founded the Confucian school of thought, popularly known as Confucianism (Ru Jia) that has profoundly shaped and defined Chinese culture (Creel 1953; Schwartz 1985; Ames and Rosemont 1998; Cua 2003; Cua 2005; Li 2007; Tan 2005). It has three core elements: *ren* as compassion, *yi* as moral appropriateness, and *li* as ceremonial rituals upon which a system of virtues are spawned. To understand Confucian leadership, one should understand these elements. As well as defining Confucianism, *ren* confers signature character to Confucian leadership. Thus, it is vital to understand *ren* to understand leadership. Confucius gave elaborate articulations of the meanings of *ren* in *Lunyu*¹:

A man of *ren*/humanity, wishing to establish his own character, also establishes the character of others, and wishing to be prominent himself, also helps others to be prominent. (6:28)

A resolute scholar and a man of *ren* will never seek to live at the expense of injuring humanity. He would rather sacrifice his life in order to realize humanity. (15:8)

Confucius also expressed the multi-layered meanings of *ren* through the acts and manners of *Junzi*, an ideal person with superior morality, and contrasted them with those of a conceived petty person, i.e., common man, who lived and endowed with lesser morality:

¹ All citations are from Chan (1963), with my alternative translations of some key terms. See also De Bary and Bloom (1999), Yao (2003a, b), Mou (2009) for discussions on Confucianism.

Junzi is broadminded but not partisan, the petty person is partisan but not broadminded. (2:14)

Junzi brings the good things of others to completion and does not bring the bad things of others to completion. The petty person does just the opposite. (12:16)

Junzi understands the higher things [moral principles]; the petty person understands the lower things [profits]. (14:24)

Junzi is ashamed that his words exceed his deeds. (14:29)

Ren is the *capacity* of compassion or benevolence for fellow human beings, which is principally expressed in complex web of social relationships. It manifests itself in *ren* acts and thoughts and moral sentiments, which are also collectively and individually referred to as *de*, which means virtues. Of equal importance in the moral core is *yi*, which is both a principle and a *de*. As a principle, it designates moral appropriateness in actions and human matters. As a *de*, it is the capacity or character for moral appropriate acts and relationships. *Li* represents the institutionalized rituals and ceremonial rites that prescribe and guide personal, social and political lives. In its more generalized sense, it refers to norms and rules promulgated and sanctioned by political authorities and society. For Confucians, the legitimacy of *li* is based on *ren* and *yi*, and people are only morally obligated to comply with legitimate *li*. Though *li* is not in itself a virtue, complying with *li* is a cardinal virtue.

As well as personifying the moral core—*ren*, *yi*, and *li*, *Junzi* symbolizes the ideal ruler or leader. In addition to those stated earlier, other salient *Junzi* attributes include²:

Junzi conducts extensive study (*wen*), and restrains himself with *li*. Thus he does not violate the Way (*dao*). (6:25)

Junzi does not promote (put in office) a man on basis of his words; nor does he reject his words because of the man. (15:22)

The way of *Junzi* is threefold, but I have not been able to attain it. The man of wisdom has no perplexities; the man of *ren* has no worry; the man of courage has no fear. (14:30)

Junzi in dealing with the affairs in the world is without preconceived ways. He complies with *yi*. (4:10)

Junzi understands *yi*, the petty man understands gain. (4:16)

Junzi regards *yi* as the substance of everything. He practices it according to propriety (*li*). (15:17)

By virtue of these attributes, Confucian leadership is primarily moral in nature. Secondly, as *Junzi* stands for a high ideal, few mortals have the capacity of becoming one. Thus, *Junzi* is by and large, a moral elite, and Confucian leadership entails moral elitism. This means that only those who have high moral accomplishment and possess strong moral capacity and disposition are able and entitled to lead or rule. Confucian, with the exception of Xunzi, believed in the innate goodness of human nature that underlies the moral based leadership vision. *Junzi*, is the few who could fully achieve robust moral goodness by relentless moral practice. This view of human nature is, as shown later, in stark contrast to that of the Legalist.

² See Chan (1963: 18–48), see also Ames and Rosemont (1998). For *Li*, see Cua (2003, 2005). All quotes are from Chan (1963: 18–48).

In sum, leaders would lead by morality and by example, with the help of legitimate rituals. Possessing the virtuous character, a leader would be resourceful and wise enough to lead. As a result, this form of moral elitist leadership yielded and sustained a rule-of-man political system, in contrast to a rule-by-law polity, which was championed by Legalist. As said earlier, though Confucius primarily conceived leadership attributes in the political context, it may as well as be adapted to other contexts.

3 The Legalist Conception of Leadership

Unlike the Confucian moral elitism, Legalist (Fa Jia) advocated a vision of leadership which is basically rule-based. The rule is in effect coercive law and legal decrees. Leading Legalist thinkers like Guan Zhong (720–645 BC), Shen Dao (c. 350–275 BC), Li Kui (455–395 BC) and Shang Yang (390–338 BC) championed the importance and efficacy of law (Hsiao 1959, 1979; Creel 1953; Duyvendak 1928; Schwartz 1985; Watson 1964; Hwang 2008; Goldin 2011). Hanfeizi (281–233 BC), who inherited much of the Legalist thinking, offered an integrative articulation of legalism that had deeply influenced the thinking and practice of dynastic Chinese politics, *albeit* often in implicit ways. In fact, Confucianism as state ideology had been officially endorsed and followed while Legalism covertly dominated much of actual political practice, thus forming the famed “Confucian-outside, Legalism inside” (*ru biao fa li*) two-tiered politics characteristics of dynastic China.

Hanfeizi contended that statecraft, the way to rule a state, depends on three core elements—*fa*, *shu* and *shi*. *Fa* refers to the coercive law, statutes and decrees enforceable by the monopolized power of the state. *Shu* denotes the myriad techniques of applying power to achieve one’s goals and asserting influences over subordinates and underlings. *Shi* is the power position one occupies within the political hierarchy of the state. Hanfeizi stated succinctly the meaning and primacy of *fa*:

The law no more makes exceptions for men of high station than the plumb line bends to accommodate a crooked place in the wood. What the law has decreed the wise man cannot dispute nor the brave man venture to contest. When faults are to be punished, the highest minister cannot escape; when good is to be awarded, the lowest peasant must not be passed over. Hence, for correcting the faults of superiors, chastising the misdeeds of subordinates, restoring order, exposing error, checking excess, remedying evil, and unifying the standards of the people, nothing can be compared to law. (Watson 1964: 28)

Several distinct features of *fa* make it formidable in running a country. Firstly, *fa* is publicized norms of behavior promulgated and enforced by the state. By making *fa* public, people are informed of their existence and the prescribed do’s and don’ts of their behaviors. Secondly, with the exception of the ruler, who stays above the law, everyone is within the reach of the law. *Fa* is to be applied equally to all people under the ruler without exception, including the imperial family and noble class, as

well as ministers and state officials. In contrast, Confucian allowed the ministers and the noble class to be exempted from the law. Thirdly, *fa* should be accessible to common folks so that they can understand them and follow them. In other words, *fa* has to be easily comprehensible and learnable. Fourthly, *fa* should be adaptable to the ever changing environment, and responsive to new issues. The ruler should use *fa* to shape and guide behavior to the effect that peace and order can be established.

Hanfeizi believed that human behaviors are motivated by self-interests, chiefly among these are favor-seeking and punishment-avoidance. Thus, using favor and punishment is the most effective way of exercising power to motivate and control people:

The enlightened ruler controls his ministers by means of two handles alone. The two handles are punishment and favor. To inflict mutilation and death on men is called punishment; to bestow honor and reward is called favor. Those who act as ministers fear the penalties and hope to profit by the rewards. (Watson 1964: 30)

These are the two formidable *shu* for achieving and maintaining dominance over his ministers and officials and commanding from them respect and obedience, as well as instilling in them fear and awe. Hanfeizi said, “The tiger is able to overpower the dog because of his claws and teeth, but if he discards his claws and teeth and let the dogs use them, then on the contrary he will be overpowered by the dog. In the same way the ruler of men uses punishments and favors to control his ministers, but if he discards his punishments and favors and lets his ministers employ them, then on the contrary he will find himself in the control of his ministers.” (Watson 1964: 30).

Furthermore, to be able to use *shu*, one should first have the *shi*, the power position to own and exercise power. Hence, *shi* is critical for a ruler to exert his influence and control.

For Legalist, rulership or leadership consists essentially of the principles and techniques of exercising power to influence and control people, especially the ministers and officials who work under the ruler. The main elements of rulership include establishing standard and abide by it, allocating the right person for the right position, and ensuring that the job is clearly defined and the division of labor is properly arranged so that the responsibilities attached to different positions do not overlap with each other. Doing these things right would create an effective administration to undertake tasks and implement policies. Being a pragmatist, Hanfeizi favored a result-oriented management, which would demand ideas and opinions be translated into practical policies that would produce concrete results. Lofty ideas would serve little purpose if they could not produce substantive results meeting the assigned objectives. Effective execution is what counts in conducting state affairs. Those who successfully executed the policies would be rewarded, while those who failed to do so would be punished. It is clear that Hanfeizi was a hard-nose pragmatist who advocated getting concrete results as the hallmark of a successfully policy, or governance in general.

In addition to the three elements of rulership, Hanfeizi also invoked the notion of the Way as the primal force and principle that shapes and defines the order of things,

natural and human. A ruler should observe and follow the Way to help establish the right way of exercising power, and in general the art of statecraft:

The Way is the beginning of all beings and the measure of right and wrong. Therefore the enlightened ruler holds fast to the beginning in order to understand the wellspring of all beings, and minds the measure in order to know the source of good and bad. (Watson 1964: 16)

Follow the way of Heaven, reflect on the principle behind human affairs, investigate, examine, and compare these things. . . .Be empty, quiet, and retiring, never put yourself forward. Trust others but never be like them, and then the myriad people will follow you as one man. (Watson 1964: 36–37)

The invocation of emptiness, stillness, and inaction as the true nature of the Way clearly demonstrates traces of Daoist influence on Hanfeizi's thinking on the fine art of statecraft: "Be empty, still, and idle, and from your place of darkness observe the defects of others. See but do not appear to see; listen by do not seem to listen; know but do not let it be known that you know. Hide your tracks, conceal your sources, so that your subordinates cannot trace the springs of your action. Discard wisdom, forswear ability, so that your subordinates cannot guess what you are about." (Watson 1964: 18).

Similar to the Confucian leadership, the Legalist leadership is primarily political in nature, but may be applicable to the corporate and organizational context.

4 Confucian Strengths and Weaknesses

It is easy to see that these two notions of leadership are contrasting as they are competing. Both have strengths and weaknesses. The strength of the Confucian notion is its affirmation of morality as the core of leadership. Leaders should have good character and the right values, and lead by morals (Koehn 2001; Romar 2002). *Junzi* leadership would presumably provide inspirations for a concept of ethical leadership that is now attracting more attention in the leadership literature (Ip 2011). However, one apparent weakness of the Confucian notion is that not enough attention has been paid to the importance of hard norms (i.e., law and decrees) and system in shaping behavior. Confucian leadership would assign an outsize role to moral elite in building good companies at the expense of other salient institutional factors. Due to the rarity of leaders with *Junzi*-level morality, moral elitism would turn out to be a liability rather than an asset for many organizations. To develop and maintain sustainable companies or organizations requires more than moral persons, let alone moral elite. Effective and practicable norms and systems are imperative. Furthermore over-dependence on a single virtuous individual, or a small group of moral elites to manage an organization is a very perilous and impractical business. The existence of moral elite with all his virtuous intentions is no guarantee for making the right and balanced decision that requires rational thinking that is based on logic and facts, as well as reasonableness. Being superbly

moral would not give a leader the immunity from biases and prejudices, nor exempt him from making fatal mistakes. Very often being staunchly virtuous could inflate one's self-righteousness that easily delude oneself into thinking one's moral invincibility and superiority over other lesser mortals, and thus blind one from seeing things objectively or appreciating different viewpoints. Furthermore, moral elitism is highly susceptible to subjectivism, capriciousness, or arbitrariness because the ultimate source of what is right or wrong depends not on some publicly and reasonably argued principles but solely on the subjective judgment, perception, or sentiment of the person (Ip 2004, 2009). Moral elitism would also reduce from other people the chance to participate in making decisions, thus depriving them the opportunity to learn and grow, therefore reinforcing the deception of the supremacy and indispensability of the elite, while perpetuating the dumbing-down of the masses. This would also help feed the self-fulfilling prophecy that only elites are well-equipped to make major and important decisions. Moral elitism is in effect a benign form of governance based on the rule-of-man with the weaknesses revealed above.

5 Legalist Strengths and Weaknesses

The Legalist is right to recognize the crucial role norms played in shaping and motivating people's behavior. The Legalist sober and empirical analysis of power and its functions gave them an advantage to frame a theory about the techniques of exercising power, and in general, the way of leading, that has more direct relevance to the real world.³ This theory of power apparently inspired and directed many rulers about the way of ruling during the imperial era and helped shape the real Chinese body politics. In contrast, Confucian, inclined to exhort or theorize on the idealistic side of human affairs, tended to make utopian and lofty recommendations on policies and practices which even well-intentioned rulers would find hard to implement. Furthermore, Confucian had little substantive things to say about power, not to mention coercive law and decrees, and the art and techniques of using them in running a country. But power matters much in politics. Confucian apparently focused too much on morality at the expense of the law. Though allowing soft norms (i.e. rituals) a supplementary role to play in shaping and guiding behavior, Confucian failed to give sufficient weight to functions of coercive law with its attendant punishments and rewards. Such a fateful neglect creates a major disconnect between theory and reality. In contrast, Legalist leaders not only would understand the nature and spirit of law, but would effectively use it to move and control people to meet their objectives. They would strategically and tactically

³ This is apparently based on their experiences and observations of the real world of politics, as the major early theorists of Legalism from whom Hanfeizi drew inspirations, were practitioners of politics.

deploy the two pillars of law: punishment and favors to rule and lead. Furthermore, the elements of law: publicity, accessibility, and comprehensibility gave leaders leverage to make people more governable by virtue of allowing them be informed and helping them understand what would be expected of them.

The dark sides of the Legalist leadership are apparent. Firstly, one conspicuous error is that the law would be applied to all except the ruler, making one person who wielded the most power to be above the law. The undivided possession and unbridled use of concentrated power would be a very dangerous thing, including potentially causing extensive harm and massive human sufferings and miseries, which has been borne out by much of the reality of autocracy in human history. The law, or norm in general, is nothing but a tool for leaders to consolidate and maintain his power, and to control and command, to intimidate and to punish. This is rule-by-law and is worlds apart from being the rule of law as a system of good governance. Secondly, being single-minded instrumentalist, leaders would merely concern about the effectiveness of the law, and would show little or no regard for its moral legitimacy. To meet objectives, leaders would use whatever means, including using deceit, lies, manipulation, falsehood, pretense, slyness, to achieve their objectives without any moral qualms. Thus, Legalist leadership would be thoroughly Machiavellian in heart and deeds. In the ceaseless bid to control, subjugate and dominate, leaders would be in constant lookout for traitors or enemies who would also use the same tactics against him. Thus, they would be locked in a perpetual state of fear and apprehension of losing power or being violently subverted by underlings. Leading would be, in addition to all those negatives just stated, a stressful and precarious game of naked and cynical power play, which would also have harmful and destructive consequences for society at large. The cost of leading would be humanly unbearable.

6 The Third Notion of Leadership

Is there a way of leading that exploit the wisdom of both schools, while shunning their un-wisdoms? One way for conceptualizing this possibility is to assimilate the strengths of both virtue-based and rule-based leadership while minimizing, if not eliminating, their weaknesses. What would such a construct be like?

Having character and rules as two pillars, this construct integrates both morality and rules in the leadership core, and is referred to as Confucian-cum-Legalist (Ru-Fa) leadership. Ru-Fa leaders, as well as possessing *junzi*-like character, would take both morality and norms as the integral part of conducting business and dealing with both internal and external stakeholders. Organizational values, mission and objectives, would conform to reasonable morality and would serve as the basis of firm policies and practices. Apart from valuing competence and productivity, good moral character is equally valued. Not only would be required to do things productively and creatively, organizational members would need to self-develop their own moral character and to do the right things and to act in

morally autonomous ways without relying on external moral authorities. Not only having impregnable characters, leaders at various levels of the organization would encourage and support subordinates to do the right things and support moral deeds of co-workers. In other words, ethical leadership is far from elitist and concentrated, but becomes multiple and diffused, with leaders displaying varied strengths of character and performance pervading the whole organization.

Recognizing the crucial role that norms would play in shaping and guiding behaviors as well as nurturing perceptions and cultures, leader would develop and implement effective and morally legitimate norms to build and sustain transparent and actionable procedures and systems to this effect. Legitimate and effective norms not only could develop and sustain morally right behavior, it would also create proper incentives for good behaviors and dis-incentives for bad acts. In addition, they could also create a moral-friendly environment where people would feel free to discuss or raise moral issues in the organization without fear or embarrassment, and would be eager to report unethical conduct or other corrupt acts as a matter of responsibility. Being public, explicit and transparent, norms would be easier to understand and follow, making morality a more practicable and accessible activity. They would also serve as some clear goal pole towards which people could continuously and incrementally strive. Morality would no longer remain merely some internal subjective practice which could be too opaque and mysterious to comprehend and follow. Nor would it remain some mystical feat only saints are endowed to achieve. The system of norms would produce an environment and culture conducive to morality. Character and norms have a mutual reinforcing effect on each other. As well as enhancing and sustaining morally right behaviors, norms help strengthen and empower good characters. Good character in turn would create and sustain legitimate norms, thus creating a virtuous cycle that would protect and sustain the moral fabric and character of the organization and its members. Organizations fashioned by this leadership would not be amoral, Machiavellian, or elitist; but would be principally moral-cum-rule based, participatory and non-elitist. Last but not least, replacing the human nature assumptions of both schools, this construct assume the plasticity of human nature, which broadly states that humans have the potential to be good and bad contingent on how the factors of nature and nurture play out.

7 Concluding Remarks

Leadership is intimately culture-bound. This means that its ideas and practices are inevitably shaped and guided by culture, for better or worse. There is no such thing as a culture-neutral leadership. The neglect of culture in framing leadership theory will ultimately prove futile. However, inheriting culture has its benefits and risks. Not all elements in culture are equally valuable, nourishing and empowering. Inheriting the wrong elements will be burdening and harmful as well as obstructive and destructive. It is unwise to blindly submit to the authority of culture and

unquestioningly adopt all its elements as if they are timeless and absolute truths. It is thus imperative to critically differentiate the good from the bad, and gingerly select the better portions of culture and abandon its worse parts. What has been constructed is a sketch of the essentials of a concept of Chinese leadership to this effect. Not only should this notion be culturally coherent with the Chinese context, it should also be relevant to the modern world as well. Thus, more detailed articulations to flesh out the contents with regard to the organizational, business, and other contexts are needed.

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