

# Chapter 24

## The Mandala Model of Power and Leadership: A Southeast Asian Perspective

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**Abstract** The philosophy and religious tradition of Southeast Asia has not yet been considered in leadership theory. The philosophical strength of Southeast Asia is adaptation, change and flexibility. This article argues that modern leadership theory should include these strengths. It does so for the context of cross-cultural leadership, a context that requires empathy, ambiguity tolerance and the ability to change perspective. The contribution is conceptual: First, I present two Southeast Asian models of leadership, namely the mandala model of power and the model of substitutional harmony between micro- and macrocosmos. Second, I link them to cross-cultural leadership theory. From this, I derive the mandala model of intercultural leadership and draw conclusions for leadership theory.

### 24.1 Introduction

Ancient philosophy in West and East is often conceptualized as Greco-Roman tradition vs. Chinese or Indian tradition (e.g., Alves et al. 2005; Ames 2003; Cheng 2003a, b; Hall and Ames 1995, 1998; Peterson and Hunt 1997; Pittinsky and Zhu 2005; Pun et al. 2000; Shun 2003; Wang 2004). This is mainly due to the fact that these ancient civilizations can look back on thousands of years of their own coherent philosophy, tradition and culture.

However, the East also includes the syncretised regions of Southeast Asia. These are characterized by a complex and ever-changing mixture of Sino-Indian influences and local beliefs that have resulted in hybrid, multicultural and contested local identities (e.g. Hall 1994; Mulder 1996; SarDesai 1997; Steinberg 1987). As many authors have shown, Southeast Asia today is still such a hybrid mixture of

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different traditions and modernity (e.g., Henley 2004; Lansing 1983; Moser 2010; Wilson 2008; Womack 2003; based on Aung-Twin 1995; Chong 2007; Emmerson 1984; Fitfield 1976; Geertz 1973, 1983; Solheim II 1985). The philosophical strength of this region is not stability; it is adaptation, change and flexibility (ibid.; e.g., Winzeler 1976; Colombijn 2003; Kimura 2010).

Modern management is increasingly conceptualized as discursive sensemaking based on recent turns to practice (e.g., Burrell and Morgan 1979; Czarniawska 2008; Jarzabkowski 2004; Van Maanen 1998; Weick 1995; Whittington 2003). Therefore, these discursive, adaptive and flexible Southeast Asian elements of power are essential for outstanding leadership (e.g., Boal and Schultz 2007). This is especially true in cross-cultural settings which require empathy, ambiguity tolerance and the ability to change perspective (e.g., Bennett 1986; Lewis 2000; Schein 2004). Still, the Southeast Asian perspective is not represented in current international leadership theory and research. In my literature review, I have not found a single article in leading journals on leadership that introduced the Southeast Asian philosophy.

Based on these observations, I argue that by excluding Southeast Asian Philosophy from the East and West philosophy-in-management debate, researchers and practitioners miss an important source for learning and reflection on how to manage change, flux and diversity. I pursue my argument through the example of conceptions of power and leadership in Southeast Asia based on the two seminal works of Robert Heine-Geldern (1942) and O.W. Wolters (1982). Based on these important contributions, I conceptualize outstanding Southeast leadership based on the mandala conception of power and the need to achieve substitutional harmony between micro- and macrocosmos. Furthermore, I suggest two areas of leadership theory that can benefit from the Southeast Asian perspective. First, I briefly link the indigenous philosophies of Southeast Asia to recent turns to spiritual leadership (overview in Fry 2005). Second, and this is the main contribution of this article, I show how cross-cultural leadership theory can benefit from this conception.

## 24.2 Conceptions of Power and Leadership in Southeast Asia

### 24.2.1 *Harmony Between Micro- and Macrocosmos*

Southeast Asia is commonly understood as those countries that are located south of China, east of India and north of Australia. This article follows this understanding in general, however, based on its leadership focus, it highlights those countries that have a long-term history of institutionalized power and leadership. These are the regions which are today Myanmar (Burma), Cambodia, Thailand, Vietnam and Laos, and two islands of today's Indonesia, namely Sumatra and Java.

The first conception of power in Southeast Asia was formulated by Robert Heine-Geldern (1942) in his seminal work "Conceptions of state and kingship in

Southeast Asia”. It has been called the model of “substitutional harmony between micro- and macrocosmos” (ibid.). When Hinduism and Buddhism met the local philosophies of Southeast Asia, they incorporated the indigenous belief that only the maintenance of harmony between this world and the other world would prevent disaster and calamity (e.g., Hall 1994; SarDesai 1997). This belief was then integrated into Hindu and Buddhist cosmology that conceptualizes the universe as a concentric series of ring-oceans and ring-continents in the middle of which Mount Meru rises (ibid.). On top of Mount Meru resides the Hindu pantheon or God Indra, as the highest entity prior to the nothingness of Nirvana (ibid.). The new syncretised meaning of “substitutional harmony between micro- and macrocosmos” was: The microcosmos (this world) has to resemble the Hindu/Buddhist universe (macrocosmos), the king or leader himself taking the place on top of Mount Meru (Heine-Geldern 1942).

Therefore, whole kingdoms in Southeast Asia have been designed and laid-out along these highly symbolic lines (e.g., Mabbett 1969), the royal palace in Bangkok being just one example (Hall 1994). Other aspects of symbolic representation include rules on which colour to wear on which day of the week, where to build roads, how many guards to employ and how many wives to take (ibid.). Following this belief, disaster and loss of power is near, as soon as the leader ceases to establish this symbolic power (ibid.; Mabbett 1969). This means: Whenever a natural calamity hit the population, this was interpreted as proof of bad leadership (Heine-Geldern 1942; Mabbett 1969). Ultimately, this means: The good leader is the one who performs well. Therefore, leadership is something that will be seen through one’s deeds. These deeds need to be symbolic.

### ***24.2.2 Mandala Conceptions of Power***

The second conception is rooted in Buddhism and answers the question of how power will shift due to bad performance. O.W. Wolters (1999/1982) coined the term “mandala conception of power”, the mandala being a major Buddhist focus point for meditation and for making sense out of the universe. A mandala is a concentric representation, mainly of the Buddhist universe, that is unstable and not meant for eternity. Buddhist monks, for example, build mandalas out of coloured sand and will destroy them as soon as their work is finished; process being the ultimate goal. As the history of Southeast Asia shows, power fluctuated between centres of power (Hall 1994; SarDesai 1997; Kimura 2010) that can be conceptualized as concentric mandala circles (Wolters 1999/1982). Power relations in this system are conceptualized as patron-client relations who are characterized by mutual obligations: The further away from the rule, the less legitimized the ruler’s power. Especially at the outer rims of the mandala, clients would frequently run over to another patron if dissatisfied with their own ruler’s performance (ibid.). The new patron’s power would then rise; the other mandala would diminish or even vanish.

## 24.3 Implications for Leadership Theory

### 24.3.1 *Leadership Power as a Category of Practice*

From the above mentioned perspective, power is an interactive process of change. The implication is that the leader is required to perform well to keep his/her base of power. The relationship between performance and acknowledgement of power is reversed: Followers of a leader believe that anyone who performs in the right way will ultimately have power. In the 1930s, for example, a group of Burmese monks took the throne in the old royal city of Mandalay in the firm belief that *the mere presence* of their leader on the throne (i.e. the occupation of the symbolic representation of the centre of the universe) would place him in power and automatically lead to the demise of British colonial rule (SarDesai 1997).

Recent leadership theory has asked the question of how identity, social performance and leadership are interlinked (Antonakis et al. 2004; Barker et al. 2001; Burns 2005; Gardner and Laskin 1995; Kets de Vries 2001; Smircich and Morgan 1982; Yukl 2002). Building on this theory, the Southeast Asian perspective links leadership theory to recent turns-to-practice (Jarzabkowski 2003; Whittington 2003): Power, like strategy, is claimed, acknowledged, rejected, and re-negotiated in discursive interaction. Furthermore, the Southeast Asian perspective strengthens views on leadership as a category of performance. This concept of “leadership as performance” has been put forward by Peck and Dickinson (2009) it is based on the anthropological understanding of culture and stresses the importance of symbolic deeds – i.e.: performances – to establish leadership socially. Some authors have researched upon performative leadership in the context of strategy workshops (Smith and Peterson 1988; Johnson et al. 2010).

### 24.3.2 *Inclusion of Indigenous Spirituality*

Recently, scholars of leadership have turned their interests to “spiritual leadership” (overview in Fry 2005). This involves the discussion of the five leading world religions, namely Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam (Kriger and Seng 2005). Yet, as this article has shown, from a Southeast Asian perspective, religion is more than these five religions. Even though Indonesia is officially an Islamic country, it is the home of many syncretised religions; the root being the Southeast Asian indigenous belief of substitutional harmony between micro- and macrocosmos. For example, a popular religion on the island of Java is the so called “agama jawi” (literary translation: Javanese belief) which is actually a mixture of Hinduism and Islam. Many religions in Southeast Asia have left their imprint on each other in such a way; something unique and new has been created in the process.

At its very roots, the differentiation between micro- and macrocosmos can be linked to indigenous religions that aim at establishing harmony between this world and “the other world” of the dead. Through rituals and trance, shamans cross the border between this world and the other world. It is assumed that natural phenomena, trees, plants and animals can represent “the other world” in this world; therefore, a harmony needs to be kept. This belief is very much present in modern Southeast Asia today; even though it might not influence every managerial context (Mulder 1996). However, it manifests itself in advice such as “do not take that road home; that is where the ghosts are” that was given to me after a business meeting in Jakarta.

Leadership theory today needs to account for such indigenous spirituality. The importance of harmony and keeping harmony might already be well-known from other contexts such as greater China (Chokar et al. 2007), yet the beliefs these values are rooted in are very different in Southeast Asia. Therefore, in order to understand Southeast Asian leadership, one has to investigate these deep meanings.

### ***24.3.3 From Cross-Cultural to Intercultural Leadership***

Cross-cultural leadership tries to assess which conceptions and outstanding examples of leadership are culture-specific (Chokar et al. 2007; Scandura and Dorfman 2004; Hofstede 1980, 2001; Hofstede and Bond 1988; Dickson et al. 2003; Krieger and Seng 2005; Smircich 1983; Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner 1997).

In this field of leadership study, Southeast Asia is not even treated as a region in its own right: The GLOBE study, the most extensive study on cross-cultural leadership so far (House et al. 2004; Chokar et al. 2007), integrates the Southeast Asian countries of Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand into a constructed cluster of “Southern Asia”. From historical, anthropological, sociological and factual perspectives, such treatment is unsound for the two distinct cultural areas of South and Southeast Asia (e.g., Hall 1994; Mulder 1996; SarDesai 1997; Steinberg 1987). To make an additional point: To include Iran in an already doubtful “Southern Asian cluster”, as al House et al. (2004) have done, seems to be inexplicable from an Area Studies’ perspective.

Furthermore, cross-cultural leadership theory is often based on dichotomies between ‘We’ and ‘the Other’, between ‘our culture’ vs. ‘their culture’, and between ‘East’ and ‘West’ (e.g. Dorfman et al. 1997; Kriger and Seng 2005). The Southeast Asian perspective breaks these overly simplified dialectics that have been criticized before (e.g., Boyacigiller and Adler 1991; Primecz et al. 2009), thereby taking the cultural complexity of modern cross-cultural leadership into account, as Sackmann and Phillips (2004) have demanded.

In summary, the conceptual contribution of the Southeast Asian perspective is double-fold: Firstly, its roots are syncretistic, flexible and adaptive. Secondly, it looks at the in-between, i.e., at the link between micro- and macrocosmos, and at

the fluctuating border between different spheres of power, e.g., mandalas. Therefore, it can help formulate a theory of *inter-cultural* instead of *cross-cultural* leadership, thereby establishing a ‘third space’ of *processual* leadership *between* cultures. With processual leadership I mean an understanding of leadership as a category of practice that is performed discursively and through interaction. This understanding of leadership as process is linked to the mentioned turns to practice in strategic management and the understanding of leadership as a category of performance. Together, these two aspects of leadership lead to a processual understanding of leadership

## 24.4 The Mandala Model of Intercultural Leadership

To give an example of how such processual leadership between cultures could look, I apply the Southeast Asian conception of power and harmony to GLOBE.

The acronym GLOBE stands for Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness. The underlying study has been the most extensive study on cross-cultural leadership so far. Data was collected by 170 scholars from various cultures through more than 17,000 interviews with middle managers from three industries in 62 countries (House et al. 2004). The study divided culture into comparative cultural dimensions that describe relative difference between aggregated national cultures. These cultural dimensions are summarized in Table 24.1.

Leadership traits were derived from these cultural dimensions (ibid.). House et al. (2004:57) define leadership as “the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute towards the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members”.

Following GLOBE, the so called “Southern Asian” cluster rates charismatic/value-based and team-oriented leadership as contributing to leader effectiveness; it rates humane-oriented and participative leadership positively; it views autonomous and self-protective leadership neutrally (Chokar et al. 2007: 1065). The contribution of the previously mentioned cultural dimensions to charismatic/value-based and team-oriented leadership styles is summarized in Table 24.2.

Those cultural dimensions that correlate to a high degree are marked in bold in Table 24.2. As Tables 24.1 and 24.2 show, the GLOBE approach to leadership is *cross-cultural*, for it compares countries with regard to their leadership style. An *intercultural* approach to leadership would require understanding of *why* one region, culture or society favors certain leadership styles: For, even though the style might be shared, the reasons *why* this is the case might differ from country to country, as can the explanations to what harmony actually is and why it is important. In the following, I will therefore apply the mandala perspective to GLOBE findings of effective leadership and show how the mandala helps to understand their deeper meaning.

Following GLOBE, charismatic and value-based leadership requires high performance orientation, high in-group collectivism, high gender egalitarianism and

**Table 24.1** Cultural dimensions of the GLOBE study

Dimension	Definition
Uncertainty avoidance	Extent to which a society, organization, or group relies on social rules, norms, and procedures to alleviate unpredictability of future events.
Power distance	Degree to which members of a collective expect unequal distribution of power.
Institutional collectivism	Degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective action and distribution of resources.
In-group collectivism	Degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families
Gender egalitarianism	Degree to which a collective minimizes gender inequality.
Assertiveness	Degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationship with others.
Future orientation	Extent to which individuals engage in future-oriented behaviors such as delaying gratification, planning and investing in the future.
Performance orientation	Degree to which a collective encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.
Human orientation	Degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring, and kind to others

Source: own figure, based on House and Javidan (2004:11–14), Javidan et al. (2004:30)

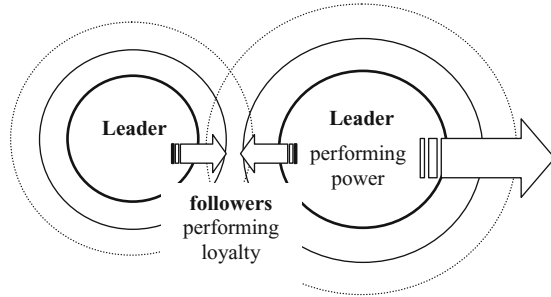
**Table 24.2** GLOBE cultural dimensions and leadership styles

Dimension	Correlation	Leadership style (LS)	Findings for Southeast Asia
<b>Performance orientation</b> in-group collectivism gender egalitarianism future orientation humane orientation	Positive	Charismatic/ value-based LS	Style contributes to leader effectiveness
<b>Power distance</b>	Negative		
<b>Uncertainty avoidance</b> in-group collectivism humane orientation performance orientation future orientation	Positive	Yeam-oriented LS	Style contributes to leader effectiveness
[no dimensions were negatively related]			

Source: own figure, based on Javidan et al. (2004, pp. 38–46)

low power distance (Table 24.1). Yet, as this article has shown, from a Southeast Asian perspective not everyone should experience an equally low power distance in a mandala. Rather, it is the *right amount of power* that is needed: For those near to the leader need to have the feeling that there is not much hierarchy between them and the leader. To those in the outer circles of the mandala the leader is distant, and s/he is perceived as such. This makes performance orientation a requirement in the mandala: Those in the outer circles of the mandala will only follow the leader if they also benefit from the leader’s *performance of power*. GLOBE also finds proof for the importance of in-group collectivism in Southeast Asia. From the mandala

**Table 24.3** The Mandala model of intercultural leadership



Source: own figure

perspective, individuals can be encouraged to work together through classification into mandala cycles (in-group collectivism).

Uncertainty avoidance is a major requirement for team-oriented leadership (Table 24.2). From the mandala perspective, the leader reduces uncertainty on behalf of his/her followers through the right performances of power within the mandala. Through these performances, s/he establishes the harmony between micro- and macrocosmos, thereby preventing unforeseen events. Again, the organizational structure should reflect mandala circles of power, thereby shaping a structural sense of belonging (in-group collectivism).

I call this deep understanding the mandala model of intercultural leadership and have summarized its key elements in Table 24.3.

The mandala model of leadership is characterized by its performative character and by its open and fluid borders to other potential mandalas. Power is performed through establishing the substituting harmony between micro- and macrocosmos. On the outer edges/rims of the mandala, other leaders compete for the loyalty of followers. Here, the integration of other leaders and different leadership styles is possible; at the same time, followers might change sides if not satisfied with their leader's performance. This means that organizational leadership can be understood beyond organizations as a process on the edges/rims of two mandalas.

The leader's symbolic management based on the Mandala model can be understood as his/her ability to perform to the best interest of the stakeholders which he/she serves. The dimension of macrocosmos, as explained by the Mandala model, might be understood as the value-dimension of leadership. This means: followers of the leader need to believe that his/her actions are based on a higher order or values which inform his/her performances. In every process or performance of leadership, the leader will be judged accordingly. In such a way, followers of the leader perform loyalty. In summary, the Mandala model integrates transcendental or value-based concepts of leadership with the practices and performances of day-to-day leadership in process. It links these performances of leadership with performances of loyalty (microcosmos) and integrates them into higher principles of leadership and loyalty (macrocosmos). It can be expected that performances of



loyalty will cease to exist as soon as these higher principles of leadership are violated.

## 24.5 Contribution and Further Research

The nature of the present work is conceptual. Its focus topic was the mandala perspective of power and its relevance for leadership studies. Its purpose was to introduce a philosophical concept from a much neglected area of leadership studies.

In summary, the contribution is threefold. Firstly, I introduced the ancient philosophy of a very much neglected region, Southeast Asia, to international leadership research for the first time. Secondly, I have attempted to show that the core elements of this tradition – syncretism, flexibility, change, process and fluidity – are perfectly suited to make sense out of modern leadership and cross-cultural management in the light of recent turns to discourse, process and practice. Thirdly, I have made suggestions of how modern *inter*-cultural leadership can benefit from the Southeast Asian view on symbolic mandala power between micro- and macrocosmos.

The purpose of this article was not to present a theory of Southeast Asian leadership but to introduce the Southeast Asian perspective and show its relevance. The next step is to put this perspective into practice. Hence, further empirical research has to analyze the applicability of this perspective and investigate current Southeast Asian leadership in detail. Leadership studies have discovered various paradigms and models which are applicable to such an endeavour. I have conceptualized the Mandala model of leadership in the spatio-temporal sense. It is also possible to conceive the Mandala model as a meditative instrument to transform the perception of reality. Hence, it seems a fruitful option to apply the model to spiritual leadership next.

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