Philosophical Roots of Servant Leadership in the Chinese Confucian Context

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ABSTRACT

Servant leadership has proven conceptually popular in Western academic research, while exploration of its transferability to and applicability in other cultures remains underdeveloped. In particular, local conceptual foundations that could ground and support the adoption (or adaptation) of servant leadership have not been examined beyond a cursory level. This brief paper initiates an effort to remedy that shortcoming by relating the key beliefs and components of servant leadership to the Confucian ethic that dominates the cultural foundations of the Chinese business context. The intention is not to provide a definitive determination, but to ground potential empirical investigations in a solid examination of relevant conceptual foundations.

Keywords: servant leadership, stewardship, cross-cultural leadership, leadership and personality, interpersonal behaviour, China

Recent decades have witnessed increasing interest in the development of leaders who leave aside self-interest while concentrating on the betterment of followers and organizations (Boyatzis & McKee 2005; George 2003). The ‘servant leadership’ approach exemplified this trend in the world of practice, although some have decried the lack of this ethic in graduates of management development programs (Wheatley, interviewed by Darso 2008). The main focus of servant leadership is to accomplish shared visions and goals by helping others and developing employees to their fullest potential by facilitating empowerment and collective work, which is congruent with the subordinates’ well-being in the long run (Greenleaf 1977; Graham 1991). Since this concept was put forward by Greenleaf (1977), many scholars and practitioners have embraced servant leadership and advocated it as a valid and contemporary theory for organizational leadership (Russell & Stone 2002).

Despite the popularity of servant leadership in the Western context and philosophy, it has seldom been studied or applied in an Asian context, with little research on its applicability in China in particular having been conducted until quite recently. Liang, Ling, and Hsieh (2007) suggest that since Chinese culture is considered distinctively collective oriented, performance oriented, authoritarian oriented, long-term oriented, and institution oriented in multiple cross-cultural studies
leadership concepts constructed in the Western theoretical world may fail when attempts are made to apply them in China. Two empirical examinations have confirmed both the extensive presence and the high degree of applicability of servant leadership in China, differentiating the public sector from the private (Han, Kakabadse & Kakabadse 2010) and validating a five-factor model derived from an accepted Western measure (Sun & Wang 2009). While the first of these studies broadly introduced a variety of cultural factors influencing leadership approaches in China, the second focused exclusively on model testing, adjustment, and validation. Neither examined the deep philosophical connections and strong cultural roots that Confucianism (the dominant Chinese philosophy) could provide for servant leadership in the Chinese context. This tested, but not thoroughly grounded, platform of somewhat adapted Western servant leadership is the point from which the present conceptual discussion commences. According to Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice (1977), human practice is constituted by individuals’ habitus (or cultural engine) shaped within a particular cultural field. Therefore, we believe there is both scope and necessity for research to develop an understanding of servant leadership embedded within the Chinese Confucian cultural context derived from a philosophical (rather than empirical) perspective.

SERVANT LEADERSHIP LITERATURE

A consensus on the definition of servant leadership has been reached as relying on the primary desire to serve (Baggett 1997; Block 1993; Turner 2000; Covey 1990; Fairholm 1997; Greenleaf 1977; Pollard 1996). Servant leaders are motivated by the needs of others instead of self-interest, on the assumptions of their positions as servant in their relationship with their followers (Greenleaf 1977; Pollard 1996). Differing from traditional leadership approaches, servant leadership emphasizes personal integrity and long-term relationships with employees, and also extends outside the organization, serving whole communities and the society at large (Liden, Wayne, Zhao & Henderson 2008). In all, the major influence power of servant leadership results from the favourable relationships
and referent power built upon subordinate trust, loyalty, respect and satisfaction with their leaders, derived from an employee-centred culture established by servant leaders.

Although there is agreement on the basic concept of servant leadership, the characteristics and behaviours of servant leadership in the literature are indeterminate and ambiguous (Russell & Stone 2002). The ten prevalent attributes of servant leadership as derived from the writings of Greenleaf (1977) by Spears (1995) are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community. Joseph and Winston (2010) note that nine of these ten characteristics are validated in Lubin’s (2001) (subsequently apparently unpublished) dissertation research and are congruent with visionary leader behaviours. In the case of servant leadership, a leader must attend to the needs and aspirations of subordinates by listening and understanding their desire. A servant leader should be able to provide emotional healing by showing his empathy to subordinates relative to their sufferings and frustrations. Social justice and equality should be provided relative to everyone whenever possible, including those at the lowest level or on the margins of the organization. With a clear awareness of what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in a given set of circumstances, a servant leader should make responsible decisions on behalf of the organization and its board of directors. Greenleaf’s concepts of servant leadership are unique in respect of incorporating leader motivation into the model (Smith, Montagno & Kuzmenko 2004; Russell & Stone 2002; Graham 1991). This outline of the major characteristics provides a clear representation of the servant leadership framework, constituting a foundation for appraising the attributes of servant leadership in future research. However, Spears (1995) also points out the weakness of these ten characteristics of servant leadership as being ‘by no means exhaustive’. There is no clear definition for servant leadership. Further, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) criticize Greenleaf’s work as not connecting nor distinguishing servant leadership and other forms of leadership. Additional attributes have been suggested in the literature, consistent with Greenleaf’s writings, extending his propositions.
Farling, Stone, and Winston (1999) devised a hierarchical model of servant leadership as a cyclical process, incorporating two elements—behaviour (vision, service) and relations (influence, credibility, trust). Despite this attempt to characterize servant leadership, their work still fails in conceptualization as no differences are clearly presented from other leadership approaches. Following from their work, Polleys (2002) explored servant leadership from three predominant attributes of leadership—trait, behaviours and contingency. However, in spite of closely aligning servant leadership with transforming leadership, this line of research does not distinguish them from other forms of leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler 2006).

Russell and Stone (2002) reviewed the previous literature on servant leadership and summarized 20 attributes categorized into two groups—functional attributes (vision, honesty, integrity, trust, service, modelling, pioneering, appreciation of others, and empowerment) and accompanying attributes (communication, credibility, competence, stewardship, visibility, influence, persuasion, listening, encouragement, teaching, and delegation). They based their classification of functional attributes on prominence in the literature; these functional attributes constitute the operative qualities, effective characteristics, observable behaviours, and distinctive but interrelated features attributed to leaders in the workplace. The classification of accompanying attributes is complementary to the functional attributes and prerequisite to the effectiveness of servant leadership rather than being secondary in nature. Including almost all attributes appearing in the existing literature, their summary offers a fairly comprehensive and integral framework for the attributes of servant leadership that is useful for structuring further analysis. However, as they also recognized, debate could certainly arise regarding their classification of these attributes as either functional or accompanying. According to the features of each attribute, no apparent distinction can be found between these two classifications, and in some cases, the accompanying part also functions in servant leadership to a large extent. In addition, given the dominant focus of their study on integrating nearly all attributes identified from previous literature, the absence of works distinguishing these attributes is noticeable, which means that some attributes overlap each other to a large degree, e.g. integrity and honesty. Winston (2004) also criticized this model as lacking significant distinctions of variables between servant leaders and non-servant leaders.
Hence, all of the above studies lack the formal theory and research designed to test their claimed attributes (Liden et al. 2008) and consequently empirical examination has been hampered by this lack of theoretical underpinnings and suitable measures (Barbuto & Wheeler 2006).

Meeting the requirement of examining the validity of the dimensions of servant leadership and based on the previous works and their interpretation of servant leadership as serving others from the workplace to home and community, some instruments have been developed by Laub (1999), Page and Wong (2000), Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) and Liden et al. (2008). In spite of their respective emphases on different aspects of servant leadership, all of the above are valid and in alignment with the core concept of servant leadership, serving others by downplaying self and exalting followers. Strengths exist in each of these approaches, e.g. the work of Liden et al. (2008) uses several outcome variables to examine servant leadership on both individual and group levels, constituting a major advantage of their study—a multi-level perspective to servant leadership.

Due to the popularity and wide acceptance of Spears’ ten dimensions based on Greenleaf’s writings and the lack of reliability and narrow thinking of the definition of servant leadership in other reports, special concern will be given to Barbuto and Wheeler’s work (2006) here. Based on the total eleven potential characteristics of servant leadership including all ten of Spears’ dimensions supplemented by one—calling, meaning the natural desire to serve others that is fundamental to servant leadership—which is also found in Greenleaf’s writings, Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) suggest five dimensions for servant leadership: altruistic calling, emotional healing, wisdom, persuasive mapping, and organizational stewardship. They thereby capture the nature of servant leadership: the leader’s deeply-rooted desire to place the primary concern on followers’ needs in order to help them grow and develop to achieve their maximum potential while optimizing organizational and career success; the leader’s commitment to and skill in recovering from hardship or trauma in order to empathize with and listen to subordinates’ personal needs and develop followers’ trust in them and establish a good relationship for the long run; the leader’s abilities to recognize surroundings, conceptualize possibilities, articulate opportunities and anticipate consequences in order to encourage followers to
visualize the future of organizations and make organizations function well; and the leader’s values and efforts to contribute benefits to the community and the society as a whole. However, as in the other studies mentioned earlier, Barbuto and Wheeler’s work also neglects building a causal relationship among the variables they proposed in their models, leaving the influence process and situations unconsidered.

**SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND CONFUCIANISM**

In Chinese culture, Confucian ethics, encompassing concepts such as *ren* (humaneness), *yi* (appropriateness), *li* (ritual), *zhong* (conscientiousness), and *shu* (mutuality) (Cheng 1991), has provided a normative behavioural pattern for individuals (Zhang, Cone, Everett & Elkin 2010). Each concept contributes a critical facet to servant leadership. *Ren* underlies a person’s sense of significance and their concern for others. *Yi* focuses on the interaction between the person and the context, requiring both contextual understanding and self-understanding, as well as the capacity to act on this self-contextualization (Hall and Ames 1987). *Li* provides a set of social ground rules, functioning more or less as a habitual manner of behaving in relationships with other people (Li 2007). *Zhong* describes the degree and depth of a person’s sincerity in exhibiting *ren* (Chan 1963). *Shu* consists of the intensity of a person’s efforts to be authentic, or “doing one’s best as one’s authentic self” (Hall & Ames 1987, p. 285).

Many ideologies in Confucianism support the attributions for servant leadership in the following ways, as presented in Figure 1. The core concept of servant leadership of serving others in order to achieve the organizational goal can be fully illustrated by the concept of *ren* in Confucian culture: helping others to take a stand (which allows the leader to also take a desired stand) and getting others to a goal (that the leader also wishes to attain). As Mei (1967) and Le (2003) argue, many virtues, such as love, honesty, tolerance, forgiveness, deference, filial obedience, wisdom, reciprocity, loyalty, courage, trustworthiness and others could be recognized as expressions of *ren*, which provides the cultural basis for the attributes of honesty, integrity, credibility and trust in servant leadership.
Also, *ren* and *yi* in Confucian culture have a very strong collective orientation, advocating self-sacrifice for the benefit of others and community as a whole and self-restraint in the pursuit of one’s own interests. In this sense, altruistic calling, described as the selfless and sacrificial roles and deep-rooted desire to gain respect and loyalty from followers and make a positive difference in their lives (Choi & Mai-Dalton 1998; Barbuto & Wheeler 2006), and organizational stewardship, described as the extent to which leaders prepare an organization to make a positive contribution to society through community development in servant leadership, are not difficult to understand in the Confucian society. Additionally, *yi* and *li* in Confucian culture have the meaning that being clearly aware of surroundings one should do the appropriate things according to the proper situation, which to some degree implies the wisdom of servant leadership that combines the awareness of surroundings and anticipation of consequences.

In addition to the modelling role, another virtue of the *junzi* or sage in Confucian culture is listening—listening to the demands of the people—offering the cultural roots for the attributes of servant leadership. Self-cultivation in order to become a *junzi* or sage that is also emphasized in Confucianism refers to the enhancement in capabilities both of emotional healing and of conceptualization in servant leadership. Therefore, we believe servant leadership, upheld by the dominant Chinese philosophy, Confucianism, can be widely demonstrated in contemporary Chinese leaders’ practice.

**CONCLUSION**

Our purpose in providing this overview of servant leadership and its philosophical groundings in Confucianism within the Chinese context was to ensure that a deeper understanding of the linkages between them underlies any future empirical or explanatory work in this area. We believe that although we have made a contribution in this area, substantial further conceptual work is desirable. Each of the components of servant leadership and Confucianism identified here (as well as in other works, some of which we have cited but others we have chosen to leave for later incorporation to reduce complexity in this initial effort) warrants more focused examination at a philosophical level, followed by derivation of reasons underlying why there are (and should be) differences between the
Western and Chinese approaches to servant leadership. We maintain that there is a need to develop a
deeper understanding of servant leadership embedded within the Chinese Confucian cultural context
derived from a philosophical perspective to validate the current tendency toward empirical research.
REFERENCES


Figure 1: Confucian Cultural Roots of Servant Leadership

Confucian Cultural Roots in China

- Junzi or sage
- Human-centred
- zhong & shu
- yi
- Collectivism
- Cultivation and reflection
- yi & li

Servant Leadership

- Modelling
- Listening
- Altruistic calling
- Empathy
- Commitment to growth of people
- Honesty
- Integrity
- Credibility
- Trust
- Organizational stewardship
- Building community
- Emotional healing
- Competence
- Wisdom
- Awareness
- Foresight

Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice

(Habitus and field)