
DIALOGUE WITH CHINA: THE PRESENCE OF HUMANISTIC LEADERSHIP IN THE PANDEMIC ERA

与中国的对话 人文主义领导力在 冠病大流行时代的存在

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ABSTRACT

The intrinsic humanistic leadership attributes defended by Confucianism in its doctrine of the cultivated gentleman, also known as *Junzi*, and its virtues formulated within the 5 constants (*Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin*), are deeply analyzed in this article, moreover, the distinctions in relation to non-Confucian leadership traits are also demonstrated through a comparative review, with the main ideas from Western views of leadership presented for that purpose. Humanism is introduced to support the derivation of *Junzi* morality. “What it is to be a humanistic leader? How does it differ from the non-Confucian leadership models?”. This paper performs a comprehensive literature review to explain different leadership concepts; furthermore, COVID data were collected, and the performances of four leaders of nations were assessed through online journals and news reading. Follow-up studies may be conducted to investigate the leaders’ ongoing responses to the COVID pandemic, for the purpose of highlighting the positive aspects of Confucian and non-Confucian leadership aspects, particularly emphasizing the traditional *Junzi* pedagogy.

Humanism by Confucius

Confucius's hero figure, the Duke of Zhou who in the 11th century BCE ruled China, at that time primarily the Yellow River region, helped to consolidate the feudal system based on mutual dependence by blood ties, marriage alliances, etc. (Weiming, 2022). Under the Zhou dynasty the main leaders and nobles were part of the aristocracy of warriors whose power and cultural influence came from the fundamentals of warfare, reinforced by sacrificial rituals and offerings to their ancestors (Rainey, 2010). The Duke of Zhou's religious thinking focuses on the concept of Heaven, and the idea known popularly as "Mandate of Heaven" where "Heaven dislikes bad rulers and sends sign of displeasure—drought, earthquakes, or floods. If the bad ruler ignores these signs and does not reform, Heaven chooses an upstanding and moral man to replace the bad and corrupt ruler. With Heaven's support, the upstanding man will overthrow the corrupt ruler and become the new ruler. So, if you are the ruler, you have the choice of Heaven; if you are overthrown, you have lost Heaven's favor and the new ruler now has it." (Rainey, 2010).

Inspired by the Duke of Zhou, the morality asserted in the Mandate of Heaven influenced Confucius to put into practice political ideas emphasising moral persuasion, such as the ideal of benevolent rulership, and a focus on the learning of humanism (Weiming, 2022). After the end of Zhou dynasty, China which was once unified was divided into many small states, with the concepts of nobility and loyalty gradually disappearing, and with a shift toward self-interest and accumulating riches (Rainey, 2010). For Confucius this was a sign of a decline in civilization. He wanted to reunify China based on the restoration of institutions that had been vital to political and social stability for centuries, such

as the family, the school, the local community, the State, and the kingdom. As Yao (2000) observes, "the Mandate of Heaven cannot be fulfilled unless it has been understood as the human way and consciously carried out by individuals in everyday life." Confucius's philosophy distinguishes the human and non-human, it establishes education and self-cultivation as the centre of the Human Way.

The ideal of humanism by Confucius is always related to what humans can become and not what they are born with; instead, it is something that can be developed. To become human in the fullest is considered the essential qualification of a person with virtue, described as the *Junzi*... Confucius emphasises behavioural reform as one of the characteristics of *Junzi*, by means of a deep internal transformation as a human.

The Humanistic Leader - *Junzi*

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desirable behaviours, including understanding the notions of virtue, can ensure one's success and societal harmony (Song & Jiao, 2017). In the *Analects* (Sinolingua Press, 2010), the *Junzi* is a person who “takes fairness as his basic life principle, observes the rites in his behaviour, speaks with modesty, and acts with sincerity”. *Junzi* is the honourable name given to the transformed human who seeks continuously to live up to the five virtues featured in traditional Confucian literature.

Five *Junzi* Virtues

The five constant virtues are the values needed for an aspiring gentleman to live a moral life. They refer to the attributes that an individual ought to have, and these are Benevolence, Righteousness, Propriety, Wisdom, and Trustworthiness.

As seen in the above measures taken, these four leaders were determined to temporarily sacrifice their nation's economy by shutting down their borders to the world on behalf of their population's safety. Notably the policies enforced by Denmark and New Zealand's leaders, a “humane leadership”, an empathetic attitude, and a wise doing are all strong features appearing in the Confucian teachings about the virtues of the *Junzi*.

Benevolence or *Ren* (仁), its Chinese etymology is composed by the first radical that means human and the second radical of number two, so literally it is “two-peopleness”, a focus on the relationship between humans. In the *Analects* (12:22), Confucius said that to be benevolent is to love. People with *Ren* will try to promote the good in others or study the good of others (Cua, 2013).

Righteousness or *Yi* (義) primarily concerns dealing with required external matters that need to be made compatible with one's inner life and concern. These requirements may be presented in the form of tradition or custom duties (Cua, 2013). *Yi* is the appropriation of *Li* by putting it into practice.

Propriety or *Li* (禮) is described in *Analects* (1:12) “In conducting the rites, seeking harmony is the most valuable principle”. One needs to have the proper conduct and fundamentally respect the formal rules (Cua, 2013). “Confucius said that it is better to be a person who is poor but joyful, or rich but polite” (*Analects*, 1:15).

人 + 義 + 禮 = 仁

Wisdom or *Zhi* (智) is a moral perception that is realized in practice, i.e., the ability to acquire knowledge and with it to analyse, judge, create and act wisely (Snell et al., 2022). According to Confucius in the *Analects* (14:28) “A man with wisdom never gets confused”.

Trustworthiness or *Xin* (信), is evident when one stands by one's word, keeps one's promises (*Analects*, 1:7). In Western idiom, it means “walking the talk”, which is similar to what Confucius defends, the importance of consistency between one's talk and actions.

Non-Confucian Concepts of Leadership

Examining the philosophical and cultural foundations of Western leadership concepts may be the most suitable way to make a comparison with Confucian leadership. Here are some primary concepts that Westerners use to teach their children to become the exemplary adults: Equality, Independence, Individualism, Freedom, Risk-Taking, Trust in Others, and Honesty (Gallo, 2011).

According to Peter Northouse (2022), there are a set of theories that differentiate different types of leadership, such as (1) Trait Theories which are focused on identifying the innate qualities possessed by historical leaders such as

Abraham Lincoln, Moses, Joan of Arc, etc; (2) Behaviour Theories that focus on what leaders do and how they act; (3) Situational Theories which state that different situations demand different kinds of leadership; (4) Relational Theories that study the relation between leaders and followers; (5) Transformational Theories which describe leadership as a process that changes people and organizations; and (6) Charismatic Theories where leaders influence their followers based on their charisma and power of persuasion rather than formal authority.

In the 21st century a set of varied leadership approaches emerged, as analysed in Northouse, 2022. (Please see Table 1).

Table 1.

Adaptive leadership	Leaders don't actually solve problems but rather encourage others to be adaptive in adverse situations and to be solution oriented according to the present circumstances.
Authentic leadership	It looks to the leaders' authenticity, reliability, and trustworthiness.
Spiritual leadership	Leaders are value-oriented and base their leadership on "callings".
Servant leadership	It accentuates the followers' needs rather than the leader's needs, leaders are known as "servants" that primarily aims to help followers to achieve their autonomy.
Gender-based studies	It analyses the impact of gender on different types of leadership, and it also focuses on women's leadership as they are assuming more leadership roles in the contemporary workforce.
Ethical leadership	It studies a leader's character, duties, decision making, and decision outcomes, in order to see how these influence ethical behaviour within an organization.
Connective leadership	It concerns the work on mutual goals and mutual understanding between diverse groups with different backgrounds, talents, and agendas.

Confucian vs non-Confucian Leadership

Besides the similarities seen in the traits of leaders for both Confucian and non-Confucian approaches, such as honesty, benevolence, empathy, trustworthiness, wisdom, and encouragement, Western leadership emphasises the relationship between the leader and its followers, such as mentioned in Table 1. While Confucius did not really intend to concentrate his teaching directly on the leadership concept, since his teachings are focused on the *Junzi* and his/her essential moral character, as well as, how an individual must respect the dual relationship between a *Junzi* and his/her followers.

Under Confucianism, every person has his or her own role in society, and in order to build a stable community each one should be aware of their social position, respecting always the elderly, the authority, and the ones above them, and at the same time be the exemplary person to ones below them by practicing the virtues of *Junzi*. There is a clear subordination between a leader and a follower that works differently from Western theories of leadership which encourage a closer “friendly” relationship between the leader and the follower.

Another aspect of *Junzi* leadership is that the leader has a deep patriotic heart, the Confucian gentleman acts benevolently, righteously, and essentially humanely towards its country, families, and followers, in contrast with Western theories in which the leader’s motivation and loyalty is more business oriented.

Leadership during COVID-19

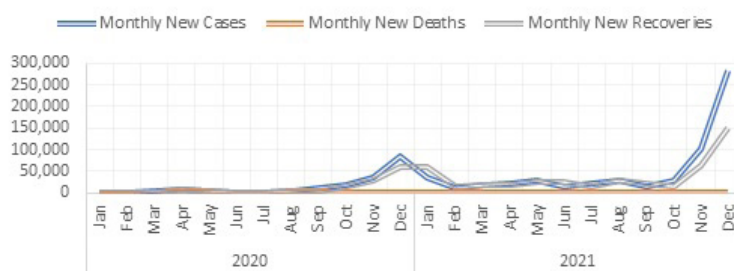
Leadership styles have great impact during difficult times whether the crises are large or small. Given the contemporary health crisis around the world, namely COVID-19, what are

the main characteristics of nations’ leaders based on their decisions and initial outcomes during the pandemic?

In March 2020, when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic, leaders around the world started working against time and making difficult decisions to safeguard the society. Amongst all the nations, four of them initially stood out in terms of their recovery progressions, and their relatively lower number of cases and deaths compared to the rest of the world. The measures taken by the leaders of these four nations, and their leadership styles deserve further study. Here are the initial reports of their performances:

Denmark

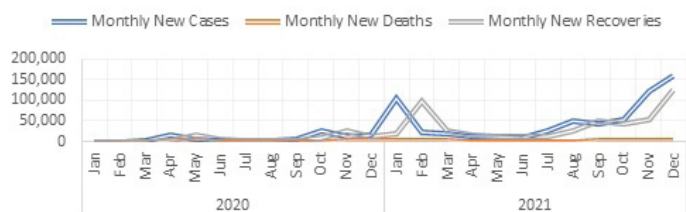
“While many of her European neighbours were fumbling around for a response, Mette Frederiksen closed her country’s borders on 13 March. A few days later she closed kindergartens, schools and universities and banned gatherings of more than 10 people.” (Phillips et al., 2021). “Her straight-talking speeches and clear instructions to the nation have been widely praised.” (Phillips et al., 2021).



(COVID Live - Coronavirus Statistics - Worldometer, n.d.)

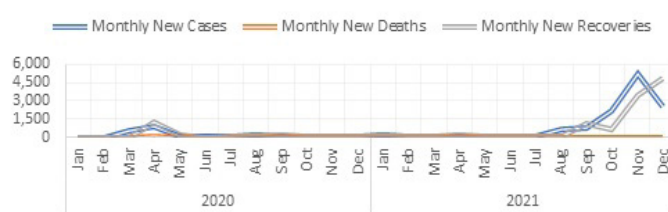
Ireland

Ireland's Prime Minister, Dr. Leo Varadkar, imposed a national lockdown in late March, which banned all the non-essential travel within the country. He also assisted medical workers in Ireland's hospitals during the crisis, as he formerly was a doctor (Thomas, 2020).



(COVID Live - Coronavirus Statistics - Worldometer, n.d.)

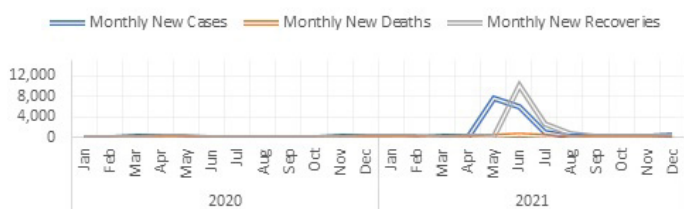
strategy would not have been possible without Ardern at the helm. “The brilliant, decisive and humane leadership of Jacinda Ardern was instrumental in New Zealand's rapid change in direction with its response to Covid-19, and the remarkably efficient implementation of the elimination strategy.” (Phillips et al., 2021).



(COVID Live - Coronavirus Statistics - Worldometer, n.d.)

Taiwan

President Tsai Ing-Wen soon began mapping the travel of infected individuals as soon as the first case was reported on January 21st (Thomas, 2020).



(COVID Live - Coronavirus Statistics - Worldometer, n.d.)

As seen in the above measures taken, these four leaders were determined to temporarily sacrifice their nation's economy by shutting down their borders to the world on behalf of their population's safety. Notably the policies enforced by Denmark and New Zealand's leaders, a “humane leadership”, an empathetic attitude, and a wise doing are all strong features appearing in the Confucian teachings about the virtues of the *Junzi*. In contrast, in nations such as United States and Brazil whose COVID statistics revealed alarming results, their leaders' attitudes were criticized as negligent, as if they were more concerned about their own political positions, and their country's economy. Initially, they seem to have underestimated the severity of the pandemic. Such leadership postures, that tried to manage the COVID crisis politically, are not defended in Confucianism, as the wellness of country and family ought to come first.

New Zealand

“Choosing to “go hard and go early”, Jacinda Ardern placed the country in total lockdown on 25 March. The decisive move shocked many of her citizens, but Ardern softened the blow using clear, empathetic language and urging everyone to “be kind” to one another – a slogan now emblazoned on billboards around the country.” (Phillips et al., 2021). “Epidemiologist Professor Michael Baker says New Zealand's “elimination”

Further studies will be conducted for the purpose of an in-depth analysis of the leadership styles from leaders with significant roles in this COVID-19 era. This article only meant to open

the discussion of fundamental ideas that sustain the Humanistic leadership based on *Junzi* virtues and the non-Confucian leadership based on Western views. Differences between them were presented with the aim of promoting the positive aspects of these leadership styles, specifically focusing on the five constants defended by Confucius, showing the continued importance in today's dialogue with China.



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