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Are there unique leadership models in Asia? Exploring uncharted territory ☆

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Our goal for this special issue on "Asian Models of Leadership" as we set out in our call for papers was "*to bring together empirical work carried out by a very diverse group of scholars and provide directions for advancing the field in new and interesting ways*." We set out to explore a number of questions and issues associated with a broadly conceived notion of leadership in Asian contexts. Our interest was to integrate fresh perspectives on leadership, and we sought rigorous data-driven research and strong conceptual frameworks. Our premise was that leadership research has been driven predominantly by Western scholars with Western data, and the growing influence of Asia in the global economy demands us to take a fresh look at our field and see what, if any, we need to call into question. We also wanted to explore if and how leadership in Asia may be different from what we have observed in Western contexts. After several rounds of reviews, we have in this special issue seven select papers, including two invited perspectives, which together address some, if not all, of these issues.

Leadership across cultures

Typical definitions of leadership include two key concepts: 1) creating a compelling *vision* and 2) *influencing* followers for the purpose of achieving important outcomes (House et. al, 2013). A more precise definition describing the actual process is presented by Yukl (2013: 7): "Leadership is the process of influencing others to understand and agree about what needs to be done and how it can be done effectively, and the process of facilitating individual and collective efforts to accomplish the shared objectives."

While many definitions of leadership exist, they all agree on the basic process of influencing others (employees, supervisors, clients, partners, etc.) to get something done. As such, leadership is about human interaction and human behavior. It is about how individuals and groups interact with each other. Therefore, an important step in understanding leadership in different countries is to focus on the drivers of human behavior. There are two major points of view regarding this topic. One stream of work asserts that many leader behaviors are universally, or near universally, accepted and effective. Leaders face common problems across the globe—how to organize, motivate, and influence others to accomplish organizational goals. As an example, there is strong belief

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that charismatic, value-based and transformational leadership is just about universally valued and effective. There is empirical support of this notion (House et al., 2004; Leong & Fischer, 2011). Transformational leadership has been found to be more acceptable and effective than transactional leadership in most empirical studies across multiple cultures including Canada (Howell &Avolio, 1993), India (Pereira, 1987), Japan (Bass, 1997), the Netherlands (Koene, Pennings, & Schreuder, 1991), and Singapore (Koh, Terborg & Steers, 1991), as well as the United States (Bass & Avolio 1993).

The second stream of work, the cultural congruency view has become a popular hypothesis among cultural theorists (Dorfman, 2004). It asserts that cultural forces affect the kind of leader behavior that is usually accepted, enacted, and effective within a collective. Accordingly, behavior that is consistent with collective values will be more acceptable and effective than behavior that contradicts collective values (House et al, 2013). In a meta-analytical study of over 20,000 participants in 18 countries, Leong and Fischer (2011) examined cultural differences in transformational leadership behavior. They studied actual transformational leadership behavior and found significant variability among countries. In fact, 50% of the variance in mean scores for transformational leadership was among societies. They found strong evidence for the impact of societal culture whereby managers in more egalitarian societies behaved in more transformational styles and managers in higher power distance countries engaged in less transformational leadership.

The proponents of this view further argue that some leadership constructs are truly emic and are found only in very specific cultures. For instance, the Chinese concept of Guanxi (often simplistically described as personal relationships) and the Japanese emphasis of *wa* (harmony) are not found in Western conceptualizations of leadership. Nor is paternalistic leadership (which is typically found in the collectivist and high power distance cultures of Asia and Latin America), a desired leadership style in the West (Aycan, 2006, 2008). The theoretical foundation of this approach is that violation of cultural norms by leaders will result in dissatisfaction, conflict, and resistance on the part of followers. As an example of this perspective, Naisbitt (1982) suggested that for Americans, leading means "finding a parade and getting in front of it" (p. 162). Yet this may not be the norm in all societies. For example, Singaporeans are more likely to represent leaders *behind* the group—all the better to watch over the group and protect it from threats, disruption, and failure (Menon, Sim, Ho-Ying Fu, Chiu, & Hong, 2010). Similarly, the admonition by Chinese general Lao Tzu "to lead the people, walk behind them" (Grothe, 2004, pp. 5–6) is contrary to Western perspectives of leadership. Meindl, Ehrlich, and Dukerich (1985), in a provocative leadership article, suggested that Americans "romanticize" leaders and view leadership qualities as the "sine quo non" for heading up (Graumann & Moscovici, 1986) various organizations irrespective of the specific context (e.g., for-profit, and nonprofits, military and volunteer organization alike).

The earlier phase of the GLOBE Project, in which one of the editors was closely associated with, (House et al, 2004) offered large scale empirical evidence that cultural values of societies predict their leadership expectations, or what GLOBE researchers termed as Culturally Endorsed Leadership Theories (CLTs). They showed that each society has a specific set of criteria that it uses in evaluating their leaders. The latest phase of the GLOBE Project showed that these societal expectations strongly predict the leadership style demonstrated by the CEOs of companies in different countries. Furthermore, they showed that in general, the greater the convergence between the CEO's leadership behavior and the society's leadership expectations, the higher the performance of their firms.

In sum, our understanding of leadership in different cultures needs continuing development and enrichment. We need in depth and rigorous studies of the concept, process, and outcome of leadership in different societies not just to understand how things are done in each of these societies, but also to "fine-tune" existing theories and incorporating cultural variations as moderators or parameters of those theories. In addition, by focusing on potential cross-cultural effects, researchers are more likely to uncover new relationships by including a much broader range of variables often not considered in contemporary theories, such as the importance of religion, language, ethnic background, history, or political systems (Chemers, 1993).

Taking stock of leadership research in Asia

Asia offers a fertile and critical arena for study of leadership. Asian economies are growing faster than all other countries of the world. Asian economies as a whole have doubled in size to almost 45 trillion dollars since 1980. As a result, Asia's share of world GDP has grown to almost 40%. All forecasts point to the continuation of these trends. Such rapid economic growth is obviously accompanied by rapid growth in the number of leadership and management positions and the number of corporations and organizations in many sectors. However, disappointingly, this rapid growth in Asia has not been accompanied by increased scholarly research on leadership in this part of the world. In fact, until recently, limited scientific work has been available on this topic and this was a motivation behind this special issue of Leadership Quarterly.

There is some empirical evidence for similarity between Asian and U.S. leadership. For example, Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, and Lowe (2009) did not find differences between China and the United States in transformational leadership. Schaubroeck and Lam (2002) did not find differences in perceptions of LMX between employees from the same multinational bank in Hong Kong and the United States. However, because of the uniqueness of cultures, business leadership in Asia–as a process of organizing and influencing organizational members to move forward towards a goal–is still an underexplored area of enquiry, especially in terms of its potentially distinct features compared to leadership in the West.

Though there are differences among countries and regions in Asia, Asian culture has generally been characterized by high levels of in-group (or family) and institutional collectivism (House et al, 2004), power distance (Hofstede, 2001) and paternalism (Chen & Farh, 2010). These cultural characteristics have played an important role in shaping business leadership styles as well as their effects and outcomes in Asian countries (House et al, 2004; House et al, 2013).

A prominent leadership attribute in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, and Taiwan, has been defined as paternalistic leadership (PL), which combines strong authority with father like leadership style (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006;