THE YIN AND YANG OF LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS: PRELIMINARY INSIGHT FROM A CROSS-ETHNIC EXPLORATION IN INDONESIA

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Abstract. Western influenced theories of leadership tend to be linear and Universalist in the way leadership characteristics are portrayed. That is, certain leadership characteristics are good while others are bad and these presumably are applicable across contexts. Based on a cross-ethic exploration of leadership characteristics in an Indonesian context (involving Javanese, Sundanese, and Chinese Indonesian), we find an argument for a more contextual form of leadership characteristics. With each ethnic group having its own leadership idea or what we call as leadership myth, the same leadership myth may be perceived as desirable or undesirable depending on the behavioral details as understood by the perceivers. Here, the "Yin and Yang" principle refers not to a balanced set of characteristics but more to a balanced view of such characteristics, which are embedded not in the personal self but in the view of the others. The analytical method employed in this research affords us to understand this possibility. We also highlight the way the argument emerges as a situated and contextual form of theory building.

Keywords: Cross-Ethnic Exploration; Leadership; Theory Building; Yin-and-Yang; Abductive Approach

INTRODUCTION

Being inclined to be rather linear and Universalist in its approach (e.g. Hofstede, 1996), a Western approach to leadership theorizing tends to be rather rule-based in the way it approaches leadership ideals. Beyond the ideas of charismatic, transactional, and transformational leadership that view leadership from the point of view of an individual leader (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1996), there have also been other ideals that are informed by ethics, spirituality, or virtues (e.g. Brown & Treviño, 2005; Fry, 2003; Winston & Ryan, 2008). These have been very insightful as it highlights varieties of often desired characteristics. The negative ones also exist, such as narcissistic leadership (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007). There is similarity in all these leadership approaches in that it puts an emphasis on individual characteristics. Such theorizing can be argued to be ontologically and epistemologically embedded in Western ideals of being a person, independent from each other (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Such characters are meant to be universally applicable in all contexts, such as in the context of servant leadership.

While studies have also discovered that certain characteristics of a leader are desirable only within certain cultures but not necessarily others (e.g. Euwema et al., 2007), this line of thinking still falls into a Universalist mindset of finding and establishing rules. A particularist approach would argue that a character or a characteristic does not stand alone and depends on a relationship in order to function as something desirable or not. In other words, it is contextual. Using a more yin-and-yang perspective, it follows that a leadership characteristic has two faces.

It does not necessarily lie in the characteristics themselves, such as in the case of the dark sides of spiritual leadership (Krishnakumar et al., 2015), but in the relationship between the leader and the member(s). In this way, we follow a cross-cultural perspective approach in theorizing about leadership (Chen et al., 2009). We attempt to show this by studying three major ethnic groups in an Indonesian context: Javanese, Sundanese, and Chinese Indonesian. Our methods include understanding leadership characteristics based on the myths embedded in Javanese, Sundanese, and Chinese Indonesian culture and conducting a survey as well as doing an autoethnographic reflections given our ethnic backgrounds.

Our methodological approach to theory building is rather abductive (Fischer, 2001). Given our ethnic backgrounds, we began by speculating about some of the differences of leadership characteristics embedded in the cultural myths of these three ethnic groups. We then proceeded to literature search on Javanese, Sundanese and Chinese Indonesian culture as broad as it may have been. After refining our conceptual ideas about ideal leadership characteristics in these ethnic groups based on literature study and group reflection, we conducted a survey that asked people about their ideal leadership characteristics. Then, some realization emerged. Based on the survey results and based on our critical formulation of statements related to the leadership characteristics, we found that certain characteristics can be perceived as more desirable and less desirable at the same time. Our premise is simple, yet rather challenging. Having been accustomed with modern Western leadership ideals of transformational leadership and other forms of leadership styles, we turn to indigenous collections of knowledge to discover varieties of leadership wisdom. Furthermore, perhaps because of the diversity of our ethnic backgrounds as a team, this theory of dual meanings of leadership characteristics emerge. In this work, we essentially extend the notion of the Yin-and-yang principle of culture (Fang, 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural Myths

Every form of culture has its own myth(s). Myth often serves as and affirms values of a nation and an ethnic group. In this way, a myth is inextricably linked with the concept of national identity (Camwron, 1999). Myths are at the core of every ethnic identity (Kaufman, 2001). By definition, myth is a legend or a fictionalized narrative which has been elevated to a symbolic level as being true to the members of a cultural group, a nation or an ethnic group. Myth is a true history or what came to pass at the beginning of time and one that provides the pattern for human behavior (Eliade, 1957). It has the power to over-dramatize true incidents, omit important historical details, or add details for which there is no evidence; or it might simply be a fictional story that no one takes to be literally true but contains a symbolic meaning for a nation (Abizadeh, 2004). In some places, a national myth may be spiritual in tone and refer to stories of the nation's founding at the hands of supernatural beings and leaders favored by the god(s). National myths exist in every society and serves many social (and even political) purposes. It can serve the purpose of inspiring civic virtue and self-sacrifice (Miller 1995) or of consolidating the power in

the society and legitimizing rule. In traditional cultures, the entities and forces described in myths are often considered sacred. Thus, by attributing the state of the universe to the actions of these entities and forces, myths give the current order an aura of sacredness. Myths reveal that the world, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is significant, precious, and exemplary (Eliade, 1964). Many cultures instill the expectation that people take mythical gods and heroes as their role models, imitating their deeds and upholding the customs they have established.

Myths are understood as a narrative that illustrates the belief of a community about itself (Hosking & Schopflin, 1997). The idea of narrative merits a brief overview as it has made a breakthrough in social sciences, from its restricted domain of literary criticism. In light of the ideas of Roland Barthes, it has become increasingly accepted that we as social beings need narratives to structure our lives. In this sense, a narrative is an ontological description of social life condition. People construct identities by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories and are guided to act in certain ways on the basis of the projections, expectations and memories derived from available social, public and cultural narratives (Somers, 1994). Myth is a narrative because it follows a storytelling structure. It places occurrences in a temporal, even if fantastic, time frame and in an interconnected relationship that serves as the meaningful part of the story. Myth is a narrative about the past of a community, composed of highly selected (historically accurate or not) events, which has the capacity to mobilize emotions and generate or modify attitudes among the members of that community.

What makes myth unique among the various other narratives of origin (of the cosmos, of a specific phenomenon or group) is its capacity to communicate emotions. Thiesse (1999) says that myths mobilize, energize, and even instigate large groups into action by appealing to the infrarational segments of behavior. Myths do not need to be accurate, they need to be believed. Once believed, they emanate a sizable emotional attraction – an irresistible force. Their emotional charge translates into action. The myths of a nation are its vital truths, even though they might not coincide with the truth (Cioran, 1990). Based on this understanding of a cultural myth, we are moved to examine leadership ideals as myths of a cultural group.

Myths of Leadership

Our focus on examining leadership across three different ethnic groups is based on our context living on Java island. The Javanese, taken directly from the island of Java itself, are usually those originating from the central through the eastern part of the island. Still part of the island of Java, the Sundanese are those originating from the western part of the island. These ethnic groups are the two largest groups in the Indonesian archipelago. The local languages that correspond to the ethnic groups are Javanese and Sundanese, respectively, with dialectical variations. The third ethnic group we focus on is a rather dispersed one: The Chinese-ethnic Indonesian. On Java island, the group can be part of either the larger Sundanese culture or the larger Javanese culture. People from the Chinese-ethnic group may have a fluency in speaking Javanese or Sundanese,

depending on where they reside or originate. It is common that across the island, one can find Chinese communities.

Understanding the myths of leadership across these somewhat distinct ethnic groups is very challenging partly and largely because of the somewhat vague state of affairs across these three ethnic groups. One can argue that there is a degree of cultural assimilation and mixing already in place that prevents us from extracting three different myths of leadership, especially post-Soeharto regimes (Hoon, 2006). But two rather separate phenomena with regard to leadership are worth noting, justifying that such myths may be possible to extract from realities. The first one is related to the fact that almost all elected presidents of Indonesia have a Javanese ethnic origin. The current 2020 presidential candidates are also of Javanese origins. This may hint on something in the larger Javanese culture that allows for such productive birthing of leadership. No Sundanese ethnic individual has even ever taken part in the Indonesian presidential race. And when a Chinese-ethnic individual took a chance of becoming a governor of the Indonesian capital, he was met with various controversies that carry ethnic-religious sentiments. Altogether, these highlight both existing myths and invisible borders between one ethnic group and other(s). Based on our social consciousness of being an Indonesian and based on Hoon (2006), discourses regarding ethnic relation issues are often discouraged because they may disrupt harmony that the country tries to maintain as reflected in the national motto of "Unity in Diversity."

METHODOLOGY

Collective Reflection of Literature

To find the leadership characteristics of the three ethnics that are compared, the first step was to conduct a literature study to find leadership characteristics or ideals from leaders in each ethnic group. Our attempt encompassed reading from and understanding cultural elements embedded in journal articles across various disciplines. We reflectively delved into literature that spoke about Javanese, Sundanese, and Chinese-Indonesian culture or leadership. This was a challenging endeavor as the six of us came from different backgrounds and we relied on our collective reflection of our reading of the literature. To help in making sense of what we found, we relied on our background(s) and relative experience interacting with people ascribed to each ethnic group. One of us has a Javanese origin, two of us have a Sundanese origin, and two of us have a Chinese-Indonesian origin, with one of us coming from any of these ethnic groups acting as a balancer. Again, the goal was to come up with one leadership ideal attached to each ethnic group and this was what we understood as leadership myth. In essence, our approach is also autoethnographic.

Survey

The next step was to explore the findings about leadership ideals or myths. Specifically, we wished to understand whether certain characteristics attached to the leadership myth(s) are indeed idealistic. What we did was to come up with up to six (6) characteristics for each

leadership myth (one myth for each ethnic group) for the purpose of exploration (with a total of 18 characteristics). We then conducted a survey that asked participants to prioritize and order the importance of all the characteristics in terms of their relevance to leadership (i.e. how important are the characteristics for a leader). In order to ensure that the respondents were not overwhelmed by all the eighteen characteristics in ordering the importance, we grouped the characteristics into three clusters, with each cluster containing two characteristics from each ethnic group. As a result, each cluster contained six (6) total characteristics. From these clusters, we asked respondents to rank the characteristics (from 1 to 6), with six (6) being the most important out of the 6 characteristics listed. To sum up, the characteristics found in the literature were listed in a questionnaire consisting of three parts (i.e. clusters) where respondents were asked to rank existing characteristics from the most important (6) to the less important ones (1). Our sampling strategy included three approaches. The first approach was convenience sampling where we sent the survey (online) to our circles. The second approach was random sampling to undergraduate students in our university (located in Bandung, West Java, Indonesia) by inviting them voluntarily to participate in the survey. They were invited to attend a session where the (online) survey participation would take place. At the end, the participating students received a token of appreciation from us. The third approach incorporated an invitation to students after the end of class sessions of a particular course. Students voluntarily participated in the survey. The survey was also circulated online to the students. To ensure that no duplication of participation occurred, respondents were asked to enter their email. In addition, respondents were also asked to enter basic information related to their ethnic identity, gender, and education background.

In total, we obtained a total number of 215 respondents. There were 93 males and 122 females. Ethnic group-wise, the majority of our respondents identified as Javanese (N = 70), followed by Sundanese (N = 36), and Chinese-Indonesian (N = 34). The remaining 75 respondents identified themselves as either a mix of any two of the above ethnic groups or any other ethnic group in Indonesia. We concluded that our respondents were diverse enough, making it a reliable sample to evaluate the characteristics. In terms of age, most respondents were under 20 years old (N = 167), followed by those in the range of 20 to 25 years of age (N = 40). The remaining were those in the range of 25 to 30 years of age (N = 2), 30 to 35 years of age (N = 2), 35 to 40 years of age (N = 2), and above 40 years of age (N = 2). In terms of education, most were undergraduate students (N = 205), with a few bachelor's graduates (N = 3), master's graduates (N = 3), and doctoral graduate (N = 1).

FINDINGS AND ARGUMENT

Collective Reflection: Leadership Myths
Our collective reflection of the literature revealed that the Javanese ideal of leadership would point to the idea of charisma. This is primarily based on the hierarchical nature of Javanese culture. While Eastern culture is overall marked by its attentiveness to hierarchy (e.g. Blunt &

Jones, 1997), among the three ethnic groups examined here, we assigned a higher emphasis on hierarchy to the Javanese culture. We theorize that the implication to leadership is that the notion of charisma becomes central. We define **charisma** as the quality of being perceived as having qualities expressed in someone's character. As for the Sundanese culture, we perceive the ideal of flexibility to be of utmost importance. The Sundanese are characterized by their easy-going and contextualizing nature. Again, this particularist tendency is something that is believed to be a characteristic of Eastern culture in general. But we perceive the ideal of flexibility to be particularly emphasized in Sundanese culture. We define **flexibility** as the quality of adjustment and bridging with regard to people and situations. It is essentially particularist (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2011). Last, we assign the ideal of hard work to Chinese-Indonesian ideal of leadership. While such an ideal is also present in both Sundanese and Javanese cultures, we think that it is particularly pronounced in the Chinese-Indonesian culture in general. This is strengthened by the understanding of high level of masculinity in East Asian countries such as China (Hofstede et al., 2010). We define **hard work** as the quality of pursuing goals with dominant persistence and efficiency. Of course, all these have also been corroborated by our own experiences as part of the ethnic group(s) ourselves and having interacted with those coming from the mentioned ethnic groups.

Survey Results: Rank of Importance

As mentioned above, we generated six statements representing characteristics for each of the leadership myths, grouped into three clusters for the survey respondents to rank in terms of their perceived importance in a leader. Based on our analysis for each set of statements related to the importance of certain leadership qualities, we find very striking findings across all three sets or clusters. In all sets, the top three qualities contain characteristics attached to Javanese, Sundanese, and Chinese ethnic groups, and so do the bottom three characteristics. In the first set, the most prioritized characteristic belongs to the Javanese ("Having a great impact to people around him," with a mean of 4.43), followed by one that belongs to the Sundanese ("Acting based on situations and conditions," with a mean of 3.69) and one that belongs to the Chinese-Indonesian ("Never giving up in doing a job," with a mean of 3.66). In the second set, the most prioritized characteristic belongs to the Sundanese ("Being able to accommodate multiple parties and interests," with a mean of 4.66), followed by one that belongs to the Javanese ("Being assertive in making decisions," with a mean of 4.47) and one that belongs to the Chinese-Indonesian ("Holding on his/her vision and mission," with a mean of 4.03). In the third set, the most prioritized characteristic belongs to the Chinese-Indonesian ("Working with efficient time and energy," with a mean of 4.55), followed by one that belongs to the Javanese ("Having vast knowledge," with a mean of 4.47) and one that belongs to the Sundanese ("Having a patient and going-with-the-flow attitude," with a mean of 3.65). Overall, our exploration suggests that certain characteristics that are seemingly about a particular leadership ideal (i.e. myth) may not be overall embraced. Table 1 below summarizes the survey results.

Table 1 The Grouping of Characteristics into Clusters (S-F = Flexibility as Sundanese myths; J-C = Charisma as Javanese myths; C-H = Hard Work as Chinese-Indonesian myths)

Cluster 1	Cluster 2	Cluster 3
1. Behaving in accordance with the situation and condition (S-F) 2. Have a big influence on people around (J-C) +++ 3. Have a diligent work ethic (C-H) 4. Not in a hurry in making decisions (S-F) 5. Have high self-confidence and authority (J-C) 6. Never give up in doing work (C-H)	1. Have high achievements in life (J-C) 2. Hold on to vision and mission (C-H) 3. Able to accommodate various parties and interests (S-F) +++ 4. Have assertiveness in making decisions (J-C) 5. Oriented to the end result in doing business (C-H) 6. Decide something with a lot of consideration (S-F)	1. Work with time and energy efficiently (C-H) +++ 2. Not too rigid in implementing existing regulations (S-F) 3. Hold idealism (J-C) 4. Have confidence that the decisions taken are the best (C-H) 5. Have a patient and flowing disposition (S-F) 6. Have broad insight (J-C)

CONCLUSIONS

Given the random nature of the characteristic arrangement across the three sets or clusters of leadership characteristics, this result of the arrangement in terms of what characteristics are prioritized and not prioritized is very striking. This suggests that each ethnic group has a central leadership myth that can be either desirable or undesirable. Theoretically, the Javanese myth of leadership is about charisma, which is essentially a projecting characteristic; the Sundanese myth of leadership is about flexibility, which is essentially an accommodating characteristic; while the Chinese-Indonesian myth of leadership is about hard work, which is essentially an effort-making characteristic. Taking the details collectively and extracting them to arrive at more abstract understanding, we may conclude that all leadership myths are naturally dualistic. Being charismatic, accommodating, or hardworking is usually seen as a positive trait, but our exploration indicates that they may not be so positive if we go into details. The Yin-and-Yang principle of leadership characteristics is therefore about how leadership myths can present themselves as either desirable or undesirable characteristics for a leader to have. Our main limitation in this preliminary research is that we do not quantitatively validate whether the characteristics attached to each leadership myth are indeed about the myth. Nonetheless, our approach to validation is rather interpretive through collective reflection. The analytical method that we chose in treating the characteristics was also one that relied on the ranking that the respondents provided. Overall, our study provides preliminary insight into how leadership ideals may not be idealistic afterall. They depend on the behavioral details as perceived by the perceivers.

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