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The construction of ethical leadership from a Chinese cultural perspective

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Research on ethical leadership predominantly emphasizes value-based virtues and value-driven behaviors; however, these aspects have not yet be adequately integrated. This paper aims to construct dimensions that enable a comprehensive and integrated understanding of ethical leadership. Drawing inspiration from Confucianism, which advocated ethical leadership, we propose the ‘Five Constant Virtues’ (*Wuchang*) as a framework for developing dimensions of ethical leadership. The Five Constant Virtues encompass both value-based virtues, (benevolence [*Ren*], righteousness [*Yi*], wisdom [*Zhi*], and integrity [*Xin*]), and value-driven behavior (ritual [*Li*]). These five dimensions interact synergistically, collectively empowering leaders to act ethically in a contextually appropriate manner.

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Introduction

Leadership is defined as the process of inspiring and guiding individuals or organizations towards a common vision through influence, motivation, and ethical responsibility, serving as a key driving force for organizational success and social progress (Hogan and Kaiser 2005; Kouzes and Posner 2006; Dinh et al. 2014). In contrast to management, which primarily focuses on operational efficiency and task execution (Kotterman 2006), leadership emphasizes the integration of vision, motivation, and moral responsibility. The essence of effective leadership lies in virtues such as integrity, empathy, and justice, which enable leaders to build trust, foster ethical behavior, and navigate complex social dynamic (Palmer et al. 2001; Yukl 2013). In an era where governments, businesses, non-profit organizations, and religious institutions face increasing moral crisis, the significance of ethical leadership becomes ever more pronounced (Brown et al. 2005; Webley and Werner 2008; Zhu et al. 2019). Numerous scholars have explored ethical leadership from behavior and virtue dimensions, (Brown and Trevino 2006; Kalshoven et al. 2011; Lawton and Paez 2015). However, the majority of current research on ethical leadership suffers from a redundancy of theory and empirical evidence, with few studies providing effective integration. Confucianism, as a philosophical system centered on ethics, primarily aimed at moral education, and oriented towards the construction of social order, offers a novel perspective on ethical leadership (Yuan et al. 2023). Therefore, the aim of this paper is to construct a comprehensive framework that integrates the various dimensions of ethical leadership, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of ethical leadership.

Ethical leadership encompasses the demonstration of moral behaviors and the establishment of a moral example by leaders, guided by ethical principles and values, while also involving the making of ethically sound decisions and inspiring team members to engage in ethical conduct, all accompanied by a strong sense of responsibility towards others and society, thereby fostering a more just and sustainable work environment (Brown and Trevino 2006). Existing research has focused on the conceptualization and measurement of ethical leadership (Trevino et al. 2000; Yukl et al. 2013). Recent empirical studies tend to examine the impact of ethical leadership on outcomes, such as employees' job performance (Piccolo et al. 2010), innovation (Tu and Lu 2013), and subordinate behavior (Stouten et al. 2010). While Western leadership theories, such as servant leadership, moral leadership, and spiritual leadership (van Dierendonck 2011; Liden et al. 2014; Newstead et al. 2019) have enhanced the understanding of ethical leadership, they often lack a comprehensive integration of virtues and behaviors, particularly in cross-cultural contexts. For instance, ethical leadership emphasizes care and support for subordinates; however, the understanding of these concepts varies across cultures. In Western cultures, the emphasis may be on promoting individual development and the protection of rights, while in Eastern cultures, these notions also encompass moral guidance for subordinates and the instillation of collectivist values. In the era of globalization, scholars increasingly recognize the importance of cross-cultural understanding of ethical leadership (Chen et al. 2009; Resick et al. 2011; Zhu et al. 2019). Consequently, it is essential to explore ethical leadership from an Eastern cultural perspective that differs from Western leadership theories.

In China, the profound influence of Confucian culture renders ethical leadership particularly significant, with related concepts permeating all facets of leadership thought and practice (Chen et al. 2014; Ma and Tsui 2015). Rooted in the teachings of Confucius, Confucianism establishes a theoretical framework that emphasizes personal moral cultivation, social harmony, and

benevolent governance (Woods and Lamond 2011). It posits that societal stability and development depend on individuals' moral integrity and the quality of their social relationships. Within this ethical framework, "ren" (benevolence) is regarded as a core value, advocating that leaders should demonstrate genuine care and support for their subordinates to enhance team cohesion (Yuan et al. 2023). Concurrently, "yi" (righteousness) underscores the importance of justice and a sense of responsibility, requiring leaders to consider fairness and morality in their decision-making process to ensure that all decisions align with organizational interests while respecting employees' fundamental rights and values (Tan 2024). The emphasis on moral and ethical considerations has permeated families, societies, and economic organizations, further reinforcing the public's identification with Confucian culture. Additionally, Confucianism introduces the concept of "li" (ritual), which refers to appropriate behaviors and etiquette that promote harmony in interpersonal relationships (Yuan et al. 2023). Leaders who adhere to these rituals effectively demonstrate respect for their subordinates and their contributions, thereby enhancing loyalty and a sense of belonging within the team. In modern corporate management, leadership styles influenced by Confucian ethics have been widely practiced, with organizations incorporating insights from Confucian classics into employee training programs to cultivate moral character (McDonald 2012; Tan 2024). In terms of motivation, there is a strong emphasis on combining spiritual and material incentives. Furthermore, efforts are made to create a workplace culture characterized by harmony, respect, and mutual assistance, aligning with the values advocated by Confucianism (Wang et al. 2005; Schenck and Waddey 2017). Notably, the moral leadership concepts inherent in Confucian thought are also critically reflected in national governance, exemplified by the principle of "governing the nation with virtue" (Moore 2012). In the processes of public administration and corporate governance, leaders employ moral guidance and exemplary behavior to achieve effective governance outcomes. In the context of globalization, Confucian ethics provide a unique cultural perspective on modern leadership, enriching its conceptual framework and developmental pathways.

Some Western scholars have acknowledged the unique contributions of Confucian ethics to the study of ethical leadership that may be drawn from traditional Chinese culture (Riggio et al. 2010). However, there has been limited effort to develop or extend mainstream Western perspectives on ethical leadership through the lens of Chinese culture (Hackett and Wang 2012). Therefore, this paper aims to construct dimensions of ethical leadership rooted in the principles of Chinese cultural thought. More specifically, we intend to articulate detailed dimensions of ethical leadership informed by values derived from Confucian philosophy.

Literature review

Conceptualization of ethical leadership. Since 2005, numerous studies on ethical leadership have emerged, conceptualizing it from various perspectives. Banks et al. (2021) categorized these conceptualizations into two main types: (a) behaviors that are both morally appropriate and effective leadership practices, as discussed by Wang and Hackett (2020), with relevant examples provided by Craig and Gustafson (1998), Brown et al. (2005), and Yukl et al. (2013); and (b) leadership behaviors that are virtue-based and well-intended, with examples from Riggio et al. (2010), Kalshoven et al. (2011), Newstead et al. (2019).

The most prevalent conceptualization of ethical leadership is defined by Brown and colleagues as "the demonstration of

normatively appropriate conduct through personal action and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers through two-way communication, reinforcement, and decision-making” (Brown et al. 2005, p.120). This definition highlights two critical dimensions of ethical leadership: the ethical leader’s identity as a ‘moral person’ and as a ‘moral manager’ (Brown and Trevino 2006). The moral person dimension refers to the ethical leader’s embodiment of and modeling ‘normatively appropriate’ behavior, characterized by fairness and honesty in relationships with others (Brown et al. 2005). Trevino et al. (2000) describe a ‘moral person’ as fair, ethically principled, caring and altruistic in decision-making. Brown and Trevino (2006) portray the moral person in terms of traits, attributes, and personal characteristics. Meanwhile, Brown et al. (2005) conceptualized the moral manager as a role model for ethical conduct - a leader who discusses ethical standards, values and principles with followers to encourage ethical behavior. Therefore, the notions of moral person and moral manager are each articulated through the lenses both virtue and ethical behavior.

Virtue in ethical leadership. The concept of virtue has become a central element in the understanding of ethical leadership (Hackett and Wang 2012; Storr 2004). Generally, virtue encompasses both moral and practical aspects, where the latter represents the behavioral manifestations of the former (Newstead et al. 2019). As a result, practical aspects of virtue can be developed (Peterson and Seligman 2004). Within ethical leadership studies, virtue has been examined from various angles, including character trait (Fry 2003; Hanbury 2004), personal values (Sama and Shoaf 2008), personality (Brown and Trevino 2006), and competencies (Bass 1990). For example, Arjoon (2000) defined virtue as a personal quality that motivates individuals to act for the common good, while Coloma (2009) described it as the norms or customary conduct guiding behavior.

Brown et al. (2005) indicated that ethical leader are expected to uphold the right actions. Newstead et al. (2019) characterized a virtuous leader as someone who consciously engages in doing what is right, for the right reasons and in the right manner. This illustrates that the ethical leader’s virtue comprises multiple characteristics. Furthermore, virtue serves as a moral foundation for the actions of a ‘good person’ and can often predict behavior in specific contexts (Broadie and Rowe 2002). Additionally, a leader’s virtue expressed spontaneously, independent of personal interests or external controls (Whetstone 2001). Moreover, a virtuous leader integrates knowledge and practice, not only understanding the right course of action but also implementing it (Ciulla 2004; Newstead et al. 2019). Ciulla (2004) emphasized that while values can exist without practical application, virtues must be concurrently expressed through both ideology and action. Philosophers like Confucius and Aristotle advocated for the development and maintenance of virtues through sustained learning and practice (Hackett and Wang 2012), leading a habitual actions that reflect virtue when circumstances arise (Bragues 2006).

The concept of the ‘right thing’ is context-dependent, meaning a leader’s virtue should be assessed according to specific situations. Context determines the prerequisites for each event-effective leadership characteristics may vary across organizations, and the interpretation and impact of a given behavior can differ depending on the circumstances (Johnson 2001). Thus, virtue can only be fully understood by considering the context in which actions are deemed virtuous (Whetstone 2001).

It is often stated that virtues guide ethical behavior (Hackett and Wang 2012). Yet, scholars have also identified more nuanced aspects of virtue, asserting that virtuous individuals consistently

act rightly and find fulfillment in their ethical conduct (Irwin 1999; Cavanagh and Bandsuch 2002). Bright et al. (2014) suggested that cultivating and emphasizing the leader’s virtues can benefit team and organizational development. The role of leaders as key sources of ethical guidance for employees is another significant theme in ethical leadership studies (Brown et al. 2005). Trevino (1986) asserted that many employees seek moral guidance from their leaders, who often serve as a pivotal ethical references in the workplace (Brown et al. 2005).

Scholars have discussed specific virtues influencing ethical leadership, including trustworthiness, integrity, justice, temperance, courage, prudence, honesty, truthfulness, love, faithfulness, responsibility, authenticity, care and compassion (Gonzalez and Cuillen 2002; McCoy 2007; Walker et al. 2007). However, these studies lack integration. Integrity, a virtue prominently highlighted in the literature, is fundamental to ethical leadership (Keating et al. 2007). Badaracco and Ellsworth (1991) defined integrity as wholeness, coherence, and moral soundness, centering on honesty and justice. It encompasses both character traits and behaviors (Lawton and Paez 2015) and is central to ethical leadership practices (Den Hartog and De Hoogh 2009). Behavioral integrity is described as “the perceived pattern of alignment between an actor’s words and deeds” (Simons 2002, p.19). Palanski and Yammarino (2007) noted that integrity is typically accompanied by additional virtues, including fairness, trustworthiness, compassion and authenticity.

Measurement of ethical leadership. Another way to understand ethical leadership is through measurement of its manifestations. Ethical leadership theory emphasizes ethical leaders as role models who demonstrate behaviors that regulate the ethical conduct of their followers (Brown and Trevino 2006). To effectively explore the impact of ethical leadership, scholars have developed several instruments to capture its dimensions (Langlois et al. 2014; Riggio et al. 2010; Spangenberg and Theron 2005). For instance, Brown et al. (2005) created the Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) to encompass the breadth of ethical leadership. Similarly, Spangenberg and Theron (2005) established the Ethical Leadership Inventory (ELI), which focuses on the creation and sharing of ethical vision. Additionally, Kalshoven et al. (2011) proposed the Ethical Leadership at work questionnaire (ELW) to measure ethical leadership behaviors, including power sharing, role clarification, ethical guidance and concern for sustainability.

Despite these efforts, existing studies on measuring ethical leadership are limited and often lack integration with one another. Researchers tend to construct scales based on their individual research interests and interpretations of ethical leadership, leading to the measurement of certain aspects while neglecting others. For example, the ELS, the most widely used measure of ethical leadership in empirical studies, was developed from a preliminary pool of 48 items selected by the authors (Brown et al. 2005). This lack of standardization can result in overlap and potential confusion among different scales. While many instruments assess integrity as a component of ethical leadership, they often employ varying definitions, which increases the likelihood of survey bias.

Confucianism and Confucian ethics

Confucianism, as one of the foundational traditions of Chinese philosophy, originated during the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period (~770–221 BCE). It was established by Confucius (551–479 BCE) and further developed by prominent thinkers such as Mencius, Xunzi, and later scholars during the Song and Ming dynasties (Yao 2000). This philosophical system is characterized by its ethical focus, placing significant emphasis

on personal moral cultivation and social harmony, which extend to familial responsibilities and political governance (Hill 2006). Confucianism has profoundly influenced East Asian culture, shaping social norms, educational practices, and governance models (Weiming 2017). At the core of Confucian ethics is principle of “Ren”, often translated as benevolence or humanness (Tan 2024). Ren symbolizes love, care, and compassion in human relationships, serving as the foundation for both personal moral refinement and societal harmony. Confucian ethics is further supplemented by “Yi” (righteousness), “Li” (Ritual), “Zhi” (wisdom), and “Xin” (Integrity), collectively forming a comprehensive moral framework that guides individual behavior and social interactions (Woods and Lamond 2011).

The influence of Confucian ethics spans various dimensions, including personal, familial, organizational, and societal, each interrelated and collectively reinforcing the ethical foundation of Chinese culture (Lin et al. 2013). Specifically, on an individual level, Confucian ethics advocates for the principles of self-cultivation and moral behavior, urging individuals to actively embody the virtue of ren in their daily lives (Ding et al. 2024). This emphasis on empathy not only facilitates a deeper understanding of others’ feelings and experiences but also empowers individuals to make more conscientious and ethically sound decisions, thus contributing to foster a positive societal impact. At the familial level, Confucianism steadfastly upholds the principles of filial piety and familial responsibility, thereby emphasizing the critical importance of mutual affection and respect among family members (Gu and Li 2023). The practice of filial piety compels individuals to exhibit a profound sense of care for their elders, serving as a foundational mechanism for preserving family harmony and continuity across generations. Additionally, Confucian doctrine accentuates the essential role of parents as moral exemplars, a dimension that is instrumental in fostering ethical awareness and cultivating a sense of responsibility in their children (Sheng 2019). Within organizational contexts, Confucian ethics advocates for a governance paradigm that is fundamentally anchored in virtue, emphasizing the imperative for leaders to embody noble moral qualities coupled with a profound sense of responsibility (Cottine 2016). It is crucial to recognize that employees are driven not solely by material incentives, but also by an intrinsic aspiration for respect and self-actualization, which are essential for holistic engagement in their roles (Liu and Ji 2019). Therefore, ethical leaders, who adeptly balance the dual objectives of fostering high performance and attending to employee well-being, play a pivotal role in enhancing both motivation and organizational cohesion. On a societal level, Confucian ethics establishes a framework centered on harmony and stability (Li 2006). It advocates for compromise and understanding in interpersonal relations and social conflicts. By promoting these values, Confucian ethics reinforces trust and cooperation among community members, contributing to societal cohesion and overall stability (Yuan et al. 2023). The holistic nature of Confucian ethics not only strengthens personal and social relationships but also cultivates a culture of ethical awareness that is deeply rooted in Chinese tradition, offering valuable insights applicable to modern leadership and organizational practices.

The Confucian ethics system and ethical leadership

To elucidate how Confucian ethics can enhance modern leadership, this paper proposes that Confucianism’s value system, particularly the “Five Constant Virtues”, provides a practical framework for ethical leadership. Confucianism envisions an ideal leader as a sage or a gentleman (*chun tzu*), embodying both virtue and competence. The Five Constant Values - ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness), li (ritual), zhi (wisdom), and xin

(integrity) - from the core of Confucian ethics and remain relevant as a code of conduct for contemporary leaders (Wang and Chee 2011). Developed by Dong Zhongshu based on the teachings of Confucius and Mencius, these virtues encapsulate natural law and moral categorization widely recognized in Chinese culture (Huang 1997). The following sections explain each virtue, illustrating their practical application in modern leadership through concrete examples and in-depth analysis.

Ren (benevolence). Ren (benevolence), the cornerstone of the Five Constants, embodies the principle of ‘loving your people’ (*The Analects*, Watson 2007). It aligns with Aristotelian notions of friendliness and the ethics of care (Hackett and Wang, 2012), emphasizing kindness, empathy, and interpersonal harmony. Grounded in loyalty (*chung*) and magnanimity (*shu*), benevolence guides leaders to treat others with sincerity and reciprocity, as reflected in the Confucian maxim: “Do not do to others what you would not have others do to you” (Lin et al. 2013).

In modern leadership, benevolence foster supportive work environment and societal impact. For instance, consider a technology firm’s CEO who implements flexible work policies to support employees’ mental health during a crisis. By prioritizing employee well-being over immediate productivity, the leader embodies ren, fostering loyalty and job satisfaction. Research by Chan (2008) supports this, showing that benevolent leaders create supportive climates, leading to higher employee satisfaction and organizational loyalty. Wang and Hackett (2016) further demonstrate that ren-inspired leadership predicts enhanced employee performance and organizational citizenship behaviors.

Externally, benevolence drives corporate social responsibility (CSR). A notable example is Zhang Yin, founder of Nine Dragons Paper, who integrated ren by investing in community welfare programs, such as education for underprivileged children. This not only enhanced the company’s reputation but also instilled employee pride, aligning with Ip’s (2009) findings that ren-driven leaders improve community development and stakeholder trust. Zhu et al. (2015) corroborate that benevolent leaders foster a culture of social responsibility, increasing employee engagement. These examples illustrate how ren enables leaders to balance organizational goals with societal needs, creating shared value through empathy and care.

Yi (righteousness). Yi (righteousness) emphasizes morally appropriate actions over profit, as Confucius states, ‘A gentleman does not set his heart for or against anything in the world. He only does what is right.’ (*The Analects*, 4.10). Mencius reinforces this, prioritizing yi over gain: ‘Why must your Majesty use that word, “profit”? What I am provided with are counsels to benevolence and righteousness’ (*Mencius*, Book I, Part I, Chapter I). This virtue aligns with Aristotle’s justice and temperance (Hackett and Wang 2012), guiding leaders to uphold fairness and ethical boundaries.

In modern organizations, yi informs ethical decision-making. For example, a pharmaceutical company leader might refuse to inflate drug prices despite market pressures, prioritizing patient access over profit. This reflects yi by placing justice above financial gain, enhancing employee morale and public trust. Low and Ang (2013) found that yi-guided leaders prioritize employee welfare and environmental sustainability, fostering organizational cohesion and sustainable development. Brown et al. (2005) align yi with ethical leadership, noting that such leaders consistently ask, “what is the right thing to do, in terms of ethics?” (Mayer et al. 2010, p.8).

A real-world case is Paul Polman, former CEO of Unilever, who championed sustainability by reducing environmental impact despite short-term profit challenges. Polman's commitment to *yi* inspired employees and strengthened Unilever's reputation, as Lin et al. (2018) suggest that *yi*-driven leadership cultivates integrity and accountability. By prioritizing justice, leaders practicing *yi* motivate teams and align organizational goals with societal good, ensuring long-term viability.

Li (ritual). Li (ritual) in Confucianism represents codes of appropriate behavior, serving as an external expression of inner virtue. Confucius stated, 'A benevolent man will control himself in conformity with the rules of propriety. Once every man can control himself in conformity with the rules of propriety, the world will be in good order. Benevolence depends on oneself, not on others' (*The Analects* 12.1). In modern contexts, li manifests as ethical norms that regulate leader-subordinate relationships, fostering respect and trust.

In practice, li guides leaders to model contextually appropriate behaviors that reflect ethical norms and foster organizational harmony. For example, a company CEO might institute regular "values alignment workshops" where employees collaboratively discuss and reinforce the organization's ethical principles, such as fairness and mutual respect. This ritual embodies li by creating a structured platform for open dialog, demonstrating the leader's commitment to transparency and inclusivity. By actively listening to employees' perspectives and ensuring equitable participation, the leader strengthens employees' sense of belonging and reinforces a culture of mutual respect. Islam and Zyphur (2009) found that such ethically grounded rituals enhance employees' emotional attachment to the organization, fostering a sense of inclusion and community. Similarly, Brown et al. (2005) emphasize that behaviors rooted in li inspire trust and position leaders as role models, encouraging employees to emulate ethical conduct. These rituals reinforced ethical conduct, boosting employee engagement, as Khuntia and Suar (2004) note that li-related virtues (e.g., humility, respect) enhance team cohesion. By embedding li in organizational practices, leaders create cultures of accountability and mutual respect, directly enhancing leadership effectiveness.

Zhi (wisdom). Zhi (wisdom) involves knowledge accumulation and sound decision-making, as Confucius notes: 'to admit what you know and what you do not know, that is knowledge' (*The Analects* 2.17). Mencius adds that wisdom discerns right from wrong, guiding ethical choices. In leadership, zhi encompasses not only self-awareness and strategic insight but also continuous learning, exploration, and extensive practical experience necessary to make sound decisions and provide valuable guidance, ultimately enhancing workforce efficiency and fostering healthy interpersonal relationships (Liu and Ji 2019).

Wisdom stands as one of the core dimensions of ethical leadership, emphasising knowledge – of good and wrong, self-awareness, and understanding others. Ethical leaders leverage their wisdom to take initiative and express a genuine eagerness to learn, including humility in learning from other subordinates. They recognize their limitations and do not pretend to possess knowledge they lack. This competence enables ethical leaders to understand their subordinates' strengths and weaknesses, thereby encouraging their development effectively. Practically, zhi enables leaders to navigate complex challenges. For example, a retail chain leader facing supply chain disruptions might use zhi to analyze market trends and employee capabilities, devising innovative solutions like local sourcing. Newstead et al. (2019)

emphasize that zhi-driven leaders apply virtues contextually, enhancing decision-making efficacy.

Xin (integrity). Xin (integrity), the alignment of actions with values, is central to Confucianism. Confucius question, 'How can an untrustworthy man be employed?' (*The Analects* 2.22), and further advises; '[if you are] sincere in what you say and trustworthy in what you do, you would behave well even among uncivilized tribes. Insincere in word and untrustworthy in deed, could you behave well in your native village?' (*The Analects* 15.6). xin, encompassing honesty and trustworthiness (Bauman 2013), is vital for fostering trust in leadership.

In modern contexts, xin serves as a pivotal attribute of ethical leadership. Ethical leaders demonstrate xin in their interactions with subordinates and when making decisions on their behalf. Keeping promises is crucial for building trust and establishing healthy interpersonal relationships, which consequently create an environment rich in integrity. Furthermore, ethical leaders empower their subordinates by granting them with autonomy and supporting their professional growth, thereby cultivating a more engaged and committed workforce.

Additionally, xin requires self-honesty. Ethical leaders naturally embody automatically, acting transparently in alignment with their beliefs and values, as noted by Avolio et al. (2004). This authenticity goes beyond merely possessing values; it involves actively enacting them in daily practices. An ethical leader earns trust not only by fulfilling promises but also by consistently upholding values, regardless of personal costs. By embodying xin, leaders foster an environment of autonomy and support, significantly enhancing employee commitment and improving the organization's reputation. These practices highlight the practical value of xin in modern leadership, demonstrating that xin is essential for creating a positive organizational culture.

Integration of the Five Constants to generate ethical leadership. The Confucian Five Constants offer a robust framework for ethical leadership, guiding leaders to foster trust, cohesion, and societal impact. Figure 1 presents a general visual representation of the dimensions of ethical leadership as perceived by the authors in a Confucian context. The outer ring identifies four dimensions of ethical leadership related to leaders' virtues: ren (benevolence), yi (righteousness), zhi (wisdom) and xin (integrity). These virtues are essential for ethical leadership. The inner

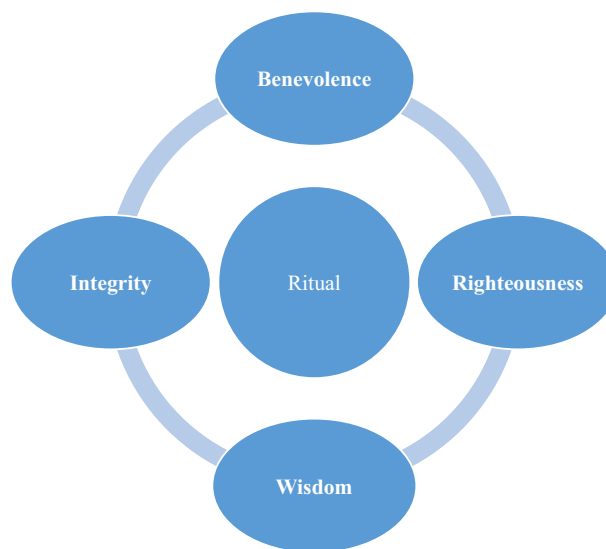


Fig. 1 Dimensions of ethical leadership.

ring emphasizes the dimension of behavior, or *li* (ritual), which serves as a crucial determinant of ethical leadership. It is through virtue that leaders are guides to behave ethically; therefore, the dimensions of ethical leadership should encompass both virtue and behavior. The five dimensions are interconnected. As suggested by Cavanagh and Bandsuch (2002), the cardinal virtues are intimately related, and their collective presence enables leaders to act ethically in a contextually appropriate manner, thereby demonstrating ritual behavior. Through this integrated approach, the Confucian framework for ethical leadership not only highlights the importance of individual virtues but also emphasizes the significance of ethical behavior in leadership practice.

Discussion

This study advances the theoretical and practical understanding of ethical leadership by proposing a comprehensive framework grounded in the Confucian Five Constant Virtues. By integrating diverse literature and addressing the under-researched integration of ethical leadership dimensions, this paper offers a multifaceted framework that unifies virtues and behaviors, internal attributes and external actions, and contextual adaptability. The conceptual and ethical implications of this framework are profound, providing a robust lens for understanding and cultivating ethical leadership in modern organizational contexts, particularly in bridging Western and Chinese leadership conceptions. Below, we elaborate on the theoretical contributions, practical implications, and directions for future research, emphasizing the framework's significance in addressing contemporary leadership challenges.

Existing leadership theories are predominantly based on Western concepts, and while there is merit in applying these theories to a Chinese context, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of Western theory in comprehensively capturing Chinese leadership paradigms, particularly those grounded in the Five Constant Virtues. First, Western ethical leadership frameworks, such as those proposed by Brown and Treviño (2006), tend to focus on observable ethical behaviors, such as fairness and transparency, while often neglecting the internal moral development of the leader. In contrast, Confucian leadership is deeply rooted in the philosophy of “inner sage, outer king” (内圣外王) (Woods and Lamond 2011), which posits that ethical behavior is an extension of cultivated virtues like *ren* and *yi*. This emphasis on self-cultivation challenges Western models that overlook the introspective processes critical to ethical leadership in Chinese contexts. Second, Western leadership theories frequently prescribe rigid behavioral norms, such as the idealized influence characteristic of transformational leadership (Bass and Riggio 2006), which may lack the contextual adaptability essential in Chinese culture. The Confucian virtue of *li*, on the other hand, underscores the importance of contextually appropriate behaviors, enabling leaders to effectively navigate complex social dynamics, including the maintenance of harmony in high power distance settings. For instance, a Western leader's tendency to provide direct feedback may be perceived as disruptive in a Chinese team, where *li* would advocate for indirect, relationship-preserving communication.

Theoretical implications. The Confucian Five Constant Virtues offer a novel conceptual framework that addresses critical gaps in ethical leadership research, particularly the lack of integration across existing studies. While prior research has predominantly focused on either value-driven behaviors (Riggio et al. 2010) or value-based virtues (Brown et al. 2005), often emphasizing virtues that prioritize others' interests over those of the leader (Banks et al. 2021), our framework proposes a broader, more inclusive set of dimensions. By encompassing both virtues (*ren*, *yi*, *zhi*, *xin*)

and virtue-based behaviors (*li*), the Confucian model provides a holistic approach that captures the dynamic interplay between a leader's internal moral attributes and their external actions.

A key conceptual contribution lies in the Confucian emphasis on the unity of *ren* and *li*, where *li* serves as the external embodiment of *ren*, and *ren* provides the internal moral foundation for *li*. This unity challenges the fragmented approach in ethical leadership studies, which often treat virtues and behaviors as separate constructs. For instance, *ren*'s focus on empathy and care aligns with servant leadership's emphasis on follower development, while *yi*'s commitment to justice complements ethical leadership's fairness principles. *Zhi* and *xin* further enhance this framework by integrating rational decision-making and trust-building, respectively, which are critical for navigating complex, trust-deficient environments. Unlike Western models that may prioritize one or two virtues, the Confucian framework's five dimensions offer a comprehensive taxonomy that captures the multifaceted nature of ethical leadership.

Moreover, this framework advances cross-cultural leadership theory by bridging Eastern and Western perspectives. This universal applicability of virtues like *ren* and *xin* makes the framework adaptable to diverse cultural contexts, while *li*'s contextual flexibility allows leaders to tailor behaviors to specific cultural norms. This cross-cultural integration not only enriches ethical leadership theory but also positions the Confucian framework as a foundation for developing global leadership models that balance universal ethics with cultural specificity. By operationalizing these dimensions, researchers can develop measurement scales that assess ethical leadership across contexts, addressing the need for a more integrated and empirically testable model.

Ethical implications. The ethical implications of applying the Confucian Five Constant Virtues to modern leadership are far-reaching, particularly in addressing pressing ethical challenges such as sustainability and diversity. This framework's emphasis on *ren* encourages leaders to prioritize stakeholder well-being, fostering inclusive workplaces that value diversity and equity. For example, a leader practicing *ren* might implement policies to support underrepresented groups, aligning with organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) goals. Similarly, *yi*'s focus on justice guides leaders in making fair decisions in resource allocation, such as prioritizing sustainable suppliers in global supply chains to mitigate environmental impact.

The framework also addresses the ethical risks of neglecting internal-external unity. Leaders who focus solely on external behaviors without internal virtues risk hypocrisy, eroding trust and legitimacy. Conversely, those with strong virtues but inconsistent behaviors fail to operationalize their ethics effectively. The Confucian model mitigates these risks by requiring leaders to align their moral character (*ren*, *yi*, *zhi*, *xin*) with their actions (*li*), fostering authenticity and accountability. This alignment is critical in high-stakes contexts, such as corporate governance, where ethical lapses can lead to reputational and legal consequences.

Practical implications for organizations and individuals. The Confucian framework offers significant practical implications seeking to cultivate ethical leadership and mitigate unethical behaviors. By integrating the Five Constant Virtues into organizational values, leadership teams can foster a culture of ethics that permeates decision-making and operations. For example, organizations can translate *ren* into employee wellness programs, *yi* into transparent performance evaluations, *zhi* into strategic foresight training, *xin* into accountability mechanisms, and *li* into

standardized ethical protocols. Such initiatives not only reduce the risk of reputational damage but also enhance employee engagement and organizational resilience.

In terms of personnel management, the framework provides a blueprint for leadership development and assessment. Organization can design selection criteria and training programs based on the Five Constant Virtues to identify and nurture ethically fit leaders. For instance, assessment tools could evaluate candidates' *ren* through empathy-based scenarios, *yi* through ethical dilemma simulations, and *xin* through trust-building exercises. Training programs might include workshop on *li*, teaching leaders to adapt behaviors to diverse cultural and organizational contexts. These efforts ensure that ethical leadership is systematically embedded in organizational practices, aligning with the growing trend of ethics-driven management.

For individuals, the framework serves as a guide for personal development. Aspiring and incumbent leaders can use the Five Constant Virtues as a self-assessment framework to evaluate their ethical competencies. For example, a manager aiming to transition into a leadership role might focus on developing *ren* by practicing active listening or *xin* by consistently honoring commitments. By internalizing these virtues and aligning them with behaviors, individuals can enhance their ethical leadership skills, positioning themselves as credible and inspiring leaders.

Implications for further research. We have provided the dimensions essential for the formation of ethical leadership, utilizing the Five Constant Virtues to address gaps in ethical leadership research and practice. However, the integration of virtues and ethical behavior warrants further discussion in future studies. Consequently, we provide suggestions to inform and inspire future research based on our presentation of these dimensions. While we do not assert that our ideas are universally applicable to all organizations or scholars, we believe they serve as a valuable starting point.

First, researchers should conduct detailed investigations into the constituent elements of each virtue (*ren*, *yi*, *zhi* and *xin*) and their behavioral manifestations (*li*). For example, what specific behaviors reflect *ren* in task-oriented versus relations-oriented leadership roles? Developing measurement scales based on these dimensions is critical next step. Such scales could include items assessing *ren* through empathy and care, *yi* through fairness, *zhi* through strategic decision-making, *xin* through trust, and *li* through contextually appropriate actions.

Second, studies should explore how the Confucian framework interacts with existing leadership taxonomies, such as Yukl's (2012) hierarchical model of task-oriented, relations-oriented, change-oriented, and external leadership. For example, does ethical leadership in task-oriented roles prioritize *yi* (justice in resource allocation) over *ren* (relationships)? Empirical studies could examine whether the relative importance of each virtue varies by leadership context, providing nuanced insights into the framework's applicability.

Third, cross-cultural research is essential to test the framework's universality and adaptability. Comparative studies could assess how the Five Constant Virtues are perceived and enacted in Eastern versus Western organizations, addressing potential tensions. Additionally, integrating the framework with emerging fields like digital leadership could yield valuable insights.

Finally, longitudinal studies are needed to identify the antecedents, processes, and outcomes of ethical leadership with the Confucian framework. Research could explore how organizational culture shapes the adoption of the Five Constant Virtues, how these virtues influence employee outcomes, and how they contribute to long-term organizational performance.

Conclusion

In this paper, we aimed to construct dimensions through which to integrate ethical leadership development. The Confucian Five Constant Virtues provide comprehensive and integrative framework for ethical leadership, addressing critical gaps in theory and practice. Conceptually, the framework enriches leadership scholarship by unifying virtues and behaviors, offering a holistic model that bridges Eastern and Western perspectives. Ethically, it equips leaders to navigate contemporary challenges, such as sustainability and diversity, by fostering authenticity, fairness, and trust. Practically, it offers actionable strategies for organizations to embed ethics in culture, training, and assessment, while empowering individuals to develop ethical leadership skills. By proposing a multi-faceted set of dimensions, this study lays the groundwork for future research to operationalize and validate the framework, ultimately contributing to development of ethical inclusive, and sustainable leadership in a globalized world.

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Author contributions

HW wrote and critical reviewed the manuscript, analyzed and interpreted the results. XX conceptualized the study, wrote and critical reviewed the manuscript, and interpreted the results. HW and XX equally contributed to the work. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval

Ethical approval was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not required as the study did not involve human participants.

Additional information

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