Asian Leadership Wisdom:
The Relevance of Kautilyan and Confucian Values for Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

This paper is on comparative leadership philosophy. It explores the ancient Asian wisdom for leadership development from the Kautilyan and Confucian perspectives. Every now and then, there is a need for us to look and re-look at ancient wisdoms to be applied effectively in the modern context. In this paper, the authors provide an inside-out leadership development approach. This has practical implications and lessons for contemporary leadership development from an Indian and Chinese cultural perspective. It is also becoming highly relevant due to the growth of both the Indian and Chinese economy. The reference in the Indian context is made from the Arthashastra by Kautilya, while reference in the Chinese context is made from the teachings of Confucius.

Keywords: Arthashastra and the Analects, Asian Wisdom, Confucius, Kautilya, Leadership Culture, Leadership Values

1. INTRODUCTION

Leadership has a long history and has been the focus of research in numerous fields, from psychology, sociology, organizational theory, philosophy, and politics to management. Leadership is also one of the most relevant and an important aspect of management whether in work organizations, political parties, societies and countries. It is also one of the most researched subjects and an interesting topic for discussion around the world. Ancient civilizations throughout the history had methods by which they were led and managed. Every king who ruled ancient kingdoms had his own style of leadership and management.

However, defining leadership has been challenging and definitions can vary depending on the situation. While defining leadership it is imperative to understand that a leader is someone who is effectively able to direct, influence, motivate, transform and inspire their followers to achieve the organizational goals. From the organizational management context, House (2004) defines leadership as the ability of an individual to influence, motivate and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members. Burns (1978) wrote that leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth and that we know a lot

about leaders while knowing very little about leadership. He defined leadership as inducing followers to pursue common or at least joint purposes that represent the values and motivations of both leaders and followers.

A review of the leadership literature reveals that many leadership theories and concepts from the western world and has been in dominance over the last two centuries due to the widespread use of English language. However several western leadership theories and concepts popularized today by the west have been in existence and have been in practice in Asian countries especially in India and in China for centuries. However, these leadership practices were not in the context of management but in the context of state or political governance, with kings playing major leadership roles.

The study of leadership is culture specific and the practice of leadership is deeply attached to culture. Sharma argues that for a leadership to be effective, it has to be rooted in the cultural soil of the country where it is practised (Sharma, 2001). Owing to the crucial role played by culture, cross-cultural leadership studies have also caught the attention of many researchers in the last fifty years. Studies of leadership styles have revealed that there are not only differences in the styles preferred by followers in different national cultures, but also in the specific behaviors (Shahin & Wright, 2004).

However, a survey of leadership literatures reveals that most leadership theories are North American and European in origin and many of these theories may not be appropriate to be applied on a worldwide basis. Several studies of leadership styles have revealed that there are not only differences in the styles preferred by followers in different cultures, but the specific behaviors which reflect these styles may vary from culture to culture. Although many studies investigated this theory in different cultures, relatively few studies have considered it in emerging nations, especially in Asia, Africa and South America.

Recognizing this importance of culture in leadership, many communities and countries in the world are now trying to discover and explore their own system of leadership. The success of Japanese, Chinese, Taiwanese and Korean systems of leadership is largely attributed to Confucian culture. In Malaysia, the 4th Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi tried to promote an approach called Islam Hadhari or civilization Islam, in which leadership ethics was included (Swee-Hock & Kesavapany, 2006) and leadership excellence promoted (Low, 2008c). The Islamic perspectives of leadership ethics in the context of the Middle East have also been examined extensively by scholars such as Tayeb (1997) and Abuznaid (2005, 2009).

Presently, interest in the studies of Asian leadership is growing due to the growth of many Asian economies, especially Japan, the four tigers (Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong, which is now a part of China), China and India. Both India and China, in terms of geography, population size and regional cultural influence, are currently the most important nations in Asia due to the consistent high economic growth rates over recent decades. As a result an interest in studying leadership systems in these countries is growing, as the number of books and articles of Indian, Chinese and other Asian contexts of leaderships.

In recent times, Maruyama was one of the authors who explored the Asian context of leadership beginning with wide understanding of Japanese leadership three decades ago (Maruyama, 1994). As for the Chinese leadership, the discussion and the studies are also growing in recent years especially based on the literatures on Confucianism and Sun Tzu Art of War. Today, the Sun Tzu's Art of War and the teaching of Confucius are used widely in the leadership, and several studies have been conducted to integrate Confucianism in leadership and the war strategies of Sun Tzu in the context of strategic leadership. We should

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