Chinese Philosophy: Lessons for Western Leaders

Key Concept
Some of the limitations in Western leadership theories can be overcome by using classical Chinese philosophy as a mirror to hold up against them. Chinese philosophy offers a different way of thinking, focusing more on relationships than the leader in isolation. These ideas can help find alternatives to current leadership models.

Idea Summary
What can classical Chinese philosophy teach the West about leaders and leadership? A lot, according to the author of this paper; Western leaders can, amongst many things, learn how to act in harmony with situations and do what is required, learn how not to abuse power and cultivate “refined” behaviour, all through an understanding of the elements of classical Chinese philosophy.

The West demands transparency, actions that produce trust and a kind of “uniform language” from its leaders. This moral superiority found in the Western concept of leadership is absent in the Chinese way of thinking, where blind obedience on the part of the followers is not demanded. Instead, leadership is seen to be located in a dynamic system of human relationships. These “relationships” between leaders and their followers consist of mutually constituting roles, rather than the interaction of autonomous individuals.

Classical Chinese philosophy also differs distinctly in style from Western philosophy; the former prefers stories, poems and sayings; as opposed to the latter’s structured logical clauses.

Quoting from the classical Chinese text Dao De Jing, as well as philosophers including Confucius throughout the paper, the author explains how Chinese thinking shows a different image and culturally different angle of leadership that can be a useful mirror for Western leadership theories. However, the idea behind the paper is to highlight the limitations of Western theories, rather than propagate Chinese leadership styles to be applied in the West.

Business Application
According to the author, Chinese thinking embodies worldly and pragmatic character, making it an inspirational tool for leaders everywhere. In contrast, the ego-centric model of leadership found elsewhere has not only often proved to be ineffective, but often leads to moral problems as well.

As such, he advises against simply focusing on popular leadership ideas, which are one-sided and rooted in fundamental philosophical assumptions about human nature, reality and truth. Instead, Chinese philosophy can help see the limitations of the idealism, individualism and dualism in those popular ideas.

However, the author also recognizes that utilising classical Chinese philosophy is not as simple as transplanting 2,500 year old ideas in their original form to Western organizations today. Similarly, contemporary Chinese leaders would not be suitable role models to use either. What we can do is use ideas from the likes of Confucius and Lao Zi to instigate discussion into finding alternatives to dominant leadership theories. Creating models that acknowledge both the social and process dimensions of leadership is what the ultimate aim should be.

Further Reading
Chinese Philosophy as a Mirror for Western Leaders, Huibert de Man, Maastricht School of Management