

Comparison of the Origins of Altruism as Leadership Value Between Chinese and Christian Cultures

Leadership Advance Online – Issue XVI, Spring 2009

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Some of the latest leadership theories, such as the authentic leadership theory, servant leadership theory and spiritual leadership theory, all share one common focus: leadership values. While these values are generally regarded as universal, research on leadership values have only been conducted primarily in the western context (Yukl, 2006). The construct of leadership theories with cultural contexts, has not been covered much in academic research to date. However, research by Javidan, Steers and Hitt (2007), as well as by House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta (2004), on the impact of cultural variables on leadership theories, have attracted attention lately. The study of Chinese leadership, in particular, has been attracting attention, due to the growing importance of China in the world theater, both economically and politically (Yi, 2002; Chen, Gampel & Sevak, 2004; Wood, 2002).

The various leadership theories define slightly different sets of values in their models, but one of the most commonly found values in leadership models, is altruism (Fry, 2003; Paterson, 2003; Burns, 1978). This paper examines altruism as an important value in leadership, and compares the origin of altruism between the Chinese culture that is under the influence of Confucianism, and the western culture that is under the influence of Christianity.

Values and Leadership

Contemporary leadership theories, such as servant leadership by Paterson (2003), authentic leadership by George (2003) and spiritual leadership by Fry (2003), have placed values into the center of the constructs. Burns (1978) argued that the concept of values is crucial to leadership (p. 74). He further explained three separate types of values at the leader's disposal:

- End values, goals and standards
- Modes of conduct such as honor, fairness, honesty
- Dual values that operate as both intrinsic and extrinsic values (p. 75)

Winston (2002) stated that the leader's behavior effects how followers behave. Empirical evidence from over 50 studies demonstrated that a value-based leader's behavior has powerful effects on follower motivation and work unit performance (Fry, 2003).

Altruism as a Leadership Value

Eisenberg (1986) defines altruistic behavior as, "voluntary behavior that is intended to benefit another and is not motivated by the expectation of external reward" (p. 1). Kaplan (2000) states that people with altruistic value is helping others selflessly, just for the sake of helping, and may involve personal sacrifice. Jencks (1990) categorizes altruism into three types: emphatic, communicative and moralistic.

When defining the values of the casual theory of spiritual leadership, Fry (2003) defines a number of core values in the theory, including altruistic love. Altruistic love is defined as a sense of wholeness, harmony and well-being produced through care, concern and appreciation for both self and others.

Origin of Altruistic Value in the Christian Culture

Altruism was a fundamental value in the teachings of Jesus Christ. Meisinger (2000) investigated the editorial history of the synoptic Gospels. He showed that the Gospel of Luke especially emphasizes the extension of the Jesus' love command beyond all bounds. The command of Jesus to love our enemies in Luke 6:27–36 (NRSV) can be regarded as the highest form of unconditional love. The Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) is an exemplary illustration of altruistic love. Jesus used this story to illustrate that human kindness and benevolence must be available to all people, even to the enemy. This shows that the mission of Jesus is not limited to the Jews, but to all nations. Jesus summarized this commandment as follows:

Love [*agapao*] the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love [*agapao*]

your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. (Matthew 22:36-39, NRSV)

Altruism is not only a virtue in the New Testament. In Leviticus 19:33-34 in the Old Testament, God commanded the Israelites:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides living with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God. (NRSV)

One can see that the responsibility of caring for other nations was given to God's people even in the Old Testament period. In fact, a large part of Leviticus 19 deals with the practical implications of loving people around oneself, no matter whether they are your immediate family or foreigners. Although some later Christian theologians, such as St Thomas Aquinas (1981), argued about the level of love one should give to God, self and others, it is generally accepted that the scope of altruism in Christianity means loving everyone. This is summarized in the golden rule: “In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets” (Matt 7:12 NRSV). Altruism in Christianity, therefore, means universal love.

Origin of Altruistic Value in the Chinese Culture

The Chinese culture is deeply influenced by Chinese philosophies and religious traditions, including Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. Among these three, Confucianism is regarded as the pillar of the Chinese ethical and philosophical system, and is considered as the *proper* culture of the Chinese. Confucianism arose during the 5th century BCE from the teachings of Confucius, collected under the name of the *Analects*. The Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD) eventually made Confucianism the official state culture. It is a philosophy that stresses ethical, moral and social values.

Dubs (1951) indicates that the fundamental concept of virtue in Confucianism is the term “*ren*” (仁). According to Dubs, there has been different translation for *ren*, such as benevolence, perfect virtue, the Good, humanity and benevolent love. Confucius himself defined it by the ordinary Chinese word for *ai* (愛), meaning love. In fact, the pronunciation of the word *ren* in Chinese is the same as that of the word human (人). The Chinese character of *ren* (仁) is made up of two parts: 人

(human) and 二 (two). Thus, Confucius defined *ren* (仁) as not only an essential human quality, but also implied that it takes more than a single human to express benevolent love to one another. Confucius made benevolent love the center of his ethical teaching. One of his famous quotes of his teaching found in Analects XV.24 is: “Do not do to others what you would not like yourself.” This is similar to the golden rule in the Christian teaching in Matthew 7:12 and Luke 6:31.

Difference in Altruism between Confucianism and Christianity

The above analysis seems to indicate similarities in the origins of altruism in Confucius altruism and Christian altruism. However, Dubs (1951) points out that Confucius’ conception of *ren* was not the same as the Christian ideal of love for all men. Confucius defined *ren* primarily as a leadership attitude of a bountiful lord. The superior manifests a benevolent kindness to his inferiors. Under Confucianism, inferiors are not expected to show benevolent love to the superior, as this would be presumption. The expected proper attitude from the inferior to the superior is loyalty and obedience. In Christianity, altruism has no such hierarchical implication and is more “peer-to-peer” in nature.

On the other hand, Confucius posited that people naturally show more love to the people closest to them, especially parents and relatives. The hierarchical relationships in Chinese society are grouped into five areas or “*wulun*.” *Wu* means five and *lun* is an ancient Chinese word for “*guanxi*.” The five cardinal relationships in *wu-lun* are listed in descending order of importance in Table 1.

Table 1

The five cardinals of wulun in Chinese culture

Priority in descending order	Five cardinal relationship in <i>wulun</i> in Chinese culture
1	Emperor-Ministers (state level)
2	Father-son (family level)
3	Husband-wife (family level)
4	Older-younger brothers (family level)
5	Friends (individual level)

These *wulun* forms the fundamental *guanxi* web in Chinese culture. Altruistic love is expected to be stronger within this *guanxi* web, than with people outside the *guanxi* network. Although altruism is

the central theme in Confucius' ethical teaching, it is a graded love rather than a universal love. Confucius' descendants and pupils emphasized "the decreasing measures of love to more distant relatives." Mencius (372 - 298 BCE), the principal interpreter of Confucius after his death, stated that equal love for all is unnatural (Dubs, 1951). This graded love has however resulted in many social and ethical issues such as corruption and favoritism, which have been plaguing Chinese and other Asian societies for centuries. In the 1000s, Confucius scholars in Neo-Confucius schools like Jou Dun-yi and Jang Dzai, realized this and tried to broaden the scope of altruism to more universal love. However, as the root of Confucius altruism is based on graded love, this limited scope of love is still the most widely adopted concept in Confucius-dominated cultures such as the Chinese culture.

Applications to Global Leaders

Altruism is an important aspect of leadership values. With such a fundamental difference in the scope of altruism in different cultures, leaders need to take this into consideration when dealing with multi-cultural organization behavior. When global leaders promote and demonstrate altruism in organizations that comprise members of the Chinese and Christian cultures, they need to be aware that the expectations from the members may be different.

When members observe uneven altruism in the organization, Chinese people may expect that this is, "the-way-it-is," while those from a Christian culture may see this as "favoritism." On the other hand, members with a Chinese culture may expect greater love if they are within the *guanxi* network of the leaders, but the altruism concept of the leaders may be that of universal love, thus creating expectations mismatch with these members.

The graded love nature of Chinese culture could result in these environments being more prone to issues like corruptions within "friends and family" circles. Global leaders working with Chinese members need to be aware of such tendencies and may need to put appropriate measures in place to prevent corruption issues among their Chinese members. Applying this value difference to the leader-membership exchange theory (LMX), Chinese leaders have a tendency to allocate disproportional amounts of love to the *guanxi* group, thus having a higher chance to form an "in-group" with them. Global leaders working with Chinese people need to be aware of this tendency. While this is a natural outcome in this culture, global leaders need to pay attention to prevent the

over-concentration of power to a limited set of members with *guanxi* in organizations with Chinese culture presence.

Conclusion

Both Christianity and Confucianism put altruism as a core value in their systems. However, the scope and nature of altruism is different in the two philosophies/religious traditions. Figure 1 and Figure 2 summarize the differences between altruism in Chinese and Christian cultures in a graphical format.

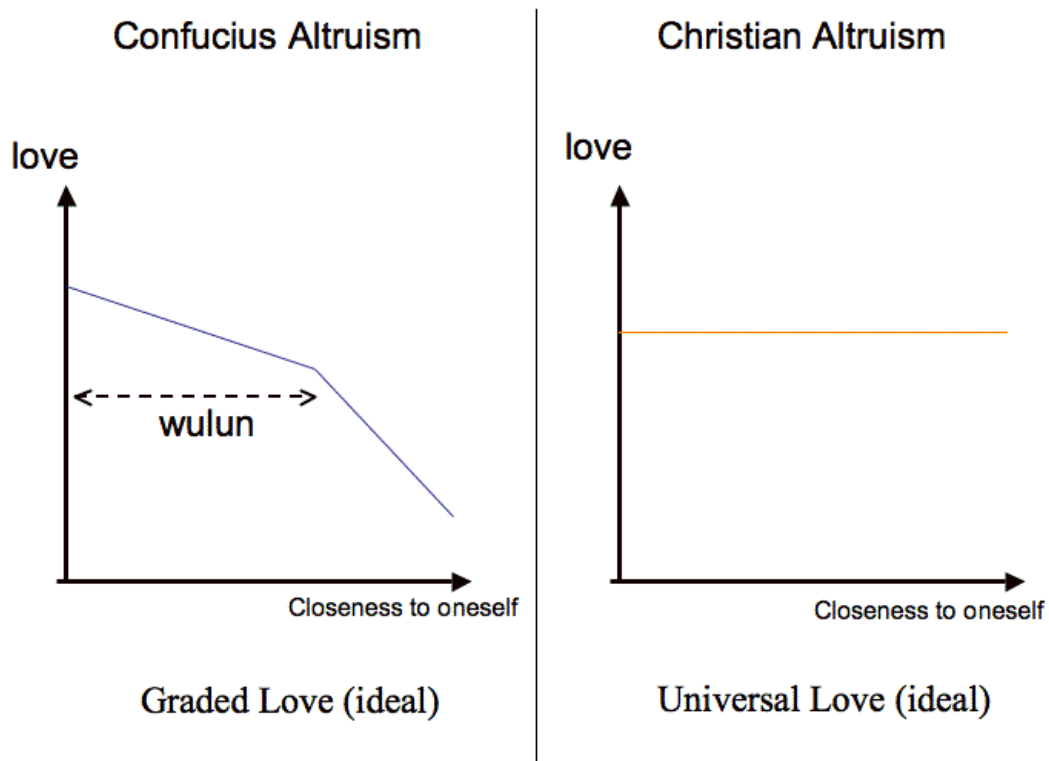


Figure 1. Graded love in Confucius altruism versus universal love in Christian altruism.

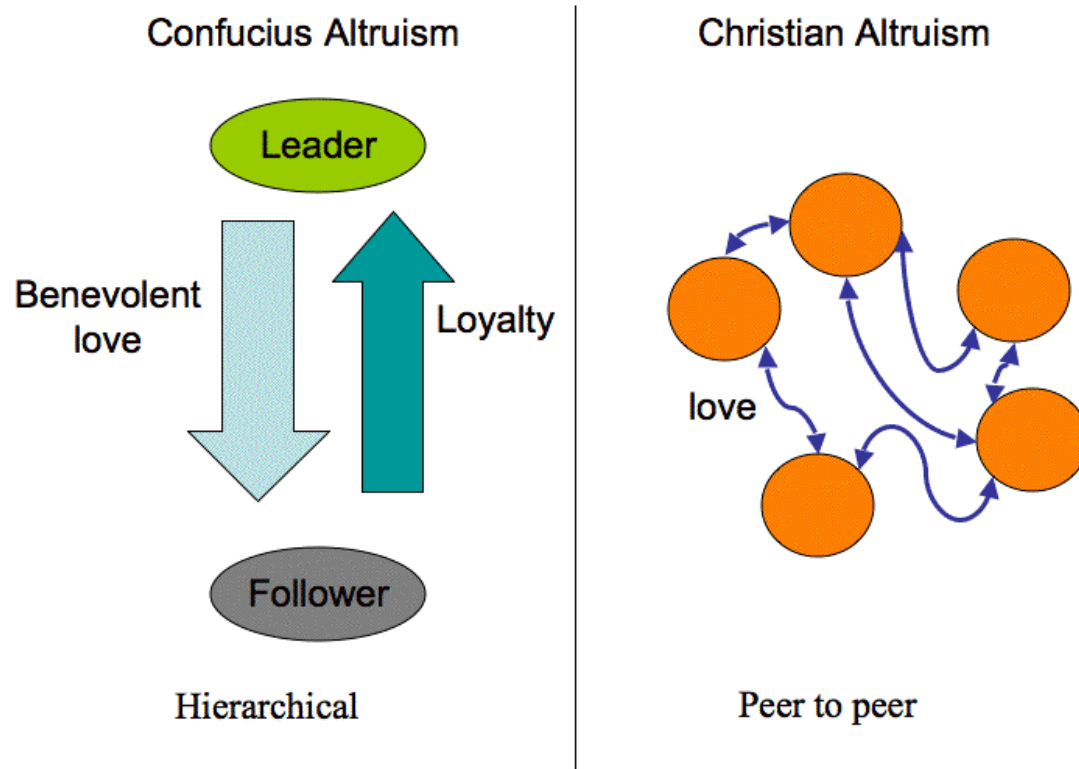


Figure 2. The hierarchical nature of Confucius altruism versus the peer-to-peer nature of Christian altruism.

To summarize, when Confucius talked about altruism, or *ren*, he was referring to graded love with more love for closer family members and relatives. When Jesus Christ talked about altruism, or *agapao*, he was referring to universal love that should apply to all people. Confucius also taught altruism primarily to leaders, while Jesus taught altruism to everyone.

Understanding the difference in altruism between the two cultures can help global leaders to properly promote and demonstrate altruism in a multi-cultural organization. It will also make them aware of the need to implement the right measures in order to deal with expectation mismatch, over-concentration of power and potential corruption issues due to the culture differences.

About the Author

With more than 14 years of experience in the global high-tech industry, Andrew Ma established a leadership and business consultancy practice to global corporations in 2007. Having a vision to develop and mentor the next generation's global leaders in Asia, Andrew began teaching part-time and has been a visiting lecturer in a number of universities such as City University in Hong Kong and Tsinghua University in Beijing, addressing subjects such as global business, business strategy, business ethics and global leadership. Andrew graduated with an EMBA degree from the Richard Ivey School of Business (University of Western Ontario, Canada), has a master's degree and a bachelor's (First Class Honors) degree in electrical engineering, and a bachelor's degree in economics from Queen's University in Canada. He is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership in the School of Global Leadership & Entrepreneurship at Regent University.

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