

# Ideal and Confucian implicit leadership profiles in China

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This paper is a regional exploratory study of implicit leadership theories in two regions of China. The purpose of this paper is to compare ideal vs Confucian leadership profiles and explore the possibility of a cultural hybrid perspective of leadership.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This study empirically explores leadership profiles through indigenous leadership research and compares implicit leadership theories of Confucian leadership and ideal leadership among a group of 128 managers representing two regions in mainland China. In doing so, measures developed by Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness that were translated into the local language are employed.

**Findings** – The results empirically show that a region known to have a deeper cultural entrenchment interprets Confucian ideology as ideal leadership, while a region more disconnected from the cultural center transforms its ideology based on more globally accepted leadership ideals.

**Practical implications** – The findings of this study caution leadership researchers (whether universally-etic or specifically-emic focused) from making generalizations regarding leadership. Although there might be some broad universals of leadership, context-specific leadership practices are deeply rooted between and within cultures.

**Originality/value** – This paper contributes to the literature by providing insight on implicit leadership theories in China and by proposing a culturally hybrid perspective of leadership based on globalization and cultural entrenchment forces.

**Keywords** Implicit leadership theories, Confucian leadership, Ideal leadership

**Paper type** Research paper

Globalization gives rise to the need to understand leadership across different countries and cultures, which points to an increased emphasis on indigenous leadership research. Indigenous leadership research relies on local language and local subjects to explore local perspectives of leadership based on historical, societal, and cultural factors (Zhang *et al.*, 2012; McElhatton and Jackson, 2012). The influence of historical, societal, and cultural factors on leadership practices highlights the challenges of transferring leadership theories and practices across variable contexts (Rousseau and Fried, 2001; Zhang *et al.*, 2012). Leadership research has been dominated by western perspectives in western contexts (Yukl, 2010) and much more research is needed in eastern cultures. Specifically, Asian perspectives of leadership are essential to explore given the rise in economic reform and stature of countries such as China. Research on Chinese leadership is still considered a relatively emerging area of interest especially when compared to western leadership research (Zhao and Jiang, 2009; Leung, 2012). It was pointed out that even Chinese researchers “pay surprisingly little attention to the impact of the Chinese context on the leadership phenomena” (Cheng *et al.*, 2009, p. 94). Because of the strong influence of western theory building and development, Chinese scholars try to duplicate the research findings from the west in the eastern regions without paying attention

