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Potential Contributions of Eastern Philosophies and Martial Arts in  
Understanding Leadership

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Abstract

This paper explores the potential contributions of “The East” in understanding leadership, including the philosophical underpinnings of the various cultures and the potential impact of Asian martial arts. As an example of a contribution of an Eastern philosophical tradition it examines the required traits of leadership from both the Buddhist “Doctrine of Elements” perspective as well as a Western perspective.

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“Everything we know is wrong.... Because we apprehend reality through such limited (hence distorting) channels, we are forced to conclude that everything we know is wrong. However ... we are able to rough out a descriptive system ... being mindful that the reality of our immediate world is many times more bustling than that sensed” (Solso, 2001, p. 80). While this quote is from Robert Solso’s “Cognitive Psychology”, it could have just as easily have been a quote from the Buddhist philosophies. With the advent of modern communication methods, such as the Internet, we have access to more information than ever before, including information on other cultures and philosophies than our own. In the west there is a general question of how much we can learn from “Eastern Philosophy”, and indeed how much may be applied to our knowledge of psychology.

Even so, considering “Eastern Philosophy” as a whole is somewhat misleading. While the philosophical similarities of various Asian cultures is widely accepted in the west, there is evidence that the similarities are less prevalent than we believed. Dien (1999) notes: “Western scholars have a strong tendency to contrast ‘the East’ with ‘the West’. Numerous psychologists have categorized the former as collectivistic and the latter as individualistic.” The main problem with this concept is that the various “Eastern” nations have distinctly different cultures. Diem uses Chinese culture and Japanese culture as examples of how misleading “the East vs. the West” can be, noting that “... the Chinese have developed a particular form of authority-directed orientation while retaining a strong sense of individuality. The Japanese, on the other hand, have developed a different pattern of peer-group orientation by virtue of their different historical and cultural circumstances” (1999).

While it might be an interesting side trip to explore if there is a linguistic basis for this bias (it is “common knowledge” in the field of linguistics that many Asian languages -- including Chinese and Japanese -- are linguistically based in the right brain, whereas most, if not all, western languages are based in the left brain), the limited space in this paper prevents any serious consideration of the hypothesis. Instead, I will concentrate on certain spiritual and martial philosophies that are common in Asia, particularly those that have influenced Japanese thinking in some way. This approach makes some sense as many Asian philosophies, especially Chinese, have been historically imported into the Japanese culture (c.f. Sansom, 1958, especially Ch. 4 & Ch. 11).

Before discussing a few of the philosophies and how they may or may not apply to our understanding of leadership, there are a few things that this paper must cover first. One of the most important concepts is what I call “meaningful generalities”. In order for a generality to be meaningful, the generality must be specific enough for categorization -- that is, whatever is being categorized (e.g. a behavior) must fit into exactly one category. Furthermore the generalization must avoid triggering the “Barnum Effect”. Well known in psychological testing, the “Barnum Effect” is named after the late P.T. Barnum who is reported to have said “there is a sucker born every minute”. Cohen & Swerdlik give an excellent example of the “Barnum Effect”. Imagine that you had just taken the latest, computer graded and “highly accurate” personality test. Suppose that it spit out something like this:

“You have a strong need for other people to like you and for them to admire you. You have a tendency to be critical of yourself. You have a great deal of unused capacity that you have not used to your advantage.... You prefer a

certain amount of change and variety and become dissatisfied and hemmed in by restrictions and limitations” (Cohen & Swerdlik, 2002, p. 440 - 41).

How good was this interpretation of your personality? Was it “excellent”, “good”, “average”, “poor”, or “very poor”? Chances are you said “good” or “excellent” because the statements in that paragraph apply to just about anyone. In other words, they are too general -- or, in other words, it is too broad of a generalization. Rather than breaking up “personality” into meaningful groups, it simply *appears* to break personality into meaningful groups.

It would, of course, be preferable for a philosophy to nicely correlate to something that we already know of as well, however this is not going to be the case very often. Also we should note that when correlation does occur it tends to be less interesting -- that is to say, we have not opened up any new avenues of research. However it does provide something of an “anchor” in traditional psychology, which makes it more verifiable.

The three best-known philosophies in the Far East are Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. Shinto also has a great deal of influence, especially in the martial arts, but its influence was primarily restricted to Japan. These four philosophies and religions are critical to understanding another “Eastern philosophy”: Asian Martial Arts. Morgan (1992, p. 230) claims that “Eastern religious thought is woven deeply into the fabric of Asian culture, and you will never truly understand the martial arts until you have a fundamental grasp of it.” He continues by noting “But it’s important for you to understand: not only are the martial arts not religions, but the Eastern religious doctrines themselves need not be treated as religions in order to study and apply their principles” (p. 230). This last part is of critical note to psychologists: Eastern philosophies and religions can be studied without a traditional western notion of “worship”. This

means that we can look at applying philosophical principles without concerning ourselves about being “un-scientific”.

One of the most important facets of Buddhism is the Mandala. Dukes notes in his introduction:

“What was termed in Buddhism the ‘Doctrine of Elements’ ... deals directly with the fundamentals lying at the heart of our study of mind and body.... [It] was symbolically represented in special patterns that describe the inter-relationship between its different constituent forces and parts. These patterns ... were expressed in picture, sound, shapes, or movement” (1994, p. 3).

The “Doctrine of elements” refers to a division of the universe into constituent parts, “fundamental elements”, most of which are familiar to the western reader: Earth, Water, Air, Fire, and Void. The last one is probably the most misunderstood as it refers to something that does not typically fit into western philosophies: emptiness. It is this emptiness that allows the other elements to exist in a given form, and it connects all things together. One must be careful, however, not to bring a literal reading to the elements such as the ancient Greeks used, but rather something more symbolic, or metaphorical, in nature. Dukes (1994, p. 13), for example, notes that Earth is characterized by solidity, Water is characterized by fluidity, Fire is characterized by heat and/or activity, Air is characterized by motion, and the Void exists only relative to the other four. Hayes (1981, p. 152) lists the mental generalizations associated with these elements as: Earth = Stability, Water = Adaptability, Fire = Aggression / Motivation, Air = Benevolence, and Void = Creativity.

Hayes bases his martial teaching method on the five traditional elements, using the Mandala for understanding the movements as well as understanding the emotions involved in combat -- both in one's self and in one's opponent. He also notes that each element has both positive and negative associated with it. For instance, Hayes (1980, p. 34) gives an example of possible reactions to a mate's death according to the elemental archetype. From Earth one could comfort others who knew one's mate (stability; positive) or refuse to acknowledge the reality of the death (stubbornness; negative). From Water one could adopt a lifestyle appropriate to the new status (adaptation; positive) or one could retreat from the world (withdrawal; negative). From Fire one could recall the happy moments (joy; positive) or one could feel an overwhelming fear (fear; negative). From Air one could accept that the mate has moved on and, sad as it may be, accept the loss (wisdom; positive) or one could analyze the situation extensively searching for the "meaning" (analytical; negative). He continues by noting that the Void would represent "appropriateness" (or, by extension, "inappropriateness") of the chosen mode. It may be appropriate, for instance, to use a psychologically stable mode ("Earth") when making funeral arrangements for the departed, however at some point it will become appropriate to mourn ("water") the departed to encourage the adaptive process. It is important to note that one may move from inappropriate to inappropriate as well. For instance, one may experience denial (also "Earth"), and then experience an "emotional breakdown" (also "water").

This Mandala exists in at least two forms, one progressive and one of harmonious opposites. The progressive form postulates one element is mandatory before progression to the other can begin, e.g. Earth (stability; confidence) must exist before Water (adaptability) can be developed. The order for this form is Earth, Water, Fire, Air, and Void. Note that this form hypothesizes that Confidence is necessary for adaptability, which are both necessary for

motivation, all of which is necessary for benevolence, and finally creativity. This view clearly stipulates that true benevolence cannot occur without action (that is to say, possessing “good intentions” is not benevolence -- one must act on one’s intentions before one can be benevolent).

The second form is one of opposition and balance. Earth “opposes” Air and Fire “opposes” Water, with Void aiding in balance or imbalance. The opposition inherent in this philosophy is distinctly complementary, however, and should not be considered to be the same as “destructive” opposites. Male and Female are examples of complementary opposites as one cannot exist without the other. Neither gender can, philosophically speaking, be “complete” without the other. Indeed it is common to speak of a “complete human” as having both a male and female side. Light and Darkness are examples of destructive opposites since one cannot exist *with* the other. It is important to note that these two Mandala forms are complements of each other -- that is to say, while one may be more appropriate in a given context, neither is considered “better” than the other.

Both of these Mandala provide testable generalities that may be useful in a philosophy of leadership. If one proceeds from the philosophical assumption that balance and completeness is required, then one may create a testable generality using these elements. Both of these Mandala may be used differently. Using the “balanced opposites” model, where all traits would be required in balance, my hypothesis would align the traits as follows: Discipline with Earth, Compassion with Air, Motivation / Action with Fire, and Research / Careful thought with Water, and Creativity and Improvement (including process, team, and self improvement) with Void. The “progressive elements” model could describe the traits required in a more constant, or progressive development format. As does Hayes, I would align Confidence with Earth, Adaptability with Water, Motivation with Fire, Compassion with Air, and Creativity with Void.

Both of these models could be used to describe the traits required by a “good leader”, and both of these models are testable. In particular, one could create a study that examines “good leaders” with respect to these traits.

In fact we can look at some of the research and analyze for a “goodness of fit”. Yukl (2002) notes several important studies in his text and having them in one place allows for convenient analysis. In the section titled “Research on Managers who Derail”, Yukl notes five problem areas: emotional stability, defensiveness, integrity, interpersonal skills, and technical and cognitive skills (2002, p. 182 - 84). If any of these traits are present the manager could be expected to “derail”, so let’s compare Yukl’s list with Hayes’ list. Emotional stability is could easily be categorized as Earth, which Hayes’ labeled “stability” so Earth = stability matches the research. Defensiveness can easily be considered the opposite of adaptiveness (that is to say that defensiveness is non-adaptiveness), so Water matches as well, and creativity can be considered an equivalent of the presence of cognitive and technical skills thus accounting for Void. We are now left to try to match integrity and interpersonal skills with motivation and compassion. Compassion and interpersonal skills easily go hand-in-hand, so I feel justified in equating the two, though perhaps the latter wording would be more precise. In fact, Compassion should be an interpersonal skill, so I now have “Air”.

Now I must look into the description of Integrity, as that does not appear to match “Motivation” for my Fire element. “Integrity. The successful managers were more focused on the immediate task and the needs of subordinates than on competing with rivals or impressing superiors” (Yukl, 2002, p. 183). That description definitely describes motivation -- or, more precisely “proper” or “positive” motivation, though “focus” may work better as a descriptor, so we now have our Fire - Proper Motivation / Focus. Oddly enough, the list I am left with was

taken almost verbatim from Hayes (1981, 152) with only a few minor wording changes for clarity -- “Aggression” (which is still appropriate but often has negative connotations) to “Proper Motivation / Focus” and “Compassion” or “Benevolence” to “Interpersonal Skills” (which could be considered a clarification) -- and we have our Mandala example validated by the current research.

The same process can be done for the “Big Five Personality Traits” (Yukl, 2002, p. 192) that Yukl identifies as Surgency (Extroversion, Energy, Assertiveness), Conscientiousness, Agreeableness, Adjustment, and Intellectance (Curious and Inquisitive, Open Minded, and Learning Oriented). Surgency would be Fire, Agreeableness would be Air, Adjustment would be Earth, and Intellectance would be Void. The only questionable one would be “Conscientiousness” which is defined as “Dependability, Personal Integrity, Need for Achievement” (Yukl, 2002, p. 192).

At this point we must be careful that we are not trying to fit the paradigm where it does not belong, so it is time to return to the basis of our two forms. Does this represent a progression? Does this represent a balance? I would posit “yes” for the latter -- Conscientiousness balances Surgency by making sure that the energy and aggressiveness does not get “out of control” -- that is, it keeps the motivation “Proper”, so it is reasonable for the list to fit the Elemental Description.

The reader will note that I have, at this point, touched on only one part of one Eastern Philosophy - that of the Godai (“Five Great Elements”) Mandala, but there are other philosophies and many other Mandala. For instance, there is one elemental Mandala used in Chinese medicine for cycles that may also be able to be demonstrated as a valid paradigm. Ethics is another place where leadership may benefit substantially from Eastern philosophies, as the primary basis of the

top three is ethical considerations -- however the area of ethics in leadership is a controversial one and the contribution of Eastern Philosophy to ethics is bound to be just as controversial.

Japanese Martial Arts are founded on the basis of the four primary Eastern philosophical traditions, so an understanding of these philosophies would be essential. While the foundational philosophies of the martial arts can make important contributions to the leadership literature, the potential contributions of martial arts are not limited to their philosophical underpinnings -- there are a number of potential contributions for the martial arts. For instance, Weiser and Kutz note the number of similarities between martial arts and psychotherapy suggesting that martial arts “can also be a useful supplement to verbal psychotherapy, as they foster and expose feelings through a physical modality” (1995). The ability to work out emotion leads to emotional stability, which, as we have seen, is an important factor in leadership.

As I noted in an earlier paper (Price, 2002), the ability to generalize what one learns in a martial arts context to other facets of life is important to many martial artists, and this ability can be considered an important part of martial arts in general. Vockell and Kwak (1990) note that many competent chess players are not skilled at academic skills – such as reading, writing, and arithmetic. “This is not to say that they are not intelligent, but rather that they have not learned to generalize to life, where as others can see the similarities between chess and real life” (Price, 2002). Vockell and Kwak quote a chess player when they state “One member of the famous Royal Knights chess team recently stated, ‘Chess is like life. If you have a plan, you will make fewer mistakes than you will without a plan’” (Vockell & Kwak, 1990).

When one notes the importance of leadership on the battlefield, one can posit that martial arts probably have a lot to offer to the serious investigator in the area of leadership. Yukl notes that “Leadership can be conceptualized as (1) an intra-individual process, (2) a dyadic process,

(3) a group process, or (4) an organizational process” (2002, p. 13). The characteristics of the process whereby one learns martial arts can easily be described as intra-individual leadership. Further, most arts contain forms (“kata”) that are practiced in pairs, groups, or both and these could be extended to developing leadership qualities in the dyadic or group situations.

One easily notes that there are a number of leadership qualities that are enhanced or developed through martial arts training. Ethical considerations are the foundation of “warrior training” in any respectable martial arts training hall, and the Eastern Philosophical foundations provide a solid place to start. Martial arts “have come to be appreciated in the west in the last 25 years for their capacity to promote health, both physical and mental ... the disciplines teach the value of directness and honesty in communications, assertiveness, ability to empathize, courage, humility, perseverance, gentleness, respect for others, responsibility, and self-improvement” (Weiser & Kutz, 1995), all of which are qualities that are either engender or are necessary for proper leadership. Further research into this topic is clearly warranted.

Even these two topics are just the beginning of the potential contributions of a proper understanding of Eastern cultures, but it is a good start. I have shown how the ancient philosophical traditions of the Far East can be investigated in a rational manner by using the “Doctrine of Elements” from Buddhist philosophy as an example. I have also shown how the martial arts hold a great potential for understanding leadership. Indeed it is the opinion of the author that a proper understanding of the martial arts can be a metaphorical gold mine when trying to understand the topic.

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