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Understanding Chinese principalship—An autobiographical approach

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Abstract

Cultural context matters in leadership. Traditions and cultures may saliently impact how leadership is conceptualized and enacted in practice. With the influence of Chinese traditions and culture, particularly Confucianism and Confucian culture, Chinese principal leadership may differ from the dominant leadership approaches that reign in the literature. Therefore, an in-depth understanding of leadership in a Chinese context is long overdue. Informed by an autobiographical approach, this study aims to explore a Chinese principal's daily leadership practices. Autobiography renders accounts of layered reality, affords access to inner experiences, and unpacks the rationale in decision-making when engaging in the leadership process. The influence of various traditional (particularly Confucian) culture variables is crystalized through the subjective experience of the principal, as articulated in the autobiography and the analysis followed. This study provides an example of how traditional (particularly Confucian) culture permeates into a principal's daily practice, including how the principal understands his role and deals with *guanxi* (network of relationships) using leadership tactics.

Introduction

Northouse (2013) suggests that current leadership approaches are significantly influenced by Western cultural predilection for charismatic/value-based, participative, and humane-oriented forms of governance. Leadership studies that are primarily conducted and reported in a Western context give rise to an embedded partiality for certain leadership understandings, namely, the Western one (Eagly et al., 2003; House et al., 2004; Walker et al., 2012). Such understandings have made leadership studies and their application in a non-Western context challenging (Schenck & Waddey, 2017). Researchers in developing countries also caution about the assumption that leadership styles are generally monolithic and leadership is common across different cultural contexts (Oduro et al., 2007). On that account, adopting leadership models derived from Western contexts in a non-Western context may risk promoting cultural imperialism and neglecting what the local context could offer. Hence, research that examines leadership in non-western contexts is sorely overdue. For instance, although the importance of unique Confucian culture and values and their influence on

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leadership practice is widely acknowledged, how Confucian cultural values and other traditional values have impacted leadership in a Chinese context has not been sufficiently explored (Walker et al., 2012). This research fills this gap by looking into a Chinese principal's daily leadership practices and explores how such leadership plays out in the Chinese context. This research specifically addresses the following questions: How do Confucian (traditional) culture and values have a nuanced influence on principals' daily practice? How does the principal perform his/her role at the personal and interpersonal dimensions in such a context?

Models of School Leadership

For decades, leadership studies have been replete with models proposed by various scholars. For example, through their review of scholarly work, Bush and Glover (2014) provide an overview of the main models of educational leadership, including but not limited to, instructional leadership, transformational leadership, distributed leadership, teacher leadership, and moral or authentic leadership. These models have gained popularity over the years and are widely recognized in the field of education because of the embedded pursuit for equity and excellence as well as a greater emphasis on participative, distributed leadership that considers teachers' subjectivity.

Instructional leadership derived from North America is "the longest established concept linking leadership and learning" (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 556). As described by Leithwood et al. (1999), instructional leadership generally assumes that school leaders should focus on the behavior of teachers as they engage in the work of teaching, which has a more direct influence on the social and academic growth of the students. Instructional leadership primarily "targets at student learning via teachers," while tending to ignore the influence process itself (Bush & Glover, 2014, p. 556). On the other hand, transformational leadership assumes that the central focus of leadership rests on the dedication and abilities of organizational members (Bush & Glover, 2014). While working toward the organizational goal, personal commitment and greater capacity may lead to greater productivity (Leithwood et al., 1999). However, this model seems to neglect the subtle dynamics at the micro level within the organization, in which one's commitment is formed and influenced. In addition, both the concept of commitment and capacity are fluid, lacking a generally accepted standard and process to fathom. As leaders seek to influence the school, the transformational model allows school leadership to focus primarily on the process to ensure desired outcomes rather than on the nature or direction of those outcomes (Bush & Glover, 2014).

Distributed leadership has become the desired leadership model in the twenty-first century (Bush & Glover, 2014). This leadership "represents one of the most influential ideas to emerge in the field of educational leadership in the past decade" (Harris, 2010, p. 55). Such leadership endorses distributed power through collaborative and collective work while acknowledging that "successful heads recognize the limitations of a singular leadership approach" (Harris, 2004, p. 16). An important starting point for understanding distributed leadership is to detach it from authority related to the position (Bush & Glover, 2014). Teacher leadership is often linked to distributed leadership, as pointed out by Bush and Glover (2014). They argue that for teacher leadership to be successful, it requires structural support and assistance from heads and senior leaders; in this sense, teacher leadership is central to the idea of distributed leadership rather than a form of leadership in its own right. Besides leadership that centers on the improvement of students' learning, moral leadership, and authentic leadership are values-

based models in which leaders are anticipated to act with integrity and embrace goals underscored by explicit values (Bush & Glover, 2014). They also point out that such leadership may be found in faith schools, guided by spiritual values or the leader's own background and experience.

Principalship in a Chinese Context

Chinese principal leadership study differs from current dominant leadership approaches on account of the influence of Chinese traditions and culture, particularly Confucianism and Confucian culture (Walker, et al., 2012). Research suggests that the importance of Confucianism has been acknowledged, and more attention is being paid to it by theorists in understanding the morality issues, discourse, and practice of politics, as well as policymaking in China (De Jong, 2012). As shown in a study conducted by Ling et al. (2000), Chinese tradition, values, and perceptions are so distinct from those in the West that there is an urgent need for both sides to better understand each other. According to Ling et al. (2000), these differences might be caused by the unique culture and values derived from the context. They suggest that future researchers "must continue to explore deeper into the hearts and minds of the Chinese to find out the true Chinese meaning of leader" (p. 34). Walker et al. (2012) argue that from a Western perspective, Chinese school principals can be seen as powerful and authoritative, but in their own context, they experience intensive pressures and anxieties, especially when they are unavoidably involved in organizational and interpersonal issues. To approach these complexities, we require "a stronger knowledge base of Chinese principalship" (Walker et al., 2012, p. 388), one that can yield genuine understandings that "unveil...the deep structure underpinning the roles of principal in either the personal or interpersonal dimensions of their jobs" (p. 388). What is this deep structure? Is it the Confucian culture or values, or more broadly, traditional Chinese cultures and values? According to Walker et al. (2012), the understanding of educational leadership must be placed within the broad sociopolitical and historical contexts in which schools are situated and principals engage in their everyday work.

Thus, more in-depth understandings gained from the Chinese context and how different Confucian (traditional) cultural variables have an impact on Chinese principalship are needed, that is, Indigenous Chinese thinking on educational leadership. While acknowledging that traditional Chinese culture was predominantly structured by Confucianism (Walker et al., 2012), this study is conducted on the premise that traditional Chinese culture is broader and may include other schools of traditional Chinese thought, such as legalism and militarism, as shown later in this paper. In what follows, we will look into a Chinese principal's daily leadership practices and how such leadership plays out in the Chinese (Confucius and more) cultural context. Thus, this study aims to address the following questions: How have the traditional culture and values (Confucian and other schools of thought) nuanced and influenced principals' daily practice? How does the principal perform his/her role in terms of personal and interpersonal dimensions?

Research Design

Autobiographical Inquiry in the Study of Educational Leadership

This study explores how the influence of various Confucian cultural variables, or more broadly, Chinese traditional cultures or values, are reflected in a Chinese principal's daily experiences. Thus, a narrative approach that aims to understand the experiences of school principals would be appropriate for this study. The narrative approach provides not only the

primary source material from which leadership understandings have been drawn but also a truthful description of how leadership is fashioned and the context in which leadership is enacted (Bennis, 1989; Samier, 2016). Specifically, this study utilizes autobiography, one of the narrative approaches for a study design. The use of biographies and shorter (auto)biographical portraits, sketches, or stories captures lived life scenes, affords access to inner experiences, and provides the thorough, methodical process and rationale for decision-making from the insider's perspective (English, 2006; Gronn, 2005; Samier, 2016). Compared to biographical inquiry, autobiography is written from the first-person perspective (Mathias & Smith, 2015). (Auto)biographical inquiry will, therefore, make a unique contribution to this study on school leadership. In addition, little research has been conducted using autobiography for leadership studies. In so doing, an autobiographical investigation will contribute methodologically to current leadership studies.

This study uses the autobiographical vignette to illustrate the influences of traditional Chinese cultures on the practice of leadership. An autobiographical vignette is a short autobiographical sketch used to capture certain moments in one's life. The autobiographical vignette can help recall the moments in the past as well as engage the moments in the present (Wang, 2020). These moments may be separate or form a theme under which a deeper self exists. Such an autobiographical vignette can be one's own story or another's story. However, both are written from the first-person perspective. The following, drawing on Samier (2016), Pinar (1995, 2011), and other scholarly work, summarizes why autobiographical inquiry is adopted for the study.

First, autobiography is a medium akin to literature and film that can contribute to a better understanding of experiential dimensions of leadership studies in ways that other forms of academic writing may lack (Samier, 2016). (Auto)biography renders more lived, comprehensive accounts of layered realities of the workplace, thereby portraying the intersection of the personal, social, and psychical aspects that most leadership theories may ignore. Compared to other narrative approaches, it is more effective in capturing and describing the complexity of the phenomenon being investigated. In addition, autobiography allows access to the inner psychical complication that a school leader may be confronted with, the influence a school leader has had over the process of decision-making, the conflicts or resistances they encounter, and the internal culture and politics of an organization in which they reside. Hence, autobiography provides access to covert dimensions of organizations that other empirical studies may fail to render, as argued by Samier (2016). An autobiography can adequately "cover many forces and factors at play in shaping people and their administrative and leadership capacity, as well as the conditions under which they perform these roles" (Samier, 2016, p. 199), some of which may be ignored before, however useful in understanding the full profile of a school leader. As Pinar (1995) posits, "Writing, and in particular, the craft of autobiography, can soar, and from the heights, discern new landscapes, new configurations, especially those excluded by proclamations of Government, State and School" (p. 217). Writing autobiographically will allow one to see new landscapes, new configurations that are previously hidden (Wang, 2020). Thus, autobiography focuses on a myriad of experiences that mediate one's formation of self-conception and understanding of organizational vision.

Second, autobiographical inquiry presents itself as a particular form of knowledge, through understanding—perhaps intensifying—one's experience. Ayers (1990) argues that autobiography is "understanding the situation from within" (p. 272). Graham (1991) reveals the rationale for using autobiography either for school programs or for university students

reflecting on their educational experience. He associates autobiography with the seven forms of knowledge proposed by Hirst (1974): the empirical, the moral, the aesthetic, the mathematical, the philosophical, the religious, and the historical/sociological. Across these forms are the irreducibility criteria; any of them cannot be reduced to any other (Hirst, 1974). Some subjects, such as art history, embody the intersection of aesthetic, historical, and philosophical forms, but they are not identical to any of them. According to Graham (1991), autobiography embodies a distinct form of knowledge. Thus, he suggests: "Autobiography can stand as the exemplar of another equally valuable and irreducible way of thinking and knowing" (Graham, 1991, p. 11). In this respect, narrative is a mode of thought (Bruner, 1986) "whose truth is discovered in verisimilitude and not in appeals to procedures for establishing formal and empirical proof" (Graham, 1991, p. 11). Grumet (1990) associates this research methodology with phenomenology: "Reliance on the lived experience of the individual in the autobiographical method of inquiry draws support from Husserl's conviction that it was only in the freshness and immediacy of encounter that certain knowledge can reside" (p. 34) and this phenomenological approach offers a more vivid, fresh description of lived experience (Wang, 2020).

However, autobiographical and biographical research in educational administration and leadership is not common (Samier, 2016). The issue of quality and rigor of narrative research, in which biographical research is regarded as one stream, tends to be salient. As Loh (2013) has asked:

> How valid is this narrative approach? How valid is the analysis of the data? How valid and reliable is the collection of these "stories," and how can a story be valid as an analysis? If the data is collected through the participants' telling of their "storied experiences," how do I know if they are being truthful? What if they made up a story or embellished the retelling? Will the research be valid then? (p. 2)

As argued by Loh (2013), to ensure the validity and trustworthiness of the narrative approach, the research must bear verisimilitude. "This quality of verisimilitude is important because it allows others to have a vicarious experience of being in a similar situation and thereby being able to understand the decisions made and the emotions felt by the participants in the study" (Loh, 2013, p. 10). Quoting Eisner (1997), verisimilitude is what "makes it possible for others to have access not only to our lives when our stories are about them but also to the lives of others" (p. 264, as cited in Loh, 2013). However, Begg (2011) finds that the most appropriate criterion was *resonance*; feeling resonance implies that the story provokes interest, builds connection, and appears to be plausible.

How does the story work? Not everyone resonates with the story told due to the uniqueness of the individual. However, what constitutes stories are the fragments of possible truths that are, therefore, connected to the way people think and feel. It renders a point of entry for one to understand the greater reality. Simultaneously, while stories provide a perspective of reality, the fine line between reality and what people perceive is never fixed and always blurred. Storytelling (autobiography) thus becomes one's particular way of experiencing the World. This particular approach thus allows us to understand how one experiences the world. Riessman (2008) argues that "a narrative is not simply a factual report of events, but instead one articulation told from a point of view that seeks to persuade others to see the events in a single way" (p. 187). The narrative approach with stories helps understand the personal meaning of the experiences (Atkinson, 2002). "To learn of their realities, to learn of their emotional and mental responses to those realities, the meanings and interpretations the

participants ascribe to these realities," quoting Polkinghorne (2007), are "the best evidence available to researchers about the realm of people's experience" (p. 479). As Polkinghorne (2007) further posits:

> Storied evidence is gathered not to determine if events actually happened but about the meaning experienced by people whether or not the events are accurately described.... Storied texts serve as evidence for personal meaning, not for the factual occurrence of the events reported in the stories. (p. 479, as cited in Loh, 2013)

Loh (2013) asks if "a study is particular to only an individual or a group of individuals, what worth can it be for the community at large" (p. 10)? Loh (2013) summarizes it as "The use, relevance, and its utility" (p. 10), drawing on a number of scholars' work. Such generalization is up to one's subjective thought and experience. Therefore, contingent upon emerging encounters, the narrative research paradigm is open to audiences' perspectives and interpretations, inviting participation and reconstruction from the audience.

Data for this study come from stories that are unique to the participant. This autobiography is from a male principal who used to work in a key high school in Fujian province, located in Southeastern China. The school has approximately 1,000 students, and 85 teachers and administrative staff in an urban area. He has worked in the school as a principal since 2010. He wrote diaries and reflections for years. One of the authors got to know him during his school visit to Vancouver, during which his school in China formed a partnership with a local Vancouver school. The author had the opportunity to meet the principals during his visit and learned that the principal's experience and insight into his work could be strikingly important for people to understand how a Chinese principal works at his school. Upon his consent, the principal shared his diaries with the author. His diaries and reflections, written from the first-person perspective (Mathias & Smith, 2015), became the main data source. The original stories were in Chinese and were translated into English for this study. After they were translated, the stories were cross-checked for accuracy by him and an English professor. The principal's writing may not accord with the method of *currere* (one particular type of autobiography) but aligns with the narrative approach discussed previously. This autobiographical work in a non-Western context focuses on how a Chinese principal performs his role in his daily work. This autobiographical approach reveals the real-time complexity and nuances of school leadership in a Chinese context. In this study, the story and analysis are intermingled. The stories were analyzed based on the details presented, instead of following the structured review of Confucian values. This study is an initial attempt to investigate how traditional cultural variables, including Confucian values, have influenced the principal's leadership vision and practice while acknowledging the other forces and factors at play.

The Way Ahead—An Autobiographical Account of A Chinese Principal

> A quiet night. People left finally. I am sitting in the office, filled with the strong smell of smoke left by some smokers during the meeting. Utterly exhausted, I can hear my own sigh. Everything seems to be over, for now, after some hot debates just minutes ago. Tomorrow will be a big day: the local educational authority (leaders in the local education bureau) is coming to inspect whether we are ready for the new Curriculum Reform. These new curriculum reforms asked schools to innovate pedagogy in order to meet the changing demands of society by adopting new teaching material and using new instructional equipment.

All the teachers have been mobilized to participate in this preparation for the inspection. They have modified or redesigned their teaching plan according to the new standard imposed through the new curriculum change. Some teachers expressed their disagreement with certain aspects of the new curriculum. Ultimately, they took my advice to modify the structure as required. It is really difficult to strike a fine balance between the demand from the education authority and the curriculum concerns raised by teachers. How can they be reconciled? As a principal, I need to take dual perspectives from time to time, learning to stand at different positions, even contradictory positions at times. I don't blame teachers, and I agree that the new curriculum has some problems. It obviously adds extra workload to teachers and may yield unintended results. I even promised some teaching staff that I would consider their initiative in adjusting the class size to accommodate the curriculum change. For this inspection, Xiao Li was even assigned to delete some posts on some local websites, posts criticizing our school, me or mentioning other sensitive issues about the school. Certain forums of local websites are filled with rumors and negative comments, and people may get misled. The list of people to attend the consultation meeting with the inspection team has been decided. Of course, they are selected based on whether they are "cooperative." I do not want it to appear to be "fake," but it should be understandable.

Then, one more thing, what place would be suitable to host the welcoming party for the inspection team? Ideally it should be close to the school, but it may require some special preparation. It needs to have spaces for private discussions. Maybe it is a good time to express teachers' concern to the authority. In addition, the Chinese Spring Festival is coming, and a token gift is needed for every member coming to our school tomorrow. Tomorrow morning I will have a difficult meeting to run, and I have thought over and over about what would be the best decision to make. It was only hours away from having to make a decision. I felt an irresistible urge to smoke but knew that I couldn't. Anxiety took hold of me...

The last thought that I always need to remember. After working as a principal for years, I have learned some "tricks" on how to communicate with the authorities since I meet them so often at school or in the local education bureau. First, you must have a solid knowledge base about anything related to our school, and be prepared for the authorities' inquiry anytime. Whatever questions is raised by the authority, you are able to provide an objective answer. Being objective or sounding objective is very important. Or so you will lose the authority's trust with the obviously biased answer. However, sometimes, you must pretend to know nothing or appear invisible around the leader when the authority does not need anything. Second, you must have an acute awareness of what is going on in the surrounding, being perceptive about the emerging situations and the leader's needs. You need to know how to coordinate and assist the leader while being aware of the leader's need. Such sophisticated political acumen, or"Lian Da" (练达)in Chinese context is much needed in these situations. You need to be more reactive and read the warning signs when you hear something. It requires one to be able to adapt and react accordingly. However, it is not just a matter of adjustment; it is based on one's tacit knowledge and ability to see beyond the surface. Third, you must be aware of propriety. This propriety refers to meanings that accord within all the constraints: being aware of the hierarchical relationships and the particular need you are about to address. You may want to provide a heads-up to the leader, even trying to tactfully influence the leader. But you must be mindful: a leader might be fully aware of the situations and such tact may lead to negative results that are not intended. You need to be very skillful in dealing with all of this information: incorporating something "subtly" when you want to convey certain message. Sometimes, the leader needs you to provide some information, for which the careful choice of words is needed so that it will not cause confusion or discomfort. You need to have a good sense of propriety: not one word more and less.

Time to go home finally.

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Results and Discussion

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The following analysis illustrates how certain elements of Confucian cultures and values have had an impact on the principal's deliberation of the delicate situation—how the principal performs his role. It is organized around three themes: the role of the principal, dealing with *Guanxi*, and the employment of interpersonal skills.

The Role of the Principal

The above story offers a real-time example of how the principal carries out his role in a school setting. He deals with many tasks on a multidimensional level and appears to be in charge of everything. His attentiveness to every detail seems to show that he dwells in the center of the school, exercising power and assuming responsibility at the same time. This is consistent with Qian's (2008) and Wang's (2007) assertion that, in China, the school principal is the person who tends to take a top-down approach to leadership. A school principal becomes the authoritative figure of the school community, bearing similarities to a father in a paternalistic family in the Confucian context.

The principal has the authority in schools. Selecting people to attend the welcoming event seems to resonate with the so-called "democratic leadership practices" in China discussed in the study of Ryan et al. (1998) by which the principal selects who would support his opinion with no detabe expected and "ballots were held in relation to options put forward" (p. 178). As argued by Chen (2007), while Chinese principals are regarded as government officials, their major work is to enact educational policies prescribed by the government. The principal in the story tried many possible means to implement curriculum innovation, such as giving favors to teachers who did not want to adjust their teaching plans. His practice was structured by the mandates issued by central district authorities instead of the needs of the school and students. Adherence to the dominant ideology was found to be an important requirement for school principals, which means the curriculum changes need to be accepted without question. This might be why the principal selected people to attend the event.

Even so, while Chinese principals abide by regulations and government directives, there appears to be some leeway for Chinese principals to enact their own thoughts. In the narrative, it seems that this Chinese principal was acting in compliance when faced with the upcoming top-down inspection. However, the principal used soft strategies to allow teachers to maintain certain autonomy, such as arranging private meetings with the authority after dinner to seek extra time and opportunity to communicate for certain support from the authority. His purpose might have been to maintain a productive relationship and harmony with the authority and other parties involved.

The principal is the middle manager, residing between the higher authority and teachers in the school. He had dual roles: leader and subordinate. Pye (1992) argues that the dominant role of leaders and the unwillingness of individual and private parties to declare their self-interest or make claims on the political system comes from a tradition where rule by men triumphed overrule by law. To declare self-interest includes requesting assistance or resources for self-interest instead of a collective one. Subjects were supposed to be dependent on instead of claiming self-interest from their political authorities (De Jong, 2012). This rule applies to both the school principal and his subordinates.

Respect for authorities and experts in Confucian culture is highly valued, which results in citizens being reluctant to openly express dissents or "allege a right" toward authorities (De Jong, 2012). Wang et al. (2005) points out that respect for hierarchy can be dated back to the Confucian principle of *li* (propriety) and *wu lun* (five hierarchical relationships), upon which everyone's role in society is regulated. Hence, if each person performs his/her role according to the given social status and rank, social harmony can be attained (Wang et al., 2005). "In the Confucian context, social hierarchy and hierarchical relations of subordination and superiority are considered natural and proper. In addition to the performance of assigned duties, filial submission, loyalty, decency, and reciprocity are also required" (Wang et al., 2005, p. 316). In such a system, adherence to the hierarchical relations within a myriad of social roles works to regulate one's behaviors in accordance with *Li* and *Wu lun*. Therefore, for Buttery and Leung (1998), the praxis of paternalism is the ultimate ideal in the Chinese political system. *Wu lun* (five principals) prescribes enduring commitment to superiors; in so doing, the subordinates' welfare will be attended to by the superiors (ibid). The pursuit of harmony and group priority underlies such social relations. The principal's thoughts and behavior manifested in the above narrative are shown through taking care of his teachers as well as satisfying his superiors and other related authorities. The principal was living these Confucius values.

Dealing with Guanxi — The Major Task of a Principal

As seen in the story, the principal was dealing with very complicated *guanxi*, including the district authority, teachers in the school, and other stakeholders involved. He tried to present a positive image to his superior and make the inspection impeccable by considering every aspect of it. He is situated in the center of this *guanxi* web. What is the Chinese notion of *Guanxi*?

As researchers recognize the prominence of *guanxi* in Chinese society, they have been paying increased attention to this construct, as pointed out by Wang et al. (2005). Some scholars have labeled the Chinese system of management as the management of interpersonal relationships (Su & Littlefield, 2001, as cited in Wang et al., 2005). This notion can also be applied to explain how the Chinese principal plays his role in this story. As a major concept in Chinese society, *guanxi* can be interpreted as personal connections or social networks. However, *guanxi* may involve more complicated meanings. *Guanxi* in China is featured as a system of favors and debts among people within the network who foster and develops relationships informed by Confucian thought (Wang et al., 2005). *Guanxi* embodies the reciprocal obligations among parties involved in social activities. Luo (1997) summarizes the essence and complexity of the *guanxi* networks in China:

> The Chinese word *guanxi* refers to the concept of drawing on connections in order to secure favors in personal relations. It is an intricate and pervasive relational network which Chinese cultivate energetically and subtly. It contains implicit mutual obligation, assurance and understanding, and governs Chinese attitudes toward long-term social and business relationships. (p. 34)

Informed by various scholars' works, five key characteristics of *guanxi* can be used to understand *Guanxi* in this autobiography. First, Yum (1988) argues that *Guanxi* is particularistic relationship. In Confucianism, human relationships are not universalistic but particularistic. "Ethics in Confucian thought are based on relationships and situations rather than on some absolute good, and they are not applicable to the larger society as a whole" (Yum, 1988, p. 378). Instead of applying the same rule to everybody with whom they interact,

East Asians, following Confucian philosophy, "differentially grade and regulate relationships according to the level of intimacy, the status of the persons involved, the particular context" (Yum, 1988, p. 376). That is why the principal adopts different rules to treat people within and outside the school (the authority). Yum (1988) points out that East Asian countries have advanced elaborate social interaction rules for those whose social positions and relationships to oneself are known, but for those who is not known, no universal pattern pertains to them.

Second, *guanxi* is fluid. *Guanxi* is not fixed and is subject to transferability. Transferability describes how one can develop more relationships based on the prior relationships established, the rule of which allows an expanding network web. If a party involved is not satisfied with the relationship, the guanxi may discontinue or suspend. This transferability can extend as much as it can if operated properly (Luo, 1997).

Third, *guanxi* is reciprocal (Luo, 1997). A return favor for favor is required to maintain *Guanxi*; for anyone who breaks such a rule may be perceived as untrustworthy. Confucian philosophy views relationships as mutually obligatory. In a sense, a person in a *Guanxi* network is forever indebted to others if he/she receives a favor from others (Wang et al., 2005). Mutual dependence, as prescribed by the Confucian principle of yi, "requires that one be affiliated and identify with relatively small and tight-knit groups of people over a long period of time (Yum, 1987, p. 94). Group members usually operate long-term relationships because each of them expects the others to return the favor and offer assistance. They also hold a shared belief that they will benefit from helping others and establishing long-term relationships. The principal tried to maintain the relationship with the educational authority in order to curry favors in the future, favors that may come in various forms that include physical and symbolic materials such as promotion or awards granted by the authority.

Fourth, *guanxi* is intangible (Luo, 1997). It is established with "overtones of unlimited exchange of favors and maintained in the long run by the unspoken commitment to others in the web" (Wang et al., 2005, p. 317), governed by the code of equality (in the sense of exchange) and reciprocity. Such exchange is essentially utilitarian rather than emotional; thus, in *Guanxi*, people are bonded through the give-and-take rapport rather than through emotion. Based on the story, it can be seen that the principal tried to maintain or improve the relationship with various parties. Many details in the story show how he took care of this welcoming event. He thought about the exact location of a restaurant to host the upcoming officials from the local education authorities; he selected people he deemed appropriate to attend the meeting with the authority. What the principal tried to do was to maintain a good relationship with the authority, especially in the long run. He did it for expected returning favor following the principle of reciprocity. In such a Guanxi network, personal connections and loyalties often outweigh organizational affiliations or legal standards (Wang et al., 2005). More importantly, *guanxi* may initiate or facilitate action and "provides a balance to the cumbersome Chinese bureaucracy by giving individuals a way to circumvent rules through the activation of personal relations" (Luo, 1997, p. 46). *Guanxi* can offer alternative solutions based on personal connections. However, building and sustaining a guanxi network requires an understanding of face (*mianzi*) culture in Chinese society. Although the notion of *mianzi* seems to be universal in different cultural contexts, the degree of concern is much higher, and its manifestations are somewhat different in the Chinese context (Wang et al., 2005). Giving a

face to others shows one's willingness to maintain *Guanxi*. Further, one's face is primarily supported by one's social image and network; to maintain a face means to stay trustworthy and fulfill obligations in one's social interactions. Not losing one's own face and saving another's face are the two key components in the dynamics of *Guanxi* (Luo, 1997). What the principal did seemed to be consistent with these values discussed above.

The Importance of Guanxi in School Leadership

Chinese culture highly values *Guanxi*. The most notable characteristic of China is the emphasis on social relationships. For Yum (1988), "the East Asian preoccupation with social relationship stems from the doctrine of Confucianism" (p. 374), and he views Confucianism as a philosophy of human nature that regards proper human relationships as the cornerstone of society and communication as the fundamental social process. As seen in the story, the principal prioritized the maintenance of relationships over other tasks. He made thorough preparations for the welcoming event for the purpose of sustaining the relationship. In China, people prioritize the maintenance of social relationships over any abstract concern for a general collective body (Yum, 1988). In a sense, it is an in-group collectivism that exists only among those welded by social networks (Yum, 1988).

Yum (1988) summarizes two reasons for the dominance of Confucianism in China. First, in China, Confucianism has endured as the basic social and political system for over one thousand years. It was adopted as an official philosophy for over five centuries in China, which was "institutionalized and propagated both through the formal curricula of the educational system and through the selection process of government officials" (Yum, 1988, p. 376). The second reason why Confucianism has exerted a much stronger impact than the other religious and philosophical systems of East Asia is because of its pragmatic and present-oriented philosophy. Max Weber argues that "Confucianism is extremely rationalistic since it is bereft of any form of metaphysics and in the sense that it lacks traces of nearly any religious basis…At the same time, it is more realistic than any other system in the sense that it lacks and excludes all measures which are not utilitarian" (as cited in Nakamura, 1964, p. 16). Nakamura (1964) points out that this rationality is pragmatic rationality, which seems to be more useful in helping people solve current problems. We argue that Confucianism has a non-utilitarian side, and its dual character should not be ignored.

The Employment of Interpersonal Skills — Practical Tactics Used to Maintain Guanxi

The story reveals the importance of tacit knowledge that the principal employs in dealing with myriads of relationships. It is known in China that some practical strategies and skills are important to master in order to navigate the complexities of interpersonal relationships. These strategies and skills can be traced back to both Confucianism and other schools of thought, such as Legalism and Militarism. *Sun Tzu* and *Sun Bin*, as the overarching figures in Militarism, represent the tactical thinkers of military and political tactics that have had a huge impact on Chinese culture. Legalism, which focuses on administrative tactics, strives to provide regulations and direct actions for emperors, rulers, and leaders to ensure their own political survival and against opponents (De Jong, 2012). These schools of thought have had an extraordinary impact on both the common sense of Chinese people of what it means to be a social person in daily life and on accepted practices for leaders to achieve their own goals (De Jong, 2012). We summarize two strategies or practical tactics used by the principal in the following.

The Building of Personal Relationships

As illustrated in the above narrative, the principal tried to develop a personal relationship with the authority by inviting the authority for a meal and preparing a token gift for them. It seems usual to weave personal relationships into public relationships in China. Both parties feel more comfortable if the communication takes place on a more personal level (Yum, 1988). This might explain why the principal invited the inspection committee for a meal and also prepared a gift card for each of them. Similarly, Chen and Chung (1993) argue that it is important to build a personal relationship in business transactions in East Asian countries: "one must develop a mutual understanding, establish a personal relationship, keep frequent contacts, develop personal trust, and build mutual interest in social activities with one's counterpart to develop an effective business relationship" (p. 10). The strategy is to diminish the clear distinction between a personal relationship and a public relationship. People may get "beguiled" or controlled easily while being in personal relationships with others. According to *Shang Yang* (2017), a legalist during the War State period in China, people can be ruled by human nature: what they like and dislike. A personal relationship tends to acquire more access to what one likes or not, and then possibly guarantee or maximize one's own benefit. In addition, a warm personal relationship promises a good public relationship. The principal may not follow these steps exactly the same way, but he, on purpose, initiated or sustained Guanxi that is deemed proper by him following certain steps.

Indirect Communication

Indirect communication is more prominent in Chinese culture. The indirect mode of communication seems to be universal (Katriel, 1986). However, it has also been recognized that there is a significant difference in the level of indirectness between North American and East Asian communication patterns (Okabe, 1987). The Confucian legacy of attention to others and concern for proper human relationships has given rise to the development of communication patterns that allow interlocutors to maintain one another's faces (Yum, 1988). Indirect communication is used to prevent other people from losing face or to avoid conflict, especially when people disagree with each other, thus enabling each side to save their dignity and keep their face unaffected (Yum, 1988). Lebra (1976) suggests that defending the face is one of the main factors influencing Japanese behaviors, which may exemplify indirect communication and help understand the story in a Chinese context. She lists a number of concrete mechanisms for defending face, such as mediated communication (asking someone else to transmit the message), refracted communication (talking to a third person in the presence of the hearer), and acting as a delegate (conveying one's message as being from someone else), which are all indirect forms of communication.

The three rules summarized by the principal typically address the characteristics of indirect communication in which different situations emerge, emphasizing how to communicate with leaders (authority). First, indirectness in Chinese culture is far more complex, imbued with tactful and subtle meaning. Sometimes, it implies something that is sensitive but hard to express explicitly. This indirect communication is not just about avoiding embarrassment; rather, it may also help avoid conflicts, thereby securing greater benefits. In Militarism, *Suntzu* (2010) discusses the indirect method: subduing the enemy without the use of military forces. If the use of military forces is understood as a "direct way," the more subtle, deeper

understanding of the whole situation (foreknowledge of the situation) and bending the enemy's will guided by such foreknowledge might be regarded as an "indirect strategy" (*Suntzu*, 2010). In this story, the principal tried to tackle problems by adopting an indirect strategy. He did not initiate a direct talk or "order" anyone to take his advice; however, he tried to create opportunities and smooth out difficulties to make people follow his lead.

Second, indirectness in Chinese culture may imply "endless interpretation" characterized by a higher level of sophistication and subtlety. Cheng (1987) has identified infinite interpretation as one of the main principles of Chinese communication: the process of such an infinite interpretation puts much emphasis on the receiver's sensitivity and ability to capture the under-the-surface meaning and discern implicit meaning. In such a situation, the result of a communication is unpredictable. While situating among various relationships, the principal demonstrated his subtle and sophisticated thought regarding emerging situations; as shown in the last passage of his account, he specified several situations he could envision while in communication with his superiors. The principal's thought is characterized by a considerably high degree of sophistication and subtlety: he considered possible consequences and tried to figure out different strategies when confronted with different situations. The different degrees of sophistication and subtlety are related to the traditional Chinese culture, which strictly limits possible solutions and predicts negative results if operated carelessly, as the social hierarchy is more stable and respect for authority is higher. This autobiographical account shows how the principal is situated within a complex web made of power, policy agenda, and tactics in the organizational process throughout which various cultural variables remain embedded.

Conclusion and Implications

This study presents the autobiographical account of an episode in the life of a Chinese principal, which centers around how he performed his role, mainly dealing with relationships using various tactics. Based upon the description above, Chinese principalship can be understood from the following two aspects. First, relationship, in this case, *Guanxi* maintenance might be the major task for a principal. Based on the story, it seems apparent that the principal's major goal is to maintain harmonious relationships with his supervisors, subordinates, and colleagues, particularly the personal relationships with various parties. The practice of establishing and sustaining relationships is congruent with Confucian culture. Second, in order to deal with the web of relationships, the Chinese principal used leadership tactics to achieve his goal. These tactics have been deeply influenced by Confucian culture and other schools of thought, seemingly comprising more complicated leadership and interpersonal skills. Contingent upon various emerging situations, the use of these tactics is characterized by different degrees of subtlety and sophistication with a sense of propriety compared to the Western context. Traditional Chinese culture thus permeates through the principal's daily practices and provides underlying and ongoing support for this leadership. The multitude of cultural influences is crystalized through the subjective experience of the principal, as depicted in the autobiographical account.

According to Gray (2000), cultural differences do not stem from the existence of fundamentally different values among countries and regions in the world but from a different estimation of and prioritization among them. It is evident that Chinese society still embraces Confucian cultures and values, and its manifestation in principal leadership needs to be well understood. To be noted, in a society with rapid development, the principal in the Chinese context is faced

with emerging challenges. A principal may always need to keep abreast of immediate and convoluted situations and be capable of tackling multiple dimensions simultaneously. The ability to orient oneself in complicated environments and navigate through messy situations with tactful personal skills is immensely required. This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of, and appreciation for, different people, cultures, and traditions towards achieving an intercultural understanding and global awareness. This study bridges the divide of understanding that exists between cultures and countries. Moreover, knowledge from different cultural contexts or regions may allow us to have greater opportunities to learn from other cultures unique to a diverse range of populations. Some of the most exciting educational innovations may come from international contexts. This research provides a snapshot of a school principal in Chinese society and renders insight into future studies related to Chinese principalship. Understanding gained in different cultural contexts allows reciprocity of perspectives, in which each perspective is entangled with another, and each experience informs the other. Such perspective and experience may "flow" from one culture to another, from one historical period to another, thus "creating an infinite, yet subliminal myriad of intersectionalities, crossings and synthesis" (Wang, 2024, p. 50), orienting us toward an expanded understanding of principalship.

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