
ATTRIBUTES OF MORAL LEADERSHIP: EIGHT ENCOUNTERS ALONG THE SILK ROAD

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ABSTRACT

The exercise of moral leadership within the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not merely a theoretical study. Rather, the exercise of moral leadership is something that happens, and thus can be described. What would good moral leadership look like? This paper examines the writing of eight personalities along the BRI to identify some of the attributes of moral leadership. The attributes identified here are reciprocity, good governance, transparency, ethical credibility, respect, integrity, humanity, and trust. The eight personalities come from a variety of occupations, and from Asia and Europe. This survey is limited, yet it provides a useful beginning for wider examination.



INTRODUCTION TO THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

At the end of 2013 Chinese President Xi Jinping announced one of China's most ambitious foreign policy and economic initiatives. He called for the building of a Silk Road Economic Belt and a 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, now referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Analyst Peter Cai comments that

BRI is arguably one of the largest development plans in modern history (Cai, 2017, p.2). But BRI is not limited to infrastructure. It also encompasses cultural exchange and institutions, media, and educational projects (Xi, 2013), (Xinhua, 2015a), (Xinhua, 2015b).

The method of BRI is to create a series of bilateral relationships and projects. Nevertheless, the size of BRI has meant that there is already a need for multilateral structures, including the Asian International Investment Bank (AIIB).

A CHINESE INITIATIVE AND A MULTILATERAL RESPONSE

The BRI is an initiative by the Communist Party of China and the Chinese government. Most of the responses to this initiative comment on the Chinese position, but the attributes to which they refer should apply reciprocally. Thus if it is correct to call for transparency in China, then it is equally correct to call for transparency in Pakistan or Poland, in Singapore or Switzerland.

Also, while the BRI is comprised of a series of bilateral agreements, it takes on a multilateral dimension because of the need for co-operation by all the parties. The multilateral nature of the BRI may open up possibilities for renewed dialogue about universality. Some years ago, there was a debate about “Asian values”. There were supporters for a variety of positions: that there could be Asian values which were not universal, or that there were no universal values, or that each polity decided its own values and their implementation. The multilateral nature of BRI will renew discussion about universality.

While the emphasis of this paper is on the testimonies of individual participants, we can begin with a context given in paragraph 14 of the Communique of Leaders at the conclusion of the Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in 2017.

14. We uphold the spirit of peace, cooperation, openness, transparency, inclusiveness, equality, mutual learning, mutual benefit and mutual respect by strengthening cooperation on the basis of extensive consultation and the rule of law, joint efforts, shared benefits and equal

opportunities for all. In this context we highlight the following principles guiding our cooperation, in accordance with our respective national laws and policies:

- a) Consultation on an equal footing...
 - b) Mutual benefit...
 - c) Harmony and inclusiveness...
 - d) Market-based operation...
 - e) Balance and sustainability...
- (Communique, 2017).

This paragraph suggests that values, principles, and attributes across the BRI are universal. However, the adoption or implementation of these values, principles, and attributes may prove to be contested, just as universal values have been contested in the past.

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The participants featured here include academic researchers, a diplomat, journalists, a politician, and the leader of an international non-governmental organisation. Their testimonies come from speeches at conferences, interviews with journalists, academic periodicals, and newspapers. Many of the sources cover a wide range of topics, but I have selected only one for each person.

Each brings their own experience to the encounter: Chinese author Xiao Yunru, for example, motored the old Silk Road from Chang’an (modern Xi’an) to Rome. He travelled 15,000 kilometres, and visited eight countries and thirty-one cities.

ATTRIBUTES OF MORAL LEADERSHIP

The Oxford English Dictionary defines an attribute as “a quality or a feature regarded as a characteristic or inherent part of someone or something.” This paper identifies attributes which

can be regarded as characteristic or inherent for moral leaders who lead and implement the BRI. The method used was to search for a variety of responses to the BRI, using the Google search engine. Search words were “One Belt One Road” “Belt and Road” “ethics” “morality” and the names of countries... Each response is an electronic “encounter” or meeting with the originator. For the purpose of this article, eight commentators were selected from eight countries or organisations directly affected by the BRI. The commentators might be regarded as electronic “encounters” or meetings with the originator, each of whom express an attribute of moral leadership expected on the architects of BRI projects.

ABDULKADIR EMIN ÖNEN (TURKEY):
RECIPROCITY

In November 2017, the Turkish newspaper *Daily Sabah* published an interview with Turkey’s new Ambassador to China Abdulkadir Emin Önen (Önen, 2017). One of the topics was for Chinese and Turks to learn about each other’s country and its culture. Ambassador Önen said:

Our most significant handicap is that we learn Chinese culture from foreign sources ... There are many fields that the two countries share similarities, ranging from family structure to cultural life.

In the short-term, our priority is to improve economic relations, trade and Chinese foreign direct investments in Turkey. We are also preparing many projects that will increase cooperation in culture and education which will bring to the countries closer [sic]. (Önen, 2017)

Learning about each other and learning directly rather than through the mediation of foreign sources requires an attribute of reciprocity. BRI includes many nations, and if their relationships are truly reciprocal, then the sixty nations involved will each be enriched.

Ambassador Önen has referred to educational exchange. This is already taking place in at least one direction, as students from the Belt and Road countries find their way to China, and Chinese universities establish campuses abroad

(Liu and Sukumaran, 2017). But this is only one step in the multiple reciprocities that facilitates introducing China to Turkey and vice versa.

MIMI ZOU (HONG KONG): GOOD GOVERNANCE

Professor Mimi Zou wrote as an academic from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, with expertise in labour law:

A critical issue arises as to the ways in which the world’s largest industrialising economy, in pursuing a new industrial development strategy that will broaden its role in global markets and production networks in addition to its potential geopolitical influence, may shape the governance of international labour standards. Could China (including its public and private actors) become a new standard setter? Will Chinese firms drive a “race to the bottom” along the Belt and Road, especially in those countries with “weak governance zones”? (Zou, 2016)

Professor Zou identifies the International Labour Organisation as the key creator of international standards. Then, surveying the experience of Chinese workers at home and workers (both Chinese and local) employed by Chinese multinational enterprises in other countries, Professor Zou provides examples of the low level of Chinese standards, especially in countries with “weak governance zones”.

There is no doubt that China aspires to set standards. While China may achieve success in exporting its “hardware” technical standards, Professor Zou’s work draws our attention to how China may shape standards in “software” fields such as labour relations. These standards may encourage good governance, or they may produce what Professor Zou has called “a race to the bottom”.

Indeed, the sheer size and diversity of the BRI give it the potential to be a standard-setter in a wide variety of fields. Already there are new institutions such as the Asian International Investment Bank, providing an alternative to the existing financing structures. While the Asian International Investment Bank is a Chinese

project, it has attracted significant international support and diverse interest.

NARGIS KASSENOVA (KAZAKHSTAN):
TRANSPARENCY

It was in Kazakhstan that Chinese leader Xi Jinping announced BRI, but there the details of BRI are only gradually being disclosed. Professor Nargis Kassenova of KIMEP University in Almaty, Kazakhstan, reviews some examples of the projects planned at the inter-governmental level, but also notes that the Kazakhstan government has yet to release the details of some projects already agreed upon with Chinese parties. She adds this comment:

If we want to benefit from the BRI projects, we need to approach it differently. One measure would be to increase transparency and inclusivity of decision-making. Basic information on projects should be available to the public. There is a need for public hearings in the parliament and consultation with the expert community (Kassenova, 2018).

PETER CHANG THIAM CHAI (MALAYSIA):
ETHICAL CREDIBILITY

Dr Chang of the University of Malaya writes in the context of Malaysia's recent change of government, and re-negotiation by incoming Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad of deals made with China by former leader Najib Razak (Chang, 2018). He argues that some countries, including Malaysia, have reached a level of development of civil society in which giving exclusive priority to economic relations is no longer possible. Dr Chang says that these societal changes require moral changes in China's way of dealing with Malaysia, and with other countries along the BRI. Dr Chang writes:

Moving forward, Beijing has to recalibrate its economic-centric approach with greater care for issues pertaining to civil liberties and restore its lost credibility with "cleaner" soft power.... Indeed, the People's Republic has enormous potential

to positively affect the world. But Beijing must set in place stronger moral oversight"

Dr Chang concludes by linking moral leadership with China's own ancient ethical tradition:

Apart from averting future ethical missteps, this enforcement will move modern China close in step with the much touted, idealized Confucian exemplary leadership, namely, "A ruler who governs virtuously is like the north star around which all other stars revolve."

ABDUR REHMAN SHAH (PAKISTAN): RESPECT

Pakistan is a key country for the BRI, as this initiative now includes the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Work on the Corridor is advancing and provides observers with early indications how the whole initiative might take shape. Researcher Abdur Rehman Shah of the Centre for Research and Security Studies in Islamabad has written not only of the hopes for CPEC, but also of the limitations (Shah, 2018). For Shah, one of the potential areas of difficulty comes from the structural differences between the Chinese and Pakistani polities. Shah writes:

As a democratically elected institution, the government of Pakistan is required to share the details of deals signed with the Chinese counterparts related to the CPEC in a transparent manner. However, the factor of transparency is clearly missing from this whole affair.

Incentives which favour Chinese stakeholders may be hidden in this opacity.

The structural differences in polities between Pakistan and China are not the only issue for Researcher Shah. He is concerned about the impact of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor on local or regional subversion, and the effect on national security policies. Shah is also concerned about other limitations which might prevent BRI from being mired in structural and economic difficulties. He concludes:

Making BRI a truly win-win and sustainable arrangement, therefore,

requires certain precautionary measures to be adopted. Transparency in economic dealings, concern for the impacts (both positive and negative) of massive funding on local economies and institutions and compliance with ‘governance-related conditionalities’ even if at minimal level are some of the essential prerequisites that China should consider while pursuing BRI project.

Mutual respect for the actual situation of all parties would make the task of Pakistan’s incoming government more secure.

XIAO YUNRU (CHINA): INTEGRITY

Author and cultural commentator Xiao Yunru writes from Xi’an city, along the ancient Silk Road. He stresses the moral importance of integrity in constructing the BRI (Xiao, 2015). Professor Xiao writes that the BRI will not only be a test of Chinese “hard power”, but also a test of China’s “soft power” of culture and spirit. The BRI will test the moral level of the Chinese government, of Chinese enterprises, and of the whole people.

For Professor Xiao, this moral credibility will be evident in many fields. He stresses credibility in quality and argues that a veneer of integrity or sub-standard production will expose short-sighted behaviour, bringing only loss of trust. Professor Xiao writes that, because BRI incorporates many risks, it must be based on mutual trust and understanding. Trust also underpins the legal relationship of contract. For the market to operate, good will is not sufficient. There must be legally binding contracts which the parties will implement sincerely and credibly.

Professor Xiao links integrity with the legal system. He concludes that his readers need to not only develop integrity as a commercial spirit, but also link it with the use of laws and regulations and contracting with integrity, to the profit of both the state and individuals.

PETER MAURER (SWITZERLAND): HUMANITY

In May 2017, the Chinese government

hosted a Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. The Forum included six thematic sessions held in parallel: [i] policy communication, [ii] connectivity of infrastructure, [iii] trade facilitation, [iv] financial cooperation mechanisms, [v] people-to-people exchange, and [vi] think-tank communication. The Red Cross and Red Crescent movement is well established in the BRI countries, including

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China. The Chinese government invited Dr Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Dr Maurer pleaded for a humanitarian dimension to the BRI. He said that he was “deeply convinced this initiative should add a humanitarian dimension, which will be an important building-block to deliver on the SDGs [Sustainable Development Goals]” (Maurer, 2017). Dr Maurer was responding to the emphasis on economics at the Forum, thus linking the Red Cross’ work in humanitarian relief with the overall goals of the BRI.

CHAN CHUN SING (SINGAPORE): TRUST

Chan Chun Sing is a politician in Singapore, and a senior minister in the Singapore government as Minister of Trade and Industry. Minister Chan attended the Davos Forum in January 2018. In the course of a panel discussion, Minister Chan suggested that BRI gave the Chinese the opportunity to “win the trust and confidence of the world” by lifting their focus from short and medium-term benefit to long-term benefit for all the participants (Chan, 2018). Minister Chan switched to Chinese to use the term 以德服人 (serving the people through morality) to emphasise that winning the trust and confidence of the world is a form of service,

carried out according to morality.

Quoting a traditional saying – the expression translated as “serving the people through morality” comes from Mencius – indicates the importance of incorporating traditional values in modern morality. Modern China is still coming to terms with its ethical traditions, and their relationship with socialist ethics.

AN INTERIM CONCLUSION

What do we learn about the attributes of moral leadership along the BRI? At the simplest level, we can list the attributes that we have observed: Reciprocity (Önen), Good Governance (Zou), Ethical Credibility (Chang), Transparency (Kassenova), Integrity (Xiao), Respect (Shah), Humanity (Maurer), and Trust (Chan). Further research may identify other attributes of moral leadership. These attributes are not simply to be found in moral theory, but are also the beginning of a practical description. Moreover, these attributes are both contemporary and traditional. Some attributes, such as trust, and honesty are found in Aristotle and Confucius. But other attributes seem more modern: transparency is an attribute which has grown in more open societies, with greater social participation. Perhaps while transparency seems to be a modern attribute, its roots are evident in older concepts such as frankness and honesty.

ASYMMETRY IN RELATIONSHIPS

One important context must be added to all the individual attributes listed above: asymmetry. In the BRI relationships between the parties may not be symmetrical. China is larger and more powerful than its other partners, although smaller partners may be more symmetrical in relationships with each other. Two examples will make this clear. China is providing finance, through loans and grants. A single loan from China may be overwhelming, given the financial capacity of a recipient nation. Researcher Shah has noted that the billions of dollars of investment under CPEC carry “the risk of straining Pakistan’s

institutions and economy” (Shah, 2018, p. 384). In labour relations, Professor Zou has pointed to the problem of China’s investment power compromising the ability of small recipient countries to implement ILO labour standards (Zou, 2016, p.19).

Handling this asymmetry in relationships has a moral dimension: attributes such as respect and reciprocity may be more difficult to implement in an asymmetrical relationship. Moral leadership carries a responsibility for a very high degree of respect and integrity to enable a positive outcome for all parties.

CONCLUSION

We can incorporate here the interim conclusions listed above, but we must add the dimension of asymmetry. Because China has initiated the BRI projects, it has already undertaken a type of leadership. Thus most of the responses listed above were directed to China. But BRI is not only a series of bilateral projects, it also is multilateral. We should expect moral leadership not only from China and Chinese people, but also from individuals and institutions in all of the BRI countries. Also, moral leadership faces particular difficulties when the relationship is not symmetrical. The larger party, even without intending to, might overwhelm the smaller parties.

Thinking about moral leadership is not limited to moral theory. We may legitimately have expectations of what moral leadership might be in practice. The attributes listed here are a beginning for a description. Encountering local people along the Belt and Road and searching in their responses for the attributes of moral leadership may have a theoretical dimension, but it is primarily practical for the large proportion of humanity within its ambit.



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