

## **The Confucian Value of Humility**

Prof. Dr. Patrick Kim Cheng Low  
&  
Sik-Liong Ang, MBA  
University Brunei Darussalam  
Gadong, Brunei

### **Abstract**

In this qualitative research paper, the practitioner-academics attempt to vigorously define the Confucian value of humility, its applications, uses and the benefits of the Confucian value of humility in terms of leading and managing people. Such a Confucian value indeed motivates, inspires and even supplies the followers and people with much leadership care and concern. The research methodology done is through semi-structured interviews with various business people in the Chinese communities in three selected South-east Asian countries, namely, Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore, the Confucian value of humility and its applications, uses and benefits are uncovered and discussed. The paper too interestingly reveals the various ways in which the Confucian value of humility gives the drive and inspiration to those who truly follow such a Confucian leader or the gentleperson (*junzi*).

*Key words:* Confucius, humility, goals; work hard; thinking positively.

### **Introduction**

Traditional Chinese culture, according to Yin's (2000) study, integrates diverse and sometimes contending schools of thought, including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism and a multitude of regional cultures. Comparison among the various schools of thought by Yin (2000), Tu (1991) and Kuo (1987) led to a joined, cohesive position that Confucianism plays the biggest part in shaping a uniquely Chinese culture (Low and Ang, 2013:31; 2012b: 87; Low, 2010d). Confucian values and ideas have thus, down the ages, influenced most Chinese in China and outside China. One of these relevant Chinese values includes the value of humility.

### **Paper's Aim and Objectives**

The aim and objectives of this paper is to define the Confucian value of humility, and its

applications and benefits or uses to leading and managing people. The paper also shows the various ways in which the value of humility supplies the drive, inspiration and motivation to those who follow such a Confucian leader or the gentleperson (君子, *jūnzǐ*).

### **What Are Values?**

A value is the key belief or a conviction that the individual strongly believes in (Low, 2009; 2002). A set of values can also be defined as personal preferences concerning appropriate courses of action or outcomes. As such, values can reflect a person's sense of right and wrong or what ought to be. Values themselves can be very motivating and by knowing them it helps one to understand how an individual ticks (Low, 2005; 2006). Some common Confucian values are: 1) Filial piety (孝, *xiào*); 2) brotherhood, peer-ship and equality (悌, *tì*); 3) loyalty and fidelity (忠, *zhōng*); 4) trustworthiness (信, *xìn*); 5) courtesy and politeness (禮, *lǐ*); 6) righteousness, right conduct and courage (義, *yì*); 7) upright, honourable, integrity and character (廉, *lián*), and 8) humility and shamefulness (恥, *chǐ*). The purpose of encouraging individuals to embrace and practice Confucian values is to help them to live a proper life and also enable them to have good relationships with people around them so that more people would attain similar good virtues; and if this continues to be so, there would be less frictions in relationships and thus this creates positive energies (*chi*) in group dynamics and teams. All would then be working towards a peaceful and harmonious society, and since everybody behaves in a socially responsible way, the people in business, when relating with their stakeholders (community and society) would be able to prosper in doing their businesses. Furthermore, there would be less problems in business dealings and transactions in the wider society and country (Low and Ang, 2012; 2012a; 2012b; Low et al, 2012).

## Literature Review

In all spheres of life and human living, particularly so during peace times, humility is critically important. And during conflicts, battles and wars, “it has been said that, ‘The arrogant army will lose the battle for sure.’ In battle, leadership and living, humility is regarded as a virtue and strength; it is to be treasured.” (Low, 2013: 78).

### What is the Confucian Value of Humility (謙遜, *qiān xùn*) ?

In the Confucian scheme of things, one must be little; very little, because one is just like a speck of dust or is perhaps even nothing in the vast expanse of the Universe or *Tao*. This is evident when one sees Chinese paintings in which human beings are featured as minute or little when compared to the great mountains or landscapes they are in. Indeed one should be little. Little, because everything and each human being comes, has energy or takes everything from the *Tao*; and they also return to the *Tao*. One must be little in this great scheme and order of the *Tao*, and everything falls into this place – and naturally.

One needs to be humble whether as a leader or a person. A humble leader will learn things and besides, he or she would listen and get feedback from his or her people. If there is no listening, there is no learning or empathy, and in fact, the leader can be taken as arrogant, his or her people may stay away from him or her. Moreover, communications breakdown can occur, and what is worse, the leader may not be able to get whatever information or feedback from the people; he or she is cut off from his or her people and not knowing their needs. If one has the heart to treat any one young or old with kindness and sincerity, this would indeed be more humanistic in nature and very much approach to the Confucian value of humility. Confucius said, “A benevolent man helps others to establish what he himself wishes to establish and also helps others achieving what he wishes to achieve. If one is capable of treating others as one would be treated oneself, this is the best way to be benevolent” (*Analects of Confucius*, VI: 30, Yu Dan, 2006: 28).

### Research Methodology

This research is based on a series of interviews – each time approximately 40 to 50 minutes though some interviews might stretch to an hour plus – conducted with a total of forty-three Chinese entrepreneurs, business-owners and employees from Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore, and this period of self-financed study was from 16 March 2012 to 7 January, 2013. The researchers capitalized their leave days/ ‘vacation trips’ to Malaysia and their respective conference or home-coming trips to Singapore in accessing and

contacting interviewees to collect data. The study relies on the qualitative research method – the key informant interviewing method was adopted in this study. The key informant interview approach differs from other forms of interview largely because the respondents are selected based on their specialized knowledge instead of being randomly chosen to sample the issue the researcher candidate is investigating. The researchers also ensured that there was a balanced make-up, being representative and of sufficient numbers of interviewees from each of the three countries with these breakdowns: 10 interviewees (Brunei), 18 interviewees (Malaysia) and 15 interviewees (Singapore). It is worthy to note that similar to Low's (2006) studies, being assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and feeling more at ease and comfortable with the interviewers, the interviewees expressed themselves freely.

Often, insignificant or small talk or a light conversation on interviewees' personal likes and interests, detected in previous interactions or previous telephone calls, would serve as a launch-pad for further discussions on the interview content.

This interview method is helpful since it enables much qualitative data to be collected from the interviewees. To get more information and data from the various interviewees, open questions were deployed (Cavana, Delahaye and Sekaran, 2001); they were crafted as follows:

1. What is the Confucian value of humility? What do you think of the Confucian value of humility?
2. For what reason(s) do you think a person should be humble or subscribe to the Confucian value of humility?
3. Why or for what reason(s) do you think a person (or you) should embrace humility or be humble?
4. What do you perceive as the Confucian ways of carrying out the value of humility?

To prevent any memory lapse or data loss, the notes were taken and transcribed by the researcher during or within 48 hours after the interview session with the interviewee (Low, 2012a).

## **Findings**

The interviewees' inputs and comments are tabulated as follows:

Table 1: The Interviewees' Responses on working or carrying out "the Confucian value of humility":		
Responses	Number of Interviewees (out of a total number of 43)	Percentage (%) of Interviewees
<p><b>Caring for Others</b>            "If I'm self-interested, I cannot take care of others. I want to care for others". "I must say the manager in any organization should show care and concern for his or her staff because by being empathetic, it will make the staff feel a sense of belonging and trust; then they can coherently live and work together like a big family"; "we only pay moderate wages to our employees; I believe that to be successful in Chinese business, managers should be caring, considerate, courteous and showing concern to their employees so that we can retain our employees because of the good working environment" "Being loving and caring makes it easy for the employees to communicate and voice out their concern to the management and to get help from others and besides, people would often be happy to work with us". "When you show care to your employees, they will listen to us." "Passion reflects one's commitment and one's getting the job done".</p>	42	97.7
<p><b>Knowing Oneself</b>            "Whether you are proud or not humble, you would know yourself"; "the self is the starting point to embrace humility and other values"; "Once a person knows himself, he would know his strengths and his weaknesses, and from there, he would be able to improve and self-develop himself"; "knowing himself and continue to learn and improve himself is the best way towards happy living". "To live in a communal life one has to know oneself so that one can adopt and adapt to the environment one is in".</p>	37	86.1
<p><b>No-ego</b>            "One can learn and unlearn; this is because there is no question of ego"; "it takes me a lot of patience to stop being egoistic and stay humble when people praise me for my good work"; "even though I am the owner of this</p>	35	81.4

<p>company, I remain as humble as possible when talking to my employees so that I can get good feedback from them with the purpose of improving myself in running the company better”; “I allow my employees to question me if they disagree with the way I run the business. In this way, I always obtain sincere and honest feedback for me to improve my business”; “If I am egoistic and not humble, I don’t believe I can have so many employees working for me today”; “ I believe that if you are selfless, without much ego, you should be able to grow yourself and your people”</p>		
<p><b>Team-playing</b>  “The leader relates with one and all, he is a good team-player”; “All Confucian’s teachings encourage selflessness and living in the Tao, the way of life; by doing so, one can learn from others and self-develop oneself, foster good relationship with others and practise team-building for a good organisation (family, company and nation) (This ties-in with Low’s 2011 Analysis); “team-playing is a way of life and is a critical component of work-life in modern organisations. One needs to be humble in order to live and work with others”; “my business success today is because I promote team-playing, working together with my employees and others; and synergising well with them”</p>	35	81.4
<p><b>Practicing of servant leadership</b>  “My opinion is that leaders must be humble and be willing to listen to their people, if they are not humble, they would not listen to what the people are talking about and the issues they encountered.” “Leaders need to serve their people, and not to be duly concerned with their self-interests or worse, going around and boasting about their achievements every time”; “I remain as polite and as humble as I can when I encounter angry clients or customers. This to me requires quite a bit of patience to explain, to apologize to serve and sometimes, to calm my clients/customers down; after all, our aim is to do well in business”</p>	33	76.7
<p><b>Continuous Learning and Improving Oneself</b>  “When one is educated through continuous learning, it is believe that one can think better, solve problem easily and make better decision and to achieve this one has to know oneself and be humble to learn from others ”; “you</p>		

can see that the computing business is changing very fast every day, I must send my technicians for training in order to catch up and upgrade themselves with new technology”; “young people should learn more so that they are up to date with new technology and new way of business”; “I encourage my employees to learn so that they are flexible in working and can handle new jobs easily”; “even though I am good in what I am doing, I am still learning” and “although I have sold so many reprocessed cars but I am still learning from the customers and young people because they all have different reasons of buying a car.”	32	74.4
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## Analysis and Discussions

### Caring for Others

“If I’m self-interested, I cannot take care of others. I want to care for others.” (interviewees’ inputs). Indeed, a self-interested or self-centered person would only think and live for himself or herself. Caring for others needs a compassionate heart which is the understanding or empathy for the suffering of others. It is regarded as a fundamental part of human love, and a cornerstone of greater social interconnection and humanism. Confucius said, “Good people are generous without being wasteful; they are hard-working without being resentful; they desire without being greedy; they are at ease without being haughty; they are dignified without being fierce” (*Analects of Confucius*, XX: 3). Another word is that people should be kind, considerate and caring for others by being humble, hard-working, generous, and friendly in human relationships.

### Knowing Oneself

“Are you proud? Are you arrogant?” One should know oneself just as what the Old Master urged; that is, one should look within and examine one’s own self (The *Analects of Confucius*, 1994; Zhou, 2005; Low, 2013a).

Does one know oneself? Thirty-seven interviewees (86.05 percent of all the interviewees) spoke of, “Knowing oneself is important when it comes to achieving” and that “one must know one’s off-putting or red-light thoughts, for example, ‘I can do this because I am too old for it’”. Several interviewees mentioned, “When in foreign lands or when one is stateless, it’s tough, one knows

who one is and one works hard. A person becomes very ‘*chye see*’ (Hokkien, meaning conscious, perceptive and sensitive of the circumstance one is in)”.

Confucius said, “When you meet a person of virtue, learn from him or her. When you meet one without virtue, examine yourself to see if you have the same defects as he or she has” (*Analects of Confucius*, IV: 17). Obviously, to Confucius, people who embrace and practice good values in their daily living are worth to respect and learn from. This means that one should understand oneself before one can follow other peoples’ good examples to emulate.

### **No-ego**

“One can learn and unlearn; this is because there is no question of ego” (interviewees’ inputs). This ties-in with Low (2012; 2011) who highlighted that, “We pose questions, we unlearn and learn and refreshes and enlarges our mind. To unlearn is to learn. More often than not, before people can learn something new, they have to unlearn what they think they already know. Their mind expands; sacred cows are dismantled; new ideas are gleaned and put forth”. In this respect, leaders who have no ego would be able to communicate well and influence their people; understand and learn better from their subordinates and good example setting for their people to emulate in achieving their organizational goals (Low, 2013; 14-19). Indeed, it is very common to see that leaders who are polite and humble like by their people and serve them better. For those who are egotistic or have much ego, most people would simply avoid them; some may be fearful or even feel very uncomfortable to approach or relate with them.

### **Team-playing**

A team can be defined as a high-performing task group where members are actively interdependent; such group members have shared or common performance goals and objectives (Low, 2003: 4). This requires good and effective communication. “The leader relates with one and all, he is a good team-player.” (interviewees’ inputs). These responses tie-in with and confirm Low’s (2010c; 2003) studies.

The Confucian leader is “unassuming and humble. And because of this and the lack of egoism, (s)he becomes a good team-player and even a likeable team leader” (Low, 2013: 79). A team



leader/player, having no ego, is good because he or she is approachable and is prepared to listen to the team's concern whenever they encounter with problems or issues. His or her ears are open and ever listening. He or she also listens with an open mind. Overall then, the team feels and becomes empowered and they will certainly be motivated towards success; they will have a strong sense of fulfillment after achieving the shared goals.

### **Practicing of Servant Leadership**

Robert K. Greenleaf (1904–1990) coined and defined servant leadership. Greenleaf said, “The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead” (Frick and Spears, 1996). The practice of servant leadership is to enable leaders to achieve results for their organisations by giving priority attention to the needs of their colleagues and those they serve. Servant-leaders are often seen as humble stewards of their organisation's resources: human, financial and physical. Servant leadership can still be defined as a management philosophy which implies a comprehensive view of the quality of people, work and community spirit. It requires a spiritual understanding of identity, mission, vision and environment. A servant leader is someone who is a servant first, who has responsibility to be in the world, and so (s)he contributes to the well-being of people and community (<http://www.greenleaf.org/whatissl/>). A good example is the servant leadership exemplified by the new pope of Roman Catholic Church, Pope Francis, who washed the feet of twelve young offenders including two girls at a Rome prison on Thursday in an unprecedented version of an ancient Easter ritual seen as part of an effort by the new pope to bring the Catholic Church closer to the needy. The pope, at the start of the Holy Thursday ceremony -- the first performed by a pontiff in prison and the first including women said, “Whoever is the most high up must be at the service of others.” (AFP, 2013). In this study, some respondents remarked, “that leaders must be humble and be willing to listen to their people, if they are not humble, they would not listen to what their people are talking about and the issues they encountered.” “Leaders need to serve their people, and not to be duly concerned with their self-interests or worse, going around and boasting about their achievements every time”

### **Continuous Learning and Improving Oneself**

“When one is educated through continuous learning, it is believed that one can think better, solve problems easily and make better decision and to achieve this one has to know oneself and be humble to learn from others ”; “you can see that the computing business is changing very fast every day, I must send my technicians for training in order to catch up and upgrade themselves with new technology”; “young people should learn more so that they are up to date with new technology and new way of business”. “I encourage my employees to learn so that they are flexible in working and can handle new jobs easily”; “even though I am good in what I am doing, I am still learning” and “although I have sold so many reprocessed cars but I am still learning from the customers and young people because they all have different reasons of buying a car.” (Several interviewees’ inputs).

A Chinese proverb has it that, “a bachelor of arts discusses books, a pork butcher talks of pigs.” (Low, 2010b; Low and Ang, 2011: 1120). In essence, what is stressed here is the fact that a successful individual must not only continue to learn to improve oneself, but needs to widen his or her horizons. Indeed an individual should not shackle or chain up him(her)self to any single idea. There is a need to always try to see things with fresh eyes. If one can do this, one will be able to achieve progress and growth. To widen knowledge and open new horizons, there is also a need to be humble and learn from others (Low, 2010). An excellent individual learns from others. To a Confucian, for one to be capable, one should study; to be intelligent and smart, one must learn from others (Zhou, 2005).

## **Benefits and Significance of Being Humble**

### **Fostering Soft Power**

Soft power (Nye, 1991) can be defined as the ability to obtain what one wants through co-option and attraction, the carrot way. “In contrast to hard power, soft power, like the carrot, is certainly more appealing and attractive to the people. And it is the honey, not vinegar, that attracts the ants, and the followers feel connected to the leaders” (Low, 2010). Confucius once said, ‘Make it your guiding principle to do your best for others and to be trustworthy in what you say.’ (*The Analects of Confucius*, IX: 25). Interestingly, trustworthiness is one of the soft power of the leader’s virtues. A humble leader is influential; he or she really acquires soft power. People know that he is not greedy or self-interested; they trust him or her and as such, readily listen,

comply to or obey such a leader. By having no ego and being a great team player, the humble leader is open and approachable; being trusted by people and gets things readily done. In sum, Confucian soft power can be effectively applied by, first of all, cultivating oneself towards being virtuous; second, leading by example; third, being trustworthy; fourth, being approachable and friendly; and fifth, sharing the same value and sixth, fostering a sense of unity amongst the team. The concept of soft power as seen through the Confucian visor is an excellent paradigm of good attraction, particularly so of the leaders', it shows their caring for the people; the key issue lies in its action and sincere practices (Low, 2010a). Take for example, businessmen such as the late CK Tang and pioneer Tan Tock Seng of Singapore; and the Lim Teck Hoo Holdings Sdn Bhd. (LTH) of Brunei each year they share their profits by paying back or returning to the community with the means of building community hospitals or cash donations, and the people are helped or attended to. These charitable doings help to fulfill their corporate social responsibilities (CSR) (Low, 2010a).

### **Listening is Soothing to the People**

To learn well from others, one should especially listen; and listen well. Confucius said that, "(He who talks too much is prone to failure)" (Zhou, 2005: 69). This is because a person, who does not listen, does not learn. Listening is an important communication tool because one can obtain and learn new information through listening. Listening also includes paying attention to the person speaking; and picking up on body language, gestures, expressions, and other non-verbal signs or clues to help one understand what they are saying. Not speaking too much and listening to others is also a polite gesture, and it helps one to get along with other people easily. Listening is a virtue, something that not everyone has. It gives one an insight of other persons' thoughts and their behaviours, and which in turn makes dealing easy with them. Sometimes just by listening, an individual can help people reason with themselves and deal better with their own emotions. And the most important of all it gives a listener other persons' perspectives of the problem or the situation. (AU, 2013) A humble leader pays attention and listens to the people. And this denotes to the people that the leader is caring, and they would, in turn, be motivated to follow, obey or work with such a leader. Besides, listening well enable leaders to make better decisions in solving problems and issues raised and encountered by their subordinates; and in helping and take care of them.

### **Encouraging Loyalty (忠, *zhōng*)**

An arrogant leader would not be liked much by his or her people; fear is deployed by the leader. On the other hand, a humble leader, when serving people, is always polite and sensitive in actions and words; he or she is selfless and empathetic. This appeals to the people and is able to draw loyalty from them (Low et al., 2012). Here, the benefits of staff loyalty resulting in staff retention are as follows (Seber, 2013):

- (1) Employees being organizations' intellectual asset that is responsible for the day-to-day business operation. Although retaining competent employees in an organization generates goodwill in the work force, it also has a positive effect on the product or services a company offers. Employee retention is a financial gain for organizations.
- (2) When organizations retain their employees, they avoid hiring costs. These are often hidden costs.
- (3) Retaining workers reduces training costs. Recruits need to be trained in business practices specific to the employer's software, culture and office practices. Training requires one or more current employees to take time away from their job responsibilities to educate the new employee on the organization's way of doing business. This training program slows down the work process.

One can say that Confucian value of humility encompasses a cluster of the following values as illustrated in Figure 1.

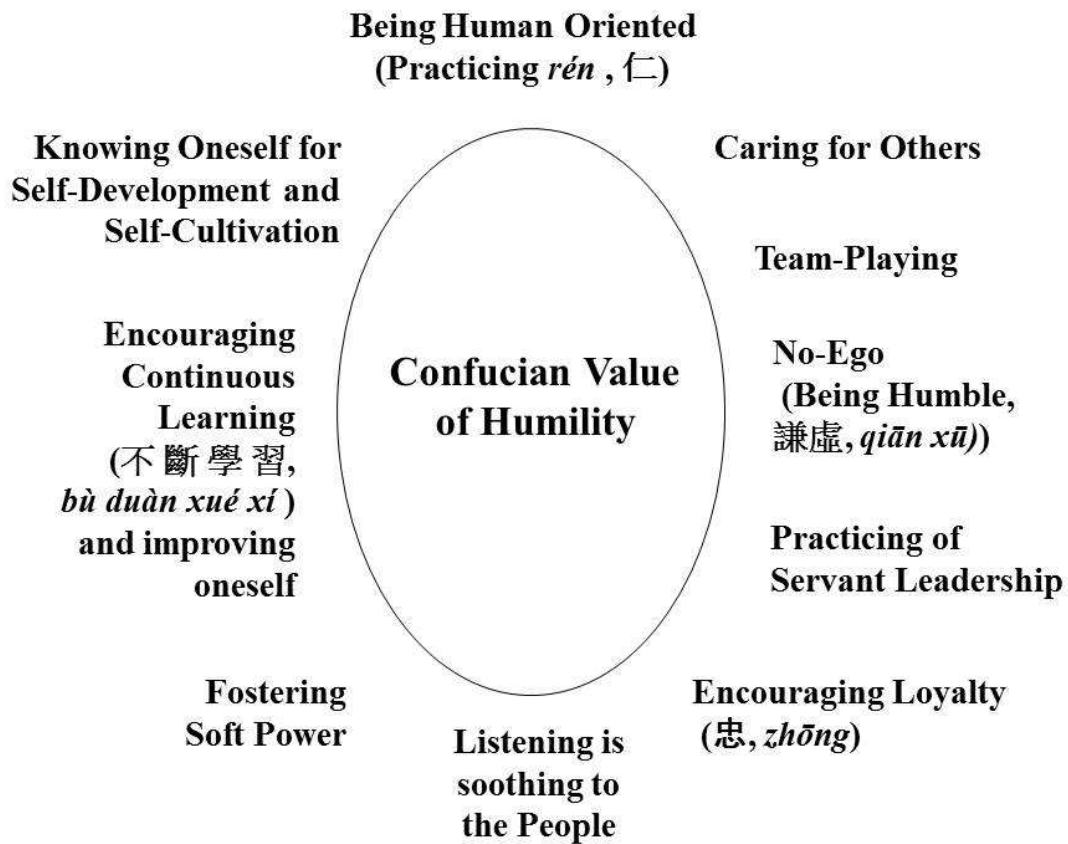


Figure 1: Confucian Value of Humility

### Limitations and Benefits of the Study

One of the main limitations of the research is the small number of sampling done, forty-three interviewees, as this was self-funded, and there were truly insufficient funds on the part of the researchers. Nonetheless, the qualitative study has its benefits, uncovering the various components that make up the value of humility; and of course, the study can serve as the platform for further studies on the Confucian/ Chinese value of humility – and perhaps, when funded on a bigger scale, would yield more fruits or different perspectives and/or possibly done in the various individual South-east Asian countries.

### Conclusion

Confucius said, "... I am from a poor family and I learned many humble crafts only to make a living. Does a real gentleman or lady (*junzi*) need to be skilled in many trades? No, he or she needs not." (*Analects of Confucius*, IX: 6). In other words, as long as an individual including a leader or a manager, can honestly and sincerely carry out one's work and fulfill one's duty in a humble way, and can even supply one's followers and people with much leadership care and concern, one would truly motivate and inspire them. From the above, it can be safely concluded that from the Confucian perspective, (the value of) humility should be an individual effort, but it helps to secure or influence others to work with the leaders. Greater accomplishments and success come when the value of humility is also practiced by the leaders' helpers and the followers, and these, combined and blended, chiefly, with a sense of duty; the individual too succeeds better when working together with others. Not like Westerners, Asians are more collectivistic.

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