

# EXPLORATION OF ASIAN LEADERSHIP THEORIES:

## IN SEARCH OF ASIAN'S ROLE IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ASIAN SOCIETY

Budi Santoso

---

<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b>	S. 102
<b>2 CRITICISM AGAINST THE GLOBALIZATION OF WESTERN-PERSPECTIVES BASED ON LEADERSHIP THEORY</b>	S. 102
<b>3 EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP: CONTINGENCY APPROACH</b>	S. 103
<b>4 THE PRESENCE OF LEADERSHIP THEORY: KNOWLEDGE-BASED THEORY</b>	S. 103
<b>5 THE EXISTENCE OF LEADERSHIP THEORY: LOW AND HIGH-CONTEXT PER- SPECTIVES AND TRADE-OFF BETWEEN GENERALIZABILITY AND SUITABILITY</b>	S. 104
<b>6 CONCLUSION: THE PROPOSED CONTRIBUTION OF THE LEADERSHIP THEORIES OF ASIAN AND WESTERN</b>	S. 105

---

## 1. Introduction

The issue of globalization has driven Western leadership theories into a dominant position or has even led to the uniformity of leadership theories. This study explores the role of Asian values in the spectrum of leadership theory. It starts with a brief explanation of the perspective developed by some theories of Asian traditional leadership and Western leadership in order to obtain the differences and similarities of both theories. Finally, the effective leadership from both values is discussed based on contingency approach, knowledge-based theories, and low-context and high-context perspectives.

In general, **leadership in Asian regions** grows along with the spirit of Asian local values. The leadership effectiveness is measured to the extent of how much a leader is able to sustain and implement the local culture. **Seniority** serves as base for recruiting a cultural leader. For example, the Javanese culture believes that the value of harmony becomes an important requisite to achieve such a goal. In fact, this core value is strongly established in several Asian cultural leadership concepts, such as: Nishkama Karma - The Indian Selfless Servant (India), Malay Hierarchical Social Structure (Malaysia), Islamic Leadership and Rabbani, Imam Khomeini's Approach (Iran) and Confucian (China). In order to achieve a harmonious society, individuals have to recognize the presence of social hierarchy affecting their social roles in the society. It results in a polarization of roles between the leader and the followers. The leaders have authority to control the processes of decision making. Hence, the patriarchal aspect is also inseparable from the values of Asian leadership.

Some **Western leadership concepts** include shared leadership and transactional and transformational leadership. In general, Western leadership is constructed in the organizational perspective in terms of conducting competition

for survival and sustainability. Next, organizations are regulated formally and hierarchically to achieve those goals. The relationship among individuals is regulated and transactional-based. Furthermore, Western leadership highlights values of formal, rational and transactional processes. A main task of being an effective leader is being in line with the organizational goals as mentioned above. Recently, the dominating western multi-national corporations globalize those values instead of maintaining the presences of Asian cultural leadership.

## 2. Criticism against the Globalization of Western-Perspectives based on Leadership Theory

Some critics have been placed on the powerful presence of Western leadership theories in the international societies. **Den Hartog et al.**<sup>1</sup> and **Scandura and Dorfman**<sup>2</sup> basically reveal that leadership concepts have no absolute commonality in every nation. The nature of leadership profile follows the uniqueness of national culture. Here, the scope of leadership's tasks also focuses on the achievement of local societal goals. It is different from global multi-national corporations where leadership concepts are standardized, as it is in line with the values of globalization.

Furthermore, **Yulk**<sup>3</sup> reveals that many empirical studies on the development of Western leadership theory are carried out in the environment of United States, Canada and West Europe. Moreover, **Hofstede**<sup>4</sup> underlines that the current

1 den Hartog, D.N.; House, R.J.; Hanges, P.J.; Ruiz-Quintanilla, S.A. (1999): Culture Specific and Cross-Culturally Generalizable Implicit Leadership Theories: Are Attributes of Charismatic/Transformational Leadership Universally Endorsed? In: *The Leadership Quarterly*, 10, pp. 219-256.

2 Scandura, T.A.; Dorfman, P. (2004): Leadership in an international and cross-cultural context. In: *The Leadership Quarterly*, 15, pp. 277-307.

3 Yukl, G. (1998): *Leadership in Organizations*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.

4 Hofstede, G.; Hofstede, G.J. (2005): *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw Hill.

leadership theories learned are a manifestation of American culture instead of representing the values of Asian cultures.

In fact, a cross-cultural approach influences the understanding of the effective leadership.<sup>5</sup> Western leadership was born in an individualistic society, while Asian leadership was born in a collective society. In an individualistic society, transactional leadership is more effective to influence the behavior of the followers for the achievement of the agreed goals. The relationship of both is based on a transactional contract. The presence of the leader emphasizes on legal and formal aspects. However, the society provides equal opportunities for individual aspirations to influence the final decisions.

While in a collective society, patriarchal leadership is emphasized. Here the relationship of a leader and followers is more personal and with a larger mutual respect, but is hierarchical. The leader holds authority to control and make decisions. The followers have no power to be involved in making decisions. This condition is well-preserved and traditionally accepted with an assumption that the leader and the followers implement their roles properly in the society.

### 3. Effective Leadership: Contingency Approach

The contingency approach perceives that the leadership effectiveness is highly influenced by situational factors, consisting of the relationship of leaders and followers, task structure and the power of a leader.<sup>6</sup> This consideration produces two types of leadership, namely a task-motivated leadership and a relationship-motivated leadership. Furthermore, various types of effective leadership are conditioned by the characteristics of employees and organizational task factors. How-

ever, this context is developed within the Western perspectives-based organizations.

The contingency approach provides a chance for the emergence of the role of Asian leadership theory to contribute significantly to the development of Asian societies. The key to the situational approach is that each social context requires different leadership approaches. In this case, the local values-based culture determines the effective leadership.

### 4. The Presence of Leadership Theory: Knowledge-based Theory

This paper perceives that the dominating presence of particular leadership theory in the society can be explained from knowledge-based theory. Spender<sup>7</sup> explains that a theory has a strong domination in a society based on three types of knowledge, namely knowledge as an object, knowledge as a personal experience (knowledge as personal), and knowledge as a cultural product (knowledge as cultural) (*see Table 1*).

- First, knowledge as an object. The existence of the existing knowledge as theory has been formed through the examination of the prevailing theory for different conditions. Achieving generalization through empirical studies is an ultimate goal for this approach. This approach encourages the presences of the examined knowledge to influence the society, in terms of commonality of behavior and perspectives.
- The second approach is knowledge as personal experiences. This approach produces the richness of knowledge resulting from individual personal experiences on one identical event or object. In addition, the existence of knowledge is temporary-based as it can be renewed by the continued personal experiences.

5 den Hartog et al.(1999): op cit.

6 Kreitner, R.; Kinicki, A. (2008): Organizational Behavior. 8th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill.

7 Spender, J.C. (2007): Social Institutions and Knowledge Management. In Hutchings, K.; Mohannak, K. (Eds), Knowledge Management in Developing Economies: a Cross-Cultural and Institutional Approach (pp.13-32). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

- The third approach is knowledge as culture. This approach stresses the influence of culture in society that determines how knowledge is acquired, accepted and preserved.

*Table 1: The Nature of Theory based on the Perspectives of Knowledge*

<b>Perspectives of Knowledge</b> (Nature of Theory)	How knowledge is acquired and its consequence on why a theory exists in society environment
<b>Knowledge as object</b> (Universal)	Positivism school of thought, hypothetic examination to confirm the prevailing theory, emphasizing on generalization, resulting in the well-documented knowledge, stable theory, knowledge accuracy and replication are prone to be consistently carried out unconditionally
<b>Knowledge as personal</b> (Contextual and personal)	Idealism or interpretivism school of thought, stressing on the accumulative local experience, tacit knowledge, contextual, and personal, using personal reference to synthesize theory (sense-making or using their own frame of reference) to synthesize knowledge or theory.
<b>Knowledge as cultural</b> (Local, culturally based)	Pragmatism school of thought, domination, pre-dominance of influence of values in society affects how knowledge is accepted and preserved (cultural practice of knowing knowledge); personal interpretation (personal) is controlled by "dominance of how to know".

As an example, the Javanese society believes in the influence of non-rational aspects to understand the causes of natural disasters, like a volcanic eruption, a flood, an earthquake, or even a tsunami. The Javanese people perceive that those phenomena are signs of the Creator delivered to mankind, because of the nature-destroying behavior. The Javanese society also believes that the relationship of nature and mankind represents that of mankind and the Creator.

### 5. The Existence of Leadership Theory: Low and High-Context Perspectives and Trade-off between Generalizability and Suitability

Low-context perspective adopts the perspective of universality and does not have sensitivity for the uniqueness of a country or region.<sup>8</sup> **Low-context perspectives** assume that each society is within a machine metaphor, having universal characteristics. As a consequence, the values of society are dominated with the importance of efficiency and productivity. Transactional and transformational leadership are examples of leadership theory on low-context perspectives. On the other side, **high-context perspectives** employ cultural metaphors in understanding the local context of societies. **Morgan**<sup>9</sup> explains that each society is unique. The development of theory on high-context perspective focuses on how to strengthen an internal harmonious atmosphere in order to create and preserve stability in society.

In social sciences, theories are based on contextual-evidences. Social theory is an outcome of observing real behavior in society. Based on this insight, the application of Western and or Asian leadership theory have sense of the suitability of

<sup>8</sup> Child, J. (2002): Theorizing about Organization Cross-Nationally: part 1- an Introduction. In: Warner, M.; Joynt, P. (eds): *Managing Across Cultures, Issues and Perspectives*. 2nd ed. London: Thomson and Learning.

<sup>9</sup> Morgan, G. (1997): *Images of Organization*. London: Sage Publications.

context. The position of Asian leadership theory is the same as that of Western leadership theory.

If at present there is an anxiety over the fading role of Asian leadership theory, let it be at least one of a cyclical chain of knowledge as a personal and cultural process that is temporary and dynamic. China as a newly-emerging gigantic economy admits that the interaction of Confucian values and Western values has been presented. Chinese society emphasizes the suitability of contextual local and modern values.

### 6. Conclusion: the Proposed Contribution of the Leadership Theories of Asian and Western

To conclude, the achievement of a societal harmony requires the synergy of traditional values and modern values which is represented with Asian values and Western values. The presence of both values is a product of cultural knowledge (**knowledge as culture**) and has the same practical stage and prioritizing contextual suitability (fit context). However, both theories contain some differences in organizations as stated in *Table 2*. Perhaps this thought enables us to inspire the development of Asian leadership theory, which is

more contextual to the current application so that the role of Asian leadership theory remains to exist concretely and plays its role in the development of modern Asian society without having to abandon its noble values. In the end, an understanding of the leadership effectiveness is a product of multicultural dimensions-based learning processes in the global economy.

**Dr. Budi Santoso**, Faculty of Economics and Business, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Indonesia. Currently, the author is as a Vice Chair at Department of Management.

*Table 2: Patterns of Western and Asian Leadership Theory*

Dimension	Western	Asian
Objectives	Effectiveness and Efficiency (Competitive)	Natural and social Harmony and Stability
Base of Leadership	Formal Influence	Cultural value
Organizational Characteristic	Mechanical and Formal	Voluntary and Informal (traditional)
Leadership Object	Controlling the scarce and important resources and preserving	Control over the preservation of social and natural harmony and stability
Their Contribution (Role) in Asian Society	Managing organizational process on the aspects of efficiency and productivity	Managing people on creating harmony society