

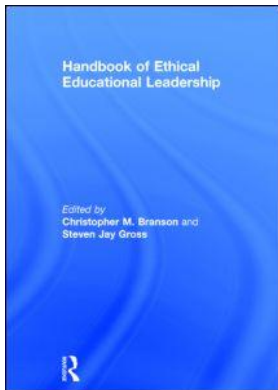
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8

LEADING WITH EMPATHY

QIAN HAIYAN AND ALLAN WALKER

Empathy is acknowledged as an important leadership quality. There is general agreement that empathetic leaders “enhance mutual communication and generate mutual trust . . . between the leader and the follower” (Mackay, Hughes, & Carver, 1990, p. 57). Empathetic leaders do more than just sympathize with the people around them; they use their emotional intelligence to improve their organizations in subtle but important ways (Goleman, 2005).

Whether defined as an affective capacity, i.e., to share others’ feelings, or as a cognitive ability, i.e., to understand others’ feelings and perspectives, empathy is an “other-focused” rather than an “ego-focused” emotional characteristic (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Ketelle & Mesa, 2006). Other-focused emotion is more consistent with the need for unity, harmony, and the alignment of one’s actions with those of another. Such values have been found to be more characteristic of collectivist than individualist societies (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Hofstede, 1980).

Research has consistently found Confucian and neo-Confucian societies¹ to be highly collective and Anglo-American English-speaking countries² to be individualistic³ (Hofstede, 1980, 1997, 2001; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). While there is an expanding knowledge base about empathetic leadership in individualist societies (e.g., Bennis, 2003; Ketelle & Mesa, 2006; Sugrue, 2005), little has been written about leaders or leading with empathy in non-Western societies, including East Asia. This is despite the fact that empathy is deeply rooted in traditional belief systems across the region, where empathy has long been recognized as an important personal attribute for both leaders and nonleaders. For example, a student once asked the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius whether there was one word that could be practiced for one’s whole life. The Great Master answered with the word empathy (*shu*), that is, do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire (*Analects*).

This chapter attempts to add to our knowledge base of how contemporary Chinese school leaders understand empathy and what it might look like in their work

environments. We do this through a single-principal case study of a leader deemed to lead with empathy. The study is guided by two questions:

- How does a leader with empathy lead in a collectivist society?
- How do empathetic understandings underpin and influence the leadership practices in such societies?

Given that it is a single-person case study, we do not claim any generalizability. Our aim is to provide a very initial snapshot of an empathetic school leader in China and hope that this can promote more research in the area. The principal was therefore selected not as a typical Chinese school leader, but rather as one recognized as upholding values such as mutual understanding, respect, and trust in a context largely dominated by an emphasis on accountability and quality assurance. Thus, the paper makes no attempt to provide a generalizable portrait of Chinese empathetic leadership. Rather, it portrays a “real flesh and blood” individual with “motives and emotions” (Ball & Goodson, 1985, p. 13) and attempts to connect the leader’s narrative with his political and cultural context. As such, the single case study aims to supply important insights into the relationships among culture, empathy, and leadership.

The chapter has six sections. The first section outlines the values found to describe collectivist societies. To do this requires a concomitant discussion of individualism. The second section reviews relevant literature about empathy and leadership. The third section describes Confucian understandings of empathy and leadership. The fourth section introduces the background of the school, the principal, and the research. The fifth section presents the major research findings with illustrations of critical incidents the principal narrated. The final section discusses the relationships among culture, empathy, and leadership.

COLLECTIVISM–INDIVIDUALISM

It is accepted that societal culture has a marked influence on how leaders lead and organizations work (Hofstede, 1997). Over the years scholars in international comparative management and cross-cultural business psychology have studied in considerable depth this influence and how it impacts organizational performance (e.g., Bigoness & Blakely, 1996; Hofstede, 2001; Hoppe, 1993; House et al., 2004; Ralston, Holt, Terpstra, & Yu, 2008). Similar interest in the field of education leadership has increased over the last decade but has only occasionally attempted serious empirical investigation (Dimmock & Walker, 2005; Hallinger & Leithwood, 1996; Hallinger, Walker, & Bajunid, 2005; Walker, Bridges, & Chan, 1996; Walker & Dimmock, 2002a). This is important given that perhaps even more so than in private-sector organizations, school leadership is centrally concerned with the interpretation and enactment of the values embedded in the society (Hallinger et al., 2005).

Perhaps the most informative work in the area remains that of Geert Hofstede (2001) and, more recently, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study (House et al., 2004). Both sets of work focus on a number of key dimensions of national culture that capture multiple features of the social

relationships that describe organizational life. One of the most researched of Hofstede's cultural dimensions is the collectivism–individualism dimension.

This collectivism–individualism dimension aims to capture the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups and to which there is closeness between persons in a relationship. Vecchio (1995) describes it as the extent to which a person is “inner directed” or “other directed.” In individualist societies, individuals place their personal goals above those of their in-group; the ties among individuals are loose. People are expected to look after themselves and their immediate families. In collectivist societies, people place group goals above their personal goals; they are brought up to be loyal to and integrated in strong cohesive groups, which often include extended families. In individualist societies, people are driven by an “I” consciousness and obligations to the self, including self-interest, self-actualization, and guilt; at school, emphasis is placed on permanent education and learning how to learn; and in the workplace, values tend to be applied universally to all, other people are seen as potential resources, tasks prevail over relationships, and the employer–employee relationship is described as “calculative.” In collectivist societies, by contrast, family members are brought up with a “we” consciousness, opinions are predetermined by the group, and strong obligations to the family emphasize harmony, respect, and shame; at school, learning is viewed as an activity primarily for the young and focuses on how to do things and on factual knowledge; and in the workplace, value standards differ for the in-group and out-groups, relationships prevail over task, and employer–employee relationships have a moral basis (Walker & Dimmock, 2002b).

CONNECTING EMPATHY, LEADERSHIP, AND CULTURE

Leading is a profoundly emotional form of work (Hargreaves, 1998; Walters, 2012). Empathy is part of the makeup of this work, and when enacted by a leader, it can positively affect the organization (Fullan, 2001, 2003). Much has been written about the strengths of leading with empathy. This section first reviews what we know about empathy and empathetic leadership. This is followed by a discussion of the relationship between empathy and culture and of how empathy is understood in relation to leadership in China. This review shows that little is known about empathetic leadership in contemporary school settings in China.

Empathy and Empathetic Leadership

Over the past three decades or so, the concepts of multiple intelligence (Gardner, 1983) and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995, 1998; Salovey & Mayer, 1990) have become increasingly popular in the leadership discourse, particularly business success stories. The literature holds that “emotional intelligence can be an inoculation that preserves and encourages growth” (Goleman, 1998, p. 312).

One of the fundamental characteristics of emotional intelligence is empathy (Fullan, 2001). Empathy, by definition, refers to the awareness of another person's feelings. In relation to leadership, Goleman (2005) defines empathy as thoughtfully considering employees' feelings in the process of making intelligent decisions. A leader who

works with empathy believes and respects his or her employees, acknowledges their power, and accepts their weaknesses (Polymilis, 2010).

Leading with empathy is a common denominator that can be observed across a range of different leadership types. Polymilis (2010) argues that terms such as transformational leadership, servant leadership, spiritual leadership, and values-based leadership, at least in part, can all be collected under the “umbrella of empathy” (p. 11). For example, individualized consideration, one of the inherent elements of transformational leadership, describes the characteristic of empathy (Pillai, Williams, Lowe, & Jung, 2003). Servant leaders consciously put themselves in the place of their followers when they make decisions—this is a key component of their desire to serve others (Greenleaf, 1970). Empathy can also enhance the spiritual dimension of the relationship between leaders and followers and evoke the feeling that followers follow their leaders because they want to, not because they have to (Polymilis, 2010). Empathetic leading is also integral to values-based leadership, where the leader focuses on the strengths of the led (Begley, 2001).

Evidence suggests that empathetic leaders are usually more effective (Gronn, 2011; Robinson, 2010). Empathy plays a particularly important role in motivation and trust building. In motivating followers, empathetic leaders understand that everyone wants to “be valued” (Donadio, 2012, p. 13) and that no one wants to be “treated as unimportant” (Manning & Curtis, 2003, p. 150). As such, they take a personal interest in their followers and provide individualized support (Hargreaves, 1998). Teachers working with empathetic leaders are thus prepared to “work above and beyond the official call of duty, entirely of their own volition” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 315).

When working to build trust, empathetic leaders understand that the social costs of an overdependence on managerial control can be detrimental to human relationships and to organizational performance (Moos, 2005). Thus, they do not rely on their formal power to win trust; rather they recognize that informal power, based on their own legitimacy, is a precursor to genuine trust (Moos, 2005). Empathetic leaders win the respect of followers by establishing their own trustworthiness.

In summary, empathy is an overarching term that is implicitly embedded across a range of contemporary leadership concepts and models. Empathetic leaders are generally effective because they promote trusting relationships within organizations and so are more likely to win the trust of others.

Empathy and Culture

Emotional experiences have been found to be quite common across cultures (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Matsumoto, 1989). However, different cultures attach different levels of importance to the same type of emotions. In other words, in some cultures people are more likely to have stronger feelings about certain emotions than in other societies (Aaker & Williams, 1998).

Cultural psychology suggests that emotions can be categorized into *ego-focused* and *other-focused*. These labels refer to “the degree to which specific emotions systematically vary in the extent to which they follow from, and also foster or reinforce, an independent versus interdependent self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991,

p. 235). Some examples of *ego-focused* emotions include pride, happiness, frustration, and anger. These tend to be associated with an individual's internal state or attributes. Examples of *other-focused* emotions include empathy, indebtedness, and shame. These are often associated with others in a social context and are consistent with the need for unity, harmony, and alignment of one's actions with those of another.

As discussed earlier, in individualist cultures, people tend to have more independent self-construal; rather, in collectivist cultures, people see themselves as inseparable from others and the social context (Aaker & Williams, 1998; Hofstede, 1980). Research shows that there is a closer relationship between collectivist societies and other-focused emotions, while individualist values are more closely connected with ego-focused emotions. For example, Morris and Peng (1994, cited in Aaker & Williams, 1998) compared how a murder was reported in an English-language US newspaper (the *New York Times*) and a Chinese-language US newspaper (*World Journal*). The case involved a Chinese postgraduate student who shot his US advisor, several fellow students, and then himself after he had lost an award competition and unsuccessfully appealed the decision. The English-language report tended to highlight the personality traits, or internal attributes, of the student (e.g., "very bad temper," "darkly disturbed man"), while the Chinese report highlighted others in the social context and the situation in which the student found himself (e.g., "did not get along with his advisor," "isolation from Chinese community"). The example hints that collectivist cultures tend to house more intense feelings of empathy.

Thus, although recognition and experiences of empathy appear to be robust cross-culturally, empathy is more widely expected and observed in collectivist societies. China is generally categorized as a collectivist society (Child, 1994; House et al., 2004). Perhaps the greatest influence on Chinese culture is Confucianism (Gu, 1981; Louie, 1984). The next section outlines traditional beliefs around empathy and leadership in China.

EMPATHY AND LEADERSHIP IN CONFUCIAN CULTURES

Empathy is frequently mentioned in Confucian writings. A number of examples taken from the *Analects* are recounted below:

The gentleman is judged wise by a single word he utters; equally, he is judged foolish by a single word he utters. That is why one really must be careful (hence be empathetic) of what one says.

If you love others, they will love you; if you despise others, they will despise you. Since you know how to treat yourself, you should know how to treat others.

Never impose upon others what you don't desire yourself.

Confucius himself was seen a model of empathy. The *Analects* recorded that "Confucius did not sing for the rest of the day as he usually would do after he had wept at a funeral" (VII, verse 10), and "Confucius never ate enough food at a meal when he found himself seated next to someone who had been bereaved" (VII, verse 9).

Thus, empathy is a quality traditionally expected of a Chinese leader. In traditional Confucian thinking, leaders are expected to exemplify three concepts: humanness (*ren*), which involves sympathy and empathy; ritualism (*li*), where the leader is expected “to comply with established social norms and to set himself as a model for the populace”; and moralism (*de*), where the leader is expected to provide a role model for establishing moral order (Guo, 2002, p. x). Empathy is a highly valued quality of leaders from a Chinese cultural perspective.

Confucianism holds that a leader with empathy is a warm (*wen*) person (Low, 2012). Such a person is soft and gentle and can always be depended upon. Only when leading with empathy can leaders win genuine obedience and loyalty. For example, according to Mencius, Confucius’s later disciple, when people are subdued by force, their hearts are not truly won over; they submit just because they do not have enough strength to fight or resist. However, when people are won by virtue (such as being empathetic and caring), they submit or accept sincerely and are glad in their hearts (Cai, 1991, p. 27, cited in Low, 2012, p. 825).

Despite the messages embedded in traditional philosophy, an examination of Chinese school leadership in contemporary literature (e.g., Lee & Yin, 2010; Qian & Walker, 2011a, 2011b; Walker & Qian, 2011; Yin, Lee, & Wang, in press) portrays a very different image of leaders. This is an image of leaders who are more authoritarian than caring and place more emphasis on upward rather than inward accountability. Leaders extend care to teachers, but this is underpinned by instrumental exchange and respect for status (e.g., Qian & Walker, 2011a; Yin, Lee, & Wang, in press). Leaders advocate mutual trust, but they also tend to control conflicts and opposition to maintain harmony (Qian & Walker, 2011a; Walker, Qian, & Zhang, 2011). Under the increasing pressure of quality assurance and accountability, managerial strategies such as rewards and sanctions are often adopted by school leaders in China to maximize teacher productivity (Qian & Walker, 2011b).

Given the contradictions between widely touted traditional values and apparent organizational reality, it is useful to look more deeply at empathetic leadership as it is played out in Chinese schools today. We will do this through an in-depth case of one principal in Shanghai. The case sets out to see how traditional values around empathy influence the leadership philosophy and practices of the leader. Given that most recent studies focus on the managerial roles of principals, using empathy as a lens for understanding aims to expose another, often neglected, side of school leadership in China.

THE STUDY

We first met Principal Ning in a master program organized by our institute. All the attendees in the program were school principals or midlevel leaders from Shanghai. In the 40-person cohort, Ning was by no means a star. He was quiet, almost hidden within the group. However, since most of the students came from the same district, they knew each other’s schools well. His classmates often made reference to Mr. Ning’s school as having a particularly effective teacher development program.

Even though others often mentioned him, Principal Ning remained silent and humble. The only time he spoke out was toward the end of the course when he

volunteered to share some of the teacher development practices at his school. Many of his practices did not aim explicitly to enhance teacher competence; instead the thrust was to improve teachers' sense of belonging and ownership. His words aroused our interest to know more about him. We therefore set up a short interview with him to talk about his teacher development policies, and the word "empathy" kept reappearing in our notes from this interview. His school policies and his leadership "wisdom" seemed to flow from the concept of 'empathy.'

We therefore decided to visit his school and talk with him further. Our discussion was still mainly about his approach to teachers and the rationale behind the strategies he adopted. We encouraged him to share stories/examples of working relationships in the school. A definite picture of a principal leading with empathy emerged from the data.

The Principal

Principal Ning is in his late forties. He was born and grew up in North China. After studying philosophy at university, he was assigned to work at a local teachers' college in his province. The main responsibility of the college was to provide in-service training to local educators. Ning taught a wide range of courses, such as politics, educational psychology, and educational management.

Due to a shortage of high-quality teachers in the late 1990s, Shanghai organized open recruitment and invited teachers across China to apply for teaching positions. In 1997 both Ning and his wife were successfully recruited by a middle school in Shanghai. Ning admitted that it was his wife that the school really wanted. His wife was a mathematics teacher, while he could only teach politics. Mathematics is a major course (together with Chinese and English) in middle schools, while politics (as a subject) is considered less important. The school wanted his wife, so they had to take Ning as well.

Although he did not impress the school with his academic and professional background at the interview, it did not take long for him to win the reputation of being trustworthy and competent. He was subsequently promoted to director of teaching and instruction in only his second year at the school. In his fifth year he was promoted to vice principal, and a few months later he became the party secretary of the school. One year later he became the principal. Even as a newcomer to the school, and to the City of Shanghai, it took him less than 7 years to be promoted from a subject teacher to school principal. What made Ning particularly proud was that before the principal election, the district bureau sent a team to the school to collect teachers' opinions. Ning got support from 100% of the teachers; all of his colleagues expected and nominated him to be the principal.

Ning believes he is known as a democratic, scholastic, and kind leader; he never attempts to "put on an authoritarian face giving orders from above." He holds that his leadership approach accentuates care for, and understanding of, teachers. To use his words:

Managing people is to manage their hearts [*guanxin*]. You can never manage others' hearts if you do not care for them [*guanxin*]. Caring for others requires that you use your own heart [*yongxin*], and using your heart means you show empathy to others and understand their needs, interests, and motivations [*dongxin*].

The School

Ning came to School A in 2007. The school is located in downtown Shanghai and has 800 students (Years 1 to 9) and 90 teachers, and it was facing unprecedented difficulties when Ning arrived. The school's reputation was originally built on extracurricular courses in painting and calligraphy, but this had almost disappeared because it could no longer attract talented students. Worrying that the school would be less and less competitive, some teachers (particularly art teachers) sought to transfer to other schools. The then-principal also suddenly resigned and left the job.

Ning was assigned to School A as a “firefighter.” He met the challenge of “saving” the school through helping teachers see *their* place in the school through his care, understanding, and empathy. He believed that the school had progressed significantly since his arrival. One indicator of this was that teachers now want to stay and have stopped applying for jobs elsewhere—this demonstrates a strong sense of belonging to the school.

The Data

The data were mainly collected from two interviews with Principal Ning in August and December 2012. The focus was how he constructed and maintained trusting relationships with teachers, how he approached teacher development, and how he generally understood the needs of teachers. He narrated his approach to teacher development and his relationship with teachers and shared stories to illustrate his approaches and relationships. In the interviews, a set of “why” questions were asked to check the consistency between the narratives and to probe Ning's beliefs and values about leadership.

The picture, which emerged from the data, was of a principal who seemed to have deeply internalized Confucius' advocacy for empathy: *Do not do to others what you do not desire yourself.*

PRINCIPAL NING AS A LEADER WITH EMPATHY

This section presents the data collected from Ning about his interpretation and practice as an empathetic leader under three themes: caring and showing concern, recognizing others' strengths and appointing people on their merit (*yongren suochang*), and putting himself in the place of another (*tuiji jiren*).

Caring and Showing Concern

As Ning held a strong belief that “managing people is managing their hearts,” one of the most important tasks he set for himself was to win teachers' hearts. In his opinion, to win teachers' hearts, a leader needs to extend care and concern to every member of the school. He was fully aware that every person was watching him closely, as he was new to the school. Then, how could he let teachers know what kind of person he was? He believed that teachers could form their judgment about who he was by observing how he treated the most disadvantaged people in the school. He therefore chose to improve the status and promote the importance of these least advantaged people:

I asked myself: Who are most disadvantaged? The answer is: those school cleaners and toilet cleaning ladies. Then for the first time in the history of the school, I invited these people to attend the School Teachers' Conference and placed them on the presidency table. I asked them to introduce themselves. When they spoke of their names and jobs, laughter burst out among the teachers. I told the teachers: It is the first time I have heard this laughter and I hope it is the last time. We should respect them and their jobs. From that time on, every time we have the annual Teacher's Conference, I invite them to sit on the stage and no one would laugh any longer.

His care for disadvantaged staff extended beyond inviting them to the school conference. He invigorated a new school policy where the principal would host a New Year's dinner for the cleaners. Since the cleaners came from outside Shanghai, they would go back to their hometowns for the Chinese New Year. Each year, before they left Shanghai, Ning invited them to have a get-together dinner. The cleaners deemed this a great honor. They would take a shower and put on their finest clothes for the occasion. They felt respected and a strong sense of belonging to the school. By this relatively simple act, Ning also established his populist appeal, and the teachers saw him as being concerned for every member of the school:

The money I paid for the dinner came from the school budget, but no one at the school would criticize me for misusing the money. In contrast, I suppose there would be gossip if I spent the school budget on a dinner with other school leaders.

Ning was also concerned about teacher well-being. He believed that when teachers were happy, they had a more positive attitude and stronger motivation toward their jobs. Ning implemented a number of specific strategies to boost teachers' sense of happiness. First, he redesigned the physical environment. Every corner of the school was decorated with student artwork according to a particular theme, such as calligraphy, painting, science, or celebrity. He invested in a sound system to pipe music throughout the school and built a self-service coffee corner so that teachers had a space to interact with colleagues. Although these initiatives were expensive, the payback was high in terms of teacher morale and closer professional relationships.

Second, Ning designed activities to enrich teachers' spiritual lives. There was a yoga class for female teachers on Monday night, calligraphy and Ping Pong classes on Tuesday, and chalk microcarving, dancing, and chorus lessons from Wednesday to Friday, respectively. The teachers enjoyed these activities and felt they had something to look forward to when they came to school every morning. As the teachers' chorus group and the Ping Pong team became increasingly famous and won several awards in the district, the teachers developed a stronger sense of achievement and appreciated that the school gave them room for personal development.

Although many of these strategies were not intentionally designed to enhance teachers' professional engagement or improve their classroom teaching competence, an apparent difference could be observed among teachers. For example, since Ning's

arrival, the district education bureau has promoted four teachers to the prestigious senior-class teacher status.⁴ By contrast, no single teacher had gained this promotion in the decade before Ning came to this school.

Recognizing Others' Strengths and Appointing People on Merit

In addition to showing care and concern, another quality that distinguished Ning from many of his counterparts was that he never complained about teachers. He recognized that most of his teachers were middle-aged women devoted to families and thus lacked a strong incentive to work hard or pursue career success. However, Ning also believed that it was the leader's responsibility to improve and develop teachers instead of criticizing or threatening them with the loss of their jobs. In his words:

I trust teachers and I also have faith in myself. I believe I have the ability to improve and transform teachers. If he or she is not doing the job well, I need to analyze why. It is probably my problem; I did not put him or her in the right position. The real touchstone for a leader is whether you can improve the teacher instead of laying him/her off.

Thus, Ning never turned to sanctions and punishment to motivate teachers; he believed that such a motivational strategy would incur more trouble:

Instrumentally you can also calculate which approach will pay you more. One is to always criticize teachers and threaten to dismiss the least performing one. Another is to always recognize their strength and encourage them. My experiences have taught me that the latter is far more effective. We need to have faith that no teacher has the intention not to do the job well or not to improve their students' academic outcomes. [Then if you lay off the least performing teacher], how will other teachers judge you? They would think you are too cold [*hen*]. Moreover, if a teacher is often criticized or punished, there will be a passive impact on him or her mentally or psychologically.

With faith that all teachers wanted to improve, Ning seemed able to see strength in each teacher. His belief was that "every teacher can be one with his or her own uniqueness" (*techang xing jiaoshi*). This belief impacted his evaluation strategies:

It is probably a stronger motivation if we can evaluate teachers' strengths and focus on what they are good at. Every teacher is unique and their value and contribution can also be distinctive [from those of others]. We cannot compare them with others. Instead we need to compare them with their past and to examine whether they have reached their potential. Every person has some weaknesses, but we need to emphasize strengths more. If we evaluate all the teachers with a single criterion, the criterion was often students' academic performance. However, this criterion is not objective, just, or reasonable. Those who are evaluated as unqualified will be less and less confident.

Therefore, in Ning's opinion, boosting and maintaining each teacher's self-confidence was extremely important. His policy was to "pick up teachers' strengths, magnify these, and publicly recognize them." Using this policy, Ning successfully shifted the work attitudes of several colleagues who used to be labeled as "disobedient" or "a headache" by previous principals. Ning was proud of this and regularly recounted supporting stories throughout our discussions.

For example, he talked about one teacher who had worked at the school for a long time and kept challenging the school authority. The teacher was widely liked and respected by other teachers. Because of his impact on teachers, the previous principals did not dare to sanction him if his job did not meet expected standards. Gradually, the teacher became sloppier in his work and developed a very negative attitude toward his job. After studying the teacher, Ning found that he was a big Ping Pong lover. Thus, Ning assigned him a new part-time job as the coach of the staff Ping Pong team. Every Tuesday afternoon, he would remind his team members one by one to attend the training; Ning was also a member of the team. The teacher was strict with his team members during the training; his teammates respected his expertise. Under his leadership the team won the district-level championship. The staff member developed a huge sense of belonging to the school and became a supportive "spokesperson" for the school policies. Ning said that the teacher's new nickname was "Vice Principal," even though he did not occupy the position.

Putting Himself in the Place of Another

Like all principals, Ning encountered unexpected problems in his work life, many of which revolved around teachers' personal problems. To Ning, the most important, if not single, principle he applied to such situations was putting himself in the place of others (*tuiji jiren*).

Ning shared an incident that took place not long before our second interview. One afternoon, two teachers came to his office. They were emotional, trembling, and crying. When Ning saw this, his first reaction was to ask the three vice principals who shared the office with him to stop what they were doing and sit down together to listen to the teachers. The two teachers complained that their photos had been viciously defaced (there were pictures of all faculty on the staff canteen wall). They considered the defacement an unbearable personal insult. One teacher even mentioned giving up her life.

After listening to the two teachers, Ning's second decision was to accompany them to the "crime scene" to investigate the issue with the vice principals. They also called the police. The police carefully examined the photos to see if they could identify the culprits. Ning did everything he could to support the police and to make the two teachers feel better. For example, he asked the school janitors to retrieve the videos that showed who and when people came to the school that day. The school allowed parents to use the staff canteen if they arrived before the students were dismissed. Ning immediately asked the head of the school logistics department to put a poster on the school gate to announce the end of the policy.

At the end of the day, the two teachers felt much better, even though the suspect was not identified. Ning justified his actions in this way:

When these two colleagues came to my office, I immediately got the impression that it was such a blow to them. Therefore, I needed to deal with it extremely seriously. That is why I asked the other members of the leadership team to stop what they were doing and attend to the needs of the two teachers. By doing so, I could make the two colleagues feel that we understood their suffering and we put their incident as the first priority; the whole high-level leadership team devoted their whole afternoon to accompanying them and investigating the incidents.

By contrast, Ning believed that if he had not shown enough empathy and had merely asked a vice principal to deal with the crisis, this incident could have become unmanageable.

As Ning consciously put himself in the place of others, it was not surprising to find that this was mirrored in school policies and the work environment. For example, on the walls next to the staircases there were signs such as “Younger sisters and brothers are small. Please walk slowly on the stairs.” This was a sign to remind higher-grade students to be more considerate of lower-grade students. Understanding that some Primary 1 students did not have a proper understanding of how to unlock the toilet doors and how to use flushing water, the school also videotaped how to use the toilet and showed it to the Primary 1 students.

A CHINESE PERSPECTIVE ON EMPATHETIC LEADERSHIP?

The case study of Principal Ning portrays an image of a Shanghai principal leading with empathy. As argued elsewhere, Ning was by no means a typical principal in China. However, he did display some features that have a strong connection with Confucian cultural values.

First, it was not difficult to delineate the impact of Confucian understanding of empathy (*shu*): Do not impose upon others what you do not want yourself. Ning internalized the concept and transfused it into school policies and norms. For example, he gave less advantaged staff more visibility because he understood that every person, regardless of social or professional background, needed to be respected. He recognized teachers’ strengths instead of weaknesses because he understood that no one would enjoy working with a pedantic leader.

Second, Ning saw the school as an organic entity. Every part of the school was connected with the others; one policy could have a chain effect and cause unexpected teacher behaviors and practices. This is the Chinese way of viewing an organization (Walker, 2011). Thus, he had to ensure the alignment among his actions, speeches, and policies. For him, he often reminded himself of these questions: What kind of school do we have? How can we cultivate our students and for whom are we cultivating them? Ning also understood that a principal’s decisions and actions were always in the spotlight. He maintained a strong sense of self-awareness that “all the teachers are watching me.” When he invited school cleaners to go to the stage to introduce themselves, Ning was proud of his decision, as were all the teachers watching. When Ning explained why he would not dismiss poorly performing teachers, the reason he gave was also that “all the teachers were watching what you do.”

The third feature was the importance attached to school harmony. In East Asia a traditional expectation of leaders is that they maintain harmony (Blunt & Jones, 1997). Ning automatically assumed responsibility for this. When he was asked to describe his successes, he explained that it was how he had changed the public image of the school. No teacher sought to move to another school; everyone seemed to be content with and devoted to the school. His responsibility to maintain harmony was also related to his strong awareness that all the teachers were watching him. He was careful not to arouse any potential conflict with and among teachers, as these could threaten the school harmony.

Fourth, Ning did not seek any personal benefits. This is also in line with the high levels of power distance (Hofstede, 1980, 2001). Leaders in Confucian contexts were expected to possess “non-utilitarian” qualities (Pye, 1991). Ning recognized that his personal merit was that he never tried to seize an honorary title or award for himself. If there was any opportunity to win such a title, he passed it on to his colleagues. Although these could be seen as personal losses, Ning was actually rewarded by holding the teachers’ trust. In Ning’s words, “Teachers will remember everything. If you only crave personal fame and gain, you are losing the greater for the less.”

In this chapter we have attempted to glean some understanding of the formation and practice of empathetic leadership through the eyes of one Chinese school principal in Shanghai. Although the scope of the study prevents generalization in traditional terms, it does prompt a number of insights or issues that may provoke further investigation into the place and exercise of empathetic leadership from a cross-cultural perspective. For example, from the case presented, it appears that many of the leadership practices associated with empathy are common across cultures. These include practices such as fostering mutual trust, making others feel cared for, and avoiding exercising overt managerial control over employees. However, some differences began to emerge. For example, Ning’s empathy was at least partly driven by a concern for his own image within the collective, as well as concern for how the school was seen by outsiders. Ning always had a strong awareness of how he and his school would be evaluated *by others*. Such considerations may show a close relationship with collectivist values.

Data flowing from this initial investigation of leadership empathy across cultures prompt a number of further questions that may inform future study:

- How does the conceptualization and exercise of empathetic school leadership play out in schools between and within different cultures?
- How does the conceptualization and exercise of empathetic school leadership play out in schools internationally as they face constant performativity demands and are held increasingly accountable for measurable outcomes, usually in the form of standardized test scores?
- How can leaders in different cultures gear empathetic beliefs and practices toward improving school performance and equity? For example, how can empathy influence the cultural foundations and structure of professional development, pastoral care, curriculum development, collaborative practices, and pedagogical innovation?

- Where is the line between genuine empathy and instrumentally construed or “faked” empathy? Is contrived empathy possible, and if so, is it acceptable?
- Can empathy be “taught” through leader development programs? And, if so, what form might these development approaches take?

NOTES

1. Confucian and neo-Confucian societies include, for example, Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea.
2. Anglo-American English-speaking countries include, for example, the US, UK, and Australia.
3. We acknowledge the pitfalls of the generic labeling of societies and that this risks overplaying the influence of culture and of downplaying value differences between and within societies. For a discussion of the problems associated with researching cross-cultural values, see the study by Walker (2003).
4. Teachers in China have a professional ranking. Teachers are classified into these ranks: third-class teacher (the lowest), second-class teacher, first-class teacher, senior-class teacher, and special-class teacher (the highest).

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