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<i>Module Code: SICH6016</i> <i>Module title: Sinological English III: Translation of Confucian and Buddhist Literature</i>	<i>Student number: 2303886</i>
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A humble leader is not weak

Dear Dr. Katherine Ngo and fellow students, good afternoon. Today, we would like to talk about ‘A humble leader is never weak from the perspective of Confucianism.’

Introduction

Humility is a key concept in both Confucian and Western culture.¹ However, in western, humility does not leave a positive impression on people due to the effect of traditional Christian humility. It was thought that humility is related to the morality of the meek and disenfranchised, the humiliated, and the poor.² This caused a decline in popularity of humility in the West, particularly among powerful leaders who view humility as not desirable for leadership and thus tend not to display it for others to emulate.³ As a result, leaders worry that humility will make them look weak, lacking confidence, self-esteem, or authority. Even now, humility has been gradually valued by scholars, but this concern persists. In contrast, leader humility had been highlighted and advocated in Confucian heritage cultures, especially for emperors, and it was thought one of key factors to manage the country well. Therefore, in this presentation, we will explore humility in Confucian leadership to address the concern that humility equals weakness. Here, the weakness means blind obedience, a passive attitude and no authority. and to demonstrate that a truly humble leader is not weak, but more effective and successful.

Three aspects of a humble leader

Leader humility in this presentation is concluded in three aspects:

1. They can control their desires and correct their conduct.
2. They can recognise their limitations and are willing to accept subordinates’ advice.
3. They can treat subordinates with the rules of propriety and build on a symbiotic relationship with them.

Next, we will explain them separately.

Firstly, as leaders, those in high positions with great power and abundant resources can easily become indulgent or addicted to pleasure. This is why moral self-cultivation is especially crucial for leaders, which brings us to the first expression of humility — self-discipline and correct conduct. The behaviour of a ruler can shape the customs of a nation, and the conduct

1 Chi-Ming Lam ‘A Confucian approach to teaching humility’, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 55.2 (2023), 207-216(P.207).

2 Sara Rushing, ‘Comparative Humilities: Christian, Contemporary, and Confucian Conceptions of a Political Virtue’, *Polity*, 45.2 (2013), 198-222(P.207).

3 Chi-Ming Lam ‘A Confucian approach to teaching humility’, P.202.

of a leader can greatly influence the behavior of their subordinates.

Confucius once said, ‘The relation between superiors and inferiors, is like that between the wind and the grass. the grass must bend, when the wind blows across it.’

「君子之德風，小人之德草。草上之風，必偃。」⁴

If we compare a leader to the wind, then the subordinates are like grass — the way the grass moves is entirely determined by the direction of the wind. This means the ‘direction of the wind’ — the leader’s conduct — must be taken very seriously. A leader who only cares about their own comfort and ignores the well-being of the group, or even the fate of the nation, will quickly bring about their own downfall. History gives us countless examples.

Mozi recorded, ‘In the past, King Ling of Chu admired men with slender waists. As a result, his ministers all restricted themselves to one meal a day; they would hold their breath before tying their belts and were so weak they had to lean against a wall to stand up. Within a year, the ministers’ faces turned dark and thin.’

《墨子·兼愛中》：「昔者楚靈王好士細要，故靈王之臣皆以一飯為節，肱息然後帶，扶牆然後起。比期年，朝有鰲黑之色。」⁵

This happened more than 2000 years ago. As we can see, King Ling was consumed by his own selfish desires, spreading corruption among his ministers. How could a ruler so focused on his own pleasure possibly lead the state to prosperity? Naturally, his extreme extravagance and personal greed brought great suffering to all his people. A few years later, a political upheaval broke out, and King Ling eventually died in the wilderness. Similarly, Emperor Yang of Sui Dynasty indulged endlessly in his desires. His palaces were filled with countless beauties and treasures, yet his greed was never satisfied. He continued to exploit the people heavily, waging wars eastward against Goguryeo 高句麗 and westward against the Tuyuhun 吐谷渾, draining the nation’s resources. The people could no longer bear the suffering, leading to uprisings that overthrew the Sui Dynasty entirely.

When the Tang Dynasty was established, Emperor Taizong (598 – 649) deeply reflected on the lessons of the previous dynasty. He placed great importance on restraining his personal desires, allowing the people to rest and recover. As a result, the nation quickly entered a time

4 The Chinese Classics Vol. 1 中國經典·第一冊, trans. by James Legge (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University of China Press, 2011), p.161.

5 Chinese Text project 中國哲學書電子化計劃, Mozi 墨子
<<https://ctext.org/mozi/zh?searchu=%E6%A5%9A%E9%9D%88%E7%8E%8B>> [accessed 12 August 2025]
(with translation)

of peace, with abundant harvests and a contented population.

Therefore, a humble leader will restrain personal behaviour for the greater good, limit personal desires, and lead by example to foster a healthy culture. When a ruler minimises the self, they can truly see the needs of their ministers and people. When a business leader minimises the self, they create space to think more about the needs of their employees and customers. This is the way to ensure the lasting success of a business and the prosperity of a nation.

Secondly, recognising personal limitations and being willing to accept others' advice to improve oneself is an important part of Confucian leader humility. Emperors or leaders, as a person with the highest position and power, face a unique danger: they have absolute authority, so subordinates may try only to please them, hiding the real problems. As a result, leaders may lose touch with reality, and this is often the reason why a country or group eventually fails. Confucianism observed this risk clearly, so it emphasises leaders need humility, self-reflection and openness to advice. As the Analects said, 'If I transgress, let not the ten thousand states suffer because of me; but if the ten thousand states transgress, the guilt is mine alone.' 朕躬有罪，無以萬方；萬方有罪，罪在朕躬。⁶

In addition, a leader's power is always limited, especially when managing a country or group. Why? Because every leader is confined by their own experience and perspective. This can easily lead to overconfidence and self-righteous mistakes in judgment. That is why it is necessary to listen to a wide range of opinions and advice.

Emperor Taizong is a classic example. When he was young, he was fond of archery and believed he had mastered all its subtleties. He once showed a bow craftsman some bows he believed were well made, but the craftsman told him that those bows were not good because the core of the wood used in the bows was not straight, so their grain would be crooked. Even if these bows were strong and resilient, they couldn't shoot an arrow straight. So, this incident made Emperor Taizong deeply aware of his own limitations. If he could not fully understand even his familiar bows, managing a country was certainly beyond him. So he listened widely to his ministers' advice, and sincerely hoped to receive their help in making up for his shortcomings. Eventually, he created a golden age in ancient Chinese history.

However, being open to advice does not mean accepting every suggestion blindly or losing leadership autonomy. Leaders must retain the initiative to choose which advice to follow.

6 The Analects 2nd edn, trans. by D.C. Lau, (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2000), p.201.

Confucianism opposes leaders who are biased or unaware in this regard.

The *Ti Lun* mentioned, ‘The ability to “listen and observe” is the door to life or death, the key to safety or danger. If a leader cannot listen and observe from diverse sources but relies only on opinions provided by his trusted sources, his plans will be deficient and incomplete. On the other hand, if he were to hear from diverse sources, and yet were to embrace this information in an unsuitable manner, or were to fail to evaluate it accurately, the resulting plans would still be disastrous.’

「夫聽察者，乃存亡之門戶，安危之機要也。若人主聽察不博，偏受所信，則謀有所漏，不盡良策；若博其觀聽，納受無方，考察不精，則數有所亂矣。」⁷

Therefore, a humble leader exercises judgment and does not follow advice blindly. A scholar, Sara Rushing, also points out that Confucius criticized feigned humility and opposed uncritical or rote humility, even when sincere.⁸ Also, the *Xunzi* offers a vivid metaphor. Beside the ruler was placed a tilting vessel (qiqi 欹器). It inclines when empty, is upright when half full, and overturns when completely full.⁹ This reminds leaders to keep a balance — neither arrogant nor excessively submissive — so that humility strengthens rather than weakens their rule.

Thirdly, when we talk about humility in Confucian leadership, we cannot ignore the Confucian view of the relationship between ruler and minister. Leadership does not exist in isolation — it is built on a symbiotic relationship with subordinates. The way a leader treats their subordinates will directly determine whether the relationship thrives or collapses.

Mencius said to King Xuan of Qi, ‘If a prince treats his subjects as his hands and feet, they will treat him as their belly and heart. If he treats them as his horses and hounds, they will treat him as a mere fellow-countryman. If he treats them as mud and weeds, they will treat him as an enemy.’

《孟子》曰：「君視臣如手足，臣視君如腹心。君視臣如犬馬，臣視君如國人。君視臣如土芥，臣視君如寇讎。」¹⁰

In other words, the ruler–minister relationship cannot be based solely on material benefits. Even if a ruler grants high positions and generous rewards, that alone cannot create a strong relationship. What matters most is the leader’s attitude.

7 Wei Zheng 魏徵 and others: *The Governing Principles of Ancient China*, Volume 1, compiled and translated by Group of Qunshu Zhiyao 360 Malasian Han Studies, (Taipei: shijie shuju, 2012), p.61.

8 Sara Rushing, ‘Comparative Humilities: Christian, Contemporary, and Confucian Conceptions of a Political Virtue’, *Polity*, 45.2 (2013), 198-222(p.218).

9 Chan, Gary K. Y., ‘Confucianism, virtue and leadership: The focus on humble leadership’, *Handbook on Virtue Ethics in Business and Management*, (2015), 1-11(p.3).

10 Mencius, trans. by D. C. Lau (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 2003), p.179.

This is why Confucius taught: ‘A prince should employ his ministers according to the rules of propriety; ministers should serve their prince with faithfulness.’ 君使臣以禮，臣事君以忠。¹¹ A humble leader first sets high standards for themselves, shows respect for their subordinates, lowers their own posture, and steps into the group to understand them. By doing so, they can build a harmonious relationship between leader and team — one that has a greater capacity to withstand risks.

A researcher once interviewed many Hong Kong CEOs who embraced and practiced Confucian values. One CEO shared his belief that a company belongs to all of its employees, not just to shareholders or customers. Because of this, he insisted on holding large-scale face-to-face meetings with employees every four to six months to promote mutual understanding between the company and its people. When the Asian financial crisis hit Hong Kong in 1998, he did not choose layoffs to cut costs — even though that was the approach most companies took, and the most economically efficient option. He understood that such a move would create inequality and conflict. Instead, he distributed all company shares to the employees, so everyone shared the burden of the crisis together. With the full support of his staff, the company quickly emerged from the crisis.¹²

This outcome was the result of his consistent care and understanding toward his employees over the years, his genuine relationship-building, and his emphasis on a shared destiny. Step by step, he built trust, resolved conflicts, and inspired unity. In the end, this allowed him to draw on the collective strength of his team in a time of need, achieving harmony and stable growth for the company.

The truth is, the ruler and the ministers are one body — when one prospers, all prosper; when one suffers, all suffer. If a leader mistreats their subordinates, the subordinates will have no desire to stand by the company in times of difficulty. Therefore, a truly humble leader is not weak — their humility gives them the strength to unite people, overcome challenges, and achieve lasting success.

Conclusion

According to the above discussion, we can conclude that in Confucian thought, humility is never about submission or loss of authority. It is about moral strength, clear self-awareness, and respect for others. A humble leader restrains their desires, seeks advice to improve, and

11 The Chinese Classics Vol.1 中國經典·第一冊, trans. by James Legge, p. 259.

12 Chau-kiu Cheung, Chi-fai Chan, ‘Benefits of Hong Kong Chinese CEOs’ Confucian and Daoist leadership styles’ *Leadership & Organisation Development Journal* Vol. 29, 6 (2008), 474-503 (p.486).

builds harmonious relationships with subordinates, thereby uniting the team and becoming more effective and successful in the face of challenges.

Like ancient Emperor Taizong and the modern CEO, they all possess the virtue of humility. They are not weak, but rather led the nation to prosperity and enhanced the company's resilience and cohesion. They have all shown us that humility can make leaders stronger. In contrast, King Ling of Chu and Emperor Yang of the Sui Dynasty indulged in their desires, mistreated their ministers, and were self-righteous without any trace of humility. They finally drove their nations to ruin, proving to us that it is the arrogant, not the humble, leaders who are truly fragile and weak.

This is our presentation. Any comments and suggestions are welcome. Thank you for listening!

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