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Responsible Leadership with Chinese Characteristics

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Abstract

Responsible leadership (RL) has become a buzz word in the current lexicon of business and politics, but there is still limited agreement on the components, scope, and characteristics. The confusion is rooted, in part, in the dominance of normative perspectives that take RL as a universal phenomenon. However, embedded in a specific culture, RL cannot be understood fully without understanding the moral traditions of that culture. In this article, we used a case study method to explore how RL is understood and practiced in China. Taking the role theory perspective, we conducted in-depth interviews with 9 highly regarded responsible executive leaders and 92 stakeholders in and outside of their companies who were well acquainted with the leaders. Our findings reveal that in China, the moral character of leaders guides them to define and take responsibility for themselves, their employees, companies, and external stakeholders. The five dimensions of RL we identified and the relationships among the dimensions include characteristics that reflect Chinese culture, such as strong sentiment for the nation, self-discipline, developing employees philosophically, and ‘*jun zi wu ben*’ (a gentleman should focus on fundamental matters). We conclude by discussing the implications of our study for RL research and practice.

摘要

负责任的领导力 (RL) 是当前商业和政治词汇中的热门概念, 但学术界对此概念的构成、作用范围和行为特征仍未形成共识。导致这种状况的部分原因在于学者们把这个概念作为一种与文化无关的现象来研究。我们认为, 负责任的领导力与其所在的社会文化及道德传统息息相关。本研究采用案例法探讨了中国文化背景下负责任领导力的内涵和实践。依据角色理论, 我们深度采访了9位被广泛认同的负责任的高层领导者以及92名熟悉这些领导者的内部各层级员工及外部利益相关者, 然后对访谈内容进行了文本分析。结果表明, 在中国, 负责任的领导力包含五个方面: 领导者的道德品格、在此基础上, 领导者对自己、员工、公司以及外部利益相关者之责任的界定和履行。这五个方面中的具体行为表现, 如国家情怀、自律、从思想上培养员工、“君子务本 (君子应当专注于根本性事务)” 等, 充分体现了中国文化特色。

Keywords: Chinese context; Chinese culture; executive leadership; responsible leadership (RL); role theory

关键词: 责任型领导; 高管领导力; 中国文化; 中国情境; 角色理论

Introduction

Research on responsible leadership (RL) has recently proliferated across multiple domains and disciplines because many researchers have realized the urgency and legitimacy of RL. Tsui (2021: 168) asserted that ‘Responsible leadership in the twenty-first century may be one of those wicked problems that responsible researchers want to tackle’. However, scholars have reached no clear consensus on the true meaning of RL. A decade ago, Pless and Maak (2011: 5) lamented that the field was ‘fluid, and the tentative answer to the question “What is responsible leadership”? must be “It depends”’. Today, the

situation remains largely the same. Waldman, Siegel, and Stahl (2020: 5) pointed out what they called ‘an interesting aspect’ of RL: ‘depending on one’s theoretical perspective, RL can be defined in multiple, somewhat disparate ways’. Although RL has been discussed in the literature on CSR, ethical leadership, servant leadership, and many other domains, our understanding of the nature or core components of RL is still very limited. Thus, it is difficult for researchers to build on the work of others and the lack of a deep understanding hampers the advancement of RL knowledge.

A growing body of research has emerged on the denotations and connotations of RL (e.g., Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Antunes & Franco, 2016; Cheng, Chen, & Zheng, 2021; Hind, Wilson, & Lenssen, 2009; Koh, Fernando, & Spedding, 2018; Maak & Pless, 2006; Pless, 2007; Voegtlin, Frisch, Walther, & Schwab, 2020). This literature has revealed several inconsistencies and conflicting results. A potential reason for the inconsistencies is that, with rare exceptions (Koh et al., 2018; Pless, 2007), researchers have adopted a normative approach that relies on their a priori beliefs of what RL is or must be (Singer, Huertas, & Scott, 2000). Another potential reason is the insufficient attention given to the cultural embeddedness of RL. It seems impossible to develop a universal conceptual model for RL. Even the notion of leadership has been shown to be culturally embedded (House, Wright, & Aditya, 1997), which justifies exploring the meaning of RL through the lens of specific cultures. Chinese scholars (e.g., Cheng et al., 2021; Zhang & Lu, 2011) have developed multiple RL scales; however, none of them reflect obvious Chinese characteristics.

While most existing literature has defined RL from a stakeholder or relational perspective (e.g., Maak & Pless, 2006; Voegtlin et al., 2020), we take a different perspective, which is rooted in role theory (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001). Since responsibility is attached to a specific role, the discussion of a leader’s responsibility should not be separated from the leader role. Maak and Pless (2006) and Voegtlin et al. (2020) defined RL as a set of roles. While this is useful for the conceptualization of RL, it is also necessary to explore how a leader can be responsible for the functional group role (Turner, 2001) the leader plays. In light of role theory (Biddle, 1986; Turner, 2001), the expectations set forth by stakeholders and the leaders themselves define the role, including the responsibilities that are attached to it. That is why we chose to dig into these expectations to understand RL.

To address the problems presented above in the existing RL research, this study focuses on the business leaders. We adopted a descriptive approach – a case study method – to investigate leaders’ responsibilities from a role perspective. Since ‘role theory tends to examine only one role at a time’ (Miles, 2012: 227) and RL more typically relates to executive-level positions (Waldman et al., 2020), we selected CEOs of Chinese companies as our sample. To develop a relatively comprehensive profile of the characteristics of RL within the roles they play, we studied the accounts given by the leaders who described the role they played as the executive leader and juxtaposed these accounts with stakeholders’ narratives of the leaders’ responsibility. By doing so, we first identify the characteristics and behaviors of Chinese responsible leaders and then propose a new comprehensive conceptual model. The new elements in the model and the relationships among the elements reflect Chinese characteristics and enrich our understanding of RL in a cultural context, which contributes to a deeper understanding of RL as an embedded concept. Our research can help business leaders understand how to lead responsibly and inspire scholars and practitioners from different cultures to delve into their own cultures to better understand and more actively engage in RL.

Theoretical Background

The first academic attempt at foregrounding the concept of RL goes back to the early 21st century when scholars began to discuss leadership as a social–relational and moral phenomenon that is inescapably tied to the rights and needs of diverse stakeholders inside and outside the organization (Maak & Pless, 2006). This perspective was a departure from the myopic focus on leader–follower dyadic relations that characterized much of the leadership literature. There was a clear emphasis in this perspective on the cultural context of RL because the moral traditions that represent responsibility and the norms that govern RL cannot be understood in isolation from the cultural context in which the leader and stakeholders are situated. However, most studies on RL seem to take a normative approach,

neglecting a descriptive approach that would reveal the impact of the cultural context. In this section, we provide a brief overview of the literature on RL. This overview sheds light on the importance of role theory as a thread that integrates the fundamental ideas of RL scholarship. In particular, we highlight the characteristics of the Chinese cultural context that are discussed in relation to RL in China.

Research on the Characteristics of RL

Maak and Pless's (2006) widely accepted definition of RL highlights that responsible leaders build sustainable and trustful relationships with multiple stakeholders. The original focus on the relationship between leaders and subordinates is expanded to all stakeholders in this definition. Responsible leaders build a network of mutual trust, cooperation, and reciprocity with multiple stakeholders inside and outside the organization, which mirrors the complexities of leadership in a stakeholder society (Voegtlin et al., 2020).

To date, scholars have proposed several characteristics to conceptualize RL. We categorize them into four groups in terms of the targeted subjects: the self (leader), employees, the entire organization, and external stakeholders. The characteristics of the leaders demonstrate their personal virtues, principles, and ethical values such as integrity, justice, humanity, decency, honesty, humility, responsibility, and social welfare orientation (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Hind et al., 2009; Maak, Pless, & Voegtlin, 2016; Pless, Sengupta, Wheeler, & Maak, 2022; Zhang & Lu, 2011). These characteristics have sometimes been conceptualized as antecedents to balance the inner self with the needs of diverse stakeholders and to reconcile conflicts of interests. Scholars have also stressed that a few behaviors, such as leading by example (Koh et al., 2018), making fair decisions (Agarwal & Bhal, 2020), self-discipline, and stabilizing others (Cheng et al., 2021) are what responsible leaders demand of themselves. Hind et al. (2009) also argued that certain knowledge and skills, such as understanding the competing demands of different stakeholder groups and critical thinking, constitute responsible business behavior. Taken together, the self (leader) RL characteristics involve leadership qualities related to morality and different stakeholders.

The RL characteristics related to different stakeholders reflect the diversity of leadership accountability (Voegtlin et al., 2020). For example, *responsibility for employees* is often manifested as caring for, inspiring, and empowering employees (e.g., Hind et al., 2009; Voegtlin et al., 2020; Waldman & Galvin, 2008; Zhang & Lu, 2011). Likewise, *responsibility for the focal organization* is manifested by pursuing long-term development, pursuing excellence, and incorporating ethical standards and stakeholder values (e.g., Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Cheng et al., 2021; Koh et al., 2018; Waldman & Galvin, 2008; Zhang & Lu, 2011). In addition to responsibility for internal stakeholders, RL also includes *responsibility for external stakeholders* by considering their welfare as integral to organizational success, creating strategic networks and alliances, engaging stakeholders, respecting social values, and engaging in corporate social responsibility (e.g., Agarwal & Bhal, 2020; Antunes & Franco, 2016; Cheng et al., 2021; Hind et al., 2009; Koh et al., 2018; Zhang & Lu, 2011).

As this brief discussion of the existing body of knowledge shows, the common thread in understanding RL is the roles that are expected of responsible leaders. Some of these roles can best be classified as character traits and others as behaviors toward stakeholders. Maak and Pless's (2006) definition of RL includes both of these roles, where they distinguish between value-based roles (steward, citizen, servant, and visionary) and operational roles (coach, networker, storyteller, architect, and change agent). Thus, we believe the role theory perspective is more explicit in defining and studying RL. We define RL as a set of interrelated attributes and behaviors that enable a leader to lead the organization toward sustainable relations with their stakeholders. This definition has a different emphasis but it is consistent with existing RL definitions.

Despite the extensive literature, an obvious limitation in the methodology in existing research on the characteristics of RL is worth highlighting: scholars have paid little attention to descriptive RL in particular cultural and empirical contexts (Cheng et al., 2021). The approaches scholars have taken to study RL can be roughly divided into two approaches: normative and descriptive. The normative approach does not rely on empirical investigations of leaders and their leadership practices

(Treviño & Weaver, 1999). This stream of RL research has often overlooked the specifics of different empirical contexts. By comparison, the descriptive approach seeks to understand, measure, and predict RL as a culturally situated phenomenon. This approach pays close attention to how different people in their natural communities identify RL. For instance, Witt and Stahl (2016: 624) pinpointed cultural and institutional differences between Asian and Western societies, arguing that ‘executives in different societies hold fundamentally different beliefs about their responsibilities toward different stakeholders, with concomitant implications for their understanding and enactment of RL’. Similarly, Fernando (2016) showed how Asian cultures developed an understanding of RL that is starkly different from the predominantly Western understanding. Cheng et al. (2021) and Zhang and Lu (2011) explored the dimensions of Chinese RL and developed scales using the survey method. These exceptions notwithstanding, research on descriptive RL, particularly in the Chinese context, is still very limited. The research has not only failed to paint a comprehensive picture of RL in China but has also hindered the cross-cultural communication of RL theories. Thus, there is a need for a deeper understanding of the Chinese context and the characteristics of Chinese responsible leaders.

Role Theory as an Integrated Perspective

Roles are one of the most fundamental concepts to explain and understand how people behave, interact, and coordinate their behaviors (Katz & Kahn, 1978). While leaders play multiple roles (Maak & Pless, 2006), the leader is regarded as a role as well (e.g., Badura, Galvin, & Lee, 2022; Hoyt, Price, & Poatsy, 2013). To understand the characteristics of RL, role theory provides a useful perspective. Three major propositions of role theory make it an appropriate perspective for studying RL: (1) roles exist in a specific social context or framework (Biddle, 1979; Miles, 2012); (2) roles are sets of expected qualities and behaviors and these expectations could come from others and oneself (Li et al., 2021); and (3) roles evolve through social interactions (Miles, 2012).

While the first proposition has been stressed in existing leadership theories (e.g., contingency theory), this proposition demonstrates the need for a descriptive approach in RL research. Scholars have suggested using role theory as the basis for leadership research (Colbert & Witt, 2009; Li et al., 2021) to understand the multiple and contextual role expectations in an interconnected network. Multiple studies have examined the role-making process facilitated by leaders’ expectations of the subordinates and vice versa, for example, in LMX theories (e.g., Matta, Scott, Koopman & Conlon, 2015) and empowering leadership (Cheong, Spain, Yammarino, & Yun, 2016). Li et al. (2021) have examined how role expectations change leaders’ behaviors and lead to increased conscientiousness and emotional stability.

Adopting a role theory perspective in RL research would expand the perspective of leadership roles from leader-follower relations to a significantly more complex set of relations with external stakeholders. The role theory perspective also sheds light on the processes through which roles are socially defined and redefined. RL is understood as ‘a moving target’ characterized by dynamic inputs from various stakeholders (Miles, 2012). Taking the role theory perspective, we define the roles of responsible leaders according to the expectations of relevant stakeholders and the leaders themselves in the Chinese context. This approach integrates the relational perspective of RL with role theory.

The Chinese Cultural Roots of Responsibility

The responsibilities we have discussed above pertaining to various stakeholders exemplify what Cooper (1992) called objective responsibility, which is primarily concerned with accountability and other-defined responsibilities. However, the Chinese culture is unique in terms of the distinctive philosophical emphasis on life rather than mere existence. This emphasis is reflected in the denotation and connotation of responsibility in China, which highlights the role of subjective responsibility based on individuals’ inner beliefs about loyalty, conscience, and identification (Cooper, 1992). We identified four prominent characteristics that illustrate why Chinese people hold subjective responsibility in higher regard compared to Westerners. These characteristics encompass the self, relationships between individuals, family, and nation, and the relationship between human beings and Heaven.

Self-cultivation (self)

Since ancient times, the focus of Chinese philosophy has been on transforming individuals to an elevated ideal, or in simple words, a good person. The three dominant schools of teaching in China emphasize self-cultivation. Confucianism teaches how to become *jun zi* (a gentleman or a good person), Daoism encourages people to be *zhen ren* (a natural person), and Buddhism urges people to become Buddha (an enlightened person). For thousands of years, Chinese people have believed that there is a guiding light called conscience in every human being, and that their conscience is the source for all moral decisions. To ensure that human beings listen to their conscience and act on it, various regimes of self-cultivation and morality education have been proposed and increasingly valued in China (Eryong & Li, 2021).

Three schools of thought have offered specific ways to cultivate the self. However, the most influential set of virtues, by far, is Confucius's *wu chang* (five virtues) – *ren, yi, li, zhi, xin*. *Ren* in present-day Chinese language is benevolence or kindness (Liu & Stening, 2016). *Yi* refers to the right action based on good judgment. Confucius said, 'Wealth and high status are what men desire but unless I got them in the right way I would not remain in them' (Analects, Chap 4:5). In his philosophy, '*yi*' carries very strong moral weight, which heavily influences the concept of responsibility among Chinese business leaders because they have to make choices between *yi* and *li* (利 interests or profits). *Li* (礼) generally refers to rite, ritual, propriety, rule, and norms. *Zhi* (wisdom) implies the use of best practices and common sense in making judgments and decisions. *Xin* relates to the trustworthiness and credibility that one gains from being reliable and responsible. As a result, practicing benevolence and justice, cultivating themselves, helping the world, and even sacrificing their lives for the sake of righteousness have become components of a Chinese responsible personality (Ren, 2008).

Like Confucianism, Daoism also emphasizes the importance of the moral quality of a person by urging people to pursue the quality of water. 'The excellence of water appears in its benefiting all things, and in its occupying, without striving (to the contrary), the low place which all men dislike' (*Dao De Jing*, Chap. 8). In this sense, responsible leaders embrace self-transcendence and self-sacrifice rather than self-enhancement (Fu, Tsui, Liu, & Li, 2010). Buddhism believes that the inner self or soul is central to understanding the universe and is vital for one's well-being (Seaford, 2016). Buddhism teaches that an erroneous view of self is the cause of suffering (Garlin, 2003) and teaches that practices such as meditation can help people let go of their desires and anxieties to lead to a new (correct) experience. In short, self-cultivation is a salient aspect of a Chinese person's inner sense of responsibility.

Ethical regulations (relationships between individuals)

The ancient Chinese established a set of unique moral and ethical rules to regulate all behaviors related to people's lives including politics, society, and economy (Huang, 2005). Among the numerous ethical concepts of Confucianism, '*wu lun*', the five cardinal relationships, are the most fundamental: emperor–subject (leader–follower), father–son, husband–wife, elder–younger brother, and friend–friend. *Wu lun* is the starting point of the moral system and the main descriptor of the interpersonal network (Jing, 2008). The word *lun* refers to the paramount importance of human relationships and the moral principles that should guide the interactive behaviors of the related parties (Nie & Lämsä, 2015). In today's business ethics lexicon, *wu lun* is the code of ethical conduct for getting along with diverse people. To some extent, this strong code of ethics helps explain why subjective responsibility plays such an important role in China compared to other cultures.

Wu lun cardinal relationships, which are closely related to *wu chang*, not only relate to self-cultivation, but also serve as the social platform where Confucian ethics are manifested. For example, Mencius proposed that 'between father and son, there should be affection; between sovereign and minister, righteousness; between husband and wife, attention to their separate functions; between old and young, a proper order; and between friends, fidelity'. These role expectations have influenced Chinese people for thousands of years. As a result, Chinese leaders are particular about the need to meet the expectations of their followers, because if they do not, they will lose credibility (Fu et al., 2010).

Family-nation sentiment (self-perceived relationship between family and nation)

Chinese culture is deeply family-oriented (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). Family serves as a paradigm for the structuring and order of the political community and other groups and organizations in China (Low & Ang, 2013). While a person is part of a family network, the family (*xiao jia*, small family) is embedded within a community network (*da jia*, big family), and the community is embedded in the nation (*guo jia*) (Tu, 2018). The isomorphism of family and nation is an important feature of Chinese society. Confucius extended the family beyond its original role to serve as a prototype for the broader social network of morally binding, mutually dependent relationships.

Filial piety at home and loyalty to the nation are core values of Chinese individual life (Liu & Wang, 2015). It is widely believed that 'A filial son is likely to be watchful over his personal conduct, conscientious about family affairs, responsive to social obligations and, as a result, qualified for political assignments' (Du, 2008: 48). The traditional individual–family–nation structure effectively shapes the sense of identity and cohesion in people's sentiment about family and nation (Zhang, 2017). Family members are also expected to give up their notion of a small family for the bigger family when needed. Over a century ago, Liang Qichao stated that 'Everyone is responsible for the rise and fall of the world'. This saying explains the scope of responsibility for Chinese people and is probably also why many Chinese individuals are able to maneuver among the different levels of *jia* and define their own responsibilities.

Harmony between people and nature (tian ren he yi, relationship between human beings and Heaven)

The word *tian* (Heaven) has many meanings in Chinese. Tang (2005) and Zhang (1985) summarized them into three types: the dominant Heaven (with personality and divine meaning); the natural Heaven (with the meaning of nature); and the Heaven of justice (with transcendental and moral meanings). *Tian ren he yi* is one of the most notable Chinese holistic perspectives addressing the dilemma between nature and mankind. Like *yin* and *yang*, it suggests that mankind and nature are an organic whole (Peng, Li, & Tian, 2016).

According to Tang (2005) and Zhang (1985), there are three levels of meaning in *tian ren he yi*. The first one refers to the inseparability between *tian* and *ren*. Human beings cannot live without nature, and nature would not be so lively without human beings. To protect nature is the responsibility of human beings. The second one means that there are universal laws in nature that people must obey. Human beings should not only understand Heaven (the law of Heaven's Way), but also have an awe of Heaven and take internal responsibility for Heaven. Finally, people aspire to gain and maintain harmony between *tian* and *ren*. Heaven symbolizes the supreme good whereby human beings are viewed as playing an active role in achieving harmony in the universe. Acting based on a moral trait or having a 'heart/mind of benevolence' (*ren xin*), manifests the Way of Heaven (*Tian dao*) (Tu, 2018). Peng et al. (2016) also explained that the ultimate goal of *tian ren he yi* is reaching harmony between nature and mankind by acknowledging the balance and synergy (complementarity) between the two.

These four characteristics are closely intertwined with the morality and inner beliefs of Chinese leaders. Thus, they reinforce the subjective responsibilities the leaders hold. For Chinese leaders, taking responsibility for their employees, the nation, and nature represents a profound moral consciousness and an embodiment of internal morality rather than an imposed responsibility from external sources (Cheng et al., 2021). Chinese culture as a whole is also widely recognized for its strong moral orientation (Bedford & Yeh, 2019). Morality in China is deeply rooted in social norms and assumes a similar role to what is traditionally played by religion in Western societies (Friedman, 2005). One of the key distinctions between the concept of responsibility and duty in China and the West stems from the self-discipline observed among Chinese individuals compared to the more externally guided behavior among Westerners (Lee, 2021). In other words, compared to Westerners, Chinese leaders are more likely to place greater emphasis on subjective responsibilities. Therefore, Chinese cultural values can also be regarded as a source influencing the proactive RL behaviors defined by Zhang, Li, and Guo (2022). In China, it is believed that individuals who have cultivated themselves can follow the Way, and those who have achieved harmony in human relationships are capable of governing the state through rituals and creating a harmonious society that embodies balance (Li, 2006). Therefore,

balancing the interests of different stakeholders is presupposed in the Chinese concept of harmony. Next, we delve into how these characteristics manifest in the practices of Chinese responsible business leaders.

Methods

We aim to explore the characteristics of RL from the perspective of leaders themselves and stakeholders. To do so, using a qualitative methodology is the suitable approach (Parry, Mumford, Bower, & Watts, 2014; Yin, 2003). We conducted an inductive, multiple-case study of nine business leaders in China who are widely perceived as responsible leaders.

Sample

The focus of responsible leaders is to build and sustain positive relationships with both internal and external stakeholders of the organization, which best suits high-level leaders or CEOs. Moreover, while the research results obtained from the CEOs in our sample may also be applicable to managers/leaders at other levels, the same might not work well the other way around. Therefore, we selected only high-level leaders as our sample, including the founders and current or former chairmen of the board of nine companies.

We adopted a theoretical sampling method to select winners of the Peter Drucker Chinese Management Award in 2019 and 2020 plus two other leaders who were not award winners but have been regarded as highly responsible leaders of their companies. We adopted a convenience sampling method to select the seven leaders from among the award winners. The selection process for the awards includes three stages: nomination and recommendation, case writing, and expert voting. The judges are deans of 100 business schools in China and 60 invited scholars and entrepreneurs. To be selected for the award, the management of the recommended enterprises have to meet the following standards: (1) convey a clear company mission, vision, and core values to guide their enterprise in sustainable and healthy development; (2) show integrity in operations and management, set high standards for their own and others' work, and unremittingly promote the achievement of goals and missions; (3) strive to improve efficiency and continuously innovate in the process of creating value for customers, forming excellent core competitiveness and unique industry position; (4) protect the freedom and dignity of employees, carefully build mechanisms and culture, and strive to help employees develop and realize their personal value; and (5) responsible for the social impact of the enterprise, never act in a way that is knowingly harmful, and take effective measures to eliminate the negative impact of business activities, and assume corporate social responsibility.

We believe the award winners are an ideal sample for our study because the standards match the definitions of RL in the existing literature. We reached out directly to seven of the 28 award-winning enterprise leaders or contacted them through a mutual third party. After we explained our research purpose, we won their support. The other two leaders were not award winners but were well-respected nationwide and have been our research targets for 8 years. We included these leaders because we knew they were comparable to the seven award winners based on the massive amount of data we accumulated and the interviews we previously conducted with people from inside and outside their companies. The nine leaders came from six industries. Table 1 presents details on the leaders and their companies.

In addition to interviewing the leaders, we also interviewed stakeholders of the companies. We adopted a purposive sampling method to select the interviewees. The criterion was that they frequently interacted with the leaders and knew the leaders well. The other interviewees in each company included one executive, four to six managers and frontline employees, and one to six external stakeholders, including customers, suppliers, peers, government officials, and trainees. We interviewed 10–15 people in each company including the leader and 101 people in total.

Data Collection

Two of the authors interviewed seven of the nine leaders in person in their companies, but they had to interview two leaders by telephone due to COVID restrictions. Of the stakeholders, 26 were

Table 1. Background information of the leaders and their companies

Name of the leader	Current position	Year of birth	Company full name	Initials used in text	Year of incorp.	Industry	Revenue 2020 (billion)
LEI [†] Jufang	Founder and Chairman	1953	Gansu Cheezheng Industrial Group Co., Ltd.	CZ	1993	Pharmacy	1.48
DING Ligu	Founder and Chairman	1970	Delong Steel Co., Ltd.	DL	1998	Manufacturing (steel)	115.70
MAO Zhongqun	Founder, Chairman and CEO	1969	Ningbo Fangtai Kitchenware Co., Ltd.	FT	1996	Manufacturing (Kitchenware)	12
WU Nianbo	Founder and Permanent Chairman	1956	Suzhou Good-Ark Electronics Co. Ltd.	GA	1991	Manufacturing (diodes)	1.81
XU Shaochun	Founder, Chairman and CEO	1963	Kingdee International Software Group Company Ltd.	KD	1993	Industrial/Managerial software	3.36
SUI Zhengjun	Founder and Chairman	1969	Muwu Barbeque	MW	2003	Catering services	1.40 [‡]
NIE Shengzhe	Founder and Chairman	1965	Tecsun (Suzhou) Homes Co., Ltd	TC	1997	Construction	0.10
ZHANG Hongrui	Founder and Former Chairman	1946	Xinyulou Department Store Group Co., Ltd.	XYL	1984	Retail	18.10
SUN Zhiyong	Founder and Chairman	1972	ZBOM Home Collection Co., Ltd.	ZB	1998	Manufacturing (household cabinets)	3.32

Notes: [†]We capitalize the last name of the leader and italicize the name of the company in the paper to make it easier for readers. [‡]The founder declined the request. The number was from 2019 based on data from the Internet.

interviewed in groups of 2–3 people, and the others were interviewed one-on-one either in person or by telephone. The average lengths of the interviews for leaders, executives, internal employees, and outsiders were 101, 77, 30, and 23 minutes, respectively. The length of each interview was decided by the amount of time the interviewee needed to answer our questions. We ended each interview when we found that they had sufficiently answered the questions.

All interviews were semi-structured and the questions were designed to collect detailed information on the interviewees' expectations of the leader role. For example, the main questions for the leaders were: 'What are the purposes of your company?' 'How do you rank customers, employees and shareholders/other stakeholders of your company?' 'What do you think the responsibilities of the leader in this company are?' 'As a Chinese business leader, how do you interpret 'responsible leadership'?' and 'What characteristics and behaviors should a responsible leader have?' The main interview questions for the other interviewees (i.e., employees, external stakeholders) were: 'Do you think (the name of the leader) is a responsible leader?' and 'Why? Please tell us a couple of specific examples'. We also asked some interviewees: 'What characteristics and behaviors should a responsible leader have?' Before each interview, we explained the purpose and ensured confidentiality of the information they provided. We also requested permission to record the conversation. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for coding.

Data Analysis

Given the lack of prior conceptualization of RL from a descriptive approach, we followed the data analysis process proposed by Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton (2013) and Corbin and Strauss (2008) to generate the data structure. We intentionally ignored the literature in the open coding phase (Gioia et al., 2013). In this phase, two authors first jointly coded one leader's transcript using NVivo. For each sentence containing relevant characteristics of RL, we used a word or phrase, which was preferentially extracted from the quotation, to identify the concept from the quotation. The two authors then coded the transcripts separately. Whenever a new code was created, the author would immediately notify the other author through the instant messaging software WeChat. The new code would be added or dropped after the two discussed and reached a consensus. This process resulted in 133 first-order concepts representing the characteristics of RL. We eliminated 39 concepts that were mentioned by fewer than five interviewees and that were related to less than three leaders. To examine inter-rater reliability, the two authors checked 10% of each other's coding results (one leader, three employees, and one external stakeholder). We checked 192 codes with a consistency ratio of 94.3%. During inspection, we found another 22 statements that one author did not code, but the other author thought should be coded. If these were counted as disagreements, then the consistency ratio would have been 84.6%. However, the authors decided that the new codes did not add any new themes.

Four authors cooperatively completed the axial coding and built a conceptual model. We first divided the remaining concepts into eight groups related to seven stakeholders (self, employees, customers & suppliers, company, community & society, nation & state, world). The 16 second-order themes were then grouped into five dimensions (see Figure 1). Throughout the process, if one author had questions, four authors would check the quotes and discuss the concerns until an agreement was reached. Finally, the authors analyzed the relationships among the five dimensions and identified the core themes of RL leading to a conceptual model of RL. To develop the conceptual model of RL, three authors jointly reviewed the quotes to extract indicators of the outcomes of RL.

Validity

Using multiple cases enhanced the external validity of our research. The data analysis showed that the nine leaders exhibited the five dimensions of RL we identified. Of the 16 themes we identified, 14 themes appeared in all nine leaders' interviews and two others appeared in the transcripts of eight leaders: 'Addressing customers' and business partners' needs and interests' and 'Helping business partners grow'.

We used investigator and data triangulation to test and enhance the internal validity of our study. Specifically, we compared the coding results of different groups of stakeholders (please refer to online

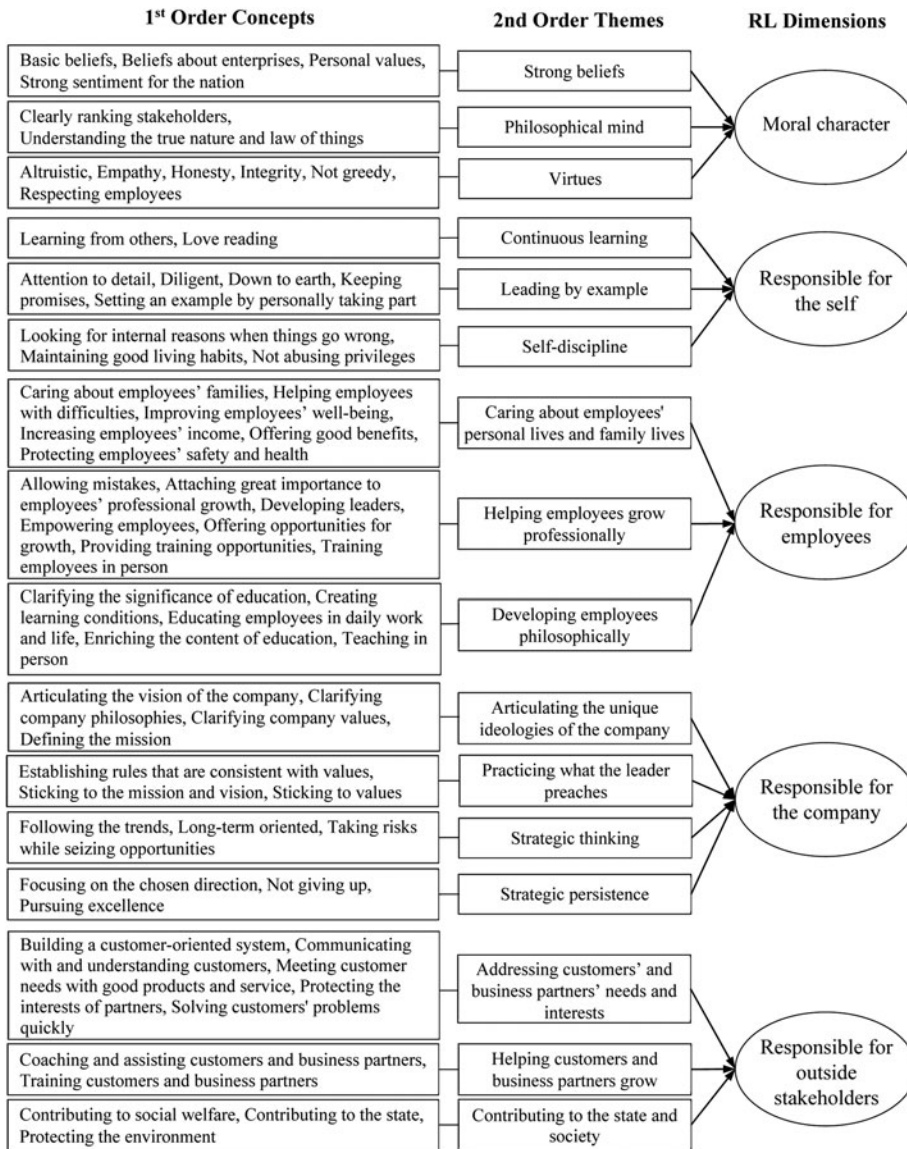


Figure 1. Data structure

supplemental materials for details). Among the five dimensions, four were mentioned by more than half of the interviewees in each group and one was mentioned by less than half of the interviewees: ‘moral characteristics’. The interview results of the leaders and executives were quite similar. Comparing the results of employees and outsiders, not surprisingly, employees paid more attention to ‘responsible for employees’, and outsiders paid more attention to ‘responsible for external stakeholders’, indicating that people were more sensitive to how the leaders treated them than how they treated others.

We also asked non-executives, including the employees, customers, suppliers, and other partners of the focal companies, about their definitions of RL. While the distribution of the five dimensions of RL in the four groups was quite different in their perceived definitions, the five dimensions were supported by the four groups of interviewees. The divergence indicates the importance of further research on the meaning of RL.

Results

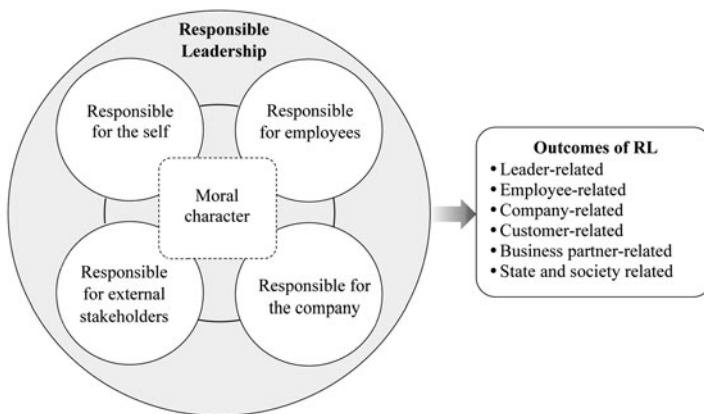
Figure 2 presents the conceptual model we derived from the results of our study. Four of the dimensions represent the actions leaders take to fulfill their responsibilities: responsible for the self, responsible for employees, responsible for the company, and responsible for external stakeholders. The fifth and most fundamental dimension, moral character, represents what guides and energizes the leaders' actions. Each dimension is introduced separately in the following sections. The quotes are extracted from the interviews we conducted for the study. Quote identifiers in brackets are used to classify the interviewees to maintain confidentiality, but we used real names for the leaders. The quote identifiers ended with 'E' indicate external stakeholders. Appendix I provides more example quotes to illustrate each theme.

Moral Character

This dimension is the compass or the driving force behind the leaders' actions. The leaders demonstrated strong beliefs and a philosophical mind. They knew what it took to run their companies effectively and they strove to practice what they preached. In the interviews, they ranked the stakeholders and explained their rationale for the order of importance they assigned to each group. They also demonstrated a strong sentiment for the nation and the world. The leaders reported that they read widely and had well-thought-out reasons behind their decisions.

Strong beliefs

The leaders had strong beliefs about life and their enterprises. As for the purpose of the enterprise, the leaders agreed that a company should deliver value to all stakeholders, including the whole society and nation, although they each had their own version of that purpose. For example, the purpose of SUI of *Muwu* was to create 'a platform and a basic way for most modern people to survive and develop'. The purpose of SUN of *ZBOM* was to 'create customers'. The purpose for WU of *Good-Ark* was to 'cultivate people', and for XU of *Kingdee*, it was to 'create value for society and make the world a better place'. They regarded the country and the nation as part of the purpose of the enterprise and themselves. One *Tecsun* senior manager said, NIE 'often talks about how an enterprise can influence a nation' (TC06). A senior manager at *Kingdee* recalled that XU told his employees 'I am willing to



- Notes:
- The square indicates that moral character is relatively stable. It remains solid and does not change easily.
 - The dotted line around the square indicates that there is no boundary between moral character and the four types of behaviors, signifying *zhi xing he yi*.
 - The four small circles representing the four behavioral dimensions indicate that behaviors could vary based on the situation as long as they do not go against the moral principles that are consistent with the moral character.
 - The solid lines between the four dimensions indicate that they are interrelated, and they can influence each other.

Figure 2. Conceptual model derived from the study

fight for the prosperity of my nation all my life' (KD02). None of them named making a profit as the core purpose of their company as they believed that making a profit was a natural outcome.

The information we collected showed that the leaders were firm in their beliefs. XU consistently referred to his sentiment for the nation (KD02). SUI kept telling employees that the company was part of the nation and he wanted them to create more value for society (MW05). WU's strong belief was a source of strength for the employees. A middle manager recounted,

Whenever we encounter resistance, feel tired or a little overwhelmed, our Dajiazhang's (big family head) firm beliefs keep us going. We could not have persisted so long in building the family-like company culture without his strong beliefs. (GA03)

Philosophical mind

The different rankings of stakeholders revealed the leaders' different conceptions of RL. When asked to rank stakeholders, MAO, NIE, SUN, XU, and LEI put customers first, SUI, WU, and ZHANG put employees first, and DING ranked the nation first. However, the leaders who put customers first also explained that customers and employees were two sides of the same coin; both were important. In general, they stressed that a leader should first do a good job leading the enterprise, take good care of employees and customers, and then participate in public welfare and charity.

Of the nine leaders, only half explicitly used the word philosophy or philosophical when describing their views of responsibility, but they all demonstrated their philosophy in life and leadership in the interviews, which showed their understanding of the true nature and law of things. For example, WU quoted a teaching from the classic '*Da Xue*' (*Great Learning*) to describe his philosophy in business,

Possessing virtue will give him the people. Possessing the people will give him the territory. Possessing the territory will give him the wealth. Possessing the wealth, he will have resources for expenditure.

DING believed that a company should follow 'righteousness, benefit, strength, and goodness', which means combining righteousness and profit, thereby making the company strong and fulfilling the company's social responsibility. MAO and XU believed in '*zhi xing he yi*' (unifying the knowledge and action). ZHANG described his philosophy of competition,

I am not interested in defeating others. I only strive to remain invincible. Develop your internal skills and put yourself in the invincible position. Then there will be no competition with others.

Virtues

Scholars have discussed the need for responsible leaders to be led by their virtues (Antunes & Franco, 2016; Cameron, 2011; Maak & Pless, 2006). For example, Maak and Pless (2006) suggested that responsible leaders should be led by virtues such as respect, care, honesty, accountability, humility, trust, active citizenship, and introspection. The virtues we found were altruistic, respect, honesty, not greedy, integrity, and empathy. We also observed accountability, active citizenship, and introspection in our samples, but we coded them as behaviors in other dimensions.

In a society with high power distance such as China, executive leaders tend to be less approachable and treat employees unequally (Hofstede, 1980), making respect for employees an even more valuable virtue for these leaders. The leaders we studied treated employees equally and they were easily approachable. SUN attached great importance to the humanistic spirit, which he believed to be 'respecting people, stimulating people, and giving freedom to those who are responsible'. A *Tecsun* employee said that NIE 'treats everyone the same. No matter whether you are good or bad, distant or close, he treats you equally' (TC04). DING told us, 'When my WeChat is on, every one of the 60,000 employees can find me'. He actually responded to an employee complaining about the cost of the dining room. SUI also accepted requests from anyone in the company to become a WeChat

friend. XU set up a personal public account on WeChat to allow anyone, including customers, suppliers, employees, to contact him if needed. Before he retired, ZHANG often walked around the shopping mall and conversed with employees. An employee said, 'When we communicated with our old chairman, we were as happy as we would be with an ordinary old man' (XYL04). Another employee recounted that when LEI comes to the company, she eats in the dining room with the staff (CZ06).

Taken together, it seems that these executive leaders' character enables them to form a strong sense of responsibility, which guides them to fulfill their responsibilities toward different stakeholders.

Responsible for the Self

In China, a sense of responsibility on the part of the leader is the cornerstone of the social hierarchy. To fulfill a leader's responsibility means to make sure that the self is the best possible person and the most capable leader. We identified continuous learning, leading by example, and self-discipline as the three key characteristics in this dimension. Of these, leading by example has been well examined in other studies (e.g., Yaffe & Kark, 2011). Due to space constraints, we focus on the other two characteristics.

Continuous learning

Learning comes first in developing the self, which is also the most important belief in Confucianism. We found that the nine responsible leaders were continuous learners of everything that would help them become better people or run their companies better. Reading is a habit that they have kept for many years. Three leaders read many Chinese classics, but most of the leaders read a variety of books, including Western philosophies. What they learned helped them lay a solid foundation to build their sense of responsibility as a person and as a leader. They frequently quoted the teachings of the Chinese sages and other sources during the interviews when illustrating the rationale for their actions. For example, when MAO realized the EMBA program did not teach him enough, he spent two more years flying weekly from Ningbo to Beijing to take Chinese traditional culture classes from the two best universities in China. SUI also consulted professors in several leading universities when he first started his own business. LEI often visited Tibetan areas and local doctors to 'better understand Tibetan culture and purify the soul'. SUN, who had a habit of spending his Sundays in bookstores when he was young, flew to Beijing every month to learn at Drucker Academy between 2007 and 2009. WU also 'reads the classics every morning' (GA02). He told us,

We need to understand these classic works. We ourselves should understand them first. If we don't understand what we say, it will harm others. We understand first, and then help employees understand.

DING also told us that he would lead senior managers to a benchmark company every month and had been doing so for years.

Self-discipline

This theme was reflected in three aspects. The first one is '*nei qiu*' (looking for internal reasons when things go wrong). One employee commenting about NIE said, 'When something unexpected happens, he always thinks it is his responsibility first' (TC05). XU also supported self-reflection based on the Confucius teaching 'If things can't be done, we should look inside ourselves'. In addition, WU stated that the self was 'the root of all problems, and love is the answer to all problems'. One time a couple of ZBOM employees who handled an important customer's complaint were nervous because they were afraid their boss would punish them. The interviewee recalled, 'SUN took the blame himself, apologizing for not taking better responsibility and comforted the employees involved' (ZB11E).

The second aspect is '*not to use privileges*', which is not easy for leaders in a society with high power distance. Employees provided several examples of this aspect. 'SUN zong¹ seldom uses his authority or power to solve problems' (ZB08). In *Good-Ark*, 'When parking, WU always drove his car to the

farthest spot, leaving the more convenient spots to others' (GA06). In *Xinyulou*, both of ZHANG's sons worked up to executive positions from interns (XYL03). In *Delong*, DING did not allow his family and relatives to work at *Delong* or to do business with *Delong* (DL02).

The third aspect is reflected in the leaders' living habits. For example, ZHANG, MAO, and WU follow a healthy diet. These three leaders along with NIE and LEI also have very low requirements for their material life.

Responsible for Employees

The leaders in our study treated each employee as a whole person. They created opportunities for employees to receive training and development to grow professionally and philosophically. They also showed concern for the employees and their families. Specifically, the leaders' care extended to employees' health, marriage, children's health and education, and relations with parents and in-laws, which is somewhat typical of a caring leader in China and makes these leaders different from their counterparts. Since developing employees professionally is ordinary and has been widely discussed in the literature, we focus on the other two themes below.

Caring about employees' personal lives and their family's lives

When we asked for examples of the responsible behaviors of the leaders, one of the first answers we would often get was: 'He cares for the employees and their families'. The word care does not simply mean to provide a good salary but to care about the personal lives of the employees and their families, such as helping employees and their families solve difficulties (e.g., DL02, GA02, CZ07, TC04), helping them find schools for their children (GA02, TC06), and sometimes even helping employees find a girlfriend/boyfriend (MW02, KD02). Even when the company faced difficult times, such as the epidemic period, the employees recounted that the leaders still ensured that the interests of the employees were protected (ZB06, MW03).

Developing employees philosophically

The leaders attached great importance to developing employees as whole individuals and encouraged them and sometimes required them to engage in moral education. Whereas some readers may feel that these leaders 'brainwash' their employees and that they have no right to make employees learn things that are not related to work, non-professional qualities, such as spirituality, emotional intelligence, and psychological capital, have been shown to influence employees' overall well-being and performance (Karakas, 2010; Luthans & Youssef-Morgan, 2017; Mayer, Roberts, & Barsade, 2008). Therefore, many business leaders believe it is their responsibility to facilitate employees' philosophical development. For example, SUI told us,

As I taught employees more, I realized that much of that [education] was on management and operation knowledge, which they had learned in class, but they appeared unwilling to implement what they knew because they did not understand the rationale behind the lessons.

XU said,

Education is not about training skills, such as how to do management, how to do technology and research and development, but about life, the meaning of life, and your own philosophy of happiness. The most important thing is to help employees grow and help them grow in character and quality.

In an earlier interview, MAO claimed that 'behaviors with scores of 0–60 must be restrained by the system, and behaviors with scores of 60–100 can be advocated in a moral way'.

Most of the leaders spent much of their time personally training employees. For example, SUI presided over employee training once a month. The training program included presentations about the

moral/ethical view of life, values, as well as management methods. NIE gives at least 12 lectures every year at the company's strategy meetings or learning sessions. He generally does not talk about work, but 'about international and domestic situation, education of children, how family members get along with each other, etc'. (TC06).

The leaders described their own approach in detail to enlighten and educate their employees. In *Good-Ark*, employees are given time during work hours to get together and read or watch videos. Each year, they also have one week of paid time to learn Chinese traditional culture and share their experiences together. In *Fangtai* and *Good-Ark*, employees spend the first 15 min of their shift reading classical books in groups. DING told us he spends a day every month to meet and chat with employees to try to understand them and discover those with high potential. XU offers philosophical lectures in the *Kingdee* Business School (KD02). Every Saturday, he attends a cultural study meeting for the middle and senior management. ZHANG jotted down sentences he found useful and included them in small pamphlets for employees to learn (XYL07). The ultimate purpose for emphasizing life-long learning, according to the leaders, is to establish consciousness, a sense of responsibility, integrity, benevolence, dedication, and mental health.

Responsible for the Company

Among the various elements of the company, the leaders were most concerned about the company's culture and strategy. SUI said 'I often say that an enterprise should have its own thinking and strategic focus, which should be the work of the top leader of the enterprise'. Four of the leaders explicitly mentioned that building the company culture was their most important responsibility. We noted from our research that they articulated the ideologies of the company, including the mission, vision, core values, and philosophies. They exemplified strong values when they made decisions or resolved problems and established rules that were consistent with the core values. They practiced what they preached and taught employees the core values by setting themselves up as a role model. They made strategic decisions from a long-term perspective and viewed challenges as opportunities. They persevered in the strategic direction they chose and did not give up easily.

Articulating the unique ideologies of the company

The leaders personally articulated the vision of the company, defined the mission, and clarified the company values and philosophies. Five of the leaders personally wrote the culture manuals or philosophy manuals of the companies. The core values and mission statements created by these leaders are unique and inspirational. For example, the core values of CZ are: 'Be humane and altruistic' and 'Do the right things to sustain'; for MW, they are: 'Work, sincere, learning, sharing, and creating, passing on happiness'; for TC: 'Honest, industrious, caring, not taking shortcuts'; for XYL: 'Pursue value maximization, not profit maximization. While safeguarding our own fundamental interests, earnestly consider interests of all stakeholders'; for ZB: 'Customers first, grow the self by enabling others, self-reflection, integrity, and stability'. For mission statements, DL's reads: 'Developing Delong steel, revitalizing the national industry and creating a harmonious society'; FT's is: 'Bringing happiness to billions of families'; GA's is: 'Spreading the teachings of the sages to the world wholeheartedly to benefit mankind'; JD's mission statement is: 'Serving the enterprise wholeheartedly and growing together with users from all over the world'. These statements show that these leaders are willing to lead the companies to serve all stakeholders. These ideologies also reflect the responsibility of the leaders.

Practicing what the leader preaches

The leaders seemed to be keenly aware of the importance of having clear and strong values and sticking to them when leading their companies in today's rapidly changing business and social environment. For example, bribery is strictly forbidden in *Tecsun*. To show how strict and firm NIE dealt with that, a manager told us: 'When a project manager reported a manager of Party A wanted us to bribe him, NIE told our manager to ask him if rodenticide was needed and that he would send nine packs if needed'. Knowing one bottle would be enough to kill a person, the implication of the message could not be

clearer. Basically, it told the customers that there were no short cuts when doing business with *Tecsun* (TC03). SUN told the employees,

When we can't reach a consensus, we will use our corporate values to find a solution. We have to make sure that the way we do things is morally correct, we cannot run the red light. Whether our partners and customers meet our common values is a condition that we choose them or not. (ZB08)

An executive at *ZBOM* recalled that they once terminated cooperation with one of the largest customers due to their different values (ZB02).

The leaders also established rules that were consistent with their values. To put the core values into practice, NIE wrote the *Tecsun Code of Conduct*, which contained more than 200 items and 10,000 words. This code has been used for over 20 years. To effectively protect the interests of suppliers, the 'Operation Principles and Credo' formulated by ZHANG stipulated that *Xinyulou* staff should not default on the payment of goods, transfer the risk to the supplier, accept a supplier's rebate, food and treats, or even drink the drinks provided by the supplier. MAO formulated 20 management principles and established 10 basic rules that guided all decision-making in *Fangtai*. To ensure employees' happiness, WU created and successfully implemented eight modules in the company practices: humanistic care, humanistic education, green environment, health promotion, philanthropic activities, voluntary services, humanistic recording, and *dun lun jin fen* (doing the best to fulfill all role responsibilities). An employee told us she was shocked to hear the mission of *Good-Ark* when she first joined the company. However, she said, 'After getting to know the *Dajiazhang* (WU, the big family head) bit by bit later, I started to see how it is possible to act according to the mission' (GA04).

Strategic thinking

In terms of decision making, the leaders followed the trends and adhered to long-term orientation. Going green is now a very important national policy, so companies in various industries are implementing the policy in different ways. As a steel company, *Delong* is a heavy-duty energy consumer and polluter. An executive in the company reported that 'DING zong does not count the cost when it comes to protecting the environment' (DL02). A middle manager in *Kingdee* told us: 'Under the national effort to build the overall digital effectiveness, XU zong has led us *Kingdee* people to work hard toward domestic substitution' (KD05). For a retail business, enhancing credibility is still an important task. A senior leader at *Xinyulou* quoted ZHANG as saying, 'Promoting the construction of the integrity system of the whole society and the development of commercial civilization are the direction that our whole nation should pursue and develop' (XYL02).

Most of the leaders viewed challenges as opportunities and were willing to take risks to seize the opportunities. DING was still the owner of a steel factory when he realized that the state government was willing to privatize the heavily debt-ridden state-owned *Tiangang* Group through mixed reform. He saw it as an opportunity to become a leading company in the industry. Thus, he took a huge risk and mortgaged his personal property to acquire *Tiangang*. He was prepared to fail, but he managed, and the media presented the case as 'a snake swallowing an elephant'. His decision was supported by 'his love for this industry, which is a sentimental support' (DL02). Since 2015, on every May 4th² XU would smash something to symbolize the start of a major change to encourage employees to be more willing to change and adapt to new ways of working.

He smashed a computer the first time to get people to work off the phone and move. Later, he smashed the boss's chair. Later, he smashed the server. He wants to switch to cloud services. In fact, it is to break ourselves and innovate. He told employees our determination to change in this way, so it is also a sense of responsibility for him to smash the boss's chair to show he does not want to make decisions. He said everyone is a CEO. ... He emphasized that everyone should bear the responsibility. We make decisions according to the *Kingdee* philosophy. (KD06)

An employee at *Muwu* told us,

At present, almost all in the catering industry are engaged in takeout or taking orders online. He (SUI) directly said that it would be cancelled, that is, no more business online. In fact, we calculated then and found the loss was quite large, but he said he would not do takeout. He was that decisive. We asked why and were told that the barbeque food they focused on would taste very differently if not eaten while hot. (MW05)

Strategic persistence

The leaders we interviewed were persistent about sticking to the direction they had chosen and then pursuing excellence. They followed the professional route they chose when they started their businesses and persisted in doing what they believed despite the great temptation to enter the real estate market and stock market in earlier years (i.e., a popular route in China). In terms of the business model, the leaders we interviewed focused on only one industry, and none of their companies were diversified. For example, *Good-Ark* persisted in the semi-conductor industry and became the top leader in the country and the third diode manufacturer in the world. When *Fangtai* was first founded, many competitors tried to compete with it by lowering their prices. All agents asked MAO to lower the price, but MAO refused. Instead, he introduced new products at higher prices, which sold very well. One employee recalled that *Fangtai* invested more than one billion yuan and spent eight years to develop a water purifier that can produce mineral water because, ‘We [the company] are committed to providing consumers with the best products’ (FT06).

Giving up in times of difficulty was not an option for these leaders. For example, when *ZBOM* tried to open a market in Nanjing in the early years, they faced difficulties and the General Manager left. SUN said,

Giving up is always the easiest way out. But we cannot leave because if we do, we will not go out again, and that means we will remain a local enterprise. I’ve been to the army and fought in wars and shed blood. I knew what it took to win. I went there and persisted.

WU is said to often tell people to ‘Find excitement when encountering difficulties’. One interviewee said, ‘He is not afraid of difficulties. The more difficult it is, the more he wants to do it. If one’s sense of responsibility is not strong, it really can’t work’ (GA06).

Responsible for External Stakeholders

The basic responsibility of an enterprise is to meet the needs of customers with high-quality products and services and protect the basic interests of suppliers. However, the leaders of the companies we interviewed went beyond the normal expectations. For example, these leaders seemed to be capable of trans-positional thinking and were very generous with their time and effort when helping others. The interviewees claimed that the business leaders not only worked to discover and satisfy their external stakeholders’ needs, but also offered to help them build their company culture and improve their managerial effectiveness by offering training and on-site support. They also took it upon themselves to help the state and society.

Addressing customers’ and business partners’ needs and interests

ZHANG stipulated that the primary responsibility of the salesperson was not to sell more goods, but to help customers make the correct purchase decision. It was not allowed to default on payments to suppliers or to return goods to the supplier that are not easy to sell, which are still somewhat common practices in China’s retail industry. ZHANG was quoted as repeatedly saying,

Our principle of cooperation with suppliers is: if we don’t benefit customers, customers will not exist; if we benefit more and customers benefit less, customers will not stay with us for long; if our interests are identical with those of the customers, customers will keep doing business with us and we can make long-term profits. (XYL05)

XU reportedly spends 70–80% of his time on customers. ‘He really puts customers in his heart’ (KD02). During the epidemic, SUN reduced the supply price by 10% and subsidized franchisees with cash to help tide them over through the difficult time (ZB05). A *Tecsun* middle manager noted that NIE ‘does not allow defaulting suppliers on the payment’ (TC03), although this is common for construction enterprises in China.

Helping customers and business partners grow

These leaders enjoy helping customers and business partners grow while doing business with them. To do so, they provide training and guidance for them in management and business practices, give them opportunities to learn traditional culture, directly help them expand their business, and provide technical and financial support. For example, an executive noted that SUI ‘shares everything he knows and does not worry what others will do after learning. He is extremely open to partners, and hopes to be helpful to others’ (MW02). In another example, *Fangtai* not only willingly trains customers and business partners on Six Sigma and how to achieve zero defects and implement lean management, ‘but also teaches us how to be a good person’ (FT13E). One supplier affectionally recalled MAO telling them that he wanted to see them (*Fangtai*’s business partners) ‘continue to grow even if *Fangtai* collapses one day’ (FT14E). ZHANG also sends teams to help other stores, who can also come to *Xinyulou* to learn for free (XYL10E). One of *Kingdee*’s customers said,

I was extremely touched and impressed by the detailed care XU offers ... All this shows that it is not only a buying and selling relationship between Kingdee and its customers, but rather, a long-term escort, running along us as we grow from a start-up enterprise at the beginning to a medium-sized enterprise. It not only solves our problems in using their products and services, but also helps us think of future development strategies. And (*Kingdee* is) willing to lend assistance when we need it, including allowing our management team to participate in some of the learning programs organized by *Kingdee*. (KD08E)

Contributing to the state and society

The leaders contributed to the state and society in many ways. In terms of contributing to the state, XU and *Kingdee* voluntarily developed software for the government to help fight the epidemic and resume production after the epidemic. DING also responded to the government’s call to become a model of environmental protection. In the process of acquiring *Tiangang*, *Delong* placed all the employees of the bankrupt enterprise, reducing the pressure on the government. In addition, LEI of *Cheezheng* actively participated in targeted poverty alleviation nationally, rural revitalization, and other projects. WU has also helped spread the Chinese traditional culture abroad.

In terms of contributing to society, five of the leaders set up public welfare foundations to support sustainable public welfare programs. The leaders have also helped other entrepreneurs and managers (not limited to customers or suppliers) develop themselves. For example, WU set up a cultural company to run weekend learning programs for executive leaders from different companies to coach them on how to build happy enterprises. MAO set up several institutions to promote its culture and allows a large number of business leaders to experience their culture or join the 2-year monthly learning programs to learn Chinese classics and management philosophies. One of the programs trains the wealthy second generation on how to sustain their family businesses. NIE also opened a carpentry school, hotel management school, and civilian primary school to cultivate all-around talent in a unique way. All three schools have a strong public welfare focus.

Environmental protection is another main approach for these companies so they can contribute to the state and society. The practices of these companies are far beyond the national laws and regulations and have benchmarking significance. WU said everyone has two mothers, one is the mother who gives birth to us, and the other is the mother of the earth. ‘We should all be filial to the mother of the earth’. When investing in other products, he would always check whether the products are low-carbon and sustainable for the earth (GA02). As a steel manufacturer, *Delong* has a much greater challenge in dealing with the environment. However, a *Delong* executive noted, ‘We are making *Delong* a 4A class

scenic spot, which is the only steel complex in the country that has reached that level' (DL02). According to one of the executives at *Muwu*,

The company was the first restaurant to use gas for barbeques. Because using carbon pollutes air, we began to use gas before the government requested switching to gas. Later, we switched to electricity. We were always ahead of the government. (MW02)

One of the distributors of *Cheezheng* told us,

Ms. Lei was encouraged to invest in a product using snow lilies. The product was very promising, but Ms. Lei declined because snow lilies grow very high on the mountains and are not easy to reproduce. She did not like seeing the gradual reduction of the flower. (CZ12E)

A Conceptual Model of RL

The relations among the five dimensions we identified from the data are interrelated, as we visualize in [Figure 2](#). We elaborate on the mutual relations in three aspects, which are also characteristics of RL in the Chinese context. First, we propose that responsible leaders ensure internal consistency among the first dimension and the other four behavioral dimensions. This consistency is encapsulated by the ancient Chinese phrase '*zhi xing he yi*', which means unifying knowledge and action. '*Zhi* (knowledge) is the guiding principle of *xing* (action), *xing* is the sincere implementation of *zhi*; *zhi* is the beginning of *xing*, and *xing* is the completion of *zhi*' (Wang, 2012: 11). The saying links the first dimension with the other four behavioral dimensions in our model. 'Moral character' represents the 'knowledge' (*zhi*) aspect, while the other four dimensions are 'actions' (*xing*). The four behavioral dimensions influence and should be consistent with one's moral character. This characteristic indicates that responsible leaders should understand that if they think they know but do not act accordingly, they don't really know, and can put what they know and believe into action. They should also understand that action without knowing is blind and reckless action, and they should be able to think and examine while in action. For example, a new manager in *Kingdee* asked XU how to inspire people who quietly make contributions to *Kingdee*. He answered: 'If you really cared about your employees, you will notice such people, regardless if they speak, behave, or stay quiet'.

The traits of leaders have commonly been studied as antecedents of leadership behaviors in the leadership literature (e.g., Derue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011). According to trait activation theory (Tett & Guterman, 2000), trait-relevant situational cues play a key role in the relationship between the traits and behaviors. However, according to the philosophy of *zhi xing he yi*, a person's traits (similar to *zhi*, which mainly refers to moral knowledge or knowledge of moral principles) and behaviors (*xing*) should be identical and independent of external factors. This is a unique view of Chinese philosophy. According to this view, 'leading by example' does not necessarily mean *zhi xing he yi*. A *zhi xing he yi* leader may lead by example; however, if a leader's behavior is not genuine, their knowledge and action would not be aligned. Several interviewees indicated that these leaders' behavior of leading by example was consistent and heartfelt, demonstrating their unity of knowledge and action.

The second aspect is that the five dimensions are interconnected through multiple conditional relationships. The most prominent feature of the relationships could be succinctly described by the ancient Chinese saying '*nei sheng wai wang*', which means to be sage-like, or having the qualities of a sage, inside, and to demonstrate abilities or acting as a king outside. We conceptualize this characteristic as a procedure embedded in our model. It was proposed by Zhuang Zi (369–286 BC), a Chinese sage whose name is often introduced together with Lao Zi because his thoughts contributed to Daoism. The saying later became part of Confucianism to describe a real gentleman. A quote in *Da Xue* (the Great Learning), one of the most influential classics on Confucianism, explained the process of '*Nei Sheng Wai Wang*' in detail,

In ancient times, those who want to clarify virtue in the world, first govern their country; those who want to govern their country, first integrate their family; those who want to integrate their family, first cultivate their moral character; those who want to cultivate their moral character, first correct their mind; those who want to correct their mind, first make sincere their meaning; those who want to make sincere their meaning, first know their knowledge and know things in the grid.

The quote from *Da Xue* that WU adopted as his philosophy (discussed in the ‘Having a philosophical mind’ section) also explains the process. WU explained the rationale of having a philosophical mind:

When leaders have virtues, people who share their virtues will go to them, then they will have the resource; when they have the resource, they will have fortune, right? But how do they make use of the fortune? They use it to educate people and help them enhance their virtues. Then they get into a benign cycle.

The five dimensions are characteristics of leadership that can exist in parallel. It is also possible to view them as having a sequential relationship, where the preceding dimension is the condition for the following dimension. First, leaders should cultivate and develop themselves, then treat employees well, run the company well, then serve or cooperate with external stakeholders well, and finally achieve the goals of the company. This is a process from ‘*nei sheng*’ to ‘*wai wang*’. To some extent, our model can be viewed as a practical road map of the necessary steps for a business leader to become a sage inside and behave like a king outside.

The third aspect is that while all five dimensions hold significance for leaders, their respective importance levels differ. We elucidate these variances using the concept of ‘*jun zi wu ben*’ from ancient Chinese wisdom, which means that a *jun zi* (gentleman, noble, selfless person) should focus on fundamental matters. To fulfill the leaders’ responsibilities, leaders must follow the way of *Junzi* and put most of the efforts into fundamental aspects. As stated in *Da Xue*: ‘Things have the trunk and the tips; affairs have the beginning and the end, knowing the order of things is close to the *Dao*’. When the most fundamental matters are taken care of, everything else can be worked out accordingly. We noticed that the leaders we studied had a sense of ‘*wu ben*’. What they described as their *ben* (the fundamental) was their personal character, the employees’ values and thoughts, and the culture, strategy, and people of the company. Leaders should pay the most attention to these aspects. For example, an executive of *Xinyulou* said: ‘When an event occurs, he (ZHANG) would not just ask people to find a way to resolve it and move on; rather, he would ask people to be frank and express their views, and then delve into the root cause and make it a learning opportunity for everyone’ (XYL02). XU believed that ‘growth includes not only tangible growth but also intangible growth. Especially for the people in the organization, the growth of our spiritual quality and the improvement of our mentality, which is the essential improvement and growth’. WU described his ideology,

The cause is the employees; the cause is their happiness. Employees will be happy only when they understand the rationale. That’s why we need to grow inside and be altruistic to seek happiness. The effects are customer appreciation. That’s why the cause is the most important. When we make efforts on the causes, efforts are predictable and expandable.

SUN also emphasized employees: ‘The organization attaches great importance to customers, but it does so through many employees. That’s why efforts should be made on employees; talents in the teams must be cultivated’.

There is no unique answer to what are fundamental factors. In general, internal factors are more fundamental than external factors, and spiritual factors are more fundamental than the material factors. For leaders, the most fundamental issue is their own moral character. Compared with other tasks in which leaders may engage, the five dimensions we propose are the fundamental issues. From the

perspective of the company, the *ben* of the stakeholders is the value the company can offer, which is often created by products and services and influenced by the organizational culture and management.

The outcomes of RL

The outcomes of RL should be consistent with the behaviors of responsible leaders, which was confirmed by our results. Indicators emerged when the interviewees answered the questions about the leaders. They included most of the stakeholders. The leader-related outcome is employees' trust and support. Employee-related outcomes include psychological safety, performance, development prospects, a sense of belonging, professional development, spiritual and emotional development, benevolence and supreme kindness, social status, life value, career growth, income, happiness, employees with lofty aspirations, organizational identification. Company-related outcomes include sustainable development, innovation, cohesion, company image, family climate, and performance. Customer-related outcomes include creating value for customers, exceeding customer expectations, and customer satisfaction. These indicators also apply to partners. Society and state-related outcomes include tax payments, contribution to the state and society, social value, social impact, and delivering positive energy to the society. Considerable research has focused on the effects of RL. While this line of research is necessary for building RL theory, the test of the effect of RL on the outcomes for different stakeholders is of special significance to the study of RL.

Discussion

This study collected extensive data from interviews with a sample of responsible leaders and various representative stakeholders. Based on the data, we developed a comprehensive conceptual model of RL with Chinese characteristics. The results not only enrich the RL literature, but also offer important implications for business leaders in China, and possibly outside of China.

Theoretical Contributions

The five dimensions of RL in our conceptual model are characterized by leaders' comprehensive responsibility to all stakeholders. The dimensions are consistent with an integrative RL style (Maak et al., 2016), but they include more non-instrumental elements. Our proposed model encompasses the traits and behaviors associated with RL, incorporating elements that align with previous studies (please refer to online supplemental materials for details). We acknowledge that Maak and Pless (2006), Pless (2007), and Pless et al. (2022) introduced several characteristics in their discussion of the eight roles of a responsible leader, which we have also identified in the Chinese context. However, their treatment of these characteristics lacked depth and primarily served to illustrate the roles, so we do not list all of them here.

Our study delves into a broader range of stakeholders and the corresponding leader responsibilities compared to the existing literature. Our findings spotlight the distinctive nature of RL in the Chinese context, which we compared and contrasted against the Western context. The primary contribution of our article is the identification of the culturally nuanced understanding of RL in China. We delineate more specific contributions of our study to the RL literature in three key aspects. First, we identified new themes and concepts of RL that are specifically rooted in Chinese culture and expanded the existing conception of RL in the Chinese context. Some of the themes that go well beyond the established descriptions in the literature include 'developing employees philosophically', 'helping customers and business partners grow', and 'protecting the interests of partners'. These themes, in addition to 'strong sentiment for the nation' and 'contributing to the state', can be interpreted as manifestations of subjective responsibilities and as the results of the internal morality of the Chinese responsible leaders we studied. These themes have rarely been explored in the literature. Voegtlin et al. (2020) classified the state as a secondary stakeholder of a corporation. Pless et al. (2022) also mentioned that considering the interest of the state should be included in social welfare orientation, but they did not provide an explanation. Although 'moral character' is not a new dimension, we found new underlying

connotations, including ‘basic beliefs’, ‘beliefs about the enterprise’, ‘continuous learning’, ‘understanding the true nature and law of things’, and the three concepts of ‘self-discipline’. These dimensions demonstrate a strong emphasis on morality for Chinese leaders. In terms of the distinction between subjective and objective responsibility (Cooper, 1992), our study shows no evidence of much difference between the objective responsibilities of Eastern and Western managers, but Chinese leaders are more concerned with subjective responsibilities. As we illustrated, there is a heavy emphasis on the moral character rooted in the Chinese traditional culture. The results of our study demonstrate the foundation on which responsible Chinese business leaders build their sense of responsibility.

The second main contribution is that we revealed the characteristics of Chinese RL by making the main connections between the different dimensions of RL explicit. The three characteristics (i.e., *zhi xing he yi*, *nei sheng wai wang*, and *jun zi wu ben*) that explain these connections reflect a Chinese perspective. In contrast, the proposed dimensions and characteristics of RL in the existing studies are mostly presented as parallel to one another. Few papers have analyzed the internal relationships among them. For example, Maak and Pless (2006) asserted that the character and qualities are the core of RL in their model, but they did not explain the relationship with the eight roles they introduced. Cheng et al. (2021: 1787) proposed a similar structural order to reflect the thinking process of ‘*nei sheng wai wang*’: self-cultivation → peace of mind → social feelings → long-term strategic orientation → interactive decision-making. We provided a more specific description of each dimension along this path. We also identified important novel themes of responsibility (behaviors). In addition, our analysis of the relationships among the dimensions is helpful to find the ‘*ben*’ of the responsibilities of the leaders.

Regardless of culture, leaders are imbued with multiple responsibilities. Only by recognizing the relationships among different responsibilities can leaders prioritize them and devote more time to the most important responsibilities to improve the effectiveness of their leadership. The existing literature has presented several views on leaders’ responsibilities, including CEOs, but there is still no clear answer to the question ‘What are the main responsibilities of executive leaders?’ Drucker (2007) believed that every enterprise has special top-level management tasks, and there are no general rules for top-level management. His view may be correct for management, because compared with leadership, management includes many functions that are closely related to the day-to-day operations of an enterprise. For leaders, however, we believe there are general rules, and it is necessary to clearly identify the main responsibilities of the leaders. Our research contributes to this goal.

The third contribution is that we highlighted the executive leader’s responsibilities for the company. Although various characteristics associated with companies have been identified in the extant RL literature, the company or organization has not been given as much attention as the stakeholders. This could be because existing RL theories are built largely on stakeholder theory, which tends to view stakeholders in affiliation with a specific company (Donaldson & Preston, 1995). However, it is important to note that the executive leader should not be equated with the organization. From a role theory perspective, leaders should view the company as an entity for which they are responsible. By assuming responsibility for the company, such as articulating ideologies and developing strategies, executive leaders can effectively fulfill their responsibility to the company’s stakeholders.

Among the four themes of this dimension, ‘strategic persistence’ has not yet been explored in the RL literature. However, in the field of strategic management research, this concept has often been viewed in a negative light, despite the potential for positive long-term outcomes for organizations (Grossman & Cannella, 2006). The conflicting perspectives surrounding strategic persistence can be attributed to the diverse reasons behind it and the various measures. For instance, previous studies have indicated that strategic persistence resulting from past success and a culture of flattery and conformity can have a detrimental impact on firm performance (Audia, Locke, & Smith, 2000; Park, Westphal, & Stern, 2011). These studies have primarily evaluated strategic persistence by examining resource allocations across the primary functional areas of the firm. However, our findings show that strategic persistence is defined as adhering to the chosen direction set by leaders who are guided by their moral character. We proposed an alternative perspective on strategic persistence that emphasizes the importance of leaders staying committed to the mission of the company.

In addition to these three contributions, the research method we employed also strengthens the theoretical contribution of the article. A few exceptional studies have adopted qualitative methods, such as grounded theory and case study (Antunes & Franco, 2016; Hind et al., 2009; Koh et al., 2018). However, those that have adopted a qualitative method have only interviewed leaders without collecting perspectives from various stakeholders as we did in this study. Our results show that the viewpoints of different stakeholders exhibit a high level of intersection and different weights were given to different responsibilities. The data triangulation ensures the validity of our research.

Practical Implications

The results of this article offer guidance for Chinese business leaders who aspire to become responsible leaders. Most of the characteristics we summarized are behaviors rather than traits so they can be practiced, copied, and adjusted. However, due to the internal logic of these dimensions, leaders need to pay attention to applying the characteristics in their own practices. First, leaders should begin by finding, changing, and strengthening their own beliefs through continuous learning and practices. Leaders who are interested in following the role models of RL leaders should focus on the following practices: have clear values, understand the purpose and mission of the company, be aware of the nature and trends of the industry, maintain good relationships with stakeholders and between the company and society and the state, and pay attention to other fundamental questions about the company. The business and social environment is constantly changing, so understanding current problems requires continuous learning and practices.

Second, leaders need to fully realize the importance of moral education for employees. For most Chinese enterprises, moral education is often neglected and regarded as ‘the short piece of the board in the wooden bucket’.³ The achievements of exemplary companies demonstrate that educating employees and helping them internalize ethical philosophies is the most fundamental aspect of developing a person’s moral character and company culture.

Finally, leaders must strive to unify their knowledge and practices so they are integrated and connected. They need to check whether their beliefs and behaviors are consistent, whether what employees learn and do are consistent, and whether the enterprise’s philosophy and practices are consistent. When knowledge and practices are not aligned, they need to be fixed.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although our conclusions were derived from interviews and data on CEOs of Chinese enterprises, they are still largely applicable to leaders at other levels and leaders outside of China, particularly in terms of the principles. In general, the higher the hierarchical level, the more applicable the results are. Nevertheless, they are still applicable to the lower levels because even a team or a department has a mission, vision, and core values, and any leader with strategic thinking will enhance team or department effectiveness. However, the sample we used still poses a limitation. We only identified the characteristics of RL of top leaders. More research is needed to determine about how middle- and low-level managers are responsible for the organization and external stakeholders, or whether the characteristics are shared by managers at different levels. In fact, other studies of RL have the same limitations. RL is often seen as uniquely applicable to the upper echelons of organizations (Waldman & Balven, 2014), and very few studies have specifically examined the characteristics of leaders responsible for particular types of jobs.

The sample of our research also has limitations. The sample was constrained by the award selection criteria. First, the standards are determined according to Drucker’s management principles, which are applicable to Chinese enterprises but may not highlight Chinese characteristics. Therefore, it is possible that some of the enterprises where Chinese characteristics are salient did not meet the performance criteria of this award and ended up being excluded from our sample. Second, the criteria for the awards are more specific than the common definitions of RL in the existing literature. Some criteria such as ‘setting high standards for others’ work’ and ‘continuous innovation’ may have also prevented leaders

who meet the standards of RL from receiving the award and being selected for our sample. Although many of the award-winning enterprises in our sample, such as *Fangtai* and *Kingdee*, have demonstrated distinctive Chinese characteristics, and the standards of RL proposed by interviewees were also highly consistent with what we found from our research, we still cannot guarantee that our findings fully cover the Chinese characteristics of RL simply because the country is huge and dynamic.

The composition of the sample is also a limitation of this article. Although the variety and the depth allowed us to fulfill our research purpose, the composition hampers the degree of generalizability. All of the leaders we studied are top leaders. More than half of the leaders worked in the manufacturing industry, and most of the companies are large or medium-sized. In addition, the average age of the leaders was relatively old. Thus, caution is needed when applying the principles or actions to other groups, especially leaders in special industries such as information technology and finance, leaders of small enterprises, low-level leaders, and young leaders. Future research could select leaders at lower levels as the sample and could identify leaders of enterprises in special industries as the sample, which can potentially lead to identifying new characteristics for RL.

Continuing to study the unique characteristics of RL in diverse cultural contexts will provide new insights for researchers as well as leaders and companies around the world. As companies become increasingly connected globally, it is important to continue this line of research and understand how leaders provide value within their own society and to the global society.

Conclusion

RL in a particular society needs to be understood from the cultural roots of that society, because leadership practices rooted in the local culture are the most effective. We hope our study will inspire scholars to pay more attention to the cultural factors when examining RL in a society, and executive leaders should also pay attention to the societal normative values when defining the connotation and scope of responsibilities. RL understood and implemented through a cultural lens will help ensure global sustainability.

Data availability statement. The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author Qing Qu. The data are not publicly available because they contain information that could compromise the privacy of the research participants.

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Notes

1. 'Zong' generally means chief, or chief executive, or general manager in Chinese. When people address their leaders, they typically add the title, but usually shorten it to the last name and 'zong'.
2. The May Fourth Movement was a Chinese anti-imperialist, cultural, and political movement which grew out of student protests in Beijing on May 4, 1919.
3. When making a barrel, the shortest piece determines the capacity of the barrel. The analogy is used to describe the critical importance of the task.

Appendix I
Sample Quotes of Themes of RL

Themes	Sample quotes
Moral character	
Strong beliefs	<p><i>Basic beliefs</i> He always talks about why our reputation building can succeed because the society then lacked integrity. When the society lacked integrity, whichever company that cared about integrity would succeed. When integrity becomes a universal value, and becomes as indispensable as our water and air, anyone who does not care about integrity will fail. (XYL09E)</p> <p><i>Beliefs about enterprises</i> In fact, an enterprise is not only an economic entity, but also a social organization. Therefore, if I use one sentence to express the purpose and significance of an enterprise, it is first to create happiness for customers, society, the country and even for mankind. (MAO)</p>
Philosophical mind	<p><i>Understanding the true nature and law of things</i> The most fundamental aspect of collective decision-making is to work together to avoid the boss's low technology, because the problems you see are one-sided. The second is to allow them to feel their sense of achievement for participation, so it is important to train them to think. (SUN)</p>
Virtues	<p><i>Altruistic</i> He is essentially a person who is happy to help others. (MW02) He doesn't have himself. His mind is full of others. In terms of responsibility, he has reached the level of selflessness. He has done a good job. (GA11E)</p> <p><i>Respecting employees</i> There was no side to Lei Gong at all. ... Sometimes we use her car and leave the smell because we ate inside, she doesn't mind. All these small things make her a very friendly person. (CZ06)</p>
Responsible for the self	
Continuous learning	<p><i>Loving reading</i> My learning of Yangming philosophy is just an entry point. I have studied Dao De Jing (Book of Dao), Zhong Yong (Doctrine of the Mean), and Da Xue (Great Learning). I also like reading Western books. I have read all Drucker's books and occasionally studied Western philosophy. To me, reading is a very happy thing to do. (XU)</p>
Leading by example	<p><i>Setting an example by personally taking part</i> Many times, when we encounter difficulties, we would find Wu Dong out there working away. When we had difficulties getting employees to clean the bathroom, we would find Wu Dong cleaning it very early the next day. Having such a role model enabled us to shoulder the responsibilities together. (GA04)</p> <p>Our old chairman has never been extravagant and wasteful. He advocates that we spend on what we should, but save what we can, and exercise restraint over ourselves. All of these are very beneficial to all our cadres and employees, and these are also how the old chairman did to set an example for us. (XYL05)</p> <p><i>Diligent</i> So far, it is still a working state. I don't usually know the day of the week. It just does not register in my mind. (LEI)</p>
Self-discipline	<p><i>Maintaining good living habits</i> He is so rich. But you can see his life is not complicated at all or luxurious. His car is not as good as mine. I said that yesterday, so he is very disciplined in life. (FT05)</p> <p>She is very hardworking and plain. She has always been like this. I see she doesn't change her clothes. The cotton padded clothe is in very bad shape, very, very old. (CZ09E)</p>

Responsible for employees	<p><i>Caring about employees' lives and family lives</i></p> <p><i>Improving employees' well-being</i> Under the direction of Ding Dong, we put forward an Employee Happiness Project. He is making a personal effort, talking about employee benefits on many occasions; particularly in regard to the amount to be given to employees with difficulties. He would ask the company leaders not to be distressed by the money. People are having difficulties living on, and you are still stingy about the money. Your enterprise will become meaningless if you go that way. (DL03)</p> <p><i>Caring about employees' families</i> The employee committee has held a Golden Butterfly Cloud matching party with other organizations with more female employees in the past two years to help male employees in Kingdee to find partners. For the sake of the employees' personal situation, Mr. and Mrs. Xu would always attend the party even if they are busy. Even if it is time for them to rest, they will both arrive at the scene in unison. (KD05) He takes care of the daily life and even the family affairs of our employees. For example, our employees would report to him if so and so's parents are sick, so-and-so's wives or children are sick, he would help you contact the relevant people he knows to take care of the sick person. (TC04) If the employees' children are in their hometown, Mr. WU would advise them to bring their children to Suzhou and help them arrange schools for their kids. If they have to leave them with their grandparents, they allow employees to go home three times a year, two times the travel expenses would be covered by the company. As an entrepreneur, he has fulfilled his utmost responsibilities to let the children of these employees enjoy so much love from the society. (GA11E)</p>
Helping employees grow professionally	<p><i>Allowing mistakes</i> What our enterprise advocates is to be effective even if you have to correct mistakes; rather than perfect but ineffective. That is, we encourage employees to do what they can without worrying. The company would take the responsibility if you make a mistake. (XYL04)</p> <p><i>Providing personal guidance</i> It's OK if you don't understand. He will explain to you again and again. In addition, he would personally demonstrate to us repeatedly until we could do it on our own. (TC11E)</p> <p><i>Developing leaders</i> One way is that you make them improve their ability. There are lots of training to achieve that. The second is to run this seminar at all levels. I think it can help them improve their cognition. We should not ignore the stimulation and growth brought by their sense of participation. I give them some time and money to go outside for training. After training, they should (have chances to) make some important decisions. (SUN)</p> <p><i>Empowering employees</i> She has always been at the front line of management, but she will not interfere with our specific reform management. She will be at these levels, and every time when there are some small problems in our management decisions, she will use her persuasive way to guide us, but more importantly, she let us know ourselves. (CZ02)</p> <p><i>Providing training opportunities</i> After leading the assigned personnel to participate in the training for many years, and then sending us to attend the management class in Beijing University HSBC College last year, I think it is very responsible for the boss of an enterprise to plan for our employees and let us learn these things. (MW04)</p>
Developing employees philosophically	<p><i>Teaching in person</i> As for education of traditional culture, in which I am more involved. Now I give the most lectures in a year, but for external entrepreneurs and for internal purposes, we have gradually accumulated some materials, including some books and materials we printed for internal use. They may learn more using those materials, including new materials we organize and share every year. (MAO)</p>

	<p><i>Creating learning conditions</i> No matter how many orders we have, he will not stop humanistic education. Like last year, when the epidemic control loosened, humanistic education was immediately resumed. But we did not have enough time to complete all the orders, the situation is worse this year, too many orders for us to finish, but he would rather slow down production than to stop education. (GA02)</p>
<p>Responsible for the company</p>	
<p>Articulating the unique ideologies of the company</p>	<p><i>Clarifying company philosophies</i> Mr. Mao always tries to integrate the excellent Chinese traditional culture, the teachings, ideologies of Confucianism, in fact not just Confucianism, also others like Daoism, with the Western managerial theories. He is using Fangtai as a platform to carry out an experiment. (FT04)</p> <p><i>Articulating the vision of the company</i> I set up a goal myself called 'One Hundred Cities, One Thousand Stores'. I made a plan then, but no one followed when I called out about it. Because 'One Hundred Cities, One Thousand Stores' is my goal, why would fellow workers work for you to fulfill your goal? Later I realized the problem and I modified the slogan. I added a line: 'One Hundred Cities, One Thousand Stores include one of mine'. (SUI)</p>
<p>Practicing what the leader preaches</p>	<p><i>Establishing rules that are consistent with values</i> Promote the implementation of the system, and promote all the systems I said just now, including the enterprise management system, including the practice of our management, the very detailed requirements for the code of conduct, and the very strict evaluation. All these things were promoted by Lei Gong in the early days. She built the managerial framework for the company's entire spiritual system. (CZ02)</p> <p><i>Sticking to values</i> At that time, I only served as a pastor to preach and promote our corporate philosophy. When I encountered something, I would apply the philosophy to evaluate how the thing should be dealt with philosophically. When people were confused about something, I would use the ideologies to resolve it. (ZHANG)</p>
<p>Strategic thinking</p>	<p><i>Following the trends</i> He magnified everything he dealt with, infinitely magnified. He looked at a macro problem from a macro philosophical perspective, and then you feel you are enlightened suddenly. (TC03) DeLong has been honored to participate and witness 29 of China's 40-year reform and opening up... It is precisely because of such a great background that DeLong has achieved its iron and steel industry... As a business operator in the new era, you have to adapt to the general trend. (DING)</p> <p><i>Long-term oriented</i> The important thing is who can clearly see the responsibility an enterprise takes for the society and the future direction of the company's value to the society and work hard for it. At the same time, who can share the wealth creation with the times and employees, that is a very good performance of the long-term doctrine. (LEI) We call it 'fix one and look at three' – fix one year's strategy but look at that of the three years. At the end of the second year, we will do some strategic reviews. I think he has always been very concerned about the enterprise development strategy. (ZB08)</p>
<p>Strategic persistence</p>	<p><i>Focusing on the chosen direction</i> We don't promote sales anywhere we open our business. Because we rely on reputation, we don't do anything else. I said we have no advantages if you need skills, for us, reputation is the greatest skill. (ZHANG)</p> <p><i>Not giving up</i> Lei Gong is different. She is settled down in the very tough place. She settled down in our place which used to be very old and shabby. She is hardworking, simple, and conscientious, and overcame all sorts of difficulties and hardships. (CZ09E)</p>

	<p><i>Pursuing excellence</i> He has sharp eyes. He can always discover problems when he goes to a place. This can be improved, and that can be improved. He will give you some suggestions. (GA02)</p>
Responsible for external stakeholders	
Addressing customers' and business partners' needs and interests	<p><i>Meeting customers' needs with good products and service</i> The customer has given you their trust in the product, and you need to give them a satisfactory answer. This house is guaranteed for 70 to 100 years, and within these 70 to 100 years, it must be in good condition. (NIE)</p> <p><i>Protecting the interests of partners</i> He said that if you follow me and work hard, I won't let you suffer losses; I will let you make money. He also promised to supply us if we lose money in some areas. This makes us feel at ease. (MW09E) In the daily operational process, she can think using the other party's perspective, to retain the profit for downstream investment, including distribution and retail, brand building, etc. (CZ12E)</p>
Helping customers and business partners grow	<p><i>Coaching and assisting customers and business partners</i> One very important thing is to help others grow. I focus more on spiritual growth, which I have been promoting in recent years. No matter what kind of person, if we are destined to meet, I will often talk to them about the four words 'heart, way, virtue, matter'. (XU)</p> <p><i>Training customers and business partners</i> We have started learning and following the Fangtai Way in 2005. Their culture is a zero-defect quality culture. We have also learned Six Sigma management from them. They always allowed us suppliers to closely surround them, which led to a very good alliance and allowed us to grow with them. (FT12E)</p>
Contributing to the state and society	<p><i>Contributing to social welfare</i> Our charity responsibility includes activities like cultural dissemination. I have participated a lot in this area. Now I mainly support entrepreneurs' education, build 10,000 happy communities, and assist 100,000 entrepreneurs to build their enterprises into great enterprises. (MAO) We have a donation institution, and when our company's employees and some disadvantaged groups in society need it, our company extends a helping hand. We have such a specialized institution to ensure that the work can be implemented. (ZB06)</p> <p><i>Contributing to the state</i> When we submitted the plan for transformation, we reported that we would place all the people, that is, all the people in the bankrupt enterprise. (DL02) Every year, we participate in projects like the national targeted poverty alleviation project, the current rural revitalization project where we are. In Tibet, Gansu, and where our enterprises are located, we will all participate. Lei Gong considers this part of her responsibilities. (CZ06)</p>

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