

Chinese Leadership And Emotional Intelligence

How Do Chinese Leaders Handle Emotions?

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As I am presently working on the second draft of my first (but not last) book called "Emotional Intelligence and Leadership in Asia", I keep dancing with a crucial question: **How do Chinese leaders make use of emotions in their leadership? Do they do anything specific, and, if yes, what can we learn from them?**

Only people who have never lived in China still have the illusion that Chinese people don't have too much emotions! Emotions are everywhere here. But obviously, they are handled differently by leaders here as compared to in the west.

This was why I was quite excited to find a book called "Chinese Leadership", by Dr. Sheh Seow Wah, during a recent business trip to Singapore. This is a quite academic piece of work, so be prepared if you want to read it. If you are not too familiar with academic style, you may not enjoy reading it. However, I found it quite interesting and it sparked some new thinking.

The author makes a distinction among four very different traditional Chinese leadership approaches:

- The humanistic approach (Confucius, Mencius)
- The legalistic approach (Han Fei Zi)
- The strategic approach (Sun Zi)
- The naturalistic approach (Lao Zi – Chuang Zi)

It is clear that the author is not particularly looking at the emotional angle, so this article is about my own impressions and reflections, based on his description of these four leadership styles.

The first conclusion I drew from reading the book is that none of the four leadership styles give a lot of room to emotions when it comes to leading people.

This is particularly evident in what this author calls the legalistic approach (Han Fei Zi). Han Fei Zi, who seemed to have heavily influenced the King of Qin, believed that “man (is) naturally evil” and that therefore “strict rules and severe punishments are needed”. Ruling with fear certainly taps into the power of emotions (fear is a strong one!), but it doesn’t go much deeper into the emotional field.

In the strategic approach (Sun Zi), emotions in leadership is also not covered. Sun Zi is a famous author in the West now, thanks to the publicity given to his book “Art of War”. This very interesting book talks about how to lead using principles normally used to win battles but it doesn’t cover the use of emotions in leadership.

The naturalistic approach (Lao Zi, Chuang Zi) could be also called the Taoist approach, as these two authors are the pillars of the Taoist thought. The focus here is on the spiritual development of the leader. The accomplished leader is the one that followers barely notice: almost invisible, unassuming, but nurturing and always present, just like the Tao. In my opinion, there is not a lot in the Dao De Jing (道德经) about the emotional side of leadership except that the leader has to aim at ultimately reaching within herself a place of deep inner peace that emotions won’t affect.

The humanistic approach is probably the one that gets the closest to the emotional field. The well-known concept of benevolence could be related to what most people would call compassion today (although it goes much further). The emotions of her followers clearly matter to a Confucian leader.

However, my conclusion after reading this book was the same as every time I dive into Chinese thought: the conscious use of emotions as resources to lead people does not seem to be very prevalent. This is also what I observe with senior Chinese leaders I work with. Many of them have a strong belief that their emotions should be left at the door of their office.

As I am writing these lines, I am well aware that my point of view could be described as the prejudice of a western mind. At the same time, I am certain that the West – and myself in particular - has benefited a lot from the wisdom of Chinese thought: its consumed art of handling paradoxes, its attention to the wisdom of the body, and its holistic approach to creating harmony within oneself and between people, just to mention a few. Why then could Chinese thought not benefit from the work that the West has done on emotions? This is what I want to investigate further in the coming years. At the same time, my in-depth work with Chinese leaders tells me already that the key concepts and tools of Emotional Intelligence developed in the West can benefit Chinese leaders immensely.

Of course, years of studying the Chinese culture and language have only made me aware of how much I still need to learn, so I would love to hear your thoughts on this...especially if you disagree!

Warmly

Sebastien

Reference: "Chinese Leadership. Moving from Classical to Contemporary", by Dr Sheh Seow Wah, Times Editions, Singapore, 2003



Sebastien Henry is **Progress-U's expert for Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and stress management**. He works with executives who want to:

- avoid feeling exhausted and uprooted as their career takes them to the top;
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Having worked in an Asia-Pacific regional position at a multinational company, Sebastien has experimented extensively on how to develop Emotional Intelligence in his daily work life. He is currently writing a book on this topic. His articles on Emotional Intelligence in Leadership have been published in Human Resources and South China Morning Post.

He firmly believes in action, and the tools he uses and shares are derived from several areas of his life: his business experience as a corporate executive, of course, but also his intensive practice of mountaineering and rock climbing (7a on-sight and more than 50 alpine routes), his commitment to teach and coach prisoners, and his daily meditations for more than six years.

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