

Wang and Ba's Distinguishing: An Exploration of the Three Elements of Leadership Power, Profit and Virtue

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Abstract: Since ancient times, the combination of hegemonic and benevolent ways has been the practical inevitable orientation of the distinction between Wang and Ba governance, yet the fundamental elements constituting this concept and their interrelationships have remained absent. Through analyzing and comparing multiple leadership models spanning ancient and modern times across different cultures—including both hegemonic way and royal way—this study reveals that nearly all leadership models can be decomposed into three core elements: power, interest, and virtue. Further analysis demonstrates that both isolated application and pairwise combination of these elements face insurmountable limitations, necessitating their inevitable integration into a sequential leadership model—prioritizing power as the foundation, followed by interest as the motivator, culminating in virtue as the transformative force. The discovery of this universal leadership tool not only provides a concise and innovative interpretation of the combination of hegemonic and benevolent ways, but also offers a new theoretical perspective for understanding China's traditional wisdom.

Keywords: The distinction between Wang and Ba governance; The integration of benevolent and hegemonic principles; power-interest-virtue theory; Chinese-style governance

1. Introduction

The distinction between the Way of Wang and the Way of Ba, as two types of governance since ancient times, has been extensively studied by Chinese scholars since the pre-Qin period. Theoretically speaking, the Way of the King is naturally superior to the Way of Tyranny: Those who dominate through force and feign benevolence those who subdue people through force do not truly win hearts, but lack sufficient strength, and those who govern through virtue and demonstrate benevolence those who subdue people through virtue genuinely win hearts and sincere compliance (Mencius, Gongsun Chou I). Compared to the Tyranny's face-to-face compliance without genuine heart acceptance, the Way of the King's heart-winning sincerity is considered a corrective measure against Tyranny [1], clearly aligning more with the long-term choices in governance. However, in contemporary management practices, we often observe the paradox where those attempting to win hearts through virtue fail to gain acceptance and instead become dominated by subordinates, while those relying on force can maintain orderly organizational operations. Thus, it is not difficult to speculate that the distinction between the Way of the King and the Way of Tyranny does not hold absolute superiority as traditionally assumed. Instead, the Way of the King and Tyranny resemble two sides of the same coin in public administration—the concepts of democracy and efficiency

—which dialectically unify through continuous confrontation and adaptation, forming good governance for both present and future. Therefore, this paper will delve into the distinction between the Way of the King and the Way of Tyranny, decomposing the Way of the King and Tyranny into three leadership elements: force, benefit, and virtue. From the perspective of blending both approaches, we explore specific application scenarios and effective integration methods for these three elements, thereby providing new research perspectives for contemporary leadership studies.

2. The Difference Between Wang and Ba with the Three Elements of Leadership

2.1 The Most Popular Debate Between King and Hegemon Comes from Mencius: Gongsun Chou I

Those who rely on force to exploit virtue dominate, and such dominion requires a great nation. Those who govern through virtue and benevolence reign, and such kingship need not be grand. King Tang conquered with seventy li (approximately 250 miles), while King Wen achieved dominance with a hundred li. Forceful conquests lack genuine acceptance, as it cannot sustain long-term power. Virtuous persuasion, however, wins hearts and minds with sincere acceptance – just as the seventy disciples embraced Confucius.

Since Mencius, the Way of the King and the Way of the Tyrant have become two opposing concepts. The Way of the King implements benevolent governance and educates the people through virtue, which must ultimately win their heartfelt acceptance; whereas the Way of the Tyrant, with historical development, manifests as governing the world through legal systems and authority [2], requiring only that the people abide by the law. Therefore, in the traditional political context of China, the Way of the King more often represents moral governance, while the Way of the Tyrant more typically symbolizes legal governance [3].

2.2 Wang's Moral Governance: To Win People Over with Virtue

The so-called rule by virtue means, as the name implies, to win people over through moral influence, inspiring genuine admiration from those being led through an individual's outstanding virtues. This strategy is adopted because in kingly governance leadership relationships, leaders typically believe that resolving conflicts should be approached through morality rather than force, and trust that moral power can resolve conflicts that would otherwise require military intervention [4]. Therefore, such leaders are now referred to as ethical leaders in contemporary management systems. By applying the roles and functions of leaders in social learning theory, it is observed that a leader's influence on subordinates is exerted through role modeling [5]. Subordinates' attitudes toward the organization and their understanding of moral norms primarily stem from observing their superiors, meaning that the moral cultivation of senior leaders must be transmitted to every corner of the organization through middle-level cadres [6]. Thus, the moral cultivation of organizational members and corresponding organizational behaviors can only be indirectly nurtured and reinforced through leaders serving as moral exemplars [7]. While the existence of ethical leadership may potentially enhance team member recruitment [8] and deliver positive outcomes such as higher subordinate satisfaction [9][10] [11], its indirect nature renders its impact less significant than commonly perceived [12]. When the flexible moral influence reveals its obvious shortcomings and fails to become an effective strategy for organizational governance, the mainstream stance of honoring the king and devaluing hegemony in traditional Chinese governance theory since the Spring and Autumn Period becomes challenged.

2.2.1 Tyrannical Rule of Law: The Combination of Power and Profit

This historic upheaval manifests as the governance gap that Wang Dao (the moral governance) could not fill, which has long been quietly filled by Da Yao (the legal governance). This is precisely the source of contention that allows Da Yao to maintain parity with Da Yao in their millennia-long debate, despite the latter having long occupied the moral high ground. In the legal system of Da Yao, leaders do not expect their members to be influenced by virtue. Instead, Da Yao leaders prefer to first overpower through force and then induce with profit to prevent emotional backlash from their followers and maintain political stability. In the political philosophy of pre-Qin Legalism in China, the abstract concepts of force and profit are concretely expressed as authority and legal codes and clear rewards and punishments.

2.2.2 Law of Power: To Overpower People with Force

In Marxist political economy, the emergence of a state is rooted in the establishment and unification of its military apparatuses such as armed forces, police departments, and courts. The leader at this stage inevitably occupies the central position that connects these institutions, wielding supreme authority within the organization and establishing legal frameworks. As stated in Han Feizi: Eight Classics: Power is the mechanism for controlling life; influence is the means to dominate the masses. By occupying this core position, leaders gain absolute authority and impose various constraints on subordinates. Since those being governed develop subconscious compliance through temporary restrictions, leaders gain coercive power beyond mere authority, which further solidifies their control. This dynamic of conquering through force creates a continuous interplay between power and influence. Consequently, leaders' discourse power rises accordingly, granting them the authority to establish or modify organizational regulations as needed. However, maintaining such regulations through brute force proves ineffective; they must be reinforced with persuasive arguments based on benefits to achieve better results.

2.3 Clear rewards and Punishments: Persuade People with Benefits

While the constraints of authority and authority imposed by leaders foster a subconscious sense of submission among subordinates, they simultaneously ignite an ever-growing yearning for freedom. To prevent backlash from followers and maintain political stability, those wielding hegemony devise a reward-punishment system that employs the winning hearts through benefits strategy.

The feasibility of winning people over through benefits stems from the assumption that human nature tends to seek benefits and avoid harm: In ancient China, classical criminology, starting from rationalism in human nature, posited that the desire for profit is both an instinct and desire of humans, serving as the starting point and driving force behind all actions [13]; Similarly, British bourgeois revolution pioneer Thomas Hobbes proposed human nature is self-preservation, while French Enlightenment thinker Helvetius argued that profit is our sole driving force [14]. Even Marx acknowledged: All that people strive for is related to their interests [15]. This demonstrates that whether in China, the West, or Marxist political philosophy and management philosophy, there exists a fundamental consensus on the human nature of seeking profit. This undoubtedly represents a further correct exploration of human essence and marks a significant advancement in the development of theories of human nature [16].

After establishing the essential attribute of human nature to pursue benefits and avoid harm, leaders must strictly enforce the established legal system to maintain political stability, particularly

when facing subordinates who harbor latent resentment under the constraints of subduing through force. This is specifically manifested in clear rewards and punishments. As stated in Han Feizi · Wudu: No reward is more effective than generous rewards that benefit the people; no praise is more effective than beautiful praise that brings prosperity; no punishment is more effective than severe punishment that instills fear; no criticism is more effective than harsh condemnation that causes shame. (Han Feizi · Wudu) This means adherence to the law brings substantial honor and rewards, while violation incurs severe punishment [17]. In ancient Chinese military treatises, this principle is even more pronounced, manifesting in three aspects: heavy rewards and punishments, swift execution, and immediate visible results. First, heavy rewards and punishments: Display them with axes and halberds, adorn them with banners—those who achieve merit are rewarded, those who violate orders face death. Under the dual threat of rewards and punishments, the ambitious pursue glory while the unambitious dare not offend. Second, swift execution: Rewards are given within days, punishments are enforced immediately. The military ensures prompt implementation, allowing subordinates to quickly perceive consequences and adjust their behavior to comply with organizational norms, thereby rapidly reducing communication costs between personnel and operational costs. Finally, immediate visible results: Kill one man to shock the entire army, kill one man to delight ten thousand soldiers—in pre-Qin military texts, warfare was seen as a last resort. The saying Warfare is a cruel instrument suggests that victory without battle and submission without punishment represent the pinnacle of excellence. However, once it is necessary to be decisive, leaders must seek after-effect, either to deter all members of the organization to strengthen the authority of law or to comply with all members of the organization to improve the organizational atmosphere, which is the due meaning for any organization [18].

When the reward-punishment system catering to human nature's seeking benefits and avoiding harm is effectively implemented, most subordinates tend to comply. Even more astute organizational members may leverage existing regulations to swiftly adjust their competitive strategies for greater social advancement. Yet there are always those who defy authority—those who persistently challenge the dignity of organizational rules. The consequences range from being relegated to the lowest ranks, unable to secure basic survival opportunities within the organization, to being directly expelled and stripped of their right to exist. Thus, any subordinate with organizational experience and survival wisdom inevitably becomes assimilated by institutional norms under such effective reward-punishment systems. This inevitable outcome remains unchanged despite their initial rebellious nature, as maintaining such defiance would lead to both mental collapse and objective exclusion. Consequently, whether they are mediocre followers, intellectually gifted elites, or fiercely resolute individuals, anyone possessing experience of surviving within an organization, submitting to power, and adhering to regulations will have their words and actions standardized. This achieves the ideal governance effect described in Legalist philosophy: Under the law's constraints, the wise cannot escape, and the brave dare not resist [19].

3. The Distinction Between Wang and Ba: Three Elements of Leadership

Through the preceding brief discussion on Wang Dao and Da Dao, the three fundamental elements that constitute their foundation—power, benefit, and virtue—have become evident. In Wang Dao-type leadership relationships, leaders rely on winning through virtue. Typical success stories of leadership in China's historical development abound, such as the King of Chu cutting his own tongue [20] during the Spring and Autumn Period, Wu Qi sucking a festering wound [21] in the

Warring States Period, and Gu Rongshi's burning of charcoal [22] during the Wei-Jin period. In these leadership success stories, leaders demonstrated exceptional moral integrity that forged formidable charisma, compelling followers to abandon rationality and personal interests to collaborate in grand endeavors. It can be said that when leaders possess strong moral appeal and subordinates uphold the steadfast belief that a scholar will die for one who understands him, the entire organization becomes an ironclad entity. This embodies the profound expectation placed on virtue-based governance within organizations.

The human nature hypothesis based on the inherent self-interest of all beings [23] posits that domineering leaders typically employ their accumulated superhuman strength to construct artificial norms that conform to natural laws, accompanied by a public opinion environment with moral evaluation systems. Under the dual impetus of human greed and the organizational principle of rewarding good and punishing evil being effectively implemented, organizational members thrive when aligned with the leadership and perish when opposed. Everyone—including the leader—must sacrifice certain interests and freedoms to gain greater benefits and autonomy. Therefore, the fundamental reason a leader gains political recognition from organizational members lies in their ability to satisfy these members' evolving interest needs. By safeguarding these interests, the leader's position is sustained through long-term support from the organization [24].

The debate between royal and hegemonic governance essentially examines the relative importance of three leadership elements: power, interests, and virtue in organizational leadership. By re-examining this discussion through the lens of these three core leadership components, this study introduces two groundbreaking academic perspectives for both classical governance theory and contemporary leadership research: First, a comprehensive framework for reducing leadership to its essential elements; Second, effective strategies for integrating these three leadership pillars in organizational dynamics.

3.1 A preliminary Study on the Combination of Three Elements of Leadership

The leadership research framed by the distinction between royal and hegemonic governance reveals the fundamental roles of three core elements—power, benefit, and virtue—in the foundational logic of organizational leadership across classical and contemporary contexts. While these pivotal factors have been thoroughly examined as discussed earlier, two deeper questions emerge:

The first question is whether the three elements of power, profit, and virtue can serve as the most fundamental components in leadership research, that is, whether reducing or simplifying organizational leadership to these three elements constitutes a comprehensive approach. As briefly demonstrated in the first section, these three elements—power, profit, and virtue—emerged from the distinction between royal and hegemonic governance, representing a precise reduction of China's royal governance and hegemonic leadership models. However, contemporary leadership research not only encompasses China but also includes more modern and postmodern Western schools. Therefore, to enhance the persuasiveness of these three elements in leadership studies, they must demonstrate both the precision and comprehensiveness of their reduction, thereby explaining all representative classical studies of organizational leadership across historical periods and cultures. This also serves as the legitimacy justification for this paper's conceptualization of leadership as being broadly reduced to these three fundamental elements.

The second aspect focuses on the effective integration of the three leadership elements within organizational dynamics. When the foundational status of power, interests, and virtue as

fundamental components of leadership research is established, it implies that all leadership models must ultimately reduce to their core elements. Consequently, leaders essentially employ these three elements through strategic combinations tailored to specific contexts. The second section of this chapter explores the feasibility of operating each element independently or in pairs. If neither independent application nor paired combinations prove viable, the author will synthesize all three elements in Chapter Three, analyzing their prioritization and integration methods. Adopting the research perspective of combining royal, hegemonic, and tyrannical approaches, this exploration aims to develop deeper strategies for cultivating, implementing, and strategically advancing leadership.

3.1 Comprehensive and Accurate Theory of Leadership Reduction

When the three elements of Li, Li, and De can achieve a comprehensive interpretation of China's traditional leadership models represented by Wang Dao and Da Wo, to enhance the theoretical extensibility and persuasiveness, we need to incorporate all classical leadership models from various Western periods into the analytical framework of these three elements. This will enable the full interpretation of these three elements in all organizational leadership contexts as presented in this paper.

3.1.1 Machiavellianism: A Classical Model of Leadership

As a renowned Italian Renaissance statesman, Machiavelli is celebrated as the culmination of the realist school in Western political philosophy through his seminal work *The Prince*. Rooted in his pragmatic approach to political demoralization [25], Machiavellian leaders typically exhibit four defining traits: First, emotional detachment from interpersonal relationships; Second, disregard for traditional morality and adoption of utilitarian rather than ethical perspectives; Third, instrumentalization of others over rational consideration; Fourth, focus on immediate outcomes over long-term goals [26][27]. The first two characteristics emphasize transcending emotional and moral constraints—a departure from winning through virtue. The third trait positions individuals as tools to achieve personal objectives, aligning with the winning through force strategy. The fourth characteristic involves breaking down complex situations into manageable tasks, prioritizing immediate results over strategic planning. This model emphasizes leaders' mastery of current circumstances, effectively pursuing self-interest through tactical manipulation of others. Crucially, it prioritizes personal gain over winning through advantage, forming a distinct winning through force paradigm. Thus, Machiavellian leadership cultivates a utilitarian leader who dehumanizes opponents through strategic maneuvering to secure practical benefits—a political demoralization that epitomizes the winning through force approach.

3.1.2 Webber's Authoritative Theory: Modernist Leadership Model

Max Weber, one of the three founding figures in sociology, established a modernist legal-rational leadership model in his seminal work *Economy and Society*. The theory posits that all organizations are grounded in some form of authority, categorizing leadership styles into three types: charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational [28].

The reason charismatic leaders gain authority lies in their followers' conviction of extraordinary abilities that inspire loyalty. Undoubtedly, their recognition stems from their capacity to resolve both spiritual dilemmas and practical challenges. As followers' concerns are addressed, their lives inevitably undergo significant transformation—a classic example of winning hearts through benefits.

To maintain their magnetic charisma, charismatic leaders not only employ benefit-driven strategies but also incorporate virtue-based persuasion in later stages.

In contrast, traditional leadership derives its authority from members' reverence for established traditions, manifesting through patriarchal systems, hereditary succession, and feudal structures. Within such relationships, leaders need neither extraordinary abilities nor exceptional virtues—instead, they maintain dominance through the generational transmission of traditional power. As evident, Weber's traditional leadership model epitomizes the power-based persuasion approach.

As the most ideal type in Weber's authority theory, legal-rational leaders are believed to establish their leadership through members' recognition of the legitimacy of rules and regulations. According to Weber, the legitimacy of these rules stems from members' long-term exploration revealing that only by surrendering a small portion of freedom to rules can one better enjoy the remaining freedom [29], which epitomizes the persuasion through benefits style of leadership. In management practice, legal-rational leaders employ bureaucratic systems as their management tool. The rigid hierarchical structure they adopt confines members' functional authority within the cage of power [30], representing the practical manifestation of persuasion through force in real-world leadership scenarios.

3.1.3 Habermas's Public Sphere: A Postmodern Model of Leadership

Habermas, the second-generation leader of the Frankfurt School, is widely recognized as the greatest philosopher of the postmodern revolution [31] for his definition of the public sphere in the postmodern administrative environment and his invention of the administrative tool communicative rationality. Through observing organizational form transformations in the postmodern era, Habermas discovered that leaders, organizational members, and the general public influenced by their political communication all inhabit the public sphere. The public sphere serves as a transitional zone between the public power domain and private domains [32]. Within this space, leaders and members transcend identity limitations to engage in equal dialogue through communicative rationality—a concept where leaders must authentically demonstrate the rationality of their actions during implementation for others' understanding [33]. This approach achieves ideological unity from micro-individuals to macro-collectives while reconciling the long-standing tension between instrumental rationality and value rationality [34]. The new leadership style, grounded in leaders' sincere expression of self-justified actions, exhibits characteristics of rationality, equality, secularism, and transparency [35]. In the postmodern governance model of the public sphere, leaders maximize individual and collective benefits through authentic communication guided by communicative rationality, serving as a prime example of winning hearts through virtue rather than conquering minds with benefits.

Through synthesizing the three leadership models, it becomes evident that the triad of power, interest, and virtue has remained an indispensable element for leaders throughout history—from classical to modernist and postmodernist eras. This framework serves as compelling evidence that these three elements form a comprehensive and precise leadership theory. Consequently, all classical leadership models can be analyzed through this triadic lens. Conversely, this study also demonstrates how the combination of these three elements provides a framework for identifying optimal solutions across various leadership paradigms.

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4. Conclusion

This study employs the Wangba Debate as its analytical framework, systematically reducing traditional concepts of Wang Dao (the Way of the King) and Da Wo (the Way of the Tyrant) to three core leadership elements: power, profit, and virtue. Through comparative analysis of classical leadership theories—including Machiavellian principles, Weber's authority theory, and Habermas' public sphere framework—this research demonstrates the comprehensive validity and precision of this reductionist approach.

Research reveals that both isolated application and arbitrary combination of the three elements exhibit structural flaws: singular elements prove inadequate for sustaining long-term effective governance, while their piecemeal integration fails to holistically address an organization's triple demands for order, interests, and values. This leads to the conclusion that an effective leadership model must organically integrate the power-interest-ethics triad, following a sequential logic of establishing order first, then regulating interests, and finally cultivating people. This finding provides a clear operational interpretation of the traditional proposition blending kingship, benevolence, and tyranny: True good governance is neither purely idealized moral governance through royal virtue nor simplistic authoritarian rule via tyranny, but rather a dynamic equilibrium where these three elements progressively advance and mutually reinforce each other.

This research not only enriches the analytical framework of leadership theories but also provides theoretical support for advancing Chinese-style good governance in contemporary China. In the context of the new era, how to organically integrate institutional authority (power), interest

coordination (benefits), and value guidance (virtue) to achieve a creative transformation from traditional governance wisdom to modern governance systems remains a crucial topic worthy of further in-depth exploration.

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