

A Modern Interpretation of Wang Ba's Distinction: An Analysis of the Three Elements of Leadership Power, Profit and Virtue

Yuzhou Zou¹, Yuanyuan Zeng²

¹ Philosophy and Religious Studies, Peking University, Beijing 100871, China

² School of Law and Intellectual Property, Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University, Guangzhou, China

Abstract: This study begins with the traditional debate between Wang and Ba, employing an element reduction method to deconstruct the concepts of royal way and hegemonic way into three fundamental leadership elements: power (deterrence), interests (benefit distribution), and virtue (moral appeal). The research systematically analyzes the inherent limitations in implementing these elements individually or in pairs, demonstrating the historical inevitability and rationality of their combined application. Through a historical examination of Emperor Xuan of Han's governance practices, the feasibility of the kingdom-hegemony-way hybrid model—combining power, interests, and virtue—is verified. The study further explores the implications of this model for the Sinicization of contemporary good governance theory.

Keywords: The distinction between hegemony and dominance; Three elements of leadership; The combination of hegemonic and non-hegemonic approaches; Good governance

1. Introduction

The distinction between Wang and Ba governance as a core proposition in China's traditional political thought has been debated for millennia since the pre-Qin period without reaching a definitive conclusion. Mencius advocated winning people over through virtue, while Han Feizi championed legalism and power. Though these two concepts appear irreconcilable, Emperor Xuan of Han's assertion that the ways of royal and hegemonic governance can be combined reveals the delicate balance between ideals and reality. Why can royal governance and hegemonic governance be combined? What is the underlying mechanism? This is not merely a historical question but also concerns the practical propositions of contemporary organizational leadership and national governance.

This study breaks free from the binary opposition of kingdom versus hegemony by employing element reductionism to deconstruct these concepts into three fundamental leadership components: Li (power deterrence), Li (interest distribution), and De (moral appeal). Through systematic analysis of how these elements operate independently, interact in pairs, and synergize, we explore the underlying logic of hegemonic principles within a benevolent governance framework. The research aims to provide localized theoretical resources for adapting contemporary Chinese theories of good governance

2. Theoretical Examination of the Combination of Three Elements of Leadership

2.1 The Theoretical Dilemma and Reduction Path of the King Versus Hegemon Debate

The debate between Wang and Ba originated in the pre-Qin period and has persisted throughout the history of China's political thought. Mencius advocated winning people over through virtue, representing a purely righteous path, while Han Feizi promoted legalism and power, leading to extreme hegemony. This binary opposition remained unresolved for a long time until Emperor Xuan of Han proposed combining both the ways of Wang and Ba, which provided a practical paradigm for their integration. However, how is it possible to combine the ways of Wang and Ba? What is the underlying logic? This requires an elemental reduction of righteousness and hegemony.

This paper deconstructs Wang Dao (the Way of the King) and Da Wo (the Tyrannical Way) into three fundamental elements: Li (power deterrence and institutional constraints), Li (interest distribution and material incentives), and De (moral appeal and spiritual guidance). These correspond to coercive power, exchange power, and inspirational power respectively, forming a complete spectrum of leadership. Through this framework, we can systematically examine different combinations of these elements to explore the theoretical basis for the blending of both dominant and non-dominant approaches.

2.2 The Three Elements that Are Not Desirable Fight Separately

The simplest combination of the three elements of leadership is undoubtedly the independent operation of power, profit, and virtue. First is the simplistic approach of conquering through force. This is clearly unwise. In the declining eras of dynasties across Eastern and Western nations, leaders can no longer provide basic material living standards for their people (lacking profit), while exposing various corrupt and incompetent governance under the general decline of the dynasty (lacking virtue). Their only remaining assets are undissolved armies and harsh laws to delay organizational collapse (having power). The inevitable outcome of this leadership model is self-destruction. Thus, purely conquering through force proves unwise. Next is the simplistic approach of conquering through profit. This lacks credibility as its theoretical foundation relies on human greed. Without strong rules and hierarchical constraints, driven by profit motives, organizational members will inevitably transcend status limitations to maximize personal gains. Finally, purely conquering through virtue is also partially unwise. If virtue-based leadership were entirely viable, why would the debate between kingship and hegemony persist through the ages? Therefore, the independent operation of power, profit, and virtue proves unwise.

2.3 The Combination of the Three Defective Elements

After recognizing that the independent application of the three elements— power, interest, and virtue —is impractical, this study proceeds to examine their synergistic integration. The three elements form three leadership models through pairwise combinations: the model combining power with interest, the model integrating power with virtue, and the model merging interest with virtue. The following sections will explore these configurations in detail.

2.3.1 Leadership Defects in the Combination of Power and Profit

The classic manifestation of the synergy between power and profit should be exemplified by the hegemonic leadership model described in Chapter 1. In such a dynamic, leaders leverage their accumulated superhuman power to enforce control over organizational members while establishing

rules that align with people's inherent pursuit of profit. Under the dual influence of the leader's formidable authority and the dual mechanism of rule-based discipline and reward-punishment systems, both mediocre performers and capable individuals—whether courageous or intelligent—will be compelled to comply.

This leadership model, where power and profit converge, traps all organizational members in a self-perpetuating cycle of power dynamics and institutional mechanisms. By exploiting people's fear of authority, it drives them into profit-seeking cycles. As members prosper through these profit-driven processes, the organization grows stronger, which in turn elevates the leader's power. Theoretically, this model appears nearly flawless, yet it creates an unbridgeable divide between classes.

However, the vast historical evidence has conclusively demonstrated otherwise: Having long lived within a leadership paradigm that harmonizes power and interests, a select few organizational members have refined their adaptability through strategic interactions with others. They've even developed an infallible formula for resource integration within this power-interest framework to secure promotions. For such individuals, as long as their vitality permits or their descendants can carry on their legacy, they will eventually attain the qualifications to become supreme leaders. Moreover, these exceptional organizers naturally develop matching ambitions—through repeated promotions, they've come to recognize themselves merely as tools within the power-interest alignment mechanism, lacking genuine respect for leadership dignity. Consequently, when poised to ascend to the highest leadership position, their deep-rooted path dependence from prolonged immersion in the profit-seeking and risk-avoidance paradigm inevitably drives them to act decisively.

Under such circumstances, the supreme leader has clearly reached a point where there is no more profit to be gained from further restrictions; meanwhile, through his own efforts, he has already consolidated power. If the supreme leader were to recklessly use coercive force to weaken the feudal lords, it would only backfire. The leader now harbors a significant sense of crisis, which is what the Chinese often refer to as excessive merit overshadowing the sovereign. Thus, through the tacit and continuous power struggles between the leader and the organization's members, the final outcome can only be the dragon battles in the wilderness, its blood dark and yellow (The Book of Changes · Kun Hexagram). This is clearly not what the leader intended when initially establishing the mechanism that harmonizes force and profit.

2.3.2 Leadership Defects of the Combination of Power and Virtue

The leadership relationship where power and virtue converge predominantly manifests in short-term religious-like organizations. This phenomenon occurs because such groups struggle to establish themselves in secular life requiring material support. A leader first commands awe through their authoritative position, then gains affinity through noble virtues. This duality creates both centrifugal forces of reverence and centripetal bonds of attachment, plunging the leader-follower dynamic into an inherent conflict from the outset. Without material incentives to mediate, this tension persists indefinitely, remaining irreconcilable.

Generally speaking, only a leadership atmosphere in which power and virtue are combined will produce two kinds of leaders:

The first category consists of prisoners with widespread second thoughts. After prolonged interaction, leaders' exceptional virtues become commonplace, failing to sustain long-term appeal for such followers. Meanwhile, the threat of severe punishment for leaving or betraying the organization

creates hesitation, prompting them to constantly weigh gains and losses while awaiting opportunities. Undoubtedly, once leaders and their organizations lose their initial deterrent power at some point, coupled with sufficient external temptations, their decision to escape or betray the organization becomes inevitable.

The second category consists of exceptionally devout followers who remain profoundly rare. These individuals, either driven by naive idealism or pursuing higher spiritual aspirations after material needs are adequately met, choose to ignore the organization's failure to provide tangible benefits. They even employ a self-motivated closed-loop logic to drive counterproductive contributions, often demonstrating admirable courage in battling ideals and noble pursuits. For idealists clinging to youthful fantasies, their beliefs inevitably waver when personal choices diverge from reality. Limited life experience prevents them from balancing ideals and practical circumstances, leading to the frequent defection of rigidly devoted model believers. Predictably, such dogmatic adherents face destruction through biological attrition. Thus, adjusting course out of instinct becomes the middle path. More mature devotees who join organizations for higher spiritual goals, however, avoid premature demise through life experience and may eventually attain promotions. Yet organizations fail to deliver benefits, trapping most as prisoners of dual aspirations. The rest, lacking political acumen due to their naive mentality, perish prematurely. This directly results in these promoted, more mature devotees facing a crisis of talent shortage.

It is evident that when grassroots cadres with strong commitment often harbor second thoughts, or when middle-level officials—though more mature—die young due to their immature mentality and lack of political wisdom, the organization cannot thrive. Leaders who merely combine power and virtue inevitably fail to sustain their presence long-term. This explains why such organizations, which tend to be short-lived and resemble religious groups, are prevalent in reality.

2.3.3 Leadership Defects in the Combination of Profit and Virtue

An organization lacking external coercive forces for maintenance and support directly provides substantial benefits and moral incentives to both formal and potential members. Tracing this model across historical and cultural contexts, such organizational structures typically exist only within mature core groups of large-scale organizations. This is because peripheral members, constrained by underdeveloped productivity and mundane tasks alongside visible organizational rules, remain vulnerable to operational pressures. Only senior managers at higher levels can mitigate these coercive forces through their authority to access more information and command larger teams.

Therefore, the leadership mode that lacks the maintenance of force and directly supplies profit and virtue to organizational members should not be universally feasible after considering the development stage of contemporary productive forces.

3. The Effective Combination of the Three Elements of Leadership

When the three elements of power, profit, and virtue prove mutually exclusive and their combinations riddled with flaws, the ideal path of blending authoritarianism with democratic governance becomes contingent upon the organic integration of these three pillars. The third section of this article will therefore examine the optimal sequence of combining these elements and demonstrate how their synergistic integration can establish the feasibility of Good Governance.

3.1 The Combination Order of the Three Elements of Power, Profit and Virtue

3.1.1 *As a Superficial Leadership Element Force*

The core issue this section explores is whether leaders should prioritize power, profit, or virtue when first engaging with organizational members. Consider this scenario: If a leader initially demonstrates virtue to team members before proportionally introducing power and profit, members might initially be deeply moved by the moral inspiration. However, they would soon discover that beneath the leader's charismatic facade lies an oppressive system of power-driven order and superficial reward systems for profit distribution. Such a reality would inevitably lead to profound disillusionment.

When leaders initially offer benefits to their team members, they inevitably face the dilemma of whether to sustain this through power or virtue. If power-based constraints are imposed on beneficiaries, the stark contrast will inevitably drive them to leave swiftly. Moreover, since benefits are prematurely distributed in the first step, organizational interests will suffer losses. Over time, this unsustainable pattern will lead to financial deficits and eventual collapse. Conversely, if virtue-driven influence is applied to beneficiaries, it creates the same predicament: the suffocating constraints of power-based order hidden beneath leaders' charismatic virtues – a path equally untenable.

From this perspective, it seems an unquestionable choice for leaders to first demonstrate power to organizational members. Compared to prioritizing virtue or benefits, presenting power as the initial approach is not only the sole solution but also the optimal one. Firstly, this aligns more closely with humanity's innate biological drive for dominance [1]. Moreover, after enduring the test of power-based order, members are subsequently provided with both material and spiritual sustenance through benefits and virtue. This dual nourishment fosters greater loyalty to the organization, encourages internal validation of past power-based challenges, and reinforces these tests through exemplary conduct. Such reinforcement undoubtedly strengthens the organizational structure.

3.1.2 *As a Middle-Level Leadership Element Li and as an Inner Leadership Element De*

When power is prioritized in the hierarchy of presenting and organizing members, the arrangement of profit and virtue becomes a topic requiring continued discussion. It is evident that discussing profit after virtue is inappropriate, as previously explained: After being strongly morally inspired by leaders, organizational members will soon discover that beneath the charismatic facade of leadership lies a rather vulgar practice of rewarding merit through profit distribution—a development that inevitably leads to significant disappointment.

Therefore, organizational members who are intimidated by the leader's formidable image and accept the test of their powerful order should first receive further benefits as compensation for their loyalty to the leader and organization. As benefits are continuously drawn, fulfilling certain material needs in a sense, this member's instinctive exploration of life will shift their focus from accumulating personal achievements to achieving fulfillment of life's meaning. At this stage, it is precisely the highly charismatic genius leader who should fully demonstrate their virtues to provide new guidance for senior organizational members.

Therefore, the combination sequence of the three elements— power, profit, and virtue —when observed through a diachronic research perspective and based on theoretical logical deduction, inevitably manifests as the power-profit-virtue sequence. The derivation of this combination order implies that the distinction between royal and hegemonic governance may no longer be confined to the theoretical dilemma of a binary conflict between royal and hegemonic power in academic discourse. Instead, it acquires a new form of theoretical integration through gradual reduction and

elemental recombination, thereby clarifying the underlying logic behind the so-called mixture of royal and hegemonic principles. This provides contemporary governance theory systems with theoretical nourishment rooted in traditional culture and China's practical realities, offering dual applicability for modern integration.

3.2 The Feasibility of Power-Interest-Deed Model Guiding Bawang Dao Zazhi and Good Governance

3.2.1 The Power-Benefit-Virtue Model Guides the Feasibility of the Traditional Bawang Dao Zazhi

Scholars typically trace the distinction between royal and hegemonic governance to the Confucian-Legalist debate, or the internal Confucian school's theoretical clash between idealism and realism known as the Meng-Xun Debate [2]. This reflects how the irreconcilable nature of royal governance and hegemonic rule became concentrated during the pre-Qin period. However, it wasn't until the Western Han Dynasty that Emperor Xuan first proposed combining royal and hegemonic governance, marking the beginning of their convergence.

Prince Liu Shi, known for his gentle disposition and Confucian ideals, observed that Emperor Xuan's court was dominated by legalists who enforced harsh punishments. When ministers like Yang Yun and Gai Kuan Rao were executed for their satirical speeches, he remarked at a banquet: Your Majesty's punishment is too severe. You should employ Confucian scholars instead. The emperor frowned and replied: The Han dynasty has always combined imperial authority with Confucian principles. How can we abandon virtue and adopt Zhou Dynasty governance? Moreover, these scholars fail to grasp modern times—obsessed with ancient doctrines while rejecting contemporary values. They dazzle people with empty rhetoric without true principles. How can they be entrusted with power? He sighed and concluded: The one disrupting our family is the Crown Prince! (Book of Han: Annals of Emperor Yuan)

Regardless of the merits and demerits of Liu Xun and his son Liu Shi's discourses, historical records reveal that Emperor Xuan of Han (Liu Xun) advocated a governance model blending the Way of the Overlord with pure virtue-based governance. Examining Emperor Xuan's life, we see he survived the witchcraft turmoil, gained power from the deposed emperor, was constrained by Huo Guang's influence, and suppressed rebels before the chaos erupted. Thus, it was natural for him to integrate both approaches in his administration. After Huo Guang's death in 68 CE (2nd year of Dijie), Emperor Xuan personally took charge: he suppressed Huo Yu and deposed the empress with strength (66 CE); pardoned accomplices and exempted high-ranking officials' eldest sons from taxes with benefit (65 CE); renamed Liu Xun and granted a general amnesty to remove taboo names with virtue (64 CE). Subsequent civil governance and military campaigns—whether stabilizing internal affairs or repelling external threats—were all rooted in these three principles. This demonstrates that Liu Xun's concept of blending the Way of the Overlord marked the convergence of kingdom-overlord and power-benefit-virtue theoretical frameworks. The phrase blending the Way of the Overlord could be seen as a manifestation of the power-benefit-virtue model, while its feasibility under this framework remains undeniable.

3.2.2 The Feasibility of the Power-Benefit-Virtue Model Guiding Contemporary Good Governance

Good Governance, in the context of Western administrative studies, refers to good governance. Since the 1990s, it has become the most frequently used term in Anglo-American and continental European legal and political literature. In the traditional Chinese political discourse, Good Governance is equivalent to Good Administration, referring to an effective political system. Taking

Confucianism as an example, it states: If one fails to reform when the time calls for change, even the greatest sage cannot govern well. Therefore, since the Han Dynasty gained the empire, it has always sought good governance, yet remains ungovernable to this day—this failure stems from failing to reform when the time calls for change (Dong Zhongshu, *On the Virtues of the Wise*). Here, reform means institutional renewal, implying that effective governance requires updating political systems to align with contemporary characteristics. Taking Taoism as another example, it asserts: The highest good is like water; water benefits all things without contention... To speak well is to be trustworthy; to govern well is to be upright... It is precisely because it does not contend that it is blameless (Chapter 8, *On the Tao Te Ching*). Here, good functions as a verb rather than an adjective, emphasizing that the essence of governance lies in effective administration. Thus, good governance—referred to as Good Governance—can be traced back to Good Administration.

The integration of Chinese and Western approaches. As early as before 2012, Yu Keping proposed that good governance is not only a borrowing of the traditional Chinese concepts of good governance, but also a borrowing from contemporary Western (good governance), aiming to combine the meanings of both. How can we integrate these Chinese and Western connotations? Yu Keping further pointed out: The transcendence of this concept over tradition lies in its not being limited to good government, but focusing on good governance for the entire society, which aims to maximize public interests... The transcendence over the West lies in the fact that within the Chinese context, good governance remains the key to achieving good governance [3].

Yu Keping's further elaboration contains two points. The former refers to good governance as the social management process that maximizes public interests, characterized by cooperative management of public affairs between the government and citizens, representing a novel relationship between the government, market, and society [4]. Clearly, in today's reality of highly differentiated departments, the public government, economic market, and civil society have already split into three relatively independent sectors. The political—administrative dichotomy emerging from Wilson's 1887 publication of *Administrative Research* is insufficient to reconcile the increasingly nuanced dynamic balance among these three elements. Therefore, Yu Keping's argument holds validity from this perspective. However, the latter claim that the transcendence over the West lies in the fact that good governance remains the key to achieving good governance within the Chinese context lacks understanding of the Chinese indigenous context. Taking Confucian and Taoist classics as examples: Dong Zhongshu's *Strategies for the Virtuous and Wise* states good governance requires continuous transformation, where continuous transformation specifically targets specific institutions and means rather than policy reform; the *Tao Te Ching* explicitly clarifies that in the Chinese context, it is good governance that realizes good politics, contrary to Yu Keping's assertion that good politics remains the key to achieving good governance. Thus, Yu Keping's inversion of the conceptual relationship between good politics and good governance in traditional Chinese political discourse leads to positioning the government—even politics—in a relatively equal position within the public value system alongside economic markets and civil society. This is inappropriate both in traditional China and in today's Chinese political context.

For the above reasons, after 2012, the theory of good governance gradually lost its dominant position in China's administrative academia. However, this does not mean that the theory of good governance has been abandoned by China's administrative academia, but rather signifies its process of being Sinicized and sublated by the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In this process of Sinicization and sublation, the inheritors of the good governance theory must recognize that the

political means of reform and modernization indeed serve governance, and that China's governance indeed relies on China's institutional framework to advance [5]. However, this does not imply that the government and politics themselves serve governance. On the contrary, under the Sinicized context characterized by political nature as the primary attribute and political awareness as the foremost requirement after millennia of exploration, the true choice that aligns with China's national conditions and transcends ideological traps is to rectify good governance and ensure that governance serves politics itself.

3.2.3 The Applicable Boundary and Theoretical Reflection of the Force-Benefit-Virtue Model

Although the Li-Li-De model provides theoretical support for the Bawang Dao Zazhi, its applicability still has limitations. First, the model emphasizes diachronic development and is suitable for the complete life cycle of an organization from establishment to maturity. However, for mature organizations, the three elements may present a more complex superimposed state. Second, the model presupposes the stepwise development of organizational members from material needs to spiritual pursuits. In societies with highly developed productive forces and abundant material resources, the hierarchical position of Li may weaken. Third, different cultural traditions exhibit varying sensitivities to the three elements of Li, Li, and De. The applicability of this model in the Chinese cultural context is stronger than in other cultural spheres.

It is equally important to reflect on the fact that while the Li-Li-De model transcends the binary opposition of kingdom versus hegemony, it has not entirely resolved the value tension between royal governance and hegemonic power. In modern political ethics, the exercise of Li must be governed by legal frameworks, the distribution of Li must uphold fairness and justice, and the promotion of De should not degenerate into moral dogma. Therefore, the contemporary application of this Li-Li-De model requires being placed under the rule of law and democratic oversight to avoid repeating the mistakes of traditional autocratic politics.

4. Conclusion

Through the elemental reduction of the kingdom versus hegemony dichotomy, this study constructs a three-element theoretical model of leadership comprising power, benefit, and virtue. The research demonstrates that both standalone implementation and pairwise combinations of these elements exhibit inherent limitations. Only by organically integrating them in the diachronic sequence of power-benefit-virtue can effective leadership be achieved. Emperor Xuan of Han's governance practice of combining royal authority with benevolent governance serves as historical validation of this model.

For contemporary good governance, the Power-Benefit-Deed model offers a Chinese-characterized theoretical framework: prioritizing political primacy as the fundamental attribute, establishing governance foundations through institutional strength, fostering social consensus via equitable benefits, and guiding development with ethical values. This approach not only creatively transforms the traditional wisdom of combining authoritarianism with non-aggression, but also provides a Chinese response to Western theories of good governance. Of course, this model still requires practical validation across different organizational types and developmental stages, with its theoretical boundaries and applicability conditions needing further exploration.

References

- [1] Zhang Xian: Criticism of Social Darwinism by Marx and Engels and Its Contemporary Value, Research on

- Socialist Core Values, 2024, No.10, p. 80.
- [2] Li Qiuli: The Difference and Similarity of Meng and Xun's Thought from the Perspective of Thinking, Confucius Studies, 2024, No.01, p. 27.
 - [3] He Zhe: Core Analysis of the Concept of Good Governance — — A Comparative View of Economic Methods, Theory and Reform, No.5, 2011, p. 78
 - [4] Chen Guangsheng: Towards Good Governance, Zhejiang University Press, 2007 edition, p. 102
 - [5] Chen Zhigang: Adhere to the system construction as the main line, Guangming Daily, 2024-08-08.