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Leadership Ethics as a Political Instrument

Normative Challenges of Global Chinese Expansion for Western Enterprise Cultures



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Abstract

Chinese enterprises with a global focus are emerging as strong competitors in the international market while simultaneously acquiring foreign companies or substantial stakes in them. Distinct leadership paradigms intersect during interactions or within change processes under Chinese influence, significantly impacting goals, strategies, and actions in leadership culture. Chinese businesses are exporting a leadership culture previously unknown in the West. Its ideal follows the large-scale cultural policy of Sinicization, promulgated by state and party leader Xi Jinping. As an ideal model of Sinicized leadership, it is rooted in Sino-Marxist values and infused with Confucian and market-oriented elements. This article deciphers the concept of Sinicized leadership for the first time as a leadership ethics paradigm, drawing predominantly on Chinese sources. It sets the stage for meaningful comparison with established alternative schools of thought. It addresses a significant desideratum in the field of leadership ethics and introduces a previously lacking systematic framework and conceptual term for Sinicized Leadership as its own approach. It also positions this approach within the context of geopolitical interests, allowing it to be understood as a strategic tool. Consequently, the interest in a values-based understanding of the model primarily lies in the field of foundational research in leadership ethics, which takes important geopolitical contexts into account.

Introduction

Discourse on leadership ethics is gaining significant momentum as the influence of Chinese companies in global markets continues to grow. The leadership cultures of these powerful competitors and acquirers from the Far East are introducing a previously unfamiliar paradigm, one that cannot be easily categorized within the established schools of thought. Distinct understandings of leadership intersect during interactions or within change processes under Chinese influence, with specific impacts on goals, strategies, and actions in areas such as human resource planning, deployment, and development, as well as in communication, motivation, and the balance between trust and control. This also encompasses the governance structure and hierarchy, power and decision-making authority, leadership principles and virtues, human resource management and corporate social responsibility (CSR). The background to this is a leadership ethics ideal that Chinese companies are expected to follow, as mandated by the ruling Communist Party of China (CPC) and Chinese state and party leader Xi Jinping. According to an “Indigenous Thesis” (Li 2012;

Van de Ven & Jing 2012), family-like networks, strict hierarchies, a notion of harmony, and Yin-Yang dualities are integral elements of a quasi-ethnically identifiable East Asian leadership style rooted in Chinese Confucian tradition. This ethnological explanation for understanding a seemingly alien leadership culture is overly simplistic and does not meet the standards of contemporary ethics discourse. The key to an appropriate analysis of this new paradigm lies in a transparent leadership ethics framework, one that introduces the approach from its core values to its implications when applied within the realm of corporate culture. Its core values and profile align with the cultural policy known as Sinicization, which Chinese head of state and party leader Xi Jinping (2014-2022) has promulgated as an ideal and emphatically reiterated in numerous speeches. Thus, this new leadership ethics approach from the Far East has rightfully earned the name “Sinicized Leadership” (SiL). Western textbooks and manuals on leadership theory and ethics will need to be revised or rewritten, as the SiL paradigm now challenges established corporate leadership cultures in the West. It does so with the inherent claim that Sinicization is superior to alternative models and should eventually displace them. This competition starts at the level of core values, specifically leadership ethics.

The Process of Sinicization

The phenomenon of Sinicization within leadership culture has not yet been systematically researched, and this article addresses that research desideratum by uncovering it and exploring it in more detail. In service of foundational research, the goal is to systematically analyze and understand this model for the first time. It is also imperative to consider the distinctive geopolitical contexts that underpin the spread of this form of leadership. After all, SiL is not merely an intriguing phenomenon within business or corporate ethics but also a strategic political instrument serving the interests of China’s rulers. By addressing this research desideratum, this article seeks to answer a research question with two interrelated facets: What is sought is a clear systematic framework that has been lacking thus far — one that critically examines the burgeoning SiL culture from its core values established in China, through the strategies employed in its implementation, to its ultimate objectives. It is also crucial to consider the opportunities and risks it presents for liberal corporate and social culture. A systematic understanding of Sinicized Leadership (SiL) thus contributes a crucial tessera within the mosaic of modern China expertise, one of exceptional immediacy and significance. This dimension is considered here. Consequently, the interest in a values-based understanding of the model primarily lies in the field of foundational research in leadership ethics — which, however, takes important geopolitical contexts into account. The discussion begins with an introduction to the new paradigm, which both complements and challenges well-established schools of thought in leadership ethics. Subsequently, several geopolitical contexts are outlined, before finally addressing how the science of leadership ethics can respond to this challenge.

1. Fundamental Ethical Discourse on Leadership

To decode SiL as a novel paradigm, it is imperative first to present the foundational systematics of leadership ethics theory, into which its semantics can subsequently be integrated. This approach will enable a systematic representation of the concept and facilitate its comparison with alternative models. In this study, leadership is contextualized within the realms of economics, particularly concerning enterprises and organizations.

1.1 Systematics and Established Schools of Thought

As is the case in other areas of ethics, the broad field of leadership theory also sees competing ethical approaches, which can be categorized into distinct schools of thought. Leadership ethics fundamentally concerns the normative principles that shape the relationships between supervisors and employees (Ulrich, 2002, 1), focusing on the questions of responsible influence on the behavior of subordinates (Kuhn & Weibler, 2015,

15). A leadership ethics approach theoretically delineates a normative system with transparent values for the critical evaluation and structuring of concrete leadership practices (within the business sector). To achieve this, such a theory must adhere to a rigorous logic (Nass & Kreuer, 2018). Underlying this ethical theory, as a foundational step, is a distinct set of core values, which must be rendered transparent and must likewise be justified from a philosophical, ideological, or other standpoint. The rationale encompasses not only this justification but also the presupposed view of humanity, the concept of human cooperation, the implicit notion of responsibility, and the understanding of economics. From this foundational basis, such an approach can and should consistently define the relationship between the major corporate ethics goals of service to humanity and economic efficiency. These two objectives are intrinsically defined by the core values. This will help determine which of these objectives may be accorded priority in the event of a conflict. In the next step, the resulting consequences for specific areas of application can then be explored. In the leadership context, this primarily concerns the impact on personnel and motivational culture, as well as the classification of SiL as an institutional or virtue-based form of ethics – or a corresponding hybrid variant. Additionally, it raises questions related to communication, control, and other relevant areas.

With the help of this framework, different schools of leadership ethics can be distinguished based on their respective value systems and the resulting consequences. The differentiation begins at the level of each school's underlying values and includes substantive differences in their value systems. Here's a brief outline of how three major, well-known schools can be distinguished in this regard:

1. A normative-individualistic school, characterized by liberal Homo-economicus heuristics and a straightforward focus on responsibility for market success. An institutional economics school (Pies, Hielscher & Beckmann, 2009) that views economic efficiency as the path to service to humanity. A Darwinian approach (Lawrence & Pirson, 2015; Kottmann & Smit, 2014), which considers market competition as an effective way to preserve the biological species.
2. A deontological school with a complex anthropology rooted in the Kantian concept of autonomy: There is a universal duty to foster human autonomy as freedom within the corporate context. Explicitly Kantian approaches (Bowie & Werhane, 2004) view sound business management as a service that enables the development of a culture of personal autonomy rooted in freedom. Discourse ethics approaches (Ulrich, 2002) prioritize societal service to humanity over economic efficiency, emphasizing the common good as the responsibility of corporate action. The aim is to explore a potential balancing of values through discourse. The textbook used by the U.S. Armed Forces, produced by the *Leader to Leader Institute* (2004), asserts the objective priority of the grand democratic mission and personal autonomy as forms of service to humanity.
3. A metaphysical school with a complex anthropology derives the essential nature of the human being from a relationship to transcendence, understanding responsibility for the (divine) good as a form of personal liberation. Economic efficiency is seen as a service to such freedom. Christian approaches (Oko 2024; Nurhayati, 2024; Melé & Cantón, 2014) interpret human-centered efficiency as a synthesis of values in service of the divine mission of salvation. Anthroposophical approaches (Dietz, 2022) posit a synthesis between personal self-liberation and economic efficiency as a means to support that liberation.

The core thesis presented in this article is that a fourth school must now be added to this foundational level, to which SiL can be assigned. This opens up a fundamental theoretical discussion. As with the other approaches just presented, the focus here is not on an empirical analysis of practice. Nor does Sinicized leadership represent the prevailing leadership culture

currently practiced in all Chinese companies. Despite the Sinicization program and the increasing presence of oversight mechanisms in both society and corporate environments, Communist Party discipline cannot simply and comprehensively dictate behavior or leadership cultures. The country is far too vast and ethnically diverse for this. Moreover, regional authorities and corporate leaders are too pragmatic in their approach to implementing the prescribed party lines. This also applies to the goals of fostering a leadership culture that is as harmonious as possible. Thus, SiL is best understood as an idealized concept of leadership — analogous to competing approaches as well — serving as a normative compass for shaping corporate culture and aligning it with the objectives outlined by the Party and its supreme leader, Xi.

Taking this classification into account, and using the leadership ethics framework presented, Sinicized Leadership (SiL) can now be deciphered step by step as a leadership ethics approach. The first step introduces the core values, along with the implications for the relationship between the goals of service to humanity and economic efficiency. This is then expanded into a complete leadership ethics program with selected areas of application.

1.2 Core Values of SiL

Core values are determined on the basis of an extensive literature review, primarily drawing upon the numerous explanations provided in the public writings and speeches of state and party leader Xi Jinping (2014-2022). To address this, this article first reveals the ideological framework of Sinicization, from which further aspects of the core values — concepts of humanity, communal life, responsibility, and economic understanding — can be determined in terms of meaning and semantics.

1.2.1 Sinicization

In his speeches from 2014 to 2022, Chinese head of state and party leader Xi Jinping has unequivocally and repeatedly declared the Sinicization of all sectors of society to be a national objective. As one of the CPC's key strategic goals, it serves as a state-endorsed directive for establishing a leadership culture within Chinese enterprises both in China and abroad. SiL is a leadership ethics-based implementation of the Sinicization program advocated by Xi. Sinicization fundamentally refers to a cultural transformation that is rooted in Chinese values as interpreted by the Party and its leaders and is being spread around the world.

Sinicization fundamentally refers to the following: social and cultural sectors are designed to serve China's overarching societal goals as set forth by the CPC. They follow the grand vision, the Chinese Dream (*Zhongguo meng*). For Xi, the great dream is for the People's Republic of China to emerge as the world's dominant power by its centennial in 2049, whether economically, politically, militarily, or culturally (Marti, 2022). The common good is thus defined as the highest social-ethical value, to which other social values and principles must be subordinated. This dream represents a dual vision, as, alongside China's objective of establishing itself as the preeminent global power, its further intention is to effectuate the vision of a classless society through the modality of Sinicized Marxism.

Xi and the CPC have learned from the missteps of other communist paths (such as those in Eastern Europe) by adopting a form of dogmatism through their program of comprehensive Sinicization of the economy, politics, culture, and beyond. This is how the constitutionally enshrined paradox of a "socialist market economy" (Nass, 2023) adopts not only Marxism but also Confucian and Western elements for the realization of society as a cultural policy, provided they facilitate the implementation of the grand dual vision. Sinicization envisions the selective adoption of non-Marxist elements into an ideological framework prescribed by the Party. SiL thus derives its core values from the interplay of Chinese Marxism with competing worldviews. In numerous speeches delivered by the supreme leader Xi Jinping, Confucianism is frequently invoked to infuse the program with values from China's rich ethical

heritage. When He (2015, 5) advocates for “an ethic for a new society” under Sino-Marxism, referencing the philosopher and social reformer Liang Qichao (1873-1929), the selective adoption of ancient traditions is presented as a key to fostering a values-based culture of expansion of Sinicization: “I believe that we should be embarking on many parallel projects to explore and exploit the rich seam of ethical resources that run through China’s history and culture and apply those resources to the modern world.” Additionally, references are made to market economy elements. These are tied to a liberal Western culture that is initially foreign to Chinese tradition. Revealing these cultural influences deepens one’s understanding of its core values. What serves or contradicts the core values rests within the people’s democratic self-conception, determined by the CPC and, ultimately, its authoritarian leader, Xi Jinping.

1.2.2 Normative Definitions

To complete the core values of this new paradigm, it is essential to uncover the underlying normative definitions of humanity, social relationships, responsibility, and economics.

At first glance, SiL embraces a collectivist view of humanity in the Marxist tradition. The individual comes into focus as the starting point when it comes to the concrete implementation of the objectives identified and prescribed by the Party to realize the great social dream. Theoretically, selfishness and materialism are incompatible with SiL. Homo-economicus heuristics have no place here. Contrary to Adam Smith’s anthropology, which expressly cautions against this, Sinicization begins with the reeducation of individuals. Every member of the collective (including every organization) is expected to be willing to make sacrifices and to remain loyal to the Party, which claims to represent the people, by devoting all their labor and intellect with the utmost effort in service of the dual vision for the people (Xi, 2014, 7 and Xi, 2014, 155-156).¹

A corporate culture such as this demands a new, confident Chinese citizen, who is committed to the grand vision, the people, and the Party. At Peking University, Xi emphasized (2014, 211) that the programmatic essence of such anthropology is that above all the elites, but also the people subordinate to them, should adopt the fundamental communist values as their own. This includes adherence to the socialist path, the dictatorship of the people, leadership by the CPC, as well as to Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought (emphasizing the revolutionary role of the peasantry over the proletariat, guerrilla-style politics, and the “mass line” as an expression of communist penetration of all aspects of society). The objective is to educate people who, in the spirit of Friedrich Engels, perceive the Marxist directives imposed on them not as coercion or threats, but as enabling conditions for their personal freedom. As such, members of the new Chinese collective believe themselves to be free through their united efforts to serve the grand Chinese vision with the utmost dedication (including in the workplace within their respective organizations).

This extends from leaders who act as role models to the lowest ranks in the hierarchy. Confucian tradition can be seamlessly integrated into such contexts. The individual can thus be understood in stages: initially as a blank matrix that takes shape only through roles and experiences, and subsequently as an integral part of personal narratives within the constitutive social narratives (Rosemont, 2018). According to this, human fulfillment, and indeed humanity itself, can only succeed within a social context, which now serves as the foundation for this non-individualistic anthropology. This view of humanity fundamentally supports the communist notion of the primacy of socialized human rights. Individuals realize their dignity through the virtuous execution of their roles, as dictated by their social contexts (Ames, 2018, 172).

¹ The page references correspond to the German editions of the four volumes of speeches by Xi, collectively titled “China regieren,” Volumes I to IV.

The concept of coexistence is shaped by the collective idea of unity that is harmonious and must be cultivated as uniformly as possible within the organization via a strict hierarchy and under the control of the Party. In the context of the mass line, this translates into deep integration of all areas of society in harmony with theory and practice. The collectivist subordination of the individual to the will of the Party is favorably presented by Xi through comparisons with an orchestra or a well-prepared soup made from various ingredients (Li, 2018, 13). An individual musician or a single ingredient in the soup has no value on its own. These separate components only gain value by contributing to the collective whole (the orchestra or the ingredients of the soup), where they provide their conditional and commensurate contributions. The orchestra and soup metaphors are meant to emphasize, according to Party ideology, that harmony should not be confused with conformity. In fact, the emphasis is not on equality, but rather on complementary diversity. Conformity, as “being the same” is therefore not the goal (Li, 2018, 9). However, in Xi’s government ethos, conformity refers to the desired alignment with the collective goals dictated from above. Conformity, as thus understood, allows for diversity, but not for individual expression beyond these given parameters. This is because paternalistic directives determine the score for the orchestra and the recipe for the soup.

Ultimately, the government remains the determining authority. In a metaphorical sense, those who deviate from the score prescribed from above or whose dish does not reflect the predetermined recipe must either adapt or be discarded. Xi labels disruptive elements as scum, viruses, and parasites, and his extensive anti-corruption campaign is an attempt to politically purge these elements from society (Xi, 2018, 143, 494; Xi 2020, 95). The objective of unity, including within the Confucian tradition, is to achieve harmony between nature and humanity while respecting their differences. Central to this Confucian idea is *Guanxi*. It is considered a form of social capital that relies heavily on special relationships and networks, with the obligation to help one another (Li, 2017). This shared social identity fortifies a sense of community, which, in instances of transgression, can also assume a punitive nature. Conceptually and in terms of content, there is compatibility between these ways of thinking.²

People’s responsibility lies in an objective idea, as Confucianism presents with the *Dao*, which prescribes the singular path to good. Eternal (now Sino-Marxist) goals and principles are the benchmark for an objectivist form of ethics. The Party’s objective claim to truth now takes the place of the *Dao*, embodying the Party’s grand vision and its ideal of freedom for the new citizen. There is a duty to follow and habitually internalize these ideals. Desirable virtues include common sense, charity, generosity, harmony, perfection, respect for one’s elders and the poor, concern for children as well as “decency, integrity, incorruptibility, and a sense of shame” (Xi, 2014, 206). These attitudes are now considered “the core socialist values” and are also interpreted in terms of patriotic unity as “humanity, a people-centered approach, trustworthiness, justice, concord and cooperation, and general harmony.”

Cultivating virtue in this way can also be justified in the Confucian mandate for “self-cultivation” (Li, 2018, 12). This responsibility of self-cultivation in service of the grand vision is borne by every new Chinese citizen toward the Party and its leader. The leader within the enterprise bears the responsibility, as a role model, for educating employees to become the new citizens who internalize the Party’s four great principles and adopt them as the foundation for their own moral self-cultivation. Such leaders are heroes, as long as they fulfill this mission. Their authority depends not only on their proven expertise and demonstration of virtue but also on their loyalty to the grand vision and to the supreme leader, Xi Jinping. These leaders are expected to internalize the communist spirit as a personal habitus and,

² *Guanxi* also includes the exchange of favors and privileges, along with path dependencies for future business dealings, which opens the door to corruption (Martino & Müller, 2020). However, anyone who is not part of the network is not subject to this obligation. *Guanxi* represents a strong, exclusive connection among individuals, especially with family, a hometown, a school, or the workplace. *Xiao* (filial piety) and *Ti* (brotherly obedience) are primary Confucian virtues (Wesołowski, 2022). The exclusivity of allegiance to family, as well as the facilitation of corruption, are not to be incorporated into the concept of Sinicization.

from this foundation, to consistently shape and assess the corporate culture. On the one hand, they serve as objects of holistic internalization and dissemination of the Sinicized worldview; on the other, they are intrinsically convinced subjects who view the people's will, as represented by the Party, as their own.

They must embody this compass and translate it into appropriate rules and strategies. Xi Jinping (2018, 320-321) made this clear in a speech on March 4, 2016, stating that even in the private sector, a pragmatic educational campaign focused on ideals and convictions — where lawfulness, honesty, and confidence are paramount — must be carried out. The goal is for all leaders within enterprises to consistently demonstrate their love for the ancestral land, the people, and the Communist Party of China, actively practicing the core socialist values. By contributing to the realization of the Chinese Dream of national rejuvenation, they will lead successful lives and build careers.

“Socialist market economy” is predominantly understood as a state-controlled economy orchestrated primarily by the Party, which nevertheless endeavors to incorporate favorable market-oriented mechanisms (Nass, 2023). There is widespread consensus that “China remains a non-market economy country” (Telep & Lutz, 2017, 703). Liberal principles of market economy thinking are thus not found in the core values of SiL; rather, certain desiderata from liberal individualism that prove useful for achieving the grand vision are selectively adopted. The original communist and even widely Confucian idea that the means of production and intellectual property belong to everyone reduces the initial willingness to accept private property and patent rights unless one has a direct stake in them. Once economic success is achieved, however, and one's own innovations are involved, the Chinese attitude toward private property rights shifts (Rothlin & McCann, 2021, 283-292).

The protection of private property rights is now desired, albeit conditionally (Agten & König, 29-32). The same applies to the positive effects of efficiency, allocation, incentives, and performance driven by risk-taking and non-egoistic self-interest in competition. Xi (2018, 280-281, 318) commends certain aspects of market thinking, such as the efficiency gained from improved resource allocation, the activation of individual performance potential, and the elimination of inefficient private loss-making enterprises in the market. Private entrepreneurship and small to medium-sized enterprises are to be strengthened for their valuable economic potential. This openness to market-oriented thinking can be justified in that it serves the successful realization of the grand vision. The Party continuously defines and monitors it, however.

Following the introduction of the four essential building blocks, the core values underpinning SiL can now be outlined: The ideological foundation of SiL is a Sino-Marxism as articulated by the CPC and its leader Xi Jinping, which shapes the cultural policy of Sinicization. It unites the Party's grand objectives with compatible and adopted Confucian traditions and market elements that serve the common good (dual vision). The ideal of the new Chinese citizen to be educated internalizes the values and virtues of the CPC through a process of self-cultivation, which bestows dignity. This collective life is rooted in a fundamentally harmonious coexistence of these new individuals, who work together and cooperate successfully with trust in and responsibility toward the supreme leader Xi and the CPC in pursuit of the grand objective as the ideal of the common good. The economy, framed as a “socialist market economy,” is a pragmatic model in the service of the common good. It values the advantages of ultimately interchangeable market elements for efficiency, allocation, and willingness to perform, integrating these into a state-controlled economy as long as no better instrumentalized building blocks are found.

Since sound business management and self-cultivation share the same goal, the objectives of economic efficiency and service to humanity are to be understood congruently as a form of unity.

1.3 Applications

Based on the foundation of core values, leadership ethics applications can be identified that pertain not only to human resource management but also to issues of motivation and performance. The primary goal of Sinicized Leadership (SiL) is to optimize the performance potential of individuals within the company, in service of the grand vision and in loyalty to the Party and the supreme leader Xi.

Leaders must exemplify and embody the self-cultivation required to become the new model citizen. Devoid of selfishness and free from materialistic pursuits, leaders must, as a matter of principle, neither be nepotists nor political upstarts. They must have demonstrated humility and diligently worked their way up or attained substantial experience with success in provincial regions. Thus, they must be enlightened heroes in the service of the grand vision as they navigate through life. They act as role models to their employees and as intrinsically motivated stewards committed to the common good. They also establish the basic conditions needed to properly educate employees. In the context of virtue ethics-based personnel development, it is essential to continue shaping the ideal of the new individual, focusing on virtues such as diligence, loyalty, harmony, and willingness to sacrifice, among others. Humility and loyalty to the Party and its leader are essential. Personnel development takes into account not only the principle of performance but also the developmental stage of cultivated virtue. Personnel planning and deployment consider the principles of allocation and efficiency. Teams must be formed in a manner that prevents or combats any forms of nepotism or corruption. When leaders and companies fulfill their responsibilities as conscientious and successful Sinicized Chinese citizens, employees are expected to show loyalty in return. All employees, in turn, have the duty to walk the path of Sinicized self-cultivation and embody the required virtues.

The objectives of a corporate culture shaped by SiL are the harmony of human development, Party loyalty, optimized performance, and economic efficiency. For Chengyang Li (2018, 3-18), the distinct advantage of this concept of harmony is that, considering the *Guanxi* culture, strong social cohesion within the company emerges, thrives, and flourishes not through coercion, but from intrinsic self-liberation through the development of social communal virtues (embodied in the principle of *li* as a ritual tradition and the principle of *ren* as human kindness). Confucian and market-driven motivations are expected to help synergistically optimize individual, collective, and deontological performance incentives. Self-interest as a motivator must be allowed to flourish solely in the service of the grand vision. Other motives of self-interest, or even moral duty-based ethics that conflict with this, are perceived as hostile and unpatriotic. To optimally enhance motivation for innovation and performance within companies, Marxist consciousness is to be expanded with a sensitivity to market-based incentives for competition.

Motivational incentives rooted in Western thinking are severed from their anthropological origins in liberalism, the Enlightenment, and Christianity. These now ideologically disentangled motives are subsequently integrated into the Sino-Marxist view of humanity. Innovative action, risk-taking, and willingness to perform are not derived from a utopian, unrealistic, Stone Age Marxist sense of communalism. This extension of morality aims to ensure that successful innovations align not with foreign liberal market values but with communist self-identity, as the underlying motives have been declared part of the expanded communist identity. Leaders and employees are encouraged to take risks, bring in their own ideas and interests, engage in competition, and challenge themselves to achieve and innovate, while also being rewarded for good performance. However, this is not an expression of individualistic self-actualization, but rather a contribution to the collective success of China — in other words, in the service of the common good and, consequently, the dual vision.

The new, noble employees, as ideal Sino-Marxist personalities, are thus not meant to be mindless puppets who drift passively within the mass collective, fading into insignificance.

The objective is, rather, for them to deeply internalize the communist spirit as a personal habitus and to consistently view, judge, and act upon the world, their company, and their work through this lens. Noble employees possess an intrinsic motivation that unleashes endogenous forces in favor of the people's will, thereby fostering unwavering loyalty to the Party, its leader, and the law (Xi, 2018, 106, 136, 159). Regarding the habitus of Sino-Marxism, Xi advocates for diligence in the cultivation of talents, virtue, morality, and self-perfection. He stresses the importance of distinguishing between right and wrong, correct and incorrect, sound and unsound ideas, along with honesty in thought and action. In such a corporate culture, says Xi (2014, 15), one must clearly state what is true, good, and beautiful, and what is false, evil, and ugly; what is worthy of recognition and praise, and what must be rejected and condemned. Anything that does not fit into this homogeneous corporate and leadership culture — with highly intrinsically motivated employees loyal to the dual vision — must be harmonized or eliminated within the SiL culture. Leaders, through advanced stages of self-cultivation as new Sino-Marxist individuals, develop an intrinsic sense of what contributes to the realization of the grand vision and what should be avoided. This is because ongoing, thorough assessments within the company are required for the responsible implementation of SiL.

The goal of creating a culture of homogeneous harmony, where self-cultivated leaders serve as role models and employees, functioning as a family under a clear hierarchy, work together in service of the grand vision, encouraging everything that is beneficial while resolutely rejecting anything that is disruptive, is fragile. The conscientiousness of employees, in line with the virtuous goals set by Xi, is the constant precondition for their own intrinsic motivation as new Chinese citizens. The leadership caste must not be perceived as an isolated elite standing above the uninformed masses. The comprehensive cultivation of virtue not only permits but also demands, under stringent conditions, critical loyalty from employees, extending even to whistle-blowing (Rothlin & McCann, 2022, 43, 215). Criticism is welcomed and punishment (including potentially punishing the leaders) is warranted whenever the collective grand vision is lost from sight — whether through corruption, selfishness, disloyalty to the Party and the supreme leader, lack of sacrifice, or infiltration by liberal ideas of freedom and individuality. As a corporate culture, SiL thus fosters and demands the education of critically loyal, Sino-Marxist individuals (including the adopted motives). This enables both individual and collective human motivation to thrive within business organizations in service of the common good.

In terms of applications, it can now be established: Effectively Sinicized individuals are heroic leaders within a hierarchical order when they, as new Chinese citizens, serve as role models for their workforce, resolutely and humbly demanding and promoting their employees' self-cultivation in line with the goals of the common good. This form of leadership and virtue ethics requires employees who are loyal, selfless, ready to make sacrifices, open to such reeducation, and willing to internalize the comprehensive motivational program. Confucian traditions, in conjunction with Marxist ideology, strengthen the collective spirit, the objective nature of the prescribed moral goals, and loyalty to authority. Moreover, market-driven elements enhance individual performance readiness and innovation potential through a focus on efficiency and allocation logic. Employees are expected to remain critically loyal to leadership with Sino-Marxist maturity, reviewing alignment with the vision and exposing and abandoning deviant behavior, such as corruption.

1.4 Conceptual Term and Initial Interim - Conclusion

After reviewing the core values and applications, an attempt can now be made to provisionally define SiL within a conceptual term until future research emerges that may suggest potential revisions:

Sinicized Leadership (SiL), from a theoretical standpoint, within the broader cultural policy of Sinicization is a harmonized and harmonizing tessera within the “socialist market economy”

mosaic, representing the CPC's ethical ideal of leadership for a corporate culture of adoptable, flexible Marxism. It builds on a moral education of employees, promoted by exemplary leaders (heroes), to shape new Chinese citizens. These citizens are intrinsically motivated and committed to the values of the common good (the dual vision). Within their culture of communication, which is aimed at harmony and loyalty, and with an intrinsically motivated willingness to make sacrifices, they perceive collective development as their personal and individual growth and uncover disruptions in overall harmony.

With this brief definition and the outlined framework in mind, the academic discourse on leadership ethics — spanning normative individualist, deontological, and metaphysical schools — can now be expanded to include a new paradigm. This opens a new avenue for further research to explore how SiL can now be compared synoptically with established approaches, critically reexamining coherencies and incoherencies in the program and uncovering similarities, differences, strengths, and challenges. The theory of SiL should be juxtaposed with the real-world practice of leadership culture, especially with a view to its applications. However, valid research within China remains unrealistic due to limited access to data and information there. As the next step toward researching the practical applications of leadership ethics within SiL, case studies of Chinese companies operating in Western countries should be conducted. It is unlikely that these companies will provide direct access to their leadership culture due to concerns over data protection and other legal or political constraints.

They are legally required to publish CSR or ESG reports in Western countries at least, which can serve as a foundation for engaging the leaders of these firms in further qualitative in-depth interviews. Potential gateways for such qualitative studies could include: a) the realization among Chinese stakeholders that sustainability and ethics are key factors for business success; b) a confident stance from Chinese actors when presenting SiL as their preferred leadership culture; and c) an existing relationship of trust between the social science researchers and the companies under investigation, perhaps established through pre-existing business ties. The prerequisite for conducting such in-depth and valid research on the practice of SiL is, to a great extent, an attitude of impartial epoché coupled with openness and curiosity. Rothlin et al. (2021, 2022, 2024) have already laid important groundwork in their case studies within the field of business ethics, as have Yin and Quazi (2018), which can be explored in the following with a focus on leadership-specific aspects of SiL's values-based practice.

2. Geopolitical Discussion

Xi has expressly declared the Sinicization of all areas of society as a national objective. As one of the CPC's strategic objectives, it also serves as a directive for establishing a leadership culture within Chinese enterprises both in China and abroad. This fundamentally refers to a cultural transformation that is rooted in Chinese values as interpreted by the Party and its leaders and is being spread around the world. Globally operating Chinese corporations are acquiring foreign companies or shares in these companies. In China, these entities are either state-owned or, in many cases heavily subsidized private companies controlled by the CPC through political cadres (Clifford, 2022, 48). The leadership culture of SiL is to be implemented and reviewed based on this. This brings different value systems into conflict. On the Chinese side, Sinicization is fueled by nationalist motives and employed within the framework of global hegemonic ambitions. Liberal Western countries view this development with concern and are adopting a new strategy of “de-risking” to address the perceived threats from the Far East.

2.1 Nationalism and China's Hegemonic Ambitions

SiL is to be practiced by Chinese companies and is expected to demonstrate superiority over Western alternatives in the competition between cultures. This aligns with the core objective

of the Sinicization program. This hegemonic aspect of the grand vision also has historical roots. China, having endured the harrowing experiences of subjugation by foreign colonial powers (Europe, Japan), perceives itself as purified and strengthened by these trials. Such prolonged periods of humiliation, which still manifest today in a certain distrust toward the West, serve as a potent impetus, particularly in relation to the country's former oppressors, to reclaim a preeminent position in the world and to assume global supremacy. A renewed self-confidence and an increasing nationalism have now proliferated throughout large segments of the population (Feege, 2022, 53). Independence, in the sense of autarky with economically dependent competitors, is today an explicit goal of Chinese policy, with enduring consequences for its current objectives and strategies. "China's 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) and its long-term strategies extending to 2035 make it abundantly clear that technological autonomy and global leadership in future technologies play a central role for China's rulers" (Russwurm & Gönner, 2022). Xi (2018, 325-339) aims to "build China into a world power in science and technology," as China should "lead the international competition" (Xi, 2020, 305). The schism resulting from the era of the Civil War, dividing the nation into Mainland China and Taiwan, is perceived by the current mainland government as a lingering wound that must be addressed, if necessary through military means by the year 2049. A key goal of the CPC is to unite patriotic sentiments with a rising socialist economy and political system, along with the pursuit of military strength. Patriotic consciousness thus intertwines with an aggressive form of nationalism. While nationalism defines its sense of national self-worth in opposition to other nations, patriotism refrains from such a disparaging view. Nationalist thinking expresses itself in the assertion of the superiority of the Chinese path over those of other nations and economic orders, along with global hegemonic ambitions. This sense of superiority is also ascribed to SiL. The declared objective remains the "transformation of the world by the Communist Party of China," as stated in the title of a speech by Xi (2018, 325-339). With regard to shaping a new world and value order, the aim is to "play a larger role from the outset in the creation of this game and its design, to contribute significantly to the drafting of the rules, and to take on a leading role" (Xi, 2014, 150). The Chinese Dream is thus projected globally, with China naturally seeing itself in a leading role (Xi, 2014, 67-68).

SiL is one of many tools in achieving this. The organizational culture practiced within and exported by Chinese enterprises is of paramount importance for the success envisioned by the state leadership. This success entails progressively reshaping the face of businesses on both the national and global stages based on its own ideological tenets. Chinese companies that operate internationally serve as key agents in promoting and enforcing ethical norms, and they act as ambassadors and multipliers, not only of a leadership culture but, above all, of Sinicized ethics, which align with state objectives and are positioned as superior to Western alternatives. The organizational culture practiced within and exported by Chinese enterprises is thus of paramount importance for the success envisioned by the state leadership. This success entails progressively reshaping the face of businesses on both the national and global stages based on its own ideological tenets, all in service of the grand dual vision.

2.2 "De-risking" of the West

Politically, such developments are now increasingly viewed with concern across much of the Western world. This pertains primarily to the overtly manifest political and economic issues. Rising hegemonic ambitions from and dependencies on China have prompted a shift in the West from the long-held notion of strategic partnership to a strategy of "de-risking," though this new strategy has not yet been sufficiently defined in terms of content. The Chinese government's ambition to reshape the global order according to its own values, democracy, and legal standards should no longer be fueled by blind trust.

This underlying analysis is exemplified in a statement by the German government (Federal Foreign Office, 2023): In the competition between systems, China aims to replace Western

values, ideals, legal, and economic systems globally, under the leadership of the Party and its great leader, according to the analysis. The means to achieve this include creating a network of international dependencies, whether economically (e.g., the Belt and Road Initiative – “New Silk Road”), through control over key global infrastructure (ports, communication networks, universities, etc.), or through new security alliances such as BRICS+, which undermine the power of the United Nations. Threats, intimidation, and the exercise of political, economic, and military power are used to sow fear and discord among systemic competitors. Sino-Marxist narratives of peacefulness, justice, and democracy are propagated as interpretations of world events, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the situation in Hong Kong or Taiwan, or human rights violations in China. The freedom of academic research is restricted not only within China by the long arm of the CPC. Such Party censorship, especially in research on and about China, is also being exported to Western universities to lay the groundwork for the new world order. China is simultaneously striving for economic, political, and military self-sufficiency to minimize potential external influence. This assessment is also largely echoed in both documents. The recognized effects therein are primarily the dangers of a global shift in values away from Western principles, increased economic dependencies above all in free countries, the displacement of Western trade partners in international markets due to Chinese competition, intimidation, disinformation, and the concern over military escalation in the South Pacific. Under Xi Jinping, China seizes every opportunity to maximize its own advantage, contrary to the principle of reciprocity.

Chinese companies are part of this culture, which is now perceived as a threat. The spheres of influence where this Sinicized corporate culture could potentially spread are primarily concentrated in strategically significant sectors and regions. Recalibrating its relationship with China will require the West to deepen its critical knowledge of China and create a demand for research-based strategies, including ones for engaging with Chinese businesses that are active in global markets. As a Sinicized view of humanity and society is being exported to Western countries through the vehicle of Sinicized Leadership (SiL), the political impetus behind “de-risking” lies in protecting enterprises in the free world from becoming tools of Chinese self-interest and preventing them from causing not only economic but also potentially cultural and ethical harm to the very fabric of their own societies.

2.3 Second Interim – Conclusion

Understanding the context of SiL’s application helps to better grasp its objectives and verify the potential challenges associated with it. Chinese nationalism and hegemonic ambitions, on the one hand, provide an ethical motivation for SiL. On the other hand, it lends the cultural agenda of Sinicization a social-ethical label of desired superiority in the competition of leadership ethics and positions SiL as a geopolitical-strategic instrument of the CPC. Western countries, in pursuing their goal of “de-risking” must address not only the major political questions in dealing with China but also this challenge, recognizing and engaging with the competition on the level of leadership ethics when dealing with Chinese companies and their cultures. This competition in leadership ethics thus acts as a lens through which major geopolitical conflicts can be viewed.

3. Outlook

This article has, for the first time, presented a systematic framework for SiL as leadership ethics, also taking into account the essential geopolitical implications for its understanding. Moving forward, this framework must be theoretically examined, deepened, and expanded through further research, analysis, and discussions. Future research on this topic must, wherever possible, be informed by engagement with practical applications, such as case studies, as outlined in the first interim conclusion. The concluding outlook focuses on the contribution that leadership ethics discourse can and should make in dealing with the phenomenon of SiL, also considering the associated geopolitical challenges, without becoming politically instrumentalized. Future engagement with SiL in leadership ethics

should, on the one hand, examine the internal coherence of the approach and, on the other hand, its normative substance.

In terms of coherence, tensions arise in the process of ideological adoption at the level of core values when compatibility is not seamlessly achieved. This is evident for example, in the facilitation of corruption through *Guanxi*, the traditionally Confucian precedence of family over state, a moral skepticism toward commerce, and traditional discrimination against women, also handed down from Confucianism. The same applies to challenges emerging from the ideological uprooting of market elements and their integration into Marxist ideology. For practical honesty, fairness, and trade for mutual benefit, there is still progress to be made in contracts with Chinese partners (Madsen, 2019; Wesołowski, 2020; Ma & Becker, 2015). The responses to such inherent tensions in the SiL program are politically determined in China: 1) The fight against corruption has become a national objective; 2) Patriotism, shared faith in the dual vision, and the people's democratic ideology are used to frame the state as a cohesive family unit; 3) Commerce, as such, is rehabilitated when it adheres to the principles of commutative justice and serves the grand vision (Rothlin & McCann 2021, 99-105); 4) Women are elevated in status, as human dignity is now tied to contributions to the grand vision, rather than to gender; 5) The concept of the market economy has been fully Sinicized so that the socialist system is presented as the true market economy; and 6) Xi has constantly reaffirmed the trustworthiness of Chinese partners despite their poor reputation in this regard.

The normative evaluation that follows deserves, in future leadership ethics discourse, a critically fair examination of both the strengths and weaknesses of the SiL approach, which will be briefly highlighted here.

- Strengths of the approach lie in its commitment to fostering inculturation at the level of core values. The concept of adoption seeks to dynamically and synergistically merge various ideological traditions, harnessing their potential for rationale and acceptance. The same applies to the phenomenon (not the specific content) of a vision grounded in the program of Sinicization, which is intended to unify and inspire people, promising direction toward a grand objective. As a leadership ethics approach oriented toward such a vision, it aligns closely with deontological models (especially the *Leader to Leader Institute*, 2004) or even metaphysical approaches, while also standing in opposition to normative individualistic models, albeit now with Sino-Marxist objectivity. Additionally noteworthy is the holistic leadership concept, which seeks to engage as many of the people's motivational potentials as possible, whether individual, deontological, or collective. The credibility of leaders is to be enhanced through moral integrity, which is sufficiently matured at the grassroots level of working life, in the provinces, or elsewhere, and characterized by a willingness to demonstrate humility. This fundamental concept can also be found in Aristotle's principle of distributive justice. It aims to prevent a hierarchy of well-connected but professionally and morally incompetent upstarts.
- The approach, as has become clear, serves as a focal point for the cultural program of Sinicization and its political agenda. This raises several critical normative questions. Xi, as the Party's and the people's supreme moral authority, holds the privilege of defining the Common Good through the dual vision, to which all adopted virtues, tools, and ethics must ultimately submit. Apart from this, critical questions must be raised regarding the understanding of human dignity and the treatment of so-called parasites, or those who refuse to conform through reeducation or threats (Oud & Drinhausen, 2023). The same applies to the unilateral interpretation of virtues in favor of Chinese interests. Taken together, the content of Marxist ideology, the authoritarian dictatorship in the background, the ideological appropriation of Confucian and other ethics through their uprooting, the conveyed image of humankind and society, the

doctrinaire reeducation, nationalism, and the pursuit of hegemony all cast long a shadow over the approach. Similarly, the more aggressive side of the grand vision, which aims to drive performance optimization through destructive incentives (such as fear) and an obsession with optimization in general, also warrants scrutiny.

Thus, the academic discipline of leadership ethics welcomes SiL as a new approach from which other schools can indeed learn. Alternative approaches and schools of thought should, however, strive to comprehensively understand this newcomer with its normative implications by building robust, sustainable expertise in China. They should also carve out their own paths of critical distinction.

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