



One nation, three cultures: exploring dimensions that relate to leadership in Malaysia

One nation, three
cultures

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693

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Abstract

Purpose – Malaysia is a multicultural country with a distinct mix of three major races; Chinese Indians, and Malays. This paper sets out to explore the contribution of the three main ethnic groups to leadership in Malaysia.

Design/methodology/approach – Summated scales for the importance of Excellent Leader (EL), Personal Qualities (PQ), Managerial Behaviours (MB), Organisational Demands (OD) and Environmental Influences (EI) were developed using most of the items categorised by Selvarajah *et al.* and several other items rated highly in the study. A structural model was constructed to explain the relationship in excellence in leadership.

Findings – From the three ethnic groups, 512 managers participated in the research. The findings suggest that Malaysian managers maintain distinctive leadership behaviour along ethnic lines and a Malaysian leadership identity is still in its infant stage.

Practical implications – Malaysia is a country with three distinct ethnic population groups and is yet to forge a single Malaysian identity. The findings are important for managers on foreign assignment in Malaysia and for others who engage with Malaysia.

Originality/value – Most literature discusses Malaysian culture from a national perspective. The paper contextualises leadership of an Asian Tiger economy, which has since independence in 1957 politically developed the nation within three Asian national cultural frameworks.

Keywords Leadership, Malaysia, Ethnic groups, Managers

Paper type Research paper

Malaysia is a multi-racial country of about 23.27 million people (*Census*, 2001) consisting of the indigenous Bumiputras (65.1 percent), Chinese (26 percent), Indians (7.7 percent) and others (1.2 percent). The Malay Archipelago is at the confluence of two dominant nations: China to the east and India to the west. Cultural and religious exchange from the Spice Route period has provided a vibrant culture in this part of Asia. The seafarers from India brought Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism and the Chinese brought Taoism and Confucianism to the archipelago. With Portuguese colonisation in the sixteenth century followed by the Dutch in the eighteenth century and then the British in the nineteenth century, Christianity and western systems of political and economic institutions were also introduced. Prior to its attaining independence from the British in 1957, Malaysia was occupied by the Japanese for more than three years during the Second World War. Following independence, mass migration mainly from India and China to Malaysia, in the form of indentured labour and people seeking economic gain, ceased.

This rich history provides the backdrop to understanding the cultural imperatives that influence management practice in Malaysia.



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Literature review

Takala (1998) has argued that Plato's concepts of leadership have long been the basis of western thought on this topic, noting that the study of leadership has maintained its roots in the works of Plato, even though the research focus may have evolved from:

- (1) Personal factors.
- (2) Behavioural styles.
- (3) Contextual approaches.
- (4) What Takala calls "synchretism", that is, a research approach that tries to examine a combination of elements from the previous three areas.

While the study of leadership may have evolved to use other paradigms, the search for leadership traits continues (see House and Aditya, 1997; and Yukl, 1989, for reviews).

Although Plato is probably the most noteworthy single individual to have exerted an influence on western conceptions of leadership, there have been many contributors to this topic. Some of these can be found in Grint's (1997) collection of classical, contemporary, and critical approaches to leadership. More recent approaches include charismatic (e.g. Conger and Kanungo, 1987), transactional and transformational (e.g. Kuhnert and Lewis, 1987), and servant (e.g. Spears, 1997) leadership. This paper attempts to observe a more culturally sensitive understanding of leadership than these authors.

Clearly defined human relation principles are essential in a plural society where managers deal with people from diverse backgrounds (race, culture and religion). To be effective, managers must have multicultural understanding, suggesting that both eastern and western managerial dimensions will exist for perceptions of leadership excellence in Malaysia.

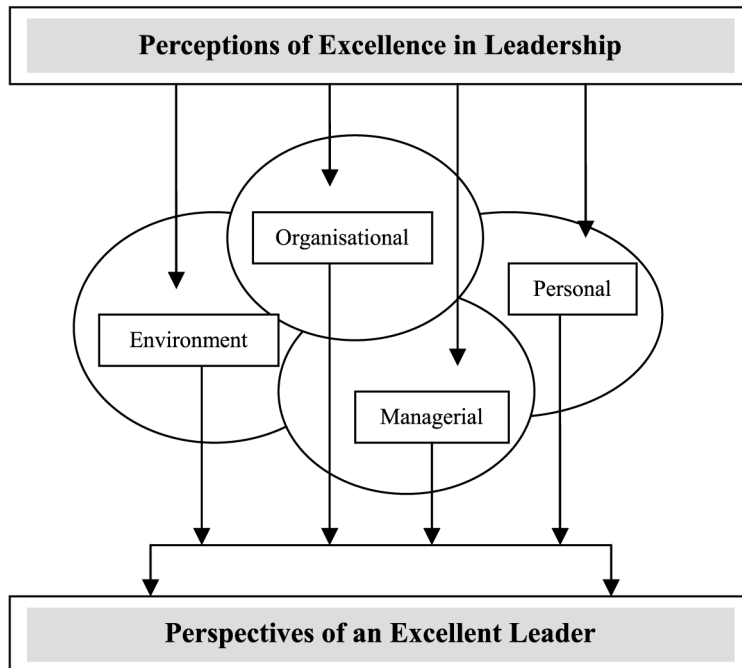
Reference to Hofstede's contribution to studying culture is recognised and compared with in this paper. However, rather than basing our research on Hofstede's (1980, 2003) four cultural dimensions and Hofstede and Bond's (1988) long term orientation, which provides a cultural framework for societies in general, this research takes the view, similar to Niffenegger *et al.* (2006), that countries possess their own uniqueness and assessing national cultures using only Hofstede's cultural dimensions is insufficient. The main purpose of this research is to study sub-cultures within a national culture and Hofstede's contribution, though it provides a framework, does not allow comparisons to be made in this context.

In developing a model for studying excellence in leadership in Asia, both western literature (e.g. Takala, 1998; Bennis, 1989; Yukl, 1989; Peters and Waterman, 1983; Hunt and Larson, 1979; Stogdill and Coons, 1957;) and eastern literature (e.g. Ling *et al.* (1992); Swierczek, 1991; Ling, 1989; Xu *et al.*, 1985, Misumi, 1984; Sinha, 1980) were surveyed and ninety-four value statements were selected (see Taormina and Selvarajah, 2005; Selvarajah *et al.*, 1995). A group of researchers from six ASEAN countries (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) explored these statements with a view to categorising them within broad categories for a balanced international perspective rather than using instruments developed only using western literature. The four broad categories identified were: Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviours, Organisational Demands and Environmental Influences (Selvarajah *et al.*, 1995). This conceptual framework for the behaviour of an Excellent

Leader is illustrated in Figure 1. The value statements were than subjected to Q-sort within the four categories by Asian managers who were attending executive programs at the Asian Institute of Management in Manila and at the Vocational Technical Institute (VOC-TECH), a Southeast Asian Management Education Organisation (SEAMEO) institute located in Brunei Darussalam.

Given the many approaches and the evolving nature of leadership research, the four broad dimensions defining excellence in leadership in this study has the potential of providing cultural insights to leadership values related to orderliness, and time which are commonly represented in western literature, as well as values such as consultative, paternalistic and democratic perhaps more commonly described in eastern leadership studies.

In this study, based on a confirmatory factor analysis an Excellent Leader scale was constructed from the eight most highly ranked characteristics of excellence in leadership, as perceived by the Malaysian managers in their positions. Similarly, scales for Excellence in Leadership: Organisational Demand, Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviour and Environmental Influence were constructed by including all the items suggested by Selvarajah *et al.* (1995)[1] and several other items that scored highly in the current survey. A five-factor confirmatory factor analysis showed good discrimination between the scales, in that no statements loaded strongly on any scale other than the scale to which they were allocated. A description of each of these scales is found in the Appendix.



Source: Adapted from Selvarajah *et al.* (1995)

Figure 1. Conceptual framework for the study of excellence in leadership

Based on the previous discussions, the following hypothesis is forwarded for testing:

- H1.* In Malaysia, perceptions of what makes an Excellent Leader can be described using the four dimensions of Managerial Behaviour, Environmental Influence, Personal Qualities and Organisational Demand.

In multicultural Malaysia, people of many ethnic origins, with each ethnic group having its own identity and culture, live in relative harmony (Abdullah, 1996, p. xiii). Although the Malaysians have different religions, rituals and symbolic expressions, the “common denominator is their deep-seated values”. Also according to Abdullah (1996), p. xiii, some of these values are; respect for elders, collective orientation, harmony, concern for face-saving, relationships, and religious orientation. Hofstede (1991), in a study in 1983, found that Malaysians had high power distance, low individualism, moderate masculinity and relatively weak uncertainty avoidance scores when compared with different countries. These observations suggest that, in Malaysia, Organisational Demand will be the most important of our four dimensions because it is this dimension, which most strongly emphasises the importance of organisational prosperity (refer to Table AIV in the Appendix). It is therefore hypothesised that:

- H2.* In Malaysia the most important of the four dimensions that makes an Excellent Leader is Organisational Demand.

A small number of studies incorporating cultural contextualization have been carried out in Malaysia (see, for example, Karande *et al.*, 2002; Kennedy, 2002; Saufi *et al.*, 2002; Lim, 2001; Mansor and Mohd Ali, 1998; Pearson and Entrekin, 1998; Gupta and Sulaiman, 1996; Schermerhorn, 1994; Hofstede, 1991). Most of these studies have dealt mainly with a national emphasis and have not seriously looked at sub-populations of the country as contributors to managerial values. Kennedy (2002), reporting on the GLOBE study in Malaysia titled “Leadership in Malaysia”, misinterpreted the values of Malaysian Malays as surrogate measure for values of Malaysian managers, thus ignoring the role and contributions of the Malaysian Chinese and the Malaysian Indians to leadership in Malaysia. The paper nevertheless provides a historical, economic and social context for Malaysian culture-based studies. It also provides insights regarding the Malaysian Malay manager. Some of the findings of the Kennedy study are supported in the current study, as explained later in this paper. The study “Ethical Orientation of Managers in Malaysia” by Gupta and Sulaiman (1996), failed to contextualize its findings within a cultural framework; rather, it interpreted the results from a study of 381 managers as a composite data set, reporting only ethnic percentages. The Karande *et al.* (2002) study, on the other hand, purports to examine cross-cultural moral philosophies of marketing managers in the US, Australia and Malaysia but fails to explain the influences of subcultures in its analysis. Again only composite national profiles are reported. This paper considers the sub-populations directly, in order to address the following hypothesis:

- H3.* Ethnicity is a moderating variable for the relationships between what makes an Excellent Leader and the four hypothesised underlying dimensions.

Explaining ethnicity in Malaysia

As explained earlier, the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia are from three regions of Asia; the Chinese as immigrants to Malaysia from East Asia, the Indian as immigrants from South Asia and the Malays who are indigenous to Southeast Asia. In this paper, we have used Swierczek's (1991) classic explanation of the three broad streams of leadership styles in Asia, which can be distinguished on cultural backgrounds. These are the East Asian, the South Asian, and the Southeast Asian styles.

- (1) *East Asia*: This includes the Japanese style, Chinese style and Korean style. In this region there is a split between participative and directive approaches. Research undertaken by Misumi (cited in Swierczek, 1991, p. 6) found that in many situations, the democratic style was more effective when the task was easy and the autocratic style was suited when tasks were difficult.
- (2) *South Asia*: These groupings include India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Management is likely to be reluctant to consult their subordinates and to delegate authority to them. Leaders are paternalistic and are likely to involve themselves in the private lives of their subordinates. The South Asian style of leadership tends to be remote, directive and paternal.
- (3) *Southeast Asia*: This includes the ASEAN countries. For Southeast Asia research had been conducted using the Hofstede categorization. It was concluded that firms generally adopted an authoritarian style of management, reflecting the fact that managers favour conformity and orderliness.

This general categorization of Asian leadership by Swierczek helps explain the cultural domains within which management is practiced in Malaysia. To classify Malaysia as having a distinct leadership style may not be appropriate given the ethnic makeup of the country. Chin (2002), p. iii) explains that in a plural society like Malaysia, "the leader has to recognize the different cultural underpinnings of each community". For example, in a recent study by Ahmad Saufi (2002), Malay and Indian managers preferred the participative style of leadership while the Chinese managers preferred the delegating style.

The Malaysian Chinese manager

The Chinese in Malaysia are descendents of the sojourners who came to Malaysia from China in the late nineteenth century. China, at that time, was under the control of warlords and feudalistic lifestyles of the peasant were harsh. The sojourners were part of the Diaspora that went to many parts of world; which in 1998 numbered 55 million accounting, it is said, for 2 to 3 trillion US dollars in wealth – in these terms they constitute the third-largest economy in the world, only behind the USA and Japan (Chen, 2003, p. 6). These sojourners lost rights to return to China and the right of access to cultural knowledge and heritage, as China was closed to them and to the rest of the world under communism. In a sense, the Overseas Chinese became surrogate custodians of ancient China's heritage internationally. These doors remained closed until the late 1970s, which marked the beginning of China re-engaging with the world.

The Chinese in Malaysia are mainly from the Quandong, Fujian, and Hainan Provinces and dialects include Cantonese, Fuzhou, Hainanese, Hakka, Henghua, Hokchia, Hokkien and Teochiu (Pan, 1999). Most of them are Confucianist, Taoist or Buddhist and have inherited a culture that "has gone virtually unchallenged for nearly

2,500 years” (Taormina and Selvarajah, 2005, p. 6). Confucius (551-479 BC) and Mencius, born a century after the death of Confucius, believed that man’s nature is naturally good, and a person cultivates the required personality through education and earnest practice (Wah, 2002). The Analects of Confucius (Book 2, Chapter 3) also states that punishment is not favoured for the purpose of cultivating the required personality (Lau, 1979). Mencius was of the view that the best practice of a leader is to help others to do some good (Lau, 1970). Mencius strongly endorsed the saying that a good leader is one who could motivate people to their highest levels by offering them opportunities and not obligations. A wise leader develops his people as human beings and not just as human resources (Wah, 2002). These attributes of an excellent leader clearly suggest that Managerial Behaviour, with its emphasis on delegation and trust, will be a very important dimension for leadership excellence amongst people of Chinese descent (refer to Table AIII in the Appendix).

Based on Confucian values, Tsui *et al.* (2004) identified six Chinese leadership dimensions, which they called:

- (1) Being creative and risk-taking.
- (2) Relating and communicating.
- (3) Articulating vision.
- (4) Showing benevolence.
- (5) Monitoring operations.
- (6) Being authoritative.

The importance of Managerial Behaviour is apparent in most of these dimensions. For a more detail discussion of Confucian philosophy in regard to leadership see Waley (1989) and Taormina and Selvarajah (2005).

In contrast to the teaching of Confucius and Mencius, Taoism’s teaching explains how to lead a simple life and the natural way of behaviour to allow things to unfold based on their natural order (Wah, 2002). In leading, Lao Tze, the founder of Taoism’s teaching, believed that a leader should play the role of facilitator, facilitating the group process and not his own process (Heider, 1994). A wise leader therefore follows the course of least resistance in leading the organisation. Lao Tze wrote that the harder the leader pushes, the greater the system pushes back. This view also supports Managerial Behaviour as an important aspect of leadership excellence in that it emphasises persuasive powers.

The cultural inheritance of the Chinese is centuries old and the Overseas Chinese have maintained the values of their ancestors as they settled in foreign nations such as Malaysia. The Overseas Chinese only represent a minority in Malaysia (26 percent of the population), but they control 61 percent of the economy (Staff, 1993). Their influence on the leadership styles in the business sectors in Malaysia is therefore very significant. In support of the above arguments which emphasises persuasive powers based on codes of behaviour and a strong sense of trust on leaders, the following hypothesis is forwarded for testing:

- H4.* For the Malaysian Chinese, Managerial Behaviour is the most important dimension of what makes an Excellent Leader.

The Malaysian Indian manager

The trade winds brought the Indian and Chinese traders to Malaysia and with them came the cultural, religious, social and political influences. Indian influence covered all of Southeast Asia and, prior to the sixteenth century, Hindu kingdoms such as Vijayanagar, Majapahid, Mataram, and Champa extended Indian influence throughout the region (Kanchan, 1990; Tinker, 1977). Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam were also brought to the Malay Archipelago by Indian traders. The *Mahabharata*, the longest Hindu war epic, and the *Ramayana*, the longest Hindu love epic, have been play-acted for hundreds of years and have become part of the Southeast Asian culture. In the interplay between the virtues and graces of democratic citizenship, as demonstrated over and over in the plays, individual freedom is wedded to social responsibilities. The concept of *Dharma* (justice and ethical conduct) as the foundation of Hindu and Buddhist philosophies is also encapsulated in the *Thirukural*[2], the basis of South Indian and Sri Lankan Tamil value systems. The influence of South Indian philosophies and Sanskrit in Southeast Asia is highly visible and evident. As Latin is the root language to many European languages, so is Sanskrit to many Southeast Asian languages. Many of the domestic or home values observed in Malaysia, especially among the local Malaysian Indians and Malays, have similarities with the above Indian cultural values.

The large-scale mobilisation of Indians to Malaysia took place during the European colonisation of Asia. Emigration of South Indians to Malaysia commenced in 1870 with British taking control over the political affairs of Malaya. Indentured labour was sourced from South India and Sri Lanka mainly to work the plantations and build the country's transport systems (Selvaratnam and Apputhurai, 2006; Tinker, 1993; Vertovec, 1991). The indentured South Indian labour was mainly of Tamil or Hindu origin. This wave of Indian migration was followed by Indian merchants mainly from Gujarat and Sind in north India and from Chettinad in South India. Collectively they brought with them values and customs of India, further strengthening the Indian cultural value base in Malaysia.

One of the earlier attempts to search for an appropriate effective leadership style in the Indian context was made by Sinha (1980). Based on his extensive research he found that in the Indian context the Nurturant Task Leadership Style (NTL) was found to be most effective. The style is characterised by leaders' concern for task and nurturing orientation. To some extent these characteristics suggest that the Organisational Demand dimension (see Table AIV in the Appendix), with its emphasis on teamwork, support for others and long-term goals, will be of most importance in shaping perceptions of leadership excellence in the Indian context. However, the Organisational Demand dimension does not stress "concern for task".

According to Sinha (1980, 1995), the NTL model has been found to be more congruent with Indian cultural values and behaviour dispositions. The style is essentially paternalistic, drawing heavily on the patterns of interaction typifying family dynamics in India. In this respect a study completed by Kalra and Gupta (1995) supported the nurturance aspect of the NTL model for Indians and showed that effective managers were rated high on nurturing dimensions. However, this study also showed that effective managers were rated low on task obsession and they were seen as moderately prescriptive. Therefore in this sense they were nurturing and moderately prescriptive but not task oriented, supporting Organisation Demand,

which emphasises the importance of organisational prosperity as the key dimension of leadership excellence for Indians. Based on Sinha (1980, 1999) and Kalra and Gupta (1995) interpretation of Indian leadership style, the following hypothesis is forwarded for testing:

- H5. For the Malaysian Indian, Organisational Demand is the most important dimension of what makes an Excellent Leader.

The Malaysian Malay manager

In the Malaysian Constitution Malays are those “who profess the Muslim religion, habitually speak the Malay language and conform to Malay customs”. The Malays have a privileged position in the Malaysian society and their position is guaranteed by the Constitution. They are recognised as *Bumiputras*, sons of the soil.

In describing the value base of the Malay, Abdullah (1996, p. 19) highlights the following factors, many of which seem to refer to the Personal Qualities dimension of Excellence in Leadership in Table AI in the Appendix, with its emphasis on morality, religion, inter-personal relationships and communication:

- Man must live in harmony with Nature. This concept is intrinsic to the Malay culture and prescribes that Malays should have humility, be non-confrontational, be able to adapt and maintain an attitude of submission in the society when necessary.
- Believe in hierarchical relationship – ready acceptance of unequal, even authoritarian relationships between young and old, superior and subordinate. Respect for elders and authority are stressed.
- Build relationship based on morality and trust.
- Emphasis on high context form of communication where both verbal and circumstances surrounding the communication must also be taken into account.
- The concept of social sensitivity and feeling *malu* (shame) is related to goals of the individual in the context of the group and family.
- Look at development of the individual or group in a holistic manner in which both material and spiritual dimensions are equally important.
- Loyalty to the group, sense of emotional interdependence, and harmonious relationship with others provides the meaning for one’s existence in a social context.
- In evaluating performance and conduct, the personal and professional qualities are important. Observed traits *Zahir* and unseen inner qualities *batin* provides a fuller picture of a Malay.
- Malays believe in the concept of a Supreme Being – Allah the Almighty. This commitment punctuates their daily lives with prayers and shared rituals to remember God.
- The pursuit of scientific inquiry and knowledge from the Holy Quran are important to the Malays. Equally Malays are expected to pursue worldly pleasures as well as live a life according to the teaching of Prophet Muhammad.

Abdullah (1996, p. 21) explains that the above assumptions underlie the Malay values and therefore surface in their behaviour. In daily behaviour, a Malay is guided by (*budi*) intellect inherited from previous generations. Budi requires the person to be rational and to be sensitive to one's intuitive inner feelings (*rasa*). The balance between rational thinking and *rasa* is *budi* which is also an expression or manifestation of kindness.

The Malay is therefore a sensitive individual living in harmony and in cordial relationships with members of the community. Based on Abdullah's (1996) interpretation of a Malay, the following hypothesis is presented:

- H6.* For the Malay, Personal Qualities is the most important dimension of what makes an Excellent Leader.

Research methodology

This paper attempts to study the importance of an excellent leader as perceived by Malaysian managers in their position. The study therefore looks at leadership within a company rather than leadership at the head of the company. The initial research population was obtained from a stratified sample based on 30 organisations identified in the Klang Valley. Questionnaires were distributed and collected centrally using collection boxes. Neither the respondents nor their organisations were required to be identified. A total of 600 "Excellence in Leadership" questionnaires were distributed and 320 were returned. Of the 320 returned, 292 were useable, giving a 48.6 percent effective return rate. A further 220 responses were obtained from the state of Kedah in the north and from the state of Negeri Sembilan in the south in order to boost the representation of Malay and Indian managers in the sample. Responses were sought on a one to five importance scale for each of the 94 "excellence in leadership" value statements.

In this paper we develop scales for the importance of Excellent Leader (EL), Personal Qualities (PQ) (see Table AV in the Appendix), Managerial Behaviour (MB), Organisational Demands (OD) and Environmental Influences (EI) (see Table AII in the Appendix). The work of Selvarajah *et al.* (1995) provided the basis for these scales but certain improvements are introduced in the current survey. In particular, in order to produce discriminant validity between the scales, the "Excellent Leader" statements are not included in any of the other four scales. In addition, likely high scoring items from the current survey are included and items that reduce the reliability of the scales, as measured by Cronbach's alpha and Confirmatory Factor Analysis, are removed. Scales with a Cronbach's alpha of above 0.70 are regarded as reasonably reliable while scales with a Cronbach's alpha of above 0.80 are regarded as definitely reliable (Hair *et al.*, 1998). Confirmatory Factor Analysis is used to check the factor structure of the scales as shown in the Appendix. Models, which produce a root mean squared error of approximation (RMSEA) of less than 0.08, a goodness of fit statistic (GFI) of above 0.90 and a normed chi-squared statistic (CMIN/DF) of less than three may be assumed to possess internal validity (Arbuckle and Wothke, 1999).

No ethnic comparisons were made using mean values for these scales because it was felt that any difference in perceptions would be confounded with cultural response characteristics. In the Globe study (House *et al.*, 2004) cultural response bias was corrected by using a regression analysis of mean responses for 62 countries and standardised values for their nine core cultural dimensions. This approach is

impossible for the current study, which involves only three cultural groups. Instead standardised regression coefficients (β) are used to assess the importance of our four dimensions in relation to the perception of what makes an excellent leader. This approach circumvents problems of cultural bias, which are assumed to affect all measured dimensions equally.

Correlation analysis is used to test whether the four hypothesised dimension are associated with perceptions of leadership excellence. A regression analysis is then used to determine whether Organisational Demand is indeed the most important of these dimensions in this context. A structural equation model based on the regression results is used to test whether the relationships between these dimensions and leadership excellence are moderated by ethnicity. Finally, the last three hypotheses are tested by comparing the effect size for each dimension for the Chinese, Indian and Malay groups. SPSS v14 and AMOS v6 are the software packages used for the previous analyses.

Results

In the sample of 512 managers, 67 percent of the respondents were men and 33 percent were women. Ethnic Chinese made up 50 percent of the sample. The skew to ethnic Chinese is probably due to the disproportionate number of Chinese managers compared to other ethnic groups in private organisations in the Klang Valley and most commercial centres of eastern-board peninsular Malaya[3]. This is reflective of the proportion of Chinese managers in the commercial sector in Malaysia. Malays accounted for 29 percent and Indians 17 percent of the sample. The Indian sample was boosted in this research to provide meaningful numbers for rigorous data manipulation. An “other” ethnicity response and missing ethnic responses were both obtained from 2 percent of the sample. It was a relatively young sample in that 52 percent of the respondents were under 35 with 79 percent of respondents aged 40 and below. Only 4 percent of the sample was aged over 50. The Klang Valley sample represented 57 percent of responses, Kedah 23 percent and Negeri Sembilan 20 percent.

Summated scales were constructed for each of the five constructs, Excellent Leader, Managerial Behaviour, Environmental Influence, Organisational Demand and Personal Qualities. As shown in the Appendix, all these scale had reasonable reliability as measured using Cronbach’s alpha and good internal validity as indicated by the confirmatory factor analysis. Modification indices indicated that these scales exhibited reasonable discriminant validity in that each value statement had higher loadings for its specified construct than for any other construct. Table I presents descriptive statistics and correlations for each of these scales. All the correlations were

	Excellent leader	Organisational demand	Managerial behaviour	Environmental influence	Personal qualities
Mean	4.10	4.08	3.97	4.19	4.17
Standard deviation	0.60	0.56	0.52	0.53	0.46
Excellent leader	1	0.752	0.689	0.425	0.576
Organisational demand	0.752	1	0.799	0.575	0.670
Managerial behaviour	0.689	0.799	1	0.688	0.780
Environmental influence	0.425	0.575	0.688	1	0.700
Personal qualities	0.576	0.670	0.780	0.700	1

Table I.
Descriptive statistics and correlations for scales

significant at the one percent level and mean values are high for all scales indicating that all dimensions are regarded as important in a leader. One nation, three cultures

Regression model for excellent leader

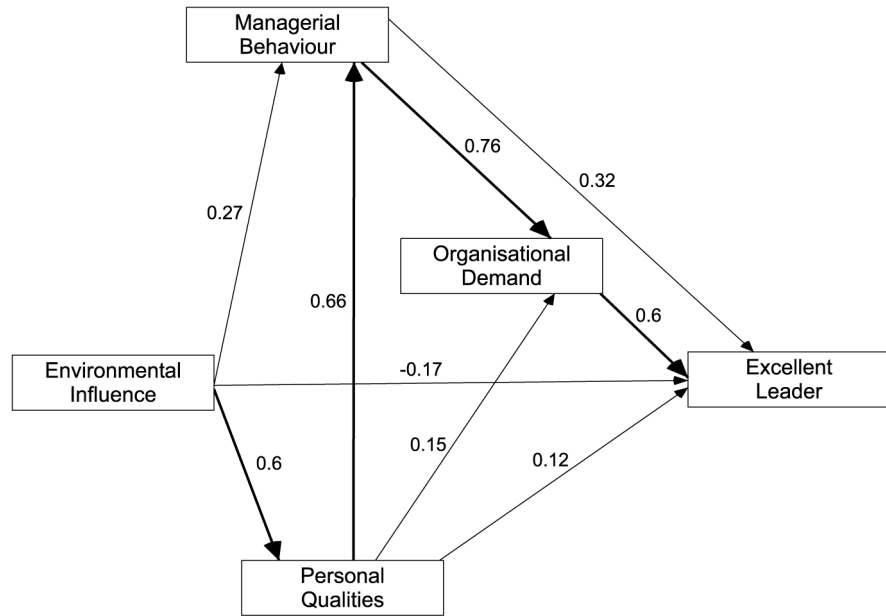
Table II shows a multiple regression model hypothesised to predict what makes an Excellent Leader in Selvarajah *et al.* (1995). This equation explains 60 percent of the variation in the Excellent Leader scale using the Organisational Demand, Environmental Influence, Personal Qualities and Managerial Behaviour scales, providing support for the first hypothesis and the framework described in Figure 1. The Organisational Demand scale is clearly the most important predictor with the highest β coefficient. This supports the second hypothesis indicating that in Malaysia the most important quality in an excellent leader is Organisational Demand. As indicated in Table I the initial correlations between the Excellent Leader scale and its predictors were all positively significant with p-values of less than 0.001. However, the contributions of Environmental Influence and Personal Qualities are insignificant in Table II suggesting mediation effects. The variance inflation factors (VIF) for all the predictor variables are less than ten, confirming the discriminant validity of the predictor scales.

Figure 2 shows a structural model, which was designed to incorporate the mediation effects observed in the above regression model. This model fits the data well (chi-square = 0.082, $df = 1$, $p = 0.774$), allowing us to check whether the same β coefficients can be used for all ethnic groups. This test for ethnic invariance indicated that different coefficients were required for each ethnic groups (chi-square = 47.456, $df = 18$, $p = 0.0002$). This result supports our third hypothesis indicating that ethnicity moderates the relationship between the Excellent Leader construct and the four dimensions of Managerial Behaviour, Environmental Influence, Personal Qualities and Organisational Demand.

The previous analysis also provides the total effects for Excellent Leader, including both direct and indirect effects, allowing the testing of *H4*, *H5* and *H6*. As hypothesised Table III shows that Organisational Demand is the most important dimension of an Excellent Leader for Indian managers while Managerial Behaviour is the most important dimension of an Excellent Leader for Chinese managers. However, contrary to expectation Managerial Behaviour is slightly more important for Malay managers than Personal Qualities. The *R*-square values show that this model explains more of the variation in perceptions of Leadership Excellence for Indian managers (76 percent) than it does for Malay (59 percent) or Chinese (57 percent) managers. Interestingly Chinese managers attach less importance to Personal Qualities and

Model	Unstandardised coefficients	Standardised coefficients (β)	<i>t</i> -statistic	<i>p</i> -value	VIF
Constant	0.589	0.00	3.679	0.000	
Organisational demand	0.597	0.555	11.754	0.000	2.811
Managerial behaviour	0.316	0.274	4.729	0.000	4.222
Environmental influence	-0.165	-0.148	-3.550	0.000	2.183
Personal qualities	0.122	0.094	1.929	0.054	2.967

Table II.
Regression model for Excellent Leader (EL)



Note: β coefficients shown at the centre of each link

Figure 2. Structural model to explain the regression relationship

Table III. Total standardised effect sizes and *R*-square for Excellent Leader (EL) for each ethnic group

	Malay	Chinese	Indian
Environmental influence	0.407	0.446	0.555
Personal qualities	0.609	0.450	0.640
Managerial behaviour	0.649	0.703	0.570
Organisational demand	0.535	0.373	0.867
<i>R</i> -square (%)	59.6	57.1	76.4

Organisational Demand than Malay or Indian managers while Indian managers pay less attention to Managerial Behaviour than Chinese or Malay managers.

Discussion

In this paper we have attempted to extend the boundaries of leadership theories by studying the influence of sub-cultures on leadership in a national setting. Malaysia, a multicultural country and predominantly populated by three ethnic groups (the Chinese, the Indians, and the Malays) provides this opportunity. With multiculturalism as an important concept as opposed to assimilation, this study may contribute to the development of cultural diversity management in western nations. Malaysia is a fast developing economy, with qualified and skilled labour attracting foreign direct investment. This article provides an insight regarding leadership behaviour in Malaysia that is useful for expatriates engaging with local manpower.

Perceptions of what makes an excellent leader in Malaysia have been examined in terms of the Personal Qualities, Organisational Demand, Managerial Behaviour and Environmental Influence dimensions suggested by Selvarajah *et al.* (1995) in their study of leadership excellence in Asia. Reliable scales have been constructed for these constructs by using manager ratings from the Klang Valley, Kedah and Negeri Sembilan in Malaysia. Overall ratings are high for all these constructs, confirming their importance.

In this study the methods of analysis were chosen in order to minimise cultural bias. Correlation analysis showed that the four dimensions of Personal Qualities, Managerial Behaviour, Environmental Influence and Organisational Demand were all associated with the Excellent Leader construct while regression analyses showed that Organisational Demand was the most important dimension in Malaysia. As hypothesised, structural equation modelling showed that ethnicity moderated the relationship between these dimensions and the Excellent Leader construct. No attempt has been made to justify or interpret the mediation effects suggested in Figure 2. This is an area of much interest in that it may help us to better understand the ethnic differences regarding perceptions of excellence in leadership and will be discussed in future research.

However, this study has provided some information on the cultural differences in regard to perceptions of excellence in leadership. The views of Mencius in regard to leadership suggested that Chinese managers would consider the Managerial Behaviour dimension (persuasive orientation) as most important and this was born out by this study. In addition it was found that Sinha's description of an effective leadership style in the Indian context reflected the Organisational Demand dimension (supporting organisational prosperity) and the results confirmed that this was the most important dimension for Indian managers. However, it was found that Abdullah's (1996) description of the value base of the Malay was not totally supported by our data. Abdullah's value base relates directly to the Personal Qualities dimension (emphasis on morality, religion and inter-personal relationships), but the Managerial Behaviour dimension had a larger impact on the Malay Managers perspectives of what makes an Excellent Leader in this study. This suggests that Abdullah's (2001) understanding of Malay attitudes may be outdated. This could be due to a changing mindset, as the Malays are fast narrowing the commercial gap between themselves and the Chinese as the nation strives toward Vision 2020. Alternatively it may be that Malay managers are not typical of the wider population in believing that Managerial Behaviour is more important than Personal Qualities. However, it must be acknowledged that this study shows that Personal Qualities are only slightly less important than Managerial Behaviour for these managers.

Armed with the understanding of these influences how should Malaysian managers' best lead their workers?

First, they must understand the Malaysian workforce. The factors that make up Malaysians' behaviour, their personalities, the demands of the organisation and the environment are important and should be considered in the context of workplace performance. The Malaysian workforce is from different ethnic backgrounds, traditions, histories and social systems and is shaped by many religions. Their feeling of kinship and family centeredness must be integrated into an organisation. The best

managers demand loyalty and trust and make sure that the needs of their people are met. They need to know the “soft” (*halus*) and sensitive ways (Abdullah, 1996; Goleman, 2000). In particular the factors comprising the Organisational Demand dimension need to be recognised and valued.

Managers also need to be aware of the motivations behind their people and be guided by the social, religious and cultural undertones in Malaysia. For example, people in more collectivist countries tend to stress social needs over the more individualistic egos and self-actualisation needs stressed in countries such as the USA (Adler, 2002). Similar to the sense of guilt of Americans, managers must appeal to the Asian sense of shame and the fear of loosing “face”, and Asians’ need for close relationships, rather like how a father would lead his family (Hamzah *et al.*, 1989).

A comparison of Malay, Indian and Chinese perceptions shows other large differences. Malays and Indians feel more strongly than Chinese managers that leaders should value the Personal Qualities dimension which emphasises morality, religion, trust and communication. This is closely linked with the values, traditions and strong religious influence originating from the Islamic and Hindu beliefs. The Malay-based organisation, as described by Abdullah (1996), is likely to be hierarchical and status-based; a leadership model based on the village headman (*ketua kampung*) governance concept. In the Indian context, consultative style of leadership could also be seen operating at the grass-roots level in the village *Panchayat* (Sinha, 1995). A “Panchayat” is a body of five wise men of the village. It is hierarchically structured with a respected village leader *Sarpanch* as its head. Panchayat members take decisions about various village matters in consultation with each other. However, Indian managers attach more importance to the Organisational Demand dimension than Malay managers. This dimension emphasises the importance of being a team player, supporting the decision of others and the corporate image. This is in accord with the Nurture Task Leadership style espoused by Sinha (1980) in an Indian context.

The Malay and particularly the Chinese managers placed greater emphasis on the Managerial Behaviour dimension emphasising delegation, management through persuasion and management education. This supports the view of Taormina and Selvarajah (2005) that Confucianist values are still alive and well in Malaysia in the twenty-first century.

It must be noted that historical, social and cultural factors contribute to the way management is practiced in Malaysia. For example, Malaysia’s geographical positioning between India in the west and China in the east is important in understanding the cultural values that impact on the notion of excellence in leadership. These two cultures have dominated economic and social activities for centuries and for prolonged periods influenced the politics of Malaysia. Similarly, colonial influences, such as the social, economic and political structures, along with the overlay of religious influences, provide the backdrop for understanding the cultural make-up of Malaysia. It is in this context that leadership should be understood in a multi-cultural country such as Malaysia. Understanding the ethnic communities in Malaysia provides the basis for understanding leadership in Malaysia.

Implications

This study clearly shows that Malaysia is quite unique in that its social, political and economic development has been along racial lines. Reporting of economic progress and development of human resources is defined by ethnicity. Selection and training of leaders in Malaysia is a privilege that is driven by race considerations. This research highlights the separate development “one nation three culture” and the behavioural values of the managers are more akin to their ethnicity than to forging of a national culture. This separate development has created conflicts among the ethnic groups in Malaysia. The first conflict was the well recorded “May 13” riots in 1969 when the opposition celebrated their victory. The recent national election in 2008 has become the watershed in Malaysian politics where the notion of separate development and privileges along ethnic lines is questioned.

This research highlights the divisions between the three major ethnic groups based on separate development and this understanding is important for foreigners engaging with Malaysian business.

Limitations and directions of future research

This research was limited to Peninsula Malaysia and future research should cover both Peninsula Malaysia and East Malaysia (Sabah and Sarawak). Bumiputra, in this research was the ethnic Malay population, while the Dayaks, Ibans and Kadazans of East Malaysia, who are Bumiputras was not included. Therefore extending the research to East Malaysia will correct this limitation.

In this study, though the results highlighted that ethnicity moderated the relationship between the leadership dimensions and the Excellent Leader construct, no attempt was made to justify or interpret the mediation effects. Future research should look at the justification of these relationships as it may help better understand the ethnic differences regarding perceptions of excellence in leadership.

Notes

1. As explained in Selvarajah *et al.* (1995), the following summary provides explanation of the four dimensions: *Personal qualities* – personal values, skills, attitudes, behaviour and qualities of an individual. It emphasises morality, religion, inter-personal relationships and communication. *Managerial behaviour* – person’s nature, values, attitudes, actions and styles when performing the managerial duties. It emphasises persuasive powers. *Organizational demand* – the way a manager responds to the goals, objectives, structures and issues in an organisation. It emphasises the importance of organisational prosperity. *Environmental influence* – external factors that influence the success of the entire organisation. It emphasises the importance of scanning and evaluating the external environment for opportunities.
2. The *Thirukural*, said to have been written around 200BC by the Tamil Saint Valluvar. Similar to the *Dharmapada*, the Buddhist text and the *Bhagavad-gita*, the Hindu text, the *Thirukural* expounds self-discipline and social responsibility as virtuous acts for total human development. This is similar to the Taoist philosophy of being sagely within and kingly without.
3. In 2005, the Department of Statistics (Malaysia, 2006, p. 334) recorded senior officials and managers of the ethnic groups as: Bumiputras (37.1 percent), Chinese (55.1 percent), Indians (7.1 percent) and others (0.7 percent).

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Appendix

Statement	Loadings
Continue to learn how to improve performance	0.80
Motivate employees	0.70
Develop strategies to gain competitive edge in the industry	0.64
Organise work time effectively	0.63
Have confidence when dealing with work and with people	0.59
Create a sense of purpose and enthusiasm in the workplace	0.58
Give recognition for good work	0.56
Be honest	0.50

Notes: RMSEA = 0.053, GFI = 0.977, CMIN/DF = 2.43, Cronbach's alpha = 0.84

Table AI.
Statements to identify the Excellent Leader (EL)

Statement	Loadings
Check consistently for problems and opportunities	0.76
Constantly evaluate emerging technologies	0.73
Use economic indicators for planning purposes	0.59
Foster an international perspective in the organisation	0.46
Be responsive to political realities in the environment	0.32

Notes: RMSEA = 0.000, GFI = 0.997, CMIN/DF = 0.67, Cronbach's alpha = 0.69

Table AII.
Characteristics in the Environmental Influence (EI) dimension

LODJ
29,8

Statement	Loadings
Select work wisely to avoid overload	0.64
Delegate	0.64
Tell subordinates what to do and how to do it	0.64
Trust those to whom work is delegated	0.61
Keep up to date on management literature	0.59
Think about the specific details of any particular problem	0.57
Persuade others to do things	0.55
Make decisions without depending too much on others	0.50
Try different approaches to management	0.44
Be objective when dealing with work conflicts	0.40
Allow subordinates authority and autonomy	0.39

Notes: RMSEA = 0.055, GFI = 0.961, CMIN/DF = 2.55, Cronbach's alpha = 0.82

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Table AIII.
Characteristics in the
Managerial Behaviour
(MB) dimension

Statement	Loadings
Sell the professional or corporate image to the public	0.61
Act as a member of the team	0.59
Support decisions made jointly by others	0.58
Give priority to long-term goals	0.50
Adjust organisational structures and rules to the realities of practice	0.48

Notes: RMSEA = 0.010, GFI = 0.996, CMIN/DF = 1.05, Cronbach's alpha = 0.68

Table AIV.
Characteristics in the
Organisational Demand
(OD) dimension

Statement	Loadings
Treat most people as if they are trustworthy and honest	0.62
Have a sense of humour	0.54
Listen to the advice of others	0.52
Be practical	0.49
Be an initiator not a follower	0.47
Write clearly and concisely	0.46
Follow what is morally right – not what is right for self or organisation	0.44
Behave in accordance with his or her religious beliefs	0.42
Accept responsibility for mistakes	0.39

Notes: RMSEA = 0.048, GFI = 0.98, CMIN/DF = 2.17, Cronbach's alpha = 0.73

Table AV.
Characteristics in the
Personal Qualities (PQ)
dimension

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