

Exploring the Role of Chinese Wuxia Fiction in Shaping Leadership Identity

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Abstract—This research explores the role of Chinese Wuxia fiction in shaping leadership identity. A Chinese Wuxia novel, *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber*, was selected as a case study. Through a close reading of the novel, four characters were selected and their personalities, abilities, and behaviors were analyzed. This data was then reconceptualized to create a typology of four distinct leadership identities. The relevance and applicability of the typology to organizational realities is discussed. It is concluded that Chinese Wuxia fiction offers a valuable addition to traditional theory development approaches.

Keywords—Chinese Wuxia, fiction, kung fu, leadership identity

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a mature field of study [1, 2]. In fact, most leadership theories in use today were created several decades ago [3], with few new leadership theories having been invented in recent years [4, 5]. Additionally, leadership researchers continue to prefer established, positivism-based methodological approaches such as surveys, experiments, and modeling techniques [3]. In contrast, fiction remains almost completely unused in leadership research. Several questions arise from this possibility: Is fiction appropriate and feasible for leadership research? Are the results scientific and valid? More importantly, are the leadership concepts generated from fiction practical and useful? These are the unanswered questions this study seeks to address.

Accordingly, this study explores a special type of fiction—Wuxia fiction—to determine its applicability in contemporary research on leadership theory. Wuxia is a genre in Chinese literature, with *wu* meaning force or combat and *xia* referring to a knight or warrior. This genre typically tells stories of ancient warriors who practice the martial art of kung fu to fight their enemies. As such, this study analyzes four major characters from a Wuxia novel to derive corresponding leadership identities.

Leadership theory undoubtedly requires modernized, updated perspectives. Yet, positivist researchers often remain within their comfort zones, using more conservative approaches [3]. In this regard, validating the suitability of Wuxia fiction offers opportunities for progress in leadership theory development. It is thus hoped that this study will provide a useful perspective and serve as a starting point for such advancement.

This paper is organized in four parts. First, the rationale for selecting a Wuxia novel as a data source is explained. Second, a summary of the data collected from the novel is presented, including the stories and personalities of the four key characters. Third, the findings are analyzed and reconceptualized to derive a comprehensive understanding of

leadership identities and connect them to real-life practice. Finally, the implications of this research for both theory and practice are discussed.

II. DATA SOURCE SELECTION

The Chinese Wuxia fiction novel chosen for this research was *The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber*, written by Jin Yong in 1961 [6].

A. Selection Criteria

Four main criteria were used in selecting the novel. First, it had to be from the Wuxia genre. Other genres were beyond the research scope, as Wuxia fiction possesses the exclusive characteristics of kung fu training and fighting. Second, the novel had to be popular or famous. Third, it needed to be influential within the community. Fourth, the novel had to contain interesting stories.

B. The Novel as a Case Study

The Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber met the criteria above and was chosen as the case study. The novel's compelling characters and storyline fit the objective of this research for the following reasons: (i) it is from the Wuxia fiction genre; (ii) it contains numerous kung fu fight scenes featuring different types of captivating kung fu skills; (iii) it is well known among Chinese communities across mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and Malaysia; (iv) it is influential and widely accepted, having been adapted into various formats (e.g., television series, movies, and comics) over the past decade; and (v) it has interesting and lively stories, unique characters, and memorable episodes.

C. Close Reading

After selecting the novel, a detailed, close reading of each episode was performed with the aim of conducting a textual analysis. A considerable amount of time was devoted to examining the novel's characters, including their personalities, attitudes, and abilities. Ultimately, four main characters were selected from the novel. Relevant incidents and stories involving these characters were shortlisted for further analysis.

The textual analysis process then commenced as follows. Raw data was first extracted from the novel, focusing on stories and descriptions related to the four characters. The original Chinese version of the data was then translated into English. Following this, the data was reconceptualized through re-transcription and reconstruction of each character's events and storyline. The purpose of the reconceptualization was to derive meaningful leadership identities based on beneficial characteristics. The next section reports the findings of the research, focusing on the

four selected characters and their personalities, abilities, and traits.

III. THE CASE: FOUR KING-PROTECTORS

The novel tells the story of a kingdom in ancient China that was invaded by the Mongolian army. Across the kingdom, many groups of inhabitants resisted the attacks. One of the largest resistance forces was *Ming Jiao*, an organization situated deep in the mountains of the kingdom's northwest region. A strong army with many capable kung fu fighters, *Ming Jiao*'s resistance was a major threat to the Mongolian invaders. Moreover, its forces were scattered throughout the kingdom, making it difficult for the enemy to eliminate.

Ming Jiao was also known for its strong leadership. The top-level positions in the organization were held by four core leaders, called king-protectors: Dragon, Lion, Eagle, and Bat. The following sub-sections present the findings on the characteristics (e.g., personalities, abilities, kung fu styles, and behaviors) of each king-protector. Due to space limitations, only selected data from the novel are quoted.

A. Lion

An example of the translated raw data on the Lion king-protector is as follows:

Lion has high nei kung. Nei kung is the foundation of every type of kung fu, reflecting one's internal ability and strength. Lion also learned Qi Shang Quan, a type of kung fu that is brutal and scary. He has strong muscles and powerful punches. Based on his ability and kung fu, he usually attacks from the front and fights with the enemy head-on. In addition, he can use powerful roaring sound waves to attack a group of enemies and cause internal injuries.

Based on this data, a transcription and narrative re-telling was carried out to identify the Lion's meaningful and relevant leadership characteristics.

The Lion is strong, brave, and confident. His kung fu is used for head-on attacks on the enemy. He also possesses a roaring skill that can eliminate large groups of enemies. Importantly, his high internal strength (nei kung) forms the foundation of his abilities, helping him build the strength and capability to overpower the enemy quickly.

Consequently, the following characteristics were identified to reflect the leadership identity of the Lion:

Lion: Strong, Independent, Fearless, Confident, Aggressive.

B. Bat

An example of the translated raw data on the Bat king-protector is as follows:

Bat is good in qin kung. Qin kung is a type of kung fu that enables practitioners to move very fast. Bat's bodyweight is light. Using this skill, he can penetrate enemy territory easily without being detected. His stealth ability makes him good at tracking enemies, hiding himself, and surprising enemies. He also learned Han Bin Mian Zhang, which is a type of kung fu that freezes the enemy's body.

Based on this data, a transcription and narrative re-telling was carried out to identify the Bat's meaningful and relevant leadership characteristics.

The Bat is lean and agile. He typically sneaks behind enemy lines to explore or interfere, and attacks from behind

when the enemy is least prepared. In terms of combat skills, he usually does not fight the enemy head-on but uses evasion. He is fast and flexible, making him impossible for the enemy to catch. He also possesses a special skill that can freeze enemies and paralyze their operations. Lastly, he is a good intelligence agent.

Ultimately, the following characteristics were identified to reflect the leadership identity of the Bat.

Bat: Sensitive, Agile, Maneuverable, Stealthy, Covert.

C. Eagle

An example of the translated raw data on the Eagle king-protector is as follows:

Eagle has high nei kung and qin kung. The balance of these two kung fu skills enables him to move fast and launch surprise attacks. His powerful eagle-claw kung fu assaults are extremely strong, swift, and brutal. These sprint attacks can cause serious injuries to the enemy, fracturing their bones, bleeding their bodies, and ultimately, killing them.

Based on this data, a transcription and narrative re-telling was carried out to identify the Eagle's meaningful and relevant leadership characteristics.

The Eagle has both high internal strength and external ability. With a light-weight body and strong internal energy, he can move very swiftly. This provides an added advantage for him when attacking the enemy. His abilities also allow him to navigate efficiently, track the enemy, and destroy them strategically. Once he locates the enemy, the Eagle is capable of inflicting serious injuries and damaging his opponents' ability to retaliate.

As a result, the following characteristics were identified to reflect the leadership identity of the Eagle.

Eagle: Smart, Courageous, Majestic, Navigable, Mighty.

D. Dragon

An example of the translated raw data on the Dragon king-protector is as follows:

Dragon is familiar with fighting underwater. She also has a special ability to take advantage of the environment or weapons to defeat the enemy. In one instance, she lost a fight to an opponent who used a good weapon: the heaven sword. Because of that, she tried very hard to borrow an equally powerful weapon to fight back: the dragon saber. It can be concluded that she believed in the use of a good weapon to win a fight. She is also good at disguising herself, a technique to hide from the enemy. She has many concealment abilities and secret kung fu.

Based on this data, a transcription and narrative re-telling was carried out to identify the Dragon's meaningful and relevant leadership characteristics.

The Dragon is intelligent, creative, and flexible, with a strong learning ability that enables her to acquire new skills rapidly. She has the special ability to adapt to different environments and terrains, such as underwater, to outperform her competitors. She can also quickly familiarize herself with different skills and systems, and make use of the environment to destroy the enemy.

Finally, the following characteristics were identified to reflect the leadership identity of the Dragon.

Dragon: Wise, Creative, Flexible, Charming, Knowledgeable.

Based on the above analysis, the characteristics of the four

king-protectors were reconceptualized into four distinct leadership identities. The next section discusses the insights gained and further interpretation of the knowledge generated.

IV. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the findings learned and derived from the novel. First, the four king-protectors reflect four distinct leadership identities, which can be attributed to two key dimensions of kung fu: *nei kung* and *qin kung*. Using these two aspects, a leadership typology can be developed. Second, by relating these perspectives to managerial practice, the four leadership identities can be linked not only to leadership theory but also to real-life application. Third, new knowledge generated from this research can enrich the current body of knowledge.

A. Leadership Typology

This study constructs a leadership typology based on the four leadership identities. From the earlier analysis, it was observed that there are both similarities and differences among the four identities. This variation can be understood by referring to the context of the novel. In the ancient Wuxia world, society was often in a state of chaos, and individuals had to learn kung fu to survive. Kung fu can be broadly divided into two schools: *nei kung* (internal strength) and *qin kung* (agility/speed). The kung fu abilities of the four king-protectors can be defined through these two dimensions. When compared, their ability levels in each category can be ranked as follows (in descending order, from highest to lowest in ability):

Nei kung: Lion, Eagle, Dragon, Bat.

Qin kung: Bat, Eagle, Dragon, Lion.

These rankings reveal a framework based on the combination of the two different dimensions. Using this, a typology can be created by placing *nei kung* on the horizontal axis and *qin kung* on the vertical axis. The resulting matrix can be divided into four quadrants, each representing a different leadership identity (see Fig. 1).

High <i>qin kung</i>	Bat	Eagle
Low <i>qin kung</i>	Dragon	Lion
	Low <i>nei kung</i>	High <i>nei kung</i>

Fig. 1. Leadership typology.

In the Fig. 1, Eagle appears in the upper-right quadrant, demonstrating high levels of both *nei kung* and *qin kung*. This identity proves that it is possible to balance strong internal strength with external speed. Lion is positioned in the lower-right quadrant, showing high *nei kung* but low *qin kung*. This identity emphasizes improving one’s internal strength, believing that such strength can beat the enemy.

On the other side, Bat is in the upper-left quadrant, as it has high *qin kung* but relatively low *nei kung*. As a result, this identity avoids direct confrontation, preferring instead to hide and launch deadly surprise assaults when the enemy is not prepared. Finally, in the bottom-left quadrant, Dragon is ranked lower in both *nei kung* and *qin kung*. Nevertheless, this does not mean it is weak. This identity pays less attention to internal strength and speed; rather, it focuses on multiple ways to outperform the enemy, such as different environments, terrains, or weapons.

Table 1. Linking fiction to theory

Fiction world (kung fu)	Real world (theory)
<i>Nei kung</i> – Refers to internal strength that increases energy and power during attacks. It symbolizes deep internal capabilities.	RBV – Focuses on internal strength. Valuable, rare, inimitable, and non-substitutable (VRIN) resources form the basis of competitive advantage [7, 9, 10].
<i>Qin kung</i> – Refers to agility and speed. It enables practitioners to move quickly, hide effectively, or retreat from the enemy swiftly.	MBV – Focuses on the external environment. Organizations respond to market dynamics and adapt quickly to changing conditions [8, 11, 12].

Table 2. Leadership identity and practical application

Leadership identity	Practical application
Lion	The Lion is known for its strength and prowess. This leader prioritizes learning new skills, acquiring new technology, and accumulating resources and capabilities. They consider their organization’s unique resources and competences as a means of gaining a competitive advantage and achieving superior performance over competitors. To the Lion, success is achieved by directly confronting opponents. Hence, one should never get on the wrong side of this leader.
Bat	The Bat spends a lot of time in the market and maintains close contact with customers. They believe that success can be obtained by first understanding customer needs, and then, quickly looking for a unique solution. Once the right solution is found, this leader will direct all their efforts and energy to fulfilling customer demands. The Bat is stealthy, cautious, and furtive, preferring to observe from afar before acting. They make the first move only if they are sure they can add value and move ahead of the enemy. Thus, the Bat should not be underestimated.
Eagle	The Eagle treats both resources and the market as equally important to organizational success, often striking a balance between the two. This leader is dynamic, perseverant, and forceful. They are quick to engage with customers and look for ways to create value. Their energy and ambition always outperform competitors.
Dragon	The Dragon is characterized as unconcerned about resources and the market. Yet, it is not weak in performance. In fact, this leader tends to make use of multiple skills and tools, creating value by improving their own capabilities and developing close connections with customers. The Dragon is intelligent, adaptable, and quick to learn new knowledge. Thus, their potential is unlimited and unpredictable.

B. Application to Theory and Practice

This section discusses how the knowledge generated from this research is relevant to both management theory and real-life practice. First, the Resource-Based View (RBV) and the Market-Based View (MBV) can be linked to the two dimensions of kung fu: *nei kung* and *qin kung*. The RBV

emphasizes the uniqueness of an organization’s internal resources as the key to gaining competitive advantage and achieving superior performance [7]. This aligns with the concept of *nei kung*, which represents internal strength and capability. In contrast, the MBV focuses on a firm’s external capabilities and actions to sustain a competitive position against rivals [8]. This corresponds to *qin kung*, which

prioritizes agility and responsiveness. Table 1 compares and links these kung fu concepts from Wuxia fiction to real-world theories. From Table 1, it can be concluded that the two kung fu dimensions, *nei kung* and *qin kung*, align well with the RBV and MBV, respectively. Using these theories as a framework, the leadership identities generated from the novel offer meaningful knowledge to management practice. Table 2 illustrates how each leadership identity is linked to real-world practices.

In real-world contexts, leaders often align their strategies with either resources or markets to compete with rivals. Leadership differences thus stem from beliefs about the relative importance of these internal and external capabilities. Some place a strong emphasis on resource development, while others focus on market alignment. Leaders who place internal resources as the most important factor match the Lion identity. Those who put market conditions and responsiveness first for success reflect the Bat identity. Dragon-type leaders go beyond resources and markets, believing that execution power is most important in management. Meanwhile, Eagle-type leaders balance both resources and market factors as equally vital.

Each leadership identity has its unique strengths, weaknesses, and pressure points. Understanding these identities and their characteristics provides a useful foundation for improving organizational management.

C. New Knowledge Development

This study has generated new knowledge from Chinese Wuxia fiction in the form of leadership identities. Rather than questioning whether this knowledge is realistic, it is more productive to ask whether it is useful. If research can yield practical and applicable insights for the real world, it should be seen as a valuable contribution to the development of knowledge in the social sciences. Indeed, the objective of science is to discover new information that enriches the existing body of knowledge [3]. When such knowledge benefits human life or organizational management, it must be considered an appropriate research method [13, 14]. In this regard, the leadership typology developed in this study can be used as a managerial tool like the managerial grid [15] to improve leadership performance. While this application has not yet been explored in current research, it represents a promising area for future research.

Although the world of Wuxia is fictional and exists only in the imagination of the novelists [16], the stories reflect abstract representations of reality. In this way, storytelling in fiction is akin to theory development in scientific research [3]. In fact, theories themselves are abstract concepts, and so can be considered a form of fiction. Most social science research data is gathered through surveys or interviews to capture respondents' perceptions and opinions, which are essentially their imaginative representations of reality.

Based on the selected Wuxia novel, this study has identified four distinct leadership identities: Dragon, Eagle, Lion, and Bat. The data extraction and interpretation process was like the scientific method of identifying themes, sub-themes, and eventually, constructs and variables [13, 14]. As such, the four identities serve as additional constructs that contribute to leadership profiling and expand the existing body of knowledge [3].

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the use of Wuxia fiction in leadership research offers numerous benefits. Notably, researchers can broaden their scope for inquiry and data collection, enabling exploration into domains that have never occurred (and may never occur) in real life. This approach creates the potential to produce new ideas for both theoretical development and industry practices.

Given that this categorization is still in the early stage of theory development, future research can build upon the leadership identities by iteratively refining and validating them. Over time, these tentative categories can be formally integrated into leadership theory, highlighting clear implications for theory development. Overall, this study has laid a novel foundation for future research in the field of leadership.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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