Rule of morality versus rule of law? A Multi-method comparative study into the values that characterize a good civil servant in China and the Netherlands
Yang, L.

Citation for published version (APA):
“The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth.”

Kate Chopin

The Awakening, 1899, p. 217

Chapter 1

Introduction

Cliché-type views on Eastern and Western civil servant values

What are your thoughts about what makes a good civil servant in Western and Eastern administrative cultures? Hold your thoughts, and let us first see how civil servants in both countries themselves characterize both cultures.

According to Chinese respondents in this study, fifty percent considered there to be significant differences between Western and Eastern civil servant values. Some described the difference as cultural, for example, "Eastern culture is a 'sage' culture, requiring a person [to be] a perfect man; Western culture is 'individualism', respecting individual character and freedom," or "in the West it requires civil servants to act by laws… but in the East (China), integrity is more important but it relies much on [the] 'rule of man'", and thus "the East focuses more on interpersonal relationships". Some other respondents noted the lack of specific values in Eastern culture such as transparency, openness, and some values popular in business-like government in the West, where a civil servant "is more like a helper to social service, while [a] Chinese civil servant is more like the controller of power".

Comparatively, Dutch respondents demonstrated more consensus than the Chinese respondents regarding the different values that Eastern and Western cultures require of civil servants. Almost ninety percent of Dutch respondents felt that there are differences, with fifty percent stating that in the Eastern context "Democratic control and regulation seems more limited, which should make moral values and perceptions stronger (loyalty, etc.)". Thus "obedience and loyalty will have a bigger role" because the culture is "more hierarchical". Furthermore, there is "less freedom to 'think for oneself'" and rather it is "more a culture of 'following'". By contrast, "Western culture is more autonomous with [people having their] own opinion" and there is "more impartiality due to many political parties". In short: Dutch civil servants are more confident about their autonomy and freedom to involve their own opinions to decision-making.

Although readers might have other distinct opinions, the ideas of these respondents are consistent with common cliché-type imagery of Eastern and Western civil servants. For instance, in East Asia, including China, the civil service is usually described as being characterized by Confucian ideals of the virtuous ruler, the collective, political loyalty, obedience, person-dependent social relationships, and strong hierarchy (cf. Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Walder, 1988; Schwartz, 1999; Frederickson, 2002). Comparatively, Western civil servants are considered more individualistic, autonomous, politically neutral, lawful, transparent, citizen-centred, and professional (Schwartz, 1999; Kernaghan, 2000; Van der Wal, 2008). We may wonder, however, whether these traditional values still fit the civil service ethos in both the Eastern and Western contexts in the present day. Are the most important values for civil servants in the East and the West as distinctive as their administrative traditions indicate?
Cliché-type views on Eastern and Western civil servant values

What are your thoughts about what makes a good civil servant in Western and Eastern administrative cultures? Hold your thoughts, and let us first see how civil servants in both countries themselves characterize both cultures.

According to Chinese respondents in this study, fifty percent considered there to be significant differences between Western and Eastern civil servant values. Some described the difference as cultural, for example, “Eastern culture is a ‘sage’ culture, requiring a person [to be] a perfect man; Western culture is ‘individualism’, respecting individual character and freedom”, or “[i]n the West it requires civil servants to act by laws... but in the East (China), integrity is more important but it relies much on [the] ‘rule of man’”, and thus “the East focuses more on interpersonal relationships”. Some other respondents noted the lack of specific values in Eastern culture such as transparency, openness, and some values popular in business-like government in the West, where a civil servant “is more like a helper to social service, while [a] Chinese civil servant is more like the controller of power”.

Comparatively, Dutch respondents demonstrated more consensus than the Chinese respondents regarding the different values that Eastern and Western cultures require of civil servants. Almost ninety percent of Dutch respondents felt that there are differences, with fifty percent stating that in the Eastern context “Democratic control and regulation seems more limited, which should make moral values and perceptions stronger (loyalty, etc.)”. Thus “obedience and loyalty will have a bigger role” because the culture is “more hierarchical”. Furthermore, there is “less freedom to ‘think for oneself’” and rather it is “more a culture of ‘following’”. By contrast, “Western culture is more autonomous with [people having their] own opinion” and there is “more impartiality due to many political parties”. In short: Dutch civil servants are more confident about their autonomy and freedom to involve their own opinions to decision-making.

Although readers might have other distinct opinions, the ideas of these respondents are consistent with common cliché-type imagery of Eastern and Western civil servants. For instance, in East Asia, including China, the civil service is usually described as being characterized by Confucian ideals of the virtuous ruler, the collective, political loyalty, obedience, person-dependent social relationships, and strong hierarchy (cf. Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Walder, 1988; Schwartz, 1999; Frederickson, 2002). Comparatively, Western civil servants are considered more individualistic, autonomous, politically neutral, lawful, transparent, citizen-centred, and professional (Schwartz, 1999; Kernaghan, 2000; Van der Wal, 2008). We may wonder, however, whether these traditional values still fit the civil service ethos in both the Eastern and Western contexts in the present day. Are the most important values for civil servants in the East and the West as distinctive as their administrative traditions indicate?
In an era of globalization, there are increasing exchanges of public administration ideas and governmental practices between Asia and the West, including China and the Netherlands (Mahbubani, 2013; Xue & Zhong, 2012; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). Public service paradigms have shifted from the traditional bureaucracy to ‘managerial’ values, which pursue business-like government, and more recently there was a shift towards a public value approach (O’Flynn, 2007; Stoker, 2006). In this context, can we identify commonalities between civil servant values in East Asia and Western Europe? If there are indeed common values, does this mean that there is no persistence of tradition, making the East-West distinction outdated?

It has also been argued that the idea of the ‘globality’ of new public management (NPM) and the convergence of public service paradigms are “exaggerated” (Hood, 1995, p. 104), as administrative reform ideas are “culturally plural rather than homogenous” (ibid.). Due to the diversity of civil service practice, “those seeking a simple progression from a bureaucratic paradigm to NPM, and then to a post-NPM convergence, are going to find their views challenged by the messiness of the real world where divergence and contextual variation prevail” (Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010, p. 1110). What is cultural or contextual variation in public service? How does it make civil servant values differ in, for instance, an East Asian country such as China and a Western European country such as the Netherlands? Regarding specific values, why, for instance, may Chinese civil servants rarely confront particular values in their practical work, while they are a big concern for Dutch civil servants? Are they even talking about the same thing?

A brief overview of the project and research questions

The central research question for this project is: Do the values that civil servants in China and the Netherlands regard important for being a good civil servant reflect the administrative traditions in both countries?

To answer this question, the project is composed of different but interrelated sections aimed at answering five sub-questions: (1) How do the traditions of the rule of morality and the rule of law differ in good administration? (2) What does a good civil servant look like – or rather, what are the prominent values of a good civil servant – in a Confucian context and in Western public administration? In order to investigate which values are regarded important, I applied a value selecting procedure to decide: (3) Which values should be selected to present to civil servants in China and the Netherlands in a value survey? (4) How are, both ideal and real-life values, ranked by civil servants in China and the Netherlands? (5) How do civil servants in China and the Netherlands perceive and prioritize specific values? In answering these questions, the research seeks to elucidate whether distinctive administrative traditions
characterize civil servants’ value preferences and perceptions of specific values in the present day civil service.

The above five sub-questions are the topics of the subsequent chapters that constitute five articles. To begin, I first examine the administrative traditions in China and the Netherlands, and identify which values are emphasized in characterizations of what makes a good official. I then examine how the Chinese Confucian tradition and the Western tradition link law and morality to good administration. Following this, I present a study of the historical literature of ‘admonitions’ in order to picture the traditional image of the good Chinese official and to elicit the core values of a Confucian sage. The prominent values in Western public administration were obtained through a review of existing research. On the basis of the literature and historical study, I conducted a pilot survey in Shanghai (China) and Amsterdam (the Netherlands), together with a study of the codes of conduct in both countries, to establish a value set that includes Confucian moral-based values and law-based values in the European context, 25 in total. The project then proceeded to compare civil servant value preferences in China and the Netherlands, with a large-scale survey involving 525 Chinese respondents and 235 Dutch respondents. This was followed by in-depth interviews on value perception and prioritization in each country. A review of the whole project, the findings and general discussion are presented in the final chapter, which also includes the implications of the research for the study of public values in cross-cultural contexts and broader public administration. This study concludes by providing suggestions for future research.

For the rest of this current chapter, the concepts of values, civil servant and administrative tradition will be explained, followed by a concise overview of the Confucian tradition of the rule of morality and the European state framework of the rule of law. Next, methodological issues such as the survey and interview design, respondent selection, and data analysis and reporting are addressed. Finally, I will indicate how the five articles link up and constitute the whole project in order to answer the research question(s).

Concepts: values, civil servant and administrative tradition

In this section, I introduce the core concepts of the research.

Values

The term ‘values’ is used in various ways within the social and behavioural sciences. The concept contains at least three key characteristics. First of all, values indicate a preference and a demand which can be “ordered by relative
important” (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p. 551). For instance, values may refer to “interests, pleasures, likes, preferences, duties, moral obligations...” (Williams, 1968, p. 283), or “a constellation of attitudes about a concept that contains a moral quality of like or dislike, desirable or undesirable, and should or should not” (Cherrington, 1989, p. 297).

Secondly, notions such as ‘preferable’ or ‘desirable’ indicate that values play a motivating role in action: individuals may choose to act in one way rather than another, and consciously or unconsciously consider that ‘this’ is (or should be) better than ‘that’. According to Lyons, Duxbury and Higgins’ definition, values can be seen as “goals or criteria that we use to determine the desirability of certain actions or motives in our lives” (2006, p. 606). Similarly, values are defined by Van der Wal as “qualities and standards that have a certain weight in the choice of action” (2008, p. 10). No matter whether these choices and decisions are “humble or grand” (Van Wart & Berman, 1999, p. 327), they indicate preferences and priorities that reflect our ultimate values.

Thirdly, values are not purely individual or subjective preferences, for “we cannot simply pose or invent values ourselves” (Rutgers, 2015, p. 35). Instead, the behaviour of valuing “is a socially established (learned) phenomenon”, which means that values are interpersonal and “characterize a culture and group” (ibid.). They are “the cultural glue of civilizations and the organizations within them, and the fundamental building blocks of culture” (Van Wart, 1998, p. 163). Values may endure within a single group, but vary from organization to organization, nation to nation, and culture to culture. Correspondingly, the study of values cannot and should not be taken out of a specific context. Cross-cultural values have been studied substantially and comprehensively; for instance, the most leading works that study through cross-national value surveys by Hofstede (and others) (e.g. Hofstede, 1983, 1984, 2001; Hofstede and Bond, 1988)\(^1\), and the value types in terms of national groups have been identified by Schwartz and others (e.g. Schwartz, 1994, 1999; Schwartz & Sagiv, 1995; Schwartz & Bardi, 2001).

Combining the arguments above, I define values as: **enduring beliefs, attitudes and standards that are regarded as important or desirable to individuals or groups, and which play a descriptive or evaluative role in referring to preferable conduct.** The focus of this research lies with civil servant values, an operational subset of public values (Bozeman, 2007, p. 13) that are “associated with the behavior of public-sector employees” (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007, p. 368). This constellation of values constitutes the precepts for public sector employees and their relationship with the state, politicians, colleagues and

---

1 Responding to the challenge that nations are not the best units with which to study cultures, Hofstede argues “true, but they are usually the only kind of units available for comparison and better than nothing”, and furthermore it does not make “cultural differences based on nation-level data invalid” (Hofstede, 2003, p. 812).
citizens, such as political loyalty, impartiality, accountability, professionalism and integrity (ibid., pp. 368-369). This leads us to the second concept: civil servant.

**Civil servant**

Civil servants are the people who practice the specific affairs of public administration. They are also called public servants (e.g. Levitan, 1942; Foster, 1981; Kernaghan & Langford, 1990), public (sector) employees (e.g. Behn, 1995; Caron & Giauque, 2006), or administrative officials (e.g. Finer, 1941; Levitan, 1946; Arnold, 1987). These terms are commonly used interchangeably, indicating three features of civil servants: they are employed in the public sector or government, not the private sector; their work is to serve the public interest rather than private interest; and in contrast to politicians, they are not usually elected, though they may be appointed (in the case of senior civil servants). The third characteristic distinguishes civil servant from ‘bureaucrat’, which Rohr identifies as neither elected nor politically appointed but “a public official hired, retained, and promoted through a merit system” independent of the electoral process (1988, p. 2). The term ‘bureaucrat’ is usually reminiscent of the Weberian bureaucratic model that calls for an executive administrator, which is narrower than the remit of a civil servant. However, there is no rigorous distinction between bureaucrats and civil servants, particularly when using both terms in opposition to politicians (e.g. Aberbach, 1981).

A Dutch civil servant, according to the Civil Service Act 1929, “is he or she who is appointed to be employed in the public service”, which includes “all agencies and (public) enterprises administered by the state and public authorities” (Van der Meer & Dijkstra, 2011, p. 154). In the Chinese Civil Servant Law, article 2 states that “civil servant refers to personnel who perform public duties according to the law and who come under the state administrative staffing system (bianzhi) with wages and welfare borne by the state public finance” (Brødsgaard & Chen, 2009, p. 2). Differing from Western practice, most politicians are included within the civil service in China, but some public service sectors such as universities and hospitals are not (Burns, 2007). Therefore, in order to get as complete a picture as possible, I use the term ‘civil servant’ in this project in a broad sense, which includes employees in government, those working in the public sector to deliver public services, and those under training to become civil servants.

Civil servants’ beliefs, values and customs compose “the spirit of public administration” (Frederickson, 1997, p. 1), which in different settings is heavily

---

influence by a particular administrative tradition (Painter & Peters, 2010, p. 8; see also Yesilkagit, 2010). This brings us to the third key concept in this study.

**Administrative tradition**

The third concept that is relevant in this project is ‘administrative tradition’. A tradition is a feature of cultural continuity, a “suitable conceptual link” or “a minimum level of consistency” (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller, 2003, p. 9) passing from generation to generation. In the same vein, “a governmental tradition is a set of inherited beliefs about the institutions and history of government” (Rhodes, 1999, p. 352). Painter and Peters (2010) identify nine groups of countries sharing some common administrative inheritance: Anglo-American, Napoleonic, Germanic, Scandinavian (four Western administrative traditions), Latin American, Postcolonial South Asian and African, East Asian, Soviet, and Islamic. Administrative traditions can also be classified in terms of cultural regions (Schwartz, 1999), such as “hierarchy” in Far East countries and “intellectual autonomy” in Western Europe. Either way, there are clear cultural differences in terms of government and public administration traditions. I adopt a simple distinction between the traditions of an Eastern ‘rule of morality’ and a Western ‘rule of law’; a cultural split between ‘moral-based’ and ‘law-based’ administrative contexts.

**Two traditions: the rule of morality and the rule of law**

Though there is always a danger of oversimplifying the differences between the East and the West, one can nevertheless identify two distinct ideals of good administration, each with their own values regarding what make a good administrator. In order to present a general picture of the two traditions, I provide a brief introduction here; more in-depth arguments are presented in Chapter 2.

The dominant administrative tradition in East Asia, including China, is Confucianism. Although studies of Confucianism vary, sometimes even substantially (e.g. Lai, 1995; Yao, 1999, 2000; Frederickson, 2002; Shun & Wong, 2004; Chan, 2007; Fukuyama, 2011; Rozman, 2014; Wong, 2014), the

---

3 According to Painter and Peters (2010) and Yesilkagit (2010), administrative tradition also includes ‘structures’, such as the institutional design of civil service systems or government. However, they are not the main concern of this project.

4 It should be noted that Confucianism is not the only important philosophical school in Chinese history. However, schools such as Legalism and Taoism never became as dominant or had such a lasting following.
observation that Confucian political thought is firmly moral-based is not a matter of dispute amongst authors. The link between personal morals and moral governance in Confucianism constitutes an integrated conceptual system simultaneously linking the individual to family, society, and the government. Confucianism believes that “the peace and harmony of the world cannot be achieved by force of arms, or by power of law, but only by moral virtues and moral influence” (Yao, 2000, p. 64). The Confucian ideal is based on a reliance on a moral king and moral ministers as a means of achieving good government. At the top of the governmental hierarchy should be the Sage King (Neisheng Waiwang), which is the “basic module” (Kang, 2009, p. 83) of political thought in ancient China. This implies the division of Confucian ethics into “ethical[s] for ordinary people and ethics for scholars” (Hwang, 1999, p. 166). Scholars occupy a higher position in government and therefore higher standards of morality and performance are required of them.

In contrast to the moral ideas of the Eastern Confucian tradition, good governance in the Western tradition can be characterized in terms of the ‘rule of law’. Early philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle regarded laws regulating citizens’ behaviour as a way to establish a link between personal virtue and a state or polis in which citizens can become virtuous. The rule of law in continental Europe can be captured in the notion of the constitutional state or ‘Rechtsstaat’ (state of law). The basic idea is one of “rationality and strict legality of administrative actions” (Morlino & Palombella, 2010, p. 7), or in another words, the government ought to be closely regulated by law. Painter and Peters refer to the (Germanic) Rechtsstaat as characterized by “a very strong and all-encompassing body of public law governing every administrative sphere” (2010, p. 22). The Rechtsstaat concept contains abstract components (Blau, 1990, pp. 81-82), while the rule of law explicitly illustrates equality, fairness and openness in the process of legitimacy, law application and the judiciary (O’Donnell, 2004). In line with these definitions, laws are established to serve some values “exemplified in legal process” (Weingast, 1997, p. 260). In other words, the rule of law is not value-free or moral-free, but emphasizes different values than the Confucian rule of morality.

Relevance of the study

This study is relevant and timely for at least four reasons. First of all, no inventory of Confucian values specifically referring to government has yet been undertaken, even though we have seen a resurgence of scholarly work into Chinese public administration in the past decade. This could be attributed to the complexity of Confucianism, as well as the difficulty in conceptualizing Confucian

---

5 “Ancient” means the period before the Opium War in 1840.
values. It is even harder to do so in English, translating the original traditional Chinese into terms and concepts that Western readers can understand. Nevertheless, it is inevitable and unavoidable to involve these values in an empirical study that concerns Confucian ideas of government. I have therefore delved into the Confucian classics, the historical documents of admonitions, as well as the relevant existing literature to elicit the prominent traditional values for Chinese officials. It is a novel effort to establish an explicit set of Confucian values particularly relating to public administrators, which can also be used as a tool in other relevant studies.

Secondly, values as a major feature of public administration should be integrated into the practice of public service (Kernaghan, 2003). However, there is no empirical study on civil servant values in present day China, nor a comparative study with Western civil servants. In the Western context, values in public administration have been studied widely (e.g. Frederickson, 1993; Van Wart, 1998; Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Bozeman, 2007; Menzel, 2007; Rutgers, 2008), specifically empirical research focusing on the values of civil servants, politicians and employees in the public sector (e.g. Rainey & Bozeman, 2000; Lyons et al., 2006; Van der Wal, 2008). Nevertheless, a study measuring the importance of values for civil servants, particularly in China, is absent, not to mention one comparing value preferences in different administrative traditions. This research will provide novel knowledge of values in countries with different administrative tradition, from which we can learn about the universality and particularity of importance, as well as meaning of civil servant values.

Thirdly, it is important to retrace the administrative traditions that we are committed to, because this helps to understand contemporary public service in terms of whom to serve, what moral principles to hold and which values to practice (Raadschelders, 1998; Stout, 2006). Nevertheless, traditions are not immutable. Both Confucianism in China and the Rechtsstaat in the Netherlands have experienced changes as well as consistencies over time. In Communist China, there has been much back and forth regarding Confucian ideas, especially during recent political developments. Confucianism was largely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1977) (Zhang & Schwartz, 1997), but later in the 1980s it was considered helpful to “fill the moral vacuum that so often accompanies modernization” (Bell, 2010, p. xi). At the beginning of 21st century, the Confucian rule of morality was declared by the government to be of the same importance for the state as the rule of law. In the Netherlands, the civil service has also adopted and adapted value patterns, especially in periods of public administration reform as they have prevailed in the West; for instance, rational Weberian bureaucratic values were superseded by business-like government, which was in turn replaced by the Dutch model of “public governance” that pursued values over ‘managerial’ effectiveness and efficiency (Kickert, 1997, p. 735). The principles of the rule of law such as state and officials are limited by laws (Tamanaha, 2012), regardless of shifting government
patterns, has never been discarded in Western administration. All this leads to pressing questions about the extent to which Chinese civil servants nowadays still aspire to the merit-based values like Confucian incorruptibility, loyalty and diligence, or whether Dutch civil servants still favour lawfulness, justice and equality more than other, managerial values? This study will investigate whether traditional values are still applicable or have faded, and whether non-traditional values have emerged in the present day civil service.

Lastly, there is a strong necessity for mutual understanding between China and the Netherlands, for nowadays there is intense collaboration in many fields such as agriculture, energy, finance, investment and culture. The Netherlands has been China’s second largest trading partner in the EU for a decade, and China has become the biggest trading partner for and second largest source of investment in the Netherlands outside of the EU. Nevertheless, due to the lack of mutual insights into administrative traditions, behaviour and value preferences, mutual prejudices and bias are still likely to impede collaboration. This research thus aims to enhance mutual understanding and promote mutual respect for politicians and civil servants from both hemispheres.

Methodology

A combination of quantitative and qualitative methods

To gather the data for observation and interpretation, in this project I applied “a variety of quantitative and qualitative data-gathering procedures” (Blaikie, 2003, p. 17). This refers to a research tradition combining positivism – which usually reveals “the ‘surface’ or empirical layer” of reality (ibid.) – and interpretivism – which explains the social reality with a reliance on meanings, descriptions and interpretations – because:

“…reality also has an ‘underlying’ layer that cannot usually be observed directly. This is the ‘real’ layer consisting of the structures and mechanisms that produce the regularities that can be observed on the surface…knowing what kinds of things are worth looking for, painstaking research will hopefully produce evidence for their existence, and perhaps will eventually expose them to the surface layer. This position is known as scientific realism, and it uses a variety of quantitative and qualitative data-gathering procedures” (ibid.).

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods can answer the research question of this study better than using only a single method. As Boyne (2002) agrees, pursuing “qualitative methods” would be useful in “more complicated quantitative research” (p. 117), and a combination of qualitative and quantitative data together helps “to produce a general picture” (Seale, 1999, p. 124). Van der Wal also argues that the debate “among different philosophical and methodological schools [about] whether constructs like attitudes or values can be researched at all” (2008, p. 39) stems from differing worldviews. These differences between quantitative and qualitative worldviews will persist, but should not “preclude the combination of both perspectives to produce a combination of different research techniques” if it can answer “the given research question as adequately as possible” (ibid., p. 40).

To be more specific, a mix of research methods fits my project because of the following concerns. On the one hand, I need a quantitative survey to construct the value rankings of civil servants. On the other hand, quantitative data alone is inadequate to study values. As “values are not only hard to locate and define but also difficult to study and measure empirically” (Van der Wal, 2008, p. 37), value ranking should be done in a certain practical context (Rutgers, 2008). Therefore, qualitative methods were required. At first, since in the beginning “qualitative research refrains from setting up a well-defined concept of what is studied” (Flick, 2007, p. xi), values were defined specifically with regard to public administration and civil service. These definitions set the frame to avoid an overly scattered understanding of each value, but were not too narrow in order to allow for potential various interpretations in follow-up qualitative interviews. In addition, in qualitative research the context is taken seriously in order to understand an issue, and the case “is an important context for understanding what is studied” (ibid.). All data were collected according to respondents’ independent thinking and practical experience, and analysed within the Chinese and Dutch administrative contexts.

This project collected data mainly in two ways. As “There are... numerous facts about the behaviours and situations of people that can be obtained only by asking a sample of people about themselves” (Fowler, 2002, p. 2), the best way to know what people think is by asking them. The first step was to conduct a quantitative survey on the hierarchy of values by means of a questionnaire distributed in China and the Netherlands. However, a questionnaire has limited power to present the importance of a value, because “even when the items in a questionnaire are worded carefully and specifically, it can be difficult for respondents to contextualize and grasp the conditions and circumstances under which something is of a certain importance” (Van der Wal, 2008, p. 37). Furthermore, due to the possibility of missing or distorting the meaning of some terms during translation, it is crucial to know how respondents interpret specific values. To do so, I collected qualitative data through in-depth interviews.
Validity and reliability

First-hand data was gathered directly from civil servants. The respondents came from civil servant training programs where participants covered various departments, government levels and functions. At best, I employed a mix of a random sampling and convenience sampling of mostly junior and mid-level civil servants, with a minority being more senior officials with supervisory duties and responsibilities (see chapter 5 for an overview of respondent characteristics). All respondents were promised anonymity during the questionnaire distribution, data analysis and publication, with no mention of identifiable information that could lead back to the respondent. Respondents were therefore expected to complete the questionnaire with adjusting their answers to minimum level. Distribution and collection of the questionnaire were undertaken in two ways: via hardcopy and an online survey. During the whole process, the researcher remained neutral: neither too close in order to avoid “reactivity” or “over-identification” (Goldenberg, 1992, p. 213), nor too far in order to maintain control and ensure that the respondents understood the questionnaire well.

Due to low data reliability when researchers are too close to their sources, I also moved one step back to investigate indirect data and second hand information, such as codes of conduct, the historical admonitions documents and the existing current literature. These indirect sources played a crucial role in the preparation and pilot survey phases. With full awareness of the risk of taking secondary data out of its original circumstances (Goldenberg, 1992, p. 210), this study only used such data referring to public sector, civil servants and administrative traditions. In the qualitative interview phase, the data were gathered in a closer way. Obtaining direct information from respondents, particularly recording their words, might trigger ‘reactivity’, but it also triangulates the findings and therefore increases validity. Throughout the whole research process, there necessarily had to be a trade-off between validity and reliability, and thus a balance of direct and indirect sources was adopted.

Phases of research

Seven phases can be distinguished in this research: phase 1, the literature study and making the research plan; phase 2, the theoretical/historical research; phase 3, the pilot survey and data analysis; phase 4, the quantitative survey and data analysis; phase 5, the qualitative interviews and data analysis; phase 6, composing and revising the articles/chapters; and phase 7, writing and completing the dissertation (the introductory and general discussion chapters). These phases are generally distinguished in terms of the research process, but it does not mean they were always neatly separated. For instance, the review of
the historical documents and the theoretical study ran almost throughout the whole project, and the articles were written and revised across three phases of data analysis.

To begin with, two clusters of the most characteristic values in the Chinese Confucian and European Rechtsstaat context were established through a literature study. The list of Confucian values was obtained through an analysis of Chinese admonitions and key moral values in Chinese academic publications. The source of law-based values in the Dutch/Western context was the abundant data on core public values in Europe (e.g., Van den Heuvel et al., 2002; Van der Wal, 2008; Beck Jørgensen & Sørensen, 2010).

To conduct the cross-cultural survey, it was necessary to build up a measurement instrument: the value set. In both the Chinese and European setting, the value list could be very long and there was no available distinction between value types (Rutgers, 2008), as well as no distinct borders between different cultural settings. Consequently, a pilot survey was conducted among civil servants in Shanghai (China) and Amsterdam (the Netherlands) to determine which values should be included in the value set in terms of rankings and ratings. In addition, civil servant codes of conduct in China and the Netherlands, as well as data obtained from the OECD, were analysed to generate the most frequently mentioned values in written ethical codes of public service. The final value set was established on the basis of the pilot survey results and the core values in the codes of conduct.

In the main survey, respondents in both China and the Netherlands were asked to rank values from an identical value set. The main survey was conducted based on a questionnaire, which consisted of two parts: three value ranking exercises (the most important ideal values, the least important ideal values, and the most important real-life values); twelve propositions about civil servants’ profession and practice; and ten questions about personal background and career development. Questionnaires were distributed in both hardcopy and online by emailing a secure link to respondents. The questionnaires were distributed among participants in professional Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs, who were employees in different governmental departments and public sectors in China and the Netherlands. The participants of MPA programs in the Netherlands include those preparing to be civil servants and those from ‘other’ sectors who have a professional background in public administration education. Chinese respondents also included participants enrolled in the Chinese Communist Party School. The individual characteristics

\[7\] In this dissertation, I use ‘CCP’ as the abbreviation of the Chinese Communist Party. To consistent with what appreas in references, however, I also use CPC in some places.

The main task of Communist Party Schools is training cadres of the Party, including political cadres and civil servants, and most of the time, they are not neatly distinguished. The Chinese civil service is extensively politicized by an expanding CCP’s leadership in all administrative departments and by classifying organizations of the Party into civil service.
of respondents are shown in Appendix 1. In China, a total of 525 out of 591 distributed questionnaires were valid (response rate 89 percent). In the Netherlands, 235 valid questionnaires were collected out of 314 (a response rate of 75 percent).

At the end of the questionnaire, all survey respondents were asked to write down their contact information if they were willing to take part into a follow-up interview. This is the way in which most of the interview respondents were recruited. A snowball sampling method was also used (cf. Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Fowler, 2002; Weiss, 1994); these were often colleagues of the interviewed students. After contacting potential respondents to inform them about the purpose and method of the interview, all interviews were conducted face-to-face and conversations were recorded with their permission. Most interviews lasted around 45 minutes. The interviews included three parts composed of eight central questions (see Appendix 2). The conversations with each respondent were transcribed, and were first sent to the respondents for them to check and correct before data reporting began.

The data collected in each phase is analysed and reported on in an independent chapter (Chapters 4, 5 and 6). The theoretical research on what makes a good administrator in the two traditions – the rule of morality and the rule of law – is presented in two chapters (Chapters 2 and 3). The following section will provide an overall outline of the dissertation.

Limitations

First of all, the hazard of translation is an issue that cannot be avoided when conducting research involving multiple languages. There is always loss, addition or distortion of meaning when a term is translated, due to the contextual, historical and cultural embeddedness of meaning (Rutgers, 2004, p. 151). Accordingly, this study has the problem of the unavoidable loss of meaning in the translation of terms from the original classical Chinese into English, and also from Dutch into English. The more complex and culturally specific a concept is, the more likely it is to be problematic. For instance, the English translation of a Confucian concept could “fail to convey either the power of the idea or its practical meaning” (Frederickson, 2002, p. 617). Some complex concepts like ‘political participation’ may indeed vary considerably between countries (Collier and Mahon, 1993, p. 848). Therefore, translating from Chinese and Dutch into
English, and vice versa, is never straightforward, and always involves interpretation. In this project, to capture the original meaning as accurately as possible, translation was entrenched with collaboration among native Chinese, Dutch and English speakers. More importantly, with full awareness of possible loss or distortion of meaning, I conducted face-to-face interviews to investigate how civil servants interpret the same values in different or similar ways.

The second limitation is a methodological one of generalization and representativeness. As no available database includes all 300,000 civil service employees in the Netherlands and the approximately 7 million in China, the most representative sample possible was thus difficult to obtain. I used a combination of “cluster” and “purposive” sampling (Black, 1999, pp. 121-124), and the respondents recruited covered a mix of government levels, functions, gender and age. Furthermore, the strength of the quantitative survey lies primarily in the completion of a well-developed research instrument for testing comparative value preferences between Western and Asian countries, and between different countries and regions in general. Qualitative research faces more challenges in terms of generalization, but it is both inevitable and unavoidable (William, 2000). In order to keep generalization to a minimum, in this study I have tried to interpret the qualitative results against the larger background of the respective administrative tradition and the present day civil service. Both ‘statistical generalization’ (from sample to wider population) and ‘moderatum generalization’ (instances of a broader recognisable set of features) have been conducted (ibid., p. 215).

The coherence of this dissertation

Between the introduction (Chapter 1) and the general discussion (Chapter 7), this dissertation includes five chapters composed on the basis of published and forthcoming articles, as well as manuscripts currently under review for publication. Each chapter addresses one sub-question.

In Chapter 2, the administrative tradition of Confucianism in East Asia and the Rechtsstaat in Western Europe are compared, focusing on the concept of law and its linkage to good administration. In the chapter, I argue that the Confucian ideal of the rule of morality and the Western tradition of the rule of law are fundamentally different.

In Chapter 3, I investigate the unique historical Chinese documents known as admonitions. I examine the image of the traditional good official in Confucian China by looking for the core values emphasized in the admonitions. In this chapter, I show the implications of Confucian ideas of self-cultivation in the study and practice of public administration nowadays, both in the Western and Chinese contexts. More significantly, prime Confucian values are elicited, which help to establish the value set that is explicitly described in the following chapter.
The data and results of the pilot survey are presented in Chapter 4, in which I introduce the value set for the main survey and the preliminary results of the value preferences of civil servants in China and the Netherlands. In this chapter, the findings are based only on a small sample of respondents; a well-developed value set is, however, established for future studies comparing values in Eastern and Western countries. I constructed the value set based on value rankings and value ratings obtained from the pilot survey, as well as the most frequently mentioned values in codes of conduct in China and the Netherlands.

Chapter 5 aims to show how civil servant values in East Asian and Western European administrations differ through an analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from a large-scale survey conducted in China and the Netherlands. This survey shows more similarities than differences in terms of value rankings, with ideal value rankings even more similar than real-life value rankings. The perceptions of respondents towards the ‘other’ administrative tradition (i.e., Dutch respondents’ opinions of Chinese civil servants, and vice-versa) demonstrate more cliché-type differences than what the value rankings actually indicate.

Due to the culture that a value conveys, the value rankings are inadequate to show what some of the key values mean for civil servants in different administrative contexts, and how they affect practice. Therefore, I conducted qualitative interviews in China and the Netherlands in order to investigate the perceptions and prioritizations of five key civil servant values: loyalty, people-orientedness, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. I found that respondents in two countries perceived and prioritized these values differently; to be more specific, their interpretations of loyalty and people-orientedness differ more than those for transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. Detailed results and findings are presented in Chapter 6.

The concluding general discussion chapter (Chapter 7) gives an overview of the research findings and what they mean for the various scholarly debates elicited in this chapter, as well as for future research endeavours to further explore administrative traditions and values and their dynamics in various settings in Asia and the West.

---

8 In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, I use the notion ‘ideal-type’ instead of ‘ideal’ to keep consistent with published or accepted articles. The notion “ideal-type” and “real-life” in this dissertation is only used to present two types of value rankings. The ideal-type values are the values that our respondents regarded ideally important when they described to us the image of an ideal good civil servant. The concept is not used in an empirical sense such as the Weberian ideal-typical rational bureaucracy (Udy Jr, 1959; also see Aspalter, 2011).
References


References


