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
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Chapter 7
General Discussion
What did I do and why?

This project aimed to answer the following central research question: 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, I answered five sub-questions, which have been addressed in the preceding five chapters.

First, I conducted theoretical research on two administrative traditions – the rule of morality and the rule of law – as they denote good government in the contexts of Confucianism in the East and the Rechtsstaat in the West respectively. To gain insight into the rule of morality, I investigated the historical literature of ‘admonitions’ that prescribe officials’ experiences in moral cultivation and administrative practice. To capture the Western tradition, I looked into the ideas on law and morality in classical Western philosophy, and the law-bound state that characterizes Western administrative thought and praxis. Based on a value set derived from the literature review in both contexts, a pilot survey and analysis of civil servant codes of conduct, I conducted a quantitative survey involving 525 Chinese and 235 Dutch civil servants. The survey aimed to quantify the values that make a good civil servant, and reveal how respondents explain the differences between ideal and real-life civil servant values. Finally, I interviewed 42 respondents to qualitatively investigate how they perceive and prioritize five specific values – loyalty, people-orientedness, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency – in their professional lives.

In the remainder of this chapter, I present my key findings in order to answer the research questions, after which I discuss how my findings enrich current public administration debates and how they contribute to a targeted agenda for future research.

What did I find?

**Prominent values in books**

Through a theoretical study of the two traditions, a literature review of existing studies on values and a historical document investigation, I answered the first and second sub-questions.

In order to answer the first sub-question – How do the traditions of the rule of morality and the rule of law differ in characterizing good administration? – I compared the concept of law in two ideal examples of good administration. The Confucian ideal of government relies on moral officials who practice self-cultivation. Therefore, rather than the ‘rule of man’, which is usually used in the Western literature to describe the Eastern tradition, I argue that the ‘rule of
morality’ is a more accurate notion with which to characterize the Confucian administrative tradition. The rule of law in the Rechtsstaat tradition emphasizes legal, transparent and predictable administrative actions. Ideally, the rule of law eradicates all personal factors, while the rule of morality presupposes governance by virtuous persons, leading to a different prioritization of values, as shown below.

This then goes to answer the second sub-question: 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? Based on my analysis of admonitions, Confucian classics and relevant literature, I distilled the prominent values for traditional Confucian good officials, such as trustworthiness, endurance, incorruptibility, diligence, obedience, loyalty and people-orientedness. Some of the most prominent civil servant values in the Western literature, as mapped out by Van der Wal (2008), overlap with Confucian values, such as impartiality, obedience and loyalty; however, other Western values like transparency, efficiency, accountability and lawfulness are rarely mentioned in Confucianism.

A value set

To answer the third sub-question – Which values should be selected to present to civil servants in China and the Netherlands in a value survey? – I conducted a pilot survey and a review of different codes of conduct. The pilot survey produced value ratings and value rankings by civil servants in Shanghai (China) and Amsterdam (the Netherlands). I constructed the final value set by combining the results of the value ratings and rankings with the most frequently mentioned values in the codes of conduct (see Chapter 4).

Quantitative results

The quantitative results answer the fourth sub-question: How are values, both ideal and real-life, ranked by civil servants in China and the Netherlands? With regard to the ideal value rankings, I expected that:

P1. Ideal value rankings of both groups show more differences than similarities.

P2. Differences between the ideal value rankings of both groups reflect the administrative traditions of the rule of morality and rule of law.
Interestingly, the opposite turned out to be the case. The ideal value rankings in the two contexts showed slightly more similarities than the real-life rankings, and furthermore they did not unambiguously reflect the respondents’ respective traditional administrative ethos. The majority of the top ideal values (10 of 15) were shared between the two groups. Therefore, the two propositions above had to be rejected.

Correspondingly, since the real-life value rankings displayed stronger contrasts than the ideal value rankings, the findings also rejected the third proposition that:

\[ P3. \text{ Real-life value rankings will be more similar between both groups than ideal value rankings.} \]

Compared to the ideal values, we can see more characteristics of the respective administrative traditions in the real-life value rankings. The values reflecting the Confucian rule of morality ethos, such as incorruptibility, obedience and impartiality, were ranked much higher by Chinese respondents than their Dutch counterparts. In the same vein, Dutch civil servants showed a stronger preference for rule of law and classical Weberian values such as lawfulness, expertise, loyalty and accountability.

Quantitative results show incongruence between ideal and real-life civil servant value rankings in both China and the Netherlands. Respondents attributed the incongruence to different reasons (see the next section). The qualitative interview further investigated how respondents in two countries perceive and prioritize specific values that I selected based on quantitative results. In general, the qualitative findings demonstrate the administrative traditions of Confucianism and the Rechtsstaat more clearly than the quantitative results.

Civil servants ‘speaking out’

Before going into the interview results, let us see how Chinese and Dutch respondents answered three open questions in the questionnaire after they had ranked the values.

When answering the first question – What makes ideal and real-life values different? – about 36 percent of Chinese respondents attributed the contrast between ideal and real-life values to institutional flaws and societal conditions, such as the imperfection of laws and regulations, the political ecology of the rule of man, and constraints caused by function or position. According to 26 percent of the Dutch respondents, practical and contextual factors such as limited time and resources are the most dominant factors accounting for the contrast
between ideal and actual value preferences. These findings reject my fourth proposition that:

**P4. Both groups of respondents will report similar explanations for incongruence between ideal and real-life value rankings.**

The second question concerned value changes in the recent past, asking: *Have the most important values for being a good civil servant changed over the past two decades? If yes, which values have changed?* Almost a quarter of the Chinese respondents answered ‘no’ to this question, since the core value for civil servants has always been ‘to serve the people’. By contrast, only four percent of Dutch respondents thought that no change had taken place. Chinese respondents acknowledged the higher importance of NPM-inspired and Rechtsstaat values such as serviceability, innovativeness and lawfulness in the present day. Similarly, Dutch respondents frequently mentioned that efficiency, effectiveness, and transparency had become more important than twenty years ago, as part of organizational and cultural renewal caused by NPM-like reforms, creating a businesslike and customer-oriented civil service ethos. Respondents’ answers particularly for the Dutch case partly support our fifth proposition that:

**P5. Explanations of both groups for incongruence between ideal and real-life value rankings will point towards an increased emphasis on managerialism and an NPM-inspired public service ethos in the past two decades.**

The third question was: *Do you think that being a good civil servant in Western and Eastern administrative cultures requires different values? If yes, please briefly describe the biggest difference.* About 23 percent of Chinese respondents answered ‘no’ to this question, compared to only five percent of their Dutch counterparts. Of those emphasizing differences, 29 percent of Chinese respondents suggested that Chinese civil servants usually serve their superiors or a specific group, while Western civil servants are more responsible to society or the general public. Almost half of Dutch respondents considered Chinese civil servants to be less autonomous and more obedient and loyal to their superiors and organization, while they saw themselves as more individualistic and freer to express their own opinions. These mutual perceptions of values were more reflective of stereotypical imagery than the actual ranked differences between both groups, which are congruent with the next proposition, that:

**P6. Mutually perceived differences between value rankings will exceed differences between ideal and real-life value rankings of both groups.**
Finding by asking: interview results

To answer the fifth sub-question – How do civil servants in China and the Netherlands perceive and prioritize specific values? I conducted qualitative interviews among 22 Chinese and 20 Dutch civil servants. The results show how they perceive and prioritize the following five values: loyalty, people-orientedness, transparency, effectiveness and efficiency. Respondents in the two countries ranked these values either very differently or rather similarly. As notions about these five values allow for various interpretations, this has led to wide debate (e.g., De Graaf, 2011; Hwang, 1999; Redford, 1954; Hood, 2006; Meijer, 2012; Rutgers & van der Meer, 2010); thus they merited more in-depth investigation.

Chinese respondents’ statements show that they interpret loyalty as being towards the country and the political party (CCP), while only two statements by Dutch respondents mentioned loyalty to the country. The largest group of statements from the Dutch respondents shows that they interpret loyalty as commitment to the organization and to colleagues, but only two statements from their Chinese counterparts fell into this category, and one respondent meant political party by the notion ‘organization’.

The value of people-orientedness, according to the dominant views of the Chinese respondents, was not a prime concern, because they usually focus on practical tasks rather than abstract values. They viewed people-orientedness as more important for civil servants in the higher echelons of government. The views of Dutch respondents depended on their definition of ‘people’, which varied from function to function. In general, they prioritized their own clients in their daily work rather than the public in a broad sense. Both groups of respondents found it difficult to be people-oriented in their daily work, but listed different reasons for this. Chinese respondents emphasized institutional factors such as the involvement of private interests, the one-party state and the lack of real voting system, while Dutch respondents attributed this difficulty to practical reasons such as time or budget constraints, restrictive regulations and the use of technology replacing their interaction with citizens. In both contexts, these explanations were essentially the same as those given to explain the incongruence between ideal and real-life values in answer to the first semi-open question in the questionnaire (see above).

Chinese and Dutch respondents had similar views on transparency: that it has a high importance but is of low necessity. Both characterized the current ‘overemphasis’ on transparency as problematic, since it causes low efficiency, violates secrecy and can mislead the public. However, the two groups also differed, as Dutch respondents worried about the misuse of government information by the media or the public, while Chinese respondents criticized the lack of reliable relevant information being accessible to the public in China. However, both Chinese and Dutch respondents evaluated transparency in
relation to other values, either in the form of trade-offs or synergies (Heald, 2006).

Regarding effectiveness and efficiency, the statements show the most similarities between the two groups: effectiveness has priority over efficiency. A substantive number of statements, however, also displayed a reluctance to choose between effectiveness and efficiency because respondents considered it an issue of balance, elucidating the potential conflict between the aim and the means of public service.

The most important values that make a good civil servant in China and the Netherlands show considerable similarities; respondents aspired to an ideal civil servant ethos of both legality and virtuousness. Furthermore, the desirable values according to civil servants themselves in each country are not as traditional as their counterparts perceived. However, the influence of tradition on the real-life civil service remains; as shown by, for instance, the high importance of obedience and personal attachment in China versus Weberian loyalty and professionalism in the Netherlands. Respondents nevertheless held more similar opinions regarding values arising from modern, i.e. less traditional, approaches to public service. To conclude, the ideal civil servant value preferences do not clearly reflect the respective administrative traditions in China and the Netherlands, though tradition has a limited explanatory power in explaining the differences in real-life value rankings, and value perceptions and prioritizations in practice.

**Implications for key debates in public administration**

This research has contributes to important and emerging debates in public administration, particularly those regarding (public) values, administrative traditions, governance and administration in Asia, and those engaged in East-West comparisons.

To begin, this research provides empirical evidence about how civil servant values differ between the two administrative traditions of the rule of morality and the rule of law. Confucianism has aroused the interest of many scholars (e.g. Yum, 1988; Yao, 1999; Frederickson, 2002; Fukuyama, 1995, 2011; Bell, 2010), but there are no comparative empirical data regarding civil servant values in both the Confucian and Rechtsstaat traditions, either in Chinese or in English. From this research, we learn that Chinese ideal civil servant values are not completely in accordance with the Confucian “merit-based” ideal (Afurecht & Bun, 1995, p. 181); indeed, some law-based and Weberian values are also considered important. Confucian tradition of guanxi, i.e. personal relationships, affect Chinese civil servants’ daily work, which is reflected in their strong interdependence with their superiors and colleagues. Chinese civil servants
aspire to the ethos of the rule of law, whereas it currently cannot actualize due to the reinforcement rather than limiting power of the CCP in the process of advancing the rule of law (Gallagher, 2006; Shen, 2000). Currently, they operate within a “rule by law” context.

In the Dutch context, traditional Weberian values and a law-abiding ethos are still appreciated in the civil service, as well as newer NPM-inspired values. However, the low rankings in this study given to the values of impartiality, incorruptibility, justice and honesty in daily work are at odds with other recent studies in Western Europe (Van der Wal, 2013b; Van der Wal et al., 2008). This might imply that there is a perception among Dutch civil servants that there is a limited problem of corruption in the Netherlands and a high level of satisfaction with the legal state. However, it is worth pointing out that it could be ‘dangerous’ for the government if civil servants take such things for granted, since “insiders tend to experience their own assumptions as obvious truths” (Forsythe, 1999, p. 130) and thus overlook possible problems.

Secondly, this research empirically confirms what other scholars have also highlighted, namely that attempts to call for a universal adaptation of common values regardless of the specific context will be problematic. In the discourse on public values, universalism offers limited promise, both in theory and in practice. Public values have been studied extensively, but achieving consensus on the definitions has proved nearly impossible; furthermore, doing so is arguably unnecessary (cf. Van der Wal, Nabatchi & De Graaf, 2015; Rutgers, 2015). Even though scholars have attempted to define and classify public values (e.g. Van Wart, 1998; Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007; Meynhardt, 2009; Rutgers, 2015), the meanings of values vary by case. Schwartz and Bardi (2001, p. 279), for instance, found consensus on some value priorities across nations, but their respondents evaluated abstract values out of context, which could decrease reliability and validity. Our findings corroborate the observation that cultural divergence and the complexity of administrative practice result in value variety among nations, both in terms of importance and meaning (cf. Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010). Despite the emergence of some shared values in the value rankings, the different perceptions and prioritizations of values between Chinese and Dutch civil servants add further doubt as to whether convergence of administrative ideas (cf. Pollitt, 2000, 2001; Pollitt, Van Thiel & Homburg, 2007; Goldfinch & Wallis, 2010) is fully possible between regions with such different traditions or contexts. Instead of calling for universal values, Chinese and Dutch respondents rather expressed mutual appreciation of the other’s administrative tradition.

In addition, this research has elaborated on the meanings of specific values, while showing how some values inevitably compete in practice. In the Chinese civil service, on the one hand political loyalty to the CPC and hierarchical loyalty to superiors are strong due to the one-party system; on the other hand, such loyalty reflects traditional “quintessential Confucianism in action” in terms of “ordering relationship[s] by status and observing this order” (Hofstede & Bond,
The majority of Dutch respondents perceived loyalty as commitment to their organization and colleagues. Differing from De Graaf’s (2011) findings among top Dutch administrators, most of my Dutch respondents did not see their minister or administrative superior as important objects of loyalty. Among those who mentioned loyalty to superiors, the Chinese respondents tended to explain it in terms of obedience to leaders as persons, while Dutch respondents explained that they show their leaders loyalty in terms of the function and authority given them by law.

People-orientedness was not particularly valued in Chinese civil servants’ daily work, in contrast to the CPC’s slogan “serve the people” (Wang, 2002, p.4; also see Fan, 2008). They tend to focus on the tasks required by their bosses rather than on what matters to the people in general. Dutch civil servants also showed less concern for the wider ‘public’ and more focus on direct clients. The prioritization of people-orientedness reminds us that public interest, the main goal of government, is actually difficult to practice in civil servants’ daily work, both in China and the Netherlands. We might attribute this to vagueness in terms of defining who constitutes the public (Redford, 1954), and even to the shrinking of publicness in the businesslike transformation of government (Haque, 2001).

The connotations of transparency, effectiveness and efficiency are less culturally-bound than loyalty and people-orientedness. Neither Chinese nor Dutch civil servants viewed full transparency as necessary, as both concerned the harm it may bring to the service of government, considering proper use of information more important than mere access to it. This echoes some public arguments that transparency is an overrated solution to governmental ills, since citizens evaluate government in terms of its active responsiveness (Beck Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007, p. 364) and real actions, rather than through passive openness of figures (cf. Mayersohn, 2014; Etzioni, 2014). Similar to the prioritization of transparency, both Chinese and Dutch respondents considered achieving proper results (effectiveness) as more important than the means used to achieve the desired results (efficiency).

These contrasts hark back to the distinction between instrumental and terminal values or moral and teleological values (cf. Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 1994), particularly when public values conflict with each other. Both groups of respondents valued the ends of government – achieving public service – as more important than the means used to achieve the goal – through transparency and efficiency. This illuminates compatibility between the rule of morality and the rule of law, as both emphasize “governing good”, albeit with different ideals of what constitutes ‘good’, rather than “governing well” (De Graaf & Van der Wal, 2010, p. 625).

Finally, this study contributes to research on Asian values and Asian public administration amidst globalization and the alleged convergence of public management practices and values. From a Western perspective, Asian public
values are mostly seen in a negative light, with the concept of “political connotations” used to explain economic achievement in East Asia, and “distinctive culture” used to justify authoritarian government and the rejection of “Western-style democracy” (Cheung, 2000, p. 4; also see Sen, 1997; Stolenberg, 2000; De Berry, 1998; Thompson, 2001). It is still debated whether the modern Asian political and economic system erected in the context of Confucianism is superior or inferior to the Western model, or whether Confucian values support authoritarianism and thus are undesirable in a modern world that requires democracy and the rule of law (cf. Bell & Hahm, 2003). First of all, my research shows that there are Asian values, a “unique constellation of beliefs, habits or values” (Stolenberg, 2000, p. 717), which are distinct from Western values. Secondly, however, it argues that the Confucian government ideal of the rule of morality as complementary rather than opposite to the rule of law in the Western tradition. As Bell and Hahm (2003) point out, “Confucian values may have universal appeal and they may be feasible and desirable even in societies without a Confucian heritage” (p. 27).

Implications for administrative practice

This research has practical implications for the establishment of codes of conduct and ethical management in the civil service. Our results show incongruence between value rankings given by civil servants and codes of conduct, which indicates a potential reduction of the efficacy of such codes. Based on this observation, policy makers or developers of conduct codes in government could either modify the codes to make them more applicable or adjust civil servants’ behaviours to be more in line with sector values. Furthermore, to aid civil servants in making decisions in complex situations, the meanings and prioritization of values should be made as explicit as possible, particularly when values conflict with each other. Loyalty, for instance, should be clearly defined, and potential conflicts elucidated. What happens when unquestioned loyalty to one’s superior violates organizational interests? Since civil servants “are confronted with various ‘wicked’ impossible situations” (Van der Wal & Van Hout, 2009, p. 226), is loyalty to their own personal morals when making decisions ultimately more important? Likewise, is there justification for the denial of transparency when information is in organization’s interest or in the public interest? These pressing questions lead to the second implication of the research.

This research provides possible guidelines for how to practice values that are important for being a good civil servant, namely regulation and self-cultivation, which combine the essence of the rule of morality and the rule of law. Since laws have to be executed by human beings, a balance between laws/regulations and the “invisible authorities” such as moral standards “must be sought” (Arrow, 1974, as cited in Caron & Giauque, 2006, p. 544). A civil servant is not merely an
employee in the government or public sector who practices democratic and professional values; s/he has a responsibility to achieve ethical values (e.g. integrity, fairness, honesty) and people values (e.g. caring, compassion, benevolence) (Kernaghan, 2003, p. 712). The latter refer to the personal qualities and individual values of administrators, which are the most fundamental because the practice of other values is determined by the quality of administrators (Van Wart, 1998). In other words, the practice of self-cultivation deserves more attention as the basis for being a good civil servant.

The findings are relevant to practitioners from different countries with various administrative cultures, making it easier for them to understand each other. As we can see from respondents’ mutual perceptions on civil servants values in this project, they imagined their counterparts more traditional than the value preferences actually showed. The perceptions of our respondents, particularly Dutch respondents, display deep-lying clichés and prejudice. Given the context of globalization and continuing exchange of management ideas between the East and the West (Mahbubani, 2013), bias will harm increasing collaboration. The findings in this research may improve mutual understanding of different governmental values and behaviours.

Methodological implications and limitations

The answers to this project’s research questions lie in the perceptions of the respondents. As with other forms of self-reported data, the process of interviewing or surveying civil servants about their own values and behaviors will inevitably suffer from a degree of social desirability bias (King & Bruner, 2000; Van der Wal, 2013a). When respondents rank a value highly in terms of importance, this may in fact mean that it is seen as more favorable or necessary in their society/context. For instance, incorruptibility was ranked very highly by Chinese civil servants, because they acknowledge the serious problem of corruption within Chinese society. Likewise Dutch interview respondents ranked incorruptibility as being of low importance in their practical work, indicating that they perceive there to be little corruption within the Dutch government and thus less need to care about it. Despite such ‘bias’, socially desired values are not necessarily “undesirable” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 6), and a study does not have to eliminate but rather identify them. The survey produced ideal and real-life value rankings, a “forced-choice procedure” to sort out the “internal values” (Ravlin & Meglino, 1989, p. 495) that civil servants in general should practice, as well as the values they need to practice. By doing so, it distinguished between “desirable values” and “desired values” (Hofstede, 2001, p. 6).
To examine values, one has to apply an instrument that is appropriate to the specific context. The validity of the value measurements in this research lies largely in the research tool that I built for this specific purpose: the civil servant value set (see Chapter 4). This tool consists of the “espoused beliefs and values” (Schein, 2010, p. 25) that are embodied in organizational moral regulations (ethical codes) and which members (civil servants) believe important. The approach taken to select the values overcome the disadvantage of selecting values based only on management preferences and/or regulations, as well as the potential lack of “genuine values” obtained from respondents (Van Rekom, Van Riel & Wierenga, 2006, p. 177). As this value set contains characteristic values in the traditional Confucian and contemporary Chinese contexts, as well as prominent values in Western public administration, it can be used as a research instrument in cross-cultural public value research, particularly in East Asian and Western settings.

Scholars have argued that it is inappropriate to use the nation as a unit for cultural comparison (Baskerville, 2003; Hofstede, 2003). In my project, however, the nation or state is an appropriate unit with which to examine values because my focus is on administrative/governmental culture rather than on culture in general. Governmental action involves human activity and perception, which requires “an interpretation” (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2013, p. xxv). Put differently, the study of public values should more often apply a qualitative approach. Values per se have been augured as difficult to measure because they are subjective, “individual and inconsistent” (Ravlin & Meglino, 1989, p. 496), and what is espoused and what is “in-use” (Van der Wal, 2008, p. 31; Schein, 2010) are not always the same. Bringing cultural traits into public values causes even more uncertainty, as it implies that the meaning of a value may differ between countries and be more easily ignored in different languages (c.f. Rutgers, 2015). The comparison could be inadequate “[b]y simply looking at mean levels of survey responses” (Jilke, Meuleman & Van de Walle, 2015, p. 35). Qualitative investigation is thus required to ascertain how people perceive and prioritize competing values. Nevertheless, and as said in the preceding chapters, values do convey a stable culture and display persistence when they are shared within a group. This concept implies a value hierarchy and preferences. Quantitative measurement is therefore legitimate in order to rank values by importance. The qualitative observations and quantitative results together answer my research questions more adequately than one method alone could do, which upholds the use of triangulation (Jick, 1979) and a mixed methods approach rather than making a rigorous either/or methodological choice (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010; Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

This research results presented an average of civil servant value preference within each country. They do not deny the diversity of individuals; the value rankings between individuals in two countries might similar as well. This leads to some measurement biases that comparative studies usually encounter (Jilke et
al., 2015). In my survey, I particularly paid attention to reducing “item bias” that is caused by translation, different connotative meaning or social desirable answers (ibid., p. 38). The collaboration between native Chinese, English and Dutch speakers makes sure the translation of civil servant values consistent as much as possible among three languages. The potential different interpretations of value allow comparison of data obtained by qualitative interview. My findings expanded the connotations of specific civil servant values, which can be used to improve measurement equivalence in future comparative research. The design of survey items usually relies on theoretical or “latent concepts”, whereas these concepts “cannot be easily generalized to other cultural settings” (ibid., p. 37). The elaborated and explicit meanings of values in my research will help to minimize “construct bias” (ibid.) at the inception stage of survey.

Cross-cultural value research requires the consideration of variety between nations, and even within one cultural region, which indicates another limitation of my project. This project involved only China and the Netherlands, and I should thus be careful when generalizing the results across various regions with Confucian or rule of law administrative traditions. While Confucian values constitute the traditional foundation of the regimes in several East Asian states, such as Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, as well as China (De Bary, 1998), these states have nevertheless adopted different political models. The Western administrative tradition connotes an even vaster scope – the Anglo-American, Napoleonic, Germanic and Scandinavian traditions (Painter and Peters, 2010, p. 20) – while the Rechtsstaat (rule of law) is more relevant for Continental European countries such as Germany, the Netherlands, France and some parts of Scandinavia. There are various historical and administrative differences between these sets of countries which merit additional scholarly attention.

What’s next?

We should pay more attention to the study of contemporary government by looking at administrative traditions (Raadschelders, 1998). It has been found that the values of people in specific cultures affect their views on norms of government; put simply, there is “causality between culture and governance” (Licht, Goldschmidt & Schwartz, 2007, p. 661). Indeed, the study of Licht, Goldschmidt and Schwartz (2007) shows that the rule of law, non-corruption and democratic accountability score higher in English speaking and Western European regions, where there is a tradition for such values, than in African, Eastern European, Far Eastern and Latin American regions, where there are different value traditions (p. 679). In my study, I also found traditional traits within the present-day civil service, with obedience and hierarchical loyalty being more important in China, while Dutch civil servants considered expertise and transparency more important. We need more insight into the topic in general,
covering for instance: 1) other administrative traditions beyond Confucianism and the Rechtsstaat; 2) civil servant values in more countries than China and the Netherlands; 3) value divergence or convergence in the context of globalization; 4) value changes over time; and 5) interaction between traditions.

The values underlying civil servants’ daily actions deserve more attention. I have studied the values that are considered important in their real work, but one may wonder whether what they say or think is consistent with what they do. People usually make choices based on an estimation of “the consequences to which the action will lead” and the “evaluation of these consequences” (Van Rekom et al., 2006, p. 178). This process thus conveys the preference for and hierarchy of values. Further study could focus on values as they guide explicit behavior, either at the organizational or individual level, by examining how a policy is made or how a government responds to citizens’ demands. In so doing, researchers could observe more delicate value contrasts and the tacit influence of tradition on civil servants’ behavior.

The literature on public administration research (1999-2009) in East and Southeast Asia represents only 0.005% of social science research outcomes (Walker, Brewer and Choi, 2013); the number is even smaller when it comes to East Asia alone. This area deserves much more attention, especially considering that 28.15% of the world population lives in and 15.1% of the world GDP comes from East Asia, and China being the world’s number one economy in purchasing power parity (PPP) in 2014. A large number of countries out of this region have been compared, while more than 60% of the individual countries have been studied only once or twice (ibid., p. 6); indeed, the Netherlands is one of the least frequently mentioned countries. This makes my project, which compares China and the Netherlands, unique, while simultaneously indicating the need for more comparative research between Asian and Continental European countries in order to enhance our understanding of how both traditions differ. The emerging research into public administration in Asia focuses on large issues of “systems and regimes” rather than “organizational and individual behavior” (ibid., p. 9), which leaves much space for future researchers to delve into, with the potential for revealing new empirical evidence of cultural differences regarding good government.

Final remarks

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I found traits of the rule of morality and the rule of law traditions in civil servant values in both China and the Netherlands. The civil service ethos in both countries is nowadays not as distinguishable as traditional ideals of government would indicate. In this sense, tradition is open to change. While maintaining its spiritual continuity, tradition does not remain precisely the same as it is passed down, but is modified and “selectively adopted” (Gross, 1992, p. 14).

The Tai-chi diagram might represent well the relationship between the Confucian tradition in East Asia and the rule of law tradition in Europe. At first glance it appears to represent opposites in black and white terms, with \textit{yin} (moon, female, negative, emotional) on the one side and \textit{yang} (sun, male, positive, rational) on the other. Yet there is a white area in the black half and a black area in the white half, the boundary is not a straight line but a curve, implying a movement and flow, and the shape of the diagram is round so that it looks stable yet contains change. The whole diagram conveys balance and harmony between two opposite components. It might therefore be an appropriate representation of the situation of Eastern and Western traditions: both sides maintain their own culture while making changes and acknowledging complementarity rather than unification.
References


