





RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Ethical leadership in the East: A systematic review of literature

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## Abstract

Differences in cultures, religious beliefs, and philosophical views suggest that leadership ethics may vary between Western and Eastern perspectives. However, ethical leadership scales are mostly rooted in Western conceptualization. This systematic review explores the cultural contributions, philosophical perspectives, and underlying theories shaping the measures of ethical leadership. A comprehensive search across Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest Management, and Emerald Insight from 1990 to 2021 yielded over 3900 articles, with only 15 focusing on an Eastern conceptualization of ethical leadership. Findings reveal that Eastern ethical leadership encompasses unique dimensions, including leaders' responsibility and concern for long-term sustainability, often overlooked in existing measures. Despite some similarities in virtues and values between Eastern and Western philosophical views, past studies predominantly employed Western theoretical perspectives to explain ethical leadership. This review highlights the imperative for measures that authentically capture Eastern cultural distinctions, crucial for advancing ethical leadership research amid the East's increasing global influence.

**Keywords:** ethical leadership; Eastern context; systematic review; leader characteristics; cultural differences

## Introduction

Ethical behavior is a key element of effective leadership (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Cheng et al., 2014; Ferdig, 2007; Greenleaf, 1997). It fosters organizational trust of employees (Kerse, 2021) and correlates with employee outcomes such as reductions in burnout, deviant behavior, and turnover (Demirtas & Akdogan, 2015; Sarwar, Ishaq, Amin, & Ahmed, 2020). Consequently, organizations that cultivate ethical leaders are more likely to create positive work environments (Mayer, Aquino, Greenbaum, & Kuenzi, 2012).

## Cultural roots and regional distinctions of Eastern ethical leadership

Ethical leadership is predominantly viewed through a Western lens, creating several issues (Eisenbeiss, 2012). First, Western employees are more individualistic and short-term oriented while Eastern employees are more collectivistic and long-term focused (Brewer & Chen, 2007). The Eastern emphasis on collectivism fosters strong social exchanges between leaders and followers. Second, Eastern ethics are rooted in religious beliefs like Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism (Filatotchev, Wei, Sarala, Dick, & Prescott, 2020), which emphasize environmental care

and responsibility (Christensen, 2014; Dorzhigushaeva & Kiplyuks, 2020). This implies that Eastern ethical leaders should reflect these values. Finally, the East's rising economic and political influence in contrast to West's decline (Cox, 2012) emphasizes the understanding of Eastern ethical leadership. Despite the significance, the field remains fragmented, signaling the need for a systematic review to explore and define the unique dimensions of Eastern ethical leadership.

We focus on the South Asian (e.g., Bangladesh and India, etc.), Southeast Asian (e.g., Malaysia and Indonesia, etc.), and the East Asian (e.g., China and Japan, etc.) regions excluding the Middle Eastern and Central Asian countries. We excluded the Middle Eastern countries due to distinct perspectives on gender equality and governance (Rizzo, Abdel-Latif, & Meyer, 2007), and Central Asian countries due to historical ties to the USSR and their Western influences (Becker, 1991).

The Asian regions in this review have several distinguishing characteristics. Southeast and East Asian regions with Confucian influence emphasize group orientation (Wei & Li, 2013). South Asian cultures characterizing human heartedness also value group cohesion (Gupta, Surie, Javidan, & Chhokar, 2002). This contrasts with Western cultures where individualism and self-dependence are more common (Ashkanasy, Trevor-Roberts, & Earnshaw, 2002). Asian cultures typically have high power distance compared to Western cultures, affecting leadership approaches (Ashkanasy et al., 2002; Wei & Li, 2013).

Western and Eastern thinking differs based on philosophical viewpoints (Suen, Cheung, & Mondejar, 2007). Western philosophy largely follows Aristotle, focusing on virtue ethics in analyzing human behavior (Xiao, 1996). In contrast, East and Southeast Asian cultures often draw from teachings of Mencius, Confucius, and Laozi (Alzola, Hennig, & Romar, 2020; Suen et al., 2007). These differences impact ethical expectations. For example, employees from Confucian cultures may expect leaders to act as familial role models, exhibiting care, moral discipline, and a sense of community, whereas Western employees typically expect a focus on individual rights (Forsyth, O'Boyle, & McDaniel, 2008; Francois, 2004; Suen et al., 2007).

### *Western perspectives in the current literature on ethical leadership*

Ethical leadership has evolved from Bass and Steidlmeier's (1999) initial work, branching into various dimensions. For instance, these dimensions include, moral person and moral manager (Brown, Treviño, & Harrison, 2005); ethical guidance, concern for sustainability, and power sharing (Kalshoven, Den Hartog, & De Hoogh, 2011); as well as temperance, fortitude, prudence, and justice (Riggio, Zhu, Reina, & Maroosis, 2010).

While several scales for ethical leadership exist, Brown et al.'s (2005) Ethical Leadership Scale (ELS) is widely used in empirical studies (Ahmad, Fazal-e-hasan, & Kaleem, 2020; Chughtai, Byrne, & Flood, 2015). However, only a few scales are designed to represent characteristics unique to the Eastern context. For instance, Zhu, Zheng, He, Wang, and Zhang (2019) Chinese ethical leadership scale strongly resembles ELS. Similarly, Khuntia and Suar's (2004) Indian ethical leadership scale concentrates on managing people, potentially overlooking other important aspects of ethical leadership such as concern for long-term sustainability.

Cross-cultural studies have shown a Western bias, as evident in the limited representation of Eastern countries. Resick, Hanges, Dickson, and Mitchelson (2006) and Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck's (2014) studies, which include fewer Eastern countries, further exemplify this bias. According to Ng and Feldman (2015) 61% of studies utilize the ELS, indicating its broad application due to its simplicity, while only 16% in Asia use a moral leadership scale derived from paternalistic leadership.

### *Theoretical and practical significance*

Exploring Eastern ethical leadership is vital for both theory and practice. Cultural variations suggest Western measures may not fully capture Eastern interpretations. Despite extensive research on ethical leadership outcomes, the lack of scales tailored to Eastern contexts restricts the scope of these studies.

**Table 1.** The search terms

Keyword	Search terms considered	Reasons
Ethical	Ethical Moral Virtue Value	The terms ‘moral’ and ‘virtue’ were found to give very similar meanings as ‘ethical.’ The phrase ‘value-based’ was found to capture a broader domain in which ethical behavior could be placed.
Leadership	Leader Manager Supervisor Business Organization	‘Manager’ and ‘supervisor’ are common terms substituted for ‘leader.’ However, as the leader’s behavior could be reflected through the entity, the terms ‘organization’ and ‘business’ were considered.
East	East Asia Cross-cultural	As Asia is the main continent of the Eastern world, ‘Asia’ was considered. Since cross-cultural research can consider Asian countries, the phrase ‘cross-cultural’ was considered.
Regional differences explaining behaviour	Culture Religion Philosophy	The words ‘culture,’ ‘religion’ and ‘philosophy’ were considered as they can influence leadership behavior within different cultures.

Our systematic review examines the dimensions of Eastern ethical leadership, offering insights to develop more culturally appropriate frameworks and scales.

Understanding Eastern and Western differences in ethical leadership is crucial for multinational companies (MNCs) operating in the East. Although Western MNCs are drawn to Eastern regions for resources and cheap labor (Park & Ungson, 2019), business ethics vary significantly between regions (Donleavy, Lam, & Ho, 2008). This divergence requires MNC leaders to grasp Eastern ethical leadership to ensure successful operations in diverse cultural settings.

This systematic review identifies knowledge gaps, pointing to the need for further research by addressing the following research question.

What are the dimensions of Eastern ethical leadership as informed by Eastern cultural and philosophical perspectives and theoretical frameworks?

We describe our review methodology and present our findings in the sections that follow, concluding with a discussion of these results.

## Methodology

This systematic review follows the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework, encompassing stages of identification, screening, eligibility, and selection (Page et al., 2021) to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous review process.

### Identification process

Ethical leadership emerged primarily from research in the 1990s (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999). Databases like Web of Science, Scopus, Emerald Insight, and ProQuest Management list top-ranking business ethics journals (Albrecht et al., 2010). However, these databases contain few or no articles on Eastern ethical leadership from before 1990. Therefore, our search focused on articles published in English between 1990 and April 2021.

To identify relevant articles, the initial search keywords were ethical, leadership, and East. Considering that culture, religious beliefs, and philosophical views might influence ethical leadership in Eastern regions (Eisenbeiss, 2012), these terms were also included in our search for articles published between 1990 and 2021 (with time frame criteria explained later). Synonyms for these keywords were discussed among the research team to ensure comprehensive coverage of key concepts. The complete list of keywords and their synonyms, along with the reasons for their inclusion, can be found in Table 1.

**Table 2.** Search term combinations

Search string categories	Search term combinations			
	1	2	3	4
Ethicality/morality	Ethic* Moral* Virtue*	Ethic* Moral* Virtue* Value*	Ethic* Moral* Virtue* Value*	Ethic* Moral* Virtue*
Leadership	Leader* Manager* Supervisor*	Leader* Manager* Supervisor* Business* Organization*	Leader* Manager* Supervisor*	Leader* Manager* Supervisor* Business*
Region	East* Asia*	East* Asia* 'Cross-cultural'	East* Asia* 'Cross-cultural'	East* Asia* 'Cross-cultural'
Regional differences explaining behaviour	Culture* Philosoph* Religio*	Culture* Philosoph* Religio*	Culture* Philosoph* Religio*	Culture* Philosoph* Religio*

Note: Terms represented here within a single cell were combined with the Boolean operator 'OR'. Each cell in a column was combined with the 'AND' operator. The designator \* provides results that contain a variation of the keyword. For example, ethic\* may mean ethical, ethics, ethically or ethicality.

Search term combinations were developed to identify the best combination for the systematic review. Wild cards, truncation marks, and Boolean operators were used to generate the maximum possible word combinations. Table 2 shows the search term combinations used.

Initial trials were conducted to understand how the keywords ethical, leadership, and East were applied in the articles. Further analysis led to the selection of combination 3 (see Table 2), as it produced a manageable number of articles while maintaining the focus on the keywords.

### Screening and eligibility

A total of 3,909 articles were identified and reduced to 2,873 after removing the duplicates. These articles underwent screening, first by topic, then by abstract, and finally by full text, resulting in the exclusion of those not clearly related to Eastern ethical leadership (see Fig. 1). We also excluded articles that tested ethical leadership's impact on outcomes using Western-based measures, focusing instead on conceptualizing Eastern ethical leadership. However, we considered one article adopting the ELS of Brown et al. (2005) because it examined cross-cultural measurement invariance between Eastern and Western cultures. All eligible articles had to focus on conceptualizing ethical leadership in the East or Asia. Accordingly, the final number for the systematic review meeting this criterion was reduced to 15 articles as shown in Figure 1.

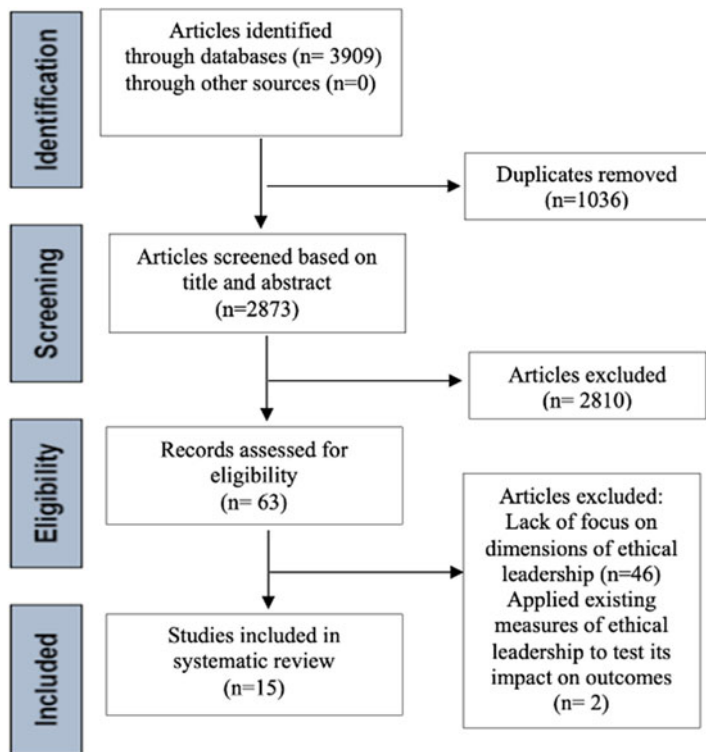
### Details of final selection

The title, database, authors, year of publication, and the citation counts of the 15 articles finally selected for the analysis are listed in Table 3.

## General findings

### Classifications of articles

The articles were initially analyzed based on authors, keywords, journal types, databases, and whether the study was a review or empirical research. The content analysis then classified them by culture and identified the dimensions of ethical leadership for the East. This was followed by an analysis of the theoretical concepts and philosophical views underpinning these dimensions.



**Figure 1.** PRISMA framework.

Table 3 shows a demographic analysis of the articles. A notable point is that there is a small pool of researchers in the field. Eisenbeiss (2012), Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck (2014), Resick et al. (2006, 2011), and Ralston, Gustafson, Elsass, Cheung, and Terpstra (1992), Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, and Terpstra (1993) were the main authors for two articles each. Among the sources, seven articles came from Scopus, five from Web of Science, and three from ProQuest Management. Eleven articles were published after 2010.

The *Journal of Business Ethics* published five of the articles while other journals contributed one or two each. Three of the 15 articles were conceptual papers by Dion (2006), Eisenbeiss (2012), and Sotirova (2018) while the remaining 12 were empirical studies. Dion’s (2006) paper examined the link between leadership approaches and ethical theories, while Eisenbeiss (2012) and Sotirova (2018) conducted cross-cultural analysis of ethical leadership. Eisenbeiss (2012) aimed to develop an interdisciplinary integrative approach to conceptualize ethical leadership by comparing the moral philosophy and ethical principles from both Western and the Eastern religions. Sotirova (2018) explored how cultural differences between East and West account for variations in perceptions of key elements of ethical leadership.

The 12 empirical studies focused on different cultures (see Fig. 2). Ten of these articles included both Western and Eastern countries, while two focused exclusively on Eastern countries. Two studies employed quantitative analyses, one based on GLOBE (Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness) project data encompassing 62 societies, and the other cross-culturally testing Brown et al.’s (2005) ELS. Remarkably, eight studies utilized qualitative interviews or combined interviews with surveys to develop ethical leadership measurement scales. The United States was the most researched Western country in cross-cultural studies, having a presence in eight articles. The People’s Republic of China (PRC) was the most researched Eastern country, appearing in six articles.

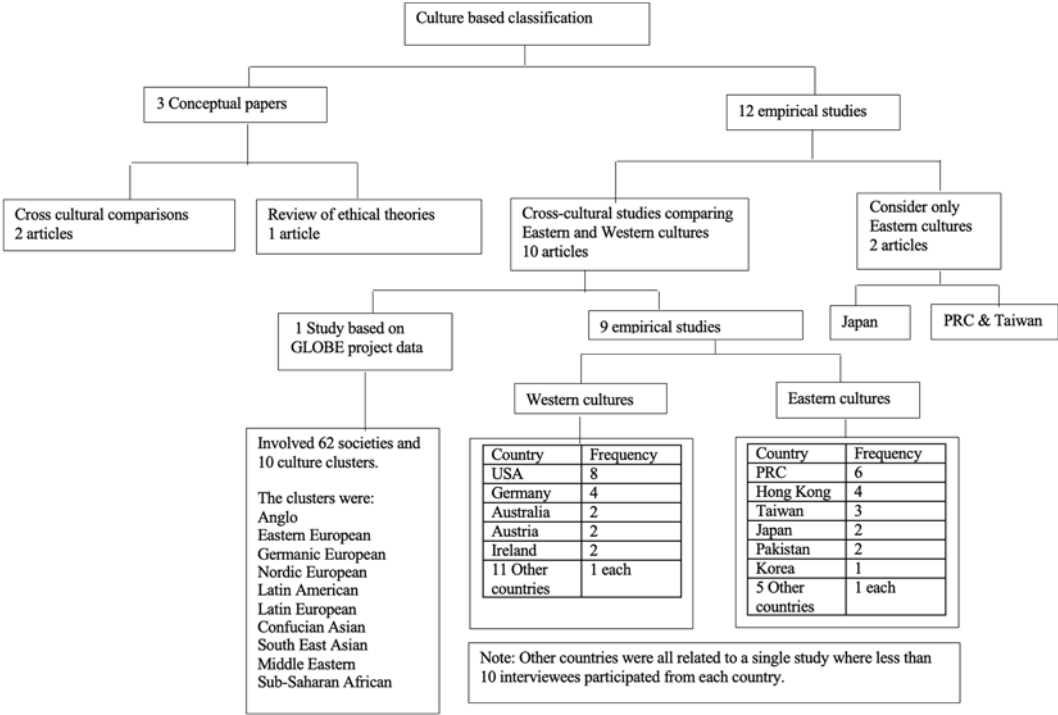
**Table 3.** Articles selected for the study

Database	Title	Authors	Citation count
Scopus	Re-thinking ethical leadership: An interdisciplinary integrative approach	(Eisenbeiss, 2012)	370
Scopus	A cross-cultural examination of the endorsement of ethical leadership	(Resick et al., 2006)	711
Scopus	Ethical leadership and its cultural and institutional context: An empirical study in Japan	(Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018)	8
Scopus	Is the meaning of ethical leadership constant across cultures? A test of cross-cultural measurement invariance	(Ahmad et al., 2020)	4
Scopus	Ethical and unethical leadership: A cross-cultural and cross-sectoral analysis	(Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014)	185
Scopus	Are ethical theories relevant for ethical leadership?	(Dion, 2006)	170
Scopus	What ethical leadership means to me: Asian, American, and European Perspectives	(Resick et al., 2011)	293
Web of Science	The meaning of leader integrity: A comparative study-across Anglo, Asian, and Germanic cultures	(Martin et al., 2013)	62
Web of Science	Ethical leadership in educational organizations: A cross-cultural study	(Göçen, 2021)	1
Web of Science	One definition, different manifestations: Investigating ethical leadership in the Chinese context	(Wang et al., 2017)	34
Web of Science	Eastern values: A comparison of managers in the United States, Hong Kong, and the People's Republic of China	(Ralston et al., 1992)	345
Web of Science	Differences in managerial values – A study of US, Hong-Kong and PRC managers	(Ralston et al., 1993)	786
ProQuest	Ethical leadership in cross-cultural business communication	(Sotirova, 2018)	1
ProQuest	Ethical leadership with both 'moral person' and 'moral manager' aspects: Scale development and cross-cultural validation	(Zhu et al., 2019)	25
ProQuest	Exploring the ethical behavior of managers: A comparative study of four countries	(Fritzsche et al., 1995)	55

Germany and Hong Kong were found in four studies, while 24 other countries were represented in less than four studies.

### *Cultural contributions to ethical leadership*

Cultural dimensions describe how different cultural groups differ in terms of psychological characteristics such as values, beliefs, self-concepts, personality, and actions (Smith & Bond, 2020). Only four articles explored cultural dimensions in depth examining power distance, individualism versus collectivism (or in-group collectivism), uncertainty avoidance, and future orientation (as presented in Table 4). Only two research groups focused on Eastern perspectives: Kimura and Nishikawa (2018) and Resick et al. (2011). Kimura and Nishikawa (2018) identified high collectivism in Japanese context. In summarizing the GLOBE study, Resick et al. (2011) assert that Confucian Asians exhibit high in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, and performance orientation. Resick et al. (2011)



**Figure 2.** Culture-based classification of articles.

**Table 4.** Cultural contributions to ethical leadership

GLOBE study's cultural dimensions	Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions	Extent of overlap	Number of articles
Power distance	Power distance	Identical	4
Uncertainty avoidance	Uncertainty avoidance	Identical	3
In-group collectivism	Individualism versus collectivism	Similar in meaning	4
Future orientation	Long-term orientation	Similar in meaning	3
Gender egalitarianism	Masculinity versus femininity	Similar in meaning	2
Human orientation	–	–	1
Institutional collectivism	–	–	2
Performance orientation	–	–	2
Assertiveness	–	–	2
–	Indulgence versus restraint	–	1

suggested ethical leaders of those cultures should prioritize organizational needs, consider sustainability and long-term effects, safeguard society’s interests, and foster teamwork. However, their findings require validation in other Asian countries such as South Asia as the GLOBE study focused primarily on East Asia and Southeast Asia. Additionally, cultural dimensions may vary within the same cluster: power distance is high in China (Resick et al., 2011) and moderate in Japan (Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018), warranting further investigations into ethical leadership in Eastern cultures.

**Table 5.** Dimensions and items of ethical leadership identified from the systematic review

Dimension	Items	Number of articles
Concern for people(Six items)	Altruism	6
	Consideration and respect	7
	Empathy and understanding	5
	Openness and flexibility	6
	Team building and providing directions	4
	Empowerment and participation	7
Justice/Fairness(Four items)	Justice	6
	Fairness	8
	Transparency	5
	Rationality of decisions made	4
Responsibility and sustainability(Four items)	Concern for environment	3
	Concern for welfare of society	3
	Long-term focus and visionary thinking	4
	Balancing organizational and stakeholder interests	5
Character(Five items)	Self-control	6
	Modesty	4
	Honesty	8
	Integrity	9
	Ethical role modeling	8
Compliance and accountability(Four items)	Compliance	6
	Accountability	5
	Enforce punishment and reward	4
	Promote moral behavior among subordinates	4

### *Eastern understandings and dimensions of ethical leadership*

Two articles compared cross-cultural managerial value systems (Ralston, Giacalone, & Terpstra, 1994; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1993). Dion (2006) examined ethical theories underpinning leadership, and Fritzsche et al. (1995) explored the ethical behavior of leaders by subjecting Donaldson and Dunfee's (1994) social contracts theory. These four articles focused on providing a theoretical and conceptual underpinning to ethical leadership rather than identifying its dimensions. The remaining 11 articles identified ethical leadership dimensions in Eastern or cross-cultural contexts. This analysis produced five key dimensions and 23 items to explain ethical leadership as detailed in Table 5. Empirical support for these dimensions and items is presented in Tables 6–10.

### *Theories and concepts underpinning ethics in leadership*

The theories in the articles can be broadly classified as social sciences and ethics oriented. Social science-related theories tend to provide an underpinning to the leader's behavioral aspects such as actions, decision making and behaviors while ethics-related theories focus on their cognition,



**Table 6.** Empirical support for items of concern for people

Authors	Concern for people				
	Altruism	Consideration and respect	Empathy and understanding	Openness and flexibility	Collective orientation
(Eisenbeiss, 2012)	Well-being Charity Altruism	Dignity Recognition Respect	Compassions		Emotional support
(Resick et al., 2006)	Generous Compassionate	Confidence building	Fraternal		Team Building Group orientation
(Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018)	Altruism	Caring Consideration	Humanity	Openness Active listening Flexibility	Emotional support Develop followers
(Martin et al., 2013)	Selfless	Consideration Respect Responsibility		Openness	
(Ahmad et al., 2020)		Serving employees to the best of their abilities		Listens to employees	Seek employee opinions
(Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014)		Consideration People oriented		Openness Tolerance	Participation Empowerment
(Resick et al., 2011)		People oriented Dignity Respect	Empathy and understanding	Approachable Tolerance Openness Being a good listener Flexibility	Developing and protecting staff
(Zhu et al., 2019)	Willing to help Kind-hearted Benevolent Merciful				
(Göçen, 2021)	Servanthood		Friendly approach		
(Wang et al., 2017)				Openness	Moral courage
Number of articles	6	7	5	6	4
					7

**Table 7.** Empirical support for items of justice and fairness

Authors	Justice and fairness			
	Transparency	Justice	Fairness	Rationality in decisions
(Eisenbeiss, 2012)	Consistent decisions	Nondiscrimination Fairness	Non-favoritism	
(Resick et al., 2006)	Justice			
(Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018)	Justice	Nondiscrimination Fairness	Transparency	Objective and logical judgments
(Martin et al., 2013)	Justice	Fairness	Transparency	
(Ahmad et al., 2020)		Fairness		Balanced decisions
(Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014)	Justice	Fairness	Transparency	
(Resick et al., 2011)		Nondiscrimination Fairness		Objective decision
(Zhu et al., 2019)	Justice			
(Göçen, 2021)		Equity Unbiased	Will not accept excuses	Wise decisions
(Wang et al., 2017)		Fairness		
(Sotirova, 2018)				Wisdom
Number of articles	6	8	5	4

**Table 8.** Empirical support for items of responsibility and sustainability

Authors	Responsibility and sustainability			
	Concern for environment	Concern for welfare of society	Long-term focus and visionary thinking	Balancing organizational and stakeholder interests
(Eisenbeiss, 2012)	Concern for environment Responsible handling of resources	Concern for welfare of society	Long-term focus Concern for future generations Visionary	Balance organizational and stakeholder interests
(Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018)		Social contribution Social responsibility	Mid- and long-term view	Organization oriented Outward oriented Overall optimization
(Ahmad et al., 2020)				Defines success by way of achieving it
(Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014)	Engaging in sustainable practices with respect to environmental conservation and socially responsible practices	Responsibility and sustainability to the society	Visionary	Integrity toward the world and people
(Resick et al., 2011)	Concern for sustainability		Consider long-term impact	Protecting interests of organization and society
Number of articles	3	3	4	5

rationality, and psychological processes. Among the 15 articles in this review, 5 addressed social science theories and 9 focused on ethics in leadership.

The five social science-related theories identified in the literature help conceptualize different dimensions of ethical leadership. Bandura's (1986) Social Learning Theory (SLT) links ethical role

**Table 9.** Empirical support for items of character

Authors		Character				Ethical role modeling
		Self-control	Modesty	Honesty	Integrity	
(Eisenbeiss, 2012)	Self-control Restrain emotions and personal desires Temperance	Humility Modesty			Strong personal will	
(Resick et al., 2006)		Modesty		Honesty Trustworthy Sincere		
(Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018)	Self-disciplined Calm, not excitable			Honesty Trustworthy Genuine	Integrity Morality	Setting an example
(Martin et al., 2013)				Honest	Word action consistency Value behavior consistency Guided by strong personal moral code/values	
(Ahmad et al., 2020)				Trustworthy	Conducts personal life ethically	Sets an example of ethical conduct
(Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014)	Acts according to own moral value framework	Servant orientation Modesty		Honesty	Walk the talk and talk the walk	Leading by example
(Resick et al., 2011)	Having a personal moral code and sense of ethical awareness Self-discipline			Honesty Trustworthy Sincere	Integrity	Leading by example
(Zhu et al., 2019)	Makes decisions with his/her moral principles				Considers moral implications of –actions –issues –decisions	Sets an example to sub-ordinates of working and behaving ethically
(Göçen, 2021)	Religious				Walk the talk	Standing for what is right
(Wang et al., 2017)				Trustworthy	Incorruptibility	Ethical role modeling
(Sotirova, 2018)		Modesty		Honesty Trustworthy		Brave Passionate
Number of articles		6	4	8	9	4

**Table 10.** Empirical support for items of compliance and accountability

Authors	Compliance and accountability			
	Accountability	Compliance	Enforce punishment and rewards	Promote ethical behavior
(Eisenbeiss, 2012)	Leader responsibility			
(Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018)	Work with sense of responsibility for the organization and society	Compliance Promotion of compliance	Enforce punishment and rewards	Promote ethical behavior
(Resick et al., 2006)	Managing ethical accountability			
(Martin et al., 2013)	Sense of responsibility toward others	Follow rules and regulations		
(Ahmad et al., 2020)			Disciplines employees who violate ethical standards	Discusses business ethics and values with employees
(Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014)		Adhere to laws, rules, and regulations		
(Resick et al., 2011)	Taking personal responsibility	Complying with laws, regulations, and professional guidelines	Holds others accountable	Promotes ethical principles in the organization
(Zhu et al., 2019)		Promotes subordinates to learn and understand the code of ethics		Constructive feedback to subordinates regarding ethical conduct and standards Explains the values that guide his/her moral decisions to subordinates
(Göçen, 2021)			Promotes adherence to rules	
Number of articles	5	5	4	4

modeling to learning by observing others (Eisenbeiss, 2012). Integrative Social Contracts Theory suggests that moral and/or political obligations are contingent on societal agreements (Donaldson & Dunfee, 1994), explaining the discrepancies in conduct and rationale of leaders (Fritzsche et al., 1995). The Implicit Theory of Leadership explores how factors such as information processing, social perceptions, organizational culture, and executive leadership influence followers' views (Lord & Maher, 2002). Ahmad et al. (2020) noted that while the core meaning of ethical leadership is consistent across cultures, its enactment may differ across cultures. Rawls' (1971) Theory of justice focuses on a universally accepted system of fairness and methods for accomplishing it. Kimura and Nishikawa (2018) found that Institutional theory in Japanese organizations supports ethical leaders' accountability and collective orientation.

Only four articles in this systematic review supported nine ethical theories related to leadership. According to Knights and O'Leary (2006), ethical leadership is 'ethical' because it reflects one or more ethical theories. Ethical theories underlying various leadership qualities were mostly discussed

**Table 11.** Ethical theories discussed in articles

Theory	Source	Description in brief
Philosophical egoism	(Hobbes, 1960 as cited in Dion, 2006)	Leaders obey social rules to gain social recognition and prestige
Utilitarian principle	(Kant, 1959 as cited in Dion, 2006)	An activity is ethically correct if it generates the greatest amount of well-being (or happiness) for the largest number of people
Ethics of responsibility	(Dion, 2006)	Everyone should be responsible for themselves as well as others
Virtue ethics of Aristotle	(MacIntyre, 1981 as cited in Dion, 2006)	Qualities which enable an individual to achieve happiness and gain wealth
Relationalism	(Hwang, 2001a as cited in Wang et al., 2017)	A form of ideal virtue that exhibits one's responsiveness to others' desires and promotes self-other harmony
The rule of man <sup>1</sup> concept within Chinese culture	(Wang et al., 2017)	The tendency in a social hierarchy to follow the rules of the most powerful man
Taoist traditions	(Wang et al., 2017)	People with strong moral principles should not point out the weaknesses of others or highlight their own goodness to strengthen their own reputation
Natural law of Aquinas	(Fritzsche et al., 1995)	There can be hyper-norms that explain morality when engaging in social contracts at a macro level

by Dion (2006). This section briefly describes these theories (see Table 11) and explains how they support the identified dimensions of ethical leadership (see Table 12).

These ethical theories provide a foundation to explain the dimensions of ethical leadership. Utilitarianism and deontology principles underpin community/people orientation which encompasses motivational and encouraging/empowering aspects of ethical leadership. Deontology and ethics of virtue support character traits in ethical leaders, as noted by Resick et al. (2006). The ethics of responsibility support the responsibility and sustainability orientation of ethical leaders. The concepts of relationalism, the rule of man,<sup>1</sup> and Taoism-related ethical ideals support ethical character in a leader's conduct. Aquinas's natural law and Confucius's universal law underpin the character and people-orientation of an ethical leader.

### *Philosophical contributions to ethical leadership*

Seven articles identified philosophical views underpinning ethical leadership, with eight philosophers in total mentioned. Notably, six of the articles referred to Confucius. Both Eastern and Western philosophers emphasized the balanced leadership behavior. Aristotle's doctrine of golden mean suggests that perfection or virtue sits midway between the vices of deficiency and excess (Lawrenz, 2021). Plato's cardinal virtue of temperance, which includes self-mastery and balanced behavior, aligns with this doctrine (Eisenbeiss, 2012). In the Eastern context, Confucius describes this balance as perfect equilibrium and harmony (Rainey, 2010). Buddhism's 'Middle Way' similarly advocates a blend of active, sincere external action with a calm, accepting attitude on the inside (Vallabh & Singhal, 2014). Confucian as well as Aristotelian teachings on ethical leadership emphasize the leader's development as a moral and virtuous person (Lawton & Páez, 2015; Zhu et al., 2019).

<sup>1</sup>Wang et al. (2017) coined 'the rule of man' to describe a leader's role in situations where the legal system is expected to protect people's rights from rulers with ultimate authority. In the Chinese context, this tradition implies that leaders, situated at the pinnacle of the power structure, are highly visible and observable.

**Table 12.** Theories and concepts supporting each dimension of ethical leadership

Theory	Concern for people	Justice/fairness	Responsibility and sustainability	Character	Compliance and accountability
Justice Theory		Moral philosophy of leader			
Implicit Leadership Theory (ILT)	Interpretation of ethical leadership could depend on the culture				
Institutional Theory	Collective orientation				Accountability
Integrative Social Contracts Theory		Rational in decisions		Leader integrity, moral conduct	
Social Learning Theory				Ethical role modeling	
Philosophical egoism					Follow social rules for recognition and prestige
Utilitarianism	Ethical actions maximize overall well-being for a majority				
Deontology		Moral principles can universally guide rational beings			
Ethics of responsibility			Responsibility to self as well as others		
Ethics of virtue				Personal qualities for happiness	
Relationalism	Promote harmony by responding to others' desires				
The rule of man <sup>1</sup>				Follow the rules of the greatest man	
Taoism related ethical ideals				Anonymous acts of goodness without seeking recognition	
Natural Law of Aquinas, Universal Law of Confucius					

Morality when engaging in social contracts at the macro level

A leader's concern for people was recognized by three philosophers. The golden rule of Confucius primarily focuses on a ruler's responsibility to care for the ruled (Lee, 2022) encouraging subordinates to build their conduct (*anren*). Similarly, the Chinese philosopher Laozi defined effective leaders as those who prioritize the well-being of their group (Zhu et al., 2019). In contrast, from a Western perspective, Kant's categorical imperative suggests that duty cannot be marginally balanced with self-interest—it must be the central focus (White, 2004). As such, the human orientation of an ethical leader can be recognized as a duty. While this leans more toward deontology than utilitarianism, an ethical leaders' duty to care for the followers can still be viewed as a prime importance. These philosophical views indicate that both Eastern and Western philosophers stress a leader's duty to care for followers, with Eastern philosophers tending to take a more utilitarian approach by prioritizing others' well-being over duty.

Our systematic review identified one philosopher (Rawls, 1971) proposing justice and fairness as relevant to ethical leadership arguing that everyone has the right to the same fundamental liberties (Eisenbeiss, 2012). However, further research showed that both Aristotle and Aquinas have considered justice as a cardinal virtue (Riggio et al., 2010). Additionally, Confucian ethics includes respecting the superior for distributive justice and favoring the intimate for procedural justice (Hwang, 2001b). These highlight the recognition of justice and fairness by both Eastern and Western philosophers.

Eastern philosophical views on ethical leadership extend beyond moral conduct and managerial ethics to emphasize environmental and social sustainability. In contrast, Western philosophers focus more on responsible leadership. In the Eastern context, the Indian philosopher Tagore highlighted the harmony between humans and nature, as well as the broader universe (Basu, 2018). Similarly, the founders of Confucianism and Taoism, Confucius and Lao Tzu, saw nature and the cosmos as sacred, with Confucius basing his principles of citizenship, leadership, and governance on this respect for the natural world (Guo, Kreml & Marinova, 2017). For guiding ethical behavior in Western philosophy, Jonas (1979, cf. Eisenbeiss, 2012) underlined the need of responsibility and sustainability. Accordingly, the Eastern philosophy places a greater emphasis on harmonious relationships with nature, leading to sustainability, while Western philosophy emphasizes responsibility as the path to sustainability.

## Discussion

This study highlighted the dearth of research on ethical leadership within an Eastern context. Although widely used in empirical research, the ELS by Brown et al. (2005) is based on the two-dimensional model of moral manager and moral person proposed by Trevino, Hartman, and Brown (2000), reflecting primarily Western perspectives. However, due to unique cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and philosophical views, Eastern ethical leadership requires a different conceptualization.

## Overall findings

Surprisingly, our systematic review across four different databases – Scopus, Web of Science, ProQuest Management, and Emerald Insight – suggests that only 15 articles have examined ethical leadership in Eastern contexts since 1990. Eastern ethical leaders are expected to embody a broader set of characteristics than the moral manager and moral person dimensions defined by Trevino et al. (2000). For instance, we found that besides the universally accepted ethical leadership traits of honesty and integrity, Eastern leaders are sometimes expected to demonstrate servanthood (see Table 6). The collectivist nature of Eastern cultures may lead subordinates to expect more support and care from their leaders compared to individualistic Western cultures. Our study identifies five key dimensions of Eastern ethical leadership: (1) character, (2) concern for people, (3) justice and fairness, (4) responsibility and sustainability, and (5) accountability and compliance. These are detailed in the following sections. This discussion focuses on etic components of ethical leadership that are globally

accepted across cultures and emic ones particularly applicable to Eastern cultures. This systematic review has several implications for theory and practice.

The first dimension, leaders' *characters*, can be resembled through five characteristics: honesty, integrity, self-control, modesty, and ethical role modeling. The cross-cultural research of Resick et al. (2006) and Martin et al. (2013) also found that characteristics such as honesty, trustworthiness, word-action consistency, value behavior consistency, justice and transparency, and sincerity are common across cultures. Similarly, we also consider these characteristics to be cross-culturally relevant.

The second dimension, *concern for people*, encompasses altruism, openness and flexibility, empathy and understanding, empowerment and participation, team building and providing directions, and consideration and respect. However, cross-cultural differences are evident. Resick et al. (2006) found that altruism was highest in Southeast Asia followed by sub-Saharan Africa and Confucian Asia. Openness and flexibility of a leader is expected more in the United States and Ireland compared to China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Resick et al., 2011). Chinese societies, rooted in Confucian philosophy, typically do not prioritize a leader's openness and flexibility, aligning more with paternalistic leadership (Cheng, Chou, & Farh, 2000, cf. Resick et al., 2011), characterized by authoritarianism (Cheng, Chou, & Wu, 2004). Nevertheless, Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck's (2014) cross-cultural study indicated that Eastern ethical leadership is more associated with openness to ideas held by others and humility than in Western cultures. This suggests that while Eastern ethical leaders may consider subordinate input, they may retain the final decision-making authority without necessarily explaining their rationale.

Participatory management style is more accepted in the East compared to the Western preference for transactional management (Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014). Consideration and respect are key traits of ethical leadership in both Eastern and Western cultures (Resick et al., 2011) and specifically with respect to Asian cultures as well (Ahmad et al., 2020; Kimura & Nishikawa, 2018). As a result, Eastern ethical leaders may be more altruistic and empathetic, encouraging follower participation, even though they may retain final decision-making authority.

Our third dimension is *Justice, Fairness, and nondiscriminatory treatment*. These characteristics were found across both East and West (Göçen, 2021; Resick et al., 2011) and proposed as core characteristics of ethical leadership by Eisenbeiss (2012). Similarly, objective and wise decision-making is recognized in both Western and Eastern cultures as a characteristic of an ethical leader (Göçen, 2021; Resick et al., 2011).

We found *concern for responsibility and sustainability* as the fourth dimension of ethical leadership. Eisenbeiss (2012) recognized the significance of a leader's responsibility and environmental consciousness and proposed it as a dimension of ethical leadership, later validated through qualitative studies (Eisenbeiss & Brodbeck, 2014). Additionally, Asian religions have fostered a greater environmental consciousness (Eisenbeiss, 2012). As such, concern for the environment could be regarded as a core element of Eastern ethical leaders.

*Accountability and compliance* represent our fifth dimension of ethical leadership. Resick et al. (2011) cross-culturally validated accountability, compliance, and promoting ethical behavior among subordinates and holding subordinates accountable as characteristics of ethical leadership. Martin et al. (2013) identified responsibility toward others and adherence to rules as dimensions of leaders' integrity across Eastern and Western cultures. Kimura and Nishikawa (2018) and Zhu et al. (2019) also highlighted accountability and compliance in Japanese and Chinese contexts respectively. However, in Eastern societies, ethical leaders may not only follow organizational rules but also respect social norms. Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck (2014) emphasized that ethical leaders go beyond formal regulations to act for the benefit of others.

### Theoretical implications

The cross-cultural differences in conceptual definitions of ethical leadership were highlighted by many scholars (Eisenbeiss, 2012; Resick et al., 2006). Authors have identified cultural parameters



to guide cross-cultural comparisons. Individualism and collectivism, for example, explain the integration of individuals into primary groups across cultures. Leaders in collectivist cultures are more likely than leaders in individualist societies to serve society at large (Robertson & Fadil, 1999). These differences are important as they shape how leaders treat their followers, approach ethical dilemmas, and make decisions, ranging from regular operations to major business decisions.

Eisenbeiss (2012) critically analyzed Eastern philosophies and religious views proposing four ethical leadership dimensions: human orientation, justice orientation, responsibility and sustainability orientation, and moderation orientation. Our systematic review includes seven articles published after Eisenbeiss (2012) (see Table 3), providing further scrutiny of her findings. Three of the ethical leadership dimensions from our systematic review – concern for people, justice and fairness, and responsibility and sustainability – align with Eisenbeiss's (2012) orientations of human, justice, and responsibility and sustainability. However, for her moderation orientation, our review suggests an alternative classification of self-control and balanced behavior. Self-control which includes agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability (Olson, 2005) can be considered a personal characteristic of ethical leaders. Balancing short- and long-term goals within the moderation orientation aligns with an ethical leader's sustainability focus, requiring the evaluation of societal impacts (Jacobs, 2004). Accordingly, we find that the two main dimensions of moderation orientation, self-control, and balanced behavior towards short and long-term views, can be addressed separately within the character and the sustainability and responsibility aspects of ethical leadership.

Additionally, we found empirical evidence supporting compliance and accountability as a dimension of ethical leadership. Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck (2014) suggest that ethical leaders should be more value-oriented than compliance-oriented, displaying humanity, honesty, justice, and responsibility and sustainability. However, Kimura and Nishikawa's (2018) study in Japan recognized the importance of accountability and compliance in the Eastern context. Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck (2014) view compliance and accountability as minimum benchmarks, with ethical leadership extending beyond mere rule-following. Tyler, Dienhart, and Thomas (2008) propose that a values-based strategy is more effective in promoting rule adherence, but Geddes (2017) warns that when ethical choices are unclear, employees may simply follow the rules. This indicates that a values-based approach alone may not suffice – compliance and accountability may also have to be considered.

Cross-cultural research indicates that the five characteristics we associate with the character of an ethical leader are common to both East and West, though their interpretation may differ. Members in Eastern collective cultures are linked by emotional predispositions, shared interests, fate, and collectively agreed social engagements. Therefore, the character of an Eastern ethical leader may be perceived as modest, charismatic, visionary, and displaying servanthood besides universally accepted effective leadership characteristics of honesty and integrity (see Table 9). Confucius's teachings, which emphasize harmonious relationships, further support these characteristics (Eisenbeiss, 2012).

Our findings can also be compared with Den Hartog's (2015) analysis of ethical leadership which follows an organizational psychology perspective. Den Hartog (2015) found that while the emphasis on specific characteristics differs across cultures, the general concept of ethical leadership is represented by comparable categories of traits and behaviors. Drawing from cross-cultural research of Eisenbeiss and Brodbeck (2014) and Resick et al. (2011), Den Hartog (2015) explored the cultural differences in ethical leadership. However, specific dimensions of Eastern ethical leadership are not detailed; instead, the focus is on potential outcomes and moderators related to ethical leadership.

Several ethical theories help explain Eastern ethical leadership. Deontology (Kant, 1959, cf. Dion, 2006), and SLT (Bandura, 1986) serve as foundations for dimensions of ethical leadership. In Eastern contexts, deontology may mean that leaders not only follow organizational rules but also adhere to social norms, reflecting philosophical egoism (Hobbes, 1960, cf. Dion, 2006). The social recognition developed by following social norms may support in developing the charisma of a leader in collectivist societies (Resick et al., 2011). However, in Taoist-influenced cultures, leaders should avoid building charisma through philosophical egoism. Taoist tradition discourages exaggerating one's virtues or criticizing others to gain reputation (Wang, Chiang, Chou, & Cheng, 2017). This aligns with

Wang, Chen, Wang, Lin and Tseng (2022) who suggest that in Taiwan, Taoist-oriented leaders are more successful with ethical role modeling than through explicit ethical guidance. Confucian virtue ethics emphasize harmonious social relationships, fitting with collectivist societies, while Aristotle's approach, which rejects a familial spirit in organizations, does not (Koehn, 2020). The concept of relationalism (Hwang, 2001a), a Chinese tradition, is applicable to other Eastern cultures with high collectivism, focusing on societal harmony.

### *Practical implications*

Leaders working with multinational stakeholders can gain insights into ethical leadership expectations by understanding the significance of various themes. Our systematic review identified five dimensions representing Eastern ethical leadership, offering benchmarks for assessing ethical leadership within a culture. Western leaders operating in Eastern cultures are encouraged to carefully assess the levels and forms of collectivism in their operational context. Some Eastern cultures may require leaders to be altruistic and empathetic, while openness and flexibility may depend on the prevailing power distance. Therefore, leaders need to determine how to integrate these traits into their management style. In Eastern cultures, Western leaders may need to demonstrate charisma and humility and understand that their moral framework may differ from the value systems in these cultures. This understanding helps avoid actions that contradict cultural norms, which could affect a leader's acceptance. Accountability and compliance with rules and regulations are best promoted through a strong value system. Therefore, leaders should use a values-based approach to guide ethical behavior, supplementing with clear rules when values alone do not offer sufficient guidance.

This research has ramifications for multinational human resource management practices and cross-cultural leadership training. Properly aligning a firm's management practices with the national culture can offer multinational firms a significant competitive edge. Understanding cultural dimensions based on Hofstede (1980) or Schwartz (2007) can guide managers in developing human resource and marketing strategies that align with the national culture, reducing potential conflicts from cultural mismatches. For instance, if an expatriate leader of an MNC understands that the national culture values collectivism, praising a group for their performance instead of individuals can increase the leader's acceptance, as group conformity is valued (Weaver, 1993, cf. Trevino & Nelson, 2014).

### *Limitations and future research directions*

This study has limitations that should be carefully considered when interpreting the results from our systematic review. These limitations also suggest areas for future research. There is an inexact comparability of search strings between the different databases employed. This inconsistency arises from variations in database search fields. In Scopus and ProQuest Management, the search was based on the title, abstract, and keywords, while in Web of Science, it was based on the topic. Readers are therefore advised that there could be further explanations on religious beliefs, philosophical views, and ethical theories that underpin the dimensions of ethical leadership. For future studies, they can conduct a more focused search under those topics. Doing so will enable a more comprehensive understanding of ethical leadership in the Eastern context.

Our initial focus encompassed South Asian and Southeast Asian countries but, due to the absence of relevant studies from those regions, our attention shifted primarily to Eastern countries with Confucian influence (China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Korea). Consequently, Eastern countries with Buddhist cultures such as Thailand, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka, and Islamic cultures such as Bangladesh, Pakistan, and Maldives, were not included in the research for conceptualizing ethical leadership. This disproportionate focus on Confucian-influenced countries and limited exploration of Buddhist and Islamic-influenced countries can hinder generalization of the identified ethical leadership traits across the broader Eastern context.

Our systematic review found that most scales for measuring ethical leadership are developed in the West, despite significant differences between Eastern and Western perspectives. As research progresses, there is considerable opportunity to develop a new ethical leadership scale that reflects the Eastern context. Future studies could explore value-based and compliance-based approaches to ethical leadership in Eastern cultures, as both were found to be relevant across different cultural settings. Given the variations in virtue ethics between individualistic and collectivist societies, examining the applicability of different ethical theories to Eastern leadership is another potential research avenue. Finally, future work could assess the relevance of Culturally Implicit Leadership theories to various Eastern leadership contexts, offering deeper insights into effective leadership across diverse cultures.

## Conclusion

Eastern ethical leaders are expected to consider a broader perspective when addressing ethical dilemmas. Their approach is influenced by common religious teachings like Buddhism and Hinduism, which emphasize a holistic approach. Western and Eastern perspectives of leadership ethics may differ due to differences of cultures, religious beliefs, and philosophical views. Yet, Eastern ethical leadership has not been researched with an aim to understand it conceptually. This systematic review fills the gap by proposing five dimensions for Eastern ethical leadership, derived from empirical and cross-cultural studies involving Eastern countries. Character, concern for people, justice and fairness, responsibility and sustainability, and accountability and compliance were proposed as dimensions of ethical leadership for the East. This finding supports the conceptual understanding of Eastern ethical leadership as differences in culture, religious beliefs and philosophical views suggest Western measures of ethical leadership may not fit into the East. We have provided several directions for future research based on our findings.

**Competing interests.** The authors declare none.

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