

# Confucian humanity (Ren) and leadership development among Ghanaian university students: Evidence from the University of Ghana

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## ABSTRACT

This paper delved into the perceptions of University of Ghana students in Ghana regarding Confucius's study, as well as the ethical principle of humanity (*Ren*) encompassing care, generosity, and sympathy, and its influence on students' conduct towards the elderly in society also studying the after-effects of students possibly taking on leadership roles in society. The study involved 240 students, equally divided between the Chinese and non-Chinese sections across all undergraduate levels. It utilized a mixed-method research approach, comprising questionnaires, in-depth interviews with lecturers and students from both sections, as well as parents, and a focus group discussion. The findings revealed a generally positive impression of the Confucius Institute, although some respondents displayed fewer positive reactions. Additionally, the study disclosed that while Ghanaian students may not be financially equipped for caregiving responsibilities, they do endorse the integration of the Chinese ethical principle of humanity into national policy, especially regarding caring for the elderly. Moreover, the findings suggested a weak correlation between the ethical principle of humanity and the development of leadership skills among students.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the early 2000s, the study of Confucianism has gained prominence globally through the establishment of Confucius Institutes (CIs). Initiated by the Chinese government in partnership with foreign academic institutions, these institutes aim to promote Chinese language and cultural understanding (Ren, 2024). The first CI was launched in South Korea in 2004 (Lien & Oh, 2014), and by December 2011, the number had grown to 358 Institutes and 503 affiliated Confucius Classrooms across 105 countries (Xu et al., 2020). In Africa alone, 61 CIs and 48 Classrooms operate across 46 countries (Gonondo, 2021).

In Ghana, Chinese language education began in 2008 at the University of Ghana, which later established a CI in 2012, followed by another at the University of Cape Coast in 2016 (Nkrumah & Darko, 2020). The CI at the University of Ghana has since expanded, establishing eight teaching sites and four specialized programs. These efforts aim to foster Sino-Ghanaian cultural and educational cooperation, reflecting China's broader soft power strategy and vision of cultural resurgence (Procopio, 2015).

Chinese language learning is increasingly viewed as valuable in Ghanaian higher education, with students perceiving it as a modern and practical second language (Nkrumah & Darko, 2020; Opoku-Darko, 2023). However, there is limited exploration of how Confucian ethical principles particularly Ren (仁) (humanity), characterized by *care, generosity, and sympathy* impact Ghanaian learners' personal development and societal engagement.

This study investigates the transnational influence of Confucianism, focusing on the principle of humanity and its role in shaping Ghanaian students' values, leadership aspirations, and societal perceptions. The research addresses the following questions:

1. How does Confucius's principle of humanity influence Ghanaian students' perceptions of their societal roles?
2. What impact does Confucian ethical teaching have on the development of moral values among these students?
3. How is Confucian humanity related to leadership attainment among Ghanaian students?

### 1.1. The Concept of Ren as a Leadership Virtue

Confucian leadership is fundamentally rooted in Ren (仁), often translated as benevolence, humanity, or "human-heartedness." While Ren is often discussed as an egalitarian potential available to all humans, scholars argue that for Confucius, Ren is the preeminent leadership virtue (Lien & Oh, 2014). It provides the ethical purpose and the orientation of an exemplary leader. The framework of Confucian leadership rests on three fundamental aspects of virtue ethics:

Ren (仁 - Benevolence): The inward moral core that emphasizes kindness, compassion, and the welfare of others (Li, 2023).

Yi (义 - Righteousness): The moral disposition to do what is right and just in each context, ensuring that actions are aligned with ethical standards rather than mere profit (Li, 2023).

Li (礼 - Ritual Propriety): The outward expression of virtue through social norms, ceremonies, and ethical conduct. Li serves as a mechanism for shaping an organization's ethical culture through the process of ritualization. A central tenet of this tradition is that "self-cultivation is the first priority" for a leader. Before one can lead others, one must master one's own character. Leadership is viewed as an extension of one's personal virtue, where the leader influences others not through positional power but through "moral charisma" and role-modeling (Li, 2022).

### 1.2. Theoretical Foundations: Ghanaian Cultural Values

#### 1.2.1. Communalism and Relational Responsibility

Ghanaian cultural values, much like the broader African philosophy of Ubuntu, emphasize the interconnectedness of individuals within a community (Elkington et al., 2017). This communalism posits that "I am because we are," placing interpersonal responsibility and collective well-being at the center of social life. In a leadership context, this translates to a focus on group goals over individualistic achievements.

#### 1.2.2. Respect for Elders and Indigenous Knowledge

Traditional Ghanaian leadership structures are heavily influenced by the respect for elders and the use of indigenous knowledge systems. Elders are viewed as the custodians of wisdom and the models for proper conduct. This value system supports a leadership style that is consultative, inclusive of traditional wisdom, and oriented toward preserving the social fabric (Arthur & Owoahene-Acheampong, 2018).

#### 1.2.3. The Role of Change and Continuity

Case studies, such as the restructuring of the Ghana Institute of Management and Public Administration (GIMPA), demonstrate that the employment of Ghanaian cultural values is crucial for successful organizational change (Arthur & Owoahene-Acheampong, 2018). Indigenous knowledge provides a foundation for change that feels authentic and sustainable within the local context, rather than being perceived as a foreign imposition. The integration of Confucian and Ghanaian values creates a synergistic framework that addresses the moral, relational, and practical dimensions of leadership.

#### 1.2.4. Shared Emphasis on Care and Humanity

There is a direct conceptual alignment between the Confucian doctrine of Ren and the "humane orientation" found in modern leadership theories like servant leadership (Liddell et al., 2014). Both traditions emphasize benevolence, kindness, and putting the interests of followers and the community above self-interest. This "care-centric" approach forms the moral-ethical core of the integrated model.

### 1.3. Relationality as the Organizing Principle

Both communal philosophies and Confucian reciprocity (the Golden Rule) place social relationships at the heart of managerial life (Elkington et al., 2017). Leadership is redefined as a relational process rather than a positional hierarchy. This shift encourages leaders to act as stewards of relationships, ensuring harmony and mutual respect within the organization.

#### 1.4. Ritual and Hierarchy as Enabling Structures

While Western models often view hierarchy as a barrier, the integrated framework views ritualized propriety (*Li*) and social respect norms as enabling structures (Arthur & Owoahene-Acheampong, 2018; Li, 2022). These norms provide predictable interactions and deference mechanisms that channel relational obligations into effective mentorship and organizational stability.

#### 1.5. Integrated Leadership Framework

Figure 1 illustrates an Integrated Leadership Framework that emerges from the intersection of three interdependent domains: Confucian humanity (*Ren*), Ghanaian cultural values, and leadership development. Rather than functioning as isolated constructs, these domains overlap to form a unified and dynamic model of leadership that is both morally grounded and contextually relevant. At the core of this intersection lies the integrated leadership framework, which represents the synthesis of ethical self-formation, communal responsibility, and practical leadership enactment.

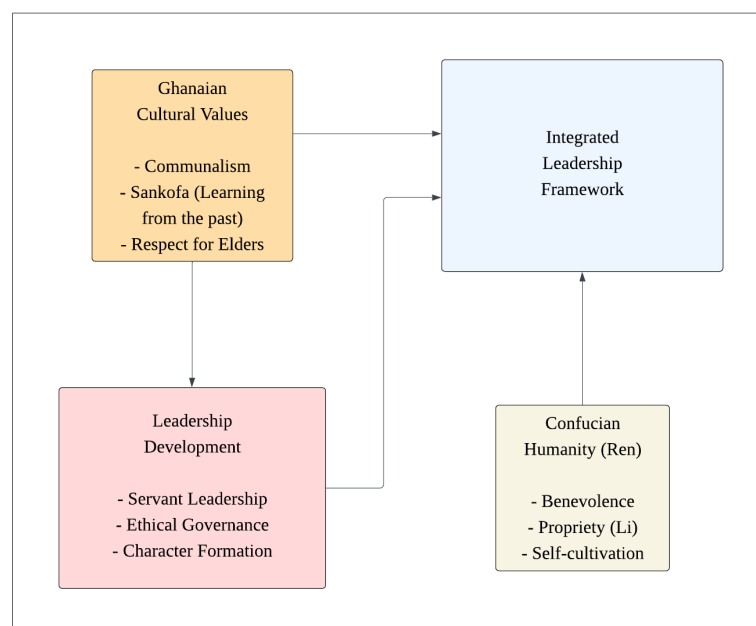


Figure 1: The integrated leadership framework

Within this framework, Confucian Humanity (*Ren*) provides the moral–ethical foundation through its emphasis on benevolence, propriety (*Li*), and continuous self-cultivation. It foregrounds the idea that leadership begins with the inner moral discipline of the individual, where ethical awareness and character refinement are cultivated over time. Complementing this moral core are Ghanaian cultural values, which function as the relational–communal pillar of the framework. Principles such as communalism and *Sankofa* are the imperative to learn from the past and respect for elders situate leadership within a network of social obligations and collective identity. These values reinforce the understanding that leadership is not merely an individual endeavor, but a socially embedded practice shaped by cultural norms and intergenerational knowledge. The third domain, leadership development, represents the praxis-oriented dimension of the framework. It translates moral virtues and communal commitments into observable leadership practices through constructs such as servant leadership, ethical governance, and character formation.

The interaction among these three domains produces a coherent values-to-practice continuum. Moral virtues cultivated through *Ren* inform relational commitments grounded in communalism and respect, which in turn manifest as concrete leadership behaviors aligned with service and ethical responsibility. In this sense, leadership development is not treated as a technical or skills-based process alone, but as an integrative journey that aligns personal character, cultural identity, and professional practice. The framework therefore emphasizes that effective leadership emerges when ethical self-cultivation is reinforced by communal values and translated into consistent behavioral action.

In practical terms, this integrated approach to leadership development requires a reorientation of training and organizational practices. Leadership education must extend beyond technical competencies to include moral reasoning, ethical reflection, and disciplined self-assessment, fostering what can be described as moral credibility rooted in consistent ethical conduct. At the same time, mentorship structures should reflect the Ghanaian emphasis on respect for elders by creating systems of guided apprenticeship in which

experienced leaders transmit values, norms, and lived wisdom to emerging leaders. Such mentorship not only facilitates skill transfer but also ensures the continuity of organizational culture and ethical standards.

Furthermore, leadership practice within this framework is expected to embody service-oriented behaviors, where leaders act as role models whose influence derives from character rather than positional authority. This includes demonstrating humility, prioritizing collective well-being, and actively contributing to the community. Finally, the institutionalization of these values is achieved through the incorporation of ritualized practices that reflect propriety (*Li*), such as ceremonies, ethical review processes, and recognition systems that celebrate value-driven behavior. These rituals serve as mechanisms of accountability and cultural reinforcement, embedding ethical leadership within the everyday life of the organization.

Overall, the integrated leadership framework presents a holistic and culturally grounded approach to leadership, where moral integrity, communal orientation, and practical action converge. By aligning Confucian ethical principles with Ghanaian cultural values and contemporary leadership development practices, the framework offers a robust foundation for cultivating leaders who are not only effective but also ethically responsible and socially attuned.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Research Design and Approach

The research was conducted on the University of Ghana main Campus. The study followed an explanatory sequential mixed methods design a dominated quantitative phrase of Two hundred and forty (240) students were selected as the sample for this study, qualitative phase (focus group discussion and interviews) aimed at explaining and expanding the quantitative results. The explanatory sequential design was chosen because the quantitative results (patterns, group differences, correlations) required deeper, contextual explanation from students, lecturers and parents.

### 2.2. Sampling and Participants

The study was conducted at the University of Ghana main campus. For the quantitative phase the use of stratified random sampling procedure. The population was then stratified by section (Chinese vs non-Chinese) and by undergraduate level (100–400), producing 8 strata; 30 students were selected from each stratum ( $30 \times 8 = 240$ ). Within each stratum students were selected from course/class lists using simple random sampling (or systematic sampling where class lists were used), ensuring equal representation across levels and sections. For the qualitative phase the use of purposive sampling to select information from participants: one focus group composed of six students (three from the Chinese section and three from the non-Chinese section) and two key informant interviews (a lecturer and a parent) were selected purposively to represent variation in exposure to Confucian studies and in Chinese language proficiency.

### 2.3. Research Instrument

A structured questionnaire was the main method used for data collection in the study. The questionnaire aimed at collecting the relevant data and information according to the objectives of the study, with specific attention to the demographic characteristics of the respondents, key variables of interest, and contextual variables affecting the phenomenon studied. The questionnaire consisted of two main sections. Section A included seven (7) questions focused on collecting student demographic data, such as age, gender, and academic level. Section B was further divided into three parts to cover students' perceptions of Confucian study, behavior with respect to humanity, and leadership outcomes. First part included five (5) questions, part two covered eighteen (18) questions, and the last part had nine (9) questions. In total, a set of thirty-nine questions were administered to the students. To ease analysis and consistency of responses, the instrument comprised both closed ended and scaled questions. To measure the perceptions, attitudes and experiences of respondents, specifically, Likert scale item was used to quantify the variables. The questionnaire was segmented to answer each of the research objectives.

The questionnaire was designed in accordance with existing literature and similar empirical studies to make sure that the items measure what they are supposed to measure and thus have content validity. Also, the instrument was reviewed for clarity, relevance and appropriateness of the questions. A pre-test (pilot study) was conducted among 10 respondents comprising of 5 Chinese students and 5 non-Chinese students who possessed similar characteristics to the target population. The purpose of the pilot study was to find out ambiguities and improve the reliability of the instrument, which has been applied to respondents with similar characteristics as the respondents in the study. After pilot testing, necessary adjustments were made to make it clearer and more coherent. The last instrument was found satisfactory for data collection and given to the respondents selected.

## 2.4. Data Collection and Integration

Quantitative data was collected through printed questionnaires administered during class sessions to different groups of participants. Group A consisted of undergraduate students at the University of Ghana studying Chinese across all levels, while Group B included undergraduate students from the same university enrolled in other disciplines, including French, but not Chinese, and served as the control group. Group C comprised lecturers from the university's Chinese department as well as from another academic department, while Group D involved parents of students in Group A who were interviewed. The questionnaires were administered to Groups A and B, whereas Group C participated in in-depth interviews. Qualitative data were gathered using a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussion (FGD) protocol. Both quantitative and qualitative data were integrated during the interpretation stage to triangulate findings and generate joint inferences.

## 2.5. Ethical Considerations

The researcher took these ethical issues into consideration during the data collection process of the research. Ethical clearance was granted in advance to the researcher's study in accordance with the regulations of the university under which the researcher was conducting his research. Departments were selected for this study, and a letter of consent was given to them. The researcher gave greatest importance to the dignity of the respondents. In this study, the participants' privacy was ensured by the use of measures which excluded the disclosure and inclusion of their name and personal information. The researcher also tried to include the respondents by securing their voluntary participation, thus obtaining their full consent. No one was forced or coerced into taking part in the study. It was assured to the participants that the data gathered will be used for academic purposes only.

## 2.6. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies), group comparisons (ANOVA) and correlation analysis (Pearson  $r$ ), consistent with the analyses reported. Qualitative interviews and the FGD were transcribed and analyzed thematically (coding for themes related to humanity, caregiving, leadership, and cultural compatibility). Integration involved side-by-side comparison of quantitative results and qualitative themes (explanatory triangulation) and use of exemplary quotes to illuminate and explain statistical patterns.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1. Demographic Characteristics and Academic Background of Respondents

From the 240 participants included in the study, Chinese students were predominantly Akan (21.66%), followed by Ewe (10.42%), Ga (10.16%), and Others (7.5%). Among non-Chinese students, Akan (27.5%) remained the largest group, with Ewe (9.58%), Ga (7.5%), and Others (5.42%) following. Academic levels were evenly distributed, with 12.5% of students at each of the four undergraduate levels (100–400). In terms of Chinese language proficiency, 44.8% of Chinese students had elementary knowledge, while 52.5% of non-Chinese students had no proficiency at all [Table 1].

Table 1. Demographic characteristics (n=240)

VARIABLE	CATEGORY	GROUP	
		CHINESE n (%)	NON-CHINESE n (%)
Age (Years)	18–24	120 (50.0)	120 (50.0)
Sex	Male	40.5 (16.88)	40.5 (16.88)
	Female	79.5 (33.13)	79.5 (33.13)
Ethnicity	Akan	52 (21.66)	66 (27.50)
	Ewe	25 (10.42)	23 (9.58)
	Ga	25 (10.42)	18 (7.50)
	Others	18 (7.50)	13 (5.42)
Level	100	30 (12.50)	30 (12.50)
	200	30 (12.50)	30 (12.50)
	300	30 (12.50)	30 (12.50)
	400	30 (12.50)	30 (12.50)
Chinese Proficiency	No proficiency	1 (0.42)	126 (52.50)
	Elementary proficiency	108 (44.80)	–
	Limited working proficiency	2 (0.83)	–
	Professional proficiency	2 (0.83)	–
	Full proficiency	1 (0.42)	–

### 3.2. Ghanaian Students' Perceptions of Confucius Studies and Their Role in Society

Awareness of the CI was generally low among Chinese students ( $1.01 \pm 0.091$ ) and relatively higher among non-Chinese students ( $1.53 \pm 0.501$ ), indicating differences in exposure to the institution. Overall

impressions of the CI were moderately positive among Chinese students ( $3.56\pm 0.896$ ) and slightly lower among non-Chinese students ( $2.98\pm 0.820$ ). Familiarity with CI activities and programs was modest among Chinese students ( $2.53\pm 0.916$ ) and limited among non-Chinese students ( $1.44\pm 0.786$ ). Perceived relevance of Confucius studies to Ghanaian culture and society was rated moderately by Chinese students ( $3.33\pm 0.881$ ) and lower by non-Chinese students ( $2.75\pm 1.154$ ). The overall quality of CI programs was rated positively by Chinese students ( $3.87\pm 0.593$ ) and moderately by non-Chinese students ( $3.29\pm 0.893$ ). Regarding policy support, responses indicate a generally favorable perception among Chinese students for increased government support and resources ( $3.93\pm 0.753$ ), while non-Chinese students reported moderate levels of support ( $3.49\pm 1.069$ ) [Table 2].

Table 2. Summary comparative statistics of student's perceptions of Confucius study

ITEMS/RESPONSES	GROUP	
	CHINESE (Mean ± SD)	NON-CHINESE (Mean ± SD)
1. Do you know the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana?	1.01±0.091	1.53±0.501
2. What is your overall impression of the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana?	3.56±0.896	2.98±0.820
3. How familiar are you with the activities and programs offered by the Confucius Institute in Ghana?	2.53±0.916	1.44±0.786
4. To what extent do you think Confucius studies are relevant to Ghanaian culture and society?	3.33±0.881	2.75±1.154
5. How would you rate the overall quality of Confucius studies programs in Ghana?	3.87±0.593	3.29±0.893
6. Do you think the Government of Ghana should provide more support and resources for Confucius studies in the country?	3.93±0.753	3.49±1.069

### 3.3. Effects of Confucian Studies on Ghanaian Students' Humanity in Society

Results show that both Chinese students ( $1.80\pm 0.402$ ) and non-Chinese students ( $1.81\pm 0.395$ ) reported similar experiences in having elderly or sick family members. Chinese students showed a slightly greater preference for alternative caregiving arrangements ( $2.72\pm 1.323$ ) than non-Chinese students ( $2.52\pm 1.202$ ). In contrast, non-Chinese students reported greater financial involvement in caregiving ( $3.48\pm 0.907$ ) than Chinese students ( $2.72\pm 0.852$ ), and a stronger sense of personal responsibility in caring for sick relatives ( $3.28\pm 1.263$ ) than Chinese students ( $2.49\pm 0.944$ ). Moreover, non-Chinese students rated the quality of care more positively ( $4.14\pm 0.929$ ) than Chinese students ( $3.21\pm 1.250$ ). In terms of cultural values, Chinese students showed stronger agreement with Confucian teachings associated with Confucius, particularly on selflessness, respect for elders, and hard work, and perceived these values as more compatible with traditions in Ghana. Both groups viewed China as having stronger systems and greater emphasis on caring for the elderly and vulnerable. Overall, Chinese students expressed stronger endorsement of Confucian values, whereas non-Chinese students demonstrated greater direct involvement in caregiving responsibilities [Table 3].

Table 3. Student behavior with respect to humanity.

ITEMS/RESPONSES	GROUP	
	CHINESE (Mean±SD)	NON-CHINESE (Mean±SD)
1. Do you provide care for aged parents, foster parents, or grandparents when they are ill and require assistance?	1.80±0.402	1.81±0.395
2. Suppose you have an ill relative, do you assist them during their illness with respect to feeding, washing, toilet assistance, medication administration, and cleanliness?	2.72±1.323	2.52±1.202
3. Do you participate in or contribute to the financial support for the medical and daily needs of your aged parents, grandparents, or foster parents during their illness?	2.72±0.852	3.48±0.907
4. How would you rank the care of your parents, grandparents, or foster parents?	3.21±1.250	4.14±0.929
5. In your view, who is expected to be responsible for your sick parents, foster parents, or grandparents?	2.49±0.944	3.28±1.263
6. To what extent do you think Confucian values of selflessness and service to the community are reflected in Ghanaian culture and society?	2.85±0.847	2.39±1.087
7. How important do you believe the Confucian emphasis on respect for elders and hierarchical relationships is in Ghanaian social and family structures?	3.33±1.198	2.98±1.299
8. To what degree do you think the Confucian value of diligence and hard work is reflected in Ghanaian attitudes toward education and professional development?	3.17±1.147	2.68±1.189
9. How compatible do you believe the Confucian emphasis on social harmony and	2.98±0.907)	2.58±1.042

collective well-being is with traditional Ghanaian cultural values?		
10. To what extent do you think Ghanaian leaders and institutions should incorporate Confucian principles of benevolent governance and moral leadership?	3.54±0.961	2.93±1.200
11. In your view, which country gives assistance more willingly to other countries?	1.70±0.460	1.59±0.494
12. In your view, which people provide better care to their aged and vulnerable population?	1.58±0.496	1.49±0.502
13. Of the two countries, which do you think has a national policy focused on the aged, children, and vulnerable during times of need?	1.72±0.453	1.72±0.453
14. Which of the two countries' cultures places greater emphasis on the elderly being the responsibility of the young?	1.53±0.501	1.56±0.499

### 3.4. Ways in Which Ethical Principle of Humanity Drives Students into Leadership Positions in Society

The research aimed to investigate whether there is a connection between the ethical principle of humanity, which encompasses generosity, care, and sympathy, and the concept of leadership. An independent ANOVA study was conducted to further explore this connection.

The result shows a weak positive relationship between Ethical Principles of Humanity and Leadership Position, with a Pearson correlation of ( $r=0.126$ ). However, this relationship is not statistically significant ( $p=0.052$ ), as the probability value is slightly above the 0.05 level of significance. This indicates that while there is a minimal tendency for students with stronger ethical principles of humanity to occupy leadership positions, the relationship is too weak to be considered meaningful in a statistical sense [Table 4].

Table 4. Correlation between the ethical principle of humanity and students taking leadership positions.

	ETHICAL PRINCIPLES OF HUMANITY		LEADERSHIP POSITION	
	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Ethical principles of humanity	1	-	.126	.052
Leadership position	.126	.052	1	-

The result shows a statistically significant difference in Knowledge of Confucius between groups, as indicated by the one-way ANOVA ( $F(1,238)=55.457$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). The between-groups variation in Knowledge of Confucius (sum of squares=22.204; mean square=22.204) is substantially higher compared with the within-groups variation (sum of squares=95.292; mean square=0.400), indicating that group membership explains a meaningful proportion of the variance in knowledge levels. Overall, the findings suggest that Knowledge of Confucius significantly differs across the groups examined, with a strong and statistically robust effect (total sum of squares=117.496;  $df=239$ ) [Table 5].

Table 5: ANOVA of knowledge of Confucius.

KNOWLEDGE OF CONFUCIUS	SUM OF SQUARES	Df	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.
Between Groups	22.204	1	22.204	55.457	<0.001
Within Groups	95.292	238	.400	-	-
Total	117.496	239	-	-	-

An analysis of leadership roles using ANOVA revealed no statistically significant difference across the groups studied ( $F = 0.644$ ,  $p = 0.423$ ). This suggests that the independent variable examined does not significantly influence leadership positions and that other factors likely play a more substantial role in determining leadership status.

Table 6. ANOVA of leader position.

LEADERSHIP POSITION	SUM OF SQUARES	Df	MEAN SQUARE	F	SIG.
Between Groups	.150	1	.150	.644	.423
Within Groups	55.433	238	.233	-	-
Total	55.583	239	-	-	-

### 3.5. Thematic Analysis of Students' and Lecturers' Perceptions of the Confucius Institute, Confucian Humanity, and Leadership Development

A thematic analysis was conducted on interview data obtained from students and lecturers to complement the quantitative findings. The analysis followed a systematic process of coding, theme development, and interpretation. Initial codes were generated from repeated patterns in participants' responses, which were then grouped into broader themes reflecting perceptions of the Confucius Institute, Confucian humanity (Ren), and leadership development.

### 3.5.1. Theme 1: Awareness of the Confucius Institute Depends on Exposure

Many participants indicated that awareness of the Confucius Institute was not universal across the student body but depended largely on direct interaction with its programs, especially language courses and cultural activities.

One lecturer noted:

*“Several of them cherish the Chinese culture especially you know the number of students we have they are varied they have various diverse backgrounds so not all of them would cherish Chinese culture. But some of them would cherish it especially those who volunteer to learn these cultural activities I think they really admire the Chinese culture.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a Chinese lecturer, 2024).

Similarly, a student explained:

*“I remember some time ago they did a free course for us students that do not study Chinese but want to study Chinese for a semester to know of the language. That made me know about the Confucius Institute at the University of Ghana”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a non-Chinese student, 2024)

This theme supports the quantitative finding that awareness levels vary across groups, with higher awareness among students who have had direct engagement. It suggests that the Institute’s visibility on campus is mediated by participation rather than passive presence.

### 3.5.2. Theme 2: Cultural Exposure Promotes Positive Perceptions

Participants consistently reported that exposure to Chinese culture through events, language learning, and exchanges fostered favorable attitudes toward the Confucius Institute and Chinese values.

A lecturer observed:

*“Students who participate in the Institute’s programs often develop admiration for Chinese culture, especially the emphasis on discipline and respect.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a Chinese lecturer, 2024)

A student similarly stated:

*“After attending their cultural festival, I became more interested in Chinese traditions. It made me see the culture as very rich and organized.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a Chinese student, 2024)

This finding reinforces the quantitative results showing generally positive perceptions of the Institute. However, it also indicates that such perceptions are experiential rather than deeply ideological, emerging from cultural engagement rather than formal moral instruction.

### 3.5.3. Theme 3: Humanity (Ren) is Perceived as Rooted in Upbringing Rather Than Formal Study

Participants emphasized that moral qualities associated with humanity such as kindness, empathy, and respect are primarily shaped by family background, religion, and socialization rather than by studying Chinese language or Confucian teachings.

One lecturer commented:

*“Values like compassion and caring are learned from home and society. Studying Chinese may reinforce them, but it does not create them.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a Chinese lecturer, 2024)

A student expressed a similar view:

*“I think being humane depends on how you were raised. Learning Chinese culture can add to it, but it is not the main source.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a Chinese student, 2024)

This theme helps explain the weak statistical relationship between humanity scores and leadership positions observed in the quantitative analysis. It suggests that Ren is not perceived as a distinct outcome of Confucius Institute education but as a broader moral disposition shaped by multiple influences.

### 3.5.4. Theme 4: Limited Direct Link Between Humanity and Leadership Outcomes

Participants did not strongly associate Confucian humanity with student leadership attainment. Instead, leadership was seen as influenced by factors such as personality, experience, confidence, and opportunity.

A lecturer noted:

*“Leadership roles on campus are usually determined by initiative, popularity, and competence rather than by specific moral philosophies.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a Chinese lecturer, 2024)

A student similarly stated:

*“Being kind or humane does not automatically make someone a leader. You also need confidence and the ability to organize people.”* (Discussant response at an in-depth interview with a non-Chinese student, 2024)

This qualitative insight aligns with the quantitative finding of a weak positive correlation between humanity and leadership position. Rather than contradicting the survey results, the interviews provide contextual explanation for why the association is limited.

Taking together, the qualitative findings complement the quantitative results by showing that while the Confucius Institute contributes to cultural awareness and favorable perceptions, its influence on deeper moral transformation and leadership development appears indirect and limited. Humanity (Ren) is viewed primarily as a product of upbringing and social context, and leadership attainment is shaped by multiple factors beyond moral orientation.

Thus, the qualitative evidence supports a cautious interpretation of the statistical findings, reinforcing the conclusion that the relationship between Confucian humanity and student leadership development is present but not strong.

## 4. DISCUSSION

The observed differences between Chinese and non-Chinese students can be explained by variations in cultural exposure, academic engagement, and familiarity with Chinese philosophical traditions. Students enrolled in Chinese language programs are more likely to interact directly with Confucian teachings through coursework, language instruction, and activities organized by the Confucius Institute, thereby enhancing their understanding and appreciation of the ethical principle of humanity (Ren) through a process of “value reconstruction,” where traditional concepts like Ren (humanity) are adapted into the local Ghanaian academic context (Wu & Yan, 2025). This immersion facilitates what (Farcor, 2024) identifies as a heightened appreciation for the ethical principles of care and generosity, particularly in how Ghanaian students relate these virtues to traditional family-oriented caregiving. In contrast, students from non-Chinese sections typically have limited exposure to Chinese philosophy and cultural content, resulting in lower familiarity and more varied perceptions. From a theoretical standpoint, this pattern aligns with cultural transmission and intercultural learning perspectives, which suggest that sustained engagement with a cultural system facilitates the internalization of its values and norms. It also reflects the principle of cultural compatibility, whereby individuals are more receptive to ideas that are embedded within their educational environment. Moreover, the decentralized governance model adopted by CIs post-2020 has placed more responsibility on host universities to bridge these cultural gaps, a transition that has met with varying degrees of success across West African institutions (Zeng, 2026). Consequently, the differences observed between the two groups are likely driven by disparities in access to cultural knowledge, language competence, and opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction rather than inherent differences between the students themselves. In summary, Chinese students generally held more consistent and favourable views of Confucius studies than their non-Chinese counterparts, whose responses were more diverse and shaped by their level of exposure to CI programs. These findings reflect broader patterns of cultural engagement and the impact of institutional initiatives on student perceptions (Nkrumah & Darko, 2020).

While previous studies, such as that by Brown et al., (2005), link ethical leadership with traits like integrity and fairness, the current findings suggest a weak and inconsistent correlation between the principle of humanity and leadership roles. Although Confucian knowledge may vary significantly across groups, this variation does not translate into a meaningful impact on who assumes leadership roles. This variation suggests that Confucian knowledge remains largely academic for many students. As (Yue et al., 2025) note in their study of CI emotional labor, the teaching focus often prioritizes “cultural ambassadorship” over practical skill-building, which may explain why *Ren* does not currently serve as a primary catalyst for assuming leadership positions.

The findings of this study highlight the need for more deliberate efforts to enhance students' awareness of the activities and benefits offered by Confucius Institute programs in Ghana. A considerable proportion of students remain unfamiliar with these opportunities, which limits their ability to fully engage with the cultural and educational resources available to them. In response, educational policymakers and Confucius Institute administrators should consider developing comprehensive awareness initiatives. These may include workshops, information sessions, and the creation of accessible digital platforms that provide clear and detailed information about available programs. By improving visibility and accessibility, such efforts can encourage broader student participation and ensure that more individuals benefit from these initiatives.

In relation to leadership development, the study indicates that although the Confucian principle of humanity (*Ren*) emphasizes important values such as care, empathy, and generosity, its direct influence on students' attainment of leadership roles appears limited based on the current statistical evidence. As such, any effort to integrate leadership training into Confucius studies should be approached cautiously and framed as exploratory rather than definitive. Introducing leadership-focused activities as extracurricular components may still offer value, particularly if they emphasize practical skill development. Initiatives such as mentorship programs, communication workshops, and training in inclusive leadership practices could help students translate abstract ethical principles into real-world applications. However, these interventions should be seen as complementary rather than conclusive pathways to leadership development, and further research is needed to better understand this relationship.

Additionally, the study reveals notable differences between Chinese and non-Chinese students in their perceptions of Confucian values and their levels of engagement with caregiving responsibilities. These disparities point to the importance of strengthening cross-cultural understanding within the academic environment. Structured cross-cultural exchange initiatives can play a vital role in addressing these gaps. Activities such as study tours, cultural immersion programs, and student-led discussions centered on the ethical principle of humanity can provide meaningful opportunities for interaction and reflection. Through such engagements, students are better positioned to compare perspectives, deepen their understanding of diverse cultural values, and integrate relevant ethical insights into their own social contexts. This approach can foster a more balanced and nuanced appreciation of Confucian ideals without overstating their direct impact on behavioral or leadership outcomes.

Given the limited statistical link between *Ren* and leadership attainment, leadership integration should remain exploratory. Rather than assuming a direct impact, institutions should focus on inclusive leadership practices and mentorship to help students translate abstract ethics into real-world application (Farcor, 2024). This structured exchange incorporating study tours and immersion mitigates 'uneven identity negotiation' (Wu & Yan, 2025), allowing Ghanaian students to integrate these values into their professional contexts without overstating the philosophy's immediate behavioral outcomes.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The primary objective of this comprehensive study was to explore the correlation between the ethical principle of Humanity by Confucius, encapsulating values such as care, generosity, and sympathy, and its influence on students undertaking leadership roles. The study focuses on two groups Chinese students and non-Chinese students. For this purpose, this study reviewed relevant literature on the concept of education, culture, students' perceptions towards Confucius's study, behavior with respect to humanity, and the effects of the ethical principle of humanity.

The findings indicated that students have a positive overall impression of Confucius's study at the University of Ghana. However, differences in behavior between Chinese and non-Chinese students with respect to humanity in catering for the elderly in society. Generally, both Chinese and non-Chinese students agreed that China places a stronger emphasis on the elderly's responsibility towards the younger generation than Ghana. In terms of applying Confucian principles to Ghanaian leadership and institutions, Chinese respondents favored a moderate to extensive application whereas, non-Chinese students expressed somewhat less enthusiasm. This suggests that while both groups support the integration of Confucian ideals, Chinese students are more inclined to endorse their broader application. The research also explored the correlation between the ethical principle of humanity and leadership. The research findings indicate that students aspiring to take on leadership roles need to embrace a broader range of values beyond just the ethical principle of humanity.

In conclusion, while Confucian studies contribute to a broader cultural awareness among Ghanaian students, their impact on perceptions of societal roles, humanitarian values, and leadership positions remains relatively modest. The study underscores the importance of personal background and individual experiences in shaping values and leadership attributes, suggesting that while Confucianism offers valuable insights, it does not singularly determine humanitarian or leadership outcomes.

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## DECLARATION OF COMPETING INTEREST

The author declares that there are no competing interests associated with this research. The study was conducted independently as part of the author's academic work and received no financial support, sponsorship, or institutional influence from the Confucius Institute, the Chinese government, or any affiliated cultural or educational bodies. The author has no personal, professional, or financial relationships that could be perceived as influencing the interpretation or presentation of the findings. The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and do not represent the positions of any institution or organization.

## DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI USE

During the preparation of this work, the author used Grammarly for grammar correction and language refinement, QuillBot for paraphrasing and improving sentence structure, and Turnitin for plagiarism checking and originality verification. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and took full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The paper was written by a sole author. The author is solely responsible for Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing, Visualization, Supervision, Project Administration.

## AVAILABILITY OF DATA AND MATERIALS

The data supporting the findings of this study are not publicly available and can be available upon request due to confidentiality and ethical considerations.

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