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## Chapter 7

# Chinese and British Virtues in the Time of the Coronavirus: Reflections on Virtue Language From a Cross-Cultural Perspective

Yan Huo and Yong Guo  
Tsinghua University, China

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### ABSTRACT

This paper elaborates upon and develops further a keynote speech by Professor Kristján Kristjánsson given at the Online Dialogue on Education in an Age of Uncertainty (2020), in which Kristjánsson identified the kind of virtue language used by the British Queen Elizabeth II in her speech on the 5th of April 2020, a use which coincides substantially with neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethical language. The authors advance the discussion further through a virtue-language lens to identify what are the key virtues used in Chinese President Xi Jinping's speech addressing the same challenge. While Kristjánsson only discusses the implications of Queen Elizabeth II's virtue language in a British character-education context, this paper, through establishing cross-cultural comparisons and reflections on virtue languages from both leaders, expands it towards an international view. The current study found the following virtues: a sense of duty or responsibility when facing challenges, a sense of compassion towards others, a willingness to offer help to others, a sense of appreciation and the resolution of the challenges and winning the coronavirus battle. These are virtues highly consistent in the two leaders' speeches despite being spoken in different languages and to different audiences.

**KEYWORDS:** virtue, virtue language, Queen Elizabeth II's speech, President Xi Jinping's speech, cross-cultural comparison

## BACKGROUND

This paper offers as its entry point a keynote speech by Professor Kristján Kristjánsson given at the *Online Dialogue on Education in an Age of Uncertainty* in 2020, in which Kristján identified the kind of virtue language used by the British Queen Elizabeth II<sup>1</sup> (hereafter “the Queen”) in her speech delivered on the 5th of April 2020, a language use which coincides substantially with neo-Aristotelian virtue-ethical language, for instance referring to the virtues of selflessness, appreciation, duty, resolution, pride, humor, helping others, and compassion (The Queen’s Coronavirus broadcast, 2020, cited by Kristjánsson, 2020). Kristjánsson’s keynote speech is timely and important, as it highlights the importance of virtue language in English and the implications of Queen’s virtue languages in a British character-education context, for instance, by focusing on the need for “virtue literacy” as part of character education. However, in the context of the worldwide coronavirus crisis, what are the implications of virtue language for non-English speaking countries, such as those in the Asia-Pacific region? There is an urgent need to explore the usage of virtue language in different cultural and linguistic contexts. Therefore, this study has chosen China, the largest non-English speaking country in Asia, as a case in point, to help contribute to a fuller understanding of the salience of virtue language in an international context.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Virtue Language

There has been a growing recognition of the relevance and importance of “virtue language” in character education, especially its acquisition through “virtue literacy”. Virtue language, that is, the use of the vocabularies of the virtues is closely connected to the context of moral education (Vasalou, 2012). Virtue language is often associated with moral language in the context of moral education, yet there are salient differences between the two and it is helpful to distinguish them. In moral language, the use of words representing moral notions, concepts, and standards is considered important; moral language is closely related to the practice and description of various moral acts, the evaluation of moral actions, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth II (Elizabeth Alexandra Mary; 21 April 1926 – 8 September 2022).

depiction of various moral phenomena (Sichel, 1991). While these may all be understood as subsets of moral language, not all moral language is virtue language. Recently, concerns have been raised that, because of the decline in the use of virtue language in Western literature (Kesebir & Kesebir, 2012), lay people's understanding and appreciation of virtue may also be declining. In other words, there is a close relationship between the command of language as a vehicle of thought and as a means of forming normative commitments to ideals which such thought expresses.

Concern with virtue language is not a recent invention, as shown by an historical analysis of it (Creyghton et al., 2016) based upon three European case studies—those of the German historian Georg Waitz (1813–86), his French pupil Gabriel Monod (1844–1912), and the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne (1862–1935). In this general context, three objects of virtue language were proposed: (1) epistemic virtues, (2) moral virtues, and (3) political virtues (Creyghton et al., 2016). The authors agree with Creyghton et al.(2016) that these objects cannot be separated in a strong sense (e.g., only epistemic or only moral), but only in a weak one (with “epistemic” as one layer of meaning along with “moral” and/or “political”). Such an analysis helps us to appreciate the complexity of virtue language and to refrain from limiting our understanding of virtue as just a character trait, or personal disposition, or behavior that is deemed to be “good” in a given situation. We thus need to understand virtues as bundles of normativity (e.g. epistemic, moral and political); one example would be that of loyalty (*Treue*)—a virtue that had epistemic aspects, but distinct political connotations as well.

From a contemporary perspective, virtue language has been recognized as an important component in moral education. For example, it has been identified and included in the Character Education Framework by the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, an important research center dedicated to character education (2017). In the Framework, virtue language is considered to be an important contributor to the development of “virtue literacy,” an important notion in the character-education framework as it includes three inter-related components: (1) virtue perception, (2) virtue knowledge and understanding, and (3) virtue reasoning. Thus schools are encouraged to provide opportunities for children to be exposed to a rich discourse of virtue language, understanding and reasoning (Jubilee Centre, 2017). The

application of virtue language involves its use through familiarity with virtue terms such as selflessness, appreciation, duty, resolution, pride, humor, helping others, and compassion, as demonstrated by the Queen's speech on the 5th of April 2020, which is featured in Kristjánsson's presentation (2020).

Moral language is thought to be embedded within a given form of life. However, there are ways of building bridges between different moral languages and various moral dialects across time and space, as Sichel (1991) suggests. Such an understanding of bridge-building lays the foundation for the current study, one that compares and bridges Chinese virtue language and British virtue language in the era of the coronavirus. The present study, therefore, expands our cross-cultural understanding of virtue language by comparing the virtue language used in two speeches: one by the Queen (cited by Kristjánsson, 2020) and the other by President Xi Jinping.

## RESEARCH METHODS

This study utilized a comparative research approach. Our starting point was to utilize Kristjánsson's (2020) list of eight virtues identified in the Queen's speech as a sample source of virtue language, representing the British perspective. We then searched for a speech or address that would need to meet three criteria: (1) a speech equivalent to the coronavirus speech on the 5th of April 2020, but given in a Chinese context; (2) a speech with the same purpose of meeting the challenges of COVID-19; (3) a speech given by the primary leader of China, namely President Xi Jinping (hereafter President Xi). A key speech then selected is a speech given by President Xi on the COVID-19 prevention and control work in Hubei on 31st March 2020. This speech was transcribed and posted on the Chinese media (e.g., Xinhua News, 2020).

This speech, and its focus on virtues, was explored via a thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clark, 2006). We first familiarized ourselves with its contents, and made notes of any vocabulary words and phrases that conveyed a sense of "virtue" based upon the following virtue-language references: (1) the eight virtues identified by Kristjánsson (2020); (2) a list of virtues provided by the character education framework (Jubilee Centre, 2017); and (3) the "Values in Action

Inventory” (VIA) classification of character strengths (VIA Institute, 2020). We then made notes that highlighted each of the vocabulary terms and idioms of this virtue language, and this process was repeated three times at different junctures.

During this process, we also used a “key word query” for searching specific virtues. For example, humor was identified in the Queen’s speech, but did not appear in President Xi’s speech. In the latter, “persistence” (in Chinese, 坚持) was directly mentioned five times, and in idioms at least twice (in Chinese, 顽强不屈, 再接再厉). As is typical in situations like this, all these words were grouped together under the heading “virtue of persistence”. Through reviewing and revisiting the speech, moving back and forth from the specific vocabulary to the overall speech, we identified a list of virtues that it expressed. Table 1 presents in both English and Chinese the virtue words extracted from President Xi’s speech.

Almost all these virtues were mentioned at least once in the speech; for example, “persistence”, “responsibility”, “heroic spirit”, “bravery”, and “help”. However, the list also included virtues that were implicitly embedded in the speech and summarized or extracted by the authors; for example, “self-regulation” (which was extracted from the three sub-virtue terms “self-obedience”, self-protection”, and “self-service”). While the virtue “hope” was not directly mentioned in the speech, based strictly on the definition of virtue language, “hope” is a better example of moral language than of virtue language, but the authors decided to include it in the virtues list because the line from the speech that led to its inclusion conveys such an extremely strong message of hope: “... the heroic people of Wuhan will be able to completely overcome the epidemic situation, revive themselves from the flames, and create more brilliant achievements in the new era” (Xi, 2020). This shows a sense of optimism and future-mindedness, and so the virtue of “hope” was included in the list (as an exception). This analysis required the authors not only to be equipped with language skills, such as translating Chinese into English and *vice versa*, it also required the researchers to establish a solid understanding of virtue concepts, as well as a cross-cultural understanding of virtues in Chinese and Western contexts.

## FINDINGS

There were 37 virtues extracted from the speech by President Xi: Perspective, Bravery, Persistence, Striving spirit, Sacrifice, Dedication, Teamwork, National spirit, Heroic spirit, Respect, Appreciation, Compassion, Leadership, Confidence, Scientific spirit, Accuracy, Effectiveness, Alertness, Prudence, Care, Love, Protection, Self-regulation, High-spiritedness, Civilized spirit, Environmental concern, Service, Awareness, Resolution, Responsibility, Humanness, Wisdom, Help, Tolerance, Law-abidingness, Hope, Purpose.

From these findings, we can observe that the Chinese speech given by President Xi was also rich in virtue language. Among those virtues, some were mentioned and repeated several times throughout the speech, such as the virtue of “persistence”, while others were only mentioned once, such as “humanness”. The frequency of mentioned virtues does not imply the importance of the virtue, and similarly, the order of the virtues does not indicate the importance of the virtues.

**Table 1**

Extracted Virtues in President Xi’s Speech on the 31st of March 2020

No.	English Translation	Original Text
1	Perspective ( taking the big picture )	识大体，顾大局
2	Bravery	不畏，不惧，英勇
3	Persistence	坚持，顽强不屈，坚忍不拔，再接再厉
4	Striving spirit	努力，奋斗
5	Sacrifice	牺牲
6	Dedication	奉献
7	Teamwork	同舟共济，众志成城
8	National spirit	中国力量，中国精神
9	Heroic spirit	英雄精神
10	Respect	敬意，敬畏
11	Appreciation	感谢
12	Compassion	慰问，哀悼（同情）
13	Leadership	领导力
14	Confidence	信心
15	Scientific spirit	科学
16	Accuracy	精准
17	Effectiveness	有效

18	Alertness	头脑清醒
19	Prudence	慎终如殆，谨慎
20	Care	关心
21	Love	关爱
22	Protection	保护
23	Self-regulation	自觉服从，自我保护，自我服务
24	High-spiritedness	昂扬斗志
25	Civilized spirit	文明
26	Environmental concern	绿色环保，善待城市
27	Service	服务
28	Awareness	意识
29	Resolution	必胜之心
30	Responsibility	责任
31	Humanness	仁爱
32	Wisdom	科学防控之智
33	Help	帮助
34	Tolerance	宽容
35	Law-abidingness	坚持依法
36	Hope	英雄的武汉人民一定能够彻底战胜疫情，一定能够浴火重生，一定能够创造新时代更加辉煌的业绩
37	Purpose	不忘初心

During the process of extracting the virtue terms, we also identified three strong sub-themes from the speech, that is “People-centered”, “Party<sup>2</sup>-centered” and “Nation-centred.” “People” was referred 27 times, “Party” was referred 23 times and “Nation” was mentioned 18 times; these three sub-themes were closely bonded together as a coherent big theme, indicating that the destiny of the people of the nation and the party are closely tied together rather than being separate. This is illustrated by the line: “Wuhan is worthy of being a heroic city. The people of Wuhan are worthy of being heroes. The whole Party, the whole nation and the people of all ethnic groups in China are moved and praise you!” (Xi, 2020)

“Heart” is the magic word that combines the virtues together. In this public speech, “heart” was mentioned over 10 times, such as in “warm people’s hearts and gather people’s “hearts” (Xi, 2020); and “we should strengthen our sense of victory in heart, responsibility in heart, humanness spirit in heart, prudence in heart... (Xi,

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<sup>2</sup> Referring to the Communist Party of the People’s Republic of China.

2020).” And in addition, “remain true to our original heart,” this original heart repeated twice towards the end of the speech, conveying a strong sense of mission and purpose. In a way, “heart” here seems to function as a master virtue or a meta-virtue, synthesizing the core element of the individual virtues

## DISCUSSION

Comparing our findings with the virtues identified in the Queen’s speech (Kristjánsson, 2020), it appears that President Xi’s speech contains a rather long list of virtue terms. However, this is not suggesting that the quantity of virtue language mirrors the importance of virtue language in the two speeches since the length of the addresses was not the same, and the public speaking tradition/style may not be the same in the United Kingdom and China.

It is still meaningful to compare the two lists of virtues. First, five out of the eight virtues in the Queen’s speech also occurred in President Xi’s speech: (1) a sense of duty or responsibility when facing the challenge, (2) a sense of compassion towards others, (3) a willingness to offer help to others, (4) a sense of appreciation and (5) the resolution of the challenge and winning the battle. These virtues are highly consistent in the two leaders’ speeches despite being spoken in different languages and delivered to different audiences.

As “selflessness” was mentioned in the Queen’s speech directly, it shows a shift from self-centered to others-centered virtues, which actually shares features with President Xi’s “People-centered” speech, which also included virtues such as service, sacrifice and dedication and so on to describe a clearer picture of a sense of selflessness. However, there are two virtues in the Queen’s speech which did not appear in President Xi’s speech: “pride” and “humor”. This may call for some cultural and historical explanations. For example, Chinese traditional culture encourages virtues such as “modesty” rather than “pride.” Moreover, “humor” (especially of the self-deprecating kind) is often considered a national characteristic of British people. These findings thus reflect both the universality and the locality of virtue.



**Table 2**

A Comparison of Virtue Terms Between the Queen's Speech and President Xi's Speech in Addressing the Challenge of COVID-19, 2020

President Xi's speech	Queen's speech
On the 31st of March 2020	On the 5th of April 2020
Perspective, Bravery, Persistence, Striving spirit, Sacrifice, Dedication, Teamwork, National spirit, Heroic spirit, Respect, <b>Appreciation, Compassion</b> , Leadership, Confidence, Scientific spirit, Accuracy, Effectiveness, Alertness, Prudence, Care, Love, Protection, Self-regulation, High-spiritedness, Civilized spirit, Environmental concern, Service, Awareness, <b>Resolution, Duty/Responsibility</b> , Humanness, Wisdom, <b>Help</b> , Tolerance, Law-abidingness, Hope, Purpose.	Selflessness, <b>Appreciation, Duty Resolution, Pride, Humor, Helping others, Compassion</b>

*Note.* Virtues in bold are shared virtues in the two speeches.

Beyond the sameness and differences of the virtue language in the two speeches, it appears that virtue language contains multiple aspects, as Creighton et al. (2016) suggested regarding the characteristics of virtues, the epistemic virtues, moral virtues and political virtues. For instance, in the virtue language used in President Xi's speech, the virtue of "teamwork" has epistemic aspects and at the same time distinct political connotations as well. As the findings revealed, the destiny of the Chinese people, the nation and the Party are closely related and cannot be separated. This is also true in the Queen's speech, for when the virtue of "pride" was included, it was not just about personal pride but also about a higher-level pride, British national pride. So once again we see how the universality of virtue is complemented by local features.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Virtue language, throughout history, has been seen as being highly significant; it remains relevant and vital in our contemporary societies, especially under the current challenges the world is facing. The language of virtue, then, was both

vibrant and powerful in these two speeches given by the two primary leaders of these two countries, Britain and China. We can conclude that there are shared virtues across languages and cultures, such as appreciation, responsibility/duty, resolution, helping others, and compassion. Future research should also investigate the virtue languages of other linguistic and cultural traditions, in order to give the existing findings a wider framework.

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