

Machiavellian Leadership in Korean Manhwa

Muhammad Taufiq

LSPR Institute of Communication and Business, Jakarta, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of Machiavellian leadership communication in the Korean manhwa *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life*. Departing from conventional studies that locate Machiavellianism within formal political institutions or historical leadership, this research positions popular visual narratives as significant sites for the construction and dissemination of power discourse. Using a qualitative approach and critical discourse analysis, the study analyses narrative structures, character dialogues, and visual symbolism to uncover how leadership, legitimacy, and organizational control are communicatively produced. The findings reveal that leadership in the manhwa is constructed as a strategic communicative practice rather than mere coercion or inherited authority. The protagonist, Roman Dmitri, establishes legitimacy through a combination of performative competence, centralized decision-making, symbolic violence, and strategic displays of care. These communicative practices generate voluntary consent and organizational loyalty, aligning closely with Machiavellian principles that emphasize effectiveness, stability, and the management of perception. Furthermore, the manhwa integrates political communication and organizational communication by depicting power as a continuous process of discourse reproduction within a hierarchical structure. Authority is normalized through narratives that frame domination as necessary, rational, and morally justified when accompanied by protection and responsibility. This study contributes to communication scholarship by demonstrating that Korean manhwa functions as a meaningful political-organizational text, capable of articulating complex Machiavellian leadership logics through visual storytelling.

KEYWORDS

Machiavellian leadership;
political communication;
organizational communication;
Korean manhwa;

INTRODUCTION

Leadership and power have traditionally been examined within the context of formal political institutions and modern organizations. Classical studies of political communication focus predominantly on state actors, electoral processes, and policy discourse, while organizational communication research has emphasized managerial structures, hierarchical coordination, and institutional interaction. However, contemporary communication scholarship increasingly acknowledges that political and organizational meanings are not produced solely within formal institutions, but are also constructed, circulated, and normalized through cultural and popular media texts.

CONTACT Muhammad Taufiq. LSPR Institute of Communication and Business. Jl. K.H. Mas Mansyur No.Kav. 35, RT.12/RW.11, Karet Tengsin, Kecamatan Tanah Abang, Kota Jakarta Pusat, Daerah Khusus Ibukota Jakarta 10220. taufiq@lspr.edu.

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Popular media narratives function as symbolic spaces in which ideas about authority, legitimacy, and leadership are articulated and negotiated. Through storytelling, character development, and visual symbolism, fictional narratives provide models of power that shape audiences' understandings of effective leadership. In this sense, leadership communication extends beyond institutional settings and operates within cultural representations that warrant scholarly attention. One increasingly influential form of popular media is Korean manhwa, a South Korean comic tradition that is culturally, stylistically, and industrially distinct from Japanese manga and Chinese manhua. Distributed primarily through digital platforms, manhwa often presents serialized narratives centered on hierarchy, discipline, loyalty, and authority, making it a productive site for analysing political and organizational communication.

This study explicitly positions *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life* as a Korean manhwa, examined as a cultural and communicative text rather than merely as a fantasy-narrative genre. The story foregrounds themes of power consolidation, organizational hierarchy, and leadership legitimacy, offering a rich narrative environment for examining how leadership communication operates within fictional organizations.

Classical political theory provides a foundational lens for understanding leadership as a strategic communicative practice. Niccolò Machiavelli, in *The Prince*, conceptualizes leadership as the capacity to manage power through perception, calculation, and adaptability. From a Machiavellian perspective, authority is sustained not only through coercion but through the strategic appearance of virtue, strength, and decisiveness. Legitimacy, therefore, emerges as a communicative achievement shaped by recognition, consent, and public perception rather than a purely moral condition.

In contemporary communication studies, Machiavellian leadership is increasingly understood as a form of strategic leadership communication. Leaders rely on symbolic actions, emotional management, and reputation construction to secure loyalty and compliance. This perspective allows Machiavellianism to be analysed beyond stereotypes of cruelty or manipulation, emphasizing its concern with stability, legitimacy, and the management of power relations instead. Within *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life*, the protagonist, Roman Dmitri, exemplifies this form of leadership communication. His authority is established through decisive demonstrations of competence and strength that function as communicative performances, eliminating doubt and resistance. Simultaneously, his leadership is reinforced through calculated acts of care toward subordinates, including protection, recognition, and material compensation. These practices reflect a balance between fear and affection, consistent with Machiavellian principles, in which power is sustained by integrating discipline with responsibility.

Political communication scholarship emphasizes that power is not exercised solely through force but is fundamentally constructed through communication processes that generate legitimacy and consent. Communication functions as a symbolic resource through which leaders frame authority, justify decisions, and normalize hierarchical relations (McNair, 2022). Castells (2022) further conceptualizes power as the capacity to shape meaning-making processes through communication networks, positioning

legitimacy as an ongoing communicative negotiation rather than a fixed condition. Recent studies highlight that legitimacy operates on both rational and affective levels, with emotional identification playing a crucial role in sustaining authority (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2022). This distinction is particularly relevant in narrative-based media, where emotional engagement often precedes rational evaluation.

Organizational communication research complements this perspective by examining how communication constitutes organizational realities. Contemporary approaches argue that organizations are communicatively constituted through discourse, interaction, and shared meaning (Putnam & Nicotera, 2023). Leadership communication occupies a central position within this framework, as leaders are increasingly evaluated based on their ability to manage meaning rather than issue commands. Relational communication that fosters trust and loyalty is essential for maintaining organizational stability (Men & Yue, 2022). Symbolic actions such as recognition, protection, and moral decision-making function as communicative signals that reinforce leaders' credibility and ethical standing (Fairhurst & Connaughton, 2023). Authority, therefore, is sustained by narratives that portray leaders as competent, just, and indispensable (Mumby, 2022).

Recent literature underscores the growing convergence of political communication and organizational communication. Strömbäck and Esser (2023) argue that contemporary power practices are inherently hybrid, as political authority often operates through organizational structures while organizational leadership adopts political communication strategies to maintain legitimacy. This convergence is particularly visible in hierarchical systems where leaders must manage both authority and loyalty. Machiavelli's political philosophy remains relevant in this context, as modern interpretations emphasize strategic adaptability and perception management rather than mere coercion (Baehr, 2022). Scholars also identify Machiavellian strategies in organizational leadership, where control is balanced with selective benevolence to secure compliance and loyalty (Gonzalez & Green, 2023).

The study of popular media as a site of political and organizational discourse has gained momentum, with scholars arguing that visual narratives such as comics, anime, and webtoons function as ideological texts shaping societal understandings of power (Kim & Lee, 2022). Manhwa, in particular, frequently depicts hierarchical systems and leadership struggles that resonate with contemporary concerns about authority (Jung, 2023). However, academic engagement with manhwa remains limited. While critical discourse analysis (CDA) has been widely used to examine power in popular media (Fairclough, 2023), existing studies often rely on single theoretical perspectives and rarely integrate political communication, organizational communication, and leadership theory.

Based on this literature, several gaps emerge. First, political communication research has paid limited attention to manhwa as a site of power representation. Second, organizational communication studies rarely treat fictional narratives as legitimate sources for analysing leadership communication. Third, contemporary Machiavellian interpretations remain underutilized in analyses of visual popular media. This study addresses these gaps by positioning manhwa as a communicative text where political

communication, organizational communication, and Machiavellian leadership intersect. Employing critical discourse analysis, the study examines how power is constructed through legitimacy, loyalty, and symbolic leadership, offering an interdisciplinary contribution to communication studies and expanding the analytical scope of leadership research in popular media.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach to examine representations of Machiavellian leadership communication in Korean manhwa. Qualitative methodology is considered appropriate because the research focuses on meaning-making processes, symbolic representation, and discursive construction of power rather than on measurable variables. The research is interpretive, aiming to understand how leadership, legitimacy, and organizational loyalty are narratively and visually constructed. By treating the manhwa as a communicative text, this study positions fictional narratives as meaningful sites for the analysis of political and organizational communication.

Critical discourse analysis is adopted to reveal how power relations are embedded in language, dialogue, visual framing, and narrative structure. CDA allows the researcher to examine not only what is communicated, but also how communication functions ideologically to normalize certain leadership practices. The primary data source of this study is the Korean manhwa *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life*, a popular serialized graphic narrative that centers on political consolidation, organizational restructuring, and leadership authority. The narrative follows the character Roman Dmitri, whose leadership style reflects strategic rationality, calculated generosity, and disciplined governance.

The manhwa is selected based on three criteria. First, it presents a clear hierarchical organizational structure resembling a political entity. Second, leadership communication is explicitly depicted through dialogue, policy decisions, and symbolic actions. Third, the narrative consistently emphasizes power consolidation, loyalty formation, and legitimacy—core elements of Machiavellian leadership. The data consist of selected chapters that depict key leadership moments, including organizational reform, conflict resolution, reward distribution, and disciplinary action. Both verbal dialogue and visual representation are treated as communicative units.

The analysis integrates Machiavellian political theory with concepts from political communication and organizational communication. Machiavelli's principles—such as strategic cruelty, calculated generosity, fear management, and reputation control—serve as the primary theoretical lens for interpreting leadership behaviour. These principles are examined through a communication perspective, emphasizing how leadership legitimacy is constructed through discourse rather than force alone. Organizational communication theory complements this framework by explaining how loyalty, compliance, and collective identity are produced within hierarchical structures. This

integrated framework enables the analysis to capture both the strategic intent behind leadership actions and their communicative effects within the organization depicted in the manhwa. Data are collected through textual and visual documentation of selected manhwa chapters. The researcher systematically identifies scenes that involve leadership decision-making, interaction with subordinates, and organizational consequences. Each selected scene is transcribed descriptively, including dialogue excerpts and visual elements such as character positioning, facial expressions, and symbolic imagery. This documentation ensures that both linguistic and visual dimensions of communication are accounted for in the analysis. The selection process prioritizes scenes that demonstrate continuity of leadership communication patterns rather than isolated incidents.

The data analysis follows three stages. First, the researcher conducts open coding to identify recurring leadership communication patterns, such as authority assertion, moral justification, and emotional management. Second, these patterns are categorized according to Machiavellian principles and organizational communication concepts. Third, the findings are interpreted to reveal how leadership legitimacy and loyalty are discursively constructed. Throughout the analysis, attention is given to how communication operates at both interpersonal and organizational levels. Leadership actions are examined not only in terms of intent but also in terms of their narrative and ideological effects. To enhance validity, this study applies theoretical triangulation by integrating multiple perspectives on power and communication. Consistency between the theoretical framework, data selection, and analytical interpretation is carefully maintained. Reflexivity is also emphasized, acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role in analysing fictional narratives. Rather than claiming objectivity, the study aims for analytical transparency and theoretical rigor.

As this research analyses publicly available fictional material, no human subjects are involved. Ethical concerns related to privacy or consent are therefore not applicable. However, the study maintains academic integrity by accurately representing the source material and acknowledging its fictional nature.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that leadership in *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life* is fundamentally constructed upon Machiavellian principles, particularly the strategic use of power, reputation management, and calculated morality. Roman Dmitri's leadership is not portrayed as purely benevolent or tyrannical, but as rational, goal-oriented, and situationally adaptive—core attributes of Machiavellian governance. This portrayal aligns with contemporary interpretations of Machiavelli that emphasize political realism and communicative strategy rather than moral absolutism.

Within Machiavelli's framework, effective rulers must prioritize stability, order, and control over moral idealism. This principle is discursively represented in Roman Dmitri's leadership communication, which consistently emphasizes clarity, decisiveness,

and consequence. His speech acts and decisions frame authority as a functional necessity for organizational survival rather than as an expression of personal dominance. Through this framing, firm control is legitimized as rational and unavoidable, thereby minimizing resistance and internal contestation.

Rather than relying on emotional persuasion alone, Roman Dmitri communicates power through actions that convey inevitability, competence, and preparedness. This reflects Machiavelli's assertion that rulers must appear virtuous while remaining willing to act harshly when circumstances demand it. In this narrative, leadership communication extends beyond verbal discourse and operates through symbolic performances that reinforce authority. As Castells (2022) argues, power is exercised through the capacity to shape meaning-making processes, and Roman Dmitri's actions function as communicative interventions that structure how power is understood and accepted.

Power in the manhwa is therefore constructed not merely as institutional authority but as a performative communicative practice. Roman Dmitri's demonstrations of combat superiority function as symbolic communication that reinforces leadership legitimacy. These performances communicate deterrence, protection, and capability simultaneously, aligning with Machiavellian logic that views fear—when disciplined and predictable—as a stabilizing force rather than a destructive one (Baehr, 2022). From a political communication perspective, such performances operate as non-verbal political discourse that stabilizes hierarchy through visibility and certainty (McNair, 2022).

Importantly, fear in this context is neither chaotic nor arbitrary. Roman Dmitri's actions are framed as measured responses to disorder, reinforcing legitimacy by portraying power as rule-based and purposeful. This predictability reduces uncertainty among subordinates and strengthens organizational cohesion, supporting Bennett and Pfetsch's (2022) argument that legitimacy operates not only on rational grounds but also through affective reassurance and emotional security.

These symbolic acts transmit messages about who holds authority, why obedience is justified, and how order is maintained within the organization. This aligns with Machiavellian logic, which views fear—when disciplined and predictable—as a stabilizing force rather than a destructive one. Importantly, fear in this context is not chaotic or arbitrary. Roman Dmitri's actions are framed as measured responses to disorder, reinforcing the perception that power operates according to rules and purpose. As a result, uncertainty among subordinates is reduced, strengthening organizational cohesion and predictability.

One of the most significant findings of this study is that care-oriented communication functions as a Machiavellian strategy rather than a contradiction. The scene in which Roman Dmitri provides substantial financial compensation to the families of fallen soldiers exemplifies this dynamic. While the act appears humanitarian on the surface, its communicative function extends beyond compassion. It signals organizational reliability, moral responsibility, and long-term protection, reinforcing trust in leadership.

In Machiavellian terms, this represents calculated generosity—an investment in loyalty rather than altruism. The act produces affective legitimacy, in which obedience

arises from emotional trust rather than from force alone. This finding aligns with Bennett and Pfetsch's (2022) distinction between rational and affective legitimacy, demonstrating how emotional identification plays a central role in sustaining authority. Roman Dmitri's leadership thus avoids hatred while maintaining control, consistent with Machiavelli's strategic guidance.

The findings further indicate that obedience within Roman Dmitri's organization is primarily constructed through voluntary consent rather than explicit coercion. Leadership communication emphasizes shared destiny, protection, and opportunity, encouraging subordinates to internalize organizational goals. This reflects Castells's (2022) argument that power is stabilized when leaders successfully shape collective meaning rather than relying on coercive enforcement. This aligns with Machiavellian insight that stable power is achieved not through constant violence but through the management of perception. Roman Dmitri's leadership discourse normalizes hierarchy by framing it as mutually beneficial. Subordinates obey not because they are powerless, but because obedience appears logical, rewarding, and emotionally secure. Loyalty, therefore, is produced as a communicative outcome rather than enforced through fear alone.

At the organizational level, communication is highly centralized, with Roman Dmitri positioned as the primary decision-maker. This reflects a high-control organizational model in which clarity and discipline outweigh participatory deliberation. However, the analysis demonstrates that centralized authority does not eliminate communication; instead, it intensifies its strategic importance. Orders are delivered with justification, contextual framing, and narrative coherence, ensuring acceptance rather than mere compliance.

Conflict management within the organization further illustrates this communicative logic. Disputes are resolved through authoritative communication that reinforces norms, consequences, and moral boundaries. These interventions function as moments of symbolic reinforcement, reminding members of the costs of disorder and the benefits of alignment. This practice stabilizes hierarchy while maintaining legitimacy, echoing Machiavelli's emphasis on order as the foundation of sustainable power.

A key finding is the seamless integration between political communication and organizational communication. Roman Dmitri's political legitimacy strengthens internal organizational discipline, while organizational loyalty reinforces political authority. This reciprocal relationship reflects the hybrid nature of contemporary power practices described by Strömbäck and Esser (2023), in which political and organizational communication converge to sustain leadership.

Leadership messages delivered internally also shape external reputation, attracting new followers and consolidating authority. The manhwa thus portrays power as a communicative ecosystem in which discourse, performance, and symbolism interact dynamically. This supports Denison's (2022) argument that fictional narratives contribute to social imaginaries of power by embedding authority within compelling symbolic frameworks. Ideologically, *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life* normalizes centralized authority when accompanied by competence, predictability, and care.

Machiavellian leadership is reframed as pragmatic rather than immoral, emphasizing outcomes, stability, and collective survival over moral purity. The narrative legitimizes dominance by presenting it as protective and necessary within a hostile environment.

Through repeated communicative patterns, the manhwa constructs an ideological framework in which hierarchy is natural, loyalty is rational, and power is justified by performance. This representation reflects contemporary anxieties surrounding leadership effectiveness, particularly in contexts where decisiveness and stability are prioritized over deliberation and democratic negotiation. As such, the manhwa not only depicts Machiavellian leadership but also participates in broader cultural conversations about authority, legitimacy, and governance in times of uncertainty.

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life* offers a sophisticated representation of leadership as a communicative process rather than a mere exercise of force. Through the figure of Roman Dmitri, the narrative illustrates how Machiavellian leadership operates through the strategic management of meaning, emotion, and perception. Authority is constructed and sustained not only through displays of strength, but also through symbolic actions that cultivate legitimacy, trust, and organizational loyalty. By integrating fear with care, decisiveness with moral signaling, the manhwa portrays power as a dynamic equilibrium that relies on communication to stabilize hierarchy and ensure long-term compliance.

More broadly, this analysis reinforces the value of popular cultural texts as analytical sites for understanding contemporary leadership communication. The convergence of political communication and organizational communication within the narrative highlights how fictional representations can reflect and normalize hybrid forms of power that resonate with real-world leadership challenges. In this sense, the manhwa does not merely depict Machiavellian leadership but actively participates in shaping social imaginaries of authority, legitimacy, and governance. These insights underscore the importance of examining visual and narrative media as arenas where leadership ideals are negotiated, legitimized, and reproduced, thereby extending the scope of communication studies beyond institutional and empirical settings.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that *Heavenly Demon Can't Live a Normal Life*, as a Korean manhwa, constructs leadership as a fundamentally Machiavellian communicative practice. Power is not merely institutional authority or physical domination, but a strategic process of communication that integrates coercion, performance, care, and persuasion. Roman Dmitri's leadership illustrates that Machiavellian principles operate through discourse rather than brute force alone. His authority is legitimized through consistent communicative strategies: demonstrations of competence, symbolic acts of protection, centralized decision-making, and carefully managed displays of generosity. These practices collectively produce legitimacy that is rational, emotional, and organizationally stable.

The findings further demonstrate that loyalty within the narrative is built primarily through voluntary consent rather than continuous coercion. Subordinates comply because leadership is framed as necessary, reliable, and beneficial. In this sense, the manhwa reframes Machiavellianism as pragmatic governance—where fear is regulated, care is strategic, and legitimacy is communicatively constructed. Importantly, this study confirms that manhwa functions not merely as entertainment, but as a cultural text capable of articulating complex political and organizational communication logics. Through narrative, dialogue, and visual symbolism, the manhwa reproduces and normalizes a model of centralized, performance-based leadership that aligns closely with Machiavellian political thought.

Theoretically, this research contributes to communication studies by extending the application of Machiavellian theory into the analysis of visual narrative media. While Machiavelli's ideas are often examined within political philosophy or historical leadership studies, this research demonstrates their relevance within fictional and popular media texts. By integrating perspectives from political and organizational communication, the study highlights how power operates across discursive levels. Leadership legitimacy emerges from the intersection of symbolic action, narrative framing, and organizational messaging. This reinforces the view that power is not a static possession, but a communicative process continuously reproduced through discourse. Additionally, the study supports critical discourse approaches that treat fictional narratives as ideological spaces. The manhwa constructs a worldview in which authority is justified by effectiveness and care, thereby offering insight into contemporary cultural imaginaries of leadership and governance.

From a practical standpoint, the findings suggest that leadership communication—both in organizational and political contexts—relies heavily on perceived competence, consistency, and symbolic care. The narrative demonstrates that acts of protection and recognition, when strategically communicated, can strengthen loyalty and reduce resistance. The study also illustrates the risks and effectiveness of centralized leadership. While hierarchical control enhances efficiency and stability, it requires continuous communicative reinforcement to maintain legitimacy. Leaders who fail to manage perception, symbolism, and emotional resonance risk losing voluntary support. For scholars and practitioners, the manhwa provides a narrative model of leadership communication that balances authority and empathy—an approach increasingly relevant in contexts where strong leadership is demanded amid uncertainty.

Methodologically, this study affirms the usefulness of critical discourse analysis for examining visual narrative media such as manhwa. Combining textual dialogue, visual symbolism, and narrative structure allows researchers to uncover layered meanings of power and ideology.

Future research may extend this approach by comparing representations of Machiavellian leadership across media, such as anime, web novels, and television dramas. Comparative studies could also explore alternative leadership models, including democratic or transformational leadership, to contrast with Machiavellian frameworks. Furthermore, audience reception studies could examine how readers interpret and

internalize these leadership representations, offering deeper insight into the cultural impact of popular media narratives.

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