

Research Article

# A Conception of Yi (義): Harmony, Fairness, and Justice in Management – A Prospective Inquiry Framework

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This paper discusses the Chinese worldview on 公平正義 *gongping zhengyi* (fairness and justice) and correlates it with equilibrium and nonequilibrium. Moving far from equilibrium (away from fairness and justice) is a social phenomenon that warrants understanding as a science. The collective phenomena far from equilibrium (far from fairness and justice) are explored with nonequilibrium dynamics concepts. The paper examines the concepts in the *Yijing* to understand stability, instability, equilibrium, nonequilibrium, centeredness, and non-centeredness. Fairness, justice, and harmony (representing equilibrium and balance) are Chinese culture's most important values and highest aims because they lay the foundation for achieving harmony and balance. However, interpersonal and societal conflicts lead to social, cultural, and moral crises.

This paper addresses a complex problem in the field of management scholarship. Specifically, the issue being examined is how to improve the effectiveness of management scholarship in promoting fairness and justice while simultaneously maintaining the pursuit of innovative concepts and rigorous theoretical frameworks. In response to this challenge, the paper offers a novel and prospective framework for inquiry centred on the concept of Yi harmony and its relationship with fairness and justice in the context of management with reference to nonequilibrium dynamics.

This paper proposes a prospective inquiry framework for exploring the relationship between Yi harmony, fairness, and justice in management scholarship. By using nonequilibrium dynamics to expand the scope of theoretical work, this approach seeks to promote the formulation, exploration, and evaluation of alternative theories for achieving desired management values. Prospective inquiry expands the purpose, value, and application of theoretical frameworks within management research, allowing scholars to develop and implement theoretical frameworks that promote fairness and justice while maintaining theoretical rigour and innovation.

Confucian culture highlights the unique ability of human beings to possess moral reason, which is essential for creating harmonious and rational existence. By promoting goodness and virtue, Chinese culture encourages establishing mutually beneficial systems and procedural justice, leading to a just society. This paper suggests that traditional Chinese culture effectively addresses contemporary social conflicts and crises by cultivating morality, social integrity, and harmonious righteousness.

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## Introduction

The concepts of 義 *yi*, harmony, fairness, and justice have been fundamental principles in East Asian societies, particularly in Chinese culture, for millennia. *Yi* is a core concept in Chinese philosophy, encompassing various meanings such as righteousness, moral duty, and moral competence. In management, *yi*, harmony, fairness, and justice encompass a wide range of interrelated values, such as ethical decision-making, social responsibility, trustworthiness, and respect for others.

For one thing, we know justice is a broadly applicable quality. Much as salt can be used to enhance the flavour of many different foods, justice can be widely applied to a wide variety of outcomes, processes, and behaviours. Beyond its breadth, we also know that the word justice suggests or connotes a kind of moral correctness or ethical appropriateness.<sup>1</sup>

Achieving *yi*, harmony, fairness, and justice in management requires carefully balancing competing demands, such as individual goals and organizational objectives, and balancing the interests of different stakeholders, including employees, customers, shareholders, and the broader society. As a result, pursuing *yi*, harmony, fairness, and justice is an ongoing and dynamic process that requires continual reflection, adaptation, and improvement. This paper aims to explore the role of *yi* in 公平正義 *gongping zhengyi*, drawing on both traditional Chinese philosophy and contemporary management theory and contributing to the understanding of how these principles can be integrated into contemporary management practices.

Cheng Chung-ying posited that in Confucian ethics, virtue is the power to act and the performance of moral action. He argued that the virtue 德 *de* must be understood in terms of its ontological and teleological aspects. It is necessary to explore the two features of *de* to develop a comprehensive theory of virtues based on 道 *dao* (the Way) and 德 *de*. The first feature is the power of self-examination and self-

restraint, while the second is the motivated action for achieving practical ends. Only an integrated moral consciousness can ensure consistency and coherence between experience, action, and ideal. This aligns with the Aristotelian notion of virtue as excellence (aretê). By incorporating the second feature of *de*, the power for effective action in the system of virtues, into the first feature of *de* as a self-restraining power, reason and virtue are practically united and inseparable. When considering the ontological foundation of virtues, reason and virtue serve as the driving and advancing forces for the formation and transformation of human morality and as motivating and prompting incentives for individuals' moral actions.<sup>2</sup> According to Cheng:

義 *Yi* is considered rooted in the natural and spontaneous feelings of man. It is, metaphysically speaking, internal to and inherent in the nature of man, in which the potentiality of all feelings subsists. Nevertheless, *yi* is not totally subjective. When giving rise to actions, it maintains a quality which has both objectivity and normative force. *Yi* is what every moral man should follow with sincerity and percept.<sup>3</sup>

Cheng further explained that "yi is not simply a matter of a natural expression of a certain type of feeling but a perception of what is right action under some given circumstances. It is a perception enabling one to apply a universal principle to a specific situation to generate appropriate and fitting action".<sup>4</sup>

In the context of Mencius' discussion of *yi* as a natural feeling, the ultimate goal of life may be to achieve a state of harmony where the objective becomes subjectively significant, and the subjective assumes objective (and therefore universal) validity. First, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that *yi* is primarily a subjective principle. As such, its ontological significance points to the subject-self as a creative source of action, value, self-understanding, and self-realization. Cheng's contextualised Mencius' texts relating 氣 *chi* to 義 *yi*:

I know word, I am well at nourishing my great flood of *chi*. But what is the great flood of *chi*? [The answer is]: It is hard to define. As *chi*, it is very great and very powerful. It needs to be nourished with straightforwardness, and no harm should be done to it. Then it will fill between heaven and earth. As *chi*, it matches with *yi* and the Way (*tao*), and if one does not have this (*yi*), the man of [*chi*] will not be strong. [Thus], the *hao-jan-chih-chi* (浩然之氣<sup>5</sup>) is born of a collection of *yi*; it is what is gotten and taken by *yi*.<sup>6</sup>

Cheng's interpretation of Mencius' concept of *yi* as a subjective principle and its connection to *chi* and the Way offers a unique perspective on achieving harmony. The idea that the subject-self is a creative source of action, value, self-understanding, and self-realization resonates with the philosophical traditions of both Western and Chinese thought. 'As *chi* it matches with *yi* and the Way (*tao*), and if one does not have this (*yi*), the man of [*chi*] will not be strong' highlights the importance of cultivating righteousness to complement one's vital energy. Furthermore, the idea can be applied to the management theory of justice, where a strong sense of ethics and righteousness can lead to more just and fair decision-making and a more positive work environment.

Both traditions seek to address the fundamental question of the 'middle way' and 'golden mean', which is achieved through the cultivation of virtues essential for society's proper functioning. Confucius and Aristotle emphasized the importance of social harmony, virtue, and cultivating the 'Way' in achieving harmony and balance. The connection between Mencius's discussion of *yi* and Cheng's contextualized interpretation provides a foundation for exploring the interconnections between Eastern and Western philosophical traditions and the potential for intercultural dialogue to enhance our understanding of these concepts. Confucius and Aristotle addressed the fundamental question of the 'middle way'<sup>7</sup> and 'golden mean'.<sup>8</sup>

Confucius, a prominent Chinese philosopher who lived during the 6th century BCE, emphasised the importance of social harmony and the cultivation of virtue. This was achieved by developing a set of moral virtues, including benevolence, righteousness, and propriety, and following the principles of 道 *dao* or the 'Way'.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, Aristotle, a Greek philosopher who lived during the 4th century BCE, believed that a balanced life is attained through the cultivation of virtues such as courage, wisdom, and justice, which he referred to as the. Both philosophers maintained that these virtues were not just individual traits but were also essential for the proper functioning of society.

Western and Chinese philosophical traditions have developed distinct doctrinal foundations; their similarities in the area of ethics<sup>10</sup>, as evidenced by the shared interest in the concept of 公平正義 *gongping zhengyi*, demonstrate that there are overarching principles that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries. By examining these shared principles, a deeper understanding of the universal human values that underlie such approaches to ethics and management is explored. This paper delves into the intersection of ethics and management in Western and Chinese philosophy, focusing on the shared concept of *gongping zhengyi*.

This paper utilises the principles of nonequilibrium theory and fluctuation to explore the concept of staying within the means or middle path, which is considered fair and just. The paper proposes a framework for prospective inquiry to investigate the relationship between *yi*, harmony, fairness, and justice in management scholarship. Applying nonequilibrium dynamics to expand the scope of theoretical work encourages the development of alternative theories that promote desired management values. The prospective inquiry framework enhances the purpose, value, and application of theoretical frameworks in management research, enabling scholars to create and apply theories that foster fairness and justice while maintaining theoretical rigour and innovation. Fair treatment of an organization's members has multifaceted impacts. It serves as a corroboration of the credibility of organizational authorities, thereby mitigating concerns regarding the likelihood of being subjected to unfair treatment while augmenting the legitimacy of organizational decisions.<sup>11</sup>

The Doctrine of the Mean is a central tenet in both Confucianism and Aristotelianism. Both philosophies prioritize balance and harmony. However, they differ in their respective emphasis on the individual versus the collective and their focus on retributive versus distributive justice. This paper demonstrates the interdependent relationship between the principles of harmony, equilibrium, fairness, and justice. By establishing a correlative association between these concepts, this paper shows that the attainment of true harmony and justice is only possible through fair and just behaviour, as discussed in the importance of a return to equilibrium, as emphasized in Hexagram 24 復 *fu* ('Return') of the *Yijing*, in promoting balance and justice.

This paper examines the intricate relationship between harmony, equilibrium, fairness, and justice, emphasizing that attaining true harmony and justice necessitates fair and just behaviour. Additionally, this paper has highlighted the significance of restoring equilibrium, particularly in situations far from equilibrium where unfairness and injustice prevail. The concept of fluctuations has been extended to nonlinear systems far from equilibrium (far from the mean and away from justice and fairness), where large fluctuations of macroscopic size govern the departure from the steady state. In this regard, this paper provides a framework for a plausible mechanism for the emergence of instabilities, including unfairness and injustice, and demonstrates how such fluctuations are remedied by restoring equilibrium. Ultimately, this paper underscores the importance of balance in the natural world and human society and the need for individuals to act fairly and justly to promote a harmonious and just society.

## *The Confucian Doctrines of the Mean*

子程子曰：不偏之謂中，不易之謂庸；中者，天下之正道，庸者，天下之定理。

My master, the philosopher *Ch'ang*, says—"Being without inclination to either side is called *CHUNG* (中); admitting of no change is called *YUNG* (庸). By *CHUNG* (中) is denoted the correct course to be pursued by all under heaven; by *YUNG* (庸) is denoted the fixed principle regulating all under heaven."<sup>12</sup>

The concept of *zhong*, or centeredness, as described by the philosopher Ch'ang, is deeply connected to balance and harmony. "Management theories so far, however, have evolved around how to maintain organisational order and keep internal and external equilibria."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, the concept of *zhongyong*, which encompasses the idea of unchanging constancy, assumes a significant role in management theory. This principle accentuates the indispensability of maintaining stability and coherence in organizational practices.

*zhongyong*, the Doctrine of the Mean, is an essential principle in the Confucian classics that emphasizes natural justice in the context of cosmic balance. It explores the implications of cosmic dynamics and harmony for human conduct. According to the Confucian tradition, it is crucial to follow the virtuous nature of the heavens and to model oneself after it, which is referred to as the rule of person or the rule of virtue. Confucianism offers a framework for understanding the relationship between human behaviour and cosmic order. It is one of the Four Books, a collection of texts that are considered the core of Confucian teachings. The *zhongyong* asserts that there is a natural balance in the cosmos that humans should strive to maintain. This balance is achieved through the principles of justice and righteousness, which are the core virtues of Confucianism.

*Zhongyong* is closely tied to the idea of the rule of person, which emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation. Confucianism posits that individuals who cultivate themselves in accordance with the virtues of the heavens will become exemplary human beings who contribute to cosmic harmony.<sup>14</sup> The rule of person is thus a way to achieve a harmonious relationship between the individual and the cosmos and the surrounding.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on the rule of virtue in Confucianism reflects the belief that the cosmic order is inherently moral. The virtuous nature of the heavens serves as a model for human behaviour and ethics, and individuals are encouraged to align their actions with this model.<sup>16</sup> In this way, the Doctrine

of the Mean and the rule of person are integral to the Confucian view of the universe as a moral and ordered system.

“Confucianism requires leaders to be role models, embraces personalized relationships within organizations, encourages members to bond with and support one another, and builds a “family culture” in which leaders show generalized care for all employees”<sup>17</sup>, and to Ma and Tsui, “that is heavenly rules”.<sup>18</sup>

This principle is based on the belief that the natural harmony in the cosmos represents eternal and universal justice and can be manifested through virtuous behaviour.

中庸第一章: “喜怒哀乐之未发, 谓之中; 发而皆中节, 谓之和。中也者, 天下之大本也; 和也者, 天下之达道也。致中和, 天地位焉, 万物育焉”

While there are no stirrings of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy, the mind may be said to be in the state of EQUILIBRIUM. When those feelings have been stirred, and they act in their due degree, there ensues what may be called the state of HARMONY. This EQUILIBRIUM is the great root from which grow all the human actions in the world, and this HARMONY is the universal path which they all should pursue. Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout heaven and earth, and all things will be nourished and flourish.<sup>19</sup>

*Zhongyong*, as articulated in the first chapter, highlights the significance of maintaining equilibrium and harmony in all aspects of life. The absence of pleasure, anger, sorrow, or joy characterizes the state of equilibrium. In contrast, harmony occurs when these emotions are present but act balanced and appropriately. The concept of equilibrium is considered the fundamental basis for all human actions and interactions, and harmony is the universal path that individuals and societies should follow. It is believed that when these states are achieved in their perfect form, a prosperous order prevails throughout the cosmos, and all shall thrive and flourish. This principle is grounded in the belief that the natural harmony in the cosmos represents eternal and universal justice, which can be realized through virtuous behaviour.

The pursuit of academic endeavours in this tradition is focused on consolidating cosmological balance, equilibrium, and moral fairness. This is the basis for Confucian political ideology, which promotes self-regulation, family values, effective governance, and global harmony. The Confucian tradition advocates for a moral and ethical framework rooted in the universe's natural order and the pursuit of virtuous

behaviour. Individuals and societies can strive towards greater balance and harmony within themselves and the wider world by modelling themselves after the virtue of Heaven, which is believed to manifest eternal and universal justice, advocating for a rule of person or virtue.<sup>20</sup> This virtue of natural justice and cosmic fairness is also central to the Heaven-Mandated-Nature Theory<sup>21</sup>. Confucian scholars aim to consolidate cosmological balance, equilibrium, and moral fairness to promote Confucian political ideology, which involves self-regulation, family establishment, country ruling, and world harmonization.<sup>22</sup>

In conclusion, this paper explores the concept of justice in Confucianism and its relationship with the Doctrine of Mean. Although Confucianism places a high value on justice, its approach emphasizes retributive justice, which differs from the distributive justice emphasized in Western philosophical traditions. The paper argues that Confucian justice is closely linked to the social hierarchy and is primarily concerned with maintaining social order and harmony. However, it also recognizes the importance of virtues such as benevolence and propriety in promoting justice and fairness. Through the application of nonequilibrium theory and fluctuation, the paper proposes a framework for prospective inquiry to investigate the relationship between *yi*, harmony, fairness, and justice in management scholarship. Overall, this paper contributes to the ongoing conversation surrounding justice and management by exploring the intersection of Confucianism and management and highlighting the need for a more holistic approach to justice that considers both retributive and distributive justice<sup>23</sup>.

### *The Aristotelian Doctrines of the Mean*

In contrast, the Aristotelian Doctrine of Mean emphasizes balancing different extremes by cultivating virtues. Aristotle's doctrine of the golden mean posits that virtue is found in the middle ground between the extremes of deficiency and excess. This concept suggests that each virtue of character is a balanced state. It comprises two components: ontological and behavioural. Ontologically, a virtue belongs to a triad rather than being one of two opposing concepts. Despite courage being commonly perceived as the opposite of cowardice or temperance as the opposite of profligacy, Aristotle contends that every virtue represents a balanced state between two vices: excess and deficiency.<sup>24</sup>

According to Aristotle, every human emotion and behaviour is linked with pleasure and pain; therefore, virtue regulates these experiences.<sup>25</sup> Aristotle further argued that in anything that can be divided and measured, it is possible for an individual to exceed or lack the appropriate amount. Additionally, Aristotle posited that the 'mean' – the desirable balance between excess and deficiency – should be relative to the



individual in question. In other words, a skilled practitioner of any art or discipline should avoid extremes and instead aim to achieve the mean relative to their abilities and circumstances<sup>26</sup>.

Ng and Tay conducted psychological studies to explore the relationship between virtue and behaviour through the lens of Aristotle's doctrine of the golden mean.<sup>27</sup> However, these studies led to a paradoxical conclusion that too much virtue has negative effects, known as the too-much-of-a-good-thing effect. Ng and Tay's study contended that the paradoxical conclusion results from the reductionist perspective in psychology that seeks to comprehend virtues by gauging them as broad dispositional inclinations in behaviours. Thus, the relationship between virtue and behaviour is more complex than finding a middle ground. Instead, the study re-contextualised the Aristotelian golden mean to be more about situation-specific optimality than a fixed spectrum point. In short, the golden mean is not about finding a middle ground between extremes but about finding the optimal expression of virtue in a particular situation.

### *Fluctuation in nonequilibrium systems, within means*

Fairness, justice, harmony, and equilibrium are all related concepts that refer to different aspects of balance and order, or 公平正義 *gongping zhengyi*. Harmony refers to agreement, consistency, and balance among different elements or individuals within a system. It is a crucial aspect of achieving stability and coherence within a system. Conversely, equilibrium refers to the state of balance or stability in which opposing forces or tendencies are equalized. Equilibrium is important in ensuring that the system functions smoothly and efficiently within a tolerable equilibrating range, but often societies operate far from equilibrium with injustices and disorder. Levin and others discussed resilience in natural and socioeconomic systems by characterising such problems as unpredictable: "This means that surprise is to be expected and that sudden qualitative shifts in dynamics present serious problems for management. In general, it is difficult to detect strong signals of change early enough to motivate effective solutions or even to develop scientific consensus on a time scale rapid enough to allow effective solutions. Furthermore, such signals, even when detected, are likely to be displaced in space or sector from the source, so that the motivation for action is small".<sup>28</sup> While equilibrium is essential in understanding complex systems, it is also crucial to recognize that many real-world systems are not in a state of equilibrium (of balance and fairness). "In the chaotic modern society, there is an increasing demand for the realisation of true fairness".<sup>29</sup> Nicolis and Prigogine discussed fluctuation around a nonequilibrium state becoming unstable:

As a result, the system becomes unstable with respect to infinitesimal thermal fluctuations and may exhibit a critical fluctuation behaviour in the neighbourhood of the onset of the instability. In contrast, macroscopic transitions in chemical kinetics and fluid dynamics occur, as a rule, under conditions that are close to a local equilibrium state. Yet these systems, which locally remain dissipative, and thus tend to damp thermal fluctuations, undergo large-scale transitions that change their macroscopic state (appearance of convection cells, spatial dissipative structures, and limit cycles in chemical autocatalytic systems, etc.) An understanding of the molecular origin of such organisational phenomena requires a detailed study of fluctuations around the nonequilibrium state that is going to become unstable.<sup>30</sup>

Most social systems exist in a state of nonequilibrium, meaning that they constantly undergo changes and fluctuations, and virtuous human actions dampen the equity fluctuations<sup>31</sup> such that they are close to a local equilibrium state (what is deemed fair and just in a localised context). Therefore, while virtuous human actions help dampen fluctuations and move the system closer to a local equilibrium state, it is important to recognize the limits of human agency in achieving a fair and just society. Nonetheless, pursuing fairness and justice remains an important and ongoing task for individuals, groups, and organisations, and virtuous actions can contribute to this pursuit and the “inescapable conflict between the interests and desires of individuals and the requirements of society”<sup>32</sup>.

In nonequilibrium systems, energy, matter, and information are constantly exchanged (due to the interests and desires of individuals) with the environment. This exchange can lead to fluctuations and instabilities in the system (as a result of perpetuating injustice or unfairness), which, in turn, drives the system towards new states of organization and complexity. These fluctuations and instabilities can be attributed to various factors such as power dynamics, social norms, individual biases, and economic inequalities. While these factors can lead to fluctuations away from fairness and justice, it is also possible for virtuous human actions to dampen these fluctuations, thereby bringing the system closer to a local equilibrium state.

Aristotle expounded on the nature of virtue by positing that virtuous individuals possess the knowledge of how to navigate between opposing vices and achieve a harmonious balance, which he refers to as the ‘mean’.<sup>33</sup> Such virtuous human actions involve discernment and taking action while exhibiting the right emotional response in any given situation, striking a delicate equilibrium between excess and deficiency.

”The one who is virtuous knows how to feel and act just right in accordance with this mean, that is, how to be at the right time, act with the right force, give not too much and not too little, as each situation requires”.<sup>34</sup>

Kim, Takahashi, and Sano argued that the “fair distribution problem can be solved immediately using physical systems, which should reduce disputes and conflicts based on inaccurate information and misunderstandings, eliminating fraud and injustice”.<sup>35</sup> While nonequilibrium systems may seem chaotic and unpredictable, they exhibit emergent phenomena and self-organization that can lead to new structures and patterns. This results in a more dynamic and adaptable system better equipped to respond to environmental changes. Kim, Takahashi, and Sano added: “Further, decisions can be made on the basis of ‘information based on accurate calculations,’ and the resources of thought that were previously taken up by the problem itself can now be used for higher-order problems (e.g., meta-thinking, which considers even the reaction of the other party after the decision has been made for self-interests next time)”.<sup>36</sup>

In many cases, it is necessary to understand the dynamics of nonequilibrium systems and a thorough understanding of the interactions (including the aggregation of information for decision-making) and feedback mechanisms within the system, as well as the role of fluctuations and perturbations in driving the system towards new states of organization, fairness, and equity. Although equilibrium is an important concept in understanding complex problems around *gongping zhengyi*, it is also important to recognize the role of nonequilibrium dynamics in shaping the behaviour of real-world systems. Understanding nonequilibrium systems requires a nuanced approach that considers the role of feedback mechanisms, fluctuations, and perturbations in driving the system towards new states of organization and complexity. In short, the restoration of fairness and balance.

In physical systems, attaining true harmony and justice is closely related to equilibrium. Equilibrium in physical systems refers to a state in which the system’s energy, matter, or other variables are balanced and stable.<sup>37</sup> In a thermodynamic system, for example, equilibrium is achieved when the temperature, pressure, and chemical potential are equalized throughout the system.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, equilibrium can be achieved in a social or economic system when the distribution of resources, power, and opportunities is balanced and stable.

However, attaining true harmony and justice is not always possible through simple equilibrium. In many systems, especially nonlinear systems far from equilibrium, the departure from the steady state is

governed by large fluctuations of macroscopic size, which can lead to unexpected or even chaotic behaviour. Blau explained:

Group size governs the probability of intergroup relations, a fact that has paradoxical implications for discrimination by a majority against a minority. Inequality impedes, and heterogeneity promotes, intergroup relations. The major structural condition that governs intergroup relations is the degree of connection of parameters. Intersecting parameters exert structural constraints to participate in intergroup relations; consolidated parameters impede them. The more differentiation of any kind penetrates into the substructures of society, the greater the probability that extensive social relations integrate various segments in society.<sup>39</sup>

This passage concerns the relationship between discrimination and inequality in social systems. It highlights the role of fluctuations, both internal and external, in shaping these dynamics. To achieve true harmony and justice, it is necessary to understand these fluctuations and the feedback mechanisms that amplify or dampen them. The size of a group affects the probability of intergroup relations, which has paradoxical implications for discrimination by a majority against a minority. Inequality hinders intergroup relations while heterogeneity promotes them. The degree of connection of parameters, or the structural conditions that govern intergroup relations, is a significant determinant of these dynamics. Consolidated parameters impede intergroup relations while intersecting parameters exert structural constraints that facilitate them. Differentiation within social substructures increases the likelihood of integrating various segments of society through extensive social ties. Overall, the passage emphasises the complex and multifaceted nature of discrimination and inequality in social systems and the need for a nuanced understanding of their underlying dynamics. Understanding the role of fluctuations is crucial for achieving fairness, equity, and harmony in any system, whether social, economic, or physical. Fluctuations can arise for various reasons, such as external perturbations, internal feedback loops, or the inherent probabilistic behaviour of the system.<sup>40</sup> The phenomenon of fluctuations can cause social systems to deviate from their state of equilibrium and lead to outcomes deemed unjust or unfair. As such, there is a pressing need for research into nonlinear dynamics, control theory, and nonequilibrium theory to shed light on these phenomena. However, it is important to approach such research with care, as social systems are characterized by complex structures and heterogeneity that must be considered. A comprehensive understanding of these systems requires an appreciation of the intricate interplay between fluctuating factors, feedback mechanisms, and the structural conditions that govern social

relations. Achieving this understanding is crucial for developing effective interventions that promote fairness and justice in social systems.

Therefore, a nuanced and context-specific approach is required to balance stability and dynamism and ensure that fluctuations serve the broader goals of fairness and justice. Finally, Brehm and Rahn discussed social capital<sup>41</sup> and argued: “All human communities confront collective action problems. Collectively, societies are better off when their members cooperate with one another to achieve common goals”.<sup>42</sup>

In summary, understanding the role of fluctuations is essential for promoting fairness, equity, and harmony in any system. A more just and equitable world is created by addressing the root causes of fluctuations and promoting feedback mechanisms that bring the system back to equilibrium. Moreover, it is important to recognize that fluctuations can also arise from internal feedback loops, such as communication breakdowns, conflicting priorities, and power imbalances. Finally, the role of leadership in managing the fluctuations is expounded by Cortellazzo, Bruni, and Zampieri:

Clear communication norms entail a number of advantages for virtual teams, such as: correct exchange of information, regular interaction and feedback, less ambiguity about teamwork processes, better monitoring of each member’s contributions, faster detection of problems and mistakes. Moreover, because leaders play a fundamental role in enabling and mediating the communication between team members, they are able to lead them in the construction of a common language. This involves gaining a deep understanding of the underlying meaning of words and expressions used in the team. The mutual understanding of the organizational and social context in which each team member is embedded facilitates this process.<sup>43</sup>

Fairness is an essential principle in promoting justice and equality within a system. It entails treating all individuals equally, without bias or discrimination, and ensuring everyone is given equal opportunities and not subjected to unfair treatment. However, achieving fairness is not always straightforward, as it requires proper judgment and consideration of various factors impacting the current situation. Moreover, the calculation of fairness often cannot keep up with the changing dynamics of the system. The elements critical to determining fairness depend on human interpretation and are difficult to formalize. Fairness is subjective and can vary based on personal beliefs, values, and cultural norms. As such, it is challenging to create a universal definition of fairness that applies to all individuals and contexts.

You Jong-sung put forth a theory on social trust and fairness grounded in psychological and sociological research on the concepts of 'belief in a just world' and 'justice evaluation'.<sup>44</sup> According to his theory, the impartiality of political and legal institutions significantly impacts an individual's motivations for trusting and being trustworthy. Additionally, individuals' evaluations of societal fairness directly influence their level of trust in others. The theory proposed by You Jong-sung highlights the crucial role of fairness in fostering social trust. He posited that people's beliefs about the justness of the world and their evaluations of the fairness of social institutions shape their perceptions of trustworthiness.

Furthermore, he argued that society's perceived fairness influences individuals' trust in others. These insights have important implications for policymakers seeking to build and maintain community trust. Policymakers may enhance social trust and strengthen social cohesion by promoting fairness in political and legal institutions and addressing societal inequities. Given the subjectivity of fairness, policymakers must consider the diverse perspectives and experiences of the communities they serve. This requires a nuanced understanding of the cultural, social, and economic factors that shape individuals' perceptions of fairness. Furthermore, efforts to promote fairness should be based on inclusive and participatory processes that enable diverse voices to be heard and considered. Only by recognizing the complexity of fairness can policymakers develop effective strategies to enhance social trust and promote justice in management.

Another noteworthy consideration is Arrow's paradox, a theorem that establishes the impossibility of finding a perfect and universally accepted solution to a problem in social choice theory. It highlights the challenges in achieving an ideal outcome that simultaneously satisfies all individuals' preferences and values. The paradox implies that the method used to aggregate individual preferences can affect the outcome of any election or decision-making process. This means a fair and consistent solution that meets everyone's interests cannot always be attained. The paradox has important implications for democracy, public policy, and social welfare. It highlights the difficulty in achieving a consistent and fair solution to a social problem that satisfies all individuals' preferences and, most notably, their sense of fairness. However, despite its theoretical limitations, Arrow's paradox has been instrumental in advancing social choice theory and stimulating further research while recognizing the inherent trade-offs and challenges involved in social decision-making.<sup>45</sup>

Promoting fairness and equity in the workplace requires a comprehensive approach that addresses the root causes of inequities and promotes feedback mechanisms that bring the system back to equilibrium. This necessitates a commitment to ongoing dialogue, reflection, and action and a willingness to listen to

diverse perspectives and respond to feedback. In addition, it is essential to consider the ethics of individuals when promoting fairness, as it involves cultivating a culture of ethical behaviour that prioritizes integrity, respect, and responsibility. By doing so, management can foster a workplace that values ethical behaviour and promotes a sense of shared responsibility for upholding fairness and equity, promoting the common good.

## Discussion

Confucius emphasized the importance of justice and equity for exemplary leadership and governance and stressed the individual's responsibility to cultivate moral character and virtue; the cardinal values of Confucianism include benevolence, justice, courtesy, knowledge, and integrity.<sup>46</sup> Confucius believed personal morality was essential for social harmony and that virtuous individuals created a just and equitable society. Ma and Tsui added:

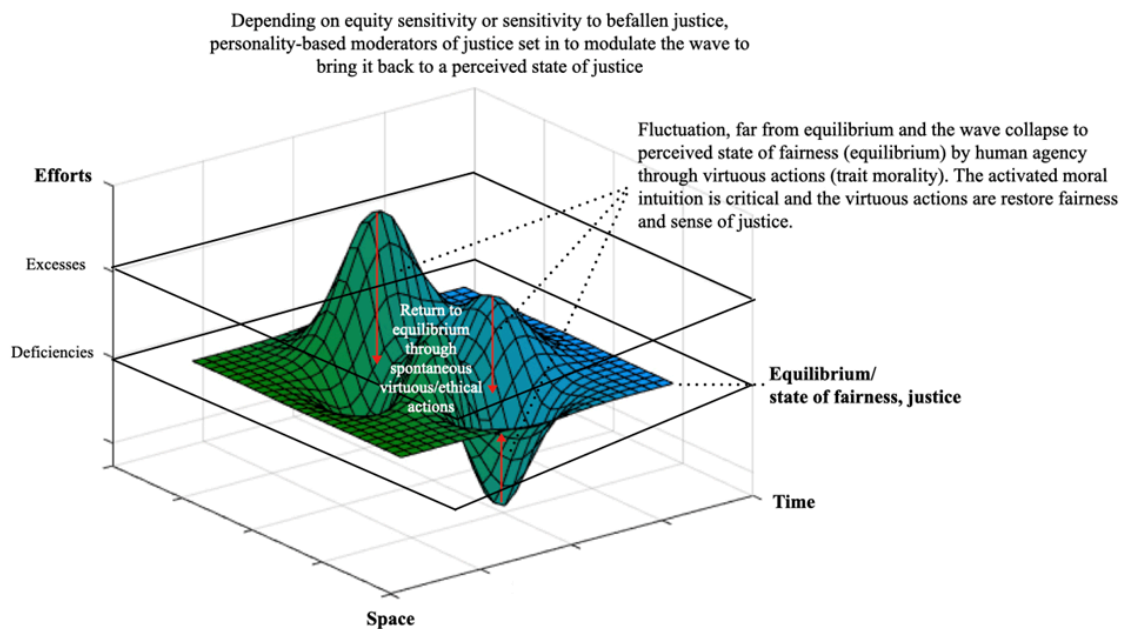
Confucianism requires leaders to be role models, embraces personalized relationships within organizations, encourages members to bond with and support one another, and builds a “family culture” in which leaders show generalized care for all employees. In turn, employees respect and care about both the leader and the company.<sup>47</sup>

Confucius's teachings on fairness and justice reflect his deep commitment to social harmony and his belief in the importance of treating others with respect and fairness. The values of spontaneity and the way these virtuous values are expressed are central to Chinese virtue ethics. Reber and Slingerland argued:

One of the central problems of early Chinese virtue ethics is the paradox that the state of effortless action can only be attained through investing effort and undergoing difficulties during training. In Confucian thought, for example, effortless virtuous action is the result of extended training in traditional cultural forms, including rituals, music, and repeated readings of moral maxims.<sup>48</sup>

From an ethical perspective, Confucius's emphasis on virtue and moral character highlights the importance of individual responsibility and duty. By cultivating their moral character, individuals are better equipped to make moral decisions and act in accordance with virtuous principles. These deeds “is only virtuous if done without the intention of obtaining virtuousness, or even any conscious awareness

of been virtuous”<sup>49</sup>, a spontaneous act to bring the deviation from a far-from-equilibrium state to a position of deemed fairness (Figure 1). The fluctuation far from equilibrium illustrates the deviation from distributed justice. The wave collapses to a perceived state of fairness (equilibrium) by human agency through virtuous actions (trait morality). Colquitt, Scott, Judge et al. explained that depending on equity sensitivity or sensitivity to befallen justice, personality-based moderators of justice set in to restore a perceived state of justice. “For example, unfair treatment may be relevant to the principle of trait activation, with fairness violations creating situational cues that enhance the likelihood of trait expression”.<sup>50</sup>



**Figure 1.** Nonequilibrium fluctuation, returning to equilibrium through virtuous actions

The activated moral intuition is critical, and virtuous actions restore fairness and a sense of justice. The concept of distributive justice entails the fair distribution of resources and opportunities within society. Figure 1 illustrates that when there is a fluctuation away from this equilibrium, it indicates a deviation from distributive justice, which leads to feelings of unfairness and inequality. The restoration of distributive justice and a sense of fairness can be achieved through the collapse of the wave function, which represents a return to equilibrium. This collapse can be facilitated through the agency of human actors, who are guided by their moral intuitions and exhibit virtuous actions that promote fairness and justice.



In this context, moral intuition is critical in guiding human behaviour towards virtuous actions that can help restore distributive justice. When individuals are motivated by a sense of moral duty and a desire to act in the best interests of society as a whole, they are more likely to engage in actions that promote fairness and equity. This involves redistributing resources or opportunities to marginalized groups, advocating for policies that address systemic inequalities, or engaging in other forms of social activism to promote justice and equality or, in Suh's argument, optimality<sup>51</sup>. Suh concluded that the Confucian concept of the mean and the optimality principle are compatible. Confucianism and Aristotelian precepts bridge personal morality and social harmony by examining human actors' economic and ethical nature. The Confucian doctrine of the mean emphasizes the timely and optimal choice of action. At the same time, utilitarianism posits that individuals choose the level of action and passion that maximizes total utility. In choosing the action level, the actors opt for actions subject to "pleasure and pain, and they make choices of action in pursuing the greatest net pleasure. In the neoclassical economics paradigm, people in everyday life are assumed to weigh the marginal benefit against the marginal cost of an increase in an action"<sup>52</sup>.

The Confucian doctrine of the mean suggests that society achieves equilibrium when the virtuous actors are in psychological and moral balance, while utilitarianism considers the interests of all affected parties. Suh concluded that the Confucian doctrine of the mean and the optimality principle are not contradictory but complementary. The significance of Suh's argument is that the business sector need not choose between the two principles, as they are not mutually exclusive but can be adopted as complementary philosophies. While utilitarianism has been criticized for its consequentialist approach and ambiguity, Suh emphasized the compatibility of the Confucian doctrine of the mean, the utility principle, and the optimality principle.<sup>53</sup> The complementary nature of the Confucian doctrine of the mean and the optimality principle may offer a framework for achieving both individual balance and distributive justice in society. However, it is important to acknowledge and address the limitations of the utility maximization principle to ensure a truly just distribution of resources and opportunities.

It is worth noting that the restoration of distributive justice is not a one-time event but an ongoing process that requires continuous efforts from individuals and institutions to ensure that resources and opportunities are distributed fairly and equitably. This may involve addressing structural inequalities and systemic biases that perpetuate disparities and working to create a more inclusive and just society. Therefore, restoring distributive justice is an ongoing process that requires continuous effort and

vigilance. Only through the virtuous actions of individuals and the collective will of society can a sense of fairness and justice be achieved. Woods and Lamond added:

The characteristics of a Confucian approach to self-regulation in the context of management ethics include an emphasis on the virtues of benevolence, righteousness, wisdom, trustworthiness, ritual propriety, and filial piety. We identified seven Confucian principles relevant to achieving ethical self-regulation in management. These include: the goal of becoming a *junzi*; the principle of social harmony; the principle of acting ethically according to roles; the principle of complementary reciprocity (*shu*); the “pole star” principle; the principle of moderated desires; and the principle of being good rather than good laws. The practical applications of a Confucian approach to developing self-regulation include the use of ritual, music, self-reflection, and mentoring.<sup>54</sup>

Self-regulation, in turn, can promote social harmony and create a more just and equitable society. Understanding the role of fluctuations is crucial for promoting equity, fairness, and harmony in management systems. By addressing the root causes of fluctuations and promoting feedback mechanisms that return the system to equilibrium, management can create a more just and equitable workplace that promotes the growth and development of all employees, regardless of their background or identity. Peterson, Tahssain-Gay, and Laila examined antecedents to perceived injustice in talent selection practices.<sup>55</sup> Implementing exclusivity as a method for identifying talented employees can result in a sense of inequity and imbalance within an organization. This is due to the influence of this practice on the perceived level of organizational justice, which can be negatively impacted by ambiguous advancement policies, reliance on hidden networks for support, lack of diversity in talent identification, frequent gender discrimination, and premature labelling of talent.

Furthermore, these practices breach procedural, distributive, and interactional justice principles by providing preferential treatment to some employees over others. Consequently, exclusivity can generate frustration, jealousy, and potentially retaliatory behaviours against individuals perceived as being unfairly labelled as talented. This can further exacerbate the sense of imbalance and nonequilibrium within the organization.

## *Interpreting the return to equilibrium from Hexagram 24, 復 fu*

One hexagram relates to nonequilibrium, and the restoration to equilibrium is Hexagram 24, *fu* (Return), which consists of two trigrams, Thunder under Earth. Thunder represents movement and activity, while Earth represents stability and receptivity. This hexagram suggests that a situation has moved too far away from equilibrium and needs to be restored to balance and harmony.

初九, 不遠復, 無祇悔, 元吉。

9 at the beginning: Returning from not far away, no need for repentance. Supremely auspicious.<sup>56</sup>

This line suggests that the subject of the hexagram is not too far from a state of equilibrium and can easily return to it. There is no need for repentance because the deviation from equilibrium is small and can be easily corrected. This line also implies that the subject of the hexagram has the potential for great success because returning to equilibrium will bring about good fortune.

《象》曰: 「不遠之復」, 以修身也。

”Returning from not far away” in order to cultivate the self.<sup>57</sup>

六二, 休復, 吉。

6 in the second: Relaxed return. Auspicious.<sup>58</sup>

This line suggests that the subject of the hexagram needs to take a break and rest before attempting to return to equilibrium. This rest can help the subject regain strength and energy, making it easier to restore balance and harmony. Furthermore, the line implies that a relaxed return is auspicious, indicating that a calm and measured approach to returning to equilibrium is most effective.

《象》曰: 「休復之吉」, 以下仁也。

The auspiciousness of “relaxed return” is submitting to humaneness.<sup>59</sup>

六三, 頻復, 厲, 無咎。

6 in the third: Repeated return. Danger, no blame.<sup>60</sup>

This line suggests that the subject of the hexagram may need to repeat its attempts to restore equilibrium before it is successful. However, this repeated effort may come with danger, indicating a risk of harm or

setback. Nevertheless, the line concludes with ‘no blame’, implying that even if the subject of the hexagram fails to restore balance and harmony, there will be no negative consequences.

《象》曰：「頻復之厲」，義無咎也。

“Repeated return” is dangerous, but rightness is blameless.<sup>61</sup>

六四，中行獨復。

6 in the fourth: Proceeding centrally, returning alone.<sup>62</sup>

This line suggests that the subject of the hexagram needs to stay focused and centred in its efforts to restore equilibrium. It also suggests that the subject of the hexagram may need to rely on its own resources and initiative to achieve balance and harmony. Finally, the line implies that a solitary approach to returning to equilibrium can be effective if the subject stays focused and true to its own path.

《象》曰：「中行獨復」，以從道也。

”Proceeding centrally, returning alone” is following the Way.<sup>63</sup>

六五，敦復，無悔。

6 in the fifth: Sincerely returning without regret.<sup>64</sup>

This line suggests that the subject of the hexagram needs to approach the restoration of equilibrium with sincerity and dedication. The line implies that the subject of the hexagram should not regret its efforts to restore balance and harmony because it is doing what is necessary to achieve a state of equilibrium. Sincere and committed efforts to return to equilibrium will lead to success and good fortune.

《象》曰：「敦復無悔」，中以自考也。

”Sincerely returning without regret”: being central for self-realization. Kao 考 [examine] is to complete/realize [cheng 成]<sup>65</sup>.

上六，迷復，凶，有災眚。用行師，終有大敗，以其國君凶，至於十年不克徵。

6 at the top: Confused return: ominous. There are disasters and calamities. If one were to set troops in motion, it would end in great defeat, resulting in bad fortune for the country’s nobles. Even after ten years, one could not correct it.<sup>66</sup>

The line suggests that if one is confused and unsure about the system’s state, attempting to intervene through force or other means may result in disastrous consequences. In nonequilibrium dynamics,

systems are characterized by constant change and evolution, and their behaviour cannot be fully predicted or controlled. This makes it difficult to intervene in such systems without unintended consequences. The warning in this hexagram line is thus consistent with the principles of nonequilibrium dynamics, which emphasize the importance of understanding the system's dynamics before attempting to intervene. The line also suggests that the consequences of such hasty intervention can have long-lasting effects, with bad fortune for the country's nobles lasting up to ten years. This is consistent with the idea of critical slowing down, a phenomenon in nonequilibrium systems where the recovery time of a system after a perturbation becomes slower as it approaches a critical point. This means that the effects of an intervention in a system near a critical point can be long-lasting and difficult to reverse.

《象》曰：「迷復之凶」，反君道也。

The bad fortune of “confused return” is to oppose the noble Way.<sup>67</sup>

The hexagram *fu* represents the restoration of equilibrium in a situation that has moved too far away from balance and harmony. This hexagram suggests that equilibrium can be restored by reversion and return to the Way, which is the movement of Heaven. The firm reverts and returns by complying with the dynamic balance of movement and stability, leading to success without harm.

However, in many systems, especially nonlinear systems far from equilibrium, attaining true harmony and justice is not always possible through simple equilibrium. In these systems, the departure from a steady state is governed by large fluctuations of macroscopic size, which can lead to unexpected or chaotic behaviour. Attaining true harmony and justice requires a deeper understanding of the system's dynamics, including the role of fluctuations of different sizes and the feedback mechanisms that can amplify or dampen these fluctuations.

The hexagram *fu*, meaning ‘returning’, can be interpreted in the context of nonequilibrium fluctuations, referring to the spontaneous fluctuations that arise in a nonequilibrium system, leading to an unstable state. In the case of hexagram *fu*, the discriminatory movement is considered a fluctuation away from an equilibrium state of fairness, followed by a subsequent return to that state. The symbolism of thunder within the earth signifies the potential energy that accumulates in a system due to distributive injustice and unfair exchange, resulting in accrued displeasure. This potential energy eventually strikes like thunder, restoring the equilibrium state, similar to the sudden release of energy during a thunderstorm. In this state, individuals with moral intuition and wisdom act virtuously to rectify the deviation. The

subsequent return to equilibrium is represented by the earth symbol, signifying the stable and grounded state to which the system ultimately returns.

In the context of nonequilibrium fluctuation, the hexagram *fu* can be interpreted as a reminder that fluctuations away from equilibrium are natural and lead to unstable situations. However, it is also important to recognize the importance of returning to equilibrium, representing the system's stability and structure.

Returning to equilibrium is necessary to restore balance and justice in a system that has deviated from its norm. The hexagram represents the natural tendency towards equilibrium and stability and the significance of human actors in promoting fairness and justice through their moral intuitions and virtuous actions. However, achieving true justice and fairness requires a nuanced approach that considers the system's dynamics, including feedback mechanisms that can amplify or dampen the effects of different factors on virtuous human actors, organisations, or communities. Confucianism emphasises virtuous leadership and management: "Guide them [the people] with government orders, regulate them with penalties, and the people will seek to evade the law and be without shame. Guide them with virtue, regulate them with ritual, and they will have a sense of shame and become upright"<sup>68</sup> (Watson, 2007, p. 20); and further added: "Conduct government in accordance with virtue, and it will be like the North Star standing in its place, with all the other stars paying court to it".<sup>69</sup> Early Confucianism, with its rich phenomenological data and techniques for internalizing social norms, offers an important resource for contemporary researchers and ethics theorists. This transdisciplinary collaboration between the sciences and humanities can advance both fields, with cognitive science providing insights into moral theory and traditional moral theory guiding cognitive science in new directions.

## Conclusion

*Gongping Zhengyi* has been deeply ingrained in Chinese culture for centuries and has significant implications for modern organizational management. The hexagram *fu* from *Yijing* serves as a reminder of the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in organizational functioning. This hexagram represents the nonequilibrium fluctuation of a system that seeks balance and harmony, much like the fluctuations in physical and biological systems that enable adaptation and evolution. The thunder within the earth in the hexagram *fu* signifies the moral and intuitive actions of virtuous human actors and agencies that work towards restoring fairness and justice to a state of equilibrium, balance, and harmony.

By making necessary changes, organizations can achieve and maintain balance and harmony, while the stable foundation of the system is represented by the earth within the hexagram.

Confucianism emphasises the doctrine of the mean, which advocates for balancing two extremes to achieve harmonious relationships and social order. This concept is central to the Chinese worldview on *gongping zhengyi*. Aristotle's golden mean doctrine similarly emphasises achieving balance and virtue in one's actions, emotions, and thoughts. Both doctrines underscore the need for individuals to seek balance in their actions and emotions to achieve a state of moral and ethical excellence. Confucius believed that individuals should strive to achieve balance and harmony between their personal desires and the greater good of society. At the same time, Aristotle emphasised the importance of achieving balance and virtue through rational thought and practical reasoning.

Virtuousness and ethics are guiding principles that allow a system to adapt and evolve while maintaining balance and harmony towards equilibrium. These principles are essential for organizations to navigate through fluctuation towards equilibrium and harmony. In summary, the Chinese worldview on *gongping zhengyi* emphasizes the importance of maintaining balance and harmony in all aspects of organizational functioning. By adhering to the principles of balance and virtue, organizations can navigate through fluctuation towards equilibrium and achieve long-term success while maintaining a harmonious work environment.

*Yijing* and Confucianism have held significant importance throughout Chinese history and differ significantly from Western philosophy in several ways. These belief systems offer a theoretical framework for philosophically understanding the world and oneself. The purpose of existence can be understood as realizing one's full potential as bestowed by nature, including developing cognitive faculties and moral character. Despite this, metaphysics has lost its significance in contemporary ethical debates, resulting in increased doubt and rejection of moral principles. Nevertheless, there is potential for hope through intercultural dialogue, which may consolidate debates on crucial topics and pave the way for a more influential philosophy in the future. The philosophical foundation of Chinese culture is centred around 'Heaven-Human Harmony', and the principle of 'Human proposes, Heaven disposes' within the golden mean should be embraced.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>7</sup> Confucius emphasized the importance of the middle way as a means of achieving harmony and balance in one's life. He believed that individuals should avoid extremes and strive for moderation in all things. Daoism, on the other hand, also emphasizes the importance of balance and harmony, but it approaches this concept from a slightly different angle. The Daoist ideal is to follow the natural order of things, to let nature take its course, and to avoid trying to force things or impose one's will on the world. The Daoist sage is one who is in tune with the natural rhythms of the universe and acts in accordance with them. Both Confucianism and Daoism share a similar emphasis on finding balance and avoiding extremes. However, while Confucianism focuses on moral principles and ethical behaviour, Daoism emphasizes the importance of attuning oneself to the natural world and following the way of nature. Hardy, G. (2011). *Great Minds of the Eastern Intellectual Tradition*.

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