



## THE APPLICATION OF CONFUCIANISM IN CHINESE HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

LIU DAN<sup>1</sup>, MATTANA WANGTHANOMSAK<sup>2\*</sup> and SUKANYA SOMSUPTRAKUL<sup>3</sup>

### ABSTRACT

Confucianism, with its profound influence on Chinese culture and society, has played a significant role in shaping the principles and practices of human resource management in China. This article aims to explore the application of Confucian values in the context of Chinese human resource management, focusing on how traditional wisdom can be integrated with modern management techniques to enhance organizational effectiveness. The research methods and theoretical framework of this article are mainly based on case studies and the core values of Confucian culture, and how these values are applied and reflected in modern human resource management.

**Keywords:** Human Resource Management ; Confucianism ; Case-Analysis ; Principles ; Practices

---

<sup>1</sup> Deputy Dean at Oxbridge College of Kunming University of Science and Technology.

<sup>2</sup> Assoc. Prof. Mattana Wangthanomsak, PhD at Silpakorn University, Thailand.

<sup>3</sup> Chinese Teacher at Wat Srinuanthamawimon School.

\* Corresponding Author, E-mail: wangmattana@gmail.com

Received: Oct 28, 2024, Revised: Dec 7, 2024, Accepted: Dec 14, 2024

## INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, China has benefited a lot from adopting many aspects of western business systems and managerial theories and practices, which have helped to bring about rapid growth in the gross domestic product (GDP) and economic development. However, the values which are embedded in these theories (e.g. the prioritization of financial ends such as profit maximization and economic growth over human and environmental well-being) are believed by many to have led to a series of destructive outcomes, such as environmental degradation, numerous health problems, increased distrust and greater economic inequality, many Chinese feel a lack of spiritual fulfillment. In response to these multiple concerns, many Chinese business professionals and scholars are seeking to develop alternative approaches to management based on China's traditional culture and indigenous philosophies.

Confucianism is one of the hundred schools of thought and philosophy, which originated in China and at the same time influenced and spread to other countries in the surrounding East Asia region. Founded by Confucius in the 5th century BC and born out of the Zhou Dynasty, the tradition of rites and music can be seen everywhere, with the core values of benevolence and justice, forgiveness, honesty, loyalty and filial piety, emphasizing the moral cultivation of a gentleman, emphasizing benevolence and etiquette complement each other, emphasizing the five ethics (wulun) and family ethics, advocating enlightenment and benevolent management, and rich in humanistic spirit, which is traditional, philosophical, religious, rationalist. Confucianism advocates governing the country with benevolence and virtue, and standardizes people's words and deeds with courtesy, which can resolve conflicts and make the country peaceful.

Confucianism emphasizes moral values, respect for authority, harmony in relationships, and continuous self-improvement. Its principles are relevant to Human Resource Management (HRM) today as they promote ethical leadership, foster a positive work environment, encourage employee loyalty, and enhance team collaboration, which offers a rich philosophical framework that can enhance and complement modern management practices.

Through a large number of literature researches, the current researches on the application of Confucianism in Chinese human resource management mainly focus on the following aspects: the cultivation of leadership qualities, the establishment of harmonious labor relations, and the improvement of organizational culture. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of moral cultivation and the role of leaders as moral exemplars, which can enhance the leadership effectiveness and promote a positive work environment. Moreover, the concept of "benevolent management" encourages the creation of a caring and supportive atmosphere within the organization, which can lead to increased employee's satisfaction and loyalty. By integrating Confucian principles into human resource management practices, companies can foster a culture of mutual respect and cooperation, ultimately contributing to the long-term success and stability of the organization.

Many ideas in Confucianism, such as putting people first, selecting talents coincide with the concept of enterprise management in the new era, and can provide guidance and reference for the enterprises to select, educate, and employ personnel.

Confucian culture takes effect in three ways: improving corporate environmental awareness, promoting social responsibility, and strengthening corporate governance.



Scientific human resource management concept originated in western countries, human resource management information system is evolved from the western “electronic archives” and foreign human resource management information system from the 1960s, after decades of development, has been more comprehensive integrated into the advanced thought of human resource management and scientific theory. There are not many studies that focus on corporate social responsibility or corporate social responsibility practices from the perspective of human resource management in the Chinese context, especially at the organizational level, which discusses corporate social responsibility practices from the perspective of employees.

Confucianism’s influence on Chinese enterprise management extends to all aspects related to people, such as human-centric management, social responsibility of companies, and paternalistic leadership.

The concept of human resource management was first introduced from Western countries in the 20th century, so human resource management of enterprise is also more influenced by Western management theories and methods. If the essence of Confucian management thought can be used in enterprise human resource management, exploring the construction of a suitable human resource management model with Chinese characteristics, it must be helpful for the sustainable development of contemporary enterprises.

“The Golden Mean” requires administrators to be fair and just, in order to respect everyone, to make staff active in the work, a fair and equitable system of rewards and punishments should be established. The concept of people-centered is advocated by Confucianism, which plays an important role in the human resource management. Administrators should

respect human value, pay attention to the growth of staff.

Confucianism emphasizes the principle of the Golden Mean, people-oriented, teaching people in accordance with their aptitude and valuing harmony. The comprehensive application of these ideas in human resource management is to optimize the structure of human resources and promote the development and progress of the organization.

This study primarily utilizes case-analysis to examine the application of Confucian concept in human resource management within the Chinese context. Through an extensive literature review, the paper analyzes the influence of Confucian culture on various human resource management practices, with particular focus on leadership development, the establishment of harmonious labor relations, and improvements in organizational culture.

## **1. The human resource management implied in Confucianism**

The core of Confucianism is benevolence(ren), righteousness(yi), rituals(li), wisdom(zhi) and trust(xin). Ren is the essence of the human being which manifests as compassion. It is the virtue-form of Heaven. Yi is the upholding of righteousness and the moral disposition to do good. Li is a system of ritual norms and propriety that determines how a person should properly act in everyday life in harmony with the law of Heaven. Zhi is the ability to see what is right and fair, or the converse, in the behaviors exhibited by others. Confucianism holds one in contempt, either passively or actively, for failure to uphold the cardinal moral values of ren and yi.

### 1.1 people-oriented concept in human resource

Confucianism advocated “benevolence” a man of benevolence loves others. “Benevolent governance” means fundamentally caring for people, respecting people, developing people, and making people happy. To pay attention to “benevolent governance” is to pay attention to people continuously, to take people as the treasure, rather than taking things as the target, rather than taking economic pursuit as the objective.

“People-oriented”, to put it bluntly, is to pay attention to management from the human nature, to know the advantages of human nature, but also to find the weaknesses of human nature, take people as a person. Confucius did not say whether human nature is inherently good or evil, but his successor Mencius and Xunzi held two opposite views, Mencius thought that human nature was inherently good, Xunzi thought that it was inherently evil. In fact, this is exactly the same as Theory X and theory Y in western management theory.

People-oriented concept is applied in the process of management. “Benevolence” must not only stay on the theory, but must be resolutely implemented into action. Nowadays, there are trade unions in Chinese enterprises, under the protection of labor unions, managers take staff welfare into consideration, such as salary, health care, children’s education, housing and so on. Mencius said, “It was by benevolence that the three dynasties gained the throne, and by not being benevolent that they lost it. It is by the same means that the decaying and flourishing, the preservation and perishing, of States are determined. If the sovereign be not benevolent, he cannot preserve the throne from passing from him. If the Head of a State be not benevolent, he cannot preserve his rule. If a high noble or great officer be not

benevolent, he cannot preserve his ancestral temple. If a scholar or common man be not benevolent, he cannot preserve his four limbs. Now they hate death and ruin, and yet delight in being not benevolent - this is like hating to be drunk, and yet being strong to drink wine!” As long as leaders implement people-centered concept, the employees will be loyal to the companies.

### 1.2 Righteousness and human resource management

In Liji-zhongyong, Confucius said, “Benevolence is the characteristic element of humanity, and the great exercise of it is in loving relatives. Righteousness is the accordance of actions with what is right, and the great exercise of it is in honoring the worthy.” Confucius thought the pursuit of self-interest was an instinctive human desire, The Master said, “Riches and honors are what men desire. If it cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If it cannot be avoided in the proper way, they should not be avoided. If a superior man abandon virtue, how can he fulfill the requirements of that name? The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it.” The Master said, “The mind of the superior man is conversant with righteousness; the mind of the mean man is conversant with gain.” The Master also said: “He who acts with a constant view to his own advantage will be much murmured against.” In present-day China, “profit” as an important component of market mechanisms has become a major driving force for the rapid development of society. However, the inflation of greed also brings about corresponding problems and contradictions. Controlling profit with “righteousness” is the solution. In enterprises, effectively utilizing the motivation of profit while effectively leveraging the

function of “righteousness” through corporate culture has significant practical significance for optimizing the organizational environment, reducing management difficulties, and improving the overall operational level of the enterprise.

### **1.3 Rituals and human resource management**

“Rituals” (li) has become the most important social order rule in China, and has been the basic institutional content of China's governance of the nation and the world for thousands of years. “Li” is the concrete expression of Confucian humanism, and Mencius called it the “jiewen” of benevolence and righteousness. Jie refers to norms, laws, and procedures; wen refers to ceremonies, articles, and regulations. “Li” is the external norm of benevolence and the concrete form of righteousness. Only by following the behavior norms and patterns based on benevolence and righteousness, i.e. following the Li system, can one rectify oneself and others effectively and coordinate interpersonal relationships. Confucius said, “It is by the Odes that the mind is aroused. It is by the Rules of Propriety that the character is established. It is from Music that the finish is received.” At that time, Confucius reckoned the country was in disorder because the ritual collapsed. Only propriety is maintained, a society can be harmonious and orderly. China is currently undergoing profound social transformation and change. The social value system and institutions are undergoing deep transformation and reconstruction. It is of great importance to establish a healthy and complete mainstream value system and a matching institutional system that conform to the era's characteristics to promote social harmony. Within the enterprise, gradually forming and effectively maintaining a unified value system and matching institutional rules has a profound practical significance for reducing coordination costs, standardizing employee behavior, improving group

living quality and work performance, and maintaining the enterprise's long-term sustainable development.

### **1.4 Wisdom and human resource management**

The Master said, “The wise are free from perplexities; the virtuous from anxiety; and the bold from fear.” “Knowledge, magnanimity, and energy, these three, are the virtues universally binding” So during the human resource management, the managers of enterprises should possess various virtues. A person with virtue must be a person with charm of personality. A manager with rich knowledge and leadership charm is bound to play a significant role in leading employees. As an ordinary employee of an enterprise, he should also have as many virtues as possible, because it has a positive effect on both himself and the enterprise. Wisdom is not a separate virtue; it can only become a person's real moral quality and promote their moral perfection when it is combined with action.

### **1.5 Trust and human resource management**

Confucius said “the people have no faith in their rulers, there is no standing for the state.” “Trust” is an important behavior rule and management thought in China. Honesty can greatly reduce the risk of cooperation, lower social transaction costs, improve the sense of happiness and satisfaction of social members, and is a fundamental guarantee for the healthy and harmonious development of society. In today's transforming and rapidly developing society, honesty is especially important. Similarly, there are also integrity issues within enterprises. With “trust” the group will be harmonious, the monitoring cost will be reduced, efficiency will be improved, satisfaction will increase, while with “dishonesty”, all the functions of management systems and systems will be weakened, even collapsed, interpersonal relationships within employees will be weakened, work efficiency will

reduce, and the enterprise will not be able to sustainably develop. The root of integrity lies in entrepreneurs themselves. Entrepreneurs must treat people with sincerity and conduct business with integrity in order to create an atmosphere of integrity in the enterprise, build a culture of integrity, and lay a foundation of integrity for the sustainable and healthy development of the enterprise.

## **2. The practice of confucian human resource management concept in universities**

Human resources work involves the vital interests of every staff member, therefore, when dealing with staff members' interests, HR department cannot make arbitrary promises, but must be careful and patient, learn to show empathy for others, and learn to provide psychological counseling. The human resources department is the window of the school, and human resources workers will make staff members feel the warmth and humanity of the school directly. Special attention should be paid to the staff. In China, every university will make a survey what the staff want, how can help the staff to solve some problem, what advice should be given to the university and so on. On Teacher's Day, the staff will get some allowance, which benevolence is embodied.

Oxbridge College, KUST prioritizes people-centered development and focuses on the all-around development of individuals. HR department had organized a group of old experts to conduct research on young teachers' work, because these new teachers may be at a loss, if they got some necessary attention and concern at the beginning, perhaps they would take university job as their lifelong career in the future, and make greater contributions to education and the university while developing their personal academics. Sun Yat-sen University established a harmonious environment in the school, which truly reflect the

respect for people. Help those who are in need is confucian's benevolence.

The leadership in the university is very important. HR department should know people well and make good use of their abilities. In 2016, the administrator in school of Oxbridge College, KUST should have a general election, there were two plans, one was to continue to ask olders become deans for a long time; the other was to choose some young scholars that excellent in academics as the dean. At last they chose the latter, in order to help the younger scholars develop well, do well in academic research and improve leadership skills at the same time. Some measures were put forward to help these young excellent teachers. Practice had proved that under the leadership of these young scholars, the academic status of the school had been greatly improved.

In Oxbridge College KUST, in the process of management, they take "respecting teachers, treating students kindly, caring for staff, facing problems directly, and solving difficulties" as the cultural concept of management work, and embed it in the minds of every manager at the school; take "whether it is beneficial to the fundamental interests of teachers and students; whether it is beneficial to teaching, scientific research, and discipline development; and whether it is beneficial to the long-term development of the school" as the value orientation of university management work. The evaluation standards for management services are: service attitude, with efficiency as the criterion, to be able to get things done; service quality, with teacher and student satisfaction as the criterion, to be able to do good things; and service level, with social recognition as the criterion, to be able to produce experience and results. Now the service philosophy has transformed from "what do you want to do?" to "What can I do for you?"



### **3. The does of the directors of human resource management**

#### **3.1 Be a role model**

The Master said, “When a prince's personal conduct is correct, his government is effective without the issuing of orders. If his personal conduct is not correct, he may issue orders, but they will not be followed.” As individual quality improves gradually, the self-image of administrators is becoming more and more important. How to be a role model, first one should reflect on himself three times a day. Confucius advocates “internal introspection” through self-reflection. It is very important for administrators to set a good example for others, the Master said, “He who requires much from himself and little from others, will keep himself from being the object of resentment.” Second, managers are required not only to work hard but also to be careful in their words. The Master said, “The superior man wishes to be slow in his speech and earnest in his conduct.” Third, to keep its promise. Honesty is not only the social fashion advocated by people but also the basic principle of life. What you promise to your staff, you should do it.

#### **3.2 Be generous and love others**

The concept of “flexible management” is emphasized by Confucians, who advocated loving others, respecting the virtuous, and accommodating all. The term “kind lover” refers to a management approach that prioritizes “love”. For HR directors, their foremost duty is to love staff as only through love can the contradictions between managers and staff be alleviated. This approach facilitates the establishment of harmonious relationships, fosters strong cohesion and unity among individuals, ultimately leading to successful management outcomes.

The master said, “not to do to others as you would not wish done to yourself.” From an employee’s perspective, adopting empathic thinking and

considering one's own heart can effectively explore their ideological motivation, thus identifying the starting point for effective work. Then the deserving should be honored and individuals should be treated with respect. In Confucianism, tolerance holds significant importance, the establishment of an equal and harmonious relationship between managers and employees can be achieved through administrators' equitable treatment of staff with diverse personalities and levels. At last, holding hardness with softness. Tolerance is not merely accommodation and indulgence, but rather “a judicious blend of leniency and firmness.” Confucius believed that this approach aims to strike a balance between strict self-discipline and the combination of forgiveness and discipline in management practices, avoiding both excessive leniency and harsh criticism. It calls for solemnity in formal occasions while fostering sincere enthusiasm with a strong sense of affinity in daily life. Managers can achieve optimal results by promoting staffs' positive self-image.

The most crucial and dynamic element in management is people. Managers should prioritize the emotional needs of individuals, guiding, persuading, and educating them based on understanding and tolerance. This can be achieved through rationality derived from common sense.

#### **3.3 Employing the people with ability**

The concept of guanxi holds significant importance in China as a fundamental basis for exerting influence. Chinese people are very emotional, which is in line with the Confucian concept of “loyalty”. Consequently, interpersonal relationships are highly valued within Chinese society. After the implementation of the system in enterprises, deviations often occur due to the leader's special relationships with certain employees, such as through gift-giving, which hinders the effective enforcement of the system.

For example, leaders often promote employees who have demonstrated gift-giving, displayed humility in their actions, or share mutual interests with them. This practice significantly undermines the morale of skilled, capable, and high-performing employees and hampers the effectiveness of enterprise promotion mechanisms in achieving incentivization.

The governance of people is crucial, and it is essential to elect individuals who are worthy. The selection of talents plays a significant role in HR management, while the appointment of talents serves as a fundamental principle in employment. Take optimal utilization of human resources. Confucius said, “Advance the upright and set aside the crooked, then the people will submit. Advance the crooked and set aside the upright, then the people will not submit.” The effective governance of individuals necessitates a comprehensive understanding of their respective strengths, which can then be harnessed to optimize management and staff development. Personnel should be treated with equal importance. As a HR administrator, it is crucial to avoid judging people based on biased perspectives and instead uphold impartiality in evaluating people solely based on personal preferences, ensuring fairness, understanding, and promoting expected management outcomes.

## CONCLUSION

The research methods and theoretical framework of this article are mainly based on case studies and the core values of Confucian culture, and how these values are applied and reflected in modern human resource management. The selection of capable individuals is not just a matter of filling positions but a critical process that shapes the future of an organization. It is imperative that HR professionals adhere to the principles of fairness and transparency in the recruitment and promotion processes. By doing so, they can foster a culture of meritocracy, where employees are recognized and rewarded based on their abilities and contributions, which not only enhances the motivation and engagement of the workforce but also ensures that the organization is equipped with the right talent to drive its success. Ultimately, the wisdom in human resource management lies in the ability to identify and nurture talent, creating a harmonious and productive work environment that aligns with the broader goals of the enterprise

## REFERENCES

- [1] Bo Yang; Pingping Fu; Alim J. Beveridge. (2020). *Humanistic leadership in a Chinese context*, Cross cultural and strategic management 27(July 23 2020):1
- [2] Chen Xiaoling, Liang Huixing. (2024). The Enhancement of Management Ideology in Contemporary Higher Education Institutions. *Journal of Guangxi Vocational and Technical College* 17(Apr.2024).
- [3] Gary Dessler. (2018). *Human Resource Management*. 16 th ed. New York: Pearson, 2018.
- [4] LI Yan-bao. (2010). The Cultural Connotation and Value Pursuit of the Human Resources. *Journal of Higher Education Management*, 4(Sep.2010): 8.
- [5] Wang Fanghua. (2016). *Human Resources Management*. 4th ed. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press, 2016.





- [6] Xiufeng Liu, Wen Ma. (2018). *Confucianism Reconsidered: Insights for American and Chinese Education in the twenty-First Century*. New York: Sunny Press,2018.
- [7] Yan A-i minLiu YuanZhang Jing-jun. (2007). Human Resource Management Thought Implied in Confucian Culture and its Practical Influence, *Journal of Hunan University (Social Science)* 21(Nov.2007):123.
- [8] Yinghua Lu. (2022). *Confucianism and Phenomenology: An Exploration of Feeling, Value and Virtue*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill,2022.
- [9] Zeger van der Wal. (2015). Confucius meets Weber or ‘Managerialism takes all’? Comparing Civil Servant Values in China and the Netherlands. *International Public Management Journal* (Sep,2015)