



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Worlding orders of worth: the justification of corporate practices in China–Africa relations

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This article contributes to the move beyond Western-centrism in the study of transnational practices and their justification. Taking Boltanski and Thévenot's work on justification out of France and Europe and to Chinese practices in Africa, it develops and 'worlds' an 'orders of worth' framework that, building on and going beyond their work, uncovers an original set of repertoires of justification at work. The article develops its argument through an analysis of Chinese discourse and practices of corporate engagement with host societies in Africa. It shows that Chinese practices mobilize five orders – a 'Market Order', a 'Legalist Order', a 'Socialist (Party Line) Order', a 'Confucian Order' and a 'Daoist Order' – and discusses the compromises and frictions between them. Instead of emphasizing Chinese misconduct or juxtaposing a 'Western' with a 'Chinese' brand of transnational governance, we propose an orders-of-worth heuristic and a variety of practices of justification that mobilize a broader set of philosophical and practice traditions than often assumed. Importantly, we argue that such an adapted heuristic and broadened repertoire of practices are useful for capturing transnational practices of justification more fully in a pluriversal and increasingly less Western-centric world order.

Keywords practice theory • worlding • China–Africa • corporate social engagement
• pluriversal international relations

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Introduction

With the successive launches of China's 'going out' strategy in 2000 and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, as well as the resulting exponential increase in Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) over the last few decades, understanding how Chinese companies act and justify their practices in host countries has become increasingly relevant. China's trajectory on the African continent is particularly striking. Chinese FDI in Africa surged from US\$75 million in 2003 to US\$5.4 billion in 2018 (CARI, 2020). After a temporary decline due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chinese engagement with Africa reached an all-time high in the first half of 2025, with the continent receiving approximately US\$30.5 billion in construction contracts and around US\$8.5 billion in direct investments (Nedopil, 2025).

While one-sided portrayals of a 'Chinese way of doing things' (positively or negatively) or claims about a 'China model' persist, Chinese corporate practices are diverse, and corporate social engagements in host societies vary. For instance, whereas some Chinese corporations pursue profit no matter the social and environmental costs, others instead engage in building local relations and implementing social responsibilities. Yet others adhere to local laws even when these laws are suddenly changed to the companies' detriment. The same corporation might uphold the local law in one issue area at one time and in one locality but not at another time and place.

This occurred, for instance, in 2008, when the Zambian government sought to renegotiate development agreements with mining corporations. Whereas the major 'Western' mines (Konkola Copper Mines [KCM] and MC Mining Limited [MCM]) 'were adamant in opposing the new Mines and Mineral Act (2008)' and even threatened to take legal action, the Chinese mining company Non-Ferrous Company-Africa (NFCA) not only did 'not join these foreign companies in voicing public objections ... [but] *complied* with paying the new taxes *before* the Zambian government rescinded the legislation in the wake of the global financial crisis ... [and even expressed] support for the windfall profit tax' (Lee, 2017: 42, emphases added). Earlier in 2003, however, 49 miners died in another mine run by NFCA in Zambia and '[f]ive miners were shot and killed by police during violent protests over working conditions at the same mine in 2007' (Kachingwe, 2009). All of this can be understood as evidence that different orders of worth are at work in Chinese-dominated transnational contexts that are irreducible to each other and coexist in tension.

The literature on China's global practices has increasingly come to demonstrate such diverse and even opposing practices in different issue areas (see, for example, De Graaff, 2020). Jones and Hameiri (2021) focus on the fragmented coalitions and societal interest groups that make for limited state control and the different faces of China. Franceschini and Loubere (2022) introduce the concept of a Global China with the very purpose of pushing back on Chinese uniqueness. Gu et al (2016) point out the diversity of Chinese companies and their varying degrees of autonomy from the government. Moreover, several important ethnographic and sociological studies refer to the mix of labour practices, ways of relating to communities and corporate social engagement that are both distinct from and convergent with the routines of other multinational companies (Lee, 2017; Lam, 2017; Hönke et al, 2023).

To explain this diversity of Chinese corporate practices abroad, we propose an alternative pragmatist approach centred around an 'orders of worth' heuristic

(Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006) adapted and worlded (Ling, 2014) for a pluriversal international relations (IR). Here, orders of worth refer to repertoires of evaluation reflected in practices of justification, both in policies and everyday practices, and consisting of ‘moral narratives and objects that enable tests’ (Hanrieder, 2016: 391; Ochoa et al, 2021). The analytical approach as such puts centre stage how actors rely on different principles of worth for justifying claims (or making critiques) in a given context (Boltanski, 2011: 27), speaking to irreducibly multiple and competing moral orders (see Lesch, 2021: 616–17). An orders-of-worth framework does not essentialize precisely because it speaks to the multiplicity of legitimizing frameworks that actors draw from in their day-to-day practices.

We therefore argue that an orders-of-worth toolbox has the potential to better capture the growing multiplicity of complex moral orders at work in transnational contexts. Consequently, we take the orders-of-worth heuristic out of Europe in order to generate new conceptual ensembles from the context of transnational governance by Chinese companies in Africa. On the one hand, this allows us to apprehend and better understand how Chinese corporate practices abroad reflect and are constitutive of a new multiplicity of justificatory repertoires at work. On the other hand, it also lets us systematize the orders of worth that corporate professionals, local communities, governments and experts mobilize to understand the ongoing contradictions and challenges that result from them. Abstracting from empirical findings on Chinese companies in Africa, the article offers a new typology of orders of worth. We identify five main orders of worth that actors draw from: a ‘Market Order’, a ‘Legalist Order’, a ‘Socialist (Party Line) Order’, a ‘Confucian Order’ and a ‘Daoist Order’. We argue that these orders and the proposed heuristic are useful for better understanding transnational practices of justification in use by various transnational actors in our increasingly less Western-centric world.

The article proceeds as follows. The first section introduces the orders-of-worth heuristic and how it fills a gap in the scholarship. The second section lays out the five orders of worth we find at work within Chinese corporate activity in China and Africa. The third section discusses conflicts, compromises and convergences among them. Finally, the fourth section draws conclusions and points out avenues for future research.

Multiple orders of worth and practices of justification

Boltanski and Thévenot’s pragmatist sociology offers a useful starting point for examining multiple and contested practices of justification at work. While this has recently been explored for international relations in the context of parliamentary debates and in the United Nations (Lesch, 2021; Ochoa et al, 2021), we argue that attention to the irreducible multiplicity of justificatory practices is particularly helpful for understanding orders of worth in transnational contexts that are not or no longer Western-dominated. Chinese corporate practices in Africa and how they are justified are a case in point here.

With orders of worth, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) refer to the repertoires of evaluation reflected in practices of justification, made up of moral narratives, objects of worth and modes of evaluation (referred to as ‘tests’ [see later]). We argue that it offers tools that researchers of transnational governance and its contestation can use to

map variegated sources of justification that operate alongside and in conflict with each other. While combining micro-analytical interest in actions and their contingencies with macro-phenomena of normative structures and shared moral discourses (Dodier, 1993: 72; Bueger and Gadinger, 2018: 88), the approach is well placed to avoid overemphasis on hierarchical structures and the reproduction of practices, arguably a characteristic of Bourdieusian work in IR (Leander, 2011; Martin-Mazé, 2017). Furthermore, new orders of worth can be identified and conceptualized to better understand social practices in a post-Western and pluriversal international order.

We draw from the idea of ‘orders of worth’ because Boltanski and Thévenot focus here on public action: practices of justification that are directed at a public or with a public audience in mind. Hence, justifications of corporate practices are aimed at societal actors who need to verify these justifications. Such intentionally public action is especially suited for capturing generalized, socially acceptable and codified normative schemes that are believed to operate in a particular situation or context. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999: 369) assume that ‘the same persons have, on the same day and in the same social space, to use different devices for assessment, including the reference to different types of worth’.

This is even more the case in the context of transnational companies in general and Chinese corporate engagement in Africa in particular. With an orders-of-worth approach, the aim is not to resolve the epistemic instability of justificatory situations or search for a dominant symbolic order or doxa that powerfully structures situations, as in Bourdieusian practice theory. Rather, its strength lies in shedding light on the different registers of action coexisting simultaneously and the moral claims actors mobilize concurrently. From this position, it is possible to ‘describe the actors’ sense of (in)justice’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 1999: 364) when legitimizing their practices and thus to (re)construct the different, often conflicting, orders of worth at play in transnational contexts. In doing so, the notion of ‘tests’ is crucial. Tests refer to how actors resolve uncertainties and evaluate worth in situations that call for clarification and justification of how things are done. Thus, practices are put to the test of plural valuation systems (irreducible to one another), to different orders of worth that express different moral standards allocating praise and blame in different ways (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 65, 233–4; see also Ochoa et al, 2021: 215).

Boltanski’s working group in France analysed plural orders of worth using ethnographic fieldwork in different domains in France, notably also in selected firms (see, for example, Boltanski et al, 1989). In IR, the orders-of-worth approach has rarely been used and, if so, mostly with regard to different normative framings in selected issue areas of state-led international governance (global health governance [Hanrieder, 2016], the War on Terror [Gadinger, 2016: 199–202; Ochoa et al, 2021] and disputes about UN policies [Lesch, 2021]).

We take the methodology outside of France and Europe, as well as outside of a single organization. We argue that the methodology and sensitizing concepts of pragmatist sociology are useful for mapping how the Chinese government, Chinese executives and other corporate professionals justify their practices towards African societies. Simultaneously, we use the case of Chinese companies abroad to develop our broader contribution and argument: taken out of France, the orders-of-worth toolbox uncovers original repertoires of justification that testify to the multiplicity of emerging contemporary globalities and transnational practices of justification. These can be conceptualized to inform future research in relation to other

(non-)Western actors. To do this, we use five guiding questions (see Boltanski, 2011: 27–9; Hanrieder, 2016: 398): ‘What is valued and seen as virtue?’, ‘What is seen as a deficiency and proof of unworthiness?’, ‘What is the common good to be achieved?’, ‘What is the relevant polity or community?’ and ‘What are the objects or measures that are taken to signify more or less virtue and achievement of the common good in each respective order?’

In terms of material, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) built their orders of worth using Western philosophy and verified them in Western managerial handbooks (their empirical material), whereas we first of all focus ‘on the critical capacities of ordinary actors’ (Boltanski, 2013: 44). As such, we built our orders of worth by scrutinizing our own empirical research conducted in Zambia in June and July 2023. During the fieldwork, one of the authors lived in Chinese-owned compounds in the Zambian Copperbelt Province and Lusaka, conducted over 60 semi-structured interviews, and engaged in constant participant observation. In addition, the article is informed by both preceding and later interviews with Chinese development practitioners, experts and officials, as well as experts on Chinese cadres and professionals in Taipei, Singapore, Washington DC, Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong in 2022–23.¹ We complemented this research with available empirical, often ethnographic, research on Chinese companies in Africa (for example, Brautigam, 2009; 2015; Lam, 2017; Lee, 2017; Driessen, 2019), as well as research on Chinese corporations more generally. During the research, we particularly looked for situations in which actors drew on their critical ‘capacities, especially in the course of disputes’ (Boltanski, 2013: 44). Situations in which people defend their actions or engage in critique make the orders of worth on which actors base their judgements explicit (Boltanski, 2011: 24). Finally, we draw from Chinese philosophical works (for example, Chan, 1963; Ames and Rosemont, 1998; Ames and Hall, 2003; Rosemont and Ames, 2009), Chinese IR literature (for example, Qin, 2018; Shih et al, 2019; Zhao, 2019), Chinese (corporate) social responsibility standards and guidelines (SASAC, 2011; CCCMC, 2017; CHINCA, 2017), and corporate social responsibility (CSR) reports by Chinese companies. We look at CSR reports and regulations because they illustrate official policy on what kind of social responsibility Chinese actors abroad *should* take.

We picked Zambia, particularly Zambia’s Copperbelt Province, as the primary fieldwork site due to its symbolic importance for China–Africa engagement. Zambia is instructive for many other contexts with significant Chinese investment and professional communities in the Global South. It was one of the first countries to recognize the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 and is home to the largest early Chinese foreign aid project, namely, the Tazara Railway.² These long-standing relations have not only made Zambia a popular destination for Chinese investments but also provided China–Zambia relations with a high level of symbolic value regarding how China–Africa relations should be conducted from a Chinese perspective.

Zambia is also representative of Chinese investments in the Global South due to the presence of complicated networks of a combination of Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private enterprises. While differences between state-owned and private companies and between provincial and central SOEs exist, we include evidence from a broad, diverse range of large Chinese companies that operate in Africa in our analysis of what orders of worth are in use. Many large-scale investment projects across the continent are run by large state-led conglomerates and their subsidiaries, such as the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC), yet alongside

these central SOEs, provincial SOEs and private sector companies form the substantive part of Chinese investment in Africa. While these have various degrees of autonomy (Gu et al, 2016) and different degrees of exposure to global markets, they all operate with Chinese personnel and are subject to state direction, making them a good basis for understanding the variety of orders of worth in use. Furthermore, despite their differences, above a certain size, all companies have party secretaries integrated in their organization, and there is a widespread culture of ‘constant checking during board meetings of how decisions would align with what “the board above the board” wants’ (De Graaff, 2020: 220). Deeply embedded ‘revolving door’ dynamics leading to shifts between party and non-party roles or between business and the state (Grünberg and Drinhausen, 2019; Pearson et al, 2022) further add to common tropes of justification in use across corporate forms.

Importantly, therefore, we do not transpose substantive orders of worth, as theorized by Boltanski and Thévenot in a distinctly European historical and philosophical context, to elsewhere. Instead, we propose an orders-of-worth framework as a ‘generic heuristic for reconstructing repertoires of evaluation as shared moral narratives’ (Hanrieder, 2016: 398). By doing so, we contribute to overcoming the Eurocentrism in Boltanski and Thévenot’s substantive findings. At the same time, we are not aiming to carve out a single ‘Chinese’ moral order. The advantage of an orders-of-worth approach is its sensitivity to the plurality of moral claims and evaluation criteria that actors mobilize. These claims and criteria may contradict each other, or actors may seek ways to reconcile different demands and narratives. It is thus important to also consider how actors create compromises between orders of worth in everyday practice (Lamont, 2012: 208). In sum, we identify what Chinese actors say and do with regard to the social role of their large-scale projects in Africa and, on this basis, disentangle the different ‘moral’ orders they draw from, systematically conceptualizing new orders of worth that go significantly beyond and cut across supposedly ‘Chinese’ or ‘Western’ repertoires.

Global China in Africa: five orders of worth

In the following, we show five orders of worth that inform Chinese companies’ practices of justification: a Market Order, a Legalist Order, a Socialist (Party Line) Order, a Confucian Order and a Daoist Order. We posit that they hold heuristic value beyond the particularities of our case and are hence useful for understanding practices of justification with, as well as decidedly beyond, Western repertoires of justification in transnational governance more broadly. We structure our account of these five orders according to the five analytical dimensions introduced earlier, that is, along what is considered in each as (1) virtue, (2) deficiency, (3) common good, (4) relevant polity and (5) objects and measures of achievement (that is, how they are put to the test).

The Market Order

The first order we identify is a Market Order, which is familiar yet also distinct from Boltanski and Thévenot’s work. Virtue in the Chinese Market Order is constituted by adhering to market concerns of profitability, or ‘financial soundness and expected

return on investment (ROI)' (CHINCA, 2017: 6). Chinese chief executive officers (CEOs) operating in African countries underscore this. When Chen Yilong, the CEO of Wuhan Kaidi in Zambia, was asked, 'Why couldn't you start on a smaller scale?' (quoted in Brautigam, 2015: 134), he replied, 'The local infrastructure is very backward.... Even for a pilot project, we would have had to make a huge investment in an irrigation system, roads, worker housing, the processing plant – everything. We need to have a large enough scale to recover the investment.'

Ethnographic research on road-building projects in Ethiopia by Driessen (2019), as well as our own findings, concur. Decades of economic growth in China due to adherence to market mechanisms have created a strong belief in the power of markets, and this belief is being exported to Africa. In fact, most private Chinese entrepreneurs in Zambia pointed out that their primary motivation in coming to Zambia was the pursuit of higher profit margins than in China domestically. Conversely, most SOEs were there due to a combination of profit and policy goals (Bunskoek and Hönke, 2025).

Virtue in this market world is, to a certain extent, in line with Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006: 193–203) Market Order, as they argue that '[i]n the market world, actions are motivated by the *desires* of individuals, which drive them to possess the same objects, *rare goods* whose ownership is inalienable' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 196, emphases in original). They further emphasize the importance of 'competitiveness' and that '[w]orthy objects are *salable* goods that have a *strong position* in the market' and that '[w]orthy persons are rich, *millionaires*, and they *live the high life*' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 196, emphases in original). Conversely, Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: 197, emphases in original) characterize deficiency (or proof of unworthiness) in the market world as follows: '[t]he state of unworthiness is one in which persons *fail, stagnate, and lose out*, and in which goods are *rejected, spurned, hated*, instead of *desired*'. This is certainly the case in the Chinese market world in Africa as well. The success of companies depends on their ability to acquire profitable projects (Lam, 2017). Failure to succeed, or even to be productive, is conversely considered 'shameful'³ (Driessen, 2019: 11).

However, in Boltanski and Thévenot's (2006: 198) market world, the perceived common good that should be achieved is a situation of equilibrium that emerges because everyone is 'occupied with satisfying their self-centered desires'. This is in line with the idea of shareholder interest maximization as the sole responsibility of corporations – also known as the Friedman doctrine or shareholder theory (Lin, 2020). However, as will be discussed in the following, whereas Boltanski and Thévenot particularly argue that there is 'dignity' in following self-centred desires in the Market Order, for Chinese actors, this dignity is either non-existent, well hidden or effectively compromised/neutralized by the justifications from other orders of worth, slightly altering the content of the Market Order in our case. As official guidelines (CHINCA, 2017: 6) also underscore, even though companies are to 'do their best to uplift the financial performance', they should only do so 'based on an overall consideration of environmental and social benefits'. In their judgments, courts in China tend to agree. As one ruling argues:

Article 5 of China's Company Law and article 7 of China's Partnership Enterprise Law highlight the importance of corporate social responsibility. Thus, this court reminds the [defendant] corporation to try its best to balance the relationship between profitability and social responsibility while legally

operating in business, thereby increasing its long-term competitiveness. (Lin, 2020: 598)

As for the relevant polity or community, arguably, whereas in Boltanski and Thévenot's Market Order, a universalization of self-interested profit maximization is perceived as desirable – as it is in neoliberal ideology – Chinese guidelines continuously focus on how 'projects should be closely aligned with *local* industry trends' and how they should 'assess their relevance to the *local* economy' and 'be aimed to boost *regional* economic growth' (CHINCA, 2017: 7–8, emphases added). In other words, profit maximization is not seen as merely for the 'self' but, rather, should be embedded in localities (that is, 'win-win'), making it more relational than Boltanski and Thévenot's Market Order. That is to say, actors first need to implement certain policies (*zhengce*) before they are allowed to give their self-centred desires free rein (personal interview with China expert, Taipei, 23 May 2022).

Finally, achievement of the common good is measured by the extent to which companies are operating efficiently and making a profit. Yet, in doing so, maintaining social stability is key (Lee, 2017). The fact that such a Market Order plays an important role in the justification process of Chinese corporate actors is evident not only in ethnographic research from Africa, such as that quoted from at the beginning of this section, but also in Chinese official narratives and guidelines. For instance, the BRI visions and action plan outlined in its foundational policy document state:

[t]he initiative to jointly build the Belt and Road ... is designed to uphold the global free trade regime and the open world economy in the spirit of open regional cooperation. It is aimed at promoting orderly and free flow of economic factors, highly efficient allocation of resources and deep integration of markets. (NDRC, 2015)

The 2011 guidelines put forward by the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council (SASAC) also state that '[b]usiness administration and capability of control and supervision are enforced, such as minimizing operational costs, strengthening risk precaution, increasing investment profit ratio, and enforcing market competitiveness as well' (SASAC, 2011: emphasis added). Last but not least, a large part of the competitiveness (and legitimacy) of Chinese corporations in Africa has to do with their ability to finish projects on time and thus efficiently (Brautigam, 2015).

The Legalist Order

A second prominent order is the Legalist Order. Chinese professionals frequently champion adherence to the law as a prime virtue. In contrast to most CSR policies in the West, it is not considered voluntary for companies to assume social responsibility. Indeed, it is mandatory for Chinese companies in China (since 2006 [see National People's Congress, 2006]) and increasingly in Africa (since 2018 [see UNDPC et al, 2019: 23]). As Article 5 of the 2006 Chinese Companies Law illustrates:

In its operational activities, a company shall abide by laws and administrative regulations, observe social morals and commercial ethics, persist in honesty

and good faith, accept supervision by the government and the public, and assume social responsibility. The legitimate rights and interests of companies shall be protected by law, and shall be inviolable. (National People's Congress, 2006)

It is in line with Legalism, the Chinese philosophical school of thought, which, in contrast to Confucianism, 'is skeptical of any form of self-claimed altruism or morality and instead advocates uniformity of law (法) enforcement' (Lin, 2017: 53). According to Legalism, no company would engage in social responsibilities if they were not required to by law. Lin (2020: 610), however, shows that Chinese courts use this obligation most often 'for the sake of "social stability"', which is a primary concern of the Chinese government. Whereas the Companies Law is domestic legislation, and thus not (directly) applicable to Chinese companies operating abroad, recent social responsibility guidelines for these Chinese companies underscore that they are to '[o]bserve relevant employment and labor laws', 'ensure lawful and rational land access', 'implement local laws and regulations', and '[e]nsure that investments and operations are in line with applicable Chinese and host country laws and regulations and comply with general industry standards' (CCCMC, 2017: 10, 14, 3, 20). The fact that 'China's NDRC [National Development and Reform Commission], the People's Bank of China [POBC], and MOFCOM [Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China] jointly signed [in 2017] the *Memorandum of Cooperation on Taking Joint Disciplinary Actions Against Subjects with Serious Dishonesty in the Foreign Economic Cooperation Field*' (UNDPC et al, 2019: 23) further emphasizes a trend towards making corporate social responsibilities mandatory in Chinese outbound investment by making it possible to punish companies domestically.

Consequently, deficiency in the Legalist Order is constituted by a failure to adhere to (local) laws (CHINCA, 2017: 20), which would lead to chaos. Chaos is the antithesis of order, which is the common good and presented as leading to predictable and stable behaviour by all actors. This becomes apparent in, for instance, China's official stance on human rights, which constantly stresses the importance of 'social' and 'public' order as a means to achieve the well-being of the population (see SCIO, 1991). The relevant polity that the Legalist Order is applicable to is constituted by a combination of the global, that is, international laws, and nation-states/areas with their own legal systems, that is, local/domestic laws. Finally, the extent to which actors engage in orderly and law-abiding practices measures the achievement of the common good. It should be noted here how the perceived inadequacy of local laws in certain African countries has led the Chinese state to start holding Chinese companies responsible domestically, as highlighted earlier (UNDPC et al, 2019). In the Zambian Copperbelt, this was illustrated, for instance, by the fact that some of the Chinese interlocutors we spoke to would regularly go on joint patrols with the Zambian police to make sure that companies stuck to the law and that order and stability were preserved in the province.

The Socialist (Party Line) Order

Alongside this strong legalist current operates the Socialist (Party Line) Order. In this order, virtue is constituted by pursuing and implementing the official party line. What exactly constitutes this party line, however, constantly changes in China.

This happened, for instance, when Chinese President Deng Xiaoping replaced the virtue of the struggle for ‘class eradication’ of the pre-1978 Maoist era with (equal) economic ‘development’ (*fazhan*) post-reform. Deng (quoted in [Sun, 1995: 203](#)) argued for the ‘elimination of poverty’ through ‘developing the production forces’ and the ‘elevation of the standards of the material and cultural life of the people’ while maintaining social stability. Judging by the active push of the Chinese government and corporations alike to improve contributions to the host society, the development of CSR contributes to this virtue too.

Thus, companies and cadres are required to continuously keep themselves updated on new developments ([Pieke, 2009; Tsai and Tian, 2022](#)). This is the case not only for Chinese companies and cadres in China but also for those operating in Africa. As [Lee \(2017: 101\)](#) describes in regard to state-owned companies in Zambia, Communist Party agents are present to offer ‘party cell meetings for members to learn about major policy documents and directions from the party leadership in China’. Regular ‘inspection’ (考察) visits from Beijing ensured party discipline, and during our time in Zambia, the authors spoke to multiple officials on such inspection trips.

One major policy document dealing with China’s role in Africa is the recent white paper ‘China and the world in the new era’ ([SCIO, 2019](#)), which states that ‘China strengthens solidarity and cooperation ... characterized by equality, mutual benefit and common development ... helping the peoples of all developing countries achieve a better life’. Such discourses, rather than constituting empty rhetoric, should be taken seriously as representing the official party line and be interpreted in line with local conditions ([Bunskoek and Shih, 2021](#)).

In contrast, we identify the main proof of unworthiness (that is, deficient behaviour) in the Socialist (Party Line) Order as divergence from the party line. Under current practices, this means the inability to achieve economic development and/or contributing to social instability ([Tsai and Dean, 2014: 345](#)). Exploiting others for the benefit of the self is one way of achieving the latter. In other words, Chinese actors are expected to achieve economic development, and in this process, they should maintain social stability. In fact, their career trajectories depend on achieving these tasks. Since many internalize such views, localities that do not strive for similar goals are considered ‘backward’ from the point of view of Chinese interlocutors. Consequently, contradictions with claims to local self-determination (see later) can be found in many of the controversies over Chinese corporations and their local engagement.

The common good in the Socialist (Party Line) Order is (equal or ‘common’) development. To achieve this goal, workers are expected to exert themselves to the utmost. As such, it is considered acceptable that (Chinese) workers are (temporarily) exploited – that is, that they ‘eat bitterness’ (see [Lam, 2017; Driessen, 2019](#)) – because they are jointly working to achieve an honourable goal: development. It should thus not be considered exploitation but, rather, self-sacrifice or, perhaps more appropriately, selfless behaviour. The relevant polity in which (equal) development should take place is, first of all, different localities within nation-states, which local governments are responsible for, and, by extension, different areas in the world, which a form of global governance is responsible for. Finally, the extent to which the common good of (equal) development has been achieved is measured by the extent to which developed societies and a world free from ‘backwardness’, social instability, exploitation, hegemony and imperialism are achieved. According to official Chinese

foreign policy discourses (Wang, 2022), such a world is the ‘Community of Shared Future for Mankind’. Although this idea remains ill-defined, this is done deliberately in order to allow for adaptation to local conditions along China’s BRI, including in African countries (Bunskoek and Shih, 2021).

The Confucian Order

In contrast to the Legalist and Market Orders, which assume actors are self-interested, we also identified a Confucian⁴ Order that is based on the idea of ethical (that is, correct) behaviour as a main virtue to strive for. In practice, this means that actors are expected to demonstrate sincerely selfless or, at the very least, seemingly selfless behaviour (Shih, 2010). In this light, a company will only be perceived as moral when it does not pursue, or seems not to pursue, apparent self-interests (of the ‘lesser self’) but, instead, the broader interests of a larger community (the relational interests of a ‘greater self’). We see this, for instance, in regular announcements, such as ‘[w]e are here because of the relationship between our two countries.... We have come here to help Zimbabwe produce’ (Chinese manager at Wanjin, quoted in Brautigam, 2015: 140).

The fact that Chinese companies tend not to claim authorship of corporate social engagement (Yin and Zhang, 2012; Lam, 2017: 137; Lee, 2017: 74), even though they might enhance their productivity and comply with the law because of it, underscores their (at the very least, pretended) adherence to the Confucian ideal of selflessness. After all, while in global, explicit CSR, claiming authorship would be a virtue in the framework of a Market Order, it exhibits selfishness, which is not valued by an audience influenced by Confucianism and hence has a negative effect. In other words, it would make the CSR insincere. This would be particularly problematic because the concept of sincerity (*cheng*) has been institutionalized in China’s (periphery) diplomacy as a core guideline since 2013 (Chen, 2013).

Logically following from the foregoing, the main deficiency in the Confucian world is selfishness and thus insincerity in working for a broader community.⁵ The common good to be achieved can be identified as establishing a network of stable and long-term relationships, also referred to as the ‘balance of relationships’ (see Shih et al, 2019). The idea is that this would provide both Chinese and other relationally minded actors with ‘relational security’ (Shih and Huang, 2015), ideally leading first to a ‘harmonious society’ and then to a ‘harmonious world’.⁶ This can only be achieved through sincere consideration of the other side in the relationship. In relation to Chinese companies in Africa, this shows in practices of reciprocal gift-giving: from the Chinese side, development, low or zero-interest loans, and prestige projects, such as stadiums and the African Union headquarters (BBC, 2012); and from the African side, diplomatic recognition and/or siding with China on issues such as human rights or China’s Xinjiang region (Olewe, 2021).

Chinese governmental as well as corporate actors exhibit this, overall, through what we call ‘accommodative behaviour’ (Driessen, 2019: 15). They attempt to have good relations with the ruling elites of the host country no matter the political system (Gonzalez-Vicente, 2011: 83). In doing so, they actually seek to reproduce developmental practices from China, where local governments and institutions actively attracted and supported companies to jointly develop localities (Brautigam, 2015: 49, 125, 161; Driessen, 2019: 153–4). Social responsibility guidelines for

Chinese companies operating abroad also confirm this when they underscore that companies should '[e]nhance cooperation with local government' (CHINCA, 2017: 14). This illustrates the hierarchical world view existent in the Confucian Order, which presupposes that elites are, or at least should be, inherently more virtuous (and thus superior) to those lower in the hierarchy (their populations) and should always have in mind the interests of the people they govern.⁷ In fact, they should be like parents to their populations.⁸ In return, those lower in the hierarchy should ritualistically acknowledge the superiority of those higher in the hierarchy by reciprocating through exhibiting obedience (Chan, 2009), in return for which they will then accrue further benefits.

Perceived from this angle, corporate social engagement by Chinese companies should therefore be seen not only as an attempt to establish relationality with local institutions and audiences but also as proof of Chinese institutions that actively encourage Chinese companies to improve company–society relations in order to establish harmony (and thus stability) as part of a larger governmentality. Illustrative of diverging epistemic viewpoints between Chinese and African actors is, however, the extent to which this often fails on the ground (Cannon, 2020). Based on a combination of survey data and qualitative interviews, Wang and Elliot (2014) show that although local elites tend to welcome Chinese actors, the latter have not won the hearts and minds of African societies as a whole. Yet, at the same time, Afrobarometer (2021) perception data give a more mixed picture, including notable approval rates of Chinese activities on the continent. In the Zambian Copperbelt, many Chinese corporate leaders also complained about the behaviour of local officials because they saw them as only thinking of their own narrow interests rather than the broader development of Zambia. In their view, this complicated the work done by Chinese enterprises.

The relevant polity in the Confucian Order is not limited to the geographic territory of the PRC or the citizens of China. On the contrary, it encompasses 'all-under-heaven' (*Tianxia*), or the world as a whole (Zhao, 2019). For instance, this is reflected in how an Africa-based Chinese training centre viewed the international food crisis as 'a battle faced by the entire human race' (quoted in Brautigam, 2015: 135). Within neo-Confucian philosophy, which draws significantly from Buddhism and (neo-)Daoism (more on this later), all things in the universe are connected to each other, underscoring the oneness of the universe. As such, '[t]he many are [ultimately] one and the one is actually differentiated in the many' (Chan, 1963: 474). Since this creates a situation in which nation-state borders are essentially irrelevant, the Confucian world is highly idealistic and even utopian (Callahan, 2008). This is highlighted by the characterization of the 'virtuous' or 'great' man (that is, *jūnzǐ*), who, in the words of the influential Ming Dynasty statesman, scholar and general Wang Yangming, 'regards the world as one family and the country as one person' (quoted in Chan, 1963: 659). In effect, what occurs is a phenomenon that Carrozzah and Benabdallah (2022) introduce as 'Selving', or including everyone, which introduces an alternative hierarchy of knowledge production than the one adopted by 'Othering', which excludes others.

The implication of this global view that is unobstructed by nation-state borders is that, for instance, poverty in Africa is seen not only as an African problem ('Other') but also as a problem for the world as a whole (the Confucian 'greater self') and

thus for China. In other words, Africa is part of the self, meaning that in this epistemology of ‘all-under-heaven’, no such concept as ‘Other’ exists (Shih, 2010). If you combine this with the way Confucius describes exemplary persons, namely as ‘establish[ing] others in seeking to establish themselves and promot[ing] others in seeking to get there themselves’ (Ames and Rosemont, 1998: 110), China helping Africa is simultaneously a way of China establishing itself, for example, ideally by providing China with a good image (Breslin, 2020), though also by creating business opportunities for Chinese corporations, gaining diplomatic recognition, facilitating access to natural resources and so on.

Finally, how would actors put this to the test and know whether the common good has been achieved? Material on Chinese corporate practices suggests that where the Confucian world is evoked for justification, the litmus test is the extent to which a network of sincere, reciprocal, long-term, stable and thus harmonious relationships exists in a locality, in the international realm and in corporation–state–society relations. One of the issues with this line of justification is that it coexists in many places alongside practices that emphasize elite-level company–state relations at the expense of other echelons of society and the localities negatively affected by corporate operations (Krippahl, 2021).

The Daoist Order

Finally, we identify an influential Daoist world at work in how Chinese policies and professionals understand and justify their role. It shines through the practices of justification employed in Africa alongside the other four orders. During his visit to Ghana, a Chinese SOE headquarter director put it as follows: ‘We have to respect the culture and tradition of the hosting country and to achieve harmonious development, which means that the development of our enterprise has to gain recognition from the hosting government and the people’ (quoted in Lam, 2017: 46). While some of this sounds close to the Confucian world outlined earlier, the main virtue in the Daoist Order is ‘to let things take their own course’ without taking action (Ames and Hall, 2003). Such non-action, however, does not constitute inactivity but, rather, means ‘taking no action that is contrary to [the] nature [of a locality]’ (Chan, 1963: 136).

Such thinking is reflected in both Chinese foreign policy discourses and practices of non-intervention. Moreover, the 2011 SASAC guidelines also state that central SOEs ‘should implement CSR according to the practical situation of the country and the circumstances of themselves’ (SASAC, 2011). Daoism inspires a cyclical view of history, in which periods of disorder/chaos (*luan*) are naturally followed by periods of order (*zhi*) (Ames and Hall, 2003).⁹ To impose something on a locality would only be counterproductive. Thus, ‘[t]he Chinese approach of investing in local infrastructure and ruling elites’ wellbeing embodies the principle of non-intervention in the hope that eventually, elites’ capacity to effect tolerance and material improvement will restore general order’ (Shih, 2014). This is reflected, we argue, in the tendency of Chinese companies to go with what localities – arguably often in the sense of their ruling elites – want or perceive as necessary, though these may be seen by Western companies as not viable (see, for example, Brautigam, 2009: 137–8).

Conversely, the main deficiency in the Daoist Order is the imposition of one’s way upon a locality. In other words, if China were to start enforcing a specific

‘Chinese’ model of development upon an African country, this would constitute proof of unworthiness. A difference compared to the Confucian Order is that ‘Confucianists want things transformed through education, but Zhuangzi [a key Daoist] leaves transformation to things themselves’ (Chan, 1963: 178). Benabdallah (2020) accurately shows how both streams of thinking play out in Chinese foreign policy and China–Africa relations. On the one hand, Chinese actors are increasingly willing to provide people-to-people training to African actors, whereas on the other hand, they only do so upon request by African actors.

In a Daoist world, justificatory practices champion situations in which everything can follow its own course or nature, which has to be respected and should not be intervened in by outsiders who do not understand this nature. Such emphasis on ‘African’ preferences and solutions is indeed valued on the ground. A report based on interviews with stakeholders undertaken by United Nations Development Programme China and others (UNDPC et al, 2019: xi, 6) concludes, for instance, that ‘local governments that have worked with Chinese companies in general have a positive attitude toward Chinese investors’, as they see these investors as sharing their experiences from China with other countries ‘to help them develop their *own* models for increasing economic growth’. This aligns with the proliferation of national development visions in Africa, for example, Kenya Vision 2030, Cameroon Vision 2035 and Rwanda Vision 2050, which suggest African leaders’ growing confidence in their own developmental paths and are likely to be the result of increased Chinese funding. The ‘Administrative Measures for the Outbound Investments of Enterprises’, implemented by China in 2014, also stipulate that enterprises should ‘respect local customs and cultures, fulfill social responsibilities ... and create a good image for Chinese investors’ (UNDPC et al, 2019: 22). Furthermore, while, like in the Confucian world, arguments drawn from the Daoist Order of worth are geared towards a oneness of the universe, the common good is put to the test by measuring whether any actor feels infringed upon by outside intervention, that is, all localities can only be judged by their own nature. In practice, this is reflected in Chinese companies and practitioners not forcing (or at least claiming not to force) African countries to develop along particular (Chinese or, for that matter, Western) ways.

The importance of a Daoist Order of worth is reflected empirically in the fact that the Chinese government does not officially propagate a single ‘China model’ and, in its foreign policy narratives and CSR guidelines alike, keeps stressing that each country/locality should develop along its own local conditions (Bunskoek, 2024). Naturally, tensions arise with several of the other orders of worth already described: with the Socialist (Party Line) Order, as it rests on an explicit expectation to develop in certain ways, and also with the Confucian Order in cases where elite interests are in opposition to those of other societal and local groups.

Summary

We have built the five orders of worth described earlier from multiple practices of justification that Chinese actors employ within their projects in Africa. The orders-of-worth heuristic has thus proven fruitful for eliciting a larger multiplicity of repertoires of justification that cut across repertoires often considered either ‘Western’ or ‘Chinese’. As such, we thus contribute new substantive orders of worth and summarize them in Table 1.

Table 1: The five orders

	Virtue	Deficiency	Common good	Relevant community	Objects and measures of achievement
The Market Order	Profitability, competitiveness	Lack of competitiveness, failure to be profitable	Profit maximization for the greater self	Nation-state, globe	Ubiquitous (market) efficiency and profit making while maintaining stability
The Legalist Order	Adherence to the law	Disobedience of the law	Order	International law, national laws	The extent to which actors adhere to the law
The Socialist (Party Line) Order	Pursuing and implementing the party line (post-1978: development)	Divergence from the party line: unwillingness to develop, exploitation of others	(Equal) Development	Nation-state, globe	Absence of 'backwardness', inequality and exploitation
The Confucian Order	Ethically 'correct' behaviour, that is, selflessness	Selfishness, insincerity	Universal relatedness, balance of relationships	<i>Tianxia</i> , the world as a whole	Omnipresent (pretended) harmonious relationships
The Daoist Order	Non-action (that is, no unnatural action for a locality)	Imposing one's will on the natural flow of things	Non-intervention in the flow of things	The entire universe, 'ten-thousand things'	Absence of (unnatural) action, localities judged by their own nature

Orders of worth, conflicts and compromises

Working with an orders-of-worth heuristic in regard to Global China in Africa is also useful to understand the contradictions, conflicts and compromises between different orders of worth in these relations. As Boltanski and Thévenot (2006: chs 7, 9) emphasize, orders of worth overlap and contradict each other. What is accepted and valued in one may be ignored or condemned in another. Individuals have to constantly manage discrepancies in ideas and demands as well as inconsistencies in their own practice, manage conflicts, and endure situational compromises. Compromises, by definition, might not satisfy all expectations of any individual order, but by combining elements from different worlds, people 'agree to suspend a clash' (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006: 277). Such a pragmatic understanding of conflict and compromise emphasizes process and leaves room for creative coexistence as well as change. While this section cannot offer a comprehensive analysis of all tensions and compromises among the five orders identified, in the following, we concentrate on two examples that emerged from our analysis of Chinese projects in Africa.

A first obvious conflict revolves around selfishness as virtue versus selfishness as deficiency. The virtues of the Market Order are evidently much cherished by Chinese firms but are also constantly adapted to other orders of worth, questioned or denied, such as in the moral orders rooted in Confucianism and Daoism, as well as (party line) socialism. For instance, the individual desire to possess objects is less individual

in the Chinese context than in Western traditions of thought; in fact, it is generally connected to the ‘family’ (家) or ‘nation’ (国家, literally, ‘country-family’) (that is, the Confucian Order) (Rosemont and Ames, 2009). Moreover, although the idea that ‘worthy persons are rich’ is reminiscent of Deng Xiaoping’s slogan ‘to get rich is glorious’, its implications are different. As Deng Xiaoping (quoted in Goodman, 2015: 187) himself explained in 1986 to Western journalists:

To get rich in a socialist society means prosperity for the entire people.... We permit some people and some regions to become prosperous first, for the purpose of achieving common prosperity faster. That is why our policy will not lead to polarization, to a situation where the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.

In other words, finding ways in which to get rich on an individual basis is a process to achieve prosperity first for the family and then for the entire population. Naturally, in practice, many examples can be found in China where people have acted merely out of self-interest and polarization between the rich and poor has taken place. However, these rich people are not considered to possess ‘dignity’, as in the market world, and the government is taking strong measures both to punish those who merely seek to maximize their self-interests (that is, corrupt officials [Ang, 2020]) and to reduce the wealth gap between China’s rich and poor (Jain-Chandra et al, 2018).

In the context of Chinese companies in Africa, this means that they are expected to do more than just maximize profit. In fact, since 1 March 2018, they are legally required to contribute to Chinese image building abroad (NDRC, 2017). On the other hand, this is still quite a recent development, albeit one that is in line with developments in China, only occurring a decade or so later. In the period just after China’s 1978 reform and opening up, which Huang (2008) calls China’s ‘entrepreneurial decade’, it became more legitimate to adhere to the Market Order in China. People were allowed to experiment with capitalism, and some were allowed to get rich first because the overarching goal was to find out what kind of (capitalist) market development worked in localities (see Ang, 2016). Therefore, it is likely that for the first Chinese companies that were pushed to Africa due to intense competition in domestic markets (Pan, 2009: 24), justifying behaviour by using the Market Order was also more widespread. This was a period in which getting rich actually did have dignity. However, in the longer term, such development turned out to be unsustainable, that is, it led to irresponsible competitiveness, often between Chinese companies (see Lam, 2017), and to social and environmental problems. In response, China announced its Company Law in 2006, which mandated that companies engage in social responsibility. In Africa, this became required starting in 2018. In fact, a similar tendency can be perceived in the development of Chinese IR, which is highly critical of the Western assumption in IR theories of states as primarily self-interested actors and juxtaposes this with the Chinese idea of states as relational actors (see, for example, Qin, 2018).

A second source of tension arises from the Daoist logic of going with the (local) flow versus the Socialist (Party Line) Order to follow party directives and the Confucian logic of building relationships with local elites. While Chinese actors need to keep their practices in line with central state directives according to the Socialist Order, hence suggesting central party-state control, this control should certainly not be

viewed along neorealist lines. In fact, one of the main concerns of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is to improve the Chinese image abroad (NDRC, 2017; Breslin, 2020) in order to establish and strengthen a network of long-term stable relationships (Confucian Order) (Shih et al, 2019). However, as our own, as well as other, ethnographic research shows, Chinese SOEs become more successful in African countries the longer they are there and the more locally embedded they become (Daoist Order) – a tendency that is in line with them being more in favour of engaging in social responsibilities (UNDPC et al, 2019: x). More importantly, the more locally embedded and successful these companies become, the more the Chinese state actually retreats from influencing these companies and the more leverage they gain vis-à-vis the Chinese state (Lam, 2017). This suggests that the CCP and practitioners alike adhere to the Daoist idea that ‘no action [should be taken] that is contrary to [the] nature [of a locality]’ (Laozi, quoted in Chan, 1963: 136). In other words, judgement should be left to local(ized) actors as to how to develop localities (Daoist Order, also Legalist Order, as actors should adhere to local laws). However, since the Confucian Order sees local elites as the most reliable (that is, they should be like parents to the population) and therefore seeks to build long-term relationships with them, Chinese corporations tend to conduct development in line with the ideas of development of local elites, which is not necessarily in line with the broader flow of the population (that is, the Daoist Order) (Corkin, 2013: 168). Moreover, the idea of development as virtue (Socialist [Party Line] Order) often contradicts local populations’ preference to preserve their natural environments (Daoist Order) (Prasso, 2022).

Overall, contradictions and tensions abound between the orders of worth at work in China’s Africa relations. The strength of our approach, based on Boltanski and Thévenot, is that it not only provincializes the orders of worth they developed but also assumes that such contradictions and compromises will remain, as it understands them as constitutive features of (transnational) social orders. Hence, the approach is conducive for further research into how such tensions and contradictions affect the public perception and empirical legitimacy of actors, who capitalizes on those contradictions and how, and, perhaps most importantly, what adaptations and compromises are worked out by actors among the various moral orders at play. This will contribute to a better understanding of how alternative practices and fragile compromises emerging from South–South relations will shape the increasingly complex landscapes of transnational governance.

Conclusion

This article has offered a new analysis of practices of justification in transnational governance. It has adapted the orders-of-worth heuristic developed by Boltanski and Thévenot and taken it out of France to the sites of global Chinese companies in Africa. By so doing, it has revealed distinct orders of worth in use: a Market Order, a Legalist Order, a Socialist (Party Line) Order, a Confucian Order and a Daoist Order. These partly overlap, and they significantly differ from the orders of worth that Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) proposed. They also do not map onto often-used binaries, such as ‘West’, ‘non-Western’ or ‘Chinese’. Rather, it was shown how actors mobilize multiple repertoires in ways that creatively cut across, adapt and relate various transnational traditions of thought. The article has argued for greater analytical

sensitivity and theoretical attention to diverse practices and related repertoires of justification in the situated and overlapping orders of worth that characterize the contemporary frontier zones of a post-Western and pluriversal international order.

As such, the article offers a route towards making research on transnational governance practices and their justification more global and more situational and pragmatic. Chinese actors are neither following a blueprint invented in Beijing nor merely mimicking Western-style scripts. Instead, they critically engage with a multitude of orders of worth, leading to situations in which Chinese companies do things ‘differently different’ (Bilgin, 2012), depending on the place, people involved and time. While the Chinese have ‘distinct and diverse cultural and historical experiences that inform their conceptions of and approach to world order’ (Acharya, 2014: 653), the implication of this, from an orders-of-worth perspective, is not to look for difference. To better understand contemporary transnational governance more broadly, it is instead crucial to include a broader range of diverse repertoires of justification as much as the pragmatic capacities of actors on the ground to relate and remake these repertoires. We argue more generally that attending to multiplicity and processes, as Schindler and Wille (2019: 1022) put it, while using a general methodology guiding reconstruction allows us to work towards more situational and regional repertoires of justification in public action (see Corcuff, 2005).

By attending to the multiplicity of practices of justification at play, a worlded orders-of-worth framework is useful to better understand public action in normatively plural settings of transnational governance that are not highly institutionalized. Beyond the particular empirical context of China–Africa relations used earlier, future research could use the orders-of-worth heuristic and repertoires of justification developed here to analyse Chinese actors in other contexts, other South–South relations and changing repertoires of practice over all that get assembled and used in the context of a transforming and fragmenting world order.

Notes

¹ Interviews were conducted in Taipei in April–May 2022, Singapore in June 2022, Washington DC in March 2023 and Shanghai, Beijing and Hong Kong in November–December 2023.

² The Tazara Railway is a single-track railway linking Tanzania’s port of Dar es Salaam with Zambia’s Central Province. It was entirely funded by the PRC and built between 1970 and 1975 to end landlocked Zambia’s dependence on Rhodesia and South Africa, which were both ruled by white-minority governments (Robinson and Shambaugh, 1994).

³ The risk of ‘shame’ or ‘losing face’ (*diulian*) vis-à-vis peers is particularly high in the Chinese context.

⁴ Over the course of China’s dynastic history, Confucianism dominantly constituted the world view of the ruling classes. Whereas former Chairman of the Communist Party Mao Zedong tried to rid China of Confucianist influence, Confucianism has made a strong comeback in China since the beginning of the 2000s.

⁵ This is underscored by, for instance, the CHINCA (2017) guidelines, as well as the increasingly stringent attempts at holding Chinese companies abroad responsible for their actions (UNDPC et al, 2019).

⁶ Both concepts were introduced by Chinese President Hu Jintao in 2005 and are fundamentally Confucian in origin.

⁷ Naturally, this is an ideal that is not always achieved in practice.

⁸ Hence, Chinese officials are often referred to as ‘parent-officials’ (父母官).

⁹ The same is true in the Confucian Order. In fact, Confucianism, Daoism and Buddhism share certain characteristics, such as universal relatedness, which is why they are often put together as the ‘Unity of the Three Teachings’ (三教同一). We decided to separate them here and specifically point out the Confucian and Daoist Orders because the empirical materials strongly reflect their unique characteristics.

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Research ethics statement

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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