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Traditional Chinese Economic Thought and Its Inspiration to Cultural Economy

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Abstract: China's 5,000-year civilization is replete with profound economic philosophies that have historically guided its socioeconomic evolution. This study systematically examines seven economic laws and seven governance strategies inherent to China's traditional economic paradigm—a body of wisdom accumulated through empirical practices over history, providing trans-generational insights for socioeconomic governance. By identifying five synergistic policy mechanisms that elucidate complex policy interactions, this study applies the *Four Dimensions-Nine Domains* framework from *Guanzi* to construct a novel economic paradigm. This analytical framework proposes a governance model that moves beyond conventional reductionist analytical frameworks, embodying the integration of theoretical principles and pragmatic applications. It thereby provides a methodological innovation pathway for cultural economy studies under the purview of traditional Chinese economic philosophy.

Keywords: traditional Chinese economic thought, economic governance, Guanzi, cultural-historical syncretism

1. Introduction

Throughout its over 5,000 years of civilization, China has forged five distinctive characteristics—continuity, innovation, unity, inclusiveness, and peace—through its outstanding traditional culture, while ancient China, rooted in economic practices and this rich cultural heritage, accumulated and cultivated a unique series of traditional economic thoughts (Cheng et al. 2024). These economic thoughts not only carry the cultural DNA of managing state affairs and addressing economic challenges but are also deeply imbued with the ideal of governing the country and bringing peace to the world, thus encompassing a wealth of economic analyses based on state governance. Take Sima Qian as an example. In his works *Ping Zhun Shu* (Book on Balanced Standards) and *Huozhi Liezhuan* (Biographies of the Wealthy), he not only documented the economic history prior to the Western Han Dynasty but also articulated his own economic theories (Liu et al. 2019). Particularly in *Huozhi Liezhuan*, Sima Qian drawing on his profound philosophical and historical insights, examined the natural conditions, resources, population, customs, agriculture, industry, commerce, and urban development across various regions (Li, 2000). He proposed a series of economic viewpoints characterized by regional and geographical economics (Deng, 1994). Many of these ideas are comparable to Adam Smith's theories of free markets and the division of labor (Cheng et al. 2024). For instance, Sima Qian's concept of the best governance argued that government intervention, especially controlling markets to compete with the people for profit, is the least desirable approach (Chen, 2015). This idea is remarkably close to modern market economy theories, which reflects a macroeconomic management theory that opposes excessive state control and advocates laissez-faire principles.

The traditional Chinese economic thoughts also place significant emphasis on ethics, particularly Mencius's theory of innate human goodness and the

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concepts of Ren (benevolence) and Yi (righteousness). Confucian economic ethics advocate prioritizing righteousness over profit and thinking of righteousness when pursuing profit, opposing profit-seeking at the expense of morality (Zhang, 2022). When conflicts arise between self-interest and altruism, moral principles and the interests of others should take precedence. At the same time, righteousness and profit are not mutually exclusive but can complement and transform into each other, as demonstrated in concepts like using righteousness to achieve profit, pursuing both righteousness and profit, and the unity of righteousness and profit (Zhao, 2024). Therefore, traditional Chinese economics moves beyond the one-dimensional assumption of the rational economic man, incorporate the social attributes of individuals, and dialectically unify self-interest and altruism. This approach integrates individual rationality with collective rationality, drawing nourishment from the core assumptions of traditional Chinese economic thought (Cheng et al. 2024). Moreover, traditional Chinese economic thought is rich in people-centered ideas, such as the people are the foundation of the state, think of righteousness when pursuing profit, the world belongs to all, the best governance follows natural tendencies, harmonizing all nations, the world as one family, harmony between humans and nature, reforming the old to create the new, and equal distribution to eliminate poverty. As an integral part of China's outstanding traditional culture, these concepts are deeply rooted in people-centered thinking, emphasizing the interests and well-being of the people, as well as the dignity, value, and development of individuals (Cheng et al. 2024).

In the article *On Ancient Chinese Economics* published in *The Eastern Miscellany* (1905), it was proposed that Chinese economics originated from *the Book of Changes* and primarily emphasized benefiting the people. The article defined Chinese economics as a theory centered on redirecting the ruler's private expenditures to public use for the nation, advocating that the ruler's diligence and frugality could increase national wealth, thus embodying a people-benefiting philosophy (Bai & Yan, 2024). Ye (1998) referenced Liang Qichao's 1902 proposal in *On the Trends of Chinese Academic Thought* to compile a *History of Chinese Economic Thought*, collecting the theories of ancient sages for comparison with Western doctrines, regarded Liang as a pioneer in exploring Chinese economics. Cheng et al. (2020) suggested that Gu Shou'en's 1931 proposal in *The Era Background and Characteristics of Chinese Economics* to "create a new economics" might mark the first formal appearance of Chinese economics in the public sphere in a strict sense. Tang (1930) in *The Reformation of Chinese Economic Thought*, pointed out that for thousands of years, China had economic thought but no economic science. He advocated that Chinese scholars should build on traditional economic thought, critically introduce foreign economic theories, and reform Chinese economic thought to address China's economic issues.

Schumpeter expressed skepticism, if not outright denial, regarding the analytical components of traditional Chinese economic thought (Cheng et al. 2024). Schumpeter (2001) argued that there existed a highly developed public administrative system in China, which effectively addressed the agricultural, commercial, and fiscal issues of the time. Classical Chinese literature frequently discusses these issues from an ethical perspective. Although these documents can be compiled into a comprehensive economic policy system and encompass methods of currency management and exchange control, there is still a lack of surviving scientific works that rigorously reason about economic issues (Schumpeter, 2001). Choi (1989) used Han Feizi as an example, refuted Schumpeter's view. He argued that Han Feizi's political economy resembled modern microeconomics, as both were based on the self-interested individual hypothesis. Like the public choice school, Han Feizi also analyzed the economic impact of rent-seeking behavior. Taylor (1956) claimed that no Eastern country has anything comparable to the promising beginnings of economic analysis made by Western medieval monks.

Petrochilos (2002) contended that defining economics as the study of a self-regulating market economy with fully capitalist characteristics was a very narrow interpretation, not widely accepted by economists. Schumpeter's market-exchange-based definition of economic analysis, representative of mainstream scholarship, has been challenged by both domestic and international scholars. These critics emphasize the unique characteristics of ancient societies, arguing that their economic analyses followed distinct patterns and should not be simplistically evaluated using modern economic frameworks (Cheng et al. 2024).

The emergence of the aforementioned perspectives can be attributed to the generally low regard for traditional Chinese economic thought within Western economic historiography, coupled with limited communication between Chinese and Western economic ideas, resulting in internationally recognized classics on the history of Western economic thought rarely including, or only minimally covering, traditional Chinese economic thought (Cheng et al. 2024). Young (1996) argued that Sima Qian, long before Adam Smith, introduced the concept of market mechanisms and an equivalent metaphor to the invisible hand—namely, water flowing downward in his work *Huozhi Liezhuan* (Biographies of the Wealthy). Zhao (1986) noted that the dominant economic relations in ancient China were not based on commodities or capitalism; economic thought was primarily not expressed through categories related to commodities and capital, highlighting the different economic foundations between ancient Chinese economic thought and modern economics. Based on this, he described ancient Chinese economics as a study of enriching the nation (Zhao, 1995), a form of macroeconomic management thought that primarily analyzed how to manage the national economy to increase fiscal revenue and the wealth of the entire country (Zhou & Ye, 2022). Peter Wiles, a renowned British Academy scholar known for his research on socialist economies, once pointed out, when comparing product distribution in different socialist systems, that China's procurement policies based on the concept of light and heavy (qingzhong) were an original invention (Wiles, 1964). Weber (2021) elaborated on *Guanzi*'s economic thought, explaining that from the perspective of the light and heavy concept, the state must restrict price fluctuations for heavy goods (those in short supply or essential to people's livelihoods), while for light goods (those in oversupply or of lesser importance), no intervention is necessary, allowing the law of value to operate spontaneously. The economic analysis systems constructed by ancient thinkers based on various conceptual assumptions not only demonstrate a unique Chinese style and national form but also provide a foundation for refining contemporary conceptual frameworks, categories, and expressions (Cheng et al. 2024). These systems reflect the distinctive characteristics of Chinese economic thought and its potential contributions to modern economic theory.

Western mainstream economics, centered on market competition, aims to reveal the competitive nature of human economic behavior. The economic man hypothesis, a core concept in Western mainstream economics, isolates human natural attributes, emphasizing only economic motives and rational self-interested activities driven by the principle of maximizing benefits. However, this hypothesis overlooks the influence of human social attributes and fails to accurately describe real economic decision-making and behavior (Feng, 2023). In contrast, traditional Chinese economic ethical concepts such as righteousness generate profit and thinking of righteousness when pursuing profit achieve a dialectical unity between self-interest and altruism, material and spiritual pursuits, and motives and goals. These ideas address the fundamental flaws of the economic man hypothesis and provide valuable insights for constructing the core assumptions of China's independent economic knowledge system (Zhang et al. 2019). Western mainstream economics posits that market mechanisms alone can achieve Pareto-optimal resource allocation, with the government playing

only a night watchman role. Although governments can help address market failures, there is generally a negative or dismissive attitude toward government intervention in the market economy (Lu & Wang, 2021). In contrast, due to the development and maturation of commodity and market economies in ancient China, economic analyses based on market exchange gradually accumulated and became enriched. For example, the monetary management theories in Guanzi and Sima Qian's theory of following natural tendencies demonstrate that the government and the market are not simply opposing forces. Instead, they play distinct yet complementary roles in economic operation and development. Therefore, traditional Chinese economic thought, which emphasizes both state management and market exchange, offers valuable insights for clarifying the relationship between government and market in contemporary contexts (Cheng et al. 2024). Furthermore, traditional Chinese economic concept such as harmony is precious and harmonizing all nations embodies the wisdom of peaceful development, coordinated cooperation, and inclusive win-win outcomes. These ideas help transcend the Thucydides Trap and reject zero-sum game thinking, providing useful references for building a new type of international relations in the current era (Lu, 2023). By integrating these principles, China's economic thought not only enriches global economic discourse but also contributes to fostering a more cooperative and harmonious international economic order.

Schumpeter (2010) argued that historical research is an unparalleled method for deepening economists' understanding of how economic and non-economic factors interact—a depth that other analytical tools struggle to achieve. However, the field of international economic thought history has long been characterized by a significant academic bias: mainstream scholarship has exhibited systematic cognitive biases and undervaluation toward non-Western economic thought traditions, particularly ancient Chinese economic systems (Cheng et al. 2024). To address this flaw in academic research paradigms, this study employs a methodological approach that combines textual analysis and theoretical reconstruction to systematically trace the evolution of traditional Chinese economic thought. It focuses on decoding the practical wisdom embedded in its economic governance, thereby providing a scholarly foundation for re-evaluating the value of traditional Chinese economic thought. In terms of theoretical innovation, this study builds upon the Four Dimensions-Nine Domains spatial framework originally proposed in *Guanzi*. It delves into the dynamic coupling mechanism between the tangible aspects (namely, the national economic structure) and the intangible aspects (encompassing ideologies of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame). By doing so, it constructs a novel economics paradigm that transcends the traditional three-dimensional linear logic. This innovative approach not only provides a fresh theoretical perspective for optimizing economic governance systems but also facilitates a paradigm shift in the research of economic thought history—shifting from a Western-centric framework to one that fosters dialogue among diverse civilizations.

2. The Traditional Chinese Economic Paradigm

Economic laws represent the fundamental principles that govern the functioning of material systems within an economic structure. They dictate how economic elements integrate to form these structures, which collectively constitute economic systems. Whether on a macro or micro scale, these systems exhibit cyclical patterns characterized by recurring events. Despite their varied manifestations, their underlying essence remains unchanged. The inherent, stable, and inevitable relationships among the structural elements of an economic system shape the trends and direction of economic development. As Laozi stated that "humans follow the earth, the earth follows the heavens, the heavens follow the Dao, and the Dao follows nature" (Ostwald, 1985). Natural laws form the bedrock of all principles, while ecological evolution, propelled by random interactions, lays the groundwork for general laws.

Social laws, in contrast, arise from the dynamic interplay between human's conscious actions and nature's spontaneous forces, leading to a rhythmic evolution of systemic structural elements. Thought paradigms, as the operational frameworks of brain cells, mirror the laws governing the transformations of all things in the world, embodying the logical derivation of objective laws within human cognition (Qi, 2016). The *Tao Te ching* begins with "The Dao that can be spoken is not the eternal Dao; the name that can be named is not the eternal name" (Ostwald, 1985). In modern terms, this suggests that everything in the universe is a form of material operation. What is visible constitutes tangible matter, while what is invisible represents intangible matter. Our approach to understanding these should include the following steps:

(1) Identification: Tangible matter exists in particle form, while intangible matter resembles wave-like quantum states. Tangible matter carries explicit information, such as resources, industries, state machinery, and policies. Intangible matter, however, holds hidden information, such as thoughts, ethics, spirit, concepts, and ideologies.

(2) Measurement: For tangible objects, we can observe their boundaries—measuring their length, width, and height to quantify their scale, limits, and effects. For intangible phenomena, we can explore their mysteries, studying their processes to indirectly measure trends, frequencies, and probabilities.

(3) Deconstruction: Tangible and named entities can be qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed to reveal their patterns, systems, structures, elemental states, and internal relationships, thereby uncovering systemic laws. Intangible and unnamed entities, through mediums and principles like quantum entanglement, can be decoded, their evolutionary processes replicated, and their internal relationships analyzed.

(4) Transformation: For intangible and hidden information, which often lies beyond modern human cognition, innovation is required to convert it into actionable, explicit information. This involves transforming the hidden laws of the non-eternal Dao into the explicit laws of the eternal Dao (Xu & Chang, 2014). The key lies in discovering the method of information transformation (Chen, 2015).

(5) Adaptation: Philosophy can generalize universal laws (Dao) from the specific laws of various disciplines and derive technical means (Qi) to decipher these laws. The Chinese study of *Yi Jing* (*The Book of Changes*) is a science of transforming intangible information into tangible information (Hu, 1999). Zheng (1996) noted that the so-called Dao is the origin of the nature of all things in human affairs. Grasping Dao and Qi entails precise control over the heterogeneous relationships within systemic structural elements, requiring the quantification of these relationships. Thus, economic laws must be translated into provable economic principles.

3. The Traditional Chinese Economic Laws

The Law of the Community of Human Destiny

There exist an objective interdependence, harmony, and unity among humans, among natural beings, and between humans and nature, forming a community with a shared future. As stated in *The Book of Rites: The Doctrine of the Mean*, "all things grow together without harming each other, and the Tao runs parallel without contradicting each other" (Hu & Zhang, 2017). Zhuangzi believed that "heaven and earth are only one with me, and all things are born with me" (Zhuang, 2012). Dong Zhongshu remarked, "Life is nurtured, grows, matures, and regenerates, ending only to begin again" (Zhang et al, 2012). To maintain the community with a shared future for mankind, unity is essential. A unified value system must be established to ensure mutual non-harm and eliminate externalities. The coexistence of all elements in one body is benevolence. Benevolence is the unifying force that integrates all elements (Zhu & Lü, 2011).

The Law of Economic and Social Development

Laozi summarized the law of economic and social development in his book *The Tao Te ching*, "when the Great Dao is grasped, the world moves forward without harm, and peace and harmony prevail" (Ostwald, 1985). Harm is an important

indicator of socioeconomic polarization. The wheel of history is rolling forward and irreversible, as long as there is no polarization, the economic and social development will be safe, stable and healthy (Chen, 2020). Social class, economic status, property income, and resource development and management efforts are all corresponding poles to the ecological carrying capacity of resources and environment. If the distance between them widens rapidly, there will inevitably be polarization, intensified conflicts, and social unrest.

The Law of Determinacy by Productive Forces

Productive forces are the combination of production factors. Resource-based production factors all possess varying degrees of scarcity. Among these resources with differing levels of scarcity, there is always one that is the scarcest, which determines how much is produced and how it is produced. The nature of productive forces is ultimately determined by the most scarce resource-based production factor. The earliest revelation of this law was in the Chinese Yi-ology in 7000 BC. The module change of Yi-ology uses the transformations of trigrams composed of three elements to reflect the laws of evolution among all things between heaven and earth. The nature of a trigram is determined by the nature of its scarcest line. The production relations formed around the most scarce resource factor embody the essence of socio-economic characteristics.

The Law of Labor Creating Wealth

The ancient Chinese philosopher Guanzi believed that "the world's prosperity comes from hard work, and hard work comes from physical labor; the way to govern a country is to first enrich the people" (Li & Xuan, 2019). Guanzi believed that labor is the creator of value. All surplus value is generated by labor. Since laborers create wealth, money should ultimately reach the hands of the common people to achieve shared prosperity. Thousands of years later, in 1817, David Ricardo elaborated on the idea of labor creating wealth in his *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* (Petrochilos, 1997). In 1867 Karl Marx demonstrated the theory of labor creating surplus value in his *Capital* (Marx, 1975).

The Law of Optimal Resource Allocation

In the early Warring States period, Yang Zhu (approximately 395–335 BCE) proposed that the optimal state of socio-economic resource allocation should be one where no individual is disadvantaged or advantaged: If everyone refrains from sacrificing even a single hair, and everyone refrains from benefiting the world, the world will be well-governed (Ye, 2015). In other words, every individual, regardless of the project they invest in, should receive equal returns. As articulated by the Italian scholar Vilfredo Pareto, this represents a state of socio-economic resource allocation where no further improvements can be made without disadvantaging someone. Allen and Hicks provided the mathematical proof for the condition of equal marginal rates of technical substitution of resources at Pareto optimality (Schumpeter, 1994).

The Law of Resource Structure-Function Matching

The optimized allocation of resources includes a mechanism for eliminating obsolete resources. The natural resources that have been eliminated can be put on hold and reused when more efficient allocation is available, but the people who have been eliminated cannot be ignored and must be matched with certain resources to ensure their survival and achieve social equity and justice. Resource matching is not the equal distribution of resources. The amount of resources allocated to each socioeconomic entity should be matched according to the essential requirements of the system's structural functions. The ratio of the ability of each actor to the amount of resources it matches is equal, that is, the more capable actor matches more resources, and the less capable actor matches less resources.

The Law of Income Redistribution

Wealth is created by labor, yet 80% of it is held by 20% of non-laborers, which is clearly unfair. Thus, *the Book of Changes* proposes the law of income redistribution. In deconstructing interests, the *Tuan Commentary* on the hexagram Yi (increase) states that increase means reducing the upper to benefit the

lower, bringing boundless joy to the people (Wang, 2012). This implies taking a portion of income from the upper class and redistributing it to the lower class, fostering universal harmony and satisfaction. The *Tuan Commentary* on the hexagram Qian (modesty) adds that modesty brings success, as the Way of Heaven descends to nourish and illuminate. The *Xiang Commentary* explains that within the earth lies a mountain—this is modesty. The noble person uses it to increase the deficient, balance resources, and distribute equitably (Wang, 2012). The state should implement income redistribution through fiscal transfer payments.

4. Traditional Chinese Economic Governance

Economic governance embodies the manifestation, operational mode, and standardized procedural framework of economic theories and methodologies, with its systematization, scientification, and operationalization of economic analytical tools being contingent upon the development of socio-economic, cultural, and technological conditions. As Laozi stated, "The Dao gives birth to all things through formlessness and namelessness" (Ostwald, 1985). Laws and principles are difficult to describe precisely because they are intangible and fleeting; they cannot be fixed or dissected for analysis. The only approach is to copy and replicate them through opportunities then studies them systematically. Deconstructing principles and establishing mechanisms is termed building virtue through the Dao. Economic order is the manifestation of economic mechanisms, and national economic governance involves monitoring this order to regulate the behavior and processes of economic development. The traditional economic governance in China mainly includes the following contents.

Equal Distribution of Land and Division of Labor

During the Spring and Autumn period, Guanzi stated that the Dao teaches that equal distribution of land and division of labor enable the people to understand the urgency of time. Only then will they recognize the fleeting nature of days and months and the threat of hunger and cold upon their lives. Thus, they rise early and retire late; fathers, sons, and brothers never neglect their duties. They work tirelessly, unafraid of hardship. Hence, inequality is a great evil. The bounty of the land cannot be exhausted, nor the people's efforts depleted. If not instructed about timing, the people remain ignorant; if not guided by practical tasks, they remain inactive. By sharing the harvest with them, the people understand fairness. By clarifying their roles, the people exhaust their efforts. Thus, without coercion, fathers, sons, and brothers never forget their responsibilities (Li & Xuan, 2019). Throughout feudal dynasties, rulers vigorously suppressed land annexation by powerful families and sought to equalize land ownership. Capitalism later dismantled the landlord class's monopoly on land, binding peasants to the land through contractual employment relationships.

The Doctrine of Unified Profit Channels

In *Guanzi: State Reserves*, Guanzi states that "a state whose profits flow from one aperture becomes invincible; if from two apertures, its military strength wanes; if from three apertures, it cannot raise an army; if from four apertures, the state must perish" (Li & Xuan, 2019). This doctrine mandates centralized state control over fiscal management, with currency exclusively minted and issued by the central authority. Such consolidation enables the state to mobilize all resources, concentrate manpower and material assets, and execute critical national projects for people's livelihoods. During the Warring States period, Shang Yang echoed this principle in *The Book of Lord Shang*, advocating profits centralized through one channel (Shi, 2011). Guided by the core tenets of unified profit channels and driving peasants toward warfare, he established a militarized agricultural-economic system capable of rapid nationwide resource mobilization. By transforming the entire populace into soldiers, this framework enabled the Qin state to conquer rival kingdoms and achieve unification.

State Monopoly over Mountains and Seas

In *Guanzi: The Sovereign of the Seas*, it is stated that "only through state monopolization of

mountains and seas can a nation prosper" (Li & Xuan, 2019). This doctrine mandates that vital resources critical to national welfare and livelihoods—such as salt and iron in antiquity, or tobacco and alcohol in modern economies—be placed under state-controlled monopolies. During the Qin dynasty, Shang Yang implemented the "guan shanhai" (state monopoly over mountains and seas) policy. The state monopolized not only mining operations but also tightly regulated agriculture, while constructing world-class hydraulic projects like the Zheng Guo Canal and the Dujiangyan Irrigation System. In the Han dynasty, this policy was further codified, as seen in *the Discourses on Salt and Iron: Wealth and Poverty*, "Control the lakes and pools, govern the mountains and seas" (Lai, 1996).

The Principle of Equalized Transport

While tax rates should be uniform, geographical disparities in transportation costs create unequal burdens. Eliminating such spatial inequities became imperative, leading to the adoption of equalized transport as a fiscal policy. As recorded in *The Book of Documents: Tribute of Yu*:

"Within five hundred li [around 250 kilometers] of the royal domain: A hundred li submit bundled grain stalks; Two hundred li submit husked grain; Three hundred li submit straw for fodder; Four hundred li submit unhusked millet; Five hundred li submit polished rice." (Wang & Wang, 2012).

This demonstrates that as early as 3,000 years ago, China formulated and successfully implemented a tax system based on differential land rent, adjusting levies according to distance and logistical costs. *The Discourses on Salt and Iron: Fundamental Proposals* further explains:

"In the past, regional lords and feudal states transported local tributes to the capital, but the process was cumbersome. Goods often deteriorated or failed to cover their transport costs. Thus, the state established transport officials to coordinate supply routes, streamlining tribute deliveries from distant regions. This is called junshu (equalized transport)." (Lai, 1996).

The Principle of Price Stabilization

Commodity prices fluctuate due to supply, demand, climate, and socio-ecological factors. Excessively high prices harm consumers, while excessively low prices harm producers. Guanzi advocated for state intervention to stabilize prices, "Through mutual regulation of east and west, equilibrium is achieved across distances and proximities" (Li & Xuan, 2019). From 115 BCE to 110 BCE during Emperor Wu of the Western Han dynasty, Sang Hongyang, the Minister of Revenue, institutionalized this policy of pingzhun (price stabilization). As recorded in *the Discourses on Salt and Iron*:

"A central treasury was established in the capital to stockpile goods. When prices fell, the state purchased; when prices rose, the state sold. Thus, the government maintained market stability, merchants could not exploit profits, and this was called pingzhun (price stabilization)." (Lai, 1996).

Guided by this principle, China established the Ever-Normal Granary system during the Han dynasty. By storing grain during surpluses and releasing it during shortages, the state stabilized food prices and ensured social welfare. This system remains a pioneering model for modern nations seeking to balance economic development, stabilize markets, and strengthen public well-being.

The Principle of Leverage

The Tang poet Han Wo wrote in *Random Verses II*: "A feather balances a thousand jun—Lightness and heaviness rest in equilibrium" (Zhou, 2000). As stated in *the Zhuangzi*: "Nothing under heaven is greater than the tip of an autumn hair, yet Mount Tai is deemed small" (Zhuang, 2012). Why can four ounces move a thousand pounds? The answer lies in the leverage effect. Within a four-dimensional economic framework, core elements—such as pivotal industries and economic variables—carry greater weight. The farther an element lies from the center, the lighter its influence. Policy tools like tax rates, interest rates, and exchange rates, though numerically small, act as leverage fulcrums. Positioned

strategically, they exert immense balancing force across the economic system.

Policy-Institutional Portfolio

Historical records reveal China's foundational contributions to combinatorial governance frameworks predating Western theories by millennia. *The Lianshan Yi* (The Mountain Continuity Codex) of the Xia Dynasty (2070-1600 BCE) established axial-phase governance through dynamic counterbalance of policy weights, while *The Guicang Yi* (The Earth Resonance Codex) of the Shang Dynasty (1600-1046 BCE) systematized structural alignment through harmonic matching principles. These were synergized with *The Qimen Dunjia* (Mystical Gates Strategic Codex) methodology implementing energy-space transformations via conservation law-based policy transfers across nodal, linear, and planar dimensions. Their tripartite integration constituted the earliest known system-wide equilibrium architecture.

As Guanzi observed: "The Dao operates without visible form or audible sound, yet orchestrates the patterning of order" (Li & Xuan, 2019). This epistemological insight reveals how institutional mechanisms reconstitute themselves through cosmic traces, crystallizing into dual-axis economic architecture. Modern scholarship identifies this as comprising vertical institutional arrangements governing hierarchical resource flows and horizontal regulatory frameworks coordinating sectoral interactions, constituting an ancient proto-systems approach to political economy that contemporary scholars have yet to fully appreciate.

The vertical order measures the relative dynamics among different hierarchical entities within an economic system, including income distribution across social strata, industrial revenues, and factor remunerations. As articulated in *The Lianshan Yi* (The Mountain Continuity Codex), harmonious relationships between upper and lower hierarchical entities are essential for stable socioeconomic development. This vertical equilibrium ensures that resource flows and value distributions align with systemic objectives, preventing structural imbalances that could destabilize the economy.

Complementing this, the horizontal order evaluates the functional efficacy of an economic system's structural arrangements, particularly the degree of resource allocation efficiency and the coordination dynamics among central and local governments, regional entities, and enterprises. *The Guicang Yi* (The Earth Resonance Codex) emphasizes that each hierarchical element must fulfill its designated role without overstepping authority or shirking responsibilities, thereby ensuring synchronized progress and systemic stability.

5. Synergistic Policy Effects in Economic Governance

The Vertical Synergy Effect elucidates the symbiotic relationship between economic development and ecological sustainability. In this framework, innovative development and governance act as the multiplier, driving economic progress, while the resource-environmental ecosystem serves as the carrier, providing the foundational capacity for regeneration, nurturing, and maintenance. The harmonious interaction between the multiplier and the carrier—moving in complementary directions—creates a state of prosperous synergy. This dynamic is exemplified in *the Book of Changes* through the hexagrams Zhen and Li. Zhen, symbolizing the "foot" and the "transport process," represents the multiplier—typically the innovative forces in economic development and governance. In contrast, Li, representing the "clinging flame," embodies the carrier—the resource-environmental ecosystem that regenerates, nurtures, and sustains economic activities. When Zhen and Li interact, they form the hexagrams Feng (Abundance) and Shihe (Biting Through), which signify harmonious coexistence and prosperous pathways.

The Dao-Nature Effect posits that the productivity of natural ecosystems fundamentally determines the scale, trajectory, and pace of socioeconomic development. In this framework, industries such as agriculture, manufacturing,

services, and information technology—with digital industries at the forefront—operate in a clockwise, stable, and coordinated manner, fostering regional balanced development. The driving forces behind these industries are rural revitalization and the innovative capacity generated through openness to global markets.

The Synchronized Development Effect emphasizes that the intensity of socioeconomic development must not exceed the carrying capacity of the resource-environmental ecosystem. Economic activities and ecological restoration must progress in lockstep, ensuring that development strategies are tailored to the specific sensitivities and vulnerabilities of different regions. For instance, in ecologically fragile areas, extensive farming practices with low investment and moderate yields are more sustainable than intensive, high-input methods, which may exacerbate environmental degradation and prove counterproductive.

The Matching Principle Effect underscores the necessity of aligning resource allocation with the structural and functional requirements of economic systems at multiple levels. This principle operates through two key dimensions: (1) Regional Alignment: The nature of factors (e.g., natural resources, labor, and capital) and the structural functions of regions must be harmonized. Development strategies should reflect the unique endowments and functional roles of each region within the national economy. (2) Systemic Coordination: Resource distribution among industries, enterprises, and individuals must align with the overarching structural and functional demands of the national economic system. The capacity and role of each economic actor (industries, firms, and workers) should be matched with the resources allocated to them, ensuring optimal productivity and systemic balance.

The Differential Regulation Effect addresses the complex, multi-layered structure of national economies shaped by regional variations in geography, climate, ecology, infrastructure, institutional frameworks, and developmental stages. To achieve optimal outcomes, this principle advocates for hierarchical energy transfer policies—tailored interventions that redistribute resources and regulatory efforts across different levels of the economic system based on their specific needs and capacities.

6. Inspiration to Cultural Economy

Any economic activity must be carried out in a certain time and space, and the study of the economy is generally analyzed in two or three dimensions. Western economics is generally expressed in a two-dimensional space to reflect the relationship between two variables. For example, to measure the relationship between market demand and supply, the horizontal axis represents the change in commodity prices, and the vertical axis represents the change in commodity demand or supply. The development of spatial statistics and spatial econometrics has introduced economic research from two dimensions to three dimensions. In two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces, the economic function model method is the most mature research paradigm in economics. It uses mathematical functions to establish economic models, simulate economic operating mechanisms, solve numerous economic problems, and provide necessary scientific basis for economic decision-making.

The logical relationship of economic laws is proved to be true through mathematical proof, which becomes economic theorem. The essence of science emphasizes the logical consistency of empirical verification, and its essence lies in positivism. Simply pursuing the perfection of tools and logic but ignoring reality is not the manifestation of economics being scientific (Zhou, 2011). The two-dimensional and three-dimensional research paradigms establish mathematical models under a series of assumptions, solve model parameters, determine economic variables, and regulate them. These assumptions generally include: full market competition, complete information symmetry, homogeneous and free flow of factors, product market clearing, economic man preference, maximization of corporate profits, no barriers to entry and exit, no monopoly, etc. The level

of technology remains unchanged, the economic order remains unchanged, and the institutional background remains unchanged, etc. The theory of spatial structure provides a feasible policy theory and method for the state to intervene in the economy, but the reality does not fully meet the assumptions for the establishment of these spatial interaction models.

The relationship between elements in the paradigm of complexity science still remains the quantitative correlation of homogeneity and infinite substitution. The structural optimization in the paradigm of complexity science still mainly focuses on the efficiency adjustment of homogeneity, isomorphism, and the proportion of parts to the whole. For example, resources in reality are not homogeneous, and the degree of heterogeneity varies with the time, location, combination method, intensity of utilization, and speed of resource development. The structure in the real economy is a combination of the social role relationships of factors, and its optimization is the improvement of the state of the economic and social relationships of factors. The evolution of economic systems within the paradigm of complexity science still ignores the imperfections and multiple constraints of market, government, enterprises, individuals, and other backgrounds, as well as the differences in the nature of the subjects formed on this basis. It measures the changes in system quality by the quantitative changes in system eigenvalues. Although quantitative changes to a certain extent may lead to qualitative changes, the inflection points and extreme values of mathematical functions can also be theoretically found. However, most systems are constantly changing in quality, and their function values do not exhibit inflection points or extreme values. Measuring the qualitative change point of a system by measuring the change in one or several variable values is only one of thousands of quality measurement methods, and it is not suitable for all. Therefore, it is difficult to find a scale for measuring the order property of a system based on the change in the number of system eigenvalues, as most order parameter functions have no turning points or extreme values.

The Western economic paradigm's reductive abstraction of socioeconomic phenomena reveals fundamental epistemological constraints. Its analytical scaffolding—predicated on variable isolation and regression-based correlation coefficients—reduces complex relational dynamics among systemic components to mere directional associations (positive/negative correlation). This methodological myopia fails to address critical ontological questions: What constitutes the prime mover within economic systems? Through what mechanisms are forces transmitted and transformed? How do elements oscillate between symbiotic catalysis and antagonistic containment? When contradictions emerge, do they resolve through dialectical synthesis or escalate into systemic crisis? Are equilibrium achieved through harmonic convergence or coercive polarization? These relationships cannot be analyzed through scenario analysis after regression testing, and must be accurately given qualitatively and quantitatively. The homogeneity and isomorphism of factors have no heterogeneity differences, and there is infinite substitution. A balance equation of factor variables can be established, and the correlation or non-correlation of variables can be tested, as well as the degree of correlation. However, no matter how the Western economic paradigm changes with the times, it cannot solve the complex relationship formed by the mutual promotion and suppression of factors in economic life, nor can it deconstruct the four-dimensional balance of the national economic system axis, organizational axis, administrative axis, and market axis, the matching balance between the central and local governments, and the balance between tangible and intangible aspects of the national economy and ideology. These questions can only be answered within the framework of China's Four Dimensions-Nine Domains framework.

The inherent limitations of three-dimensional economic modeling find resolution in China's

cosmological framework of tetradic syncretism. Rooted in classical Chinese philosophy, this paradigm asserts that all phenomena—from cosmic systems to quantum particles—can be analyzed through a Four Dimensions-Nine Domains space-time matrix. As articulated in *Guanzi Mumin*: "The state's vitality resides in four cardinal dimensions"(Li & Xuan, 2019)—a governance architecture synthesizing material institutions with ideological superstructures, the latter encompassing ritual propriety, social justice, bureaucratic integrity, and collective moral consciousness. During the Spring and Autumn Period, Guanzi believed that socio-economic governance was a four-dimensional framework of management behavior. The four dimensions must be symmetrical, balanced in weight, synchronized in expansion and contraction, and moderate in tension and relaxation. Comprehensive equilibrium among all four dimensions is indispensable; if one dimension grows or shrinks, the other three must follow suit in growth or shrinkage; similarly, if one dimension gains or loses weight, the other three will also gain or lose weight accordingly (Chen et al., 2022). For instance, if the first dimension dominated by institutions gains weight, then the second dimension dominated by organizations must also gain weight, meaning that after institutions make decisions, cadres within organizations become the decisive factor. Another example is that if the third dimension dominated by the government gains weight, then the fourth dimension dominated by the market must also follow suit, indicating that there must be a balance between the government and the market, and neither can fail. If one dimension collapses, it leans; if two dimensions collapse, it is endangered; if three dimensions collapse, it overturns; if all four dimensions collapse, it perishes (Li & Xuan, 2019).

The positions, time, elements, and axes used in the four-dimensional space all possess specific heterogeneity. Each variable exhibits both qualitative and quantitative differences. For example, the numerical value of spatial position is not only related to the distance from the origin of coordinates but is also determined by the role and function assigned by the central government, which undoubtedly enhances the explanatory power for actual economic relationships. Furthermore, in two- or three-dimensional spaces, time is neutral. However, in the four-dimensional space of traditional Chinese economic research, time is a combination of the Heavenly Stems and Earthly Branches, with each moment representing 60^5=777,600,000 different mass points, which are specific combinations of years (60 Gang), months (60 Mu), days (60 Ke), hours (60 Shu), and moments (60 Zhong). These billions of mass points with unique arrangements and combinations correspond one-to-one with the complex economic relationships in reality. An increase in the number of spatiotemporal heterogeneous points of explanatory variables promotes the fibrosis, networking, and digitization of the relationships between constituent elements and influencing factors within the economic system, precisely deconstructing the dynamics, transmission modes, and paths of economic states. The billions of heterogeneities in space-time constitute the essential distinction between China's differentiated economic paradigm and the Western homogeneous and isomorphic economic paradigm.

The economic system, structure, and elements have a Four Dimensions-Nine Domains relationship between various elements in any space, and there are also vertical and horizontal correspondences between various elements in different levels of the four-dimensional and nine-field relationship. These relationships manifest as economic evolution patterns. Establish the research paradigm of economics, convert economic laws into laws and theorems, and prove them one by one. Four-dimensional is actually a plane, which is easier to achieve balance between axes and elements than three-dimensional from a technical level. Obviously, this four-dimensional does not reflect the three-dimensional state of things. How can Chinese economics express and quantify the three-dimensional state of things? The traditional

Chinese economic paradigm conceptualizes socioeconomic organization through planar holography—a multidimensional architecture formed by stacking four-dimensional coordinates planes. This stratified model divides economic activities into six interdependent layers, each governed by distinct systemic principles:

(1) The bottom layer is the natural environment and ecological layer, including natural resources, mineral deposits, crude oil reserves, water resources, water storage capacity, inventory, and available construction land. The natural ecosystem includes nine fields: water system is the first field, land system is the second field, forest system is the third field, flower system is the fourth field, geographical center is the fifth field, platform system is the sixth field, marsh system is the seventh field, mountain system is the eighth field, and fire system is the ninth field. The study of traditional economics has proved that the natural ecosystem is balanced without human intervention (Chen, 2015).

(2) The second layer is the micro-level, which is the economic link composed of economic entities, enterprises, institutions, consumers, etc. The system structure function is to maintain vitality.

(3) The third level is the macro level, which is the economic chain composed of industries, sectors, departments, and major fields. The system structure function is stable and orderly.

(4) The fourth level is the human ecosystem, with the water system and financial system in the first area, the market, product, and commodity systems in the second area, the labor and logistics systems in the third area, the communication system in the fourth area, the manufacturing industry in the fifth area, the control system in the sixth area, the organizational system in the seventh area, the infrastructure and fixed asset systems in the eighth area, and the planning, scheduling, and qualification systems in the ninth area. The study of Confucian economics proves that the humanistic system needs regulation to achieve balance (Chen, 2015).

(5) The fifth level is the central decision-making, authoritative governance, and harmonious unity level. This layer is the central nervous system of the organic system, determining the nature, structural state, development trend, and operational regulation of the system.

(6) The sixth level is the layer of heavenly timing. It is a variety of information and development opportunities.

7. Conclusion

In ancient China, economics, politics, and philosophy were closely intertwined, with the social characteristics of the time naturally drawing the functions and essence of economic activities, as well as the understanding and operation of each economic process, into the realm of philosophy (Wang, 2023). Due to the unique historical environment and social constraints of the time, many of China's classical texts, particularly those from the pre-Qin period, exhibit certain theoretical limitations. However, traditional Chinese economic laws are not "historical relics." Instead, Chinese economic philosophy deconstructs laws, mechanisms, and orders through the natural principle of the correspondence between the invisible and the visible, revealing the complex relationships among heterogeneous elements. The explanatory power of the economic research paradigm derived from this evolution far surpasses the element correlation testing of homogeneous, isomorphic, and identical-element data-based economic research paradigms. Therefore, we should approach traditional Chinese economic thought with a balanced perspective, neither accepting it wholesale nor rejecting it entirely. As the saying goes, we should take the best and leave the rest.

Economic systems, structures, and elements, any space has a four-dimensional nine-field relationship between various elements, and there are also vertical and horizontal correspondences between various elements at different levels in the four-dimensional nine-field. These relationships manifest as an evolutionary relationship of mutual promotion and restriction. By setting up a lightweight

scale, we can accurately measure its heterogeneity, and completely solve the problem of numerous qualitative differences in economics that are left unaddressed. According to *the Guicai Yi*, tangible national economic development policies must be matched with intangible national ideologies of propriety, righteousness, integrity, and shame, and material civilization policies must be synchronized with spiritual civilization policies. The policies of various sectors of the national economy should match the spirit of the central policy, and the policies of various sectors should also match each other. Policies for various regions, urban and rural areas, and ethnic groups should be tailored to the actual conditions of the location. Matching is adaptation, and one party's policies cannot be mechanically applied to the other party. We should adopt the traditional Chinese economic approach of weighing the importance of each policy, and adjust the intensity of law enforcement according to the priorities of each policy, in order to achieve a comprehensive balance in the system, structure, and elements of policy combination.

All things are synchronized with the universe and change with time and space. Economics should not set the universality of space-time, but directly use the quantitative correlation between independent variables and dependent variables to test economic laws, regardless of the background. Chinese economics synchronizes the rapidly changing space-time of the universe with the heterogeneous changes in the structural elements of the economic system, which is an objective prerequisite for the establishment of the discipline system of economics. Only when the logical framework is accurate and reasonable, can the refined calculation of the quantitative model of modern economy not become a digital game. The complex relationship of digital economy elements generated by the heterogeneity of elements in space and time forms the outline structure of the economic discipline system, and the prioritization of its dynamic operational order can format the evolution path of the economic discipline system at all times. The construction of the economic research system begins with the identification of its research paradigm, establishes its framework structure based on the logical relationship between the Dao and the Qi in China, enriches the content around core concepts, and integrates and innovates theoretical methods from various disciplines. Economics has matured in the application of computer software technology in the hypothesis testing of factor quantity relationships. After the clear positioning of the logical relationship between Dao and Qi in China, economics can accurately measure economic laws, mechanisms, and order, and scientifically program economic governance.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest to this work.

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