

RESEARCH PAPER OPEN ACCESS

Towards a More Holistic and Pluralistic Critical Systems Thinking: The Dimension of ‘Hé’ (和)

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Correspondence: Wenxian Hetty Sun (w.sun@greenwich.ac.uk)**Received:** 6 September 2024 | **Revised:** 16 November 2024 | **Accepted:** 18 November 2024**Keywords:** critical systems thinking (CST) | dimension | holistic | philosophical foundations | pluralism

ABSTRACT

This paper is dedicated to the pioneering work of Mike Jackson, a prominent figure in systems thinking. His enduring commitment to philosophical inquiry and holism has been pivotal in shaping critical systems thinking (CST). This paper emphasises Jackson's insights into addressing the complexities of the VUCA world. It examines the significant influence of Western philosophy on CST, highlighting the need for a balanced approach to pluralism. In challenging Jackson's recent endorsement of 'discordant pluralism' and his shift toward a 'pragmatist turn', the paper argues that these positions diverge from CST's foundational principles of holism. As an alternative, the paper advocates for exploring the concept of 'Hé' (和) from Eastern, particularly Chinese, philosophical traditions, which promotes harmony, diversity and unity within the framework of CST. The paper argues that 'Hé' (和) can enrich CST's capacity to cultivate a holistic and pluralistic perspective, ultimately fostering self-reflexivity as a crucial pathway for navigating the complexities of our contemporary world.

1 | Introduction

In the development of systems thinking, Mike Jackson's contributions to the field have exceeded the boundaries of conventional framework, shedding light on the intricate relationships between paradigms, methodologies and the ever-evolving complexities of our modern world.

This paper embarks on a journey through the intellectual landscape Jackson has thoroughly crafted. It begins with a reflection on the philosophical foundations that underpin his work, exploring the influences of renowned philosophers and scholars, and how their ideas have developed in the fertile soil of his own inquiry. From this philosophical foundation, the narrative transitions into an exploration of Jackson's key concept—critical systems thinking (CST), its strengths and critiques encountered, and in particular, the challenges generated by isolationist, imperialist and pragmatist positions.

This paper continues to discuss Jackson's insights into the contemporary VUCA world—illuminate the complexity of 'wicked problems' and the solutions designed to tackle them. The discussion traces the evolution of total systems intervention (TSI) to critical systems practice (CSP), where 'metaphors' emerge as powerful tools for unveiling worldviews and examining methodological choices. These metaphors, drawn from Pepper's 'world hypotheses', enhanced by Lakoff and Johnson and Morgan and developed into the five 'systemic perspectives' by Jackson, offer a unique lens through which systems methodologies can be translated into accessible descriptions for addressing critical issues.

This paper contends that Jackson's recent adoption of a 'pragmatist turn' for CST and his endorsement of 'discordant pluralism' may provoke debate. It challenges these positions, arguing that they conflict with CST's long-standing commitment to holism and the complementary coexistence of paradigms. Alternatively, this paper proposes connecting CST with Eastern philosophical traditions, specifically the Chinese concept of 'Hé' (和), which

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embodies harmony, diversity and unity. The paper discusses that 'Hé' (和) operates at a dimensional level, transcending individual paradigms and fostering a holistic and pluralistic approach that embraces and respects differences.

2 | Philosophical Foundations of CST

Philosophical inquiries traditionally hold a crucial place in academic studies. Without a reflexive or self-reflexive understanding of researchers' underlying philosophical position, their intellectual structures are vulnerable to being built on unstable foundations, risking collapse and limiting room for future development (Mbanaso, Abrahams, and Okafor 2023). Jackson's contribution on knowledge reflects a consistent and sustainable interest and commitment in philosophical explorations.

Jackson has been greatly influenced by the ideas of Habermas, and he has also drawn insights from the works of Aristotle, Plato, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Marx, Althusser, Pepper, Kuhn and Foucault. Meanwhile, his work has been enriched by a profound understanding of social and organisational theories with strong philosophical ties derived from Burrell and Morgan, Giddens and Luhmann. From the initial proposition of systems methodology (SOSM) in which the hard/soft systems methodologies are evaluated and a multi-dimension perspective is presented, to the debate of the stance which CST has positioned itself to be, and later the creative and holistic application of CST for practice improvement, philosophy has laid the principal foundation. To Jackson, 'rational clarity' is vital to any theory building and philosophy is able to bring forth clarity rationally. It is embedded in each and every phase of Jackson's work from early 1980s until present.

In systems thinking, the concept of a holistic perspective is dominant. Jackson (2000) articulates explicitly the influence of the Western philosophical tradition on shaping the creative 'holism' in CST. Taking a cue from Aristotle, the system as a whole takes priority over its constituent parts, with the parts only gaining significance when they contribute to the purpose of the whole. Plato's utilisation of these systems concepts can be associated with the navigation and stabilisation of the vessel, the 'State', as the whole, and the skills required in managing communication and control across diverse components. Spinoza further features the idea that while the whole comprises parts capable of independent existence, it is irrational to disassemble the whole into its constituent parts. Kant's exploration of 'categories' highlights the inherent limitations in our thinking processes, emphasising the necessity of achieving holistic understanding in both science and ethics, despite in full awareness of the restrictions involved in pursuing this mission.

Delving into the dialectical method, whether it is Hegel's 'thesis', 'antithesis' and 'synthesis' to achieve a much closer understanding of the whole, or Marx's dialectical materialism, which highlights the history of class struggle and the structure of capitalist society, drawing upon the notion of 'social totality' from Althusser, as the one of the most insightful interpreters of Marx, Jackson has incorporated the key concepts of 'process', 'structure' and 'instances' into his CST. According to Althusser, these 'instances' include the economic, political, ideological and

theoretical realms, collectively known as the superstructure, each characterised by internal contradictions but functioning within a relatively autonomous framework to shape the overall history. For Jackson, this provides a fertile foundation for the expanding focus on holistic and 'systemic process of inquiry'.

The inspiration gained from Marx' early writing as well as his later evolution into a structuralist perspective has empowered Jackson and Keys (1984) to establish a connection to Burrell and Morgan's sociological paradigm. This connection involves the categorisation of Marx's evolution between radical humanism and radical structuralism. As for Jackson (2000), the early stage of Marx's study led into the rise of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School and Habermas.

Habermas' theory has enlightened Jackson's work in at least three different ways. First, the three human interests, technical, practical and emancipatory (Habermas 1970, 1975), have encouraged the idea of assessing the diverse emphases, strengths and weaknesses of different systems methodologies, in other words, the original formation of SOSM. Second, Habermas' alert of the overwhelming focus on 'instrumental' use of knowledge (typically associated with the technical interest) to understand and control the environment in which the knowledge is applied, often directs the attention to the positivist or its related approaches; this, however, stimulates Jackson's (2020) early exploration of systems methodologies as complementary rather than mutually exclusive. Third, Habermas' (1984) discussion of communicative actions and public sphere has provided Jackson with a framework for critical reflection and an opportunity to question the over-emphasised shift from 'hard' to 'soft' approaches, with the soft systems methodology serving as a key example. Drawing from Foucault, Jackson (1991) acknowledges the inherent power dynamics shapes how knowledge is created, disseminated and used within the 'systematising' processes. By doing so, he promotes CST that respects the plurality of viewpoints, thereby challenging the legitimacy of favouring any overarching methodology over the others.

The pluralism of CST encounters various challenges, and even within the community of systems thinkers, there is a prevalent ambivalence in adopting different stances supported by isolationism, imperialism and pragmatism.¹ To solidify pluralism within CST, Jackson (2020) systematically draws on philosophical principles to demonstrate why these alternative positions are inadequate. For instance, he criticises the isolationist stance for its reductionist tendencies, asserting that it oversimplifies the intricate world of complexity, losing sight of both breadth and depth. Concerning the imperialist approach, often seen as a solution to isolationism, Jackson invokes Kuhn's (1970) 'paradigm incommensurability' to argue that reliance on a single dominant approach, even with support from others, is ultimately bound to fail. Distinct paradigms and their derived conceptual frameworks are incompatible and cannot be effectively translated or integrated. The same reasoning applies to his critique of 'pragmatic pluralism,' which adopts a 'mix and match' approach. This approach not only lacks a solid theoretical foundation but also presents difficulties for those who prioritise methodological consistency.

While issues related to 'paradigm incommensurability' are acknowledged and discussed within the group of critical systems

thinkers, Jackson (2020) concurs that labelling CST as a metaparadigm is not the solution. He offers philosophical reasoning as to why neither the ‘process paradigm’ (Midgley 2000) nor ‘critical realism’ (Mingers 2014) is a viable solution. According to Jackson, the endeavour to identify a single existing paradigm that can simultaneously meet the criteria of being plural to accommodate CST comfortably is unattainable. Such an approach fundamentally contradicts the commitment to pluralism or the creative holistic orientation of using ‘multi-paradigm’, ‘multi-methodology’ or ‘multi-method’ (Jackson 2006).

It can be concluded that CST is built on a strong philosophical foundation, from its original creation through its ongoing evolution. Jackson’s critical analysis of contemporary theories and managerial practices—across systems, science, social and organisational issues, as well as political and cultural contexts—relies heavily on philosophical insights. Furthermore, his responses to critiques of CST and its application in management are deeply rooted in philosophical principles, highlighting the central role philosophy plays in shaping, evolving and defending CST.

3 | Observing a VUCA World and Reshaping Paradigms

Over 15 years ago, Jackson (2006) highlighted concerns about the prevalence of ‘quick-fix solutions’ inundating our problem-solving landscape. He pointed out their limited effectiveness, primarily due to their lack of holistic view. These solutions often concentrate on isolated aspects of problems rather than addressing the entire picture. For instance, quality management prioritises process design and improvement but often neglects structural and political issues. Balanced scorecard, which, despite its broader scope, tends to employ standardised templates to evaluate activities. While management practices have evolved and gone through phases, regrettably, the persistent tendency to rely on speedy and short-term remedies remains largely unchanged. Since Jackson has stated that ‘improvement’ is one of the core commitments of CST, its practical implementation takes on a crucial role in the overall agenda. This is exemplified by the development of TSI (Flood and Jackson 1991), which subsequently shapes the advancements in CSP. Transitioning from CST to CSP might seem straightforward in theory. However, in reality, this shift bridges a substantial gap, particularly for scholars well-versed in philosophy.

Jackson (2003, 2006) has initially described the world featured with increasing ‘complexity’, ‘change’ and ‘diversity’. Later, he progressed to encapsulate these attributes utilising the acronym VUCA, representing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (Jackson 2020). While the exact origins of the term VUCA are unclear, it has been known to be used since the 1980s (Bennis and Nanus 1985; Stiehm 2002). This application of this description received widespread acclaim from institutional investors during events such as the ‘Central Sub-Advisory Roundtable’ in Chicago and the ‘Battle of the Quants Worldwide’ in London in 2023. Building on the ideas of ‘messes’ (Ackoff 1999), ‘general complexity’ (Morin 2006), ‘radical uncertainty’ (Kay and King 2020) and ‘Cynefin’ framework (Snowden and Boone 2007), Jackson detects the hallmarks of the contemporary world, where he not only identifies the challenges posed

by ‘wicked’ problems but also delves into the complexities of the solutions designed to address them.

Jackson (2020) contends that a misjudgement of a problem situation can lead to significant costs, including not only ill-defined issues but also those widely acknowledged. In relatively ‘unitary’ environments, such as the realm addressed by operational research (OR), problems can be clearly defined, procedures carefully planned, solutions readily prescribed and outcomes modelled and predictably anticipated. However, the VUCA world frequently reveals new challenges that need addressing. In some cases, problems become elusive, and in others, mathematical modelling loses its former effectiveness. Consequently, many operational researchers venture beyond their customary boundaries, embracing alternative paradigms with distinct ontological and epistemological stances. For instance, there are arguments for logistics and supply chain management to incorporate lenses such as consumer insights (Truong et al. 2020), social resilience and ecological considerations (Lin et al. 2022) into their design. However, unlike social theories, which typically align with specific ‘sociological paradigms’ as categorised in Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) matrix, OR seldom explicitly states its associated paradigm by providing a clear account of what they think the real-world is about. As the result, the aforementioned ‘paradigm shifting’ is challenging to discern.

Jackson’s approach to how various systems methodologies identify ‘wicked’ problems and craft solutions is both intuitive and profound. He proposes that CST should employ ‘metaphors’ to illuminate the prevailing worldviews that underpin social paradigms (Jackson 2003). This method offers a more accessible means to unveil the implicit assumptions that shape the world prior to methodological examination. It serves as a powerful tool, accessible even to individuals without extensive knowledge of pluralism or multi-paradigm perspectives, and more importantly, it not only helps people in evaluating others’ choices but also engaging with self-reflexivity.

The ‘metaphors’ developed, based on Pepper’s (1942) ‘world hypotheses’, enriched by the contributions of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Morgan (1986), have been systematically categorised by Jackson (2020, 2021) into five distinct ‘systemic perspectives’. These perspectives, namely, ‘machine’, ‘organism’, ‘cultural/political’, ‘societal/environmental’ and ‘interrelationship’, effectively serve as vehicles for translating the language of systems, including various methodologies, methods and approaches, into accessible and widely understood descriptions of critical issues that require resolution. Case studies have revealed that both early TSI and the subsequent CSP have been successfully applied across various domains, including higher education, the energy industry, government, public sectors, and healthcare, providing concrete evidence of their effectiveness in solving complex problems.

4 | Exploring Jackson’s Adoption of Pragmatist Turn for CST: A Debate on the Implications of Discordant Pluralism

Recently, in his discussion on the flexibility of implementing multi-methodological intervention as the Stage 3 of CSP,

Jackson (2022a) has made several claims and, in some instances, contradictory to his established philosophical and theoretical framework, which has remained notably consistent since the 1980s. For instance, although Jackson (2020) has previously criticised the ‘mix and match’ approach of ‘pragmatist pluralism’ (Taket and White 1995) by invoking ‘paradigm incommensurability,’ he now suggests that a pragmatist turn, influenced by figures like Bogdanov, has enabled CSP to maintain pluralism while avoiding paradigm incommensurability and relativism.

Over an extended period, Jackson (2000, 2003, 2019) has been an advocate for embracing paradigm diversity by recognising the strengths and weaknesses inherent in each of them. SOSM stands as a significant contribution for structuring and visualising these paradigms within a unified framework. While the previous emphasis was on complementarism among various paradigms and methodologies, the endorsement of Gregory’s (1992) ‘discordant pluralism’ has positioned CSP to emphasise confrontation and taking advantage of the differences embedded in each paradigm. Jackson (2022a) argues that adopting discordant pluralism enables CSP to bypass Tsoukas’ query regarding Habermas’ human interests, asserting that paradigms cater to different realities but addressing questions related to all three human interests. Hence, a positivist approach is not limited to addressing technical needs but extends to practical and emancipatory dimensions.

However, this paper argues that Tsoukas’ statement may blur the distinction between the questions of ‘what it is’ and ‘what it can be used for’. In alignment with Jackson’s previous work, paradigms stem from fundamental philosophical positions that inherently shape all understandings; hence, they differ by nature. However, the discussion pertains to what purposes paradigms can serve in problem-solving, which is a separate consideration. For instance, the widespread use of computers and the internet (refers to the question of ‘what it is’) as a significant technical breakthrough in human history does not regress historically due to its utility to cybercriminals (refers to the question of ‘what it can be used for’, including negatively). Similarly, embracing pluralism does not necessitate those paradigms must challenge or confront each other, nor does it require a metaparadigm to stand superior to all. This paper would like to use the analogy of vitamins while each type serves unique functions. Even if one type can serve multiple purposes, it cannot replace other types of vitamins, nor can it diminish the value of multivitamins. Conversely, having multivitamins does not imply the existence of a super-vitamin grander than the entire family.

Discordant pluralism accentuates the differences among paradigms and argues against their complementary co-existence. However, systems theory presents a contrasting perspective. Establishing a boundary can define what is included within a system, alternatively, rendering the background or context highlights the environment can also stress a system’s identity. As Luhmann (1995) said, identity is possible only by differences, and it differentiates a system from everything else within the environment. When a confrontational strategy, as suggested by discordant pluralism, is adopted, a system exaggerates differences and primarily focuses on its own thoughts and desires as what ‘I’ think or want, causing others or the environment fade

to disappear. Consequently, differences cease to exist, and the system loses its original identity (Sun 2021). On the contrary, when different paradigms complement each other, effectively enabling the existence of others, differences are adequately preserved, and identity is maintained. This paper argues that adopting discordant pluralism may not strengthen CST’s position, but instead risks diluting its original character and foundational nature. While discordant pluralism embraces multiple paradigms and rejects metaparadigms, this paper questions its effectiveness as a tool for CST, as well as the appropriateness of the pragmatist turn, which CST seems to be guided toward by discordant pluralism.

5 | Investigating Jackson’s Pragmatist Turn for CST: Perspectives on Multiple Truths and the Corridor Analogy

In alignment with many pragmatists who contend that there is no universal and everlasting truth, Jackson (2022a) adopts the notion of multiple truths, claiming that pragmatism supports pluralism. Acknowledging no truth is absolute and universally applicable raises the possibility that what is termed ‘truth’ may not necessarily align with factual reality but rather with practical results and contextual usefulness.

Jackson illustrates the above point with James’ ‘corridor’ analogy. However, as this paper argues, the assertion that ‘all must pass through it (the corridor, or pragmatism) if they want a practical way of getting into or out of their respective rooms (paradigms)’ (James, 1997, as cited in Jackson 2022a, 5) might not hold true. If this ‘corridor’ is perceived as the sole obligatory path, the only ‘practical way’, it effectively becomes a ‘metaparadigm’. This is precisely what CST has long sought to avoid.

If the absence of a universally applicable ‘hotel design’ (the universal truth) is accepted in this analogy, the hotel’s layout should be context-dependent, leaving room for alternative routes—hidden passages, windows or even entirely different pathways. In some instances, corridors might serve as ornamental features rather than functional ones, as often depicted in modern literatures and films. The acceptance of multiple truths therefore implies that ‘the corridor’ should not be considered as the only legitimate or practical route. In essence, it creates a contradiction by accepting multiple perspectives, which mirrors the non-exclusive nature of pragmatism, while simultaneously embracing the ‘corridor’ analogy, which implies a singular, exclusive solution.

Furthermore, while pragmatism values pluralism, its support appears conditional. It is often overshadowed by its evaluation on adaptability—different approaches are effective in different contexts to achieve desired outcomes. From this perspective, while it could be argued that pragmatism shares CST’s goal of fostering practical improvement, their philosophical foundations lead to different approaches to pluralism. For pragmatism, pluralism acts primarily as a tool for practical use in varied contexts, because it ‘in its everyday meaning, confers the right to use whatever approach seems best for the circumstances’ (Jackson 2020, 6), whereas for CST, it offers a broader and richer framework that encourages the

complementary coexistence of paradigms, methodologies and methods (Jackson 2000). Drawing from the philosophical perspectives of Spinoza and Kant as previously discussed, pragmatism's focus on the idea that truth or meaning is determined by practical usefulness does not align with CST's commitment to holism—another key value CST has strongly upheld from the beginning. This paper argues that a holistic understanding transcends the limitations of time and space. Even if it is hard to achieve (in this three-dimensional world²), it should not be selective, context-dependent or result-driven.

Therefore, without intending to criticise pragmatism as a whole, this paper challenges the proposition that pragmatist turn is the most appropriate move for CST, given its long-standing commitments not only to pluralism and practical improvement but also to holism.

6 | The Reflection of Eastern Philosophical Tradition in CST

As CST engages with philosophical inquiries surrounding metaparadigms and paradigm incommensurability, Zhu (2011) highlights concerns about the pervasive 'paradigm mentality', which may hinder the progress of CST. This concern arises because few systems practitioners prioritise multi-methodology theory, opting instead for a more pragmatic approach.

Jackson (2022a) has mentioned in a number of occasions that the theoretical foundation of CST is rooted in the Western philosophical tradition, while also acknowledging the intention to explore how its insights can be easily adapted to other cultural settings. If Jackson's recent advocacy for a pragmatist turn aims to support pluralism while avoiding paradigm incommensurability and relativism, it is important to recognise, as argued earlier, that a pragmatist approach to pluralism differs from CST's. Additionally, concerns arise that a pragmatist shift could undermine CST's commitment to holism. It may be time to broaden CST's scope beyond its Western boundaries.

To align with CST's ongoing agenda, three key priorities must be upheld: first, maintaining its core commitments to holism, pluralism and improvement; second, preserving its philosophical foundations; and third, addressing the challenges posed, particularly by paradigm incommensurability and relativism. This paper explores how Eastern philosophical traditions, with a focus on the Chinese concept of 'Hé'³ (和), can offer valuable insights toward achieving these goals.

Traditional Chinese thinking on 'Hé' (和) began to evolve between 771 and 481BC, centred around key discussions on two concepts: 'Hé' (和) and 'Tóng' (同). While 'Tóng' (同), as a related concept to 'Hé' (和), symbolising the continual repetition of a single element, the central notion of 'Hé' (和) encapsulates ideas of *mutual coordination, adaptation of one another and balance to co-exist within a holistic whole*.

The emphasis on totality in 'Hé' (和) aligns closely with CST's holism, which, as Jackson says, 'concentrates its attention instead at the organisational level and on ensuring that the parts are related properly together and are functioning well to serve

the purposes of the whole' (Jackson 2006, 650). Moreover, 'Hé' (和) also adheres to the principle of CST's pluralism by emphasising the importance of relationships—whether through coordination, adaptation or coexistence—between individual agents. As discussed earlier, pluralism does not require paradigms challenge or confront one another. In contrast to 'Hé' (和), traditional Chinese philosophy also presents the concept of 'Zhēng' (争), representing contention and discordance. While 'Zhēng' (争) allows for diversity, it lacks unity or the sense of totality, often involving conflict over differing opinions or competing interests. Thus, the pluralism embodied by 'Hé' (和) embraces diversity and totality while rejecting confrontation, thereby distinguishing it both from 'Zhēng' (争) and from discordant pluralism.

The difference between 'Hé' (和) and other concepts as mentioned above laid the groundwork for its evolution. However, it was Confucius who elevated 'Hé' to a philosophical level through his extensive discourse on harmony (Zhao 1991). Confucius (551–479 BC) explicitly explained on the profound significance of harmony in his teachings, famously stating, 'A noble person seeks harmony without uniformity, while a petty person seeks uniformity without harmony' (The Analects of Confucius: Zilu). Drawing from traditional Chinese philosophies, Zhao (1991) explains that 'Hé' (和) embodies 'diversity', signifies a 'unified entity' and represents a state of 'harmony'. A comprehensive understanding of the concept of 'Hé' requires acknowledging these three aspects simultaneously. Therefore, alongside the shared values of pluralism and holism, the state of harmony in 'Hé' (和) aligns closely with CST's vision of complementary paradigms.

It is important to note that 'Hé' (和) is not exclusive to Confucianism; similar applications of 'Hé' (和) can be traced across various traditional Chinese philosophies. It is included in *The Book of Changes*,⁴ and illustrated by philosophers such as Laozi,⁵ Zhuangzi,⁶ Xunzi⁷ and in numerous other Schools of Thoughts. This serves as a clear example demonstrating that 'Hé' (和) is not in conflict with paradigm incommensurability, a concept Jackson firmly embraces to address concerns raised about CST's position. Although each of these schools operates within its own unique paradigm, the principle of 'Hé' (和) is inherently embedded in all or most of them. Embracing 'Hé' (和) does not demand strict uniformity; rather, it promotes harmony among diverse paradigms, enabling their coexistence through mutual respect for their differences. From this perspective, 'Hé' (和) cannot be confined to any single paradigm, nor does it function as a paradigm or metaparadigm. Instead, it represents a holistic dimension that transcends the paradigm level altogether as will be discussed in the next section.

7 | Interactions Between Dimension and Paradigms

Drawing from the previous discussion, 'Hé' (和) is understood not through a strict definition but rather as an embodiment of 'diversity', a representation of a 'unified entity' and a symbol of 'harmony'. Its integration across various Schools of Thought in ancient China, and its ongoing application in modern Chinese philosophies, theories, policies and practices, establishes it as a

fundamental principle. This concept parallels the notion of ‘Dao’ (道) in Taoism, another Eastern philosophical tradition widely recognised in the Western world.

The *Tao Te Ching*,⁸ one of the foundational works of Taoism, discussed four key phrases ‘Dao’ (道), ‘Fa’ (法), ‘Shu’ (术) and ‘Qi’ (器). These concepts represent four levels within the Taoist tradition, progressing from higher/abstract to lower/concrete, and together they form the holistic Taoism. ‘Dao’ (道) refers to the fundamental way of understanding; ‘Fa’ (法) implies underlying principles or doctrines; ‘Shu’ (术) involves the practical methods for applying those principles; and ‘Qi’ (器) represents the tangible tools or means to implement strategies. While they can be roughly translated as ‘philosophy, methodology, techniques, and tools’, it is important to note that these translations do not fully capture the depth of their original meanings.

While ‘Hé’ (和) is a concept that aligns with the level of ‘Dao’ (道), to avoid confusion between Confucianism and Taoism, this paper uses the term ‘dimension’ to illustrate this level and convey a unified entity that transcends the limitations of time and space. Consequently, with regard to ‘Hé’ (和), paradigm incommensurability is no longer a concern, nor is there a risk of falling into relativism. Although paradigms operate within a specific dimension shaped by time, space, culture and knowledge, a dimension can cut across multiple paradigms. It can be translated into the lower or concrete levels, creating specific methodologies, techniques and tools to address practical problems and drive improvement.

In reflecting Eastern philosophical tradition in CST, Jackson’s development of CST since the 1980s—marked by extensive philosophical exploration, rigorous academic scrutiny, creative innovation and critical real-world application—aligns closely with the key levels discussed above. First of all, the introduction of the SOSM framework can be seen as a ‘Fa’ (法), as it provides a comprehensive platform that accommodates various systems methodologies within a unified space, clearly reflecting CST’s principles or doctrines. Second, the creation of TSI and its later iteration, CSP, can be viewed as a ‘Shu’ (术), offering innovative methods for applying CST principles to address practical challenges. These methods begin with a comprehensive approach to understanding the context in which problems arise, with CSP in particular following a sequential yet iterative process of identifying and addressing key issues through critical awareness. Third, the engagement of ‘metaphors’ or ‘systemic perspectives’ can be seen as a ‘Qi’ (器), as they serve as tools to implement the methods holistically and plurally in the VUCA world across diverse disciplines.

Based on this analysis, this paper argues that the development of CST appears to encompass the levels of ‘Dao’ (道), ‘Fa’ (法), ‘Shu’ (术) and ‘Qi’ (器). Consequently, this paper proposes that CST could consider itself operating at the level of a ‘dimension’, similar to the concept of ‘Hé’ (和) discussed earlier. On one hand, the debates in which CST has been involved have positively contributed to its advancement at the levels of ‘Fa’ (法) and ‘Shu’ (术), as demonstrated by the creation of TSI and its evolution into CSP. On the other hand, ongoing questions directed at the levels of ‘Fa’ (法) and ‘Shu’ (术) should not detract from CST’s forward trajectory at the dimensional level or ‘Dao’ (道). Specifically,

critiques to CST’s status as a metaparadigm or its capacity to address paradigm incommensurability should not have prompted the adoption of a pragmatist turn.

8 | Practical Indication and Further Development

This paper acknowledges that ‘Hé’ (和) represents an ideal dimension, and as such, questions regarding its practical relevance in a VUCA world may arise. However, such inquiries often approach ‘Hé’ (和) from the level of ‘Fa’ (法), ‘Shu’ (术) and ‘Qi’ (器). This paper argues that by emphasising the pursuit of harmony, ‘Hé’ (和) remains an actionable dimension. In other words, it can be translated into practical methods, as evidenced by historical, cultural and political developments in China, such as the method of ‘seek common ground while preserving differences’.⁹

By adopting a similar approach, CST could enhance self-reflexivity within CSP, particularly by integrating it into the final ‘Check’ stage (Jackson 2022b), counteracting the prevailing ‘paradigm mentality’. Future papers will explore the importance of prioritising self-assessment over the assessment of others, thereby promoting complementarity rather than confrontation. While achieving widespread self-reflexivity may be seen as an ideal aspiration, each step toward this goal strengthens CST’s alignment with the dimension of ‘Hé’ (和).

Endnotes

- ¹ Jackson (2022a) later adopted a ‘pragmatist turn’ in CST, a position the author questions, as discussed later in this paper.
- ² It will not be expanded upon in this paper, but it is a concept worth discussing separately.
- ³ ‘Hé’, is pronounced as ‘Hér’ and written in Chinese as ‘和’.
- ⁴ The Book of Changes, written as 周易 in Chinese (pronounced as Zhōu Yì).
- ⁵ Laozi also known as Lao Tzu, written as 老子 in Chinese (pronounced as Lǎozǐ).
- ⁶ Zhuangzi also known as Chuang Tzu, written as 庄子 in Chinese (pronounced as Zhuāngzǐ).
- ⁷ Xunzi also known as Hsun Tzu, written as 荀子 in Chinese (pronounced as Xúnzǐ).
- ⁸ Written as 道德经 in Chinese. It has several other English translations that can be understood as The Classic of the Way and Virtue. This ancient Chinese text is attributed to Laozi (Lao Tzu).
- ⁹ It means ‘求同存异’ in Chinese.

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