

# THE ENLIGHTENMENT OF THE“THREE TALENTS ”SYSTEMIC THINKING OF THE YIJING ON CORPORATE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

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**Abstract:** In the face of the global environmental crisis and the structural dilemma of the dislocation of short-term interests and long-term risks in the transformation of enterprises, this paper introduces the systematic thinking of " YiJing " and " San Cai " ( heaven, earth and human ), and constructs a new paradigm of sustainable development of enterprises suitable for the VUCA era. The article first explains the philosophical connotation of "San cai" as a dynamic ontology:" Tian" corresponds to the macro trend and strategic positioning, emphasizing the adaptation to the current situation and periodic rhythm; with "land" corresponding to resource endowment and green operation, it advocates local conditions and full life cycle management ; with" people" corresponding stakeholders and value co-creation, ethical governance and harmonious symbiosis are advocated. On this basis, this paper deeply analyzes the systematic coordination mechanism of the " three talents " dimension, and puts forward that enterprises need to shift from passive compliance to active guidance, and realize the unity of economic and social ecological benefits by reconstructing the dynamic resonance of strategy, resources and people. The research shows that the integration of oriental holism wisdom and modern management science not only makes up for the shortcomings of the western reductionism framework in dealing with complex adaptive systems, but also provides theoretical guidance and practical path with cultural embeddedness and global competitiveness for enterprises to realize the transition from " survival" to " symbiosis" under the dual carbon goal.

**Keywords:** “Three Talents” systemic thinking; Corporate sustainability; Yijing

## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Global Environmental Crisis and Corporate Dilemmas

Amid escalating climate crises, the traditional linear “take-make-dispose” model has become unsustainable, necessitating a strategic shift from profit maximization to sustainable coexistence. However, this transition faces critical structural frictions: a dynamic paradox where short-term financial penalties for green investment clash with long-term existential risks of inaction, and a"time horizon mismatch"where quarterly reporting cycles undermine the multi-decadal timelines required for ecological restoration and systemic innovation [1].

### 1.2 The Contemporary Value of the "Three Talents" Systemic Thinking in the Yijing

As the foundational source of Chinese traditional culture, the Yijing (I Ching) offers a profound philosophical framework for deciphering complex adaptive systems through its"Three Talents" (San Cai) paradigm—integrating Heaven (Tian), Earth (Di), and Humanity (Ren) into a unified, dynamic ontology. Unlike Western reductionist methodologies that isolate variables for linear causality, the Yijing posits that systemic integrity arises from the continuous, non-linear interaction of these three dimensions [2]. Here,"Heaven"represents temporal rhythms and macro-environmental trends; "Earth"embodies spatial constraints, resource endowments, and material realities; while"Humanity"signifies organizational agency, ethical decision-making, and social responsibility. The core wisdom lies not in static equilibrium, but in maintaining dynamic harmony amidst constant flux, achieved through adaptive responsiveness rather than rigid control.

This paradigm holds transformative value for corporate sustainability in the Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous (VUCA) era. By transcending fragmented management approaches, the"Three Talents"framework equips enterprises with a holistic mode of cognition. First, it enables alignment of strategic planning with macro-temporal shifts (Heaven), ensuring resilience. Second, it mandates optimization of operational efficiency within finite ecological boundaries (Earth), fostering circular economy practices. Third, it elevates corporate governance to a moral imperative (Humanity), guiding stakeholders to navigate conflicts through coexistence rather than zero-sum competition. Ultimately, the Yijing provides a nonlinear epistemological tool allowing firms to thrive by evolving in symbiotic resonance with cosmic, terrestrial, and social forces [3].

## 2 PHILOSOPHICAL INTERPRETATION AND MAPPING OF THE "THREE TALENTS" SYSTEMIC THINKING IN THE YIJING

## **2.1 The "Heaven" Dimension: Macro Trends and Strategic Positioning**

In the Yijing framework, "Heaven" (Tian) transcends celestial imagery to represent objective, immutable laws governing the temporal dimension, embodying shifting circumstances and uncontrollable external forces. Central to this is the axiom: "those who align with the Heavenly Way thrive, while those who resist it perish." This offers a robust lens for corporate strategy, positing that longevity depends on resonant synchronization with macro-environmental rhythms rather than conquest [4].

To operationalize "Heaven," enterprises must cultivate acute macro-environmental perception and predictive foresight. Strategic leaders must proactively grasp the tripartite drivers of change: economic cycles, policy trajectories, and technological paradigms. The global energy transition serves as a case study. China's "Dual Carbon" goals have evolved from aspirational targets into binding structural constraints. Firms viewing these solely as regulatory burdens face obsolescence; conversely, those interpreting them as transformation signals convert external pressure into internal kinetic energy. By pivoting toward low-carbon technologies and circular models, firms redefine value propositions, securing first-mover advantages in green markets.

Furthermore, the "Heaven" dimension recognizes cyclical patterns in policy and technology. These cycles are non-linear, exhibiting distinct phases demanding differentiated responses. A static strategy is ill-suited for a dynamic universe; corporate agility must be calibrated to the specific "season." During the embryonic innovation phase, the imperative is accumulating technological reserves and R&D capabilities. As policy implementation becomes stringent, focus shifts to rigorous compliance and operational efficiency. In the mature phase, characterized by standardization, priority accelerates toward industrial scaling and ecosystem integration.

This dynamic adaptability necessitates restructuring organizational DNA. Enterprises must dismantle rigid hierarchies for flexible mechanisms capable of rapid iteration, establishing real-time monitoring systems and empowering decentralized decision units. Ultimately, the Yijing teaches that strategic positioning is a continuous alignment process. By internalizing the laws of "Heaven," enterprises navigate VUCA turbulence, transforming unpredictability into a deterministic path for sustainable growth.

## **2.2 The "Earth" Dimension: Resource Endowments and Green Operations**

In the Yijing, the hexagram "Earth" (Kun) symbolizes the fundamental substrate of existence, embodying spatial stability, latent resource capacity, and pragmatic action. Its core tenet, "Earth gives birth to all things," underscores the necessity of a resilient foundation for growth. In the corporate context, this maps to material bases, operational infrastructure, and tangible asset portfolios sustaining the lifecycle.

To actualize "Earth" wisdom, enterprises must engage in rigorous, data-driven audits of resource endowments. This extends beyond superficial inventories to dynamic analyses of interdependencies and systemic bottlenecks. By identifying structural strengths and vulnerabilities, organizations transition from static possession to strategic management of resource flows. Sustainability mandates a shift from extensive, resource-intensive growth to intensive, efficient operations. This requires holistic, full-lifecycle management across the entire value chain.

This interpretation demands integrating circular economy principles into core operational DNA. Through advanced innovation like Industry 4.0 digital twins for real-time monitoring, enterprises can decouple economic value from environmental degradation [5]. The goal is maximizing resource productivity while minimizing ecological footprints, promoting clean production, zero-waste factories, and waste-to-resource mechanisms. Waste is redefined not as a byproduct, but as a misallocated resource awaiting reintegration.

Furthermore, "Earth" emphasizes "adapting to local conditions," acknowledging heterogeneous resource endowments and constraints across contexts. A "one-size-fits-all" strategy is antithetical to the Earth hexagram. Strategies must be tailored to specific operating environments. Resource-intensive industries in fragile zones must prioritize energy efficiency and ecological restoration. Conversely, service-oriented enterprises in urban centers should focus on green office practices, reducing embodied carbon in logistics, and fostering low-carbon cultures.

Ultimately, constructing an operational system centered on efficient utilization and contextual adaptability yields dual advantages. Internally, it reduces compliance risks and ensures continuity. Externally, it cultivates competitive edges through cost control and enhanced brand image. Thus, ancient "Earth" wisdom provides a framework for grounding sustainability in reality, ensuring growth is profitable, ecologically regenerative, and socially resilient.

## **2.3 The "Human" Dimension: Stakeholders and Value Co-Creation**

In the "Three Talents" framework, "Human" (Ren) occupies a pivotal ontological position, serving as the dynamic nexus harmonizing Heaven and Earth. This stance transcends anthropocentrism, positing human agency as the active force actualizing universal principles. The tenet that "the way of human beings is benevolence and righteousness" (Ren Yi) provides a metaphysical basis for modern governance, suggesting legitimacy derives from ethical cultivation of the collective spirit. In business, this reconfigures shareholder primacy into a holistic ecosystem of governance, culture, and responsibility.

First, regarding internal human capital, Yijing philosophy reframes employees from instrumental resources to moral subjects to be cultivated. A people-oriented strategy grounded in "Ren" must evolve beyond basic rights protection to "humanistic capital appreciation," where the organization acts as a crucible for self-actualization. By institutionalizing adaptive learning ecosystems and transparent career pathways, enterprises align employee growth

with organizational evolution. An inclusive culture respecting diversity and ensuring psychological safety mitigates turnover and catalyzes innovation, transforming human capital into a regenerative asset driving sustainable advantage.

Second, the external dimension mandates transcending profit maximization for broader social stewardship. This entails proactive responsibility permeating the value chain: adhering to labor standards, protecting consumer rights, and engaging in community welfare. Crucially, it involves the Yijing emphasis on "harmony without uniformity" (He Er Bu Tong). Enterprises must navigate conflicting stakeholder interests—investors, employees, communities, environment—seeking the "greatest common ground" for value co-creation. This ensures economic efficiency does not compromise social equity or ecological integrity, transforming CSR from a PR exercise into a core strategic imperative.

At the governance level, "Human" wisdom is operationalized through ethics-driven decision-making mechanisms embedding moral reasoning into corporate DNA. This involves moving beyond reactive compliance to proactive ethical foresight. By institutionalizing stakeholder participation in board deliberations and enhancing disclosure transparency, enterprises fortify governance legitimacy. Empirical evidence supports this: organizations integrating Ren-based governance demonstrate superior risk resilience and long-term value creation. Ultimately, the "Human" dimension serves as the moral compass guiding enterprises toward a future where prosperity is inextricably linked to human flourishing [6].

### 3 SYSTEMATIC SYNERGY AND STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION OF THE THREE TALENTS

#### 3.1 System Synergy: Reconstructing the Holistic Perspective

The "Three Talents" paradigm offers a meta-framework for corporate sustainability, proposing dynamic, systemic synergy. Here, Heaven, Earth, and Humanity are interdependent variables in a complex adaptive system: macro-strategy, resource base, and human agency. True sustainability emerges only when these dimensions achieve resonant equilibrium, fostering positive feedback loops.

First, unifying economic and social benefits requires shifting from viewing Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as a cost center to a strategic engine for value co-creation. Enterprises must leverage business model innovation to internalize externalities. The transition to circular economies exemplifies this: redesigning product lifecycles minimizes waste (Earth) while securing supply chain resilience and reducing costs. This aligns commercial viability with social license, creating a "double bottom line" where profit links to societal well-being [7]. Such strategies enhance brand equity and attract impact-oriented capital, proving ethical stewardship precedes financial performance.

Second, aligning short-term goals with long-term visions addresses "intertemporal equity." In the VUCA era, tension exists between quarterly earnings and decades-long sustainability horizons. The Yijing advocates a dialectical balance: maintaining strategic stability (Heaven) while exercising tactical flexibility (Humanity). This requires dynamic capabilities to pivot operations without compromising core missions. Embedding long-term sustainability metrics into executive compensation decouples immediate performance from myopic decision-making, ensuring current actions do not erode future viability.

Third, integrating local optimization with overall synergy challenges siloed governance. Departmental efficiency gains often result in suboptimal organizational outcomes ("local optima"). A holistic approach demands departmental KPIs align with the group's overarching vision. For instance, procurement's focus on lowest-cost sourcing must be recalibrated if it compromises carbon footprints or labor standards. This requires robust cross-functional governance and data transparency, ensuring micro-decisions contribute to macro-resilience.

Finally, unifying individual development and organizational growth underscores the centrality of "Humanity." Sustainability is a human endeavor; without employee engagement, frameworks remain abstract. Enterprises must cultivate a people-oriented culture viewing well-being and growth as core drivers. By providing learning pathways and aligning values with purpose, firms transform labor-management relationships from transactional to transformational. This synergy ensures the workforce acts as co-creators of value, capable of driving innovation and adapting to the macro-environment.

In conclusion, applying "Three Talents" philosophy provides a robust framework for navigating 21st-century complexities. By harmonizing strategy, resources, and agency, enterprises transcend profit-purpose trade-offs, achieving sustainable flourishing that is economically resilient and socially regenerative.

#### 3.2 Value Co-Creation: From Protection to Leadership

Under the "Three Talents" framework, corporate sustainability shifts from passive compliance to proactive value co-creation. Enterprises must align operations with cosmic rhythms (Heaven), ecological integrity (Earth), and social welfare (Humanity). To realize this, three critical strategic transitions are required [8].

First, enterprises must evolve from "protection" to "leadership." Rather than reacting defensively to regulations, forward-thinking corporations should become standard-setters. This requires moving beyond minimum legal thresholds to proactively define rigorous benchmarks for energy efficiency, carbon reduction, and ethical procurement. By establishing elevated standards, firms mitigate risks and drive a "race to the top" across the value chain [9]. A leading manufacturer adopting circular principles can compel suppliers to innovate, transforming

isolated efforts into systemic industry transformation. This proactive leadership makes sustainability a competitive differentiator.

Second, the scope must expand from "internal" optimization to "external" ecosystem regeneration. Traditional models focus on internal upgrades. The "Three Talents" framework demands broader ecological consciousness where the corporation acts as a node in a larger system. Enterprises must actively restore and co-build external ecosystems: constructing green supply chains prioritizing biodiversity, participating in cross-sector innovation, and investing in social welfare. By integrating these dimensions, corporations transition from economic actors to active stewards of the socio-ecological fabric [10].

Lastly, motivation must shift from "interests" to "contributions." While economic viability is prerequisite, true sustainability redefines success by balancing profit with profound societal and environmental contributions. This challenges shareholder primacy, advocating a stakeholder-centric approach where value is measured by net positive impact. Economic returns become byproducts of solving societal problems. Enterprises embedding this philosophy cultivate deep trust and legitimacy, ensuring activities harmonize with natural order and human well-being, creating a future where prosperity and integrity are mutually reinforcing.

In conclusion, guided by Yijing wisdom, corporate sustainability is an evolving practice of alignment. By embracing leadership, expanding boundaries, and prioritizing contribution, enterprises navigate modern complexities to co-create a resilient future.

## **4 CONCLUSION: PHILOSOPHICAL RETURN AND FUTURE OUTLOOK**

### **4.1 Research Conclusions**

This study systematically deconstructs the Yijing's "Three Talents" ontology and maps its logic onto corporate sustainability frameworks. Bridging Eastern metaphysics with modern management science yields three pivotal conclusions.

First, the "Three Talents" paradigm offers a superior systemic architecture, transcending linear limitations of current models. While ESG provides robust metrics, it often treats dimensions as discrete silos. The Yijing posits Heaven (macro-environment), Earth (material resources), and Humanity (agency) as an indivisible triad. This reorients ESG from a static checklist to a dynamic equilibrium system. Unlike Western frameworks prioritizing isolated optimization, "Three Talents" emphasizes holistic synergy and dynamic balance. True sustainability is the emergent property of continuous, harmonious interaction, offering a resilient lens for navigating volatile ecosystems.

Second, the operational wisdom provides a prescriptive roadmap for execution. "Following Heaven" (Shun Tian) mandates transcending reactive compliance for proactive anticipation, internalizing macro-trends as immutable laws and adapting with fluidity. "Establishing Earth" (Li Di) compels grounding ambitions in tangible resource stewardship, ensuring extraction honors biosphere regenerative capacity to secure physical viability. "Establishing Humanity" (Cheng Ren) redefines purpose from shareholder primacy to stakeholder symbiosis, prioritizing human dignity and social equity. Sustainable development is achievable only when these dimensions unify in dynamic resonance; disruption in one destabilizes the whole.

Finally, integrating Eastern wisdom serves as an epistemological corrective to Western-centric theories. Dominant frameworks rooted in reductionist logic struggle with "wicked problems" due to lacking holism and cyclical time. "Three Talents" thinking fills this void, prioritizing interdependence and balance. For Chinese and global firms, this offers a distinct intellectual resource for constructing a sustainability model that is culturally authentic and globally competitive. Synthesizing Western precision with Eastern depth proposes a hybrid framework for resilient, ethical organizations.

### **4.2 Research Outlook**

For managers, operationalizing "Three Talents" wisdom necessitates rigorous cultivation of systemic thinking, perceiving the organization as a complex adaptive system within a broader ecosystem.

In strategic formulation, systemic thinking mandates holistic integration. First, regarding macro trends, managers must anticipate non-linear disruptions from geopolitical shifts and technological singularity. Second, resource assessment must evolve from static inventory to dynamic capability auditing, identifying synergies between tangible and intangible assets. Third, addressing stakeholder demands requires shifting from transactional engagement to relational value co-creation, acknowledging interdependent interests. Failure to harmonize these vectors leads to strategic myopia.

During execution, emphasis must shift from rigid adherence to dynamic adjustment. In the VUCA era, static roadmaps are obsolete. Managers must institutionalize feedback loops for real-time data assimilation, enabling agile pivots without losing coherence. "Coordinated advancement" implies breaking silos to ensure cross-functional initiatives reinforce one another, creating multiplicative performance effects.

Crucially, this approach redefines ESG management. It must be decoupled from passive compliance and elevated to an active strategic choice. When embedded into the core value chain, ESG ceases to be a cost center and becomes a driver of innovation, brand equity, and capital efficiency. Aligning objectives with planetary boundaries unlocks new opportunities, secures a "license to operate," and fosters resilience. Consequently, robust ESG integration transforms into a definitive component of core competitiveness, distinguishing industry leaders in the global marketplace.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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