

# Influence of Employees' Unethical Behavior on Their Victimization from Observers: The role of Relationship Conflict and Deontic Justice

Xianwei Zheng

*School of Management, Zhejiang University,  
Hangzhou 310058, Zhejiang, China*

### Abstract

It is widely believed that misconduct of employees would be punished by observers, while this phenomenon has not been proved by sufficient theoretical interpretation and empirical evidences. Based on ethical decision-making theory, the effects of unethical behavior on employees' victimization, as well as its influencing mechanisms and boundary conditions were analyzed in the work, from interactive perspectives of individuals conducting unethical behavior and observers. Two rounds of questionnaire survey were conducted on 265 frontline employees from a Chinese manufacturing enterprise. The results showed that employees' unethical behavior significantly positively influenced employees' victimization; observers' deontic injustice made significant mediating effects between unethical behavior and victimization of employees; relationship conflict had significant moderating effects between unethical behavior and victimization of employees. There were obvious practical significances of the results in prevention and reduction of employees' unethical behavior in organizations.

Key words: UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR, RELATIONSHIP CONFLICT, DEONTIC INJUSTICE, VICTIMIZATION, ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

### Introduction

Old and new values coexist in the society with accelerating transformation and drastic change. Employees constantly encounter ethical dilemmas and choices, with frequent unethical behavior appearing in organizations. Harmful effects are brought by employees' unethical behavior to the organization, including destruction of organizational reputation and profits [1]. Meanwhile, employees' unethical behavior will be punished by the victims for revenge. In addition, lots of righteous cases indicate that implementers of unethical behavior will be punished by observers. The motivation of observers in punishing unethical behavior is more based on deontic justice rather than self-interest [2]. For example, an observer is willing to punish the attacker at the cost of

personal economic interests, even though the victim is not clear. Therefore, effects and incentives of employees' ethical behavior on their victimization from observers should be further explored, which has obvious practical significances in prevention and reduction of unethical behavior, as well as cultivation of healthy social conduct with righteousness and shame-awareness.

Decision-making of employees in the workplace is affected by situational factors including interpersonal relationship [3, 4]. Relationship conflict refers to interpersonal disharmony of employees within the team, reflecting in tension, hostility and anger in employee relationship [5]. It also indicates negative relationships between individuals and their colleagues. Relationship conflict compels employees to focus more attention to

interpersonal issues [6], enhancing their possibility perceiving moral events. Moreover, relationship conflict will undermine the trust among team members [7]; employees will easily generate negative attribution to others' behavior, resulting in mutual hostility and confrontation [8]. Therefore, ethical decision-making of individuals will be affected by relationship conflict through negative

interpersonal communication. In the work, relationship conflict was introduced as a moderating variable, further exploring the impact of relationship conflict on employees' unethical behavior and observers' deontic injustice. Research framework of this study is shown in Figure 1.

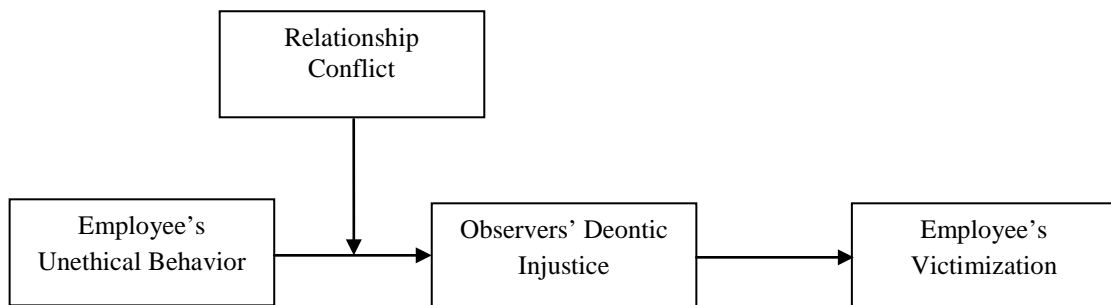


Figure 1. Research Frame

## 2. Theories and hypotheses

### 2.1 Employees' unethical behavior and victimization

Attacker and victim are involved in aggressive behavior. Thus, the effects of individuals' unethical behavior on victimization from observers should be analyzed from attacker and victim. From perspective of the victim, [9] divide victims into aggressive and vulnerable types. Aggressive victims, often with destructive, hostile or threatening behavior, are punished by others through threats or violence. For example, too much dominating behavior of individuals usually makes an impression that they attempt to control the environment with compelled expression and influence; the behavior is easily attacked by others due to high provocation [10]. The results also show that unethical behavior easily results in punishment on individuals [1].

From perspective of attacker, observer may punish individuals conducting unethical behavior to prevent their direct or indirect interests [11]. Research shows that people tend to attack the dangerous source while perceiving to be hurt [12]. Observers also conduct punishment on individuals with unethical behavior for the purpose of justice. In

this case, ethic principles are more focused rather than interest. For example, individuals with high level of moral clarity are more likely to punish perpetrators of unethical behavior [13]. [14] studied incivility which is one of minor unethical behaviors in the organization, finding that bystanders implemented punishment because they generated negative emotions when they witnessed uncivilized behavior. Therefore, hypothesis was proposed as follows:

*Hypothesis 1: Employees' unethical behavior is positively correlated to employees' victimization.*

### 2.2 Mediating role of deontic injustice

Observers' deontic injustice refers to emotional reaction of observers to unethical behavior. As a temporary psychological state, deontic injustice contains several separate and associated emotions, such as anger, hostility and contempt etc. [2]. Differentiated sense of justice results from social evaluation; the reason that people are keen to focus on fairness is based on the process of emotion [15]. Deontic injustice is a strong emotional reaction led by immoral events [16]. [14] found that individuals would generate moral emotions when they witnessed uncivilized behavior. It is derived that unethical behavior of individuals

will significantly enhance moral emotion of observers. Therefore, hypothesis was proposed as:

*Hypothesis 2: Employees' unethical behavior is positively correlated to observers' deontic injustice.*

Moral emotions refer to perception of interests and welfare of others rather than individuals themselves [17]. Based on ethical decision-making theory, individual emotions play important roles in all aspects (including moral consciousness, judgment, motivation and behavior, etc.) of ethical decision-making [18]. As a special moral emotion, deontic injustice is often associated with revenge and punishment. Research indicates that deontic injustice is an outward type of negative emotion; generating deontic injustice, individual takes emotion-driven vindictive acts with less focus on interests of the violator, thus preventing the harmful behavior and its recurrence [19]. Therefore, it is derived that observers' deontic injustice will promote their punishing behavior, with the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 3: Observers' deontic injustice is positively correlated to employees' victimization.*

Based on the above analysis, employees' unethical behavior is positively correlated to employees' victimization (Hypothesis 1); employees' unethical behavior is positively correlated to observers' deontic justice (Hypothesis 2); observers' deontic injustice is positively correlated to employees' victimization (Hypothesis 3). Therefore, observers' deontic injustice mediates the relationship between unethical behavior and victimization of employees, with the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 4: Observers' deontic injustice plays an intermediary role between unethical behavior and victimization of employees.*

### **2.3 Moderating effect of relationship conflict**

Individual awareness of ethical events is an important element of moral decision making [20, 21]. According to ethical decision making model of [20], moral decision making includes moral awareness, moral judgment, moral tendency and moral behavior. [21] further expanded ethical decision-making model. He focused on the impact of moral events themselves rather than individual

characteristics or organizational cultural characteristics on moral consciousness of decision makers. Jones proposed concept of moral intensity which refers to moral pressure or urgency resulted from the event itself, including Magnitude of Consequence, Social Consensus, Probability of Effect, Temporal Immediacy, Proximity and Concentration of Effect. He also believed that moral intensity strengthened individual moral consciousness on moral events.

Based on theory of moral decision-making, moderating effect of relationship conflict was analyzed mainly from perspective of moral consciousness and moral intensity of colleagues. When high level of relationship conflict exists between individuals and colleagues, their relationship has characteristics of tension, hostility and anger, etc. [5]. Thus, proximity, one element of moral intensity, will be inevitably reduced. Proximity refers to similarity between observers and victims (or beneficiaries) in social, cultural, psychological or physical aspects [21]. Hostility resulted from high level of relationship conflict will undermine colleagues' proximity to the individuals; moral intensity of colleagues will be enhanced, thus increasing moral consciousness for unethical behavior. Strong moral consciousness leads to higher levels of moral emotions—deontic injustice [2]. It is predicted that unethical behavior has more obvious effects on observers' deontic injustice under higher levels of relationship conflict. Therefore, the following hypothesis was proposed:

*Hypothesis 5: Relationship conflict moderates the relationship between employees' unethical behavior and observers' deontic injustice—the higher the level of relationship conflict, the stronger positive influence of employees' unethical behavior on deontic injustice will be.*

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Objects**

The data was collected from a large-scale manufacturing enterprise in Zhejiang Province of China. Working environment and job characteristics are important factors to cause aggressive behavior in the organization [22, 23]. Frontline employees work in the workshop with relatively poor environment and high physical load; there are frequent interaction among employees within the team. It is predicted that front-line employees are

more easily to be attacked by bystanders. Therefore, front-line employees were selected as the objects of investigation.

Two rounds of questionnaire survey were conducted to minimize common method variance [24]. The first round was to investigate background information, unethical behavior and relationship conflict of employees; the second round was aimed at observers' deontic injustice and employees' victimization. All questions were filled out by respondents themselves; interval of the two surveys was one month. In the first round of the survey, 450 questionnaires were distributed with 337 valid questionnaires recovered, and the effective rate was 74.8%. In the second survey, 391 questionnaires were distributed, where 282 were valid questionnaires, with the effective rate of 72.1%. Then, the two surveys were paired, with 265 effective questionnaires. Among the 265 employees, there were 109 male and 156 female, occupying 41.1% and 58.9% of the total, respectively; average age of the subjects was 34.92 (SD = 9.55), and average length of service was 6.41 years (SD = 4.76 years). There was no subject with master degree (and above); there were 6 subjects with undergraduate level, occupying 2.3%; there were 22 subjects receiving education of junior college, occupying 8.3%; the number of subjects with high school education (technical school) was 93, accounting for 35.1%; there were 144 subjects with and below primary education, occupying 54.3% of the total.

### 3.2 Variable measurement

Mature scales commonly used in first-rate international journal literature were adopted to ensure validity and reliability. Back translation of standard translation method was used to ensure accuracy of scale contents. Employees conducted evaluation through Likert-5 point scale method (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = strongly agree).

Unethical behavior was measured with sub-dimension of "Deviant Behavior" compiled by [25]. There are 12 items in Organizational Deviant Behavior, where the item "taking illegal stimulant and alcohol during work" was deleted due to inconformity to Chinese social conditions, leaving 11 questions. Considering sensibility and concerns of respondents on the contents, all questions were reversely presented. For example, the items were presented as "I have

never kept organizational property as my own" and "I have never dealt with private matters irrelevant to the work during working hours". Reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.95.

Relationship conflict was measured using the scale proposed by [26], with three questions items. For example, the item can be expressed as "the relationship between me and other members of the team is tense" and "I often get angry with other members of the team". Reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.91.

Observers' deontic injustice was measured by 4 questions of the sub-dimension Moral Outrage in Deontic Justice Scale compiled by [27]. The sample questions could be "when the observers see others suffering unfair treatment, they will be sad" and "when the observers see others suffering from unfair treatment, they will feel uneasy". Reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.86.

Victimization was measured through five questions proposed by [28]. All questions were revelry expressed for consideration of respondents' sensitivity and concerns on contents of the questions, with sample question items as "I've never been abused by observers" and "observers never threaten me". Reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.92.

### 3.3 Statistical analysis

The software SPSS17.0 was used for reliability analysis of questionnaires, descriptive statistical analysis of variables, as well as correlation analysis and regression analysis.

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Results of confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis was used to calculate discriminant validity of unethical behavior, relationship conflict, observers' deontic injustice and employees' victimization. Table 1 showed that four-factor model had better data fitting compared with the other models. The ratio of chi-square to degree of freedom was less than 2 and RMSEA less than 0.1, with CFI and TLI higher than 0.90. This indicated high discriminant validity of these variables, which can be considered as different constructs. Goodness of fit for this model is significantly superior to that of the three-factor model and one-factor model (See Table 1), indicating high discriminant validity.

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**Table 1.** Variable Confirmatory Factor Analysis Results (N=265)

Fitting index	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	RMSEA	CFI	TLI
Four Factors Model	361.13	224	1.61	0.04	0.97	0.97
Three Factors Model 1	935.11	227	4.12	0.11	0.84	0.83
Three Factors Model 2	888.11	227	3.91	0.11	0.86	0.84
Three Factors Model 3	833.94	227	3.67	0.10	0.87	0.86
Three Factors Model 4	1609.72	227	7.09	0.15	0.70	0.67
Three Factors Model 5	833.39	227	3.67	0.10	0.87	0.86
Three Factors Model 6	935.68	227	4.12	0.11	0.85	0.83
One Factor Model	2580.13	230	11.22	0.20	0.50	0.45

Note. (1) four factors model: including unethical behavior, relationship conflict, observers' deontic injustice and victimization. (2) three factors model 1: combining relationship conflict and observers' deontic injustice into one factor. (3) three factors model 2: combining relationship conflict and unethical behavior into one factor. (4) three factors model 3: combining observers' deontic injustice and unethical behavior into one factor. (5) three factors model 4: combining victimization and unethical behavior into one factor. (6) three factors model 5: combining victimization and observers' deontic injustice into one factor. (7) three factors model 6: combining victimization and relationship conflict into one factor. (8) one factors model: combining all factors into one factor.

### 4.2 Results of descriptive statistical analysis

Table 2 showed mean values, standard deviation, correlation coefficients, and coefficients of internal consistency for the variables. The results indicated that correlation between unethical behavior and victimization, unethical behavior and observers' deontic injustice, as well as observers' deontic injustice

and victimization reached significant level. Meanwhile, internal consistency coefficients of the variables were above 0.85, reaching an acceptable level. These results provided necessary preconditions for analysis of relationship among variables and testing of intermediary effect.

**Table 2.** Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Internal Consistency Statistics (N=265)

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Unethical Behavior	1.66	0.72	(0.95)			
2. Relationship Conflict	2.14	1.15	0.25**	(0.91)		
3. Observers' Deontic Injustice	3.24	0.82	0.33**	-0.00	(0.86)	
4. Victimization	2.37	1.03	0.15*	-0.01	0.36**	(0.92)

Note. N=265. Symble \* on behalf of  $p < 0.05$ , Symble \*\* on behalf of  $p < 0.01$ ; Cronbach's alphas are displayed on the diagonal

### 4.3 Results of regression analysis

In terms of Hypothesis 1-3, Model 4 indicated that employees' unethical behavior significantly positively correlated to employees' victimization ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ), thus providing data support for Hypothesis 1; Model 2 indicated that there was significantly positive correlation between employees'

unethical behavior and observers' deontic injustice ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), supporting Hypothesis 2 with data evidence; Model 3 indicated significantly positive correlation existed between observers' deontic injustice and employees' victimization ( $\beta = 0.36$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), thus Hypothesis 3 was verified with data support.

To verify Hypothesis 4, Stepwise Regression was adopted for verification of mediating effect. According to results of Table 3.11, Model 4 indicated significant positive correlation between employees' unethical behavior and dominant victimization ( $\beta = 0.15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ); Model 1 indicated significant positive correlation between employees' unethical behavior and observers' deontic injustice ( $\beta = 0.32$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ); Model 5 showed that when unethical behavior and observers'

deontic injustice were simultaneously introduced into the model, coefficient of observers' deontic injustice was significant ( $\beta = 0.35$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The combined results indicated that observers' deontic injustice had significant mediating effect between unethical behavior and dominant victimization of employees, thus verifying Hypothesis 4 with data support.

**Table 3.** Testing Results of Hypothesis 1 to 3

	Observers' Deontic Injustice		Victimization		
	Model1	Model 2	Model3	Model4	Model5
Control Variable					
Gender	-0.02	-0.02	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02
Age	0.16*	0.18*	0.00	0.06	0.00
Tenure	0.00	0.00	-0.02	-0.03	-0.02
Education	-0.01	-0.05	0.03	0.02	0.03
Independent Variable					
Unethical behavior	0.32**			0.15*	0.04
Mediating Variable					
Observers' Deontic Injustice			0.36**		0.35**
R <sup>2</sup>	0.36	0.12	0.13	0.01	0.11
$\Delta R^2$	/	/	/	/	0.11
F	7.93**	6.81**	7.71**	1.33	6.47**
$\Delta F$	/	/	/	/	31.41**

Note. N=265. Symble \* on behalf of  $p < 0.05$ , Symble \*\* on behalf of  $p < 0.01$ .

For verification of Hypothesis 5, observers' deontic injustice was selected as dependent variable, while control variable, independent variable and manipulated variable, as well as product term of independent variable and manipulated variable were introduced into the model layer by layer (See Model 1, Model 2 and Model 3 in Table 4). Model 3 showed that the coefficient was significant for product term of unethical behavior and relationship conflict ( $\beta = 0.12$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This indicated that

relationship conflict had moderating effect between employees' unethical behavior and observers' deontic injustice, thus verifying Hypothesis 5 with data support.

Procedure proposed by [29] was used to further demonstrate the moderating effect. Taking one standard deviation higher than the mean value and one standard deviation below the mean value as benchmarks, effect of employees' non-ethical behavior on observers' deontic injustice was described under different

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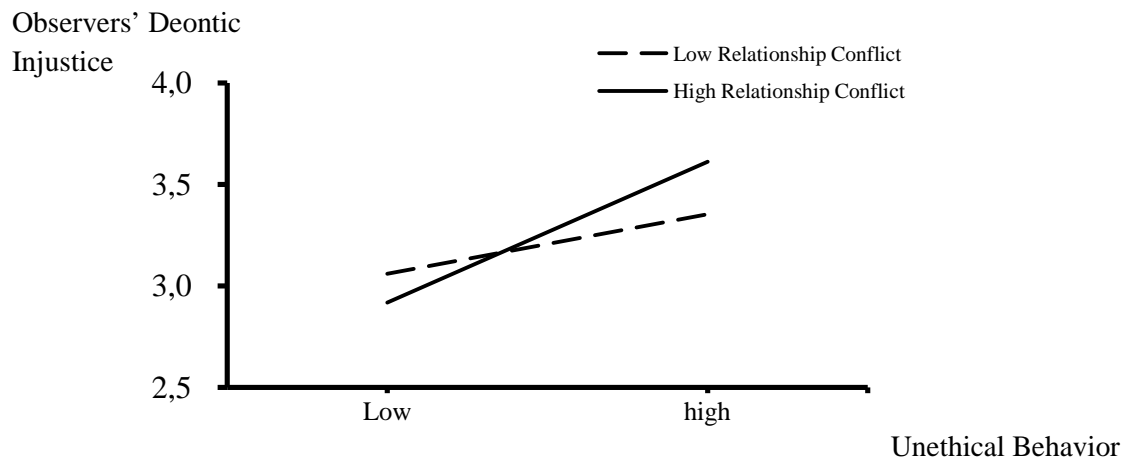
levels of relationship conflict (See Figure 2). The straight line became steeper with increasing levels of relationship conflict, indicating more obvious effect of employees'

unethical behavior on observers' deontic injustice, thus further verifying Hypothesis 5.

**Table 4.** Testing Results of Moderating Effert

	Observers' Deontic Injustice		
	Model1	Model 2	Model 3
Control Variable			
Gender	-0.02	-0.03	-0.05
Age	0.16*	0.18*	0.15 *
Tenure	0.02	-0.02	-0.01
Education	-0.02	-0.03	-0.04
Independent Variable			
Unethical behavior		0.28**	0.27**
Moderating Variable			
Relationship Conflict		0.01	0.05
Interaction			
Unethical behavior ×Relationship Conflict			0.12*
R <sup>2</sup>	0.03	0.20	0.23
ΔR <sup>2</sup>	0.03	1.70	0.04
F	2.15	8.99**	8.60**
ΔF	2.15	17.56**	6.00**

Note. N=265. Symble \* on behalf of p<0.05, Symble \*\* on behalf of p<0.01.



**Figure 2.** Unethical Behavior×Relationship Conflict Interaction for Observer's Deontic Behavior

## 5. Conclusions and discussions

### 5.1 Conclusions

In the work, two rounds of questionnaire surveys were conducted on 265 employees. The results indicate that: (1) employees' unethical behavior has positive effect on employees' victimization from observers; (2) observers' deontic injustice play a significant intermediary role between employees' unethical behavior and employees' victimization; (3) relationship conflict between employees and observers has significant moderating effect between employees' unethical behavior and employees' victimization. The positive effect of employees' unethical behavior on observers' deontic justice becomes more significant with increasing levels of relationship conflict.

### 5.2 Theoretical significances

Important theoretical significance has been brought by this research. Firstly, studies on results of individual unethical behavior and factors affecting individual victimization are enriched. Although there is overlap between unethical behavior and aggressive behavior in definition, little direct links between them have been related in academic research. The study on influence of unethical behavior on individual victimization provides a bridge between unethical behavior and victimization. Secondly, the results cover shortage of empirical studies on deontic justice. Concepts of deontic justice have been commonly used to explain non-profit motive that observers punish individuals with unethical behavior. However, deontic justice is more used in qualitative research without empirical testing. In the work, observers' deontic injustice has been empirically tested as a mediating variable, making up for the shortcomings of existing research results. Thirdly, research has been deepened on situations of effects brought by individual unethical behavior. Based on ethical decision-making theory, the impact of situational factors in relationship conflict has been explored, deepening the understanding on boundary conditions of unethical behavior influencing observers' deontic injustice. Fourthly, new ideas are explored for further research of individual unethical behavior. Previous studies focus more on one-way influencing relationship between individuals and observers. However, the social interactive process "individual—observer—individual" has been focused in the work, providing new

ideas for studies on ethical behavior of individuals.

### 5.3 Practical significances

There are important practical significances in results of this study. Intervention measures should be taken in organizations due to significant negative impact of employees' unethical behavior.

(1) Employees should be encouraged to play supervisory role in the organization. On the one hand, morals and ability should be equally emphasized in recruitment and selection, focusing on cultivation of moral quality for employees, with improvement of overall moral level. On the other hand, normative standard of employees' behavior should be established, defining behavior boundaries in detail; employees should be guided to comply with ethical norms, providing standards and basis for supervision of employees

(2) More channels should be developed to prevent unethical behavior of employees. Some specific attacks possess unethical feature to a certain extent. Thus, the attack of observers to individuals conducting unethical behavior can be considered as the way of "violence for violence and evil for evil". Therefore, organizations need to explore more channels to prevent unethical behavior of employees. For example, employees should be trained to care for neighboring colleagues and deal with problems by proper methods. Active communication and sincere advices are more useful when employees find colleagues have motives and tendencies of unethical behavior; when they witness colleagues conducting unethical behavior, they should inform leaders or relevant departments, avoiding taking actions all by themselves.

(3) Various factors should be fully used to create a favorable environment for prevention of unethical behavior. It is widely believed that relationship conflict would negatively affect organizational performance [30, 31]. However, conflicts can be utilized to strengthen behavior supervision among employees in organizational management, exploring positive functions of unfavorable factors.

### 5.4 Limitations and prospects

There are limitations in the research due to various objective and subjective factors. First of all, although the data was collected at different times, mediating variables and



dependent variables were measured at the same time. Thus, common variance exists to a certain degree. In future studies, the data can be collected at three time points for independent variables, mediating variables and dependent variables, respectively. Then, all variables are from self-reports of employees, greatly enhancing possibility of common variance. Subjects of data source can be extended in future studies. In addition, the subjects are selected from the same company, limiting diversity and randomness of the sample. The sample should be expanded to select multiple enterprises for questionnaires. Finally, the variables are measured using foreign scales, with unavoidable interference of cultural differences; scales conforming to Chinese culture remain to be developed.

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