



## REFRAMING WU CHANG AS MORAL-SPIRITUAL CULTIVATION: ETHICAL CONVERGENCES AND DIVERGENCES BETWEEN CONFUCIANISM AND ISLAMIC MORAL THOUGHT

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Received: January 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2025	Reviewed: January 2026 – March 30 <sup>th</sup> , 2026	Published: April 2 <sup>nd</sup> , 2026
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### ABSTRACT

This article reframes *Wu Chang*—*ren, yi, li, zhi, and xin*—not merely as a set of social virtues in Confucianism, but as a framework of moral-spiritual cultivation that integrates self-formation, relational ethics, and alignment with *Tian*. It addresses a gap in existing scholarship, which has often treated Confucian morality descriptively or compared it with Islamic ethics through overly general moral parallels. Using comparative textual and conceptual analysis within the framework of comparative religious ethics, this study examines classical Confucian sources, selected works on Confucian ethics, and Islamic materials on prophetic moral virtues, including relevant Qur’anic verses and Hadith. The analysis argues that *Wu Chang* functions as a virtue-centered grammar of ethical self-cultivation whose public significance lies in the formation of compassion, justice, civility, wisdom, and trust. It further shows that Confucianism and Islamic moral thought converge in their concern for character formation and ethical responsibility, yet diverge in their metaphysical grounding, sources of normativity, and models of moral authority. By clarifying both convergence and divergence, this article contributes to comparative religious ethics and interreligious moral discourse in plural societies.

**Keywords:** Wu Chang; moral-spiritual cultivation; Confucianism; Islamic moral thought; comparative religious ethics; virtue ethics

### ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menafsirkan ulang *Wu Chang*—*ren, yi, li, zhi, dan xin*—bukan sekadar sebagai seperangkat kebajikan sosial dalam Konfusianisme, melainkan sebagai kerangka pembinaan moral-spiritual yang mengintegrasikan pembentukan diri, etika relasional, dan keselarasan dengan *Tian*. Artikel ini berangkat dari celah dalam kajian yang ada, yang kerap memperlakukan moralitas Konfusian secara deskriptif atau membandingkannya dengan etika Islam melalui paralel moral yang terlalu umum. Dengan menggunakan analisis tekstual dan konseptual komparatif dalam kerangka etika agama komparatif, penelitian ini mengkaji sumber-sumber klasik Konfusian, karya-karya terpilih tentang etika Konfusian, serta bahan-bahan Islam mengenai kebajikan moral kenabian, termasuk ayat-ayat Al-Qur’an dan hadis yang relevan. Analisis menunjukkan bahwa *Wu Chang* berfungsi sebagai tata bahasa etis berbasis kebajikan bagi pembinaan diri moral, dengan signifikansi publik yang terletak pada pembentukan kasih sayang, keadilan, kesusilaan, kebijaksanaan, dan kepercayaan. Artikel ini juga menunjukkan bahwa Konfusianisme dan pemikiran moral Islam bertemu dalam perhatian terhadap pembentukan karakter dan tanggung jawab etis, tetapi berbeda dalam landasan metafisis, sumber normativitas, dan model otoritas moral. Dengan menjelaskan konvergensi sekaligus divergensi tersebut, artikel ini berkontribusi pada pengembangan etika agama komparatif serta memperluas ruang dialog moral antaragama dalam masyarakat plural.

**Kata Kunci:** *Wu Chang*; pembinaan moral-spiritual; Konfusianisme; pemikiran moral Islam; etika agama komparatif; etika kebajikan



## INTRODUCTION

Recent scholarship has renewed interest in the ethical resources of religious traditions in response to what is frequently described as a contemporary moral crisis: declining social trust, the normalization of dishonesty, the erosion of civic responsibility, and the weakening of moral restraint in both private and public life (Tandiongan & Riak, 2024). In this context, religion has re-emerged not only as a system of belief but also as a normative tradition capable of shaping moral orientation in relation to God, fellow human beings, and the wider order of life (Sultan et al., 2023). This renewed attention is particularly relevant to traditions whose ethical vision is deeply tied to character formation rather than mere doctrinal adherence.

Confucianism is one such tradition. It is best understood not simply as a code of etiquette or social order, but as a moral tradition centered on disciplined self-cultivation, relational harmony, and the refinement of human character (Heriyanti, 2021; Taylor, 1990). Within the Chinese intellectual and religious context, Confucian teaching has often been linked to *Rujiao*, the tradition of the learned, which places ethical refinement at the center of human flourishing (Sou'yb, 1996). Accordingly, morality in Confucian thought should not be reduced to outward conformity to rules; it is an inward and sustained process through which persons align themselves with *Tian* as the ultimate moral-spiritual horizon (Tu, 1989; Rozie, 2017).

A central formulation of Confucian morality is Wu Chang, the “Five Constant Virtues”: *ren* (benevolence or humaneness), *yi* (rightness or righteousness), *li* (propriety or civility), *zhi* (wisdom), and *xin* (trustworthiness) (Zarkasi, 2017; Husin, 2014). These virtues are commonly presented as the ethical basis of proper conduct and social

harmony. Previous studies have indeed shown their significance for empathy, discipline, responsibility, and communal cohesion in modern life (Aprilia & Murtiningsih, 2019; Syahputra et al., 2025; Yu, 2025). In Indonesia, Confucian values have also been discussed as moral resources for social integration, civic ethics, and national harmony in a plural society (Kasyfurrahman et al., 2020; Hun, 2025).

However, much of the existing scholarship still treats Wu Chang primarily in descriptive terms, that is, as a list of virtues or a code governing proper conduct. Such readings are useful, but they remain insufficient for explaining how Wu Chang operates as a framework of moral-spiritual cultivation. Earlier scholarship on Confucian religiousness and self-cultivation has already pointed toward this deeper horizon (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990; Rozie, 2017), yet the Five Constant Virtues themselves have not always been theorized as an integrated moral grammar linking self-formation, relational order, and spiritual orientation. The issue, therefore, is not that Confucian virtues have been ignored, but that they have not been adequately reinterpreted as a coherent structure of moral formation.

A similar limitation appears in comparative studies of Confucianism and Islam. Several scholars have highlighted moral affinities between the two traditions, especially with regard to humanity, tolerance, social harmony, and ethical responsibility (Risky et al., 2023; Nugraha & Rachmawati, 2025; Sultan et al., 2023). Other works have gone further by relating Wu Chang to Islamic concepts of character and virtue (Rohman et al., 2025). Yet such comparisons often remain at the level of broad moral parallels. They show that both traditions value compassion, justice, wisdom, or honesty, but they rarely clarify the level at which such similarities hold or the point at which they break down.

As a result, moral resemblance is sometimes mistaken for theological or conceptual equivalence.

This article argues that a more rigorous comparison must attend to both convergence and divergence. Confucianism and Islamic moral thought do converge in their concern for character formation, moral discipline, and responsibility toward others. Yet they diverge in important ways: in metaphysical grounding, sources of normativity, and models of moral authority. In Islam, morality is rooted in revelation, shaped by the Qur'an and Hadith, and embodied in the exemplary character of the Prophet Muhammad as the ideal model of *akhlaq* (As'ad, 2014; Daryanto & Ernawati, 2024). In Confucianism, morality emerges through cultivation, relational practice, ritual propriety, and alignment with *Tian* (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990). The comparison, therefore, is most fruitful when it seeks ethical convergence without metaphysical equivalence.

Against this background, this article proposes a reinterpretation of Wu Chang not merely as a cluster of social virtues in Confucianism, but as a framework of moral-spiritual cultivation integrating self-formation, relational ethics, and alignment with *Tian*. It asks three interrelated questions: first, how should Wu Chang be understood as a mode of moral-spiritual cultivation in Confucian thought? Second, how does this framework remain ethically significant for character formation and public life in contemporary plural society? Third, to what extent can Wu Chang be brought into meaningful dialogue with Islamic moral thought in terms of its convergences and divergences?

This study makes three contributions. First, it offers a more conceptually robust interpretation of Wu Chang as an integrated grammar of virtue-centered self-cultivation. Second, it refines comparative discussion

between Confucianism and Islam by moving beyond generalized ethical resemblance toward a more careful account of similarity, difference, and the limits of comparison. Third, it contributes to comparative religious ethics by showing that interreligious moral dialogue is most fruitful when traditions are compared without erasing doctrinal and metaphysical distinctions. In doing so, the article illuminates the relevance of Confucian ethics and Islamic moral thought for moral discourse and character formation in plural societies.

## METHOD

This article employs a comparative textual and conceptual analysis within the field of comparative religious ethics. The study is interpretive rather than empirical: its aim is not to measure attitudes or social practices, but to clarify the ethical architecture of *Wu Chang* in Confucian thought and to assess its convergences and divergences with Islamic moral thought (Moleong, 2017).

The unit of analysis consists of key moral concepts and their ethical functions within each tradition. On the Confucian side, the focus is on *ren*, *yi*, *li*, *zhi*, and *xin* as an integrated framework of moral cultivation. On the Islamic side, the comparison centers on selected categories of *akhlaq* and prophetic moral virtues, especially those associated with compassion, truthfulness, trustworthiness, wisdom, justice, and ethical responsibility.

The comparison is conducted at three analytical levels: conceptual structure, ethical function, and normative grounding. To strengthen the Islamic side of the comparison, the study draws not only on secondary works on Islamic ethics but also on selected primary textual materials from the Qur'an and Hadith. These include Qur'anic passages on mercy, truthfulness, wisdom, and

trust—such as Q. 21:107, Q. 9:119, Q. 2:42, Q. 2:269, Q. 4:58, and Q. 8:27—as well as selected Hadith on noble character, love for others, truthfulness, wisdom, and moral trustworthiness.

Primary sources therefore include the *Lunyu (Analects)*, *Mengzi (Mencius)*, Qur'anic verses, and selected Hadith relevant to prophetic virtues and Islamic moral formation. Secondary sources include scholarly books and articles on Confucian ethics, Confucian spirituality, virtue ethics, Islamic moral thought, character formation, and interreligious ethics. In particular, the article engages works on Confucian moral cultivation and religiousness (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990; Rozie, 2017), the structure of Confucian virtues (Husin, 2014; Zarkasi, 2017; Heriyanti, 2021), and Islamic conceptions of morality, character, and prophetic exemplarity (As'ad, 2014; Nawi & Othman, 2018; Daryanto & Ernawati, 2024; Darwis et al., 2024; Nurgenti, 2025).

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the selected texts were read closely to identify how moral concepts are defined, related, and embedded within broader visions of ethical life. Second, the study mapped the internal structure of *Wu Chang* as a coherent moral grammar rather than a mere list of virtues. Third, the Confucian framework was placed in dialogue with Islamic moral categories and primary Islamic texts to examine points of functional convergence, especially in relation to compassion, justice, civility, wisdom, and trustworthiness. Fourth, the study identified the limits of comparison, particularly with regard to metaphysical grounding, sources of normativity, and models of moral authority.

To maintain interpretive rigor, three safeguards were adopted. First, concepts were analyzed within their own textual and religious contexts before being compared. Second, comparison was conducted at the

level of ethical function and moral formation rather than through premature doctrinal equation. Third, convergences were always assessed together with divergences so that similarity did not erase theological or epistemological difference. The study remains limited to a textual-conceptual inquiry and does not examine lived religious practice through fieldwork or ethnography. Its purpose is analytical precision: to reinterpret *Wu Chang* as a framework of moral-spiritual cultivation and to evaluate its comparative significance in relation to Islamic moral thought.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Wu Chang as a Framework of Moral-Spiritual Cultivation

A central argument of this article is that *Wu Chang* should not be understood merely as a normative list of virtues regulating outward conduct, but as a coherent framework of moral-spiritual cultivation. This reinterpretation is necessary because much of the literature still treats Confucian morality descriptively, as a body of teachings about social harmony and proper behavior, without sufficiently clarifying the deeper anthropological and spiritual logic that underlies those teachings (Heriyanti, 2021; Syahputra et al., 2025). Yet within the inner structure of Confucian ethics, morality is not reducible to external compliance. It is fundamentally a process of self-formation through which persons refine their dispositions, order their relationships, and align themselves with *Tian* (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990).

If *Wu Chang* is read only as five separate virtues to be memorized or socially applied, its deeper significance is easily flattened into moral formalism. By contrast, when read through the lens of self-cultivation, the five virtues appear as an integrated ethical grammar through which the self is disciplined, relational life is ordered, and

moral subjectivity is gradually transformed. Wu Chang is therefore not simply about what one ought to do; it is about what kind of person one must become.

This reading is consistent with scholarship that sees Confucian ethics as inseparable from self-cultivation. Tu (1989) argues that Confucian religiousness cannot be sharply divided into the ethical and the spiritual, since moral cultivation itself is participation in a larger moral-cosmological order. Taylor (1990) similarly shows that the religious dimension of Confucianism lies not in dogmatic theology but in the formation of persons whose lives become attuned to the normative structure of the cosmos. In this sense, morality is not secondary to spirituality; morality is one of the principal forms through which spirituality is enacted.

Wu Chang may thus be understood as the ethical architecture of cultivated personhood. Ren provides the affective center of moral life; yi supplies principled rightness; li gives embodied and relational form to virtue; zhi enables discerning judgment; and xin secures integrity and trustworthiness in human interaction (Husin, 2014; Zarkasi, 2017; Rohman et al., 2025). These virtues are not self-sufficient. Their significance lies in their interdependence.

Among them, ren occupies a foundational place. In the *Analects*, ren is closely tied to loving others and to reciprocity, expressed in the familiar principle of not imposing on others what one does not desire for oneself. Ren is therefore not sentimental benevolence alone; it is a morally disciplined responsiveness to the claims of others. It humanizes the self and prevents morality from degenerating into rigid formalism.

Yet Confucian ethics does not allow ren to remain a matter of feeling. This is where yi becomes indispensable. If ren provides humane orientation, yi ensures that such concern is disciplined by commitment to

what is right rather than what is advantageous. It guards against expediency and self-interest, insisting that moral action be measured by appropriateness and justice rather than utility (Husin, 2014; Rohman et al., 2025).

The social embodiment of moral life is articulated through li. Frequently translated as propriety or civility, li is often misunderstood as mere etiquette. In fact, it is one of the chief means by which moral life is cultivated and stabilized. Through forms of conduct, speech, respect, and ritualized relational behavior, the self learns to embody virtue in socially intelligible ways. Moral formation, in Confucianism, occurs not only through principle but through habituated practice in concrete relationships (Taylor, 1990; Zarkasi, 2017).

If li gives moral life its form, zhi gives it reflective intelligence. Confucian ethics does not assume that the possession of virtues automatically yields right action in every circumstance. Moral life unfolds in complex and context-dependent situations. Zhi therefore denotes practical moral wisdom: the ability to judge what is fitting, to discern how principle should be applied, and to avoid both rashness and rigidity (Yu, 2025).

Finally, xin may be seen as the social proof of cultivation. It signifies the alignment of speech, intention, and action such that a person becomes worthy of trust in both private and public life. In the *Analects*, trustworthiness is treated as indispensable because relationships and political order alike depend on it. Without xin, virtue may remain performative rather than credible. Trust is thus not incidental to Confucian ethics; it is one of the conditions of stable moral and social life (Rohman et al., 2025; Kasyfurrahman et al., 2020).

Taken together, these five virtues reveal that Wu Chang is not a simple moral checklist. It is an interdependent framework

of ethical formation: *ren* humanizes the self, *yi* rectifies it, *li* disciplines it, *zhi* guides it, and *xin* confirms its integrity. This is precisely why Wu Chang should be understood as a framework of moral-spiritual cultivation rather than merely as a set of social virtues. The self formed through Wu Chang is not only socially compliant but morally transformed.

This reading also clarifies the spiritual dimension of Confucian ethics. To speak of moral-spiritual cultivation is not to impose an alien category on Confucianism, but to name the way moral formation participates in a larger order of meaning. The cultivated person does not simply become ethically useful; he or she becomes aligned with *Tian* as the ultimate horizon of moral order (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990). Spirituality here is not private inwardness detached from public life. It is realized through disciplined refinement of the self in relation to others, to ritual order, and to the normative structure of the cosmos.

### The Ethical and Public Relevance of Wu Chang in Contemporary Plural Societies

If Wu Chang is interpreted merely as a classical vocabulary of moral virtues, its contemporary significance may seem limited to cultural preservation. Yet once understood as a framework of moral-spiritual cultivation, its relevance to public ethics becomes much clearer. Its importance lies not in providing a premodern code to be mechanically imported into the present, but in offering a morally substantive account of how ethical persons are formed and how social life depends upon such formation (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990).

This is especially important in societies marked by moral fragmentation, institutional distrust, and polarized public interaction. Contemporary ethical problems cannot be reduced to legal or administrative failures alone; they also reflect the erosion of character, reciprocity, restraint, and responsibility in public life (Tandiongan &

Riak, 2024). Confucian ethics is significant because it refuses to separate personal morality from social order. It insists instead that public harmony depends on cultivated dispositions embodied in everyday relations, institutions, and leadership.

The relevance of Wu Chang becomes clearest when each virtue is read in relation to enduring problems of public life. *Ren* addresses moral indifference. In plural and often polarized societies, coexistence cannot be sustained by legal tolerance alone; it requires the cultivated capacity to perceive others as morally significant. *Ren* therefore functions as a corrective to dehumanization, exclusion, and instrumental treatment of others. It grounds empathy, mutual regard, and ethical reciprocity—conditions without which plural coexistence remains formally possible but morally fragile.

*Yi* is directly relevant to justice, accountability, and the moral limits of self-interest. Contemporary institutional life is often shaped by opportunism, selective enforcement, and compromise driven by gain rather than moral rightness. *Yi* responds to this by requiring action to be guided by what is right rather than expedient. It matters not only because it affirms justice abstractly, but because it shapes agents whose judgments are not reducible to utility (Kasyfurrahman et al., 2020; Aprilia & Murtiningsih, 2019).

*Li* becomes highly significant where public discourse is marked by incivility, aggression, and the collapse of ethical restraint. Modern discourse often assumes that sincerity alone is morally sufficient, even when expressed through humiliation or contempt. *Li* challenges this assumption by preserving the ethical importance of form. It regulates conduct, speech, and interaction in ways that make respect socially visible and ethically durable. In plural societies, where disagreement is inevitable, *li* provides a language of disciplined interaction that

prevents difference from degenerating into degradation (Taylor, 1990; Zarkasi, 2017).

Zhi addresses the problem of moral simplification and accelerated judgment. Digital communication, polarized media, and populist politics often reward immediate reaction rather than reflective discernment. Yet plural societies require precisely the opposite: the capacity to distinguish between legality and justice, emotion and judgment, prudence and compromise. *Zhi* is therefore not merely an intellectual virtue; it is a public virtue of morally responsible discernment (Yu, 2025).

Finally, xin is perhaps the most visibly urgent in contemporary public life. Many societies face crises of trust in institutions, leaders, professions, and interpersonal commitments. Such crises are not merely systemic; they are deeply ethical. *Xin* is therefore not a secondary interpersonal ideal but one of the moral conditions of sustainable social life. Institutions become credible only where persons are reliable, and reliability depends on the alignment of word, intention, and action (Rohman et al., 2025; Kasyfurrahman et al., 2020).

Taken together, these virtues indicate that Wu Chang remains relevant not because it offers a ready-made solution to modern ethical problems, but because it articulates the moral conditions under which public life becomes inhabitable. Compassion, justice, civility, wisdom, and trust are not optional refinements added after institutional order is established; they are among its ethical preconditions. The relationship between the five virtues and their public significance can be summarized as follows.

**Table 1.** Ethical Functions of Wu Chang in Contemporary Plural Societies

Virtue	Core Ethical Meaning	Public-Ethical Function	Contemporary Relevance
Ren	Humaneness, benevolence,	Grounds empathy, reciprocity,	Counters dehumanization, exclusion, and

Virtue	Core Ethical Meaning	Public-Ethical Function	Contemporary Relevance
	relational concern	and moral recognition of others	moral indifference
Yi	Moral rightness, justice, principled action	Orients judgment toward what is right rather than advantageous	Addresses corruption, opportunism, and selective justice
Li	Propriety, civility, disciplined relational conduct	Sustains respectful interaction and ethical restraint in public life	Responds to incivility, symbolic violence, and social degradation
Zhi	Wisdom, moral discernment, reflective judgment	Enables context-sensitive ethical reasoning in complex situations	Counters moral simplification, impulsive judgment, and ideological rigidity
Xin	Trustworthiness, sincerity, moral reliability	Generates credibility in relationships, institutions, and leadership	Addresses distrust, institutional fragility, and loss of public legitimacy

As the table suggests, the public relevance of Wu Chang lies not in preserving traditional virtues for their own sake, but in the way each virtue addresses a specific ethical deficit in contemporary social life. This is especially significant for plural societies such as Indonesia, where legal recognition of difference must be accompanied by ethical capacities that make coexistence socially and morally viable (Aprilia & Murtiningsih, 2019; Hun, 2025; Sultan et al., 2023).

This argument also has implications for leadership and character education. Leadership crises are often explained in procedural or managerial terms, but Confucian ethics points to a deeper problem: institutions cannot remain just when the persons who inhabit them lack moral discipline. In this regard, Wu Chang provides a normative vocabulary for ethical leadership.

Likewise, in education, Wu Chang offers more than a list of values to be taught; it provides a pedagogy of habituated character formation. This remains relevant wherever the challenge is not merely to transmit norms, but to form subjects capable of carrying them responsibly into public life (Syahputra et al., 2025; Hun, 2025).

### **Ethical Convergences and Divergences between Confucianism and Islamic Moral Thought**

The comparative significance of *Wu Chang* becomes clearer when it is placed in dialogue with Islamic moral thought at the level of moral formation rather than superficial lexical resemblance. Many comparative discussions rightly highlight shared values such as compassion, justice, honesty, wisdom, and social responsibility, but they often fail to distinguish between ethical convergence and metaphysical equivalence (Risky et al., 2023; Rohman et al., 2025). A more rigorous comparison must therefore examine not only moral similarity, but also the deeper structures through which each tradition authorizes and cultivates moral life.

At the broadest level, Confucianism and Islamic moral thought converge in rejecting a merely external or procedural understanding of morality. In Confucianism, moral life is rooted in the cultivation of virtues through repeated practice, relational discipline, and inward transformation (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990; Rozie, 2017). In Islam, morality likewise concerns the formation of *akhlaq* as a stable disposition of the soul from which righteous action emerges. This is reflected in the Prophetic statement, “I was sent only to perfect noble character” (HR. Ahmad), which indicates that the ethical mission of Islam is not limited to legal prescription but includes the formation of morally refined persons. In both traditions, ethics is therefore not reducible to isolated

acts; it concerns the making of a certain kind of human being.

A first area of convergence appears in the relation between *ren* and Islamic discourses of mercy and compassionate concern. In Confucian ethics, *ren* denotes the humane and relational center of moral life, expressed through love of others, reciprocity, and the refusal to impose on others what one does not desire for oneself. In Islamic moral thought, a comparable ethical orientation appears in the Qur’anic presentation of the Prophet Muhammad as “a mercy to all worlds” (Q. 21:107). This compassionate orientation is reinforced in the Hadith, “None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself” (HR. Bukhari; Muslim). The convergence lies in the rejection of moral indifference and in the insistence that ethical formation includes active concern for the dignity and well-being of others. Yet the difference remains significant: *ren* is grounded in cultivated humaneness within a relational anthropology, whereas Islamic compassion is more explicitly grounded in divine mercy and prophetic exemplarity.

A second convergence may be seen in the comparison between *yi* and Islamic commitments to truthfulness and moral rightness. *Yi* signifies principled rightness, righteousness, and moral appropriateness; it directs action toward what is right rather than what is advantageous. In Islam, a partial functional parallel appears in *sidq* and in the Qur’anic command to stand with the truthful: “O you who believe, fear God and be with those who are truthful” (Q. 9:119). Likewise, Q. 2:42 warns believers not to mix truth with falsehood or knowingly conceal the truth. The Prophet also taught that truthfulness leads to righteousness and righteousness leads to Paradise, while falsehood leads to wickedness and eventually to destruction (HR. Bukhari; Muslim). The comparison is productive

because both traditions oppose expediency, deceit, and moral opportunism. Nevertheless, the overlap is not exact. *Yi* is broader than truthfulness alone; it refers to principled moral judgment and justice beyond gain, whereas *sidq* specifically emphasizes truthfulness and sincerity within a revelation-grounded moral universe. The comparison is therefore strongest at the level of ethical function, not conceptual identity.

A third area of convergence involves *li* and Islamic notions of *adab* and disciplined moral comportment. In Confucianism, *li* should not be reduced to etiquette in the narrow sense. It is the social and ritual form through which inner virtue becomes visible, embodied, and stable in relationships. It governs speech, gesture, respect, role-consciousness, and patterns of conduct that make moral order socially inhabitable. In Islamic thought, the closest functional analogue is not simply *tabligh* or *amanah* taken in isolation, but *adab*: disciplined moral comportment rooted in scriptural instruction and prophetic example. Islamic ethics similarly insists that inward virtue must be manifested in proper conduct, restraint, and responsible relational behavior. The Prophet's mission to perfect noble character (HR. Ahmad) gives this dimension a normative center. One may also observe that the Qur'anic command to render trusts to their proper recipients and judge justly (Q. 4:58) reflects an ethical concern with ordered conduct and responsible public behavior. Even so, an important distinction remains: *li* is inseparable from the ritual-social architecture of Confucian life, whereas Islamic *adab* is grounded more explicitly in revelation and Prophetic normativity.

A fourth convergence appears between *zhi* and Islamic notions of *hikmah* and *fathanah*. In Confucian ethics, *zhi* is not merely intelligence but practical moral wisdom: the capacity to discern what is fitting

in concrete situations and to avoid rash or simplistic judgment. Islamic moral thought places comparable weight on wisdom as a moral and spiritual good. The Qur'an states, "He grants wisdom to whom He wills, and whoever has been granted wisdom has certainly been given abundant good" (Q. 2:269). This association between wisdom and moral excellence resonates strongly with the Confucian emphasis on discerning judgment. The Prophetic tradition also reflects this concern, as seen in the prayer for Ibn 'Abbas: "O God, teach him wisdom" (HR. Bukhari). The convergence here is substantial: both traditions recognize that moral action requires reflective discernment, not mere good intention. Yet divergence remains. Confucian wisdom develops through cultivation and habituation within a moral-cosmological order, while Islamic wisdom is framed by divine guidance and the exemplariness of the Prophet.

A fifth and especially significant convergence may be seen between *xin* and *amanah*. In Confucianism, *xin* signifies trustworthiness, sincerity, and reliability; it marks the alignment of speech, intention, and action so that a person becomes morally credible in both personal and political life. Islamic thought similarly treats trust as a central moral obligation. The Qur'an commands believers to render trusts to whom they are due and to judge with justice (Q. 4:58), and it warns them not to betray God, the Messenger, and the trusts committed to them (Q. 8:27). The Prophetic tradition reinforces this by teaching that faith is deficient in one who cannot be trusted and that religion is incomplete in one who does not keep promises (HR. Ahmad). Another Hadith adds that a confidential statement entrusted in private is itself an *amanah* that must be preserved (HR. Abu Dawud). The convergence between *xin* and *amanah* is thus especially strong because both link inner

integrity to social credibility. Yet here too the difference is important: *xin* emerges within a virtue-centered account of moral consistency, while *amanah* carries a more explicit theological and covenantal force.

These convergences, however, must be read alongside deeper divergences. The first major divergence concerns metaphysical grounding. Confucian moral cultivation is oriented toward harmony with *Tian*, the highest moral-spiritual horizon of human life (Tu, 1989; Taylor, 1990). Yet *Tian* should not be assimilated too quickly to the God of Islamic theology. In Islam, morality is grounded in Allah's will as revealed through scripture and Prophetic guidance. Even if both traditions affirm a higher moral order, the terms on which that order is conceived remain distinct.

A second divergence concerns sources of normativity. Confucian ethics authorizes moral life through virtue, cultivation, ritual transmission, and the authority of sages and classics. Islamic morality, by contrast, is normatively anchored in the Qur'an, Hadith, and Prophetic exemplarity. Similar ethical outcomes may therefore arise from different justificatory logics. What appears comparable at the level of moral function may remain quite distinct at the level of epistemic source and religious authority.

A third divergence concerns models of moral authority. In Confucian thought, the *junzi* functions as a formative ideal realized through education, ritual refinement, and self-cultivation. In Islam, the Prophet Muhammad occupies a singular and normatively constitutive role as the paradigmatic embodiment of perfected *akhlaq*. This distinction is crucial. The Confucian sage or *junzi* represents an attainable ideal of cultivated humanity, whereas Prophetic moral authority in Islam is inseparable from revelation and cannot be reduced to exemplary ethical pedagogy alone.

The most productive conclusion, therefore, is not that *Wu Chang* and Islamic moral thought are conceptually identical, but that they exhibit ethical convergence under conditions of structural difference. Both traditions aim at the formation of humane, truthful, disciplined, wise, and trustworthy persons. Yet they do so through different metaphysical assumptions, different sources of normativity, and different symbolic worlds. Comparative religious ethics becomes most fruitful precisely when it can illuminate such convergence without collapsing difference into sameness.

Table 2. Comparative Mapping of Ethical Convergences and Divergences between Wu Chang and Islamic Moral Thought

Confucian Category	Core Ethical Meaning	Closest Islamic Parallel	Illustrative Islamic Texts	Point of Convergence	Point of Divergence
Ren	Humaneness, benevolence, relational care	Mercy, compassion, prophetic benevolence	Q. 21:107; HR. Bukhari; Muslim ("None of you truly believes until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself")	Both reject moral indifference and affirm ethical concern for others	<i>Ren</i> is grounded in cultivated humaneness; Islamic compassion is grounded more explicitly in divine mercy and Prophetic mission
Yi	Moral rightness, principled action, justice beyond gain	<i>Sidq</i> and commitment to truth and justice	Q. 9:119; Q. 2:42; HR. Bukhari; Muslim on truthfulness leading to righteousness	Both oppose deceit, expediency, and moral opportunism	<i>Yi</i> is broader than truthfulness and is embedded in Confucian virtue-judgment; Islamic truth and justice

Confucian Category	Core Ethical Meaning	Closest Islamic Parallel	Illustrative Islamic Texts	Point of Convergence	Point of Divergence
					are more explicitly revelation-grounded
Li	Propriety, civility, disciplined relational conduct	<i>Adab</i> and ethical comportment	HR. Ahmad (“I was sent to perfect noble character”); cf. Q. 4:58 on ordered moral responsibility	Both stress that inward virtue must be embodied in conduct, restraint, and social form	<i>Li</i> is inseparable from Confucian ritual order; Islamic <i>adab</i> derives from scriptural and Prophetic norms
Zhi	Wisdom, discernment, context-sensitive judgment	<i>Hikmah, fathanah</i>	Q. 2:269; HR. Bukhari on the prayer for Ibn ‘Abbas	Both regard wisdom as necessary for responsible moral action	Confucian wisdom emerges through cultivation within moral cosmology; Islamic wisdom is framed by divine guidance and Prophetic authority
Xin	Trustworthiness, sincerity, moral reliability	<i>Amanah</i>	Q. 4:58; Q. 8:27; HR. Ahmad; HR. Abu Dawud	Both link integrity to social trust and moral credibility	<i>Xin</i> is grounded in cultivated consistency; <i>amanah</i> carries stronger theological and covenantal force

The table clarifies a key theoretical point: the most defensible comparison between Confucianism and Islamic moral thought is not one that seeks strict conceptual equivalence, but one that traces functional affinity across different normative structures. Qur’anic and Hadith materials strengthen this conclusion by showing that Islamic moral categories are not merely abstract analogues but are embedded in a revelatory framework that shapes moral agency through divine command and Prophetic exemplarity. The comparison therefore becomes more analytically rigorous when similarity is articulated together with difference. Rather than flattening traditions into a universal moral sameness, comparative religious ethics should identify where ethical concerns converge, how they are justified, and why those justifications matter.

## CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Wu Chang* should be understood not merely as a set of social virtues in Confucianism, but as a

framework of moral-spiritual cultivation through which the self is formed, relationships are ethically ordered, and moral life is oriented toward harmony with *Tian*. In this perspective, *ren, yi, li, zhi,* and *xin* function as an interdependent grammar of cultivated personhood grounded in humane concern, principled action, disciplined conduct, reflective wisdom, and trustworthy integrity. The contemporary relevance of *Wu Chang* lies not simply in preserving a classical moral vocabulary, but in illuminating the ethical conditions of sustainable public life in plural societies, especially where trust, civility, justice, and character formation remain fragile yet indispensable.

At the comparative level, the article shows that Confucianism and Islamic moral thought can be brought into meaningful dialogue through their shared concern for character formation, moral discipline, and ethical responsibility, especially when Islamic moral categories are grounded not only in secondary ethical discussion but also in

primary Qur'anic and Hadith materials. Yet the most defensible conclusion is not theological equivalence, but ethical convergence under conditions of structural difference. Both traditions seek the formation of morally credible persons, while remaining distinct in metaphysical grounding, sources of normativity, and models of moral authority. On this basis, the article contributes to comparative religious ethics by offering a more rigorous reading of *Wu Chang* and by showing that interreligious moral dialogue becomes most fruitful when similarity is clarified without erasing difference.

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