Top executive leaders' compassionate actions: An integrative framework of compassion incorporating a confucian perspective

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Abstract This paper sets out to develop a theoretical framework for understanding compassion. It contributes to the research of compassion from an indigenous theory perspective to complement the Western theory of this important topic. We do this by adopting self-cultivation, a Confucian indigenous theoretical perspective based on *xin* (mind-heart) to guide our grounded study and thus develop an integrative framework. With an analysis based on extensive interviews with top executive leaders in Chinese enterprises, we thus show that (1) integrating compassion and self-cultivation enriches our understanding of the moral growth of compassion; (2) compassion affects performance outcomes at the individual, relational, and organizational levels; and (3) self-cultivation and compassion have an ultimate interaction effect on organizational performance outcomes.

Keywords Integrative framework · Self-cultivation · Confucian perspective · Paternalistic leader · Compassion · Organizational outcomes

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The importance of compassion in organizational life and functioning has attracted increasing research attention over recent years (Dutton, Worline, Frost, & Lilius, 2006; Simpson, Clegg, & Pitsis, 2014). According to the Oxford Dictionary, compassion, derived from the Latin word "*compti*" (suffering with), means sympathetic pity and concern for the suffering or misfortunes of others. In critical times of an organization such as downsizing, restructuring, and acquisitions, suffering is inevitable (Frost, 1999). Hence, research on compassion helps people to understand how and develop strategies to cope with suffering.

Extant research on compassion sees it mainly as an approach to alleviate others' suffering and pain that follows the psychological formula of noticing, feeling and responding to such distress (Dutton & Workman, 2011; Rynes, Bartunek, Dutton, & Margolis, 2012). Given that compassion is often understood as an important moral value of sympathetic care towards others "but not (or not intensely) directly toward oneself" (Frost, 1999: 128), researchers mostly focus on giving compassion to "others" while neglecting "the moral development of self," or the moral selves in the process of compassion (Atkins & Parker, 2012; Miller, Grimes, McMullen, & Vogus, 2012). We argue that to give compassion to others requires the self to be morally and emotionally ready; hence there is a need for understanding the moral development of self as a prerequisite to giving compassion when needed in organizations.

By "moral self," we mean that a person has the qualities of being wise, faithful, thoughtful, and conscientious, and seeks moral growth and social interaction (Dewey, 1960). Dewey (1960) insisted that the self and actions were the moral end, and selfhood was an agency of realizing consequences being evaluated by the moral criteria. Thus, the moral self not only inherits the general meaning of morality, it also involves seeing the self as an agency that strives for moral growth.

Recently, although scholars are increasingly aware of the abovementioned issue and are thus making efforts to bring the self into the theoretical consideration, attention to the moral side of the self remains insufficient. For example, Atkins and Parker (2012) proposed individual psychological flexibility as "being open and curious regarding the present moment and, depending on what the situation affords, acting in accordance with one's chosen values" (528) and explicated it as an individual determinant of compassion. Building on relational frame theory, Atkins and Parker (2012) analyzed how mindfulness and value-directed action, as two components of psychological flexibility, led to different elements of the practice of compassion. With a closer examination of elements of mindfulness and value-directed action, we notice that Atkins and Parker (2012) adopted a cognitive approach to elucidate the emotional process in two aspects. On the one hand, they placed self-interests in a dominant position by focusing on what the self could do to observe, accept, and reduce (or enhance) certain personal feelings or self-determined behavior. On the other, they did not identify moral components that could be delivered in the cognitive psychological process (Hannah, Avolio, & May, 2011; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). In this regard, the moral side of the self, especially being faithful, conscientious, and attentive to moral growth and development, were not given full attention in their work. Personal authenticity, flourishing and development of the moral self are in tune with the essence of positive organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) that has been driving compassion research for a while. Consequently, the primary motivation for writing this paper is to fully explore the moral self as an antecedent of

compassion, and thus provide a comprehensive framework of compassion to help us understand it from a more integrative perspective.

We argue that the Confucian theoretical perspective of self-cultivation (*xiu-xin yang-xing* in Chinese) helps to substantiate an integrative framework of compassion. According to Confucius, self-cultivation is an avenue to accomplish the evolving transformation of the self, that is, its growth and moral development (Ho, 1995; Hwang & Chang, 2009; Tu, 1985), which are in line with the Deweyan understanding of moral self as noted earlier. We extract two concepts, *si* (reflection) and *qing* (heart), from Confucian notion of *xin* (mind-heart) to elucidate self-cultivation and develop a mechanism linking self-cultivation and compassion in this paper. This research direction is imperative, especially for a collective or *guanxi*-based culture like China where leaders tend to prioritize organizational or societal issues over personal issues (Ip, 2009; Kirkbride, Tang, & Westwood, 1991; Zhu & Zhang, 2007). Meanwhile, the moral realization of the self requires self-transcendence, that is, reflecting on and reshaping activities one actively engages in during self-other interactions (Cheng, 2004; Tu, 2012). Thus, a person's self-cultivation plays a significant role in his or her compassionate interaction with others.

Organizations provide an interesting and relevant site for studying compassion that benefits leadership development and organizing (Boyatzis, Smith, & Blaize, 2006; Dutton et al., 2006). Because a top executive leader in an organization holds multiple roles and responsibilities, he or she has to be responsible to the organization and to the people working within it. More importantly, compassion is seen as a generative force for opening up new vistas, expanding resources, and creating new insight (Carlsen & Dutton, 2011; Dutton & Workman, 2011). Therefore, when facing suffering or crisis, it is crucial for a top executive who is in charge of the organization to show compassion towards employees and help the organization to survive (Dutton, Frost, Worline, Lilius, & Kanov, 2002). However, with the increased level of institutionalization, the self is gradually decoupled from the job role. Recently more and more researchers call to bring the consideration of the self into the organization (e.g., Lawrence, Suddaby, & Leca, 2011). Yet, few studies have sufficiently explored how to explain this phenomenon of integrating self-cultivation and compassion from a moral growth aspect. In this regard, developing an integrative framework of compassion incorporating self-cultivation of top executive leaders has important theoretical and practical implications.

Our contributions are triple. This study extends the current understanding of compassion with the Confucian concept of self-cultivation, thus providing the means of developing the moral self and practicing compassion in the workplace. Second, this approach enriches the research of compassion (e.g., Dutton et al., 2006; Frost, 1999) with an indigenous Confucian perspective. We call this perspective indigenous as it derives from the local theoretical contexts with a history of more than 2000 years in China. Our third contribution lies in our developing a framework linking self-cultivation, compassion and organizational outcomes. As Frost (1999) pointed out, compassion not only represents one's feelings but also one's competency; a lack of or insufficient use of compassion might increase flawed outcomes especially in nursing or service industry. Further, in situations of organizational change or adjustment (e.g., layoffs, mergers, pay cuts, etc.) insufficient positive affect such as compassion may lead to workplace deviance (Greenberg, 1990) or high turnover (Barsade & Gibson, 2007). The strengthening of top executives' compassionate action thus contributes to

the well-being and moral development of individuals and the organization (Frost, Dutton, Maitlis, Lilius, Kanov, & Worline, 2006).

Specifically we propose the following research questions. What are the possible antecedents for the moral development of self that help to initiate compassionate action? What role do they play in shaping organizational outcomes and leadership in the practice of compassion?

To answer these questions, we draw findings from extensive interviews with Chinese executives in light of both the Confucian compassion perspective and extant theories. In order to deepen our understanding of compassion, we further develop an integrative framework inductively building on our interview results to identify emerging patterns of compassion. We are also open to other types of innovative theoretical discoveries depending on the findings of our interview results.

The rest of the paper is organized in this manner. First, we review research on compassion, and further point out research gaps in this field. We introduce the Confucian perspective of self-cultivation as an important theoretical source for developing an integrative framework of compassion. Second, we contextualize the study and analyze Chinese executive leaders' views by referring to their organizational behavior and performance. Third, we provide detailed information about research methodology based on our interviews with 31 top executive leaders. Following a grounded theory building approach, that is, an inductive approach for theory development with qualitative data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), we identify emerging patterns of the self-cultivation and compassionate action of executive leaders as a basis for developing an integrative framework of compassion.

Theoretical background

In this section, we review the interpretation of compassion in extant literature and complement it with a Confucian perspective.

Compassion as sympathetic concern of others' suffering

Most research agrees that compassion is an expression of sympathizing and caring to alleviate the suffering of others (e.g., pain, loss, challenges, and failure) that threaten a person's life and work (Dutton et al., 2006; Shepherd & Cardon, 2009). Compassion is relational by nature and thus embodied through interpersonal connections with other human beings (Frost et al., 2006; Kanov, Maitlis, Worline, Dutton, Frost, & Lilius, 2004).

Current research theorizes compassion as a process instead of just a feeling. Kanov et al. (2004) identified three sub-processes of compassion: noticing, feeling, and responding. Atkins and Parker (2012) added an appraisal process and extended compassion as a four-stage process including noticing, appraising, feeling, and action. A closer examination of the multiple stage process of compassion shows that it includes the cognitive (i.e., noticing and appraising), emotional/affective (i.e., feeling), and relational elements (i.e., action). Recently a study of how compassion encourages social entrepreneurship discovered that the cognitive and affective processes triggered by compassion include integrative thinking, prosocial cost-benefit analysis, and

commitment to alleviating others' suffering (Miller et al., 2012). However, little is known of the means of incorporating moral self as a prerequisite for compassionate action. It is thus important to conduct a comprehensive examination of the moral self and its relationship with emotional and relational compassionate action.

A growing body of research notes that compassion has an essential influence on leadership and organizing (Dutton et al., 2006; Kanov et al., 2004). For instance, more compassion in the workplace is positively related to less turnover (Barsade & Gibson, 2007), more prosocial behavior (Brief & Motowidlo, 1986), and increasing organizational attachment and commitment (Grant, Dutton, & Rosso, 2008; Lilius, Worline, Maitlis, Kanov, Dutton, & Frost, 2008). In addition, Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) claimed that the ethics of care and caring practices could enable relationships inside work teams to flourish. Given the serious issues of too much focus on self-interest in reality and the lack of practical impacts that compassion yields in an organization, George (2014) called for people to identify organizational conditions where conflict has caused less harm and suffering in the presence of compassion. Executive leaders play the role of bringing compassion to the organization, the effect of which is therefore worth our detailed and systematic exploration.

Regarding the determinants or triggers of compassion, most research sees various suffering and destructive situations as triggers of compassion, while insufficient work has been done to explore the moral self as a prerequisite of compassion. To further enhance compassion, Atkins and Parker (2012) proposed the sub-processes of psychological flexibility that included values-directed action and mindfulness. As they pointed out, mindfulness reflected the capacity of compassion, whereas values-directed action motivated compassion (Atkins & Parker, 2012). However, these two dimensions emphasize the individual psychological process, with little attention being paid to the moral growth and development of the self. The answer to the question of why and how the moral self impacts compassionate action is still unclear. In the following section, we explain that self-cultivation is a Confucian way of developing moral self, and how it connects to compassionate action.

Self-cultivation as an avenue to accomplish the moral self

In spite of increased research on compassion, most research has been done in cultures where individual interests are seen as of paramount importance, and thus insufficient attention has been paid in a collectively oriented culture such as China. George (2014) pointed out that the real tenets of American corporate capitalism (ACC) were possibly converse to the thoughts of compassion, because ACC emphasized the ideology of "self-interest, competition, market exchange, consumerism, and using a profit/loss criterion to make decisions in organizations" (6). However, the ACC scenario is less reflective of the *guanxi*-based (relationship-based) societies like China where self-interest is prone to be subordinate to group interests (Chen & Chen, 2004).

Confucian thoughts emphasize that the ruler and subordinate relationship should follow the righteousness rule (*yi*), that is, the benevolence of the ruler and the loyalty and obedience of the subordinate (Hwang, 1999). Thus, following traditional

Confucian thoughts, it is the righteous thing to do for an executive leader to show compassion and care for followers. Recent research on paternalistic leadership in Chinese culture has pointed out that executive leaders tend to show benevolence and authoritarian simultaneously in leadership and management (Farh & Cheng, 2000). This tendency of seeing the organization as his or her family and an employee as a family member that should be protected and cared for (Cheng, Chou, Wu, Huang, & Farh, 2004) still exists. Even though Confucian heritage was seriously attacked during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), its influence has never ceased (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2002).

Recently there seems to be a revival of Confucian values and virtues representing a continued trend in the Chinese economic development (Yang, 2007). The analogy of valuing the organization as family requires one to elevate organizational interests above their own. Consequently, moral self-cultivation is more likely to initiate other-oriented moral behaviors such as compassion. To become a compassionate person and a competent leader, Confucian thoughts insist that one has to cultivate oneself (*Great Learning*, 1), do reflective thinking (*Analects*, 1: 4), and "conquer oneself and return to propriety" (*Analects*, 12: 1), which are the connotations of self-cultivation (Tu, 1968). Confucius viewed self-cultivation as closely connected to compassion (or *ren*). Here we translate *ren* into compassion. We are aware that there have been numerous forms of English translation for *ren* including "benevolence," "love," "kindness," "compassion," and "humanity." According to Chan (1955), the most persistent Confucian tradition indicates that *ren* represents compassion for others and compassion is also closely related to self-cultivation as moral development. This view, among other Confucian studies (e.g., Ip, 2009; Zhu, 2009, 2011, 2015), suggests a direction for developing a relationship between self-cultivation and compassion.

Specifically, we propose *xin* (mind-heart) as the Eastern theoretical root for the Eastern conceptualization of compassion. Confucian *xin* (mind-heart) represents a nurturing aspect of self-cultivation, which explains the emergence of morality. The Confucian *xin* (mind-heart) is a mix of mind (cognitive in nature) and heart (emotional in nature) that builds on the assumption of genuine and positive emotions (Wei & Li, 2011). Mencius, the second most important Confucian philosopher, is a strong advocate of viewing *ren* as compassion for others through the self-cultivation of *xin* (mind-heart). In addition, compassion involves intention and potential interaction with others (Solomon, 1998), hence reflecting the original Chinese character of *ren* (仁, indicating 'two people').

Self-cultivation following Confucian thoughts of *xin* (mind-heart) can be elaborated with two aspects of *si* (reflection) and *qing* (heart). *Si* (reflection) is a cognitive element of self-cultivation. Self-reflection and self-transcendence in Confucian thought play a significant role for one's moral development (Cheng, 2004). Tu (1968) pointed out that, in self-cultivation philosophy, there were two different but complementary perceptions: "the traditional ideals of harmony, integration, and unity and the modern emphases on alienation, tension, and contradiction" (Tu, 1968: xxi). The Confucian perspective of learning deviates from "a static adherence to predetermined pattern," and thus "signifies an unceasing spiritual self-transformation" (Tu, 1968: xxi). Thus by reflecting on one's experience and ongoing activities, the moral self is accomplished through an adaptive, authentic, and unified process. Overall, *si* enriches the cognitive and transformational meaning of self-cultivation.

Qing (heart) is an affective element of self-cultivation. Mencius, in light of Confucian thoughts, viewed compassion as located in the affective domain of *xin*, that is, heart (*qing*) (Lau, 1995: 60). This domain ties closely to compassion and is seen as essential for nurturing compassion. Note that *xin* also has a relational and affective connotation of moral emotions for others and society rather than as an individual emotion as in the extant Western literature on compassion (e.g., Lilius et al., 2008). A well-cited example by Mencius about *xin* is one's capacity to feel for the child when seeing him falling into a well (Lau, 1995: 18). The concept of *qing* (the affective domain of *xin*) emphasizes the moral internalization of feelings thus further stressing the importance of the affective dimension of the Confucian school of thought as a precursor of compassion.

Self-cultivation and compassion for top executive leaders

Compassion is important for the effectiveness of top executive leaders (Dutton et al., 2002). The reason lies in various challenges an executive leader has to confront. Organization and its members face various disasters, challenges, and stressful situations, which impede the development of an organization and bring pain to members in the organization (Frost, 2003). Top executive leaders, as the strategy makers and leaders of organizations, play an essential role in shaping their emotional climate. As Simpson et al. (2014) pointed out, it was appropriate to interpret organizational power relations with compassion. When an organization faces disasters and challenges (e.g., mergers and acquisitions, economic recession, or strategic adjustment), top executive leaders can use compassion as a powerful tool to lead, motivate, and heal people (Dutton et al., 2002; Lilius et al., 2008).

Also, as many real stories demonstrate, when employees are in a stressful situation and experience burnout, and when they face difficult work relationships, compassionate behavior from top executive leaders is important to inspire employees and motivate their interest in citizenship behavior (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002). In fact, leaders' persuasion and inspiration involving appropriate emotional elements such as compassion would be more effective than a rational approach (Fox & Amichai-Hamburger, 2001). However, we still need to understand the underlying moral development of the self as a trigger of compassion for executive leaders. People may ascribe such behavior to executive leaders' "super power." However, we argue that self-cultivation of an executive leader is an essential means of initiating compassionate action.

According to Confucius, to be a leader with compassion, one needs to build the foundation of compassion, that is, self-cultivation. First, self-cultivation as a means to link the moral self and compassion is rooted in Confucian thoughts. Confucius said that a person could carry out compassionate action "if everywhere under Heaven he or she can practice the five virtues: courtesy, generosity of soul, good faith, earnestness and clemency" (*Analects*, 17: 6). These virtues are embedded into *xin* (mind-heart) as a nurturing system. They are also the expression of moral growth and authenticity, and both are integral to compassion (Li, 1994).

Additionally, although Mencius insisted on the goodness of human nature, a person needs to be cultivated following "the four principles," that is, compassion (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*) (*Mencius*, 6A: 7) which reflect both the nurturing and cognitively reflective meanings. In dealing with ordinary social

relationships, showing affection and care to those who one conceives as a close relationship is called compassion (*ren*); respecting those within this relationship (e.g., the supervisor) is called righteousness (*yi*); and love and respect for others according to social norms is propriety (*li*) (Hwang, 2011, 2015a). For a socialized individual with the reflexivity and knowledgeability, the application of compassion, righteousness, and propriety for a purpose of psychosocial equilibrium is termed wisdom (*zhi*) (Hwang, 2011, 2015b). The principles of compassion (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*) align with the emotional element of self-cultivation, that is, *qing* (heart), while the principles of propriety (*li*) and wisdom (*zhi*) align with the cognitive element of self-cultivation, that is, *si* (reflection). Thus, self-cultivation through learning, reflection, and nurturing is at the forefront of expressing compassion to others.

In addition, self-cultivation is important for resource allocation when leaders express compassion to followers. Hwang (2012) divided *guanxi* into three types: instrumental, expressive, and mixed ties. Expressive ties, according to Hwang (2012), occur between family members and close friends and operate according to the need rule underpinned by the *ren* principle. Opposite to expressive ties, instrumental ties operate on the basis of the equity rule. Mixed ties refer to relationships between people who are known to each other, following the rule of empathic reciprocity (or *renqing*) and also incorporating a certain level of *ren*. Hwang (1999) found that organizations tend to apply mixed ties to best reflect leader-follower relationships. Therefore, an appropriate use of Confucian principles noted above helps leaders to make appropriate decisions not only to put others before the self but also allocate resources appropriately to express compassion following the *ren-yi* principle.

Based on the above review of the Confucian perspective of self-cultivation, we propose that an executive leader needs to practice self-reflection, self-transformation, and self-authenticity that further trigger the affective and moral elements of compassion.

Methods

Sampling and data collection

We followed criteria sampling in choosing the initial informants: First, we focused on executive leaders from small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in China, because compassion has been identified as an important factor impacting the performance of top level managers of SMEs (Farh & Cheng, 2000; Zhu, 2015). In addition, it is especially relevant to the Chinese private sector (Ahlstrom & Bruton, 2002; Yang, 2007) largely composed of SMEs, which are also an important component of the Chinese economy (Khanna, 2011). Second, all the informants needed to be at a top executive position for at least two years, because the effectiveness or success of these informants is reflected through their consistent behaviors. This also increases the comparability of incidents across different informants. Third, since compassion is about how people deal with challenges, failures, or suffering, only incidents about how the informants handling challenges or failures were included in the final sample. Then we used snowball sampling by asking each informant to recommend potential informants who were successful even after going through various challenges and failures.

We collected data with on-site interviews. Critical incident interviews were used to ask each informant to describe at least one successful and one unsuccessful experience, that is, because "identifying and analyzing discrepant data and negative cases is a key part of the logic of validity testing in qualitative research" (Maxwell, 2012: 112). A semi-structured interview protocol was used. Questions such as the following were covered in collecting each incident: "What led up to the situation?" "What did you say or do next?" "Who else was involved?" "What were you thinking and feeling?" and "What was the outcome or result of the event?" All responses were audio recorded in detail and transcribed afterwards. Interviews lasted from 60 to 90 min. To capture most details that could not reflected by audio (e.g., special gestures, facial expressions, or actions), observational notes were made following each interview. In sum, 31 executives from 30 to 45 years old were interviewed and the valid incidents numbered 61. They were from four cities in north China. Three of the executives were female and the tenure in current job positions for all participants ranged from two to 20 years.

Data analysis

A grounded theory approach was used for coding and theory building. The unit of coding in this study was a complete incident story. Each complete incident described a story of an executive's compassionate experience. We coded episodes relevant to self-cultivation, compassionate action, and impacts and outcomes. Self-cultivation was a means for an executive leader to develop the moral self. Compassionate action referred to what an executive leader did or what strategies an executive leader adopted to alleviate various sufferings, which differed from the moral antecedent of compassion. The impacts and outcomes of compassionate action were determined by what happened at the end of each story, which occurred in an organizational context.

Coding of compassionate action and self-cultivation

Open coding was firstly used to identify various compassionate action and self-cultivation elements, that is, the 1st-order elements, from interview materials. Then axial coding was applied to capture the relationships and patterns among the compassionate action and to integrate these elements into more inclusive 2nd-order categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These processes around the categories and themes continued as a recursive procedure until theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In this procedure, the reliability was checked this way: Once the first coder finished all the coding procedure mentioned above, a second coder sorted all the 1st-order elements into the 2nd-order categories. The two coders discussed the discrepancies of the sorting until they arrived at agreement. The next step was to aggregate similar categories of compassionate action and self-cultivation into more overarching theoretical dimensions, in an attempt to understand how different categories were assembled together. These categories and dimensions set the foundation of building a coherent theory. Reliability was also checked at this step. Specifically, the second coder sorted all the 2nd-order categories into the aggregated dimensions and then the two coders discussed the discrepancies until they arrived at agreement.

Coding of impacts and outcomes of compassion

To understand the impacts and outcomes of compassionate action, we coded the outcome in each incident, following the same procedures as when we coded compassionate action. Open coding was first used to identify impacts and outcomes in each story and code them into the 1st-order elements. Then axial coding was applied to abstract the patterns among the outcome concepts and to integrate these elements into more broad 2nd-order categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Finally, the overarching dimensions of outcomes were aggregated based on the 2nd-order categories. Reliability was checked following the same principle we mentioned above.

Building a grounded theoretical framework of compassion

The above coding showed us patterns and outcomes of compassionate action. However, they were just the static picture of relevant themes and concepts but did not indicate a dynamic process. A grounded theory building approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2013) was applied to identify dynamic relationships among concepts and categories of self-cultivation, compassionate action, and outcomes.

Results

Coding results of compassionate action and self-cultivation

In each incident, compassionate action reflected what an executive did as a result of his or her internal moral and affective ascriptions (Tables 1 and 2). Following the procedures described above in the data analysis section, eight 2nd-order categories emerged from the data. The eight 2nd-order categories were further aggregated into compassionate action and self-cultivation.

Compassionate action included the following categories: creating shared moments, improving other's well-being and development, motivating and inspiring, and gaining trust/support or showing trust/support. For instance, an executive shared a story that all the employees would probably lose their jobs. At that moment, he aimed to create a shared moment with employees by honestly disclosing the truth with all the employees. He said "if we went through the tough time together [by supporting each other], we would all survive; but if not, we could all die." This greatly increased employees' commitment and performance in the end. For another instance, another executive described how he sympathized with an employee's pain in an accident wherein the skin on the employee's foot was peeled off. After that he invested more money to improve the protection infrastructure and also changed the welfare policy in the organization.

Self-cultivation included the following categories: cognitive analysis and reflection, positivity towards the future, development of individual capacity, and expressing one's feelings appropriately. Based on the earlier explanation, these four categories were differentiated into two elements: *si* (reflection) and *qing* (heart). The former three were labeled as *si*-element, while the last one as *qing*-element. For instance, an executive explained how he reflected upon this experience and summarized the reasons for his failure, "I did not handle the project in the best time with the most cost-saving method. I did not promote this project until the end

Table 1 Sample quotes of compassionate action and self-cultivation categories

Samples of 1st-order elements	Examples
Share organizational struggles with employees	"I was very clear in telling them of the [desperate] situation and I shared it with everybody. I honestly told them that, all my achievements were accomplished together with everybody. So I told them the predicament our company was facing. I told them directly with one sentence: if we went through the tough time [by supporting each other], we would all survive; but if not, we could all die."
Share feelings with each other	"I feel so sad after hearing what he said. I knew that years ago it was me that communicated with him and told him to leave our company. I said: 'if you feel tired, come back to our company.' He cried and cried but still insisted that 'I need more practical experience.'"
Consider for employees' well-being	"I was thinking to spend less money at that time and so we did not have enough protection. I wanted less investment and thought we would be lucky. In the end, because of insufficient protection, an employee got injured. The skin on his foot was peeled off. This event had a huge impact on me. Because when I saw that my employee suffered so much, and I as an owner of the company should put employees at the first place and earning money second."
Stimulate employees' passion towards work and life	"I invited a management company to give professional and individualized training, so as to strengthen our team… We want employees to experience joy in their learning, and then they will be enthusiastic to take adventure with courage and passion."
Motivate employees' interests	"On the one hand, I allured them. I told them, 'cloud calculation plays an essential role in this field. We have nothing to lose if we succeed in the end. Maybe we can reply on this product and jump to another company all together a few years later. What we had sold to this current organization, we cannot take it together with us. But we master the new skill and can do better.' On the other hand, if you have nothing to do, team cohesion and your personal skills will be weakened."
Increase employee involvement	"I told them this was like recruiting a group of young energetic people for war but we were defeated in the end. I told them that if we were all alive, we would surely win another battle because we already knew how to fight. We will have hope only if we live."
Strengthen relationship with others	"In the process of making principles, I invited them to dinner everyday and chatted with them. In the end, I made friends with them. I did not talk with them about the market and selling. Together with them, I only did two things: one was to broaden their thoughts by telling them how to develop; the other was telling them what products to choose."
Commitment to customers	"We notified our customer enterprises right away. In the email we told them: 'we are sorry. We were not able to satisfy everyone. We have some difficulties in our finance rotation, but we will pay the money back in a year.'"
Reflect of challenges, failures, and relevant issues	"I did not handle the project in the best time with the most cost-saving method. I did not promote this project until the end of November, the cost of which was several times more than it should have been."
Dialectical analysis of the situation	"First, we have to choose products popular in the market. Then, we choose which one can sell at a high price and in large quantities. Another question is a technological one: whether you have the technology or not? If you have, then what about equipment and materials?"

Table 1 (continued)

Samples of 1st-order elements	Examples
Passion and pleasure in entrepreneurial process	"It is hard to calculate in regards to money. Maybe it is worth 160 million. But it cannot be calculated by money, because it is my internal need. I think now I am calm and happy."
Positivity towards the future	"In the process, there is no sadness or things to show off. I will enjoy a drink from time to time and tell myself 'see, you successfully get out from another disaster.'"
Make an assertive decision	"At that time I made a very assertive decision: leave all the instruments as they were. This impacted the investigation later on. The other enterprise working above moved their machine away and left traces, because the fire was generated at the lower level not the upper. However, the investigators analyzed the traces of moving instruments and considered the fire started from their instruments."
Be humble and confident	"I feel I have confidence in this company, because I have my own evaluation of the standard of investment. I can control the values of this company and know where the issues are."
Regulate individual emotions	"I was very angry at that time. But I had to control myself because this company needs to be operated. And we may face various issues and still be in need of his support. A lot of senior employees are in management positions and he has his own subordinates. Thus when I correct him I have to understand his feelings and his working environment."

of November, the cost of which was several times more than it should have been." In another instance, an executive was struggling with the external pressure from creating the future development strategy for his organization. He asked himself repeatedly about what to do, and he said in the end, "I wanted to realize my own value. This company gives me a feeling of home. This factory is like my own child that I cannot give up or abandon." This executive showed self-cultivation with a positive outlook and confidence in his efforts.

Specific findings from our interviews are summed up in Tables 1 and 2.

Coding results for impacts and outcomes of compassionate action

Executive leaders' compassionate action in each incident bears significant outcomes. Results showed that these outcomes concerned the following categories: (1) organizational performance, (2) organizational culture and system, (3) team building, (4) employee commitment, creativity, and well-being, and (5) self-satisfaction. These categories were aggregated into three dimensions: organizational, relational, and individual level outcomes (Tables 3 and 4).

Here is some evidence from the data to substantiate the above findings. For instance, an executive shared that she did not have a stable team and that her employees did not enjoy their work. She initiated lots of fun activities for them which in the end stimulated employees' enthusiasm towards their work and the organization as this executive described, "Everybody started to feel interested in their work, although they did not work on getting business contracts every day but this [singing activity]. In the end they generated strong enthusiasm, showed trust, and became highly involved in the company," and "this means that our company now has its own core employees and a stable team."

Table 2 Compassionate action of top executive leaders

Samples of 1st-order elements	2nd-order themes	3rd-order dimensions
Share entrepreneurial pleasure with employees	Create shared moments	Compassionate action to others
Share organizational struggles with employees		
Share feelings with each other		
Consider for employees' well-being	Improve others' well-being and development	
Train employees to improve the team		
Provide employees with pleasant learning experience		
Hold activities for employee to enjoy		
Motivate employees' pursuit of beautiful things		
Stimulate employees' passion towards work and life		
Take care of employees falling behind		
Appreciate the passion of employees	Motivate and inspire	
Motivate employees with high compensation		
Motivate employees' interests		
Increase employee involvement		
Make employees' voice being heard		
Motivate the team to be creative		
Get support from key people	Gain trust/support or show trust/support	
Strengthen relationship with others		
Commitment to customers		
Acquire recognition from coworkers		
Communicate to retain employees		
Adjust self perceptions	Cognitive analysis and reflection	Self-cultivation
Change the way of providing feedback		
Change one's own mindset		
Reflect of challenges, failures, and relevant issues		
Dialectical analysis of the situation		
Anticipate the potential risks		
Eager to pursue the dream	Positivity towards the future	
Positivity towards the future		
Passion and pleasure in entrepreneurial process		
Enjoy life		
Make an assertive decision	Individual capacity	
Make a coherent plan		
Effective communication		
Empathy		
Individual achievement		
Intelligent negotiation		
Be humble and confident		
Be tolerant and resilient		
Feel stressful	Express one's feelings appropriately	
Feel enjoyable		
Regulate individual emotions		
Express guilty		

Table 3 Sample quotes of impacts and outcomes of compassionate actions

Samples of 1st-order elements	Sample quotes
Organization cohesion strengthened	"My employees have a strong cohesion. I never told them to work for extra hours; however, I worked there till very late and then left for some social activities, and they were still working there till they got the work done."
Organization stability	"Looking back at that experience, I think it was worth it. If I did not do it that way, all the financial investment and human resources were centered on sales and marketing. The products will exceed the demands of the market with the unstable economy and less promising export situation in the past several years. Now with the price falling dramatically, the competition is intense and destructive competition is serious. With my business focus shifting to this new field, I really feel it's worth it."
Construct organization system	"Now we are building our enterprise system which we did not have in the beginning. With the new system, the execution will be more efficient. We used to depend on people to do everything, now we reply on the system. And we need this change."
Team stability	"One advantage (of that experience) is that our team became more stable after being integrated into this organization, and gradually, the team was involved in the organizational culture."
Team strengthened	"Everybody feels that we have a strong team. When the team is strong, our products are very competitive."
Employee active work attitude	"Now for my organization, I feel all my employees are improving themselves. I want to help my employees to change themselves with my guidance. Now all my employees, even those with low performance, have been greatly improved after my motivating them."
Employee curiosity and passion towards work increased	"Everybody started to feel interest in their work, although they did not work on getting business contracts every day but this [singing activity]. In the end they generated strong enthusiasm, showed trust, and became highly involved in the company."
Have self-satisfaction	"I feel very satisfied. If we were late with this directional change, we would be in a very passive position."
Get self recognition	"My persistence succeeded in the end. Even when I think of it now, I still have a feeling of achievement."

An integrative framework of executive leaders' compassion

The above coding explored the structure of the data, and showed the static picture of relevant concepts rather than a dynamic process. We followed Gioia et al.'s (2013) grounded theory development for model building to illustrate dynamic relationships among concepts and categories. As they pointed out, an inductive grounded theory model described the dynamic relationship among the emerging concepts by building data-to-theory connections. We organized the data by putting together the 2nd-order categories and aggregated dimensions of self-cultivation, compassionate action and outcomes. We referred to the data and built data-to-theory connections based on dynamic relationships among concepts (Fig. 1). Additionally, to understand the complexities of executive leaders' compassion, we articulated specific levels (e.g.,

Table 4 Impacts and outcomes of compassionate actions

Samples of 1st-order elements	2nd-order themes	3rd-order dimensions
Finish the task with success	Organizational performance	Organizational level outcome
Organization income increased		
Organization stability		
High performance		
Organization cohesion strengthened		
Construct organization system	Organizational culture and system	
Comfortable organization culture		
Formation of organization identity		
Team stability	Team building	Relational level outcome
Team satisfaction		
Team confidence increased		
Team strengthened		
Employee active work attitude	Employee commitment, creativity, and well-being	
Employee curiosity and passion towards work increased		
Improvement of employee well-being		
Employees form deep affectional bond with the organization		
Have self-satisfaction	Self-satisfaction	Individual level outcome
Get self recognition		
Self emotion stability		
Psychological safety		

organizational, relational, or individual) and cross-level effects involved for theory development (Rousseau, 1985).

The structure of data suggested direct relationships among the emerging categories. First, as described earlier when elaborating categories of compassionate action, executive leaders' compassionate actions impacted organizational and relational level outcomes. In addition, self-cultivation was accompanied by one's own cognitive, affective, and motivational behaviors, which increased one's self-satisfaction. For instance, an executive was very mindful of the market situation and realized that, with the fast development of technology, the traditional products of his company faced challenges. Thus, he adapted to the new technological development and successfully led the change. In the end, he described, "I feel very satisfied. If we were late with this directional change, we would be in a very passive position."

Data also suggested complicated relationships among self-cultivation elements, compassionate action, and outcomes. First, compassion might interact with self-cultivation elements (*si* and *qing*) to impact outcomes. For instance, an executive shared a story about how he coped with an economic crisis several years ago. He observed how other companies reacted to the recessed social economic situation and carried out three detour strategies including updating devices, improving efficiency, and reducing cost. He did self-reflection and self-transcendence and was positive towards
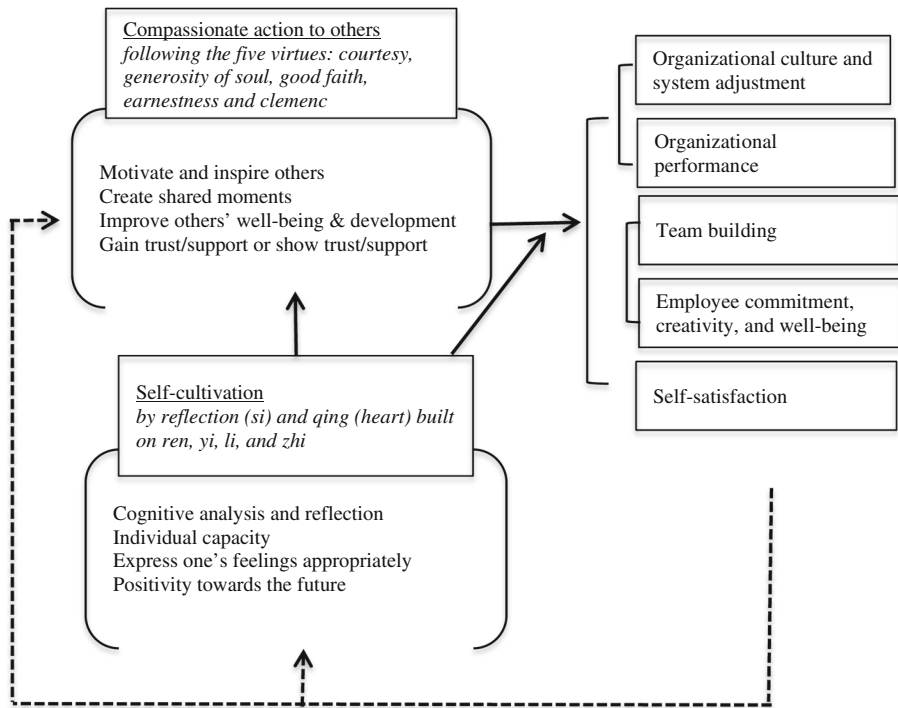
Fig. 1 An integrative framework of executive leaders' compassion

the future. He met regularly all the other executives and brought them together by creating activities for their families. He stated, "When a person accomplishes something, there will be a strong internal self." He described how the close and intimate connection he built with his organization, coworkers and employees help them to survive the challenge. The positivity towards the future nurtured the flourishing of work teams (Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012). It turned out that, after the economic crisis, the size of his company was significantly increased, the team was strengthened, and he tasted a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction. This story implied that with self-cultivation and compassion, an executive leader ultimately promoted organizational and team development and personal feelings of success.

Second, self-reflection initiated compassionate behaviors, which then impacted individual level outcomes. For instance, an executive reflected on his experience and realized that he did not accomplish anything in his organization in the past several years, and employees were struggling with their current situations, so he felt intense pressure. What he did was to improve himself through continual learning of new knowledge and management theory; he also provided learning opportunities to his employees and the organization. He shared his thoughts with them in meetings and told them what the right way was to make a change. He also made some positive changes to the management system including bringing in a time management system and personal ethics credits to motivate employees and build a trusting relationship with them. In the end, employees not only built a trusting relationship with him, but also made significant personal development and supported his plans. This story implied that, for executive

leaders, self-cultivation strengthened compassionate behaviors, which benefitted the work of executive leaders and strengthened their relationships with employees. Moreover, we argued that positive outcomes derived from the compassionate behaviors further encouraged executive leaders to carry out self-cultivation and show compassion. Thus, there were back-loop arrows from outcomes to self-cultivation and compassion. However, given that we collected discrete incidents without knowing how one incident was linked to another, we could not provide data to support the back-loop link in this study, which could be a future research direction.

Discussion and conclusion

This paper has adopted an indigenous Confucian theoretical perspective based on self-cultivation to complement a Western theory of compassion. This perspective has proved to be fruitful for developing a theoretical framework that (1) integrates moral self and compassion through applying self-cultivation practicing *si* (reflection) and *qing* (heart) as an integral process of nurturing process, and (2) examines impacts of the integration of self-cultivation and compassion on organizational practice. Specifically, we have made three major contributions. First, this is one of the first studies to show how the Confucian concept of self-cultivation serves as an embodiment and process of moral growth for initiating compassionate actions. In other words, it shows that self-cultivation and compassion are closely intertwined with the moral growth as a prerequisite for compassion in organizational contexts, especially in difficult situations where compassion is essential. Second, we have extended research on compassion by showing that it is embodied through specific behaviors, which could be cognitive, emotional and affective, and relational. Third, our interview results indicate that the relationship between self-cultivation, compassion and organizational outcomes is not linear. It is rather expressed through multiple levels of interaction including individual, relational and organizational. We sum up our major arguments and findings in the next section.

As noted earlier because of different research focuses of compassion between the West and Confucian moral research, self-cultivation and compassion have seldom been positioned in one theoretical framework. In this paper, we integrate self-cultivation and compassion as an essential resource for top executive leaders in organizational contexts. The position of top executive leaders requires them to undertake multiple roles and responsibilities. In this sense, top executive leaders have to reflect on their own experience and transform themselves for further development, and to alleviate others' suffering at the same time. To be sustainable leaders balancing self-development and others' interests, executives need both self-cultivation and compassion to invigorate their moral selves and build various relationships within the organization.

Confucian thoughts provide a theoretical foundation for exploring moral self as an antecedent of compassion. To Confucius, a person not only has to show compassion to be a good leader, but also has to balance self-interests and collective interests (*The Great Learning*, 4–5). The realization of self-growth and learning is seen as a prerequisite of realizing collective interests (*Mencius*, 6A: 7). Self-cultivation not only benefits one's development and learning, but also reinforces compassionate behaviors (Cameron, 2012). Data from Chinese top executive leaders confirmed that self-cultivation and compassion were accompanied with positive outcomes at individual, relational, and

organizational levels. Thus, self-directed cultivation with principles of compassion (*ren*), righteousness (*yi*), and propriety (*li*) are more likely to lead to compassionate behaviors and appropriate social exchange in allocating resources for those in need.

Data in this study indicated the interaction effects of self-cultivation and compassionate behaviors on outcomes. For a top executive leader, there is an ambiguous boundary between oneself and the collective entity. In this case, moral behaviors derived from self-cultivation may extend to impact various relations and the organization. Compassionate behaviors within the organization may be strengthened and have stronger impacts towards various interpersonal and organizational relations.

Theoretical and practical implications

This study has theoretical implications for studying compassion as a complex concept involving multiple dimensions and levels of analysis in at least two aspects. First, we have offered insight for theorizing the moral, emotional and cognitive aspects of compassion drawing from the Confucian notion of self-cultivation. Our inductive examination of compassion in this study suggests that the incorporation of Confucian *xin* (mind and heart) not only offers a more comprehensive understanding of compassion from the cognitive, emotional and affective, or relational perspective, but also helps to develop leaders' moral growth. Second, still in light of Confucian perspective on self-cultivation, we are able to better tap into the investigation about the relationship between compassion and organizational performance across the three levels: individual, relational, and organizational. From this, we have shown that that self-cultivation and compassion are closely intertwined, which deserves further research attention. These areas, although by no means exhaustive, shed light on other potential areas of applying indigenous theories to enrich extant theories. For example, our assumptions built on both Western and Confucian perspectives serve as a guideline for developing other integrative theoretical frameworks for a better understanding the complexities of compassion and other social phenomena in organizational contexts. In addition, a further theoretical implication, which is also a spin-off of the above implication, includes developing new models from other indigenous philosophical traditions of Chinese or other Asia Pacific countries and beyond to enrich management research in the future. This research direction is exciting and promising as the Asia Pacific Region, as well as other parts of the world, has abundant indigenous sources of theory that contribute to theory development in various ways.

The practical implications deriving from this study include the following two aspects. First, leaders can gain knowledge from our study by looking at compassion more integratively, and thus align self-cultivation and compassion in the moral growth sense. Second, leaders can ascertain how to balance self- and other interests, and prepare themselves to prioritize other interests over self-interests if needed, especially in challenging organizational situations. The impact of this kind of integration can be very powerful in bringing people and organizations together.

Future research directions

A similar grounded theory approach can be used in future research to further explore the nuances and complexities of compassion and its relationship with organizational

performance and outcomes. It is anticipated that greater insight will be drawn from empirical findings in other contexts. Our study, for example, only focuses on SMEs. Although our model is replicable with a focus on a prevalent area of research of compassion, different contexts such as other industries or countries may provide additional sites for theory development.

In conclusion, our study has developed a new perspective of integrating self-cultivation and compassion that has been hitherto overlooked in extant research. In our study, we have shown that Chinese top executive leaders need self-cultivation to strengthen compassionate actions, and that the integration of self-cultivation and compassion for top executive leaders has positive impacts on outcomes. These findings highlight the imperative to look at compassion from a moral and affective perspective in addition to the cognitive. Additionally, the integrative model we build for exploring top executive leaders' compassion points to a novel direction of understanding compassion more holistically and comprehensively.

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