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Research Article

The Application of Laozi's Leadership Spirit in Contemporary Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the application of Laozi's leadership spirit in contemporary higher education, focusing on the practice of integrating Laozi's ideas into teaching and policies, as well as the enlightenment of Laozi's educational philosophy for teachers and students. Employing a qualitative design, an interview with two deans, 10 teacher representatives, and 6 class monitors from the School of Electrical Engineering at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute of Industry was conducted. The study found that the school effectively integrates Laozi's "governing by doing nothing" via flexible curricula, process-oriented teaching, and relaxed policies. This balances academic freedom with institutional constraints while fostering student autonomy and sustainable development. The areas of Laozi's philosophy inspire self-management through non-intervention, soft communication to resolve conflicts, process-focused learning, and moral modelling, promoting educational harmony.

Keywords: Curriculum, Higher Education, Interview, Laozi leadership spirit, Qualitative design, Teaching practices

Background

The innovative strain of present-day higher education is accompanied by a multitude of challenges emerging as a result of globalization, rapid technological change, and diverse student needs. Consequently, universities must also move away from traditional leadership models that focus solely on institutional effectiveness and must preserve organizational flexibility. A potential way is to use the

philosophical schools of thought stemming from antiquity to assign a role to modern governance and leadership—bringing alternative value frames and instructions of decision-making into dialogue with the current management challenges.

While other traditions are concerned, Laozi's ideas—formulated in the Tao Te Ching—highlight such concepts like authority, action, and human desire through distinct

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lenses. The concepts such as wu wei, flexible authority, and "leadership by non-coercive action" reflect a position of leaders that focus on facilitation, restraint, and intrinsic spring rather than hierarchical management. Even if these ideas were introduced over 2,000 years ago, they are still relevant to today's higher education problems, tackling, for instance, stimulating faculty engagement, supporting student autonomy, and managing change with small-scale rather than administrative intervention.

On the one hand, although they are of significant theoretical interest, three specific gaps exist, which are empirical and conceptual. First, the process is rarely shown, how the leadership principles by Laozi reach their goal to be put into higher-education concrete policies or parts of the everyday administrative practices. Second, the prevalent interpretation of the Tao Te Ching leads some readers to dismiss it as anti-education or a text irrelevant to educational settings. As a result, the educational potential of this book has been severely undermined. Thirdly, there is a lack of archived cases for documenting the route taken by specific institutions in order to inform how they have implemented Laozi-inspired approaches and known results. Therefore, it seems philosophically retrospective to think through the fairness of applicability and adequacy of the impact in the present-day universities.

The main purpose of this study is to analyze the application of the leadership spirit in Laozi's thought in contemporary higher education, and further maximize the guiding significance of Laozi's thought in university education practice. Specifically, it aims to determine the practices of Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute on the integration of Laozi's ideas in their teaching and policies; identify the areas by which Laozi's educational philosophy inspire the teachers and students; and determine the advantages of using the leadership spirit of Laozi's educational philosophy as a guide in solving problem in the university.

With some educational issues and the influence of Laozi's teachings, it is considerable to explore further how Laozi's thoughts can be an instrument in improving higher education.

Review of Literature

In recent years, the continuous deepening of people's understanding of Laozi's thoughts, especially the emergence of modern education issues, has aroused the attention of the theoretical community to the educational value of philosophical ideas in the Tao Te Ching. Research on the relationship between the Tao Te Ching and education has begun to increase. According to Xiaohui and Ngoi (2024), Tao Te Ching represents an enigma of Chinese culture, yet the educational concepts embedded within it are likewise an infinite resource that requires additional investigation. Numerous notable quotes in Tao Te Ching have implications that might be extrapolated to various areas of pedagogy and used as aphorisms by educators. Yang (2018) analyzed the overall thinking of Chinese education from the perspective of Taoist thought. The book argues that Taoism had its own unique educational wisdom in ancient Chinese education, and its contribution and influence on Chinese education were profound. Feng (2024) mentioned that Laozi's educational value orientation is to conform to the natural nature and individual development laws of human beings, and "inaction" is the basic characteristic of education, providing a valuable theoretical basis for modern education. Zheng (2023) mentions that modern Chinese education, under the heavy pressure of Confucian traditional thought and the spirit of the times characterized by scientism, technicalism, and instrumental rationality, suppresses learners. These cause them to distance themselves from nature, society, and human beings, and to be in a state of alienation.

Modern education has forgotten its mission and become a means of alienating people. Feng and Cui (2018) believes that cultural change is the precursor to educational change, and cultural awakening promotes educational awakening. Jeng et al. (2022) pointed out that Laozi said that ancient times are also discussed in the present, which has infinite enlightenment. Laozi's thoughts are not only the wisdom of ancient philosophers, but also the wisdom of modern humans for self-rescue. Laozi is an educational philosopher, and his ideas have

become an important theoretical source for social reconstruction. Laozi is not only a thinker, but also an educational philosopher, and the Tao Te Ching is full of educational wisdom. Guo (2024) also mentioned that Taoist ideas have extremely rich enlightening value for Chinese education. Under the current new situation and requirements of education, Taoism advocates following the laws of development, respecting individual personality development, teaching by example, and breaking through traditional constraints, which have important guiding significance for educational reform. According to Wang et al. (2024), Taoist ideas can profoundly influence moral education by promoting inner cultivation and virtue to align with students' personal development, thus fostering an independent learning environment. By incorporating these principles, vocational education can address challenges such as the loss of professional ethics and the lack of personalized teaching methods. Innovative approaches, including case teaching, scenario simulation, and the use of modern technology, are recommended to create an engaging and effective learning experience. In relation, Qi and Ma (2023) proposed that education should follow the laws of educational development and follow the path of connotation development. Education should teach students according to their aptitude and give full play to their strengths. Teachers should lead by example and behave in a world like manner. Education should constantly innovate and reform to meet the needs of the times. As contemporary college students shoulder the heavy responsibility of modernization, mental health education should learn from Lao-Tzu's life philosophy and aid the students to behave decently and grow to be useful talents at last (Yang, 2019).

The results of the study of Shang (2024) indicate that Laozi's principle of natural inaction can guide entrepreneurs to adopt more flexible and sustainable development strategies. The concept of 'Dao follows nature' can help enterprises better adapt to market changes and achieve internal harmony and external balance. Laozi's management philosophy is not only an ancient wisdom, but also an important supplement to modern enterprise management theory. Laozi's thought of "doing nothing and

governing" means to follow the natural law of development of things and to act modestly for the achievement of "doing nothing and governing". The idea of "doing nothing and governing" is of great significance to the realization of the fundamental task of the education of "establish moral education" (Jin & Wang, 2020). By bridging Taoist thought with contemporary pedagogy, this research underscores the importance of well-being in education and advocates for a teaching approach that nurtures both intellectual and emotional development (Wang, 2025).

From the 16th to the 18th century, European missionaries began to carry out missionary activities in China. Chinese people were exposed to a richer Western culture through missionaries, and Westerners were also exposed to Chinese Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism through missionaries. Catholic Jesuit missionaries, represented by Matteo Ricci, came to China during the Wanli period of the Ming Dynasty. In order to achieve their missionary goals, they adopted a cooperative strategy with Confucianism, which occupied the core position of Chinese culture at that time. Liu (2023) summarized in his doctoral thesis the dissemination of Laozi's ideas in the West covering the 17th to the 19th century. In the 19th century, Western society not only boasted about its political, economic, and military superiority to the East, but also vigorously transmitted Christianity to China. However, the various new situations and problems arising from the rapid development of technology today make it difficult to find ready-made answers in existing research results, regardless of the language used. Therefore, by reviewing the research situation both domestically and internationally, the significance of this study is further highlighted.

Methods

Research design

The qualitative design was adopted for this study taking Shaanxi Industrial Vocational and Technical College as the locale, and conducted interviews with some teacher and student representatives to explore the application of Laozi's leadership spirit in higher education. These groups could most intuitively understand the application of the leadership spirit in Laozi's educational philosophy in current

schools. Therefore, interviewing teachers and students was the most direct way to understand the leadership spirit in Laozi's educational philosophy.

Population of the study

Using a purposive sampling method, two deans, ten teacher representatives, and six class monitors from the School of Electrical Engineering at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute of Industry were selected for interviews. This sample size was chosen to represent the primary groups involved in implementing and experiencing Laozi's leadership principles. The participants were those with direct experience and understanding of the application of Laozi's ideas in higher education at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute.

The dean had to be the current dean of the School of Electrical Engineering at Shaanxi Industrial Vocational and Technical College. He is responsible for teaching or for administrative management, with a tenure of more than 3 years, and directly involved in the formulation and implementation of college policies. They had to sign a written consent and voluntarily participate in in-depth interviews. Deans who were administrative staff but not participated in the formulation of college policy or had a tenure of less than 3 years were excluded.

Teachers who participated in the study were full-time faculty members of the college with at least five years of teaching experience and had explicitly integrated Laozi's philosophy into their teaching practices. Priority was given to those involved in the college's teaching reform projects. They were also required to sign a consent letter and provide concrete examples of how they applied Laozi's philosophy in practice. Teachers with less than five years of teaching experience; those who stated they had not applied Laozi's philosophy in their teaching; or those who declined to sign the consent letter or were unable to accommodate the interview schedule, were excluded from the list of participants.

Student participants were class representatives from all grade levels who had served for at least one semester and were capable of reflecting and communicating students' views and needs regarding teaching policies. They

were expected to have basic communication skills and willingly signed a consent form. Those who were not class representatives, had held their position for less than one semester, were unwilling to share learning experiences, or withdrew midway from the study were not included.

The School of Electrical Engineering is a department of the Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute with three grades, nearly 60 teaching classes, and over 2000 students, making significant contributions to China's vocational education.

Data gathering tool

Data were collected through interviews with participants on the current topic. The 5 open-ended questions were asked to determine the practical application of Laozi's leadership spirit in educational practice. The questions were closely aligned with the participants' roles ensuring the reliability and specificity of data. For the integration of Laozi's thought, the question for the deans was focused on the macro management perspective while on micro teaching strategies for the teachers. As to the areas by which the participants were inspired, the focus for teachers is on teaching while for the students is on learning. The participants were asked about their suggestions on better methods for the practical application of Laozi's leadership spirit in contemporary higher education to promote theoretical exploration and practical innovation in the field of education, and achieve sustained progress in contemporary higher education. The interview guide was validated by a tool validator from the University of Baguio to ensure its reliability and validity in capturing relevant data on Laozi's leadership spirit.

To document the responses, a laptop and pen and paper were used. The written responses were shown to the participants for verification and confirmation.

Data gathering procedures

Through one-on-one face-to-face interviews, the privacy of participants was ensured. In this way, the anonymity of participants was maximally ensured (if they chose not to disclose their identity), and the confidentiality of

information was also guaranteed (if they chose not to disclose information).

All participants signed a consent form prior to the interview, clearly stating the purpose of the study, the principle of voluntary participation, and data confidentiality measures. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequences. The consent form emphasized anonymous treatment to ensure privacy protection.

In special circumstances, interviews were conducted through online methods such as WeChat, QQ, email, etc., but the likelihood of such a situation occurring was low because all interview targets were on campus.

The outline of interview questions for all participants was the same, and their answers were mainly saved in text form for organization and analysis. This form of storage also ensured the privacy of participants to a certain extent.

Treatment of the data

Thematic analysis was used to process the responses. Responses were translated from Chinese into English. Responses regarding the integration of Laozi's ideas into teaching practice were translated and coded into themes. The relationship between macro policies and micro practices identified was analyzed. Responses regarding areas where participants were inspired were coded into themes. The themes demonstrated how teachers transformed philosophy into teaching strategies and revealed how students internalized philosophical ideas into learning practices, thereby forming a complete picture of mutual inspiration between teachers and students. Responses regarding the advantages of applying Laozi's leadership spirit to solve university problems, as perceived by participants, were coded into themes. The abilities of teachers to use Laozi's ideas to solve practical problems in teaching and their reflections were demonstrated, thereby promoting the deep integration of theoretical frameworks and practical cases.

The responses were analyzed by first converting all collected records into classified record files to facilitate the analysis of the interview questions. This step helped in understanding the interview situation for each topic and supported the subsequent analysis. The

data was transcribed in English, and was encoded. The relevant portions of the text were highlighted. Coding themes were organized based on the interview outline. Meaningful coding was determined during this phase. Afterward, the codes were checked to identify patterns and generate themes. Each theme was defined and named by accurately clarifying its meaning and determining how it contributed to understanding the data. Finally, the analysis was documented, and corresponding conclusions were drawn for each question in the interview outline.

Ethical considerations

Participants were asked to complete the consent form. The participants were asked for their anonymous voluntary participation and that they can withdraw anytime. Before the interview began, the researcher informed the participants of the research project and purpose, as well as data confidentiality measures. The researcher kept the collected data confidential and protected the privacy rights of participants during the process of publishing and disseminating research results. For anonymity, the participants were coded in the discussion of the results.

At any stage of the study, the researcher promised to report the progress of the research to the participants at any time. To reduce the risks identified in the research, all collected data were only allowed to be used by one researcher.

Risk management strategies at the technical level included encrypting data storage and restricting access permissions. At the ethical level, participants were allowed to refuse to answer sensitive questions and were provided channels for emotional support.

The researcher clearly informed all participants that their resources would not be spent or utilized in this study. All studies were conducted in the form of interviews, so participants did not experience any physical pain or emotional or psychological harm.

Result and Discussion

This section presents the results and analyses based on the interviews conducted with the participants. The discussions addressed the

three primary objectives of the study. Each objective was discussed with reference to the themes identified through the thematic analysis of interview responses.

The practices of Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute on the integration of Laozi's ideas in their teaching

As presented in Table 1, the analysis of teaching practices at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute reveals an innovative integration of Laozi's philosophical principles into modern

pedagogy. The practices were categorized into 3 key themes—curriculum diversity and flexibility, emphasis on the learning process over grades, and leadership by example—each reflecting aspects of Laozi's advocacy for natural, self-directed growth and minimal coercion. This exploration underscores the institute's effort to create a learning environment where students are encouraged to follow their own pace, discover knowledge organically, and experience moral guidance through exemplary teaching.

Table 1. Practices in Teaching

Themes	Frequency	Responses
Diversity and flexibility in curriculum	7	T1: encourage students to explore themselves and cultivate their ability for self-directed learning ; T2: helping students find their own learning pace; T3: allowing students to choose their own learning content based on their interests and needs; T5: avoid a "one size fits all"; T6: constantly pursue self-improvement; T9: respecting students' natural learning pace, avoiding forcing students to complete tasks beyond their abilities; T10: guiding students to discover and learn knowledge naturally
Learning process rather than grades and outcomes	3	T1: don't force students to learn according to a fixed pattern, but rather play a more guiding role.; T2: blindly pursuing grades and progress; setting reasonable goals and encouraging students to enjoy the learning process rather than just focusing on the results; T6: we should help students avoid excessive pursuit of grades and progress, but encourage them to move forward with a healthy pace
Leadership by example	3	T4: establishing equal relationships with students; T7: influence students through their own moral cultivation; T8: establishing equal teacher-student relationships

Diversity and flexibility in curriculum

The integration of Laozi's "governing by inaction" and "adapting to nature" is evident in the pedagogical practices at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute. Teachers emphasize fostering self-directed learning by allowing students to explore topics based on their interests (T3) and setting personalized learning paces (T2). This aligns with Laozi's philosophy of respecting natural rhythms and minimizing coercive intervention, as highlighted in Jeng et al. (2022) analysis of implicit moral education. By avoiding a "one-size-fits-all" approach (T5), educators create a curriculum that mirrors Laozi's

critique of rigid structures, which he deemed counterproductive to organic growth.

The emphasis on flexibility resonates with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination theory, which posits that autonomy enhances intrinsic motivation. For instance, T10's approach of guiding students to "discover knowledge naturally" reflects Laozi's belief in the Tao as an invisible force that cultivates wisdom through experiential learning. This contrasts with traditional Confucian models criticized by Zheng (2023) for prioritizing conformity over individuality. The high frequency of this theme (7 responses) emphasizes its

significance in connecting Laozi's philosophy with contemporary pedagogy. However, it is still hard to find the right balance between structure and freedom, since too flexible curricula could make academic rigor less strong.

Learning process rather than grades and outcomes

Teachers' emphasis on the learning process rather than outcomes (T1, T2, T6) directly reflects Laozi's warning against "blinding pursuing external achievements." By telling students to "enjoy the learning journey" (T2), teachers shift the focus from transactional results to holistic development. This is in line with Laozi's criticism of society's obsession with utilitarianism. This method is also in line with modern educational psychology, especially Keenan's (2018) focus on mindfulness and intrinsic motivation in learning.

T6's rejection of "forced acceleration" is similar to Laozi's warning against artificial haste, which stops natural growth. The fact that this theme came up less often (3 times) suggests that institutions don't want to lower the importance of grades, probably because of systemic pressures related to standardized tests. As mentioned, discussions about educational reforms and the use of formative assessments can help bridge the gap between process-oriented learning and accountability demands. This can help close the gap between research and teachers' attitudes toward acceleration (Jourde & Soledad, 2018).

Leadership by example

Leadership through moral influence (T7) and equal teacher-student relationships (T4, T8) reflects Laozi's ideal of "convincing people through one's moral integrity". Teachers become role models of the 'highest good' by embodying virtues such as humility and integrity, and cultivate students' moral development through silent example — a concept that echoes Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership. T7 Fostering a sense of responsibility through moral stories indicates that the moral

governance emphasized by Laozi goes beyond mere management to shape character.

The relatively low frequency of this theme compared to academic achievement (3 responses) may indicate a general lack of emphasis on moral exemplars in schools. However, this is consistent with Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which posits virtue as the foundation of leadership and emphasizes its timeless relevance. To deepen this practice, schools could provide formal moral training for educators and ensure that the spirit of Laozi's leadership becomes systematic rather than anecdotal.

Overall, the integration of Laozi's ideas at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute presents a promising shift towards a more holistic educational approach. While the strong emphasis on curriculum flexibility and self-directed learning indicates significant progress, challenges remain, particularly in balancing these practices with traditional, grade-focused systems. Moving forward, further embedding moral education and servant leadership into formal teaching methods could enhance the transformative potential of Laozi's philosophy, ultimately enriching both academic rigor and personal development.

Practices of Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute on the integration of Laozi's ideas in their policies

Table 2 shows the two main directions in which Shaanxi Vocational College has integrated Laozi's thinking into the process of formulating school policies: first, creating a "relaxed learning environment" and second, "setting reasonable development goals". By reducing excessive intervention; stimulating intrinsic motivation; and balancing resource allocation with an emphasis on sustainable development, the college seeks to create an educational ecology that conforms to the natural development of teachers and students, respects individual differences, and encourages humanistic care. Each of these topics are discussed and analyzed in depth below.

Table 2. Practices in Policies

Themes	Frequency	Responses
Relaxed learning environment	1	D1: minimizing excessive intervention and promoting their self-development more by stimulating internal motivation
Setting reasonable development goals	1	D2: guided by long-term development, striving to balance resource allocation, avoid resource waste and excessive competition, attach importance to the physical and mental health of teachers and students, focus on academic freedom and innovation, and emphasize sustainable development.

Relaxed learning environment

The theme of 'a relaxed learning environment' was discussed in an interview with D1, who proposed the policy of 'minimizing excessive intervention and promoting self-development of teachers and students by stimulating intrinsic motivation'. This policy is a vivid embodiment of Laozi's 'governing by doing nothing' in management. Theoretically, Laozi emphasizes that leaders should follow the laws of nature in a 'doing nothing' way, reduce unnecessary forced intervention, and thus stimulate the individual's intrinsic self-drive (Jeng et al., 2022).

In modern higher education management, excessive external constraints often lead to a utilitarian competitive atmosphere for teachers and students, making it difficult to achieve true personalized development. By creating a relaxed, low-intervention policy environment, schools cannot only provide teachers with more room for innovation, but also encourage students to choose their own learning paths, promote self-exploration and reflection. This policy direction breaks away from the traditional management model that focuses on grades and rankings, and instead focuses on the intrinsic needs and long-term development potential of teachers and students.

Also, this policy shows a big-picture view: the main goal is to create a healthy mental state in teachers and students by cutting down on unnecessary competition and stress. By cutting down on unnecessary administrative interference, schools encourage teachers to change how they teach and give students more freedom to make their own decisions. This makes the school a place where everyone trusts each other, is equal, and is tolerant. This not only makes teaching more effective, but it also gives

teachers and students a place to reach their full potential and go beyond themselves. The idea of a relaxed learning environment is in line with Laozi's idea of "following the natural way." It also gives modern higher education a strong theoretical and practical basis for finding ways to grow in a changing world.

Setting reasonable development goals

The idea of "setting reasonable development goals" comes up once in policy practice as well. Its main idea is "oriented towards long-term development, balancing resource allocation, avoiding waste of resources and excessive competition, focusing on the physical and mental health of teachers and students, academic freedom and innovation, and emphasizing sustainable development." This policy direction profoundly reflects the wisdom of Laozi on "knowing when to stop is not dangerous", that is, recognizing that excessive pursuit of short-term gains may lead to long-term damage. Laozi advocated that people should be content and happy, and stop when they have had enough. It is this philosophy that inspires the school to pay more attention to long-term benefits than short-term results when formulating policies.

From the perspective of management theory, this policy is highly consistent with the concepts of 'sustainable development' and 'overall balance' emphasized in modern educational management. Deci and Ryan's (2000) research on intrinsic motivation points out that only in an environment that fully respects individual autonomy and ensures fair resource allocation can teachers and students truly be creative and promote overall development. In practice, the school has abandoned the previ-

ous single ranking and competition mechanism. It focuses instead on academic freedom and innovative ability, creating a relaxed research and teaching environment for teachers. It also pays attention to the physical and mental health of students, and builds a platform for them to stimulate their potential and achieve self-breakthrough.

This policy practice also emphasizes avoiding ‘resource wastage and excessive competition’. Its connotation lies in building a diverse and inclusive educational ecology that encourages all parties to make progress together on the basis of win-win cooperation. Sá (2023) has argued that in the face of fierce competition, modern higher education is prone to neglecting genuine academic growth and humanistic care. However, reasonable development goals can enable schools to better fulfil their social responsibilities and promote educational equity while pursuing excellence. By distributing resources fairly, the school can encourage teachers to do their best in both teaching and research, and give students more options for growth. This will help avoid problems and unhappiness that can arise from uneven resource distribution.

In short, the policy practice of "setting reasonable development goals" is not only a continuation of Laozi's idea of "knowing when to stop without danger." It is also a new idea that goes beyond the old way of teaching in a globalized world. It lets the school make an

educational setting that focuses on both personal growth and overall harmony while also protecting academic freedom and encouraging new ideas. This really meets the two goals of long-term and sustainable growth.

In short, Shaanxi Vocational College has successfully used Laozi's ideas of "governing by doing nothing" and "knowing when to stop without danger" in its school management by using the two main ideas of "a relaxed learning environment" and "setting reasonable development goals" when making policies. These policies not only reduce external pressure on teachers and students, but also stimulate their internal motivation. They have also achieved remarkable results in balancing resources, safeguarding academic freedom and promoting sustainable development. Through combining theoretical literature, this study shows that the application of Laozi's leadership spirit in modern higher education not only has theoretical guiding significance, but also provides innovative ideas and practical paths for solving current educational problems.

Areas by which Laozi's educational philosophy inspire the teachers and students

Table 3 reflects the practical impact of Laozi's educational philosophy on inspiring teachers and students. It mainly covers four themes: ‘Governing by inaction’, ‘Using softness to overcome hardness’, ‘Knowledge is not shameful’ and ‘The highest good is like water’.

Table 3. Areas and Laozi's Educational Philosophy That Inspire the Teachers and Students

Themes	Frequency	Responses	
Supervision: “Governing by inaction”	8	T1: Minimize intervention and give students the freedom to explore.	S2: Learn independently and reduce dependence on teachers.
		T3: Provide more learning options and enhance independence.’	S5: Combine active exploration with reflection.
		T9: Reduce direct control and encourage students to choose their own learning methods.	S6: Arrange learning and life reasonably
		T10: Respect the growth of students and teach them according to their aptitude.	
		T7:Guide students through moral example	

Themes	Frequency	Responses	
Management: "Using softness to overcome hardness"	4	T4: Resolve classroom conflicts through gentle communication. T8: Avoid coercive measures and build trust between teachers and students. T10: Soft guidance instead of strict management	S3: Flexibly adjust methods to meet challenges.
Learning approach: "Knowledge is not shameful"	4	T2: Emphasize a balanced approach to learning and don't over-emphasize grades. T6: Accept imperfection and set appropriate goals.	S1: Enjoy the learning process and don't seek external recognition. S4: Accept gradual accumulation, not forcing a quick fix.
Modelling: "The highest good is like water"	2	T5: Lead by example and influence students with your character. T7: Teachers are guides for students' moral growth.	

Supervision: Governing by inaction

'Governing by inaction' is an important part of Laozi's educational philosophy, and it received the most responses (8) in this interview, mainly reflected in the teaching practices of teachers and students through reducing external intervention and giving more autonomy. Teacher T1 proposed "minimizing intervention and giving students the freedom to explore", while T3, T9 and T10 emphasized providing students with diverse learning options, reducing direct control and tailoring teaching to students' characteristics, respectively. This practice is precisely an embodiment of Laozi's 'Tao follows nature', which means that educators should not intervene too much in students' natural development, but should respect the laws of their inner growth.

By reducing over-guidance and adopting a 'non-intervention' approach, teachers are actually creating an environment that supports self-directed learning, allowing students to explore and reflect independently and thus develop intrinsic motivation. Meanwhile, T7 mentioned guiding students through a moral example, which is also reflected in Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership, that is, leaders should influence team members through their own virtues to achieve the effect of 'convincing people with virtue'.

In addition, the responses of students S2, S5 and S6 reflect that 'governing by doing nothing'

is not only effective in teachers' teaching, but also plays a positive role in students' self-learning and life planning. They emphasize the importance of independent learning, active exploration and reasonable arrangements for learning and life. This self-driven learning approach helps cultivate an innovative spirit and critical thinking. Jin and Wang (2021) pointed out that a flexible management model can make the academic environment more open, promote equal interaction between teachers and students, and thus improve the overall teaching effect. In summary, 'governing by doing nothing' not only makes the classroom atmosphere more relaxed, but also creates a self-directed learning platform for students that can stimulate their inner potential. It truly realizes the educational concepts of 'following nature' and 'putting people first'.

Management: Using softness to overcome hardness

'Using softness to overcome hardness' received four responses in this study, which mainly reflected the use of gentle communication and flexible adjustment of teaching methods to resolve teacher-student conflicts and classroom management issues. Teacher T4 emphasizes the importance of gentle communication in resolving conflicts in the classroom, while T8 and T10 advocate avoiding coercive measures and replacing rigid management

with soft guidance. Student S3 also suggests the need to flexibly adjust learning strategies when encountering challenges. This theme fully embodies the management wisdom of Laozi's 'the highest good is like water', that is, to overcome rigidity with flexibility and to achieve management goals through flexible strategies.

'Using soft power to overcome hard power' not only conforms to Laozi's idea of 'following the way of nature', but also fits in with emotional leadership and transformational leadership in modern leadership theory. For example, James MacGregor Burns proposed that transformational leadership promotes teamwork by inspiring emotions and trust, rather than relying on strict orders. Gentle communication from teachers not only alleviates students' resistance, but also establishes an equal and open teacher-student relationship, which is of great significance in improving student participation and the spirit of cooperation.

This view is also supported by Mintzberg's theory of flexible management and adaptation. When faced with different opinions in the classroom, teachers' adoption of a flexible management approach helps to create a learning environment that is tolerant of mistakes and innovation, thus stimulating the creativity of both teachers and students. Laozi's educational thinking emphasized a flexible management model, which Li (2021) can better motivate teachers and students, reduce resistance caused by strict management, and thus improve the overall quality of education.

In addition, 'using gentleness to overcome rigidity' also emphasizes that when solving problems, one should avoid a head-on confrontation, but rather guide, adapt and communicate emotionally to promote consensus among all parties. This not only conforms to the traditional Chinese educational philosophy of integrating Confucianism and Taoism, but also meets the current needs of educational diversification and personalization. Overall, a gentle management style can effectively create a harmonious teaching environment, help establish good teacher-student relationships and a team spirit, and provide a practical path for educational reform.

Learning approach: Knowledge is not shameful

The theme of 'knowledge is not shameful' also received 4 responses in the interviews, which focused on the views of teachers and students on balancing learning methods and evaluation mechanisms. Teacher T2 emphasizes the importance of balancing learning methods in teaching and avoiding over-emphasis on grades, while T6 advocates the teaching philosophy of accepting imperfection and setting appropriate goals. These views reflect the philosophical essence of Laozi's saying 'contentment is no shame, knowing when to stop is no danger'. In other words, people should have a reasonable position on their own learning and development, not blindly pursuing perfection, but focusing on the process and accumulation.

From a theoretical perspective, this concept is closely related to autonomy and intrinsic motivation in Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. By reducing the singular pursuit of results, teachers can not only alleviate students' psychological pressure caused by competition, but also encourage students to focus on the connotation and application of knowledge, thereby cultivating their long-term learning interests and abilities. Students S1 and S4 both expressed their agreement with enjoying the learning process and gradual accumulation, reflecting the positive role of this educational concept in alleviating the pressure of external evaluation and promoting individual self-growth.

In addition, this idea of Laozi is also in line with the current trend of educational evaluation reform. Nowadays, more and more studies (e.g. Fan & Jing, (2016) advocate the construction of a diversified evaluation system that focuses on process evaluation and ability development, rather than using exam scores as the only criterion. By advocating 'shameless knowledge' in the classroom, teachers can guide students to establish correct values and pay more attention to exploration and reflection in the learning process, thus achieving a two-way improvement of knowledge and ability.

Modelling: The highest good is like water

Although 'the highest good is like water' is one of the core concepts of Laozi's thinking, it only received two responses in this table, but its influence should not be underestimated. Teacher T5 and T7's responses emphasize influencing students by setting a personal example and guiding them morally, respectively. This reflects the idea that leaders should inspire students and teachers to pursue a higher spiritual realm with noble character and moral strength. This approach is precisely the concept advocated by Laozi in "The Highest Good is Like Water": the highest good is like water, which nourishes things without making a sound, but can subtly influence everything.

From the perspective of leadership theory, this concept is highly compatible with Greenleaf's servant leadership and Aristotle's virtuous leadership mentioned in Nicomachean Ethics. Through their words and deeds, leaders set an example for students, not only imparting knowledge but also, more importantly, shaping character and moral character. Teachers influence students with their own character, so that they consciously cultivate a sense of responsibility and moral judgment in the learning process, thus laying a solid foundation for the development of future society.

In the higher education environment, the construction of teacher morality is always an important factor in improving the quality of education. The practice of teachers T5 and T7 has proved that education through the 'highest good is like water' approach not only helps to build a harmonious teacher-student relationship, but also promotes the development of students' overall quality. As Sá (2023) pointed out, higher education is not only the transmission of knowledge, but also the cultivation of character and values. Teachers should guide students on the right path with noble virtues.

In addition, the soft leadership advocated by 'the highest good is like water' also plays a positive role in solving moral and behavioral problems on campus. Through the example of teachers, students can subconsciously develop good habits and moral values, and then remain

calm and rational when facing complex social problems. Although this influence is not easy to quantify, its long-term significance is crucial to cultivating talents with noble character and a sense of social responsibility.

In general, the idea of "the highest good is like water" came up less often in this interview, but it has a deep, exemplary, and leading meaning. Teachers setting a good example creates a good moral environment on campus. This not only makes the education better, but it also lays a strong moral foundation for building a peaceful society.

In short, Table 3 shows how Laozi's educational philosophy has helped teachers and students learn on their own, solve problems, evaluate fairly, and develop their moral character. The four areas embodying Laozi's philosophies illustrate how educators and learners can internalize and implement his wisdom in practical contexts, thereby fostering harmony and innovation within the educational setting. Along with the previously mentioned ideas of self-determination and servant leadership, as well as traditional Confucian and Taoist ideas, these talks not only back up the idea of reforming higher education in theory. They also give a practical way to build an education system that is focused on people and personal growth.

Advantages of using the leadership spirit of Laozi's educational philosophy as a guide in solving problem in the university

Table 4 shows the main benefits of using Laozi's leadership philosophy in modern higher education, as reported by faculty, administrators, and students at Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute. The themes—enhancing students' autonomy and responsibility, resolving conflicts through flexible communication, and reducing academic pressure by focusing on process growth—highlight how Laozi's principles address modern educational challenges. These findings align with both classical Taoist tenets and modern educational theories discussed in the literature review and theoretical framework of the study.

Table 4. Advantages of using Laozi's leadership spirit

Themes	Frequency	Responses
Enhancing students' autonomy and sense of responsibility	5	<p>T1: Students organize discussions independently, and their sense of responsibility has improved significantly.</p> <p>T3: Reduce theoretical classes and design exploratory tasks to stimulate independent learning.</p> <p>T9: Students plan their studies and lives independently, which improves their motivation.</p> <p>T10: Guide students to explore answers independently and cultivate critical thinking.</p> <p>D1: Teachers adjust their teaching styles to provide students with personalized education.</p>
Flexible communication resolves conflicts and enhances cohesion	5	<p>T4: Resolving conflicts among students through gentle communication enhances class cohesion.</p> <p>T8: Private communication improves student attitudes and builds trust.</p> <p>D2: Listening to the opinions of teachers and students, coordinating to reach a consensus, and the team becomes more united.</p> <p>T7: Sharing your own experiences eliminates negative emotions in students.</p> <p>T5: When solving this problem, I drew inspiration from Laozi's concept of "the highest good is like water", ... successfully stimulated the creativity of team members and improved collaboration efficiency.</p>
Reduce academic pressure and focus on process growth	3	<p>T2: No ranking of grades, encouraging a balanced mindset.</p> <p>T6: The evaluation focuses on the learning process rather than test scores.</p> <p>S4: Accept gradual progress, not forced acceleration.'</p>

Enhancing students' autonomy and sense of responsibility

The emphasis on autonomy reflects Laozi's principle of "governing by inaction", which advocates minimal intervention to allow natural growth. By designing exploratory tasks and reducing rigid theoretical instruction, educators create environments where students "discover knowledge naturally" (T10). This approach resonates with Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, which posits that autonomy-supportive environments enhance intrinsic motivation and self-regulation.

The shift toward student-led discussions (T1) and personalized education (D1) also mirrors the servant leadership model, where educators prioritize student needs over authoritarian control. By encouraging independence, teachers help students develop critical thinking and responsibility, which are important skills for lifelong learning.

The combination of "governing by inaction" with modern teaching methods connects old knowledge with new ways of doing things. Wang (2022) said that Laozi's philosophy encourages "conformity to human nature." This is clear in the institute's focus on individualized learning rhythms. Mintzberg's flexible management theory also stresses the importance of being adaptable in education. This idea fits well with Laozi's focus on natural progression.

Flexible communication resolves conflict and enhances cohesion

The idea that "softness overcomes hardness" is at the heart of this theme. Laozi's saying that "the softest things overcome the hardest" is shown by T4's use of "gentle communication" to settle student disagreements. By not using force, teachers build trust and unity. For example, T8 stressed "private communication" to change how students think.

D2's method of listening to stakeholders and finding common ground is similar to Laozi's idea of leading with humility and compassion. This fits with transformational leadership, which is when leaders use moral influence instead of power to motivate people to work toward common goals. For instance, T7's use of personal stories to help students deal with "negative emotions" shows Laozi's idea that leaders should "act without contention," putting emotional resonance ahead of strict discipline.

The focus on soft power is in line with Aristotle's virtue ethics, which say that leaders should be moral examples. Jeng et al. (2022) posited that Laozi's philosophy promotes "implicit ideological education," wherein ethical modeling, rather than rules, influences behavior. This method is also in line with Mintzberg's adaptive management, which values feedback that is given over and over and harmony between people.

Reduce academic pressure and focus on process growth

Though identified to have the least number of responses, this theme bears a considerable weight. Laozi's admonition against excessive striving "knowing when to stop prevents danger" underpins this theme. By abolishing grade rankings (T2) and emphasizing "learning process evaluation" (T6), educators reduce performance anxiety and align with Laozi's warning that "forcing growth leads to decay". S4's acceptance of "gradual progress" reflects the Taoist ideal of *ziran*, "natural spontaneity", where growth emerges organically.

This shift from outcome-centric to process-oriented education mirrors holistic pedagogy, which prioritizes student well-being over standardized metrics. For instance, T6's focus on "imperfection acceptance" aligns with Laozi's critique of Confucian rigidity, as noted by Zheng (2023), who argued that modern education often "alienates learners" through excessive competition.

The results corroborate Sá's (2023) claim that Laozi's philosophy provides remedies for the "instrumental rationality" that afflicts higher education. By prioritizing process over

product, educators exemplify Laozi's *daofa ziran* ("Dao follows nature"), cultivating environments conducive to student flourishing free from external pressures.

In short, Laozi's leadership philosophy is still useful in today's higher education because it promotes independence, helps people resolve conflicts through empathy, and lowers academic stress. These themes support the theoretical framework's combination of Taoist ideas with modern leadership idea like servant leadership. Shaanxi Polytechnic Institute shows how ancient wisdom can help with modern problems by connecting Laozi's *wuwei* with adaptive pedagogy. This promotes sustainable educational practices that put humanistic growth ahead of mechanistic efficiency. Subsequent research may investigate the cross-cultural applications of these principles, thereby enhancing the connection between Eastern philosophy and global educational reform.

Conclusion

Shaanxi Vocational College of Industry and Technology effectively incorporates Laozi's idea of "governing by doing nothing" through a flexible curriculum, a process-oriented teaching model, and a relaxed policy environment. This encourages students to learn on their own and grow in a way that is both academically free and institutionally constrained.

Laozi's philosophy has influenced self-management through "governing without doing," flexible communication through "overcoming hardness with softness," process-oriented learning through "knowing when to stop without being in danger of running out of time," and moral demonstration through "the highest good is like water" among educators and learners. These foster the harmonious evolution of the educational ecosystem.

A leadership model inspired by Laozi's philosophy has demonstrated significant advantages in promoting student autonomy, enabling adaptable conflict resolution, and reducing academic stress, providing a contemporary solution for higher education that integrates humanistic care with innovative progress.

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