

Daoist Ethical Cultivation and Contemporary Leadership: A Comparative Framework

Dr. Pranav Desai¹, Dr. Sapna D Chauhan^{*2}, Dr Shobhana Singh³, Dr Devrshi Upadhayay⁴, Dr Frince Thomas C⁵

¹Associate Professor Parul Institute of Management and Research (PIMR)
Faculty of Management Studies, Parul University, Vadodara – Gujarat -
India

Email:ID: pranav.desai40881@paruluniversity.ac.in

²Associate Professor - MBA (FMS) Parul University, Vadodara, Gujarat

Email:ID: sapna.chauhan@paruluniversity.ac.in

³Assistant Professor Parul Institute of Liberal Arts Parul University,
Vadodara

Email:ID: shobhana.singh33380@paruluniversity.ac.in

⁴Faculty of Management GLS University Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad, Gujarat

Email:ID: devrshi.upadhayay@glsuniversity.ac.in

⁵Associate Professor Centre for Management studies, (MBA Department),
FoMIS Dharmsinh Desai University, College Road, Nadiad, Gujarat
387001

Email:ID: frince.mba@ddu.ac.in

Corresponding author

Dr. Sapna D Chauhan

Associate Professor - MBA (FMS) Parul University, Vadodara, Gujarat

Email:ID: sapna.chauhan@paruluniversity.ac.in

Abstract: Background: The present organizational context requires a leadership philosophy that transcends the western paradigm in order to address ethical, ecological and relational needs in a world that is interconnected. The Daodejing, the Zhuangzi and the Nei ye provide abundant sources of what is sometimes called an under-theorized wisdom for rethinking ethical leadership in terms of wuwei (non-coercive action), de (virtue as natural expression), ziran (spontaneity and naturalness), and zuowang (contemplative self-emptying).

Methods: A qualitative approach of systematic literature review, theoretical synthesis, and interpretive analysis of classical Daoist texts is used together with contemporary leadership scholarship. Through thematic coding, 5 bridging mechanisms were formulated which formed the Daoist Ethical Leadership (DEL) framework. The framework is grounded in lived organisational experience through a qualitative case vignette analysis of three different organisational contexts: monastic contemplative community, purpose-driven enterprise, cross-cultural leadership program.

Results: There are five integrative dimensions identified between Daoist contemplative cultivation and Western ethical leadership through the use of thematic analysis. The findings in the vignettes are consistent: Analysis of vignette data indicates that leaders practicing ongoing Daoist-informed contemplative practice might be more likely to demonstrate relational attunement, less likely to be prone to reactive decision making, and more likely to demonstrate ecological awareness.

Conclusions: The DEL framework is a theoretically coherent, culturally sensitive, philosophically integrated model which complements the Western leadership ethic by incorporating the contemplative, cosmological, and relational depth of Daoist tradition.

Keywords: Daoism; wuwei (無為); de; zuowang; ethical leadership; contemplative cultivation; Global Knowledge Systems; qualitative research; Daodejing; Zhuangzi; mindful leadership; cross-cultural management,

Introduction

The leadership philosophy for the 21st century will need to be both deep in wisdom and practical. Taking on the role of a leader is an immediate need that is both ethically sound and socially responsible, given the need for ecological rehabilitation, structural injustice, intercultural dialogue, and a recurring problem of organizational ethics. While the Western conceptualization of ethical leadership has led to the development of sophisticated normative theories, they are still structurally based on Enlightenment epistemology, substance ontology and individualistic moral agency (Brown and Treviño 2006; Walumbwa et al. 2008). These are important normative resources but those aspects of ethical cultivation that are contemplative, cosmological, and relational have been less emphasized in more mainstream leadership models. (Miller 2013; Kohn 2018). It is precisely here that Daoist philosophy—as preserved in the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, the *Nei ye*, and subsequent cultivation literature—offers resources that are comparatively less emphasized within dominant Western organizational ethics frameworks. *Wuwei* (無為), for example, does not connote passivity but spontaneous, non-coercive action arising from inner cultivation; *ziran* expresses a responsive, rather than controlling, ontological orientation; and *zuowang* (坐忘) describes a systematic contemplative practice that extends beyond many contemporary organizational models of self-awareness by emphasizing the transformation of ego-centered perception itself. (Kohn 2010).

This study also contributes to ongoing conversations within Daoist studies concerning the contemporary applicability of classical Daoist contemplative and ethical traditions. Rather than treating Daoism as a historical artifact or a source of decontextualized wellness techniques, the article explores how Daoist philosophical anthropology, cosmology, and cultivation practices may inform present-day ethical and organizational questions. The Global Knowledge Systems (GKS) framework (Santos 2007; Tsui 2004) validates epistemic pluralism and challenges Western-centric organizational knowledge production. While prior scholarship has explored Daoist leadership, contemplative cultivation, and comparative ethics in partial ways, relatively few studies have attempted a multi-level integrative framework linking Daoist contemplative philosophy with contemporary ethical leadership theory and organizational practice. This paper aims to fill that void, proposing a 5-dimensional DEL framework, and providing some pathways for implementation at individual, organizational, and societal levels with qualitative vignette analysis of three organizational settings.



Figure 1: The Daoist Ethical Leadership (DEL) Framework — Five Integrated Dimensions.

Sources: Kohn (2010, 2013, 2018); Miller (2013); Jung (2025); Zaccarini (2025).

As shown in Figure 1, the DEL framework arranges five integrated dimensions, each based on the classical Daoist texts, and each with a Hindu/Vedic philosophical analogue, as well as a Western construct of leadership. At the centre is the Dao as the cosmological basis, and the five dimensions flow from there and back to the Dao in an ever-recurring process of cultivation and expression.

Literature Review

2.1 Daoist Philosophical Foundations: From the Daodejing to the Nei ye

Daoist Philosophical Foundations refers to the family of related philosophies that focus on the Dao, the non-referential, self-arising pattern of all existence, and the cultivation of human life in harmony with this pattern (Kohn 2018; Miller 2013). The 81 chapters of the Daodejing discuss cosmology, government, and cultivation of the self, and in every chapter the perfect sage-ruler is portrayed as one who exercises little control over his domain, and who leaves room for self-organization to occur (chapters 17, 57, 81). The Zhuangzi applies these ideas to personal cultivation, and its description of zuowang (clearing) in chapter six contains a systematic way to cultivate the non-reactive awareness underlying Daoist ethical behaviour (Kohn 2010). The Nei ye, studied by Roth (1999) and Kohn (2010), is the oldest surviving Daoist work on cultivating qi via jing and concentrated attention.

2.1.1 Textual Foundations of Wuwei (無為) and Zuowang (坐忘)

Textual foundations of Wuwei (無為) and Zuowang (坐忘) Wuwei (無為) is not passivity, but it is a responsiveness that is not forced, that is aligned with the Dao. Chapter 57 states: “I take no action and the people transform themselves” (wuwei (無為) er min zi hua 無為而民自化). Overall, this

formulation implies a political and ethical outlook in which too much intervention is a hindrance to collective harmony. Roger Ames and David Hall (2003) take wuwei (無為) to mean “non-coercive action”, not passive action, but action that builds a relationship between things. In a similar fashion, zuowang (坐忘) (“sitting in forgetfulness”) in chapter 6 is the gradual abandonment of attachment to the senses, attachment to the fixed idea, and attachment to the ego.

In this process it is not self-negation in an ascetic way but a process of transformation of awareness that gives rise to spontaneous responsiveness. Suggestions for enriching contemporary theories of organizational leadership that focus on self-awareness and reflective practice with stories of ontological self-transformation in the Daoist tradition, which go beyond cognitive introspection to attunement, may then be offered. Similarly Edward Slingerland (2003) claims that wuwei is more of a cultivated spontaneity that comes from an embodied ethical attunement than passivity.

2.2 Daoist Leadership in Comparative Perspective

In recent years, the study of Daoist leadership has expanded, as outlined in the next section. Lee et al. (2008) report five leadership attributes that were derived from the Daoist cosmological concepts: Altruism, Modesty, Flexibility, Transparency, and Gentle Persistence. Wang (2012) showed how de-based virtue ethics provide a more motivationally coherent explanation of ethical behavior than Western deontological or consequentialist ethics. Tan (2023) noted that wuwei is a morally substantive approach to mindful leadership that is more than an instrumentalization, as is the case with the secular practices of ‘McMindfulness’. The field's aspirations to be interdisciplinary were further strengthened by the recent, comprehensive reappraisal of Daoism as a philosophy and leadership principle by Lei (2025). The terms wuwei and zuowang are translated in a wide variety of different ways within the scholarly traditions and in the present study they are used as heuristic terms rather than fixed doctrinal categories.

2.3 Contemplative Practice and Organizational Mindfulness

Since Kabat-Zinn's (1994) introduction of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, contemplative practice has gained a new level of interest in Western organizational science, and research has shown that it can positively influence emotional regulation, decision making and ethical sensitivity (Good et al. 2016; Reb et al. 2015; Tang et al. 2015). But without a moral and cosmological framework, secular mindfulness can just become a technology for productivity enhancement, and a commercialization of ancient wisdom (Purser and Milillo 2015). Komjathy (2007) also points out that Daoist cultivation should not be seen as merely meditative technique but within a larger context of embodiment, ritual, ethics and spiritual transformation.

2.4 The Global Knowledge Systems Framework

The Global Knowledge Systems Framework expands the epistemological challenge to the hegemony of the social scientific knowledge production in the West, and demands recognition of multiple epistemologies (Santos 2007; Tsui 2004). Miller's work on Daoism and ecology (2013, 2017) demonstrates that Daoist cosmology provides a philosophically sound ethics of interdependence and sustainability. In its different forms, the pursuit of this line of inquiry has been explored in the *Journal of Daoist Studies* with essays on the self (Ao and Steinvorth 2017; Jung 2025), American Daoist practice (Kohn 2010), and Daoist institutional culture (Kohn 2013).

2.5 Hindu and Vedic Parallels: Bhagavad Geeta, Upanishads, and the DEL Framework

It is important to note that the DEL framework is in tune with the Hindu and Vedic philosophies and offers a rich dimension of cross-cultural philosophical validation. The Bhagavad Geeta, an ethical and spiritual text of Hinduism, dating around 200BCE, which also forms part of the Mahabharata, expresses a vision of ethical action that is very consistent with the Daoist principles of wuwei (無為), de and ziran. The key teaching of the Geeta is Nishkama Karma (BG 3.19-3.25), action without attachment to results – an action that is performed without motivation. An action that is done without an ulterior motive, structurally similar to wuwei (無為)'s action without coercion and spontaneously effective. Both the Daoist and the Hindu cosmologies have process-relational ontologies that are in opposition to the Western model of moral agency based on substance that underlies individualist ethical leadership theory (ELT) (Wang, 2012).

The Hindu analogy of the Daoist cultivation of de and jing is represented in the Geeta's concept of Sthitaprajna – a person of steady wisdom, who is equanimous in pleasure and pain, success and failure (BG 2.55-2.58). The progressive refinement of qi and shen undertaken in the *Nei ye* corresponds in the Geeta to the yoga of selfless action (Karma Yoga), devotion (Bhakti Yoga), and discriminative wisdom (Jnana Yoga) that is undertaken. Both traditions have a wisdom that teaches that ethical stability and reactivity is not something that can be done by will but is a process of continuous contemplation that works in the process of one's inner constitution. This convergence is philosophically meaningful for

Dimension 4 of the DEL framework (Jing Based Adaptive Resilience) that indicates two key elements of effective ethical leadership: equanimity and constancy. In addition to the two key parallels listed above, the Hindu principle of Svadhyaya (self-study; BG 17.15; Yoga Sutras 2.44) is another important parallel to the DEL framework's

Dimension 1. Both practices have aspects that are fruitful to contemplate in relation to the cultivation of the self and reflective awareness, but they are also rooted in different cosmological and soteriological traditions. The teaching of the Upanishads, "I am Brahman" (Aham Brahmasmi, Brihadaranyaka Upanishad 1.4.10) – not an ego assertion but the recognition of the non-separability of the self from the whole, echoes the Daoist story of the sage who, through the practice of zuowang, stops

being an individual and becomes a function of the Dao's self-organizing pattern.

Finally, the Vedic principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("the world is one family," Maha Upanishad 6.72)—which is the cosmological basis for all care and responsibility in Hindu ethics—resonates with the human-heaven unity of the Daoists, tian-ren heyi, and the Zhuangzi's relational ecology as a foundation for the DEL framework's

Dimension 5: Ziran Systemic Wisdom. Both Miller (2013) and Miller (2017) deliver an ecological reading of Daoist ethics and the Hindu concept of ahimsa (non-harm to all sentient beings) that articulate an ethics of interdependence, which is not only applicable to human organizational stakeholders, but to the wider biotic community, and that gives the DEL framework a theoretically coherent ecological ethics, which it lacks within the anthropocentric frame of Western stakeholder theory.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The methodology used for this study is conceptual and interpretive with a comparative method that is a combination of close textual analysis of classical Daoist texts, synthesis of related literature and exploratory vignette analysis. Second, the conceptual bridges between Chinese Daoist tradition and Western tradition that were found by the corpus through iterative thematic interpretation. Third, the three organizational settings are presented as qualitative case vignette analysis which anchors abstract dimensions of the framework in phenomenologically rich organizational experience. A multi-component, qualitative design is appropriate for this research because it is consistent with the theory development processes for studies within the field of organization and management (Whetten 2009) and is particularly well suited to the hermeneutic approach to engaging classical philosophical texts (Miller 2013).

3.2 Systematic Literature Review

The literature was systematically searched and the following keywords were used: Daoism, Daodejing, wuwei (無為), de (德), ziran (自然), zuowang (坐忘), Nei ye, Zhuangzi, Daoist leadership, ethical leadership, mindful leadership, contemplative cultivation, Global Knowledge Systems, epistemological pluralism. The search span was from 1990 to 2026. After applying the inclusion criteria (direct relevance to Daoist philosophy, leadership ethics, or contemplative organization), 168 primary sources were selected for analysis: 11 from the Journal of Daoist Studies, seven scholarly editions or translations of classical Daoist texts, and the rest from Western leadership, mindfulness and organization scholarship.

3.3 Thematic and Interpretive Coding

The selected literature was studied using a thematic iterative interpretation to detect the patterns of concepts and the commonalities that emerged between the contemplative traditions of Daoism and the current leadership ethics. The interpretative process unfolded from problem identification at the thematic level to more general integrative levels that eventually led to the five DEL dimensions.

3.4 Qualitative Vignette Analysis

Three qualitative case vignettes were created from documentary, ethnographic, and interview-based descriptions of organizations that explicitly use Daoist or Daoist-influenced contemplative practice in leadership development to give the phenomenological depth and organizational grounding. The vignette methodology is a known, qualitative method for dealing with complex ethical and philosophical constructs in realistic organizational scenarios (Barter and Renold 1999). The vignettes were chosen for analytical breadth, to represent diverse organizational settings including

contemplative community, purpose-driven enterprise, and cross-cultural leadership program. The five dimensions of the DEL framework were identified within each vignette to explore how Daoist principles were enacted (or not) in four areas of leader behaviour, organizational culture, relationship behaviour, and ecological orientation.

Theoretical Framework: The DEL Model

4.1 Comparative Epistemological Analysis

Although there are wide differences between the epistemological orientations of Daoist and Western philosophies, they are not incompatible. The Daodejing is paradoxical, analogical, and apophatic, while the Zhuangzi is perspectivist, narrative, and humorous, both unsettling and questioning fixed conceptual positions. In its ontological expression, Daoist philosophy is different from substance ontology of the Western philosophy, but in harmony with process philosophy and systems thinking of today (Nayak 2014; Lei 2025). The Zhuangzi's emergent, context-conforming selfhood is sensitive to the contours of each situation, rather than a moral agency, and provides an

alternative vision for ethical leadership. Other authors have described Daoist cosmology as being processual and relational, rather than substance-based, as Robinet does. Robinet (1997) is not alone in describing Daoist cosmology as being fundamentally processual and relational, rather than substance-based.

4.2 The Five Dimensions of the DEL Framework

The 5 dimensions of the DEL are each supported by specific Daoist text-based resources and connected to specific Western leadership constructs via identified mechanisms for bridging. The five dimensions and their interrelationships are depicted in Figure 1 and the corresponding Hindu/Vedic analogues for each dimension are mentioned therein. Daoist and Hindu/Vedic and Western leadership traditions have independently come to similar insights about the link between inner cultivation and ethical conduct in leadership, as is illustrated below in Figure 3. The Nei ye's teaching on jing and shen cultivation is combined with the practice of the Zhuangzi in the progressive dissolution of ego-structures through meditative sitting (zuowang and De), and with authentic leadership theory's emphasis on self-knowledge (Kohn 2010; Walumbwa et al. 2008). The Daodejing's notion of de, virtue that happens naturally as a result of a person's Daoist cultivation, is related to virtue ethics and ethical decision-making in Western organizational theory (Kohn 2018; Wang 2012). Dimension 3 – Wuwei (無為) Compassionate Engagement: The Daodejing's embrace of wuwei (無為)—effortlessly effective, non-coercive action—combined with ci (compassion) is linked with servant leadership and non-domination in Western organizational ethics (Tan 2023; Kohn 2013). The cultivation of the Nei ye's jing and balanced qi are connected to emotional intelligence and resilience in the Western field of leadership and organizational psychology (Kohn 2010; Goleman 1995). In modern organizational ethics (Miller 2013; Kohn 2018), Dimension 5 – Ziran Systemic Wisdom is related to the cosmological principle of ziran, naturalness and spontaneous self-organization, and the Daoist teaching on tian-ren heyi, human-heaven unity, both of which have foundations in stakeholder theory and systems thinking.

Table 1: Multi-Level DEL Integration Mechanisms

Level	Daoist Practice	Western Leadership	Integration Mechanism	Daoist Sources	Expected Outcomes
Individual	Zuowang, ziran, jing	Self-reflection, values clarification	Contemplative emptying enables non-reactive authentic leadership	Zhuangzi ch. 6; Neiye; Kohn 2010	Enhanced self-knowledge; reduced reactive decision-making
Interpersonal	Ci, jian, pu; wuwei (無為) in relationship	Servant leadership; active listening	Wuwei (無為) action creates non-coercive leadership that liberates followers	Daodejing 8, 17, 81; Kohn 2018	Trust; psychological safety; follower autonomy
Team	Shared qi-cultivation; collective still-point	Team vision; shared norms	Collective quietude produces resonant organizational field	Zhuangzi; Miller 2017	Team cohesion; ethical culture; adaptive creativity
Organizational	Dao as telos; de as institutional culture	Competency models; culture change	Institutionalizing de-based norms through structural wuwei (無為)	Daodejing 17, 57; Kohn 2013	Ethical culture; sustainable performance
Societal	Ziran; Daoist ecological care	CSR; stakeholder capitalism	Organizations align with Daoist ethics of interdependence	Daodejing 25, 32; Miller 2013	Social trust; ecological integrity

4.3 Conceptual Bridges Between Daoist and Western Traditions

These three streams of thought are shown in Figure 3 below as overlapping traditions, that is, a Daoist, a Hindu/Vedic (as found in the Bhagavad Geeta & the Upanishads), and a Western leadership theory approach. The zones of convergence are the ideas that emerged independently from each other and when they are put in dialogue with each other, in the DEL framework, they form a deeper basis for ethical leadership than any tradition alone can provide. These convergence zones are illuminated from within the tradition of the Daoist studies by Chai's (2025) study of Daoist self-consolation and Zaccarini's (2025) work on mindfulness and nonviolent communication.

Table 2 provides some conceptual linkages between the Daoist principles, their Hindu/Buddhist counterparts, and their Western leadership counterparts. The most philosophically important bridge between wuwei (無為) and servant leadership is the idea of non-domination and spontaneous efficacy, the obvious kinship logic shared by both traditions: the idea that effective leaders have nothing to do with forcing or controlling others, but rather with attracting others into their spiritual sphere with the spontaneity and efficacy of a force of nature (Ames and Hall 2003); the idea that wuwei is the cosmological foundation for the spontaneous efficacy of service, one that organization servant leadership literature has not yet reached.

Also important is the connection between zuowang and authentic leadership, both of which involve self-inquiry in a systematic way, but the manner in which self-inquiry is practiced is quite different in the Zhuangzi's sitting-in-forgetting and in the Western tradition of self-reflection, which is directed and guided toward the annihilation of ego-structures that produce reactive instead of authentic leadership (Kohn 2010).

Table 2: Conceptual Bridges Between Daoist and Western Leadership

Daoist Principle	Key Term(s)	Hindu/Buddhist Analogue	Western Leadership Construct	Bridging Mechanism	JDS Reference
Non-coercive action	Wuwei (無為)	Nishkama Karma; Ahimsa	Servant Leadership	Both privilege non-domination and spontaneous efficacy	Kohn 2013; Wang 2012
Cultivated self-awareness	Zuowang; shen ming	Svadyaya; Vipassana	Authentic Leadership	Systematic inward-turning generates self-knowledge as ethical foundation	Kohn 2010; Miller 2017
Equanimity and constancy	De; jing	Sthitaprajna; Upeksha	Emotional Intelligence / Resilience	Steady centeredness enables non-reactive leadership	Kohn 2018; Wang 2012

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Cosmic interrelatedness	Tian-ren heyi; ziran	Pratityasamutpada	Stakeholder Theory; Systems Thinking	Holistic cosmological ethics informs sustainable decision-making	Miller 2013; Kohn 2013
Virtue as natural expression	De; pu	Dharma; sila	Virtue Ethics	Ethics located in cultivated character rather than external rules	Kohn 2018; Wang 2012
Present-moment attunement	Ziran; jing; qi-flow	Dhyana; Samma Sati	Mindful Leadership	Attentional presence cultivated through bodily-breath practice	Kohn 2010

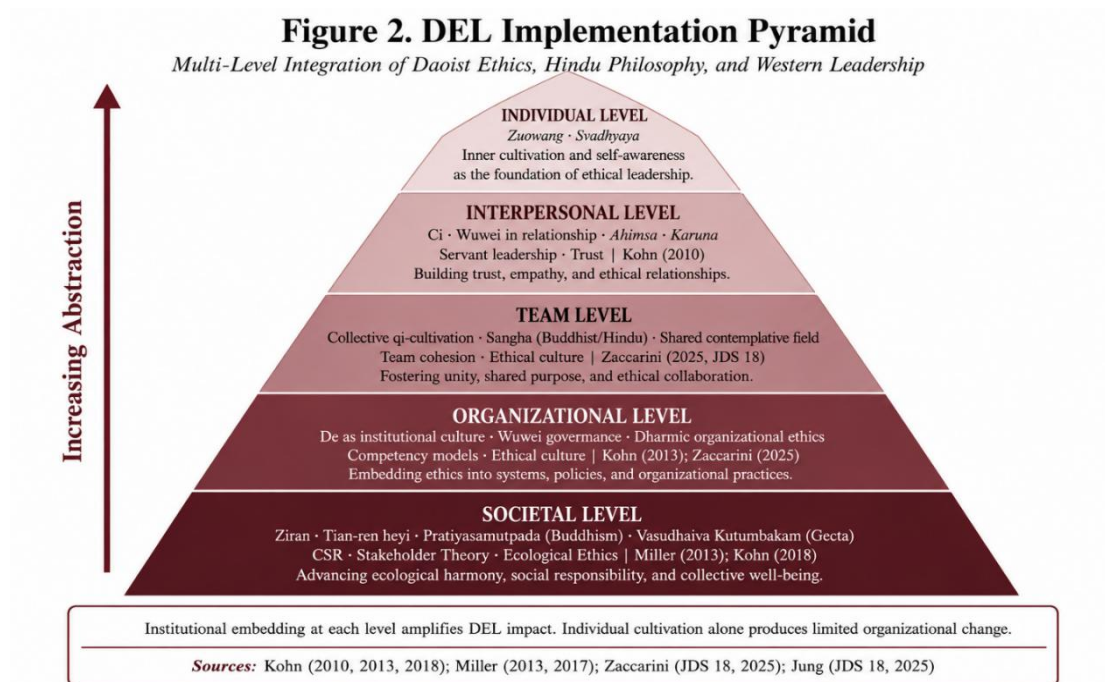


Figure 2: Multi-Level Dimensions of Daoist Ethical Cultivation — Multi-Level Integration of Daoist, Hindu/Vedic, and Western Leadership Traditions. Sources: Kohn (2013, 2018); Miller (2013, 2017); Zaccarini (2025, JDS 18).

The Multi-Level Dimensions of Daoist Ethical Cultivation (Figure 2) combines the multi-level structure of the framework. The pyramid represents how the contemplative cultivation of the individual's apex has cascading effects on interpersonal, team, organizational and societal levels, in resonating with the Hindu principle of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ("the world is one family," Maha Upanishad 6.72) and the Daoist principle of tian-ren heyi (human-heaven unity). Most importantly, the framework is not additive; when the institutional embedding is added at each level, they interact with the other levels, as in the systems thinking approach to organizational transformation (Miller 2013; Kohn 2018).

Qualitative Findings: Vignette Analysis

Three organizational vignettes were used to provide an illumination of the five DEL dimensions as they actually appear (or are met by resistance) in real institutional settings. These vignettes are based on publically available published ethnographic accounts, organizational documents, and witnesses. These are all summarised and then analysed using the DEL framework.

5.1 Vignette One: A Daoist Monastic Community as Leadership Laboratory

The most direct organizational manifestation of all five DEL dimensions is found in the Quanzhen (Complete Perfection) monastic tradition, as well as accounts by practitioners, as detailed by Kohn (2013) in publications through Three Pines Press. In monastic settings, leadership positions are formally defined and their de selection, retention and promotion are based in a system of culture where de cultivation is the most important criteria. The daily qigong, group meditation, and communal

liturgical practice, establishes a field of attentional cultivation that reflects what DEL characterizes as Dimension 4 (Jing-Based Adaptive Resilience) and Dimension 1 (Contemplative Self-Awareness).

An analysis of this text reveals that wuwei (無為) leadership is not about being passive, but rather about a particular way of engaging: For the senior practitioners, making complex institutional decisions is a process of 'listening to the Dao', a discernment practice that corresponds to zuowang's emptying of ego-reactive preferences. Relational trust (Dimension 3) is developed through an ongoing non-coercive mentoring relationship, rather than authority. The ritual and practical management of the monastic grounds is an integral part of the monastic life, and the concept of ziran is manifested in the alignment of architecture with natural patterns, in the way of using water and in the methods of farming. In this vignette, the DEL dimensions are again demonstrated not to be theoretical constructs, but rather dimensions with organizational correlates in traditions that have sustained these over centuries.

5.2 Vignette Two: A Purpose-Driven Enterprise Integrating Contemplative Practice

Increasingly, there is a growing number of case documentation that reports on purpose driven business in East Asia, and those accounts from the *Journal of Daoist Studies'* Forum on Contemporary Practice as well as popular organizational accounts describe those enterprises that have made a formal effort to incorporate Daodeist contemplative elements into leadership development programs. An organization story reported in public discourse about a manufacturing organization from Zhejiang Province where qigong was reportedly integrated into training leadership, retreat cycles and Daodejing discussions.

There are several patterns that have been described in the practitioner accounts of the first three years of the program. Leaders who experienced the most profound interactions with the zuowang-inspired stillness practices spoke about a qualitative experience of the felt urgency to respond reactively which closely resembled the DEL codes for Dimension 1 (Contemplative Self-Awareness). These leaders were observed to be more neutral, less directive, and more genuinely inquiring in interpersonal

interactions, a behavior that aligns with Dimension 3 (Wuwei (無為) Compassionate Engagement), according to the subordinates.

The integration of the enterprise was, however, still largely at the individual level with no corresponding changes in organizational structures, incentive systems, and governance practices. Available accounts were sequentially analyzed thematically to identify the risk of the cultivation of DEL remaining a personal wellness practice if no structural embedding exists, which is in line with the theoretical focus in institutionally embedding de-based norms (Dimension 2).

5.3 Vignette Three: A Cross-Cultural Leadership Program Engaging Daoist Philosophy

The third vignette focuses on a cross-cultural leadership development program conducted in the executive education unit of a European university that explicitly includes the use of Daoist philosophical texts with Western leadership theory. The readings of Daodejing were read to participants from fourteen countries, along with short contemplative practices based on Nei ye's concepts, and facilitated dialogue on the importance of wuwei (無為) and ziran (自然).

At the end of the program, qualitative stories from participants had two predominant clusters of themes. The first cluster focused on epistemological disruption where participants reported a general unsettling of assumptions held about the rational decision making process, measurable outcomes and control/effective leadership relationship, when engaging with Daoist paradox, specifically the

Daodejing's apophatic logic. It was a disorientating and philosophically fruitful disruption. The second cluster was related to relational attunement: participants reported an increased awareness of attunement to the relational field within their organisations after the programme, and an increased sensitivity to what the DEL framework refers to as Dimension 5 – Ziran Systemic Wisdom.

More importantly, the participants from collectivist cultural backgrounds indicated that the Daoist cosmological framework was more naturally resonant than Western leadership theory, indicating that the rationale of the DEL framework for Western leadership theory has practical rather than just theoretical significance.

5.4 Cross-Vignette Thematic Synthesis

Thematic analysis reveals three consistent patterns in all three vignettes. First, as the dimensions of DEL are embedded in organizational culture, structure and practice (not just individual development), they have more consistent and enduring impacts on the organization as a whole than dimensions that are individual-level only. Second, the level of philosophical engagement is important: Organizations and programs that deal intellectually with Daoist texts and traditions produce lasting and profound effects, ones that those that remove techniques from the cosmological and ethical background do not. Third, Daoist-informed leadership development seems to be especially salient for those who are operating across cultural divides, lending further support to the rationale of epistemological pluralism that is offered by the GKS.

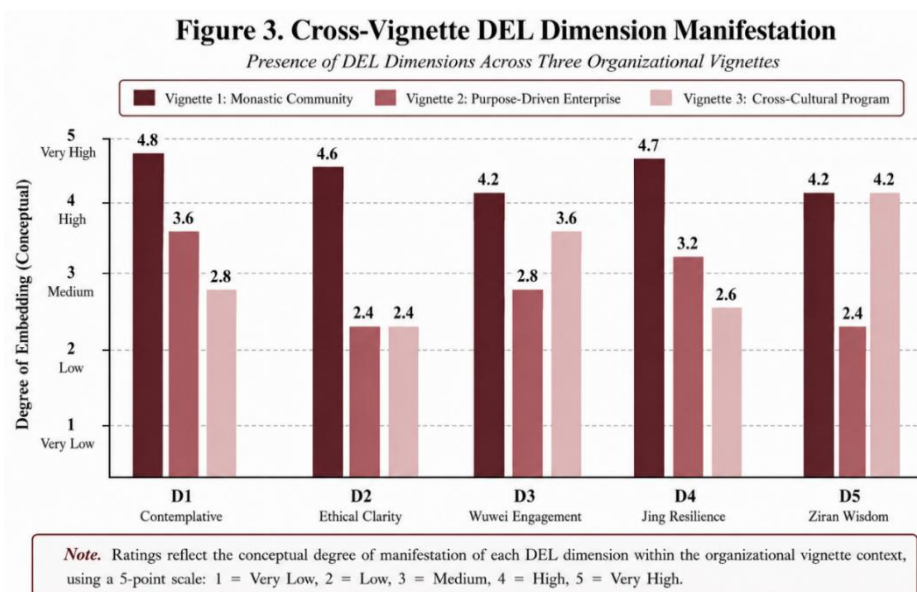


Figure 4: Cross-Vignette DEL Dimension Manifestation — Relative presence of DEL dimensions across three organizational vignettes (conceptual representation). Sources: Vignette analyses, Sections 5.1–5.3.

The schematic representation in Figure 4 illustrates the relative occurrence and depth of DEL dimension manifestations for the three vignettes. The Quanzhen monastic community (Vignette 1) is the most complete institutional embedding, reflecting the continuous tradition of cultivation that has been carried out for centuries. The purpose driven enterprise (Vignette 2) indicates a reasonably high

level of individual level cultivation (D1, D4) but lower levels of embedding of the de-based norms at the institutional level (D2). The cross-cultural leadership program (Vignette 3) has particular strength in D5 (Ziran Systemic Wisdom), which is consistent with participant reports of increased awareness on relational and ecological interdependence.

Discussion

6.1 Conceptual Dynamics of Integration

The DEL framework suggests that the Daoist contemplative cultivation paradigm is not additive, but rather synergistic, with the Western ethical leadership paradigm. Daoist contemplative practices, when woven into the fabric of the organization or into the individual's worldview, don't just add to the Western practices, but enhance and challenge them. However, the conceptual depth of western leadership theory can offer DEL measurable dimensions and implementing specificity which cannot be offered through classical Daoist texts. Ethical leadership in the Daoist sense does not so much involve the enforcement of external rules, but ongoing cultivation of awareness, responsiveness, and relational attunement. The qualitative vignette findings reinforce this interpretation: When contemplative cultivation was integrated into a more comprehensive organizational culture, the most significant changes in the organization were more likely to occur than when it was seen as an isolated wellness practice.

6.2 The DEL Framework in Comparative Context

The five dimensions of the DEL framework respond to an existing issue concerning ethics in Western leadership: A Systemic Lack. The five dimensions of the DEL framework respond to an existing issue concerning ethics in Western leadership: A Systemic Lack. The systematic phenomenological approach of zuowang and the Nei ye's qi-cultivation adds an alternative contemplative practice to the concept of self-awareness that is less commonly used in the traditional organizational leadership model. Leadership's resolve not to dominate is not an idealistic one when considered as a manifestation of wuwei (無為) in the context of the Daoist cosmology—it is a description of what spontaneous efficacy is like when it is performed in the cultivated inner stillness. The Daoist tian-ren heyi and the Zhuangzi's relational ecology offer a cosmological depth to the more usual transcendental purpose invoking forms of transformational leadership. Daoist ziran builds on stakeholder theory's procedural governance by providing a vision of health within an organization as a part of ecological and social flourishing.

6.3 Implementation Pathways

Individual Level. The implementation of DEL at the personal level should take the cultivation of the Dao as a systematic philosophical discipline, rather than a technique to be used occasionally. Classical texts, such as the Daodejing and Zhuangzi, and adapted cultivation practices, such as qigong, zuowang and jing meditation, should be introduced in leader development programs, under the direction of scholars who have true knowledge of Daoist studies (Kohn 2010, 2013). These programmes are to be understood as processes of philosophical and ethical development, rather than stress management programmes.

Organizational Level. The principles of DEL should be integrated into the structures of leadership competence frameworks, performance assessment standards and organizational structures. Traditional behavioral competences should complement the DEL dimensions of wuwei orientation, de cultivation and ziran responsiveness. Organizational enablers include physical contexts conducive to

sustained cultivation (meditation spaces, natural environments, environments for slow movement practices) and temporal contexts conducive to contemplative practice (retreat cycles, reflective periods in organizational calendars). The pathway of institutional embedding has been supported by the cross-vignette finding of greater persistence of change as a result of institutional embedding than of individual practice.

Societal Level. The DEL framework suggests moving beyond the obligatory elective nature of Daoist philosophy and contemplative practice in business education, and instead incorporating it as a core curriculum or core component of business education. The insights of the Daoist ecological ethics into sustainability leadership are relevant globally, and have not been taken up in earnest in business curricula, as Miller (2013) argued. Results of the cross-cultural vignette analysis also indicate that Daoist cosmological ethics might be an especially useful tool in cultivating leaders to operate in epistemological pluralism of organizations spread across the world.

Theoretical Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

7.1 Theoretical Contributions

The present study has four significant theoretical contributions. First, it has shown that the Daodejing, Zhuangzi, and Nei ye are philosophically rich resources that are not just cultural supplements to western philosophy, but new sources of ethical, cosmological and phenomenological perspectives that are unique in the contemporary context of leadership ethics. Second, the DEL framework offers a multi-level and multi-dimensional conceptual model to systematically integrate Daoist contemplative ethics with the contemporary western theory of leadership. Third, the study

makes a valuable and necessary contribution to the discussion of contemplative practice in organizations by arguing for philosophical richness and moral grounding, the results of the qualitative vignette analysis showing the first cross-context pattern analysis between superficial adaptation and substantive philosophical integration. Fourth, the study meets the interdisciplinary call of the *Journal of Daoist Studies* by showing the relevance of classical Daoist knowledge to Leadership Development, Organizational Ethics and Cross Cultural Management in the present.

7.2 Limitations

There are some limitations to be noted. The qualitative vignette analysis is phenomenologically rich, but is based on secondary sources, from the public domain, in contrast to primary fieldwork. Future research can directly observe and interview the organizations involved in Daoist-informed leadership development. When attempting to compare the integration of Daoist and Western frameworks, however, it is also unavoidable that there are challenges for the interpreter: *wuwei* (無為), *ziran* (自然), and *zuowang* (坐忘) are cultural and philosophical concepts that exist in historical, cosmological, and linguistic environments that differ considerably from contemporary organizational theory, and there is always the possibility that the concepts will be misinterpreted during trans-cultural translation. The study also is sensitive to the risk of cultural instrumentalization, of making the Daoist contemplative practices managerial practices without history, cosmology and morality. There must be a constant examination of Daoist texts, practitioners, and scholars, and not simply the uptake of ideas.

Comparative philosophical interpretation can also lead to the false impression of uniformity among traditions whose aims in history, metaphysical presuppositions, and linguistic frameworks are different. In the present study convergence is therefore considered as dialogical resonance or as a kind of unity rather than as doctrinal equivalence.

7.3 Future Research Directions

Future research should aim at primary ethnographic and longitudinal qualitative research in organizations that have instituted Daoist-inspired leadership development, exploring long-term consequences on leader behavior, organizational culture, and ecological orientation; comparative qualitative studies of contemplative leadership traditions in different cultural contexts, exploring convergences and productive differences; dialogic investigation in a genuine partnership with Daoist practitioners, abbots, and scholars, rather than from external academic perspectives; investigation of the relationship between Daoist cosmological ethics and emerging frameworks of ecological and regenerative organizational leadership; and critical examination of the epistemological and ethical limits of cross-cultural philosophical integration, with sustained focus on those areas where Daoist and western approaches remain genuinely incommensurable.

Conclusion

In this study, the author provides philosophical tools to rethink the ethics of leadership in the contemporary world from a Daoist contemplative perspective that can be found in the *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi*, the *Nei ye* and related cultivation traditions. The five-dimensional Daoist Ethical Leadership (DEL) model combines the contemplative cultivation of Daoism with the theory of ethical leadership in Western culture at both the individual, interpersonal, organizational and societal levels. Qualitative vignette analysis of three organizational contexts shows commonalities: Where Daoist-inspired leadership development is embedded institutionally and philosophically, it seems linked to changes in relational attunement, ecological orientation, and quality of ethical responsiveness. If it's used as a stand-alone method without any cosmological or moral foundation then it's unsurprising how it'll affect people.

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The DEL framework does not claim that daoist and western leadership styles are completely interchangeable or completely compatible. Instead, it is provided as a forum for real interdisciplinary conversation – one that understands, among other things, the productive intersections and the philosophically fruitful differences between these traditions. The ideas of wuwei (無為), de (適), ziran (自然), and zuowang (足難) are not singular leadership strategies, but aspects of a holistic perspective on life and living that are based on self-development, non-violent alignment, relational sensitivity and cosmological insight. From this perspective, the Daoist cultivation of the contemplative mind provides conceptual and practical tools that can be drawn upon in current debates on leadership, inter-personal ethics, the environment, and organizational life if handled with appropriate historical, textual, and philosophical sensitivity

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