

Learning without Forcing: Daoist Principles for University Education

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Abstract: This article develops recommendations for university education from Daoist principles through a secondary analysis of existing sources. It synthesizes classical Daoist texts in translation, Daoist studies scholarship, and educational philosophy that has already brought Daoist ideas into conversation with teaching, learning, curriculum, leadership, and contemplative practice. The article argues that Daoism should not be reduced to a classroom technique or to a vague celebration of spontaneity. Read carefully, Daoist concepts such as dao 道, wuwei 無為, ziran 自然, de 德, pu 樸, qi 氣, yangsheng 養生, emptiness, water-like responsiveness, yin-yang 陰陽 balance, and the usefulness of the apparently useless offer a coherent educational orientation. That orientation understands learning as a responsive way-making within relational, embodied, and ecological conditions. The analysis identifies a recurrent pattern in the existing literature: Daoist education privileges conditions over coercion, indirect influence over managerial control, embodied attunement over disembodied information transfer, plural development over standardization, and non-instrumental cultivation over narrow performance. On that basis, the article proposes eight recommendations for university education: teach by designing conditions rather than forcing outcomes; build curricula that balance structure and spontaneity; redesign assessment as revision, feedback, and maturation; protect emptiness and slow attention in courses; integrate embodied and ecological learning; cultivate relational de through trustful academic communities; defend the usefulness of non-instrumental inquiry; and govern universities with light, responsive, and equity-conscious forms of wuwei. The conclusion clarifies safeguards against common misreadings: wuwei is not negligence, ziran is not social Darwinism, simplicity is not austerity, and Daoist-informed education should not appropriate Daoism without historical and religious literacy.

Keywords: Daoism; higher education; wuwei; ziran; university pedagogy; secondary analysis; contemplative education; curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary universities are expected to do many things at once. They must prepare students for uncertain futures, produce research, justify public and private investment, widen participation, support mental health, respond to ecological crisis, and make learning measurable. Some of these expectations are legitimate. Problems arise, however, when the university imagines that the solution to every educational difficulty is more control: more outcomes, more dashboards, more standardized assessments, more acceleration, more strategic intervention, and more pressure to demonstrate.

short-term usefulness. Biesta's criticism of measurement-centered education and Barnett's account of supercomplexity remain instructive here: the university's central task cannot be reduced to the production of visible outputs, because education also concerns judgment, purpose, uncertainty, and the formation of persons able to inhabit complex worlds (Barnett 2000; Biesta 2010).

Daoism offers a language for rethinking this predicament. This does not mean that a university should become a Daoist institution, nor that Daoist ideas can be extracted from Chinese religious and philosophical traditions and turned into universal management slogans. It means, rather, that the Daoist tradition contains a set of disciplined reflections on non-coercive action, embodied cultivation, transformation, humility, uncertainty, simplicity, and harmony with wider patterns of life. Those reflections have already been explored in education scholarship, including studies of wuwei and classroom dynamics, wuwei and reform, individualized learning, yin-yang balance, contemplative higher education, qi and virtue, nonverbal learning, art education, future-readiness, and nonnegative forms of ignorance (Moon 2015; Yang 2019; Wang 2019; Bai et al. 2014; McLachlan Jeffrey 2021; Culham and Lin 2020; Xiong and Ju 2023; Shin and Yang 2021; Tan 2024; Zhu 2023). A recent *Journal of Daoist Studies* forum article on emotions and communication in the college classroom further indicates that Daoist studies now includes explicit concern with higher education practice (Zaccarini 2026).

The article, therefore, asks: What recommendations for university education follow when Daoist principles are interpreted through existing Daoist studies and education scholarship? The argument proceeds by secondary analysis. It does not report interviews, surveys, classroom observations, or new empirical data. Instead, it draws on published sources to construct a conceptual framework and translate that framework into recommendations for university teaching, learning, assessment, curriculum, student support, and governance.

The contribution is threefold. First, the article distinguishes Daoist-informed education from a simplistic pedagogy of laissez-faire spontaneity. Daoist nonaction is not non-care; it is a cultivated capacity to intervene in ways that do not violate the situation's own possibilities. Second, the article brings together several strands of scholarship that are often treated separately: Daoist studies, educational philosophy, contemplative pedagogy, environmental education, and higher education studies. Third, it proposes a practical agenda for universities that is at once modest and ambitious: modest because it begins with course design, assessment, attention, embodiment, and institutional rhythm; ambitious because it challenges the coercive habits by which universities often respond to complexity.

Method and scope: secondary analysis of existing sources

This article uses an integrative secondary analysis of existing scholarship. In the review methodology, an integrative review is appropriate when the aim is not merely to summarize a single evidence base but to synthesize different kinds of literature to generate a conceptual framework and practical implications (Torraco 2005; Whittemore and Knafl 2005; Snyder 2019). The approach is interpretive rather than statistical. It is also bounded: the article does not claim to offer a comprehensive history of Daoism, a systematic review of all articles that mention Daoism and education, or an ethnography of Daoist educational communities. Its narrower goal is to ask how established Daoist principles, as interpreted in existing scholarship, can guide recommendations for university education.

The source base includes four overlapping bodies of literature. The first consists of classical Daoist texts in scholarly translation, especially the *Daodejing* and *Zhuangzi*, used here as primary philosophical and religious sources rather than as newly collected data (Ames and Hall 2003; Ivanhoe 2002; Ziporyn 2009). The second consists of Daoist studies and comparative philosophy that clarify key concepts such as *dao*, *wuwei*, *ziran*, *de*, *qi*, inward cultivation, ecological relation, and the complexity of Daoist traditions (Kohn 2009; Kirkland 2004; Komjathy 2013; Roth 1999; Slingerland 2000, 2003; Lai 2007; Moeller 2006; Miller 2017; Nelson 2020). The third consists of educational scholarship that explicitly uses Daoist ideas to address teaching, reform, curriculum, classroom leadership, contemplative education, individuality, art, future-readiness, nonverbal learning, or ignorance (Bai et al. 2014; Moon 2015; Yang 2019; Wang 2019; McLachlan Jeffrey 2021; Culham and Lin 2020; Miller, Li, and Ruan 2022; Shin and Yang 2021; Xiong and Ju 2023; Tan 2024; Zhu 2023). The fourth consists of

selected higher education literature used to situate the argument within debates over measurement, supercomplexity, active learning, and contemplative practice (Barnett 2000; Biesta 2010; King 1993; Barbezat and Bush 2014).

The selection logic was conceptual relevance rather than numerical exhaustiveness. Sources were included when they met at least one of four criteria: they are widely used scholarly translations or studies of Daoist texts; they offer established interpretations of Daoist concepts relevant to education; they explicitly connect Daoism with teaching, learning, curriculum, or educational reform; or they help translate Daoist insights into contemporary higher education without replacing Daoist sources. Popular self-help texts and managerial appropriations of "the Tao" were excluded unless they were needed to identify a misunderstanding; in practice, they are not used as evidential sources. The analysis also prioritizes sources that keep Daoism historically and religiously complex, rather than treating it as a single, timeless philosophy.

Three cautions shape the method. First, this article uses the spelling "Daoism" except when a source title uses "Taoism." Second, it does not sharply separate "philosophical Daoism" from "religious Daoism" as if the former were pure thought and the latter a later distortion. Daoism includes texts, communities, rituals, bodies, ecologies, and practices (Kirkland 2004; Kohn 2009; Komjathy 2013). Third, recommendations for modern universities are interpretive translations, not claims that classical Daoist authors designed higher education policy. Such translation is legitimate only when its limits remain visible. Daoist-informed education should not turn Daoism into decoration for preexisting university reforms. It should change how those reforms are imagined.

Daoist principles as an educational orientation

Dao 道 is often rendered as way, path, or the generative process through which things arise and transform. In educational terms, Dao resists the idea that learning is simply the transfer of fixed content from expert to novice. A way is walked, found, revised, embodied, and shared. It cannot be fully captured in advance by a syllabus, a rubric, or a learning management system. This does not make knowledge irrelevant. It means that knowledge becomes educational when students learn how to move with it, practice it, question it, and let it change their relation to self, others, and world. The Daodejing's recurrent suspicion of naming and over-assertion therefore has curricular implications: concepts are necessary, but they do not exhaust reality; explicit instruction is necessary, but it cannot replace direct attunement and practice (Ames and Hall 2003; Ivanhoe 2002; Moeller 2006).

Wuwei 無為, often translated as nonaction, non-forcing, or effortless action, is central. Slingerland shows that wuwei is not mere idleness but a cultivated state in which action becomes responsive, unselfconscious, and aligned with the situation (Slingerland 2000, 2003). Lai's reading of ziran and wuwei stresses responsiveness, relationality, mutuality, and interdependence rather than atomistic self-expression (Lai 2007). For education, this means that good teaching is not the maximum visible performance of teacher activity. It is the art of making appropriate interventions, withdrawing when withdrawal permits student agency, and establishing conditions in which learning can organize itself. Wuwei is therefore closer to skilled restraint than to passivity.

Ziran 自然, literally the self-so or what is so of itself, is equally important. In the Daodejing, the highest order is not imposed from outside but arises when beings are allowed to unfold according to their own tendencies within wider patterns (Ames and Hall 2003; Ivanhoe 2002). Educationally, ziran does not mean "let students do whatever they want." It means that students are not standardized raw material. They arrive with different histories, abilities, rhythms, questions, vulnerabilities, and aspirations. A Daoist-informed university honors those differences while also cultivating forms of discipline that help students become more responsive and less trapped by ego, fear, competition, or rigid knowledge.

De 德 may be translated as virtue, potency, integrity, or relational efficacy. In Daoist contexts, de is not primarily a moral badge possessed by an isolated individual; it is the power of a life that expresses Dao in concrete situations. The teacher's de is therefore not domination, charisma, or constant visibility. It is the quiet credibility generated by attentiveness, fairness, intellectual humility, and the ability to help others flourish. This connects Daoist pedagogy to the distinction between teaching as performance

and teaching as relational formation. It also complicates the familiar image of the teacher as the "sage on the stage." King's constructivist argument for the teacher as guide remains relevant, but a Daoist perspective adds that guiding requires cultivated attunement rather than simply a different classroom technique (King 1993).

Pu 樸, the uncarved block, and the Daoist valuation of simplicity challenge universities that confuse educational quality with accumulation. More readings, more outcomes, more assignments, more software, more committees, and more metrics do not automatically produce deeper learning. Simplicity is not anti-intellectual; it is the clearing away of needless complication so that what matters can appear. The Daodejing's praise of softness, lowliness, water, and the valley similarly suggests that educational power often works indirectly. Water nourishes without competing, flows around obstacles, and shapes what is hard over time (Ames and Hall 2003; Moeller 2006). In university education, water-like pedagogy encourages flexible pacing, formative feedback, revision, and care for the conditions of growth.

Emptiness and non-being are not mere absence. The usefulness of the empty space in a vessel, room, or wheel appears in the Daodejing as a way to show that what is not filled can be enabling (Ames and Hall 2003; Ivanhoe 2002). In education, empty space is the time needed for slow reading, reflection, silence, not-knowing, and integration. Buckingham's account of education, Daoism, and epistemological chaos is relevant here: education does not always consist in adding more determinate knowledge; it can also cultivate skillful dwelling within uncertainty and not-knowing (Buckingham 2014). Zhu's work on ignorance likewise challenges the assumption that ignorance is only a defect to be eliminated, suggesting that traditions of unknowing, forgetting, and intuitive illumination may open space for self-formation (Zhu 2023).

Qi 氣 and yangsheng 養生, nourishing life, connect education to bodies, breath, attention, health, and environment. Roth's study of the Neiye and Daoist inward cultivation, Kohn's account of Daoist practices, and Culham and Lin's treatment of qi and virtue all suggest that learning is not disembodied information processing (Roth 1999; Kohn 2009; Culham and Lin 2020). This matters in universities where stress, exhaustion, digital saturation, and sedentary habits shape students' capacity to learn. A Daoist approach asks how the bodily conditions of learning are cultivated, not merely how information is delivered.

Finally, yin-yang 陰陽 thinking emphasizes dynamic balance rather than static compromise. It does not simply split reality into two opposites. It imagines apparent opposites as interdependent, transforming, and mutually conditioning. McLachlan Jeffrey's educational application of yin-yang shows how Daoist ideas can help teachers seek harmony among de, ziran, wuwei, and qi in contemporary classrooms (McLachlan Jeffrey 2021). In universities, yin-yang balance means that effective education needs both structure and freedom, knowledge and unknowing, speech and silence, intellectual rigor and bodily care, specialization and breadth, assessment and trust.

What existing educational scholarship already contributes

The educational literature on Daoism is relatively small compared with that on Confucian education, Buddhist contemplative pedagogy, or Western constructivism. Still, it is sufficiently developed to support a secondary analysis. Several patterns emerge.

First, scholars repeatedly use wuwei to critique coercive reform and overmanaged classrooms. Moon argues that the language of educational action can become compulsive when every problem is framed as something to be fixed by additional intervention. Drawing on Laozi's political theory, Moon interprets wuwei as a way to complicate standardization and accountability, opening space for non-interference, non-intervention, and effortless action amid reform pressure (Moon 2015). Wang extends this insight to classroom dynamics by bringing wuwei into conversation with self-organization. In this view, classroom learning emerges through relations among teacher, students, texts, and peers; the teacher's work is to create conditions under which a learning system can become dynamic, diverse, relational, and creative (Wang 2019). For universities, this literature suggests that pedagogy should be designed less like a factory line and more like a living field.

Second, Daoist educational scholarship emphasizes individuality without isolating individuals. Yang argues that Daoist wisdom on individuality, pluralism, and diversity is directly relevant to higher education. Against factory-like models of producing degree holders, Yang proposes the image of the university as a nurturing garden where students' natures and differences are respected (Yang 2019). This is one of the clearest points of contact between Daoism and university education. Yet Daoist individuality is not neoliberal self-branding. Through *ziran* and relationality, it points toward situated flourishing: students become themselves through relations, contexts, and practices, not by being left alone.

Third, Daoist education is embodied, affective, and often nonverbal. Xiong and Ju's account of teaching without words stresses that Daoism opposes cumbersome, rigid, limited, and antagonistic knowledge rather than knowledge as such (Xiong and Ju 2023). Shin and Yang similarly argue in art education that Daoist nonaction, interdependence, and nonlinguistic learning can move education beyond a Cartesian focus on mind alone, making room for affect and material exploration (Shin and Yang 2021). Culham's work on compassion and Culham and Lin's later work on *qi* and virtue connect Daoist cultivation with affective and embodied dimensions of learning (Culham 2014; Culham and Lin 2020). In higher education, these sources support practices that include observation, demonstration, practice, bodily awareness, silence, and affective climate alongside explicit discourse.

Fourth, Daoism is increasingly used to think about uncertainty, the future, and the limits of fixed competencies. Tan's Daoist interpretation of future-readiness, drawing on Zhuangzi, argues that future-readiness is not reducible to skills-centered education. It involves open and flexible responsiveness to emerging realities, including unlearning and self-transformation (Tan 2024). This insight is especially important for universities. Many future-ready frameworks assume that the future can be met by adding competencies. Daoist educational thinking suggests that students also need looseness, perspective shifting, responsiveness, and the ability not to cling to inherited categories.

Fifth, Daoist-inspired education has a contemplative and ecological horizon. Bai and colleagues call for wisdom in higher education through contemplative voices from the Dao-field, placing attention, presence, and relational awareness at the heart of university learning (Bai et al. 2014). Miller, Li, and Ruan develop a nature-based Taoist approach to education, while Miller and Nelson show how Daoist ecological thought can inform contemporary environmental philosophy (Miller, Li, and Ruan 2022; Miller 2017; Nelson 2020). This literature matters because universities educate students into a world of ecological vulnerability. Daoist principles challenge an education that treats nature merely as an object of management rather than as a field in which human learning is embedded.

Together, these sources support a coherent conclusion: a Daoist university pedagogy would not be anti-intellectual, anti-modern, or anti-institutional. It would be anti-coercive, anti-reductionist, and anti-extractive. It would seek to cultivate students, teachers, and institutions that can act without forcing, know without clinging, assess without reducing, and innovate without severing themselves from the conditions of life.

Analytical synthesis: translating Daoist principles into university design

The secondary analysis yields five propositions that connect Daoist principles to recommendations for universities. The first proposition is that learning is conditioned before it is controlled. Wuwei, *ziran*, and self-organization converge on the claim that educational growth depends on the quality of the field in which students act: relations, time, material settings, expectations, models of inquiry, and forms of feedback. Wang's use of self-organization helps clarify why this is not mystical language. Complex learning cannot be fully commanded from above; it emerges from local interactions within a prepared environment (Wang 2019). Daoist pedagogy, therefore, begins by asking what kinds of conditions make growth likely.

The second proposition is that teaching is indirect without being absent. Daoist sources often place high value on wordless teaching, quiet influence, and the transformation that occurs when the sage does not over-assert. Education scholarship confirms that this should not be read as anti-teaching. Xiong and Ju argue that Daoism resists cumbersome, rigid, and antagonistic knowledge, not the attainment of knowledge itself (Xiong and Ju 2023). The teacher remains responsible for framing,

modeling, questioning, and protecting the learning environment. What changes is the teacher's self-understanding: from a producer of outcomes to a cultivator of responsive action.

The third proposition is that individuality and relation must be held together. Yang's garden metaphor is important because it honors student differences, but a garden is not a collection of isolated plants in empty space. It includes soil, water, seasons, light, cultivation, and mutual dependence (Yang 2019). In Daoist terms, *ziran* unfolds through relational conditions. Universities should therefore individualize learning without privatizing responsibility. Advising, accessibility, peer learning, and flexible pathways are not concessions to consumer preference; they are ways of recognizing the diverse conditions through which students become capable.

The fourth proposition is that knowledge requires practices of unknowing. Daoism is not anti-intellectual, but it is suspicious of knowledge that becomes rigid, proud, or disconnected from life. Buckingham, Zhu, and Tan each show that not-knowing, forgetting, unlearning, and flexible responsiveness can be educational virtues in conditions of uncertainty (Buckingham 2014; Zhu 2023; Tan 2024). Universities should teach disciplinary knowledge strongly, but they should also teach students how to loosen premature certainty, revise assumptions, and remain open to what exceeds existing categories.

The fifth proposition is that education is a practice of nourishing life. Qi, *yangsheng*, ecological Daoism, and contemplative education converge on the view that learning is inseparable from body, place, affect, and environment (Roth 1999; Bai et al. 2014; Miller 2017; Culham and Lin 2020; Nelson 2020). A university that damages attention, sleep, relationships, and ecological awareness while delivering content has misunderstood education. Daoist-informed recommendations, therefore, concern not only classroom technique but also institutional pace, built environments, assessment calendars, and the moral atmosphere of academic life.

These propositions provide the bridge between principle and practice. The recommendations below are not presented as a universal checklist. There are design implications drawn from the pattern that appears across the sources: universities should act more like cultivators of living conditions and less like machines for forcing outputs.

Recommendations for university education

1. Teach by designing conditions rather than forcing outcomes

The first recommendation is that university teachers should treat courses as fields of conditions rather than as pipelines for content delivery. This is the pedagogical meaning of *wuwei*. A course still needs structure: aims, readings, assignments, deadlines, feedback, and standards. But the teacher's task is not to control every movement of thought. It is to create the conditions for serious learning to emerge.

At the course level, this means syllabi should be less crowded and more purposeful. Each course should identify a small number of deep questions, practices, or problems around which learning can self-organize. Lectures should be used when they genuinely open a field, clarify a pattern, or model inquiry; they should not be the default evidence that teaching has occurred. Seminars should include moments in which students formulate questions before the instructor explains them away. Laboratories, studios, and professional courses should include space for demonstration, imitation, experimentation, failure, and reflection. In all settings, the teacher practices *wuwei* by intervening at the point of need and withdrawing at the point where student responsibility can grow.

At the program level, designing conditions means reducing policy churn. Universities often respond to poor outcomes by adding new forms, platforms, committees, and reporting cycles. A Daoist-informed program would ask a different question: What conditions currently prevent faculty and students from doing good work? The answer may be workload, fragmented timetables, poor advising, competitive grading, inaccessible spaces, lack of trust, or assessment overload. The appropriate intervention may be subtraction rather than addition.

This recommendation does not abandon outcomes. It changes their status. Outcomes should function as orienting paths, not as mechanical guarantees. A Daoist course can state what it hopes

students will learn while acknowledging that the deepest learning may exceed what the instructor can predict. The goal is not vagueness but responsive design.

2. Balance structure and spontaneity in the curriculum

The second recommendation is to redesign curricula in accordance with the yin-yang balance. Universities often oscillate between extremes: rigid core requirements or unstructured choice, disciplinary depth or interdisciplinary breadth, faculty authority or student autonomy, vocational preparation or liberal inquiry. Daoist thinking suggests that these are not mutually exclusive substances but dynamic relations.

A Daoist-informed curriculum would combine stable pathways with open spaces. Students need intellectual discipline, methods, traditions, languages, and standards. They also need room to wander, connect, and encounter what they did not know they needed. Zhuangzi's educational significance lies partly in this capacity to unsettle fixed distinctions and cultivate responsiveness to the unexpected (Ziporyn 2009; Tan 2024). Program design should therefore include both required foundations and protected electives, both sequenced skill development and open inquiry, both disciplinary apprenticeship and cross-disciplinary exploration.

At the level of classroom rhythm, yin-yang balance means that each course should include contrasting but complementary modes of learning: reading and making, speech and silence, lecture and dialogue, individual reflection and collaborative work, digital resources and embodied presence, critique and appreciation, theory and practice. The point is not to include every method in every course. The point is to avoid one-sidedness.

For university leaders, this recommendation has implications for strategic planning. Institutions often claim to value creativity while rewarding only predictable outputs. They claim to value interdisciplinarity while structuring workloads and promotions around narrow metrics. They claim to value student well-being while creating timetables that make reflection impossible. Yin-yang balance requires alignment between declared values and institutional rhythms. A university cannot teach responsiveness if its organization is frantic.

3. Redesign assessment as revision, feedback, and maturation

The third recommendation is to make the assessment more water-like. In many universities, assessment is hard, periodic, competitive, and final. Students learn to ask what counts, how many points something is worth, and how to avoid mistakes. Daoist principles do not eliminate judgment, but they reorient it. Water shapes by sustained contact rather than force. Assessment should similarly guide learning through feedback, repetition, and gradual refinement.

Practical changes include portfolio assessment, staged assignments, reflective commentaries, opportunities for revision, oral defenses, learning journals, peer response, and assessment of process as well as product. These practices are not uniquely Daoist, but Daoism provides a philosophical foundation: learning unfolds through transformation, not merely through performance at a single point in time. Wuwei assessment asks how students can be guided without being dominated by grades. Ziran assessment asks how different students can demonstrate serious learning without being forced into a single expressive mold. De assessment asks whether feedback is trustworthy, fair, and oriented to flourishing.

This recommendation is especially important in first-year education. Students entering university often carry habits formed by examination systems: fear of error, dependence on teacher approval, and the belief that learning is identical with accumulating correct answers. Yang's critique of examination-oriented education and Xiong and Ju's critique of rigid knowledge both support a shift toward assessment that honors growth, creativity, and self-transformation (Yang 2019; Xiong and Ju 2023). Universities should teach students how to revise, not only how to submit.

The institutional implication is that grading systems should be used lightly. Programs can reduce the number of high-stakes summative tasks, coordinate course deadlines, and discourage assessment designs that reward strategic minimalism. Where grades are required, rubrics should be clear but not suffocating. They should describe dimensions of quality without pretending that every valuable feature

of learning can be fully anticipated.

4. Protect emptiness and slow attention in courses

The fourth recommendation is to protect empty space as an educational resource. Modern universities often treat every unfilled hour, every pause in conversation, and every unscheduled moment as inefficiency. Daoism suggests the opposite: emptiness enables use. A course with no empty space becomes a container so full that nothing can enter.

At the course level, protected emptiness can take simple forms: a few minutes of silence before discussion; slow reading of a short passage rather than rapid coverage of many pages; reflective writing after complex material; pauses after student contributions; assignment calendars with time for incubation; and class sessions devoted to synthesis rather than new content. In online or hybrid contexts, it may mean asynchronous reflection rather than constant posting requirements. In studio, laboratory, or field courses, it may mean observation before explanation.

This is not the same as importing a generic mindfulness program. Daoist-informed emptiness has its own conceptual ground in non-being, forgetting, fasting of the mind, and the loosening of rigid knowledge. Bai et al.'s work on contemplative higher education, Barbezat and Bush's practical account of contemplative practices, Buckingham's analysis of not-knowing, and Zhu's study of nonnegative ignorance all support the educational value of attention, unlearning, and receptive awareness (Bai et al. 2014; Barbezat and Bush 2014; Buckingham 2014; Zhu 2023).

Universities can support this recommendation by designing timetables and workloads that permit attention. It is contradictory to ask faculty to teach contemplatively while assigning workloads that fragment every day into administrative urgency. It is equally contradictory to ask students to become reflective while overloading courses with continuous micro-assessments. Emptiness requires institutional protection.

5. Integrate embodied and ecological learning

The fifth recommendation is to make embodied and ecological learning the norm rather than the exception. Daoist traditions do not treat body, breath, environment, and cultivation as external to knowledge. Qi and yangsheng point to the conditions through which life is nourished. Higher education should therefore ask how learning environments support vitality, attention, and relation.

In practice, this can include walking seminars, outdoor observation, garden or campus ecology projects, embodied demonstrations, contemplative movement where appropriate, breathing pauses before difficult discussion, studio and maker practices, and attention to posture, fatigue, sensory experience, and material surroundings. Science courses can integrate field observation and ecological interdependence. Humanities courses can use place-based reading and reflective walking. Professional programs can connect decision-making to bodily stress, attention, and ethical presence. Art and design courses can learn from Shin and Yang's Daoist new materialist emphasis on affect, interdependence, and nonlinguistic exploration (Shin and Yang 2021).

This recommendation is not merely about wellness. It is about epistemology. Students know differently when they observe, move, make, breathe, and attend to place. Daoist ecological scholarship further suggests that the human learner is not outside nature looking in, but part of a larger field of transformation (Miller 2017; Nelson 2020; Miller, Li, and Ruan 2022). University education should cultivate ecological humility: the recognition that knowledge is responsible for the conditions that sustain life.

Institutionally, this means that campuses are not only service infrastructures. They are pedagogical environments. Gardens, courtyards, libraries, laboratories, studios, clinics, residence halls, and digital platforms all teach. A Daoist university would ask what kind of qi its spaces generate: agitation or steadiness, competition or relation, extraction or care.

6. Cultivate relational de through trustful academic communities

The sixth recommendation is to make relational de a central educational aim. Universities often treat ethics as a module, code, or compliance requirement. Daoist de suggests something deeper: the

lived potency of persons and communities whose conduct makes flourishing possible.

At the classroom level, relational *de* appears in how teachers respond to questions, distribute attention, handle disagreement, admit uncertainty, and model intellectual humility. It appears when students learn to critique without humiliation, listen without passivity, and speak without domination. It appears in advising relationships where the advisor does not force a predetermined path but helps the student discern appropriate next steps. It appears in academic integrity education that emphasizes trustworthiness and formation rather than only punishment.

This recommendation connects with compassion and contemplative education (Culham 2014; Bai et al. 2014). It also requires attention to power. A teacher's *wuwei* can be ethical only when students are not abandoned to invisible hierarchies. Quiet classrooms may express thoughtful attention, but they may also express fear, exclusion, or inequity. Daoist-informed *de*, therefore, requires active care for participation, accessibility, and justice. Non-forcing cannot be an excuse for ignoring structural barriers.

At the institutional level, relational *de* requires communities of trust. Faculty need time to discuss teaching without fear that every difficulty will become a performance metric. Students need advising systems that recognize them as whole persons rather than credit accumulators. Departments need conflict practices that repair relations where possible. Leadership needs humility: the willingness to support good work without claiming credit for every transformation.

7. Defend the usefulness of non-instrumental inquiry

The seventh recommendation is to defend the usefulness of the apparently useless. Zhuangzi repeatedly unsettles ordinary judgments of utility, showing that what appears useless within one frame may preserve life, open freedom, or resist destructive use (Ziporyn 2009). For universities, this principle is urgent. Programs in the humanities, arts, basic sciences, languages, philosophy, religious studies, and other fields are often asked to justify themselves in terms of immediate market value. Daoist thought does not deny the practical use of its principles. It asks whether an education governed only by obvious utility becomes too narrow to perceive deeper forms of value.

Non-instrumental inquiry develops capacities that are difficult to measure in the short term: wonder, judgment, patience, historical consciousness, symbolic imagination, ethical sensitivity, linguistic subtlety, aesthetic perception, and the ability to live with questions. These are not luxuries. In a supercomplex world, the capacity to inhabit ambiguity may be one of the university's most practical gifts (Barnett 2000; Tan 2024). A Daoist university would therefore protect spaces where students study things that do not immediately appear profitable.

This recommendation has concrete implications. General education should not be reduced to a mere employability checklist. Research funding should include exploratory and theoretical work. Student advising should not treat every elective as a risk unless it directly aligns with a career plan. Public communication should explain that universities serve society not only by producing trained labor but by cultivating persons capable of subtle, critical, and humane responsiveness.

8. Govern universities with light, responsive, equity-conscious *wuwei*

The eighth recommendation concerns governance. Daoist political passages in the *Daodejing* are often read as favoring minimal intervention, but in the context of education this must be interpreted carefully. Universities cannot simply withdraw from responsibility. They must address inequity, harassment, academic misconduct, poor teaching, financial constraints, and social obligations. *Wuwei* governance is not the absence of governance. It is governance that acts with restraint, timing, proportionality, and trust in local intelligence.

In practice, this means using metrics diagnostically rather than sovereignly. Data can reveal patterns of exclusion, progression problems, workload imbalance, or assessment bottlenecks. But metrics become coercive when they replace judgment. A Daoist-informed university would ask whether each metric helps learning or merely generates performative compliance. It would reduce redundant reporting, coordinate initiatives, and avoid constant restructuring. It would allow departments enough autonomy to respond to their students and disciplines while holding them accountable for equity and educational quality.

Wuwei governance also means attending to institutional pace. Rapid reform can exhaust the very people expected to enact it. Moon's analysis of action-oriented reform is relevant here: the desire to fix education through visible action can become part of the problem (Moon 2015). A Daoist university would distinguish urgent action from anxious action. It would intervene strongly where harm is present, but it would not confuse administrative motion with transformation.

Finally, wuwei governance must be equity-conscious. Historical Daoist language about naturalness cannot be used to naturalize unequal outcomes. If some students flourish only because others lack support, the institution is not practicing ziran but neglect. Non-forcing means removing barriers that prevent people from developing to their full potential. Responsive governance asks where students and faculty are being forced by poverty, racism, disability exclusion, gendered expectations, precarity, or bureaucratic overload. Sometimes the most Daoist intervention is to remove the obstacle.

Implementation at the course, program, and institutional levels

The recommendations above can be implemented in three nested levels. At the course level, faculty can begin with small redesigns: reduce content overload; center a few generative questions; include pauses, reflection, and revision; diversify assessment; use embodied or place-based practices where appropriate; and create norms for respectful inquiry. These changes do not require the course to be explicitly about Daoism. They require the teacher to act less as a controller of learning and more as a cultivator of conditions.

At the program level, departments can audit curricula for one-sidedness. Are students given only required sequences, or are they also given room for exploration? Are assessments clustered in ways that reward crisis management rather than learning? Do advising structures help students discern paths, or merely check requirements? Are there opportunities for interdisciplinary wandering without sacrificing disciplinary rigor? Are students taught to revise and integrate across years of study? A Daoist-informed program would cultivate rhythm, balance, and maturation.

At the institutional level, leaders can ask whether governance nourishes or depletes educational life. This includes workload design, promotion criteria, assessment policy, advising systems, classroom spaces, campus ecology, student mental health, and the use of metrics. The aim is not to create a "Daoist university" as an identity claim. The aim is to make universities less coercive and more responsive to the conditions of learning.

A phased implementation model may be useful. In the first phase, universities can invite faculty learning communities to study Daoist educational scholarship and redesign one course element using wuwei, ziran, or emptiness. In the second phase, programs can revise assessment maps, advising practices, and curriculum structures to balance discipline and exploration. In the third phase, institutions can examine governance, workload, and metrics by asking: What are we forcing, and what conditions would allow better learning to arise? This question is simple, but it can disclose much.

Evaluation should also be Daoist-informed. Rather than immediately demanding proof through narrow metrics, universities can combine qualitative reflection, student work, retention patterns, advising narratives, well-being indicators, and peer review of teaching. The point is not to avoid evidence. The point is to avoid evidence practices that destroy the phenomena they claim to measure.

Risks, misreadings, and safeguards

Several risks must be addressed. The first is romanticization. Daoism is not a timeless Eastern solution to Western educational problems. It is a complex family of Chinese religious, philosophical, ritual, textual, ecological, and bodily traditions (Kirkland 2004; Kohn 2009; Komjathy 2013). Universities outside Daoist cultural contexts should teach and use Daoist ideas with historical humility, appropriate citation, and attention to living Daoist communities.

The second risk is passivity. Wuwei can be misread as doing nothing. In education, that misreading can harm students. Teachers must intervene when students are excluded, confused, unsafe, or unsupported. Institutions must act against inequity and abuse. The Daoist point is not that action is bad; it is that forced, anxious, ego-driven, or excessively controlling action often undermines what it seeks to achieve. Skilled non-forcing may require decisive action at the right time.

The third risk is naturalizing inequality. Ziran can be misused to suggest that students should follow their nature, as if social conditions did not shape opportunity. This would be a serious distortion. A student's apparent "natural" performance may reflect prior schooling, language background, disability accommodation, financial stress, discrimination, or access to time. Daoist-informed education must therefore pair ziran with equity-conscious support. To let students become themselves, universities must remove barriers that prevent self-development.

The fourth risk is austerity disguised as simplicity. Pu and simplicity do not justify cutting support services, reducing intellectual richness, or asking exhausted faculty to do more with less. Daoist simplicity removes needless complication, allowing life to flourish. It does not legitimize institutional neglect.

The fifth risk is superficial contemplative practice. Silence, breathing, walking, or reflective exercises should not be imposed without context. Students may have religious objections, trauma histories, disabilities, or cultural concerns. Daoist-informed contemplative education should be invitational, explain its educational purpose, offer alternatives, and avoid treating inward practice as a universal cure.

These safeguards do not weaken the recommendations. They make them more Daoist. A tradition that values responsiveness, humility, and alignment with circumstances should not be applied rigidly.

Conclusion

This article uses secondary analysis of existing sources to propose recommendations for university education grounded in Daoist principles. The synthesis shows that Daoism offers more than a collection of attractive terms. It offers an educational orientation: learning as way-making; teaching as non-forcing; curriculum as balance; assessment as maturation; attention as empty capacity; embodiment as cultivation; community as relational de; inquiry as more than utility; and governance as light, responsive, equity-conscious action.

The university that emerges from this analysis is neither anti-modern nor nostalgic. It still teaches difficult knowledge, supports research, assesses learning, prepares students for work, and accepts institutional responsibility. But it does these things differently. It does not assume that the best education is the most controlled education. It does not confuse acceleration with depth, visibility with value, or measurement with purpose. It recognizes that students and teachers flourish when conditions are carefully cultivated, and not every process is forced.

For university education, the Daoist question is not simply "What should we do?" It is also "What are we doing too much?" "Where are we forcing what should be cultivated?" "What empty spaces have we eliminated?" "Whose natural development is blocked by our structures?" "What forms of usefulness are invisible to our metrics?" and "How can we act in ways that nourish life?" These questions do not provide a final program. They provide a way. That is precisely their value..

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