

Responsible Management and Taoism, Volume 1

Praise for Responsible Management and Taoism

This book offers a refreshing step forward from traditional management literature towards a new management thinking. It consists of a unique blend of Eastern philosophy and Western management science, showing the way towards an integrative business paradigm. It is a must-read for anyone interested in creating a socially responsible and sustainable organization. The practical guidance and case studies provided in this book are invaluable.

– **Professor Dr René Schmidpeter**,
*Research Scientist at Parmenides Foundation in Munich, Germany,
and Professor at BFH Bern, Switzerland*

Taoism and Responsible Management is a truly original and unique book that offers practical insights and guidance for business practitioners seeking a more sustainable approach to management.

– **Dr Nicholas Capaldi**,
*Professor in Business Ethics at Loyola University, and CEO of
Global Corporate Governance Institute (GCGI),
New Orleans, USA*

In a world where traditional management practices are no longer sufficient, this book offers a novel approach to responsible management. The principles of Taoism provide a unique perspective that is both practical and visionary.

– **Dr Marisa Mühlböck**,
*Social Entrepreneur, Researcher and Author in Vienna,
Austria*

The originality and novelty of Taoism and Responsible Management make it an important contribution to the field of responsible management and sustainability. Therefore, this book is a highly practical guide to implementing responsible and sustainable management practices.

– **Dr Hualiang Lu**,
*Professor of CSR and Sustainability at
Changzhou University, China*

The principles of Taoism are a unique and valuable addition to the field of responsible management. This book provides a practical and insightful guide for both academic scholars and business practitioners looking to integrate these principles into research projects and management practices.

– **Dr Qingxia Xia,**
*Philosophy Professor in Nanjing University of Finance and
Economics, Nanjing, China*

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Responsible Management and Taoism, Volume 1: Managing Responsibly for Sustainable Business Development in the VUCA World

BY

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(T-LASE), Italy*



United Kingdom – North America – Japan – India – Malaysia – China

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About the Author

Dr Liangrong Zu is a specialist and consultant in corporate social responsibility (CSR), business ethics, sustainability science, systems and design thinking for sustainable development, social innovation and social entrepreneurship, Taoist leadership and management, leadership and executive presence, etc.

Dr Zu holds PhD in Business and Management at Nottingham University Business School in the United Kingdom specialized in CSR, business ethics and sustainability science. He received his Master's degree in Economics of Education from Beijing Normal University in Beijing, China.

Dr Zu is the Founder of Global Youth Leadership Academy (GYLA) and Taoist Leadership Academy for Sustainability and Excellence (T-LASE). GYLA is a programme for young people who aspire to work in the international organizations as global leaders and professionals. T-LASE is a platform which provides practical guidance for the next generation of entrepreneurs and executives on how to apply Taoist principles in leadership and management practices and offers practical wisdom and tools for business leaders to create a more sustainable business.

Dr Zu had worked at the academic institution, the national government and the United Nations for over 30 years, and created numerous innovative and unique education and training programs for government officials, business executives, academic scholars and college students in the fields of CSR, sustainable business development, emotionally intelligent leadership, sustainable supply chain, responsible management education, social innovation, social and green entrepreneurship, systems thinking for sustainable development, youth leadership development, leadership and executive presence, etc.

Dr Zu has served on several academic committees and editorial boards, such as the Organizational Committee for the International Conference on CSR, Sustainability, Ethics, and Governance; and the Springer Board for the Series Books on CSR, Sustainability, and Ethics and Governance, etc. Dr Zu has authored and edited many books with the publishing companies such as Springer, Emerald, Edward Elgar and Amazon in recent years.

- Responsible and Sustainable Business: Perspectives from Taoism’s Wisdom (2022, Springer)
- Responsible Management and Taoism: Overcoming Challenges in the VUCA Era (2023, Emerald)
- The Wisdom of the Tao: A Novel Translation of Tao Te Ching with Illustrations of Chinese Calligraphy (a book series, 2023, Amazon)
- Global Youth Leadership for SDGs: Empowering Youth as Future Leaders for Social Change (in the pipeline, Springer)
- Corporate Social Responsibility, Corporate Restructuring and Firm’s Performance (2008, Springer)
- The Elgar Companion to Corporate Social Responsibility and SDGs (co-editor, 2023, Edward Elgar)
- Encyclopaedia of Corporate Social Responsibility (co-editor, 2013, Springer)
- Dictionary of Corporate Social Responsibility (co-editor, 2015, Springer)
- The Future of the UN Sustainable Development Goals: Business perspectives Global Development in 2030 (co-editor, 2020, Springer)

Dr Zu is currently dedicating himself to authoring the trilogy of youth leadership development based on his decades of experience and expertise in education and training.

- Rising from Zero to Hero: Youth’s Journey to Unravelled Success in the VUCA World
- Rising Star: The GYLA Way to Cultivating 3Q and 3C in Youth as Future Global Leaders
- Rising from Hero to World-Changing Leaders: Transforming Youth’s Dream into Global Influence in the United Nations.

Foreword One

I wrote the foreword with the great pleasure and honour to the outstanding book ‘Taoism and Responsible Management: Overcoming Challenges in the VUCA Era’. This book is a testament to the passion and commitment the author – a close friend, respected academic scholar and practitioner – has put into his years of research on the meeting point between ancient wisdom and contemporary management.

I’ve had the pleasure of knowing the author for more than 10 years and seen his unwavering dedication to the search for truth and understanding. My respect for his work ethic and intellectual curiosity has grown as a result of our time spent together at conferences, workshops and academic discussions. I have always been inspired, like other members of the academic community, by the author’s thorough research and thought-provoking concepts. His innovative ability to combine traditional Taoist principles with modern management theory demonstrates his profound knowledge of both fields.

As I reflect on this thought-provoking book, I cannot help but appreciate the timeliness of its publication. In today’s rapidly changing business landscape, leaders and managers face increasing pressure to address complex issues such as social inequality, environmental degradation and corporate social responsibility. This book offers a unique and powerful approach to tackling these challenges by drawing upon the ancient wisdom of Taoism and applying its principles to modern management practices.

The 3C Model of Taoism, which the author thoroughly explores, stands for compassion, conversation and compliance. It offers a comprehensive framework that managers and leaders can use to help their organizations become more responsible and sustainable. The author has examined the nuances of each ‘C’ and provides helpful advice and useful insights that will undoubtedly be appreciated by readers from a variety of backgrounds and industries.

Moreover, the author’s adept use of real-world examples and case studies brings the concepts presented in this book to life, allowing readers to see the tangible impact of integrating Taoist principles into their management strategies. These compelling illustrations of the power of Taoism in action will inspire readers to consider how they can apply the lessons learnt from this book in their own organizations.

In today’s increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the need for innovative and forward-thinking leadership has never been more apparent. As such, the insights and guidance provided by ‘Taoism and Responsible

Management' are not only timely but also essential for those looking to make a lasting, positive impact in their organizations and beyond.

I would like to reiterate my admiration for the author and his extraordinary work in bringing the wisdom of Taoism to the forefront of responsible management. This book is a testament to the power of interdisciplinary thinking and the transformative potential of ancient wisdom when applied to contemporary challenges. I am confident that 'Taoism and Responsible Management' will serve as an invaluable resource for leaders, managers and scholars alike, and I eagerly anticipate the positive changes it will inspire in the world of business and beyond.

Finally, I wholeheartedly endorse this book and commend the author for his exceptional work in bringing this important and timely subject to light. I have no doubt that 'Taoism and Responsible Management' will not only benefit its readers but will also contribute significantly to the ongoing conversation about the future of responsible management and leadership.

Dr Samuel O Idowu
London Metropolitan University
President, Deputy Chief Executive Officer & Director,
Publications, Global Corporate Governance Institute

Foreword Two

As a Chinese professor specializing in business and management, I have also long held a keen interest in the intersection of Chinese philosophy and management, particularly in the areas of corporate social responsibility (CSR), sustainable development and responsible management education. It is through this shared passion that Dr Liangrong Zu, the author and I have forged a long-standing partnership, working together on many research projects and teaching initiatives over the past years.

The author's unique approach to responsible management, grounded in the rich tradition of Taoism, has consistently impressed me with its depth and nuance. Drawing on the timeless wisdom of Taoist philosophy, the author offers a fresh perspective on the challenges and opportunities facing today's organizations as they navigate the complexities of the VUCA era.

One of the most compelling aspects of 'Taoism and Responsible Management' is its potential to create positive change not only at the individual level but also within organizations as a whole. I believe that when we apply the principles of the 3C Model – compassion, conversation and compliance – managers and leaders can foster a culture of responsibility, sustainability and ethical decision-making. In turn, this has the power to transform organizations from the inside out, leading to more resilient and adaptive businesses that can thrive amid uncertainty.

As we are now facing unprecedented challenges in the 21st century, the need for a holistic approach to management and leadership has never been more crucial. I am sure that this book, 'Taoism and Responsible Management', is a timely and much-needed resource that provides readers with a comprehensive understanding of how ancient Taoist principles can be applied in the modern business context.

The author skillfully weaves together the rich tapestry of Taoist thought, exploring its relevance and applicability to contemporary management and leadership issues. This is particularly evident in the discussion of the 3C Model, which seamlessly integrates the core Taoist concepts of compassion, conversation and compliance with the overarching goal of responsible and sustainable management.

This book provides practical examples and case studies to demonstrate how these ancient principles can be implemented in various organizational settings, illustrating their potential to drive positive change and foster a more responsible approach to management. This book also highlights the importance of collaboration, open communication and adaptability in overcoming the challenges of the

VUCA era, making it an invaluable resource for both seasoned professionals and emerging leaders. In addition, this book encourages readers to reflect on their own management and leadership practices, prompting them to consider how they can incorporate Taoist principles into their daily decision-making processes. This introspective approach not only promotes personal growth and development but also inspires individuals to become agents of change within their organizations and communities.

It is my firm belief that this book will resonate with a diverse audience, from academic scholars seeking to expand their understanding of responsible management and Chinese philosophy, to business leaders searching for innovative approaches to organizational challenges. I believe that national governments and heads of international organizations can also benefit from the insights presented in this book, as they strive to develop policies and strategies that promote sustainable development on a global scale. Therefore, I strongly recommend ‘Taoism and Responsible Management’ to anyone interested in exploring the nexus of Chinese philosophy and responsible management. The author’s unique perspective and deep understanding of both fields, combined with his commitment to making a positive impact on the world, make this book an invaluable resource for all those seeking to create a more sustainable and just future.

Haifeng Huang
*Professor at Peking University Shenzhen Graduate School
Co-Chancellor, China Institute for
Responsible Management Education and Sustainable Development
(CIRMESD)
Global Member, PRME Steering Committee, UNGC*

Preface

*A certain world may be what we want and what we wish for,
but it is not what we need, and it is not what we have.*

– Tom Koulopoulos, Futurist

In 2023, we managed to escape the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic and regained a sense of freedom. Looking back three years ago, we could not have predicted the profound impact of the coronavirus or the outbreak of conflict in Ukraine. The unpredictable and complex nature of the world we live in is now defined by the VUCA phenomena – volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. The COVID-19 crisis serves as a stark example of VUCA and presents a wicked problem.

This pandemic has revealed how deeply interdependent and interconnected our world has become in the VUCA era. The crisis has exposed the intricate web of connections that extend beyond health and wealth to encompass management, leadership, governance, culture and the basic necessities of life and business. The VUCA era ushers in new contexts for management, leadership and business that span personal, professional, organizational and global realms. To adapt to this new reality, we must embrace agility, inner security, holistic thinking and comfort with ambiguity.

Although we cannot predict or control everything that happens in the VUCA era, we can choose how to respond if we are aware of it. We may not be able to change the VUCA world, but we can transform ourselves by adopting a new perspective and taking responsibility for our actions. For example, managers and leaders need to shoulder social responsibility to address the unintended consequences of crises like the pandemic. To tackle these challenges, leaders need to shift from traditional management to responsible management, re-evaluating mainstream management functions and practices that have contributed to social injustice and environmental degradation.

As an academic scholar and practitioner, I believe it is my responsibility to respond to the world by sharing ancient wisdom with modern management practices, thus assisting organizations in navigating the complex and uncertain landscape of today's business world. My interest in the content of this book was sparked by the realization that current management approaches, rooted primarily in the Industrial Age, are no longer sufficient to tackle the multifaceted challenges we face in the VUCA era. With the world characterized by volatility, uncertainty,

complexity and ambiguity, I felt compelled to explore alternative management philosophies that could offer valuable guidance to today's leaders and managers. In my view, the timeless wisdom of Taoism, with its emphasis on balance, harmony and interconnectedness, has emerged as a particularly pertinent and insightful framework for this purpose.

I have found that the process of researching this topic involved an extensive review of both classical Taoist texts and contemporary management literature. I immersed myself in the works of Laozi, Chuangzi and other Taoist thinkers, seeking to distill their teachings into principles that could be applied to modern management practices. In the meantime, I also examined the latest research and case studies on responsible management, sustainability, leadership and the new science like complexity theory and systems thinking to establish a solid foundation for the development of the 3C Model of Taoism: compassion, conversation and compliance.

I am aware that the writing of this book was a challenging yet rewarding journey, spanning over two years. Throughout this period, I was constantly refining my understanding of Taoist principles and their applicability to responsible management. It required a delicate balance between maintaining fidelity to the original teachings and adapting them to contemporary contexts. Furthermore, I sought to create a coherent and engaging narrative that would resonate with readers from diverse backgrounds, bridging the gap between ancient philosophy and current business practices.

This book aims to foster a deeper appreciation of the interconnected nature of today's business environment, emphasizing the need for a holistic and systems approach to management. Drawing on the insights of Taoism and complexity theory, we can develop a greater sensitivity to the complex dynamics of our organizations and the ecosystems in which they operate, equipping us with the tools needed to make more informed and responsible decisions.

As you explore 'Taoism and Responsible Management: Overcoming the Challenges in the VUCA Era', you will find that this book is structured in a way that allows you to build your understanding of the 3C Model progressively. Each chapter delves deeper into the individual components of compassion, conversation and compliance, providing real-world examples, case studies and practical advice to help you apply these principles in your own personal life and professional work.

Therefore, I firmly believe that this book will benefit both individual readers and organizations as a whole. For leaders and managers, it offers a fresh perspective on responsible management, illuminating the potential of Taoist principles to enhance organizational performance, foster ethical decision-making and promote sustainability. For organizations, the adoption of the 3C Model can lead to increased resilience, adaptability and long-term success in the face of rapidly evolving challenges in the VUCA era.

It is my sincere hope that 'Taoism and Responsible Management' can serve as a catalyst for positive change, empowering you to take action and contribute to the creation of a more sustainable, inclusive and prosperous world. May the wisdom of Taoism guide and inspire you all in your quest to overcome the

challenges of your time and chart a path forward that honours both the beauty of your natural world and the boundless potential of human ingenuity.

Liangrong Zu, PhD
*Founder of Global Youth Leadership Academy (GYLA),
Founder of Taoist Leadership Academy for Sustainability
& Excellence (T-LASE).*
20 May 2023.

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Acknowledgements

*The more you give of yourself,
The more you find of yourself.
The more you give to others,
The more you receive from others.*

– Laozi Tao Te Ching, Ch. 81

I am grateful for the numerous supports and assistance that I have received since I began my journey of incorporating Taoist philosophy in management science and writing a series of the books on Taoist leadership and management over the past years. It is with immense appreciation that I present this book as a tribute to those who have supported and helped me in my efforts. In this book, I have made an effort to explore and explicate the Taoist principles, along with related wisdom and ideas that have guided our thinking and behaviour over the years. The process has been a labour of love, and it has given me with a profound insight into the world of Taoism and profound relationship to contemporary leadership and management practices.

I am especially thankful to the prestigious academic scholars from China and other countries, including Professor Samuel Idowu from London Metropolitan University, Professor René Schmidpeter, professor of Berner Fachhochschule BFH, founder of M3trix, Professor Nick Capaldi, at Loyola University in New Orleans who have inspired and supported my work on the Taoist philosophy and leadership and management.

I would also like to extend my gratitude to Professor Hualiang Lu at Changzhou University, and Professor Haifeng Huang at Beijing University who have collaborated with me for many years in the areas of CSR, sustainability, and they have offered insights in responsible management education. I am also grateful to Professor Qingxia Xia, at Nanjing University of Finance and Economics, a specialist in philosophy, for generously dedicating herself to discussing, reviewing and offering invaluable advice and comments on improving my work.

I especially appreciate the support and encouragement provided by the team at Emerald, particularly, Nick Wallwork, Senior Commissioning Editor, Thomas Creighton, Madison Klopfer, Sheena Reghunath, Gabriella Barnard-Edmunds, who helped make this book accessible to readers. Mr Niall Kennedy, a former editor and Books Commissioning Lead, Business, Management and Economics

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at Emerald Publishing must also be remembered. In May 2021, he got in touch with me and suggested we start this publishing initiative.

I am grateful to my family for being a constant source of encouragement and support. The GYLA (Global Youth Leadership Academy) dream team is one of my family members. Since I founded GYLA, which was based on the philosophy ‘GYLA of the youth, by the youth and for the youth’, the GYLA dream team has collaborated with me to plan, manage and organize the programme for young people who aspire to become global leaders and international professionals. Additionally, I have imparted Taoist knowledge and concepts to young people in GYLA outreach. Their comments have been quite helpful in helping me get better at what I do. Therefore, I also want to express my gratitude to the GYLA team member for their creativity and dedicated commitment.

Prologue: Beginning Your Journey to Explore Laozi's 'Treasures' for Responsible Management

*Beautiful are the things we see
More beautiful those we understand
Much the most beautiful those we do not comprehend.*
– Niels Steensen (Steno) 1638–1686, Danish scientist

Being Prepared to Discover Laozi's 'Three Treasures'

The ancient Chinese sage Laozi, founder of Taoist philosophy, left behind a single holy book containing his teachings and wisdom: the Tao Te Ching, consisting of 81 chapters. One of the most notable chapters is verse 67, in which Laozi introduces what he calls his 'Three Treasures:' compassion, conservation and compliance.

*I have three treasures to cherish,
The first is compassion
(Virtue of love, empathy, courage, justice, magnanimity, etc.),
The second is conservation
(Virtue of moderation, simplicity, generosity, efficiency,
effectiveness, etc.),
The third is compliance
(Virtue of humility, prudence, judgement, integrity,
self-control, etc.).
Those who act with compassion are courageous.
Those who act with conservation are generous.
Those who act with compliance become head of the world.*
– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 67¹

¹The author of this book cites an English translation of the Tao Te Ching that he personally created. In constructing his translation, the author engaged in extensive research into various fields, including Chinese philosophy, literature and history, as well as management and leadership, complexity theory and systems science. Through synthesizing his knowledge and understanding of these diverse areas of study, the author aims to unlock the mysteries of the Tao Te Ching and gain a deeper understanding of practical wisdom of Laozi. The author hopes that his translation will serve as a valuable resource for those seeking to apply the timeless principles of the Tao Te Ching to the challenges of the modern world.

Laozi's 'Three Treasures' are essential knowledge for everyone who wants to study and comprehend Taoism's wisdom and teachings. On the one hand, the 'Three Treasures' are a distillation of Laozi's teachings, like a perfume drop containing millions of roses. The 'Three Treasures' are Taoism's fundamental principles, basic values and essence for humanity. On the other, the Tao that Laozi speaks of is the life force, the spiritual and natural rules; it is omnipresent, but abstract, abstruse and elusive: *'invisible when we look at it, inaudible when we listen to it, intangible when we grasp it'*. But when we apply Laozi's 'Three Treasures' to our daily lives, they become expressions of the Tao, which makes them simple to comprehend and put into practice. They are visible, audible and palpable, but they are also limitless. As an illustration, consider how parents and kids interact inside the family. Parents always live a simple and moderate life to save money for their children's education and future (conservation). Parents always guard their children from harm by encouraging them to be humble and in harmony with others (compliance). Parents always love and care for their children with compassion, but they never ask for anything in return (compassion).

Laozi's teaching is the master key, and once we have it, we can use it to unlock every lock in existence and life. His Tao Te Ching teaching applies the value and knowledge of the past to the difficulties of the present. Everyone may therefore learn it and put it into practice in their daily lives, wherever they are.

Laozi was unhappy to learn that only a relatively small number of individuals in the world could comprehend and apply his principles and wisdom. In Tao Te Ching Chapter 70, he expresses his feelings.

*What I said is easy to comprehend and put into practice,
Yet very few people in the world do so.*

*What I said was founded on the source,
What I did was founded on the truth.*

However, very few people understand this idea.

*They don't get the idea because they don't know who I am,
The less people know who I am, the less likely they are to follow my
teachings.*

*The sages are difficult to know because they always wear coarse
clothes and*

Keep the treasures inside.

– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 70

The Tao Te Ching contains Laozi's teachings on nature, society, politics, management and leadership in only 5,000 words. Though Laozi's advice is simple to comprehend and put into practice, relatively few people have access to his insights. Laozi thought that because people didn't know him, they can't understand his teachings. Why is it that nobody knows him? Because the sages, like him, are usually modest and dressed simply, they conceal the jewels in their clothing, much as how people frequently judge a book by its cover and fail to see the gem inside. I would like to tell you two stories that can easily and clearly

illustrate and better understand Laozi's sentiments expressed in his sacred book. One is about a father and son in the West and the other is about a River God and a Sea God in the East.

Jean-Pierre is the son of a billionaire. As he approached his 21st birthday, he told his father, Joseph, that he really wanted a small penthouse in Paris that he had admired for many months. He wanted to move out of the family home and start living independently. On his birthday, his father called him into his office and told him how much he loved him, before handing his son a beautifully wrapped package. With a mixture of curiosity, anticipation and excitement, Jean-Pierre tore open the package, but to his surprise found only a leather-bound holy book. Bitterly disappointed, he shouted at his father: "With all your wealth, all you can give me for my 21st birthday is a holy book?" Furious, he slammed the book on the desk and left the house, never returned. Many years later, Jean-Pierre had become a prominent businessman with a happy family. Unexpectedly, one day he received a call from an estate lawyer telling him that his father died, and that Jean-Pierre needed to take care of his father's estate immediately. When he arrived at his father's house, Jean-Pierre was filled with grief and sadness. As he searched through his father's documents, he came across the Holy Book. It was right where he had left it years before. Tears streamed down his face as he opened the book, only to find a hidden compartment containing a small envelope. Jean-Pierre took the envelope from the book and when he opened it, he found a set of keys on a tag with the address of the penthouse he had wanted so much. The tag bore the date of his birthday and the words: '*Paid in full and ready to move in tomorrow*'. There was also a note inside the envelope.

*Dear Jean-Pierre, you are my beloved, and I'm very proud of you.
On your 21st birthday, I want to give you a very special gift – the
penthouse you always wanted. With all my love, your father Joseph.*

This tale serves as a powerful example of the Tao Te Ching's teachings and a gentle reminder never to judge a book (or a person or circumstance) by its cover. When we pass judgement on people, we not only alienate them and give them a terrible name and reputation, but we also miss out on valuable knowledge and chances – some of which we'll never even be aware of. The tale of Jean-Pierre also made us aware of other worthwhile things. For instance, the fact that the penthouse key Jean-Pierre so desperately desired was always within his grasp makes us ponder how many other excellent opportunities there may be that we are not aware of. We all know how horrible it feels to be criticized, categorized and underappreciated. And have we not all perpetrated it against others? We rarely take into account the fact that when we stereotype and condemn others, we lose out on opportunities as well as the advantages of pleasant feelings like gratitude and thankfulness.

In his work 'Chuangzi: The Autumn Flood', the Taoist philosopher Chuangzi related a tale about the River God and the Sea God to Laozi's statement in verse 70 of the Tao Te Ching, 'Few people understand my teachings and the vast Tao'. Those who have now realized the limitations of conceptual knowledge, ignorance

and hubris are probably the target audience for the parable. According to the story, River God is proud and content in the autumn when the rain falls on schedule and the hundred streams flow into the river, thinking that he has everything wonderful in the world. Until he reaches the North Sea, River God travels along with it as it flows eastward. He cannot discern the sea's boundaries when he looks east. River God starts to feel guilty about his previous contentment. Sea God told River God that 'we cannot discuss the ocean with a frog in a well, because its vision is limited by the size of its well (place). We cannot discuss ice with an insect in summer because its existence is limited by its season (time). We cannot discuss the Tao with those who are ignorant and arrogant because their lives are imprisoned within the confines of their own thoughts (value)'. Sea God continues to say to River God, 'Now you have come out of your river banks (emptying your own thoughts) and seen the Great Ocean (the Tao). You now realize your own limitations and ignorance, so it is now possible to discuss the great Tao with you'.

You may readily understand the message of Laozi's sacred book when you connect with truth and reality, when you move past your fixed mindsets and the boundaries of your own thoughts, and when you have the unwavering clarity of the ancient spiritual teacher, Laozi.

In the traditional sense of the word, Laozi, our true spiritual teacher, has nothing to impart or add, such as fresh knowledge, ideas or moral codes. Such a teacher has no other purpose but to assist you in removing the obstacles that stand between you and the truth of who and what you already are at your core. Laozi is there to explore and make that aspect of your inner depth, which is also peace, known to you. You will be let down if you seek to Laozi or his holy book in search of intriguing concepts, hypotheses, convictions or intellectual debates. In other words, you won't find any food for thought if you're looking for it. And you'll miss the point of his instruction, which isn't in the words themselves but in you and how you interact with them.

This book seeks to take you on a journey to explore Laozi's 'treasures' and employ them in your life and work, especially the Taoist wisdom. I'd like to ask you to join me for a brief minute of meditation to revitalize your body and mind before we start the difficult journey.

I have left the gate open and thou art welcome to my home.

There is room in my house for all.

I have swept the hearth and lighted the fire.

The room is warm and cheerful, and you will find comfort and rest within.

The table is laid, and the fruits of Life are spread before thee.

The wine is here also, it sparkles in the light.

I have set a chair for you where the sunbeams dance through the shade.

*Sit and rest and refresh your soul.
Eat of the fruit and drink the wine.
All, all is yours, and you are welcome.*

(Holmes, 2021)

Beginning Your New Venture Towards Exploration of the ‘Three Treasures’

I hope that the fruit and drink have refreshed your body and soul and strengthened you to join me in this new venture of spiritual exploration of Laozi’s ‘Treasure’ – the great Tao.

*From a tiny sprout grows a giant tree.
A skyscraper tower builds from a mound of earth.
A journey of thousands of miles begins with a single step.*
– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 64

I was happy to discover that Taoism provided the real wisdom and spiritual guidance I was seeking when I started my journey of spiritual exploration decades ago, wanting to enhance my connection to the cosmos and to life. As I set out on my quest to write this book, I discovered that I was tremendously gaining from the fruits of the enormous spiritual tree, the Taoist wisdom, which had grown from the tiny seedling. Therefore, today I am able to guide you through this book to uncover and study the Tao of management, notably the key concepts of responsible management and leadership from a fresh holistic perspective.

I anticipate that you’ll be happy to start your journey through this book with me to nurture a small seedling inside you. I have no doubt that after your journey is over, you will be able to incorporate Taoist ideas and wisdom into your daily activities, bringing you, your family and your team closer to peace and harmony with other people, organizations and the rest of the world.

I’d like to start the voyage by introducing you some of the Taoist ideas that are applicable to managing in today’s volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. Two perspectives are used to understand Taoism in China: one is the religious tradition of Taoism, which is one of the three main religions in China along with Confucianism and Buddhism; the other is the classical or philosophy of Taoism, which was established by Laozi some 2,500 years ago, but which Laozi never intended to become a religion. While the philosophical tenets of Confucianism and religious Taoism are concerned with the effects of people’s activities, Taoist moral arguments concern proper conduct. It is clear that yin and yang are intrinsically linked; this means that any action will inevitably result in a counteraction, and therefore practices call for acceptance, conformance and moving on despite the results of nature. The idea is holistic rather than atomistic and static, which is how it differs from Western ontology. The discussion of Taoism in this book will be mostly focused on Taoist philosophy.

The Tao is the unbounded spirit, the unchanging unity beneath all changing occurrences and the universal energy of nature. It is a method of living that individuals might adopt to synchronize with the cosmos. Thus, the term ‘Tao’ denotes the overarching idea that unites all of reality. There is no doubt that existence is not a chaotic universe. It has a vast order to it, an innate order, and that order is known as the Tao. Simply put, the Tao refers to the balance of the entire. The Tao is pure knowledge rather than an ideology or a religion. ‘Nature’ is the English word that most closely resembles the Tao; the Tao is the laws of nature.

*Those who learn from the ancient Tao
Are able to guide the present world.
Those who follow the laws of nature
Will be able to know the origin of the universe.*

– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 14

When Taoism’s ideals are put into practice in modern society, it is evident that the philosophy has evolved past its roots. Taoism is a way of thinking and acting, and its inspiration, the unformed, unnameable and mystical Tao, is still relevant in today’s world. The wisdom of Taoism is eternal; it is comparable to a compass that can guide us through life and to the North Star that can illuminate our steps, providing us with support during the darkest times and solace, equilibrium and happiness during the happier times. The Taoist concepts enable us to take part in the course of events naturally by understanding the interconnectedness of our own nature and the nature of the cosmos. Learning about Taoism entails developing a mindset that emphasizes development, self-discovery, transformation and establishing a connection between one’s inner self and the outside world. This is how one interacts with the Tao world.

What effects does Taoism have on management and leadership? Can we use the Tao’s concepts in the contemporary business world? Of course, yes, but if we want to reach the domain of the Tao, we must have the readiness to accept the natural flow of activities and events. When we are aware of the ever-changing facets of nature, we will have the power to create harmony.

I’d like to give you an illustration of how Taoist wisdom is used to support business leaders in their success. James A. Autry, a former Fortune 500 executive, award-winning business author and one of the business world’s most popular and influential consultants, praises the wisdom of Taoism in the Tao Te Ching for contributing to business success. In *Real Power: Business Lessons from the Tao Te Ching*, Autry says: “The Tao Te Ching, perhaps the world’s most profound book of leadership wisdom, speaks to the principles that underlie all truly fulfilling enterprises. It is a way that many powerful business leaders already practice, but call by other names, such as ‘servant leadership’, ‘values-based leadership’ or ‘leadership from the heart’. Each of these terms describes aspects of the wisdom in this ancient text. It transcends all systems and yet brings fulfilment, both personal and organizational” (Autry & Mitchell, 1998). James has not only benefited personally from Taoism’s wisdom but has also had a positive impact on

other leaders and organizations through his job as a top business executive and consultant.

According to Taoism, in order to be a responsible leader, you must cultivate three key principles and attributes of management and leadership, particularly when you deal with adaptive challenges and wicked problems in a world of uncertainty (Part II will discuss sustainability challenges and wicked problems).

The first Taoist principle is to cultivate the systems thinking paradigm, i.e. shift paradigm of thinking from conventional reductionism to holism in the context of a complex environment. I can discern from Laozi's Tao Te Ching what was present but went unnoticed and what we knew but failed to recognize. That is to say we must approach problems from a systemic perspective and think in systems. The paradigm of systems thinking is just one illustration of Laozi's wisdom. In the ancient times, Laozi had already mastered the ability to observe and think the universe in systems rather than in isolated parts. This is referred to as systems thinking or a holistic approach in our contemporary jargon.

Reductionism, which is the foundation of our old scientific style of thinking, has given us the Archimedean tools to move the world and the delusion that we comprehend what we are doing. We live in a world where even the simplest parts can interact in complex ways, creating an emergent whole that behaves in ways seemingly unrelated to its humble origins. It is both a magical and a dangerous world, where simple beginnings can produce either a miraculous outcome or an awe-inspiring catastrophe (Miller, 2016).

Taoist philosophy's earliest teachings were based on observations of nature. The philosophy of Laozi and others held that everything has a complementary opposite. They said that the only way to understand anything is to contrast it with its antithesis. These observations were thoroughly examined, and the results revealed that such linkages seem to flow. Everything is consequently linked and dependent upon one another. The Taoists came to understand the purpose of life and the significance of human life in the cosmos through such observations of nature. The philosophy is built on this tenet. According to Taoist philosophy, everything in nature is effortless. However, it does not imply that everyone succeeds without effort or that things happen on purpose.

Laozi's mental model, which he employed to observe and investigate the enigmas and wonders of the cosmos, provides us with insight into his paradigm of systems thinking. Laozi's mental model focuses on holism from the three views of what (observation), why (interpretation) and how (intervention): observing and exploring what patterns and events are there in the cosmos; interpreting why they happen; and intervening in how we might learn from them and apply them in our daily life. In the book of Tao Te Ching, most of the verses begin with 'what:' describing phenomena, symptoms or events in the universe, then Laozi discovers and interprets 'why:' the root causes, and then he intervenes with the principles and wisdom he derives from observation and interpretation and gives his advice on 'how'.

I would like to use Chapter 7 of the Tao Te Ching as an example to illustrate this mental model thinking.

*Heaven is eternal, and Earth is everlasting.
Why Heaven and Earth exist forever is
because they do not live for themselves.
This is why the sages (wise men)
Place themselves behind, and yet, find themselves ahead.
Lay their life down, and yet, find their life go on.
Give on thought to themselves, and yet, end up fulfilling themselves*
– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 7

Laozi starts with an event and a pattern: Heaven and Earth are eternally present in the cosmos. Then he investigates and explains the causes, concluding that heaven and earth are responsible for the universe's support of life through their selfless creation of it. Finally, he steps in by convincing others to learn the virtue of Heaven and Earth, which is that great leaders must also be unselfish in serving others in order to achieve in fulfilling themselves. Laozi was able to learn numerous things that are marvel-worthy thanks to the systems thinking or holism paradigm. Laozi understood that profoundly distinct processes explain how living systems develop and change. He also learnt that humans live in interaction and are connected to everything else. Laozi saw the webs of interconnectedness that bind the world together.

Second, recognize and welcome the inevitable movement of change. The first principle and this one go hand in hand. Because 'everything flows' is one of the key tenets of systems thinking or holism. One of the fundamental ideas of Taoism is 'the natural movement of change'. Taoism is upbeat about life's potential and constantly emphasizes the fundamental, innate cycles of change. This promising trend gives us hope for change and brighter days ahead. Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, also espoused the notion that everything changes when he declared that you cannot tread into the same river twice. Oneness, the complex mechanism that oversees the equally complex cosmos, is the Tao. In the intricate universe, everything is dependent on and connected to one another. The cosmos has evolved through a perpetual cycle of dialectical progress; hence, the complex structures are not static but dynamic, and individual components of the universe interact to produce a new pattern. In the Tao Te Ching, Laozi notes,

*The laws of movement of the Tao are
The cycle of dialectical progress and the unity of opposites.
The Tao's principles of operation are
The act of yielding and function of dispossing.
All creatures in the universe were created by being,
Which itself was created by non-being.*
– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 40

Laozi asserts that the dynamic nature of being should be the primary focus of any comprehensive account of how the world works. Every element has an opposite or is related to an opposite. Thus, the material world is said to be

composed of an infinite, boundless apeiron from which the elements and pairs of opposites have arisen. Natural wisdom enables us to act appropriately. When we harmonize with the dynamics of nature, we learn to let go of our interpretations and stereotypical thinking. Nature is made up of opposites and does not make discriminations or moral judgements, which are usually the cause of irresponsible management. We also realize from this verse that by not clinging to either polarity, an individual is able to see a crisis as an opportunity for growth. They generally develop an optimistic view of life. Working with the ultimate unity of opposites enables people to accept the different facets of human existence that follow the path of the Tao.

According to Laozi, the major focus of any thorough explanation of how the world functions should be the dynamic nature of being. Each element has an opposite or a relationship with its antithesis. Thus, it is said that the elements and opposite pairs emerged from an infinite and boundless apeiron, which makes up the material world. Our inherent intelligence allows us to behave appropriately. We learn to let go of our interpretations and conventional thinking when we synchronize with the rhythms of nature. Nature is made up of opposites and does not make moral judgements or discriminations, which are typically the root of negligent management. This verse also teaches us that by letting go of either polarity, a person is able to recognize a crisis as a chance for personal development. They typically adopt a positive outlook on life. People can accept the various dimensions of human existence that adhere to the Tao by working with the ultimate unity of opposites.

The third principle requires leaders to manage people with less rules and control, but with more freedom and responsibility. The first and second principles are related to this one. They can self-organize and manage themselves because everything in a complex world is interrelated, interdependent and interacted with. Self-organization is a prominent theme in complex systems and a common occurrence in our world. Complex organizations like schools of fish, ant colonies and traffic are examples of emergent patterns that complex organizations can create without the need for any kind of global coordination. And this runs somewhat opposite to what we typically believe, which is that order and organization must be imposed by some outside power. Hurricanes, consciousness and bee swarms are further instances of organization that develops out of the internal interaction between the component elements, but self-organization is formed inside.

The Tao emphasizes the essential nature of the universe, as we already stated. It is difficult to limit the ultimate essence of the universal order since it is non-conceptual, according to Laozi, who describes the Tao as the universal natural order in the Tao Te Ching. One of the fundamental ideas or guiding principles of Tao is 'wu wei' (non-action). The *wu wei* principle places a strong emphasis on natural, spontaneous leadership. It doesn't tamper with or exert excessive control over the natural course of events. People consider themselves to be a part of the cosmos by adopting the holistic perspective, which enables them to work in harmony with life's natural cycle. Tao Te Ching also offers examples of the self-organizational principle.

The Tao acts upon everything spontaneously without deliberate effort (wu wei),

But she accomplishes whatever she wishes to do.

Thus, when rulers lead in alignment with the Tao,

All things shall self-organize and fulfil themselves.

– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 37

I lead with wu wei (non-action), people are self-organized.

I lead with no control, people are self-efficacy.

I lead with no rules, people are self-disciplined.

I lead with no desires, people are self-contented.

– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 57

According to Laozi, when there aren't any rigorous laws, rules or restrictions, individuals develop an honest work ethic. It holds that people will become wealthier if economic planning is abandoned, and happier if the control is let go exerted by managers and leaders through plans, policies, sanctions and rules. Executives who voluntarily abdicate authority over an organization do so with greater success. Believing in self-organization permits the Tao's guiding principles to rule people. Leaders must have faith in the Tao's powers to sustain order even in the absence of long-term plans and laws. Leaders must forgo the expenses of creating policies and conducting strategic planning. Due to geopolitics and commercial dynamics, modern company leaders create policies and strategic plans that are quickly forgotten. The constantly shifting dynamics may naturally produce common benefits, which the leaders must take into account. According to Taoism, a leader simply doesn't meddle with the affairs of the world, and it advises others to do the same. A leader can implement Taoist ideas in his company with the objective of producing a shared benefit.

In the modern business world, a significant portion of our management paradigm is based on the notion that management's job is to persuade individuals to take actions that they would not naturally take. This makes sense because you would not require management in this sense if people just did what you wanted them to do. Therefore, the concept of self-organization appears to be in direct opposition to the entire managerial endeavour within this conventional paradigm. As we have discussed, management in this new context needs to be redefined. It is now all about leading by creating or designing the future context, and this is where design thinking and systems thinking fit into management. Instead of directly controlling and coordinating, we are designing the context.

The Taoist principles, that one can become a responsible and effective leader by shifting from traditional reductionism to systems thinking or holism, accepting the changes and chaos of the VUCA era and creating an environment or context that allows people to self-organize and self-fulfill themselves, have been confirmed by modern science.

*Great minds actively put it into practice when hearing the Tao.
Average minds practice it reluctantly when hearing the Tao.
Small minds despise it when hearing the Tao.*

– Laozi, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 41

Our mind is a remarkable system, according to Laozi's teachings. When our thinking operates one way, it can carry us forward to remarkable accomplishment. However, the same mind acting in a different way can result in a complete failure. The mind is the most sensitive and fragile tool in all of creation. The perception that huge achievement is out of reach, in my opinion, is the biggest impediment to discovering Taoist 'treasures' for high-level success. This mindset results from the numerous suppressive factors that mould our thoughts to fit little brains.

I'm hoping that through learning about and putting the Tao and Taoist wisdom into practice, our journey together can help you grow great minds. Those with brilliant minds would, I'm confident, choose one notion from the voyage to adopt as your own, making that idea the centre of your thoughts, dreams and daily existence. You will eventually find the path to success in your life and at work if you just let that notion fill your brain, muscles, nerves and every other part of your body.

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Book Description for Vol.1

Volume One: ‘Managing Responsibly for Sustainable Business Development in the VUCA World’ – From the book series ‘Responsible Management and Taoism: Overcoming Challenges in the VUCA Era’.

In this thought-provoking Volume One of the series, ‘Managing Responsibly for Sustainable Business Development in the VUCA World’, we embark on a transformative journey towards sustainable and excellent management practices. As the world grapples with the complexities and uncertainties of the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) era, it has become imperative to explore new approaches that align with responsible management and Taoist principles.

This volume serves as a comprehensive introduction to the Trilogy of the 3C Model of Taoism – compassion, conservation and compliance, which forms the foundation for sustainability and excellence. Through a deep exploration of the relationships among business, management, leadership, sustainability and excellence, readers gain valuable insights into how these aspects intertwine to shape responsible management in today’s dynamic landscape.

Furthermore, Volume One explores the adaptive challenges and wicked problems that organizations face in the VUCA world. It provides guidance on shifting the management paradigm to adapt to these challenges and effectively address wicked problems within complex organizations. When adopting the 3C Model of Taoism, managers and leaders will discover how to manage people with compassion, embracing social responsibility; manage organizations with conservation, fostering ecological sustainability; and manage businesses with compliance, upholding strong business ethics.

Volume One is an indispensable resource for managers, leaders and scholars seeking innovative solutions and a deeper understanding of responsible management practices. Drawing from the profound wisdom of Taoism, this volume offers practical insights and strategies to navigate the complexities of the VUCA world while upholding values of compassion, conservation and compliance.

Volume One is one of a two-volume series. Volume Two, ‘Transforming Management Education for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)’, explores the crucial role of transforming management education to meet the challenges and goals of sustainable development. Together, these volumes provide a comprehensive and enlightening exploration of responsible management, Taoism and their impact on overcoming challenges in the VUCA era.