

# The Internal Fit and Practical Enlightenment of the Philosophical Thought of the Tao Te Ching and the Theory of Self-Leadership

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**Abstract:** As the core theory of individual self-regulation in organizational behavior, self-leadership emphasizes the achievement of goals through internal regulation, and its effectiveness has been empirically supported in multiple scenarios such as remote work and crisis response. However, most of the existing research is rooted in the perspective of Western individualist culture, and there is insufficient attention to the adaptability and localization practice in the context of Eastern collectivism. As a classic classic of traditional Chinese philosophy, the Tao Te Ching contains rich self-regulation wisdom such as "Taoism follows nature", "rule by doing nothing", and "self-knowledge is clear", which deeply resonates with the core logic of self-leadership "self-management through internal drive". Through theoretical deconstruction and literature cross-reference, this study systematically analyzes the internal compatibility between the two: "rule by doing nothing" and the natural reward strategy share the logical core of "conforming to intrinsic motivation", while "self-knowing is clear" and constructive thinking strategies are based on self-cognition, and "trying to figure out is easier than easy" is highly consistent with the behavioral focus strategy at the level of goal dismantling. Combined with empirical research in the field of self-leadership (e.g., Abid et al., 2021; Bakker et al., 2021), this study further proposes an integrated practice path at the individual and organizational levels, providing theoretical support and practical enlightenment for organizations to improve employees' self-management ability and cope with uncertain challenges, and supplementing the cross-cultural development of self-leadership theory from an oriental philosophical perspective.

**Keywords:** Tao Te Ching; Self-leadership; Taoism is natural; Inaction; Cross-cultural management.

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## 1. Introduction

With the deepening of digital transformation and profound changes in work models, new forms of work such as remote work and gig economy have gradually become popular, and individual autonomous regulation capabilities have become a key resource for organizations to cope with external uncertainties (Müller & Niessen, 2019; Mao et al., 2024). Since Manz (1986) proposed it, the theory of self-leadership has developed over decades and has formed a mature framework with behavioral focus, constructive thinking, and natural rewards as the core. Existing empirical studies have shown that self-leadership can effectively improve individual performance and organizational effectiveness - Abid et al. (2021) confirmed through a sample of Pakistani employees that positive personality traits such as hope and optimism can promote self-leadership through thriving at work, thereby improving organizational performance. Bakker et al. (2021) found in the COVID-19 crisis scenario that daily self-leadership can help employees meet basic psychological needs such as autonomy and competence to maintain job performance in a volatile environment. However, it is worth noting that most of these studies are based on Western cultural backgrounds, and the exploration of the practical logic and adaptation path of self-leadership under Eastern collectivist culture is limited, while cross-cultural research has confirmed that cultural dimensions (such as power distance, collectivist tendencies) can significantly modulate the effect of self-leadership (Alves et al., 2006; Ho & Nesbit, 2014), which makes it necessary to tap Eastern philosophical wisdom to enrich the localized theory and practice of self-leadership.

As the source of traditional Chinese philosophy (Yao, 2022), the Tao Te Ching contains profound wisdom of self-regulation and interpersonal interaction, and its core ideas are naturally compatible with the theory of self-leadership. "Taoism and nature" emphasizes following the essential laws of things and opposes "recklessness" that goes against nature, which is highly consistent with the logic of the self-led natural reward strategy of "focusing on internal motivation rather than external pressure"; "Rule by doing nothing" is not passive inaction, but "assisting the nature of all things and not daring to do it", which advocates stimulating individual potential by reducing excessive intervention, which is in line with the concept of "fun work design (PWD)" proposed by Bakker et al. (2021), which allows employees to adjust their work styles independently to improve the effect of self-leadership. "Self-knowledge is clear" regards self-awareness as the core of self-cultivation, which coincides with the constructive thinking strategy of "optimizing cognition through self-reflection"; "Difficult to Draw is Easy" advocates breaking down complex goals into specific steps, which is completely in line with the operational logic of "goal setting and task decomposition" in the behavioral focus strategy. However, at present, the academic community has not systematically integrated the philosophy of the Tao Te Ching with the theory of self-leadership, and has not fully released the empowering value of Eastern wisdom on the practice of self-leadership, which provides space for exploration in this study.

From the theoretical significance, this study can fill the gap in cross-cultural integration of self-leadership theory. Existing studies have found the moderating effect of cultural

factors on self-leadership (Harari et al., 2021; Houghton et al., 2014), and this study provides philosophical support for the localization adaptation of self-leadership through the in-depth dialogue between the Tao Te Ching and self-leadership, and further expands its theoretical boundaries. At the same time, most existing studies regard self-efficacy (Prussia et al., 1998) and psychological capital (Kotzé, 2018) as key antecedents of self-leadership. From a practical point of view, based on the empirical research results of self-leadership, this study combined with the practical strategies proposed by the wisdom of the Tao Te Ching can directly guide organizations to optimize management practices - for example, in view of the challenges of self-management in remote work, we can learn from the mindfulness of "reaching the extreme and keeping quiet" to improve employees' self-observation ability; In response to the stress problem of employees in crisis situations, the appropriate wisdom of "contentment and not humiliation" can be used to optimize natural reward strategies to reduce the exhaustion of self-control resources, which provide a specific path for organizations to design self-leadership training programs and improve employees' mental resilience.

## 2. Theoretical Basis and Literature Review

Since the theory of self-leadership was proposed, it has formed a systematic theoretical framework and rich empirical accumulation. Manz (1986) defined self-leadership as "the ability of individuals to manage their personal behavior and formulate strategies to achieve their goals through the process of self-influence", and Houghton and Neck (2002) further divided it into three second-order dimensions: behavioral focus, constructive thinking, and natural reward through the revision of the Self-Leadership Questionnaire (RSLQ). Among them, the behavior focus strategy focuses on specific behavior regulation and manages daily task execution through self-observation, goal setting, self-reward or punishment, such as dismantling goals in complex projects to reduce the difficulty of execution (Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012). Constructive thinking strategies focus on cognitive optimization to improve self-perception and motivation by challenging negative beliefs and visualizing successful performance, and a study by Kang et al. (2022) on Korean employees confirmed that this strategy can promote informal learning, which in turn indirectly enhances innovative behavior. Natural reward strategies emphasize stimulating intrinsic motivation and maintaining self-regulation by focusing on the enjoyment of the task itself (e.g., fulfillment, interest) rather than external incentives (e.g., salary, promotion), and Bakker et al. (2021) found that this strategy can effectively alleviate employee burnout and maintain job engagement in the context of the COVID-19 crisis.

In recent years, empirical research on self-leadership has focused on three core directions: anterior variables, outcome variables and boundary conditions. In terms of antecedent variables, scholars found that personality traits, leadership style, and cultural background all have a significant impact on self-leadership: Abid et al. (2021) found that positive personality traits of hope and optimism can promote self-leadership through the mediation of work exuberance, and this relationship is more significant in employees with high self-initiative personality. Amundsen and Martinsen (2015) confirmed that empowering leadership can indirectly enhance

employees' self-leadership ability by improving their psychological empowerment. The meta-analysis of Harari et al. (2021) showed that the power distance dimension in culture moderates the relationship between self-leadership and work outcomes, and that self-leadership has a stronger effect on performance in low-power distance cultures. In terms of outcome variables, the positive effects of self-leadership have covered many fields such as job performance, innovative behavior, and mental toughness: Prussia et al. (1998) found that self-efficacy completely mediates the relationship between self-leadership and performance. Kang et al. (2022) confirmed that self-leadership positively influences innovative behavior through informal learning; Longitudinal experiments by van Dorssen-Boog et al. (2021) on healthcare workers showed that self-leadership training can significantly improve employee engagement and mental toughness. In terms of boundary conditions, work environment and organizational support are key moderators: Müller and Niessen (2019) found that part-time remote workers use strategies such as self-reward and goal setting more during home office days, and autonomy mediates the relationship between work location and self-leadership. A cross-cultural study by Malaeb et al. (2023) pointed out that perceived organizational support reinforces the positive relationship between self-leadership and employee engagement, and this moderating effect was more significant in the UAE sample.

The core philosophical ideas of the Tao Te Ching provide profound oriental wisdom support for self-leadership, and its ideological system can form a dialogue with self-leadership theory from four dimensions. As the core proposition of the Tao Te Ching, "Tao follows nature", advocating that "man follows the earth, the earth follows the sky, heaven follows the Tao, and the Tao follows nature" (Chapter 25), emphasizing the following of the essential laws of things, which is highly consistent with the logic of self-leadership of natural reward strategies to "conform to internal motivation" - natural reward strategies achieve continuous self-regulation by guiding individuals to pay attention to the intrinsic value of the task itself, rather than external pressure; "Ruling by doing nothing" advocates "not daring to do anything to assist the nature of all things" (Chapter 64), opposes excessive intervention, and believes that the stimulation of individual potential needs to rely on respect for internal laws, which is in line with the concept of "fun work design" proposed by Bakker et al. (2021), which improves the effect of self-leadership by allowing employees to independently adjust their work content and methods, reducing their sense of external control; "Self-knowledge is clear" (Chapter 33) regards self-knowledge as the basis of self-cultivation, believing that "those who know others are wise, and those who know themselves are wise; Lee and Jung (2022) study on Korean college students also confirmed that improving self-awareness (such as through mindfulness training) can significantly enhance self-leadership skills. "Difficult to Draw is Easier than Easy" (Chapter 63) proposes the practical wisdom of decomposing complex goals into specific steps, advocating that "difficult things in the world must be done easily, and big things in the world must be done in detail", which is highly consistent with the goal-setting logic in the behavioral focus strategy.

Cross-cultural research further confirms the necessity and feasibility of integrating Tao Te Ching thought with self-leadership theory. Alves et al. (2006) based on the Hofstede

cultural framework pointed out that in cultures with high power distance (such as China), employees have a higher demand for "task symbolic value" and "social relationship integration", while the Tao Te Ching "is both human and self-possessed; The idea of interpersonal reciprocity (Chapter 81) can respond to this cultural trait, and Zhang et al. (2024) also found that colleagues' self-leadership behavior can promote knowledge sharing within the organization by stimulating a sense of admiration and desire for relationships, which is mutually validated by the relationship-oriented wisdom of the Tao Te Ching. Ho and Nesbit (2014) conducted a study on the supervisor-subordinate pair of 407 in China and found that work autonomy moderates the relationship between self-leadership and performance, and the positive effect of self-leadership is stronger in high-autonomy situations, while the Tao Te Ching emphasizes the idea of "reducing excessive intervention" (Chapter 60), which can provide guidance for organizations to design a highly autonomous work environment, thereby improving the practical effect of self-leadership.

### **3. Analysis of the Internal Compatibility Between the Tao Te Ching and the Theory of Self-Leadership**

The idea of "ruling by doing nothing" in the Tao Te Ching and the natural reward strategy of self-leadership are highly unified in the core logic of "conforming to internal motivation". Chapter 60 of the Tao Te Ching uses the metaphor of "governing a big country like cooking a small fish", emphasizing that excessive operation will destroy the natural process of things, which is completely consistent with the core appeal of natural reward strategy - natural reward strategy advocates by guiding individuals to pay attention to the intrinsic value of the task itself (such as interest, sense of achievement) rather than external incentives (such as salary, promotion), Achieve continuous self-regulation (Neck & Houghton, 2006). This fit is supported by a diary study conducted in the COVID-19 crisis scenario by Bakker et al. (2021), which used a sample of 195 employees and found that employees who adopted natural reward strategies were more likely to meet basic psychological needs such as autonomy and competence by perceiving the intrinsic pleasure of work (e.g., "the sense of accomplishment that comes from problem-solving"), thereby maintaining work performance in a volatile environment, which is similar to "adapting to internal needs to stimulate potential" in "rule by doing nothing" The logic of the formation is perfect mutual verification. In addition, van Dorsen-Boog et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal experiment on healthcare workers that self-leadership training based on natural reward strategies can significantly increase employees' work engagement, and this effect is mediated by "perceived work meaning", further indicating that "conformity to intrinsic motivation" is a common core mechanism for both parties.

The idea of "self-knowledge is clear" in the Tao Te Ching and the constructive thinking strategy of self-leadership both regard self-awareness as the basis of self-regulation. Chapter 33 of the Tao Te Ching proposes that "those who know others are wise, and those who know themselves are wise; The victor is powerful, and the self-winner is strong", clearly placing self-awareness at the core of self-cultivation, believing that individuals can only effectively regulate behavior and achieve

self-transcendence by first gaining insight into their own strengths and limitations, which is completely in line with the core logic of constructive thinking strategies. The constructive thinking strategy focuses on cognitive optimization, helping individuals improve their self-perception and strengthen intrinsic motivation through specific methods such as "challenging dysfunctional beliefs" and "visualizing successful performance" (Houghton & Neck, 2002). A study of 127 students at Korea Women's University found that mindfulness training (a classic way to improve self-awareness) can significantly improve self-leadership by enhancing empathy (the integration of self and others' cognition), and the mediating effect of empathy reached  $\beta=0.187$  ( $p<0.001$ ), which confirms the practical value of "self-knowing" - Mindfulness training helps individuals become aware of their emotions and beliefs, thereby optimizing their self-leadership strategies. Similar conclusions were reached by the "Mindfulness-Based Self-Leadership Training (MBSLT)" developed by Sampl et al. (2017), which confirmed in a sample of college students that after improving self-awareness through mindfulness, students' exam anxiety was significantly reduced and academic self-efficacy was significantly improved, which is highly consistent with the idea of "reducing internal conflict through self-awareness" in "self-knowledge".

The practical wisdom of "difficult than easy" in the Tao Te Ching and the behavioral focus strategy of self-leadership have formed a deep resonance at the level of goal dismantling and task execution. Chapter 63 of the Tao Te Ching proposes that "the picture is difficult than easy, and the is greater than the detail", advocating the dismantling of complex goals into concrete and feasible steps, and achieving the ultimate goal through the accumulation of small successes. The behavioral focus strategy emphasizes that individuals need to transform long-term goals into short-term executable tasks and monitor progress through self-observation (Hauschildt & Konradt, 2012), for example, salespeople gradually achieve monthly performance targets through the small goal of "visiting 3 customers a day", or new employees gradually adapting to job requirements through the task of "mastering 1 basic skill per week". Cranmer et al. (2019) provided empirical support for this fit in a study of 193 new employees in the organization, which found that self-leadership can significantly improve the organizational commitment of new employees by "actively seeking organizational resources and dismantling social tasks", and this relationship is partially mediated by the "socialization process", and new employees gradually achieve role integration through small steps such as "understanding job responsibilities" and "establishing colleague relationships", which is completely consistent with the practical path of "trying to find difficult than easy". A study of 551 employees in South Korea by Kang et al. (2022) found similar conclusions, which confirmed that behavioral focus strategies indirectly promote innovative behavior by promoting informal learning (such as accumulating knowledge in small daily tasks), and "task decomposition" is a key premise of informal learning, further verifying the internal consistency between "difficult to figure out" and behavioral focus strategies.

### **4. The Practical Path of Integrating the Tao Te Ching with Self-Leadership**

Based on the inherent compatibility between the Tao Te

Ching and the theory of self-leadership, combined with the empirical research results in the field of self-leadership, a practical framework for the integration of the two can be constructed from the individual and organizational levels, and the deep combination of Eastern philosophical wisdom and modern management theory can be realized.

At the individual level, we can rely on the ideas of the Tao Te Ching to optimize self-leadership strategies and improve the effectiveness and sustainability of self-regulation. In view of the problem of resource depletion that may result from self-leadership (Müller & Niessen, 2018), the idea of "doing nothing to rule" can be used to optimize the natural reward strategy - individuals need to avoid overly utilitarianizing goals (such as "must complete KPIs") and instead focus on the meaning of the task itself (such as "helping others through work"), which is consistent with the logic of "conforming to intrinsic motivation" in "Taoism and nature", for example, medical workers can stimulate sustained motivation through "the sense of accomplishment of curing patients". rather than focusing solely on performance indicators (van Dorssen-Boog et al., 2020); At the same time, there is a need to reduce excessive monitoring of behavior (such as "checking progress every hour") in favor of trusting the internal rhythm, and research by Bakker et al. (2021) shows that this "moderate let-go" strategy can effectively reduce self-exhaustion and maintain long-term work engagement. For example, college students can record their learning progress through diaries, identify inefficient behaviors, and optimize learning strategies (Sampl et al., 2017). At the same time, past small successes (such as "completing a speech") can be visualized, combined with the idea of "a thousand miles of travel, starting with a single step" (Chapter 64) to improve self-efficacy, and the study of Prussia et al. (1998) has confirmed that self-efficacy completely mediates the relationship between self-leadership and performance, and "visualization of successful experiences" is the key way to improve self-efficacy. In response to the procrastination problem caused by complex tasks (Jian et al., 2024), the behavioral focus strategy can be refined according to the idea of "trying to figure out the easier one" - individuals need to break down long-term goals into "minimum units of action", such as "completing a paper" into small tasks such as "writing 500 words a day" and "reading 2 articles a week" to lower the threshold for implementation, Cranmer et al. (2019). It has been found that this strategy can significantly improve the speed of new employees' role adaptation; At the same time, progress should be monitored through self-recording (such as "task completion logs") and the moderation principle of "contentment" (Chapter 44) should be used to avoid excessive pursuit of perfection, which Junça Silva et al. (2024) has shown to reduce anxiety and improve task performance in remote work.

At the organizational level, a self-leadership support system can be built based on the Tao Te Ching ideology to provide an environment and resource guarantee for employees' self-regulation. In view of the special needs of employees for "autonomy" in Eastern culture (Alves et al., 2006), the idea of "governing a big country is like cooking a small fresh" can be used to design a working environment - organizations need to reduce excessive monitoring of employees, such as avoiding real-time clock-ins and frequent reports to remote employees, and instead trust employees' self-management ability. At the same time, employees should be provided with resources related to "natural rewards", such as involving design-loving employees in product packaging

optimization and environmentally conscious employees leading sustainability projects, which can align with employees' intrinsic motivations and significantly increase work engagement (van Dorssen-Boog et al., 2021). In view of the cultural adaptability of self-leadership training, the training program can be designed based on the idea of "self-knowledge is clear" - the organization can develop a training module that integrates mindfulness exercises, and help employees be aware of their own emotions and beliefs through the mindfulness training of "reaching the virtual extreme, keeping quiet" (Chapter 16), and at the same time designing self-assessment tools (such as strengths identification questionnaire) in combination with "knowing people are wise, self-knowing is clear" to improve employees' self-awareness; In addition, oriental wisdom can be integrated into case teaching, such as using the case of "cooking to solve the cow" (Zhuangzi is derived from the Tao Te Ching's idea of "conforming to the law") to explain the task decomposition logic in the behavioral focus strategy, so as to enhance the cultural affinity and employee acceptance of the training. In view of the high cost of socialization for new employees, the socialization process can be optimized according to the idea of "trying to find a difficult way to make it easy" - the organization can break down the first year of new employees into "role recognition period (1-3 months)", "ability improvement period (4-6 months)", and "independent contribution period (7-12 months)", and set clear small goals for each stage, such as "mastering basic tools" and "completing small projects independently"; At the same time, it is necessary to provide new employees with "small success" opportunities, such as engaging them in low-risk tasks (such as data collation, meeting minutes), and improving self-leadership confidence through accumulating successful experiences, which is not only in line with the idea of "a thousand miles starts with a single step", but is also supported by the empirical results of Cranmer et al. (2019), which found that this strategy can significantly reduce the social burden of the organization and improve the retention rate of new employees.

## 5. Research Limitations and Future Prospects

Although this study systematically analyzes the internal compatibility between the Tao Te Ching and the theory of self-leadership and proposes a practical path, there are still three limitations. First, the breadth of theoretical integration is limited, this study only focuses on the integration of Tao Te Ching and self-leadership, and does not involve the potential value of other traditional Eastern philosophies (such as Confucian "self-cultivation" and Mohist "universal love" thought), and fails to fully demonstrate the supporting role of Eastern philosophical systems in self-leadership theory. Second, the directness of empirical support is insufficient, and most of the existing empirical evidence is independent research in the field of self-leadership, and there is a lack of data specifically testing the integration effect of Tao Te Ching thought and self-leadership, which is difficult to directly confirm the practical value of the integration of the two. Although Alves et al. (2006) and Ho and Nesbit (2014) have explored the influence of culture on self-leadership, the adaptability of Tao Te Ching ideas in different subcultures (such as different regions and industries in China) has not been verified, making it difficult to accurately guide

differentiated practice scenarios.

In view of the above limitations, future research can be promoted in three directions. First, carry out localized empirical research, design a self-leadership intervention program based on the Tao Te Ching, and use a quasi-experimental design (such as Marques-Quinteiro et al., 2019) to compare the effects of "non-action" and "control" oriented self-leadership, and verify the empowering effect of Tao Te Ching thought on self-leadership. Second, it expands the cross-cultural comparative research, combined with the measurement invariance study of Houghton et al. (2014), to compare the differences between Tao Te Ching thought in Chinese and Western self-leadership practices, such as the comparison of the effect of the "non-action" strategy in individualist and collectivist cultures, so as to provide more accurate theoretical support for cross-cultural management; Third, explore the application in digital contexts, and study the integration path of the Tao Te Ching's "conforming to nature" idea and self-leadership for new scenarios such as the metaverse and AI-assisted work, such as how to assist in "goal dismantling" through AI tools while avoiding over-reliance on technology intervention (Lehrer et al., 2021), providing a new perspective for self-leadership practice in the digital age.

## 6. Conclusion

Through theoretical deconstruction and literature cross-verification, this study systematically reveals the internal compatibility between Tao Te Ching and self-leadership theory: "rule by doing nothing" shares the core logic of "conforming to intrinsic motivation" with natural reward strategies, "self-knowledge is clear" and constructive thinking strategies are based on self-awareness, and "trying to find it difficult is not easy" is highly consistent with behavioral focus strategies at the level of goal disassembly. Combined with the empirical research in the field of self-leadership, this study further proposes an integrated practice path from the individual and organizational levels: individuals can optimize natural rewards through "non-action", strengthen constructive thinking through "self-knowledge", and improve behavioral focus through "trying to find difficult things are not easy", so as to improve the effectiveness of self-regulation. Organizations can empower employee autonomy based on "rule by doing nothing", design localized training based on "self-knowledge", and optimize the socialization of new employees with "difficult than easy", providing an environment and resource guarantee for self-leadership.

This integration not only complements the Eastern philosophical perspective of self-leadership theory and expands its cross-cultural applicability, but also provides new ideas for organizations to deal with the challenges of digital transformation and uncertainty. Future research needs to further verify the effect of the integration of the two through localized empirical evidence, promote the in-depth development and practical innovation of self-leadership theory, and realize the synergistic empowerment of traditional oriental wisdom and modern management theory.

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