

The Subtle Application of Laozi's "Governance through Non-Action" in High School Class Self-Management

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Abstract

This paper explores the application of the concept of "Governance through Non-Action" from Laozi's Daoist philosophy within secondary school classroom management. It undertakes a conceptual analysis of the philosophy's historical context and core tenets, while proposing practical implementation strategies. The author contends that this approach fosters student autonomy, enhances self-management capabilities, and promotes individualised development by transforming the teacher's role from that of a director to a facilitator.

Keywords

"Governance through Non-Action", Class Self-Management

1. The Historical Background of the Idea of "Wu Wei Er Zhi" (Governance through Non-Action) (Qi, 2007)

"Wu Wei Er Zhi" is a fundamental concept of Daoism proposed by Laozi. Its emergence has a specific historical background, reflected in the following aspects:

1) Social Turmoil

During the Spring and Autumn period, the feudal lords were vying for supremacy, and social order was chaotic. Laozi believed that excessive human intervention and conflicts were the root causes of social unrest, thus proposing "Governance through Non-Action" in the hope that nations could return to a state of peace and stability.

2) Political Corruption

At that time, the politics of various states were corrupt. Rulers levied heavy taxes and imposed harsh laws to maintain control. Laozi criticized this excessive governance, advocating strongly that rulers should reduce their interference in the

people's lives and allow society to develop naturally.

3) Economic Decline

Wars and political instability disrupted agricultural activities and other economic operations, leaving land barren, production halted, and the populace impoverished. Laozi believed that rulers should refrain from arbitrary actions and avoid disturbing the people, enabling them to focus on production and restore the economy.

4) Intellectual Diversity

During the Spring and Autumn period, various schools of thought emerged, in an era known as the "Hundred Schools of Thought". Laozi pondered issues of society and life, and incorporated elements of contemporary natural philosophy, proposing "Governance through Non-Action" to emphasize adhering to the natural order.

5) Decline of the Zhou System

The well-field system and the feudal system established by the Zhou dynasty gradually disintegrated during the Spring and Autumn period, leading to the collapse of the old social order and value system. Laozi's idea of "Governance through Non-Action" was also a reflection on how to rebuild social order after the collapse of the old system, aiming to restore social harmony and stability through non-intervention.

2. The Essence of the "Governance through Non-Action" Philosophy

2.1. Following the Natural Course (Zhang, 2012)

This philosophy emphasizes that all things in the universe follow their own inherent developmental patterns, such as the changing of the seasons and the movement of the sun and moon. In governing a nation or managing affairs, one should align with these natural laws rather than impose artificial interventions.

2.2. Emphasizing "Non-Action" over "Action"

Laozi proposed that "governing a great nation is like frying small fish." Just as one must not stir small fish too frequently during cooking lest they break apart, governance should avoid excessive interference. This means rulers should refrain from meddling and allow the people to live and work in peace.

2.3. Non-Action Governance Means "Willingly Taking the Lower Position, Acting without Contention"

Laozi favored water as a metaphor: "The highest virtue is like water." Water benefits all things without contention, dwelling where others despise, thus approaching the way.

Laozi believed water embodies the qualities of humility, non-competitiveness, and universal benefit. Rulers should emulate water—willingly occupying the lowest position, leading from behind while appearing unseen. Only then can rulers

achieve the governance of non-action.

3. Insights from “Governance through Non-Action” for Management

“Governance through Non-Action” forms the core of Laozi’s management philosophy. He asserted: “When I act without interference, the people transform themselves; when I cherish stillness, the people align themselves; when I have no affairs, the people enrich themselves; when I have no desires, the people return to simplicity.” Laozi evaluated different types of rulers thus: “The highest ruler is one whose existence is unknown; the next is one who is close and praised; the next is one who is feared; the next is one who is disgraced.” In Laozi’s view, truly exceptional leaders rarely issue commands; the people scarcely perceive their actions.

The philosophy of “Governance through Non-Action” encompasses four dimensions: “harmonious equilibrium,” “embracing unity and returning to simplicity,” “humility and skill in correction,” and “ignorance and desirelessness.” Together, these form Laozi’s comprehensive management system. Harmony and balance represent the management principle; embracing unity and returning to simplicity embodies the management mindset; humility and skill in rescue reflect the management attitude; and ignorance and desirelessness signify the management cultivation (Li, 2020).

The insights of “Governance through Non-Action” for modern management: Guide by leveraging existing conditions and following objective laws; management must align with public sentiment and mobilize the enthusiasm of the masses; management must know what to do and what not to do (Zhao, 2010).

4. The Ingenious Application of “Governance through Non-Action” in High School Class Self-Management

The historical origins of Laozi’s doctrine of “Governance through Non-Action” resonate with contemporary high school classroom self-management. The core logic of this philosophy is that excessive intervention disrupts the equilibrium of “self-organisation”. The direct resonance between historical issues and contemporary classroom challenges is evident: from “oppressive governance and reckless actions” to “micromanagement,” Laozi’s critique of “excessive human intervention” directly mirrors teachers’ “micromanagement” in modern classrooms. Both fundamentally constitute “coercive control that violates natural laws,” yielding strikingly similar problems.

4.1. Feasibility of “Governance through Non-Action” in High School Class Self-Management (Lan, 2013)

1) Feasibility Aligned with “Capability Development” Objectives

“Governance through Non-Action” does not imply the homeroom teacher’s complete withdrawal, but rather the delegation of decision-making authority over class affairs to students. In class self-management, students must address matters

such as conflict mediation and academic mutual assistance through group or class committee units.

2) Alignment with “Individual Development” Objectives

Self-governance under non-intervention allows students to transcend the constraints of “uniform management.” When students transition from “managed individuals” to “managers,” class affairs become directly linked to their personal interests and developmental needs.

4.2. The Essence of Non-Interference Governance in High School Class Self-Management (Li, 2008)

Class advisors study students’ psychology and behavior, transforming class directives into students’ self-motivated activities. By managing “water-like” affairs without direct intervention, they achieve comprehensive educational goals. Through guidance, coordination, and refinement, advisors cultivate students’ self-management capabilities, ultimately empowering them to govern their class autonomously.

4.3. Fundamental Strategies for “Governance through Non-Action” in High School Class Self-Management

To effectively manage a class, one must adhere to educational principles, operate according to students’ physical and mental development patterns, and ultimately learn to delegate authority. So, how can homeroom teachers steer the class’s development direction and enhance the quality of self-management?

1) Implement student self-governance to shift the focus from “doing for” to “doing by.” (Yang, 2016)

Laozi stated: “They enjoy sweet fruits, wear fine clothes, dwell in comfortable homes, and delight in their customs. Neighboring villages are within sight, the sounds of chickens and dogs audible between them, yet people live out their lives without ever interacting.” This describes a society where people eat deliciously, dress beautifully, embrace comfortable customs, and live in pleasant surroundings. Though neighboring villages are within sight and the sounds of chickens and dogs are audible, people never interact throughout their lives. This ideal clearly reflects Laozi’s dissatisfaction with and protest against reality. He envisioned a utopian society like the Peach Blossom Spring, where everything is serene and natural. Shouldn’t schools also be like small societies where everyone safeguards this idyllic realm? Shouldn’t each student protect this collective and focus on present responsibilities? As the saying goes, “Without rules, nothing can be accomplished.” Therefore, homeroom teachers should establish comprehensive class rules. At the outset of class management, teachers should collaborate with students to formulate reasonable regulations. Teachers must lead by example, and rules should be established sparingly—ideally only once—never changed on a whim. These rules must apply to everyone, covering academics, discipline, hygiene, and more, with clear standards for rewards and punishments. For instance,

completing homework on time earns bonus points, while disrupting class order results in point deductions. Once established, these rules become the fundamental guidelines for class operations. Subsequent management should follow these rules, minimizing arbitrary intervention and allowing class affairs to run naturally within the framework of established regulations. This forms the institutional foundation of “non-action.”

2) Implement democratic and open management, transforming the approach to “action.” (Ren, 2015)

Laozi said: “Serene and unhurried, he values few words. When achievements are made and tasks accomplished, the people all say, ‘It happened naturally.’” This means the best rulers govern with quiet non-action, rarely issuing commands. When the world is well-ordered, the people believe “this is how things naturally are.” Class teachers should carefully select and cultivate student leaders. Choose responsible, organized, and influential students for roles like class president (coordinating class affairs) or academic committee member (handling study-related tasks). Class advisors should provide systematic training to these officers, imparting management techniques and communication methods before empowering them to operate independently. In daily management, officers should autonomously organize class activities, mediate peer relationships, and resolve issues according to established rules—fully leveraging self-governance and self-supervision. The advisor need only offer guidance and advice at critical junctures, thereby achieving “Governance through Non-Action” in class management.

Case Study: Distinguishing Appropriate Intervention from Over-Intervention in “Classroom Self-Directed Learning Plan Adjustments”

Background:

A Year 13 class practised “Governance through Non-Action”, allowing study groups to autonomously formulate their final-stage learning plans. However, after two weeks of implementation, issues arose: the foundational group abandoned the plan due to falling behind, while the top-performing group experienced diminished efficiency from excessive practice. This polarisation of the class’s learning atmosphere threatened to directly impact monthly examination results and the rhythm of Gaokao preparation—marking a critical juncture.

a) Appropriate Intervention

Intervention Process:

Convened a meeting with the study representative and group leaders. Presented the issues without outright rejection, offering 2-3 adjustment suggestions without prescribing a single solution. Empowered students to implement their chosen approach.

Intervention Outcome:

Students autonomously developed a “tiered pairing” scheme based on the suggestions. The class learning atmosphere returned to a positive cycle, with students further enhancing their coordination skills during the process.

b) Excessive Intervention

Intervention Process:

Directly halted the class's autonomous planning, personally drafted a detailed study schedule, and even assigned specific tasks and leaders to each group.

c) Daily inspections of plan execution followed, with direct criticism levelled at students failing to meet requirements and full supervision of corrective actions.

Intervention Outcome:

Students reverted from “proactive planning” to “passive compliance”, creating a stifling classroom atmosphere where the “Governance through Non-Action” proved utterly ineffective.

This embodies the strategy of the “non-action” system.

3) Strengthen classroom culture development and transform the content of “doing for others.”

Laozi said: “The Tao is empty, yet its use is inexhaustible. Profound, it resembles the origin of all things: blunting sharp edges, resolving conflicts, harmonizing light, and blending with dust.” This means that the Tao is void and formless, yet its function is boundless. Profound as the depths, it resembles the origin of all things: blunting their sharp edges to resolve their conflicts; harmonizing their radiance to blend with the dust. To achieve democratic and open classroom management, homeroom teachers must blend their light with the dust. They should cultivate a positive classroom culture by guiding students to jointly shape an uplifting environment—establishing class mottos, songs, and emblems to foster a sense of belonging and collective pride. By organizing diverse activities—thematic class meetings, sports days, essay contests, calligraphy competitions—the teacher strengthens cohesion. Students then voluntarily adhere to class rules and actively participate in affairs within this enriched cultural environment. This harnesses cultural influence to achieve self-governance, reducing external coercion and embodying the “Governance through Non-Action” philosophy that aligns with natural development. This constitutes the concrete methodology of the “non-action” system.

4) Addressing Potential Challenges and Limitations.

The “Governance through Non-Action” in secondary school classes presents inherent challenges and constraints. Some pupils may distort “self-governance” into “free rein.” Resistance and varying adaptability among student groups may arise. Introverted or less confident pupils risk being marginalised during self-directed negotiations.

Targeted Mitigation Strategies:

a) Establishing Boundary Frameworks for Autonomy to Prevent Abuse

Establish a “minimum standards checklist” for self-governance, enforcing zero tolerance for core issues while allowing non-core matters to be resolved through student negotiation.

b) Tiered guidance + empowerment to mitigate resistance

For “passive-dependent” students: Provide an “autonomy toolkit” (e.g., study plan templates, class task allocation lists). For “marginalised” students: Ensure each group assignment includes “one core responsibility per person”. For “rebel-

lious” students: Adopt “contract-based management”, individually agreeing with them that “autonomy rights are matched by equal responsibilities”.

c) Establish a “node early-warning mechanism” to reduce unpredictability

Define three categories of “warning signals”: consecutive two-week increases in class disciplinary violations, voluntary resignation of core class officers, or a single instance of the class average score dropping by over 5%. Triggering any signal activates “temporary guidance mode”.

4.4. The Positive Effects of “Governance through Non-Action” in Class Self-Management

1) Enhancing Students’ Self-Management Capabilities (Liu & Wang, 2010)

Through class self-management, students gain opportunities for independent thinking and problem-solving, accumulating practical management experience that enhances their organizational coordination, communication, and other skills. For instance, when organizing class cultural performances, student officers must independently plan program sequences, assign roles, and coordinate venues and props—processes that significantly strengthen their self-management abilities. In traditional classroom management models, homeroom teachers often micromanage every detail, leaving students in a passive, managed role. By adopting the philosophy of “Governance through Non-Action”, teachers begin to boldly delegate authority, gradually transferring responsibility for class affairs to students. For instance, implementing a daily class monitor system assigns one student per day to oversee classroom discipline, recess order, hygiene inspections, and other duties. Under this model, every student gains opportunities to participate in class management, significantly enhancing their sense of responsibility and self-discipline. Progressing from initial disorganization to handling issues methodically, students gradually learn self-management and self-supervision through practice. Within one semester of implementing the system, the class’s discipline scores markedly improved, with significant reductions in tardiness and early departures. This clearly demonstrates the students’ growth and progress through self-governance.

2) Strengthening Class Cohesion and Teamwork (Gao, 2008)

When all members participate in management and contribute to the class’s development, their sense of belonging to the class is enhanced. Students develop mutual understanding and support, fostering friendships while resolving problems together. This reduces conflicts and creates a harmonious and friendly class atmosphere. The philosophy of “Governance through Non-Action” emphasizes mutual collaboration and shared participation among students. Through various class activities and group tasks, students gradually recognize that the class is an integrated whole, and each individual’s actions are closely tied to the class’s honor. When organizing events like sports meets or cultural performances, the homeroom teacher provides only general direction and requirements, leaving the specific planning, organization, and execution entirely to the students. Students divide responsibilities based on their strengths—some handle publicity, others logistics, and some choreograph performances. Through this process, they not only

leverage their individual talents but also learn to listen to others' opinions, support one another, and work in tandem. This spirit of teamwork significantly enhances class cohesion, fosters warmer relationships among classmates, and cultivates a more harmonious classroom environment.

3) Fostering Individual Development and Innovative Thinking (Luo, 2021)

Under the principle of "Governance through Non-Action", students transition from passive recipients of management to active participants in it. Everyone is willing to take ownership of the classroom, cultivating comprehensive qualities such as a sense of responsibility, teamwork spirit, and innovative abilities beyond academics. This lays a solid foundation for their future development and creates broader space for personal growth. High school is a critical period for the formation and development of students' personalities. The philosophy of "Governance through Non-Action" provides students with ample space to showcase their individuality and talents in class management. Homeroom teachers refrain from excessive interference in students' ideas and approaches, encouraging bold innovation and experimentation with new management methods. In building class culture, students have proposed numerous creative initiatives—such as establishing a class library corner, creating a cultural wall, and organizing themed class meetings. These activities not only enrich the class's cultural life but also stimulate students' innovative thinking and creativity.

4) Profound Impact on Students' Future Development (Hu, 2019)

Classroom management experiences during high school significantly influence students' future development. Students nurtured under the "Governance through Non-Action" philosophy develop strong self-management skills, teamwork spirit, innovative thinking, and a sense of responsibility. These qualities lay a solid foundation for their future studies, careers, and personal lives. Whether pursuing higher education or entering the workforce, they adapt swiftly to new environments, leverage their strengths, and achieve greater success. Follow-up studies reveal that graduates from "Governance through Non-Action" class management models significantly outnumber peers in university student leadership roles. Their excellence in organizing activities and navigating interpersonal dynamics earns recognition from faculty and peers alike.

5. Description of the Effects of the "Governance through Non-Action" Philosophy in High School Classroom Management in Recent Years

In recent years, the philosophy of "Governance through Non-Action" has gradually gained prominence and been widely applied in high school classroom management.

5.1. Analysis of International Application and Outcomes (Dong, 2013)

1) Student-Led Classroom Rule Development

Influenced by the “Governance through Non-Action” principle of following nature and allowing things to develop organically, some international high school classrooms empower students to establish their own rules. Teachers provide only fundamental principles and direction—such as respecting others and maintaining order—while students collectively discuss and determine specific details. Rules formulated this way gain greater acceptance and adherence from students, as they embody their own will rather than externally imposed constraints. This mirrors the principle “I do nothing, yet the people transform themselves,” enabling students to achieve self-management and self-discipline through active participation.

2) Autonomous Selection of Learning Projects and Methods

In some European and American high schools, teachers design multiple learning projects or themes based on the curriculum, allowing students to independently choose topics of interest for research-based learning. Students are also permitted to form study groups independently, manage their own pacing and methods, with teachers providing guidance or resources only when difficulties arise. This approach respects students’ natural learning tendencies and individual differences, stimulating their initiative and creativity—aligning with the “Governance through Non-Action” philosophy of following nature’s course without coercion.

3) Student-Organized Class Activities

For managing class events like sports meets or cultural performances, some international high school classes grant students full responsibility. Students divide tasks autonomously—some handle planning, others logistics, and some publicity—with teachers offering advice only when necessary. This allows students to fully utilize their strengths and abilities during events, cultivating teamwork and organizational skills. It embodies the “Governance through Non-Action” philosophy of enabling students’ self-development and self-realization.

4) Self-Assessment and Reflection

Internationally, some high school classes also regularly engage students in self-assessment and reflection, rather than relying solely on teacher evaluations. Students summarize their strengths and weaknesses based on their academic progress, classroom performance, and participation in class activities, then develop improvement plans. Teachers guide students in reflection to help them better understand themselves, but refrain from providing direct evaluations or specific requirements. This allows students to achieve self-growth through self-reflection, aligning with the “teaching without words” principle of “Governance through Non-Action”.

5.2. Domestic Application and Effectiveness Analysis (Wu, 2017)

This philosophy, rooted in Daoist thought, has infused traditional classroom management models with renewed vitality and fresh perspectives. Wei Shusheng focuses on achieving high-performance automated management in his classroom approach, with democracy and science at its core. Liu Jing analyzes the philosoph-

ical foundations and connotations of the “Governance through Non-Action” philosophy, along with its educational implications. Wu Xuemin, within the context of the homeroom teacher system, introduces the management philosophy of “Governance through Non-Action”, establishing its prerequisites, principles, and strategies for classroom management. Zhang Anna examined the “Governance through Non-Action” alongside contemporary middle school students’ characteristics, introducing “non-action” educational methods in specific middle school classroom management scenarios. “Governance through Non-Action” does not equate to complete neglect of classroom affairs but emphasizes aligning with students’ developmental patterns, fully leveraging their initiative to achieve autonomous classroom management and harmonious development.

Successful case studies of “Governance through Non-Action” in high school classroom management:

1) Significant Reduction in Disciplinary Incidents

A class previously plagued by lax discipline implemented “Governance through Non-Action” through measures like democratically drafted class rules and a weekly student CEO system. This approach nearly eliminated disciplinary violations.

Class 3 of Year 11 at a prestigious secondary school once recorded a monthly disciplinary violation rate of 32% due to issues such as inattentiveness during lessons and tardiness or early departure. Class teacher Mr Li adopted a “Governance through Non-Action” to restructure the management model, clearly defining disciplinary boundaries and establishing a self-correction process. After one term of implementation, the class’s monthly disciplinary violation rate dropped to 5.8%, with classroom misconduct reduced by 78% and instances of tardiness or early departure virtually eliminated.

2) Academic Performance Improvement

A class implemented self-governance centered on study groups. After three iterations of model optimization, the “student-led team formation + teacher-guided intervention” approach yielded outstanding results. By the end of the second semester of Grade 11, the number of top-performing students and those qualifying for various university admission tiers reached their highest levels throughout high school.

Prior to implementing the “Governance through Non-Action”, Class 1 of Year 13 at a secondary school in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, ranked 12th in the year group with an average pass rate of 76%. Form tutor Mr Wang delegated authority to the students, enabling the study representative to establish an “autonomous learning group”. Teachers provided targeted learning resources and methodological guidance only. Under this model, students’ initiative in learning was fully stimulated. After one academic year, the class average jumped to 3rd place in the year group, the pass rate rose to 94%, and six students ranked among the top 20 in the year group.

3) Enhanced Student Leadership Skills

A rotating class president system engaged students in daily classroom management. Results showed 16 students became members of the Youth League Committee or Student Union, including one Student Union President, three Youth League Department Heads, and one school astronomy club president. These experiences honed their ability to manage larger groups beyond the classroom.

Mr Wei Shusheng's classroom management exemplifies the principle of "Governance through Non-Action". Through his "task contracting system", every pupil becomes a class steward: some take responsibility for wiping the lectern, others maintain the classroom library corner, while even collecting book fees and rearranging seating are organised autonomously by the pupils. In a class of 72 pupils, book fees are collected in just two and a half minutes, a thorough clean-up is efficiently completed within 15 minutes, and the entire class rearranges seating in under a minute. These seemingly trivial tasks enable pupils to develop practical skills in planning, coordinating responsibilities, and resolving conflicts through hands-on experience.

4) Increased Class Honors

Under the collaborative management of the hands-off homeroom teacher and proactive students, the class excelled in all school-wide moral education assessments. It earned the non-rotating "Red Flag of Excellence," maintained a significantly higher rate of outstanding dormitories, and was honored as a Civilized Class and Outstanding Class.

Prior to implementing the "Governance through Non-Action" approach, Class 6 of Year 10 at a certain senior secondary school in Ningbo, Zhejiang Province, had scarcely secured any honours at the school level or above. The form tutor adopted a "self-governance plus collective co-creation" model, enabling students to autonomously establish specialised groups for cultural activities, volunteering, and academic pursuits. They independently proposed campus initiatives and devised class development plans. Under this student-led framework, the class secured six school-level accolades, including the "Gold Award in the Campus Culture and Arts Festival," "Outstanding Volunteer Service Collective," and "Model Class for Academic Ethos Development." Furthermore, their self-produced theatrical production earned them second prize in the municipal secondary school arts showcase.

6. Conclusion

The philosophy of "Governance through Non-Action" has demonstrated remarkable effectiveness in high school class management, creating favorable conditions for student growth and development. Implementing this approach cultivates students' abilities in self-education, self-management, and self-improvement. It stimulates their enthusiasm and creativity in managing the class, fosters harmonious teacher-student relationships, and enhances students' self-awareness. Naturally, in practice, homeroom teachers must flexibly apply this philosophy based on their class's specific circumstances, carefully balancing the degree of "non-interven-

tion” and “intervention.” They should continuously explore and innovate class management models to achieve optimal results. With deeper research and application of this philosophy, more classes will benefit, cultivating outstanding talents with comprehensive qualities and innovative capabilities (Yang, 2023).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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