

Research on Integrating Traditional Medical Culture into the Teaching of Management Courses in Applied Undergraduate Programs — A Case Study of *Huangdi Neijing*

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Abstract: *Huangdi Neijing*, as a significant classic of ancient Chinese medicine, embodies ideas such as holism, harmony, and the primacy of human value, which are equally applicable in the field of management. An analysis of its unique medical theories and methodologies reveals a wealth of management elements. These elements are closely related to management principles and can offer students new perspectives and interdisciplinary educational experiences, helping to cultivate managerial thinking and enhance problem-solving abilities. The teaching of management is redesigned in three key areas—goal setting, case design, and performance evaluation—in order to provide new perspectives for the cultivation of management talents.

Keywords: *Huangdi Neijing* ; Management; Teaching Research

1. Introduction

Management is an important branch of philosophy and social sciences. Its social attributes are directly influenced by social and cultural contexts. It is essential to uphold confidence in history and culture, to draw on the past while innovating for the present, and to integrate the essence of Marxist thought with the finest elements of traditional Chinese culture, as well as with the shared values that are deeply embedded in the daily lives of the people. This ongoing integration continuously endows scientific theories with a distinctively Chinese character.^[1] To meet the higher demands posed by the development of philosophy and social sciences in the new era, efforts must be accelerated to build a “philosophy and social sciences system with Chinese characteristics, Chinese style, and Chinese spirit.”

Vocational education is a type of education that holds equal importance to general education. Management is a foundational course for economics and management-related majors in higher vocational colleges. As an early-introduced course, it plays a vital role in shaping students' professional awareness, cultivating managerial thinking, and fostering correct values. Management courses are offered at undergraduate, higher vocational, and secondary vocational levels, but the content shows little differentiation and is mostly delivered through traditional theory-based teaching. This approach lacks the distinctive characteristics of “type-based education” required in vocational education. Over time, case-based teaching has become a common and highly regarded method in management education, with cases typically drawn from real-world business scenarios. However, due to the transitional socialization stage of higher vocational students and their lack of practical experience, corporate case studies often fail to create a strong sense of engagement. In this context, traditional culture provides abundant resources for selecting management cases. With its long and rich history, China offers a wide variety of management cases with deep connotations. Management education should make good use of culturally rooted cases with Chinese characteristics and focus on uncovering the educational elements within these cases, identifying those that align with key knowledge points, so as to offer more resource options for teaching management.

Huangdi Neijing is one of the most important medical classics in China and a representative work of traditional Chinese medicine culture. As an ancient medical text, *Huangdi Neijing* not only reflects the medical knowledge and wisdom of ancient China but also contains rich cultural connotations and philosophical reflections. If the human body is regarded as an “organization” and disease as a “management problem,” the wisdom found in *Huangdi Neijing* can provide a localized philosophical

framework for modern management. This is especially meaningful in highly uncertain environments, where its concept of dynamic balance offers significant guidance. Integrating *Huangdi Neijing* into the teaching of management can offer several advantages: first, it can enrich course content, stimulate students' learning interest, and better achieve instructional objectives; second, it can enhance applied undergraduate students' understanding of medical classics and deepen their management insight; third, traditional Chinese medicine emphasizes individualized treatment and regulation rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. By studying typical cases in *Huangdi Neijing*, students can develop keen observation and analytical skills, understand the characteristics and needs of different groups, and provide targeted management recommendations; finally, incorporating *Huangdi Neijing* into study can help students recognize the importance and value of traditional culture, form correct values, strengthen cultural confidence, and enhance patriotic spirit, thereby better meeting the needs of career development.

2. Feasibility Analysis of Applying *Huangdi Neijing* to Management Course Teaching

The feasibility of applying *Huangdi Neijing* to the teaching of management courses lies in the consistency between its medical theories, modes of thinking, and methodologies and the principles of management.

2.1 The Systems Principle of Management — *Neijing's View of Disease*

The system thinking in *Neijing* can be summarized as “holistic connection, dynamic balance, hierarchical order, and open adaptation,” which aligns closely with the principles of modern management systems. Management views organizations as open systems where coordination among internal departments is essential to avoid inefficiency caused by “working in isolation,” and where adaptation to external environments such as policies, markets, and cultural dynamics is required. *Neijing* explains the operation of complex systems through natural laws, such as Yin-Yang and the Five Elements, and grasps the laws of life from a holistic perspective, emphasizing that the diagnosis and treatment of diseases should focus on the whole. “The five viscera communicate and move in order. When one of the five viscera is ill, it transmits influence to those it dominates.” This means the five viscera are interconnected; a disease in one organ can affect others, and a local problem may reflect an imbalance in the whole. When a department in an organization or an organ in the human body encounters an issue, it is not only that part that is problematic—other parts are likely affected as well.

2.2 The Human-Centered Principle of Management — *Neijing's View of the Human Body*

“Heaven covers and Earth supports, all things are complete, none is more precious than humans.” This idea is based on the concept of the unity of heaven and humanity, emphasizing the important role of human subjective initiative. It regards human needs and development as the highest value goal, reflecting the core concept of “people-oriented” in the field of management. Specifically, it places human interests and needs at the center of problem consideration and treats them as the primary objective of various activities. This requires that, in talent management, people should not be treated as mechanized objects, but rather human nature should be valued and respect for human worth upheld. In addition, *Neijing* advocates dialectical treatment, formulating different plans according to individual constitutions (such as the “twenty-five types of Yin and Yang”), emphasizing a people-centered approach and respect for individual differences. Management should avoid one-size-fits-all methods, instead respecting differences among employees in abilities, personalities, and needs, while flexibly adjusting incentive approaches.

2.3 The Principle of Moderation in Management — *Neijing's View on Prevention and Treatment*

Neijing holds that the body's wholeness, dynamic functions, and regulation constitute prevention and treatment. Early stages of illness manifest as functional disorders, while later stages involve substantial pathological changes. “Therefore, spring, summer, autumn, and winter, the yin and yang of the four seasons, diseases arise from excessive use; this is normal.” Management emphasizes the principle of moderation, where an appropriate degree ensures organizational coordination. Overly detailed plans leave subordinates no room for initiative, while overly vague plans lose direction; too many organizational layers hinder information transmission and communication, increasing management costs, whereas too few layers result in ineffective guidance and difficult decision-making;

excessive control diminishes employee motivation, while insufficient control makes it difficult to ensure alignment with plans.

Furthermore, both management principles and *Neijing* study the concept of "variation thinking," emphasizing change and underlying laws. "The yin and yang of the four seasons are the root of all things. To oppose the root is to cut down the source, destroying the essence." Traditional Chinese medicine views diagnosis and treatment as processes of change. Management respects objective laws and adopts a developmental perspective when addressing issues. It emphasizes that management practice should follow certain rules and principles to improve organizational efficiency, effectiveness, and sustainability, while also requiring decision-making tailored to different situations to ensure the organization's success at various stages.

3.Elements Selection for Integrating Huangdi Neijing into Management Course Teaching

3.1Preventive Treatment in Relation to Planning and Control

The important idea of prevention and treatment in *Neijing* is "treating illness before it arises." It states: "Therefore, the sage does not treat what is already ill but treats what is not yet ill; does not manage what is already in chaos but manages what is not yet in chaos. This is what it means. To medicate only after the illness has occurred, or to rectify only after disorder has taken place, is like digging a well when thirsty or forging a spear after a fight— is it not too late?"^[2] This concept emphasizes the importance of preventing disease and maintaining health. In management, decision-makers should also take preventive measures to avoid problems and maintain organizational health. Taking preventive measures before problems arise is better than treating problems after they occur. This reflects two functions of management: first, the control function, which means taking proactive control measures before problems occur, as in "treating illness before it arises." Reactive control refers to corrective actions taken after problems have appeared, like "mending the fold after the sheep are lost." Therefore, proactive control is superior to reactive control; second, it reflects the planning function, as in "the sage does not treat what is already ill but treats what is not yet ill; does not manage what is already in chaos but manages what is not yet in chaos." This means managers should plan and prepare in advance, rather than respond hastily after problems arise. Planning is not about chasing changes, but about anticipating possible future changes and making preparations. Managers need to foresee the future based on changes in the external environment to respond to various possible situations.

3.2 The Organs and Organizational Structure

Neijing describes the five organs as interrelated, each fulfilling its own function. Similarly, organizations operate through division of labor, with departments defined by function, each playing a specific role. The heart governs blood, the lungs govern qi, the liver governs strategy, and the gallbladder governs decision-making. These can be likened to different departments and roles within an organization, each bearing specific tasks and responsibilities. Effective division of labor and collaboration in an organization facilitate the smooth progress of work. *Neijing* emphasizes that the five organs depend on one another, with none existing independently. Likewise, departments and teams within an organization rely on each other and cooperate to achieve shared goals.

According to *Neijing*, the human body is an organic whole, with the heart as the governing center and the five organs at its core. Structurally, the body consists of various organs and systems interconnected by the meridian system. The meridians function like the connecting lines among departments, hierarchies, and employees within an organization, facilitating communication and information flow. The organs resemble organizational departments—each has a distinct function, forming part of the organizational whole, influenced both by the organization and by other departments. By understanding these concepts, managers can better optimize organizational structures and enhance work efficiency.

3.3 The Balance of Yin and Yang and Organizational Coordination

Yin and yang represent one of the core concepts in traditional Chinese medicine and ancient Chinese philosophy. The theory of yin and yang posits that the two exist in a relationship of opposition, transformation, mutual restriction, and waxing and waning. Management is a practical activity aimed at coordinating people, matters, and resources to serve organizational goals. All departments within an organization must support one another, with none being dispensable. The fluctuation between yin and

yang requires regulation—such as "reducing excess and replenishing deficiency"—to restore balance. In management, organizational resources must be dynamically adjusted according to different phases of development: for instance, increasing production during peak seasons and focusing on research and development during off-seasons.

Neijing discusses the yin-yang principles governing all things in nature: "When yin is in excess, yang becomes diseased; when yang is in excess, yin becomes diseased." If yin prevails, yang will be weakened, leading to illness, and vice versa. Therefore, when "yin is balanced and yang is secure," the body remains in a normal physiological state. Imbalance between yin and yang is considered the root cause of illness, and the fundamental goal of treatment is to restore this balance.^[3]

Similarly, imbalances within an organization can manifest as dysfunctions. If left unaddressed, these small issues may escalate into major problems. In *Neijing*, the presence or absence of "harmony" is regarded as the key to evaluating the normalcy and change of life activities. Only by maintaining a state of harmony can physical health and the normal, balanced functioning of blood and energy be ensured. Likewise, management should emphasize "harmony," including harmonious interpersonal relationships within the organization, harmony between the organization and its employees, and coordinated relationships between the organization and its external environment.

3.4 Diagnosis and Decision-Making

A skilled diagnostician observes complexion and feels the pulse, first distinguishing between yin and yang; examines turbid and clear conditions to identify affected areas; observes breathing and listens to voice to identify discomfort; assesses balance and proportion to determine the affected organ; and palpates for floating, sinking, smooth, or rough pulses to understand the origin of illness. Treatment should not exceed what is appropriate, and accurate diagnosis ensures nothing is missed. *Neijing* emphasizes the integration of the four diagnostic methods—observation, listening/smelling, inquiry, and palpation—to avoid one-sided conclusions. A competent physician relies on comprehensive and accurate information. Similarly, management should avoid impulsive, intuition-based decisions and instead establish a holistic information integration system.

Observation corresponds to monitoring trends, such as market dynamics and consumer behavior; listening refers to gathering feedback from customers and frontline employees; inquiry involves research tools like surveys and in-depth interviews; palpation corresponds to quantitative analysis, including financial indicators and operational data.

Decision-making must be rooted in the context of the internal and external environment; organizational choices cannot be made in isolation. The key to effective management decisions lies in accurately identifying and understanding problems. According to *Neijing*, "the pulse changes with the movements of the four seasons," emphasizing the importance of aligning diagnosis with seasonal patterns. Every organizational "illness" has its own cause and mechanism. "Strictly observing the disease mechanism" is the foundation for effective treatment. The principle of "adjusting measures to individual, time, and place" corresponds to contingency decision-making in management: adapting leadership style to team maturity (individual), adjusting strategy based on economic cycles (time), and making localized decisions suited to specific regions (place).

3.5 The Role of Internal Vital Energy in Organizational Systems

The concept of zhengqi (righteous or vital energy) in *Neijing* emphasizes the body's intrinsic resistance and self-healing capacity. "Where evil gathers, there must be deficiency of vital energy." "When vital energy is stored internally, evil cannot invade." These principles indicate that zhengqi plays a decisive role in the onset of illness—only when it is weakened can external pathogenic factors exploit the deficiency and cause disease. By drawing an analogy between zhengqi and organizational health, it becomes evident that institutional design should focus on enhancing internal resilience rather than relying excessively on external controls such as strict reward-punishment systems or audits.

The root causes of organizational problems often lie in flawed system design, such as excessive centralization of power or lack of transparency. When organizational rules and regulations are incomplete, issues are more likely to arise in unregulated areas. Similarly, the absence of formal communication mechanisms encourages the spread of rumors. The phrase "serenity and emptiness nurture true energy" underlines the importance of mental stability for maintaining zhengqi; in management, this translates to replacing fear-based motivation with mission-driven approaches and

fostering self-discipline through cultural alignment. The concept of zhengqi offers valuable insights for management, suggesting that a well-structured organizational system is not merely a tool of constraint but a vital foundation for cultivating long-term organizational vitality.

4. Instructional Design Approach for Integrating *Huangdi Neijing* into Management Courses in Applied Undergraduate Programs for Pharmaceutical Professions

Applied undergraduate management courses should be designed with a goal-oriented approach, centering the learning process around students and restructuring the course flow based on learning outcomes. The teaching process should emphasize understanding and respecting traditional Chinese culture. Students should be encouraged to draw knowledge from pharmaceutical culture. By incorporating elements of pharmaceutical culture, vivid cultural case studies can enrich classroom content. Each chapter in the course design should include a pharmaceutical culture module, which may cover health theories from *Huangdi Neijing*, traditional Chinese medicine knowledge, and its applications in the field of management.

In terms of goal setting, based on Peter Drucker's theory of management by objectives, all tasks become clearer once objectives are established, and individuals are more inclined to strive toward goals they help formulate. Therefore, management education should closely align with professional demands, aiming to cultivate students' competence in their future careers. Before class, students are expected to familiarize themselves with the course content and jointly establish learning goals with the instructor. Building upon the mastery of core principles and methods, the focus should be on developing students' management thinking, managerial skills, and professional literacy. Instruction should target three dimensions: knowledge goals—basic principles and methods of the course; ability goals—communication skills, problem-solving skills, and analytical thinking; and literacy goals—professional values, career orientation, and professional ethics.

In terms of case design, theories from the *Huangdi Neijing* should be integrated with real-world management cases. Based on the background information of the cases, students can analyze these scenarios to understand how traditional Chinese medicine principles function in management decision-making. Students should be guided and encouraged to explore answers alongside instructors during theoretical learning, and classroom discussions or debates can be organized around specific theories or viewpoints from the *Neijing* to cultivate critical thinking and the ability to apply theory.

In terms of performance evaluation, learning outcomes are the most essential aspect of course assessment. The study of management emphasizes both knowledge and action, focusing not only on the learning process but even more on the results. Course assessment should vary from person to person, as each student's level of understanding differs and expectations for outcomes vary. Instruction should be adjusted according to student learning conditions, with personalized evaluation plans designed to progress step by step, continuously optimizing and improving teaching content and methods. In actual assessment, both theoretical and practical components should be considered to provide a comprehensive evaluation of students^[4].

Learning outcomes should be assessed across three main modules: knowledge-based outcomes, management ability outcomes, and managerial literacy outcomes. Knowledge assessment should focus on written exam scores and in-class quizzes; ability assessment should evaluate students' performance in training reports, group projects, and business case competitions, including organizational skills, effective communication and conflict resolution, and the ability to analyze and solve problems; literacy assessment should emphasize cultivating craftsmanship, role-model work ethic, patriotism, strong professional ethics, and a sense of professional responsibility.

Regarding evaluators, under the development context of school-enterprise cooperation in vocational education, knowledge assessment should primarily be conducted by instructors, while ability assessment should involve practice-hour evaluations by corporate mentors, as well as peer evaluations within groups.

Conclusion

The holistic view, dialectical thinking, preventive treatment, and the principle of adapting to three factors in the *Huangdi Neijing* provide management science with a unique Eastern philosophical perspective, addressing deficiencies in Western management theories regarding dynamic balance, flexible management, and preventive decision-making. Vocational undergraduate education emphasizes

the cultivation of application-oriented talents, and traditional Chinese medicine management thinking can help students respond more flexibly to complex management situations. Interdisciplinary integration in teaching practice enhances learning outcomes by strengthening students' systems thinking, improving dialectical decision-making abilities, and fostering preventive management awareness through goal setting, medical culture case teaching, and personalized evaluation. Vocational undergraduate education stresses the unity of knowledge and action, and the practical wisdom of the *Huangdi Neijing* aligns closely with the practical demands of management positions. Incorporating the *Huangdi Neijing* into vocational undergraduate management courses not only broadens the cultural dimension of management education but also cultivates new types of managers who combine scientific rationality with humanistic wisdom, thereby providing an innovative path for China's characteristic management education system.

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