

MANAGEMENT ANTE MANAGEMENT: PROVERBIAL EXPRESSIONS WITH MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION MEANING IN THE ANCIENT BOOKS OF WISDOM

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Abstract. *Besides their cultural heritage and particular value, the old books of wisdom are presented by this essay from a novel perspective: that of identifying and highlighting meanings of management and administration (good governance included), yet applicable–mutatis mutandis–in current circumstances as well. The ancient examples discussed were produced many centuries and millennia ago, well before the seminal works on scientific management were (end of the 19th century–beginning of the 20th century). The research approach consisted of identifying proverbial expressions and formulations (relevant from the standpoint of management) in works from antiquity (known as books of wisdom). Then these relevant fragments were extracted and discussed in the contemporary environment, still understanding the original circumstances when they were generated. The purpose of this paper is to display a part only of this effort, limited to three representative examples from ancient Chinese, Indian and Mesopotamian books of wisdom. There are two main objectives while investigating this less studied area: (i) to provide a definitive answer relative to the existence of such fragments; if the answer is positive then (ii) to assess and discuss their characteristics. This endeavour contributes to better understanding the ancient roots which served as necessary philosophical and practical background for later contributors to the contemporary scientific management and administration science. The implications are multifaceted, on a large range, not only for management and its origins: from cultural and philosophical to social and historical perspectives, for both synchronous and longitudinal comparative studies. Deeper studies may provide evidence for the ancestors' way of life and work, about their crafts and trades, money and business, about how their institutions were administered, communities were ruled and, ultimately, they have progressed and developed.*

Keywords: *management, administration, books of wisdom, paremio-management, proverbial expressions*

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INTRODUCTION

In historical terms, by the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, the scientific management was fathered by Frederick Taylor who has developed his practical theory, that scientific principles and methods can be applied in management. Obviously, he was not the only one who took notice of the unprecedented development of industry in that period: Henry Fayol, Laurence Gantt and Henry Ford – all prominent engineers [1, p.5] – have reported remarkable achievements, both in their industrial practice and in authoring seminal articles and books [1, pp.5–7].

Pre-Taylorism

Taylorism did not spring from scratch or by divine overnight inspiration as the economic environment during preceding two centuries provided favourable conditions for industrial development in particular, and emergence of scientific management.

Üsdiken and Kipping [2] underline the specific relationship between history and management scholarship that has evolved from the 19th century until today, while also identifying the remaining "blind spots". In this respect, the scholars produced notable works on how organizations have evolved in time [3–5] as well as on business history [6–7].

Yet a legitimate question stands still: *What was before pre-Taylorism?*

In search of origins in space and time

Nevertheless, the historical investigation, goes deeper back in time, by the time our ancestors have learnt how to use the writing they invented: "In terms of the beginnings of historical writing, these are said to be located in ancient

Egypt and in what could be called the Near East, between the Nile delta, the plains of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers in Anatolia, home to various civilizations. They mainly take the form of chronological lists of rulers but also include parts of the Hebrew Bible.” [2, ch.1].

LITERATURE SURVEY: BOOKS OF WISDOM

Undoubtedly, the early notable works—as the best-sold book worldwide, *the Bible*—were religious, primarily. However, besides their religious content, the ancient books of wisdom have the merit to include secular elements, not always independent – as Alter [8, pp. xxiii–xiv] notes: “Abundant evidence has been uncovered, in Egypt and in Mesopotamia as well, that *Wisdom writing was a fairly widespread practice in the ancient Near East*. The perspective of *Wisdom literature is international*, and, in many instances, one might say, *universalist*. It raises questions of value and moral behaviour, of the meaning of human life, and especially of the *right conduct of life*.” (italicized – C.S.)

Managing before the scientific management

If the identification of secular elements as proverbs are easy to identify – as being distinct chapters or even independent books – the separation of religious and philosophical elements in the books of wisdom might be a considerable endeavour. Then it is not surprising that ancient philosophy is among the root-elements of “management *ante* management” that may be identified [1, p.8; 9]. Notably, Aristotle was both an echo of existing proverbs and a source of dicta that eventually became proverbs; Plato wrote *Politeia* (i.e. *Republic* in Greek).

The religion (as place of religious gathering and worship) was the physical kernel of urban agglomerations and, consequently, of planned urban development [10] and, at a later stage, city administration. In terms of administration and management elements, along the military and city administration, the religious institutions [1, pp.9–10] were early examples of hierarchic organization. Moreover, the religion, as institution, was an element of progress as long as it was a place of education as well [11–13; 14, p.268; 15, p.267].

Defining the scope of work

Two more observations should be made in order to clarify the scope of this work.

First, besides *books of wisdom* (yet a large area to be investigated) and religious and philosophical books in general, there are several other categories of works that precede pre-Taylorism (e.g., heroic epics, legends and myths; fables and short stories; fairy tales – most of them anonymous creations that circulate orally, traversing and overcoming centuries) as well as older documents that are expected to be sources of embryonic administration and management elements.

Second, *proverbs* are another large but relatively well-defined category of sources worth to be investigated. However, they are so diverse: from ruling instructions to moral guidelines and codes of conduct to weather and life lessons (including private and even intimate relationships, but also *good crafting and trading practices*). Their diversity explains why proverbs can be parts of books of wisdom (e.g., *Proverbs* is a distinct chapter of *The Bible*) or totally independent anonymous popular creations, which are studied as such, generating a distinct study area (*paremiology*).

Paremiology and paremio-management

The concert of the paremiologic studies is vast: Mieder [16] authored has an international bibliography that counted 10,000 paremiological and phraseological publications from around the world, which issued during the past two centuries only (and counting). Some studies refer strictly to the theoretic framework of this discipline [17–19], while Bhuvaneshwar [20] identified not less than 50 proverb definitions. Many studies refer strictly to a certain language, culture or specific folklore area. Despite this trove of studies on proverbs, there was not much on managerial meaning of proverbs. Several consistent works in this respect [21, 22] have led to the following remarks [23, p.134]:

- *Proverbs* are as old as human articulate speaking; and they have evolved – as rhythmic and rhymed, collective and anonymous creations of the people, reflecting their life experience – within human communities and society up to-date, proving extraordinary resilience.
- *Proverbs with managerial meaning* are considerable older than principles of contemporary scientific management; and they have evolved over centuries, reflecting the people’s work and trade, administration and business experiences.
- *Proverbs with managerial meaning exist in any language and culture*; and they can be used as universal means of communication and mutual understanding regardless the intellectual level – in managerial communication and education (as teaching aids), while teaching scientific management.

The study of the managerial meanings of proverbs is neither paremiology nor scientific management in absolute terms. Nevertheless, this inter-disciplinary approach is a premiere [22, p.19] which open further paths for both longitudinal and comparative studies in this area of study that might be called *paremio-management* [1, p.12].

Since investigation of proverbs proved successful, it is challenging to *extend the same methodological approach on books of wisdom*, which contain if not proverbs proper then proverbial expressions or formulations that reflect life lessons or instructions for their descendants – to eventually *identify early and weak signals of management*.

Therefore, this study is focused on exploration of books of wisdom in order to identify early elements of

administration and management practices or even principles. It actually is a continuation of previous efforts to stream a light through a largely open window facing the aged books of wisdom. Consequently, the remaining of this paper is structured as follows: methodological approach; presentation and discussion of the examples selected; followed by final remarks – conclusion, limitations of this essay as well as further investigation options.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The volume of the ancient books of wisdom is considerable, and their investigation has to overcome archaeological obstacles, restoring difficulties, translation from languages that are not spoken anymore, and solve accessibility problems among other issues.

Therefore, this pilot study is limited to three sources, which were selected based on their accessibility in reliable translations, old enough (BC), and covering a diverse cultural and geographic area:

- China (*Tao Te Ching*)
- India (*Panchatantra*)
- Mesopotamia (*Instructions of Suruppak*).

In each case, the text is analysed to eventually identify *proverbial expressions or formulations* that may have managerial meaning or interpretation (in case of metaphoric formulations). Most relevant formulations are selected and displayed. Comments are provided when necessary.

The research methodology is essentially qualitative (deep metaphorical content analysis).

There are two main objectives: (i) to provide a definite answer about the existence of such elements—call them *proverbial expressions with management and administration meaning* (PEMAM); if positive, then (ii) to assess their characteristics, mostly qualitatively; and, possibly, to discuss their managerial meaning in contemporary context.

THE CASE: THREE EXAMPLES

Example 1: Chinese Tao Te Ching

The *Tao Te Ching* (*The Book of The Way and its Power*) is considered the earliest book of Chinese school of thought called Taoism and “the ideas put forward in this text constitute the first statement of one of the three key philosophies on which the Chinese tradition of thought rests, the other two being Confucianism and Buddhism” [24, p.vii].

The work was traditionally attributed to Lao Tzu (trad. 6th–5th century BC), also known as Laozi; semi-legendary Chinese philosopher, considered the founder of Taoism, contemporary to Confucius (founder of Confucianism).

However, the authorship is disputed by modern scholars since Wilkinson [24, p.viii] argues: “the view mostly widely accepted now is that this text dates from the latter part of the aptly named Warring States period of Chinese history (420–222 BC), and that it is probably an anthology of Taoist sayings, rather than the work of one man”.

Beyond the debates on the paternity of this work, our purpose is to highlight the fact that “Tao” is a term used in the ancient Chinese philosophy, which literally means “way” or “path” as a “way of doing something” – hence the important meaning of this text as a *set of principles*. In this respect we agree with Wilkinson’s observation [24, pp.xvii–xix] that a distinction should be made between the religious side of Taoism (*tao chiao*) and the action oriented philosophical side of Taoism (*tao chia*) that plays an important role in *Chinese spiritual, artistic and intellectual life, and creativity*. In the same line of philosophical thought, the Nature is “an object of reverence and worthy of the most careful attention”, stimulating the *scientific study* of the natural order as well as *protection of the natural environment*.

Neither analysis of Taoism as philosophy nor full analysis of this book are the scope of our work. However, in this context, a fair selection of Tao principles applicable to rulers and administrators are highlighted below [25]:

- About the greatest ruler: “The greatest carver [i.e. ruler] does the least cutting.” (Chapter 28, p.29).
- Ruler’s leadership: “He who in dealing with the empire regards his high rank as though it were his body is the best person to be entrusted with rule; he who in dealing with the empire loves his subjects as one’s body is the best person to whom one can commit the empire.” (Chapter 13, p.13).
- Ministers and their role to serve the people: “... Nor till fatherland was dark with strife / Did we hear of *loyal slaves* [as ministers called themselves].” (Chapter 18, p.18).
- Hierarchical relationships: “The man of *higher power* does not reveal himself as a possessor of power; therefore he keeps his power. The man of *inferior power* cannot rid it of the appearance of power; therefore he is in truth without power.” (Chapter 38, p.39).
- Governing during peace versus war times: “Kingdoms can only be governed if rules are kept; Battles can only be won if rules are broken [i.e. by unexpected manoeuvres].” (Chapter 57, p.60).
- About [war] strategies: “The strategists have the sayings: *When you doubt your ability to meet the enemy’s attack, take the offensive yourself, and If you doubt your ability to advance an inch, then retreat a foot.*” (Chapter 69, p.73).
- Authority of rulers: “Never mind if the people are not intimidated by your authority. A Mightier Authority will deal with them in the end. Do not narrow their dwellings or harass their lives [i.e. heavy taxation]; and for the very reason that you do not harass them, they will cease to turn [away in disgust] from you.” (Chapter 72, p.76).

- About good governance versus poor governance: “The people starve [i.e. low living standard] because those above them [i.e. rulers] eat too much tax-grain [i.e. excessive taxation]. That is the only reason why they starve.” (Chapter 75, p.79).
- About making sound decisions: “To allay the main discontent, but only in a manner that will certainly produce further discontents can hardly be called successful.” (Chapter 79, p.83).

Example 2: Indian *Panchatantra*

Panchatantra – also known as *The Fables of Bidpai* [26] – is an Indian collection of ancient stories written in Sanskrit. The work is anonymous, since the author/authors are unknown. The oldest existing book is dated around 300 CE, and it is attributed to Vishnu Sharma, an Indian ancient (c. 4th–6th centuries BC) scholar. However, the stories are considered to be more ancient [27], being already in circulation by the time they were collected. Govindan [28] reasons that *Panchatantra* stories are 5000 years old. The legend goes that Vishnu Sharma was asked by the king Amar Shakti to “impart the world wisdom” to his three sons. A collection of fables apparently, the book is really about the *wisdom needed for ruling a state, governance and good administration*.

Notably, it is important to let the readership know that “governance” is a term used in this paper in that sense of state administration and rulers’ authority (*the right to make decisions*) and control (in its managerial sense), and definitely less as authoritarian power to dominate discretionarily.

It is beyond the purpose of this essay to debate the authorship or the time each story from *Panchatantra* was produced; the fact is that this book in five parts (actually “five treatises” or strategies or principles in Sanskrit) is among the most translated Indian literary works. Besides Olivelle’s translation, another English translation belongs to Ryder [29]. Regardless of the small differences between translations, the five books discuss, in an accessible language of fables and meaningful stories with predominantly anthropomorphised characters, essential issues to be acknowledged and mastered by a ruler, which we would nowadays say *good administration and management knowledge areas* (after: Ryder [29] and Olivelle [27]):

- Book 1 (Mitra-bheda ~ dissonance among friends): causes of misunderstanding among friends or allies, leading to the loss of friends; importance of alliances in a competitive environment.
- Book 2 (Mitra-lābha ~ advantages of alliances): winning of friends and securing the alliances.
- Book 3 (Kākolūkīyam ~ the story of crows and owls): on war and peace actually.
- Book 4 (Labdhapraṇāsām ~ loss of what was attained): on loosing what you have gained.
- Book 5 (Aparīkṣitakārakam ~ to do with no pre-examination): on decision making – unprepared or ill-prepared actions.

Olivelle [27] notes that characters of the Book 5 are predominantly humans, stressing the importance of well-prepared decision making, given their longer-term consequences. Or, in the proverbs’ language:

Haste makes waste.

It is interesting that, as compared to other notable ancient works, *Panchatantra* does not have a religious print or purpose, but a secular, neatly declared educative purpose, for the use of the ruler’s successors (call them today inheritance *administrators* or *managers*). Most of the lessons are time-invariants; they are as legitimate today as they were millennia ago (*Panchatantra*, Book 1), as translated by Ryder [29, p.26]:

“If loving kindness be not shown,
to friends and souls in pain,
to teachers, servants, and one’s self,
what use in life, what gain?”

The rulers should not be despotic and kind attention should be paid to “souls in need”, equally to teachers (upper class) and servants (lower class) – which is a democratic principle, despite strict Indian caste-based social order.

Example 3: Mesopotamian wisdom in *Instructions of Suruppak*

According to Buccellati [30, p.5]: “There are two major strands in the Mesopotamian wisdom tradition. A popular one (proverbs and folk stories) reflects what we may call a zero-degree reflection on the human condition, whereas a scribal tradition hails from a more detached intellectual effort at defining this human condition especially in its moments of greater fragility.” While proverbs and folk stories circulated orally, Buccellati considers them older than writing. The scribal tradition, on the other hand, made possible that Mesopotamian wisdom to be better documented. Nonetheless both categories are important.

Regarding the first category, Alster [31] published two volumes that include 30 collections of ancient Sumerian proverbs, which are considered [32] the world’s earliest (it is not surprising, since Sumer was the place where the writing was invented). Nevertheless, from the perspective of this research, they are important as content for two main reasons:

- Many proverbs tell their short stories with real characters that had real occupations in the Sumerian society by that time (as shepherds, fishermen and boatmen, weavers and potters) along real beggars and slaves, singers and scribes, merchants and hired workers, and temple people. Those proverbs depict a vivid and dynamic society, with functioning organizations which were, definitely, *managed*.

- There also are proverbs which refer to the legal proceedings of that time, meaning that society was functioning according to a legal system in place. Then crafts and trades were *planned, organized and controlled* – as the scientific management will say millennia later.

Instructions of Suruppak is a book of wisdom attributed to the mythical king Suruppak (or Shuruppak), name that coincides with the documented name of a real Mesopotamian city.

The instructions, “carved in stone” (i.e. clay tablets), dated to c.2600–2500 BC, were unearthed in the Southern part of Mesopotamia.

It is confusing that the list of Sumerian kings as translated from Weld-Blandell Prism [33] does mention the names of the last two antediluvian kings: Ubara-Tutu and Zin-Suddu (Zisudra) but not the name of Suruppak, while the translation of *Instructions of Suruppak* [34, p.93] reads: “Šuruppak, the son of Ubartutu, offered instructions to his son Ziusudra: *O my [son], instruction I offer thee, take my instruction, / O Ziusudra, a word I would speak to thee, give ear to my word, / My instruction do not neglect, / My spoken word do not transgress.*” [underlined – CS].

Despite uncertainty (name of city or king, king or not), the *Instructions* are as real as the name of that lady-scribe which is carved by the end of *Instructions* tablets: “Pride be to the lady who completed the great tablets, the maiden Nisaba, that Shuruppak, the son of UbaraTutu gave his instructions” [35]. Alster [36] describes the instructions given by the king to his son as list of “about 100 admonitions”, both ethical and practical, to serve as good ruling guidelines. They were negatively formulated mostly (you should not, my son, ...). One of the most quoted instructions, met also in later Egyptian books of wisdom is:

“You should not serve things, things should serve you, my son!”

This formulation reflects an advanced way of thinking, not only as a secular formulation (non-religious, definitely) in the first part (“you should not serve things”); but also, the second part of instruction (“things should serve you”), neatly points to an active entrepreneurial orientation. King or not, the analysis of the translated document [35] leads to the conclusion that Shuruppak was a remarkable character (according to PEMAM italicized below). His profile is depicted as follows (relevant words are underlined):

Land and cattle owner:

- You should not make a well in your field; people will cause damage on it for you.
- You should not locate a field on the road.
- You should not scatter your sheep in unknown pastures.

Living in a city:

- You should not place your house next to a public square; there is always a crowd there.
- Without suburbs a city has no centre either.
- A small city provides its king with a calf; a huge city digs a house plot.

... but not like the king living in the palace:

- The palace is like a mighty river: its middle is goring bulls; what flows in is never enough to fill it, and what flown out can never be stopped.
- If you hire a worker, he will share the bread bag with you; he eats with you from the same bag and finishes up the bag with you. Then he will quit working with you and, saying “I have to live on something”, he will serve at the palace.

Rich enough:

- You should not buy a vicious bull.
- You should not buy a donkey which brays.
- If you hire a worker, ...
- You should not buy a house-born slave

Well-living but with hard working culture:

- At the harvest time, at the most priceless time, collect like a slave girl, eat like a queen, this is how it should be.

With right business and entrepreneurial orientation towards any source of income:

- My son, a field situated at the bottom of the embankments, be it wet or dry, is nevertheless a source of income.

With basic finance knowledge and relationship:

- You should not drive away a debtor; he will be hostile to you.

Skilled in building business partnerships:

- You should not establish a home with an arrogant man: he will make your life like that of a slave girl.

Good decision maker:

- You should not pass judgement when you drink beer.

Knows what a hierarchic organization is and how it functions; he observes the hierarchy but is flexible:

- To have authority, to have possessions and to be steadfast are princely divine powers. You should submit to be respected; you should be humble before the powerful. My son, you will them survive against the wicked.
- By grasping the neck of a huge ox, you can cross the river. By moving along at the side of the mighty man of your city, my son, you will certainly ascend.

Intelligent enough to distinguish between essence and appearance:

- You should not choose a wife during a festival. Her inside is illusory. [Everything] on her is borrowed.

RESULTS DISCUSSION

The preference for the larger syntagm “proverbial expressions” instead of “proverbs” is easy to accept in the context of different definitions for a proverb [20]. If from linguistic perspective the discussion is essential, for the purpose of this study it is not indispensable. In addition, the borders between proverbs and many proverbial expressions are so fuzzy at one extreme, and between proverbial expressions and philosophical statements are so rigid at the other that make this observation more than necessary.

All selected Panchatantra “fables”, Suruppak’s and Tao instructions are “proverbial expressions” with management and administration meaning (PEMAM). Nevertheless, besides proverbs and instructions, Samet [37] considers a larger variety of wisdom literature: pious sufferer compositions; perceptive hymns; vanity literature; disputation poems; riddles; fables; and folktales. Leaving aside vanity and predominantly religious literature, the folktales, fables and riddles, as well as heroic (epic) poems, are still of interest (for their managerial and administrative meaning) – therefore they deserve separate studies that exceed the scope of this work.

The purpose of this piece of work is neither to solve nor even to address the good deal of controversies linked to age or paternity of proverbs. It was in view of this study to keep straight the PEMAM line and avoid either side of religious or philosophical interpretations or arguable debates. The philosophical or religious controversies (e.g., disputation poems), which all are life-time studies, were avoided as beyond the purpose of this essay.

The research lens was focused on books of wisdom in order to identify early signals of management principles or administration practices. Nonetheless, the focus PEMAM does not intend to minimize the importance of wisdom literature for moral, linguistic and cultural education.

CONCLUSIONS

Three sets of examples from three different geographical regions of ancient civilizations (Mesopotamia, India and China) have documented the existence of PEMAM, in various circumstances. These proverbial expressions were neither random nor unique but systematic and carefully planned instructions addressed to successors, future rulers or governors, formulated plainly or metaphorically, as ready-to-apply solutions or decision models to be applied in daily life or exceptional instances, peace or war time.

This investigation of these ancient sets of documents did not aim to discuss religious ideas or abstract philosophical principles. However, any more profound understanding of the circumstances the old wisdom literature was produced would be beneficial.

Moreover, the contribution of this work to *paremio-management* should not be understated.

The implications are important for scholars interested in inter- and cross-disciplinary studies as well as for practitioners (all-level administrators, managers, strategy and policy makers interested in understanding their mission).

The old wisdom literature has long-lasting echoes in time. Just recently, while reading a novel by Karl Gjellerup set more than a century ago in India (*Die Weltwanderer* translated as *The World Wanderers*) I was struck to see cited an archaic proverb from *Panchatantra* (translation C.S.): “The one who said that serving is like a dog life was wrong! Here [in India], while the dog is free, the servant must follow his master’s will”. Needless to say, that, besides the satisfaction to see a piece of old wisdom cited in contemporary top literature, it was the confirmation that an ancient proverbial expression was properly used in contemporary environment, about two millennia later, as an illustration of the master-servant relationship or the hierarchical manager-employee relationship in the terms of Taylorism.

Notably, *Die Weltwanderer* was published in 1910, by the time Taylor was writing his seminal works that certified the birth of scientific management.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

For obvious reasons, it should be made clear that not all genres of wisdom literature, and not all of it were investigated. This study presents three case-examples only. For all that, extensive and intensive studies are further opportunities. For example, the study of Greek and Roman ancient philosophers or Hebrew and Egyptian books of wisdom are large areas to be investigated from PEMAM standpoint. In addition, comparative and cross-relational studies (e.g., to what extent the Mesopotamian wisdom literature influenced the Hebrew and Egyptian such literature) are challenging, too.

The purpose of this essay was not to clean the dust from each page or tablet, but to stream a light through this window looking to troves of ancient wisdom and prove that *early seeds of management science were there*.

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