

‘Nature¹ and Nurture’ - The Making of a Renaissance Manager

I grew up in a remote corner in China. During summer, us children would be sent into nearby cornfields to hunt and destroy a soot-tinted, marble-shaped, malicious fungus grown on corn stalks. This fungus, called *umi*, was always deemed as local corn farmers’ top enemy. Every time, while rummaging through vast areas of corn shades and occasionally snacking on baby corn ears, we would half-jokingly curse why, unlike edible mushrooms found under pines and oaks, *umi* served nothing useful and still required us to toil... Years later, under some purely accidental occasions, I ran into *umi*’s counterpart in Mexico. There, and under the name of *huitlacoche*, it is a highly nutritional and scarce delicacy. Some farmers would grow corn as a medium to farm it, and crowning ‘black gold’ (*el oro negro*) as its other name.

Leonardo da Vinci once said that ‘nature is the source of all true knowledge²’. Similarly, Peter Drucker also notes that ‘knowledge is not to be found in books. But what a man has between his ears, or in his fingertips, and consists in application³.’ While I hoped to use the small episode above to serve as an example and illustrate that when nature presents its wonders, our biases and assumptions can lead our thinking astray and even reach polarised conclusions. Therefore, to me, the making of a Renaissance Manager is inherently a continuing process of actively seeking and refining our understandings of the natural world and our social world. This process enhances our abilities to examine, analyse, reflect, and seek knowledge by forging our relationships with Mother Nature and with our own and other cultures and societies and at the meantime, allowing us to remove certain outdated concepts and practices. Ultimately, it allows us to understand the formal and informal rules of the games of our world and our societies to manage for a better tomorrow.

¹ In this essay, the term ‘nature’ is largely used to refer to the natural world and less related to our innate abilities.

² Leonardo Da Vinci, *Leonardo’s Notebooks: Writing and Art of the Great Master*, ed. H. Anna Suh (Black Dog & Leventhal, 2013)

³ Peter F. Drucker, “Powers and Responsibilities of the Business Executive,” *Business & Society* 3, no. 2 (1963): 21-30.

My notion of the Renaissance Manager closely relates to my upbringing and academic background. My family relocated when I was twelve, allowing me spend my senior years in a small coastal city not far from Confucius's hometown, whose Analects has shaped my character and thinking. His teachings, such as the 'three ways of gaining wisdom: from reflection, then imitation, then by experience⁴', or that of 'knowledge is always grounded in a human world⁵' are recurring themes that we can also find in Drucker's writings. Later, I moved to the UK to pursue an undergraduate degree in Development Studies and upon graduation, faced the options of either becoming an anthropologist and stay in London or change course to study Management. I opted for the second along with a breve stay in Cambridge. Now, I work as a business intelligence consultant leading a few core teams in a start-up. This trajectory has allowed me to benefit greatly from multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary training and has also enabled me to appreciate Drucker and others' teachings in a detailed manner.

I find joy from reading Drucker. One is always awed by the depth and width of the topics covered in his works as he leads us to traverse time and space to Ancient Inca, to China, to Japan, and to the Western World, connecting history, philosophy, anthropology, political economy, culture studies, religious studies, and sociology to provide us with valuable management-related learnings, lessons, and insights. From early childhood discussions with Joseph Schumpeter to later intellectual exchanges with academic colleagues like Karl Polanyi⁶, Drucker's ability to convey, to tell stories and deliver them meticulously to our hearts, has been undoubtedly shaped by his own understandings of both the natural world and our social world.

⁴ John Makeham, "The Original Analects: Sayings of Confucius and His Successors, and: The Analects of Confucius: A Philosophical Translation (review)," *China Review International* 6, no. 1 (1999): 1-33.

⁵ David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, *Thinking Through Confucius* (SUNY Press, 1987).

⁶ Daniel Immerwahr, "Polanyi in the United States: Peter Drucker, Karl Polanyi, and the Mid-century Critique of Economic Society," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 70, no. 3 (2009): 455-466.

While Drucker spent his life as an ‘ecologist of societies’, the quest to understand nature and our relationships with nature has been rooted throughout Leonardo da Vinci’s life. Other than an artist, an anatomist, a designer, a biologist, he also served as a military engineer⁷ and worked closely with Niccolò Machiavelli⁸ as well as made less well-known contributions to subject areas such as geology, aviation, botany, and many others. Da Vinci’s curiosity about nature is similar with the teachings in Tao Te Ching that to become a master in leading and managing, one needs to ‘understand our chaotic nature and universe⁹’ and to seek beauty from the ordinary and discover order from the order-less-ness. Leonardo da Vinci devoted his time to observing, reading, accurately documenting, and understanding nature¹⁰. Even after five hundred years, his ideas, observations, and reflections still resonate with us. For example, when observing the colour of rivers and how rivers flow, he accounts that ‘when the greater current of the smaller river empties into the smaller current of the larger river, then the smaller current appears more turbid in contact with the greater’¹¹. We could perhaps draw a strikingly similar parallel of this description with the progression of disruptive technologies into mainstream markets.

It is particularly interesting how the Chinese translation of ‘Renaissance’ literally translates into the ‘rebirth of literature and arts’, implying a subdued role for sciences and technology. As someone who has come from a non-technical background and now working closely with technical partners, this has indeed imposed challenges for me. As Drucker has predicted, it has been increasingly difficult for us to see polymaths nowadays as industries, markets, and

⁷ John W. Lieb, “Leonardo da Vinci - Natural philosopher and engineer,” *Journal of the Franklin Institute* 191, no. 6 (1921): 767-806.

⁸ Ronald J. Nelson, “Leonardo da Vinci as Technical Writer,” *Technical Communication* 35, no. 1 (1988): 80.

⁹ Douglas A. Hensler, Rick L. Edgeman, and Jose-Luis Guerrero-Cusumano, “East meets West: Weaving the threads of Deming, da Vinci and the Tao Te Ching,” *Total Quality Management* 11, no. 4-6 (2000): 501-508.

¹⁰ Sidney Forman, “Lessons in Leadership - Leonardo da Vinci,” *The Military Engineer* 50, no. 337 (1921): 376.

¹¹ Daniel J. Jones, “Leonardo da Vinci - Pioneer Geologist,” *Brigham Young University Studies* 4, no. 2 (1962): 119-132.

professions further specialise and new inventions commercialise. Nonetheless, this does not and should not prevent us from trying to understand other specialists' work and knowledge reservoir¹². I have met clients who plant tea, clients who launch commercial satellites, and clients who build complex hydro-electric power systems. Although I might not have all the information to understand how each of them produces and operates, Drucker has provided us with some essential questions about the nature of their work that we can raise. For instance, 'what each is about? What is it trying to do? What are its central concerns? What are its central theories? What major insights has it produced? What are its important areas of ignorance, its problems, its challenges¹³?'

Drucker has taught us the importance of asking the *right* questions. This reminds me of a small out-of-classroom experience I once had when undertaking a module in Qualitative Research Methods. It was a mock ethnography task – imagine if you are an alien who has just landed on earth, go to a Topshop store, observe, and make notes. What would you see? For any earthling, perhaps we could categorize our findings according to Drucker's analysis of a business enterprise¹⁴, we see our physical environment, a crowded, noisy shop with garments on railings. Then we see through an economic perspective, there are shop assistants working and trying to clean the space, there are economic transactions taking place as one touches one's contactless payment card. Then we can try to understand the relationships between people, between shoppers and attendants, before couples, and even between passers-by and shop-goers. The Japanese phrase, '*kuuki-wo-yomu*', or to read the atmosphere, could help us in this matter¹⁵.

¹² Peter F. Drucker, "Work and Tools," *Technology and Culture* 1, no. 1 (1959): 28.

¹³ Peter F. Drucker, "The Rise of the Knowledge Society," *The Wilson Quarterly* 17, no. 2 (1976): 52-71.

¹⁴ Peter F. Drucker, "'Management Science' and the Manager," *Management Science* 1, no. 2 (1955): 115-126.

¹⁵ Tadamasa Kimura, "Keitai, Blog, and Kuuki-wo-yomu (Read the atmosphere): Communicative Ecology in Japanese Society," *Ethnographic Praxis in Industry Conference Proceedings* 2010, no. 1 (2010): 131-152.

However, for a newly landed alien, it is possible that none of these makes any sense. Drucker has often told the tale of America's soap company executives falsely believing that American housewives live their lives around soap and would spend time companies the whiteness of their laundry¹⁶. Interestingly, this attitude has been and still is reflected in our laundry commercials today. In such a case, a small ethnographic exercise like the one discussed above could serve to be helpful. To pretend one is an alien, although funny at first thought is, in fact, a conscious way to suppress our own biases and assumptions about this world.

It concerns us and helps us to undo what has been done and to break the social constructs that we have always believed in and thus could enable us to gain new learnings of our customers, our employees, our stakeholders, and our communities. As Drucker suggests, a Renaissance Manager strives to acquire the 'ability to understand many other knowledges¹⁷'. And to say that 'management is a liberal art', is to mean by undergoing such an education, a manager can obtain a mindset and a way of synthesizing systematic thinking to help to understand a one's work better and to reflect on how to do a better job. A manager exists to support their 'first-rate people to do a first-rate job their way¹⁸'. He or she is no longer the boss, but a 'planner and coordinator¹⁹'.

A Renaissance Manager also values 'conessione²⁰'. That is, they recognize and appreciate the 'interconnectedness of all things and phenomena'. A Renaissance Manager will, therefore, see the 'relevance and interconnectedness of the political governance, physical sciences, social sciences, technology, business and other disciplines²¹'. In this way, one does

¹⁶ Peter F. Drucker, "Big Business: Private Enterprise, Public Service," *Business & Society* 4, no. 1 (1963): 15-20.

¹⁷ Drucker, "The Rise of the Knowledge Society," 52-71.

¹⁸ Peter F. Drucker, "The Effective Administrator," *NASSP Bulletin* 48, no. 291 (1964): 157-166.

¹⁹ Peter F. Drucker, "Drucker on "Knowledge Work" and Careers: Who is the Boss?" *Phalanx* 20, no. 2 (1987): 18-19.

²⁰ Michael J. Gelb, *How to Think Like Leonardo da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Every Day*. (Dell Publishing, 2000).

²¹ Wayne Visser and Polly Courtice, "Sustainability Leadership: Linking Theory and Practice," *SSRN Electronic Journal*,

not need to be a philosopher to learn about Karl Jaspers's standpoint on technology and to apply such learnings into our current line of work by uniting 'both the universe of doing and that of knowing²²'. Understanding technology is essential as it has shaped the ways we live and work and how it is continuing to shape our relations with others and the environment.

Similarly, one does not need to be a sociologist to read Émile Durkheim's analysis of suicide, and one can indeed benefit from such a reading to become more aware of employees' welfare. Perhaps I can identify with this the most as many of my colleagues, myself included, share a similar poignant feeling of the 'uprootedness²³' that is caused by enormous economic and social changes as well as large scale rural to urban migration in China. And when we read Polanyi, we can still find the concept of the 'commodification of labour' highly relevant today especially revolving the recent protests around the toxic '996 work culture' found in many Chinese and foreign tech companies alike.

Sports is another highly effective way to enhance our understandings of the natural and social world. Many sports provide us with a perfect opportunity to be close with nature and often at times a litmus test that reflects one's qualities – qualities such as fair play, honesty, and perseverance. Sports also provide us with another gateway to generate new thinking. Although Drucker has not written extensively on sports, he has linked different sports²⁴ to help us understand that there is more than one kind of team and how different teams perform with their own mode of cooperation and following each game's rules.

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²² Peter F. Drucker, "The Technological Revolution: Notes on the Relationship of Technology, Science, and Culture," *Technology and Culture* 2, no. 4 (1961): 342-351.

²³ Edward A. Tiryakian, "Chapter 7 - Sociological Dimensions of Uprootedness," in *Uprooting and Development: Dilemmas of Coping with Modernization*, ed. George V. Coelho and Paul I. Ahmed (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013): 131-152.

²⁴ Peter F. Drucker, "Drucker on Management: There's More Than One Kind of Team," *The Wall Street Journal*, last modified November 19, 2009, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704204304574544312916277426>.
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While there are very few historical records on Leonardo da Vinci's life as a sportsman, we have learnt that he was extremely fit in his youth and thus he was able to devote his time and energy and focus on understanding nature and his surroundings. Other than keeping one's physical and mental health in check, sports can also further our understandings of management as a practice. For example, the phrase 'steer before gear' in powerboating is a great example that still resonates with Drucker's teaching that 'there is nothing worse than the right decision about the wrong matter'²⁵. A right decision, say to speed up and overtake another vessel without changing one's course, could mean that you either crash or hurt the boat's engine.

No one is born a manager. Not even Peter Drucker. While we may say that Leonardo da Vinci exemplified an 'untiring search for an understanding of nature'²⁶. Peter Drucker has shown us, throughout his life, an untiring search for an understanding of institutions, organizations, and societies, and ultimately – the untiring understanding of management as a social organ²⁷. Thus, the quest to becoming a Renaissance Manager is a lifelong task and it requires us to devote ourselves, challenge ourselves, and fine-tuning our practices well. As Drucker reminds us, 'knowledge work requires continuous learning on the part of the knowledge worker, but equally continuous teaching on the part of the knowledge worker'²⁸. Fortunately, the sharing of knowledge has become increasingly convenient as more specialists and professionals are beginning to open up and teach through digital mediums with a proliferation of MOOCs.

A Renaissance Manager never stops seeking knowledge. To know that the

²⁵ Peter F. Drucker, "Decision-Making and the Effective Executive," *NASSP Bulletin* 52, no. 328 (1968): 24-39.

²⁶ Lois Olson and Helen L. Eddy, "Leonardo da Vinci: The First Soil Conservation Geologist," *Agricultural History* 17, no. 3 (July 1943): 129-134.

²⁷ Peter F. Drucker, "Management: The Problems of Success," *The Academy of Management Executive* 1, no. 1 (1987): 13-19.

²⁸ Peter F. Drucker, "Knowledge-Worker Productivity: The Biggest Challenge," *California Management Review* 41, no.2 (1999): 79-94.

clash of civilisations is simply a clash of ideas, values, and belief systems; and the end of history marks the beginning of another. A Renaissance Manager would pass around and pass on the teachings and spirits of great men like Confucius²⁹, like Leonardo da Vinci, like Peter Drucker, and many others who have paved their thinking into management as a discipline – to celebrate diversity and mobility³⁰, to contribute to community and society³¹, to relentlessly pursue knowledge and build on to our adaptive capacity, to learn by ‘doing’ the job³² and to learn from other each, to have the courage to experiment and fail fast³³, and ultimately, to continue to strive to make ‘human strength productive³⁴ in the face of change.

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²⁹ Ronald J. Nelson, "Leonardo da Vinci as Technical Writer," *Technical Communication* 35, no. 1 (1988): 199-210.

³⁰ Peter F. Drucker, "Worker and Work in the Metropolis," *Daedalus* 97, no. 4 (Fall 1968): 1243-1262.

³¹ S. Klein, "Drucker as Business Moralist," *Journal of Business Ethics* 28, no. 2 (November/December 2000): 121-128.

³² Peter F. Drucker and Shaker A. Zahra, "An Interview with Peter Drucker," *The Academy of Management Executive* 17, no. 3 (July 2003): 9-12.

³³ Peter F. Drucker, "The Deadly Sins in Public Administration," *Public Administration Review* 40, no. 2 (March/April 1980): 103-106.

³⁴ Peter F. Drucker, "Decision-Making and the Effective Executive." *NASSP Bulletin* 52, no. 328 (May 1968): 24-39.

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