



**Undergraduate assignment feedback form**  
**(to be completed by marker)**

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| <i>Module Code:</i> SICH5010                                                                                     | <i>Student number:</i> 2205749 |
| <i>Module title:</i> The Daodejing                                                                               |                                |
| <i>For completion by marker:</i><br><i>Comments:</i><br><div style="height: 300px;"></div>                       |                                |
| <i>Marker's signature:</i>                                                                                       | <i>Date:</i>                   |
| <i>Provisional mark:</i><br><b>NB.</b> All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board. |                                |

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# Understanding Laozi's Idea of *Wuwei* 無為 through Chapter 64 of *The Daodejing*

*Wu-wei*, literally means 'non-action', is an important idea of Laozi. The phrase has appeared in 9 chapters in *Daodejing*, and there are more ideas about *wu-wei* in other chapters throughout the book. What is *wu-wei*? Is it as negative as it sounds like? In this presentation, I will focus on chapter 64 of *Daodejing*, to see what *wu-wei* means in Laozi.

The translation of *the Daodejing* used in this presentation is based on Wing-tsit Chan, for it basically conveys the original meaning, and is also clear and simple.

Because the chapter is a bit long, I've divided it into 4 parts according to their meanings and will go through it one by one.

1.

What remains still is easy to hold. What is not yet manifest is easy to plan for. What is brittle is easy to crack. What is minute is easy to scatter.

其安易持，其未兆易謀，其脆易泮，其微易散。

At the very beginning of something, when it has not yet happened, or there are only some little signs, it is easy to put it into the right way and eliminate the future disaster before it develops.

Deal with things before they appear. Put things in order before disorder arises.

為之於未有，治之於未亂。

This is the principle. At this moment, before anything has formed, it is the easiest time to do it, and little effort could make huge changes. But to do this, we need to be perceptive and know the way things are going.

A tree as big as a man's embrace grows from a tiny shoot. A tower of nine storeys begins with a heap of earth. The journey of a thousand *li* starts from where one stands.

合抱之木，生於毫末；九層之臺，起於累土；千里之行，始於足下。

Next, it gives three examples to help us understand. Every big project begins with a small start. Although the start could be as small as someone can easily neglect, over time it can develop into a powerful project. This is the natural order of things. If someone tries to change it after it has grown to a big tree, it will require huge efforts with little reward, because it no longer

follows the way of nature.

This idea echoes chapter 63: Prepare for the difficult while it is still easy. Deal with the big while it is still small.

圖難於其易，為大於其細。

The easy and the small are the start of the difficult and the big. The start is the crucial point and the key to success. From this, we learn that Laozi's *wu-wei* is not doing nothing, but rather doing things in accordance with the way of nature, with the Dao.

## 2

He who takes an action fails. He who grasps things loses them. For this reason the sage takes no action and therefore does not fail. He grasps nothing and therefore he does not lose anything. 為者敗之，執者失之。是以聖人無為故無敗，無執故無失。

The first two sentences repeat in chapter 29:

He who acts on it harms it. He who holds on to it loses it. Among creatures some lead and some follow. Some blow hot and some blow cold. Some are strong and some are weak. Some are in safety and some in risk. Therefore the sage discards the extremes, the extravagant, and the excessive. (Trans. Wing-tist Chan with modification)

為者敗之，執者失之。故物或行或隨；或歔或吹；或強或羸；或載或隳。是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。

After that, it says everything has its own characteristics, so one should follow their nature and act in accordance with their characteristics. Otherwise, if you hold on to your own opinions and force things to go your way, you will certainly fail and lose them. Therefore, the sages return to the natural order.

Back to this chapter, when it says that the sages 'take no action' and 'grasp nothing', it means that they simply follow the natural order without forcing their own will. This is why they do not fail.

## 3

People in their handling of affairs often fail when they are about to succeed. If one remains as careful at the end as he was at the beginning, there will be no failure.

民之從事，常於幾成而敗之。慎終如始，則無敗事。

It reminds us of another common mistake. The first part emphasizes the importance of the

beginning, while this part reminds us that we must also be cautious at the end. At this stage, people tend to slack off, thinking that the work is almost done, and this often leads to failure. We should not deviate from the way of nature from beginning to end.

#### 4

Therefore the sage desires to have no desire. He does not value rare treasures. He learns to be unlearned, and returns to what the multitude has missed (Tao).

是以聖人欲不欲，不貴難得之貨；學不學，復衆人之所過。

There is another interpretation about ‘desire not desire’ and ‘learn not learn’, which is by Heshanggong 河上公: the sages desire what the common people do not desire and learn what they cannot or do not learn.

Both explanations make sense, but I prefer the second one, for it accord with the following sentence. The sages pursue what people don’t. Ordinary people value precious treasures, and pursue material comfort, fame, intelligence, and so on. What the sages value the most is the Dao, which is often missed by the ordinary people.

Thus he supports all things in their natural state but does not take any action.

以輔萬物之自然，而不敢為。

The last sentence concludes this chapter. The sages take no action (*wu-wei*). All they do is to follow the natural order and return to the Dao.

Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢 said that the ‘nature’ (or ‘self so’) is the central value and fundamental ideology of the philosophy of Laozi, while *wu-wei* is the principled method of realising this value.

自然是老子哲學的中心價值和根本思想，無為則是實現這一理念和價值的原則性方法。

Therefore, through the practice of *wu-wei*, we can learn to approach the natural state, where everything is in accordance with the Dao and the De.

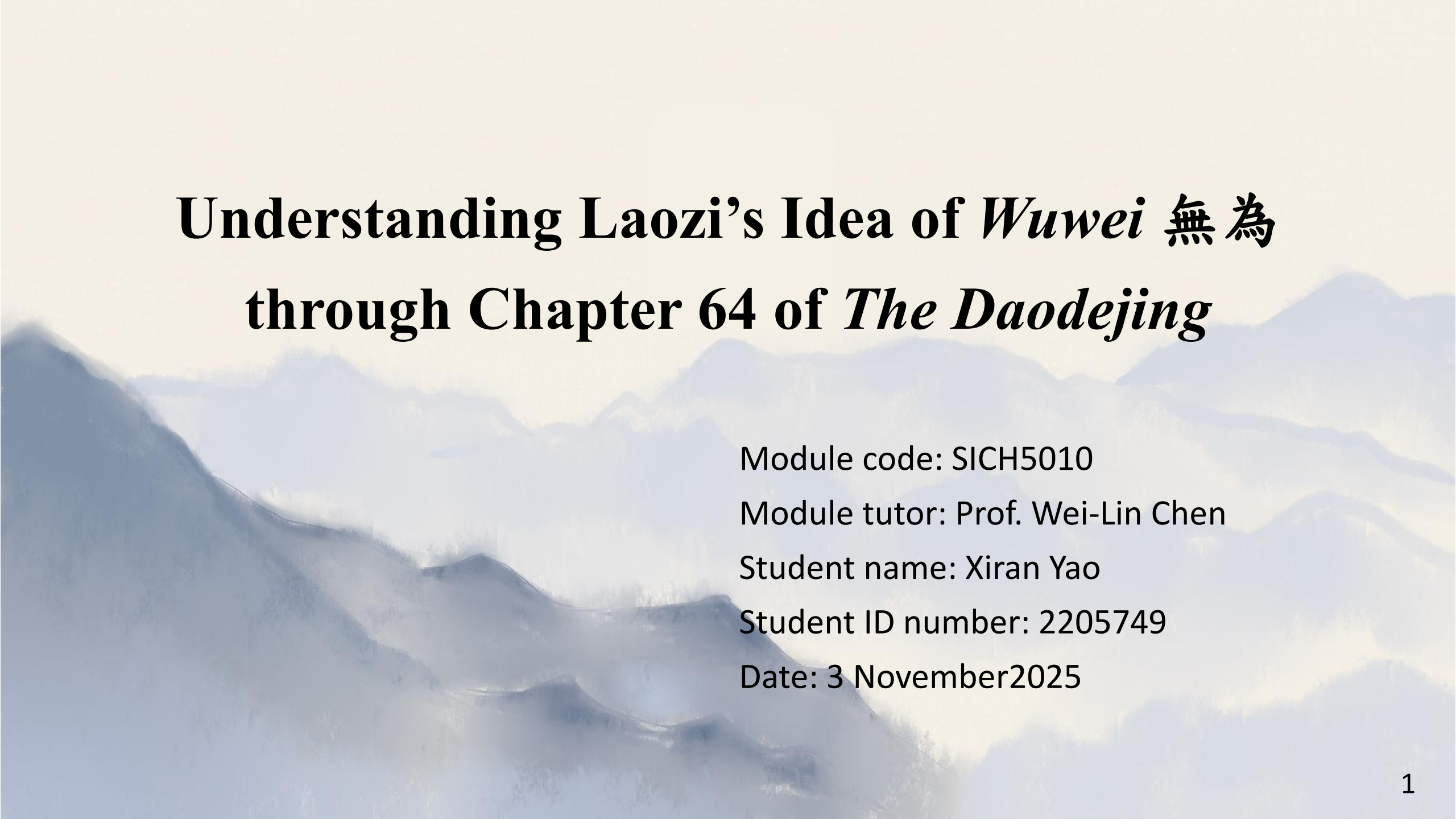
#### Conclusion

*Wu-wei* is not about doing nothing at all, but about refraining from actions that interfere with the natural way. It means doing things wisely, in accordance with the characteristics of each thing.

Roger Ames translates *wu-wei* as ‘noncoercive action that is in accordance with the *de* of

things'. In this translation, he highlights two key points: acting without force or personal will, and following the natural way.

If we follow the natural way in everything we do, we can accomplish our tasks with the least effort. In fact, the *wu-wei* method that Laozi teaches us is the most effective and effortless way of doing things, because it is in harmony with the Dao.

The background of the slide features a traditional Chinese ink wash painting of misty mountains. The mountains are rendered in various shades of blue and grey, with soft, ethereal mist filling the valleys and surrounding the peaks. The overall mood is serene and contemplative, reflecting the Daoist theme of the presentation.

# Understanding Laozi's Idea of *Wuwei* 無為 through Chapter 64 of *The Daodejing*

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Date: 3 November 2025



*Wu-wei* 無為 (non-action) in *the Daodejing* 道德經:

2, 3, 37, 38, 43, 48, 57, 63, 64

(Translation used in this presentation is based on Wing-tsit Chan)

# 1. Deal with things before they happen—the importance of the beginning

What remains still is easy to hold.

What is not yet manifest is easy to plan for.

What is brittle is easy to crack.

What is minute is easy to scatter.

Deal with things before they appear.

Put things in order before disorder arises.

其安易持，其未兆易謀，

其脆易泮，其微易散。

為之於未有，治之於未亂。

## Three examples

A tree as big as a man's embrace grows from **a tiny shoot**.

A tower of nine storeys begins with **a heap of earth**.

The journey of a thousand *li* starts from where **one stands**.

合抱之木，生於毫末；九層之臺，起於累土；千里之行，始於足下。

➤ Chapter 63:

Prepare for the difficult while it is still **easy**.

Deal with the big while it is still **small**.

圖難於其易，為大於其細。

## 2. Those who act fail—follow the natural order

He who takes an action fails. He who grasps things loses them.

For this reason the sage takes no action and therefore does not fail.

He grasps nothing and therefore he does not lose anything.

為者敗之，執者失之。是以聖人無為故無敗，無執故無失。

### ➤ Chapter 29:

He who acts on it harms it. He who holds on to it loses it.

Among creatures some lead and some follow. Some blow hot and some blow cold.

Some are strong and some are weak. Some are in safety and some in risk.

Therefore the sage discards the extremes, the extravagant, and the excessive.

為者敗之，執者失之。故物或行或隨；或歔或吹；或強或羸；或載或隳。

是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。

### 3. Be on the Way from beginning to end

People in their handling of affairs  
often fail when they are about to succeed.

If one remains as careful at the end as he was at the beginning,  
there will be no failure.

民之從事，常於幾成而敗之。慎終如始，則無敗事。

#### 4. Follow the natural state and take no action

Therefore the sage desires to have no desire.

He does not value rare treasures.

He learns to be unlearned,

and returns to what the multitude has missed (Tao).

是以聖人欲不欲，不貴難得之貨；學不學，復衆人之所過。

- ‘Desire not desire’ 欲不欲, ‘learn not learn’ 學不學:

The sages desire what the common people do not desire, and learn what they cannot or do not learn. (Heshanggong 河上公)

#### 4. Follow the natural state and take no action

Thus he supports all things in their natural state but does not take any action.

以輔萬物之自然，而不敢為。

- Liu Xiaogan 劉笑敢: The ‘nature’ (or ‘self so’) is the central value and fundamental ideology of the philosophy of Laozi, while *wu-wei* is the **principled method of realising this value**.

自然是老子哲學的中心價值和根本思想，無為則是實現這一理念和價值的原則性方法。

## Conclusion

### *Wu-wei*

- Refraining from actions that interfere with the natural way.
- In accordance with the characteristics of each thing.
- The most effective and effortless way

Roger T. Ames translates *wu-wei* as:

‘noncoercive action that is in accordance with the *de* of things’.

- Two key points: acting without force, following the natural way

The background of the slide is a soft, painterly illustration of a mountain range. The mountains are rendered in shades of blue and grey, with mist or fog filling the valleys and surrounding the peaks. In the upper right corner, two white birds with black wingtips are shown in flight, moving towards the right. The overall atmosphere is calm and serene.

Thank you for listening!

# Bibliography

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