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An Analysis of ‘Non-contention’ in *Tao Te Ching*

論《道德經》中的「不爭」

A dissertation submitted to the University of Wales Trinity Saint

David

In fulfilment of the requirements for BA (Hons) in Sinology

Degree

威爾士三一聖大衛大學

漢學文學學士

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Abstract

In modern society, with highly developed technology and unprecedented speed of media transmission, people are eager to acquire more things to live a happier life, but also exhausted by the pursuit. However, in traditional Chinese values, non-contention is the highest good. In *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Zi advocated following the way of Heaven to conduct oneself in the world without contention. This idea is very different from the current trend, even the opposite. But in a serious and in-depth understanding of the virtue of non-contention, the essence of non-contention, the effect of non-contention helps us to break the inherent prejudice, to understand Lao Zi said the wisdom of the Tao, to apply in daily life. In the end, both the country and the individual can gain the greatest benefit.

Key words: supreme good, the virtue of non-contention, the essence of non-contention, the effect of non-contention, *Tao Te Ching*

摘要

現代社會，隨著科技水平高度發達，媒體傳播的速度也前所未有，人們一方面渴求獲得更多的東西，以期生活更加幸福，一方面卻也因為這種追逐而疲憊不已。然而，中國傳統價值觀中以不爭為最善。在《道德經》中，老子提倡效法天道應以不爭處世。這樣的理念與現今流行的趨勢大不相同，甚至可以說是背道而馳。不過在認真深入地了解不爭之德、不爭之體、不爭之用後會幫助我們打破固有的偏見，從而體悟老子說的大道之智，運用在日常生活。最後無論國家還是個人都能獲得最大的利益。

關鍵詞：至善、不爭之德、不爭之體、不爭之用、道德經

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1.Introduction

1.1The Research Background

‘Involution’, originally from Latin, means to roll up. It originated from Kant and Alexander Golden Weiser. According to Kant, ‘involution’ refers to the phenomenon of internal entanglement and degeneration. In Alexander Golden Weiser’s opinion, “‘involution’ refers to the process of continuous refinement and complexity of the system under the condition that the external expansion conditions are strictly restricted.”¹ Later, American anthropologist Clifford Geertz used the concept of ‘involution’ to study rice agriculture in Java in his book *Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia*. As a result, ‘this concept is widely known in anthropology and sociology and has become a special concept to describe the phenomenon of social and cultural development retardation.’²

In recent years, the term ‘involution’ has been introduced into Chinese society and is widely used in all walks of life. Now ‘involution’ refers to a state of excessive competition, that is, in the context of competition, to be better than others, artificially added the standard far beyond the current stage can achieve. For example, in school, students will supplement their knowledge in after-school

¹ Ji Yaping 计亚萍, ‘A Review of the Theory of “Involution”’, *Journal of Changchun University of Technology(Social Sciences Edition)*,03(2010),pp48-49

² Ji Yaping 计亚萍, ‘A Review of the Theory of “Involution”’, *Journal of Changchun University of Technology(Social Sciences Edition)*,03(2010),pp48-49

classes in advance, so that on the first day of the new semester, the teacher finds that most of the class has already studied the whole semester's lessons in advance. Some college students even shouted the slogan, 'I would rather work myself to death, but I also want to surpass my classmates.' However, the same kind of competition that *neijuan* 内卷 represents is a never-ending internal battle. Everyone is overwhelmed but dare not stop, can only be forced into this competition. The reason is that in today's highly developed media, many things become transparent and clear. In the process of horizontal comparison, people are more and more dissatisfied with the existing life. To get the same material or spiritual enjoyment as others, they squeeze themselves desperately and finally find it difficult to bear. In recent years, the number of anxiety and depression is soaring, people's life is more convenient, but it is more difficult for them to feel happy. Thus, the continuous development of competition will not give people satisfaction but will bring a lot of harm.

1.2 Research Objectives

As we can see, the side effects of competition are obvious, and the idea is influenced by American values. However, competition has never been advocated in the traditional Chinese concept. The sages taught people to be humble and courteous and not to contend with others. Therefore, modesty and non-contention is the moral model advocated by Chinese people in their mind. As the originator

of Taoism, Lao Zi mentioned non-contention many times in *Tao Te Ching*, and called it the supreme good. According to statistics, 'In *Tao Te Ching*, non-contention appears eight times.'³ The last sentence of the whole book ends with 'the way of the sage is bountiful and does not contend,'⁴ from which we can see the significance of the thought of non-contention. This article takes non-contention as the core. First, the specific performance of non-contention is described in detail and put forward some views about the essence and effect of non-contention. What mentioned above is to explore the thought of non-contention comprehensively and deeply in *Tao Te Ching*, comprehend the profound and lasting wisdom behind non-contention, and find the guiding significance of non-contention to modern society.

1.3 Literature Review

In recent years, many people have explored the virtues of non-contention in *Tao Te Ching*. And most of the articles agree that non-contention is not about doing nothing, but not chasing too much. In addition, almost all regard non-contention and Tao together, thinking that non-contention is the wisdom that goes along with heaven. The above mentioned is also what author agree with. However, in the process of discussing the essence of non-contention, there are few in-depth studies on the reasons behind contention and non-contention, and there are many people

³ Dong Jingquan 董京泉, 'An Analysis of Lao Zi's Thought of "Non-contention"', *Journal of Beihua University*,06(2007),pp10-15

⁴ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p88

who stop at the level of interests and losses. For example, Chen Xuxin 陳緒新, in ‘Subtle and Clear Interpretation of Laozi's Life Wisdom of Non-contention and Good Speech and Faith’ , believes that ‘non-contention is a special form of contention, and it is the means, methods and approaches of contention, and the ultimate goal of contention.’⁵ In ‘the *Tao Te Ching* on Modesty’, Shen Shengchao 申聖超 holds that ‘without competition, there would be no development of society; but disorderly competition would affect fairness.’⁶ It can be seen that they fundamentally agree with the role of contention, and see the negative effects of excessive contention, then they use the replace way which more gentle than contention to achieve their goals. The author holds different views on this point, and the reasons for contention and non-contention should have a deeper meaning in addition to the interests and losses. Only by analyzing and clarifying this point can the greatest effect of non-contention be revealed. Therefore, non-contention is not a mild substitute for contention, but is fundamentally different from contention. Therefore, this article focuses on *Tao Te Ching* thought of non-contention to clarify some own views.

⁵ Chen Xuxin 陳緒新, Yang Yujie 楊玉潔, Gao Panpan 高盼盼. ‘Subtle and Clear Interpretation of Laozi's Life Wisdom of Non-contention and Good Speech and Faith’, *Journal of Anhui Agricultural University*, 05(2013), pp 40-45

⁶ Shen Shengchao 申聖超, ‘The Tao Te Ching on Modesty’, *Xue Lilun* 學理論, 03(2016), pp 159-161

2. The Virtue of Non-contention

2.1 The Connotation of Non-contention

As one of the core ideas in *Tao Te Ching*, non-contention is not passive self-avoidance, just as *wuwei* 無為 advocated by Lao Zi is not doing nothing. It is not a way to compromise because you cannot compete with others, but a behavior characteristic of people who understand the way of heaven and earth. Those who have such wisdom understand that everything in the universe is ‘the way gives them life; virtue rears them.’⁷ Therefore, man is not the dominator of all things. If one acts recklessly under such perceiving, he will be punished accordingly. Lao Zi said, ‘woe to him who willfully innovates while ignorant of the constant.’⁸ Going against nature is a recipe for disaster. As Lao Zi said, ‘the net of heaven is cast wide. Though the mesh is not fine, yet nothing ever slips through.’⁹ The net of heaven is very wide, and though it is invisible and intangible, no one can escape. Therefore, non-contention is a kind of insight into the natural rules of a high level of wisdom.

It can be said that non-contention means to act in accordance with way of nature. ‘The way of heaven benefits and does not harm; the way of the sage is bountiful and does not contend.’¹⁰ The Way of Heaven benefits all things without harming them. The sage acts according to the principle of ‘man models himself on

⁷ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p58

⁸ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p20

⁹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p80

¹⁰ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p88

earth, earth on heaven, heaven on the way, and the way on that which is naturally so.’¹¹ Therefore, the sage also helps all things and does not contend with them. Non-contention is a practical embodiment of Tao, and a criterion for people to follow heaven and earth. Then, under the guidance of the core idea of non-contention, the specific performance is non-contention for profit and non-contention for good fame.

When it comes to benefits, we all know that this is the motivation of most people's behavior and the purpose of many people's contention. The person who has the virtue of non-contention, like water, is willing to ‘settle where none would like to be.’¹² ‘In the humblest place, but doing noble dedication, promoting the growth of all things.’¹³ That is why Lao Zi said that the sage wears coarse cloth but has a priceless piece of jade in his arms, which means that his inner soul is as flawless as a gem. ‘It comes close to the way.’¹⁴ Because of the quality of non-contention is very similar to the Tao. This is reflected in the story of Feng Yi 馮異 in *The Book of the Later Han*. ‘When the troops came to a place to camp, Feng Yi 馮異 would often retreat to the tree alone while the other generals would sit together and discussed who had done the most contribution. Then he was known in the army as *dashu jiangjun* 大樹將軍.’¹⁵ Although Feng Yi 馮異 never contend for merit with other generals, the soldiers are willing to join his team, it

¹¹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p30

¹² D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p12

¹³ Wang Cong 王聰, ‘Superior Goodness is Like Water Acting Without Contend -- Tao Te Ching’, *Lantai Neiwai* 蘭台內外, 04(2018), pp77-78

¹⁴ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p12

¹⁵ Translated by myself, Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Houhanshu Jijie* 後漢書集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1984),p237

can be seen that non-contention can make people be sincerely convinced. Like the Tao, it is silent but powerful. Therefore, non-contention does not mean to suffer defeat, but to achieve the greatest victory. 'The way of heaven excels in overcoming though it does not contend.'¹⁶ If people can imitate the law of heaven, do not contend with others, go with the flow, do not pursue fame and wealth, then they can get the public's recommendation and trust.

2.2The Cause and Harm of Contention

It is well known that thoughts are the cause behind actions. Then what kind of cognition is reflected behind the contention? People think that many things can be get by means of contention. For example, money, status and so on. If you are smarter than others, naturally can get a bigger cake than others. Thus, People agree with the idea that contention are efficiency and through it could get what they want. Even hearing the truth wisdom of non-contention, it is still very difficult to change their cognition. This is just like the Tao that Lao Zi said is not accepted by people. 'When the best student hears about the way, he practices it assiduously; when the average student hearsay about the way, it seems to him one moment there and gone the next; when the worst student hears about the way, he laughs out loud.'¹⁷ People who can accept without doubt are very rare, and most of the world is dubitative about the wisdom of the Tao. Similarly, even if people know the benefits of non-

¹⁶ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p80

¹⁷ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p48

contention, it is difficult to completely abandon their own cognition and act in accordance with Lao Zi's teachings. Therefore, those who follow the teachings of sages are truly wise. Only such people can establish immortal merits.

Tao Te Ching says, 'what is firmly rooted cannot be pulled out; what is tightly held in the arms will not slip loose.'¹⁸ Master *Hanshan* 憨山 said, 'Those who keep their achievements with smart and intelligence can be exceed by those who are smarter and more intelligent than them.'¹⁹ What is gained by cleverness would be taken by those who are more resourceful than you. For example, a person can stand out in a certain aspect and occupy the first place. Then there must be someone who will come and try to beat the record. This is a victory that cannot last forever. But people who are not intended to contend can hold this achievement for a long time. For example, Confucius, although he did not want to boast about his achievements, is still remembered by people nowadays and respected as the 'the greatest sage and teacher.' This is 'he does not brag, and so has merit; he does not boast, and so endures.'²⁰

The behavior of contention in addition to reflect the above people's wrong cognition, but also will have great harm. Lao Zi said, 'there is no crime greater than having too many desires; there is no disaster greater than not being content; there is no misfortune greater than being covetous.'²¹ Desire is a great crime. 'The five colors make man's eyes blind; the five notes make his ears deaf; the five tastes

¹⁸ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p61

¹⁹ Translated by myself, Shideqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie* 老子道德經解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2019)

²⁰ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p27

²¹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p53

injure his palate; riding and hunting make his mind go wild with excitement.’²² The lure of material desire makes people lose their reason. In this process, the desire will further expand. As a result, people will also contend more fiercely. In modern society, ‘Consumerism and money worship permeate every aspect of life in various forms. Material possession represented by money becomes the main yardstick to measure individual value.’²³ However, ‘that is why excessive meanness is sure to lead to great expense; too much store is sure to end in immense loss.’²⁴ Excessive greed will inevitably lead to great expense; Too much accumulation is lead to too much loss.

People only know that getting what they want is a good result, but they do not know that ‘The Tao of heaven is to lose those who are in surplus and profit those who are not in full.’²⁵ Contention means a state of surplus and non-contention means a modest attitude, when a person not to contend is the beginning of gain, when a person contend means on the road to lose. Lao Zi thought, ‘if you would take from a thing, you must first give to it.’²⁶ This is also in line with *the Book of Changes* ‘Nothing is always straight without encountering dangers, nothing always goes forward without turning back.’²⁷ It shows that things are not immutable, and there is a certain truth that things will develop in the opposite direction when they become extreme. Then the end of the contention means have

²² D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p16

²³ Cui Jian 崔健,Zhang Bo 張博, Liu Xiaochen 劉曉晨. ‘Some Thoughts on Lao Zi's Thought of "Doing Without Contending"’, *Chuancheng* 傳承 · 04(2016),pp 150-151

²⁴ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p51

²⁵ Translated by myself, Cheng yi 程頤, *Zhouyi Chengshizhuan* 周易程氏傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2011),p86

²⁶ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p41

²⁷ Translated by myself, Cheng yi 程頤, *Zhouyi Chengshizhuan* 周易程氏傳, p66

nothing at all. Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 named his study *Qiuquezhai* 求缺齋, which shows that he does not seek perfection and reflects the lofty wisdom of ‘bowed down then preserved.’²⁸

Lao Zi advised common people, ‘one who is good aims only at bringing his campaign to a conclusion and dare not thereby intimidate.’²⁹ To be able to achieve the goal is enough, people cannot just use force to seize, keep accumulating and not satisfied. If so, it will bring about great disaster, and even end a person's life. ‘To forsake the rear for the lead, is sure to end in death.’³⁰ It shows that the practice of fighting to get ahead and refusing to retreat is very harmful. For example, After the change of dynasties, a lot of meritorious officials would be killed. At that time, they could have saved themselves if they had known how to retire from political life. For example, after the feudal princes Gou Jian 勾踐 restored his state, Fan Li 范蠡 left the royal court. However, Wenzhong 文仲, another meritorious statesman, is not willing to retire from political life. Fan Li 范蠡 wrote a letter to Wen Zhong 文仲 advising him that he could only go through hardships with Gou Jian 勾踐, but not enjoy riches and fortune with him. ‘If you do not leave, Goujian 勾踐 will kill you.’³¹ Wen Zhong 文仲 took Fan's advice and stopped taking part in government affairs on the grounds of illness. However, Wen Zhong 文仲 did not avoid being killed by Goujian 勾踐. Similarly, after the establishment of the Han Dynasty, Zhang Liang 張良 said to the emperor, ‘I would like to give up the

²⁸ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p27

²⁹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p35

³⁰ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p74

³¹ Translated by myself, Zhao ye 趙曄, Liu Xiaodong 劉曉東 *Ershiwu bieshi* 二十五別史(Jinan: Qilu publishing house, 2000)

things of the world like Chishongzi 赤松子 seeking Tao.’³² From then on, he retires from political life. However, Han Xin 韓信, who was also a meritorious man, was cling to riches and honor and refused to leave. He was later killed by Empress Lu 呂后 and Xiao He 蕭何.

There are many wise and talented people in history, but few understood the wisdom of non-contention and really did it. Therefore, there are many people who have established great achievements in history, but few people can always maintain their achievements forever. ‘To retire when the task is accomplished is the way of heaven.’³³ *Yanshi jiaxun zhizu* 《顏氏家訓·止足》 says, ‘The way of heaven and earth, ghosts, and gods, hate the state of arrogance and surplus. A person who keeps modest and refrain from complacency can avoid being harmed.’³⁴ ‘Things begin to decline after they have reached their peak form.’³⁵ *Kongzi jiayu* 《孔子家語》 says, ‘The way of heaven will not remain unchanged. It has never been the case that a state of surplus can remain unchanged for a long time.’³⁶ When things reach their extremes without moderation, the next step is decline and extinction. Therefore, ‘the result of retreat is, in essence, a kind of progress. It is to get rid of the constraint of the existing success, to move towards a greater future than before and build a new career.’³⁷

³² Translated by myself, Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2014)

³³ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group, 1963), p13

³⁴ Translated by myself, Yan Zhitui 顏之推, *Yanshi jiaxun* 顏氏家訓 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1936), p168

³⁵ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group, 1963), p35

³⁶ Translated by myself, Zhonghua Book Company, *Sibu Beiyao* 四部備要 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1989), p25

³⁷ Translated by myself, Chen Guying 陳鼓應, Bai Xi 白奚 *Laozii pingzhuan* 老子評傳 (Nanjing: Nanjing University Press, 2001), p274

2.3 The Metaphor of Water

Tao Te Ching vividly embodies the virtue of non-contention by taking water as the carrier. This is a kind of metaphorical expression. As in *the Metaphors We Live By* ‘We can use metaphorical linguistic expressions to study the nature of metaphorical concepts.’³⁸ Metaphor is a basic cognitive way and means of human beings, ‘that is, to recognize and understand unfamiliar and abstract things with the help of familiar and concrete things in the past.’³⁹ For example, Lao Zi uses water, the most common substance, to describe the virtue of Tao, ‘so as to make the abstract and profound Tao more emotional, intellectual and interesting.’⁴⁰

Lao Zi praised ‘highest good is like water. Because water excels in benefiting the myriad creatures without contending with them.’⁴¹ The supreme good is like water, which silently benefits everything but does not contend with it. It is because of the virtue of water that it becomes an indispensable part of our life. The nature of water is delicate, but it is not without strength. ‘In the world there is nothing more submissive and weaker than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it.’⁴² Though water is the most delicate thing in the world, it is most powerful to destroy those strong things. ‘The most submissive

³⁸ Lakoff George, Johnson Mark, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: Chicago University Press,1980),pp8 .

³⁹ Mao Chunzhou 毛春洲, Li Xiang 李翔, ‘Water Metaphor and Its Connotation in Tao Te Ching From the Perspective of Metaphor Theory’, *Journal of Human University of Science and Technology*, 03(2021),pp. 177-184

⁴⁰ Zhang Pengfei 張鵬飛, ‘Good is Like Water Without Conflict: The life Enlightenment of Lao Zi's Philosophy of Life’, *Journal of Guanzi 管子*, 01(2011), pp.84-87

⁴¹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p12

⁴² D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p85

thing in the world can ride roughshod over the hardest in the world.’⁴³ Therefore, non-contention is the most tough and tensile character, nothing can stand it in the way. ‘The reason why the River and the Sea are able to be king of the hundred valleys is that they excel in taking the lower position.’⁴⁴ *Heshanggong* 河上公 annotated ‘The River and the Sea located at the lowest place, then all the rivers converge here spontaneously. Just as a king can become the leader of his people by being humble to them.’⁴⁵ It is because of the quality of water modesty can make the tide of the River and the Sea surging forward with great momentum, as the king has modest quality nature can get the people's recommendation and trust. *Baopuzi waipian cijiao* 《抱樸子外篇·刺驕》 says, ‘If a man is modest and never boasts of his merits, then there are many people who surrounding him; If one is conceited and disdainful, many people will leave him.’⁴⁶ Therefore, non-contention is not useless, but can achieve the effect of ‘it is because he does not contend that no one in the empire is in a position to contend with him.’⁴⁷

Professor *Chen Xuxin* 陳緒新 said, ‘Because a person is selfless, he can get great benefits in the end, because a person who does not contend with others can get the best thing.’⁴⁸ Because water does not want to contend with everything,

⁴³ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p50

⁴⁴ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p73

⁴⁵ Translated by myself, Wang ka 王卡 collation, *Laozi daodejing heshanggong zhangju* 老子道德經河上公章句 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1993),p258

⁴⁶ Translated by myself, Zhang Songhui 張松輝, zhangjing 張景 annotation, *Baopuzi waipian* 抱樸子外篇 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), p577

⁴⁷ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p73

⁴⁸ Chen Xuxin 陳緒新, Yang Yujie 楊玉潔, Gao Panpan 高盼盼. ‘Subtle and Clear Interpretation of Laozi's Life Wisdom of Non-contention and Good Speech and Faith’, *Journal of Anhui Agricultural University*, 05(2013), pp 40-45

nothing under the whole heaven can contend with it. Because water has the quality of non-contention, water has the virtue of supreme goodness. Similarly, 'it is because it does not contend that it is never at fault.'⁴⁹ This is quite different from the common people. In the end, the person who wins fruits of victory becomes the target of public anger and resentment, and it leads to the next round of contending. But people who are as non-contention as water do not attract the disapproval of others. Because the more you can avoid confrontation, the more people are willing to follow, naturally there will be no resentment. This is the philosophical speculation in *Tao Te Ching* that 'turning back is how the way moves.'⁵⁰ Which also reflects the great wisdom of Lao Zi and the broad and long-term view which difference from the common people.

3.The Essence of Non-contention

3.1Non-contention Means *Wuxin* 無心

Lao Zi said, 'words have an ancestor and affairs have a sovereign.'⁵¹ So that words and actions will not be reckless because they lose their core. A man who can grasp the essence of things will not go wrong. Therefore, we need to further explore what is the essence of non-contention, to find its deeper ideological connotation. If contention is regarded as a form of tangible, then non-contention is an external form of intangible.

⁴⁹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p12

⁵⁰ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p47

⁵¹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p77

The reason why people fight is to obtain benefits, to satisfy their own desires. They think that there is a body of mine which could get enjoyable from outside. Therefore, they are really clinging to the phenomenon of tangible. However, Lao Zi said, 'Thirty spokes share one hub. Adapt the nothing therein to the purpose in hand, and you will have the use of the cart.'⁵² The wheel can roll because it is hollow in the middle. Confucius also said, 'Am I knowledgeable? That's not true. Some boorish person comes to ask me a question, I know nothing, and I have no mind of my own. The best I could do was to explore both sides of the question he had asked. Keep going like this and repeat it a few times, he could find a solution for himself in the end.'⁵³ This is not Confucius's humble words, but the real objective situation. It is because the sage has no mind of his own that he can clearly know everything. When people ask them questions, it is like tapping a big bell. 'A bell will ring loudly if it is struck vigorously, and very softly if it is struck softly.'⁵⁴ Because the inside of the bell is hollow, it can make different sounds accordingly. Similarly, heaven and earth are the same, as Lao Zi said, 'Is not the space between heaven and earth like a bellows? It is empty without being exhausted; the more it works the more comes out.'⁵⁵ Therefore, we can know about a truth, 'thus what we gain is something, yet it is by virtue of nothing that this can be put to use.'⁵⁶ The intangible is the part of everything that

⁵² D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963),劉殿爵 p15

⁵³ Translated by myself, He Yan 何晏, Xing Bing 邢昺, *Lunyu Zhushu 論語注疏* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000), P128

⁵⁴ Translated by myself, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Liji Zhengyi 禮記正義* (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000),p1244

⁵⁵ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p9

⁵⁶ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p15

really works. It is invisible and formless, then it often overlooked by all of us. However, the tangible is something that can be intuitively felt, then people are chasing after it in the hope of obtaining material or spiritual enjoyment. In the process of continuous pursuit of the tangible things, our mind will be filled with selfishness and various desires. these negative emotions are like thatch, slowly blocking our mind, making our mind like solid wheels, unable to turn and play a role. This is because we can only see and only care about the benefits and losses of our own body, unable to feel the effect of intangible and realize the precious of Tao. There is no point in looking for something tangible. If we can get rid of all the emotions in our hearts and get our minds back to being nothing, then it really works.

‘The sage has no mind of his own. He takes as his own the mind of the people.’⁵⁷This is where the idea of *wuxin* 無心 put forward. It does not mean a complete absence of emotion, like stones and plants on the road. If we use this way to understand, it is Lao Zi said, ‘It is because people are ignorant that they fail to understand me.’⁵⁸Therefore, *wuxin* 無心 refers to *wuwo* 無我, which is a person who does not act for his own material or personal gain. And this *wuxin* 無心, in fact, is selfless. As mentioned above, Lao Zi said that because a person does not contend with other people, no one in the world can contend with him. There are some people who, after hearing non-contention interests, will consider what Lao Zi said as conspiracy theory. If a person keeps his competitive mind hidden and

⁵⁷ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p56

⁵⁸ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p77

appears to be not contending with others, he can hide himself from others and gain the maximum benefit. That is what Lao Zi said, ‘not to know yet to think that one knows will lead to difficulty.’⁵⁹ It is not correct for ordinary people to interpret the teachings of sages with their own false knowledge.

In fact, the person with the virtue of non-contention not only does not compete with others, but he does also not even want to compete. Because he does not ask others in return, also has no selfishness inside. A person who has reached this level will not think that there is any difference between people and all things, and at the same time ignore the pleasures of his own body and put down the worldly wisdom. Since I am one with all things, where is my opponent in the world? And what is there to contend for? This kind of virtue is in accordance with the Tao of Heaven, ‘this is known as matching the sublimity of heaven.’⁶⁰ Just like in *the Book of Changes*, the *Qian* 乾 trigram on the top and the *Kun* 坤 trigram on the bottom, which forms the *Pi* 否 trigram. In such a state, there is no life between heaven and earth, and everything cannot grow. On the contrary, the *Kun* 坤 trigram on the top and *Qian* 乾 trigram on the bottom, which forms the *Tai* 泰 trigram. When the pneuma of Yin and Yang flow together, it forms the *Tai* 泰 trigram. Everything is thriving and growing at that time. The *Qian* 乾 trigram represent the heaven, and play a role in the lower position. Non-contention can bring up all things, which is the biggest use of selflessness and *wuxin* 無心.

Therefore, Lao Zi said. ‘Not daring to take the lead in the empire one could

⁵⁹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p78

⁶⁰ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p75

afford to be lord over the vassals.’⁶¹ One man who never wanted to be ahead of the others could lead the others and become the ruler of the state. This is like what *Shun* 舜 said when praising *Yu* 禹, ‘Because you never feel yourself have any merit, no one in the world can compare with you; Because you never boast of your accomplishments, no one in the world can compete with you for them.’⁶² Because *Yu* 禹 was not interested in the position of emperor, nor did he want to boast about his achievements. Therefore no one in the world will be equal to him, and no one will compete with him in merit. Therefore, non-contention means selflessness, it can not only get the greatest interests, but also will not be hurt by the outside world. ‘There is nowhere for the rhinoceros to pitch its horn; there is nowhere for the tiger to place its claws; there is nowhere for the weapon to lodge its blade.’⁶³ ‘Because a man has no conception of self, he cannot be harmed even in the face of these dangers.’⁶⁴ Even if the opponent has the most powerful weapon, he cannot hurt the one who has the virtue of non-contention. It is like attacking the void with claws and fire, but it is just a waste of energy and does not make any damage to the void. Therefore, the essence of non-contention is very broad and boundless. Because it has *Wuxin* 無心 inside, it can encompass all things and become the head of all things.

⁶¹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p74

⁶² Translated by myself, Kong Anguo 孔安國, Kong Yingda 孔穎達, *Shangshu Zhengyi* 尚書正義 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000),p111

⁶³ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p57

⁶⁴ Translated by myself, Shideqing 釋德清, *Laozi daodejing jie* 老子道德經解, p107

3.2 Non-contention Means No Discrimination

What Lao Zi's non-contention is 'a person's heart is sincere will naturally be reflected in the external behavior of speech'⁶⁵ natural performance. Ordinary people hope that they can gain more benefits and reputation, but they do not want others to surpass them, otherwise they will feel dissatisfied and resentful. However, a person with the virtue of non-contention does not bother about gain or lose he has, nor does he feel wronged because others have what he does not have. Those who non-contention thinks that there is no difference between themselves and other people, just as Zeng Zi highly praised, 'Seeing the virtues of others as if they were your own and help them achieve better virtues. This is the embodiment of Confucius's virtue of non-contention.'⁶⁶ It is because a person has no difference in the mind that he can achieve the realm of 'heaven and earth share the same root with me, and all things are one with me.'⁶⁷ Because they are no different from all things, they are from the Tao of heaven, and finally return to the Tao of heaven.

Therefore, it makes no difference where the benefits belong, no matter who gets them is also no difference. In *the Spring and Autumn Annals of Lv Shi* 《呂氏春秋》, there is a story about the people of *Jing* 荊 who lost their bows and arrows.⁶⁸ A man of the State of *Jing* 荊 accidentally lost his bow and arrow and

⁶⁵ Translated by myself, Zheng Xuan 鄭玄, *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義, p1860

⁶⁶ Translated by myself, Zhonghua Book Company, *Sibu Beiyao* 四部備要, p116

⁶⁷ Translated by myself, Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi jinzhuji* 莊子今註今譯 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1983), P71

⁶⁸ Translated by myself, Lev Buwei 呂不韋, *Levshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1936), p15

did not look for it, because he thought it would also be taken by the people of the State of *Jing* 荊 in the end. Since we are all *Jing* 荊 people, what difference does it make who gets the bow and arrow? After hearing this, Confucius thought that the concept of *Jing* 荊 should be removed. If it was picked up by someone, it was the same no matter what country they were from. When Lao Zi heard this, he thought that the concept of man should be removed. Even if the bow and arrow could not be picked up by human, it would eventually return to nature. Then why does it have to be humans who get bows and arrows? Lao Zi further regarded man and all things as one, in the end, who gets benefits are the same. Thus, the non-contention person is truly integrated with all things in nature, with neither loss nor gain. This is the same as the law of conservation of energy, the total amount of energy remains the same, but it is changed from one form to another, and the total amount of energy does not decrease or increase.

Therefore, without discrimination in one's heart, one can achieve the realm that 'the same virtue as the vast expanse of heaven and earth, and the same effulgence as the sun and the moon.'⁶⁹ It is because he does not think that there is discrimination between man and all things, then he can break through the tangible edge and realize the true wisdom of the Tao of heaven. 'Nature and man are an organic whole, this is the harmony of the whole.'⁷⁰ Therefore, *wenyan* 文言 of the *Book of Changes* says, 'If a man foresees things going on before heaven, heaven

⁶⁹ Translated by myself, Cheng yi 程頤, *Zhouyi Chengshizhuan* 周易程氏傳, p12

⁷⁰ Mei Xinyu 梅馨予, 'The Ecological Concept of Sustainable Development Contained in "Unity of Man and Nature" in Tao Te Ching', *Shanxi Youth Journal*, 14 (2020), pp276.

will not disobey him. If a man knows what is going on later than heaven, he follows the law of nature and does not go against it,'⁷¹ Even heaven and earth are not contrary to it, let alone ordinary people? Therefore, people who non-contention are like the River and the Sea. They are good at treating people with humility, they have no discrimination between people in their mind. Rivers naturally return to the sea. Similarly, what he has done is in line with the will of the people, and people all over the world will naturally recommend and trust him. 'It is because it never attempts itself to be great that it succeeds in becoming great.'⁷² This is the reason why he does not contend with other people, then there is no one in the world to contend with him.

To sum up, the essence of non-contention is *Wuxin* 無心 and no discrimination in the mind. Because a person has no self-inside, then others will not want to contend with him; Because a person has no discrimination in the mind, all things will naturally follow him. Moreover, the intangible of both is not nothingness. Although not being is more important than being, not being cannot exist alone and must be embodied by being. Being and not being is one entity and cannot be viewed separately and oppositely. Therefore, the person who really does non-contention, although the external performance is delicate, but it does not mean that he is weak. There is a big difference between the two. The former has the most power while the latter can only be down without any power. Even if people who are non-contention do not constant pursue for their own material comforts, they do

⁷¹ Translated by myself, Cheng yi 程頤, *Zhouyi Chengshizhuan* 周易程氏傳, p12

⁷² D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group, 1963), p39

not think that since their body is not important, then they do not need to take care of it. That is what Confucius said, 'going too far is as bad as not going far enough.'⁷³ Therefore, a man who has no selfish interests and discrimination in his mind forgets his personal gains and losses and takes the world as his own duty and protects himself for the sake of the world. 'He who loves his body more than dominion over the empire can be given the custody of the empire.'⁷⁴ This is to care for his body for the world, therefore the whole world can be entrusted to him. There is no discrimination and self-interest in his mind, then he can constantly improve his moral level. Then he can achieve the ideality prosperous scene of Confucian that first self-cultivation can make family harmony, then can govern the country, and finally can make the whole world peace.

4.The Effect of Non-contention

4.1 *Fu Xing Zhi Zhen* 復性之真

Zhuang Zi said, 'Cultivating your morality with the essence of Tao, governing your country with the rest of Tao, and bringing peace to the world with the dross of Tao.'⁷⁵ The greatest effect of Tao for people is to help them realize the truth or philosophic theory, and the rest of it is enough for governing the country. Therefore, the most important effect of non-contention is to cultivate

⁷³ Translated by myself, He Yan 何晏, *Lunyu Zhushu* 論語注疏, p166

⁷⁴ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p17

⁷⁵ Translated by myself, Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi jinzhujiyi* 莊子今註今譯, P751

one's morality. It is the process from selfness to selflessness. Lao Zi thought, 'The reason I have great trouble is that I have a body.'⁷⁶ Why did Lao Zi said that the body is the greatest trouble? Because we possess this body, we will mistake the body for ourselves. We confine ourselves to this limited body, and our thoughts and actions revolve around how to satisfy our desires. In the end, we become addicted to material pleasures and do not want to leave. In addition, since the body is myself, everything that this body has also belong to me. Based on this understanding, we are constantly chasing fame and status to get spiritual satisfaction. In such a way that neither the material nor the spiritual can be separated from the limitations of the body, then we forget that the vast our own nature is the true self. That is why Lao Zi said that our body a great trouble, and this is the reason. Some people may think that the state of selflessness is too high, only the sages can achieve, ordinary people cannot achieve this level. Mencius, however, said, 'It is not only the sages who possess such a high level of morality. Everyone has such a perfect nature, but the sages can keep it and not lose it.'⁷⁷ This kind of virtue is possessed by everyone. Because the sage does not lose his nature, he can know about the Tao of heaven and earth. However, in the process of striving for fame and profit, ordinary people gradually forget their own nature and themselves original unity with the Tao, which is the biggest loss and regret.

Therefore, in the process of learning the virtue of non-contention, people

⁷⁶ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p17

⁷⁷ Translated by myself, Zhao Qi 趙岐, Sun Shi 孫奭, *Mengzi Zhushu* 孟子注疏 (Beijing: Peking University Press, 2000),p363

constantly abandon excessive material enjoyment and reduce their own desires and greed. Like water, willing to be in the humble places that men hate, silently nourishing all things and not contending with anything. And at the same time to correct their own wrong view, break the inherent cognition of lowliness or nobleness of people. Eliminating one by one the discrimination between all things in the mind, so that we can live in harmony with nature and achieve the realm of harmony between man and nature. Therefore, the greatest effect for people to learn the virtue of non-contention is to recover the inner consciousness which galloping outside, let oneself free from narrow knowledge and return to contemplating one's own heart. Thus, one can merge with the nature of the Tao, regain one's true nature and roam freely in the Tao of heaven and earth.

Only a man with noble qualities within can govern his country well by kingly ways. This is exactly what Zhuangzi said about the method of being sage inside and being kingly outside. When a man is selfless and free from prejudice, he can lead people with humble words and put the common good of the people under heaven ahead of his own interests. Then ‘that is why the empire supports him joyfully and never tires of doing so.’⁷⁸ All the people were willing to choose such a man as their leader, because his virtue of non-contention was like water, and the people naturally follow him. In Chinese history, King *Shun* 舜 had deeds that people under heaven were willing to adhere. *Shiji* 《史記》 recorded, ‘When Shun was farming in *Lishan* 歷山, many people gathered in the place where he lived in

⁷⁸ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group, 1963), p73

a year. In two years, it became a town, and in three years it became a city because of its large population.’⁷⁹ As *Shun* 舜’s virtue was as humble as water, people willing to move to the place where Shun lived, and finally a city was formed. *Shun* 舜 had no intention of contending for the power and position of the state, but his virtue would naturally move and inspire people. Finally, king *Yao* 堯 heard about his deeds and hand over the throne to *Shun* 舜. Therefore, Zhuang Zi said ‘the achievement of the emperor is only the second thing that the sage did after self-cultivation’⁸⁰ is indeed true. If a person's inner virtue is perfect, then he can be elected by the people, and naturally he can achieve imperial achievements.

4.2 The National Affairs

From the above, we know that non-contention can restore true nature of people. If this thought is applied to state affairs, it can also achieve very good results. Taking national contacting and military strategy as examples, *Tao Te Ching* specifically describes the effect of virtue of non-contention. In terms of national contacting, both large and small countries should communicate with a modest attitude. Lao zi said, ‘all that the large state wants is to take other under its wing; all that the small state wants is to have its services accepted by the other.’⁸¹ The demands of big and small countries maybe are different, but they should deal with each other

⁷⁹ Translated by myself, Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記, P40

⁸⁰ Translated by myself, Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Zhuangzi jinzhuji* 莊子今註今譯, P751

⁸¹ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group, 1963), p68

humbly. ‘Thus, the one, by taking the lower positions, annexes; the other, by taking the lower position, is annexed.’⁸² Big countries can be trusted by small countries, and small countries can be accommodated by big countries. This is Lao Zi's heartfelt feeling after seeing the phenomenon that during the Spring and Autumn Period, that is, the big countries often annexed the small ones, and the small ones often betrayed the big ones. It is obviously that large and small countries can coexist peacefully if they are humble to each other. However, the ruler could not understand the usefulness of non-contention, instead used the means of contending to achieve their own goals. The consequences of doing so are as recorded in *Shiji* 《史記》. ‘In the spring and Autumn period, there were thirty-six cases of court officials killing their Kings and fifty-two cases of states were destroyed. There were too many cases in which a vassal could not secure his state even though he asked for help.’⁸³ This caused great chaos and confusion in the Spring and Autumn Period. Therefore, if countries can communicate with each other in a modest way, then they can establish friendly cooperative relations. In this way, the exchange of needed goods and the sharing of resources among countries are of great interest to the development of each country. Such ideas can also be very useful in today's international environment.

In terms of military strategy, *Tao Te Ching* says, ‘The strategists have a saying, I dare not play the host but play the guest, I dare not advance an inch but

⁸² D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group, 1963), p68

⁸³ Translated by myself, Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記, P4003

retreat a foot instead.’⁸⁴ Even in the battlefield, Lao Zi taught people do not dare to flaunt their superiority and advance rashly. We can see that the military is also using the method of non-contention, even if the country needs to fight, it will only be forced to do so, and will never initiate an aggressive war. ‘It is because arms are instructions of ill omen and there are Things that detest them that one who has the way does not abide by their use.’⁸⁵ This is the consensus of moral people. Just because wise people see the battlefield is terrible, then how to maximize the efficiency of the victory of the war is the most important point. Lao Zi said, ‘One who excels in fighting is never roused in anger; one who excels in defeating his enemy does not join issue.’⁸⁶ War is the place of contention, and Lao Zi here to use the wisdom of non-contention to win the victory of war, this is good thinking of *shansheng* 善勝. This is consistent with the strategic thought of Sun Zi, the founder of military science. Sun Zi believed that *quansheng* 全勝 was the best policy in war. ‘Fighting a hundred battles and winning a hundred victories is not the best form of strategy. The best form of strategy is to make the enemy surrender without expending our troops.’⁸⁷ Thus, non-contention wars expend no troops and can be won in a bloodless way. That is mean that we can win victory without battle. If we win the victory in this way, to the maximum extent, we can retain the effective strength of both sides. Then we will not go against the benevolence of heaven. The tragic scene that ‘where troops have encamped there will brambles

⁸⁴ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p76

⁸⁵ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p36

⁸⁶ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p75

⁸⁷ Translated by myself, Li Xingbing 李興斌, Yang Ling 楊玲 *Sunzibingfa Xinyi* 孫子兵法新譯(Jinan: Qilu publishing house, 2001),p11

grow; in the wake of a mighty army bad harvests follow without fail'⁸⁸ will not occurred. In the military field, the best results are achieved by using the wisdom of non-contention.

5.Conclusion

To sum up, non-contention is not blindly conceded, but in accordance with a high degree wisdom of Tao. If an individual can learn to be non-contention, he or she can return to the truth nature. Countries can live in harmony with each other if they can do things with non-contention. Tao does not increase or decrease, and virtue remains unchanged. The wisdom of non-contention is of great practical significance in today's economic globalization. In modern times, the idea of competition has taken root in people's minds. From personal infighting to international hegemony, these situations are common nowadays.

However, as mentioned above, contending is the beginning of losing. An individual who only knows to advance without retreating will fall into a situation of confusion and danger. If a country encroaches on other countries, there is no way to obtain the expected benefits in the end. For example, at the beginning of the year, the United States took control of Ukraine, forcing Russia to go to war and later calling for economic sanctions against Russia. Finally, Russia listed the United States as one of the most undesirable countries. Nor is it good for the US

⁸⁸ D.C.LAU, *LAO TZU Tao Te Ching* (England: Penguin Group,1963), p35

to be on bad terms with an energy powerhouse like Russia. And there are many countries in the world that remain neutral and will not take orders from the US against Russia. After The Second World War, the United States quickly became the world's hegemonic power and pursued hegemony to gain interests all these years. However, for instance, the war in the Middle East also consumed a lot of domestic resources and money, and finally had to announce its withdrawal from the war. In fact, it has received far less profit than it has invested. Then we can see that contending can only bring little benefit in a limited time, and in the long run, the loss is very huge.

However, if we follow the teachings of our forefathers and treat people with wisdom of non-contention, it will bring far-reaching benefits. Because ‘the purpose of not contending is to obtain inner peace, its starting point is to respect people, people-oriented.’⁸⁹ In this process, it does not need to spend too much manpower, material resources and financial resources to achieve unexpected results. By extension, if people all over the world can understand the meaning of non-contention, people will no longer contend with each other and will no longer destroy the environment because of personal desires. Finally, harmony between man and man, man and nature can be achieved, and we will achieve the greatest win-win.

⁸⁹ Ma Xianyu 馬仙玉, ‘Laozi's Non-contention Thought and Its Modern Value’, *Journal of Changchun University of Science and Technology*, 04(2010), pp57-59

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