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<i>Module code:</i> SICH6013	<i>Student ID number:</i> 1704328	<i>Educational support needs:</i> No
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**An Analysis of the Origin, Characteristics
and Contemporary Value of *Laozi's***

Political Theory of *Wuwei*

**淺析老子無為政治觀的根源、
特質及當代價值**

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

學位論文

Name: Jingya Yu

姓名：余靖雅

Student Number: 1704328

學號：1704328

Date: 03/2021

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Abstract

This article mainly studies *Daodejing*'s political theory in four procedures. First, analyzing the ambiguous text to understand the relationship between Daoism philosophical system and politics. Secondly, tracing back the establishment of the political theory from *Laozi*'s view of human nature. Thirdly, discussing the core implication and the demonstration of *wuwei*. Finally, make a brief comment on the political principle of *wuwei*'s contemporary value.

Key Words: Politics, Laozi, Wuwei, Human nature

摘 要

本文主要從四個方面對《道德經》所蘊涵的政治思想進行研究。首先對模稜兩可的文本進行解析，以貫通道家哲學系統與政治的關係；其次以老子的人性觀推論政治觀的確立；然後著重討論「無為」的核心意涵與表現形式；最後略言「無為」政治觀的當代價值。

關鍵詞：政治，老子，無為，人性

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1. Preface

Humorous and occasionally caustic in its expression, the *Daodejing* presents its unique angle of philosophy. However, its radical uniqueness and paradoxical ambiguity, to some extent, results in a biased picture of Daoism. For instance, a stereotypical statement is that *Laozi* 老子 supports ‘*Wuwei*’ 無為 (noninterference, noncoercive action, or the action-of-nonaction), which is a way of negatively ‘dropping out’ from social and political participation. However, these kind of misinterpretations should not be taken to cover the value of Daoism’s profound and novel angle of political philosophy. Therefore, this essay intends to elucidate the fundamental source of *Laozi*’ political theory and its formation. In comparison with the conventional Western doctrine of politics, distinguish its current value with the characteristic of Eastern philosophy. By this multidimensional analysis, we aim to reveal its obvious self-worth and attract in-depth study in the future.

2. The Political Aspect in *Daodejing*

Having been acknowledged as a philosophical classic, scholars are passionate about studying its metaphysical element. Nevertheless, the study remains insufficient to distinct *Daodejing*’s dimension of secular consideration combined with Daoism philosophical depth. Even though *Daodejing* seems to be ambiguous and enigmatic, the implication of politics would be discovered through a more careful textual analysis.

According to the German Sinologist Hans-Georg Moeller, the text of *Daodejing* does not arranged as the accustomed linear sequence -- following a plot and extending logically. Therefore, in order to understand various imagery conceptions, it is necessary to collect correlated phrases of a certain conception appeared randomly throughout the whole text and then summarise implications of them. Only then *Laozi*’s attitude towards politics could be distinguished.

2.1 Sage or Sage-ruler

2.1.1 Implication in *Daodejing*

The phrase ‘sage’ 聖人(or ‘sage ruler’) appears thirty-two times, and ‘I’, which shares the equivalent connotation, also appears nineteen times. The ‘Sage’ in the context of *Daodejing* not only refers to an ideal model of self-cultivation, the image of which is often connected with that of common people, indicating *Laozi*’s hypothetically perfect leadership. When *Laozi* expounds on the qualities of sage rulers, he aims not to describe an ideal personality but mainly to explain his highest expectation of politics.

Hence in the words of the sage: We do things according to the principle of *wuwei*, and the common people will naturally self-educate themselves; We cherish equilibrium, and the common people order themselves.¹
故聖人云：我無為，而民自化；我好靜，而民自正。（第五十七章）

This sentence shows a leader’s vital role in the relationship between the governor and the governed, which is the expression of politics. In traditional Chinese philosophy (Confucianism, Legalism and Mohism), leaders’ characteristic have a critical influence on people’s general intellectual and mental state. As long as the sage king has less desire and possesses a tranquil state of mind, people will naturally be sincere and honest. Sometimes this would be regarded as a kind of cause and effect. Therefore, in Daoism political theory, sage-ruler is of great importance.²

2.1.2 The importance of sage-ruler in classical Greek politics

Interestingly, the attention is given to sage rulers’ characteristic, also demonstrated in Plato’ *The Republic*.³ In the forms of Socrates’ dialogue with friends, Plato talks

¹ We have used both the Ames and Hall’s translation, as well as that of Arthur Waley, but sometimes according to my understanding of the text would give some modifications (Roger T. Ames & David L. Hall: *Making This Life Significant*, The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003)

² Both Confucianism and Daoism hold the view that a good governance depends on a good leader. In the *Central Harmony* 中庸, it says that: ‘The principle of good government of the Emperors Wen and Wu are abundantly illustrated in the records preserved. When the men are there, good government will flourish, but when the men are gone, good government decays and becomes extinct.’ (Lin Yutang’s translation, in *The Wisdom of Confucius*, Taipei: Cheng Chung Book Co., LTD, 2009)

³ Western political theory’s origin lies in the city-state system of ancient Greece and the Middle Ages’ monarchy, where various countries coexist. Scattered city-states led to many different political systems; each has its development track. Therefore, to generate a convincing theory, it is necessary to differentiate and analyze under multiple possibilities. Consequently, Western political works are very different from traditional Chinese political theories. Whatever proposal was put forward, the carefully logical reason is the prerequisite for reaching credible conclusions. For example, Plato’ *The Republic*, before talking about his political theory, Plato spent length on discussing the nature of ‘justice’. He did so to introduce the importance of justice and its relationship with good governance. However, *Laozi*’ theory is clear and direct, giving conclusions without too much analysis and inference. Even though the discrepancy is quite large, they have a very striking similarity: they highly value the role that a wise leader could play. (Plato: *The Republic*, edited by G. R. F. Ferrari, trans. By Tom Griffith,

about the definition and education of ‘philosophical king’, which occupied more than half of the book’s content. The emphasis shows that both Chinese and Western philosophers value the role of wise leaders in politics. Whether the Warring States period of China or the ancient Greece, people suffered constant wars and immoral monarchs’ governance. However, instead of demonstrating a negative attitude towards the monarch, *Laozi* and Plato creatively propose that the ideal governance is accessible as long as the ruler possesses the quality of a sage (or a philosopher). This argument is an establishment of a unique political theory by putting ethics and politics in the same position. Meanwhile, given the turbulent situations they encountered, it is a theory exceeded their era, providing later generation with theoretical height and a desirable state of politics.⁴

2.2 The Meaning of *Tian* 天 (Sky, heaven, the universe)

The character *tian* has emerged more than eighty times in *Daodejing*, in which the most common phrase that includes *tian* is *tianxia* 天下 (the world). Since *tianxia* itself refers to human politics, we shall discuss other phrase *tian di* 天地 (the sky and earth, the universe).

2.2.1 The Meaning of *Tian di* 天地

Some criticism alleges that the *tian* (sky) belongs to the mysterious realm or the metaphysics, showing that *Laozi* is indifferent to the mundane world. In terms of Daoist philosophical style, what *Fang Dongmei* 方東美 has pointed out refutes this statement to be one-sided. He argues that Daoist’s spirit is like a Roc bird soaring up to the vast sky and flies freely, and then from the lofty sky, it looks down to the world, getting the whole picture of the earth meanwhile remaining its detached attitude.⁵ Although displaying a strong interest in the universe, *Laozi* aims at

Berkeley: University of California, 2003)

⁴ Whether it is the chapter *Liyun* 禮運 in the *Book of Rites*; Plato’s *The Republic*; Thomas More’s *Utopia*; Francis Bacon’s *The New Atlantis*; Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, these classics without exception have a common factor: They have built an ideal world that transcends their times. The politics of their times are not desirable, but they all theoretically put forward the possibility of better governance that have not been created yet. Although being rejected at that time, these classics finally became the theoretical basis for later generations to pursue. If there is no lofty goal to strive on, the politics would only be increasingly disappointing. Hence, in my opinion, this is not an impractical or wishful blueprint, but the greatness of political philosophy.

⁵ Fang Dongmei 方東美: *Yuanshi Rujia Daojia Zhexue* 原始儒家道家哲學[The Philosophy of Original Confucianism and Daoism], Beijing 北京 :Chung Hua Book Co.中華書局, 2012, p.170-173.

returning to the humanities (Here ‘politics’ is in a broad sense included), which is evident in the seventh chapter:

The sky is lasting and the earth enduring. The reason the world can be lasting and enduring is because it does not live for itself...On this model, the sages withdraw themselves from contention yet find themselves out in front, put themselves out of mind yet find themselves taken care of.

天長地久。天地所以能長且久者，以其不自生，故能長生。是以聖人後其身而身先；外其身而身存。（第七章）⁶

It can be seen that with the artist’s keen insight, *Laozi* observes the terrestrial vicissitudes and the celestial phenomena, speaking of the features of the universe (the sky and earth are lasting); With philosopher’s objective reasoning, he concludes that this everlasting is by virtue of the selflessness; Finally, with the sympathy of humanistic thinkers, he proposed that the sage ruler should follow the principle of the universe and apply them into human affairs. Therefore, the quality of *tian* is a formulation of different features of ideal governance. There is a clearer exhibition in chapter nine and sixteen showing that *Laozi* takes the way of the universe as politics’ guidance .

(The sage rulers) retire when the deed is done is the way that tian (universe) works.
功遂身退天之道。（第九章）

Being kingly is tian-like. Being tian-like is to be Dao. And the Dao is enduring. To the end of one’s days, one will be free of danger.
王乃天，天乃道，道乃久，沒身不殆。（第十六章）

2.2.2 The Meaning of *Tian* 天

In addition to *tian di* 天地, the character *tian* alone appears twenty-one times. For instance:

Can you in opening and shutting the sky-gates play always the female part?
天門開闔，能為雌乎？（第十章）

There are two directions for scholars to explain *tian* in this sentence.

I. The realm of sociology and anthropology.

i. Sensation: The prevailing view was to connect it with human ‘sensation’.

⁶ All translations are mainly quoted from Ames and Hall’s. Still, some are quoted by Arthur Waley’s and some are modified by myself because of the different opinions to the texts.
(Roger T Ames & David L. Hall, *Making This Life Significant - A Philosophical Translation*, The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003.)
Arthur Waley, *The Way and its Power: A Study of the Tao Te Ching and its Place in Chinese Thought*, 1934)

Heshagn gong 河上公 says it means ‘nose’,⁷ *Gaoheng* 高亨 elaborates more logically: Eyes are the gate of sight; mouth, food and speech; nose, smell; Because organic sensations could be regarded as kind of gates, the sky-gate as a collective term refers to human senses⁸.

ii. Pivot of political performance: *Suzhe* 蘇轍: ‘Sky-gates means the pivot that determines the prosperity and decline.’⁹ Similar with *Suzhe*’s alternative, *Lu Xisheng* 陸希聲, from the perspective of semantics, points out that ‘The latter three (There are six parallel clauses in the tenth chapter where the sky-gates clause are the second last.) are obviously about politics.’¹⁰ Indeed, the parallel sentence consists of clauses with similar meaning and structures. The former three clauses: ‘Embracing oneness’抱一, ‘making it pliant’致柔 and ‘getting rid of imperfections’滌除玄覽 illustrate the theme of personal cultivation in both physical and mental state. While the latter three clauses, ‘loving the people and governing the country’愛民治國 and ‘letting your insight penetrating every corner of the land’明白四達 are related to politics, according to the formation rules of parallel sentences, *tianmen* (sky-gates) must has an intimate relationship with politics. In any case, the character *tian* (sky)’s prominent interpretation is confined to the realm of sociology and anthropology.

II. The realm of Metaphysics

In the second explanation that receives less attention, *tian* is understood as an abstract concept that does not belong to the field of secular experience. *Cheng Xuanying* 成玄英 states that the opening and shutting of the sky-gates means the universe’s formation and disappearance.¹¹ Nevertheless, it has already been proved in the previous sector that Daoism cosmology is closely related to the values of

⁷ Heshang Gong 河上公, ‘*Daode zhenjing zhu*’ 道德真經注, in *Laozi jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collections of Editions and Commentaries for the Laozi], ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 & Chen Hongxing 陳紅星, Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2011.

⁸ Gao Heng 高亨, ‘*Laozi Zhuyi*’ 老子注譯 [The Annotation and Translation of Laozi], Henan: Henan Renmen Chubanshe 河南人民出版社, 1980, p.36.

⁹ Suzhe 蘇轍, ‘*Daode Zhenjing Zhu*’ 道德真經注 in the *Laozi Jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collections of Editions and Commentaries for the Laozi] ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 & Chen Hongxing 陳紅星, Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2011, vol. 3, p.4.

¹⁰ Lu Xisheng 陸希聲, ‘*Daode Zhenjing Zhuan*’ 道德真經傳 in the *Laozi Jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collections of Editions and Commentaries for the Laozi] ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 & Chen Hongxing 陳紅星, Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2011, vol. 1, pp. 588-589.

¹¹ Cheng Xuanying 成玄英, ‘*Daode Zhenjing Yishu*’ 道德真經義疏 in the *Laozi Jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collections of Editions and Commentaries for the Laozi] ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 & Chen Hongxing 陳紅星, Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2011, vol. 1, p. 295.

social politics. In conclusion, not to belittle the metaphysical height of *Daodejing*, what is worth highlighting is that *Laozi*'s seemingly abstract and oracular illustration should not in understanding separate from his eagerness to enhance the world.

3. The Foundation of Political Theory

A political theory transcended the time and space constraint bases on the accurate identification of human nature, for regulations change constantly, while human nature is eternal. Therefore this chapter will discuss *Laozi*'s view of human nature and its relationship with political theory.

3.1 Political Theory Originates from the Cognition of Human Nature

Governing a country contains many factors, but the core values is not complicated. Knowing the essence of governance is foremost. Karl Marx says in *The Grundrisse* that 'Society ... expresses the sum of connections and relationships in which individuals find themselves.'¹² In his view, society is the manifestation of various relationships. The essence of politics is through the establishment of laws and regulations, creating individuals and communities a sound environment where the relationships could be stabilized by maintaining balance. From which it can be seen that the object of politics is the human being.

On the other hand, interpreting 'politics' in the way of traditional Chinese exegesis, we may look back to *Shangshu* (尚書, the Book of Documents), which is one of the oldest classics in China concerning how to govern a country:

This True Way and the fact that the government is good for the people means that you can ensure double happiness for all. This will even affect the barbarian tribes from all four quarters.¹³

道洽政治，澤潤生民，四夷左衽，罔不咸賴。（《尚書·周書·畢命》）

The phrase *zhengzhi* 政治(politics) first appeared in this classic. It expounds that contributing to people's material and spiritual life is the ancient Chinese definition of the core value of politics. Despite the distinct cultural background, there

¹² Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, edited&trans. By David Mclellan (America: Harper Torchbooks,1972), p.77.

¹³ *The Most Venerable Book: Shang Shu*, Translated by MARTIN PALMER with JAY RAMSAY and VICTORIA FINLAY, Penguin Books Ltd, 2014, p. 180.

is no difference between the East and the West: the core of politics is to benefit people.

Just as a carpenter needs to understand the properties of woods and a chemist needs to learn the elements, the cardinal procedure of any knowledge is to study its research objects' nature. Since the object of politics is people, an insightful political theory can not lack a thorough understanding of human nature. Only when human action and motives are well studied, can the establishment of decrees and laws reasonably formulate in line with human nature. Therefore, we agree that the Western classical law-of-nature school's perspective: 'The concept of law, especially the concept of natural law, is obviously related to the concept of human nature.'¹⁴ Modern Scholar Zhengkai 鄭開 also advocates that 'The understanding of human nature is the pivot of ethics and political philosophy.'¹⁵

3.2 The Theory of Human Nature Stems from the Cognition of the Universe

3.2.1 Pure Theoretical Speculation

The previous section's conclusion tells that study of human nature lays the foundation of constructing a systematic politics theory. Hence what is *Laozi*'s view on human nature? *Daodejing* does not directly express his theory of human nature, but there is much explanation of cosmology content, where the analysis should begin.

Laozi is different from the traditional Eastern philosophers (such as Confucius) in the way of thinking. His macro vision, never taking human beings as the sole theoretical pillar and placing human beings in the vast universe, results in a magnificent theoretical system. It can be assumed that, like philosophers of all ages, he would come up with the question 'where do people come from and what is human nature?' Nevertheless, thinking from a broader perspective, he attempts to understand human nature by figuring out the creative source of the universe:

Dao engenders one, one two, two three, and three, the myriad things.

¹⁴ Jean Jacques Rousseau: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Edited by Patrick Coleman, trans. by Franklin Philip, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

¹⁵ Zheng Kai 鄭開: Detailed Educidation on Daoism Political Philosophy 道家政治哲學發微, in the *Journal of Modern Philosophy*, 2019.

道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物。

Dao ... So abysmally deep - it seems the predecessor of everything that is happening.

道……淵兮似萬物之宗。

His answer is *Dao*. In Daoism, *Dao* is not the essence for ontology like classical Greek philosophy. It is more like a concept put forward theoretically to solve the origin of human nature and all things so as to endow human beings with ultimate value. Therefore, he does not further entangle with the problem of source, saying that 'I do not know whose progeny the *Dao* is.'¹⁶

Human beings, animals and plants are equally born of *Dao*, thus being part of it. While a mother gives birth to a child and the child will inherit his mother's genes, human being's characteristic preserves the nature of *Dao*. *Laozi*'s description of *Dao* could be respectively separated as the essence and the function of *Dao*. The essence of *Dao* concerning the universe, while the function shows in human beings. In short, what is the function of *Dao* is the nature of human beings.

I. The potential of human nature is the function of *Dao*.

Those of magnificent character are committed to *Dao* alone.

孔德之容，唯道是從。

II. A specific description of the essence of *Dao* & Those who realise the essence of *Dao* would inspire the potential of human nature.

This is what is called the form of the formless and the image of indeterminacy. This is what is called the vague and the indefinite... Hold tightly onto *Dao* in the present, we are able to manage what is happening right now.

是謂無狀之狀，無物之象，是謂惚恍……執古之道，以御今之有。

III. A concrete narration of the potential of human nature

(When) it comes nearest to proper *Dao* ...

In dwelling, the question is where is the right place.

In thinking and feeling, it is how deeply.

In giving, it is how much like nature's bounty.

In speaking, it is how credibly.

In governing, it is how effectively.

In serving, it is how capably.

In acting, it is how timely.

幾於道。居善地，心善淵，與善仁，言善信，正善治，事善能，動善時。

3.2.2 Practical Evidence

¹⁶ 「吾不知誰之子。」（《道德經·第四章》）

A complete theory always involved pure theoretical speculation and reflection on experience. If we criticise that *Dao* and its application are merely the fantastic ideas by *Laozi*, then his research report on observing babies is convincing empirical evidence. Given that there would be various demonstrations of human qualities accompanied with different circumstances throughout a lifetime, the floating and changeable stages of life could not be selected as the subjects of human nature. Nevertheless, at the time of birth, babies have not yet affected by external influences, so what they present is the most natural, purest and objective state of human nature. By observing the state of babies, *Laozi* again confirms what to be the essence of human nature.

One who is vital in character can be compared with a newborn baby ... Though his bones are soft and his sinews supple, his grip is firm ... Such is the height of potency...He screams throughout the entire day, yet his voice does not get hoarse; Such is the height of harmony.

含德之厚，比於赤子。骨弱筋柔而握固……精之至也。終日號而不嗷，和之至也。

Therefore, although *Laozi* is not a ‘good nature’ (性善論) supporter, he highly identifies with human nature. He does not use the term ‘good’ because in Daoism language system, ‘good’ is contrary to the ‘bad’, a strong ethical inclination indicating dualism. However, for the sake of convenience, in view of the fact that Zhuangzi 莊子 often refers to those who return to nature as ‘true person’, it is accepted that *Laozi* holds ‘the nature to be genuine theory’.

Those who know what role the universe plays, and know what human play, has reached the perfection (of knowledge)...There must be a True person, and then there is the True knowledge.

知天之所為，知人之所為者，至矣……且有真人，而後有真知。¹⁷

3.3 Rousseau’s Theory of Human Nature

Interestingly, Rousseau’s point of view towards human nature is very similar to *Laozi*. They not only share similar conclusions but also have the same way of thinking:

But as long as we are ignorant of the natural man, it is in vain for us to attempt to

¹⁷ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Laozi Jinzhujinyi Jizhuping* 老子今註今譯及評介[The Modern Annotation and Commentary of Laozi], Taipei: The Commercial Press 商務印書館, 2017.

Here we adopt James Legge’s English translation with some modification:
<https://ctext.org/zhuangzi?searchu=%E7%9C%9F%E4%BA%BA>

determine either the law originally prescribed to him or that which is best adapted to his constitution.¹⁸

What Rousseau means by ‘natural man’ is the human nature, which he believes is the foundation for justice. Furthermore, *Laozi* advocated ‘Extend your utmost emptiness as far as you can and do your best to preserve your equilibrium.’致虛極守靜篤, and Rousseau practised it by leaving the city and living alone in the forest near Walden lake.

The difference is that the evidence that Rousseau adopted differs from *Laozi*’ observation of babies. Rousseau was born in the age of great navigation of Europe. With the discovery of the new land, anthropologists were able to study the temperament of indigenous people, their way of life and social structure. Travellers found that the so-called ‘barbarians’ who have not been polluted by ‘civilization’ are kind-hearted and genuine. In contrast, the 18th century was the era of competition and intrigue between different feudal powers. The paradoxical gap of morality level between citizens and barbarians has stimulated many scholars to doubt what they had accustomed. Inspired by this trend, Rousseau also began to consider. Aristotle’s *Politics* provided him with some ideas:

We should consider what is natural not in things depraved but in those which are rightly ordered according to nature.¹⁹

Hence he said:

Important as it may be, to judge rightly people’s natural state, consider him from his origin, and examine him, as it were, in the embryo of his species.²⁰

Ultimately, he argued that the human nature is similar to the state of barbarians because they have not been changed by depraved social accustoms and habits. Therefore, taking barbarians as his evidence, Rousseau proposed that the natural person’s characters are of kindness, simplicity, agility and little desire. His rigorous inferences in his *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* can be said to be a sound proof of *Laozi*’s view of human nature.

4. *Laozi*’s Political Preferences

¹⁸ This sentence comes from the introduction part of the Chinese version of Rousseau’s work. (Beijing: The Commercial Press, 1999, p.66)

¹⁹ Aristotle: *Aristotle’s Politics*, translated by Carnes Lord, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., 2013.

²⁰ Jean Jacques Rousseau: *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Edited by Patrick Coleman, trans. by Franklin Philip, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

4.1 Coercion or Weakness

The formation of different political theories lies in various scholars' understanding of human nature. If one alleged that human nature is evil, there is no doubt that people must be regulated and punished by harsh laws and regulations. In the East, Legalists *Han Feizi* 韓非子 is the representative: 'The inclination of being afraid of the mighty and bullying the weak is the human nature; Governing by using power to be the king is the ancient way of governance.'²¹ Therefore, he stressed the importance of regulation which could control people. In the spring and Autumn period, Legalist politicians such as *Shang Yang* 商鞅 and *Wu Qi* 吳起, were famous for their strict legislation and temporary successful administration though their endings were miserable.

In the west, Machiavelli²², the author of *The Prince*, as well as Thomas Hobbes, who wrote *The Elements of Law* and the famous *Leviathan*²³, took a pessimistic judgment on human nature. Therefore, they confirm that human society must be led by monarchs' power (Military power is the priority).

On the contrary, *Laozi* possesses the human nature being genuine, which is to say, he agrees that the origin of human is pure and absolutely good. Only depraved influences lead to the forgetting of human nature. What kind of political view will this kind of cognition of human nature lead to? First and foremost, *Laozi*'s ideal governance is free from harsh measures. Because primary purposes for the law is not to punish but to prevent the bias behaviour. If it is assured that the mentality that determines behavior is always in a state of peace and selflessness, then a harmonious relationship in the society is a natural result. Why should the politicians bother themselves to make unappreciated harsh punishments?

²¹ Wang Xianshen 王先慎, *Hanfeizi Jijie* 韓非子集解[The Collective Annotations of Hanfeizi], Beijing: Chung Hua Book Co.中華書局, 2003, p.123

²² Machiavelli has a fourteen-year political career living in the Republic of Florence (1494-1512). He witnessed the tragedy caused by the Pope's interference in national politics and the national leaders' fight for power. Therefore although he did not talk much about Human nature, there was a strong sense of identification with human beings' evil nature. For example, in the chapter Of Liberality and Parsimony, what he expounded is not how to have true generosity but how should a monarch act in order to disguise possessing a generous quality in the people's eyes. (Niccolo Machiavelli: *The Prince*, trans. by Peter Bondanella, New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

²³ Basing on the premise that in the state of nature, there is 'nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common rule of good and evil, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves', Hobbes thus proposed that to avoid the tragic consequences caused by human being's natural reaction, establishing the legal contract. (Thomas Hobbes: *Leviathan*, edited and noted by J. C. A. Gaskin, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)

For example, when adults see infants or young children, they would naturally feel happy and smile. They smile not because they wish to make up to the baby's parents or have been command to do so; It is simply because the innocent state of infants has infected them to put down their guard and let the emotion of love and pity rise in their hearts. At this time, except for lunatics, it is natural that any adult will be extremely cautious and gentle, needless of advice and reminding. Similarly, in politics, if citizens of a country gradually come close to their nature by means of education, it is natural for them to possess the inclination of humanity, which would result in an environment where mutual respect and kindness exist in all kinds of relations. Under such circumstances, strict and detailed law seems to be unnecessary. This is the reason that Laozi values the policy of softness:

The soft and weak vanquish the hard and strong.
柔弱勝剛強。（第三十六章）

Weakening' is how Dao functions.
弱者道之用。（第四十章）

Nothing in the world is softer or more yielding than water; And in attacking what is hard and resistant nothing can surpass it...That the yielding prevails over the resistant and the soft prevails over, yet none can act accordingly.
天下莫柔弱於水，而攻堅強者莫之能勝.....弱之勝強，柔之勝剛，天下莫不知，莫能行。（第七十八章）

4.2 Regulations or Human's State of minds

4.1.1 The Priority to Human's State of Mind

As analyzed in the previous chapter, *Laozi* attaches much importance to laws and regulations. Instead of that, the way of educating such as water soften things is his option. *Daodejing* says:

In not desiring, they would achieve equilibrium, and all the world would be properly ordered of its own accord.
不欲以靜，天下將自定。（第三十七章）

Here, 'Not desiring' and to 'achieve equilibrium' all refer to the spiritual state, rather than the realm of action, not to mention regulations. Hence, Laozi argues that the key factors for political stability are human being's state of mind. It is worth mention that this sentence mainly talks about the state of the sage ruler.

Give them Simplicity to look at, the Uncarved Black to hold. Give them selflessness

and fewness of desires. Lessen their concern for themselves, and there will be no more grieving.

見素抱樸，少私寡欲。（第十九章）

It is for this reason that in the proper governing by the sages; They empty the hearts-and- minds of the people and fill their stomachs; They weaken their aspirations and strengthen their bones; Ever teaching the common people to be unprincipled in their knowing and objectless in their desire.

是以聖人之治，虛其心，實其腹，弱其志，強其骨。常使民無知無欲。（第三章）

These two paragraphs above clarify how a sage ruler guide people to be selfless in their mind and subsequent actions. *Yan Shigu* 顏師古 generalises that the latter chapter is talking about *Laozi*'s notion of politics.²⁴ But even if the chapter of politics, the content is all about the expectation of universal education. According to the explanation of *Zhang Shunhui* 張舜徽, 'empty the heart and mind' means to decrease people's prejudices; 'Fill stomachs' talks about the qualities of accepting all differences and diversities; 'Weaken aspiration' and 'strengthen bones', etc. are all refer to the expected qualities of people that comes from the sagacious education and administration.

From the beginning to the end, the narration of politics in *Daodejing* all relates to education. How to sublimate people's hearts and minds into a simple and selfless state accounts for *Laozi*'s emphasis. The only once regarding laws is a ruthless denouncement: 'The more prominently the laws and statutes are displayed, the more widespread will be the brigands and thieves.' To conclude, from Daoists' point of view, the leader and people's good character and mental state, rather than the laws and regulations, are the crucial factors for social stability.

4.1.2 The Reflection on the Importance of Regulation

Some people may criticize that the political theory of Daoism is too idealistic. They state that in any contemporary country, enormous political matters need to be considered, which is difficult for the ancients who lived in agricultural society to imagine. But let us ask, does political stability really determined by laws and

²⁴ Shigu Yan 顏師古: 'Xuanyan Xinji Minglaobu' 玄言新記明老部 in the *Laozi Jicheng* 老子集成 [A Collections of Editions and Commentaries for the Laozi] ed. by Xiong Tieji 熊鐵基 & Chen Hongxing 陳紅星, Beijing: Zongjiao wenhua chubanshe 宗教文化出版社, 2011, vol. 1, p. 269. 'The previous chapter talks about the spirit that in accordance with Dao. Since Dao provides leaders the precondition to guide citizens, this chapter continue to discuss the principles of governance.'

regulations?

It is interesting that though Americans have constantly propagandised their democracy system, George Washington, who served as the first president of the United States and was regarded as the Founding Father, has announced differently in his Farewell Address.

‘Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.’²⁵

Taking history as a mirror, the disintegration of the Soviet Union in the 20th century has caused the greatest reflection on the political system. Mikhail Gorbachev, who was in power at that time, believed that the root of the problem is embedded in the system, so he carried out radical reforms of the economic and political system. However, only six years later, the Soviet Union’s disintegration proved that Gorbachev’s judgment and subsequent actions were wrong, which merely accelerated the social disorder. This tragedy provoked heated discussion. After long-term reflection of the academic world and opinion poll of ordinary people, the state’s political system which had been regarded as the crux of the disorder, is testified not the chief culprit. In 1997, when the official research centre of Russian public opinion put forward the question: ‘what kind of political system do you think is better?’ 42% of the people in the whole country answered: the Soviet Union. Only 9% approve of today’s system.²⁶

Trofimke 特羅菲穆克, an academician of the Russian Academy of Sciences, points out that manipulating the media and causing ideological confusion and moral corruption of the people is one of the reasons: ‘You suddenly transform your priceless wealth - profound knowledge - into a pile of cheap paper money.’ The scholar Naognev 奧格涅夫 describes the reasons as ‘There is an increasingly wide rift between the government and the masses. The excessive concentration of power, the spread of bureaucracy and dogmatism... and the failure of the institutions with inflexible ideology to answer the practical problems in people’s daily life.’²⁷

At that time, the military reserves of the Soviet Union kept pace with that of the

²⁵ George Washington, Farewell Address,

The Avalon Project, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp, 25th May, 2021.

²⁶ Guo Zhijing 郭值京: ‘Treason and Destruction: Russian scholar Naognev’s Reflection on the ten years since the Disintegration of the Soviet Union’ 叛逆与破坏——俄罗斯著名学者 A·奥格涅夫对苏联解体十年的回顾和反, in the *Journal of Political Studies*, 2001.

²⁷ Ibid.

United States, new laws and regulations were constantly produced from political reform. However, none has helped to stabilize the country. Summing up the scholars' argument, it is the people's disappointment, not the imperfection of the legal system that results in the Disintegration of the Soviet Union. Whatever the propaganda or poverty, they ultimately lead to the lost of people's confidence both intellectually and physically. In other words, the disorder of people's mind is responsible for the disintegration of the state. Therefore, the stability of a country lies not in laws and government, but in the heart-and-mind of people.

5. The Core and the Demonstration of *Wuwei*

The discussion above illustrates the ideological background of *Laozi's* political theory. Owing to the cognition of human nature and the factors for stability, *Laozi's* political theory is unique from the traditional western theory. Therefore, it is unwise to simply introduce it as an old theory, for analysing it would be a process delving into Daoism's overall ideological framework. Only after in-depth understanding can we accurately judge the practical value of his theory.

The keyword for Daoist politics is *wuwei* 無為 (noninterference, noncoercive action, or the action-of-nonaction), which is generally accepted by the academic circles. However, even the most basic definition of it remains unclear. As a result, nowadays, some people regard it as an antique rather than a reference to political science. Therefore, this chapter will be analysing from three aspects. The first part refutes the misinterpretations; The second part deals with its core spirit; And the third part is some features of *wuwei*.

5.1 The Misinterpretations of *Wuwei*

5.1.1 An Passive Attitude of Non-action

Yi Zhongtian 易中天 said that 'The passive *wuwei* is an important thought of Daoism.'²⁸ Hu Shi 胡適 states that 'The more the government interferes the worse

²⁸ Yi Zhongtian 易中天: *Xianqin Zhuzibaijia Zhengming* 先秦諸子百家爭鳴 [The Contention of hundred schools in the Pre-Qin Dynasty], Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House 上

consequences it gets. With the government's bad performance, a kind of counter-force was provoked, advocating laissez-faire policy.'²⁹ Xi Meibo 席美博: 'In a turbulent time, Daoism has developed a philosophy of avoiding the world to preserving oneself.'³⁰

This kind of argument literally takes *wuwei* as non-action, alleging that Daoists adopt an attitude of negatively abandoning social life because of the severe dislike for unwarrantable jurisdiction. Nevertheless, this misunderstanding may come from the superficial reading of the text. By analyzing the context of *Daodejing*, it is not difficult to find that Laozi emphasizes the limitation of language: 'Dao that can be put into words is not really the Dao.'³¹ Indeed, language would easily deviate from the truth by the hinderance of old experience and subjective concept. Especially in *Daodejing*, which has the most obscure text among the classics, the exegetical way of interpretation is never the right option. For example, the character *yu* 愚 in mandarin means 'foolish' but in Laozi's philosophical context it indicates 'pristine', which Daoists aimed is to retain. Embracing diverse experience like that of an infant, a blockhead is what *yu* really means. Therefore chapter twenty says, 'I have the heart-and-mind of a fool - so vacant and dull!'³² However, some readers do not collect relevant phrases in full text scope, merely based on the modern interpretation and allege that *yu* displays Daoism's disrespect and insult to the people. As a result, the sentence 'Did not use it to edify the common people, but rather to keep them foolish'³³ was regarded as the expression of obscurantist policy. Such mistakes are the same as interpreting *Wuwei* to non-action. They are caused by the one-sided understanding of the scriptures.

5.1.2 A Tactics of Opaque Operation

Qian Mu 錢穆 has an enlightening insight into Confucianism, but regarding Daoism, his evaluation seems to be disputable: 'The politics in *Daodejing* has become a

海文艺出版社, 2009.

²⁹ Hu Shi 胡適: *Zhongguo Zhexueshi Dagang* 中國哲學史大綱 [Outline of the History of Chinese Philosophy], Shanghai: Shanghai Guji Chubanshe 上海古籍出版社, 2000.

³⁰ Xi Meibo 席美博: Analysis of Laozi's 'Dao Emulating the Nature' and Rousseau's 'Returning to Nature' 探析老子「道法自然」與盧梭「回到自然」, in the *Journal of The Study of Philosophy* 哲學研究, 2020.

³¹ 「道可道，非常道。」（《道德經·第一章》）

³² 「我愚人之心也哉！」（《道德經·第二十章》）

³³ 「非以明民，將以愚之。」（《道德經·第六十五章》）

conspiracy theory.’³⁴ This misinterpretation is so influential that until today many criticisms still regard the Daoism’s political theory as the Emperor’s art of tactics. Among the scriptures on which this view is based, the most controversial one is:

Whatever is gathered in must first be stretched out; Whatever is weakened must first be made strong; Whatever is abandoned must first be joined. Whatever is taken away must first be given.

將欲歛之，必固張之；將欲弱之，必固強之；將欲廢之，必固興之；將欲奪之，必固與之。（第三十六章）

In general, criticisms say that this sentence demonstrate *Laozi*’s tactics of cheating. Don’t do it on the surface, but do everything in the dark. *Chen Guying* 陳鼓應 in his book *The Modern Annotation and Commentary of Laozi*³⁵, refuted this point in details. He quoted thirteen ancient commentaries to clarify its true implication. For instance, the annotation of *Yan Zun* 嚴遵: ‘The solid is going to be void; The bright is going to be obscure; The prosperous is the beginning of the decline; And the stretched is going to be loose. This is the natural law of everything.’³⁶ Therefore, what this controversial sentence really expounds is the law of cause and effect. Consequently, it is the scientific observation that *Laozi* utilised to support his philosophy: all things are under a cycle in which opposites mutually entail each other. The evidence used to support this argument are often untenable.

Additionally, the art of tactics requires analysis of the bilateral situations. But this kind of discussion does not exist in the *Daodejing* at all. Therefore, viewing *wuwei* as an opaque operation is the interpretation with subjective judgment.

5.1.3 Common Reason of the Two Misconceptions

The common problem of the two statements above is that they only provide a conclusive definition and focus on the external world’s performance but give little attention to *wuwei*’s inner spirit. As a result, the essence and connotation of *wuwei* become even more challenging to discern.

Reading the ancient classics, whether or not successfully recognising the

³⁴ Qian Mu 錢穆: *Zhuanglao Tongbian* 莊老通辯[The Argument of Zhuangzi and Laozi], SDX Joint Publishing Company 三聯書店, 2002, p.121.

³⁵ Chen Guying 陳鼓應, *Laozi Jinzhujinyi Jizhuping* 老子今註今譯及評介[The Modern Annotation and Commentary of Laozi], Taipei: The Commercial Press 商務印書館, 2017, pp. 25-29.

³⁶ Yan Zun 嚴遵: *Daode Zhiguilun* 道德指歸論[On the Point of Morality], in Chen Guying’s *The Modern Annotation and Commentary of Laozi* 老子今註今譯及評介, Taipei: The Commercial Press 商務印書館, 2017.

implication and the spirit behind the terminology engender fatal discrepancy. As in the interpretation of Confucianism, solely proposing the importance of filial piety without the realization of the essence of it, filial piety would gradually become the formalization of ethical values. The formalization prevailed in the Qing Dynasty, ultimately leading to the trend of demeaning and attacking the value of filial piety in the Republic of China. In fact, filial piety is not only to implement the attitude of obedience towards parents. In the Confucian context, the state of being humane and benevolent is the expression of human nature and the highest achievement of self-cultivation. And the fastest way to realize human nature is to feel the love in the relationship between father and son. Confucius's student *Youzi* 有子 said, 'Filial piety and fraternal love are the foundation of benevolence.'³⁷ Gradually opening up the experience of human nature is the natural consequence of implementing filial piety. Therefore, Confucianism's expectation of proposing filial piety is not utilising ethical bound to make people obedient and submissive, but to inspire their inner state of benevolence love. It is the ignorance of the spirit of filial piety that generates so many misunderstandings.

Similarly, we need to search for something like a central insight that defines *wuwei*. If we confine it into the realm of action will inevitably make this profound thought superficial but even draw criticism based on the misconceptions.

5.2 The Core Implication of *Wuwei*

To sum up, *wuwei* is not belonged to the action level. When speaking of Confucian politics, *Liang Qichao* 梁啟超 said: 'From the perspective of Confucianism, the only purpose and means of politics is to improve the citizens' overall personalities ... In terms of measures, politics is education.'³⁸ *Liang Qichao*'s statement also applies in Daoism. In fact, *wuwei* is an expression of a kind of spiritual education. The purpose of which is to enlighten people's awareness of human nature. As the name suggests, *wu* indicates a realm that does not refer to the field of behaviour.

Many if not most ordinary education evolve with an elaborate accumulation of values and ideas. It seems that one could reach the truth through an ever-expanding

³⁷ Cheng Shude 程樹德, *Lunyu Jishi* 論語集釋 [A Collection of Editions and Commentaries for the *Analecets*], Beijing: Chung Hua Book Co., 中華書局, 2017), p. 16.

³⁸ Liang qichao 梁啟超: *Xianqin Zhengzhi Sixiang Lun* 先秦政治思想論[On the Pre-Qin Political Theory], Beijing: China Publishing Housh 東方出版社, 1996, p.101.

range of knowledge. Nevertheless, submerging in all sorts of precepts and principles, hovering in the vortex of fame and wealth in the name of learning, Daoists keep their suspicion on whether this way of knowing the world is effective. Even if people want to get rid of the shackles of concepts, theories and contrived value system, they are still likely to be bound to the fixed path determined by predecessors as long as their way of learning remains unchanged. Therefore, *Laozi's* ideal education is contrary to normal approaches of education.

In studying, there is a daily increase, while in learning of Dao, there is a daily decrease; One loses and again loses to the point that one does everything with the principle of *wuwei*, in which nothing goes undone.

為學日益，為道日損。損之又損，以至於無為。無為而無不為。取天下常以無事，及其有事，不足以取天下。（第四十八章）

Roger T Ames comments on this chapter,

Daoist is persuaded that such “knowledge” promotes attitudes of mind that frustrate its own intentions. The development of a really deferential disposition requires largely a letting go of those barriers to associative and synergistic living that prevent full participation and contribution.³⁹

Put it in another way, the education of ‘*wu*’ (literally means nothingness) is in essence to untie the mind, to release the dependence on solidified thinking, to detach the obsession with material desires and the pursuit for fame. In the process of releasing, the inherited light of human nature gets the opportunities to come out.

It seems that this proposal is no longer a political theory but it is a higher political pursuit. The human’s heart-and-mind is the most unpredictable thing, but they possess tremendous potential in the meantime. There are many examples in history that a great leader influenced numerous followers to strive for a common goal, which is not by a force of compulsion, but a feeling and an encouragement that works. The principle of *wuwei* has theoretically exceeded the level of tangible measurements, such as GDP.

Hence *Laozi* said:

The softest things in the world ride roughshod over the hardest things. Only the least substantial thing can penetrate the seamless. This is how we know that doing things noncoercively (in the principle of *wuwei*) is beneficial.

天下之至柔，馳騁天下之至堅。無有入無間，吾是以知無為之有益。（第四十三章）

³⁹ Roger T. Ames & David L. Hall: *Making This Life Significant*, The Ballantine Publishing Group, 2003.

That disengage oneself from old experience and judgment lead to a new realm, opening up unlimited potential. This is the effect of the education of spirit following the principle of *wuwei*.

5.3 The Demonstrations of *Wuwei*

There are three primary aspects of the demonstrations of *wuwei*.

5.3.1 Reducing desires

First, *Laozi* does not abandon the primitive impulse of human beings. ‘Fill their stomachs’ in *Daodejing* implies that human’s rational need is admitted. What he proposed is to lessen one’s concern for itself and reduce unnecessary and detrimental desire. And this requirement is for both the leaders and the public:

Ever teaching the common people to be unprincipled in their knowing and objectless in their desire. 常使民無知無欲。（第三章）

It is for this reason that the sages eschew the excessive, the superlative, and the extravagant. 是以聖人去甚，去奢，去泰。（第二十九章）

We are objectless in our desires, and the common people are of themselves return to the state of uncarved wood. 我無欲，而民自樸。（第五十七章）

Reducing desires is also the most fundamental factor that enables people to recover their nature, for ‘desire’ belongs to the realm of ‘having something’, while *wuwei* belongs to the realm of ‘nothing’, decreasing desire is the process of returning to the realm of ‘nothing’ which is the origin of everything.

For though all creatures under heaven are the products of Being, Being itself is the product of Not-being. 天下萬物生於有，有生於無。（第四十章）

It seems to have little to do with politics, but it is closely related. Only when leaders have few desires can they better understand people’s need and make laws accordingly. Only when the common people have few desires, they would not take advantage out of legal loopholes. Otherwise, no matter how comprehensive the legislation is, it will not be able to resist the greed. Because of carving, the system of democracy may become an oligarchy but still in the name of democracy; Because of carving, Socialism may become an ideological excuse to invade others’ outcome of labour.

But ‘reducing desire’ is not an easy thing to be achieved. If the execution of

laws may encounter external obstacles, then the implementation of ‘reducing desire’ is an internal challenge. Because people have been affected by social attractions, the recovery of human nature needs consciously resisting the inertia brought by such adverse effects. Therefore, ‘reducing desire’ is not sitting there motionless, it is an inward pursuit that is even harder than that of outward attempt. That may be the reason why *Laozi* says, ‘To know oneself is acuity...To conquer oneself is strength.’⁴⁰

Although it is difficult to make efforts inwardly, those who try to their utmost have the strength to influence others. For example, it requires insight for an enterprise with the competence of expansion to resist the attraction of outward expansion and keep improving in its own professional field. Because choosing product development and technology advances implies to delay favourable satisfaction in the future. But once the research attains success, the effectiveness will have a qualitative leap, less growth in revenue would immediately reverse, for the quality of products is the guarantee of the turnover. Similarly, educating people to reduce desire is just like the process of product development. Although it does not seem to be related to economic growth, it is the foundation of a promising company. Enhancing people’s state of mind from the internal side is like the drop of water wears away the stone, when it comes to success, no law can achieve that effect.

5.3.2 Following its Natural Course

Laozi said :

Dao gives things life yet does not manage them. It assists them yet makes no claim upon them. It rears them yet does not lord it over them.

長之育之；亭之毒之；養之覆之。生而不有，為而不恃，長而不宰。（第五十一章）

He conceives of the world as an everlasting process of production, in which all things follow the course or order of ‘nature’. This ‘nature’ is not a supreme cosmic power but a kind of universal law summed up by *Laozi* as the *Dao* and personifies it. This sentence says that nature creates all things without the slightest thought of ‘I create it’. There is no concept of ego in nature. Imitating this trait, politicians should also show no individual subjective consciousness, making policies entirely based on the situation:

Sages really think and feel immediately. They take the thought and feelings of the common people as their own.

⁴⁰ 「自知者明……自勝者強。」（《道德經·第三十二章》）

聖人無常心，以百姓心為心。（第四十九章）

The Book of History⁴¹ has recorded evidence of governing the country by the principle of *wuwei*. After being elected as the prime minister, *Cao can* 曹參 adhered to the policy of doing nothing. All regulations remain unchanged, just as what *Xiao He* 蕭何 (the last also the first prime minister in Han Dynasty) has established. Later, judging that *Cao Shen* had no political achievements, the Emperor Hui of Han 漢惠帝 commanded *Cao Can* to adjust his policy. However, *Cao Can* argued with Emperor Hui and reject the proporsal, saying that the his predecessors was wiser than himself, so there is no need for change. *Cao Can* appears to adopt an irresponsible policy. But if we analyze the country's overall situation, the conclusion will be different. The Han Dynasty had just acquired political power. Less modification of laws creates people an environment more accommodative, thus esily to recuperate and multiply. Therefore, *Cao can*' s policy is really in line with the needs of the people. Because following the natural trend, people did not feel that *Cao Can*'s policy has any benefit. But in reality, the country has got a good rest. This is the ideal politics:

With all things accomplished and the work complete, the common people say,
'We are spontaneously like this.'
功成事遂，百姓皆謂我自然。

5.3.3 The Excellent Characteristic of A Leader

Let us take the previous instance to further analyse. Studying *Cao Can*'s background, we found that he had been an excellent military general. Battlefield is where in an instant a myriad things change. Hence Cao Can must have the ability of examining and judging the situation fast and precisely. And it is reasonable to conclude that his policy of 'following the natural course' is built on a clear understanding and reflection of the social conditions. Additionally, under pressure given by senior supervisor, instead of flattering, he stuck to his own opinions and gave convincing reasons. This demonstrates that behind the policy, there is *Cao Can*' s resolute executive ability. Furthermore, it's effortless to put forward one's opinion in order to show off, but only those who possess the quality of selflessness can restrain themselves and endure no performances.

⁴¹ Sima,Qian 司馬遷, *Shiji* 史記[Records of the Grand Historian] , annot. by Han Zhaoqi 韓兆琦, Changsha:Yuelu Publishing House 嶽麓書社, 2005.

To conclude, the above three factors are the vital features of the principle of *wuwei*. An integrated implementation of them is the political theory of *wuwei*'s application.

6. The Modern Application of *Wuwei* Politics

Applying the notion of *wuwei* into temporary politics, there are still controversies concerning whether it is the governance of anarchy or centralised power. John Clark states that: 'The *Laozi* is one of the great anarchist classics.'⁴² However, *Daodejing* has presented a classical vision of politics, which distinctive insight should not be reductively labelled as the anarchists' theory.

The control of power is never the theme of *Daodejing*. There is a wise ruler as personally passive while still actively governing through ministers. His penetrating insight directs the macro-policy and his lack of much desire guarantee his avoiding factionalism and selecting competent officials. To take specific examples, Deng Xiaoping 鄧小平's economic reform is a quite typical application of the *wuwei* political theory.

In the era of Mao Zedong 毛澤東, the strict control of ideology hindered the development of economy. Commercial activities would be branded as capitalist and thus received punishments. However, with the development of the country, the old model of governance gradually revealed a deficiency in satisfying people's practical needs. Neither to keep the old fashion of policy as many conservative leaders stressed, nor immediately adopt capitalist economy policy, Deng Xiaoping decided to give a degree of freedom to people.

Along with gradually opening up the space, people went to a new development direction respecting Chinese particularities and being appropriate to their conditions. To avoid provoking conflict of ideology, *Deng Xiaoping* creatively expressed his intention for diminishing the effect of ideology, 'let's see how it goes.' 'It doesn't matter if the cat is black or white as long as it catches the mouse.' With this passive encouragement, Household enterprises sprouted 'like bamboo shoots

⁴² Sarah Flavel & Brad Hall, *State Maternalism: Rethinking Anarchist-Readings of the Daodejing*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-020-09731-2>, 25th May 2021.

after the spring rain', resolved the urgent problem of people's livelihood.⁴³

The decree made in *Deng Xiaoping's* time, always in accordance with the actual needs. Later, when the problem of illegal immigration to Hong Kong was passed on to the central government, it was suggested that strict control should be carried out and regulations should be formulated. However, *Deng Xiaoping* realized that this was a social reflection of people's requirements, and then came the policy of opening Guangdong and Fujian provinces as special economic zones. With the establishment of new regulations, he also carefully select capable officials to these special zones for experiments.

Today, China has become one of the most economically powerful countries around the world, but all these began with economic reforms under *Deng Xiaoping* in 1979. It is fair to say that the path of transformation which have had neither predecessors nor successors could success is because of *Deng Xiaoping* and his ingeniously political thought. Therefore, the achievement acquired in China's economic reform is the most powerful evidence to prove the value of the political theory of *wuwei*.

In today's society, education reform is a new challenge. Perhaps, the Daoism political theory is an alternative provided by the ancient wisdom with the current situation.

7. Conclusion

Behind *Laozi's* enigmatic language system, there is utmost compassion and in-depth humanistic concern. Fervently believing that human nature is intrinsically true allows him to put aside the complicated appearance of politics, directly communicate with human's spirit level. Instead of paying attention to external laws and regulations, *Laozi* advises the *wuwei* political theory, which is in essence a kind of spiritual education. In the blueprint of *Laozi's* optimal politics, the wise leader takes the education of decreasing egocentricity as their primary responsibility and utilising decrees that always align with the current situations as the supplement measure. Ultimately produce a harmonious society where each element is performing its proper function.

Ancient Chinese philosophy is never a purely theoretical concept remote from

⁴³ Ezra F. Vogel: *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*, America: The Belknap Press of Havard University Press, 2011.

daily life; because those great philosophers constantly focus on ordinary people's well-being. Of all factors, politics and education are two fundamental pillars that support people's happiness and have become topical issues of all times. Therefore, being lucky to study the classics, we should always strive to grasp its core spirit and combine it with the current situation, expecting ourselves to be competent to benefit the world.

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