

A brief analysis of the philosophy of *qingjing wuwei* in the *Tao Te Ching*: Self-cultivation and state governance

Jiaming Hu^{1*}, Xinlin Jiang¹, Yuan Li¹, Zhihan Zhang²

¹Shihezi University, Shihezi, China

²Heilongjiang University, Harbin, China

*Corresponding Author. Email: 13608209172@163.com

Abstract. Tranquility and non-interference constitute the proper way of conduct. The principle of *qingjing wuwei* (tranquility and non-action) serves as a guide for self-cultivation by encouraging individuals and rulers alike to attain inner emptiness and preserve serenity. It also provides a philosophy of governance, advocating non-coercion, love of tranquility, freedom from unnecessary intervention, and moderation of desires in order to transform, rectify, enrich, and simplify the lives of the people, thereby achieving effective state administration. Furthermore, *qingjing wuwei* offers a path toward universal harmony, fostering peaceful relations among individuals and among states and ultimately contributing to lasting peace under Heaven. The essence of this philosophy lies in maintaining a tranquil mind while practicing governance through non-interference, so that great affairs may be accomplished without artificial action and yet nothing remains unmanaged. A thorough examination of the concept of *qingjing wuwei* in the *Tao Te Ching*, together with a dialectical reflection on its implications, allows its philosophical insights to be applied flexibly to personal cultivation, political stability, and the preservation of social harmony. Consequently, this doctrine has provided significant intellectual inspiration and exerted a profound influence on later theories and practices of self-cultivation and state governance.

Keywords: *qingjing wuwei*, self-cultivation, state governance, universal harmony

1. Introduction

Beginning with the harmonious unity of Heaven, Earth, and humanity, Laozi constructed a political philosophy and model of social governance centered on the principle of "governing through non-action" (*wuwei er zhi*) from a cosmological perspective [1]. At the core of his philosophical system lies the question of the essential nature of the *Dao* [2]. This study explores the philosophy of *qingjing wuwei* in the *Tao Te Ching* as it relates to self-cultivation and state governance, seeking to uncover its significance as both the highest ideal of personal moral development and a fundamental principle of political administration. The concept of *qingjing wuwei*, also rendered as *qingjing wuwei* ("purity, tranquility, and non-action"), represents a major philosophical and political doctrine of the Daoist school during the Spring and Autumn period. It maintains that the Way of Heaven follows the natural course of things without forced intervention, while advocating an inner state of emptiness and serenity through steadfast adherence to tranquility, thereby enabling a return to

one's original natural condition. Since antiquity, Laozi's doctrine of *qingjing wuwei* has generated diverse interpretations among scholars. Some regard it as little more than an attitude of detachment—remaining indifferent to worldly affairs, avoiding social entanglements, and refraining from meaningful action—thus characterizing it as a passive form of escapism. Others argue that *qingjing wuwei* refers not to inactivity itself but to a particular state of mind characterized by inner calm and freedom from artificial striving. From this perspective, one practices non-coercive action rather than complete inaction, achieving the ideal of "acting without contrivance while leaving nothing undone", and ultimately realizing governance that governs precisely by avoiding excessive government. Taking *qingjing wuwei* as its point of departure, this paper both builds upon earlier positive interpretations of its political significance and further investigates its deeper philosophical implications, while also examining its essential role in the cultivation of personal character. In explicating this concept, the study extracts and analyzes both the implicit meanings and explicit statements concerning *qingjing wuwei* found in the *Tao Te Ching*. These ideas are systematically organized into three interconnected levels: self-cultivation, state governance, and the ultimate ideal of peace under Heaven. Within each of these broad categories, further thematic subdivisions are established to facilitate a more nuanced discussion of the intricate dimensions of the doctrine. Finally, each major section, as well as the paper as a whole, offers a synthesis and generalization of the principles of *qingjing wuwei*, with the aim of presenting a comprehensive understanding of its philosophical essence.

2. Self-cultivation: attaining emptiness and preserving tranquility to return to one's original nature

As the *Tao Te Ching* states, "Attain utmost emptiness and maintain steadfast tranquility". Human nature is originally clear and serene, yet personal desires and the distractions of external things cloud the mind and give rise to restlessness. Only by cultivating emptiness and preserving inner stillness can one maintain a tranquil heart. The *Tao Te Ching* further declares: "All things flourish, yet each returns to its root. Returning to the root is called tranquility; tranquility is called returning to one's true destiny" (Chapter 16) [3]. All beings ultimately return to their original source, and this return is identified with tranquility, which in turn signifies a restoration of one's primordial nature. Thus, attaining the highest degree of emptiness and steadfast stillness enables one to return to one's original state of inner serenity. Self-cultivation through the practice of attaining emptiness and preserving tranquility applies not only to ordinary people but also to those who govern.

2.1. Self-cultivation for the people: preserving inner contentment to achieve a peaceful and prosperous life

The *Tao Te Ching* states, "He who knows contentment is truly rich" (Chapter 33) [3]. At first glance, this proposition may seem paradoxical. If a person is content and does not actively pursue wealth, how can such a person be considered rich? Laozi's intention, however, is to suggest that those who possess inner contentment and spiritual abundance do not regard material wealth as the sole or ultimate goal of life. This reflects the spirit of *qingjing wuwei*, reminding individuals not to become mere instruments of material pursuits but to preserve their authentic selves, cultivate their own character, and attain inner sufficiency through emptiness and tranquility. Rather than straying onto misguided paths, people should follow the proper way, acquire wealth through legitimate means, and avoid being consumed by greed and selfish desire. By preserving tranquility, they can pursue a stable and fulfilling life. A person who constantly seeks excess can never experience genuine fulfillment. Material abundance may create the appearance of completeness, yet inwardly such a person may remain spiritually impoverished and emotionally empty. Only by cultivating a tranquil and untroubled mind

can one practice *qingjing wuwei*, achieving an appropriate balance in material life while enriching the inner self and ultimately attaining true fulfillment. The *Tao Te Ching* further teaches: "Without leaving one's door, one may know the world; without looking through the window, one may perceive the Way of Heaven. The farther one travels, the less one truly knows. Therefore, the sage knows without going forth, understands without seeing, and accomplishes without deliberate action" (Chapter 47) [3]. Laozi places great emphasis on introspection, maintaining that individuals should cultivate themselves through self-examination, eliminating selfish desires and external distractions so that the mind may become empty and tranquil. With such an inner disposition, one can perceive the underlying principles governing the external world. Although this passage is framed in terms of the sage, its implications extend equally to ordinary people. Through self-reflection, self-understanding, and contentment, individuals can embrace tranquility and practice non-coercive action. By living in accordance with the natural order, abandoning excessive cleverness and selfish ambition, maintaining a peaceful state of mind, and pursuing their occupations without artificial striving, people may attain the secure and prosperous life they genuinely seek. This constitutes the self-cultivation of the people. Since the governance of a state depends upon both the people and their rulers, those who govern should likewise devote themselves to moral cultivation, embody the principles of *qingjing wuwei*, and thereby govern the realm.

2.2. Self-cultivation for rulers: self-restraint and public commitment as the foundation for governing the realm

The *Tao Te Ching* states: "The noble takes the humble as its root, and the high takes the low as its foundation. Therefore, kings and lords call themselves 'the orphan', 'the widowed', and 'the unworthy'. Is this not because humility is their foundation? Indeed it is. Thus, the highest honor seeks no honor. Therefore, one should not wish to shine like jade but rather remain plain and enduring like stone" (Chapter 39) [3]. This passage suggests that nobility is grounded in humility and that what stands high must rest upon what is low. The self-designations adopted by ancient rulers—such as "the orphan", "the widowed", and "the unworthy"—may appear self-deprecating, yet they do not imply that rulers should debase themselves. Rather, they serve as expressions of modesty and humility. Laozi advises rulers not to place themselves arrogantly above the people but to remain humble while bearing responsibility for affairs of state and the welfare of the realm. Such humility does not signify passivity or inaction; instead, it embodies the principle of governing through non-coercive action. From this perspective, the *Tao Te Ching* does not call upon rulers to become weak or insignificant but to cultivate an attitude of humility, employ modest language, conduct themselves with integrity, restrain personal desires, and dedicate themselves to the public good. Through self-cultivation and moral refinement, they may become enlightened rulers who provide a stable foundation for the state. Like rough stone, they should be simple yet steadfast, capable of attaining emptiness and preserving tranquility, remaining calm and detached while restraining selfish impulses for the benefit of the people. Such personal example has transformative power. Through their humility and virtue, rulers may influence society at large, encouraging the people to become modest rather than arrogant and tranquil rather than restless. When both rulers and subjects preserve inner serenity and practice *qingjing wuwei*, social affairs naturally follow their proper course and return to their original harmony. The *Tao Te Ching* further observes, "Only those who do not live merely for the sake of preserving life are wiser than those who place excessive value upon life itself" (Chapter 75) [3]. The implication is that those who cultivate tranquility and simplicity surpass those devoted to luxury and indulgence. A similar idea appears in the well-known words of Zhuge Liang: "The conduct of a gentleman is cultivated through tranquility and his virtue through frugality. Without detachment, one cannot clarify one's aspirations; without serenity, one cannot achieve distant goals". This likewise emphasizes that tranquility nurtures character and that simplicity enables one to realize lofty ideals. To be tranquil and

detached is to preserve inner serenity, restrain selfish desires, and place the welfare of the people above personal interests. Only then can rulers practice frugality instead of extravagance and provide a moral example for society. When the people admire and emulate such conduct, arrogance and excessive luxury diminish, public morality improves, and both rulers and subjects embrace the principles of *qingjing wuwei*. Society becomes free from domination by unchecked desires and corrupt influences, preserving the original moral order in which rulers cherish virtue and the people cultivate goodness. Under such conditions, the affairs of the realm may be governed effectively.

2.3. The shared self-cultivation of the people and their rulers: pursuing the way of emptiness and tranquility to achieve national prosperity and social stability

The self-cultivation of the people aims at securing a peaceful and prosperous livelihood, while that of rulers seeks to govern the affairs of the state wisely. The two are inseparable and mutually dependent. If the people cultivate only themselves and rulers concern themselves solely with their own moral development, with each pursuing separate interests, genuine national prosperity and social stability cannot be achieved. According to the Daoist cosmological view, the interaction of yin and yang gives rise to all things and sustains the continuous generation of life. This relationship may serve as an analogy for the bond between rulers and the people. Only when their aspirations are united and both sides embrace the way of emptiness and tranquility can true peace and stability be realized, enabling each to fulfill its respective ideals and responsibilities. The Emperor Taizong of Tang repeatedly warned that "Water can carry a boat, but it can also overturn it". Although the saying primarily emphasizes that government should be people-centered, it also reminds rulers and officials to steer the ship of state responsibly, avoiding extravagance, arrogance, and self-indulgence. At the same time, the people should remain content, preserve tranquility, restrain excessive desires, and refrain from social disorder. Only when both rulers and subjects fulfill their respective duties can the great ship of the nation navigate steadily and endure over time. The modern Chinese reform thinker Zheng Guanying advanced the concept of "joint sovereignty between ruler and people", advocating the establishment of representative institutions through which the state and its citizens could govern together. At a deeper level, this idea reflects the necessity of unity between rulers and the people. Such unity requires not only cooperation in governance but also shared moral cultivation. Both parties must preserve tranquil hearts and pursue the way of emptiness and serenity. In doing so, they cultivate the spirit of *qingjing wuwei*, practice non-coercive governance, and ultimately realize the long-cherished aspiration of national prosperity and social harmony.

In essence, self-cultivation consists in pursuing the way of emptiness and tranquility, cultivating a peaceful mind, and governing human affairs through the principle of non-coercive action. Whether for rulers or for ordinary people, the ultimate purpose of self-cultivation is the preservation and enduring stability of the state. As society grows increasingly complex and external distractions multiply, both the people and their leaders must strive to attain emptiness and preserve tranquility, safeguarding the purity of their original nature and embodying the principles of *qingjing wuwei*. Through such personal cultivation, the foundation is laid for the effective governance of the state.

3. State governance: governing the realm with the spirit of *qingjing wuwei*

The *Tao Te Ching* states, "Governing a great state is like cooking a small fish" (Chapter 60) [3]. A common English rendering of this passage is, "*Governing a big country is as delicate as frying a small fish*". The adjective *delicate* conveys the ideas of gentleness and careful handling, suggesting that the administration of a state should be conducted with restraint and subtlety rather than through drastic or disruptive measures. Rulers

should preserve a spirit of tranquility and non-interference, avoiding impatience and excessive intervention, for to disturb the people unnecessarily is ultimately to harm them. Just as a small fish will fall apart if it is constantly turned over during cooking, the people should not be subjected to continual interference and burdensome policies. Excessive manipulation only breeds resentment and undermines political stability, eventually threatening the ruler's own authority [4]. Only through the practice of *qingjing wuwei* can harmony between ruler and people be maintained and the state effectively governed. As Laozi declares: "I practice non-action, and the people transform themselves. I cherish tranquility, and the people correct themselves. I refrain from excessive interference, and the people prosper. I am free from selfish desires, and the people return to simplicity" (Chapter 57) [3]. Non-action, tranquility, non-interference, and freedom from selfish desire constitute the ruler's path toward inner serenity, while the people's self-transformation, self-discipline, prosperity, and simplicity represent the natural outcomes of governance through *wuwei*. Thus, the ruler should approach the affairs of the state with a tranquil and non-coercive disposition.

3.1. Governing through non-action: the people transform themselves

The *Tao Te Ching* observes: "The more prohibitions there are, the poorer the people become. The more sharp weapons the people possess, the more chaotic the state becomes. The more clever devices there are, the more strange things arise. The more laws and regulations multiply, the more thieves and bandits appear" (Chapter 57) [3]. This passage suggests that excessive prohibitions impoverish the people, the proliferation of weapons creates disorder, excessive cleverness encourages corruption, and increasingly complicated laws give rise to greater criminality. Why is it that the more a ruler attempts to control society, the more instability emerges and the more difficult governance becomes? The underlying reason, according to Laozi, is that rulers become impatient and excessively interventionist, abandoning the principle of *qingjing wuwei*. A restless and anxious ruler cannot expect the people to cultivate themselves naturally or the state to achieve lasting stability. Laozi's concept of *youwei* ("action") should not be understood simply as arbitrary intervention. Rather, true action consists in acting according to the Dao and following the natural course of events. Within Laozi's philosophy of governance, action means addressing problems before they fully emerge and acting in harmony with natural processes [5]. Consequently, *qingjing wuwei* emphasizes non-coercive action rather than complete inactivity. Its purpose is to achieve effective governance precisely by avoiding excessive interference. Although Laozi's vision of a state in which "nothing remains unmanaged" represents an ideal, it is an aspiration shared by rulers and peoples across different cultures and historical periods, and one toward which governments should continually strive. Excessive self-indulgence and arbitrary action stand in direct opposition to *qingjing wuwei*. A ruler driven by personal ambition may regard complicated administrative measures and grand political projects as evidence of decisive leadership, believing that such actions display determination and achievement. Yet in pursuing personal ambitions, the ruler may neglect the needs and sentiments of the people. Restlessness and unchecked desire then replace tranquility and restraint, making it difficult for the people to develop self-discipline and moral responsibility. The *Tao Te Ching* further states: "When government is lenient, the people are honest. When government is harsh and exacting, the people become cunning" (Chapter 58) [3]. This observation clearly illustrates the contrasting consequences of governance through *qingjing wuwei* and governance driven by excessive desire and intervention. The principle of non-action does not imply abandoning responsibility; rather, it recognizes that rulers should allow the people sufficient space for self-cultivation instead of overwhelming them with coercive authority. Excessive control restricts personal freedom, creates confusion and resentment, and may ultimately drive individuals onto misguided paths, resulting in social instability and political crisis. Laozi also warns: "When the people no longer fear authority, a greater calamity is at hand. Do not oppress them in their homes, nor make their lives unbearable. Only by not

oppressing them will they not grow weary of you. Therefore, the sage knows himself but does not display himself, values himself but does not exalt himself. Thus, he rejects the latter and embraces the former" (Chapter 72) [3]. Here, rulers are explicitly advised not to burden the people's living conditions or exploit their livelihoods. Once governmental intervention becomes excessive, the people's basic welfare can no longer be secured and social order inevitably deteriorates. Desperation may drive people to rebellion, generating severe conflicts between rulers and subjects and plunging society into disorder. Under such circumstances, the state itself becomes increasingly difficult to govern. Only by adhering to the principles of *qingjing wuwei* and refraining from unnecessary interference can rulers allow individuals to pursue their proper place in society. Influenced by the ruler's tranquility and benevolence, the people naturally cultivate themselves and foster a healthy social ethos. In this sense, society achieves order precisely because it is not governed through excessive coercion.

3.2. Governing through tranquility: the people correct themselves

The *Tao Te Ching* states: "The Dao is ever non-active, yet nothing remains undone. If rulers and kings could preserve this principle, all things would transform themselves. Should desires arise during this transformation, I would restrain them with the simplicity of the nameless. Restrained by the nameless simplicity, they would cease to desire. Free from desire and abiding in tranquility, the world would naturally become orderly" (Chapter 37) [3]. This passage advocates acting in accordance with the natural order, restraining selfish desires, and attaining inner tranquility, thereby enabling the world to return to harmony and stability. It emphasizes both *wuwei* and *jing* (tranquility), the latter corresponding directly to the notion of serenity embodied in *qingjing wuwei*. Tranquility signifies a state of mental clarity and inner peace. A ruler should value tranquility and cultivate a calm disposition. Only then can the people themselves become peaceful and follow the proper moral path, allowing the state to achieve stability and sustainable development. The twenty-three-year reign of Emperor Taizong of Tang provides a historical example frequently associated with these principles. During his rule, political administration was stable, officials were comparatively upright, the people enjoyed peaceful livelihoods, and economic recovery and development flourished. This prosperous period became known as the "Reign of Zhenguan". Its success was closely connected with policies emphasizing moderation, reduced taxation and labor obligations, and concern for the people's welfare. Emperor Taizong consistently advocated "nurturing the people through tranquility", thereby fostering social stability and public well-being. The chapter "The Way of Heaven" in the *Zhuangzi* offers a further explanation of the nature of tranquility: "The sage's tranquility is not tranquility for its own sake. It is tranquil because nothing can disturb the mind. Still water reflects the eyebrows and beard with perfect clarity and serves as a model for the skilled craftsman. If still water can achieve such clarity, how much more can the human spirit? The tranquil mind of the sage is the mirror of Heaven and Earth and of all things. Emptiness, tranquility, simplicity, serenity, and non-action represent the highest expression of the Dao and the ultimate repose of sages and rulers". This passage explains that those who embody emptiness and tranquility are able to comprehend the Dao and follow the natural order. If sages can attain such tranquility, rulers should likewise cultivate a tranquil mind. Inner calm gives rise to the spirit of *qingjing*, while tranquil conduct enables governance through *wuwei*. When rulers are tranquil, the people likewise become tranquil, preserving pure hearts and resisting the temptations of external desires. By following the natural course of things, society regains its harmony and the state its stability. The *Tao Te Ching* further teaches: "The heavy is the foundation of the light, and tranquility is the master of restlessness. Therefore, the noble person travels all day without leaving the baggage train behind. Though surrounded by splendid sights, he remains calm and detached. How can the ruler of a great state treat the world lightly? Lightness loses the foundation, and restlessness loses mastery" (Chapter 26) [3]. Both

gravity and tranquility point toward the same essential principle: only a tranquil heart can provide stability and steadfastness. Laozi explicitly criticizes rulers who govern rashly and impulsively, urging them to preserve serenity and avoid arrogance and impatience. By forgetting their fundamental responsibilities and failing to follow both the natural order and the will of the people, rulers risk creating social unrest, widespread suffering, and political instability. Finally, the *Tao Te Ching* states: "Few words accord with nature. Violent winds do not last all morning, and torrential rains do not continue all day. Even Heaven and Earth cannot sustain such extremes; how much less can human beings? Therefore, those who follow the Dao become one with the Dao; those who follow virtue become one with virtue; those who abandon them become one with loss. Those who are one with the Dao are welcomed by the Dao; those who are one with virtue are welcomed by virtue; those who are one with loss are welcomed by loss. When trust is insufficient, distrust inevitably follows" (Chapter 23) [3]. The deeper meaning of "few words" is the avoidance of excessive commands and coercive policies. Even the violent forces of nature cannot endure indefinitely, much less the harsh rule of human governments. If rulers become impatient and pursue quick results through oppressive measures, the state itself cannot enjoy lasting stability. From this perspective, only when rulers preserve inner tranquility and govern with restraint can society itself become tranquil, public affairs be properly ordered, and the state achieve enduring prosperity and longevity.

3.3. Governing through non-interference: the people prosper of themselves

The *Tao Te Ching* states: "In the pursuit of learning, one acquires daily; in the pursuit of the Dao, one diminishes daily. Diminishing and diminishing, one arrives at non-action. Through non-action, nothing remains undone. One ordinarily gains the world through non-interference; when one resorts to excessive action, one is unfit to govern the world" (Chapter 48) [3]. The statement, "One ordinarily gains the world through non-interference", underscores the significance of *wushi* (non-interference). Here, *wushi* does not imply idleness or neglect of responsibility. Rather, it signifies refraining from burdensome policies and unnecessary actions that disrupt the people's lives or inflict suffering upon them. In the spirit of *qingjing wuwei*, rulers should avoid disturbing the populace, thereby allowing individuals sufficient time and opportunity to pursue their livelihoods, improve their standard of living, and contribute to social prosperity. As society flourishes, the state itself grows stronger and more prosperous. The principle that "when the people are prosperous, the state is prosperous" reflects an important aspect of Laozi's political philosophy. The wealth of a nation ultimately derives from the productivity and well-being of its people. Only when the people are economically secure can the state accumulate lasting prosperity and sustain long-term development. The concept of tranquility also entails a society free from unnecessary warfare. As the *Tao Te Ching* observes: "When the world follows the Dao, warhorses are returned to fertilize the fields. When the world lacks the Dao, warhorses are bred on the frontiers. There is no greater calamity than not knowing contentment, and no greater fault than the desire for gain. Therefore, the contentment of those who know contentment is enduring" (Chapter 46) [3]. Laozi suggests that when political order departs from the proper path, rulers become preoccupied with military expansion and constant warfare. Such actions create conflict where none need exist, amounting to the needless manufacture of political and social crises. Yet it is the ordinary people who bear the consequences of these ambitions. Soldiers are sent into battle, some returning victorious while others lose their lives, leaving families shattered and deprived of their principal means of support. Civilians, meanwhile, suffer the devastation of war, facing both foreign aggression and domestic burdens imposed to sustain military campaigns. Even when territorial gains are achieved, innocent people on all sides endure profound hardship. Laozi's implicit question is straightforward: why should the people suffer the consequences of a ruler's unnecessary actions? The ruler, therefore, should avoid provoking conflict or creating needless disturbances.

By maintaining peace and social stability, the people are granted the opportunity to devote their energies to productive labor, generating wealth for themselves and contributing to the development of the state. In this sense, the prosperity of the people naturally promotes the prosperity of the nation. The phrase, "When one resorts to excessive action, one is unfit to govern the world", also carries important political implications. It warns against excessive governmental intervention and burdensome administration. Harsh government policies make life difficult for the people, while complicated regulations create frustration and resentment. A ruler who relies exclusively on severe punishments to suppress wrongdoing neglects the equally important role of moral education. Law should not be regarded as the sole instrument of governance. For those whose offenses do not pose serious threats to society, measured punishment and opportunities for rehabilitation should be emphasized. Governance should combine legal institutions with moral guidance, maintaining a tranquil and balanced approach rather than pursuing harsh penalties in a spirit of impatience. By cultivating both respect for moral values and observance of the law, rulers may foster an internal culture of virtue while maintaining an external framework of justice. Similarly, excessive taxation places heavy burdens upon the people and undermines their ability to sustain themselves. Rulers should reduce unnecessary tax burdens and adopt reasonable fiscal policies that avoid exploiting the populace. With sufficient resources at their disposal, people can invest in new productive activities, create additional wealth, improve their own livelihoods, and simultaneously contribute to the public treasury. State revenues may then be directed toward projects that benefit society as a whole, realizing the ideal of "taking from the people for the benefit of the people". In this way, popular prosperity stimulates national prosperity, while national prosperity further promotes the well-being of the people, creating a virtuous cycle of economic and social development. Accordingly, rulers should practice the principle of *wushi*, refraining from unnecessary interference and allowing the people to prosper naturally. As the people become prosperous, the state itself flourishes, and the affairs of the realm are effectively governed through non-interference.

3.4. Governing through freedom from desire: the people return to simplicity

The *Tao Te Ching* states: "If I possessed even a little wisdom, I would walk the Great Way and fear only straying from it. The Great Way is broad and level, yet people prefer narrow paths. The court is splendidly adorned while the fields lie neglected and the granaries stand empty. People wear embroidered garments, carry sharp swords, indulge themselves with food and drink, and accumulate excessive wealth. This is the ostentation of thieves and is not the Way" (Chapter 53) [3]. This passage illustrates the destructive consequences of unchecked desire. When political morality deteriorates, rulers exploit their authority to satisfy personal ambitions, accumulating wealth through the oppression of the people and indulging in extravagance and luxury [6]. The populace suffers exploitation, while corruption and criminality spread throughout society. Influenced by the conduct of their rulers, many people likewise pursue pleasure while neglecting honest labor. Gradually, social morality declines, public order deteriorates, and the state itself becomes unstable. A ruler consumed by desire loses the tranquil and pure disposition central to *qingjing wuwei*, while the spirit of simplicity disappears from society. To achieve freedom from desire, rulers should cultivate emotional detachment and self-restraint, neither exulting in external gains nor becoming consumed by personal losses. Historical examples provide a useful contrast. During his reign, Emperor Hongwu of the Ming Dynasty, Zhu Yuanzhang, was widely regarded as diligent in government and comparatively restrained in personal indulgence. By avoiding unnecessary projects that burdened the people, encouraging agricultural production, and attending carefully to state affairs, he contributed to a social environment characterized by relative simplicity and stability. By contrast, Qin Shi Huang, the founder of the Qin Dynasty and often celebrated as one of China's greatest rulers, allowed personal ambition and extravagance to expand without restraint. His

massive palace and mausoleum projects imposed enormous burdens upon the populace. Du Mu's *Epang Palace Rhapsody* vividly describes the palace complex as stretching "for more than three hundred li, shutting out the sun and sky", symbolizing the ruler's excessive ambition and desire. The fulfillment of imperial aspirations came at immense human cost. Extravagance spread throughout society, political stability weakened, and the state itself became increasingly vulnerable. Ultimately, Epang Palace was destroyed, becoming "nothing but scorched earth after a single torch of the Chu forces", while the Qin Dynasty itself soon collapsed. The contrasting examples of these rulers illustrate Laozi's warning that excessive desire in governance breeds social unrest, moral decay, and ultimately political instability. The *Tao Te Ching* further teaches: "Do not exalt the worthy, and the people will not compete. Do not prize rare treasures, and the people will not steal. Do not display objects of desire, and the people's hearts will not be disturbed. Therefore, the sage governs by emptying their minds, filling their stomachs, weakening their ambitions, and strengthening their bodies. He constantly keeps the people free from excessive knowledge and desire, so that the clever dare not manipulate others. Practice non-action, and nothing will remain unmanaged" (Chapter 3) [3]. Laozi advocates freedom from excessive desire as the means of preserving inner tranquility and genuine simplicity. Such freedom represents one of the highest forms of personal cultivation for the sage and should likewise serve as the ultimate aspiration of rulers. Preventing social conflict, discouraging theft, and maintaining public order all depend upon ensuring that people are not enslaved by excessive desires. The primary responsibility for establishing such a social climate rests with those who govern. Rulers should refrain from ostentatiously promoting status, excessively valuing rare and luxurious goods, or displaying objects that encourage greed and envy. By restraining their own desires and preserving an inner spirit of tranquility, they set a moral example for society as a whole. When rulers embody *qingjing wuyu*—tranquility and freedom from desire—the people are encouraged to abandon deceit, suppress impulses toward competition and theft, and cultivate a simple and harmonious way of life. Only by governing through self-restraint and freedom from desire can rulers ultimately realize the ideal of *qingjing wuwei* and bring the affairs of the realm into genuine harmony.

3.4.1. *Qingjing wuwei and the shared governance of ruler and people*

Through non-action, the people transform themselves and the state is governed. Through tranquility, the people correct themselves and the state is stabilized. Through non-interference, the people prosper and the state grows strong. Through freedom from desire, the people return to simplicity and the state remains secure. A nation consists not merely of political institutions but of countless families whose collective lives form the foundation of the state. Effective governance therefore requires both capable rulers and the active support of the people. Rulers must embody the principles of *qingjing wuwei*, practicing non-action, tranquility, non-interference, and freedom from selfish desire. Likewise, the people should cultivate self-transformation, self-discipline, prosperity through honest labor, and simplicity of character. The state depends upon both rulers and citizens. The people constitute the foundation of political order, while rulers provide guidance and direction for national development. The question of how this foundation may grow into a flourishing and enduring social order ultimately rests upon the cooperative efforts of both ruler and people. Only through their shared commitment to the principles of *qingjing wuwei* can harmonious governance, social stability, and lasting national prosperity be achieved.

4. Bringing peace to all under heaven: tranquility as the proper way of the world

The *Tao Te Ching* states: "Great perfection seems incomplete, yet its usefulness never fails. Great fullness seems empty, yet its utility is inexhaustible. Great straightness appears crooked; great skill appears clumsy;

great eloquence appears hesitant. Movement overcomes cold, while stillness overcomes heat. Tranquility and serenity are the proper way for all under Heaven" (Chapter 45) [3]. The statement that "movement overcomes cold" suggests that activity generates warmth sufficient to dispel the chill, while "stillness overcomes heat" indicates that a tranquil mind can withstand and moderate excessive passion and agitation. These contrasting forces exist in a relationship of mutual balance, culminating in the assertion that "tranquility and serenity are the proper way for all under Heaven". This passage is the only place in the *Tao Te Ching* where the concept of *qingjing* is explicitly identified and directly explained. On the surface, the phrase means that tranquility and non-coercive action constitute the proper path for the world. At a deeper level, it implies that only when rulers embody the principles of *qingjing wuwei* can the state prosper, the people enjoy stability, and society attain lasting peace. Why, then, does *qingjing wuwei* represent the highest state arising from the balance of opposing forces? The answer lies in its implicit contrast with its opposite. Arbitrary and reckless action is not the proper way for the world. Excessive intervention disrupts the lives of the people, undermines social order, and threatens the stability of the state. Unless such conduct is restrained and replaced by the principles of *qingjing wuwei*, the people will inevitably suffer, and political collapse may ultimately follow. From the perspective of domestic governance, *qingjing wuwei* represents the proper political path. Rulers should cultivate inner tranquility and govern through non-coercive action. They should avoid policies that unnecessarily burden the people, refrain from arbitrary measures that inflict harm, and reject excessive intervention that creates social disorder. Instead, governance should be directed toward benefiting the people, safeguarding their welfare, and preserving social harmony. Under such conditions, the state achieves effective governance, the people enjoy security, and rulers earn the genuine support and loyalty of their subjects. United in purpose, rulers and people can work together to preserve the stability and prosperity of the nation. From the perspective of the wider world, Laozi's advocacy of "non-contention" (*buzheng*) may likewise be understood as a concrete expression of *qingjing wuwei*. When individuals and nations embrace tranquility and refrain from unnecessary competition, conflict naturally diminishes. Warfare is among the greatest misfortunes for ordinary people, and rulers should therefore avoid pursuing aggressive policies that provoke disputes, initiate wars, and disrupt the lives of their populations. Instead, they should maintain a tranquil and restrained disposition, placing the welfare of both their own people and the broader human community above narrow political ambitions. Even when serious conflicts arise, rulers should approach them with the spirit of *qingjing wuwei*, seeking reconciliation rather than confrontation. As expressed in the *Huainanzi*, they should strive to "turn weapons of war into gifts of peace". Peaceful coexistence among states requires the restraint embodied in the principle that "if something does not belong to us, we should not take even the smallest portion of it". It likewise reflects the classical ideal that only through tranquility can one attain stability, through stability attain peace of mind, through peace of mind engage in careful reflection, and through reflection achieve one's proper ends. The highest realization of *qingjing wuwei* therefore requires nations to refrain from coveting even the slightest possession of others and to avoid provoking unnecessary disputes and conflicts. At the same time, the peoples of different countries should cultivate tranquility and simplicity in their own lives, living peacefully, helping one another, refraining from theft and immoral conduct, and avoiding deceit and the pursuit of unjust gain. When nations interact in this spirit, and when individuals likewise embody the principles of *qingjing wuwei*, tranquility becomes the prevailing ethos of the world and non-coercive action its guiding mode of conduct. In this way, the ideal that "tranquility and serenity are the proper way for all under Heaven" may gradually be realized. The people enjoy health and prosperity, states are well governed and secure, and lasting peace may ultimately prevail throughout the world.

5. Conclusion

Qingjing wuwei constitutes the proper way. As a philosophical principle, it provides guidance for self-cultivation, state governance, and the attainment of peace under Heaven. Throughout the *Tao Te Ching*, whether the concept is expressed explicitly or embedded implicitly within individual words and passages, Laozi consistently develops his arguments around the intrinsic relationship among rulers, the people, and the state. His teachings offer both practical guidance for the moral cultivation of individuals and important admonitions concerning the responsibilities of political leadership. The essence of *qingjing wuwei* lies in two complementary dimensions. The first is *qingjing*—inner tranquility and serenity—which forms its spiritual core. Through a tranquil mind, one observes the world with clarity and wisdom. The second is *wuwei*—non-coercive action—which serves as its practical principle of conduct. Genuine practice of *wuwei* requires the internalization of the values of *qingjing wuwei* and their external realization in the administration of public affairs. Rulers must continually guard against arbitrary action and prevent external temptations or personal ambitions from disturbing their inner composure. The philosophy of *qingjing wuwei* guides self-cultivation by encouraging both ordinary people and rulers to attain emptiness and preserve tranquility. It guides state governance through the complementary principles of non-action, tranquility, non-interference, and freedom from excessive desire, thereby enabling the people to transform themselves, regulate themselves, prosper, and preserve simplicity. It further provides a path toward peace under Heaven by encouraging harmonious relations among individuals and among states, so that universal tranquility and stability may gradually be achieved. Whether for ordinary people or for rulers, *qingjing wuwei* is of fundamental importance. It concerns not only the well-being of individuals and governments but also the future development of states and the broader human community. As a philosophy of governance, it constitutes an indispensable principle for political leadership. When rulers govern according to the spirit of *qingjing wuwei*, cultivate its values throughout society, and inspire the people to embrace its ideals, the state can achieve effective governance, the people can enjoy the secure and fulfilling lives they seek, and lasting peace may become attainable.

An examination of Laozi's philosophy of *qingjing wuwei* in the *Tao Te Ching* not only deepens our understanding of the historical and intellectual context in which his ideas emerged but also offers valuable insights for contemporary governance in China and throughout the world. In the Chinese context, these principles may be interpreted in light of the country's contemporary social and political development. Government should seek harmony with the people, formulate policies responsive to changing social conditions, prioritize public welfare, and encourage broad social participation and support. At the same time, the people may be inspired by the values of moderation, moral self-cultivation, and social responsibility, promoting honesty, lawful conduct, and peaceful livelihoods, thereby contributing to the healthy and sustainable development of society. From a global perspective, an increasingly interconnected world calls for cooperation rather than confrontation. Nations should pursue peaceful coexistence instead of provoking conflict, strengthen mutual exchange and collaboration rather than isolate themselves, and seek shared prosperity instead of pursuing narrow self-interest at the expense of others. In this way, international order may become more stable, cooperation more fruitful, and the ideal of peace under Heaven envisioned by Laozi may continue to offer meaningful philosophical guidance for the contemporary world.

References

- [1] Hu, J. (2019). Laozi's thought of governing through non-action and its contemporary value [in Chinese]. *Journal of Luohe Vocational and Technical College*, 18(6), 64–68.

- [2] Geng, M. Z. (2026). An analysis of the nature and connotations of Dao, the core concept in Laozi's philosophy [in Chinese]. *Journal of Jiaozuo Teachers College*, 42(1), 36–40.
- [3] Chen, G. Y. (2006). *Laozi: Modern annotation and translation [in Chinese]*. The Commercial Press.
- [4] Yang, L. N. (2012). Laozi's political thought and its influence on later political development [in Chinese]. *Journal of Hunan University of Science and Engineering*, 33(1), 68–71.
- [5] Nie, L. (2026). "Acting before things come into being": The three-dimensional framework of Laozi's doctrine of purposeful governance [in Chinese]. *Journal of Ningbo University (Humanities and Social Sciences Edition)*, 39(1), 45–55. <https://doi.org/10.20101/j.cnki.1001-5124.202508063>
- [6] Dai, H. Q. (2026). A study of Laozi's theory of political order [in Chinese]. *New Chu Culture*, 1, 16–18. <https://doi.org/10.20133/j.cnki.CN42-1932/G1.2026.01.003>