

THE DAOIST THOUGHT OF WU WEI – ACTION THROUGH NON-ACTION AND ITS INFLUENCE IN VIETNAM

O PENSAMENTO TAOÍSTA DE WU WEI – AÇÃO ATRAVÉS DA NÃO-AÇÃO E SUA INFLUÊNCIA NO VIETNÃ

VU HONG VAN

University of Transport and
Communications,

Hanoi,

Vietnam

vanvh_ph@utc.edu.vn

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adaptation and influence of Wu wei – Action through non-action within Vietnam’s historical and cultural context, from the period of Chinese domination to the Lý–Trần dynasties, and into the spiritual and political traditions of Vietnamese intellectuals. The concept also permeates folk beliefs, vernacular literature, and philosophies of governance. In this process, Wu wei – Action through non-action was localized and synthesized into a distinctive Vietnamese mode of ethical-political conduct, integrating ideals of tranquility, moral autonomy, and social harmony. The article argues that in Vietnamese culture, Wu wei – Action through non-action is not merely a metaphysical concept, but also a symbol of humanistic value, shaping indigenous patterns of thought and moral life, and continuing to hold relevance for modern Vietnamese society.

Keywords: Wu wei – Action through non-action. Taoist (Daoist). 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ. 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ. Chinese philosophy thought and cultural of Vietnam.

Resumo: Este artigo investiga sistematicamente o conceito taoísta de “Wu wei – Ação através da não ação” (無為), enraizado na filosofia chinesa antiga, especialmente por meio de dois textos canônicos: o 道德经 – Dao De Jing de 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ e o 南华经 – Nan Hua Jing de 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ. Dentro de seu contexto filosófico original, Wu wei – Ação através da não ação não implica passividade ou inação, mas sim denota uma maneira de agir pela ordem natural (Dao), rejeitando a força coercitiva e a intervenção excessiva, enquanto enfatiza a humildade, a autorregulação e a harmonia com todos os seres. Representa uma forma profunda de sabedoria prática com implicações ontológicas e éticas. Com base na análise desse sistema ideológico, o artigo explora ainda mais o processo de adaptação cultural e a influência de Wu wei – Ação por meio da não ação no contexto histórico e cultural do Vietnã, desde o período de dominação chinesa até as dinastias Lý-Trần, e nas tradições espirituais e

políticas dos intelectuais vietnamitas. O conceito também permeia crenças populares, literatura vernacular e filosofias de governança. Nesse processo, Wu wei – Ação por meio da não ação foi localizado e sintetizado em um modo vietnamita distinto de conduta ético-política, integrando ideais de tranquilidade, autonomia moral e harmonia social. O artigo argumenta que, na cultura vietnamita, Wu wei – Ação por meio da não ação não é meramente um conceito metafísico, mas também um símbolo de valor humanístico, moldando padrões indígenas de pensamento e vida moral, e continuando a ter relevância para a sociedade vietnamita moderna.

Palavras-chave: Wu wei – Ação por meio da não ação. Taoísta (Taoísta), 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ. 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ. Filosofia chinesa. Pensamento e cultura do Vietnã.

Introduction

In the history of Eastern philosophy, Taoist (Daoist philosophy) is distinguished by its doctrine of Wu wei – Action through non-action, which serves as a foundational pillar of Daoist thought. It originated with 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ (6th–5th century BCE) and was later profoundly developed in the works of 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ (4th century BCE). Wu wei – Action through non-action (無為) is not merely a philosophy of life, but a comprehensive metaphysical principle that encompasses conceptions of humanity, society, and the cosmos.

According to Roger T. Ames & David Hall (2003), Wu wei – Action through non-action (Simplified Chinese: 无为; Traditional Chinese: 無為) is a central concept in Daoist philosophy (道家), particularly elaborated in the canonical works 道德经 – Dao De Jing and 南华经 – Nan Hua Jing. Despite consisting of only two characters, Wu wei – Action through non-action contains multiple philosophical layers, ranging from ontology, epistemology, ethics, to political theory.

In the Vietnamese context, this concept was not passively absorbed from China but actively localized, interwoven with Buddhist elements, folk spiritual practices, and traditional governance philosophies, forming a unique cultural synthesis. According to Nguyen Duy Hinh, Taoist (Daoism), along with Wu wei – Action through non-action, entered Vietnam quite early (around the 1st–3rd centuries CE), and permeated both popular and elite strata through practices such as ritual healing, exorcism, health cultivation, and concepts of immortality. He notes: “Daoism in Vietnam does not exist as an organized church, but as a current of thought and practice blended with indigenous beliefs and Confucian–Buddhist traditions” (Hinh, 1995, p. 17). Furthermore, scholars such as Tran Dinh Huou (1996) and

Pham Duc Duong (2001) have argued that Daoist influence in Vietnam extended beyond religion into ethical norms, cultural values, and especially the governance ideologies of Vietnamese thinkers like Nguyen Binh Khiem, Le Quy Don and Ngo Thi Nham.

This article aims to clarify the concept and essence of “Wu wei – Action through non-action” within the Daoist system of thought, thereby examining the process of its adaptation and influence within Vietnamese culture and intellectual history. From a philosophical perspective, this study employs classical textual analysis of the **道德经** – Dao De Jing and **南华经** – Nan Hua Jing, alongside intercultural comparison and historical–sociological approaches, to highlight the flexible yet profound and enduring nature of Wu wei – Action through non-action throughout the evolution of Vietnamese intellectual traditions. Accordingly, to study Wu wei – Action through non-action in a comprehensive and accurate way, a multidimensional and flexible methodology is required—one that combines both classical and contemporary tools, philosophical and interdisciplinary approaches.

Research Methods

Philological method and classical Chinese hermeneutics: The first and most fundamental step in researching the concept of Wu wei – Action through non-action is to interpret the original classical texts, especially selected passages from the **道德经** – Dao De Jing, the **南华经** – Nan Hua Jing, and certain writings by Vietnamese thinkers. This approach requires a solid command of classical Chinese to establish the original meanings, implications, parallelisms, symbols, and metaphors characteristic of Daoist literary style and its later influence in Vietnam.

Philosophical analysis – ontology, epistemology, ethics: The idea of Wu wei – Action through non-action should be treated as a synthesized philosophical truth, encompassing multiple internal structural layers in conjunction with key concepts such as ontology, epistemology, and ethics. Philosophical analysis here involves comparing these layers of meaning internally, while dialectically contextualizing Wu wei – Action through non-action with contrasting concepts such as you wei (**有為** – purposeful action), ren wei (**人為** – human intervention), intervention, manipulation, and artifice.

Intercultural comparative philosophy: This method compares Wu wei – Action through non-action in Daoism with other philosophical systems to highlight its uniquely Eastern characteristics: (i) With Confucianism, Wu wei – Action through non-action stands in opposition to you wei morality and societal regulation. Whereas Confucius emphasizes ritual, learning, and moral destiny, 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ negates all forms of coercive structure; (ii) With Buddhism: Wu wei – Action through non-action may be paralleled with notions such as “anattā” (no-self) or “nirvāṇa.” Despite differing paradigms, both aim for the abandonment of ego and the attainment of ultimate freedom; (iii) With Vietnamese intellectual history, Wu wei – Action through non-action has served as a counterpoint to ideologies of action, creativity, and control. Phenomenological approach – interior lived experience: A distinctive feature of Daoism lies in its prioritization of experience over doctrine. This idea has influenced several prominent Vietnamese thinkers. Therefore, Wu wei – Action through non-action should not be studied solely as a conceptual system but also as a lived, existential state, a mode of being.

In conclusion, the study of Wu wei – Action through non-action in Daoist philosophy and its influence in Vietnam is both a philosophical and introspective journey. With its complex and multilayered nature, Wu wei – Action through non-action cannot be reduced to a mere ethical or political model; instead, it must be analyzed within the ontological–epistemological–existential framework of Eastern philosophy. This requires a combination of methodologies: Classical philology (textual hermeneutics); Internal philosophical analysis; Interdisciplinary and intercultural comparison, and Phenomenological engagement with lived experience. Only through such an integrative approach can we grasp the true depth of a concept that is simultaneously a cosmic principle and a mode of existential being.

Literature Review

Within the treasury of Eastern thought, “Wu wei – Action through non-action” (無為) is regarded as one of the most fundamental and ancient concepts in Daoist philosophy (Taoist – 道家), encompassing simultaneously ontological, epistemological, and ethical dimensions. This concept is extensively elaborated in the 道德经 – Dao De Jing by 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ and the 南华经 – Nan Hua Jing by 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ, and was later carried forward into Daoist religion (Taoism – 道教), serving as both a metaphysical foundation and a spiritual practice.

In the context of globalization and cross-cultural dialogue today, the idea of Wu wei – Action through non-action is reemerging as a philosophical countercurrent to the crises of interventionism, technocratic life, and exploitative civilization.

On the international level, many scholars have approached Wu wei – Action through non-action from the perspectives of philosophy, religious studies, phenomenology, and cross-cultural comparison. Notable among these are the works of Henri Maspero (*Le Taoïsme et les religions chinoises*, 1971), Livia Kohn (*Daoism and Chinese Culture*, 2001), Roger T. Ames and David Hall (*Dao De Jing: A Philosophical Translation*, 2003), and Chad Hansen (*A Daoist Theory of Chinese Thought*, 1992). These works not only clarify the meaning of Wu wei – Action through non-action about the Dao (道), but also explore its ontological, ethical, and political layers within the fabric of ancient Chinese culture.

In Vietnam, research on Wu wei – Action through non-action has mainly focused on classical Eastern philosophy, intellectual history, and folk culture. Important contributions include: Nguyen Duy Hinh's *Taoism and its influence in Vietnam* (1995), Nguyen Hien Le's translation and commentary on the *道德经* – Dao De Jing by 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ (numerous reprints), Nguyễn Duy Can's annotated translation of the *南华经* – Nan Hua Jing by 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ, as well as several scholarly articles published in the *Journal of Religious Studies*, the *Journal of Philosophy*, and doctoral dissertations on the influence of 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ and 庄子 – Zhuāng Zǐ on Vietnamese culture. However, domestic scholarship remains lacking in interdisciplinary comparisons and has yet to establish a specialized academic discourse on Wu wei – Action through non-action as a transhistorical philosophical–cultural phenomenon.

Results and Discussion

Overview of Taoist (Daoist)

Taoist (道家) is one of the three major philosophical systems of ancient China, alongside Confucianism (儒家) and Legalism (法家). Daoist thought has deeply influenced Eastern philosophy, culture, and religion—especially in China—and later contributed to the formation of Daoist religion (Taoism – 道教), an indigenous spiritual tradition. Taoist originated in the 6th–5th centuries BCE, prominently represented by two key figures: Lǎo Zǐ

(老子) and Zhuāng Zǐ (莊子). Its core texts are the Dao De Jing (道德經) and the Nan Hua Jing (南華經).

The central concept of Daoist thought is “Dao” (道), an absolute, formless, and ineffable principle that is the generative source of all things. “Dao” is not a tangible entity but the intrinsic order of the cosmos, transcending linguistic definition. In close relation to “Dao” is the concept of “Wu wei” (無為), not acting through coercion, but acting following nature. As Lǎo Zǐ wrote: “Dao chang wu wei er wu bu wei” (The Dao constantly does nothing, yet nothing remains undone) (Dao De Jing, Chapter 37). Zhuāng Zǐ further developed this idea toward personal liberation, emphasizing “xiaoyao” (逍遙), a state of spiritual freedom unbound by dualistic distinctions or social conventions (Nan Hua Jing, chapter Xiaoyao You).

The philosophical character of Taoist includes opposition to excessive political intervention, an emphasis on tranquility and balance, and rejection of anthropocentrism (Van, 2022&2023). Unlike Confucianism, which places humans at the center of cosmic order, Daoism views humans as a part of the broader natural continuum. It resists dogma, fame, and binary distinctions, instead affirming intuition, emptiness, and transcendence. According to scholar Roger T. Ames, “Daoist philosophy is a system of language, ethics, and behavior designed to facilitate the harmony between human beings and Dao, the all-encompassing order of the cosmos” (2003, p. 12).

Daoist thought extends beyond philosophy into the art of living, self-cultivation, medicine, meditation, and aesthetics. Over time, it evolved into Daoist religion – Taoism (道教), incorporating esoteric practices such as alchemy, talismanic rites, and an elaborate pantheon. French scholar Henri Maspero observes: “Taoist is the philosophical source, whereas Taoism is the religious system that developed from it. Both represent a worldview in opposition to the pragmatic and formalistic tendencies of ancient Chinese social life” (1971, p. 33).

The Concept and Nature of “Wu wei – Action through non-action” in Daoist Philosophy

Wu wei – Action through non-action of 道德经 – Dao De Jing :

In the 道德经 – Dao De Jing , Wu wei – Action through non-action is presented as the highest mode of being and governing. It entails non-coercive action, allowing natural order

to prevail without imposition. This is not mere passivity, but a refined way of acting without striving, which paradoxically achieves everything by aligning with the rhythm of the Dao.

In Eastern philosophy, few concepts are as succinct, profound, and debated as “Wu wei – Action through non-action” (無為) in the thought system of 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ, author of the 道德经 – Dao De Jing, one of the most influential classical philosophical works in Asia. More than a moral or political guideline, Wu wei – Action through non-action is a multilayered philosophical structure, linking ontology, epistemology, and ethics into a coherent whole that reflects 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ’s unique worldview on the cosmos, human existence, and social order. The content of Wu wei – Action through non-action in the 道德经 – Dao De Jing is presented as follows:

Definition and essence of “Wu wei – Action through non-action”: Wu wei – Action through non-action is often translated into English as “non-action,” “effortless action,” or “non-intervention.” However, such renderings rarely capture the full philosophical nuance of the original classical Chinese. The character “無” (wú) means “not” or “without,” while “為” (wéi) means “to do” or “to act”. As Livia Kohn (2001, p. 32) notes, “Wu wei – Action through non-action does not mean doing nothing, but rather not engaging in forced or unnatural action”—it is action that does not violate the natural order, avoiding the imposition of the ego upon objective processes. In Chapter 3 of the 道德经 – Dao De Jing, 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ writes: “聖人無為而治，無言而教” (The sage governs through Wu wei – Action through non-action, and teaches without words (Le, 2003). This shows that Wu wei – Action through non-action is a state of supreme wisdom, in which the subject unites with the “Dao” (道)—the ultimate principle of the universe—and thus acts in harmony with nature, without desire or calculation.

Wu wei – Action through non-action about the Dao: The concept of Wu wei – Action through non-action is inseparable from the concept of “Dao” in 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ’s thought. The Dao is not a deity, nor does it possess form or identity. It is the nameless, egoless, ultimate essence from which all things emerge: “道生一，一生二，二生三，三生萬物” (The Dao gives birth to One, One gives birth to Two, Two gives birth to Three, and Three gives birth to all things) (Le, 2003). Because Dao is a self-arising principle, authentic human action must follow the Dao, i.e., Wu wei – Action through non-action. Any intervention, modification, or

coercion goes against the Dao and gives rise to disorder. Henri Maspero (1971, p. 44) pointed out: “In Daoist thought, human intervention is a kind of crisis: it disrupts the inherent harmonious order of the Dao.”

Wu wei – Action through non-action in governance and ethics: 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ does not construct an activist political ideal but rather a politics of non-action. In contrast to the Confucian model of governance, based on moral education, ritual, and law, 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ advises rulers to minimize intervention, allowing people to live according to their natural dispositions: “治大國，若烹小鮮” (Governing a large country is like cooking a small fish—not to be stirred too much) (Le, 2003). In personal ethics, Wu wei – Action through non-action does not imply passivity or indifference, but rather the relinquishment of ego, desire, and control—living in harmony with nature, attaining the states of “知足” (knowing sufficiency), “知止” (knowing when to stop), and “守虛靜” (maintaining emptiness and stillness): “爲學日益，爲道日損” (In pursuing knowledge, one accumulates daily; in following the Dao, one diminishes daily) (Le, 2003).

Thus, Wu wei – Action through non-action in the 道德經 – Dao De Jing by 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ can be read as a reflection on power and existence. It poses a profound counterpoint to modern action-oriented philosophies, which emphasize human agency, creativity, and domination over the world. Instead, Wu wei – Action through non-action represents a philosophy of limitation, letting go, and yielding to nature. According to Roger T. Ames & David Hall (2003), Wu wei – Action through non-action reflects a worldview of “low codification”, in which language, law, knowledge, and authority are all called into question. It is a philosophy of anti-power, markedly distinct from Western theories of action.

Even Chad Hansen argues that Wu wei – Action through non-action entails epistemological skepticism, in that it denies the ability to grasp the Dao through conceptual knowledge: “Wu wei – Action through non-action is purposeless action, where humans do not act by ideas but through resonance with all things” (Hansen, 1992, p. 120). 老子 – Lǎo Zǐ’s view of Wu wei – Action through non-action is not merely a passive or defeatist attitude; it is a philosophical core rooted in ontology, politics, and ethics. It stands in direct opposition to you wei (有為 – purposive action), intervention, and artifice, inviting humans to return to inner emptiness, to live harmoniously in a universe free of compulsion and imposition.

Wu wei - Action through non-action in 南华经-Nan Hua Jing:

庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ, the successor and developer of 老子-Lǎo Zǐ's thought, in 南华经 - Nan Hua Jing, expanded the concept of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” (無為) to encompass the entirety of life and cosmology. As the inheritor and systematizer of 老子 -Lǎo Zǐ's philosophy, 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ not only continued the doctrine of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” but also deepened it into an existential dimension, associating it with the notion of absolute freedom, the dissolution of binary oppositions, and the attainment of the state of “逍遙遊” (Xiao Yao You - “Free and Easy Wandering”). While “Wu wei - Action through non-action” in 道德经 - Dao De Jing presents a political and ethical philosophy of aligning with the Dao (道), in 南华经 - Nan Hua Jing, it becomes a transcendent state of epistemology, ontology, and inner liberation. The expression of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” in 南华经 - Nan Hua Jing is elaborated as follows:

Context and Definition: The concept of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” in 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ does not appear frequently as a direct term, but it permeates the entire structure of his thought. As Henri Maspero noted: “In 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ, Wu wei - Action through non-action is no longer a political principle but a mode of existence: living without entanglement, without purpose, without self-definition” (Gallimard, 1971, p. 68). This is a unique feature: “Wu wei - Action through non-action” in 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ is no longer confined to political or social action but becomes a metaphysical and epistemological phenomenon.

Wu wei - Action through non-action as a Reflection on Epistemology and Boundaries: In the chapter “齊物論” (Qi Wu Lun – Equalizing Things), 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ poses a deeply skeptical question: “知之為知，不知之為不知，是知也?” (“To know that one knows is knowledge; to not know that one does not know— is that also knowledge?” (Can, 2002). For 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ, all forms of knowledge are shaped by the limited self, creating a world full of distinctions and attachments: right/wrong, good/evil, self/other... Therefore, he advocates a type of “cognitive Wu wei - Action through non-action”, relinquishing concepts, non-judgment, non-intervention — to merge with the Dao (道), where all things are equal, known as “齊物” (Qi Wu). Thus, Wu wei - Action through non-action in 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ is primarily

of the consciousness, where the mind ceases its turbulent activity and attains the state of “虛靈” (Xu Ling – luminous emptiness).

Wu wei - Action through non-action as the Existential State of “Xiao Yao”: The opening chapter of 南华经 - Nan Hua Jing, “逍遙遊” (Xiao Yao You), may be considered the most vivid metaphor for the philosophy of Wu wei - Action through non-action. The image of the giant bird “Peng” soaring ten thousand miles contrasts with the little birds perched on bean stalks, symbolizing those trapped in worldly limitations. “其無為者乎？漂乎？行乎？息乎？望乎？” (“Does it act? Does it drift? Does it go? Does it rest? Does it gaze?” (Can, 2002). These questions are not meant to be answered but to dismantle the very need for answers, thereby dissolving all dualistic constructs of consciousness. This is radical Wu wei - Action through non-action: action-in-being, where the individual is no longer bound by roles, names, or goals.

Wu wei - Action through non-action as Liberation from Death: One of the most famous passages in 南华经 - Nan Hua Jing is the butterfly dream: “莊周夢為蝴蝶，蝴蝶自適之也，不知周也。俄然覺，則蘧蘧然周也。不知周之夢為蝴蝶與？蝴蝶之夢為周與？” (Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, flying joyfully, unaware that he was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly waking, he realized he was Zhou. Was Zhou dreaming he was a butterfly, or was the butterfly dreaming he was Zhou?) (Can, 2002). This passage proclaims the uncertainty of perception and existence. Wu wei - Action through non-action, in this sense, entails the relinquishment of the need to distinguish reality from illusion, life from death, self from other. Such surrender opens the path to a form of freedom, a “transcendental ease,” where humans merge with the cosmos as a natural flow.

In this way, the philosophy of Wu wei - Action through non-action in 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ is not merely a doctrine, but a mode of being, a way of engaging with existence in a transcendent manner. It is a philosophy of freedom, of boundarylessness, and liberation from normative constraints. Here, Wu wei - Action through non-action is not about “doing nothing,” but about acting without attachment, without striving for outcomes, without ego and thus returning to the primordial essence of Dao.

Therefore, 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ’s articulation of Wu wei - Action through non-action represents a revolutionary epistemology, moving beyond even the non-desire-based Wu wei

of 老子 -Lǎo Zǐ, to an existential Wu wei: not to govern, cultivate oneself, or fulfill duty, but to transcend the entire system of thought – ego – duality. In contrast to Western activism, which values goals, efficacy, and control, 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ proposes a model of existence that is unforced, unmarked, and as spontaneous as nature itself. The soul becomes like a cool breeze.

The Influence of Wu wei - Action through non-action in Vietnam

The philosophy of Wu wei - Action through non-action (無為) from the Taoist (道家) tradition has permeated multiple dimensions of Vietnamese cultural and religious life, especially through forms of indigenous Daoist (道教) practices, folk beliefs, and syncretic religious expressions. Within the traditional cultural space, Wu wei - Action through non-action is reflected in life ideals such as “living in harmony with nature” (thuận tự nhiên), and “contentment with modest circumstances” (an phận thủ thường), which are evident in proverbs, folk verses, the peasant lifestyle, and a moral foundation that “respects stillness and devalues agitation” (trọng tĩnh, khinh động)—emphasizing harmony, patience, and humility in conduct. This resonates with the spirit of “Wu wei - Action through non-action nhi vô bất vi” (“Wu wei - Action through non-action, yet nothing is left undone”) as expressed in (道德经 - Dao De Jing, Chapter 37).

Studies by Nguyen Duy Hinh (1995), Phan Ngọc (2002), and Vu Hong Van (2020&2022) have shown that within the realm of folk belief, the philosophy of Wu wei - Action through non-action shapes the way people conceive of and interact with deities. Deities do not appear as omnipotent, coercive entities but rather as forces that “silently assist” (âm thầm phù trợ) or “respond naturally” (cảm ứng tự nhiên), creating a flexible, tolerant form of belief. This is especially evident in traditions such as Tam phủ, Tứ phủ, Mother Goddess worship, and hầu bóng (spirit possession rituals). Here, the Wu wei - Action through non-action element of Daoism fuses with the Buddhist concept of non-self (vô ngã) and indigenous belief systems, forming a uniquely Vietnamese model of spirituality. As Nguyễn Duy Hinh (1995, p. 52) observes: “Daoism in Vietnam does not exist as a theological system, but rather as a current that seeps into native religious beliefs.”

On the level of social ethics, the philosophy of Wu wei - Action through non-action has been received and expressed in Vietnamese life through value models such as “tùy duyên nhi bất biến” (adapt flexibly without losing oneself), “lấy nhu thắng cương” (softness

overcoming hardness), “dĩ tĩnh chế động” (use stillness to govern movement), and “trọng đức, hành nhân” (honor virtue and practice benevolence). These models are not only present in language, idioms, and folk expressions, but also deeply embedded in traditional Vietnamese modes of conduct careful, moderate, and avoiding extremism. Wu wei - Action through non-action encourages a stance of minimal interference in others’ lives, respect for natural and social order, and the maintenance of inner and outer balance. According to Lê Mạnh Thát, this is the lifestyle of “hòa nhi bất đồng” (harmonious yet non-conforming), which the Vietnamese have inherited from Confucianism, Buddhism, and Daoism, but which is most vividly articulated in the Daoist intellectual tradition (That, 2014).

It is important to emphasize, however, that the concept of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” has not always been correctly understood. In certain historical periods, it was conflated with a defeatist or fatalistic attitude, leading to social passivity. For example, during the post-Le and early Nguyễn dynasties, when Vietnamese society was in a state of stagnation, the idea of “Wu wei - Action through non-action trị quốc” (governing by non-governing) was at times used to justify the inaction of the intelligentsia. In today’s context of modernization and global integration, there is a risk of misunderstanding “Wu wei - Action through non-action” as apathy, indifference, or avoidance of social responsibility. As Henri Maspero (1971, p. 106) pointed out, “Wu wei - Action through non-action is not a rejection of action, but a rejection of unnatural action.”

A comprehensive study of Vietnamese intellectual history reveals that the Daoist notion of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” had a significant impact on the thought of Nguyen Binh Khiem. Living in a tumultuous era, during the decline of the Le dynasty, the rise of the Mạc, and incessant civil strife, Nguyen Binh Khiem saw the collapse of moral and political order. After passing the imperial examination as a trạng nguyên (top scholar) in 1535, he served as a mandarin under the Mạc for eight years before submitting a memorial requesting the execution of 18 corrupt officials. When this was ignored, he resigned and retreated to his village to teach, write poetry, and cultivate his spirit. This decision is often interpreted as a form of escapism or hermitage, but in reality, it was a conscious choice rooted in the Daoist spirit of “Wu wei - Action through non-action”.

In his poem “Cảm hoài” (Personal Sentiments), he wrote: “Ta dại ta tìm nơi vắng vẻ. Người khôn người đến chốn lao xao” (“I, a fool, seek solitude; the wise seek the bustling crowd”). Here, “dại” (foolishness, fool) is not ignorance but rather Daoist wisdom: the

rejection of worldly struggles, seeking inner tranquility, and living in harmony with nature. He believed that intervention in the chaotic and immoral politics of his time would bear no true fruit. This attitude reflects the Daoist ideal of “tri thời nhi thoái” (knowing the time to withdraw), a supreme form of “Wu wei - Action through non-action” as emphasized by both 老子 -Lǎo Zǐ and 庄子-Zhuāng Zǐ.

Nguyen Binh Khiem became famous for his prophetic verses and strategic political advice. He counseled Trinh Kiem to “support the Le family to build your foundation,” and advised Nguyen Hoang to “go south and take control,” advice that had long-term strategic consequences. However, he refrained from direct political involvement, choosing instead the role of a “hermit-statesman,” akin to the figure of the “Daoist strategist” in 老子 -Lǎo Zǐ’s philosophy. He did not impose rigid political models but merely hinted at natural principles, guiding the wise to “act at the right time.” His notion of “Vô vi - Action through non-action trị quốc” (governing by non-governing) is reflected in his poetry, where he emphasizes that cosmic and moral order exist independently, and that excessive intervention leads to disorder. In his poem “Thuật hoài” (Confession), he writes: “Ở thế mới hay là thế giả. Có chi mà vương bận lòng ta” (This world may be real or false, why let it weigh down my heart?). That is, life is transient, and excessive interference only entangles one in the fleeting illusions of fame and fortune. This echoes 老子 -Lǎo Zǐ’s statement: “Vi đạo nhật tổn, tổn chi hựu tổn, dĩ chí vô vi” (The Way is realized by daily reduction, reducing and reducing until one arrives at Wu wei - Action through non-action).

In Nguyen Binh Khiem’s ideology, “Wu wei - Action through non-action” is not just a political or hermitic philosophy, but also an ethic of being. He often advised people to live following nature and destiny, to abandon the pursuit of fame and wealth. This is expressed clearly in his verses: “Tri túc tiện túc đãi túc hà thời túc. Tri nhàn tiện nhàn đãi nhàn hà thời nhàn” (“Know contentment, and you are content; if you wait for contentment, when will it come? Know peace, and you are at peace; if you wait for peace, when will it arrive?”). This is a Vietnamese localization of 老子 -Lǎo Zǐ’s teachings in Chapter 33: “Tri túc giả phú, tri chỉ giả cường” (“He who knows contentment is rich; he who knows how to stop is strong”). The junzi (virtuous man) does not strive or compete, but lives in harmony with the community and all beings, resonating with the Daoist spirit of “dĩ nhu thắng cương” (softness overcomes hardness) and “vô tranh” (non-contention).

An important point in understanding Daoist influence is the need to distinguish between a wise “Wu wei - Action through non-action” and a defeatist one. Although Nguyen Binh Khiem lived in seclusion, he did not withdraw entirely from the world. He maintained contact with political leaders, left prophetic poems as guidance, opened schools, and disseminated moral teachings. This represents a form of “Wu wei - Action through non-action *nhi hũu vi*”: non-interventionist in form but profoundly influential in effect. As scholar Tran Dinh Huou (2005) noted, Nguyen Binh Khiem exemplifies the “Confucian scholar imbued with Lao-Zhuang spirit”, a fusion of Confucian engagement with Daoist tranquility and naturalism. This synthesis of activism and withdrawal, of statecraft and spiritual life, is a hallmark of Vietnamese medieval philosophy.

Thus, “Wu wei - Action through non-action” is not merely a metaphysical concept but a cultural-intellectual structure that has shaped the Vietnamese worldview and way of life. Continuing to study this philosophy from interdisciplinary perspectives, including philosophy, religious studies, anthropology, and cultural science, is crucial for understanding how Chinese and indigenous ideas have merged in the evolution of Vietnamese culture.

Conclusion

The concept of Wu wei - Action through non-action (無為) represents the philosophical core of Daoist thought, profoundly articulated in the *道德经* - Dao De Jing by *老子* - Lǎo Zǐ and further developed with flexibility and depth in the *南华经* - Nán Huá Jīng by *庄子* - Zhuāng Zǐ. Wu wei - Action through non-action is not simply about “doing nothing,” but rather embodies a profound mode of action following the natural order *道* – Dao, without coercion, without imposing human will, aiming to attain harmony between humanity and the cosmos. Built upon the foundations of ontology, epistemology, and ethics, the philosophy of Wu wei - Action through non-action has played a pivotal role in shaping worldviews, life philosophies, and political doctrines throughout the cultural histories of both China and Vietnam. In the Vietnamese context, Wu wei - Action through non-action was not absorbed as a rigid or closed system, but rather adapted fluidly and flexibly, manifesting through forms such as folk beliefs, localized Daoism, the Confucian and Daoist hermit tradition, as well as in colloquial language and the small-scale agrarian way of life. Core values

such as “thuận tự nhiên” (following nature), “an phận thủ thường” (being content with one’s lot), “tri túc” (knowing contentment), “lấy nhu thắng cương” (softness overcomes hardness), and “đĩnh tĩnh chế động” (using stillness to control movement) became foundational to traditional Vietnamese moral philosophy. In the sphere of religious belief, Wu wei - Action through non-action is expressed through a conception of deities not as omnipotent enforcers, but as subtle, responsive forces, exerting influence through “cảm ứng âm thầm” (silent resonance) and “gia hộ nhẹ nhàng” (gentle spiritual support). This orientation is reflected in the spiritual practices of Đạo Mẫu, Tam Phủ – Tứ Phủ, and hầu bóng (spirit possession rituals), which represent a dynamic fusion of Daoism, Buddhism, and indigenous belief systems.

Most notably, the influence of Wu wei - Action through non-action can be seen in the life and philosophy of major historical figures such as Nguyen Binh Khiem, who embodied the ideal of “vô vi nhi hữu vi”, not directly intervening in political affairs, yet leaving a lasting impact through strategic counsel and spiritual example. However, it must also be recognized that in some historical periods, Wu wei - Action through non-action has been misinterpreted as passive resignation or escapism, leading to inertia and a lack of proactive social engagement. This study demonstrates that Wu wei - Action through non-action is not merely a product of Chinese philosophy, but has become a distinct cultural-intellectual structure embedded in the Vietnamese mindset. It has contributed significantly to shaping an Eastern intellectual identity within the broader Southeast Asian context. Further interdisciplinary research into Wu wei - Action through non-action—through the lenses of philosophy, religious studies, cultural studies, and anthropology, may offer new pathways for understanding Vietnamese thought, reinterpreting cultural identity, and proposing humane approaches to social behavior in contemporary society.

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