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# The Philosophy of Wu Wei

by J. J. L. Duyvendak

The contrast between Western and Oriental philosophies is a theme that for many scholars has a great fascination. More than one observer has been particularly struck by a characteristic that seems to be essential. It is that of activity in the West, passivity in the East, or, in other words, masculinity as against femininity. Some years ago Walter Schubart examined the problem in his «Europa und die Seele des Ostens». Although the East he has in mind is primarily not the Far East, some of the antinomies which he develops may serve as a starting-point for our discussion.

He writes <sup>1)</sup>: «Masculine are the will to power, the subordination of love to law, of vision to action, of sentiment to reason. Feminine are self-surrender, awe, humbleness, patience. Masculine are criticism, rationalism. Feminine are intuition, receptivity to inspiration, faith. Masculine are individuation, the principle of fission, the mechanical. Feminine is the principle of one-ness, the organic . . . For a man, to be alive, means to fight, to kill, to destroy life; for a woman to generate, to bear, to renew life . . . »

Then he continues: «The Asiatic high-grade cultures in the Chinese, Russian and Indian continents, have always had a strong feminine streak. That is the secret of their indestructibility . . . The attitude of yielding has nothing to do with cowardice. Where it is primary, we find the masters of endurance, the bearers of long lasting cultures. Not to respond to external stimuli but to be silent, that has always been the wisdom of the feminine oriental. In him the specifically feminine meets the magical power of silence. It is from the yielding attitude that Lao-tzu's doctrine is born: «The softest conquers the

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<sup>1)</sup> Op. cit. (1938), p. 185. When this was written, Northrop's *Civilizations East and West* had not yet been received.

hardest thing in the world, water conquers the rock, the feminine conquers the masculine, the weak conquers the strong». Schubart compares with this the Indian Ahimsâ and the words from the Gospel: «Do not resist evil», and he adds: «It has always been the wisdom of cultures with a feminine character 'to love retreat', which is a hard truth for the West to understand» <sup>2</sup>).

The quotation from Lao-tzu leads me to the very heart of my subject and the connection in which it is quoted shows the wide complex of ideas and problems of which it forms part. Let us examine the specifically Chinese form of the «femininity», this passivity, that is called Wu Wei, «Non-action».

The term is an old one and it is fundamental for the antique Chinese world conception. In this conception it was an axiom that man and world form a fundamental unity. All things are indissolubly interrelated and mutually influence each other. Ideas that seem to us entirely dissimilar, or to belong to different planes, are connected, sometimes merely on the strength of an external similarity of sound, number or form. Heaven, Earth and Man are the three principal parallel planes of philosophic thought and these three are constantly correlated. Just as the work of man at the proper time is required, as well as the fertility of the earth and the rain of heaven, to make the harvest possible, exactly so there is an intimate relationship in every domain of life. The earth is square; on it heaven is placed as a cover supported by pillars at the four points of the compass. The sun, the moon and the planets move there in their respective courses. That course is called the Way, Tao, of Heaven; to this corresponds the Way, Tao, of Earth and the Way, Tao, of Man. A check in the course of one Way means a check in the others. All phenomena participate in certain categories, whose interrelation is expressed by a symbolism of numbers: the five so-called elements

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<sup>2</sup>) Ibidem, pp. 186—187.

(water, fire, wood, metal and earth), the five points of the compass (counting the center also), the five seasons (counting the middle of the year separately), the five planets, the five colours, the five tastes, the five musical notes, the five intestines, the five mythical emperors etc.

The influence radiating from one link in this long chain on the next is called *Tê*, Power, Virtue. The word virtue is equivocal because, as will appear later, under Confucian influence the meaning of the word has been transferred to the moral sphere. In old texts however the word should not be understood in an ethical sense, but in a magical one. *Tê* is magical potency; it is the nearest Chinese equivalent for the idea of Mana in the so-called primitive religions.

As long as things run smoothly and naturally, unchecked and without friction in any part of this mechanism – to use a modern image – then we have the ideal condition, in which *Tê* or Virtue may come to full development in each part of the whole. The spontaneous character of this process is emphasised. In nature things always happen imperceptibly. This is the way a ruler should behave. The *Yi-ching*, the ancient Book of Oracles, says: «Heaven and Earth move accommodatingly and so sun and moon do not fail (in their courses) and there are no deviations in the four seasons. If the sacred (prince) moves (i. e. acts) accommodatingly (to Heaven and Earth), then his laws are pure and the people are submissive».

If however a prince behaves wilfully, if he does not observe his taboos, nor perform the regular sacrifices designed for the maintenance of the natural order of things, briefly, if he fails in the correct ritual behaviour, then abnormal celestial phenomena occur: stars are flung out of their courses, or strange events happen in nature on earth: e. g. plants flower in winter instead of in summer. This is elaborated even to the minutest detail. Thus, rain falling at the right time, is an earnest of gravity in the king; sunshine, of order; heat, of discrimination; cold, of prudence; wind, of wisdom. Constant rain however is a token of recklessness; constant sunshine of arro-



gance; constant heat of sloth; constant cold of precipitation and constant wind of stupidity.

In texts pertaining to Confucianism action as such is not blamed. Moral endeavour is, on the contrary, the principal concern of Confucianists. They take pains, however, to demonstrate that the moral is equivalent to the natural. In the long run they supply the words *Tao*, Way, and *Tê*, Virtue, with a new, ethical content. Nevertheless, in a text like the following of the Confucian *Analects* (II, 1): «He who rules by means of *Tê*, 'Virtue', is like the Polar Star. (Motionless) it remains in its place while all the stars bow to it», the original magical meaning of *Tê* is unmistakable. Of the mythical emperor Shun it is said (in the same book, XV, 4): «Ruling by non-action, that is what Shun did. He placed himself in a reverent attitude, he sat with his face due South and that was all».

«With his face due South» (the source of light and warmth), this is the ideal position of a prince, in which the operation of *Tê*, «Virtue» may attain its full effect. Then there is no danger of wrong and disturbing actions on his part. Such non-action therefore is not merely passivity, but it is, on the contrary, a state of the highest magical potency.

Against this cosmological background one should view the way in which the idea of Wu Wei is developed in the Taoist classics. I have particularly in mind the *Tao-tê-ching* and *Chuang-tzu* (both probably to be dated around 300 B. C.). In the former especially the idea of Wu Wei is the central one. It is completely identified with the character of the Way itself. For briefness' sake I shall confine my quotations to this work.

The Way, *Tao*, here remains a formal notion. It is not a First Cause, a Logos. It is nothing but the process of change and growth, a *Modus Operandi*. This conception differs from other philosophical schools especially in this respect, that the world is no longer viewed statically, but dynamically. There is an alternating rhythm of Yin

and Yang, darkness and light, cold and heat, femininity and masculinity, passivity and activity. Herein it shows a relationship with certain parts of the *Yi-ching*, the Book of Oracles, in which the symbols of all things are constructed from combinations of alternating broken and unbroken lines. This Way is the opposite of an ordinary way that is characterised by constancy and immutability. This Way is constantly inconstant, it is the intransitory transitoriness. Being and Non-being, flowering and decay, life and death, alternate forever. In this paradoxical Way there is no other constancy than that of mutability; it is a stream, a never resting wave that rises and falls. Every condition in which a thing finds itself is merely a temporary aggregate condition that reverts to its opposite.

«Reversal is the movement of Tao,  
Weakness is the method of Tao.

Heaven and Earth and the ten thousand things are generated from Being; Being is generated from Non-being». (*Tao-tê-ching* XL<sup>3</sup>)

Hence a series of antinomies:

«The defective becomes whole,  
The crooked becomes straight.  
The hollow becomes full,  
The faded becomes fresh,  
Who lacks shall gain,  
Who has plenty shall strive in vain». (XXII)

In this Way all things are potentially contained in all their variety, but the character of the Way itself is simplicity (XXXII). The term used to express this simplicity originally meant rough, unhewed wood. It is the simplicity of the rough original material, not yet differentiated in things. The development of the ten thousand things happens quite

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<sup>3</sup>) The quotations from the *Tao-tê-ching* here given follow the re-arrangement of the chapters as given in my Dutch translation of that book, *Tau-te-tsjing, Het Boek van Weg en Deugd* (Arnhem, 1942).

spontaneously. «The Way has no preference for the left or the right» (XXXIV). Everything goes gradually without any shock and without any show.

«The Way of Heaven resembles the stringing of a bow: what is high, is pressed down; what is low, is raised up; wherever there is a surplus, it is removed; wherever there is a shortage, it is supplied» (LXXVII). This goes on without ever ceasing.

«Is not the space between heaven and earth like unto a bellows? It is emptied without ever being exhausted. It is set in motion and produces ever more». (V)

A forced exertion does not endure; man has to follow the example of the Way:

«Paucity in words is (in accordance with) the natural course. For a whirlwind does not last all morning, nor does a rain shower last all day. Who causes these? Heaven and Earth. If even Heaven and Earth cannot keep up (such exuberance) for long, how much less then man!

Therefore, he who in his actions guides himself by the Way, identifies himself with the Way. If he succeeds, he identifies himself with success; if he fails, he identifies himself with failure». (XXIII)

In this spontaneous development, where there is no preference for either right or left, high or low, flowering or decay, life or death, there is therefore no «striving», no goal. The Way, in a higher sense, «does» nothing while all things happen. The classical formula runs: «The Way is constantly inactive (Wu Wei) and yet there is nothing that remains undone» (XXXVII). It does not try to make a certain condition of things permanent. «When a work has come to development, it does not appropriate it» (XXXIV). Hence man should also understand where to «stop».

«He who knows when it is enough, is not disgraced,  
He who knows when to stop, is not outfaced.  
He endures long». (XLIV)

But contrariwise:

«He who would seize All-under-Heaven by action, I see that he will not succeed. The spiritual vessel of All-under-Heaven can not be made. He who makes it, spoils it. He who holds it fast, loses it.

Therefore the Sage does nothing and so spoils nothing; he does not hold fast anything and so he does not lose anything. For as to the things: sometimes they are in front, sometimes in the rear; sometimes they blow softly, sometimes they pant violently; sometimes they are strong, sometimes they are weak; sometimes they begin, sometimes they decay.

Therefore the Sage banishes (from his actions) emphasis, exaggeration, excess». (XXIX)

Or in other words again:

«On tiptoe one does not stand,  
Straddle-legged one does not go forward.  
By self-exhibition one does not become conspicuous.  
By self-affirmation, one does not become distinguished.  
By boasting one gains no merit.  
By vaunting one does not last». (XXIV)

What is empty and apparently useless is of greater value than what is full and useful:

«Thirty spokes may be united in a hub, the usefulness of a carriage lies in what is not.

Loam may be fashioned into vessels, the usefulness of the vessel lies in what is not.

Doors and windows may be cut out for making a house, the usefulness of the house lies in what is not.

So, utilising what is, one uses what is not». (XI)

Things that flower are bound to decay, but things that have just sprouted may flower. Hence in what is soft, weak, inconspicuous

there is more potentiality of life and development than in what is hard, strong, conspicuous.

«Man at his birth is soft and weak, at his death hard and stiff. Plants and trees are, at their birth, soft and fragile, at their death dry and withered. Consequently, what is hard and stiff is a follower of death; what is soft and weak is a follower of birth. Therefore, if a weapon is stiff (i. e. inflexible) (or, in a pun: «if the army is strong»), it does not conquer; if a tree is stiff, it withers (or, in a pun: «it is broken»).» (LXXVI)

The most perfect image of the strength of weakness the *Tao-tê-ding* finds in water:

«The softest in All-under-Heaven defeats the hardest in All-under-Heaven. In All-under-Heaven nothing is softer or weaker than water; yet in attacking what is hard and strong nothing surpasses it. Without substance it penetrates into what has no crevices.» (XLIII)

Water is ready to be low:

«The highest excellence is like water. The excellence of water consists in this that it benefits the ten thousand things without emulation. It stays in the (lowest) place which all men hate. Thus it comes close to the Way.» (VIII)

«That whereby rivers and seas are able to be kings of the hundred valleys, is their ability to be lower than these . . . Therefore, if a sage wishes to be above the people, in his words he should be lower than they; if he wishes to be ahead of the people, in his person he should place himself behind them. Thus a Sage is above without the people feeling his weight; he is ahead without the people suffering harm. Therefore All-under-Heaven will gladly push him in front without tiring of him. Because he himself does not emulate, none in All-under-Heaven can emulate him.» (LXVI)



Hence the Saint, that is he who identifies himself as much as possible with the Way, remains passive. Here the *Tao-tê-ding* puts up the antinomy «masculinity-femininity».

«The mare always conquers the stallion by stillness. By stillness she is underneath». (LXI)

«He who knows (his masculinity as) a cock, but preserves (his femininity as) a hen, is like a brook for All-under-Heaven. If he is a brook for All-under-Heaven, constant «Virtue» (i. e. Power) does not trickle away. He reverts to the condition of an infant.» (XXVIII)

In such an infant all power of the Way is potentially present.

«The strength of him who contains «Virtue» within himself, is like unto that of an infant. Poisonous insects do not sting him, neither do ferocious animals seize him, nor birds of prey claw him. Though his bones may be weak and his muscles soft, his grip is firm; though he does not understand the union of male and female, his male member stirs. This is because the fine essence in him (has) the utmost (potency). Though he may cry all day long, his throat does not become hoarse. This is because the natural harmony in him (has) the utmost (potency).» (LV)

The special grace of little children, it is a thought familiar enough in another context. The same words however convey here an entirely different meaning. The child is the ideal bearer of the life-force, the *Tê*, the magical potency.

Nursing and preserving this *Tê*, this magical life-force, is the concern of the Saint in Taoism. That is why he is interested in following the Way, that is why he keeps to the weak and lowly, that is why he abstains from striving. In point of fact he does strive; he does have a purpose. His Wu Wei, Non-action, is conscious design. He chooses this attitude in wise understanding. «He who knows the Way,



endures long; he is not endangered till his body be annihilated» (XVI) that is, he will be able to run the natural course of his life without being cut off prematurely by the dangers inherent in all striving and forcing of things.

«I have heard that they, who excel in holding fast to life, when they travel overland, will not meet rhinoceroses or tigers, and when they march into battle, will not gird on armour or weapons. The rhinoceros finds no place to gore him with his horn, neither does the tiger find a place to clutch him with his claws, nor do weapons find a place to enter their edge in him.» (L)

Invulnerability, inviolability of his destined life, are attained by him who knows how to nurse his vitality. This requires asceticism and mystical training.

«Stop up the entrances (i. e. the senses), close the gates, and for the (natural) completion of your bodily development (i. e. your entire life, unhampered by influences that may abridge life), your forces will not be exhausted.

Open the entrances, promote your action, and for the (natural) completion of your bodily development nothing will boot you.» (LII)

This thought is still more clearly expressed by *Chuang-tzu* (XI<sup>4</sup>) «If your eyes see nothing, your ears hear nothing, and your mind knows nothing, your mind will preserve your body and your body will have long life.» And again (*ibid.*<sup>5</sup>) «Rest in Non-action and things will develop of themselves. Let your body decay<sup>6</sup>), spit out your hearing and seeing.»

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<sup>4</sup>) Legge I, p. 299.

<sup>5</sup>) Legge I, p. 302.

<sup>6</sup>) The decay of the body refers to the coarser parts that are purified by fasting.

Lasting vitality, long life therefore are the purpose and the result of the practice of Wu Wei. A special technique is developed to that end. Breathing exercises in which one tries to make the *ch'i* «air, breath, life-force» circulate as intensively as possible through the entire body so that one breathes with his «heels» (*Chuang-tzu* VI<sup>7</sup>). A sexual hygiene in which one tries in the union of Yin and Yang to retain the life-force by remaining inactive<sup>8</sup>). The search of medicinal herbs promoting vitality, such as the Ginseng (*Aralia quinquefolia*) and alchemy for preparing the pill of immortality. Taoist saints, devotees of such practices, attain the gift of levitation; they float freely on the wind and their dematerialised bodies, no longer requiring food, become imperishable.

The «Virtue» proceeding from Wu Wei is therefore purely vitalistic. It is entirely amoral and it is diametrically opposed to what others consider virtue. Humanity, *jen*, right conduct, *i*, ritual behaviour, *li*, knowledge, *chih*, are the four virtues which the Confucian school propagated. The *Tao-tê-ching* is quite aggressive towards the Confucian incorporation of Tao as an ethical concept.

«Heaven and Earth are not humane; they treat the ten thousand things as straw dogs (used for sacrifices and thrown away afterwards). The Sages are not humane; they treat the people as straw dogs.» (V)

The culture of moral virtues merely results in unnaturalness. Therefore: «Abolish sagesness and reject knowledge and the people will be benefited a hundredfold. Abolish humanity and reject righteous conduct and the people will revert to (the natural virtues of) filial piety and (parental) love.» (XIX) «Abolish learning and you will be without care.» (XX)

<sup>7</sup>) Legge I, p. 238.

<sup>8</sup>) Cf. for a study of these practices H. Maspero, *Les procédés de nourrir le principe vital* in *Journal Asiatique*, CCXXIX, pp. 177-252, 353-430. Cf. also J. J. M. de Groot, *Universismus*, 1918, pp. 86-126.

The Taoist Saint therefore is the very opposite of the Confucian one, who is concerned about reform of the world through education in moral virtues. The Taoist is like the divine fool, an asocial individualist. «The Saint is one who is dressed in a robe of haircloth but who carries a jade (tablet) in his bosom.» (LXX)

This is the individualistic side of the Saint. However, the *Tao-tê-ding*'s message is primarily addressed to the Saint as prince. What are the consequences of Wu Wei for the ruling of a state? Here the idea of non-action is expanded into that of complete abstention from all governmental activities.

«A country may be ruled by means of rectification (of names, i. e. the Confucian theory in which everything receives and retains its proper place and function), a war may be carried on by means of startling (inventions), - but All-under-Heaven is gained by means of abstention from action. How do I know that it is so? Thus: the more taboos and interdictions exist, the poorer the people will be. The more useful (or: sharp) tools the people possess, the more there will be sedition in the state. The more clever people there are, the more startling things are produced. The more laws and ordinances are promulgated, the more thieves and robbers there will be. Therefore a Sage has said:

If I practise non-action, the people will be transformed of themselves.

If I love quietude, the people will be rectified of themselves.

If I abstain from action, the people will become rich of themselves.

If I am free from desires, the people will become simple (as uncarved wood) of themselves.» (LVII)

And elsewhere:

«In antiquity, those who were capable in practising the Way, did not enlighten the people therewith, but stultified the people

therewith. If the people are difficult to rule it is because of too much knowledge. Therefore, he who rules a country by means of knowledge, is injurious to the country. He who does not rule a country by means of knowledge is beneficial to the country.»

(LXV)

And again, very forcefully:

«The Saint, in ruling, empties the hearts (i. e. minds) (of the people) and fills their bellies, weakens their wills and strengthens their bones, thus constantly bringing about that the people have no knowledge and no desires and that even those who have knowledge, dare not act.» (III)

If things be thus, the ideal condition of great natural simplicity will prevail, that is the Utopia which is the negation of all culture.

«A small country with few inhabitants, in which, though there be tools that can do the work of ten or hundred men, (the people) may be induced not to use them;

in which the people may be induced to regard death with grave (apprehension) and not to move to distant places;

in which, even though there be boats and carts, there is nothing to load them with and in which, even though there be cuirasses and arms, there is no place to drill;

in which the people may be induced to revert to the use of knotted cords (instead of written characters), to prize their own food (i. e. not desire imported delicacies), to appreciate their own clothes, to be content with their own dwellings and to take pleasure in their own customs; in which, though a neighbouring country may be within sight so that the people hear each others cocks crow and each others dogs bark, the people of these two countries have no intercourse until they die of old age.» (LXXX)

The final consequence for a prince who practises Wu Wei is pacifism.

«He who assists a lord of men (as minister) in accordance with the Way, does not coerce All-under-Heaven by force of arms. Such an action is apt to rebound (against himself).

Where armies have camped thorns and thistles will grow. In the rear of great armies follow years of famine . . . . » (XXX)

In the thirtieth chapter of the *Tao-tê-ching*, just quoted, and even more in the thirty-first, text and commentary seem to be hopelessly mixed. The main idea fits very well with the trend of thought of the *Tao-tê-ching*; with the commentary however sentiments are introduced that seem less purely Taoistic. However, the chapter deserves to be quoted:

«Truly, arms are tools of disaster! . . .

A nobleman, in time of peace, values the left as the place of honour, but when he bears arms, he values the right.

Arms are tools of disaster and not the tools of a nobleman. He only uses them in sheer necessity, and he prefers peace. Therefore, even if he conquers, he does not glory in it. If he gloried in it, he would take delight in it, and to take delight in it would mean to take delight in the killing of men. He who takes delight in the killing of men cannot achieve his will in All-under-Heaven.

For joyful occasions the left is regarded as the place of honour, but for unpropitious occasions the right is regarded as the place of honour. The lieutenant-commander is seated on the left, and the commander-in-chief is seated on the right, which means that they are seated according to the rites for mourning. The killing of multitudes of men is bewailed by mourning. Therefore after a victory in war (the generals) are seated according to the mourning rites. » (XXXI)

On strategy we find the following remarkable utterance:

«A military expert of old has said: I dare not be host (i. e.



take the initiative) but prefer to be guest (i. e. who awaits the attack); I dare not advance one inch, but prefer to retire a foot.

This is called: marching a non-march, baring a non-arm, seizing a non-sword, pushing against a non-match.» (LXIX)

Weak, passive, empty, useless, foolish, content, peace-loving, simple, — this is the ideal picture of the Taoist Saint, the man who practises Wu Wei, Non-action. He seems harmless enough. On closer acquaintance he appears far from harmless. For he is amoral and anti-cultural. However debonair and complaisant he may seem, he is really cynical. Or rather, in this attitude, divorced from an understanding of its deeper truths, there is something that may easily lead to gross cynicism if a prince handles this doctrine as a political instrument.

There is, in ancient China, a very important school of thought, called the *Fa-dia* or School of Law, that can only be completely understood from this point of view. It was a reaction against the feudal system, in which everything depended on the qualities, the prestige, the *Tê* or Virtue of the prince. It advocated the rule by a system; first in the conquered territories which had no feudal tradition, then also in the old Chinese states that, in the 4th and 3rd centuries B. C., were one after the other conquered by the rising power of Ch'in. It found that system in laws and ordinances by which, after their promulgation, even the ruler himself was bounded. It was firmly convinced that nothing could be expected from a moral education of the people. It regarded human nature as evil. For this view it found support in the philosopher Hsün-tzu, the chief exponent of Confucianism in the 3rd century B. C. In contrast to Mencius who had believed in the natural goodness of human nature, he postulated the opposite view with considerable acrimony. However, he believed in the perfectibility of that same human nature by means of moral education, that is: ritual behaviour, right conduct, humanity and knowledge. One of his disciples, Han Fei-tzu, a Taoist who



was true to his master only in his views regarding human nature, became one of the chief theorists of the School of Law. For him the law took the place of moral rules and that law should be able to function without constant personal interference of the prince; it became the method by which it was possible to rule a country according to the Way, by means of Wu Wei, Non-action, and to keep it free from cultural activities.

Han Fei-tzu had a close affinity to a book called *Shang-tzu*, probably dating from the 3rd century B. C. that has come down in fragmentary form. They had the following characteristics of Non-action in common:

There shall be a law, public and knowable to all, which by its severity will have a deterrent effect. All writings in which one might find a different standard of conduct, shall be forbidden and burnt. The people shall regard the officials as their only masters, who will instruct them in what is demanded by the law.

All power shall be concentrated in the hands of the prince, and all building up of power, by the people themselves, shall be prevented. State and people become two opposite ideas. The state should become rich and strong, but the people should be kept weak and poor and entirely dependent on the state. This condition is attained by a system of rewards and punishments. Rewards should only be given for merit in military service or in agriculture. It is on these two that the existence of the state depends. The people are by nature averse to both these harsh professions, but they hate military service even more than agriculture. Therefore the ordinary conditions of life for the people should be made so harsh, that they look upon war as a welcome release from their heavy toil and as a welcome occasion to earn rewards. Rewards however should be given sparsely: one reward against nine punishments, and punishments should be made severe: light offences should be regarded as serious. As a result the deterrent effect of punishments will be such, that punish-

ments become superfluous and that therefore «by means of punishments punishments will be abolished». On the other hand, mild punishments that overlook minor offences, will promote the development of crime and thus will necessitate frequent punishments.

But how is one to discover crime? If virtuous people are employed in the government, the wicked will easily hoodwink them. Therefore it is imperative that the wicked govern the virtuous. Fear alone may restrain people from transgressing the law, and so «virtue has its origin in punishments».

This virtue however is merely obedience to the law. It has nothing to do with morality. Strict measures should be taken to prevent the people from becoming interested in morality. All morality, even all cultural activities, are dubbed «lice». Such «lice» are humanity, right conduct, integrity, knowledge, ritual behaviour and music. If the people practise these, they become completely useless for the state and if the state permits such activities it will be overrun by the first enemy at its gates. «When a state is in peril, it is of no avail for the professional talkers to form battalions».

Simplicity (like uncarved wood) and ignorance alone are fit for the people. They should remain without all culture and therefore be kept poor. The poor should be encouraged to till the land so as to become rich, but they should not be permitted to remain rich lest they might become interested in culture and morality and become addicted to the «lice». A state that knows how «to make the poor rich and the rich poor» will become strong. Strength should be «produced» for the benefit of the state, but, in order to keep the people from becoming strong in themselves, strength should also be «reduced» by employing the people in ever more warfare.

The people should be organised in groups of fives and tens held mutually responsible for each other's conduct and sharing each other's punishments. They should spy on each other. Whosoever does not indict a guilty person is cut in two; whosoever indicts a guilty person,

receives the same rewards as he who cuts off the head of an enemy. Thus the law applies itself and does not require the constant interference of the ruler. Therefore «the law will be eliminated by means of the law», that is, will make itself superfluous.

For Han Fei-tzu the law becomes the instrument of a rationalised Tao, functioning as inexorably and automatically as Tao itself. Thus he saves the unity between man and the world. He never tires of arguing that government measures should be taken with a view to the masses; no rule can be based on exceptional cases.

Against a Taoist background of Non-action therefore a system is built up that in its effect is very different from that which, at first sight, one might expect from the doctrine of Wu Wei. Yet the affinity is unmistakable. The explanation lies in the mechanical and amoral character of the Way.

It is improbable that the theories of the School of Law, in their full implication, were ever put into practice. Nevertheless such ideas were doubtless at the back of the policy of Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, the man who in 221 B. C. unified all Chinese states into an empire under his rule. In Taoism with its strong emphasis on totality, on the one principle, there was a strong unifying force, and in its vitalism, its doctrine of conservation of the life-force, of invulnerability for the Saint, its search for the elixir of immortality or long life, there was a strong attraction for this prince who was without any considerable tradition of culture of his own. In a career of the most active political conquest he was a devoted Taoist; in his domestic policy, as much as was possible, he put into practice ideas of the School of Law. He burnt all the classics of Confucianism, and many Confucian scholars were put to death. These scholars, by keeping alive the tradition of humanity and right conduct even in such hard times, were the ones who prepared the ground for a less tyrannical interpretation of political Wu Wei.

The emperor Ch'in Shih Huang-ti and his dynasty did not last long. In the Han dynasty that followed (206 B. C. – 221 A. D.), although his official apparatus continued to be used, his extreme policy of unification had outlived itself. Once more the attention turned to ethics and culture. Confucianism, as the bearer of tradition, came into honour.

Tao, the Way, henceforth is humanised. *Tê* becomes virtue in a moral sense. The emperor becomes the great Saint, the Virtuous one, by whose example all are induced to virtue. Nevertheless the cosmological implications remain very vivid. The walls around the capital of the first Han emperor were built in the shape of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor placed in a contiguous position and its principal palace was situated on the spot corresponding to the location of the Polar Star, which was a realistic representation of the phrase from the *Analects*, quoted before: «He who rules by means of *Tê* 'Virtue' is like the Polar Star. (Motionless) it remains in its place while all the stars bow to it».

The magical influence imputed to that position is very evident in the case of Wang Mang, a usurper who ruled as emperor from 9–24 A. D. Wang Mang's ambition was in every respect to imitate the ancients and to realise the cosmological relationships. He went so far that, when in a rebellion his palace was attacked and set on fire, he donned his ceremonial purple robes (purple being the colour corresponding to the Polar Star), arrayed himself with the imperial seal and ribands, and took in his hand the dagger of the mythical emperor Shun, the haft of which was curved like the tail of Ursa Major. Thus accoutred he took his position on a mat, faced by an astrologer holding a divining board on which the constellations of the zodiac were engraved. The astrologer marked the astronomical positions for the day and the hour, while Wang Mang sat revolving on his mat so as to correspond to the positions of the tail of Ursa Major and he said, referring to a word of Confucius: «Heaven has

created the *Tz*, 'Virtue', that is in me; what could the Han troops do to me!»

In the Confucianistic system, prevailing in the main after the Han period, the cosmological connection between man and world is also retained. The Confucianistic zeal for ritual behaviour, for correction and education of man might very well have conduced to a rejection of what is natural and to a rupture of that connection. However, the connecting link had been forged by Mencius' doctrine of man's natural goodness which merely requires further development. In origin that conception was doubtless Taoistic, for, though Taoism itself is not concerned with the distinction between good and evil which it regards as relative, the Taoistic faith in what is natural tended to the conclusion that the natural is good. If therefore man's nature is good, moral education, to be sure, is necessary (and doubtless it was through Hsün-tzu's influence that this need was never forgotten) but one should be careful not to deviate too far from the natural or to force things. So there was room here also for Wu Wei, but, curiously, this time in a state whose very existence was rooted in the recognition of culture. The method by which the emperor ruled was no longer a law, operating mechanically, but it was an officialdom of men, indoctrinated by the teaching of the classical books, that is, in other words, well trained in Virtue. By performing the proper sacrifices at the proper times the Emperor, in his ritual conduct, strictly observed the course of nature, while, at the same time, he ruled in accordance with the principles of humanity and «rightness». Thus Wu Wei became an ethical concept.

It remained valid down to modern times. In the former imperial palace at Peking, in the spacious audience-hall, above the Emperor's throne, which faced south, there was a large lacquered tablet with a broad decorated border, displaying in bold strokes of the brush these two characters: Wu Wei.

This ideal of government was more than merely a word. It cor-



responds to something fundamental in Chinese society. Laws and regulations are promulgated, but little is done to carry them out; paper reforms are introduced, but things remain much the same as before. Never to force things, to allow everything to follow its own natural course, to interfere as little as possible with situations that will straighten themselves out, — that is Chinese political wisdom.

The concept of Wu Wei and its cosmological correlations have entered deeply into the character of the people. The realisation of the close affinity between human life and that of nature has saved Chinese culture from degenerating into a mere external civilisation. It has been the cause of its spiritual strength and material weakness. Wu Wei, in its mitigated Confucian form, did not turn the Chinese into asocial mystics, but, on the contrary, it developed in them the social virtue of understanding the value of temporary non-assertion, of yielding to others. They know that, given space and time, there is strength in yielding. «Marching a non-march» is in them an instinct that will come out as soon as the pressure is heavy enough.

This attitude however has nothing in common with the Buddhistic aversion to the world. Schubart's disquisition, with which we started, turns out to be far too general and to confound what is dissimilar. This «passivity» is not really negative; it is essentially «healthy-minded».

It is, moreover, characterised by a certain whimsical worldly wisdom. It is this feature which prompted that playful philosopher, Lin Yü-t'ang, to forge the expression «Old Rogue». Such an Old Rogue resembles the Ecclesiast in so far as he knows that «the thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done»; yet to him it is by no means merely «vanity and vexation of spirit». He never gives up: if he yields it is in order to advance the better, for he knows the words from the



*Tao-tê-ding:*

«If you wish to contract, you should first expand.

If you wish to weaken, you should first let it be strong.

If you wish to destroy, you should first let it flourish.

If you wish to seize, you should first give.

This is called the subtle understanding: the weak overcomes the hard and the feeble overcomes the strong.» (XXXVI)