

The Wu Wei (inaction) Thought of Daoism and its Influence on German Literature in the 1920s

Taking *Siddhartha* and *The Magic Mountain* as Examples

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Abstract:

The thought of Wu Wei (inaction) is an important part of Daoism. In the aspect of governing the country, it means that the monarch should not act rashly but should try to reach the realm of “when you need do nothing, there is nothing you cannot do”. In terms of individual behaviour, it contains the thoughts of transcending opposites, conforming to the laws of nature and complying with Dao. Using the method of influence studies, this paper will study how Chinese culture, especially Taoist thought, influenced German literature and thought in the 1920s in terms of social history and academic trends. Then, using the method of reception studies, this paper will take Hesse's *Siddhartha* and Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* as examples to explore the cultural factors and psychological logic behind the two different manifestations of Daoist "Wu Wei" thought in German literature in the 1920s.

Keywords: Daoism, Wu Wei, German literature, Hesse, Thomas Mann

I. Germany and Chinese Culture in the 1920s

The end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century was an important stage in the modern history of Germany. Through the Second Industrial Revolution at the end of the 19th century, Germany rapidly completed its transformation from an agricultural to an industrial country and became a capitalist powerhouse in one fell swoop. Along with the country's rapid transformation and rapid progress, Germans' national enthusiasm, racial consciousness, cultural self-confidence, as well as the momentum of colonial expansion were on the rise. Around the outbreak of World War I, German society, like other warring nations, was caught up in the fervor of war. Some intellectuals even declared that "the Great War will finally put an end to the cultural struggle between Germany and Britain and will put heroic Germany on top of the world" (Meng, 2012, p. 214). The course of the war, however, was a major disappointment to the Germans. Faced with the devastation and the defeat of the war, Germany was inevitably plunged into social unrest and economic crisis.

Faced with a sharp turn in the country's fortunes, the intellectual community was even more plunged into an unprecedented cultural uncertainty. "While the victorious countries could look back with satisfaction on their culture, which had proven its legitimacy by the war, Germany, as a defeated country, had to painfully review its cultural traditions" (Wei , 1996, p. 330). At this time in Germany, old values began to disintegrate. European civilization, which symbolized the light of humanity, began to be questioned, and the question about connotation of German nationhood and national spirit was constantly raised.

In the 1920s, Germany (Weimar Republic) gradually entered a period of relative stability, known as the "Golden Decade". The domestic economy gradually recovered, and the "Weimar culture" flourished. In the face of social change and cultural uncertainty, various ideas and "isms" blossomed in Germany. During this period, the Republic became a "testing ground for multiculturalism".

"Whenever the generally aggressive European spirit reached a warlike, military climax and began to change abruptly, there came from the East a calming, inward-looking and enriching wave of spiritual thought" (Wilhelm, 1973, p. 166). At this time Germany needed to examine and reflect on itself, and the spirit of the East was precisely "inwardly inclined". Thus, the eyes of the German intelligentsia once again turned to the East, especially to classical Chinese culture. Its attitude toward China and Chinese culture also changed from the previous "Yellow Peril" theory, and began to try to engage in intercultural dialogue and learning, trying to find a way to the light for Germany and even Europe.

The first scholar who played an important role in the "Oriental fever" in Germany during this period was Richard Wilhelm. As far as he was concerned, the so-called East meant almost China. Because Turkish-Arabic culture in general belonged to Western culture, Indian culture had lost its substantively spiritual life. Therefore, the "East" to which the Western intelligentsia turned referred to a large extent to classical Chinese cultural thought. During his stay in China, which coincided with 22 years of dramatic change in Germany (1899-1920). Richard Wilhelm studied Chinese culture extensively and translated almost all the important classics of ancient Chinese philosophy. By the end of the 1920s, he had translated and published in Germany: *Analects* (1910), *Dao Te Ching* (1911), *Lie Zi* (1912), *Zhuang Zi* (1912), *Mencius* (1916), *The Great Learning* (1920), *I Ching* (1924), and *Lü Shi Chun Qiu* (1928). Through his translations and research works, Chinese culture and philosophical thought were widely disseminated in Germany and the West, thus exerting a profound influence on the entire social trend of thought.

Through Wei Lixian, the image of China in Germany changed completely (Bauer, 1973). "For the German people, he became the interpreter of the ancient Chinese sages. Thanks to his remarkable and understandable translations, the quotations of the ancient Chinese sages became a real household name in Germany. In these times of despair and inner division, anyone who found refuge in the

writings of Confucius and Lao Tzu would have respected him as a gifted translator" (Wilhelm, 1956, p. 123). German intellectual and literary circles in the 1920s were generally exposed to Chinese culture.

II. German Literature and Daoist "Wu Wei" Thought in the 1920s

Among the richness of Chinese culture, the Daoist idea of "Wu Wei" received particular attention from German writers in the early 20th century. The Daoist concept of "Wu Wei" appears mainly in *Dao Te Ching* and *Zhuang Zi*. In *Dao Te Ching*, the word "Wu Wei" appears 14 times and refers mainly to the way of ruling by emperors or sages, i.e. "ruling without doing anything". In *Zhuangzi*, the word "Wu Wei" appears 43 times and enriches the meaning of "Wu Wei" to a certain extent. Of the 43 "Wu Wei", only 13 are used to refer to the basic methods and principles of ruling by emperors or sages, while the remaining 31 are mainly used to refer to the behavior of personal cultivation or the realm of the Dao (Wang, 2005).

In 1915, the famous writer Alfred Döblin published the Chinese novel *Die drei Sprünge des Wang-lung* (The Three Leaps of Wang Lun), for which he won the Fontana Prize. In 1919, Krabond published his book *Triad*, in which he expressed his admiration for Lao Tzu and directly praised the ideological principle of "Wu Wei" in many chapters. In the same year, he adapted the *Dao Te Ching* and completed the poem *Lao Tzu*. It can be seen that the German literary works that incorporated the idea of "Wu Wei" in Daoism during this period were mainly "reproductions" of Chinese literary works. They usually adapted Chinese stories and literary works to convey their understanding of the idea of "Wu Wei". The German literary works that absorbed the idea of Daoism's "Wu Wei" during this period were mainly "reproductions" of Chinese literature, i.e., they were adapted from Chinese stories and literature to convey their understanding of "Wu Wei".

By the 1920s, there was a general shift in the way the idea of "Wu Wei" was presented in literature. In such literary works as Tolle's *The Masses and the Man* (1921), Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924), Hesse's *Siddhartha* (1922), and *Steppenwolf* (1927), the Daoist idea of "Wu Wei" was already integrated into the traditional themes and non-Chinese backgrounds. Most of these works are about the choice and the path of redemption in the face of the spiritual crisis of the times. The writers wrote about Eastern culture, often with the aim of exploring the future direction of German and even European civilization. In these works, the ideological meaning and presentation of "Wu Wei" can be roughly divided into two types: some writers identified the core of the idea of "Wu Wei", that is, that one should follow the laws of development. They took it as the highest wisdom and guiding principle of life. They even integrate the idea of "Wu Wei" with other philosophical and religious concepts, showing a kind of humanistic concern beyond religion and culture, such as Hesse's *Siddhartha*; some writers still held a Eurocentric attitude (although they might not have realized it) and summarize the whole Eastern civilization with the characteristics of "backwardness" and "irrationality". They interpreted "Wu Wei" in terms of "old-fashioned". It can be seen that while they actively paid attention to Eastern culture and tried to learn Eastern philosophy, they subconsciously rejected foreign cultures, such as Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*.

(I) The *Siddhartha*

The novel "*Siddhartha*" is divided into two parts. The first part is based on the legend of the Buddha's self-torture, while the second part tells the story of Siddhartha's other path of practice. *Siddhartha* is a rich and noble Brahmin. But he was distressed because he had not found "himself", so he started an ascetic practice to seek the path of the eternal "self". Three years of austerity did not produce the results Siddhartha expected, so he left his friends and the Buddha behind and went on his own to begin another kind of practice. He wandered around the busy city, met famous prostitutes and became a rich merchant. Then he understood that the only way

the prodigal son and the rich man in him could die was to first experience worldly life and taste desire. After his epiphany, he went to the river. The river and the boatman, Vishudeva, are the representatives of "purity and inactivity". The river's surface is unperturbed but it is all-encompassing and flows eternally. The boatman, Vishudeva, spent his entire life gazing at and listening to the river. His figure is just like Lao Tzu. In the end, by listening to the river, *Siddhartha* achieved the realm of "unity of heaven and man" and completed his search for the "self".

In a letter to Helena Welty, Hesse said: "The end of *Siddhartha* is more akin to Daoist philosophy than to Indian influence" (Hesse, 2001, p. 28). Siddhartha's path to unity is based on an epiphany of the meaning of "Wu Wei". We can find the Daoist thought throughout the novel's plot: Through the forcible action, we cannot seek true knowledge or know ourselves. Only by following one's own rhythm and the laws of development can one achieve the state of "nothing to be done" through "doing nothing".

In *Siddhartha*, the Daoist idea of "Wu Wei" is integrated with Indian Buddhism. It is the way of "Wu Wei" that helps Siddhartha achieve soul enlightenment in his Buddhist practice. As Hesse said, "For a long time I have been working on something like to this, wrapped in an Indian veneer, originating in Brahman and Buddha and ending in the 'Dao'" (Baand, 1986, p. 158). In the novel, Siddhartha took the sound of "Om" as the starting point to trace the self, and then discovered that "whether it is meditation, or detachment from the body, or fasting and breath-holding, these practices of escaping from the self are only a brief break from the pain of the self, no more than a brief paralysis against the pain and absurdity of life" (Zhang & Yu, 2010, p. 300). After "enlightenment," he rejected dogma and focused on the experience of oneness. He realized the wisdom about harmony by the method of "Wu Wei". The realm of Brahman, which Siddhartha eventually reached, has unconsciously evolved into the world of the Dao.

Hesse himself attached great importance to and actively absorbed the culture and philosophy of the East, and the ideas of

Daoism were often seen as the highest inspiration in his novels. But for Hesse, Eastern wisdom was not the end of his search for himself, nor was it the only solution to Europe's spiritual crisis. What he sought was a kind of love that transcended all religions, "the common denominator of all human piety and good deeds" (Hesse, 2000, p. 287). Hesse once said: "In my *Siddhartha*, it is not knowledge, but love, that occupies the highest place... One could see these as a return to Christianity and as a truly Protestant trait" (Hesse, 2018, p. 72). Thus, the story of *Siddhartha* is the Buddhist path of practice on the surface, but at its core the Daoist search for "Wu Wei", and in general the Christian search for the "New Evangelization". The question he explored through "Wu Wei" is the way out of the spiritual crisis in the West.

(II) *The Magic Mountain*

The Magic Mountain tells the story of a German university student, Hans Castorp, who visited his cousin at an alpine lung sanatorium, but contracted lung disease and spent seven years on the "Magic Mountain". The "Magic Mountain" is inhabited by people of the leisure class from all over the world. There was the unconventional, free-spirited Russian woman Madame Clawdia Chauchat, the ignorant, flirtatious Mrs. Stel, the learned "defender of European culture" Lodovico Settembrini, and the Jewish Naphta who scoffed at European civilization and order. Hans lived in the circle of life where East meets West. The clash and conflict between East and West was categorized in Thomas Mann's writing as a conflict between reason and irrationality, health and disease.

The book reads: "According to Settembrini, there are two principles in the world that are often in a state of resistance. These are power and justice, tyranny and freedom, superstition and wisdom, the principle of conformity and the principle of constant change, that is, the principle of progress. People call the former the Asian principle and the latter the European principle. Europe is the land of rebellion, criticism and change, while the Eastern continent embodies the spirit of purity and immutability. There is no doubt as to which of the two forces will prevail, and it is only by the power

of enlightenment that victory can logically be achieved" (Mann, 1991, p. 211).

Settambrini relentlessly attributed power, tyranny, superstition and conformity to Asia and justice, freedom, wisdom and progress to Europe. He regarded the course of world development as a struggle between these two forces, and foretold the triumph of the "principle of progress". He also added, "But before this can be achieved, that Asian principle of servility and conformity must be defeated once and for all..." (Mann, 1991, p. 212).

The Eastern culture, which symbolizes "irrationality", refers to a large extent to China. Settambrini went on to say: "Hey, no, I'm European, Western, and your program is purely Eastern. Easterners are afraid of activity. Lao Tzu has this teaching: Pure inactivity is more beneficial than anything in heaven and earth. If all people in the world did nothing, there would be peace and happiness on earth. Then you will have what is called divine fellowship" (Mann, 1991, p. 529). Thomas Mann himself once said, "Settambrini is sometimes even the author's sounding board" (Soviet Academy of Sciences, 1984, p. 790). It is clear that in the work, the idea of "inaction" is not only related to the "fear of activity" "immutability" and "inaction", but even represents the core of the whole "irrational" culture of the East.

The author conveys the curiosity and exploration of a new generation of young people about the East through Hans's love for Madame Chauchat, but also through the mouth of Settambrini, who arbitrarily dismissed the backwardness of Eastern civilization, especially the misinterpretation and unrelenting criticism of the idea of "Wu Wei". This reflects the views and opinions of many thinkers and literary scholars of the time, as Wilhelm once said, "Although people play a clever game of promises, they still fundamentally regard China as a second-class black country; although people try with all their strength and all their means to arouse the demand for European culture in non-European countries, it is only for the better sale of this purpose, which has to do with the European cultural-psychological structure" (Wilhelm, 1973, p. 191-192). "Europe

forced the world to accept the imperialist principle of power by which it ruled," and at the same time, because of "the primitive instinct of each cultural circle to scorn the alien as barbaric" (Wilhelm, 1973, p. 192). Even though the German spiritual world turned to China again and again, many writers and thinkers spoke of Chinese literature or culture with a certain sneering tone and condescending attitude. What is hidden behind this is a subconscious instinct to reject alien civilizations (Wilhelm, 1973, p. 197). At the end of *The Magic Mountain*, the World War I began, and Hans, feeling that he has been "asleep" on the "Magic Mountain" for seven years, resolutely set out for the front. "On the battlefield, Hans was looking for the signposts, but he was blurred by the obscure light. Is it east or west?" (Mann, 1991, p. 1013). In the face of this question of the times, Hans was at a loss. The author does not see the answer either. However, the author's complex attitude permeates the plot of the novel. Faced with the decline of the West, the author looks to the East, but subconsciously rejects foreign civilizations. In the novel, "Wu Wei" is equated with "irrationality", which is the imagination of Thomas Mann and other European writers about the East, and also the obscuring of Eastern culture.

III Conclusion

At the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, Europe was in a period of change in its socioeconomic structure and a period of transformation of traditional thought. Germany experienced rapid development, rapid decline, institutional change and post-war reconstruction in just a few decades. Faced with the chaotic social reality and the spiritual crisis of traditional civilization, the German intellectual community and thought circles began to "lean inward" and "turn eastward". In the 1920s, Germany was filled with the spread and practice of multiculturalism, and the translations of the scholar Richard Wilhelm were widely disseminated, which immediately set off an "Oriental fever" in German intellectual circles.

Among the richness of Chinese culture, the Daoist idea of "Wu Wei" was of particular interest to German writers in the early 20th century. By the 1920s, it had already been incorporated into traditional German literary themes and representations of non-Chinese contexts. Most of these works were about choices and redemption from the spiritual crisis of the times, and the writers drew on Eastern culture and embodied it in their works, often with the aim of exploring the future direction of German and even European civilization.

In these works, the ideological meaning and embodiment of "Wu Wei" can be roughly divided into two types: the first one, the writer explored the "non-delusional" core of the idea of "Wu Wei" and takes it as the highest wisdom and guiding principle of life. For example, in Hesse's *Siddhartha*, "Wu Wei" not only serves as a key element and core for finding true knowledge, but the author even integrates the idea of "Wu Wei" with other philosophical and religious concepts, showing a kind of humanistic concern beyond religion and culture. "Wu Wei" serves as a path that leads to the ultimate beyond religion. At the end of this path lies the "Tao", "God" and "Brahman". The difference between them is no longer important, what matters is the realization of love and the unity of the self. Other writers still harbored a Eurocentric attitude, covering the entire Eastern civilization with the characteristics of "backwardness" and "irrationality", and interpreting "Wu Wei" in terms of "conformity". For example, in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, the idea of "Wu Wei" becomes a generalization symbolizing the irrational civilization of the East. This search for Eastern wisdom and the incomplete cognition of Daoist thought constitutes the inner tension of the text, showing us the contradiction of the author's desire to seek new methods of salvation and his inability to get rid of the Eurocentric mentality. Different writers' interpretations of Chinese cultural thought are surely closely related to their personal experiences, but the writers' ideas and the themes of their works are also inseparable from the overall trend of the times. The different interpretations, expressions and views of the idea of "Wu

Wei" in *Siddhartha* and *The Magic Mountain* reflect the two different attitudes of the literary and intellectual circles during the "Oriental fever" in the German intellectual circles in the 1920s. In the face of ancient Chinese philosophy and culture, whether admired or criticized, German literary scholars actively considered how Western civilization could be regenerated and revived. They showed the paths and provided references for the integration and transcendence of Chinese and Western cultures. At the same time, their works also provided implications for exploring how Chinese thought can be effectively disseminated and actively dialogued.

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