https://doi.org/10.52521/kg.v22i3.16286

Daoist political philosophy and Its Value for Contemporary Political Leadership

Filosofia política taoísta e seu valor para a liderança política contemporânea

Nguyen Thi Thanh DUNG
Institute of Politics and International Relations,
Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics
Email: Dungnguyenthanhhcma@gmail.com
Orcid: 0009-0005-1609-0607

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and the proliferation of socio-political crises, there is a growing demand for models of leadership that emphasize flexibility, humility, and adaptability. Eastern political philosophies have left profound legacies; however, most studies have focused on Confucianism and Legalism, while Daoism has often been regarded more as a mystical worldview than as a viable political theory. This article addresses this gap by examining Daoist political thought, particularly the concepts of Dao (道), De (德), and the principle of *wu wei* (無為), to analyze their significance for contemporary political leadership.

KEYWORDS: *Daoism; wu wei, political leadershi,; comparative philosophy, political culture.*

RESUMO

No contexto da globalização e da multiplicação das crises sociopolíticas, cresce a demanda por modelos de liderança que enfatizem flexibilidade, humildade e adaptabilidade. As filosofias políticas orientais legaram contribuições profundas; contudo, a maior parte dos estudos concentrou-se no Confucionismo e no Legalismo, enquanto o Daoismo tem sido frequentemente visto mais como uma visão mística do que como uma teoria política aplicável. Este artigo busca preencher essa lacuna ao examinar o pensamento político daoista, em particular os conceitos de Dao (道), De (德) e o princípio de *wu wei* (無為), a fim de analisar seu valor para a liderança política contemporânea.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Daoismo, wu wei, liderança política, filosofia comparada, cultura política..

Introduction

Over the past two decades, global crises, ranging from climate change, pandemics, and economic–financial turbulence to armed conflicts and social unrest, have posed unprecedented challenges to traditional models of leadership. In this context, there has been a growing demand for new forms of leadership: more sustainable, more humble, and more flexible, capable of adapting to the complexity and uncertainty of the contemporary world. Modern leadership theories such as servant leadership, transformational leadership, and adaptive governance reflect this concern by emphasizing humility, empowerment, and responsiveness rather than coercion. Yet, these theories are largely rooted in Western intellectual traditions, while non-European sources of thought remain underexplored in a systematic way.

Within the intellectual history of ancient Eastern political philosophy, particularly in China, Confucianism and Legalism have traditionally stood out. Confucianism is regarded as the moral foundation for governance, stressing the exemplary role of rulers and the maintenance of social order; Legalism is typically associated with governance through strict laws and coercive measures. Daoism, though one of the three major pillars of classical Chinese thought, has often been marginalized or treated as a metaphysical system with little practical value for politics. This perspective has obscured the profound potential of Daoism to provide a supplementary conceptual framework for contemporary models of leadership.

Against this backdrop, the article raises the central research question: Can Daoist political thought, particularly the principles of Dao (道), De (德), and *wu wei* (無為), offer useful insights for contemporary political leadership? More specifically, it asks: (i) What core principles of politics and leadership can be identified in Daoist thought? (ii) How can these principles be applied to contemporary political leadership? (iii) Typical examples in contemporary political leadership practice?

The article employs a threefold methodology: (i) textual analysis of the classical sources, the *Dao De Jing* of Laozi and the *Zhuangzi*, to reconstruct the foundational political principles of Daoism; (ii) comparative analysis between Daoism, Confucianism, Legalism, and selected Western political theories, to highlight the distinctive position of Daoism within the broader philosophical tradition; and (iii) dialogue with modern leadership theories, especially those that emphasize humility, service, and adaptability, in order to assess the potential applicability of Daoism to contemporary political leadership.

The novelty of this article lies in repositioning Daoism not as an apolitical philosophy but as a genuine source of leadership thought with relevance for political theory and practice. Whereas Confucianism and Legalism have often been invoked as representing two poles of classical Chinese

politics, moral rule and rule of law, Daoism opens a third path: leadership grounded in humility, balance, and the self-regulation of communities. In the context of today's world, such an approach may serve as a valuable reference for developing models of leadership that are more flexible, human-centered, and adaptive.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

Within the landscape of Eastern political philosophy, three major traditions correspond to three distinctive models of governance: Confucianism as rule by virtue (*de zhi*), Legalism as rule by law (*fa zhi*), and Daoism as rule by non-action (*wu wei zhi*). Confucianism emphasizes that rulers and political elites must cultivate themselves morally, leading by example and inspiring the people through their virtue; governance is anchored in rectification of names (*zheng ming*) and the transformative power of moral authority (*yi shen jiao, yi de hua*) (Nguyen, 2016). By contrast, Legalism stresses the importance of strict law and institutional discipline in maintaining order. From this perspective, the relationship between ruler and ruled must be mediated by impersonal norms such as statutes, regulations, and bureaucratic structures, rather than by the personal character of the sovereign (Wu, 2025). Law (*fa*), in the Legalist vision, is designed with clarity, impartiality, and rigor, with precise rewards and punishments to sustain social order. Opposed to both these tendencies, Daoism, as articulated by Laozi and Zhuangzi, advocates governance through *wu wei* (non-action). This entails leadership that refrains from coercive interference, allowing people to live in natural simplicity under the spontaneous order of the Dao. *Wu wei* is not inaction, but rather effortless, adaptive, and context-sensitive action that enables society to self-regulate without unnecessary disruption (Wu, 2025). As the *Dao De Jing* famously declares, "Through non-action, the people transform themselves" (*xuan de wu wei*), highlighting the ideal of a humble leader who guides not by imposition but by facilitating natural harmony (Wu, 2025). In sum, Confucianism embodies governance through virtue, Legalism through law and coercive order, while Daoism represents governance by non-action, providing a flexible framework for harmonizing society with the Dao.

Literature Review

In the West, scholars have increasingly explored Daoism's significance for leadership and governance. For example, Lee et al. (2008) describe Daoist leadership as "water-like leadership," characterized by five core features: altruism, modesty, flexibility, transparency, and gentleness combined with persistence (Lee, 2008). They also highlight the Daoist notion of *wei wu wei* ("acting without forcing"), captured in metaphors such as "cooking a small fish," which implies governing with subtlety and restraint (Lee, 2008). More recently, studies on mindful leadership have drawn inspiration from Daoist principles. Tan (2023) argues that Daoist leadership manifests in three interrelated dimensions: orienting collective

goals through Dao (way-making), embodying virtue (*dė*) as a source of legitimacy, and practicing *wu wei* in organizational management, eschewing coercion while fostering natural growth and intrinsic motivation among subordinates. Similarly, Lei (2025) portrays the Daoist leader as a "sage leader," one who wields power primarily through informal influence, embracing formlessness and paradox to rethink conventional understandings of authority. Together, these international contributions portray Daoism as a non-traditional theory of leadership that values humility, adaptability, and consonance with nature.

In Vietnam and broader East Asia, the imprint of Chinese philosophical legacies is clearly visible. In Vietnamese feudal history, Confucianism provided the normative foundation of political culture, yet Legalist measures were pragmatically adopted by rulers despite being justified under the rhetoric of Confucian "moral governance." Research by Doan Van Tien has shown the prevalence of the formula "Confucian on the outside, Legalist on the inside", whereby monarchs and officials incorporated Legalist rigor into administration but legitimized it as benevolent Confucian rule. This demonstrates that Confucian virtue politics often held primacy, but it was tactically blended with Legalist techniques in Vietnam's traditional political culture. As for Daoism, classical texts such as the *Dao De Jing* circulated early in Vietnam, and Daoist thought permeated popular beliefs and indigenous religious practices. Similarities can be observed between Daoist ideas of natural harmony and Vietnamese traditions such as Taoist ritualism or Zen-influenced thought. However, specialized scholarship on Daoism's political dimension in Vietnam remains scarce. Existing Vietnamese works largely highlight Daoist philosophical values or offer broad comparisons among Eastern traditions, with little sustained inquiry into the application of *wu wei* as a political leadership strategy in Vietnam or modern East Asia.

Surveying the literature reveals a clear pattern: while Confucianism and Legalism have been extensively studied in East Asian political thought, Daoism has seldom been treated as a comprehensive political philosophy in dialogue with contemporary leadership theory. International works tend to approach Daoism as a source of inspiration for leadership styles, emphasizing flexibility, humility, empowerment, and *wu wei* (Lee et al., 2008; Tan 2023), rather than as a systematic political framework with implications for public governance. Consequently, there remains a significant research gap: no comprehensive study has yet analyzed Daoism as a political philosophy in its own right and explicitly compared its principles with modern leadership models. Addressing this gap is precisely the contribution this article seeks to make.

Daoist Political Thought

- **Daoism and Political Philosophy**

In Daoist philosophy, the Dao (道) is regarded as the supreme principle, existing prior to heaven and earth, uncreated and indestructible, the ultimate source of all beings. Laozi employs the term "Dao" to

signify the ineffable cosmic principle that "cannot be named by any concept." The Dao governs natural laws and sustains the balance of the universe: "If you would contract, you must first expand; if you would weaken, you must first strengthen" (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 36). Thus, the Dao is both the immutable cosmic order and the natural principle regulating all things. Daoism emphasizes that the Dao cannot be fully expressed in words but only intuited directly: "The Dao that can be spoken is not the constant Dao; the name that can be named is not the constant name" (*Dao ke dao, fei chang Dao; ming ke ming, fei chang ming*).

For Daoism, *De* (德) is both an attribute of the Dao and the inner moral quality of human beings, particularly rulers. From a Daoist perspective, *de* may be understood as the "numinous potency of the Dao" inherent in all beings. The *Dao De Jing* describes *de* as a latent force "present within all entities," often translated as virtue, efficacy, or inherent capacity. Laozi insists that sage-kings must possess *de*: they govern by virtue, aligning themselves with the spontaneity of nature (*ziran*) (Wu, 2019). The Daoist ruler is one who "keeps to the Dao with a single mind," guiding people through virtue without disturbing the natural order, enabling all beings to "transform themselves (Wu, 2019)." Thus, in the political context, *de* signifies both the personal virtue of the ruler and the harmonizing capacity that brings prosperity by conforming to the Dao.

The principle of *wu wei* (無為), governing through non-action (*wu wei er zhi*), is the core of Laozi's political philosophy. *Wu wei* does not mean absolute inaction, but refraining from forced or coercive intervention. Laozi explains: "*Wu wei* means doing nothing that is contrived, yet there is nothing left undone." In other words, when leaders embody *wu wei*, all things follow their natural course. Leadership through *wu wei* entails acting without ostentation, teaching without words (*xing bu yan zhi jiao*). The result is that "the people transform themselves": living simply, being content, and spontaneously turning toward the good without the need for constant commands. By contrast, coercive interference often produces disorder; Laozi warns, "The more laws and edicts are imposed, the more thieves and robbers there will be" (*Dao De Jing*, chap. 57). At the level of the state, Laozi denounces aggressive measures such as wars of conquest, harsh punishments, and excessive taxation. He argues that true rulers do not rely on military force: "He who leads the people by Dao does not conquer other states by arms." Likewise, imposed reforms that disrupt natural life are rejected. In short, *wu wei er zhi* signifies governing subtly in accordance with nature: allowing the people to follow the Dao, keeping desires few, and cultivating a tranquil and balanced society (Wu, 2019).

Laozi's Vision of Ideal Politics

Laozi envisions the ideal polity as a "small state with few people" (*xiao guo, gua min*), a self-sufficient community living in simplicity. The *Dao De Jing* (chap. 80) describes:

"*A small country with few inhabitants: Though there are labor-saving tools, none use them; Let the people take death seriously and not wander far. Though there are boats and carriages, none will ride them; Though there are armor and weapons, none will display them. Let the people return to tying knots for record-keeping, Relishing their food, delighting in their clothing, At peace in their dwellings, happy in their customs.*" (Nguyen, 1968)

For Laozi, the small state ideal reflects a society focused on subsistence and simplicity, with little ambition for expansion. People "do not travel far," vehicles and weapons are rarely used, and neighboring villages live quietly, separated yet content, able to hear each other's roosters and dogs without the urge to dominate. Laozi even suggests that vast territories should be divided into smaller communities, each preserving its own customs: "Enjoy their food, find beauty in their clothing, dwell in peace, and delight in their traditions."

Central to this political vision is compassion for the people and rejection of luxury. Laozi condemns extravagance, asserting that the opulence of the wealthy is built upon the suffering of the poor through exploitation. He criticizes feudal oppression and calls for equality and harmony among peoples. Thus, Laozi is particularly wary of conflict: "He who rules by Dao does not engage in wars to subdue others" War and coercive violence are seen as violations of the cosmic order. Similarly, heavy taxation and harsh laws are rejected for causing misery among the people. Instead, Laozi dreams of peaceful communities: "Till death, people never have to travel to each other," a metaphor for self-contained societies living naturally, free from strife.

Another crucial aspect of Daoist ideal politics is the notion of the "nameless leader." Laozi portrays the sage ruler as guiding the realm silently yet effectively: "He helps all beings without claiming merit; he accomplishes without taking credit." Like the sun that illuminates all without demanding acknowledgment, the sage benefits others unnoticed. Laozi calls this "teaching without words" (*xing bu yan zhi jiao*): governing by example rather than imposition. The people transform themselves by emulating virtue, while the polity as a whole remains rooted in the Dao, sustaining balance and stability. In summary, Laozi's political philosophy advocates for a simple, decentralized state governed by virtue and natural harmony, eschewing oppression, militarism, and the pursuit of fame or profit.

Zhuangzi and the Philosophy of Absolute Freedom

Zhuangzi (莊子), the second great figure of Daoism, continued the thought of Laozi but placed greater emphasis on individual freedom and liberation from all forms of constraint. Whereas Laozi focused primarily on the Dao as a cosmic principle and the political practice of *wu wei* (non-action), Zhuangzi radicalized this teaching by advancing the idea of *xiao yao* (逍遙, "free and easy wandering"), a state of unbounded freedom and transcendence. He likened the highest form of freedom to the legendary

figure Liezi, who could ride the wind and wander through the clouds, an allegory of complete spiritual liberation in harmony with heaven and earth (Pham, 2019).

For Zhuangzi, true freedom is attained when one is "no longer bound by anything", including rituals, social laws, and conventional norms (Pham, 2019). He transformed Daoist cosmology into a philosophy of liberty: "absolute freedom," meaning the full emancipation from desires and attachments, allowing each person to live in accordance with their original nature (Pham, 2019).. In this sense, the trajectory of Daoist thought, from Laozi's Dao to Zhuangzi's vision of absolute freedom, represents, as some scholars observe, "a rare development in the history of human thought." Zhuangzi's parables, such as the story of the "Sacrificial Turtle" or "Confucius and the Scale Beam," illustrate his call for abandoning worldly ambition so that the human spirit may become as vast and untroubled as the cosmos itself. He believed that once individuals achieved such spiritual liberation, even social rites and moral codes would become superfluous, for society would spontaneously harmonize itself according to the Dao without coercion.

In sum, Daoist political philosophy emphasizes "non-governmental governance" (*wu wei* politics): constructing a simple society, avoiding oppression and war. The Dao represents the natural cosmic order to which the ideal state must conform, while *de* (virtue) constitutes the internal standard that secures the trust of the people. Laozi urged rulers to "practice virtue without seeking fame," guiding the people through moral example rather than imposition. Zhuangzi deepened this orientation by affirming the ultimate right of every individual to freedom, liberating them from rigid social constraints.

The Value of Daoism for Contemporary Political Leadership

Since antiquity, Daoism has upheld values such as humility, non-action, balance, the primacy of the people, and harmony with nature. In the sphere of modern political leadership, these values retain significant vitality and applicability. According to Ma and Tsui (2015), Daoist principles in leadership include "not overreaching, not coercing, empowering subordinates, seeking balance and avoiding extremes, and selflessness" (Li and Tsui, 2015). Other scholars highlight Daoist leadership traits such as persistence, modesty, altruism, flexibility, and honesty (Li and Tsui, 2015). These characteristics correspond closely to the concept of "servant leadership" in contemporary governance, a style of leadership that prioritizes the development and service of followers over personal power-seeking.

In this article, we analyze five core Daoist values and their application to contemporary political leadership, illustrated with concrete case studies. These include humility and modest speech, non-extreme intervention through empowerment, the pursuit of balance in times of crisis, the principle of people-centered governance, and the Daoist approach to flexible, peace-oriented diplomacy.

1. **Humility and Modesty – Servant Leadership and Humble Leadership**

Daoism places particular emphasis on the virtue of humility, avoiding self-assertion, refraining from taking credit, and eschewing boastfulness. Laozi's *Dao De Jing* repeatedly underscores humility as a fundamental virtue of the sage ruler (*sheng ren*). For instance, Laozi teaches: "He who does not put himself before others will become their leader" (Lionel, 1905). Another passage makes this explicit: "I have three treasures; the third is humility, by which I do not put myself above others… By not elevating oneself over others, one naturally becomes a leader among them." (Lionel, 1905). The *Dao De Jing* also employs the metaphor of rivers and seas to illustrate humility: "The reason the sea can govern a hundred rivers is that it lies below them" (Lionel, 1905) This humility does not signify weakness but, rather, leadership without contention, where others willingly follow. As Ma and Tsui (2015) note, "modesty" constitutes a core quality of Daoist leadership. In other words, the Daoist leader prioritizes listening, places themselves behind others, and avoids self-promotion, thereby generating deep and enduring influence.

Empirical observation shows that the concept of "servant leadership" has gradually gained prominence in global politics. Robert Greenleaf defined servant leadership as a style that prioritizes serving and empowering followers or citizens over the pursuit of personal power. At its heart lies humility: the servant leader places communal interests first, listens attentively, and encourages others to develop their capacities. To lead humbly is also to enhance authenticity and foster trust. In this respect, Daoist leadership and servant leadership converge, both call upon leaders to cultivate a "spirit of service" and to position themselves as secondary to those they guide. (Lionel, 1905)

A striking example of this spirit is found in New Zealand's Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern, often hailed as an emblematic servant leader of the twenty-first century. During crises such as the Christchurch mosque shootings in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic, Ardern demonstrated humility, attentiveness to citizens, and empathetic, compassionate responses. She described herself as "the last member of the team," frequently stressing the importance of empathy: "We are here to feel empathy, to consider what it means to walk in someone else's shoes…" Her people-centered, modest, and gentle leadership style inspired citizens and contributed to New Zealand's positive international reputation. In Daoist imagery, this parallels Laozi's metaphor of the "sea" as the lowest body of water yet the ruler of all rivers, an image that, according to Ma and Tsui, epitomizes leading from behind in order to win people's hearts. Similarly, Ardern quietly supported and highlighted the contributions of those around her.

Thus, the Daoist ethos of "humility and modest speech" is not merely an ethical exhortation but an effective leadership method, deeply resonant with modern models such as servant leadership. (Li and Tsui, 2015)

2. Non-Extreme Intervention – Empowerment and Adaptive Governance

Another key Daoist value is the principle of *wu wei* (**無為**, "non-action"), which emphasizes avoiding excessive intervention. Daoism holds that rulers should act naturally, simplify regulations, and allow the social system to adjust itself according to its own inherent order. Chapter 57 of the *Dao De Jing* states: "The more prohibitions there are, the poorer the people become… I take no action, and the people transform themselves." (Wu Similarly, Laozi advises: "Governing a large state is like cooking a small fish; to poke at it too much will spoil it." These passages highlight that heavy-handed policies, repression, or an overabundance of laws often lead to disorder. By contrast, Daoist leadership encourages empowerment and respect for people's capacity for self-governance. As Ma and Tsui observe, a defining feature of Daoist leadership is "empowering subordinates to lead". In this sense, the Daoist leader withdraws partially, allowing citizens or subordinates to resolve issues proactively within a general framework.

This philosophy closely parallels the modern concepts of empowerment and adaptive governance. Adaptive governance emphasizes decentralization and flexibility, enabling individuals and communities to participate in decision-making while policies are continuously adjusted based on feedback. Elinor Ostrom, for example, demonstrated that when communities are empowered to manage their own resources, rather than being subjected to centralized control, the outcomes are typically more effective and sustainable. Decentralizing authority to local levels or encouraging civic organizations to assume responsibility reflects the Daoist spirit of *wu wei*. When leaders intervene less, "the people transform themselves," expressing greater initiative and creativity in problem-solving. As Laozi suggests, the ideal leader makes people feel that "they themselves have accomplished everything" thereby fostering trust and commitment.

Globally, one of the most prominent models of decentralization is Switzerland's federal system. In Switzerland, political power is strongly devolved to the cantons, which enjoy high degrees of autonomy, and citizens frequently participate in direct democracy through referenda. This model vividly reflects the Daoist spirit of "non-excessive rule" and community empowerment. For example, fiscal restraint policies, such as the "debt brake" pioneered by the canton of St. Gallen, were voluntarily adopted at the cantonal level and contributed to the country's overall economic stability (Rother, 2018). Similarly, cooperative frameworks for water resource sharing at the regional level in Europe illustrate governance through light-touch intervention, promoting collaboration rather than imposition. These cases show that a Daoist style of leadership, eschewing concentrated control while prioritizing empowerment, can foster an environment conducive to creativity, resilience, and social self-balancing. (Li and Tsui, 2015)

3. Avoiding Extremes, Seeking Balance – The "Middle Path" in Crisis, Environmental, and Health Governance

Daoism emphasizes the harmony of yin and yang, consistently avoiding extremes and advocating for natural equilibrium. Laozi warns that "excess leads to reversal": excessive action, rigid laws, or luxurious excesses inevitably bring unintended consequences. As Ma and Tsui point out, one of Daoism's key tenets is "seeking balance and avoiding extremes." (Li and Tsui, 2015). This insight provides modern leaders with an approach to problem-solving that resists black-and-white thinking, instead favoring moderation, flexibility, and pragmatism. The Daoist principle of the Middle Path may be compared to contemporary policy orientations across multiple domains: neither pursuing radical solutions nor embracing neglect, but adopting measured responses adapted to context.

In practice, today's leaders and policymakers often walk a tightrope between strict control and excessive freedom. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, for example, states faced stark choices between two extremes: total lockdowns or full openness. Moderate solutions, such as temporary closures combined with large-scale testing and flexible monitoring, embodied a balanced mindset. In environmental governance, the concept of sustainable development reflects the long-term balance between economic growth and ecological preservation. Bhutan, for instance, implemented its *National Environment Strategy 2020 – The Middle Path*, aiming to maintain carbon neutrality, promote eco-friendly infrastructure, and encourage sustainable agriculture. The very title "Middle Path" reflects Daoist thinking: avoiding the extreme of sacrificing the environment for unchecked growth while pursuing solutions that simultaneously advance economic development and conservation.

Daoist leadership's orientation toward situational adjustment resonates strongly with modern "middle path" policies. For example, flood management strategies in parts of Europe combine traditional defenses (levees) with natural restoration (wetlands, buffer zones) rather than relying solely on rigid, artificial structures. In public health, strategies that balance pandemic control with the maintenance of social and economic life embody the same careful navigation between extremes.

In short, the Daoist principle of "avoiding extremes and seeking balance" encourages leadership that adopts flexible planning, context-sensitive policies, and a commitment to sustainability (Li and Tsui, 2015). Bhutan's explicit application of the "Middle Path" in public policy, so central that it names its national strategy, is a vivid example of this Daoist legacy. At the international level, the Paris Agreement on climate change also reflects a middle-ground approach: bridging oil-dependent economies with the demand for emissions reduction by combining climate commitments with financial support for developing nations. Similarly, developed countries such as Sweden and Singapore often pursue social policies that simultaneously guarantee welfare (health, education) while promoting flexible market economies, embodying the Daoist spirit of balance and fairness in modern governance.

4. Placing the People at the Center – The Idea of *Minben* and Social Justice

The principle of placing the people at the center, expressed in the maxim *"the people are the foundation of the state; when the foundation is stable, the state is at peace"*, is a common spirit across many East Asian political traditions, including Daoism. Although the concept of *minben* (**人民為本**, "the people as the foundation") originated in Confucian thought (notably Mencius) and was later appropriated by the Chinese Communist Party, the Daoist spirit of "thinking for the world first, seeking the welfare of all people" resonates with the same ethos. Under this principle, rulers are not to govern for private gain but for the common good, and the role of the state is defined as serving the needs of its people. The *Dao De Jing* refers to the "three treasures," which include compassion, frugality, and service to humanity, underscoring that the essence of political leadership lies in enabling people to live well.

In modern governance, the idea of *minben* corresponds closely with the pursuit of social justice and welfare. Many states have established welfare systems to ensure universal access to healthcare, education, and social security. Universal health insurance in Europe, or unemployment protection and poverty-reduction policies in the Nordic countries, serve as practical illustrations of prioritizing social well-being. In Asia, Singapore's human development policies, such as the "Every Student a Scholar" program and its basic pension scheme for the elderly, embody the same principle. Theoretically, many contemporary scholars argue that the idea of "the people as the foundation" harmonizes with modern notions of democracy and social justice. As the *ECPR* notes, Mencius taught: *"The people are most important, the state comes second, the ruler is least"* (**民為貴，社稷次之，君為輕**). This perspective has been reformulated in modern Chinese political philosophy to emphasize that *minben* places the ruler last and affirms that nothing is more important than the well-being of the people. Such insights highlight that modern Daoist-inspired leaders must internalize the principle of centering the people and craft policies aimed at improving popular welfare.

In practice, the notion of *minben* has appeared in the manifestos of ruling parties. In China, despite being expressed in the language of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics," the Chinese Communist Party asserts that its central mission is to "serve the people," even framing its revolutionary legitimacy in terms of this principle. In democratic states, this orientation manifests through welfare programs: for example, the Nordic model of high taxation to fund free healthcare and education ensures universal access to essential services. Within ASEAN, Singapore applies a "market-socialist" model with affordable housing, basic health insurance, and other measures that provide a foundation for long-term development.

In short, the Daoist spirit of "putting the people first" today corresponds to the pursuit of social justice: a "government of the people, by the people, for the people," in which strategic policymaking must prioritize serving the majority and enhancing collective well-being.

5. Flexibility and Amity in Diplomacy – Soft Power and Cultural Diplomacy

The Daoist values of peace and non-aggression, embodying the spirit of *harmony* (*hiếu hòa*) and mutual respect, reflect a philosophy of flexible statecraft. In international relations, this corresponds to the strategy of *soft power* and cultural diplomacy. Joseph Nye defines soft power as the ability to achieve desired outcomes "through attraction rather than coercion". Governments exercise soft power when others admire their culture, policies, and values. Daoism extols the art of "non-coercion" and "non-contention," likened to water, which parallels diplomatic strategies based on persuasion: leveraging cultural appeal, ritual civility, and education to exert influence.

In practice, many Asian states have successfully advanced their interests through cultural influence: South Korea with the global spread of K-pop and television dramas, Japan with anime and cuisine, and China through Confucius Institutes and educational investment, all examples of constructing positive images and persuading international audiences. ASEAN, likewise, has long been recognized for its "ASEAN Way": avoiding overt confrontation, seeking consensus, and promoting cooperation through shared cultural values. Initiatives such as ASEAN Cultural Day, heritage exhibitions, and intergovernmental cultural cooperation embody this "soft" ethos. Research indicates that cultural diplomacy strengthens trust and mutual understanding, thereby reinforcing regional stability. The ASEAN model of cultural diplomacy stands as a significant example.

According to Indrawan (2016) and Ma (2015), cited in Indraswari (2015), the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community uses culture to "connect people across political boundaries and promote shared values". Cambodia offers a concrete case: by actively promoting Angkor heritage and traditional arts, it enhances its cultural appeal and strengthens its image within the region. Meanwhile, major powers such as China and India also invest in soft power through language institutes, cultural exchange funds, and tourism promotion agencies. For instance, China's Confucius Institute program, expanded worldwide, has advanced Chinese culture through mutual appreciation rather than coercion. Similarly, South Korea and Japan have transformed popular culture into powerful diplomatic tools, with K-pop, K-drama, and anime capturing global audiences. ASEAN has sought to build a shared identity through cultural cooperation: initiatives such as the ASEAN Cultural Community, ASEAN festivals, and joint heritage projects foster "mutual understanding and trust" among member states.

In short, the Daoist style of flexible and conciliatory diplomacy has been concretized through *soft power*: cultural, educational, and humanitarian policies designed to cultivate goodwill and normative influence. Daoism's spirit of softness and harmony in interpersonal and interstate relations has been translated into a modern diplomatic strategy that relies not on military force but on admiration, attraction, and people-to-people connections.

Thus, the five core values of Daoism, humility, *wu wei*, balance, people-centeredness, and harmony, remain highly relevant to the demands of political leadership in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. These principles are not only humanistic but also carry practical significance for policymaking (serving the people, decentralization, balanced governance, soft diplomacy). Contemporary examples such as Jacinda Ardern's servant leadership, Switzerland's federal model of decentralization, Bhutan's "Middle Path" strategy, and the soft power of South Korea and ASEAN illustrate the applicability of Daoist wisdom. Leaders today, if they embrace governing with humility, flexibility, and peaceful engagement, can achieve political legitimacy and effectiveness while also contributing to stability and social justice.

Conclusion

This article has analyzed the core tenets of Daoist political thought and examined their essential value for contemporary political leadership. It argues that Daoism should be seen as a complementary resource rather than an absolute alternative to Confucianism or Legalism. Daoism offers a set of values that emphasize humility, leading by example, empowerment, and minimizing coercive intervention, principles that can enrich the repertoire of sustainable leadership in the twenty-first century. Daoist ideas intersect with modern leadership theories such as Greenleaf's *servant leadership* and Burns/Bass's *transformational leadership*, particularly in their focus on human development, ethical leadership, and empowerment. Nevertheless, for such principles to be politically viable, they must be combined with mechanisms of accountability and instruments of evaluation.

Daoist political philosophy also proves relevant in contexts requiring adaptive capacity, sustainable environmental governance, and soft diplomacy, as well as at the local level where empowerment and self-governance can flourish. Examples such as Switzerland's decentralized federal model or the human-centered and transparent communication styles of certain contemporary governments illustrate the feasibility of applying Daoist values of "humility + empowerment" when practiced responsibly. At the same time, it must be emphasized that *wu wei* is not a universal formula for all times and contexts. It requires modification in situations of crisis (where decisive action is necessary), within welfare states (where intervention is needed to ensure equity), and to prevent misinterpretation or misuse by elites as an excuse for irresponsibility. Therefore, Daoist principles should be integrated with transparency, rule of law, and accountability.

The scholarly contribution of this study lies in proposing a more systematic reading of Daoism as a philosophy of political leadership, shifting from a purely metaphysical interpretation toward an applied framework in dialogue with contemporary leadership theory and institutional thought. This opens pathways for interdisciplinary research programs across political philosophy, management science, and public policy studies, including: (i) quantitative testing of "*wu wei*-informed leadership" models in public

organizations; (ii) detailed case studies of governments applying similar principles (e.g., New Zealand, certain Swiss local administrations, ASEAN diplomacy) to extract practical lessons; and (iii) applications in environmental governance (*adaptive governance*) and crisis management, where flexibility, empowerment, and humility can yield strategic advantages.

References

Andrew. (2024, March 13). Lao Tzu on servant leadership. Patheos. https://www.patheos.com/blogs/soapboxredemption/2024/03/lao-tzu-on-servant-leadership/

Floisand, E. (2019). Jacinda Ardern: A model servant leader for these times. Deh Foundation. https://dehfoundation.org/jacinda-ardern-a-model/

Indraswari, R. (2015). Cultural diplomacy in ASEAN: Collaborative efforts. International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, 5(4), 394–397. https://doi.org/10.7763/IJSSH.2015.V5.487

Lee, Y.-T., Han, A.-G., Byron, T. K., & Fan, H.-X. (2008). Daoist leadership: Theory and application. In C.-C. Chen & Y.-T. Lee (Eds.), Leadership and management in China (pp. 83–107). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511753763.005

Li, M., & Tsui, A. S. (2015). Traditional Chinese philosophies and contemporary leadership. The Leadership Quarterly, 26(1), 13–24.

Lionel Giles (Trans.). (1905). The teachings of Lao Tzu. http://www.sacred-texts.com

National Environment Strategy 2020: The middle path. (n.d.). https://climate-laws.org/documents/national-environment-strategy-2020-the-middle-path_5e77?id=national-environment-strategy-2020-the-middle-path_eef7

Nguyen Duy Can. (1968). Tao Te Ching. Khai Tri.

Nguyen Huu Phuoc. (2016). Legalism in the history of Chinese political-social thought and its influence on Vietnamese feudal society (Doctoral dissertation). Hanoi: [s.n.].

Pham, Q. H. (2019). Zhuangzi's philosophy of freedom: Reflections and references for legal studies. VNU Journal of Science: Legal Studies, 35(3), 84–95.

Pines, Y. (2023). Chinese Legalism. In E. N. Zalta & U. Nodelman (Eds.), Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2023 Edition). Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/chinese-legalism/

Rother, N. (2018, August 20). Decentralization has fostered an ever prosperous Switzerland. interest.co.nz. https://www.interest.co.nz/news/95754/decentralisation-has-fostered-ever-prosperous-switzerland

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (2018, September 21). Laozi. In Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2023 Edition). https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/laozi/ (Original work published December 15, 2001)

The Loop – ECPR. (n.d.). Let's tell a more contextual story about Minben. https://theloop.ecpr.eu/lets-tell-a-more-contextual-story-about-minben/

Wu, Y., & Kang, X. (2019). Core values and ethical principles in Lao politics. China Studies, 8(3).

Wu-wei and governance: The art of non-action in leadership. (n.d.). Licentia Poetica. https://licentiapoetica.com/wu-wei-and-governance-2cb8054eb3cc

Yao, Y. M. (n.d.). Rise of cultural diplomacy in East Asia. The Pardee Atlas Journal of Global Affairs.

DUNG, Nguyen Thi Thanh. Daoist political philosophy and Its Value for Contemporary Political Leadership. ***Kalagatos***, Fortaleza, vol.22, n.3, 2025, ek25037, p. 01-16.

Received: 07/2025
Approved: 10/2025