

## WU-WEI AS THE PROFESSIONAL ETHOS OF PUBLIC SERVICE: 'NON-ACTION' FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY<sup>1</sup>

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### **Abstract**

*Public service currently lacks a guiding philosophy to underpin its role and work, not least in preserving long-term interest over short-term political expediency. Furthermore, if solutions to public sector problems are specific to context, no universal or common approach exists, nor is a definition of 'excellence' possible. This article suggests the ancient Chinese concept of 'wu-wei' (purposeful 'non-action') in public administration offers a well-tested solution, a simple yet profound way to guide realistic expectations of public service and its reform everywhere, while assisting public officials to cope with the increasingly complex demands put upon them in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.*

**Key Words:** *Wu-wei, ethics, public service competencies, New Public Passion, innovation, complexity.*

### **Activity without action**

"Something must be done!" shrieks every politician. The ambitious local MP emerges to congratulate the government on its handling of the crisis. The opposition spokesman puts in an appearance to condemn the ruling party for allowing acts of God to happen. The high-flying political appointee in the departmental 'delivery unit' continues to adjust the data until at last the graph shows that the problem has been 'fixed'. The junior minister rushes to the scene of the disaster, looking more shaken by the bumpy ride in the shabby vehicle from the office car pool than by the incident. The Secretary

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of State cancels her holiday to exploit a much-needed opportunity to appeal to voters as earnest, committed and deeply motivated, at least to hang on to her job. Meanwhile her cavalcade is blocking the road, thus hampering the emergency services from dealing with the scene. The Prime Minister flies home from the Summit meeting, clutching his umbrella, waving a piece of paper and declaring “Peace in Our Time”, even as the invasion is taking place.

But, despite all the melodrama of apparent action, the government feels insecure. The reason is clear. “Events, dear boy, events!” warned British Prime Minister Harold MacMillan, when asked to sum up the problem of governing a country<sup>1</sup>. He was right of course but, typically perhaps, not wholly honest: he had, after all, spent a career getting to the top of the greasy pole of national politics by turning happenstance to political advantage.

Events are indeed the oxygen of politics. Being a politician is about leading and, more importantly, being seen as a leader. That requires opportunities to show leadership skills: ‘lights, camera, action!’, or *wayang*, the Malay word used for politics as dramatic performance.

Yet the politics of prestige and panic under the spotlights has not always seemed inevitable. Over the throne in the Forbidden City hangs a piece of calligraphy designed to remind any Chinese emperor of the limits to even heavenly ordained power, and the preposterousness of political posturing. The writing captures the great insight from thousands of years of studying the art of good governance in ancient China, including how to avoid the danger of political over-reaction. In a few elegant brush strokes, the skills of a great ruler are reduced to two Chinese pictograms.

### *Wu-wei: Purposeful ‘Non-Doing’*

The word these two Chinese characters render, *wu-wei*, literally means “non-doing,” and so can be translated simply as ‘inactivity’ or ‘inaction’. But its true meaning is more refined, certainly does not imply ‘indolence.’ Rather, as a personal objective and a rule for effective and efficient government, the idea exercised many ancient Chinese philosophers, including Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi and Zhuangzi (Ames, 1994). The clearest elaboration of the concept comes from Laozi, the founder of Taoism, in three pithy insights

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<sup>1</sup> Despite being one of the most cited quotations on politics, its origins remain uncertain.

offered in the core text of this philosophy, the *Tao te Ching*. The first states: *The wise man deals with things through wu-wei and teaches through no-words. Ten thousand things flourish without interruption. They grow by themselves, and no one possesses them* (Chapter 2). The principle, then, is enigmatic, of non-action by purposeful design (the wise *deal with things*, not ignore them). This is elaborated by a second, more direct insight: *When wu-wei is done, nothing is left undone* (Chapter 48). This emphasises contrast, the union of two contradictory concepts, namely action (nothing remains undone) and no action (nothing is done). Any credible resolution of this paradox (and others related to it in the same school of thought, such as of ‘trying without trying’ or upholding the ‘virtue of non-virtue’) must somehow manage to combine both (Loy, 1985). How this can be anything other than a contradiction in terms might seem impossible.

That leads to the third and final strand of Laozi’s insight on the concept: *“The highest attainment is wu-wei and is purposeless”* (Chapter 38). So *wu-wei* also means avoiding a conscious effort in performing an action. Instead, through instinct or training, the action becomes second nature, without effort. Success, as in the Japanese martial art of judo, is the result of turning the force of the adversary against himself. Rather than ‘doing nothing’, this is Sun Tzu’s ‘winning without fighting’: under the weight of a heavy snowfall, the branches of a tree bend until the snow falls off and, having dropped the burden, the branches spring back.

Some scholars have concluded that *wu-wei* represents a mystic or unresolvable contradiction. Others suggest that the paradox can be resolved by the realization of Tao, which, like the Vedāntic revelation of Brahman and the Buddhist attainment of nirvāṇa, cannot be understood logically. A third interpretation suggests that the term was the unintentional consequence of the juxtaposition in early Taoism of its original “contemplative” and a subsequent “purposive” stance. However, such ambiguous responses need not be the only credible interpretations of this enigmatic concept.

The seeming contradiction of *wu-wei* can be resolved by realising that ‘non-action’ refers not to physical action but the mental state of the doer, in which *wu-wei* is balanced by *wu-bu-wei* (*nothing left undone*). *Wu-wei*, then, is more than studied fatalism ‘at the edge of chaos’, but describes “a state of personal harmony in which actions flow freely and instantly from one’s spontaneous inclinations—without the need for extended deliberation or inner struggle—and

yet nonetheless perfectly accord with the dictates of the situation at hand, display an almost supernatural efficacy” (Slingerland, 2000). In modern context and parlance, this implies critical judgment, enabling strategic prioritisation where intervention can make a real difference for all.

So *wu-wei* is action that is ‘natural’: not controlling or micromanaging to force things artificially in a certain direction, but ‘going with the flow’. In essence, *wu-wei* represents “the culmination of knowledge manifested in an ability to move through the world and human society in a manner that is completely spontaneous and yet still fully in harmony with the normative order of the natural and human world” (Slingerland, 2000). It is therefore, a professional skill, honing effective behaviours. If public service recruit for and inculcate *wu-wei*, officials would have a philosophical depth and an institutional consensus that would minimise politicisation, media pressure and self-promotion. Integrity would become intuitive, realism instinctive, honesty almost second-nature – the objective of any anti-corruption agency. As Zhuangzi, another early Taoist thinker explains, the best butcher is the one who has been chopping meat for so long that he does not need to think about where to cut, but carves up the meat by force of habit. If he stops to think about what he does, that perfect efficiency would be lost.

### ***Wu-wei as the Ethical Professionalism of Public Service***

Seen from this perspective, Laozi’s insights imply that as the complexity (*Ten thousand things*) of events (that *grow by themselves*) cannot be ‘possessed’ or controlled, the public official must ‘deal with’ events purposefully, not by neglecting his/her duty, but nevertheless with ‘non-action’. This is either through ‘effortlessness’, or the instinctive ability to act effectively and efficiently that is, indeed, a prized skill in public service everywhere, or on the basis of a carefully considered ‘do no harm’ problem diagnostic. That conclusion then must be communicated to the population (‘teaches through no-words’, supported by professional expertise and standards) judiciously through ‘non-action that speaks louder than words’.

Since the Dwight Waldo/Herbert Simon debate seventy years ago on whether public administration is a science, it has been a concern that public service lacks an adequate philosophical and methodological underpinning. As a result, research on public administration may suffer from insufficient analytical rigor because of the absence

of testable theory (Raadschelders, 1999). *Wu-wei* as a deeply-rooted philosophical basis for the professional ethics of public administration posits an ideal of peace and prosperity ('sustainable development' in modern terminology) built on effortless standards of spontaneous behaviour derived from either natural skills or cultivated habits, or both, that appear effortless (Hon, 2006).

In the institutional context of public service, spontaneity to respond effectively to crisis requires constant exercise, regular drills, and routine training. Public services must hire, train and retain public officials who are, by nature and training, calm and effective when a problem arises. This requires staff professionally trained to think and sufficiently self-confident to act by themselves and not wait for instructions for every step, but who can prioritise and keep headquarters well-informed but not overwhelmed by trivia. This, in colonial times, was described as 'character' and 'common sense' (Talib, 1999), but is too often lacking in modern public service (Hollingsworth, 2012). Similarly, the Japanese culture of etiquette and propriety continues to contribute greatly to assisting in times of crisis, as people are still capable of behaving in a 'civilised' way. This is a sharp contrast to many other parts of the world where society breaks down in the event of a crisis and looting and rioting become the norm. It is a culture of "every man for himself" where public authority imposes a solution to the problem. True bureaucratic 'non-action' is only possible when a culture of 'non-action' is also established in that society. Professional ethics in public service require an ethical political leadership and population.

*Wu-wei* identifies bureaucratic non-action as the essential skill of anticipating problems and tackling those that are susceptible to intervention early before they grow into major challenges. So in a well-functioning bureaucracy that acts with the professional ethics of *wu-wei*, much of their efforts will often go unnoticed. In case when problems are visible to the public, they are testament of the failure of a bureaucracy to anticipate these issues early enough. The arrogance of 'answers', 'fixes' and 'solutions' is then dangerous, when political leaders demand certainty where certainty is lacking. Instead, one can try to influence, but not pretend to control.

James C. Scott's classic work *Seeing Like a State* exposes the 20<sup>th</sup> century hubris of state planning everywhere: "The utopian, immanent, and continually frustrated goal of the modern state is to reduce the chaotic, disorderly, constantly changing social reality beneath it to something more closely resembling the administrative

grid of its observations" (Scott, 1998). Edmund Burke had, over a hundred and fifty years earlier, similarly warned against the ambitions of the French Revolution to remake mankind.

By contrast, Benito Mussolini, the dictator of Italy between 1922 and 1943, coined the term "Totalitarian" in his closing speech at the fourth Congress of the Italian National Fascist Party on 22 June 1925. His political vision advocated total state penetration of society. To achieve this, he called for radical social innovation through experimentation in which Italy would serve as a 'pop-up lab of life' (Kandel, 1997). By destroying ancient laws and venerable traditions, a new 'rational' society could be created in which the individual would be totally subservient to the state. Freed of ethical values and liberated from the past, the politician would become the artist, creating the amoral beauty of a new world forged by force and liberated through violence. Innovation, freed from any constraint from history, would be chiselled by the *Duce* or *Führer* from the raw material of the characterless anonymous 'masses' (Falasca-Zamponi, 2000).

In contrast, non-totalitarian Governments can only 'nudge' events and people. The skill, in the analogy of classical philosophers, is to imitate water sweeping around rocks and gradually wearing even granite down, rather than acting as a boulder crashing down on a river and upsetting the flow of its natural order. By training the instincts of long-term patience in an administrator or politician, behaviours become effortless or instinctive, based on universally shared professional ethics, ethos and values of public service as an institution with a lasting collective memory (systems thinking suggest the same point). For the seasoned bureaucrat the world over follows the universal, deep wisdom of *wu-wei* as the skill or art of 'non-action'. The collective experience from over four thousand years of organisational development suggests that the wisest path may be the pursuit of the deliberate, conscious act of either effortless action (through good preparation) or non-action.

### *An ancient philosophy for modern public service excellence*

Seen from this perspective, *Wu-wei* does not reflect a lack of professional ethics, or absence of concern. The core competence of public service is the capacity to maintain calm 'common-sense' – in the face of 'something must be done' hysteria and opinion poll chasing populist politics – should therefore be regarded as an



essential quality of good administration. The capacity of officials to maintain professional ethics, side-step the need for knee-jerk solution and offer decision makers, honest and fearless advice in the tradition of speaking truth to power, should become the hallmark of 'good governance'. The public official should aspire to calm common sense, or action without desire, based instead on a higher motivation or intention.

Professional ethics as *the highest attainment being wu-wei, purposeless, and nothing left undone*, characterized by ease and alertness by which – without even trying – experienced public officials are able to respond appropriately to whatever situation may arise. These ethics are vital if liberal democracies are to remain 'liberal' and avoid pandering to every whim of vociferous interests, public service must have the status and capacity to discern when public opinion is valid and needs to be factored into decision-making and when it is frenzied, ill-judged and guided by a mob mentality. The last few decades have exposed the dismaying failure of comprehensive reforms that claimed to drastically change how governments worked (Hood & Dixon, 2015). Unfortunately, rather than making public service more 'responsive', they instead fostered short-termism often resulting in the public service blindly following and not querying and guiding public opinion. The Dangerous Dogs Acts<sup>1</sup> rushed through parliaments in the UK and Holland were classic examples of this.

Now, having realized, albeit late that knee-jerk yet wide-ranging reforms may not be the solution, could *wu-wei* be the universalist philosophy required for a context-specific effective public sector? *Wu-wei* indeed implies that any action should be cautious and piecemeal experimentation rather than the grand design implementing the master plan through a 'logical' framework of causality. It implies cautious incrementalism in reforms, along the lines of Lindblom's "science of muddling through" (1959) within bureaucracies, as a rational way of managing complexity and the inherent uncertainty in predicting exactly what the consequence of reforms at each stage will be. This means rejecting 'best practice' in favour of 'best fit', that is the most appropriate to context, and proceeding by reason and compromise, quiet negotiation, 'purposive muddling'

<sup>1</sup> "In Westminster, that's the byword for a spectacular mess, specifically legislation botched through being rushed. If a minister ponders a panicked response to a news story, a wise spad, or special adviser, will be on hand to whisper: "Careful. That could end up being a bit dangerous dogs." Freedland, J. (2013). *Dangerous dogs legislation – don't mess it up again*. The Guardian. 6 August 2013.

and ‘satisficing’. This is not ‘effortless action’ but the minimum appropriate action, that is, efficient within bounded rationality: *Reason must guide action in order that power may be exercised according to the intrinsic properties and natural trends of things.*<sup>1</sup>

This philosophy of self-generating natural order derived from a seeming contradiction, assumes high relevance when confronted by ‘the edge of chaos’ (Ramalingam, 2014). This modern concept, in complexity science, of emergent self-order in complex systems means the search for such a sense of natural order will place a premium on calm common sense throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For public service everywhere is confronting rapid change, as well as limits on funding and capacity constraints. Henry Kippin, for example, calls attention to changes evident in public service. A major one is that public service will increasingly be delivering less by itself, and doing more to create the platforms to enable others (Kippin, 2015).

In any society, people learn how to interact with one another, to work with one another through social etiquette, norms, or professional protocols. Public service as an organization and institution derived from the ‘political settlement’ in every state, links elites to the wider population, politicians to taxpayers, government to citizens, an instrument of state but also a symbol of unity, galvanizing or blocking action by careful positioning and use of discretionary authority, creating the climate where self-order can finally emerge. The public service of the future will act less as the universal solution. Instead it will have the *wu-wei* ambition of symbolic ‘non-action.’ Effortless and pre-emptive, meaningful by signaling concern for problem, its main task becomes to uphold and guide a natural order, and its main skill the emotional and cultural intelligence underpinning spontaneity and intuition (Slingerland, 2014). The more public service collaborates to co-create with society, the more it will be capable of non-action, offering direction, but leaving civil society and the private sector to act.

This concept of “non-action” is, indeed, the central guiding insight in Taoist thought. If *wu-wei* meant ignoring complexity and rapid transformation, it would risk being irrelevant. In that, perhaps, there is another profound divide: between those people who see the commonality of mankind with small albeit important differences,

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<sup>1</sup> Book Nine of the *Huai Nan Tzu*, compiled under the patronage of Liu An at the court of Wu Ti perhaps around 140 B.C. presents *wu-wei* as serving state efficiency, within the Legalist political philosophy.



and those who see deep differences with a weak commonality. But the “Act of non-action” refers to mastering the art of minimum effort to align public authority to create trust and the legitimacy of power. This, indeed, is the original sense of *Wu-wei* when it appears for the first time, not in Taoist texts, but in the work of Confucius (Ames, 1981). His sole recorded reference to *wu-wei* relates how the philosopher-king, Shun, governed efficiently by simply occupying the throne: *If anyone could be said to have achieved proper order while remaining inactive (wu-wei), it was Shun. What was there for him to do? He simply made himself respectful and took up his position facing due South (Analects, 15.5)*. By regulating his own conduct so that it upholds order and tradition (Emperors ‘naturally’ always face South), the ruler sets a positive example and thus influences his subjects without any need for coercion (Loy, 1985). So, as Laozi observed, *If he acts without action, order will prevail* (Chapter 3). Competent bureaucracy requires effective political leadership, applying *wu-wei* to promote prosperity for all citizens, or, as in Singapore, an ‘administrative state’ constraining the ‘irrationality’ of politics. Thus the developmental state evolves, usually to the lyrics of nationalism (Everest-Phillips, 2015).

Yet, while the influence of *wu-wei* has been credited for the rise of *laissez-faire* liberal democracy in Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (Hobson, 2004), Laozi (chapter 57) posits a philosophy of government also suitable for the post-Great Recession 21<sup>st</sup> century: *The more laws and restrictions there are, The poorer people become. ... Therefore the sage says: ... I do nothing and people become rich*. But this is *wu-wei* not inaction. Markets only work when well regulated, not unregulated. The effective central bank governor or head of the competition commission/anti-trust agency is not indolent or inactive, but rather working by non-action.

Countries around the world face similar challenges from globalisation. Yet, contrary to expectation, this is not resulting in ever-growing uniformity of form and commonality in function among public administrations tackling similar challenges. Rather, although public service is evolving fast everywhere, the outcome is not convergence around some neo-Weberian principles and organisational structures, but increasing divergence – just as appeared in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century between the then industrialising world (Silberman, 1993).

An effective and efficient public service is essential for good

governance, credible stewardship and sustainable development (Barber, 2015; Turner et al., 2015). Yet the historic and philosophical differences shaping the effective behaviours and actions of public bureaucracy in different countries with different traditions and cultures are, however, poorly understood. As the flattery of 'isomorphic mimicry'<sup>1</sup> from 'international best practice' gives way to more home-grown 'best fit' experimentation, public service is becoming ever more diverse and divergent among the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) member states, between the developed and developing world, and within developing countries.

Yet this growing diversity indicates the common understanding about how the world actually works, shared by public administrations addressing the universal needs and characteristics of humanity. This is 'wu-wei'. Refined by over two thousand years of practical experience, it offers insights of common value today that helps link an ever more integrated, yet divided, globalised world. While the political rhetoric of intransigence can foster a dialogue of the deaf between East and West or North and South (and, increasingly between other more refined polarities such as North-West and South-East), a common understanding of public service would ease the sense of humanity divided by its common problems. The legitimacy bestowed by a shared philosophical understanding of public administration would be invaluable, in the ever-increasing complexity of decision-making in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, for guiding officials to cope with the pressures in public service careers.

### *Wu-wei and innovation*

'Innovation' is the fashion of the moment to address ever increasing change, but the risk involved may have unforeseen and unintended impacts. An obsession with physical innovation may cause organizations to drift away from their critical goals – getting the routine right also matters. But professional ethics are challenged when there is rarely money, promotion, or glory in advocating the *status quo*, while the rhetoric and the reality of innovation in public service can differ. Talk of promoting innovation can induce escalating cynicism that politics is about announcements not results. 'Churn' or change without adequately thought-through purpose, contributes to underperformance, poor decisions and

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<sup>1</sup> Meaning building organisations in weak states to appear *de jure* to resemble those found in effective states, but without the *de facto* capability of functioning properly or at all: Pritchett et al (2010).

bad delivery. Improvement can occur without innovation. When is it better to follow the rubric of “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”? Are changes required by new technologies really “innovation”? How much innovation is re-inventing the wheel? Why is ‘reform’ so much more desired than cautious incremental improvement?

So professional ethics based on *wu-wei* suggests a typology of unhelpful ‘innovation’ that might include: i) Change for change’s sake that is not inspired by a vision of ethical, accountable, competent and capable public service and administration; ii) Innovation for self-advancement that is not motivated for the common good but by material self-interest; ‘Innovation’ for permanent revolution to destabilise and intimidate employees; iii) Experimentation without proper analysis; iv) Innovation driven by evolution in technology without change in the institutional and organizational system, as with e-government without business process re-engineering; and v) Risk-taking too costly for the poor and vulnerable to contemplate.

But changing mind sets is the biggest innovation. *Wu-wei* expresses the professional ethic of bureaucratic caution in the face of complex political choice and uncertainty. So when a crisis does arise, the public service may need to perform symbolic *wayang*, buying time to allow non-action to resolve the issue. Non-action is required when the time is not right, the means to act are lacking, or action can do more harm than good. Across thousands of years, Confucianism, Taoism and other schools of thought placed deep faith in *wu-wei* as a personal spiritual competence and as the professional ethics for government. For this, however, modern performance management is problematic as the *wu-wei* resolution of problems before they attract political attention, requires personal qualities lacking in the ‘talent matrix’: the ability to be genuinely respected, and modesty. It is also recognition that many problems can only be managed, not fixed until the context changes and new opportunities arise. Thirty years of civil war in Northern Ireland, for instance, required patiently waiting for the right opportunity to end. But political short-term incentives make it often impossible to admit that complex problems may be either unresolvable, or eventually resolve themselves when left alone as context changes. ‘Mission Accomplished’ today could be the start of a new round of crisis tomorrow, stumbling from one intervention to another, worsening problems in the name of finding ‘solutions’.

Instead, minimal tinkering limited in scope and ambition may

be advisable in certain contexts. This underlines that “Action of non-action” refers to mastering the art of minimum effort to align public authority to create trust and the legitimacy of power. The concept of ‘Non-action’ therefore captures the idea that informed bureaucracy everywhere undertakes considerable fact-finding, analysis and planning before concluding that, in the face of risk and uncertainty, a ‘do no harm’ caution is prudent. *Wu-wei* promotes ‘learning by doing’ and ‘muddling through’ that has been a notable attribute of effective public administration reform (Andrews, 2013; Levy, 2015). One reason, as the Nobel Prize winning economist Herbert Simon pointed out, is that public administration is governed by contradictory principles, similar to *Wu-wei*. As a result, public officials do not seek optimal but rather accept satisfactory and sufficient solutions (Simon, 1956). *Wu-wei* as a ‘natural’ and ‘effortless’, not ‘maximising’ approach, pre-empted ‘satisficing’ in public administration and ‘problem-driven iterative adaptation’ in public service reform by two and a half thousand years.

### *Wu-wei as Professionalism with Pride and Passion*

Non-action in bureaucracy requires, however, hard work and cunning, as viewers of the BBC series *Yes Minister* and *Yes Prime Minister*, are aware. Cautious, risk-averse bureaucrats intuitively embrace *Wu-wei* or “not doing,” as a professional skill. The meaning is not indolence as in just the ‘doing nothing’ of laziness: as every seasoned public official knows, *wu-wei* requires profound knowledge of the institutional context and experience in organisational culture, so rarely does ‘non-action’ allow for ‘inaction’. A one page official document can often be the result of months of writing, commenting, redrafting, inter-departmental consultative meeting, inter-agency wrangling, and condensing into a ministerial submission. The successful monarch or CEO reigns but does not rule: that is, the effective political leader, like a figurehead of state, avoids getting bogged down in trivial matters of government but influences or controls through strength of personality, breadth of political and professional networks, depth of ideas or the charismatic influence of his or her virtue (*te*). That, in modern parlance, delivers the vision that sets the direction and atmosphere.

Professional rationality does not appear to sit well with the aspiration that Helen Clark, the United Nations Development Programme Administrator, referred to, in a speech in Kazakhstan in May 2015, as ‘New Public Passion’. This concept, humanising ‘New Public

Management', emphasizes that officials need to be empowered, and to *feel* empowered, to do what they joined the public service for in the first place, namely to serve citizens. 'New Public Passion' seeks to nurture high job satisfaction by ensuring that all civil servants feel directly engaged in improving the lives of their fellow citizens (GCPSE, 2015). Does that embrace *wu-wei* philosophy?

The answer is that personal commitment is different from professional procedure: the medical doctor should feel a strong personal commitment to saving life and reducing people's suffering; but professionally must pursue calm procedures and clear rationality. As with the placebo effect, the general public may not be able to discern between purposive 'non-action' (a decision to not act as the best approach to the matter after heavily investigating the problem) and evasive 'inaction' (avoiding responsibility due to indolence, corruption or inefficiency). *Wu-wei* lay behind the Laozi's concept of government as the minimum interference conducive to the individual's quest for personal fulfilment. This is profoundly democratic (Feldt, 2010), but different from neo-liberal small government and free market argument for the state just to 'get out of the way.'

***Conclusion: the 1<sup>st</sup> Astana Wu-Wei 'Official Non-Action of the Year' Award***

*Wu-wei* offers the philosophical basis that is currently lacking for guiding modern public service. It eschews applying simplistic private sector principles but recognises that problems resolve themselves where political interference is more their cause than their solution. One idea of the last few decades that has overflowed all too readily to public service around the world, the often inappropriate fashion for PPP ('public-private partnerships'), should be replaced with PPPP – Prestige, Professionalism, Pride and Passion. For *Wu-wei* captures the cautious spirit of realistic ambition and officials' pro-social expectations of the added value from enhancing public welfare. It represents the public service's professional ethos of considered incremental change confronting complexity. The concept rejects the simplistic temptation of political leadership's 'vision' for sweeping reform to 'mould the masses' in the fascist manner, but recognises politics as a public spectacle and sport. People instinctively want heroes for leaders (Brown, 2014). Prestige matters, while political vision is needed to drive possibility of change.

Two schools of thoughts developed for how effortless action can

happen. While Confucianism advocates the discipline derived from years of practice to make a particular skill second nature, the Taoists promote freeing the natural instincts from within. The compromise approach of Mencius in the fourth century B.C. was to combine both approaches under the epithet: *Try, but not too hard*. That doubtless includes trying to explain the complexity of the Wu-Wei concept itself.

So ancient wisdom may not offer greater profundity than such modern preoccupations of public service as cost-benefit analysis or econometrics, but at least it incorporates more good humour. In that lies the real strength of humanity and, yes, even of bureaucracy too. But then even the data suggests that ancient wisdom is anyway not in the terminal decline in the realm of government that might have been feared: to take one measurable indicator, the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was mentioned 48 times in the British House of Commons in the nineteenth century, but referred to on 251 occasions in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, including 41 times in the 1990s, and with 21 mentions already between the years 2000 and 2005. Not bad going, especially for a long-dead Caucasian male who didn't have much faith in democracy.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Plenary Session of 18<sup>th</sup> Central Committee of the Chinese Communist party in 2012 ordered cadre members to project Chinese culture to the outside world as 'soft power' to increase the country's international influence. But Chinese culture, rather than being a weapon of nationalism, can more helpfully be seen as articulating universalist not 'superior' nationalist principles (Hon, 2006), reflecting the complex reality in the international flow and interplay of ideas (Hobson, 2004).

In this neo-Realism era of austerity and global competition, national governments and international organisations can apply *wu-wei* as a philosophy for public administration that concentrates on real comparative advantage and avoids attempting comprehensive solutions for every problem big or small, fixable or not amenable to a current solution. By eschewing grand but unrealistic plans, *wu-bu-wei* (*nothing left undone*) signifies the credibility of clear commitment to feasible policies (Krishnadas, 2015).

*Wu-wei* articulates realism and honesty about the limitations of public authority. Rather than forcing action and acting for the sake of it, the wisdom of *wu-wei* is to assist things to take their natural course,



to work ‘with the grain’ (Kelsall, 2008; Levy, 2015). The polarity of East and West may not, after all, be so polarised: bureaucracy fulfils an important function everywhere to uphold the present and inter-generational public good. Careful, cautious consideration of policy options is always needed. The facile belief, therefore, that the private sector has much to offer by way of guidance for public service, is doubtful. Public service should revert to its unique core task: to build and preserve fairness, trust and legitimacy.

In such complex challenges, *wu-wei* underpinning the ethics and epistemology of public service has much to offer sector-specific policies (eg. Barbalet, 2011; Moon, 2015). But the integrity it symbolises goes sadly unrecognised in modern public sector human resource management. So United Nations Development Programme might initiate an annual award for the finest example of purposeful non-action by a public servant anywhere around the world. Please therefore, inform the editors of this journal about the professional non-action over the last twelve months of which are you most proud (non-action in response to this call for examples is, however, not an option – nor, indeed, acceptable as an entry for the competition). Any winner of the first Astana Award for the Best Application of *Wu-Wei* in Public Service will be announced in early 2016 – or whenever the editorial board gets round to it. The prize could include a trip to Singapore to receive the award in person from the Director of the Global Centre for Public Service Excellence and the Chairman of the Regional Hub of Civil Service in Astana – but only if, after due, lengthy but effortless consideration, they deem such evident lack of ‘non-action’ to be appropriate.

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