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***Wu-Wei* in Europe. A Study of
Eurasian Economic Thought**

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Abstract

This present paper focuses on the diffusion of *wu-wei* (an ancient Chinese concept of political economy) throughout Europe, between 1648 and 1848. It argues that at the core of this diffusion process were three major developments; firstly the importation and active transmission of *wu-wei* by the Low Countries, during the seventeenth century. It is revealed that the details of Chinese expertise entered Europe via the textual diffusion of Jesuit texts and the visual diffusion of million of so-called *minben*-images, during the ceramic boom of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Thus, the hypothesis is advanced that the diffusion of *wu-wei*, co-evolved with the inner-European *laissez-faire* principle, the Libaniusian model.

In the second part it is shown that the intellectual foundation of Europe's first economic school, Physiocracy, is a direct replica of the imported Chinese economic, agrarian craftsmanship of *wu-wei*; subsequently it is denied that the indigenous European Libaniusian ideology can be considered the intellectual master-model of Physiocracy and his founder Quesnay.

Thirdly, it is argued that Switzerland can be identified as the first European paradigm state of *wu-wei*. The crystallization process of *wu-wei* inside Europe ultimately ended with the economic-political reorganization of the *new Eidgenossenschaft* in 1848, in which Chinese agrarian *wu-wei* was institutionally combined with the traditional Swiss "*commercial wu-wei*". In due course, this alpine paradigm enabled the endogenous Libaniusian model to verify and reflect upon its own theory of commercial society. Additionally, this third focus also demonstrates that the later development of Europe's *laissez-faire* doctrine has to be seen as a Eurasian co-production – without *wu-wei*, Europe's pro-commercial ideology might never have matured.

ENDOGENOUS MODEL

LOW COUNTRIES

INDIGENOUS LIBANIUSIAN MODEL

LOW COUNTRIES

Introduction

Which is the more believable of the two, Moses or China?
Blaise Pascal (*1623–†1662), *French philosopher*¹

This essay will explore the impact of *inter-Eurasian webs of interconnections* on Europe's political economy from 1648 to 1848. I will start with the assumption that there has never been an autonomous civilization in history, which proved capable of providing continuous development inside a framework of political or economical autarchy. Furthermore, I claim that to assure an extensive, succe -0.00079 Tw 13.02 0 02v7ur9i-0.7

into *complete absence of activity* or *doing nothing*, but what it does mean is *lesser activity*, or *doing less*. The *Huai Nan Tzu*

political outlook of the modern political unit to a considerably extent. To trace back the European history of *wu-wei* I am going to focus on three geographical areas that proved essential in transforming pieces of Eastern knowledge into European practice: the Low Co

how *wu-wei* entered the Low Countries during the 17th century; this paper seeks to correct this.

Almost all the literature on *wu-wei* in France concentrates on François Quesnay's role, while the broader Eurasian network of the Physiocratic School is mainly neglected. During the late 1930s, Ly Siou Y and Edgar Schorer were the first to deal with possible influence of *wu-wei* on Physiocracy.¹⁸ The first text, which convincingly portrayed Quesnay's Sinophilism, is Maverick's '*China – A model for Europe*'¹⁹ but it was only with a paper by Briger Priddat that a detailed evaluation of the *wu-wei* behind France's Physiocracy arrived, in 1984.²⁰ Priddat, relying on Schwarz's translation of *wu-wei*, "to let it grow"²¹, concluded that the system of Physiocracy indeed corresponds to the principle of '*tun/ ohne/ tun*' i.e. *wu-wei*.²² Thus, Physiocracy's claim "[...] that free trade would lead to a natural distribution of [agricultural] produce [...]"²³ is directly linked to Quesnay's belief in the universal morality of agri-culture (i.e. *nongben*). The productive *branches* of industry and trade (the *Industrie,- und Handelszweige*), writes Priddat, form only minor parts of the all embracing *ordre naturel* which Quesnay imagined as a tree, which he called *économie*. For Physiocracy, 'good government' is therefore based on 'letting the branches grow' (*s'étendre en liberté*)²⁴ i.e. Practising *wu-wei erzhi*. Consequently, it is this variant of the *laissez-faire* maxim in which the basis of Physiocracy's 'moral philosophy' is to be located.

Priddat's work made clear that the *wu-wei* of the complete *économie* has to be considered central to Physiocracy; Quesnay's call for *free trade* in agricultural products constitutes merely a logical sub branch of this greater structure.²⁵

New research by Clarke and Hobson on *wu-wei* in France, equally

I. *Wu-wei* in the Low Countries

Keeping the lack of comprehensive sources in mind, it will nevertheless be interesting to analyze in which ways the introduction of Chinese art products (picturing idyllic scenes of a prosperous Empire) and the parallel occurrence of Sinophile texts (published in Amsterdam and partly written by Flemish Jesuits), transformed the intellectual outlook of Europe.

Contemporary authors, who emphasize the indigenous development of economic *laissez-faire* in Europe, do repeatedly emphasize the significance of the Dutch natural law thinker *Hugo de Grotius* (*1583- †1645).²⁸ It is commonly understood that Grotius matters greatly for the development of 18th century Liberalism because he greatly influenced *Francis Hutcheson*, one of Adam Smith's most important teachers.²⁹ This chapter seeks to juxtapose the beginning infiltration of *wu-wei* into Europe with Grotius's impact on the European mind, after the period of religious wars of the 17th century. *In what way did the Low Countries diffuse wu-wei throughout Europe, while Grotius's legacy continued to mature?*

1.1 The textual diffusion

Translations of Grotius's magnum opus *De jure belli et pacis* (1625), a book which had passed almost unnoticed in the year of its first publication, kept constantly reappearing throughout the century. Grotius work on the unwritten but imperative Law of God that governs also in times of war, the Natural Law, resurfaced widely in the minds of a generation which stood in awe before the terror and bloodshed of the Thirty-Years-War.³⁰ However, the re-emerging of Grotius texts during the second half of the 17th century also meant the continuation of the so-

²⁸ Irwin, *Against the Tide*, p. 69.

²⁹ Roger E. Backhouse, *The Penguin History of Economics* (London 2002), pp. 108-114.

³⁰ e.g. in the writings of Jean Le Clerc, Samuel von Pufendorf or Giambattista Vico.

called *northern European revival of Libanius*.³¹ Libanius, a Roman pagan teacher, had eulogized the great virtues of free commerce and peaceful cooperation between men during the fourth-century BC. Grotius and others tried to find ways to resurrect Libanius's ancient 'universal economy', after 1648.³² The liberal, urban environment of 17th century Amsterdam was ideal for harbouring this *neo-*

Amsterdam showed in detail the territorial magnificence and economic wealth of the Empire, influencing Leibniz, Quesnay and others, in the years to come.³⁵

Apart from printing works by German (like Kircher) or Austrian (like Martini) Jesuits that revealed China's high level of prosperity, the Low Countries were also the origin of many China missionaries, like Nicolas Trigault (*1577-†1628) or Ferdinand Verbiest (*1623- †1688).³⁶ Just as the Jesuit Matteo Ricci (*1552- †1610) introduced Euclid to Ming Chin

through commercial power, respectively Jesuit passion, proved essential for the European version of economic government by *wu-wei* that was soon to emerge. China, and therefore *wu-wei*, entered Europe not through Portugal or France but via the Low Countries. John M. Headley describes the outcome:

“The most notable single appropriation of Confucianism by the Enlightenment comes with the Amsterdam 1758 edition of Diogenes Laertius’ Lives of the Philosophers. There amidst the tradition1 1afha5m(vel)Tj13.02 0 0 0 Tc cl9riBica3.02 0 0 13.025913.02 121.0815

influx of Chinese porcelain. By 1650, ten pottery workshops had opened at Grotius's birthplace alone – there would be thirty in 1670.⁴⁴ The makers of Delft's faïence copied various Chinese images displaying picturesque and joyful scenes of *minben* (see image 2). By 1700, millions of pieces of faïence, depicting the comfort and welfare of the *wu-wei* Empire, had diffused throughout Europe.⁴⁵

To demonstrate the importance of this non-textual diffusion, we can refer to the later case of Jean Theodore Royer (*1737- †1807). Royer was a successful lawyer from The Hague and the most important Sinologist in the Low Countries of the 18th century. He thought that the best way of develop a true understanding about the prosperous life in China was actually to collect ceramics and other objects depicting information from China. Royer believed in this hypothesis all his life, deeply mistrusting European publication on China.⁴⁶

Minben-porcelain and *neo-Libaniusian texts* did attain their closest proximity in Amsterdam.⁴⁷ For a short period, this urban entrepôt nurtured Grotius, Chinese porcelain and the bookish merchandise of Jesuit missionary zeal.⁴⁸ But in contrast to later France, where the Physiocrats would transform the *dispersed pieces* of Eurasian economic thought into one *grande* Eurasian theory of *good government* (without having the pleasure to see it transformed into real governmental practice), the Low Countries proved unable to articulate the first European transformation of

⁴⁴ Richard Robinson (ed.), *Business History of the World – A Chronology* (Westport 1993), p. 143.

⁴⁵ Adolf Reichwein, *China and Europe – Intellectual and Artistic Contacts in the Eighteenth Century* (London 1925 [original: Berlin 1923]), pp. 28.

⁴⁶ Jan van Campen, *De Haagse jurist Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807) en zijn verzameling Chinese voorwerpen / door Jan van Campen* (Hilversum 2000).

⁴⁷ It was in this European entrepôt where the first small tea shipments to Europe arrived, in 1609. Dutch VOC servants in Batavia (modern Jakarta) may have been the first Europeans who drank Chinese tea for purely personal pleasure and therefore started Europe's relationship with tea by stimulating the shipments to Amsterdam. (Ross William Jamieson, *The Essence of Commodification: Caffeine Dependencies in the Early Modern World*, p. 283 in: *Journal of Social History* – Vol. 35, No. 2, Winter 2001, pp. 269-294.)

⁴⁸ J. I. Israel, *European Jewry in the Age of Mercantilism, 1550-1750* (London 1985); V. Barbour, *Capitalism in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore 1963).

history of *laissez-faire*, Jacob Viner, restricted the antecedents of Europe's *laissez-faire* doctrine to four indigenous traditions: *Greco-Roman, Scholastic, English common law, and mercantilist thought*.⁵⁷ Another group of critics admits the existence of Quesnay's Sinophilism but continues to overweight indigenous European explanations for the evolution of a philosophy of *free trade* after 1776.⁵⁸ The key writings that do underline Quesnay's considerable debt to Chinese thought were mainly

trade [...] do not create wealth [...]; they are violations of the 'natural order'."⁷¹

Consequently, Quesnay's model of Physiocracy is primarily based on his implementation of *wu-wei* erzhi. Quesnay's Eurasian make-up is crucial for the history of *wu-wei* in Europe because, as McCormick accentuated, "*Quesnay had a direct influence on [Adam] Smith*"⁷². *However, what were Quesnay's sources on the wu-wei Empire? Which part did he play inside Europe's network of Asian relations?*

2.2 inside the Eurasian web

As an 18th century man who lived in the *China of Europe*⁷³, Quesnay was not only influenced by the old strings of inherited Stoicism and Descartes, like his fellow citizen, the radical anti-Colbertiste *Pierre Le Pesant, Sieur de Boisguilbert* (*1646-†1714) had been.⁷⁴ The founder of Physiocracy tried to show that the pieces of economic philosophy he received from the East were in fact more advanced compared to the ones of western Eurasia – the end result was a fusion of the two worlds of thought, the first step towards one *grand design* of Eurasian political economy. *But how did the altering form of Chinese thought reach the mind of Quesnay?*

There were of course several 'European reasons' why Quesnay ended up with his specific type of economic system based on 'Natural Order i.e. Law' (Deism and the aftershock of the religious War of the 17th century were two important factors). Nevertheless, Quesnay's new and

⁷¹ Hudson, *Europe and China*, p. 322

⁷² McCormick, *Sima Qian and Adam Smith*, p. 85.

⁷³ After 1750, people started to call France frequently the *China of Europe*. (Charles A. Fisher, *Containing China? I. The Antecedents of Containment*, p. 549 in: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 136, No. 4., Dec., 1970, pp. 534-556)

⁷⁴ Paul P. Christensen, *Epicurean and Stoic Sources for Boisguilbert's Physiological and Hippocratic Vision of Nature and Economics*, in: *History of Political Economy*, Vol. 35, Annual Supplement, 2003, pp. 101-128; Douglas A. Irwin, *Against the Tide* (Princeton 1996) p. 65.

challenging physiocratic mosaic is best to be seen as the zenith of the century old European movement of deep admiration for China.⁷⁵ The

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position shifts towards the original economic notion of Han China and drifts away from old European conceptions of 'Natural Order' as a force undermining the foundations of civilisation.⁸⁴ Surgy's text enables Quesnay to go beyond the Stoic and parts of medieval thinking, arriving at a very Chinese arrangement of 'good government', embracing the lessons of the *Lun Yü*.⁸⁵

The other major influence on Quesnay's work was the retired French ambassador to China and president of the Royal Society of Agriculture at Lyons, *Pierre Poivre*. In 1763 and 1764, Poivre gave two lectures on agriculture to the French Academy of Lyons; they were later to be repeated in Paris and published in Switzerland in 1768.⁸⁶ In Lyon, Poivre lectured on what the world might become, namely an image of flourishing China, if only the laws of China would become the laws of the world. Poivre called upon all Frenchmen to go to Beijing, to gaze at the perfect image of Heaven.⁸⁷ Quesnay became aware of these axioms through copies of the lectures and his acquaintance to another Sinophile, Anne Robert-Jacques Turgot (*1727- †1781).⁸⁸ Poivre's reflections on agriculture were in essence a tribute to the Chinese superior form of virtuous economic management and government:

*"This great nation unites under the shade of agriculture, founded on liberty and reason, all the advantages possessed by whatever nation, civilized or savage."*⁸⁹

⁸⁴ Maverick, *China*, p. 131.

⁸⁵ Davis, *China, the Confucian Ideal*, p. 540.

⁸⁶ Pierre Poivre, *Voyages d'un philosophe ou, observations sur les mœurs & les arts des peuples de l'Afrique, de l'Asie et de l'Amérique* (Yverdon 1768).

⁸⁷ Raymond Dawson, *The Chinese Chameleon – An analysis of European conceptions of Chinese civilization* (New York/ Toronto 1967), p. 55.

⁸⁸ Lewis A. Maverick, *Chinese Influences upon Quesnay and Turgot – Read before the Society for Oriental Studies, at Claremont, in April 1942* (Claremont 1942).

⁸⁹ As quoted in: Rowbotham, *Missionary and Mandarin*, p. 285.

Poivre's interpretation convinced Quesnay once more of China's supreme model of 'natural government' – once again the *wu-wei erzhi* of 'enlightened despotism' offered itself to be the magic but subversive (i.e. Anti-mercantilist) key to open France's door to economic, agricultural progress. Therefore, it comes as no

section we will consider two aspects of this fusion process, first, the effects of Quesnay's theories on Switzerland, and secondly, Switzerland's development into a European paradigm of *wu-wei*. The Swiss succeeded where France and the Low Countries failed; through their example, the European political unit transformed itself under the banner of China's *wu-wei*. *But how did Switzerland do this?*

3.1 The Fusion

After the revocation of the *Edict of Nantes* (1685) by Louis XIV, 25,000 Huguenots exiles had settled and revived large parts of Switzerland, economically and culturally.⁹² From the seven Swiss contributors to the French *Encyclopédie*, only two were not second generation Huguenots.⁹³ Additionally, the traditional inter-European intellectual endeavours of the Huguenots (the 'livre de Hollande')⁹⁴ pulled Switzerland closer to the inner-circles of the so-called 'Republic of Letters', whose centre was Amsterdam.⁹⁵ Thus, a matured *enlightened* nexus had arise

texts were published at the *'imprimerie de Fortunato Bartolomeo de*

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Besides replicating Quesnay's sources on *wu-wei*, Yverdon was very active in diffusing various original physiocratic texts. Parallel to Poivre, a collection of Quesnay's writings by the French Physiocrat *Pierre du Pont de Nemours*, the "*Physiocratie, ou constitution naturelle du gouvernement*", was published.¹⁰⁶ Once again, the strong influence of French Sinophilism on the Swiss *enlightened* nexus becomes apparent by quoting *Nemours* on the Chinese expertise in government:

*"[China's way of government], by taking human nature into account, includes all the **needed** [...] laws for men, and is suitable for all types of climate and countries; since four thousands years [the ordre naturel] has remained the [official doctrine] of the Chinese government."*¹⁰⁷

Unsurprisingly, the French Physiocrats had been attracted to parts of this very sinophile part of Switzerland – especially after the foundation of the partly physiocratic *Economic Society of Bern*, in 1759.¹⁰⁸

From very early on, one of Quesnay's students, the Sinophile *Marquis Victor de Mirabeau* became ecstatic about the French Physiocrats's Swiss connection.¹⁰⁹ In 1760, he travelled to Bern and addressed the society:

"Finally the day of days has dawned which will open the eyes of mankind to the best of her truest advantages, this is because the 'Ökonomische Gesellschaft' is to be established in the capital of the

¹⁰⁶ Francois Quesnay, *Physiocratie, ou constitution naturelle du gouvernement le plus avantageux au genre humain / recueil publié par Du Pont*, 6 vols. (Yverdon 1768- 69).

¹⁰⁷ Pierre Samuel du Pont de Nemours, *De l'origine et des progrès d'une science nouvelle 1768/ Dupont de Nemours ; publié avec notice et table analytique par A. Dubois* (Paris 1910), p. 35.

¹⁰⁸ Georg C. L. Schmidt, *Der Bauer im Zeitalter des Frühkapitalismus – Die Wandlung der Schweizer Bauernwirtschaft im achtzehnten Jahrhundert und die Politik der Ökonomischen Patrioten* (Bern 1932), pp. 112- 118.

¹⁰⁹ August Oncken, *Der ältere Mirabeau und die Ökonomische Gesellschaft in Bern* (Bern 1886) p. 38.

most powerful canton of Switzerland [...] Admirable citizens, soon all the dispersed pieces of knowledge will, under your favour, crystallize in your country and form a protected and secured treasure of knowledge. I cannot rev

was deeply influenced by the principle of *wu-wei*.¹¹⁴ Although Haller's story plays in Persia, the lessons of his *Staatsroman* were the lessons he had personally drawn from examining the government of *virtuous China*.¹¹⁵ Haller's ideal state is based on China's universally applicable laws and a bureaucracy that is governed by the principle of accountability, but most importantly on the principle of '*action by non-action*'.¹¹⁶ Haller's Emperor simply rests in a state of *wu-wei* as the human embodiment of the authority in which laws and bureaucracy are grounded, like the ideal Confucian ruler *who reigns but does not rule*.¹¹⁷ Furthermore, the tax system is copied from the Chinese practice.¹¹⁸ Like in China, the system is mainly based on land-poll, and indirect taxes play only a secondary role.¹¹⁹ One indirect tax is known, a very low import duty. However, this duty is fixed at the lowest rate possible because it is "*not the Emperor's wish to extort riches from the merchants*"¹²⁰ but to increase commerce and agriculture.¹²¹ Thus

of China, the economic model by Haller endorses the modern commercialism of the urban centres as a vital element for a *wu-wei* state

Soon, after Napoléonic rule, the Swiss cantons ultimately transformed themselves into a *federal, republican* version of Haller's ideal *patriarchal and monarchic* Swiss state. The emerging '*new Eidgenossenschaft*' of the 19th century, would prove to be strongly supportive of *free trade*, merchants and industry. Nevertheless, *agroculture* (the *nongben* foundation of Haller's model) had to be first identified as the most virtuous foundation of the '*old Eidgenossenschaft*', to be additionally embraced by the '*founding elite of 1848*'.¹²⁸ In other words, the post-1800 affirmation of the *agrarian variant of wu-wei* was politically generated to legitimise the new domination of *commercial wu-wei*. After the Civil War of the 1840s, a constitutional reform based on this 'double embrace' promised to be the best way to assure national unity and economic welfare, while easing the strong national strife between Catholics and Protestants, commercial Liberals and agricultural Conservatives.¹²⁹ To

framework of the ideal state included a re-affirmation of this Swiss *laissez-faire* commercial tradition. As one of Europe's key economic gateways, a majority of the cantons's economies had conditioned themselves to function in a continuous environment of *free trade* (like Bale), although pockets of protectionism continued to exist (like Bern), right up to the 19th century.¹³² The influential English *free trader* Richard Cobden was one of the first admirers of Switzerland's strange blend of *agricultural* and *industrial* prosperity, of *agrarian* and *commercial wu-wei*. On the 6th June 1834, he wrote to his brother, from Geneva:

*"The people of this country [Switzerland], are I believe the best governed and therefore the most prosperous and happy in the world. It is the only Government [,] which has not, one douanière in its pay, and yet, thanks to free trade, there is scarcely any branch of manufacturing industry which does not in one part or other of the country find a healthy occupation. The farmers are substantial. Here is a far more elevated character of husbandry life than I expected to see. Enormous farm-houses and barns; plenty of out-houses of every kind; and the horses and cows are superior to those of the English farmers."*¹³³

Like the prominent German political economist Friedrich List, Cobden was amazed that the free-trading Swiss economy, unlike his native England, included *substantial farming*.¹³⁴ Nonetheless, he was just as impressed by the Swiss partly urban *manufacturing industry* i.e. Haller's *commercial wu-wei*. This type of admiration of the Swiss economy was typical for the 19th century-disciples of the *Libaniusian model*. In consequence, the paradigm of the Swiss *wu-wei* state helped to

¹³² Rupli, *Zollreform*, p. 196.

¹³³ As quoted in: John Morley, *The Life of Richard Cobden*, 2 vols. (London 1881) Vol. 1, p. 28.

¹³⁴ Friedrich List, *Gesammelte Werke*, 10 vols. (Berlin 1935), Vol. 5, p. 348.

transform Europe into an altered image of the *wu-wei* Empire. At last,
Confucius and Libanius would fuse in

by re-focusing on the historical forces, which allowed both models to exist and mature simultaneously, can historians win a deeper understanding of the origins of *laissez-faire* in Europe. The Low Countries are a supreme example of the historical proximity of both models, and a great deal may be learned from a direct and more detailed juxtaposition of Grotius and the early characteristics of *wu-wei*'s importation; on this matter, I have only touched the historical surface. Furthermore, the Low Countries offered essentially two entry points for *wu-wei*'s diffusion into Europe: firstly, their printing presses and secondly, the import of ceramics.

The groundbreaking textual base was truly enhanced by the visual wave of images that confirmed a China at the peak of her economic development. The sinophile triangle of Amsterdam, Antwerp and Douai, was

mental autarchy and the example of the history of *wu-wei* in France verifies this claim. Quesnay has to be understood as a mind inside the Eurasian web of economic thought, his *ordre naturel* as a product of *wu-wei*ian influence and his so-called Physiocracy and his s cop3.02 428.95937 713.120

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