**liberty/自由(Zì Yóu)**

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The concept of freedom in modern western languages (free in English, liberal in French, frei in German) is originated from ancient Greek ἐλεύθερος and Latin līber, which denotes a state of not being enslaved or restrained (the opposite concept is ancient Greek δῦῦλος, Latin servus “slave”), its original meaning is “belonging to the people, belonging to the tribe” (cf. Old High German liut, pl. liuti, Old English lēod, pl. lēode “people”, Old Church Slavonic ljudije, Russian ljúdi (pl.) “men, people”, Lithuanian liáudis “lower people”, which can be further traced back to Proto-Indo-European \*h1leudh-“grow up, come out”) , distinguishing from slaves and foreign people. Thus, the concept of freedom in the western context since ancient Greek times always stands in contrary to the state of enslavement and is pointed to liberation from slavery. Its sense core is highly political.

The word “Ziyou自由” in modern Chinese stems from the translation of the concept of freedom in western languages. In traditional Chinese context, such a concept has no exact correspondence, and its connotation is somewhat closer to “Xiaoyao (逍遥)”. The word “Xiaoyao (逍遥)” appears in the name of “Xiaoyaoyou (逍遥游)”, the first piece of Zhuangzi (庄子), and has no exact correspondence in western languages, either. Therefore, there are quite different translations of Xiaoyaoyou (逍遥游) in various English versions of Zhuangzi, such as “Engagement in untroubled easy” (James Legge), “Free and easy wandering”(Burton Watson), “Going rambling without a destination” (A. C Graham), “Happy Excursion” (Feng Youlan). Among them the translation of “free and easy” by Watson attempts to interpret the word Xiaoyao(逍遥) through the concept of freedom. Although freedom and Xiaoyao(逍遥) sahre the characteristics of not being confined by external objects, there are essential differences between them.

Freedom is the opposite of the state of being enslaved, oppressed and restricted, a diametrically opposed state of such beings. In this sense, it takes the existence of enslavement, oppression and restriction as its premise, and sets their subversion as the ideal state. Therefore, the concept of freedom not only points to a special state of being, but also contains a will to ask the outside world to accept, accommodate and conform to such state of being. This type of requirements relating to external acceptance, accommodation and conformation of self will, present inevitably a logic of antagonism, that is, when the outside world does not meet this will, there will be contradictions, conflicts and even fierce confrontation.

The essence of Xiaoyao (逍遥) is independence (“无所待”), that is, beyond all opposites, while every being in opposition depends on its opponent. In Xiaoyaoyou, it is said that Lieh-tzu (列子) could ride upon the wind, but he still had to depend upon something. Only those who ignore and transcend the distinction between things can be really independent and reach the state of Xiaoyao (逍遥) . So the perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no achievement; the true sage has no name (至人无己，神人无功，圣人无名). Due to independence, three is neither a specific ideal state to be set, nor a desire to realize this ideal. No matter what the state of the external environment or the external object is, the ones who achieve Xiaoyao (逍遥) can adjust their own physical-mental mode, action mode and even existence mode to follow the evolution of the outside world. They are simultaneously not limited by the outside world’s evolution and can keep their independence regardless of time, place or situation. Therefore, Xiaoyao (逍遥) does not depend on any external conditions, but is the highest level of mind cultivation (in other words, the very ability of awareness and adjustment of body and mind). In this sense, Xiaoyao (逍遥) , which keeps harmony with all possible evolutions of the outside world, is fundamentally different from freedom, which is always with a strong will to transform the world (active freedom) or not to be influenced by the outside world (passive freedom).

Since modern times, the concept of freedom has been widely spread and adopted in China. During the historical process of China’ being forced into the global capitalist system as a result of foreign invasions, the concept of freedom, standing in contrast to enslavement-oppression and containing the political pursuit of being independent through the transformation of the world, while also combined deeply with the common will to eliminate the humiliation and oppression imposed by the foreign powers, has inspired a strong resonance among Chinese people. In modern revolutionary narratives, freedom and independence often occur together, which constitute the basis of national identity and imagination centering on ending both internal and external oppressions through revolution and achieving independence in the world. Individual freedom is considered to be fundamentally consistent with national freedom. Both individuals and nations should fight for the realization of freedom. Mao Zedong’s verse “All creatures strive for freedom under frosty skies（万类霜天竞自由）” (Qinyuanchun · Changsha) is a case in point, reflecting this Zeitgeist.

Since the end of 1970s, the once consistent relationship between individual freedom and national freedom has been questioned and denied by the narrative of Neo-liberalism. According to the logic of Neo-liberalism, the state is not the embodiment of freedom, but an obstacle to the realization of freedom, or the so-called “necessary evil”. The real freedom exists in a “free market economy”, presented as unlimited self-reproduction of capital free from all constraints. In response to Neo-liberalism’s view that “free market” is the core of freedom, Isaiah Berlin’s concept of “negative freedom”, that is, freedom to keep oneself free from outside interference, has become a prominent topic in China’s academic circles. Both “free market” and “negative freedom” contain the idea of limiting the government’s power to interfere in personal and social economic affairs as much as possible. This view of freedom led by Neo-liberalism essentially reflects the demand of capital, especially financial capital, for unrestricted free allocation and free flow. It is a typical ideology reflecting the logic of capital in the era of globalization.

Just like the concepts of freedom and Xiaoyao (逍遥) share similar characteristics at first glance, Neo-liberalism in China often uses Taoist thought as kindred spirit by aligning itself with traditional Chinese intellectual thoughts. For example, the teaching sentences in Chapter 57 of Tao Te Ching (道德经), which state that: ” I change nothing, and the people transform themselves; I stay still, and the people adjust themselves; I do nothing, and the people enrich themselves; I want nothing, and the people simplify themselves” (我无为，而民自化；我好静，而民自正；我无事，而民自富；我无欲，而民自朴), are interpreted as precursor of Hayek’s “spontaneous order”, and the Taoist concept of Wuwei (无为)，which literally means “nothing to do”, is interpreted as laissez-faire in the sense of economic liberalism.

Just as freedom and Xiaoyao (逍遥) are different in essence, there is a fundamental difference between liberalist “laissez-faire” and Taoist “Wuwei(无为)”.

The premise of laissez-faire is the validity of capital logic, which presupposes that the free flow of capital will automatically lead to optimization of resource allocation and improvement of social welfare, thus pointing to unlimited self-reproduction of capital and unlimited expansion of human desire;

The essence of Wuwei (无为), contrary to the continuous growth of human knowledge and desire (so-called “devoting himself to learning by daily increment”为学日益), lies in “devoting himself to the Tao by daily loss” (为道日损), that is, to  cast off the obsession with all external conditions, and through the process of “loss upon loss” (损之又损), to reach the state of “nothing to do” (Wuwei“无为”). Wuwei (无为) doesn’t mean unable to do, as lifeless as a dead tree or rock, neither does it mean rigidly adhering to all external conditions, or all the physical-mental models, action models and existence models dealing with external conditions. Therefore, Wuwei (无为) is everywhere accessible and free from all rigid patterns, so as to realize the state of “nothing to do, meanwhile nothing not done” (无为而无不为, Chapter 48 of Tao Te Ching).

From the Taoist point of view, the unlimited self-reproduction of capital, which adheres rigidly to the external conditions, is just the opposite of Wuwei (无为). Similarly, unlimited expansion of human desire just blocks the access to the realization of the essential connections between body-mind and all beings. Just as Zhuangzi once said: “Deep in their passions and desires, shallow in the spring of nature (嗜欲深者，其天机浅)” (Great Teacher of Zhuangzi). It is evident from above that neither Xiaoyao (逍遥) should be understood as freedom, nor Wuwei (无为) as laissez-faire.