



## ARTICLE

# A Taoist Perspective on China's Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy and Implementation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

China's "Dynamic Zero-COVID" policy has been one of the most defining aspects of the global pandemic response, representing a unique strategy to eliminate virus transmission rather than coexist with the virus.<sup>1</sup> This policy, involving strict quarantine measures, extensive testing, and regional lockdowns, had profound implications for public health, society, and the economy.<sup>2</sup> Initially praised for its success in controlling outbreaks, the policy also faced criticism for its social and economic disruptions.<sup>3</sup>

While conventional leadership approaches often emphasize authority and control, Taoist philosophy offers a contrasting perspective, rooted in balance, harmony, and adaptability.<sup>4</sup> This essay examines the "Dynamic Zero-COVID" policy through the lens of Taoist leadership principles, exploring its alignment

with concepts such as *Wu Wei* (non-action) and *Yin Yang* (balance). By analyzing the policy's strategy and implementation, this essay seeks to uncover insights into its effectiveness and its resonance with Taoist values.

## 2. Taoist Leadership Principles

Taoist leadership offers a compelling alternative to traditional hierarchical leadership models, emphasizing fluidity, adaptability, and harmony.<sup>5</sup> Central to this approach is the principle of *Wu Wei*, which advocates for leadership that aligns with the natural flow of events rather than imposing forceful control.<sup>6</sup> This principle underscores the importance of nature, where leaders act in accordance with the right moment, allowing situations to unfold organically and fostering natural

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<sup>1</sup> Zaihua Ba et al., "Reflections on the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy in China," *Preventive Medicine Reports* 36 (December 2023): 102466, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pmedr.2023.102466>.

<sup>2</sup> State Council Information Office, "为什么要坚持'动态清零'? '动态清零'是否等同于全域静默、全员核酸? 最新回复! \_服务信息\_中国政府网," April 29, 2022, [https://www.gov.cn/fuwu/2022-04/29/content\\_5688064.htm](https://www.gov.cn/fuwu/2022-04/29/content_5688064.htm).

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, "2022 年中国经济回顾: 扼住经济的'封控'大手放开, 如何重回正轨," BBC News 中文, December 15, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-63975122>.

<sup>4</sup> Lesley Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner: Tao and Leadership," *Leadership* 1, no. 1 (February 1, 2005): 105-26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715005049355>.

<sup>5</sup> Laurent Auzoult, "Wu Wei: A Contribution to the Water-like Leadership Style," *ResearchGate*, June 10, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.51327/QHZL6968>.

<sup>6</sup> Lesley Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner: Tao and Leadership," *Leadership* 1, no. 1 (February 1, 2005): 105-26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715005049355>.

progression.<sup>7</sup> By embracing *Wu Wei*, leaders promote organic progress and reduce unnecessary resistance in their decision-making.<sup>8</sup>

Equally significant is the Taoist emphasis on Yin and Yang, which underscores the need for adaptability and balance in response to dynamic circumstances.<sup>9</sup> Yin-Yang leadership is particularly effective in multicultural environments, as it fosters adaptability and commitment among diverse teams.<sup>10</sup> Taoist principles highlight the importance of context-sensitive decision-making, emphasizing actions tailored to specific environments and conditions, and their application to the integration of Taoist ethics.<sup>11</sup> This approach ensures that leaders respond effectively to shifting dynamics rather than rigidly adhering to preexisting plans.<sup>12</sup>

The Taoist focus on *Qi* (life energy) further enriches its leadership framework, emphasizing the importance of a leader's ability to inspire and resonate with others.<sup>13</sup> Leaders who cultivate *Qi* guide through presence and example, fostering unity and collaboration rather than exerting authoritarian control.<sup>14</sup> Taoist leadership emphasizes cultivating *Qi* to inspire, lead by example, and foster unity and collaboration over authoritarian control.

Taoist leadership thus challenges the rigidity of conventional models by prioritizing adaptability, context-awareness, and relational harmony.<sup>15</sup> Research suggests that integrating principles such as *Tian Ren He Yi*, translating to "the unity of heaven and man," is a fundamental principle in Taoism that emphasizes harmony between humanity and nature.<sup>16</sup> By focusing

on balance and collective well-being, Taoist leadership provides a nuanced and context-sensitive framework for navigating complex organizational landscapes.<sup>17</sup>

### 3. Analysis of the Dynamic Zero COVID Policy through Taoist Principles

#### 3.1 Dynamic Zero

The term "Dynamic Zero" (*Dong Tai Qing Ling*) has been a recurring theme in Chinese governance, appearing in 61 policy documents as listed on government websites. Its earliest recorded use dates back to December 6, 2018, in a policy addressing the goal of achieving "Dynamic Zero" for zero-employment households in Inner Mongolia.<sup>18</sup> Beyond pandemic-related policies, the concept of Dynamic Zero has also been applied to issues such as healthcare, poverty alleviation, employment, broadband coverage, and education reform. In these contexts, Dynamic Zero emphasizes identifying and addressing individual challenges as they arise, rather than striving for absolute eradication, while maintaining the broader goal of preventing systemic setbacks or large-scale recurrences. The versatility of this term underscores its significance as a guiding principle in addressing various societal challenges through adaptive, ongoing efforts.

The notion of "dynamic" inherently aligns with Taoist principles, particularly the emphasis on fluidity and responsiveness. Taoist thought advocates for harmonious adaptation to ever-changing circumstances,

<sup>7</sup> Prince.

<sup>8</sup> Seungho Moon, "Wuwei (Non-Action) Philosophy and Actions: Rethinking 'Actions' in School Reform," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, April 16, 2015, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131857.2013.879692>.

<sup>9</sup> Cody Ding, Hung-Gay Fung, and Yan Zhang, "Yin-Yang Framework of Decision-Making: Development and Assessment of Yin-Yang Decision-Making Styles Questionnaire," *Personality and Individual Differences* 205 (April 1, 2023): 112090, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2023.112090>.

<sup>10</sup> Hyun-Jung Lee and Carol Reade, "The Role of Yin-Yang Leadership and Cosmopolitan Followership in Fostering Employee Commitment in China: A Paradox Perspective," *Strategic Management*, 2016.

<sup>11</sup> Craig Johnson, "Taoist Leadership Ethics," *Journal of Leadership Studies* 7, no. 1 (January 2000): 82-91, <https://doi.org/10.1177/107179190000700108>.

<sup>12</sup> Guoli Liu and Ran An, "Applying a Yin-Yang Perspective to the Theory of Paradox: A Review of Chinese Management," *Psychology Research and Behavior Management*

Volume 14 (October 2021): 1591-1601, <https://doi.org/10.2147/PRBM.S330489>.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Brooke Barrett, "The Qi Connection: A Study in Studying Qi," 2004.

<sup>14</sup> Guoqing Yu, "Taoism," in *Rituals and Practices in World Religions: Cross-Cultural Scholarship to Inform Research and Clinical Contexts*, ed. David Bryce Yaden et al. (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020), 99-111, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27953-0\\_8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27953-0_8).

<sup>15</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>16</sup> Li Shenzhi, "Reflections on the Concept of the Unity of Heaven and Man ('Tian Ren He Yi')" (Brill, 1999), [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004501676\\_009](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004501676_009).

<sup>17</sup> Ding, Fung, and Zhang, "Yin-Yang Framework of Decision-Making."

<sup>18</sup> State Council Information Office, "内蒙古实现零就业家庭动态清零的目标\_滚动新闻\_中国政府网," [www.gov.cn](http://www.gov.cn), December 6, 2018, [https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/06/content\\_5346231.htm](https://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-12/06/content_5346231.htm).

encapsulated in concepts like the dynamic interplay of Yin and Yang.<sup>19</sup> The term's flexibility mirrors the Taoist view that effective action requires an attunement to the natural flow of events rather than rigid control.

### 3.2 Strategic Analysis of China's Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy

In 2022, the Chinese government refined its "Dynamic Zero-COVID" policy with six key points.<sup>20</sup> Firstly, the strategy rejected a "lying flat" approach, which means doing nothing or avoiding involution,<sup>21</sup> asserting that the proportion of severe or asymptomatic cases of Omicron is still manageable with active interventions. Secondly, it emphasized that policies should not be uniform, advocating localized responses for more efficient containment. Thirdly, the policy clarified that "Dynamic Zero" does not equate to universal lockdowns or blanket mass testing, but focuses on targeted measures like early detection, reporting, isolation, and treatment. Fourthly, it recognised that COVID control should work in harmony with economic and social activities. Fifthly, the policy examined the costs and benefits of ongoing measures to ensure public health while minimizing disruption. Finally, special attention was given to vaccinating vulnerable populations, particularly the elderly, to reduce severe outcomes. This sector will analyze these principles through the lens of Taoism, understanding how Taoist ideas of balance, flexibility, and responsiveness shaped this approach.

In Taoist thought, leadership is seen as an exercise in aligning actions with the natural flow of the environment, responding to changes in circumstances in ways that minimize unnecessary interference.<sup>22</sup> This is rooted in the Taoist principle of *Wu Wei*, which suggests that the best way for a leader to act is by refraining from excessive interference, allowing things to develop according to their natural rhythms.<sup>23</sup> However, this

concept is often misunderstood, as *Wu Wei* is not about passivity but rather about effective alignment with natural processes.<sup>24</sup> A Taoist leader does not force actions but adapts to circumstances, stepping in only when necessary and in a way that harmonizes with the current state.<sup>25</sup>

When examining China's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its refusal to adopt a "lying flat" approach, the government's decision might initially appear to contradict Taoist thought. "lying flat" is a policy of passively coexisting with the virus and allowing natural immunity to build – aligns more closely with the Taoist idea of minimal interference. By contrast, the government's active intervention through dynamic zero-COVID policies can be seen as an example of *Wu Wei* in a more practical sense: intervening only when necessary and doing so in a way that prevents greater disruption to society, when situation in China is complex due to vast population and uneven healthcare resources.<sup>26</sup> This decision highlights the dynamic aspect of Taoism – leadership is not about static non-action but responding to changing conditions, sometimes decisive action is required to restore balance.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, the rejection of "lying flat" can be understood through the Taoist concept of *Tian Ren He Yi* (the unity of heaven, humanity, and nature). This principle underscores the interdependence between humans and their environment, advocating for harmonious actions that align with the natural order and prevailing circumstances. In China's case, this meant implementing measures to protect vulnerable populations from the virus's impact and to prevent overwhelming stress on the healthcare system.<sup>28</sup> The government's strategy, therefore, reflects Taoist thought more closely than it might first appear, as it sought to achieve balance - recognizing the interconnectedness of societal, environmental, and health factors, and responding in a measured, context-sensitive way.

<sup>19</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>20</sup> State Council Information Office, "为什么要坚持'动态清零'? '动态清零'是否等同于全域静默、全员核酸? 最新回复! \_服务信息\_中国政府网."

<sup>21</sup> Heather Mowbray, "Trending in China: Young Chinese Reject Rat Race, Embrace 'Lying Flat' - Caixin Global," May 26, 2021, <https://www.caixinglobal.com/2021-05-26/trending-in-china-young-chinese-reject-rat-race-embrace-lying-flat-101718332.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Gan, "Spontaneity and Nonspontaneity in Wu-Wei as an Ethical Concept of Early Daoism," *Philosophia (Philippines)* 14 (January 1, 2013): 1-15.

<sup>23</sup> Livia Kohn, Associate Professor of Religion Livia Kohn PhD, and Michael LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching:*

*Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (SUNY Press, 1998); Laozi and Ralph Alan Dale, *The Tao Te Ching* (Watkins Pub Ltd, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> John Heider, *The Tao of Leadership: Lao Tzu's Tao Te Ching*, 1986, <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Tao-Leadership-Tzus-Ching-Adapted/dp/0893340790>.

<sup>25</sup> Wing-Tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy*, ed. Wing-Tsit Chan (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963).

<sup>26</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>27</sup> Moon, "Wuwei (Non-Action) Philosophy and Actions."

<sup>28</sup> State Council Information Office, "为什么要坚持'动态清零'? '动态清零'是否等同于全域静默、全员核酸? 最新回复! \_服务信息\_中国政府网."

Further reinforcing Taoist principles, the Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy emphasized flexibility and regional responses to outbreaks, rather than enforcing uniform measures across the entire country. The implemented localized strategies have been adjusted according to the severity of outbreaks in specific areas. This method of differentiated intervention highlights Taoism's belief in the dynamic adaptation of strategies based on the current context. Taoist governance stresses that leadership should flow with the natural rhythms of the environment, responding to local variations and circumstances without rigidly sticking to a one-size-fits-all solution.<sup>29</sup> This Taoist principle of harmony with nature is evident in the policy's reliance on local assessments of risk, ensuring that responses were tailored to real-time needs.

The targeted response also mirrored the Taoist idea of *Wu Wei*, not in the sense of doing nothing, but rather in not forcing excessive intervention when not necessary. The policy avoided drastic actions like full city-wide lockdowns unless absolutely required, instead promoting early detection, early isolation, and early treatment. This approach adheres to the Taoist principle of acting with minimal intervention, where leadership encourages natural processes rather than forcing outcomes.<sup>30</sup> The dynamic adaptation of measures, such as focused testing or selective isolation, aligns with the Taoist understanding of non-coercive leadership, where interventions are minimized to maintain natural flow and harmony without unnecessary disruption.

Moreover, the balance between public health and economic activity is a key feature of the policy, which sought to protect lives while minimizing the economic disruptions caused by lockdowns. By carefully balancing strict control measures with efforts to maintain economic activity, the policy echoed the Yin-Yang principle of Taoism, which stresses the importance of maintaining balance between opposing forces. Taoism teaches that true wisdom lies in achieving harmony between extremes, and in the case of the COVID-19 response, the government sought a middle ground between public health and economic stability. This approach aligns with Taoist thought, which advocates for a flexible and dynamic equilibrium that accounts for both health and economic concerns, without allowing one to dominate at the expense of the

other.<sup>31</sup> The government's strategy of precision measures, focusing on targeted restrictions rather than blanket lockdowns, directly reflects this Taoist understanding of finding balance between conflicting goals.

The cost-benefit analysis used to evaluate the policy's impacts also reflects Taoist systematic thinking. The government accounted for short-term sacrifices—such as economic disruptions or restrictions on individual mobility to achieve long-term societal benefits, such as health protection and economic stability. Taoism's holistic perspective encourages leaders to evaluate policies not just in terms of immediate outcomes, but in their broader, long-term impact on the system as a whole.<sup>32</sup> The decision to prioritize life preservation over immediate economic activity aligns with the Taoist belief that the health and harmony of the collective should take precedence over individual or short-term concerns. This decision is also consistent with Taoist philosophy's emphasis on a systems approach, where all aspects of society are interconnected, and the health of one part contributes to the well-being of the whole.

At the same time, the policy's emphasis on protecting the vulnerable population—particularly the elderly and those with pre-existing health conditions—aligns with Taoism's focus on caring for the weakest members of society.<sup>33</sup> Taoist philosophy teaches that leadership must prioritize the well-being of those who are most at risk, and the Chinese government's policy of targeting resources toward protecting vulnerable groups demonstrates this commitment to compassionate governance. In Taoist thought, the strength of society is reflected in how it cares for its most fragile members.<sup>34</sup> Thus, the government's prioritization of vulnerable groups, and its recognition that certain populations require additional protection, aligns with Taoist principles of compassion and care for others.

Finally, as the pandemic evolved, particularly with the emergence of the Omicron variant, the policy was adjusted to meet the new challenges, demonstrating the government's adaptability. The ability to adjust interventions to fit the changing nature of the virus reflects Taoism's emphasis on flexibility and the fluidity of leadership. Taoism teaches that a leader must be responsive to the changing environment, adjusting

<sup>29</sup> Kohn, PhD, and LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching*.

<sup>30</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>31</sup> Kohn, PhD, and LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching*.

<sup>32</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>33</sup> Lao-tzu, "The Internet Classics Archive | The Tao-Te Ching by Lao-Tzu," accessed December 7, 2024, <https://classics.mit.edu/Lao/taote.1.1.html>.

<sup>34</sup> Kohn, PhD, and LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching*.



actions in real-time to reflect the dynamics of the situation.<sup>35</sup> The fourth phase of China's COVID strategy, which emphasized precision and flexibility, demonstrates the Taoist ideal of adapting to natural flow and acting with awareness of shifting conditions.

#### 4. Implementation of China's Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy

In this section, we will focus on the implementation of China's Dynamic Zero-COVID Policy, analyzing the impact of specific measures such as large-scale nucleic acid testing, city lockdowns, and the balancing of emergency healthcare needs. While the policy's overall objectives were to control the spread of the virus and protect the health of the population, its implementation exposed critical challenges and tensions when viewed through the lens of Taoist principles like *Wu Wei* and the need for balance. We will examine how these aspects of the policy aligned or conflicted with Taoist values, drawing attention to the consequences that emerged during its application, such as significant economic costs, healthcare access issues, and public unrest.

One of the most visible aspects of the implementation was the Shanghai lockdown in March 2022. The lockdown, which imposed a gradual, phased shutdown of the city, led to an estimated economic loss of approximately 190 billion RMB.<sup>36</sup> This large-scale intervention highlights a fundamental conflict with Taoist principles, particularly *Wu Wei*, which calls for minimal interference and an approach that allows things to happen naturally, without forced control.<sup>37</sup> The extreme measures involved in these lockdowns disrupted daily life, led to economic turmoil, and caused social frustration, reflecting a forceful imposition rather than the Taoist ideal of natural harmony. Taoism suggests that excessive intervention often leads to unintended consequences, and the economic and social costs of such lockdowns are a prime example of this dynamic.

Further challenges were observed in cities like Xi'an, where the lockdown measures were so rigid that several pregnant women and critically ill patients were unable to receive urgent care, leading to tragic outcomes such

as miscarriages and deaths.<sup>38</sup> This stark contradiction underscores a failure to achieve the balance central to Taoist philosophy. Taoism emphasizes the importance Yin and Yang which is the balance of public health and individual needs.<sup>39</sup> The rigid enforcement of lockdown measures without consideration for urgent medical needs not only undermined public trust but also exacerbated the situation, making it clear that a more holistic, balanced approach could have alleviated these tensions. Taoism would advocate for an approach that adjusts and responds organically to changing circumstances, rather than adhering to rigid protocols.

The public outcry following incidents in Xi'an, where people were denied essential medical care, also highlights the need for Taoist responsiveness in leadership. Taoism teaches that true leadership must be flexible and responsive to the needs of the people, not dictated solely by top-down decisions. In this case, the central leadership's public apology and subsequent policy shift reflect an instance of adaptive leadership, where public concerns prompted a re-evaluation and a more balanced response. This is in line with Taoist principles that encourage leaders to listen and adjust to the natural flow of events and the needs of the people.<sup>40</sup>

Additionally, the economic fallout from these lockdowns, particularly the small businesses and local economies that were devastated, is another point where Taoist principles of balance come into play. Taoism teaches that the forces of health, economy, and social well-being must be balanced to maintain harmony. The lockdowns, while aiming to preserve public health, caused significant disruption to economic life and increased financial strain on individuals and businesses. Taoism's emphasis on avoiding extremes and seeking a middle way would suggest that a more balanced approach, which carefully weighed the economic costs against the health benefits, could have achieved a better outcome.

Finally, the over-reliance on intervention and stringent control measures, such as mass testing and citywide lockdowns, raises questions about Taoism's principle of *Wu Wei*—the idea that government action should be as unobtrusive and non-intrusive as possible. The scale of the interventions, although aimed at protecting public

<sup>35</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>36</sup> BBC News, "2022 年中国经济回顾：扼住经济的'封控'大手放开，如何重回正轨."

<sup>37</sup> Kohn, PhD, and LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching*.

<sup>38</sup> BBC News, "西安封城：多名孕妇和危重病人遭医院拒诊激起民愤," *BBC News 中文*, January 7, 2022,

<https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/simp/chinese-news-59906253>.

<sup>39</sup> Prince, "Eating the Menu Rather than the Dinner," February 1, 2005.

<sup>40</sup> Kohn, PhD, and LaFargue, *Lao-Tzu and the Tao-Te-Ching*.

health, resulted in significant social and economic upheaval. Taoist thought advocates for minimal interference in the natural course of events, trusting that order will emerge from natural processes rather than forced control. In this instance, excessive intervention led to a disruption of harmony, making the case that *Wu Wei* could have provided a more effective framework for responding to the pandemic.

## 5. Conclusion

In summary, China's Phase IV dynamic zero-COVID policy in 2022 reflects both Taoist principles and implementation challenges. The term "dynamic zero" embodies Taoist adaptability and fluidity, while localized approaches align with the context-sensitive nature and *Yin Yang* balance. The policy's focus on caring for vulnerable groups reflects Taoist human-centered values.

However, heavy reliance on interventions like lockdowns and mass testing contradicted *Wu Wei* and created imbalances. Economic disruptions, especially in key hubs like Shanghai, burdened citizens, deviating from *Yin-Yang* harmony. Tragic outcomes, such as the Xi'an maternity case, exposed gaps in balancing pandemic and critical healthcare needs. From a Taoist perspective, policy implementation could have better reflected adaptability to local conditions, human-centered priorities, and *Yin Yang* balance.

By applying Taoism as an analytical framework, this discussion highlights the value of integrating non-Western philosophical perspectives to understand complex leadership challenges generally. Specifically, the analysis illuminates how Taoist principles offer a nuanced lens to evaluate policies within the unique Chinese sociopolitical and cultural context, providing insights into both the strengths and shortcomings of adaptive governance during crises.

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