



# Effortless Action: Wu-wei As Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China

By Edward Slingerland

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## Effortless Action: Wu-wei As Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China By Edward Slingerland

This book presents a systematic account of the role of the personal spiritual ideal of wu-wei--literally "no doing," but better rendered as "effortless action"--in early Chinese thought. Edward Slingerland's analysis shows that wu-wei represents the most general of a set of conceptual metaphors having to do with a state of effortless ease and unself-consciousness. This concept of effortless ease, he contends, serves as a common ideal for both Daoist and Confucian thinkers. He also argues that this concept contains within itself a conceptual tension that motivates the development of early Chinese thought: the so-called "paradox of wu-wei," or the question of how one can consciously "try not to try."

Methodologically, this book represents a preliminary attempt to apply the contemporary theory of conceptual metaphor to the study of early Chinese thought. Although the focus is upon early China, both the subject matter and methodology have wider implications. The subject of wu-wei is relevant to anyone interested in later East Asian religious thought or in the so-called "virtue-ethics" tradition in the West. Moreover, the technique of conceptual metaphor analysis--along with the principle of "embodied realism" upon which it is based--provides an exciting new theoretical framework and methodological tool for the study of comparative thought, comparative religion, intellectual history, and even the humanities in general. Part of the purpose of this work is thus to help introduce scholars in the humanities and social sciences to this methodology, and provide an example of how it may be applied to a particular sub-field.

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**Effortless Action: Wu-wei As Conceptual Metaphor and Spiritual Ideal in Early China** By Edward Slingerland **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"This provocative work is the most ambitious general study of pre-Qin thought to appear in more than a decade. ...a rich, stimulating work, full of interpretive insights that shed light on conceptions of ethical perfection in early Chinese thought."--*Philosophy East and West*

"The scope of Slingerland's discussion and his mastery of the relevant scholarship make the book a useful and learned introduction to early Chinese thought."--*Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*

"Edward Slingerland is one of a group of exciting and creative young scholars revolutionizing the study of Chinese history, culture, and religion by applying the recently developed tools of cognitive analysis, especially conceptual metaphor analysis. *Effortless Action* is a remarkable work that explores the meaning of the crucial concept of wu-wei in a depth never before achievable, showing how Chinese metaphorical thought forms a nexus around this most central of ideas. If you care about China, about its culture, history, and religion, you will find this book extremely enlightening. And if you are a humanist seeking a deeper understanding of culture and history, this book will open up new worlds to you."--George Lakoff, Professor of Linguistics, *University of California, Berkeley*

"Slingerland shows that wu-wei is a much richer and more pervasive notion than anyone has ever imagined. His work will convince even the most entrenched skeptic that it is an important and often neglected concern of just about every major religious thinker in traditional China."--Philip Ivanhoe, author of *Confucian Moral Self Cultivation* and *Ethics in the Confucian Tradition*

#### About the Author

**Edward Slingerland** is Assistant Professor of East Asian Languages & Cultures and Religion at the University of Southern California (homepage: [www-rcf.usc.edu/~slingerl](http://www-rcf.usc.edu/~slingerl)).

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