Redefining Subjectivity and Ethics: Maugham and Zhuangzi

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Abstract: W. Somerset Maugham, an English author active from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, has long been the subject of comparative and cross-cultural literary studies, especially in relation to his literary connections with the East. Moving beyond Edward Said's "Orientalist" model, this paper adopts J. J. Clarke's concept of "strategy of self-questioning" to explore Maugham's "creative" engagement with Zhuangzi's philosophies. Through analyzing *The Painted Veil* and *The Narrow Corner*, the paper argues that Maugham employs Zhuangzi's concept of *Yi Dao Guan Wu* as a lens to redefine the concepts of subjectivity and ethics within the context of cross-cultural dialogue.

Keywords: subjectivity; the strategy of self-questioning; *Yi Dao Guan Wu*; thing; ethics

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标题：重构主体性和伦理：毛姆和庄子

内容摘要：作为活跃于19世纪末和20世纪中叶的英国作家，毛姆和东方的文学关系一直以来都是比较文学和跨文化研究的热点。本文试图超越赛义德"东方主义"理论分析框架的常规路径，采用克拉克提出的东方主义中另一种传统，即"自我质疑策略"的概念，探讨毛姆对东方思想产生兴趣的复杂动机。通过聚焦分析毛姆的《面纱》和《狭角》，本文认为毛姆创造性地"整合使用"庄子的思想，由此重新定义主体性的概念并在跨文化交流的语境下反思和想象主体性和伦理的关系。

关键词：主体性；"自我质疑策略"；以道观物；物；伦理

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The scholarly discourse surrounding W. Somerset Maugham's mid- and late-period works, particularly those written since the 1910s, has often focused on his redefinition and construction of man as a subject amid the convergence of cross-cultural contexts and discourse systems, fully represented in various conflicts between the human subject and the "other." These criticisms may be complemented by the theories of Feminism, Orientalism, Post-colonialism and queer studies. Christine Doran, for example, argues that Maugham's works related to Asia are seen as abound with "literary devices, images, stereotypes, and clichés" (8) deeply entwined with the discourse of Western imperialism. Gayatri Thau Pillai & Chitra Sankaran, in contrast, examine how Southeast Asian women in Maugham's novels strive to counteract their objectification within the subject-object paradigm of Orientalism. They explore the influence of indigenous women and nature in deconstructing the rational and self-regarding imperialist male subject, casting these elements as agents that realign their designated positions within the oppressive system of domination. These two contrastive yet representative readings, however, do point to Maugham's ambiguous attitudes towards the East.

This paper is ignited with the concern of understanding Maugham's connection with Zhuangzi in his configuration of subjectivity and ethics, a topic traditionally contextualized within the Western intellectual thoughts of Spinoza, Sartre, Freud and Lacan—among which Spinoza's *Ethics* is more frequently discussed. Don Adams posits that Maugham's "ethically earnest fiction," to a certain extent, is informed by Spinoza's model, which distinguishes between "a naturalistic individualist ethics" and "collective social morality." "Combining a metaphysical determinism with a socio-political progressivism," his work offers a nuanced reconciliation between the subject and the "other" (45-46). This perspective finds resonance in Robert Calder's interpretation of *Of Human Bondage* (1915), who reads the end of this novel as embodying the perfect Spinozan Situation. The influence of Spinoza was readily acknowledged in Maugham's 1938 autobiography *The Summing up*: "I look upon my first reading of Spinoza as one of the signal experiences of my life. It filled me with just the feeling of majesty and exulting power that one has at the sight of a great mountain range" (240). Scholars generally concur that Maugham's understandings of human subjectivity, whether exploring the dynamic relation between love and desire, immanence and otherness, free choice and responsibility, or physical and spiritual liberty, is deeply entwined with Spinoza's philosophy.[1] According to Spinoza, the ultimate goal of man as a subject is the rational virtue,

1 See Amin Ettehadi and Roohollah Reesi Sistani, "Psychoanalytic Reading of Love and Desire in Somerset Maugham's *Of Human Bondage*," S*tudies in English Language Teaching* 1 (2017): 58-66.

defined as "the desire to do good generated in us by our living according to the guidance of reason" (37).

Such a view, though unintentionally, is questioned poignantly in Maugham's *The Summing Up*: "But goodness is shown in right action, and who can tell in this meaningless world what right action is?" (255) Maugham's question form a dynamic collision with Spinoza's account that ethical progress towards the Supreme Good depends essentially on the mind's innate knowledge. With an attempt to explain the inconsistent understanding of the human subject and ethics as it can be found in Maugham's work, from his early work to the works published after *Of Human Bondage*, I suggest that his later works demonstrates a reconfiguration of subjectivity goodness informed by Zhuangzi's philosophy. I shall use *The Painted Veil* (1925) and *The Narrow Corner* (1932) as examples to investigate how Zhuangzi's thought of *Yi Dao Guan Wu* (以道观物 *Dao*) offers Maugham a means to challenge the dualisms that define Western notions of subjectivity (self/other, subject/object, good/bad). Furthermore, we will analyze in what ways Maugham's man, following the principle of *Dao*, is capable of negotiating between the relationship of man and things, achieving the nature of "Dao as One," the liberty in imaginary space.

From Spinoza to Zhuangzi

In Maugham's narrative, the concept of goodness assumes a rebellious stance against rule-based ethics. This unreserved goodness, rooted in one's own temperament, is viewed by Maugham as a defiance of determinism. An exemplary representation of this ethos is found in *Of Human Bondage*, particularly in the character of Athelny. Athelny's acts of kindness towards Phillip emanate effortlessly, reflecting a life lived modestly without a pursuit of worldly success, even as he shoulders the responsibility of supporting eight children on a meager income. Athelny's ideal existence mirrors Spinoza's philosophy, asserting that human happiness lies in recognizing and accepting one's own nature. This, according to Spinoza, involves operating free will within the constraints of one's existence, exerting control over external circumstances, and realizing one's inherent nature.

Surprisingly, only four years later, Maugham challenges the notion of such ideal goodness in *The Moon and Sixpence*. He bestows upon Dirk Stroeve, an individual described as an "honest, sentimental, exuberant soul" (*The Moon and Sixpense* 129), the attributes of being ridiculed and misunderstood. Similar to Athelny, Stroeve leads a modest life, demonstrating selfless and effortless goodness towards Strickland purely out of his innate love for art, despite being inherently

labeled as a "buffoon" by nature. After enduring abandonment by his beloved wife, Stroeve expresses a philosophy of humility and inconspicuous living in the face of life's harshness: "The world is hard and cruel. We are here none knows why, and we go none knows whither. [...] And let us seek the love of simple, ignorant people. Their ignorance is better than all our knowledge. Let us be silent, content in our little corner, meek and gentle like them. That is the wisdom of life" (*The Moon and Sixpence* 192). Here the meaning of goodness is subjected to ridicule. The narrator, representing one of Maugham's personas, "rebelled against his renunciation" (*The Moon and Sixpence* 192), signifying Maugham's disagreement with Stroeve's passive acceptance of life. This sentiment aligns with Robert's criticism that when faced with a choice between the happiness of a good, ordinary couple and the creation of a masterpiece at their expense, Maugham appears to favor the painting.[1] For Maugham, the virtue of goodness does not always lead to a harmonious balance between the individual and the external world.

Returning to Spinozan ethics, Spinoza posits the existence of a singular substance in the universe. This substance possesses two fundamental attributes: thought and extension, and the various states of these attributes constitute the essence of all natural things. According to Spinoza, humans gain knowledge of this substance through concrete entities or rational understanding, with the highest form of the latter manifesting as supreme goodness in an ethical context, signifying true freedom. Spinoza defines freedom as the knowledge of necessity, not external necessity, but the intrinsic necessity of one's own nature. In essence, true freedom arises from a clear understanding of one's desires and emotions, allowing the ethical subject to reconcile the inherent contradiction between the self and the object. This leads to the formulation of a model for the relationship between the self and the other, progressing from sensibility to reason to divinity.[2]

The self as the subject, however, as Maugham later realized, cannot consistently act in alignment with self-consciousness to achieve a harmonious balance with the other. Following Maugham's encounter with Zhuangzi, his thoughts of goodness undergo an evolution, evident in the portrayal of Waddington in *The Painted Veil*. It should be noted that critics have long been preoccupied with the novel's feminist undertones and "Orientalist construction" of China, disregarding the links between Waddington and Zhuangzi. In comparison with his earlier works such as *Of Human Bondage*, this novel marks a philosophical departure in the definition of goodness,

1 See W. Somerset Maugham, *The Moon and Sixpence*, New York: Modern Library, 1919, 222.

2 See Chantal Jaquet and Lena Taub Robles, "From the Self to Oneself: Subject and Interiority in Spinoza," *The New Centennial Review* 2 (2017): 63-76, 66-67.

particularly in the context of grappling with the meaning of life and death, as well as the intricate relationship between "things" and humans, a philosophical turn closely intertwined with the thoughts of Zhuangzi.

For Maugham, China held a profound allure, being a land that, in his words, "gives you everything" (Hastings 242). Nevertheless, scholarly attention has predominantly fixated on "the veil" through which Maugham perceives China, emphasizing the passive representation of the country in his works. Moving beyond such an orientalist reading of Maugham's China, Issac Yue, among others, have examined Maugham's travel narratives and landscape depictions of China, contending that "his interests in the East, after all, lie in its traditions and heritages (both manmade), and it is through such a style of landscape description that he is able to express his negative sentiments concerning colonialism and imperialism" (80). Luo Moubei, in a similar vein, asserts that Maugham centers on Chinese rural areas to define the authenticity of China, thereby highlighting the sense of dislocation and fragmentation he experiences in the context of wars and bourgeois society.[1]

Considering Maugham's ambiguous intentions and reluctance to clarify his admiration for China, this question of how to assess his connection with China, however, remains unsolved. This paper shall take this critical challenge by focusing on Maugham's engagement with Zhuangzi as a process of *dialogue* between the Western and Chinese traditions in context of the twentieth-century literary scene. Other than align with Edward Said's summary of the relationship between East and West as "a relationship of power, domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony" (5), this paper follows instead J. J. Clarke's path in emphasizing that "the religious and philosophical ideas of India, China, and Japan have provided an instrument of serious self-questioning and self-renewal, […] an external reference point from which to direct the light of critical inquiry into Western traditions and belief systems, and with which to inspire new possibilities" (6). Literature is a form of ethical expression in a specific historical situation.[2] Given Maugham's potential attempt at cross-cultural dialogue during the imperialist era, it becomes crucial to move beyond the traditional Orientalist model and redefine his critique of Western thoughts and values in intercultural dialogues.

1 See Luo Moubei, "Geopolitical Changes and Modernist Transitions in Travel Narratives," *Tianfu New Idea* 3 (2020): 70-77.

2 See Nie zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 2 (2021): 189-207; Nie Zhenzhao, "Ethical Literary Criticism: Sphinx Factor and Ethical Selection," *Forum for World Literature Studies* 3 (2021): 383-398.

Orientalism as "a Self-questioning Strategy"

Maugham's experiences of World War I, however, marked a significant shift in his literary focus, shifting from a satirical commentary on Christian ethics and rigid Victorian values to the disillusionment with the materialistic values, and more importantly, Western culture in general evident in *Of Human Bondage* and *The Moon and Sixpence*. Such a spiritual crisis, however, was widespread in the Western world during the postwar period, marked by the disillusionment with the rationalist ideals of the Enlightenment and the progressive beliefs of the Victorian era. Notable philosophical movements, such as Schopenhauer's "philosophical pessimism," Nietzsche's proclamation of "the death of God," and Freud's psychoanalytic doctrine, contributed to the development of irrationalism from the late 19th to the 20th century. As Clarke notes, these factors collectively fostered "a mood of discontent with the comforts and promises of Western civilization, and to encourage a search for more satisfying and meaningful alternatives" (95). It is against this backdrop of European reflections on modernity since the late 19th century that Maugham's fascination with the East, particularly China, needs to be understood. Maugham's journey to China was not merely a geographical exploration but a response to the changing intellectual currents of the time, where the West sought alternative perspectives to address the profound shifts in societal values and spiritual foundations.

We should be reminded that Maugham has been actively seeking theories from diverse sources that not only satisfied his intellectual curiosity but also contributed to the creation of a system that resonated with him. Underlying his diverse narratives there runs a consistent theme of individuals' pursuit of freedom together with the construction of subjectivity. In his youth, German philosophy, particularly the ideas of Spinoza and Schopenhauer, shaped Maugham in his ethical perceptions and values. However, Maugham gradually found himself disenchanted with the prevailing values of Western culture. During the First World War, Maugham embarked on a journey to the South Seas to gather material for *The Moon and Sixpence*. He expressed that the people on these islands were nearer to the elementals of human nature. This phase of Maugham's life can be seen as a progression of interest, from his early fascination with the bohemian lifestyle to his longing for marriage, his interest in exotic culture and lifestyles, and to his subsequent disappointment with Western traditions of ethics and values.

Maugham's reflection on subjectivity and ethics is manifested in various forms—from the exploration of conflicts to dialogues, reconciliations, or

entanglements between the self as a subject and the "other," both within the realm of human internal attributes and in interaction with the external circumstances. The concept of the subject was historically rooted in the idea of the "I" who experiences and interacts with the world. In the pre-modern era, the human subject was often perceived as a product of external forces, such as God, or as being subject to fate or providence. However, Descartes introduced a revolutionary perspective, positioning human experience at the center of existence with his famous assertion in Meditations: "I think, therefore I am." Nevertheless, 20th-century approaches to subjectivity have often grappled with the anxiety of not replicating Descartes,[1] and many critics have focused on how the subject is constructed by cultural conditions or the human psyche. The prevailing assumption is that the modern subject is less stable, dominated by the unconscious, desire, and the influence of the "other." Maugham's works, including *Of Human Bondage*, *The Narrow Corner*, and *The Painted Veil,* reflect this modern mental situation, where protagonists navigate the complexities of society and the degradation of human nature. Calder aptly notes that Maugham is representative of the 20th century "in his examination of the manifestations of freedom and bondage" (390).

This partly explains Maugham turning to Asia, particularly China. In *The Summing Up*, he explains his post-war journey to China, driven by a traveler's interest in art, curiosity about the manners of a people with ancient civilization, and a desire to encounter individuals who could enrich his experience. It was both a quest for spiritual freedom and an opportunity to interact with diverse individuals who could serve his purposes.[2] During his travels in China, Maugham visited Koo Hongming, journeyed along the Yangtze River to Chengdu, and immersed himself in the rural and natural beauty of the countryside. On the other hand, his interest in Zhuangzi, as evident in works like "Rain" and "A Student of The Drama" in *On the Chinese Screen* (1922), surpasses his fascination with Confucianism. Maugham, relying on Giles's translation, considers Zhuangzi to be a mystic, emphasizing a connection with Eastern philosophy that goes beyond the surface of cultural observations.

Giles, in his 1889 translation of Zhuangzi, notes in the preface that Zhuangzi has long been considered "a heterodox writer," representing a "reaction against the materialism of Confucian teachings" (14). Upon Giles' request, Aubrey Moore, who lacked knowledge of Chinese, provided an introduction to Zhuangzi

1 See Jonathan Rée, "Subjectivity in the Twentieth Century," *New Literary History* 1 (1995): 205-217, 206.

2 See W. Somerset Maugham. *The Summing Up*. New York: Arno Press, 1977, 202.

based solely on Giles' translation. Moore's interpretation, focusing on quietism, mysticism, and relativism, has influenced how later Western translators and scholars perceive Zhuangzi's philosophy.[1] It is interesting to note that, Maugham, in *The Summing Up*, reveals that by the age of twenty-four, he had constructed a complete philosophical system based on two principles: "The Relativity of Things and The Circumferentiality of Man" (251).

The kindred spirit between Maugham's philosophy and Zhuangzi's is noticeable—though implicit—in *The Painted Veil*. Waddington's discussions on concepts such as "things," death, and goodness in the novel are intricately linked to Zhuangzi. Similarly, in *The Narrow Corner,* Dr. Saunders rethinks the relationship between the self as subject and the phenomenal world, linking himself with Zhuangzi's thoughts. While there are inherent differences between Eastern and Western philosophies, Maugham appears to belong to the category of those who find value in drawing from ancient Eastern traditions to supplement perceived lacks in the West.[2] In the following analysis, we shall examines how Maugham creatively "adapted" Zhuangzi's thought in his configuration of human subjectivity, through the representations of Waddington in *The Painted Veil* and Dr. Saunders in *The Narrow Corner.*

Redefining Self and Other

Maugham's journey through China is rich with encounters with idyllic scenes—"the hills and the valleys, the trees, water and the water" and fields with peasants working (*On a Chinese Screen* 71)—that consistently provide him with aesthetic enjoyment and psychological comfort.[3] Additionally, Zhuangzi, for Maugham, offers "very good reading" that allows him to easily wander without immediate application (*On a Chinese Screen* 105). The natural beauty of the Chinese countryside and the narratives of "other things" in Zhuangzi's world seem intertwined in Maugham's search for spiritual freedom.

Waddington, in *The Painted Veil*, becomes the embodiment of this fusion, moving beyond limited, anthropocentric perspectives and offering a mitigating force against the horror of the plague and the pain of moral betrayal. When Kitty asks Waddington about the meaning of *Dao*, he provides a very Daoist explanation:

1 See Herbert A. Giles, *Chuang Tzŭ: Mystic, Moralist, and Social Reformer*. London: Bernard Quaritch, 1889.

2 See John James Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought*, London: Routledge, 1997, 97.

3 See Luo Moubei, "Geopolitical Changes and Modernist Transitions in Travel Narratives," *Tianfu New Idea* 3 (2020): 70-77.

> It is everything and nothing. From it all things spring, all things conform to it, and to it at last all things return. It is a squire without angels, a sound which ears cannot hear, and an image without form. It is a vast net and though its meshes are as wide as the sea it lets nothing through. It is the sanctuary where all things find refuge. It is nowhere, but without looking out of the window you may see it. Desire not to desire, and leave all things to take their course. (234)

In the context of Zhuangzi's philosophy, "things" (物 *wu*) encompass all entities, including human beings. Zhuangzi, in *The Identities of Contraries* （齐物论 *Qi Wu Lun*) posits that all things originate from *Dao* and are finite beings. When "things" as subjects observe "other things," the perspective profoundly influences the results. This is the meaning of one of the foundational concepts in Daoist philosophy, *Yi Dao Guan Wu*, which can be translated as "viewing things through the *Dao*" or "observing things from the perspective of the *Dao*." This concept is essential for understanding Zhuangzi's approach to life, nature and the cosmos. Zhuangzi suggests that humans, driven by spirit and wisdom, often engage in arguments about right and wrong, limited by various constraints when perceiving the self and other things. According to Zhuangzi, if individuals can set aside prejudice and adopt a perspective that transcends the notions of "self" and "other," all things can attain an ideal state of equality and unity.

Departing from the use of things as cultural and social symbols—such as the Persian carpet as a metaphor for the meaning of life in *Of Human Bondage* and the pagoda and Buddhist temple representing chastity and Kitty's spiritual transformation in *The Painted Veil*, Maugham's focus in *The Painted Veil* is not on specific objects but on various things correlated with human life revealing themselves to Waddington's eyes and mind. For instance, when Kitty questions the meaning of death in the novel, Waddington refrains from answering. Instead, he lets his eyes interact with the wild scene. In contrast to a dead man stagnating like a machine, nature, and the wild are animated with pleasure:

> He did not answer, but his eyes travelled over the landscape at their feet. The wide expanse on that gay and sunny morning filled the heart with exultation. The trim little rice-fields stretched as far as the eye could see and in many of them the blue-clad peasants with their buffaloes were working industriously. It was a peaceful and a happy scene. Kitty broke the silence. (232)

In Waddington's perception, the rice fields and natural landscape are dynamic, mirroring each other without being disturbed by human thoughts or states, including plagues and disasters. They exist and grow on their own, forming a unity with humans that encompasses life and death—reflecting the Daoist notion that "in TAO life and death are ONE" (Giles 96). People do not exist independently but as integral parts of this unified cycle. From this perspective, viewing things through the lens of *Dao* rejects the objectification or instrumentalization of people and things, emphasizing respect for all entities—a spirit rooted in freedom. This holistic approach, where things are tightly intertwined with human life, allows for the emergence of "thing power" when people enjoy them without instrumental motives. Waddington's attitude toward things reflects this perspective, as the wild and the fields inspire a sense of vulnerability in the face of plague and death, fostering reflection on and appreciation of beauty. When Kitty asks about the meaning of the nuns' good deeds, Waddington claims that the nuns' lives are beautiful in themselves, expressed through the pictures they paint, the music they compose, the books they write, and the lives they lead. Among these, the most beautiful is the beautiful life, equated with the perfect work of art.[1]

Waddington's equating of a "beautiful life" with a "perfect work of art" marks the presence of humans as a footnote, emphasizing the desire for the presence of things, or the other. In Calder's interpretation, Maugham's expectation of human relations is sensible detachment outwardly but a thirst for intimacy inwardly. Here, things are not mere possessions of the author; they actively participate in the human construction of meaning, playing a significant role in "stabilizing human identity" (Brown 162). The interaction between humans and things reveals Maugham's expectation for human interrelationships, requiring the subject to break away from traditional dualistic modes and approach relationships without preconceptions or utilitarian attitudes—a redefinition of goodness. Just as Zhuangzi suggests, it is important to leave behind preconceptions and focus on the true nature. Waddington continues his interpretation:

> Each member of the orchestra plays his own little instrument, and what do you think he knows of the complicated harmonies which unroll themselves on the indifferent air? He is concerned only with his own small share. But he knows that the symphony is lovely, and though there's none to hear it, it is lovely still, and he is content to play his part. (233)

1 See W. Somerset Maugham, *The Painted Veil*, New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1963, 233

Here Waddington further examines the goodness of the nuns by placing individuals and their deeds within a system, likening it to an orchestra where each person has a specific role. This differs from the Catholic notion of goodness, which advocates love for God, as well as Spinoza's progressive ethics exemplified by such characters as Athelny and Dirk. In fact, both Spinoza and Zhuangzi adhere to monism, with the distinction that Spinoza defines goodness based on people's knowledge of intrinsic necessity, elevating the rationality of humans to the highest level. Although Maugham's works are marked by conflicts between reason and desire, it turns out his later novels do not perfectly align with the Spinozan situation presented at the end of *Of Human Bondage*. One very possible explanation is that Maugham diverges from Spinoza on the latter's emphasis on rationality as the solution to the cultural and spiritual crisis in the 20th-century Western world. Maugham rejects both the idea that man, as a subject, is at the mercy of religion and social morality, and the paradigm that the subject is trapped in a prison of internal desires or external subject-object relationships. Waddington, as the mouthpiece of Maugham, provides a redefinition of goodness and human subjectivity from an egalitarian, flexible and spontaneous perspective within a holistic system of relations. This approach aligns himself more closely with Zhuangzi, suggesting looking beyond the superficial appearances and perceiving the deeper, intrinsic nature of things as part of the interconnected and ever-changing fabric of the universe.

Reimagining Subjectivity

In contrast to the extensive critical discussions on *The Painted Veil*, *The Narrow Corner* has received relatively little attention since its publication in 1932. The narrative unfolds through the perspective of Dr. Saunders, a cunning yet principled captain, a melancholic young man entangled in a murder case, a half-breed girl and her fiancé on a remote Pacific Island, and an idealistic young man—all caught up in a web of love, intrigue, and death. Dr. Saunders, as a detached observer, witnesses the diverse personalities of these individuals ensnared by their desires, each navigating a distinct path to their diversifying destinies. In many aspects, "the doctor's point of view encapsulates the author's life philosophy meticulously developed over fifty years" (Calder 353). In contrast to his empathy with all creatures, Dr. Saunders, as an outsider, maintains a worldly and indifferent stance toward human destiny. Additionally, he passionately reflects on the intricate relationship between body and soul. Some critics (Calder, for example) perceive the

novel as an exploration of Hindu philosophy.[1] The fact is that Dr. Saunders, akin to Waddington, engages in philosophical contemplation not through the "rationality" of traditional Western philosophy or the yoga of Indian philosophy/Buddhism (emphasized in *The Razor's Edge*), but through the lens of the thing of opium. This substance becomes a pivotal element in shaping human subjectivity within the narrative.

In *The Painted Veil*, when Kitty queries Waddington about the role of *Dao* in his life, he responds that after having half a dozen whiskies and gazing at the stars, it works and signifies everything. Similarly, Dr. Saunders opts to transcend his body and soul through opium-induced contemplation: "They smoked alternately. Gradually, peace descended upon the doctor's soul [...] his spirit soared in regions far above the storm. He walked in the infinite" (*The Narrow Corner* 89).

It is worthy of note that both alcohol and tobacco objectively induce a sense of relaxation, often leading individuals into a state of mental paralysis. Alternatively, opium sheds its artificially assigned status as a psychotropic drug, reverting to its original role as a pain-relieving medication. This signifies the dissolution of its instrumental properties and the alleviation of the "oppression" it may exert on humans. Much like opium, the island where the protagonist ascends is portrayed in its natural beauty, unspoiled and pristine: "You had a sensation of primeval freshness, and all the complications of the generations disappeared. A stark simplicity, as bare and severe as a straight line, filled the soul with rapture" (*The Narrow Corner* 92). Here, the elements do not assume the identity of the Other, avoiding objectification as desire or an unknown antagonist. Instead, the "primeval freshness" of these elements allows the protagonist to "float on the spiritual altitudes," providing a contrast to the complexity and finitude of human behavior. Similar to opium, this experience aids in healing the confusion and loss experienced by the characters, prompting a return to questioning the nature of the soul. As John Frow describes, "the true role of Things, of underlying thingness, is to be the mirror of our souls, the object that makes us a subject, that makes us real" (273).

On the flip side, Maugham portrays Waddington behaving decently while under the influence of alcohol, and Dr. Saunders smokes opium without succumbing to addiction. Both seek to enter the realm of imagination with rationality. In a similar vein, Zhuangzi advocates for the abandonment of distinctions and oppositions between the self and the universe through a "Pure State of Mind" (心斋 Xin Zhai), ultimately attaining a state of being "Carefree" (逍遥 Xiao Yao). This involves "the

1 See Robert Calder, W. *Somerset Maugham and the Quest for Freedom*, New York: Doubleday, 1973, 353.

desire to break through the phenomenal thing to its essential by means of imagination" (Tang 120). In traditional Western discourse of thoughts, characterized by dualistic thinking regarding self and other, reason and sensibility, Zhuangzi's world may seem mystic and haphazard. Alcohol and opium thus could act as neutral mediators, facilitating the potential for a cross-cultural philosophical dialogue in Maugham's texts. The narratives of them as things offer a perspective into the Western thinking of culture and values from an Eastern philosophy standpoint, prompting "a challenging and uncomfortable" dialogue with Western "culture of individualism, of power, of dualistic thinking, and of materialism" (Clarke 99).

In summary, the existential meaning of opium implies a state unrestricted by human will and an interaction with humans without oppression. It engages with humans on an equal footing, providing temporary anesthesia of the spirit. This brings human thought and spirit into a dialogue with the physical body in an imaginary space, establishing a unifying relationship between the two. Such a relationship transcends all finitude, reaching a state unburdened by the external world and prompting contemplation of the essential meaning of human existence. While it may appear that the thing becomes the object of human gaze, involving acts of possession or projection, it is, in fact, a subject participating in defining the meaning of human existence in the real world.

As Maugham writes in *The Summing Up*, "In civilized communities, men's idiosyncrasies are mitigated by the necessity of conforming to certain rules of behavior. Culture is a mask that hides their faces. Here, people showed themselves bare" (198). This statement highlights the allure of the East for Maugham. Opium, in turn, acts on the human spirit, crafting imaginary worlds that liberate individuals from the complexities of desire and social relations, ultimately returning them to the essential state of the soul and affirming the meaning of existence:

> In this condition of freedom, his soul could look down upon his flesh with the affectionate tolerance with which you might regard a friend who bored you but whose love was grateful to you. His mind was extraordinarily alert, but in its activity, there was no restlessness and no anxiety; [...] He was lord of space and time [...] (*The Narrow Corner* 36)

Through a Daoist interpretation of the relationship between things and humans, one rediscovers the self through the power of imagination. The thing of Opium facilitates the creation of an imaginary world that prompts individuals to reconsider their subjectivity. Simultaneously, it helps to overcome the feelings of fragmentation

and nothingness prevalent in the modern experience, enabling one to reach the realm of "Dao as One," though *simulacra*, in the tangible world and attain spiritual freedom that transcends the limitations of time and space. This philosophical paradigm effectively dissolves the Western debate on the contradiction between body and spirit. In this way, Dr. Saunders accesses the imaginary world of "Dao as One" through his interaction with things. In this moment, the practical significance of the human spirit and existence becomes evident.

Despite experiencing this spiritual oneness, Dr. Saunders, however, maintains a belief in the inherent meaninglessness of the real world. He asserts that the world comprises only himself, his thoughts, and feelings, dismissing everything else as mere fantasy, a perspective deriving from Russell's *The Problems of Philosophy*. This amalgamation of Western and Eastern philosophical thoughts shapes his rules for navigating life in reality:

> "I have acquired resignation by the help of an unfailing sense of the ridiculous."
> "Laugh, then. Laugh your head off."
> "So long as I can," returned the doctor, looking at him with his tolerant humour, "the gods may destroy me, but I remain unvanquished." (*The Narrow Corner* 233)

It seems that the concept of "resignation" suggests the interplay between freedom and necessity as carefully discussed in Spinoza's *Ethics*. We should be reminded that the central thesis of *Ethics*, however, is *conatus* (endeavor), underscoring the affirmation and lucidity of desire as a form of rational freedom. As such, it is not surprising to find that Dr. Saunders' articulation of spiritual freedom drastically divergence from Spinoza's thoughts: "It had liberated him from the bonds of unprofitable habits, and, more relaxed than ever from all earthly ties, he rejoiced in a heavenly sense of spiritual independence" (*The Narrow Corner* 244).

Indeed, the descriptions align more closely with Zhuangzi's pursuit of the Dao—the "Carefree" state characterized by no yearning, no tiredness, and no suffering. This ideal spiritual freedom transcends opposition or contradiction between subject and object, representing a state of mind where all sensory existence is elevated into the rational concept of "Oneness," unburdened by the complexities of life. However, this ideal freedom remains confined to the realm of ideas, expressed through imagination; it is a sensual and imaginative "freedom" that cannot manifest in the tangible world. Dr. Sanders, therefore, employs mediators to

surpass the limitations of the body, initiating a dialogue with the soul and ultimately entering the realm of what could be termed as the Buddha.

There seems to be a convergence between Hindu philosophy and Maugham's philosophical thoughts. Here we shall take a diversion to explain further on the distinction of the two thoughts. From the standpoint of Hindu philosophy, it is human ignorance, attachment to the earthly world, and the entanglements of *karma* that make it challenging to distinguish *Brahman* (the nature of reality) and *Atman* (the self). The determined practitioner, by renouncing social life, suppressing passions, and undergoing various stages of spiritual training, can intuit the wise nature of *Atman* and witness the unity of *Brahman* and *Atman*, achieving liberation. This perspective aligns more with Larry in *The Razor's Edge*, as opposed to Dr. Saunders, who leans towards merging physical pleasure with spiritual enjoyment.

Moreover, Saunders's assessment of Frith's commitment to Hindu philosophy echoes his evaluation of mysticism in *The Summing Up*—flawless but incredulous: "That is an explanation of things that does not entirely displease me," Dr. Saunders believes, adding, "There is a futility about it that gratifies the sense of irony" (140). Indeed, Dr. Saunders's reception of Hindu philosophy, as depicted in *The Narrow Corner*, appears more ambiguous than Larry's in *The Razor's Edge*. Calder further contends that Maugham, despite his deep interest in Hindu philosophy, had not "got religion" (351). As such, it would be safe to conclude that the Maugham's involvement with Zhuangzi and Hindu philosophy suggests his interest in the concept of "Oneness" formed by the subject and the phenomenal world. This underscores an attempt to dismantle the dichotomous subject-object model prevalent in the tradition of Western philosophy.

Amid the spiritual turmoil characterizing the Western world in the 20th century, Maugham finds himself confronted with a pressing dilemma: How is it possible to lead a meaning and goof life when Spinoza's envisioned intellectual freedom appears to falter at its foundational premise? In light of the perceived inadequacies within Western philosophical discourse, Maugham seeks renewal in Eastern thought, viewing it as a viable antidote to the pervasive sense of void and disorientation in Western society. Within this framework, Maugham deliberately "adapt" Zhuangzi's philosophical concept of *Yi Dao Guan Wu* alongside Spinoza's and later Hindu philosophy in his redefinition of subjectivity. This exploration manifests through two primary relational dynamics: the interplay between self and others within human constructs, and the interaction between humans and things. .

In *The Painted Veil*, Maugham's narrative, when viewed through Zhuangzi's

principle of observing things through the *Dao,* reveals a nuanced discussion on life, death and the essence of goodness. This perspective posits that the character's reconstitution of existence and moral values is catalyzed by their engagement with "things." "Things" or "good deeds" humans forge are, in themselves, life's inherent value. This standpoints diverges from the dualistic subject-object framework, embracing instead a monistic view where self and other coexist equitably within the "Dao as One"—a harmonious totality. *The Narrow Corner* further explores Maugham's meditation on redefining human subjectivity and freedom within this holistic "Dao as One." Characters like Waddington and Dr. Saunders leverage "things" to foster a self-awareness captured within an imaginative realm. Here traditional dichotomies—self versus other, humans versus objects, body versus soul—dissolved into a unified state of being. This envisioned ideal of "carefreeness," free from hierarchical and evaluative judgments, is achievable only within an imaginary domain, facilitated by a state of mental disengagement or paralysis.

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