



Literal Translation of Laotzu's Book of Tao & Virtues

2nd Edition

直譯老子道德經

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2nd Edition: 2024

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To Tao,
aka Way aka 道

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Preface to the Second Edition

In the midst of the pandemic lockdown, out of boredom and motivated by the mandate-versus-freedom debate, I jotted down a literal translation of Laotzu, the most ancient articulation of libertarianism in mankind that I know of, let alone its being the source of the only indigenous Chinese religion (Taoism) that had lasted till almost the modern day. Three years have elapsed, the pandemic lockdown and mandate are no more, but their institutional legacy remains. Thus, I am making this revision during the several days when I happen to be away from work for Christmas.

In addition to polishing the English in the translation, I am moving my endnotes forward to insert each note next to the chapter where it belongs. That I think saves the readers the time of clicking back and forth. Meanwhile, I have added a few notes, though still mostly confined to the issues about the original meanings of words. I try to resist the temptation of offering too much my own views and interpretations in the notes. After all, my translation should have expressed my interpretation of Laotzu already.

This revision reflects a new thinking about Chinese religions that I have recently learned from a book 《翦商》 by 李碩 (published by 麥田出版, 台北, 2024). Based on the archeological results collected in the past several decades, in a coherent way, the author of this book provides a refreshingly new narrative about ancient Chinese religions: The ancient Chinese worshipped God and practiced human sacrifice, perhaps in a manner similar to that of Abraham in *Genesis*, Agamemnon in *Iliad*, and the Maya and Aztecs, until three thousand years ago when the Shang empire (商) was conquered by a peripheral tribe called Chow (周). To end the savage practice of human sacrifice, the early Chow kings also ended the God-worshipping religion and replaced the notion of God by the abstract, impersonal, and somewhat secularized Sky or Heaven. The part of what Chow did that has been well-known to Chinese is that it established a new order for the world known to the ancient Chinese through a colonial system, decentralized and yet bound by filial connections, and thereby

became the cultural and genetic ancestors of most Chinese nowadays. Laotzu lived in a period about half a millennium after the founding of the Chow empire, a period when the filially connected colonial system of Chow started to decline. The notion of God might not have been completely forgotten at his time. To reflect that possibility, I have modified my translation of the words that contain transcendent meanings, such as 天, 神 and 帝.

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Preface

The most ancient philosopher in China, Laotzu (老子) speaks to today's world. Mandates or free will? Right or wrong? Male or female? How many things can be boiled down to binary antitheses such as good versus evil, black versus white, or the weak versus the strong? Who is to tell who is right and who is wrong? Can the weak overcome the strong? If yes, how? Such are the burning questions in today's world, each easily torn from the headlines, and each addressed radically in Laotzu's terse, poetic *Book of Tao and Virtues* (aka *Tao Te Ching*). His notion of laissez faire, his conviction of moral relativism, and his recurring theme of female power, whether one agrees with them or not, are easily found to be relevant to the issues that are tearing our society apart nowadays.

Laotzu is arguably the first among all the great thinkers to articulate the notion of laissez faire:

Creatures in tens of thousands
arise without being triggered;
done, without being relied upon;
accomplished, without being possessed.
Never possessed, they never depart (Ch. 2).

Get things accomplished, and let
houses in hundreds say: "We made it by ourselves"
Ch. 17).

His motto "do by not doing; work by not working" (Ch. 62) is echoed again and again in a Netflix series *The Crown* (such as "your[the Queen's] job is to maintain the Empire by not doing anything"). In line with laissez faire, Laotzu advocates contracts over mandates and taxes:

Hence the saint maintains
the right-hand sides of inscribed contracts,
but uses them not to levy duties on the people.

The virtuous inscribe contracts.

The virtueless, for taxes, carve out farmlands (Ch. 80).

In today's political climate, such a radical stance is sure to draw applause from one side and objection from the other.

Some of Laotzu's worldly wisdom appears light-hearted. The following lines, for example,

when you can't friend them,
they can't unfriend you (Ch. 55),

sound like tailor-made for today's (or yesterday's?) Facebookers. But there are more sober ones:

Help the lords with Tao.
Rely not on arms
to be strong under the sky.
Things done to others turn around to the doers.
Wherever an army has quartered,
soon do thorns and thistles cover (Ch. 30).

Having made a lot of killing,
in sadness should we attend the ceremony.
Victories should be treated as funerals (Ch. 31).

This looks as though an advice that was heeded twenty years too late by our leaders, who were quick to invade a country out of purported moral high ground just to pull out decades later, mess and death behind.

Female power is a recurring theme in Laotzu:

The gate to Heaven opens and shuts;
could it stay feminine? (Ch. 10)

Capable of masculinity, yet stay feminine (Ch. 28).

The female, in calm, overcomes the male (Ch. 60).

The birth gate of the dark, purple female
is the root of heaven and earth (Ch. 6).

Among the ancient Chinese thinkers, only Laotzu utters a sense of female power, which I think reflects the fleeting memory, during Laotzu's time, of female worshipping in pre-historic China (for example, it is a goddess who created human beings according to the Chinese legend). In today's political theater, Laotzu would sound as though one's gender is not predetermined and female is the more powerful alternative, likely to attract strong reactions from either side of the debate.

Laotzu lived in a tumultuous era of China, when the filial connection between the king and the noble houses started to give way to the ruthless, military competition among the noble houses. The utmost uncertainty of life was vividly captured by Laotzu with only four words, 出生入死, which I hope the following translation could do justice to:

Alive or dead, Oh how random it is to be either,
as if stepping out hither and falling in thither! (Ch. 49)

Morality became uncertain as well:

Some dare to march forward and die;
some dare to stay behind, survive.
Between the two, one is good, the other bad,
but which one does Heaven disdain,
and for what reason, who could ascertain? (Ch. 74)

When I started to read Laotzu as a high schooler, the world felt mostly peaceful and predictable, and the above lines to me were merely the reflection of a tumultuous period long gone. But now aren't we all feeling like living in a tumultuous time as well? The world order set up by the West appears to be giving way to the

competition between China and the West not only in political ideologies but also in economies, cultures, and possibly militaries. As if that were not enough, there are also the global climate change and the dihard pandemic. With the social and mass media inundated with news about the random infection of a deadly virus, the unpredictable floods caused by torrential rains, the frequent school shootings and random violent crimes, aren't the above lines uttered by Laotzu about twenty-six hundred years ago also a reflection of today's world?

For his tumultuous society, Laotzu proposes to regress back to simple, primitive life styles:

Let the state be tiny, and the populace small.
Let the military instruments never put to use.
Let the people fear death and avoid migration.
Let there be boats and chariots and nowhere to go with them.
Let there be armors and weapons and nowhere to display them.
Let the language regress to tied knots for denotation (Ch. 66).

As extreme as this prescription might sound, it is not completely outdated, at least not so to those who would attribute the global climate change to industrialization and modernization. Worse yet, the ending of this prescription might even sound like a description of the pandemic lockdowns and travel restrictions that we have found ourselves stuck in for most the past two years (especially if you live near the border between countries like me):

Let the neighboring states,
one visible to the other from faraway,
and dogs and roosters heard by the other side,
see their peoples, living till their aging dying days,
never travel to and fro across the divide (Ch. 66).

Out of the utter uncertainty, however, Laotzu does not see chaos. Rather, Laotzu sees a deep force—Tao—that drives the cyclic transformation between life and death, good and evil, fortunes and disasters, and the strong and the weak. Such a dynamic notion of relativism I believe is relevant at all times:

Things being toppled
is Tao in action.
Things getting weakened
is Tao performing its function (Ch. 41).

Oh! It is disasters that fortunes rely upon,
and fortunes, where disasters incubate.
Who knows where the end is?
Is there not the norm?
Norm again becomes odd,
and good again turns evil.
The maze entrapping mankind
has been here for long (Ch. 57).

Different from Confucius, his younger contemporary (and most traditional Chinese thinkers, I dare say), Laotzu is not shy to transcend worldly affairs and reach out for the abstract and the infinite. Also different from most religion founders in the West, Laotzu—the absolute relativist—does not maintain exclusivity of truth. While he never doubts existence of the ultimate driving force for everything, Laotzu is never presumptuous like many self-proclaimed messengers; he never pretends that he knows the true picture of the ultimate driving force, nor that he knows how to describe it or even name it. Yet Laotzu does not give up *trying* to describe it in the five thousand words that constitute the *Book of Tao and Virtues*. As cynical about human nature and worldly notions of justice as Laotzu, he nonetheless ends his book with two hopeful, though humble, lines:

Tao of Heaven has no side to favor.
Constant it is with the good ones (Ch. 80).

Laotzu, though revered, is misunderstood in both China and the West. Generations of Chinese scholars have over-interpreted Laotzu, stretching every line of his to “deep” meanings as if every stanza were a fable of good governance or a prediction of modern science. Meanwhile, in popular Chinese culture, Laotzu is misunderstood as a collection of trickery stratagems, with his notion of *laissez faire* long

abandoned in the millennia of heavy-handed centralization endeavors, and his theme of female power sidestepped completely. Perhaps due to such distorted interpretations in both the academia and the popular culture of China, the English translations of Laotzu that I have seen all fail to convey the original spirit of Laotzu, cheapening Laotzu to a collection of wholesale, haiku-like lines that sound flavorlessly safe to a modern reader.

In translating the five thousand words that he left behind, I try to stick to the original denotations of those words, rather than rely on their common interpretations in Chinese nowadays, where the raw, shocking and specific imagery of words has faded into commonplace idioms and mundane phrases, further corrupted by bureaucratic double-speaking and internet vulgarities. I stick to the original sequencing of the lines in each stanza and stay aloof from the over-interpretations by generations of scholars. Such literalism brings out Laotzu's original poetic spirits—his straightforward outpourings, in contrast to the even-tempered and indirect style in much of the Chinese classics; the bits and pieces of ancient daily life mentioned in passing; his sudden leaps from the concrete to the abstract; shocking identifications between opposite ends; and the occasional, unexpected switch from a serene mind to melancholy loneliness. To ease the comparison between my translation and the original text, within each chapter I provide, right below the translation of the chapter, the original text according to the version edited by 徐梵澄: 《老子臆解》, 中華書局, 1988 (which incorporates the two silk-scroll versions discovered in 1973 from a two-millennium-old tomb). The footnotes of the translation are collected in the Endnotes, organized by chapters, at the end of the book.

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Book I: Tao (道經)

Chapter 1: Tao, can it be told? (道可道也)

Tao, can it be told? Not the eternal Tao?
Names, can they be named? Not the eternal names?

Things in tens of thousands start without a name;
having a name is the mother of things in tens of thousands.
Thus, stay desireless to watch the wonders
and keep desires in mind to see the outlets.

From the same origin out came the twain,
named differently yet meaning the same.
In darkness upon darkness
stands the gateway to all the wonders.



道可道也？非恆道也？
名可名也？非恆名也？

無名，萬物之始也
有名，萬物之母也
故恆無欲也以觀其眇
恆有欲也以觀其噉

兩者同出
異名同謂
玄之又玄
眾眇之門

Notes on Chapter 1

1.1. The usual rendition of the first two lines of Laotzu is: “The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao / The name that can be named is not the eternal name” (Mitchell, 1988). That is based on the common, unfortunately unauthentic, version, “道可道非恒道名可名非恒名,” which would have been too bold for the unassuming Laotzu. According to the two ancient versions discovered in 1973 from a tomb dating back to about two thousand years ago, the original text is rather “道可道也非恒道也名可名也非恒名也,” with the four instances of 也 understood to signify questions (徐梵澄, 1988).

1.2. Actually the common version of the first two lines is “道可道非常道名可名非常名,” with the word 恒 in the original text replaced by its synonym 常 just to avoid uttering the given name 恒 of a Han Emperor. That causes a lot of confusion among those who know only the common tongue of modern-day Chinese (普通話 aka Mandarin), where the two consecutive words 非常 together mean “extraordinary,” making Laotzu sound like a salesman in infomercials.

1.3. “Things in tens of thousands” is my literal translation of the phrase 萬物, which appears often in Laotzu and classic Chinese. It is understood as “everything” or “countlessly many things” in modern day, but literally the phrase means “ten thousand things.” I opt for the literal translation in the hope of reflecting the ancient mindset to some extent, as it takes a conceptual leap to jump from large finite numbers to infinity.

1.4. Chapter 1 opens Laotzu’s teaching with a bang, which I do not have to try hard to convey, as his original writing is bold and poetic. I merely translate his words as literally as I can so that they are not obscured by the derived meanings nowadays. For example, the second last line, 玄之又玄, is taken as “mysterious and mysterious” by Google, whereas the original meaning of the word 玄 is the deep dark purple color.

Chapter 2: When all beneath the sky are aware of beauty (天下皆知美之為美)

When all beneath the sky are aware of beauty,
ugliness comes to be.
When all beneath the sky are aware of the good,
The bad comes to be.

The haves and the have-nots
live on each other;
the hard and the easy
foster each other;
the long and the short
shape each other;
the high and the low
fulfill each other;
the tone and the sound
echo each other;
the front and the back
follow each other:
always are such.

That's why the saint acts without action
and preaches with no word.

Creatures in tens of thousands
arise without being triggered;
done, without being relied upon;
accomplished, without being possessed.
Never possessed, they never depart.



天下皆知美之為美，惡已
皆知善，斯不善矣

有無之相生也
難易之相成也
長短之相形也
高下之相盈也
音聲之相和也
先後之相隨：恆也

是以聖人居無為之事
行不言之教

萬物作而弗始也
為而弗恃也
成功而弗居也
夫唯弗居，是以弗去

Notes on Chapter 2

2.1. The word 天 has two meanings in Chinese. The first is the physical sky. The second is the Chinese counterpart to God or Heaven, all-covering, bearing constant witness for everyone and everything. One can tell which one the word means based on the context. I translate the first into “the sky,” “heaven,” or “heavens”; and the second, “Heaven.” In the phrase 天下 that occurs in this and many other chapters, the meaning of 天 is the first one, as 天下 refers to the entire world known to the Chinese at that time, “all that is beneath the sky” literally.

2.2. The reason why I do not translate the second meaning of 天 into “God” is that the second meaning of 天 is arguably only the secular substitute of God, rather than God, in the mainstream Chinese culture dating back to three millennia ago. Before then, ancient central China was ruled by a people Shang (商), who worshipped God (帝) and practiced human sacrifice, perhaps in a like manner as Abraham in *Genesis*, Agamemnon in *Iliad*, and the Maya and Aztecs. When Shang was conquered by a peripheral tribe, Chow (周), around 1,000 BCE, its religion, together with the human sacrifice practice, was eradicated. The eradication was so complete that, had it not been the modern day archeological discovery of the Shang era human sacrifice and the reinterpretation of ancient inscriptions as a consequence, the notion of God would have appeared absent in ancient China. It is said that one of the leaders of the Chow conquerors (周公) was so personally distraught over the human sacrifice practice (himself likely having witnessed one of his own elder brothers being sacrificed in the Shang palace) that he eradicated the entire religion, together with all records thereof. Part of his campaign was to replace the concept God with the abstract, impersonal Sky. A recent illuminating book on this subject is 《翦商》 by 李碩 (published by 麦田出版, 台北, 2024).

2.3. The word 物, frequently used by Laotzu, has been taken as a common word for “objects” and “things” in Chinese. However, its left-hand radical, 牛, indicates that it might have started with a connotation of large animals in the ancient time. Thus my translation of 物 ranges among “things,” “creatures” (such as that in this chapter) and “animals,” depending on the context.

Chapter 3: Appreciate not the clever (不上賢)

Appreciate not the clever,
so subjects do not compete.
Treasure not the rare goods,
so subjects do not steal.
Show not the desired,
so subjects do not revolt.

Hence the saint's governance
is to empty the mind,
fill up the stomach,
weaken the will,
and strengthen the limb:
Keep them from wits and desires.
Let them know what not to do,
then nothing can't be managed.



不上賢使民不爭
不貴難得之貨使民不為盜
不見可欲使民不亂

是以聖人之治也
虛其心
實其腹
弱其志
強其骨
恆使民無知無欲也
使夫知不敢弗為而已
則無不治也

Chapter 4: Tao, an endless pitcher (道沖)

Tao, through which things are splashing and crushing,
and flowing and running,
is like an endless pitcher
that is never filled up.
Oh how deep is Tao, like the ancestor of all!
It blunts the sharpest end,
unties the knotty complexes,
mingles with light,
and converges with dust.
Oh how dewy is Tao, as if bordering nonexistence!
I know not where it hailed from,
as if coming before the almighty God.



道沖
而用之有弗盈也
淵兮似萬物之宗
挫其銳
解其紛
和其光
同其塵
湛兮似或存
吾不知其誰之子也
象帝之先

Notes on Chapter 4

4.1. The second word on the first line, 沖, was meant to describe how water moves when it is being poured down into a pitcher. Thus I improvise it with the first three lines of my translation.

4.2. On the last two lines, “吾不知誰之子也象帝之先”: The word 帝 usually means emperor. But according to the bone-shell inscriptions, the earliest archeological remains of Chinese writings, 帝 looks as though the pictorial abstraction of flower stems. In an ancient poem 《詩經 大雅 蕩》 by 周文王, the first king of the Chow tribe, who eventually conquered the God-worshipping Shang empire and became the ancestor of most Han Chinese nowadays, the word 帝 appears in the phrase 上帝 with the word 上 signifying “above,” and so 帝 mostly likely means God. Since Laotzu is only five hundred years after the fall of Shang, perhaps the concept of God might not have been completely forgotten in his time despite the Chow founding fathers’ effort to secularize “God” into “Sky” (cf. Note 2.2).

Chapter 5: Heaven and earth are not humane (天地不仁)

Heaven and earth are not humane,
using creatures in tens of thousands
as sacrificial straw dogs.
The saint is not humane,
using noble houses in hundreds
as sacrificial straw dogs.

Heaven and earth: the space in between
is but the vast chamber of a gigantic air blower!
Spacious as if empty, yet it does not collapse.
The more you push in, the more it lets out.

Listening a lot and reckoning little
is not as good as staying in the middle.



天地不仁
以萬物為芻狗
聖人不仁
以百姓為芻狗

天地之間
其猶橐籥歟
虛而不屈
動而愈出

多聞數窮
不若守于中

Notes on Chapter 5

5.1. In the first stanza, “noble houses in hundreds” corresponds to 百姓. The phrase literally reads “hundreds of family names” and used to mean the nobility in Laotzu's era, when China was still vibrantly decentralized and noble houses were the main players, family names their privilege. Nowadays, however, 百姓 means plainly “the people” (or “subjects” to be more precise), with the nobility denotation long gone, crushed to oblivion by the relentless centralization endeavor in the past two millennia.

Chapter 6: O how immortal, Goddess of Valleys (谷神不死)

O how immortal, Goddess of Valleys
that spring out fountains
and give birth to rivers.
'Tis called the dark, purple female.
The birth gate of the dark, purple female
is the root of heaven and earth.
Oh! So soft and so thin,
meandering without end,
as if bordering nonexistence,
functioning without exhaustion.



谷神不死
是謂玄牝
玄牝之門
是謂天地之根
縣縣兮若存
用之不勤

Notes on Chapter 6

6.1. This is the first instance where we see Laotzu's explicit reference to the female genital (玄牝之門 and, at least metaphorically, 谷), though generations and generations of scholars have shied away from the explicit reference and simply claimed that it was merely a metaphor for Tao. The word 谷 nowadays means valleys, and the ancient dictionary 《說文解字》 defines it by “泉出通川爲谷”. Thus I added to this chapter a literal translation of this definition, as the second and third lines of the English version.

Chapter 7: The sky lasts long, and the earth perseveres (天長地久)

The sky lasts long, and the earth perseveres.
They last long and persevere
because they don't live for themselves.
Thus long they can live.

That's why the saint withdraws himself,
yet he is followed; and keeps himself out,
yet he is counted in.
Isn't it exactly his selflessness
that accomplishes his own self?



天長地久
天地之所以能長久者
以其不自生也
故能長生

是以聖人退其身而身先
外其身而身存
不以其無私歟
故能成其私

Chapter 8: Goodness to the utmost: just like water (上善如水)

Goodness to the utmost
is just like water,
good to creatures in tens of thousands
nonetheless with calm.
Staying low, where others disdain,
it's almost with Tao.

Dwell at the good ground,
think at the good depth,
grow in the good seasons,
speak with the good honesty,
govern in the good form,
work with the good capacities,
and act at the good moment.

Only when you do not compete
can you have no fault.



上善如水
水善利萬物而有靜
居眾人之所惡
故幾於道矣

居善地
心善淵
予善天
言善信
政善治
事善能
動善時

夫唯不爭
故無尤

Chapter 9: Growing it and fulfilling it (揔而盈之)

Growing it and fulfilling it
is not as good as stopping it.
Holding it and supporting it
still cannot prolong it.
Glittering gold and shiny jade fill up the majestic hall,
yet none can you protect.
Arrogance for wealth and power
is flirting with disaster.
Succeed and then withdraw:
That is Tao of Heaven.



揔而盈之
不若其已
揣而稅之
不可長葆也
金玉盈室
莫之能守也
富貴而驕
自遺咎也
功遂身退
天之道也

Chapter 10: Carry the soul and embrace the one (戴營魄抱一)

Carry the soul and embrace the one:
Could they not part from one another?
Roll the breath to the utmost supple:
Could it be innocent like an infant?
Clean with diligence the dark, purple mirror:
Could it remain unstained?
Love the subjects and revive the kingdom:
Could you not intrude on them?
The gate to Heaven opens and shuts:
Could it stay feminine?
Be farsighted and enlightened:
Could you not rely on intelligence?

Create them; nourish them.
Create but not possess them.
Lead them but not dictate:
Such are dark, purple virtues.



戴營魄抱一
能毋離乎
搏氣至柔
能嬰兒乎
修除玄監
能毋疵乎
愛民活國
能毋以為乎
天門啟闔
能為雌乎
明白四達
能毋以知乎

生之畜之
生而弗有
長而弗宰也
是謂玄德

Notes on Chapter 10

10.1. I like this chapter a lot, which to me is a lyrical manifesto of *laissez faire*. It also typifies the traditional Chinese way of reasoning: Start with the inner awareness of oneself (the soul, the breath, etc), move on to daily domestic activities (cleaning mirrors), extend to state affairs (subjects and kingdoms), and then transcend to Heaven. All along is the theme of letting it be.

Chapter 11: Thirty spokes to share a single hub (三十輻同一轂)

Thirty spokes converging, to share a single hub:
upon the void and occupancy is the usage of carts.
Water mixed with clay, and together forming a pot:
upon the void and occupancy is the usage of potteries.
Openings cut out, becoming doors and windows:
upon the void and occupancy is the usage of rooms.
Thus let things occupied to generate benefits
and empty things away to allow for usage.



三十輻同一轂
當其無有
車之用也
埴埴而為器
當其無有
埴器之用也
鑿戶牖以為室
當其無有
室之用也
故有之以為利
無之以為用

Notes on Chapter 11

11.1. This chapter centers the antithesis: 無 (void/nothingness/lack) and 有 (existence/possession/fulfillment), and the interpretation hinges on whether to put a punctuation between 無 and 有, or to put it after 無有. (The original text of Laotzu, like all original texts in Chinese classics, is not punctuated.) If the punctuation is put between the two words, such as “當其無，有車之用也”，the concept 無 supersedes the concept 有: “Upon the void/nothingness, there is the usage of carts.” By contrast, if we put 無 and 有 together and then punctuate right afterwards, such as “當其無有，車之用也”，the two concepts become equal counterparts in an antithesis: “Upon the void and occupancy is the usage of carts.” I choose the latter because the last two lines in this chapter, which seem to be a conclusion thereof, list 無 and 有 in equal footing, as though they were two sides of the same coin: “故有之以為利，無之以為用” (Thus let things occupied to generate benefits, and empty things away to allow for usage.)

Chapter 12: Colors blind the eyes (五色使人目盲)

Colors blind the eyes.
Horseback hunting maddens the mind.
Treasures hinder the conduct.
Spices numb the mouth.
Music deafens the ears.
—That's why the saint's governance
is for their stomachs
rather than the eyes.
Thus take this over that.



五色使人目盲
馳騁田獵使人心發狂
難得之貨使人之行妨
五味使人之口爽
五音使人耳聾
是以聖人之治也
為腹而不為目
故去彼而取此

Chapter 13: Favors and disgrace are likewise scary (寵辱若驚)

Favors and disgrace are likewise scary.

Big worries and my body are likewise heavy.

What does it mean that favors and disgrace are likewise scary?

Favors are only bestowed

to recipients down below,

who are scared to receive one,

and scared to lose another.

Thus favors and disgrace are likewise scary.

What does it mean that big worries and my body are likewise heavy?

I have big worries because I have this body;

should I have no body, what worries would I still have?

Thus, weigh your own body as you do to all beneath the sky,

and you can trust to all beneath the sky!

Love as your own body all beneath the sky,

and you can rely on all beneath the sky!



寵辱若驚
遺大患若身
何謂寵辱若驚？
寵之為下也
得之若驚
失之若驚
是為寵辱若驚
何謂遺大患若身？
吾所以有大患者
為吾有身也
及吾無身
有何患？

故遺為身于為天下
若可以托天下矣
愛以身為天下
女可以寄天下矣

Chapter 14: Look and you cannot see it (視之而 弗見)

Look and you cannot see it; call it the minute.
Listen and you cannot hear it; call it the sparse.
Reach out and you cannot grasp it; call it the elusive.
The three, impossible to vet,
are bundled into one, of which
the top is not sharp,
nor the bottom vague.
Oh how endless and far-reaching, unnamable!
Regressing to the void
—the shape of no shape,
and the image of nothing:
It's called the indefinite.

Chase it and you cannot see the end.
Face it and you cannot see the head.

Hold on to the current Tao
to rein in the current beings,
Thereby to infer the primal start.
That is Tao reasoning.



視之而弗見，名之曰微
聽之而弗聞，名之曰希
摺之而弗得，名之曰夷

三者不可致詰

故束而為一

一者，其上不

攸

其下不忽

尋尋兮，不可名也

復歸于無物

是謂無狀之狀

無物之象

是謂惚恍

隨而不見其後

迎而不見其首

執今之道

以御今之有

以知古始

是謂道紀

Notes on Chapter 14

14.1. In the Chinese text I entered for this chapter, the standalone character in the larger font was directly copied from the original Chinese version edited by 徐梵澄 because I could not locate the character from any Chinese input app (pinyin or handwriting). Other standalone characters in this book are in the same situation.

Chapter 15: Like an elephant wading across icy rivers (與兮其若冬涉水)

Those in ancient times who were good at practicing Tao
were subtle and opaque, dark and far-reaching,
too deep to discern.

Indiscernible are they,
thus hard shall I try to sketch their appearance
and say—
Oh how hesitant, like an elephant
wading across icy rivers.
Oh how fearful, like a large monkey
watching out for dangers coming from all sides.
How respectful, like a guest being honored.
How relaxed, like the ice melting into pieces.
Unadorned, like a log.
Turbid, like muddy water.
Open and receptive, like a deep valley.

Make it muddy, then let it sit
and gradually it gets clear.
Make it still, then perturb it
and it becomes alive.
Keep this Tao and never max out.
Never maxed out, it perseveres
and never wears out.



古之善為道者

微眇玄達

深不可識

夫唯不可識

故強為之容

曰：與兮其若冬涉水

猶兮其若畏四鄰

儼兮其若客

渙兮其若釋

沌兮其若朴

濔兮其若濁

汜

兮其若谷

濁而靜之，徐清

安而動之，徐生

葆此道

不欲盈

夫唯不欲盈

是以能敝而不成

Notes on Chapter 15

15.1. In the second stanza, the elephant denotation comes from the word 豫 in the common version, or its “borrowed identical character” (通假字) “與” in the original text, and the monkey denotation comes from the word 猶 in the original text. In Chinese nowadays, 猶 and 豫 are used together to mean hesitation. By contrast, according to the ancient dictionary 《说文解字》, 豫 means “the large ones among elephants” (“象之大者”), with the right part of the character being a pictorial abstraction of elephants, and 猶 refers to a kind of large monkeys (獾). This is an example where the specific, original imagery of Chinese words fades into commonplace phrases.

Chapter 16: The void is the ultimate end (致虛極也)

The void is the ultimate end.
The serene is the central trend.
Creatures arise around me;
I watch them cycle.
Creatures come and go.
All retiring to their roots:
’Tis called the serene.
The serene is returning to fate.
Returning to fate is the norm.
Knowing the norm is enlightening.
Ignoring the norm is reckless,
resulting in disasters.
Knowing the norm, you are tolerant.
Tolerant, you are fair.
Fair, you are kingly.
Kingly, you accord with Heaven.
In accord with Heaven, you follow Tao.
Following Tao, you persevere,
never endangered.



致虛極也
守靜督也
萬物旁作
吾以觀其復也
天物芸芸
各復歸于其根
曰靜
靜謂復命
復命常也
知常明也
不知常妄
妄作凶
知常容
容乃公
公乃王
王乃天
天乃道
道乃久
沒身不殆

Chapter 17: The best governor is barely known by the subjects (太上下知有之)

The best governor
is barely known by the subjects.
The second best is praised and endeared.
The next is feared
and the worst, shamed.
Not enough trust, hence the distrust.
Oh, how far and wide, to use words sparingly!
Get things accomplished, and let
houses in hundreds say: “We made it by ourselves.”



太上下知有之
其次親譽之
其次畏之
其下侮之
信不足
焉有不信
悠兮其貴言也
成功遂事
而百姓爲我自然

Chapter 18: When Tao is abandoned (大道廢)

When Tao is abandoned,
Humanity and justice emerge.
When intelligence springs out,
hypocrisy comes about.
Parents and children at odds,
piety and love are called for.
States and houses in turmoil,
loyal ministers become crucial.



故大道廢
安有仁義
智慧出
安有大偽
六親不和
安有孝慈
國家昏亂
安有貞臣

Notes on Chapter 18

18.1. The 仁 (humanity) on the second line is the word representing the central notion in Confucianism. A usual translation is benevolence. According to the Confucian classic 《中庸》 the definition of the word is “仁者人也” (“仁 means human”). Thus I think “humanity” is a more precise translation.

Chapter 19: Let go of knowledge and intelligence (絕聖棄智)

Let go of intelligence and knowledge,
and subjects will benefit hundredfold.
Let go of humanity and justice,
and subjects will return to piety and love.
Let go of trickeries and profits,
and robbers and thieves will cease to exist.
—On these three not enough is written,
hence I shall make them this enjoiner:
Show the plain, embrace the simple,
limit the ego, and reduce the wants.



絕聖棄智
而民利百倍
絕仁棄義
而民復孝慈
絕巧棄利
盜賊無有
此三言也
以爲文未足
故命之有所屬
見素抱朴
少私而寡欲

Notes on Chapter 19

19.1. The word 聖 on the first line is usually attached to a superhuman connotation, such as the phrase 聖人 that occurs frequently in Laotzu, which is why I translate the phrase as “the saint.” In this chapter, however, the word stands alone almost immediately next to the word 智 (knowledge/intelligence). Thus I look for an interpretation closer to the original structure of the word, which consists of three radicals: ears (耳), mouth (口) and king (王). This, coupled with a usual pattern in Chinese in which two related words are juxtaposed to refer to a subset of the union of their meanings (such as 手腳, 兄弟, and 聖智 here), is why I opt for “knowledge” or “intelligence” as the translation of 聖.

Chapter 20: Others come and go (眾人熙熙)

Stop all studies and no more worry.

Yes or No, what is really the difference?
Good or bad, what is really the distance?

What people fear is hard not to be feared.

Oh, how vast and wide, yet to show any boundary!

Others come and go,
as if feasting in a ritual,
sacrificing beef, lamb and pork,
and climbing up to platforms in spring festivals.
But I park myself alone without a signal,
as if a newborn yet to become vocal,
drifting about as if having nowhere to go!
Others all keep extra,
but I leave things behind.
I simply have a fool's mind!
Oh, how opaque!
Common folks are sharp and bright,
and I alone appear so dim!
Common folks are seeing and knowing,
yet I alone appear oblivious!
Oh, how vague! Just like the dusk.
Absent-minded am I, as if having no place to rest.
Everyone else has something to lean on,
yet I alone appear low and stubborn.
I would rather be different from others
and cherish only Her who milks for all the living.



絕學無憂

唯與訶，其相去幾何？

美與惡，其相去何若？

人之所畏，亦不可以不畏

恍兮，其未央哉！

眾人熙熙，若饗于太牢

而春登臺

我泊焉未兆

若嬰兒未咳

累兮似無所歸！

眾人皆有餘

我獨遺

我愚人之心也

濔濔兮！

俗人昭昭

我獨若昏兮！

俗人察察

我獨閔閔兮！

忽兮其若無所止

眾人皆有以

我獨頑似鄙

吾欲獨異於人

而貴食母

Chapter 21: The path to virtues (孔德之容)

The path to virtues:
only Tao should be pursued.

Tao as a thing
is nothing but vague,
and nothing but opaque.
Oh how opaque and vague,
yet inside is an image!
Oh how vague and opaque,
yet inside is an object!
Oh how deep and obscure
yet inside is the essence!
The essence, very real,
has truth within.

From the current to the ancient,
the name stays present
to comb through all situations.

How do I know how all such situations came to be?
Through this.



孔德之容
唯道是從

道之為物
唯恍唯惚
惚兮恍兮
中有象兮
恍兮惚兮
中有物兮
窈兮冥兮
其中有精兮
其精甚真
其中有信

自今及古
其名不去
以順眾父

吾何以知眾父之然也
以此

Chapter 22: He who is lighting a stove does not stand out (炊者不立)

He who is lighting a stove
does not stand out.

Those who see only themselves are invisible.
Those who show off are not enlightened.
Those who praise themselves are unappreciated.
Those who pride themselves cannot lead.
Such actions, in terms of Tao,
are like discarded food and redundant acts,
which creatures disdain.
Hence from them Tao adherers refrain.



炊者不立

自視者不章
自見者不明
自伐者無功
自矜者不長
其在道也
曰餘食贅行
物或惡之
故有道者弗處也

Chapter 23: Bent, it keeps the whole (曲則全)

Bent, it keeps the whole;
crooked, it turns upright;
hollowed, then filled;
worn out, then renewed;
lessened, it gains;
multiplied, then confused.
Thus the saint holds on to the one
to shepherd all beneath the heavens.
Not self-absorbed, he becomes prominent;
not self-watching, he becomes enlightened;
not self-praising, he is appreciated;
not self-priding, he becomes the chief.
Just because he does not compete,
no one can compete with him.

Keeping the whole
via being bent into a circle:
How could such classic notions be cheap talks?
Complete the whole and be back to the origin.



曲則全
枉則正
洼則盈
敝則新
少則得
多則惑
是以聖人執一
以為天下牧
不自視
故章
不自見
故明
不自伐
故有功
弗矜
故能長
夫唯不爭
故莫能與之爭

古之所謂曲全者
豈語哉
誠全歸之

Chapter 24: O how transient, things that come to be by themselves (希言自然)

O how transient,
things that come to be by themselves!
Winds, howling, do not last for a whole morning;
showers, heavy, not for an entire day.
What made them so? Heaven and earth.
Yet not even they can last forever,
let alone us mankind!

Thus those who accord with Tao
are with Tao;
those who attain virtues
are with virtues;
and those who lost them,
are with the loss.

Those who are with the virtues
are received by Tao.
Those who are with the loss
are also rejected by Tao.



希，言自然
飄風不終朝
暴雨不終日
孰為此
天地
而弗能久
又況于人乎

故從事而道者
同于道
得者，同于得
失者，同于失

同于得者
道亦得之
同于失者
道亦失之

Chapter 25: Out of chaos there grew a thing (有物昆成)

Out of chaos there grew a thing, preceding
heaven and earth, arising.
Oh how deserted! Alone it's been withstanding
without alteration, capable of mothering
heaven and earth.
Its name not yet known,
I label it Tao
and name it, by a stretch, the extensive.

The extensive means running away.
Running away means going farther and father.
Going farther and father means returning.

Tao is extensive,
heaven is extensive,
earth is extensive,
and kings as well.
Such four in a realm are regarded to be extensive,
among which the king is merely one.

Mankind follows earth;
earth follows heaven;
heaven follows Tao;
Tao follows whatever come to be by themselves.



有物昆成
先天地生
蕭兮寥兮
獨立而不改
可以為天地母
吾未知其名
字之曰道
吾強為之名曰大

大曰逝
逝曰遠
遠曰反

道大
天大
王亦大
國中有四大
而王居其一焉

人法地
地法天
天法道
道法自然

Notes on Chapter 25

25.1. The last two words “自然” of this chapter means nature in Chinese nowadays. Misled by this connotation, many get the notion that Laotzu ranks nature above Tao, at odds with the rest of *Book of Tao and Virtues*, which apparently puts Tao as the ultimate driving force. Actually “nature” is rather a western concept imported to China in recent centuries. The original denotation of “自然” is simply “self being” and hence “whatever come to be by themselves.” As “whatever come to be by themselves” embody Tao, the last stanza can be understood as a view that mankind, earth, heaven and Tao are related to one another as a loop rather than as a linear hierarchy.

25.2. A Tang empire scholar 李约 in his 《道德真经新注》 has noted the oddity of explaining the last stanza as Laotzu’s ranking of mankind, earth, heaven, Tao and “nature.” He therefore punctuates the last stanza “人法地地法天天法道道法自然” (as ancient Chinese texts had no punctuation) differently: “王[人]法地地, 法天天, 法道道, 法自然,” the translation of which would have been:

Mankind follows the way
in which earth is being earth,
heaven is being heaven,
Tao is being Tao,
and nature is being nature.

Chapter 26: The heavy is the root of the light (重為輕根)

The heavy is the root of the light.
The serene is the master of the haste.
Thus a nobleman, trekking throughout a day,
never leaves behind his baggage wagon.
Surrounded by the hustle and bustle,
he keeps the cool and stays aloof.
How can a king with ten thousand chariots
so lightly treat his own body
for all sorts of stuff beneath the heavens?
Lightness costs the root.
Haste costs the reign.



重為輕根
靜為躁君
是以君子終日行不離其輜重
雖有環宮
燕處則昭若
奈何萬乘之王而以身輕于天下
輕則失本
躁則失君

Chapter 27: Skillful trekkers leave no trail (善行者無轍迹)

Skillful trekkers leave no trail,
and skillful speakers, no erred detail.
Skillful counters use no bead,
and skillful shutters, no lock nor key.
Skillful tiers, without string, can make binds impossible to undo.

Thus the saint is good at saving everyone,
with no one forsaken, nor material abandoned.
It's called improvisational enlightenment.

Thus someone good
is a teacher for a good person,
and someone bad,
still a resource for the good person.
Unable to appreciate others
for teaching or resources,
you would be doomed to big confusion
despite your intelligence.
That's the subtle essence.



善行者無轍迹
善言者無暇適
善閉者無關籥而不可啟也
善結者無繆約而不可解也

是以聖人恆善救人
而無棄人
物無棄財
是謂襲明

故善人
善人之師
不善人
善人之資也
不貴其師
不愛其資
雖知乎
大迷
是謂眇要

Chapter 28: Capable of masculinity, yet stay feminine (知其雄守其雌)

Capable of masculinity, yet stay feminine
to be the inlet for all beneath the heavens.
Be the inlet for all beneath the heavens,
never deviate from the virtue that is constant,
and regress to the innocent state of an infant.

Capable of being clean, yet remain tarnished
to be the valley for all beneath the heavens.
Be the valley for all beneath the heavens,
be content with the virtue that is constant,
and regress to the simple state of a log.

Capable of being white, while stay being black
to be the chariot crossbar for all beneath the heavens.
Be the weight-bearing crossbar for all beneath the heavens
and never stray from the virtue that is constant.
Never stray from the virtue that is constant,
and regress to the utmost end without impediment.

A log, partitioned, becomes instruments.
The saint, using them, becomes the chieftain.

A masterpiece needs no cut.



知其雄
守其雌
為天下谿
為天下谿
恆德不離
復歸于嬰兒

知其白
守其辱
為天下谷
為天下谷
恆德乃足
復歸于朴

知其白
守其黑
為天下式
為天下式
恆德不忒
恆德不忒
復歸于無極

朴散則為器
聖人用之則為官長

夫大制無割

Notes on Chapter 28

28.1. In the first stanza, the word 谿 is taken for 溪 in modern-day Chinese, meaning valleys or creeks. Such a connotation, however, does not fit well with the theme of the stanza, which is about the choice between masculinity and femininity. In Cantonese, a dialect that retains more ancient pronunciations of Chinese than the current common tongue (Mandarin) does, 谿 rhymes with the name of the female genital, with only the consonants, k versus h, differentiating the pronunciations of the two words. Such an interpretation might not sound too farfetched, as homophones (通假字) were common in ancient Chinese, plus there are other instances in this book where Laotzu makes explicit references to genitals. Without surprise, the literature provides no support for such. Thus I compromise at the word “inlet.”

28.2. In the third stanza, the “crossbar” (軾, or 式 in the original text) was a crucial component of a chariot typical in Laotzu's era. Passengers leaned on or held on to the crossbar to keep their balance during the (likely) bumpy ride. For a picture of such a chariot see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chariots_in_ancient_China#/media/File:THorseChineseChariot400BCE.jpg.

28.3. This chapter is my all time favorite. The repeated motifs read like a pop song lyric. The meaning, once translated literally, is actually quite explicit and straightforward, though generations of scholars have shied away from it and instead stretched the chapter into a metaphor of stratagem and trickery.

Chapter 29: To take over all beneath the sky and meddle therein (將欲取天下而為之)

To take over all beneath the sky and meddle therein
is a plan that I do not think can succeed.

All beneath the sky is God's instrument,
not to be meddled with by humans.
He who meddles in it ruins it.
He who holds onto it loses it.

Thus some may lead and end with following;
some may be hot and soon become cool;
some may be sharp and soon become blunt;
and some may be carried safely just to fall behind.

That is why the saint would rid of
the excess, the extra and the grand.



將欲取天下而為之
吾見其弗得已

夫天下神器也
非可為者也
為之者敗之
執之者失之

故物或行或隨
或熱或吹
或強或挫
或培或墜

是以聖人去甚去大去奢

Chapter 30: Help the lords with Tao (以道佐人主)

Help the lords with Tao.

Rely not on arms

to be strong under the sky.

Things done to others turn around to the doers.

Wherever an army has quartered,
soon do thorns and thistles cover.

Only the fruit should be enough.

Never overdo in forces.

Just for the fruit and not for the pride;

just the fruit, and no arrogance;

just the fruit, no self-praising;

just the fruit, no self-possessing—

the fruit rather than the might.

Things that get strong immediately turn old.

That is called un-Tao.

Un-Tao means early death.



以道佐人主
不以兵強于天下
其事好還
師之所居
荊棘生之
善者果而已矣
毋以取強焉
果而勿驕
果而勿矜
果而弗伐
果而毋得已居
是謂果而不強

物壯而老
是謂之不道
不道早已

Chapter 31: The military (夫兵者)

The military: an ominous, hateful instrument,
not a place to dwell in for those aspiring achievements.
Noblemen, in residence,
rank the left side above the right.
In warfare, whereas, the right is ranked above the left.
Thus the military is not for noblemen.
The military: an ominous, hateful instrument.
Use it only as the last resort.
And should you use it,
keep your cool and enjoy it not.
If you enjoy it, you enjoy killing people.
Enjoying killing people, you can't achieve your goal beneath the heavens.

Thus the left is ranked high in celebrations,
and the right, in funerals.
Thus deputy generals stay on the left,
while the master general, on the right.
That is, warfare is treated as funerals.
Having made a lot of killing,
in sadness should we attend the ceremony.
Victories should be treated as funerals.



夫兵者，不祥之器也

物或惡之

故有欲者弗居

君子居則貴左

用兵則貴右

故兵者，非君子之器也

兵者，不祥之器也

不得已而用之

恬淡為上

勿美也

若美之

是樂殺人也

夫樂殺人

不可得志于天下矣

是以吉事上左

喪事上右

是以偏將軍居左

而上將軍居右

言以喪禮居之也

殺人眾

以悲哀蒞之

戰勝而以喪禮處之

Notes on Chapter 31

31.1. “Victories should be treated as funerals” was not completely an anti-war libertarian pipe dream at Laotzu’s time. About three quarters of a century before his time, there was an important battle - the Battle of 城濮 - that determined which state got the primacy among the lords at that time, most within the Chow filial colonial framework and some outside. The victor 晉文公 (Literature Duke of Jin) looked worried despite his troops having feasted for three days on the grains captured from the enemy. This episode was cited as the basis for a deliberation on whether to execute a major general for a lost battle, and the deliberation occurred about two decades before Laotzu’s time (宣公十二年, 《左傳》). It would not be farfetched to assume that Laotzu knew of the said episode in his adulthood.

Chapter 32: Tao is constant and nameless (道恆無名)

Tao is constant and nameless,
simple like a log, and tiny.
But none dare subordinate it under the heavens.
Kings and marquises, upholding it,
would get willing vassals in tens of thousands.

Heaven and earth, coupling with each other,
rain down sweet dews, equally distributed
among the people without any edict.
Such systems initiate titles.
Titles assigned, boundaries are known.
Boundaries known, dangers do not arise.

To Tao, all that lie beneath the heavens
are like streams and valleys to rivers and oceans.



道恆無名
朴雖小
而天下弗敢臣
侯王若能守之
萬物將自賓
天地相合
以俞甘露
民莫之令而自均焉
始制有名
名亦既有
夫亦將知止
知止所以不殆
譬道之在天下也
猶川谷之與江海也

Chapter 33: Knowing others is intelligence (知人者智)

Knowing others is intelligence;
knowing oneself, enlightenment.
Overcoming others is brawn;
overcoming oneself, strength.
Knowing to be content is wealth;
soldiering on, strong will.
Not losing one's own base is endurance;
being remembered after death, longevity.



知人者智也
自知者明也
勝人者有力也
自勝者強也
知足者富也
強行者有志也
不失其所者久也
死而不忘者壽也

Chapter 34: How immense is Tao (道汎汎兮)

O how immense is Tao,
floating to the left and drifting to the right,
achieving things without claiming a fame
and gathering followers in tens of thousands without controlling them.
Never having a desire, it can name itself from the small.
Gathering followers in tens of thousands without domination,
it can name itself as the great.
That is how the saints accomplish greatness
because they are never after greatness.



道汎汎兮其可左右也
成功遂事而弗名有也
萬物歸焉而弗為主
則恆無欲也
可名于小
萬物歸焉而弗為主
可名于大
是以聖人之能成大也
以其不為大也
故能成大

Chapter 35: Raise the magnificent icon (執大象)

Raise the magnificent icon
for all beneath the sky to follow.
Follow without hindrance,
for peace, security, and greatness,
like music and good food that stop passersby.

Thus are such words uttered from Tao:
Oh how insipid, so unflavored!
Look and you cannot see it;
listen and you cannot hear it;
use it and you cannot exhaust it.



執大象
天下往
往而不害
安平大
樂與餌
過格止

故道之出言也
曰：淡兮其無味也
視之不足見也
聽之不足聞也
用之不可既也

Chapter 36: To capture something, first let it expand (將欲翕之必固張之)

To capture something, first let it expand.
To weaken something, first let it strengthen.
To rid of something, get along with it first.
To grab hold of something, give it away first.
That is subtle enlightenment.

The supple and the weak
overcome the strong.
Fish cannot leave water.
Lethal weapons of a state
should not be shown to others.



將欲翕之
必固張之
將欲弱之
必固強之
將欲去之
必固與之
將欲奪之
必固予之
是謂微明

柔弱勝強
魚不可脫于淵
邦利器不可以示人

Chapter 37: Tao is constant (道恆)

Tao is constant, without a name.
If Tao is upheld by kings and marquises,
creatures in tens of thousands evolve by themselves.
Evolving and stirring, they are about to uprise.
I would subdue them with nameless simplicity, simple as a log.
Subdue them with nameless simplicity, simple as a log,
and render no tarnish.
No tarnish rendered, and serenity kept,
heaven and earth are by themselves redressed.



道恆
無名
侯王若能守之
萬物將自化
化而欲作
吾將鎮之以無名之朴
鎮之以無名之朴
夫將不辱
不辱以靜
天地將自正



Book II: Virtues (德經)

Chapter 38: Those with high virtues never mind virtues (上德不德)

Those with high virtues never mind virtues
and hence have virtues.

Those with low virtues strive to lose no virtue
and hence have no virtue.

The highly virtuous persons act on none and have none to act for.

The highly humane ones act on some though still have none to act for.

Those striving for justice act on some and have some to act for.

Those striving for the norm, not only do they act,
if responded by none, would push up their sleeves
and hurl their arms into actions, thereby missing Tao.

Once Tao is missed, virtues are pursued;

virtues lost, humanity;

humanity lost, justice and honor;

justice and honor unattained,

norms are maintained.

Norms are but shallow parts of loyalty and bond,
and the harbinger of revolts.

Foresight is merely the flaky flower of Tao,
and the harbinger of follies.

A man of great stature would stay with the deep and not with the shallow,
and keep the concrete fruit, not the flaky flower.

Hence take this over that.



上德不德是以有德
下德不失德是以無德
上德無為而無以為也
上仁為之而無以為也
上義為之而有以為也
上禮為之而莫之應也
則攘臂而扔之

故失道

失道矣，而後德

失德而後仁

失仁而後義

失義而後禮

夫禮者，忠信之薄也

而亂之首也

前識者道之華也

而愚之首也

是以大丈夫居其厚不居其薄

居其實不居其華

故去彼取此

Notes on Chapter 38

38.1. The 禮 (norm) that Laotzu dismisses as the lowest level of virtues in this chapter must have been a key notion at his time, as Confucius, his slightly younger contemporary, proposed 禮 as the crucial aspect of the social order to restore (“克己復禮”, or “overcome the ego to restore the norm”), so crucial a notion that one of the six Confucianist classics is *The Book of Norms* (《禮記》), which collects all the Chow rites and ceremonies that Confucius managed to document. These rites and ceremonies - specific down to the fine details such as how many servants are allowed for which level of noblemen, and how tall the castle wall should be for which class of lords - presumably constituted the social norm during the heyday of the Chow dynasty.

Chapter 39: Those in the past that attained the one (昔之得一者)

Those in the past that attained the one:
The sky, clear because of the one;
the earth, calm because of the one;
gods, effective due to the one;
valleys, filled up due to the one;
marquises and kings rely on the one
to set things right beneath the heavens.
The way to get to such a point, 'tis said:
The sky would break if not clear,
the earth would explode if not calm,
gods would quit if not effective,
valleys would dry out if not calm,
and kings and marquises would topple
if they become haughty for their noble status.
Therefore those in noble status must stay on the humble base!
That is why kings and marquises refer to themselves
as the lonely, the widowed and the poor,
which means the humble is the foundation, doesn't it?

Thus, befriend with the friendless.

Therefore, don't be showy like a shiny jade,
nor abrasive like a rock.



昔之得一者
天得一以清
地得一以寧
神得一以靈
谷得一以盈
侯王得一以為天下正
其致之也
謂天毋已清
將恐裂
地毋以寧
將恐發
神毋以寧
將恐歇
谷毋已寧
將恐竭
侯王毋已貴以高
將恐蹶
故必貴而以賤為本
必高矣
而以下為基夫
是以侯王自謂孤寡不穀
此其賤之本歟，非也

故致數與無與

是故不欲碌碌若玉
硌硌若石

Chapter 40: Top intellects, in learning of Tao (上士聞道)

Top intellects, in learned of Tao,
adhere to it with diligence.
mediocre intellects, in learned of Tao,
sometimes keep up with it, but sometimes lose the track.
Low intellects, in learning of Tao, simply laugh at it,
which is alright: had it not been laughed at,
it wouldn't have been good enough for Tao.
Thus there is a saying as follows:
The enlightening Tao would appear to be blind;
the progressing Tao would appear regressive;
the path-opening Tao, entangled;
the high level of virtues, low as valleys;
the perfect white color, tarnished;
the generous virtue, insufficient;
the robust virtue, lethargic.
Objects true in substance are sullied.
The extensive space is defined by no corner.
Magnificent instruments are late to complete.
The superb sound is too subtle to hear.
The enormous icon assumes no shape,
and the omniscient Tao, no name.

It is only Tao
that can start well and end well.



上士聞道
勤能行之
中士聞道
若存若亡
下士聞道
大笑之
弗笑
不足以為道
是以建言有之曰
明道如



進道如退
夷道如類
上德如谷
大白如辱
廣德如不足
建德如偷
質真如渝
大方無隅
大器晚成
大音希聲
大象無形
道褒無名
夫唯道
善始且善成

Chapter 41: Things being toppled is Tao in action (反也者道之動也)

Things being toppled
is Tao in action.

Things getting weakened
is Tao performing its function.

Things beneath the sky arose from being,
and being, from non-being.

Tao gave birth to one,
one gave birth to two,
two gave birth to three,
and three, creatures in tens of thousands.
Creatures in tens of thousands
lean on the Yin and embrace the Yang,
with breath in between to keep the equilibrium.

All that people hate to become
are the lonely, the widowed and the poor,
yet by names so disdained,
kings and dukes refer to themselves.
Things might get enriched after being reduced,
and reduced after being enriched.
Therefore what others teach
could be discussed and taught to others.
“Bullies do not die well,”
which I shall use as a lesson.



反也者道之動也
弱也者道之用也
天下之物生於有
有生於無

道生一
一生二
二生三
三生萬物
萬物負陰而抱陽
中氣以為和

人之所惡
唯孤寡不穀
而王公以自名也
物或損之而益
益之而損
故人之所教
亦議而教人
強梁不得其死
吾將以為學父

Notes on Chapter 41

41.1. The last word of the second stanza, 和, means harmony in Chinese nowadays. According to the ancient dictionary 《说文解字》, however, the original denotation of 和 is mutual response (相應), which is strikingly close to the central concept of game theory, equilibrium. The dynamic view that Laotzu so forcefully and poetically conveys through the first stanza fits better with the notion of equilibrium than with the static-sounding “harmony.”

Chapter 42: The most supple among all beneath the heavens (天下之至柔)

The most supple among all beneath the heavens
gallops across the most solid under the heavens.
The volumeless penetrates the gapless:
From that I see the contribution of inaction.
Teaching without words,
and production from inaction,
are matchable by few beneath the all-covering heavens.



天下之至柔
馳騁乎天下之至堅
無有入于無間
吾是以知無為之有益也
不言之教
無為之益
天下希能及之矣

Chapter 43: The fame or the body (名與身)

The fame or the body,
which one is more endeared?
The body or the treasure,
which one should weigh more?
The gain or the loss,
which one is more worrisome?
That's why excessive treasure leads to massive costs,
and overabundant safekeeping leads to heavy losses.
Thus, be content and you won't be disgraced;
know when to stop and you won't be endangered.
With that you can persevere.



名與身孰親
身與貨孰多
得與亡孰病
是故甚愛必大費
多藏必厚亡
故知足不辱
知止不殆
可以長久

Chapter 44: The most complete tool appears broken (大成若缺)

The most complete tool appears broken,
yet, when used, it never wears out.

The vast container appears empty,
yet, when used, it is never exhausted.

The straight appears zigzag;
the skilled appears awkward;
and big wins, fraught with defect.

The dry overcomes the cold;
the calm overcomes the hot.

The clear and the clam can be used to set things right
beneath the all-covering heavens.



大成若缺
其用不敝
大盈若冲
其用不窘
大直如屈
大巧如拙
大贏如絀
躁勝寒
靜勝熱
清靜可以為天下正

Chapter 45: When Tao prevails beneath the heavens (天下有道)

When Tao prevails beneath the sky,
racing horses are kept away because of their feces.
When Tao's abandoned under the sky,
war horses flourish and multiply at outskirts.

No sin is worse than desire.
No disaster is worse than discontent.
No fault is more miserable than wanting acquisitions.
Thus the content with being content
suffices forever.



天下有道
却走馬以糞
天下無道
戎馬生于郊

罪莫大于可欲
禍莫大于不知足
咎莫憯于欲得
故知足之足
恆足矣

Chapter 46: Step not out of the door (不出于戶)

Step not out of the door
and get to know all beneath the sky.
Peek not out of the window
and get to know the Tao in Heaven.
The farther you venture out,
the less you know about.
Thus, the saint knows without trekking,
is renowned without showing,
and gets things done without acting.



不出于戶
可以知天下
不窺于牖
可以知天道
其出也彌遠
其知彌少
是以聖人不行而知
不見而名
弗為而成

Chapter 47: Students add to their knowledge day by day (為學者日益)

Students add to their knowledge day by day,
while Taoists reduce theirs day by day.
Reduction upon reduction
until it boils down to none.
None being done, none is undone.

About to overtake all beneath the sky,
Constantly you have no action.
When there is an action,
you are inadequate to overall all beneath the sky.



為學者日益
聞道者日損
損之又損之
以至於無為
無為而無不為矣

將欲取天下
恆無事
及其有事也
又不足以取天下矣

Chapter 48: The saint minds not himself (聖人恆無心)

The saint minds not himself,
but minds what houses in hundreds mind.
Be kind to those who are kind,
and also to those who are unkind:
such is the virtue of kindness.
Trust those who are trustworthy,
and also those who are not:
such is the virtue of trust.
Wandering here and there, the saint
looks relaxed and furlled.
Handling affairs beneath the sky,
he looks boundless and carefree.
His ears and eyes are the focus
of noble houses in hundreds,
yet the saint merely chuckles.



聖人恆無心
以百姓之心為心
善者善之
不善者亦善之
德善也
信者信之
不信者亦信之
德信也
聖人之在天下也
歙歙焉
為天下
渾渾焉
百姓皆注其耳目焉
聖人皆咳之

Chapter 49: Alive or dead, Oh how random it is to be either (出生入死)

Alive or dead, Oh how random it is to be either,
as if stepping out hither and falling in thither!

Alive, one stumbles into the other end
in three paths out of every ten.

Dead, one stumbles into the other end
in three paths out of every ten.

Ignorant folks seek to be alive when they are already alive
and step into death, three out of every ten.

Why so? Because

They seek to be alive when they are already alive.

I heard of someone skilled
to stay alive in whatever journeys:

Trekking in mountains, he avoids neither rhinoceros nor dashing tigers.

Entering battlefields, he neither puts on armors nor carries weapons.

No place in his body can a rhinoceros thrust with its horn,
nor in his body can a dashing tiger lunge at with its paws,
nor in his body can swords or knives impale with their blades.

Why so? Because

Occupying the dead ground,
he leaves no room for death.



出生入死
生之徒十有三
死之徒十有三
而民生生
動皆之死地十有三
何故也
以其生生也

蓋聞善攝生者
陵行不辟兕虎
入軍不被甲兵
兕無所揣其角
虎無所措其爪
兵無所容其刃
夫何故也
以其無死地焉

Notes on Chapter 49

49.1. The reasoning in ancient Chinese thoughts is rarely quantitative. That is why this chapter stands out like an orange in the snow, with such specific consideration of conditional probabilities! The last sentence of the chapter is so much echoed by the Ironborn phrase “What is dead may never die” in *Game of Thrones*.

Chapter 50: Tao creates them (道生之)

Tao creates them.
virtues nurture them.
Animals are the shapes they assume
and instruments, the forms they are cut into.
Therefore Tao is revered,
and virtues cherished,
by creatures in tens of thousands.
Such reverence for Tao,
and appreciation for virtues,
are conferred by none,
but always are
what things themselves shall be.

Tao creates them,
then it nurtures them,
fosters them,
grows them,
completes them.
lets them mature,
feeds them and eventually topples them.
Create them without claiming ownership,
support them without reliance,
and parent them without interference:
such are virtues of dark subtleties.



道生之
德蓄之
物形之而器成之
是以萬物尊道而貴德
道之尊
德之貴也
夫莫之爵而恆自然也

道生之
蓄之
長之
育之
成之
熟之
養之
覆之
生而弗有
為而弗恃
長而弗宰
是謂玄德

Chapter 51: All beneath the sky have a beginning (天下有始)

All beneath the sky have a beginning,
taken as the mother of all beneath the sky.
Figuring out the mother,
then infer about the children;
having understood the children,
return and stay with the mother.
Throughout your life you will never be endangered.

Plug the holes and shut the doors,
and you will never get exhausted.
Unplug the holes and ferry through affairs,
and you will never get stuck.

Seeing the minute takes brilliance.
Staying supple takes resilience.

Use the luster
and brilliance we recover.
Expose the body to no disaster.
That's suiting up with the regular.



天下有始
以為天下母
既得其母
以知其子
既知其子
復守其母
沒身不殆

塞其兌
閉其門
終身不勤
啟其兌
濟其事
終身不棘

見小曰明
守柔曰強

用其光
復歸其明
毋遺身殃
是為襲常

Chapter 52: Such must be theft! (是謂盜乎)

Should I get the knowledge, like
something that can be carried on,
walk on the main path, Tao, shall I,
and avoid, with fear, the winding and the crooked.
Tao, the major path, is long and straightforward,
but ignorant folks prefer crooked shortcuts:
Squares and courts they clean up,
leaving farmlands overgrown with weeds,
and granaries, empty;
sashed in color, clothed in drawings,
they carry sharpened swords and overeat all day,
and still have goods and wealth in excess:
Such must be theft!
Not Tao at all!



使我挈然有知
行于大道
唯它是畏
大道甚夷
民甚好徑
朝甚除
田甚蕪
倉甚虛
服文采
帶利劍
厭食而資財有餘
是謂盜乎！
非道也哉！

Chapter 53: The deeply founded others cannot uproot (善建者不拔)

The deeply founded others cannot uproot.

The firmly held will not drop loose.

Thus offsprings, multiplying without end, offer sacrifices.

Cultivate the virtues in the body and they become true.

Cultivate the virtues in the household and they become abundant.

Cultivate them in the village and they grow.

Cultivate them in the state and they become aplenty.

Cultivate them under the sky and they wide spread.

Observe the body through the body.

Observe the household through the household.

Observe the state through the state.

Observe the realm beneath the sky
through the realm beneath the sky.

How do I know what underlies the realm beneath the sky?

Through this.



善建者不拔
善抱者不脫
子孫以祭祀不絕
修之身
其德乃真
修之家
其德有餘
修之鄉
其德乃長
修之邦
其德乃豐
修之天下
其德乃溥
以身觀身
以家觀家
以邦觀邦
以天下觀天下
吾何以知天下之然哉
以此

Chapter 54: He who is rich in virtues (含德之厚者)

He who is rich in virtues
is like a newborn, reddish in hue, whom
bees and scorpions would not sting,
lizards and snakes would not bite,
birds would not snatch,
and beasts would not strike.
His limbs are feeble, and tendons tender,
yet his grasp is firm.
Sexual encounters he has yet to know of,
yet his genital stands erect:
That's the reach of vigor.
Crying throughout a day, he never gets choked:
That's the reach of equilibrium.

Knowing equilibrium means constant.
Knowing the constant means enlightenment.
Prolonging lives artificially means disaster.
Forcing breath mindfully means reluctance.

Things that are strong immediately turn old.
That is called un-Tao;
un-Tao means early death.



含德之厚者
比于赤子
蜂蠆虺蛇弗螫
攫鳥猛獸弗搏
骨弱筋柔而握固
未知牝牡之會而媾怒
精之至也
終日號而不嘔
和之至也

知和曰常
知常曰明
益生曰祥
心使氣曰強

物壯則老
謂之不道
不道早已

Notes on Chapter 54

54.1. The 祥 in the second stanza was taken as the “borrowed form” (通假字) of 戕 (“killed”) according to the Chinese version (徐梵澄: 《老子臆解》, 中華書局, 1988, who in turn cites ancient scholars for similar interpretations) based on which I translate the whole book. That is the opposite of the word 祥. I follow his interpretation because it is consistent with the rest of the stanza.

Chapter 55: Convergence in dark subtleties (玄 同)

Knowers do not talk;
talkers do not know.
Plug the hole,
shut the door,
mingle with light,
converge with dust,
blunt the sharpened tips,
and untie the messy knots.
That's convergence in dark subtleties.
Thus, when you can't friend them
they can't unfriend you.
Unable to benefit,
you wouldn't be damaged.
Unable to get appreciated,
you wouldn't get depreciated,
then you would be cherished under the heavens.



知者弗言
言者弗知
塞其兌
閉其門
和其光
同其塵
挫其銳
解其紛
是謂玄同
故不可得而親
亦不可得而疏
不可得而利
亦不可得而害
不可得而貴
亦不可得而賤
故為天下貴

Chapter 56: Govern a state in constancy (以正治 邦)

Govern a state in constancy;
conduct warfare with oddities;
overtake all beneath the sky with inaction:
How do I know that they should be so?

The more taboos prevail beneath the sky,
the poorer the subjects become.
The sharper instruments the subjects have,
the more decadent are states and houses.
The more subjects are learned and skilled,
The more eerie gadgets are stirred up.
The more decrees and edicts are issued,
the more thefts and murders emerge.

That is why the saint has said such words:
“I do nothing and the subjects civilize themselves;
I keep quiet and the subjects right themselves;
I launch no campaign and the subjects enrich themselves;
I want no want and the subjects simplify themselves.”



以正治邦
以奇用兵
以無事取天下
吾何以知其然也哉

夫天下多忌諱
而民彌貧
民多利器
而邦家滋昏
民多智能
而奇物滋起
法令滋彰
而盜賊多有

是以聖人之言曰
我無為而民自化
我好靜而民自正
我無事而民自富
我欲不欲而民自樸

Chapter 57: Oh! It is disasters that fortunes rely upon (禍兮福之所倚)

When the governance is sickly passive,
the subjects are simple and obedient.
When the governance goes investigative,
the state becomes broken.
Oh! It is disasters that fortunes rely upon,
and fortunes, where disasters incubate.
Who knows where the end is?
Is there not the norm?
Norm again becomes odd,
and good again turns evil.
The maze entrapping mankind
has been here for long.
That is why the saint is square
but not abrasive, sharp
but not hurtful, straight
but not overreaching, and bright
but he never glares.



其政閔閔，其民淳淳
其政察察，其邦缺缺
禍兮福之所倚
福兮禍之所伏
孰知其極？
其無正也？
正復為奇
善復為妖
人之迷也，其日固久矣
是以聖人方而不割
廉而不劓
直而不肆
光而不耀

Chapter 58: In governing people and serving Heaven (治人事天)

In governing people and serving Heaven,
nothing ranks above the thrift in farming.
It is for the thrift in farming that humbly are we dressed.
Humble dressing is for the virtue of saving.
With the virtue of saving, none is impossible to overcome.
None impossible to overcome, no limit is known.
No limit known, the kingdom can be owned.
Having the base of the kingdom, longevity is achieved.
That's the Tao of deepening the root and firming up the base,
and the Tao of long life and far sight.



治人事天
莫若嗇
夫唯嗇
是以早服
早服是謂重積德
重積德則無不克
無不克則莫知其極
莫知其極
可以有國
有國之母
可以長久
是謂深根固柢長生久視之道也

Chapter 59: Governing a massive state is like boiling a little fish (治大國若烹小鮮)

Governing a massive state is like boiling a little fish,
ruined if stirred too often.

Use Tao to establish the rule beneath the sky
so that ghosts do not become gods.

It is not really that ghosts do not become gods,
but rather that they do not hurt mankind;
it is not only that they do not hurt mankind,
but also that the sages in mankind do not hurt them either.
Neither side hurting the other,
their virtues are wed to each other.



治大國若烹小鮮
以道立天下
其鬼不神
非其鬼不神也
其神不傷人也
非其神不傷人也
聖人亦弗傷也
夫兩不相傷
故德交歸焉

Notes on Chapter 59

59.1. The second line does not come from the original text, but rather from Han Fei (韓非子), a philosopher about three hundred years after Laotzu. Han Fei offers his explanation for the first line of this chapter as: “When you are boiling a little fish, it would be ruined if you stir it often.” I add his explanation into this chapter because Han Fei still belongs to roughly the same, pre-imperial period of ancient China as Laotzu, and the description adds another bit of daily-life description for that period.

Chapter 60: Large states are downstream (大邦者下流也)

Large states are downstream,
playing the role of the female for all beneath the sky.
Beneath the sky, in an intercourse,
the female, in calm, overcomes the male.
Calm, she stays below.

A large state, staying below, overtakes a small state.
A small state, staying below, is overtaken by a large state.
In staying below, some overtakes others,
and others, overtaken.

What a large state wants is none but to overtake and domesticate others.
What a small state wants is none but to enter and service others.
Each side obtains exactly what it wants,
and the large one is fit to stay below.



大邦者下流也

天下之牝

天下之交也

牝恆以靜勝牡

為其靜也

故宜為下

大邦以下小邦

則取小邦

小邦以下大邦

則取于大邦

故或下以取

或下而取

故大邦者不過欲兼畜人

小邦者不過欲入事人

夫皆得其欲

則大者宜為下

Notes on Chapter 60

60.1. This is the most abstract perspective about interpersonal and international relationships that I have ever come across, from the ancient to the modern, and from the east to the west. The same perspective, dressed up in modern lingo, would go that an individual is essentially just a carrier of DNAs, and a nation-state essentially just a collection of individuals, each associated with some resources. An intercourse between two individuals would then be merely a transfer of DNAs from one to the other, much like uploading some digital information from a USB to a laptop. A trade between two countries would be just a transfer of resources from some members in one to some in the other, and to signify the transfer, a flow of money in the reverse direction. From such a perspective, is there still any point to claim who is taking advantage of whom in such a transfer? What is really a “who” or a “whom”? Is what defines a “who” or “whom,” namely, the boundary between two carriers of DNAs, or that between two nation-states, really fundamentally out of the first principle, or merely an artifice of some equilibrium?

Chapter 61: Son of Heaven and the triumvirate (立天子置三卿)

Tao is the core of things in tens of thousands.
Goodness is what people cherish;
badness is what they ward off.
Good words gain one respect;
good deeds build up followers.
Even those who are not good,
what's the point of abandoning them?
Thus, establish the rule
of the son of Heaven
and the triumvirate
—one to manage local chiefs,
one for horses and warfare,
and one to manage irrigation.
Notwithstanding a disk of jade, in the tempting offer,
so enormous that only with open arms can you hold;
or herds of racing horses, four in each team:
better sit tight and advance only with Tao.
Why was Tao so cherished by the ancients?
Isn't all that we wish is just to get what we pray for
and be forgiven when we are at fault?
Thus it's cherished beneath the heavens.



道者萬物之注也
善，人之寶也
不善，人之所保也
美言可以市尊
_行可以加人
人之不善也
何棄之有？
故立天子
置三卿
雖有拱壁
以先四馬
不若坐而進此
古之所以貴此者何也？
不謂求以得、有罪以免歟！
故為天下貴

Notes on Chapter 61

61.1. The three positions that constituted the triumvirate (三卿) is not mentioned in the original text, though mentioned in ancient documents (e.g., 《周禮》, or *The Book of the Chow Norms*). I include them to indicate what the three were supposed to do in the ancient time from Laotzu's standpoint.

61.2. The missing word in the fifth line of the Chinese text is missing in the original text as well. Thanks to the antithesis structure in Chinese, however, it is not hard to infer from the context what the missing word is supposed to mean.

Chapter 62: Do by not doing (為無為)

Do by not doing;
work by not working;
flavor foods by adding no flavor.
Enlarge the small and increase the few.
Repay grudges with virtues.

Plot against the difficult from its easy parts;
work on the big from small openings.
Difficult things beneath the sky have easy starts,
and great things have small beginnings.

That is why the saint never works on the big,
and hence he achieves the big.

Those quick to promise rarely deliver;
things that look easy are likely difficult.
Thus the saint would take the easy as difficult
thereby ending with nothing difficult.



為無為
事無事
味無味
大小多少
報怨以德

圖難于其易也
為大于其細也
天下之難作于易
天下之大作于細

是以聖人終不為大
故能成其大

夫輕諾者必寡信
多易必多難
是以聖人猶難之
故終于無難

Chapter 63: When it's stable, it is easy to hold (其安也易持)

When it's stable, it's easy to hold.
When it's yet to signal, it's easy to plan.
When it's brittle, it's easy to cut.
When it's little, it's easy to separate.
Act before it exists.
Rule before it revolts.

A trunk requiring joining open arms to enclose
grew out of a tiny sprout.
A platform so high, up to nine stories,
started with a basket of earth in its construction.
A peak of seven hundred feet: To scale it
we begin with the first step.

He who acts, fails.
He who holds, loses.

That is why the saint
acts on nothing, hence suffering no defeat,
and holds on to nothing, hence suffering no loss.

When people work on projects,
often at the verge of success do they fail.
Thus it is said:
Be careful of the end as if it were the start,
so no project would fail.

That is why the saint desires the undesired
and treasures not the rare goods.
He studies what are not studied
and covers what others miss.
He fosters creatures in tens of thousands,
for them to be what they shall be,
and dares not act on them.



其安也易持
其未兆也易謀
其脆也易判
其微也易散
為之于未有
治之于未亂

合抱之木
生於毫末
九成之台
作于累土
百仞之高
始于足下

為者敗之
執者失之

是以聖人無為也
故無敗
無執也
故無失

民之從事也
恆于其成而敗之
故曰：慎終若始
則無敗事矣

是以聖人欲不欲
而不貴難得之貨
學不學
而復眾人之所過
能輔萬物之自然而弗敢為

Chapter 64: The ancient practitioners of Tao (古之為道者)

The ancient practitioners of Tao
would not enlighten the subjects.
Rather, they fool them.
Subjects are difficult to govern
because they have knowledge.
Thus, informing a state of knowledge
does violence to the state.
Informing a state of ignorance
brings virtues to the state.
These two principles
constitute the model.
Knowing the model
is a virtue that is dark and subtle.

Dark, subtle virtues are deep and far-reaching,
opposite to usual matters,
and thus smoothing them out.



古之為道者
非以明民也
將以愚之
民之難治也
以其知也
故以知知邦
邦之賊也
以不知知邦
邦之德也
恆知此兩者
亦稽式也
是謂玄德

玄德深矣
遠矣
與物反矣
乃至大順

Chapter 65: Rivers and seas can be kings of hundreds of valleys (江海之為百谷王)

Rivers and seas can be kings of hundreds of valleys
because they stay below.
That's why they can be kings of hundreds of valleys.

That is why the saint, to stay on top of the people,
uses his words to be humble.
In order to be the first,
he makes himself the last.
Thus, when he is on the top,
people do not feel his weight;
when he goes the first,
people do not feel the cost.
All beneath the heavens are glad to support him
and of him they never get enough.
Isn't that because he does not compete?
Thus none beneath the heavens can compete with him.



江海之所以能為百谷王者
以其善下之
是以能為百谷王

是以聖人之欲上民也
必以其言下之
其欲先民也
必以其身後之
故居上而民弗重也
居前而民弗害也
天下皆樂推而弗厭也
不以其無爭歟
故天下莫能與爭

Chapter 66: Let the state be tiny, and the populace small (小邦寡民)

Let the state be tiny, and the populace small.
Let the military instruments never put to use.
Let the people fear death and avoid migration.
Let there be boats and chariots and nowhere to go with them.
Let there be armors and weapons and nowhere to display them.
Let the language regress to tied knots for denotation.
Let people enjoy their food,
feel beautiful in their dress,
be happy with their customs,
and feel secured in where they live.
Let the neighboring states,
one visible to the other from faraway,
and dogs and roosters heard by the other side,
see their peoples, living till their aging dying days,
never travel to and fro across the divide.



小邦寡民
使有十百人器而勿用
使民重死而遠徙
有舟車無所乘之
有甲兵無所陳之
使民復結繩而用之
甘其食
美其服
樂其俗
安其居
鄰邦相望
雞犬之聲相聞
民至老死不相往來

Chapter 67: True words aren't pretty (信言不美)

True words aren't pretty;
pretty words aren't true.
Knowers don't debate;
debaters don't know.
The skilled do not brag;
braggers are not skilled.

The saint collects none for himself.
Having done it for others,
he gets another;
having given it to others,
he ends with even more.

Therefore, Tao of Heaven
is to benefit others without infringing on them.
Tao for mankind
is to work on others without competing with them.



信言不美
美言不信
知者不博
博者不知
善者不哆
哆者不善

聖人無積
既以為人
己愈有
既以予人
己愈多

故天之道
利而不害
人之道
為而弗爭

Chapter 68: Heaven will build it; you, with love defend it! (天將建之女以慈垣之)

“All beneath the heavens say that I am big,
so big that they cannot tell that I look like what they think I am.”
Precisely because it cannot be told that it looks like what they think it is,
it is really big.
If they could tell, it's got to be small!

“I have three treasures.
Take them, hold them and cherish them:

“First is love,
the second is thrift,
and the third, never advancing to the first beneath the heavens.

“With love, you have courage.
With thrift, you can expand.
Never advance to the first beneath the heavens,
you can take charge of instruments.

“Now they forego love while going for courage,
forego thrift while going for expansion,
and forego the backward position while advancing to the first.
So they meet their death.

“With love, in battles you achieve victories,
and, under siege, withstand assaults.

“Heaven will build it;
you, with love defend it!”



天下皆謂我大
大而不肖
故能大
若肖
久矣其細也夫

我恆有三寶
持而寶之

一曰慈
二曰儉
三曰不敢為天下先

夫慈，故能勇
儉，故能廣
不敢為天下先
故能為成器長

今舍其慈
且勇
舍其儉
且廣
舍其後
且先
死矣

夫慈
以戰則勝
以守則固

天將建之
女以慈垣之

Chapter 69: Good warriors do not look military (善為士者不武)

Good warriors do not look military.

Good soldiers do not look angry.

Those good at battles avoid confrontations.

Those good at using others stay in low positions.

That is called the virtue of competing with none,
and the force of utilizing others.

That is called fitting in with Heaven,
the utmost virtue among the ancients.



善為士者不武

善戰者不怒

善勝敵者弗與

善用人者為下

是謂不爭之德

是謂用人之力

是謂配天

古之極也

Chapter 70: Between clashing arms alike, the mournful party wins (抗兵相若哀者勝)

On warfare there is a saying:

“Rather than be the host, I would be the guest.

Rather than advance by an inch, I would retreat by a foot.”

That is to advance not the front line,

push up not the sleeves

to expose the fighting arms,

grab no weapons first,

and hurl no fist into the enemy.

No disaster is worse than running out of enemies.

Enemies gone, also about to be lost

is what I should cherish!

Thus, between clashing arms alike,

the mournful party wins.



用兵有言曰
吾不敢為主而為客
不敢進寸而退尺
是謂行無行
攘無臂
執無兵
扔無敵

禍莫大于無敵
無敵近亡吾寶矣
故抗兵相若
而哀者勝矣

Chapter 71: The saint, in hempen rags, wears a jade next to his chest (被褐而懷玉)

My words are quite easy to understand
and quite easy to follow,
but none beneath the sky comprehend
and none follow.

My words have a foundation,
and actions follow principles.
Precisely due to their ignorance
do they not know me at all!
The fewer are those who know me,
the more I shall be treasured!
—The saint, in hempen rags,
wears a jade next to his chest.



吾言甚易知也
甚易行也
而天下莫之能知也
莫之能行也
夫言有宗
事有主
夫唯無知也
是以不我知
知我者希
則我貴矣
是以聖人被褐而懷玉

Notes on Chapter 71

71.1. Most resonant to me is the poet in Laotzu. Straightforward outpouring from an unpretentious, lonely soul. Never shy to complain. No pretense to be balanced. Same in Chapters 20 and 52. Such poetic lonely voices were echoed by a Qu Yuan (屈原) in the declining kingdom of Chu (楚國) about two centuries later, and then gradually went quiet in the Chinese classics as China progressed/regressed into a Confucianist centralizing civilization that ranks individuals below the state.

Chapter 72: Knowing not knowing is esteemed (知不知尚矣)

Knowing not knowing is esteemed.
Not knowing not knowing is at fault.
The saint is never at fault
because he faults being at fault,
and so is never at fault.



知不知
尚矣
不知知
病矣
是以聖人之不病也
以其病病也
是以不病

Chapter 73: When subjects fear not the fearful (民之不畏畏)

When subjects fear not the fearful,
the greatest fear is coming!
Do not invade where they live.
Do not suppress what they grow.
Only when you do not suppress them
do they not disdain you.

The saint knows himself but shows himself not;
he respects himself but prides himself not.
Thus take this over that.



民之不畏畏
則大畏將至矣
毋狎其所居
毋厭其所生
夫唯弗厭
是以不厭
是以聖人自知而不自見也
自愛而不自貴也
故去彼取此

Chapter 74: Casted far and wide is the net of Heaven (天網恢恢)

Some dare to march forward and die;
some dare to stay behind, survive.
Between the two, one is good, the other bad,
but which one does Heaven disdain,
and for what reason, who could ascertain?

Tao of Heaven:
Victories without battles,
responses without words,
coming without calling,
and plans without plots.

Casted far and wide is the net of Heaven,
broad and scattered, but leaving nothing out.



勇于敢者則殺
勇于不敢者則活
此兩者
或利或害
天之所惡
孰知其故

天之道
不戰而善勝
不言而善應
不召而自來
繹然而善謀

天網恢恢
疏而不失

Chapter 75: If subjects do not fear death (若民恆且不畏死)

If subjects do not fear death,
why scare them with death?
If they fear death,
and get executed if they do evil,
who would dare to do evil?
If subjects fear death,
there should be executioners to do the killing.
Doing the killing instead of the executioners
is like doing the logging instead of the loggers.
Doing the logging instead of the loggers,
you would be hard pressed not to hurt your own hands.



若民恆且不畏死
奈何以殺懼之也
若民恆且畏死
而為畸者
吾將得而殺之
夫孰敢矣
若民恆且必畏死
則恆有司殺者
夫代司殺者殺
是代大匠斲也
夫代大匠斲者
則希不傷其手矣

Chapter 76: People are starving (人之饑也)

People are starving
because the tax is too heavy,
hence the starvation.
Noble houses are in turmoil
because the overlord would meddle,
hence the turmoil.
Subjects do not fear death,
because to survive they have to give up even more,
hence lightly they take death.
Nothing left to live for,
they would rather forfeit their lives.



人之饑也
以其取食稅之多也
是以饑
百姓之不治也
以其上之有以為也
是以不治
民之輕死
以其求生之厚也
是以輕死
夫唯無以生為者
是賢于貴生

Chapter 77: A person when alive is so very tender (人之生也柔弱)

A person when alive is so very tender!
When dead, the body gets tougher.
Animals and plants when alive are so very tender.
When dead, they turn dryer and harder.
Thus it is said:
being tough and hard is a path to death;
being weak, tiny and tender is a path to life.
Therefore weapons powerful get you no victory,
and plants getting tough are easy to twitch.
The strong and the big should stay below;
the tender and the weak should stay above.



人之生也柔弱
其死也

槁

仞堅強
萬物草木之生也柔弱
其死也枯

槁

故曰：堅強者死之徒也
柔弱微細生之徒也
是以兵強則不勝
木強則競
故強大居下
柔弱居上

Chapter 78: Tao of Heaven is like drawing a bow (天之道其猶張弓歟)

Tao of Heaven is like drawing a bow!
To shoot from a high ground, aim low.
To shoot from below, aim high.
Things are in excess, reduce;
things in shortage, add.
Thus the way of Heaven
reduces the excess and cover the shortage.
The way of mankind, by contrast,
takes from the shortage and contributes to the excess.
Who would contribute his excess to Heaven?
Only the ones with Tao.

That is why the saint produces, but claims no ownership;
accomplishes missions, but claims no credit.
Just like that, he wants to show no talent!



天之道
其猶張弓歟
高者抑之
下者舉之
有餘者損之
不足者補之
故天之道
損有餘而益不足
人之道則不然
損不足以奉有餘
孰能有餘而又以取奉于天者乎
唯有道者

是以聖人為而弗有
成功而弗居也
若此
其不欲見賢也

Chapter 79: None beneath the sky is softer weaker than water (天下莫柔弱于水)

None beneath the sky is softer weaker than water,
yet, in attacking the tough and the strong,
none can outdo water,
as none can alter it.

That the supple overcomes the hard
and the tender the strong,
is known by all beneath the heavens,
but practiced by none.

That is why the saint's word says:
"He who bears the blame for the state
is the lord of the commune, worshipped for land and grain.
He who bears the misfortunes for the kingdom
is the king of all beneath the heavens."

Positive words sound negative.



天下莫柔弱于水
而攻堅強者莫之能先也
以其無以易之也
柔之勝剛也
弱之勝強也
天下莫弗知
而莫之能行也

是故聖人之言云
曰受邦之詢
是謂社稷之主
受邦之不祥
是謂天下之王

正言若反

Chapter 80: Tao of Heaven has no side to favor (天道無親)

Animosities settled, grudges remain.
How then can goodness be attained?

Hence the saint maintains
the right-hand sides of inscribed contracts
but uses them not to levy duties on the people.
The virtuous inscribe contracts.
The virtueless, for taxes, carve out farmlands.

Tao of Heaven has no side to favor.
Constant it is with the good ones.



和大怨
必有餘怨
焉可以爲善

是以聖人執右契
而不以責于人
故有德司契
無德司徹

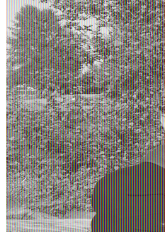
夫天道無親
恆與善人

Notes on Chapter 80

80.1. According to the mainstream interpretation, the word 徹 in the second stanza has been taken as the borrowed form of the word 轍, which refers to a path that marks the boundary of a farmland. In Laotzu's time, taxation still largely took the form of carving up the boundary between public and private farmlands (井田制). A household was supposed to work on both, but only the produce from the private part could go to the household.



About the Translator



Charles Z. Zheng (鄭軸承) is a professor of economics at the University of Western Ontario. Born a Cantonese, he started to read the ancient form of Chinese (古文) at the age of seven. He owes ZhiXin (“Faith Holding”) Middle School (執信中學) for the basic math training, Sun Yat-Sen University (中山大學) for the coming-of-age experience, Lawrence University for the conviction of liberal arts education, and the University of Minnesota for the academic training.