

Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment coversheet & feedback form

**THIS SHEET MUST BE THE FIRST PAGE OF THE ASSIGNMENT YOU ARE
SUBMITTING (DO NOT SEND AS A SEPARATE FILE)**

For completion by the student:		
Student Name: SIYUN HE (賀思芸)		
Module code: SICH 6009 Module title: TEXTUAL STUDIES OF DAOISM: LAOZI'S TAO TE CHING (ENGLISH ESSAY)	Student ID number: 1604233	Educational support needs: Yes/No
Module tutor: PROFESSOR YU-HERN, CHANG Assignment due date: 28 TH JANUARY		
If your module has multiple submissions please indicate which piece of work this is. 1 st ☐ 2 nd ☐ 3 rd ☐ ✓ 4 th ☐ 5 th ☐ 6 th ☐		
I confirm that this is my original work and that I have adhered to the University policy on plagiarism. Signed SIYUN HE.....		
Email submission: if you are submitting this form via email, please tick this box ☐ ✓ (as a substitute for your signature) to confirm that you agree to the above declaration.		

Assignment Mark

1 st Marker's Provisional mark	
2 nd Marker's/Moderator's provisional mark	
Agreed Internal Mark:	
External Examiner's mark (if relevant)	
Final Mark	

NB. All marks are provisional until confirmed by the Final Examination Board.

For completion by Marker 1 :

Comments:

Marker's signature:

Date:

For completion by Marker 2/Moderator:

Comments:

Marker's Signature:

Date:

AGREED INTERNAL MARK (where necessary):

Comment on process on arriving at agreed mark:

External Examiner's comments (if relevant)

External Examiner's Signature:

Date:

A Brief Discussion on the Spirit of 'the Highest Virtue Is Like Water' in Tao Te Ching

Abstract

'Shang Shan' means the highest virtue, and Lao-tzu described the core spirit of it as water.

Mirror has no image in its own surface, but it can reflect all things. Flute is hollow inside, but it can produce wonderful music. The kind nature of human beings is also like this, which is originally pure, and could deal with every thing properly according to specific conditions, 'When getting along with parents, people will naturally be filial; when getting along with brothers, they will naturally be friendly; when encountering a child falling into a well, they will naturally be compassionate.'¹ To do something beneficial is not to seek fame or position, but to return to the nature. If one could steadfastly dwells in this nature, and abides by the highest virtue, he will naturally be like water, which 'benefits all things and does not compete with them'.² He will be soft and flexible and could benefit others in a most proper way. Just like water, when put in a square vessel, it will be square; when put in a round vessel, it will be round.

Keywords: Highest Virtue, Human Nature, Inner Peace, No Competition

Preface

Water without source will dry soon , trees without roots will die before long, and kind behaviors without motivity will slack soon. The 'highest virtue' derives from the kind nature of human beings, and the motive of it is not to seek personal interests or reputation. This kind of virtue can be compared to the flowing water with continuous sources. One who has this virtue will help others with endless efforts and various methods.

¹ Wang Shouren 王守仁, *Instructions for Practical Living* 《陽明傳習錄》 [In Chinese](Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Classics Press 上海古籍出版社, 1992), p.7.

² Jiao Hong 焦竑, *Lao-tzu Yi* 《老子翼》 [In Chinese](Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2011), p.18.

According to the opinion ‘the Highest Virtue Is Like Water’ in the chapter seven in Tao Te Ching, this essay tries to analyse the source, characteristics and the application of ‘the highest virtue ’ from three aspects: ‘the highest virtue derives from the kind nature of human beings’; ‘it benefits all beings with no competition’ and ‘it benefits all beings with various methods’ respectively.

The Source of the Highest Virtue: the Kind Nature of Human Beings

Water has its source, it can therefore flow down endlessly into the ocean.³ ‘Virtue’ also has its source. When connected with the source of ‘virtue’, as what is said in Tao Te Ching, the man will live for other people, and become richer himself. Meanwhile, when giving to other people, he has greater abundance.⁴

The question then arises: what is the source of the highest virtue?

Mencius said, ‘If men suddenly see a child about to fall into a well, they will without exception experience a feeling of alarm and distress. They will feel so, not as a ground on which they may gain the favour of the child’s parents, nor as a ground on which they may seek the praise of their neighbours and friends, nor from a dislike to the reputation of having been unmoved by such a thing.’⁵ That is the natural reaction from the kind nature. The renowned philosopher in the Ming dynasty Wang Yangming called this condition ‘the natural state of human mind’,⁶ which is the source of all virtues.

Deriving from this source, the so-called kind behaviours occur. There are many examples in history and reality. In ancient China, Da-yu was bothered with those who were drowned by flood. Regarding others’ calamities as his own, he overcame all of the difficulties and challenges to control flood. Hou-ji was concerned with people who

³ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *The commentary of Mencius* 《孟子譯註》 [In Chinese](Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1960), p.190.

⁴ Translation by Lin Yutang, with modification as appropriate. Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of Lao-tse* 《老子的智慧》, <<https://pan.baidu.com/s/1jI3mY5w>>[accessed 28 January 2018].

⁵ James Legge, *The works of Mencius* 《孟子》 (Zhengzhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Classics Press 中州古籍出版社, 2016), p.115.

⁶ Wang Shouren 王守仁, *Instructions for Practical Living* 《陽明傳習錄》, p.3.

suffered from famine and took people's sufferings as his own sufferings. It was on this account that he spared no efforts to teach people how to cultivate various crops.⁷

More than a decade ago, Tony, a young man from Britain, had no hesitation to choose to stay in Xi'an, an ancient city in west China because of his sympathy for the homeless. He has established the 'Yellow River Soup Kitchen' to provide food, clothes and medicine for those local tramps. Tony was formerly in the British Royal Navy with no worries about finance. When he decided to give up this, he said, 'I hope I could slow down my life to listen to my heart.'⁸ He then spontaneously established the 'Yellow River Soup Kitchen'. When encountering various doubts and derision, he has still persisted in doing this until now. With more than ten years passed, his belief has never been shaken since his only pursuit is to live with no guilt and to attain inner peace.

A dutiful son always feels unease when his parents are upset as his inner joy is just from parents' health both physically and mentally. A wise ruler always feels anxious when his people are suffering from various disasters as his inner joy just derives from the condition that every person in the country could have a good life. Buddhas and Bodhisattvas always feel sympathetic when they see sentient beings are stuck in annoyances and troubles as their inner joy just comes from the expectation that every sentient being could be awakened from delusion. Moreover, since there were a great number of people who were still homeless, Yi-yin, the minister in the Shang dynasty, thought that was like 'he pushing them into gorges'⁹ and believed it was his responsibility to save them. Since there are many sentient beings still creating bad karma, Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva has vowed that 'If those sentient beings who had fallen into the Hell were not totally saved, I would not wish to achieve Nirvana.' This kind of virtue is the natural reaction deriving from human nature. In this case, to benefit others is not to seek for rewards nor something forced to do. However, this kind of conduct touches people's heart in the deepest level. Is it not 'the Highest Virtue'?

In Chapter Seven - 'the Highest Virtue Is Like Water' in Tao Te Ching, Lao-tzu offered 'to dwell in the ground of virtue and to keep the heart as calm as a lake.' The explanation

⁷ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *The commentary of Mencius* 《孟子譯註》, p.199.

⁸ *Why I Come to China Is to Distribute Steamed Stuffed Buns and Do Charity work*,
<<https://www.douban.com/note/211944690/>>[accessed 17 January 2018]

⁹ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *The commentary of Mencius* 《孟子譯註》, p.232.

of the venerable master Han-shan was ‘to abide by the highest moral discipline and to keep your inner peace as a calm lake whichever the circumstances are’.¹⁰ When disturbed by noise, one cannot hear clearly the sound in external world. Also, when disturbed by wondering thoughts and selfish desires, one cannot hear clearly the real voice from his heart. Only under the circumstance that one’s inner world is not disturbed by wondering thoughts and selfish desires and is extremely peaceful as the water surface, one could follow the real voice from his heart, act according to his conscience and dwell in the ground of ‘the highest virtue’. And, that is the source of all virtues.

The Characteristics of the Highest Virtue: to Benefit All Beings with No Competition

Just as water nourishes all things with peace and selflessness, the characteristic of the highest virtue which derives from the kind nature is also to benefit all beings without selfishness and competition.

The renowned scholar in recent China Liang Shuming once said that ‘It is not for others that we search for a proper way to promote the development of human society or spare no efforts to help friends and people. Instead, it is just like my own body is itchy and I need to scratch.’¹¹ We do good deeds or help others in order to make our own heart not to be guilty, as if we scratch where we have itches in order to make our own body to be more comfortable. Therefore, to do good deeds or help others is a very natural thing as we need food when we are hungry and need sleep when we are tired. Besides, it is also the very natural thing that when we are full, we will pat our stomach and stand up; when we get enough sleep, we will push aside our quilts and get up. Likewise, when we have fulfilled our duty with an clear conscience, we have acquired inner peace and happiness, most precious things in our life and, what we have done will be no longer important. In this case, one should not compete with others any more.

Mother Teresa devoted herself to taking care of those who suffer from diseases and poverty. Her pure heart and selfless spirit has touched the whole world. She was one of

¹⁰ Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Commentaries on ‘Tao Te Ching’* 《道德經解》 [In Chinese](Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2009), p.44.

¹¹ Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *The Assembly: The Enlightenment of Life* 《朝話：人生的省悟》 [In Chinese] (Tianjin: Bai Hua Wen Yi Press 百花文藝出版社, 2005), p.73.

those who have been awarded the most prizes in the last century including the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. However, she did not regard these as her honour, and even said more than once that she was only an arm of the poor.¹² When we view from her perspective, she was part of those poor people. Considering left hand never thinks it is great when it helps right hand, mother Teresa also did not think to help people in poverty was a great thing. She continued her ordinary life by doing everything that she needed to do. One day, when a Spanish young man who admired her arrived India after a long journey, he was surprised to find that mother Teresa was teaching a little sister how to hang clothes herself.¹³

People who benefit all beings with no competition as mother Teresa can also be found in Chinese history. During the Warring State period, Fan-li assisted Gou-jian, the King of Yue kingdom to conquer Wu kingdom, and subsequently left the court and lived in seclusion. Afterwards, Zhang Liang helped Liu Bang, the first emperor of Han dynasty to establish Han empire, and then requested for being free from worldly things and followed Chi Song-zi to pursue spiritual practice.¹⁴ In addition, in Sui dynasty, Li Shiqian, a hermit, donated all of his property to make porridge, which saved tens of thousands of people from a severe famine. Someone commended him on his great action and believed he accumulated a lot of ‘merit’. He responded, however, ‘The so-called merit is like tinnitus which could only be heard by himself. Now what I have done is well known by many people, therefore, it can not be called “merit”.’¹⁵

Every being derives from the same origin, which is the so-called noumenon. According to this, it is the natural thing that we benefit others but do not think it is great. If someone helps others and thinks that is a great thing, he has already separated himself from all beings; if he feels arrogant about it, the sense of separation between subject and object will be strong; if he not only ignores others’ needs but also hurts others, the sense of separation between subject and object will be stronger. When the situation develops to the extreme, one will do anything as wicked as possible and even kill his parents. When

¹² Hua Zi 華姿, *The Biography of Mother Teresa* 《德蘭修女傳》 [In Chinese] (Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Press 山東畫報出版社 2005), p.245.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.249.

¹⁴ Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Records of History* 《史記》 [In Chinese] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1959), p.2048.

¹⁵ *History of Sui Dynasty* 《隋書》 [In Chinese] (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1973), p.1753.

we analyse the reasons of it, we will find that is the result of deviating from the noumenon which Lao-tzu called ‘Tao’, the source that generates all things.

In the opinion of those who have already obtained enlightenment, everything derives from the same origin. There is no separation between you and me as all beings are one entity. To help others is just like helping ourselves to wash hands or feet. No one thinks that is great or feels honorable about it. *The Diamond Sutra* refers that ‘One should live in the present and does not attach to anything’,¹⁶ which means to do everything conscientiously and diligently and to forget what you have done. If someone could follow this teaching, he will be like what Lao-tzu said ‘to benefit others with no competition’. That is the characteristic of the highest virtue.

The Application of the Highest Virtue: to Benefit All Beings with Various Methods

Lao-tzu said that there is nothing softer or more flexible than water. Therefore, soft and flexible are other characteristics of water. Because of this, water has no fixed shapes. When it flows into a square pond, it will be square; when it flows into a round pond, it will be round; when it is mixed with vegetables, it becomes nutritious soup; when it is mixed with tea leaves, it becomes tasty tea.

The applications of the highest virtue are also like this. It derives from the human nature, which is originally pure and not stained by anything. One who act in accord with his nature, which is not stained by wondering thoughts or selfish desires, could handle everything in most proper ways according to specific situation, just as a calm water surface, which is not disturbed by wind or other things, could precisely reflect everything. Lao-tzu said, ‘The highest virtue is like water, one who has this kind of virtue loves kindness in his relations with others, sincerity in his words, peace in government, ability in business affairs and the choice of the right time in his actions.’¹⁷ Therefore, to some extent, the highest virtue could be defined as to benefit others or serve the society by various means, which has profound influences.

¹⁶ *The Diamond Sutra* 《金剛經》 [In Chinese](Shijiazhuang: Xu Yun Yin Jing Gong De Zang 虛雲印經功德藏), p.10.

¹⁷ Translation by Lin Yutang, with modification as appropriate. Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of Lao-tse* 《老子的智慧》, <<https://pan.baidu.com/s/1jI3mY5w>>[accessed 28 January 2018].

Guan Zhong was a renowned minister in ancient China with outstanding political ability and profound insight. His deeds were recorded in *Records of the Grand Historian*. His policy was in accord with people's wishes and was easy to implement. He provided what people needed and abolished what people found unreasonable. Meanwhile, He was an expert in turning calamities into blessings and changing failures into successes.¹⁸ One day, Duke Huan of Qi was angry with his wife Ms Cai and launched an attack southwards on Cai's parents' home - Cai state. That was originally a farce of conflict between husband and wife. However, Guan Zhong took advantage of this opportunity to fight against Chu state, and accuse them of the absence from paying tribute to Zhou dynasty. The action turned the farce of family conflict into a righteous deed of honouring the Zhou dynasty, which highly enhanced the international reputation of his state.¹⁹ With the righteous reputation, Guan Zhong united the states to form an alliance during the Spring and Autumn period, which helped maintain international stability in a relatively long time. Confucius once expressed his gratitude that without Guan Zhong's initiative, he would have become a barbarian.²⁰

Zhuge Liang was an outstanding strategist and statesman in the Three Kingdom period who always compared himself to Guan Zhong. The kingdom Shu which he faced was controlled by Liu Zhang, a cowardly monarch without a strong mind. Because of political corruption and chaos in social order, a famous scholar Fa Zheng suggested Zhuge to implement leniency policy. Zhuge responded, however, 'The governmental prestige will fade away if the government shows its favour to officials by offering high positions to them frequently; people's sense of gratitude will gradually vanish if the government always satisfies their desires without principles. At present, I will rule the kingdom by law which will bring real convenience to people and improve the promotion system which could help officials treasure their offices.'²¹ Subsequently, he ruled the kingdom with severe punishments and draconian laws. People complained about it at the beginning, but after a period, the kingdom became prosperous and wealthy. Zhuge Liang was then admired by tens of thousands of people.

¹⁸ Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Records of History* 《史記》, p.2132-2133.

¹⁹ Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, *Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 《左傳》 [In Chinese](Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House 岳麓書社, 1988), p.51-52.

²⁰ Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *The commentary of The Analects* 《論語譯註》 [In Chinese](Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1980), p.151.

²¹ *History of the Three Kingdom* 《三國志》 [In Chinese](Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1959), p.917.

Thousands of years ago, Guan Zhong and Zhuge Liang managed the states in a most flexible way, which was in accordance with the spirit of water. Nowadays, Professor Chingkung also uses a most flexible way to propagate the Buddha's education to benefit people.

In modern society, many people are attracted and controlled by the power of media. To some degree, media have become one of the highest authorities which dominate people's mind and spirit. Because of media, many children could not understand parents' love and many students could not receive teachers' instructions. Besides, a great number of people even regard laws and disciplines as unimportant things. The power of media is so huge. To some extent, when its direction is right, the direction of the whole world will be right; when its direction is wrong, the direction of the whole world will be wrong. Professor Chingkung has a profound insight into this situation and foresees it will be greatly beneficial to the society if the power of media can be used in a proper way. Therefore, he uses media to propagate the sages' education. In recent decades, a great number of people have learned related courses at their own home. In this case, 'home' is not only a place of eating or sleeping, but a place of study and self-cultivation. In thousands of families, stars' concerts have been replaced by the series of lectures on sages' education and false notions have been displaced by correct outlook on life. This invention of 'satellite education' is extraordinary with keeping pace with the times, which is the flexible and proper application of media.

It is the principle of dealing with affairs that one should act according to objective circumstances without subjective prejudice. By this means, Guan Zhong and Zhuge Liang governed their country in most appropriate ways and, were admired and appreciated by tens and thousands of people throughout history; professor Chingkung propagates sages' education in a very flexible and attractive way, which gives positive influences to a great number of people who are led astray by false instructions in their life path. This kind of great wisdom derives from the pure nature which everyone actually possesses if his heart is not disturbed by wondering thoughts and selfish desires. That is the application of the highest virtue.

Conclusions

Everyone possesses the pure and kind nature. Undoubtedly, there are evil people in the world, but none of them could enjoy the real life; there are unfilial sons and daughters in the world, but none of them are happy; there are treacherous officials in the world, but none of them could gain final successes. Everyone derives from the one life entity. If anyone separates himself from it, he will be lonely, anxious and nervous.

An renowned ancient scholar Su Shi said: ‘If we could keep inner peace wherever we live, we will find that the real home is in our heart and we never leave it.’²² The real happiness of life is not from wealth, position and reputation. To some degree, we can only enjoy our lives when we could keep our inner peace under any circumstances and have no guilty in our heart. The core spirit of the highest virtue is to fulfil our duty and do our best under any circumstances with the variety of flexible methods and the most humble attitude. Just like water, the highest virtue has continuous sources, so that it can spare no efforts to benefit all beings; it is soft and flexible, so that it can deal with everything in a most appropriate way; it regards all beings as one life entity, so that it benefits others with no competition.

If we want to implement this spirit in our daily life, we should start from being considerate of others in every moment and connecting with others with kindness and patience. We should consider others’ feelings when we communicate with others and consider others’ taste when we cook for others. Meanwhile, a kind deed could also be to prepare a cup of warm water for parents or provide a seat for an elder. The so-called success is to deal with every small thing conscientiously. Big success is from the accumulation of small successes and great love is from the accumulation of small love. If the ‘wall’ between the so-called you and me no longer exists, we will thoroughly be connected with ‘Tao’ the common root of all beings, and the source of the highest virtue. In this case, we will love others as we love ourselves and enjoy a peaceful and wonderful life.

‘When the mind is pure, the land will be pure. When the mind is at peace, all beings will be at peace. When the mind is impartial, the world will enjoy equality.’ If someone takes

²² Su Shi 蘇軾, *Ding Feng Bo* 《定風波》, [In Chinese],
<<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%AD%A4%E5%BF%83%E5%AE%89%E5%A4%84%E6%98%AF%E5%90%BE%E4%B9%A1/19189793?fr=aladdin>>[accessed 17 January 2018].

pursuing inner peace as his lifelong goal, his inner world will become purer and more and more peaceful.

Bibliography

Books (Chinese)

1. *History of Sui Dynasty* 《隋書》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1973)
2. *History of the Three Kingdom* 《三國志》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1959)
3. Jiao Hong 焦竑, *Lao-tzu Yi* 《老子翼》 (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2011)
4. Liang Shuming 梁漱溟, *The Assembly: The Eeelightenment of Life* 《朝話：人生的省悟》 (Tianjin: Bai Hua Wen Yi Press 百花文藝出版社, 2005)
5. Shi Deqing 釋德清, *Commentaries on 'Tao Te Ching'* 《道德經解》 (Shanghai: Huadong Normal University Press 華東師範大學出版社, 2009)
6. Sima Qian 司馬遷, *Records of History* 《史記》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1959)
7. *The Diamond Sutra* 《金剛經》 (Shijiazhuang: Xu Yun Yin Jing Gong De Zang 虛雲印經功德藏)
8. Wang Shouren 王守仁, *Instructions for Practical Living* 《陽明傳習錄》 (Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Classics Press 上海古籍出版社, 1992)
9. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *The commentary of Mencius* 《孟子譯註》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1960)
10. Yang Bojun 楊伯峻, *The commentary of The Analects* 《論語譯註》 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company 中華書局, 1980)
11. Zuo Qiuming 左丘明, *Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals* 《左傳》 (Changsha: Yuelu Publishing House 嶽麓書社, 1988)
12. Hua Zi 華姿, *The Biography of Mother Teresa* 《德蘭修女傳》 (Jinan: Shandong Pictorial Press 山東畫報出版社, 2005)

Books (English)

13. James Legge, *The works of Mencius*《孟子》(ZhengZhou: Zhongzhou Ancient Classics Press 中州古籍出版社, 2016)

Websites (Chinese)

14. Lin Yutang, *The Wisdom of Laotse*,
<<https://pan.baidu.com/s/1jI3mY5w>>[accessed 28 January 2018].
15. Su Shi 蘇軾, Ding Feng Bo 《定風波》 ,
<<https://baike.baidu.com/item/%E6%AD%A4%E5%BF%83%E5%AE%89%E5%A4%84%E6%98%AF%E5%90%BE%E4%B9%A1/19189793?fr=aladdin>>[accessed 17 January 2018].
16. Why I Come to China Is to Distribute Steamed Stuffed Buns and Do Charity work
我來中國的目的是發包子，做慈善，
<<https://www.douban.com/note/211944690/>>[accessed 17 January 2018].