



Undergraduate assignment feedback form

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The Meaning and Significance of Softness in the *Dao De Jing*

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1. Introduction

The *Dao De Jing*, or *Laozi*, a five-thousand-odd character work by the ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi of the 6th century BCE, presents Laozi's thoughts on the *dao*, or, as it is commonly translated, the way. Laozi's philosophies come from observations of the ways of nature and often incorporate the qualities of the heaven and earth, male and female, of water, trees, and of babies to illustrate his ideas. Among these important ideas in the *Dao De Jing* is the concept of 'softness', often accompanied by 'weakness'. D. C. Lau, a Chinese sinologist, states that 'The weak, the submissive, the bent, these are the important concepts in the *Lao tzu* [or *Laozi*] because these are the qualities the *tao* exhibits.'¹ The meaning of softness can be found in observing nature, and its significance lies in the use of it, for Laozi tells us that the soft and weak are what overcomes the strong and hard.²

2. The Meaning of Softness in the *Dao De Jing*

'Soft' or 'softness' is an English translation of the original text in Chinese. Regardless of how accurate translations can be, they are after all, translations, and involve a certain degree of interpretation. For instance, what James Legge — a 19th century Scottish missionary and sinologist, and translator of the first widely known English

¹ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau (England: Penguin Books, 1963), p. xxiii.

² *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 85.

translation of the *Dao De Jing* — and Xu Yuanchong — a 20th century Chinese translator — translated as ‘soft’, D. C. Lau translated as ‘submissive’. In certain contexts, the translators also used terms such as ‘supple’. In the original Chinese text, ‘softness’ is often followed by ‘weakness’; they go hand in hand and the two terms, *rou ruo* 柔弱, are often used together in Laozi’s chapters.

2.1. The Chinese Characters *Rou* 柔 ‘Soft’ and *Ruo* 弱 ‘Weak’

The Chinese character that is translated as ‘soft’ is *rou* 柔. It is most commonly translated as ‘soft’ or ‘softness’. However, D. C. Lau generally prefers the term ‘submissive’ in his translation.³ *Rou* 柔 also carries the meaning of supple, flexible, and pliant, and such terms are also used in certain chapters in translation under the right context. The Chinese character *ruo* 弱 is translated as ‘weak’.

Rou ruo 柔弱 is the opposite of *gang qiang* 剛強 and *jian qiang* 堅強. *Qiang* 強 means strong. *Gang* 剛 and *jian* 堅 have slight differences in meaning, but both can be translated as ‘hard’, synonymous to firm or solid. James Legge notes the difference between them by translating *jian* 堅 as ‘firm’.⁴

The nature of the opposite meanings of *rou ruo* 柔弱 and *gang qiang* 剛強 or *jian qiang* 堅強 can be seen in Chapter 36: ‘The soft and weak may overcome the hard and strong.’⁵ Chapter 78 also says: ‘The weak may surpass the strong and the soft may surpass the hard.’⁶ Here it is clear that Laozi considers the qualities of soft

³ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, pp. xxiii, 83.

⁴ *The Texts of Taoism*, trans. by James Legge, 2 vols (New York: Dover Publications, 1962), I: *The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu*, p. 118.

⁵ *The Old Master Modernized: Laws Divine and Human*, trans. by Xu Yuanchong (Beijing: High Education Press, 2003), p. 78.

⁶ *Laws Divine and Human*, trans. by Xu Yuanchong, p. 172.

and weak are superior to that of strength.

Laozi's thought often comes from nature, and he uses his observations of phenomena in nature to illustrate his philosophies, creating vivid imagery to demonstrate the concept. D. C. Lau states that *rou* 柔 (softness or submissiveness) is 'looked upon as the quality resembling most closely that of the *tao*'.⁷ Nature follows the *dao*, or the way, and as the quality of *rou* 柔 resembles that of the *dao*, the precept from Chapter 36, that 'the soft and weak may overcome the hard and strong'⁸ should be present in nature. To illustrate such, Laozi uses metaphors of human life, of plants, and of water to show softness as it is in nature.

2.2. Metaphors for Softness in the Text of *Dao De Jing*

Laozi observed things in nature such as the grass and the trees. Chapter 76, as Xu Yuanchong translated it, reads:

Man is born soft and weak;
dead, he becomes hard and stiff.
Grass and wood grow soft and supple;
dead, they become dry and withered.
So the hard and strong belong to death;
the soft and weak belong to life.⁹

Laozi first mentions man, or human. At birth a baby is soft and supple, flexible and weak; as one ages, one becomes less supple and increasingly stiff; becoming stiff and hard and inflexible upon death. The same is true for other living beings. Plants, too, follow this principle: alive, they are pliant and bendable; dead, they are dry and rigid, breaking easily. Another translation, by D. C. Lau, reads: 'Grass and trees are pliant and fragile when living, but dried and shrivelled when dead.'¹⁰ Green grass

⁷ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. xl.

⁸ *Laws Divine and Human*, trans. by Xu Yuanchong, p. 78.

⁹ *Laws Divine and Human*, trans. by Xu Yuanchong, p. 168.

¹⁰ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 83.

becomes yellow and withered when dead; tree branches, which spring back upon bending when living, become hard and snap upon bending when dead. Thus, Laozi concludes from these observations that the hard and strong are the *tu* 徒 (disciples, followers) of death and the soft and weak are the *tu* 徒 of life.

Laozi explains this phenomenon of nature in Chapter 22, which says ‘bowed down then preserved’.¹¹ ‘Bowing down’ or bending is synonymous with being soft and submissive. Like grass and trees, to be bowed down in the storm will preserve it through; but standing tall in the wind, it may not withstand.

Another element of nature which qualities are frequently connected with softness and weakness is water. The entire Chapter 8 of the *Dao De Jing* is about the virtues of water, in which Laozi says that ‘Highest good is like water’¹² and that this is so because water does not contend. Chapter 78 further states: ‘In the world there is nothing more submissive and weak than water. Yet for attacking that which is hard and strong nothing can surpass it.’¹³ Water is soft and weak, having no form of its own, yet over time, it can erode hardest of rocks. This is yet another example of ‘the soft and weak may overcome the hard and strong’.¹⁴

Therefore, the softness and weakness that Laozi speaks of is the softness and weakness of water, of human at birth and when living, of the living grass and trees, and of nature, which overcomes the hard and strong. It is the softness that resembles that of the *dao*.

¹¹ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 27.

¹² *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 12.

¹³ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 85.

¹⁴ *Laws Divine and Human*, trans. by Xu Yuanchong, p. 78.

3. The Significance and Use of Softness in *Laozi*

As seen illustrated in many metaphors, softness is a quality which Laozi has observed in nature. However, it should not be viewed merely as a natural phenomenon, for as Laozi himself said, ‘The weak may surpass the strong and the soft may surpass the hard. It is well-known to the world, but none can put it into practice.’¹⁵ This must mean that it should be something to practice, somewhat like a precept. D. C. Lau, in the introduction of his published translation, argues that it is ‘not only possible, but also useful, to follow the precept of holding fast to the submissive’.¹⁶ Not only does Laozi promote softness, but he also warns against the use of strength.

2.1. Holding on to the Precept of Softness

When Laozi said, ‘The submissive and weak will overcome the hard and strong’¹⁷ he meant it to be more than an observation of a rather fascinating phenomenon. In an English translation of Chen Guying’s *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, there states that from the observations, ‘Laozi concludes that it is preferable to promote the soft and weak.’¹⁸ Laozi wants his reader to learn from water, and from the living grass and trees, to learn to be soft and be weak. It is knowledge that ‘everyone in the world knows’ but something that we must learn to put into practice.¹⁹ As Chapter 40 puts it, ‘Weakness is the means the way employs.’²⁰ Presuming it is the ideal of Laozi in writing the *Dao De Jing* to live by the *dao*, then this verse gives enough reason to

¹⁵ *Laws Divine and Human*, trans. by Xu Yuanchong, p. 172.

¹⁶ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. xxiv.

¹⁷ Chapter: 36; *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 41.

¹⁸ Guying Chen, *The Annotated Critical Laozi; With Contemporary Explication and Traditional Commentary*, ed. by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and Xiao Ouyang, trans. by Paul J. D’Ambrosio and others (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2020), p. 42.

¹⁹ Chapter: 78; *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 85.

²⁰ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 47.

practice the use of softness and weakness.

D. C. Lau comments on the method of ‘holding fast to the submissive’, saying: ‘One can follow the precept by refusing to make the effort necessary for development.’²¹ By doing so, one avoids developing therefore remaining soft and weak. Such as what Chen Guying observes, the ‘smaller trees, grass and weeds, being soft and weak, [they] both fail to entice their own death and simply sway with the wind.’²² Thus, the benefit of putting into practice ‘softness’ is life.

2.2. Laozi’s Warning Against the Use of Strength

Laozi goes beyond promoting softness by also warning his reader against its opposite: strength and hardness. Chapter 76 states:

Therefore a weapon that is strong will not vanquish;
A tree that is strong will suffer the axe.
The strong and big takes the lower position,
The supple and weak takes the higher position.²³

These few lines seem paradoxical, as one would usually believe the strong to be more powerful, and so, better. But as Chen Guying explains, ‘strength and sturdiness even seem to invite disaster. Tall trees attract lumberjacks and are more likely to be toppled by a strong storm,’²⁴ Likewise, a weapon that is strong is more likely to invite more weapons. Therefore, what is strong cannot be strong for long; its strength does not last. The chapter concludes by stating that the strong takes the lower position while the soft and weak takes the higher. This may be contrary to the common intuition that the stronger the better, or the bigger the better. As Steve Coutinho puts it, ‘We usually seek to progress, but the advice of the Laozi is to retreat.’²⁵

²¹ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. xxiv

²² Guying Chen, *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 42.

²³ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 83.

²⁴ Guying Chen, *The Annotated Critical Laozi*, p. 42.

²⁵ Steve Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies* (New York: Columbia University Press,

Laozi not only cautions against the use of force and strength, but also goes further to say that the hard and strong belong to death. ‘Thus the hard and the strong are the comrades of death; the supple and the weak are the comrades of life.’²⁶ This is a strong statement and clearly and directly tells the reader the consequence of being hard and strong: death. The alternative, which Laozi promotes, leads to life.

4. Conclusion

In the observation of nature, Laozi uses metaphors — non-contending water; supple and soft grass, withered when dead; flexibility of man, turned to stiffness at death — each to illustrate the *dao* of the nature: that the soft and weak overcome the hard and strong. Steve Coutinho states: ‘The *dao* of the *Laozi* is thus a gentle way, the way not of strength but of weakness.’²⁷ The quality of softness is one that Laozi hopes his reader can put into practice and hold onto as a precept, as its significance is in its use.

2014), p. 62.

²⁶ *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching*, trans. by D. C. Lau, p. 83.

²⁷ Coutinho, *An Introduction to Daoist Philosophies*, p. 62.

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