

Governance by no-action

為無為之治理方式

The subject of my talk today is governance by no-action and I will share with you chapter 63 of *Tao Te Ching*. I'm going to divide my presentation into three parts: an introduction, an interpretation of the chapter with different translations, and finally a conclusion which is my personal thought and perception of the chapter.

I- Introduction

Chapter 63 of *Tao Te Ching* tells us how a sage will govern his world. Let's read first the original text in Chinese: 為無為，事無事，味無味。大小多少，「報怨以德。」圖難於其易，為大於其細；天下難事，必作於易，天下大事，必作於細。是以聖人終不為大，故能成其大。夫輕諾必寡信，多易必多難。是以聖人猶難之，故終無難矣。 This chapter is separated into 3 paragraphs as we can see on the PowerPoint, so we will see more precisely by analyzing the chapter.

II- Interpretation of the chapter

1. 為無為，事無事，味無味。

Just looking at the first sentence maybe we will think that it's a little bit confusing. So, let's explain some important characters of the sentences. Firstly, the character 為 means acting or doing, as we can see James Legge translate this first sentence as "It is the way of the Dao to act without thinking of acting"¹ and D.C. Lau's translation is "do that which consists in taking no action"².

Then referring to James Legge's interpretation, the character 事 means affairs or matter, so he said "to conduct affairs without feeling the trouble of them"³ which signifies doing things without the feeling of doing it. We can interpret it as feeling peace in oneself and having a clear mind.

And thirdly, the first character 味 is a verb and can be defined as taste or flavor; 無味 signify bland and refer to the Dao as being insipid, so the meaning of 味無味 is ruling by tranquility. Let's make a little comparison for this sentence between James Legge's and Xu Yuanchong's translation, so James Legge thinks that it means "to taste without discerning any flavor"⁴ and

¹ James Legge, *Chinese text Project* (1885) <<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>> [accessed 10 July 2022].

² D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

³ James Legge, *Chinese text Project* (1885) <<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>> [accessed 10 July 2022].

⁴ James Legge, *Chinese text Project* (1885) <<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>> [accessed 10 July 2022].

Xu Yuanchong as “take the tasteful as if it were tasteless”⁵. We can observe that they have the same perception of this sentence. In addition, Wang Bi’s 王弼 interpretation is that “taking the mild as flavorful is the extreme of (politically) ordering (a state)”⁶.

2. 大小多少，報怨以德。圖難於其易，為大於其細；天下難事，必作於易，天下大事，必作於細。是以聖人終不為大，故能成其大。

Let’s move now to the second part of the chapter. Here, the character 大 and 多 of the first sentence are verbs, which signify regard as big and as more. Moreover, we can observe in this sentence that 大小 and 多少 are antonym and Yu Peilin 余培林 think that 大小多少 can be considered as see small as big, see less as more⁷. In the *Comprehensive Interpretation of the Laozi* of Yan Lingfeng 嚴靈峰, he argues that “the great originates from the small, the many commences from the few”⁸. Many scholars, such as Yao Nai 姚鼐, Xi Dong 奚侗, and Jiang Xichang 蔣錫昌, suspect that the phrase cannot be asserted because it maybe misses some characters, so the meaning is not completely clear.⁹ Consequently, there are a few ways to explain the phrase, but I have only chosen one which connects with what I’ve said earlier. So, some think that it means “the great is regarded as small, and the many is regarded as few”¹⁰ such as Shi Deqing 釋德清 compares the different value perspectives between the sages and the common people.

Then for the next sentence 報怨以德, some scholars think that it seems to be disconnected from its context. But professor Zhang Youheng 張有恆 explains this sentence as if others resent me, I will repay him/her with kindness¹¹. Here the character 德 signify virtue.

The character 圖 means contemplate. So, it teaches us that we need to deal with difficult things when we are in an easy condition. And when we have to deal with a big deal or an important matter we have to start with the subtle things. The next sentences summarize and emphasize what we’ve just said. Both characters 作 signify arise. According to the original text, we can see that for this paragraph James Legge’s translation is more equivalent to the original meaning which is “(The master of it) anticipates things that are difficult while they are easy, and does things that would become great while they are small. All difficult things in the world are sure to arise from a previous state in which they were easy, and all great things from one in which they were small.”

⁵ X.Y.Z., *The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2013), p. 138.

⁶ D’ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 340.

⁷ Yu Peilin, *Xinshi Laozi Duben* (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju Gufen Youxian Gongsì, 2017), p. 130.

⁸ Yan Lingfeng, *Comprehensive Interpretation of the Laozi* (Taipei: Huanzheng Shuju, 2008), p. 325-330.

⁹ D’ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 340-341.

¹⁰ D’ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 341.

¹¹ Zhang Youheng, *Laozhuang Baihua Jieshi* (Tainan: Jilesi Tainanshi Jingzong Xuehui, 2015), p. 189.

Professor Zhang Youheng interpret 不為大 as not considering itself as great, and 成其大 as making itself great. So, it means “therefore, those who master Dao never consider themselves as grand, and this is why they can accomplish great things”¹². So, sages act with humility they are not arrogant, and only in that way they can succeed, as D.C. Lau’s interpretation “therefore it is because the sage never attempts to be great that he succeeds in becoming great.”¹³

3. 夫輕諾必寡信，多易必多難。是以聖人猶難之，故終無難矣。

The last paragraph tells us how sages manage every situation. The characters 輕諾 means easy promises, so it says that if we promise things easily there is necessarily a lack of trustworthiness. And if often take things too lightly, it will certainly cause much trouble; as Chen Guying’s 陳鼓應 interpretation that “considering matters as too simple will surely bring more difficulties”¹⁴. Xu Yuanchong also defines this sentence as “much underestimation will entail much difficulty”¹⁵. In addition, D.C. Lau’s and James Legge’s interpretations are quite similar, on one hand, one said that “one who is in the habit of considering things easy meets with frequent difficulties”¹⁶, and on the other hand one said, “he who is continually thinking things easy is sure to find them difficult.”¹⁷

Let’s learn now sages’ wisdom in which Laozi gave us a solution in the following sentences. Professor Zhang Youheng explains that sages consider easy things as difficult that’s why there is ultimately nothing difficult.¹⁸ We have the same interpretation as Xu Yuanchong’s which is “therefore the sage anticipates all difficulties, so there is nothing difficult in the end.”¹⁹ Or a mix of James Legge’s and D.C. Lau’s by interpreting as “therefore the sage sees difficulty even in what seems easy”²⁰ “that is why in the end no difficulties can get the better of him.”²¹

III- Conclusion: personal understanding

In conclusion, in the first paragraph of the chapter, I think that Laozi would like to tell us to not attach to everything. That we have to be neutral, without any desire whether actions, affairs, or flavors, because only in that way we will achieve the Dao. Similarly, concerning the sense of the sentence about sages always looking at things as if they were complicated, and this is why, eventually, they do not face difficulties, tell me again to be stable and to not lean too far toward one side. And it also reminds me of some daily life examples. Sometimes the reason why we consider one thing too easy it’s because we are too familiar with it. For

¹² D’ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 342.

¹³ D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

¹⁴ D’ambrosio et al., *The Annotated Critical Laozi* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2020), p. 342.

¹⁵ X.Y.Z., *The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2013), p. 138.

¹⁶ D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

¹⁷ James Legge, *Chinese text Project* (1885) <<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>> [accessed 10 July 2022].

¹⁸ Zhang Youheng, *Laozhuang Baihua Jieshi* (Tainan: Jilesi Tainanshi Jingzong Xuehui, 2015), p. 190.

¹⁹ X.Y.Z., *The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human* (Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2013), p. 138.

²⁰ James Legge, *Chinese text Project* (1885) <<https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>> [accessed 10 July 2022].

²¹ D.C. Lau, *Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963).

instance, while we have more than 10 years of driving experience, we will give each other more permission to discuss while driving. And it will cause a higher percentage of danger. So, Laozi teaches us to not consider ourselves as great, we have to be modest and respect everything in the world, which will protect us.

Sages know how to anticipate things. The Venerable Chengde 成德 also taught us to be occupied while free and be free while occupied. Thus, one will be more mentally and physically prepared for a sudden situation. For example, you will take the plane in two months, and you have already prepared and verified all the documents you'll need. You also have been informed how to get there at the airport and all that is boarding time etc. so if you'll face a delay, you won't be as stressed as if you weren't organized.

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