



## Undergraduate assignment feedback form

(to be completed by marker)

[illegible]

# **From governing a big country is like frying a small fish to explore the wisdom of governing the country**

Word count:2531

## **1. Introduction**

Governing a country has been a problem that people have been thinking about since ancient times. Whether in the East or the West, especially in China, both rulers and ordinary people are thinking about how to better manage the country. The ancient Chinese scholars all read with the heart of 'cultivating oneself, aligning the family, governing the country, and bringing peace to the world.'<sup>1</sup>Their purpose is to improve their own virtue and ability through their own study, so as to help the ruler to better govern nation. *Laozi* said: governing a big country is like frying a small fish in *DaoDejing*, which points out the wisdom of running a country and provides us with a theoretical basis. After we have a theory, how do we do it? How to truly govern the country better and let the people have a happy life? This is also the responsibility and mission we should have as students. Therefore, this article will discuss the wisdom and methods of governing the country from several aspects.

## **2. What is governing a big country is like frying a small fish?**

Governing a big country is like frying a small fish, which comes from *DaoDejing*. 'If you cook small fish and stir it too often, the fish will fall apart. If the rulers govern the people, they intervene too much, and the hearts of the

---

<sup>1</sup> 朱熹 [Zhu Xi], *四書章句集註* [Sishu zhangju jizhu] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983), p.4.

people will dissipate.’<sup>2</sup> Wang Bi said, ‘Governing a country is like cooking a frying a small fish. That is to say, you cannot stir the fish too much. If you stir too much, it will be harmful. If you do not stir too much, the fish will be kept as it is. Therefore, the bigger the country is, the more the leader should follow the nature law. Then, the leader can win the support of the masses.’<sup>3</sup> Master *Hanshan* said, ‘Governing a country is like frying a small fish. This means that you cannot stir the fish too much. If you stir, the fish will become a pulp and will not be complete. The same goes for governing the people. The tyranny harms the people. Both the natural and man-made disasters come together, and the common people are the first to suffer.’<sup>4</sup>

From this we can see that Lao told us that the highest goal of governing a country is not to be scientific, but to be artistic. Governing a big country is like cooking a small fish, which is a superb art of running a country. When we cook a small fish, we only need the oil, salt, sauce and vinegar to be just right, but we can't turn it frequently, otherwise it will rot. Similarly, to govern a country, the ruler should not interfere too much and arbitrarily, so that the country can operate spontaneously under the established rules and achieve governance by inaction.

### 3. Making people simple not tricky and ingenious (非以明民，將以愚之)

The people are the foundation of politics, and governing the people is the theme of politics. *Laozi* thought that the reason why people are difficult to govern is that their hearts are no longer pure. People are more and more greedy for their own interests, like to pursue fame and fortune, and like to compete. What's more, the root cause of the difficulty of governing the people is the rulers

---

<sup>2</sup> 陳奐 [Chen Huan], *詩毛氏傳疏* [Shij maoshi zhuanhu] (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2018), p.424.

<sup>3</sup> 王弼 [Wang Bi], *老子道德經注校釋* [Annotated and Proofreading of Laozi's Tao Te Ching] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), p.157.

<sup>4</sup> 釋德清 [Shi Deqing], *道德經解* [The Explanation of Daodejing] (Shanghai: East China Normal University chubanshe, 2009), 118-119.

themselves. One is because of the ruler's own desires and another is the ruler's reckless behavior. In chapter 75 of *DaoDejing*, Laozi said: 'The people's starvation results from the rulers' overtaxation, so the people starve. The people are difficult to rule, for the rulers give exacting orders, so the people are hard to rule. The people make light of their death, for the rulers overvalue their own life, so the people undervalue their death. Those who have no use for life are better than those who value their life.'<sup>5</sup> This situation is like frying fish, which requires maintaining the integrity of the fish to ensure its delicious taste. If the person frying the fish tries to keep turning the fish over, it will smash the fish. The reason for this result is not the fish itself, but the person who fry the fish. Extending to the political level, Laozi attributed the root cause of the people's loss of naturalness to the ruler. The ruler's hobby will inevitably lead to the people's wanton imitation, and the ruler's excessive material desire will inevitably lead to the poverty and resistance of the people. Therefore, in the chapter 57 of *DaoDejing* Laozi concluded that : 'Govern the country in a way of inaction and tranquility, use military force in a clever and mysterious way, and harass the people and govern the world. How do I know this is the case? The basis is this: the more taboos in the world, the more the people are trapped in poverty; The sharper the people's weapons, the more the country is plunged into chaos; The more people's skills, the more vicious the evil wind and strange things become; The stricter the statute, the more thieves continue to increase. Therefore, the wise saints say: "If I do nothing wrong, the people will go the right way; if I love peace, the people will not go to war; if I do not impoverish them, they will become rich; if I have no selfish desire, they will naturally be simple.'"<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, governing a country needs to abide by the Way and the principle of nature and inaction. As far as the ruler is concerned, it is to govern by inaction and stick to the Way; for the people, it is necessary to adhere to the simplicity and return to nature, rather than making the people have many desires and

---

<sup>5</sup> 許淵沖 [Xu Yuanchong], 漢英對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human] (Beijing: Gaodengjiaoyu chubanshe, 2003),p.166.

<sup>6</sup> 許淵沖 [Xu Yuanchong], 漢英對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human] (Beijing: Gaodengjiaoyu chubanshe, 2003),p.126.

scheming. So the ultimate goal of governing the people is 'not to teach the people to know wisdom and hypocrisy, but teach the people to be pure and simple.'<sup>7</sup> *Laozi* objects to letting the people know about ingenuity and advocates making the common people have no cunning heart, be generous and simple, kind and loyal. *Laozi* hopes that people will reduce the interference of material desires and return to their natural nature. At the same time, although *Laozi* advocates returning to nature, he does not deny the development of social production, as *Laozi* said: 'the sage rules by purifying people's soul, filling their bellies, weakening their wills and strengthening their bones.'<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the ignorance of the people in *Laozi's* thought is to make the people maintain their simple nature while meeting their material needs. This is in line with requirements of human nature and social development.

## 4. Take the hearts of people as rulers' hearts ( 以百姓心為心 )

### 4.1. Confirm to people's hearts.

Governing a country must first understand the hearts and thoughts of the people. The reason why politics can prosper is to obey the will of the people, and the reason why politics decline is to go against the will of the people. For example, China has a population of 1.4 billion. Maybe the achievements of the country divided by 1.4 billion people will become very small, and small problems multiplied by 1.4 billion will become very large. So, the people's hearts is the greatest politics, the people's heart is the foundation of the great cause of the country, and it is also an important factor in determining the

---

<sup>7</sup> 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], *老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi]* (Xinbei: Taiwanshangwu, 2017), p.262.

<sup>8</sup> 許淵沖 [Xu Yuancong], *漢英對照老子道德經 [Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human]* (Beijing: Gaodengjiaoyu chubanshe, 2003), p.6.

development of the country.

Chinese President Mao Zedong said: We are like seeds, and the people are like land. When we arrive at a place, we must unite with the people there, and take root, sprout, blossom, and bear fruit among the people. He wanted to express that he would like to intend to root his roots in the land of the people, which can absorb the nutrients and water needed to govern the country. He also expressed his love for the people at different times and on different occasions. He said: 'We should love the people as we love our parents.' Therefore, he always put the suffering of the people at the top of the governance of the country, admonishing himself, and also the party members and leading cadres who serve the people: 'Be sure to remember the word "people" in front of the government.' The word people before people's government is very important. If there is no people in our hearts, the government will become water without a source. People and rulers are like fish and water. Laozi said that fish cannot survive without water. As rulers, they should always be able to consider the needs of the people. Rulers should be able to put the people in their hearts, think about whether the people can accept them when they speak, and strive for the people's well-being. Because the importance of the people in the minds of rulers is the same as the importance of rulers in the minds of the people. If rulers can truly share weal and woe with people, understand people's true thoughts and do things for the people in line with their thoughts, they will be able to gain the support and advocate of the people.

#### **4.2. Know the will of people.**

The prosperity of the country and the prosperity of the nation is achieved on the basis of meeting the needs of the people. So, achieving the goal of common prosperity should be the pursuit of rulers. The people love life, and they long for their children and themselves to receive better education, get more stable income, more satisfying jobs, more reliable social security, more comfortable living conditions, and a more beautiful environment. They hope that the children can grow up better, work better, and live better. The people's yearning for a better life is the

ruler's goal. So for rulers, they need to be aware of the needs of the people and should adopt a people-oriented concept of governing the country. In addition, the ruler not only has to find a solution to the problem when dealing with the challenge, but the ultimate problem-solving effect is also judged by the people. The people play a very important role in the governance of the country. If the ruler is completely separated from the people and is above the people, he may be abandoned by the people. Therefore, in the process of governing the country, rulers should pay special attention to maintaining a close relationship with the people, so that the people can feel the real benefits and let the people have a better life. The ruler should start from the people's point of view, understand the real difficulties of the people and give real help in policy, so as to gain the people's trust. When the people can obtain the dividends of national development, they can enhance their confidence in the government and thus support the government's work more.

## **5. To govern the country, employing people is the first. ( 治國之要，首在用人 )**

A country has a large population, and governance is very difficult. Therefore, it requires the ruler to have extremely high governance wisdom and the superb leadership art of gathering the power of the people. Rulers need to have a deep understanding of popular sentiments and conditions of their state. They should have the attitude of governing a big country is like frying a small fish, and cannot be sloppy or slack in the work process, like cooking small fish. Cooking small fish requires care and patience, and cooking is to simmer over low heat rather than stir fry over high heat. When we cook the small fish, we need to pay attention to the method and the heat, and the same is true for the governance of the country. The rulers should take the initiative to conduct research, listen to

the opinions of the people, and especially conduct key research and solve the problems that the people most hope, most urgently, worry about, and complain the most. A person's time, energy and ability are limited. Only by giving full play to the synergy effect can a strong cohesion be formed. An old Chinese proverb says: everyone gathers firewood and the flame is high. ( 眾人拾柴火焰高 ) The ruler should be good at mobilizing all aspects of strength to overcome difficulties, and establish a leadership mechanism with the ruler as the core. The leader of each position has corresponding responsibilities, and everyone can work together to do a good job. The ruler is like a chef, and the working mechanism is like a cooking process, so that every member of the collective can play a role and can contribute. *Laozi* said: Govern the country with righteousness, use the odd, use the army, and take the world with nothing in the chapter 57 of *DaoDejing*.<sup>9</sup> When the working mechanism maintains normal operation, the people can move forward in the direction of the established correct line, principles and policies. Cooking needs to be just right to cook deliciously, which means good steel is used on the edge of the knife. The first task of governing a country is to use the right people. Therefore, it is necessary to cultivate a high-quality talent team with both ability and political integrity. This team must have firm beliefs, love service, and be honest. In order to achieve such a goal, the rulers need to arrange for the cadres to strengthen their study and practice at the same time. Learning gives chance to cadres to accumulate knowledge, and practice gives chance to cadres to accumulate experience, both of which are very important. As the public servants of the people, cadres can work diligently and continuously improve their abilities and morals, so they can serve the people well and deliver a satisfactory answer to the people.

## 6. Conclusion

Do nothing and do nothing, which means the way is always nature-free and does nothing, but there is nothing that it does not do. Governing a big country is like frying a small fish, which is the generalization and application of *Laozi's Wuwei*

---

<sup>9</sup> 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], *老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi]* (Xinbei: Taiwanshangwu, 2017), p.240.

( 無為 ) thought. *Laozi* advocates governance by inaction. He pushes the idea of the natural way of heaven to the way of humanity, and believes that human society is like nature. They are all self-transformation by inaction, endlessly reproducing, and repeating in cycles. He believed that as long as rulers followed nature, everything would develop well by itself. The rulers should not intervene excessively in the governance process, and should respect the dominant position of the people; at the same time, they should understand the needs of the people and make good use of talents. This thought of *Laozi* is an important part of his political thought and contains profound political wisdom. In this regard, I believe that it has good research value, if we can conduct more in-depth research, grasp the historical basis, and reflect the times, so as to provide services and reference for politics and national governance.

# Bibliography

## Books

朱熹 [Zhu Xi], *四書章句集註* [*Sishu zhangju jizhu*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1983)

王弼 [Wang Bi], *老子道德經注校釋* [*Annotated and Proofreading of Laozi's Tao Te Ching*] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), p.157.

釋德清 [Shi Deqing], *道德經解* [*The Explanation of Daodejing*] (Shanghai: East China Normal University chubanshe, 2009)

陳奂 [Chen Huan], *詩毛氏傳疏* [*Shij maoshi zhuanhu*] (Nanjing: Fenghuang chubanshe, 2018)

陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], *老子今注今譯* [*The Annotated Critical Laozi*] (Xinbei: Taiwanshangwu, 2017)

許淵沖 [Xu Yuanchong], *漢英對照老子道德經* [*Chinese-English Edition The Old Master Modernized Laws Divine and Human*] (Beijing: Gaodengjiaoyu chubanshe, 2003)