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(to be completed by marker)

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<i>Module Code: SICH4005</i>	<i>Student number: 2016053</i>
<i>Module title: Sinological English I</i>	
<i>For completion by marker:</i> <i>Comments:</i>	
<i>Marker's signature:</i>	<i>Date:</i>
<i>Provisional mark:</i> NB. <i>All marks are provisional until confirmed by the final examination board.</i>	

English oral presentation

Today the topic of my presentation is the soft and weak overcomes the firm and strong, and I will share with you the chapter 36 of Tao Te Ching.

I will divide my presentation into three parts: the introduction, the interpretation and my personal idea of this chapter, and the conclusion.

Now let's begin with the introduction.

Chapter 36 of Tao Te Ching tells us that "Laozi thinks that things are in a state of continual transformation to their opposite."¹ Firstly, let's read the original text in Chinese: 將欲歛之，必固張之；將欲弱之，必固強之；將欲廢之，必固興之；將欲奪之，必固與之。是謂微明。柔弱勝剛強。魚不可脫于淵，國之利器不可以示人。 In this chapter, Laozi divides it into three parts to explain the soft and weak overcomes the firm and strong.

Now let's see more accurately his intention by interpreting the chapter.

1. 將欲歛之，必固張之；將欲弱之，必固強之；將欲廢之，必固興之；將欲奪之，必固與之。是謂微明。

The character 歛 means gather, the character 固 means temporary. 微明 means subtle indicating omens. Fan Yingyuan explains that: "When we expand something, strengthen something, excite something, and take something there is already the subtle implication of accumulating something, weakening something, abandoning something, and taking something. Although the implication is minute, the things are already quite obvious. Therefore, it says: 'This is called subtle bright.'"² From this sentence, we know that we will find it maybe expand

¹ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi] (Xinbei: Taiwanshangwu, 2017),p180.

² 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi] (Xinbei: Taiwanshangwu, 2017),p179.

constantly at the beginning, but when it arrives the limit point, it will naturally shrink.

Master Hanshan interprets that “This describes the natural propensity of things, but people usually fail to observe it. Everything in the world reverses after it tends to an extreme.”³ He gave us three examples that sun, moon and damp. He said that the light is strongest before the sun goes down, the moon is the roundest before it is about to be deficient, and the light is the brightest before it goes out. These are all laws of nature.

Therefore expansion is the sign of accumulation, strength is the bud of weakness, excitement is an sign of abandonment, and giving is the sign of seizing.⁴ From the phenomena of the sky to people’s things, the laws of all things is natural. Although people do not recognize it when they encounter the laws of nature, it is thereby called subtle indicating omens.

I agree with ideas of Master Hanshan, because when I studied the history of China, I often saw some examples of ancient dynasty. For example, in Tang dynasty, the ruler created Kaiyuan prosperous age that reached the peak of the development of Tang Dynasty. But after that, it gradually went to die. Laozi want to tell us if we want to gather something, we can’t gather it by fore. We can stretch it first to make it gather by itself.

So D.C.Lau translated to “If you would have a thing shrink, you must first stretch it.”⁵ His translation is in line with the original text. Therefore, Mr.Chen Guying said that “the first section in this chapter expresses Laozi’s analysis of how situations develop; this is a description of the famous Daoist ideas about when

³ 釋德清 [Shi Deqing], ed. 道德經解 [The Explanation of Daodejing] (Shanghai: East China Normal University chubanshe, 2009), p85.

⁴ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p179.

⁵ Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching, trans. by D.C.Lau (New York, Penguin, 1963), p41.

things reach their peak they must return, when influence and authority is great it must weaken.”⁶

2. 柔弱勝剛強。

Let's go to the second part.

The soft and weak overcomes the firm and strong, which is the cow of this chapter. Why does Laozi advocate the soft and weak? In his opinion, weak is the function of the way. The way is the principle of the nature. In chapter 77, Laozi used the metaphor of pulling a bow for the natural way. He said: When you draw the bow, if you lift it too high, press it down a bit; if you lift it too low, lift it up a bit. Up and down, left and right, must make an appropriate adjustment for the target. Therefore, the way of heaven is to make up for what is insufficient. The water flows all over the ground, and those who lose will return, and those who overflow will flow, and a state of balance must be reached. When we observe nature, we can often see the strong prey on the weak in the animal world. So in nature, is the strong stronger, or does the weak overcome the strong? Laozi said: people who are very violent won't get their timely death in chapter 42.⁷ Why? Because there must be someone more violent than you in this world. There are people outside people, and there are days outside the sky.

Laozi spoke very clearly in chapter 50: the rhinoceros have no place to pitch its horn; there is nowhere for the tiger to place its claws; there is nowhere for the weapon to lodge its blade.⁸ 兕無所投其角，虎無所措其爪，兵無所容其刃。The character 兕 is the rhinoceros. The rhinoceros is very vigorous. Why is it vigorous? It has horns on the head. If its horns don't even have a place to focus, then it's useless. A tiger's claws are powerful, but if its claws have nothing to grab, it's useless. A weapon is a very sharp weapon. If you can't find a place to start, then

⁶ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p179.

⁷ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p200.

⁸ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p230.

what's the use of a sharp weapon? From these three examples, what does Laozi want to tell us? If we go head-to-head with others, we are likely to be hurt by being too strong. But if we can overcome hard with softness, it is very likely that we will be saved from danger.

Everything in nature can confirm this point of view. The grass swaying with the wind will not break; the tree is very strong, but when the wind blows, it will be uprooted. This is Laozi said: the hard and strong are follower of death, the soft and weak are follower of life.⁹ Various phenomena of nature tell us: the soft and weak overcomes the firm and strong. What kind of revelation and reminder can the soft and weak overcomes the firm and strong teach us? In chapter 22, Laozi said: bowed down then preserved, bent then straight, hollow then full, worn then new.

In our daily life, we often say 委曲求全 , which means compromise. Because not everything is to our liking. For example, some people work in sales, and they will always encounter complaints from customers. At this time, they should listen to the customer quietly and help them solve the problem, instead of accusing the customer of impoliteness with a strong attitude. A man not only can bend but also can stretch. As we all know, when a man is old, why does his tongue still exist but all his teeth are lost. This is because the teeth are too strong and the tongue is soft and weak. That's the wisdom of Laozi's opinion that the soft and weak overcomes the strong and hard.

3. 魚不可脫於淵，國之利器不可以示人。

Let's go to the third part.

The character 利器 means sharp instruments. There are several explanations of sharp instruments: Heshang Gong said that it's the way of power. ¹⁰Hanfeizi said

⁹ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p284

¹⁰ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p179.

that it's the punishments.¹¹ Xuehui said: sharp instruments are a metaphor for a country's power.¹² Wangbi said: showing people means employing punishment.¹³ If the rulers only know how to treat the people with severe punishment, they are showing people with sharp instruments. From this sentence, Laozi wants to tell us that people go on the way of danger and defeat when they are hard and strong, people go on the way of safety and conservation. And then violent rule will not last long.

So D.C Lau gave his translation is that: The instruments of power in a state must not be revealed to anyone.¹⁴ Why do we say that? The instrument of power, for example the governance of a country. If rulers are always showing their power in front of the people, if they only know how to govern their people by the strict laws, by the penalties that is what we say 以利器示人 show to their people the instruments of power. The instrument of power includes the strict law or the penalty or the everything which we think cruel in the state. Why do we say that the extreme power must not be to review to anyone? If we always show our muscles to others, they will know our weakness. Because when we show our muscle, we are also showing our weakness, we can't stay in the state of being powerful all the time, just like the rule of the nature, such as the changement of four seasons, just like all living things that we go to our summit and then we are falling down. So this is the cycle. Everything in everyday that we see follows this natural law, and nobody can escape from that. So if rulers try to control their people by the power, by the penalty, by the laws which are very strict. These things can never last long time.

Conclusion:

I think that somethings look like soft or weak for Laozi, just like the grass.

¹¹ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p179.

¹² 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p179

¹³ 陳鼓應 [Chen Guying], ed. 老子今注今譯 [The Annotated Critical Laozi], p179

¹⁴ Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching, trans. by D.C.Lau (New York, Penguin, 1963), p41.

Something which is weak and soft, it's usually can resist to the pressure much more than the strong things. The strong things are always excessive. So for those things which want to take advantage of the strong, for those who want to attack the strong is so easy to find your drawbacks. Because you are always there, you seem to be very strong, very robust. We can find we see you through every each small part on you. And then you seem to be strong, but actually you are the most weakness. Therefore, we should learn to restrain our sharp edges from this chapter, and practice in our life.

That concludes my presentation, any feedback and suggestions will be appreciated.
Thank you for listening patiently.

Bibliography

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