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- [forward 1](#)
- [forward 2](#)
- [preface](#)
- [ch1](#)
- [ch2](#)
- [ch3](#)
- [ch4](#)









Confucius deeply understood Laozi, as seen in the *Eulogy on the Dragon*, where he extolled the profound spirit of the Dao.

Confucius' teaching too has, for centuries, been little understood.

From Yan, Zeng, Duanmu, Ran, Min, Zai Wo, and You Ruo to Si and Meng, the transmission was maintained, each preserving a part.

Later, it devolved into exegetical scholarship, obscuring Confucian learning; then into the study of poetry and prose, again obscuring it; then into empty discourse on metaphysics, obscuring it yet again.

Thus Confucius' path fell into deep decline, equally shrouded in clouds and darkness — only a corner of the qilin's horn or a hoof could be glimpsed.

Both Confucian and Daoist learning became similarly obscured.

Later students of Confucius clung only to exegesis, literature, and abstract speculation; students of Laozi clung only to Yin-Yang, talismans, and alchemy.

Though their words may be fine, they are empty talk.

One who seeks to see Confucius' qilin or Laozi's dragon will forever lose the chance.

Unfortunately, later generations, unable to see even a fragment, took the Han and Tang interpretations as the true teachings of Confucius and Laozi.

Some even slandered them, bringing offense to the sages.

Yet those who honor or slander them alike cannot harm or add to them — both remain unseen in the mist.

Jiang was a great elucidator appearing after thousands of years, sweeping away the clouds to reveal the saints' true forms.

With a great voice he awakened the deluded, ringing the wooden bell.

Suddenly one could behold the lofty walls of their school, the beauty of the ancestral halls, the elegance of Tang and Yu's legacies, the perfection of the Three Dynasties' institutions.

Not merely a horn or hoof, but the full form of the qilin was revealed.

His vernacular commentary on the Four Books is something unseen since the Han and Tang, awakening insight not known for over two millennia.

He not only clarified Confucius' profound vision but also peered into the Laozi beyond form and

name, beyond the reach of thought and sense.

With a mind pure as Heaven, free from human distortion, he matched heart to heart — Confucius' heart to Laozi's heart — measuring the nameless simplicity.

Thus he opened the celestial pattern, gathering light and essence into form, uniting Heaven and Earth, traversing space and dust alike.

The image of Laozi now appears vividly before the world, destined to guide the Great Harmony of all nations.

Laozi recorded his learning thousands of years ago; Jiang expounded it thousands of years later.

Heaven's timing will unfold the Great Harmony, and Jiang's appearance is to lay its foundation.

The beginnings of Laozi and Confucius were different in form but the same in breath, deeply connected.

When they met, they conversed long and warmly, like old friends; each held the other in their heart alone.

Yet over the centuries, Confucians have belittled Laozi, and Daoists have belittled Confucius — due to knowing only the broad but not the concise, the apparent but not the hidden, the empty but not the substantial.

Laozi's learning is Heaven's learning with humanity included; Confucius' learning is humanity's learning with Heaven included.

Laozi's words proceed from Heaven to humanity, hence their simplicity; Confucius' words proceed from humanity to Heaven, hence their subtlety.

Outwardly they seem opposed; inwardly they are one.

Thus, one deeply versed in Confucius and the relation of Heaven and humanity is also deeply versed in Laozi.

This is why Mencius refuted Yang and Mo but never Laozi.

This truth lay buried for centuries until I saw it in Jiang's commentary.

I see this clearly in Jiang's annotation of the *Dao De Jing*.

With his vernacular explanations of both Confucius and Laozi, these works will become household knowledge, shining brightly in the world as ironclad proof of future Great Harmony.

In recent years, Governor Yan Xishan of Shanxi has promoted the true learning of Confucius and

Laozi, bringing peace and prosperity to his province.

Yet some foolishly claim that Confucius valued benevolence and righteousness over profit, that Laozi despised war, and thus these teachings would doom the nation.

They would abolish the classics entirely — words reckless and self-destructive, born of mistaking Han and Tang distortions for the truth.

If they knew the real teachings, they would venerate them instead.

Jiang's *Vernacular Commentary on the Dao De Jing* was funded and printed through the generosity of Ye Xiting of Jiangsu, and later by Ding Lishan of Zhili.

Thus the *Dao De Jing* will circulate alongside the Four Books and *Li Yun*.

Jiang's authorship and his patrons' efforts will be remembered alongside the works of Confucius and Laozi, enduring for all time.

Written in the summer of the 9th year of the Republic (1920), on the 15th day of the 7th lunar month.

Zhang Zhirong of Lin'an, Daming, Zhili.





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Although the pioneers of mechanical science had the noble intention of benefiting the nation and the people, with no thought of harming others,

unexpectedly there arose cruel and inhumane people who stole the fruits of these sciences to create poison bells and cannons, slaughtering our fellow human beings.

All the great mechanical scientists, though endowed with skillful hands and keen minds, were not only powerless to stop them, but were even exploited to help produce such weapons.

These fine machines not only failed to resist the guns and cannons but also served to transport troops and supplies, and to transmit messages.

Thus, happiness turned into calamity, progress became poison; progress at its extreme would send one's own people into the hail of bullets and rain of shells.

Ha! Can this "happiness" still be enjoyed? Can this "progress" still advance?

I believe that if the souls of the pioneers of material civilization are aware, they would not only loathe those who make weapons, but also regret it themselves.

The sages, in educating the world, always first teach the knowledge of morality, and only then the knowledge of skill.

With moral heart, skills can assist morality, and morality, borrowing from skills, can shine all the more.

If the heart is full of deceit and cunning, skills will aid evil; morality will decay, and the world will fall into disorder.

If one does not teach morality first, but teaches skills first, then those with skill but without morality will inevitably fall into corruption, do all manner of wrongs, and grow arrogant in their abilities.

This is the great underlying cause of the world's turmoil in the past few centuries.

I have long carried this pain in my heart, but due to the trends of the age I dared not speak of it in detail, fearing it would be useless to say and would only bring ridicule upon myself.

In August of this year, the weather was peaceful, and I had just finished annotating the *Dao De Jing*

I went up Mount Tai to mark its completion.

From the summit, I looked in all directions and saw oppressive clouds shrouding the sky and sun;

I heard cries of grief and wailing that shook the earth and startled the heavens.

My heart ached and my eyes grew moist.

Unable to keep silent, I borrowed pen and ink from a Daoist, and with each word like a tear, I freely wrote down my thoughts to sincerely inform my fellow countrymen.

Even if some say I am mad, I do not care.

It is like the tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, and elephants among beasts — fierce in courage, a hundred times more dangerous than robbers —

yet the harm they cause is a million times less than that of robbers armed with skill and weapons.

If someone were to teach them skills and give them guns, they would surely devour all humankind and still not be satisfied.

Thus, those with morality pass on skills selectively, not carelessly, just as Bodhidharma's martial arts and the Daoist sword techniques were taught —

not out of stinginess, nor unwillingness for others to have skills, but to prevent future harm, and so caution was necessary.

The *Great Learning* says: "All things have a root and branches; all affairs have a beginning and an end. Knowing what comes first and what comes after brings one close to the Dao."

Morality is the root; material things are the branches.

Morality should come first; material things after.

Otherwise, though our country was among the earliest to be civilized, producing sages in succession — such as the Yellow Emperor, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, King Wen, King Wu, Duke of Zhou, Confucius, and Mencius — all were people of unfathomable divine transformation.

Some invented agricultural tools, musical instruments, and water control devices; some created the armillary sphere; some invented the compass; some were famed for their fine materials; some for their great learning.

They were the forerunners of all the world's inventions, too many to list.

Was it that they could not make trains, ships, and all kinds of machines?

No — they simply first taught morality, not the practicalities of sound, light, electricity, and chemistry, until the people's morality was established, and then taught skills.

In governing the world, this was the necessary method of our sages.

The West did not understand this and laughed at our teachings as old-fashioned.

Our teachings may indeed seem old-fashioned, yet the world today is in utter chaos.

I dare ask the great mechanical scientists to create a machine that can save us.

Even so, this calamity of war is not the fault of the materialists;

if morality and material progress had advanced together in earlier days, how could today's strange disasters have come about?

However, it is understandable that the West laughs at us.

What is truly astonishing is that we, the descendants of the divinely wise Yellow Emperor and the upright disciples of Confucius and Mencius,

have picked up the scraps of the Western doctrines of killing, stolen the outer shell of their killing machines, and have erased in one stroke the great laws of governance handed down from our two emperors, three kings, Confucius, Zeng, Si, and Meng,

regarding them as deadly poison. How deluded to this extreme!

They do not know that our Daoist learning can not only save our nation from poverty and weakness, but can also save the West from calamity.

This is no empty boast — only by creating a marvelous and unfathomable “Dao Device” can we counter the deadly weapons of war.

After writing *On Ceasing War*, I wished to create such a device.

I pondered it diligently for three years, fearing no lack of materials.

This spring, Mr. Yang Xianting lectured on the Supreme Dao, saying the energy of the Dao had already stirred, and it was time to study the *Dao De Jing*.

Around the same time, Mr. Liu Liqing sent me his work *Good Words*, which embodies the meaning of sharing goodness with others and being selfless.

Inspired by this, I also took up the *Dao De Jing* to read.

When I came to the lines “The great carving does not cut” and “The nameless uncarved block,” I suddenly realized — the method and the materials are all here!

Because of the importance of the matter, I followed the Islamic way of purification, fasting, and bathing to cleanse body and mind;

I prayed in the Christian manner to God;

I drew from the *Analecets* the principle of Confucius' "carpenter's square" at seventy, and from Ziyou in Wucheng using the butcher's knife;

I drew from the Buddhist sutras the wisdom of wondrous observation.

Then, using Buddhist insight to observe the state of the world, I saw that the heavenly cycle was at noon, the earth's energy had opened;

using Confucius' square and the principles of wisdom, I made the device.

People did not recognize it, but in the end it was fit for use.

Measuring Laozi's nameless uncarved block, I found it whole, though previous generations had divided it chemically into two great parts and eighty-one sections,

allowing over a hundred craftsmen to make whatever they wished — great artisans made great devices, small workers made small devices — suitable or unsuitable, all were out of place.

Fortunately, this block is a divine block.

Though carved by craftsmen, it can never be exhausted, and it can return to its original substance, whole and complete.

I was both amazed and delighted, and dared not act rashly.

I stilled my wandering thoughts, focused my energy, my body like dead wood, my heart like cold ashes,

feeling the harmony of Heaven had arrived and the spirit had come to dwell.

I met it with spirit, not with the eyes.

Taking the butcher's knife, I cut freely, more wondrously than Butcher Ding cutting up an ox for Lord Wen Hui.

When done, it was still whole — a device of the gentleman who is not a device.

Looking closely, it was formless yet had form, divided into two great parts and eighty-one sections.

When cutting, I opened great clefts and guided great hollows;

due to the nature of the original, the number was the same as before, but the form and use differed entirely.

Though less refined than before, it suited today's needs.

The front half resembled Laozi's flying, transforming blue ox; the back half resembled the same-track carriage described by Confucius in the central hall.

The front half was for travel, with tremendous ox-power, able to reach all places under the sun and moon, where frost and dew fall, where boats and carts go, where human strength reaches — anywhere with living beings.

The back half was for carrying cargo, with a spacious interior, able to carry all the classics of the sages — the *Poetry*, *History*, *Changes*, *Rites*, *Spring and Autumn*, *Classic of Filial Piety*, *Analects*, *Great Learning*, *Doctrine of the Mean*, *Mencius* —

plus the various masters and the *Twenty-Four Histories* for reference.

Due to current circumstances, I cast aside the dross of petty comfort and wrote out the essence of Great Harmony.

Wherever this ox-cart went, it emitted auspicious light and harmonious energy, forming benevolence, righteousness, and morality; naturally the country would be secure and the people at peace.

It was truly a treasure, praised by all who saw it.

Only one ignorant friend said: "Your Dao Device is good, but why not have someone sit in it and give speeches?"

I replied: "In the first illustration, do you not see that there is no one?"

Yet, after it was made, I worried — how could one ox and one cart travel the whole world?

By fortune, Mr. Ye Xiting came to visit, saw it with great joy, raised funds, and had a thousand identical ones made in Shanghai.

But I have never attended a technical school, never studied mechanics, know nothing of physics, and do not understand manufacturing.

Whether my creation is suitable or not, I humbly offer it to all nations, hoping great mechanical scientists will give guidance.

There is one more important matter to state in advance: if it is not suitable, there is nothing more to say;

if it is useful, then when the world is at peace, I must take it back.

For Laozi's nameless uncarved block has long been said to be "The great carving does not cut."

I could not bear the world's chaos, so I took it to forcibly create a Dao Device to save the world.

Once used, it must be returned to its original substance, the nameless block given back to Laozi.

I dare not keep what I have borrowed; my pledge will be clear for all to see.

Fifteenth day of the eighth lunar month, summer of the 8th year of the Republic (1919)

Jiang Xizhang of Licheng, Shandong

preface

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# Vernacular Explanation of the Dao De Jing (Upper Volume)

By Jiang Xizhang of Licheng, Shandong





Thus, always without desire, one can observe its subtlety;

always with desire, one can observe its manifestations.

These two emerge from the same source but have different names.

Both may be called “mysterious,”

and the mystery of mysteries is the gateway to all wonders.

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### **Explanation of terms:**

**Dao (道):** principle or the Way.

**Ke dao (可道):** able to be spoken.

**Chang (常):** constant, unchanging.

**Ming (名):** name, designation.

**Miao (妙):** wondrous, subtle.

**Jiao (界):** limit, boundary, or sign.

**Xuan (玄):** deep, profound.

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### **Interpretation:**

If the Dao can be spoken of, it is not the unchanging Dao.

If a name can be designated, it is not the unchanging name.

“The nameless” refers to the origin from which Heaven and Earth arise.

“The named” refers to the mother from which all things arise.

Thus, uniting with the Dao as one body,

one is constantly in true emptiness, without thought, to observe the Dao’s subtlety;

constantly in wondrous being, with intention, to observe the Dao’s manifestations.

These two states — true emptiness and wondrous being —

both arise from the ineffable Dao, though they have different names.

Both may be called profound, indeed profoundly profound,  
the gateway through which all marvels emerge.

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In human conduct, the first priority is to understand subtlety.

If one cultivates oneself without knowing subtlety, one harms one's own life;

if one governs without knowing subtlety, one brings disorder to the state.

Scientists who build airships and ships, who can travel in the sky and under the sea,  
are simply those who understand the subtlety of material things.

The Emperor Shun "ruled without action,"

and when Confucius assisted the state of Lu for three months, it was well-governed —  
both were cases of knowing the subtlety of governance.

Everything has its subtlety.

If you seek it from the branches and leaves, you labor without result;

seek it from the root, know its subtlety, and all subtleties will be known without seeking.

What is the subtlety of the Dao?

The world today is rotten, fighting for power and profit, devoid of humanity.

Where is the subtlety that can save the world?

It is Laozi's secret of stopping war and killing —

the emptiness of the Dao and the life-preserving virtue.

Otherwise, selfish desires fill the chest, cruelty becomes habit — how can there not be war?

The lives lost are countless; the property destroyed is beyond reckoning.

If everyone practiced Laozi's Dao and virtue,

turning back the tide of destruction,

all nations could share in harmony, peace, and happiness.



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# Chapter 2

When all under Heaven know beauty as beauty, ugliness already exists;

when all know good as good, not-good already exists.

Therefore, being and non-being give birth to each other,

difficult and easy complete each other,

long and short contrast with each other,

high and low incline toward each other,

sound and tone harmonize with each other,

front and back follow each other.

Thus, the sage manages affairs through non-action,

teaches without words,

lets the ten thousand things arise without rejecting them,

produces them without claiming ownership,

acts without depending on them,

and achieves success without taking credit.

Because he does not claim credit, his achievements never depart.

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### **Interpretation:**

When people universally recognize beauty, ugliness is created;

when people universally recognize goodness, what is not good appears.

Thus, opposites define and give rise to each other —

existence and non-existence, difficulty and ease, length and shortness, height and lowness, sound and tone, before and after.

The sage, therefore, does nothing yet governs all;

teaches without speaking;

allows all things to develop naturally without interference;

does not possess what he gives life to;

does not rely on what he accomplishes;

and when his work is done, he does not cling to it.

Because he does not cling, the fruits of his work remain.

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# Chapter 3

Do not exalt the worthy, and the people will not contend for position.

If one overly exalts the worthy, then all will strive to become such, and contention will arise, bringing disorder.

Do not prize goods that are rare in the world, and the people will not risk themselves to become thieves.

If rare treasures are prized, greed will awaken and thieves will appear.

Do not display objects of desire, and people's hearts will not be enticed into turmoil.

If desirable things fill the eyes, hearts will be disturbed and evil thoughts will grow.

Therefore, in governing the state, the sage strives to empty the hearts of the people, keeping them tranquil and free of idle schemes, yet to fill their bellies with food.

Their ambitions are kept gentle, so they are not arrogant or competitive, yet their bones are made strong.

By constantly causing the people to be without cunning knowledge and without vain desires, even those who deem themselves clever will not dare to act rashly.

When one governs through non-action, there is nothing that will not be well governed.

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# Chapter 4

The Dao is empty, yet in using it there is no filling.

Deep indeed — it seems to be the ancestor of the ten thousand things.

It blunts the sharpness, so that none are overbearing;

unties the tangles, so disputes dissolve;

softens its radiance, so brilliance blends with the world;

makes itself the same as the dust, dwelling among all things without elevating itself.

Calm and clear — it seems as though it might exist, yet is beyond grasp.

I do not know whose child it is; it seems to have existed before the Lord of Heaven.

The essence of the Dao is without form or image and cannot be measured;

yet its virtue can bring forth Heaven and Earth, nurture the human heart, and give life to all beings.

The sage, by observing the Dao and following it in action, can be without contention toward others, without conflict toward things, and thus achieve enduring peace.