F1 — Preface

I was fortunate to be born in an age when the world is “evolving” and the mechanical arts are flourishing: steamships on the water, trains on land, airplanes in the sky, submarines beneath the waves. Truly, the five continents are as one family and the myriad nations as one room. Moreover, in all the machines we use, operate, watch, and listen to, none fails to be convenient and ingeniously made. With so many happy encounters and so much delight, I “drink water and think of the source,” and cannot help but admire and thank the pioneers who invented the mechanical arts.

Yet although those pioneers intended to benefit the nation and the people, without any wish to harm others, who could have foreseen that cruel and inhumane men would steal these arts and fashion poison guns and poison cannon to slaughter our fellow humans? The great masters of mechanics—though gifted with exquisite skill and agile minds—could do nothing; worse, they were used to help make murderous weapons. These fine machines not only cannot resist guns and artillery, they are also used to transport troops and provisions and to transmit information. Seen this way, “happiness” has turned into calamity; “evolution” has become “evolving into poison.” Pushed to the extreme, this “evolution” drives our compatriots into forests of rifles and showers of bullets. Ha! Is this “happiness” worth enjoying? Is this “evolution” worth pursuing?

If the souls of the pioneers of material civilization are aware, they would not only hate the makers of guns and artillery; they themselves would surely repent. For when sages educate the world, they must first teach people knowledge of Dao and virtue, and only then knowledge of skills. (By “skills” I do not mean manufacturing alone; any heart given to stratagem and contrivance counts. But cunning is born of clever devices; where there are “engineered works,” there will be engineered minds.) Then skill can assist virtue, and virtue, borrowing skill, will shine more brightly; with virtue illumined, the world will naturally be at peace. If we do not teach Dao and virtue but teach skill first, then skill will amplify human desires and virtue will decay. (All who possess skill without virtue inevitably linger in dissipation and destruction, indulging wayward extravagance, doing anything whatsoever; they grow proud because they rely on their ability, and money abets it.) When virtue decays, disorder naturally follows. This is the great disease behind the world’s upheavals these past centuries.

I have long borne this pain in my heart and have spoken of it a little already. But, carried by the tide of the times, I dared not speak at length, fearing it would be useless and only bring disgrace upon myself. This year in the eighth month, the weather was calm. Having just finished annotating the Dao De Jing, I went up Mount Tai to announce completion. From the summit I gazed in all directions and saw a gloom of sorrow clouding the sky and covering the sun; I heard cries of lamentation and wailing that shook the earth and startled heaven. Unawares my heart ached and my eyes stung. I could not endure to remain silent. I asked a Daoist for brush and ink, and—each character a tear—I freely wrote down the thoughts of my heart to address my compatriots. Even if the world calls me insane, I will not mind.

Consider fierce beasts—tigers, leopards, rhinoceroses, elephants: their ferocity and strength exceed bandits a hundredfold, yet the harm they do is ten thousand times less. If someone taught them skills and gave them guns and cannon, they would surely devour the human race and still not be sated. Thus, those with virtue transmit skills only to those who are fit, and will not lightly pass them on. Bodhidharma's boxing and the Daoist art of the sword are like this. Is this stinginess? Is it reluctance to see others acquire skill? No—it is prudence to prevent future ills; they must be careful. Hence the Great Learning says: "Things have root and branch; affairs have beginning and end. Knowing what comes first and what comes later draws near to Dao." This means: Dao and virtue are the root, material things the branch; Dao and virtue should come first, material things later. (The "things" in "investigating things" are desires, not physical objects; former scholars have already made the distinction.)

Otherwise, our country, first to be civilized and rich in sages—Huangdi, Yao, Shun, Yu, Tang, King Wen, King Wu, Duke of Zhou, Confucius, Mencius—were people of unfathomable spirit. Some made agricultural tools, musical instruments, and devices for controlling floods; some invented the armillary sphere and the compass; some were famed for their moral timber, some for broad learning—the progenitors of all manufacturing under heaven. (And beyond these: Mozi, Lu Ban, the Marquis of Wu—talent never failed from age to age; they are too many to name.) Could they not have made trains, steamships, and all machines? Did they only prattle of Dao and righteousness and neglect the practical study of sound, light, electricity, chemistry? (The classics do in fact reveal sound, light, electricity, and chemistry—refined, though not in detail.) Rather, they first cultivated the people's virtue, and only then taught skills. (After the Three Dynasties, those who sought to "stupefy the people" for the sake of a private "family-held" realm are an exception.) For the time being, a little skill was taught—enough to use. This is how our sages ruled the world by Dao; there was no alternative.

The West failed to perceive this and mocked our teachings as pedantic. Let them. Today the world's chaos has reached an extreme. I would ask the great mechanicians to invent a machine to save us. Although—this calamity of war is not the fault of the materialists alone. If, from the beginning, Dao and material civilization had advanced together, would we have such disasters today? Still, seeing our corrupt present, Westerners mock us; that is understandable. What I cannot fathom is how we, the descendants of the numinous Huangdi and disciples of Confucius and Mencius, should ape the West's art of killing, pilfering its machinery for slaughter, and sweep away in a single stroke the cardinal laws by which the Two Emperors and Three Kings, Confucius, Zengzi, Zisi, and Mencius governed the world—as if these were venom and poison. How confused we have become! Do we not know that our Dao-learning can save not only China's poverty and weakness, but also the West's calamity and chaos?

This is no idle talk: one must fashion a wondrous "Dao-device" to counter the murderous implements. After I wrote an essay on ceasing war, I wished to build such a device. For three years I pondered and researched—it was beyond me; I lacked even the materials. This spring, Mr. Yang Xianting lectured on the Way of the Supreme, saying that the pneuma of the Supreme Dao has begun to move and we should timely study the Dao De Jing. I also received Mr. Liu Liqing's book on beneficence, which teaches sharing goodness with others and a great, selfless spirit. Taking this as my aim, I turned again to the Dao De Jing. When I came to "Great carving does not cut" and "the un-named unhewn wood," I suddenly realized: here are method and material!

Because the matter was weighty, I first observed the Muslim discipline of fasting and ablution to purify body and mind; then I followed Christian prayer to petition God. From the Analects I took the “square” (ju) Confucius used at seventy, and the “butcher’s knife” Ziyou wielded in Wucheng. From the Buddhist scriptures I adopted the methods of “wonderful discernment” and “accomplishing wisdom.” (If I fashioned the “uncarved-wood” method without Buddhist dharma, people would not recognize the device; adding Buddhist method makes it fit for use.) Next I used Buddhist insight to survey the world’s condition and saw that Heaven’s cycle is at noon and Earth’s pneuma has opened. Using Confucius’s “square” to measure Laozi’s “un-named unhewn wood,” I found that although this block is a single, seamless whole, the ancients—like chemists—had already separated it into two large sections and eighty-one small parts. For over a hundred “makers,” each crafted as they pleased: master artisans made great devices, petty craftsmen made small ones—never mind the quality. But now none of these suits the time.

Fortunately this “block” is a divine block: though craftsmen hewed it and made it small, it is inexhaustible and returns to its primal substance, whole and round. I was shocked and delighted and dared not act rashly. I stilled delusive thoughts, unified the breath—my form like deadwood, my heart like cold ash. Feeling Heaven’s harmony arrive and the spirit come to dwell, I met it with spirit, not sight. Taking the butcher’s knife in hand, I cut as naturally as skillful Cook Ding dismembered the ox for Lord Wen-hui—wondrous indeed. When I had finished, it was still seamless and whole: a “device” that is “not a device.” Looked at closely, it is formless yet has form: two great sections and eighty-one small parts, the same count as before—because my blade followed the largest fissures and widest hollows left by the ancients. Its form: the first half resembles the blue ox that Laozi rode, ever changing and soaring; the second half like the chariot of “common measure” in the Doctrine of the Mean on which Confucius sat. The first half governs movement, with the strength of an ox, able to reach every place touched by sun and moon, frost and dew, ship and foot, wherever there is breath and blood. The second half governs capacity: its carriage is spacious enough to carry the Classics—Odes, Documents, Changes, Rites, Spring and Autumn, Classic of Filial Piety, Analects, Great Learning, Mencius—together with selections from the Hundred Schools and the Twenty-Four Histories for reference. Because of present circumstances, I cast away the dross of “lesser prosperity” and transcribed the essence of Great Unity. Wherever this ox-cart goes, auspicious light and harmony arise; benevolence, righteousness, and virtue knit together, the state becomes secure and the people joyful—what a precious device! Everyone who sees it claps and praises it. Only one foolish friend asked, “Your ‘Dao-device’ is splendid—why not seat a person upon the cart to lecture?” I replied, “In the first plate—do you not see there is no person?” Yet after the device was finished, I worried: how could a single ox and a single cart travel the world? Luckily Mr. Ye Xiting came to lodge with me, was delighted, and raised funds to have one thousand replicas made in Shanghai, all exactly the same. But I never attended specialized schools, never studied mechanics, physics, or manufacture; I cannot tell whether what I have made is usable. I therefore present it to the nations and humbly ask the great masters of mechanics to instruct me.

One more crucial word must be stated in advance. If it is unusable, say no more. If it is of use and the world returns to peace, it must be reclaimed. Laozi long ago said that the un-named “unhewn wood” is “great carving that does not cut.” I could not bear global chaos and so “stole” it to forge a “Dao-device” to save the world. When it has served its purpose, it will be returned to its primal substance, and I shall return the “un-named unhewn wood” to Laozi—I dare not keep what is

borrowed and not return it. Thus I will make my great good faith manifest.

—Jiang Xizhang, Licheng, Shandong, 1919

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