F2 — Nine Guidelines

(New Annotation) Dao De Jing — Vernacular Explanation: Nine Guidelines

1. Aim of this book. To make Dao and virtue flourish, to bring an end to warfare and killing, to reverse the course of the age, and to rectify the human heart—this is the single aim. My earlier works—Ceasing War, The Great Cosmos Illustrated, Vernacular Explanations of the Four Books, Vernacular Explanation of “Evolution of Rites”—have already stated this; the present Preface explains it in detail.
2. Word-by-word explanations. Difficult characters are explained as they arise. Once a graph has been explained earlier, it will not be explained again later.
3. Whole-chapter explanation. I explain the meaning of each chapter and convey it in a spoken, accessible voice.
4. Whole-chapter “Discourse.” I speak my own mind and develop the meaning of the scripture. Where the text touches most directly on the present moral condition of the world, I explain all the more earnestly.
5. “Whole-work Discourse.” This is a comprehensive discourse on the entire work. In my earlier Four Books commentary I wrote whole-essay and whole-book discourses; I intended to do likewise here. But after annotating the Upper Volume I had nearly two hundred pages; to add three more large discourses seemed needlessly prolix. So I unfolded the meaning of the Upper Volume within the Discourse to Chapter 37 (which can be read as the Upper Volume discourse), and unfolded the meaning of the Lower Volume within the Discourse to Chapter 38 (which can be read as the Lower Volume discourse). Looking back, the Discourse to Chapter 1 embraces the gist of the whole book and can be read as the “Whole-work Discourse.”
6. How to read this book. Although my notes are plain and popular in language, they are grounded in the scripture; I dare not graft extraneous branches. The Discourses, however, are my own views; I am fairly confident they are not pedantic or useless. When you read, please first set aside any aversion to “the old learning.” With aversion in your heart, not only will my words resist you; you will fail to see the unsurpassed wisdom of the sages. A mind not present cannot taste its food; how much less if it nurses disgust. (I have tested this. In May I dined with my school brother Zhou Lesan and a blind friend, Shen Deyi. Because Shen’s sight is poor, Lesan served him the finest dishes. I deliberately said, “This food is spoiled.” Without testing the flavor, he spat it out and echoed me, “Yes, spoiled.” Lesan clapped and laughed: “Truly, all is mind-made! But you—without tasting sweet or sour—followed a clever man into nonsense. Was that not a waste of my care?”) So, remove aversion; take this as the newest of teachings; read with calm and even mind—you may find some truth in it. If, after careful reading, there is still nothing to it, then even your reproaches and abuse I am willing and eager to hear.
7. Later expansion. Once this book was complete, I planned to translate it into English and distribute it to the nations. But my colleagues were in haste to publish, so we did not wait. If an eminent scholar should translate it into a foreign tongue, I will be delighted.

8. Basis of the annotations. This work relies mainly on Master Zhang Haoyan's Brief Discourses on Laozi (a universal scholar at the end of the Ming). I have also added my own understanding and rendered it into the vernacular. The "Discourses" are my own. Master Zhang's notes are quite concise and in literary style; beyond expounding the scripture, there is little argument. If one were to follow the ancients entirely, why annotate at all? Since I have adopted his earlier explanations, I must openly acknowledge the fact, and also tell the world of his moral learning.

(Brief note on Master Zhang: He was a tribute student in the late Ming. His father served the Ming and died with integrity, leading the people of Jiyang to resist when the Qing armies arrived. Master Zhang, in grief and indignation, burned his examination essays and devoted himself to practical Dao-learning, hoping to accomplish great things. Yet he encountered the benevolent and enlightened Kangxi Emperor; Heaven's mandate had settled, so he dared not force a rising like Tang and Wu. All his life he would not sit facing north, and styled himself "Haoyan" to show that he could not carry on his forebears' enterprise and was unworthy to be called a son. His descendants did not sit for the county exams throughout the Qing. Among his students, many were famed for writing and learning, but did not seek office. At that time, literary inquisitions raged in the south; the Master, knowing what Heaven portended, hid his brilliance deeply. Of his writings, One Book on Master Zhu places "loyalty to the ruler and respect for superiors" at the center and is especially known for his mastery of the Three Rites; he and Li Erqu and Gu Tinglin are sometimes called the "three great scholars" of the early Qing. In truth his learning transcended Han and Song; he penetrated Confucius's mystery of "nature and the Way of Heaven," standing with Yan, Zeng, and Zisi. Had he attained office to enact the Way, he would have united the moral virtue of Zhuge Liang and Wang Yangming with comparable achievements. Note that he says "following the family method, we base ourselves on Master Zhu": "family method" means the private law of one house—a "world as family" law, not the "world as common to all" of Great Unity in the "Evolution of Rites." In his Brief Discourses on the Changes, commenting on the top line of Hexagram Tongren (Fellowship), he says: "The gentleman's original aspiration is Great Unity; to 'fellow' at the outskirts, though without fault, falls short of the Great Unity." This passage seems to reveal Haoyan's hidden devotion to Great Unity, plain between the lines. Was this not "foreknowledge through utmost sincerity"? His courtesy name was Jiruo—"like Ji," the minister who, thinking of all who hunger under Heaven as if he himself were hungry, taught the people to farm and "by beautiful benefit benefitted the world," assisting Yao and Shun in modeling Great Unity. Many of his annotations contain such grand principles and subtle words; they are too many to list, and I have not been able to read them all. But from these few points, one can glimpse his hidden intent. Alas! Everyone knows he was rooted in Master Zhu; who knows his hidden aim at Great Unity? Everyone knows his mastery of the Three Rites; who knows his insight into Confucius's "nature and the Way of Heaven"? Everyone knows his loyalty to ruler and filial piety to parents; who knows his loyalty to the Han race and filial devotion to the Yellow Emperor? Now the era of "the world as a family" has ended, and the curtain rises on "the world as common to all." Can such a one remain forever obscured? This summer, while annotating the Dao De Jing, I consulted two or three family-held commentaries, but found none suitable—until I obtained the Master's book. Reading it greatly delighted me; I felt he had already obtained my heart. When my book was finished and I drafted these "Nine Guidelines," I had not intended to include this note. But hidden virtue long pent up must finally shine forth; perhaps it was the Master's spirit silently stirring my heart. His personal name was Erqi, from Jiyang in Shandong. His works include Brief Discourses on the Odes, Documents, Changes, Spring and Autumn, Three Rites, and Four Books; Haoyan's Collected Essays;

Haoyan’s Idle Talk, and others. The Odes, Documents, Spring and Autumn, and Four Books were not yet in print; the rest had already circulated. He should be honored at the ancestral altars and enshrined for all ages.)

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