



# Discourse

In Laozi's era of warfare, there must have been many unscrupulous characters traveling among the states, instigating military conflict and stealing power and profit for themselves. The rulers and ministers of that time, seeing that the rhetoric of these men was enough to stir people to action — and enough to do harm — inevitably made use of them, keeping bands of retainers to expand their influence. Yet these retainers sat idle and ate without working, draining the state's resources. They sought only their personal comfort and inevitably brought harm to all under Heaven.

And so Laozi could not help but expose this great evil in advance. Savor closely the six characters "**music and fine food draw the passing traveler to pause**" — they capture perfectly the treacherous hearts and ugly faces of those who became retainers.

Those who became retainers were generally men without the standing of citizens. Had they possessed the standing of citizens, they would have been called hosts, not guests. Laozi calls them "passing travelers" because they had no constancy, no love for their country — they lived only by the creed of eating and watching plays. Like the cock-crowing and dog-stealing types of Lord Mengchang's household, they wheedled a few coins here and there. Day after day they haunted the singing halls and dancing pavilions, listening to music and melodies, squandering the state's currency and treasures. Day after day they feasted on lavish banquets, devouring the fat and marrow of the people. When the state fell and the ruling house was extinguished, they slipped away with perfect composure — casting off the old coat, marrying the new groom. They found the sage-ruler Liu quite superior to "that boy from the Sima family." (When Liu Yao conquered the Western Jin and carried off its empress, he asked her: "How do I compare to that boy from the Sima family?" She replied: "Your Majesty is a sage-ruler who founded a dynasty; he was an incompetent lord of a ruined state.") People like this are just like travelers at an inn — beyond occupying their room, eating their meals, and watching their entertainment, they are utterly indifferent to the innkeeper, the inn itself, and their fellow guests. No matter how well the innkeeper treats them, they cannot be kept for long.

Seeing this, those who hold power and influence would do far better — rather than using music and fine food to nourish these cock-crowing and dog-stealing types so lavishly — to take Dao as their master, to cease coveting influence, to stop employing petty men, and to govern through quiet nonaction. For nonaction can accomplish everything. From nothing, it brings forth something. This is the **Great Image** of all under Heaven. Hold fast to this Great Image and one can bring peace to all under Heaven. All under Heaven will naturally submit, and those who submit can be made to dwell in peace and security, free from the least anxiety.

This Dao, though its words come out sounding bland and flavorless — though it cannot be seen or heard, and lacks the bluster of the retainers' rhetoric — yet possesses this wondrous efficacy. It is nothing like those greedy devourers of music and fine food, those passing travelers who merely talk a fine game and accomplish nothing real.

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