

There are those in the world who interpret Laozi together with the *Classic of the Hidden Talisman* as works on military strategy. Looking at these several chapters, they are indeed military strategy. Not only these chapters — if one reads the entire scripture as military strategy, that too is perfectly valid. This is because Laozi's words do not fall into fixed traces. The wise see wisdom in it; the humane see humaneness in it. Take the Confucian *Book of Changes* and the first chapter of the *Analects*: depending on the time, the place, and the person, they can be interpreted in any number of ways. How could they be seen merely as military strategy?

Yet interpreting them as military strategy has deep origins. The study of Dao has its headwaters in the Yellow Emperor. Our nation's culture, along with its agriculture and manufacturing, also has its headwaters in the Yellow Emperor. Thus the study of Dao is the vanguard of all learning, and also the great method for governing the state and bringing peace to all under Heaven. In governing the state, whether to eliminate tyranny or to resist enemies, one cannot avoid using troops. Therefore the study of Dao is also the source from which military science springs. But the military science of the Daoist school is fundamentally different from that of later military specialists. The Daoist school takes retreat as advance, takes not fighting as fighting, takes not killing as victory. Its essential meaning lies in not lightly initiating hostilities and thereby bringing on the terrible calamity of war and slaughter.

I, this young student, upon close examination of its central purpose, find it is not merely compassion and magnanimity. It is that Laozi had thorough insight into the Dao of Heaven and human feeling. All who delight in war and relish killing — regardless of how strong the state or how brave the army — in the end will certainly meet with defeat. To kill others is precisely to kill oneself. To destroy others is precisely to destroy oneself. This is why one dares not do otherwise.

Let me attempt to explain by way of the Dao of Heaven and human feeling.

First, from the standpoint of the Dao of Heaven. Heaven takes its love of life as its De. The Dao of Heaven is the way of what is so of itself. It generates and brings forth the myriad beings. When any among the myriad beings grows and flourishes in excess, it begins to sustain its own life at the expense of other beings' lives. At that point, Heaven loathes its excess and puts an end to it. In truth, it is not Heaven that kills it — it kills itself.

How so? All beings receive Heaven's qi and are thereby born. All possess the De of cherishing life. The De of cherishing life is called humaneness. With humaneness, one can grow and flourish. Confucius said: "The humane are long-lived." When a being's growth reaches its peak of vigor, its vital impulse dissipates outward, and the humaneness within is lost. To lose humaneness is to lose one's Heaven-endowed nature. To lose one's Heaven-endowed nature is to die. This is why Laozi repeatedly says: "What has grown vigorous then grows old. This is called departing from Dao. What departs from Dao comes to an early end."

Moreover, Heaven's cherishing of life is a cherishing of the myriad beings — not merely the cherishing of a single being. Those who hold the cherishing of life in their hearts — Heaven assists them. Those who take killing as a glory — Heaven certainly loathes them. Those who are weak — Heaven certainly protects and shelters them. From this vantage, all who delight in war and relish violence are pursuing the path of death.

Second, from the standpoint of human feeling. No father fails to love his son and wish for his son to grow and thrive. No son fails to be filial to his father and to mourn bitterly at his father's death. If one lightly initiates hostilities, one will inevitably kill the sons of others and kill the fathers of others.

Kill a man's son — that father's love for his child is acute and utterly sincere. Being utterly sincere, his qi will be brave. He will be fierce and unafraid of death. Consider even the smallest birds and beasts — if their young are harmed without cause, they will rise up against even those they ordinarily fear. How much more so for a human being! King Tang of Shang destroyed the state of Ge because its lord killed his boy. This is precisely the reason.

Kill a man's father — that son's mourning at his father's death is extreme. Being stricken with grief, his qi will be fierce. In fury he will disregard his own life. There are those who, to avenge a father, as a lone commoner dare to assassinate the lord of ten thousand chariots. How much more so when state opposes state! Fuchai, mourning his father's death, defeated the state of Yue. This is evidence from the past.

Alas! Killing one boy brought the calamity of a state's destruction. Killing one man's father led to becoming a slave of a destroyed state. How much more so when they fight to seize a city and the slain fill the city; they fight to seize territory and the slain fill the fields! When one has killed the fathers, brothers, and sons of multitudes, can one not bring upon oneself the calamity of state-destruction and racial annihilation?

This is why Laozi says: "In compassion, go to battle and you conquer." And: "When opposing forces meet, the one who mourns shall prevail."

From these two lines of reasoning, Laozi's esteeming Dao and De and abhorring war is not pedantic and impractical. Nor is it mere soft-heartedness. To love another's state is precisely how one loves one's own state. To love another's people is precisely how one loves one's own people. Even when he has no choice but to use troops, it must be a punitive expedition to save the people — an army of compassion — not a use of military force to expand power.

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