

Chapter 75



Translation

The people's hunger —
it is because those above consume too much in taxes.
This is why they hunger.

The people being hard to govern —
it is because those above are addicted to action.
This is why they are hard to govern.

The people making light of death —
it is because the nourishing of life is made too lavish.
This is why they make light of death.

Only those who do not make life their preoccupation
are wiser than those who prize it.

Word Notes

- 稅 — "**taxes**": The levies and tribute paid by the people.

Chapter Explanation

The people's hunger is because their superiors consume too much tax revenue. The strength of the people is exhausted; therefore they go hungry. The people being hard to govern is because their superiors employ scheming techniques of active governance. The people respond with a hundred kinds of trickery; therefore they are hard to govern. The people making light of death is because their appetite for pleasure has been given free rein and the materials for nourishing life are too lavish — their resources are inadequate; therefore they make light of death.

Only those who do not take the nourishing of life as their paramount concern are truly skilled at honoring their life.

Discourse

This past summer, I, this young student, read the last testament of Mr. Liang Juchuan, who gave his life as a martyr to principle. He wrote: "The livelihood of the people grows desperate under the burdens they bear. In the villages of the four quarters, living conditions are such that people and livestock are nearly equal. Yet in the cities, people chat and laugh and pursue their pleasures, prizing refinement and hygiene — truly a lamentable thing." He further wrote: "Unless one resorts to cunning schemes and deceitful stratagems, there is no way to survive."

I believe Mr. Liang's words cut directly to the heart of our present ills — they are truly a righteous argument for saving the world. When I came to annotate this chapter, I realized that Mr. Liang's words secretly accord with Laozi, and that Laozi's formulation is even more precise and penetrating.

Examining Laozi's main idea closely, the weight rests on the single phrase "the nourishing of life is made too lavish." For the people's hunger comes from those above consuming too much in taxes, and the excessive consumption of taxes comes from lavish life-nourishing.

How so? The taxes paid to the state were originally meant for public expenditures. When the state spends more, naturally more must be collected — this is a duty the people ought to fulfill. But Laozi does not say "those above *use* too much in taxes"; he says "those above *consume* too much in taxes." This plainly refers to the state maintaining a host of parasitic officials — as the *Great Learning* puts it, "the consumers are many." They strip away the fat and marrow of the people to feed their palaces, wives and concubines, their eating and drinking, their sounds and colors — all to nourish their own lives.

Thus those above set the example and those below follow it. Everyone lavishly nourishes their life. Even the lowliest laborers learn to smoke paper cigarettes, drink expensive tea, wear silken clothes, and eat rich food.

They do not realize that material resources are finite but human desire is boundless. The sources of wealth will inevitably run dry. When the sources of wealth run dry, those above levy upon the people — but even that does not suffice. When it does not suffice, they invent new names and categories to extract more, using legal power to take from the people and political scheming to deal with the people. The people too respond with scheming. And so a hundred kinds of trickery emerge — just as Mr. Liang said: "Unless one resorts to cunning schemes and deceitful stratagems, there is no way to survive."

In this condition: is it better to follow the upright way and die in poverty, or to use deceitful schemes and perhaps live? Even if one uses deceitful schemes and dies taking risks, at least one has had some pleasure. Whether you choose good or ill, it is all death — who still fears death?

If a noble person does not fear death, no danger or hardship will he avoid. If a petty person does not fear death, there is no great upheaval he will not dare set in motion. When great upheaval comes, there is mutual slaughter. And so everyone's devotion to nourishing life is precisely what kills them.

Alas, how painful! How much better to use virtue to adorn the self and use righteousness to nourish one's qi! That alone is truly to care well for one's life — truly to honor one's life.

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