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Lao Zi's Policy for Dealing with the "People"

There is no question that in the book *Lao Zi*, the word "*min*" (people) does not strictly refer to slaves, as it does in the book *Lunyu* (The Analects [of Confucius]). Rather, in *Lao Zi*, the term refers to the common people, the laboring people who suffer from exploitation and oppression. There are several aspects to Lao Zi's policy of dealing with the "people": One is to carry out a policy of making the people ignorant, and keeping them in a state of ignorance (obscurantism); and the second is to reduce the burdens of exploitation and oppression so as to ameliorate the tensions of contradiction; and opposing pure and simple—or outright—suppression of the people.

With regard to the policy of keeping the people ignorant, we have already discussed, in the two preceding sections of this chapter, how Lao Zi said such things as: "Ever striving to render the people without knowledge and without desire"—essentially arguing for letting the bellies of the people be filled but rendering the people simply units of labor power that are without thought and without brains for themselves. Here in this section let us take another look at this issue, and focus on discussing the position, within his conceptualization of the way (*Dao*) of ruling a country, that Lao Zi places his ideas of a policy of keeping the people ignorant.

The sixty-fifth chapter of *Lao Zi* says:

> Those who were adept at practicing the *Dao* in antiquity did not use it to enlighten the people. Rather, they used it to render the people dumb and ignorant. Now the reason that people are difficult to rule is because of their knowledge. As a result, to rule the country with

> knowledge and wisdom is thievery of the state, while not to use knowledge and wisdom to rule the state is to bless the state with goodness. These two are indeed models [of ruling the country.]

One may well say that this is explicit enough and clear enough. See how important the policy of rendering and keeping the people ignorant is to Lao Zi. He took "to rule the country with knowledge and wisdom is thievery of the state," while "not to use knowledge and wisdom to rule the state is to bless the state with goodness" as the model for ruling the country—in other words, he took carrying out a policy of keeping the people dumb and ignorant as the proper model for government. Still, however, there are those who insist on another interpretation.

Mr. Zhan Jianfeng, on the foundations of a rubbing off a lithographic recording of this text at the Longxing Daoist temple at Suizhou, and cited in the book *Daojing zhenjing cijie* (A Secondary Exegesis of the True Record of the Dao Classic) which was written or compiled anonymously, read the word "*yu*" (ignorance) in the phrase "*jiang yi yu zhi*" (used it to render the people dumb and ignorant) as "*yu*" (to entertain, or amuse). Mr. Zhan said:

> All the other versions of this text renders the passage: "Did not use [*Dao*] to enlighten thepeople, but used it to render the people dumb and ignorant" (*fei yi ming min, jiang yi yu zhi*). Only this version rendered it as: "Did not use [*Dao*] to enlighten people, but used it to entertain or amuse them" (*fei yi ming ren, jiang yi yu zhi*), and interpreted the word "*yu*" as "entertaining [the people], or making the people happy" (*yuele*). For this reason, I speculate that the original text of *Lao Zi* had written the passage as "*yu zhi*" (entertain [the people] or make them happy), and it was this idea and meaning that was passed down among the people, thus the masters of the temple of Longxing were able to engrave these words on their stone tablet, based on this tradition; whereas the words "*yu zhi*" [meaning "rendering them dumb and ignorant"] were the result of an arbitrary revision [of the meaning of *Lao Zi*] by those people who interfered with the lives and times, in order to pander to the intentions of the feudal rulers. Although I dare not insist that this be necessarily the case, I can base this reading on what the anonymous author of this

> *Cijie* (Secondary Exegesis) said, most earnestly and seriously in that book, which is: "Although this version is different from the older versions, it contains its own true meaning and principle. I urge the gentlemen of the future not to change the meaning arbitrarily." Furthermore, according to what Mr. Ma Xulun has said: "The Fan version [of the *Lao Zi*] reads: "Those that are adept at practicing the way of the scholar in antiquity did not enlighten the people with [the way] so much as they entertained and amused the people with it." Given these, our speculation is not without foundation. Then, if indeed the book *Lao Zi* had originally rendered these words as "*yu zhi*" (entertain, amuse, or "make them happy"), then all those interpretations down the ages that argue that Lao Zi advocated "keeping the people ignorant," that [he advocated] a "policy of rendering the people dumb and ignorant" and [that he] "fooled and deceived the people" would all have lost their foundation. (See Zhan Jianfeng, *op. cit.*, p. 364)

Although Mr. Zhan wrote the caveat that he "did not dare insist that this be necessarily" the proper interpretation, in arguing for what he called Lao Zi's "opposition to the feudal ideology," he simply went ahead to affirm the reading of "*yu zhi*" (entertaining the people, or amusing the people, or "making the people happy"), and furthermore, he proceeded directly to interpret chapter 65 of *Lao Zi* as:

> Those that were adept at practicing the *Dao* did not want to make the people intelligent and smart, but concerned themselves instead with making the people happy; in other words, they wanted to render the people contented with the good food they ate and the good clothes they wore, with their dwellings, and happy with their customs. The reason that the people are difficult to govern is because of their knowledge and their craftiness. (see *Ibid.*, p. 461)

As far as I can tell, there is only one person among all the scholars who have explained *Lao Zi* down the ages that affirms the reading of "*yu zhi*" as "entertain, or amuse the people" or "making the people happy," and that one person is Mr. Zhan. This does not make sense. In the original text of *Lao Zi*, it is clear that the passage "did not use [*Dao*] to enlighten the people, but

instead used it to render the ignorant" (*fei yi ming min, jiang yi yu zhi*) contained a parallel, juxtapositional construction of text. In other words, "*yu zhi*" (render them ignorant) was an opposition to "*ming min*" (enlightening the people). How can we make "*yu zhi*" (make the people happy) a juxtaposition to "*ming min*" (enlightening the people)? The ancients do not write like that, and this is true even of today's writing. Indeed, if the meaning was "to entertain the people" or "to make the people happy," then the text should read: "Not *only* to enlighten the people, but *also* to make them happy." The writing: "*did not* want to make people the people intelligent and smart, *but* . . . *instead* wanted to make people happy" is not grammatically sound.

Moreover, the section of text that follows clearly goes on to say: "The reason that the people are difficult to govern is because of their knowledge." Even if we are to read this last phrase here, [as Mr. Zhan does,] as "because of their knowledge and craftiness" (*zhiqiao*), then "knowledge and craftiness" is also a type of "knowledge"—and have not the ruling classes through the ages always accused those people that are difficult to govern of being cunning and crafty? Well, as it is a type of "knowledge," how then can we fit it in with "thus to make the people happy" (*jiang yi yu zhi*)? And how does "making happy" connect back to the sentences "to rule the country with wisdom and knowledge is thievery of the state, while not to rule the country with wisdom and knowledge is to bless the state with goodness"? Does not "ruling the country with wisdom and knowledge" mean to "enlighten the people"? Even if we took that to mean "knowledge and craftiness"? And how can "not to rule the country with wisdom and knowledge" be equated with "making the people happy" rather than with "rendering the people ignorant"? Can one imagine "not to rule the country with wisdom and knowledge" as somehow, then, "to make the people happy" or to "entertain" them? After all, the "masters of the temple of Longxing" did not rewrite the entire chapter of *Lao Zi* integrally, nor did they (or he) go forth to check out all the other chapters and passages in *Lao Zi* that are of related meaning and rewrite all of

them; thus it is that this passage itself stands out as senseless, both in terms of the logic and in terms of the grammar. To render it as "make the people happy" is really an arbitrary revision of the meaning on the part of this "master of the temple of Longxing."

For his part, Mr. Zhan's "speculation . . . that *Lao Zi*'s original text had written this passage as '*yu zhi*' (entertaining, or amusing [the people] or 'making them happy') and that this had been passed down among the people; and that it is based on this that the master of the temple of Longxing engraved it as such on the temple's stone tablets" is, we must say, a terribly "bold hypothesis," but he failed to follow up with "careful search for evidence." It is simply inconceivable, and unthinkable, that, under conditions in which the laboring people lacked their own culture, and since it was not until some four or five hundred years after the book *Lao Zi* first appeared that paper was invented, after over a thousand years, in the Tang dynasty, there was still circulating, "among the people," a "true version" of *Lao Zi* that contained the reading of "*yu zhi*" as "entertaining the people" or "making the people happy." As for the statement that the anonymous author of the book *Cijie* (Secondary Exegesis) made, that "although this version is different from the older versions, it contains its own true meaning and principle," of what value is such a remark, anyway? No matter how long it has lasted, may it be a hundred years, or a thousand years, the simple truth is that it cannot deceive a scholar of textual criticism.

Mr. Chen Guying interpreted the word "*yu*" (ignorance) as "simple, pure, honest," and the term "more knowledge, or wisdom" (*zhi duo*) as "more craftiness, cunning and hypocrisy." Now that has some foundation in the older annotations and commentaries on *Lao Zi*. Wang Bi's commentaries, for instance, read: "*Yu* means without knowledge; or, in other words, keeping their sincerity and obeying nature, or what is natural," and "more knowledge and wisdom is to be crafty and false." Wei (The False) He Shang Gong's commentary said: "to render [the people] pure of essence, as the uncarved block, and without cunning

and falsehood." Even so, this is not reliable, and cannot be the foundation of our interpretation of this passage.

It is clear that from Lao Zi's perspective, once the people have wisdom and knowledge they become cunning and hypocritical, and they would become difficult to govern. It is the people that are not difficult to govern, whose intelligence and knowledge have not been developed at all, that are pure of essence and honest and "down to earth." The commentaries made by Wang Bi and by Wei He Shang Gong were clearly words spoken from the standpoint of the ruling class, from the standpoint of those who rule over the people, just that they were quite skillful at camouflaging this. [Again, keep the historical background in mind.] In Wang Bi's and Wei He Shang Gong's times, the "wisdom and intelligence" of the common people have already been long developed, and the people's minds have already been "opened up," and therefore it would not be wise of them to openly speak of "keeping the people ignorant and dumb," whereas in Lao Zi's time, the people's intelligence was only just beginning to develop, and therefore Lao Zi could say, bluntly and without avoiding the "truth," "[those who are adept at practicing *Dao*] do not use it to enlighten the people, but use it, rather, to render the people ignorant."

This is similar to the case of Confucius, who was a contemporary of sorts of Lao Zi. Confucius, too, said quite bluntly, "One may let the people be; one may not let the people know" (*min ke shi you zhi, bu ke shi zhi zhi*) (*Lun yu*, chapter "*Weizheng*" [On Governance]). As for Liang Qichao's reading of this passage, through an alternate punctuation scheme, as: "*Min ke, shi you zhi; bu ke, shi zhi zhi*" (If the people are amenable, then let them be; if the people are not amenable, then let them know)—that, I am afraid we must say, is not something that we can or must treat seriously, even though Liang was such a reputable and "illustrious" scholar.

Mr. Zhang Songru's viewpoint on this issue is also worth discussing. He insists that Lao Zi represented the peasants. In his reading of chapter 65 of *Lao Zi*, in addition to considering the

term "intelligence and enlightenment" (*chongming*) as synonymous with "great hypocrisy" (*da wei*), and the term "to make them ignorant" (*yu zhi*) as synonymous with "nature, or 'self-so'" (*ziran*), he also went on to present a broad argument about this. He wrote:

> Let us not jump to the conclusion, when we see the words "*yu zhi*" (render them ignorant), that [Lao Zi] was offering to the powers that be a "strategy of fooling the people." Indeed, for the purpose of governing the people, the feudal rulers had a need for a strategy of fooling the people, or keeping the people in ignorance. However, as for the peasants who are being ruled, since, as Lenin said, they operated on the basis of a small peasant economy, and "the small peasants are those who are oppressed by poverty as well as coerced by personal reliance and ignorance of mind and intelligence" (see Lenin, "The Development of Capitalism in Russia"), then how can we expect this weakness [on the part of the small peasant] not to be reflected in the ideas of those thinkers that represent them?

Furthermore, Mr. Zhang said that Lao Zi

> saw "to make them [the people] ignorant" and "not to rule the state with wisdom and knowledge" as a matter of ruling by following *Dao*, and obeying the laws of heaven's way and nature. If we understood this point, we would, at the same time that we criticize [Lao Zi's] backwardness and conservatism, be also able to reveal, more reasonably, the difference that lies between Lao Zi's "do not use [*Dao*] to enlighten the people, but instead use it to keep them ignorant" and Confucius's "one may let the people be; one may not let the people know," namely that while the former represented the naive and childish consciousness of the peasant class, the latter represented the cunning and insidious ideology of the class of the feudal suzerains. (*Lao Zi jiaodu* [Reading *Lao Zi*], pp. 361–362)

We believe that Lenin's words and Mr. Zhang's viewpoint are entirely two different things. It is one thing for the peasants to "be coerced by personal reliance and by ignorance and foolishness of mind and intelligence," but it would be an entirely different thing for the peasants to say to the rulers over them, "Keep us

in the dark." It is inconceivable that the thinkers that represent the peasants, because the peasants carry with them the weakness of "ignorance," would request of their rulers to "keep them ignorant."

In fact, however one may assess Lao Zi, one thing that we cannot say of Lao Zi is that he was "foolish or ignorant." Lao Zi was one of the extremely rare high-level intellectuals of his day. From the "five thousand words" [of the book *Lao Zi*] we can certainly perceive that the level of his abstract thought, his literary and artistic skills and his historical knowledge was in no way inferior to that of Confucius or Sun Wu. As for saying that Lao Zi himself may have considered "use *Dao* to keep [the people] ignorant" and "not to rule the country with wisdom and knowledge" as a matter of "obeying the laws of heaven's way and nature," that does not prove anything. Did Confucius not also believe the same thing about his own teachings? How, then, does that demonstrate that Lao Zi represented "the naive and childish consciousness of the peasant class" while Confucius "represented the cunning and insidious ideology of the class of the feudal suzerains"? Can we imagine that a philosopher that truly represented the peasants was so "naive and childish" himself that he proposed to the ruling class that it "keep ignorant" his own brethren? That is inconceivable and incomprehensible. I am afraid that Mr. Zhang simply placed too much stock in Lao Zi and despised Confucius. In fact, we need not pour so much calumny on Confucius either. After all, the statement "one may let the people be; one may not let the people know" was pretty commonplace and moderate for the times in which they were "spoken." In essence, was there any exploiting class that had the power of government in its hands that did not implement a policy of keeping the people ignorant?

Let us, in the following, move on to discuss how Lao Zi advocated ameliorating exploitation and oppression, and opposed outright suppression of the people.

It is written in chapter 74 of *Lao Zi*:

> If the people did not fear death, how could you use death to strike fear into their hearts? If you brought it about that the people, con-

> stant in their behavior, nonetheless feared death, and you took those who were abnormal and killed them, who then would dare to act in such ways? If the people are constant and moreover feared death, then there are those who have the office of killing and they will kill. To kill in place of those who are in charge of killing [or executions] is like cutting wood in place of the great carpenter. If you cut wood in place of the great carpenter, it would be strange if you did not hurt your hand.

Mr. Chen Guying rendered the following contemporary translation for this passage:

> If the people did not fear death, why use death to threaten them? If we could make the people truly fear death, then we could arrest those people who do evil things and have them killed. And if we do that, who, then would dare to do bad things? There are always those who are in charge of the responsibility of killing to carry out the duty of killing. If you took the place of the one who is in charge of killing and carried out the responsibility of killing in his place, then it would be as if you took the place of a carpenter, and went to cut wood. He who cuts wood [improperly] in the place of the carpenter is likely to cut his own hand.

We are basically in agreement with Mr. Chen's "contemporary" translation of this passage, although we believe that the word "constant" (*chang*) should be read, as suggested by Mr. Yu Shengwu, as "should" (*dang*) (*Zhu zi xinzheng* [New Evidence For the Reading of the Various Philosophers]) and the word "rarely" (*xi*) should be read as "none" (*wu*)—in other words, the last sentence should be read as: "none of those who cut wood in the place of the carpenter could avoid hurting his own hand" (See my *Lao Zi jiaogu*). In any case, these are minor points, that have nothing to do with the major issues of interpretation. The reason that we bring out Mr. Chen's translation here is that we wish to demonstrate that as long as we consistently and more rigorously follow the requirements of semantics and textual criticism, we can be consistent in comprehending the original meaning of *Lao Zi*.

When I wrote the early draft of *Lao Zi jiaogu*, which was

before I had a glimpse of Mr. Chen's writing, I was already basically in agreement with Mr. Chen's translation in terms of how I explained this chapter in *Lao Zi*. Nonetheless, my assessment and interpretation of this chapter was, and is, very different from Mr. Chen's. Mr. Chen's commentary on this chapter is:"This chapter is where Lao Zi, in response to the conditions of the harsh laws and strict regulations of the day, forcing the people toward the path of death, raised an embittered and profound voice of protest" (*Lao Zi zhuxi ji pingjie*, p. 338). Now, this interpretation is not consistent with Mr. Chen's own translation. Did not Lao Zi say: "If the people are truly afraid of death, then *we* could arrest *those people* who do evil things, and have *them* killed? Then, *who* would dare to do bad things?" Here, the sense of "we" and "they" is very clear; how obvious and vivid is the standpoint, and the tone of voice, of this passage? How unmistakable! How, then can we interpret this as "raising an embittered and profound voice of protest" against the rulers? Did not Lao Zi say: Those people who ought to be executed should be killed by "those who are charged with the responsibility of killing," and we should not take their place in doing the killing? Is not this standpoint, and this tone of voice, again as obvious and vivid as they can be? How, again, can we interpret this as "raising an embittered and profound voice of protest"?

Looking at the chapter as an integral whole, "if the people are not afraid of death, how can you use death to strike fear into their hearts" merely means to say to the rulers: "The masses are already not afraid of dying, so do not use death to threaten or intimidate them." To take the text out of context and to fragment the meaning, to take "if the people are not afraid of death, how can you use death to strike fear into their hearts" as an expression of resistance to the reactionary ruling class, is one thing—this is simply a matter of using language in a certain way. On the other hand, interpreting Lao Zi's intentions is a different thing altogether—here we cannot take things, and meanings, out of context, or by cutting up the text. Rather, we must look at this from the perspective of the entire chapter, and even the book of *Lao Zi*

as a whole, and then accurately explain and develop its original intent and meaning. This belongs to the realm of the work of scientific research in the discipline of the history of philosophy.

Even though the true intentions behind these statements made by Lao Zi are very clear and obvious, those who have decided for themselves already that Lao Zi stood for the peasants nonetheless persist in pitching all sorts of defenses on Lao Zi's behalf, and trying to explain these intentions away. The reasons that they submit in these defenses of Lao Zi, however, are even more disingenuous than simply taking meanings out of context.

Mr. Zhang Songru asserted categorically that this chapter (that is, chapter 74 of *Lao Zi*) was representative of Lao Zi's sympathy for the common people. He said:

> [The statement:] "If you brought it about that the people, constant in behavior, nonetheless feared death, and you took those who were abnormal and killed them, who then would dare to act in such ways" was precisely a statement intended to furnish proof, from the negative side, for: "If the people did not fear death," and helps to express the theme of the piece, which is "how can you use death to strike fear into their hearts?" . . . How can we think that it has the meaning of [encouraging the government] to be "not so modest with those who rise up in rebellion, and simply go ahead to take up the knife and kill them"? [To this we say,] how come not? Did Lao Zi not clearly say: "as for those who [act or behave] abnormally [or in deviant ways], *we* shall arrest them and have them put to death"? How come suddenly this statement has become, [in Mr. Zhang's mind, anyway,] "negative evidence" for the theme of "how can you use death to strike fear into their hearts"?

So, we see, in fact, Mr. Zhang's logic is supposed to work this way: "as for those who behave abnormally, we can arrest them and have them put to death" is saying that "there is no end to those who will act and behave abnormally," and thus the statement becomes "negative evidence" for "if the people do not fear death," and from that point of view, it then helps to express the theme of "how can you use death to strike fear in their hearts?" In any case, this way of thinking about the problem and this

"logic" of argumentation is simply too strange and too odd for words. Did not Lao Zi state very clearly: "*If you brought it about that the people,* constant in their behavior, nonetheless feared death, *and we took those who acted abnormally, and have them put to death*, then who would dare to act in such a way"? Then, where does such arguments as "there is no end to those among the people who act abnormally" and "this is precisely furnishing proof from the negative side" come from?

Mr. Zhang then goes on to say:

> [People] often interpret the term "those whose responsibility is in killing people" (*sishazhe*) as "those who are specially in charge of putting people to death"; perhaps this is referring to certain offices, such as the *sikou*, the *sibai*, the *tingwei*, or the officer in charge of carrying out punishments (*zhixingli*) or the official executioner, and so on? In fact, how many tyrants in history, even the most brutal and bloodthirsty, would ever wield the knife himself and put people to death personally? So, does that not make *Lao Zi*'s statement here that: "Those who take the place of those whose responsibility is to put people to death is like cutting wood in the place of the master carpenter" simply garbage? He Shang [Gong]'s commentary here reads: "It is Heaven that [legitimately] is responsible for putting people to death." This, then, is self-evident and self-explanatory, and there has been no disagreement ever. (For the above, see Zhang Songru, *Lao Zi jiaodu*, pp. 339, 401)

In fact, there have been many people who have expressed disagreement with the commentary made by Wei He Shang [Gong], and it is far from "there has been no disagreement ever."

Even setting this aside for the time being, however, Mr. Zhang Songru, elsewhere, has consistently affirmed the reading that Lao Zi was an atheist, and that Lao Zi repudiated the idea that Heaven is a willful Heaven. So how come he suddenly turns around and puts store in Wei He Shang [Gong]'s commentary that "It is Heaven that is responsible for putting people to death"? Is this not self-contradicting? Furthermore, how can he understand the phrase "[to] take [those who act abnormally] and have them put to death" as necessarily "taking up a knife personally

and killing [these people] themselves"? It is true; there are not many tyrants who would "take up the knife and kill someone personally," but there surely are many who gave the orders to have people put to death.

Lao Zi's meaning was that if someone should be put to death, then it must be up to the person, or persons, who are "responsible for the office of killing, to put these people to death," and one should not reach beyond the scope of one's ability and legitimate office to make the judgment and give the order. In this way, [the ruler] could maintain a face, or front, of transcending all this, and even a face of mercy and goodness, and, indeed, even if someone were put to death wrongfully, [the ruler] would not carry the responsibility, and would not bear the blame. This is [what Lao Zi] called "the art of 'facing South' on the part of the ruler of men." In this sense, what Lao Zi stated, "to kill or put people to death in the place of those whose office is to execute people or put people to death would be like cutting wood in the place of the master carpenter" would make sense in the writing of Lao Zi, and how could we say that that would "render [this] garbage"?

In fact, the "wisdom" or "intelligence" of not "killing people in the place of those whose office is to put people to death" was not exclusively Lao Zi's; many people of the Spring and Autumn period evidently possessed the same "wisdom." There is, for instance, the following story in the chapter "*Dao ying xun*" (Lessons Responding to *Dao*) in the book *Huainanzi*:

> In times of old there was the man, called Sicheng Zi Han [or, Zi Han who Manages a City], who became the Chief Minister for the state of Song. He said to the sovereign of Song thus: "The security of the state, and whether there is order or disorder among the people, indeed relies on the enactment of rewards and penalties on the part of the sovereign. When the sovereign bestows high places, rewards, and gifts upon the people, this is what the people like, and therefore I urge you, O Sovereign, to carry these acts out yourself. As for executions and other punishments, these are the things for which the people have grievances, and I, your servant, ask your permission to carry these acts out [on your behalf.]" The sovereign of Song replied:

> "Good indeed is your suggestion! I, who stand alone, shall then do what is good, and receive the praises, while you accept and bear the brunt of the people's complaints. I then know myself, and yet I shall not be laughed at by the lords of the realm."

See, is this not essentially the same line of thinking as that of Lao Zi? Nonetheless, we need to be reminded that, according to "rumors," the results of this stratagem were not quite as good as anticipated. The story goes that Zi Han, on the strength of wielding then the powers of meting out punishments and carrying out executions, soon became very powerful, and, within a year's time, "came to hold the sovereign of Song in the grasp of his own hands, and began to take over full control of the government." In any case, though, with Lao Zi, there was yet another line of defense. He also admonished that: "One [the sovereign] must not show to others the sharp weapons of the state."

Let us take a look now at Mr. Zhan Jianfeng's defense, and interpretation, of this passage of *Lao Zi.*

Mr. Zhan Jianfeng wrote:

> [*Lao Zi* states:] "If the people are not afraid of death, then how can you use death to strike fear into their hearts? If you can make it thus that the people, constant in their behavior, nonetheless fear death, then we can arrest those who act abnormally and have them put to death; then who dare to act thus?" This is a truth that is demonstrated in the experience of Zhu Yuanzhang, more than two thousand years after those words were originally written. Zhu Yuanzhang said: "In the beginning, when order was first brought about in the country [under my rule], the people were recalcitrant, and among the petty officers of the realm there was misbehavior, so much that even if ten offenders were executed and have their corpses strewn in the marketplace in the morning, in the same evening there would still be a hundred people who would commit the same offense." Then I read what was said in the classic: "If the people did not fear death, how can you use death to strike fear into their hearts?' So I banished capital punishment, and instead, incarcerated the offenders and put them to hard labor. Within the year, my mind was put at greater ease." [Here the word "*shu*" (forgiveness) in the phrase "*jianshu*"

> (reduced forgiveness) is understood, by us, to be a mistake for the word "*kong*" (apprehension).—Author.] (From *Ming taizu yuzhu daode zhenjing xu* [Preface to the True Scripture of *Dao* and *De*, With the Commentaries Made by the Royal Brush of the Taizu Emperor of the Ming Dynasty])

What did the experience of Zhu Yuanzhang (the Taizu Emperor of the Ming dynasty) actually demonstrate? It was very clear that this emperor, this general representative of the landlord class of his time, came to the realization, in practice, that pure and simple suppression was not effective. (He remarked that, even if he executed ten people in the morning, there would still be a hundred rebelling in the same evening.) So, from this chapter in *Lao Zi*, he received inspiration, and thereupon "banished capital punishment, and instead, incarcerated the offenders and put them to hard labor." (Author's [Guan Feng's] note: Take note that he still "incarcerated the offenders and put them to hard labor"!) Does not this demonstrate very well and clearly that Lao Zi was standing on the position of the ruling class, and offering a strategy to those who ruled? How could he have possibly been representing the peasants?

Mr. Zhan went on to say, here:

> At this point Lao Zi was also warning those feudal masters who thirsted for bloodshed that they will, in the end, suffer the fate of their own actions. He said: "If a ruler were to take the place of those whose office is to put people to death, and carry out executions personally, it would be like cutting wood in the place of a master carpenter. If one were to take the place of a master carpenter and cut wood, it is rare that such a person would not hurt his hand." (The above cited from Zhan Jianfeng, *Lao Zi qi ren qi shu ji qi daolun*, p. 454)

Strange indeed! Lao Zi might be warning the rulers, but what he said was that, for those rulers who "took the place of those whose office is to put people to death," the worst that could happen would be that they would "hurt their hand," and furthermore, if they did not kill people themselves personally, but "let those whose office is to put people to death execute the punish-

ment," then there would not be any problem, and even their hands would not be harmed. If so, how can we see this as "warning those feudal masters that they will, in the end, suffer the fate of their own actions?" Moreover, we surely can find many vassals who were loyal to their masters in feudal times and societies, who, out of that loyalty, warned their feudal masters that if they were to employ the methods of naked suppression alone, they could "suffer the fate of their actions," and yet we certainly do not consider all such "loyal subjects" representatives of the peasants.

Perhaps we are better off if we simply continue to pursue traces of the real meaning of *Lao Zi*.

The words that are particularly worthy of our attention in chapter 74 of *Lao Zi* are: "If you can make it so that the people, constant in their behavior, are nonetheless afraid of death." [The meaning conveyed here is]: The people are already not afraid of death; how can we make them "though constant in their behavior, nonetheless fear death"? Lao Zi's suggestion here is to reduce the degree of severity of exploitation and oppression, thus allowing the people to be able to go on living, or continue to make a living.

Chapter 72 says: "It is when the people do not stand in fear of the great might, that the great might has arrived. Do not abuse the people in the places where they live; do not oppress them in the means by which they live. This is what is meant by 'having no oppression,' and this is why [the people] will not abandon [you.]" This is to say: "Since the people do not fear suppression, therefore suppression has little effectiveness." Then, what to do? "Do not oppress the people so much that they cannot live in peace; do not press the people so hard that they cannot make a living. It is only when you (the rulers) do not excessively oppress the people (the masses) that the people will not become fed up with you and abandon you."

Here in this passage, there are three words that are all written or read as "*ya*" or "*yan*"—they are written in the same way. In the first two of these three instances, the word is written with the meaning of "*ya*" as in "*yapo*" (repression or oppression), and in

the third instance, the word is written with the meaning of "*yan*" as in "*tian yan zhi; tian yan zhi*" (See the chapter "*Yong ye*" in the book *Lun yu* [The Analects of Confucius]), which conveys the sense of "detest," "being fed up with," and "abandonment" (*yanqi*). It is very clear that this here is exactly the method prescribed by Lao Zi to get "the people, though constant in their behavior, nonetheless fear death." The same meaning was conveyed in chapter 75: "The reason that the people take death lightly" is because those who occupy the high positions of power over them "eat up too much of the tax grain"; they [the people in high places] are too abundant in the means by which they "nurture their own lives" and therefore have wasted all of the valuable assets with which life is sustained, and in turn, then, have forced the people's masses into a situation wherein they simply could not continue to live.

The meaning and suggestion here is that the degree of severity of exploitation and repression or oppression must be reduced; do not force the people's masses into a corner where they can no longer continue to live or make a living, but let them enjoy life, and then they would "fear death." Once the people "constant in their behavior, nonetheless fear death," things would become easy for the ruler—all they have to do is "arrest those who behave abnormally and put them to death, and then who would dare to act in these ways?" Then there would not be anyone who would dare to act deviantly, and the regime, the "order" will be stabilized and secured. The grammar and logic in *Lao Zi* was, in fact, very clear and unequivocal to begin with; it is equally clear that Lao Zi never pretended to be a representative for the oppressed and exploited peasants.

Mr. Chen Guying commented on chapter 72 of *Lao Zi* by saying: "This chapter represents a warning issued in response to the politics of high pressure oppression," and he commented on chapter 75 by saying, similarly: "This chapter represents a warning issued against brutal government" (*Lao Zi zhuyi yu pingjie*, pp. 333, 341). It is correct enough, we think, to say that these chapters carry "warnings." Nonetheless, we must be clear on

this: Lao Zi was issuing these warnings from the standpoint of the "out-of-power" faction of the slave-owning class to the power holders of the same class to which he (Lao Zi) himself actually belonged. Furthermore, the purpose of his warning was to alert the power holders to the fact that they must not force the people into such a tight corner that the people could not continue to live, and that it is only when "the people are made to fear death, though they may be constant in their behavior" that the power to rule on the part of those who govern may continue to be in effect.

Throughout the history of over two thousand years of a society of class oppression, there have always been those who are themselves out of power issuing these kinds of warnings to those who do have power, admonishing the power holders not to employ the methods of naked and outright oppression against the people . . . but again, these people are not representatives of the exploited and oppressed laboring people. This seems to be so self-evident that we need not say too much about it at this point. Naturally, we should also acknowledge here that Lao Zi was, comparatively speaking, enlightened, and we must distinguish him and people such as him from the utterly vicious and diabolical reactionary power holders who never knew when to stop asking and demanding of the people and taking from the people.

On this matter, we do not agree with Mr. Ren Jiyu's point of view either. In a book *Lao Zi xinyi* (A New Translation of *Lao Zi*) which he published in 1978, he changed the point of view that he had held up to that point. His new perspective was to acknowledge that Lao Zi's standpoint was one of the slave-owning class. We believe that on this specific issue his viewpoint is correct, but overall, his point of view is too "leftist." One of the expressions of this "leftist-ness" can be found in Mr. Ren's commentaries on chapters 74 and 75 of *Lao Zi*. With regard to chapter 74, he said:

> On this matter, *Lao Zi was even more cunning and devious than the slave-owning class of his time*. It is not that he did not want to suppress the revolution, it is only because the method of suppression

> is not effective that he advocated not adopting high-pressure means in dealing with the people. He believed that if there were a way to make the people truly fear death, then, simply by arresting those people who are making trouble for the state and putting them to death, the state would be able to put an end to these troubles, because, in that situation, who would dare to make trouble? In this way, Lao Zi *fully revealed to us that savage face of a diabolical and extremely evil, but decadent and dying class.* (*Lao Zi xinyi*, p. 8).

With regard to chapter 75, Mr. Ren's commentary read, in part:

> This chapter warns the rulers not to force the people into a corner and make it impossible for them to continue to live. It warns the power holders not to be excessively exploitative. This, however, represents suggesting opinions and policies to help the rulers formulate strategies to deal with the people. It comes right out of a fear that the people would be forced to rebel, and thus bring even more severe consequences that are detrimental to the ruling class. Lao Zi admonishes the rulers of his day, that they must not only care about protecting and nurturing their own lives, while not caring a wit about whether the people live or die. *He furthermore praised those rulers that have learned to relax the pressure of oppression and exploitation whenever it is appropriate, saying that they are smarter than those rulers who only know to use oppression and exploitation against the people. [However,] like the stuff that Confucius, Mencius and their Rujia ilk advocated and promoted, such as the ideas of [so-called] "benevolent government" and "loving the people," this, too, is nothing but deceiving people.* (*Ibid.*, p. 125)

In our opinion, some of Mr. Ren's words here are excessive and exaggerated. From our perspective, his argument does not conform to Marxist class analysis, and does not conform to historical materialism.

In Lao Zi's time, some of the fiefdom states had already brought about the transition from the slave system to the system of feudal landlord ownership, while others had not. In general, the Zhou monarch ("Son of Heaven") and the rulers of the various feudal states all still maintained their positions as sovereign

rulers. Under these circumstances, Lao Zi advocated policies that would not put as many people to death, and opposed naked suppression, while advocating that the rulers reduce the degree of severity of exploitation and oppression, and opposed unrestrained and unlimited oppression and pressure on the people to squeeze the people ever harder. How, then, can we say that Lao Zi was "even more cunning than the slave-owning class of his time"? Can we, for instance, say that Roosevelt was more cunning and devious than Hitler? That Roosevelt's face was even more savage and evil? Can we say that the landlord who lent money to other people at 30% interest was more cunning and brutal than the landlord that practiced the most oppressive form of usury—exacting interest on interest? Can we say that the landlord that advocates exacting 30% returns on his land is just as deceiving as the usurer who exacts snowballing interest on interest for their loans? (Of course, we recognize that 30% interest on anything is also exploitation.)

As for the comment on "the stuff that Confucius and Mencius and their *Rujia* ilk advocated and promoted, such as the ideas of 'benevolent government' " and so on, we shall not discuss that here (although one must say that the idea of "benevolent government" in Mencius is clearly not a matter of simply deceiving people; it was an expression of the sense of the common people and their interests in Mencius's thought,) but Lao Zi himself did indeed propose to the holders of power that they carry out the policies of "not abusing the people in the places where they live, and not oppressing them in the means by which they live." How can we say that all this was simply a matter of "deception?"

We feel that we should distinguish Lao Zi, a member of an "enlightened" faction, from the holders of power, many of whom were utterly cruel and vicious and diabolical. While we acknowledge Lao Zi to be adopting the standpoint of the slave masters on the one hand, on the other hand we also acknowledge that he belonged to the "enlightened" faction among the slave masters. We believe that only if we acknowledge and recognize that Lao Zi did oppose excessively severe exploitation and oppression of

the people, and that he opposed aggressive war (see section VI, "Views on Warfare, and Lao Zi's Tactical Thought")—only if we do affirm these points, and recognize that Lao Zi did make a considerable contribution to philosophy and to China's culture—would we then be scientific and true to reality. The "ultra-leftist" viewpoints of Mr. Ren Jiyu, as we have described above, will not work in practice, and makes no sense when applied to the study and discussion of history.

We should make the following clear: At the time that Mr. Ren Jiyu published *Lao Zi xinyi*, it was only a few short years after the "Gang of Four" was overthrown, and it is likely that the influence that Mr. Ren received from the "Gang of Four" had not yet been cleared out, and therefore we should not put the blame on Mr. Ren personally. The book *Zhongguo zhexue fazhanshi (xian qin)* (A History of the Development of Chinese Philosophy—The Pre-Qin Period) that was published with Mr. Ren as its chief editor in 1984, we can see, turned around the previously described viewpoint with regard to Lao Zi—in a basic sense, Mr. Ren returned to the viewpoint that he had held in 1959. This is a viewpoint that argued that Lao Zi basically represented the peasants. However, he did not discuss, in this 1984 book, whether there were any mistakes and errors in the viewpoint represented in *Lao Zi xinyi* and in other related viewpoints, or discuss where these mistakes and errors may lie. Therefore, the problem, still, can only be cleared up after considerable discussion. Nonetheless, since this has been published already, it has thus become material for the study of the history of thought, and therefore we are obligated to discuss and debate the issues, so as to derive from it the experiences and lessons of theoretical thought. This is precisely why we have, in this book, brought up in several places the various viewpoints contained in the book *Lao Zi xinyi* (Mr. Ren's first book) and discussed the related issues.