

Not Lao-tzu's Magna Carta, lxxiii - lxxxii

by strannikov

lxxiii

“those conspicuous for being brave
make easy targets:
who is not ashamed of reticence
will live to fight his battles”.

in both cases courage can expose or hide:
who knows why Heaven despises what it loathes?

the Way of Heaven:
vanquishes without a fight,
replies without need for eloquence,
attracts without issuing summons,
relaxes after planning with care.

Heaven traps with its wide net—
no matter how loose the mesh,
nothing at all can escape.

lxxiv

if folks manage to outgrow their fear of death,
could fear of execution guide them?
when folks retain their fear of dying,
and I capture the unruly to kill them,
who among them would long resist rule?

the office of executioner
 has its tools and its methods:
to kill without executioners
 is to keep carpenters from working with wood—
 someone could take a master carpenter's place
 and smash the fingers he doesn't lose.

lxxv

folks starve when taxes eat their wages:
tax collectors dine on other people's food.
folks merely pushed around are poorly governed:
to distract instead of rule is not to rule.
folks mock death once they see life lived at all costs:
hot zeal to live does not make life worth living.

those who do not want "life at all costs"
 are the ones who merit life.

lxxvi

though born soft and flexible,
we die rigid and brittle.
the ten thousand, with their grasses and their trees,
enter life tender, exit life dried.

the hard and the strong are companions of death,
the tender and weak are companions of life.

a weapon too stiff will not hold up,
a tree too stiff will snap in a storm.

the hard and the strong will be buried,

the tender and weak will bury them.

lxxvii

the Way of Heaven is like a tested bow—
pulling down the high part to lift the low part,
subtracting from abundance,
to add to what is lacking.

the way of men is not quite the same:
men subtract from those who lack
to add to those who have abundance.

who can add abundance to Heaven?
perhaps only those who can hew to the Way.

thus does the sage confer benefits
without exacting tribute,
accomplishing tasks without seeking credit,
desiring deeds without the acclaim.

lxxviii

in this world nothing is as soft or as weak
as water, nothing at all—
yet nothing else is as good for wearing down
what is hard and what is strong:
nothing else even comes close.

anyone paying attention can see this,
that the soft conquers the hard,
that the weak conquers the strong,
but look at just how many can practice it.

so the sages say:

who takes on himself abuse aimed at the state
is meet to make sacrifice for god and grain.
who bears the afflictions of the state
is worth being deemed "the king of all".

proper words fail to get proper points across.

lxxix

once longstanding hatreds can be overcome,
something is always left unresolved:
can any reconciliation succeed?

thus the sage will calculate one's debts
but then exact no payments—
the virtuous man settles accounts,
those without virtue collect what's owed.

the Way of Heaven is impartial
and thus dispenses favor to all.

lxxx

how happy the small uncrowded state!

to have all the skilled men you could want
but to have no use for them—
to have all the ships and chariots you'd want
but to have no use for them—
to have weapons and armor enough
with no need even for a parade!

leave folks to count on their knotted strings,
leave their food to be tasty,
let their clothes be plain and beautiful,
let them find peace and quiet at home.

though states stand to each other close as neighbors,
though dogs bark and cocks crow close enough to hear,
let the residents of states grow old and die
never curious enough to leave their realm.

lxxxi

truthful words have no beauty,
beautiful words have no truth.
who knows has no vast learning,
who has vast learning knows naught.
who is good does not own much,
who owns much is not much good.

the sage is not a hoarder of goods.
what he does on behalf of others
is what he retains for his own use:
disbursing more to others,
he gains much more for himself.

the Way of Heaven benefits without harm.
the Way of the sage is to do, not to strive.

