

五十

“You think you know China
you’ve been to the core
your journey’s just started
go west and see more”
How could she have known that
from reading my face
yet her message was clear
no doubt, not a trace



Chapter 50 – When the End is the Beginning

The old lady on the side of the road was right. I probably did know more about China than most foreigners, but I had still barely scratched the surface. I was discovering words and ideas on my “journey” that I kept bumping into, no matter where I was in China, and many of them led back to Lǎozǐ (老子) and the Dào Dé Jīng (道德经), that 5000 character, 81 chapter canon which forms the foundation of Daoism a.k.a. Taoism. There is something compelling and homegrown about the character “道 dào”, which translates as “path” or “way.” Growing up in the West, the scientific method makes one search for answers. Paths and ways must have beginnings and end points. . . mustn’t they? Yet, according to the Dao De Jing, 有 “yǒu” (to have) and 無 “wú” (to lack) are born from one another. Difficult and easy complement each other. It is only because people accept certain ideas of beauty, that the concept of ugliness even exists, suggesting that contrast is what defines opposites. Can there be a path with no beginning and no end?

Daoism forced me to think differently. The lessons are often simple and profound which makes them even more difficult to translate into English. Take for example, 無為 wú wéi. Wu wei is often translated as “non-action”, but what is action? Is it movement? Can you be involved in “action” without instigating or influencing action? Wu wei does not mean non-doing or non-action, but rather not attempting to influence action. Sort of a ‘go with the flow.’ Indeed, Laozi said that “the highest good was like water. Water is content wherever it is.” But even when water moves, it is never the instigator of the move. Water is powerful like the Dao.

Laozi said that the space where there is nothing is the most important space. It is into that space in a cup where there is nothing that tea is poured. It is into the space where there is nothing that light flows through windows into a building. And it is into the space where there is nothing that a wheel moves on its axel. Laozi said, “Just as we appreciate and take advantage of what is, we should also recognize the usefulness of what is not.”

In the Dao De Jing, Laozi speaks of simplicity and the power of the “uncarved block.” He asked us to question both wisdom and knowledge and to embrace selflessness and lessening of desire. Once the block is carved, there will be names. Like Zhuangzi’s “useless tree”, Laozi believed that useful is as useful does, and that straight only manifests itself next to crooked, that hollow could be made full, and names and what they name are not the same. Laozi warned us that we should not tamper with Heaven and that those who attempt to tamper with Heaven, lose it. One does not glorify nor boast about what one has done. One of my favorite

passages is where Laozi said that when Dao is lost, only power remains. When power dissipates, there is human kindness; after human kindness fades there is morality; and then ritual. Laozi said that ritual is “the mere husk of loyalty and promise keeping” and eventually leads to brawling which is “the beginning of folly.” (Laozi and Arthur Waley. *The Way and Its Power: A Study of the Tao Tê Ching and Its Place in Chinese Thought*. New York: Grove Press, 1958. Print.)

Laozi said that the loftiest power can appear as an abyss; the way into the light can seem dark; the purist state can look faded and dishevelled; and the loveliest music can have the subtlest notes. The Dao is often hidden in plain sight. One can therefore see without looking and by doing nothing can achieve everything.

I was on the edge of the precipice and staring into western China – the void. I knew how to float and to swim. It was time to leave that part of China where I could touch the bottom of the pool and move into the deep end.

