



CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY AND PROSE

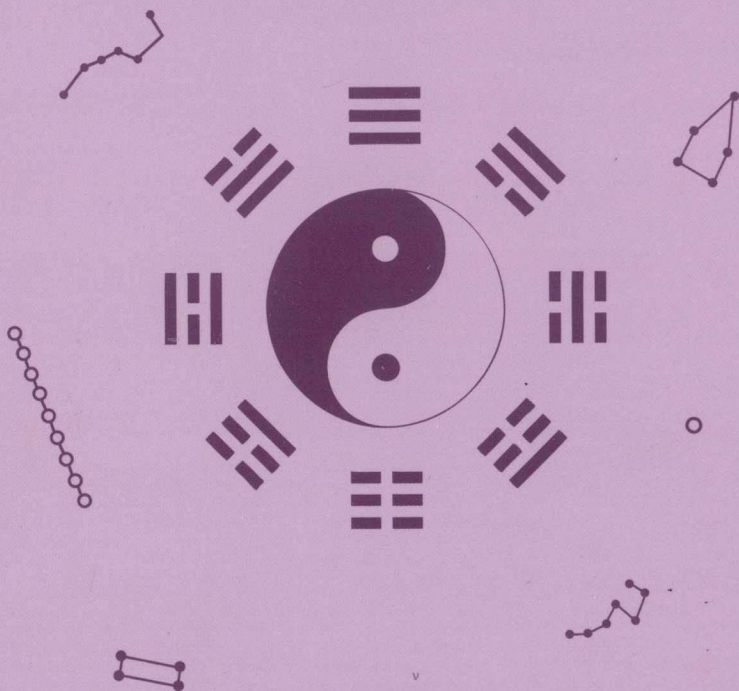
LAWS DIVINE AND HUMAN

TRANSLATED BY XU YUANCHONG



许译中国经典诗文集

道德经 | 许渊冲 译



远流传出版社

China Intercontinental Press

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PROJECT FOR TRANSLATION AND PUBLICATION
OF CHINESE CULTURAL WORKS
中国文化著作翻译出版工程项目



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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Ancient Chinese classic poems are exquisite works of art. As far as 2,000 years ago, Chinese poets composed the beautiful work *Book of Poetry* and *Elegies of the South*. Later, they created more splendid Tang poetry and Song lyrics. Such classic works as *Thus Spoke the Master* and *Laws Divine and Human* were extremely significant in building and shaping the culture of the Chinese nation. These works are both a cultural bond linking the thoughts and affections of Chinese people and an important bridge for Chinese culture and the world.

Mr. Xu Yuanchong has been engaged in translation for 70 years. In December 2010, he won the Lifetime Achievement Award in Translation conferred by the Translators Association of China (TAC). He is honored as the only expert who translates Chinese poems into both English and French. After his excellent interpretation, many Chinese classic poems have been further refined into perfect English and French rhymes. This collection of Classical Chinese Poetry and Prose gathers his most representative English translations. It includes the classic works *Thus Spoke the Master*, *Laws Divine and Human* and dramas such as *Romance of the Western Bower*, *Dream in Peony Pavilion*, *Love in Long-life Hall* and *Peach Blooms Painted with Blood*. The largest part of the collection includes the translation of selected poems from different dynasties. The selection includes various types of poetry. The selected works start from the pre-Qin era to the Qing Dynasty, covering almost the entire history of classic poems in China. Reading these works is like tasting "living water from the source" of Chinese culture.

We hope this collection will help English readers "understand, enjoy and delight in" Chinese classic poems, share the intelligence of Confucius and Lao Tzu (the Older Master), share the gracefulness of Tang poems, Song lyrics and classic operas and songs and promote exchanges between Eastern and Western culture. We also sincerely invite precious suggestions from our readers.

出版前言

中国古代经典诗文是中国传统文化的奇葩。早在两千多年以前，中国诗人就写出了美丽的《诗经》和《楚辞》；以后，他们又创造了更加灿烂的唐诗和宋词。《论语》《老子》这样的经典著作，则在塑造、构成中华民族文化精神方面具有极其重要的意义。这些作品既是联接所有中国人思想、情感的文化纽带，也是中国文化走向世界的重要桥梁。

许渊冲先生从事翻译工作70年，2010年12月荣获“中国翻译文化终身成就奖”。他被称为将中国诗词译成英法韵文的唯一专家，经他的妙手，许多中国经典诗文被译成出色的英文和法文韵语。这套“许译中国经典诗文集”荟萃许先生最具代表性的英文译作，既包括《论语》《老子》这样的经典著作，又包括《西厢记》《牡丹亭》《长生殿》《桃花扇》等戏曲剧本，数量最多的则是历代诗歌选集。这些诗歌选集包括诗、词、散曲等多种体裁，所选作品上起先秦，下至清代，几乎涵盖了中国古典诗歌的整个历史。阅读和了解这些作品，即可尽览中国文化的“源头活水”。

我们希望这套许氏译本能使英语读者对中国经典诗文也“知之，好之，乐之”，能够分享孔子、老子的智慧，分享唐诗、宋词、中国古典戏曲的优美，并以此促进东西文化的交流。也敬请读者朋友提出宝贵意见。

2011年10月



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PREFACE

Li Er, the Old Master (571–500 BC), twenty years older than Confucius(551–479 BC), was a great philosopher of ancient China. His *Laws Divine and Human* of 5,000 words in 81 chapters is an influential philosophical work in the world. This book has many English translations. So far I have read four different versions, namely, *The Way and Its Power* by Arthur Waley Published in 1934, *Lao Zi the Book of Tao and Teh* published by Peking University Press in 1995, *Tao Te Ching* published by Liaoning University Press in 1996, and *the Classic of the Dao, A New Investigation* published by Foreign Languages Press in 1998. All these versions are literal translations, and the key word is phonetically transcribed as “tao” or “dao”, except for Waley who translates it as “the way”. This cannot be easily understood by the modern reader. In reality, the key word means law, divine law, natural law or truth. In the very beginning of the first chapter of his book, Lao Zi says: “The divine law may be spoken of, but it is not the common law.” By common law Lao Zi means those enforced by human beings. So we may see the difference between divine and human laws. The divine law is objective truth which does not depend on human will for its existence, while human laws do. The former may be called natural philosophy, while the latter social philosophy. The former will not change when the latter does. That is the reason why the Old Master says that the divine law is not the common law. Based on such interpretation, I have translated the Old Master’s *Laws Divine and Human* as I understand it, so that it may be easily understood by the modern reader.

What is the divine law? The Old Master says in Chapter 4 that the divine law is formless, its use is inexhaustible; it is endless, whence come all things. That is to say, the divine law is abstract, empty and formless, but it can be embodied in concrete things, so its use is inexhaustible like an unfillable abyss, for it is deep, bottomless, endless, boundless, whence come all concrete things. Thus we see the divine law inwardly and outwardly.

In Chapter 37 the Old Master says that the divine law will not interfere, so there is nothing it cannot do. Non-interference is an important principle of the Old Master's philosophy. Only when the law does not interfere can all things develop freely. So the law should always be inactive so as to let all things be active. The activity of all things is the result of the law's inaction or non-interference. The law's inaction provides the condition for the activity of all things. When we say there is nothing the law cannot do, we mean that the activity of all things are the embodiment of the divine law. In Chapter 2 the Old Master says more concretely, "Therefore the sage does everything without interference, teaches everyone without persuasion, and lets everything begin uninitiated and grow unpossessed. Everything is done without being his deed, and succeeds without being his success." And the Old Master sums up in Chapter 57: "Therefore the sage says, 'If I do nothing wrong, the people will go the right way.'" Thus we see "to rule by inaction or non-interference" is an important principle of the Old Master's political philosophy.

As a result of inaction, the Old Master advocates non-contention. In Chapter 8 he says, "The highest good (virtue) is like water. Water benefits everything by giving without taking or contending. It likes the low place others dislike, so it follows closely the divine law." Here virtue is compared

to water which flows to a low place without contending for a high position. Thus the virtue of non-contention conforms to the divine law. In Chapter 22 the Old Master says, "He who does not show himself is seen everywhere. He who does not assert himself is well-known. He who does not boast wins success. He who is not proud can lead. As he contends for nothing, none in the world could contend with him." This further illustrates his principle of non-contention or his economic philosophy. If nobody should contend for personal gain or selfish profit, then there would be a lasting peace in the world.

How can the principle of non-contention be carried out? The Old Master puts forward the rules to be observed in Chapter 19: "Be simple and plain, selfless and desireless." If you can control or subdue your desire, of course you will not contend for personal profit. That is the reason why the Old Master says in Chapter 1, "So we should be free from desires in order to understand the internal mystery of the divine law, and we should have desires in order to observe the external manifestations." Only when you understand the divine law inwardly and outwardly can you be selfless and desireless.

How can we control or subdue our desire? The Old Master puts forward his principle of contentment in Chapter 33: "It needs observation to know others but reflection to know oneself. Physically strong, one can conquer others; mentally strong, one can conquer oneself. Content, one is rich." That is to say, if you know yourself through reflection, you will become mentally strong and conquer yourself. Content, you can control your desire. In Chapter 46, he further says, "No crime is greater than insatiable desire, no woe is greater than covetise. If you know contentment

comes from being content, you will always have enough." That is to say, if you are mentally content, then you will have enough material.

Non-interference, non-contention, desire-control and contentment are the four important principles of the Old Master's philosophy. Objectively, the Old Master is a dialectic relativist. For instance, he says in Chapter 2, "For 'to be' and 'not to be' coexist, there cannot be one without the other: without 'difficult' there cannot be 'easy'; without 'long' there cannot be 'short' ;without 'high' there cannot be 'low' ... The contrary complement each other". Here we see his theory of relativism. In Chapter 22 he further says, "Stooping, you will be preserved; wronged, you will be righted. Hollow, you will be filled; worn out, you will be renewed. Having little, you may gain; having much, you may be at a loss." Hence his theory on the soft and the hard.

In Chapter 43 the Old Master says, "The softest thing in the world can penetrate the hardest." This is the basis of his military philosophy. In chapter 78 he further says, "Nothing in the world is softer and weaker than water, but nothing is better to win over the hard and the strong, for it cannot be replaced. The weak may surpass the strong and the soft may surpass the hard. It is wellknown to the world, but none can put it into practice." This is true even today. For instance, some hegemonic power tries in vain to conquer the world by force, because it does not know the reason why the weak may surpass the strong.

It was said that once Confucius asked the Old Master for advice, who opened his toothless mouth without saying anything, but Confucius understood that he meant the soft outlasts the hard. Hearing of this story, Xin Qiji (1140–1207) wrote the following stanza:

The hard may not be strong,
While the soft may last long.
See into my open mouth if you think me wrong:
The teeth are lost before the tongue.

According to the *Weekly Book Review* (September 7, 1999), 75 Nobel Prize winners who gathered together at Paris in 1988 made a statement to the effect that mankind should seek wisdom from Confucius if they wish to live a peaceful happy life in the 21st century. In my opinion, the wisdom of Confucius may include the advice he got from the Old Master, that is, the supremacy of the soft over the hard and the principles of non-interference, non-contention, desire-control and contentment. Therefore, the publication of this modernized version of the Old Master in this new era of globalization may bring a new light from old Chinese culture and make a new contribution to the peace-loving mankind.

Xu Yuanchong
November 1, 2003
Peking University, Beijing, China

PART I

Chapter I

The divine law may be spoken of,
but it is not the common law.

(Truth can be known,
but it may not be the well-known truth
or

Truth can be known,
but it may not be the truth you known.)

Things may be named,
but names are not the things.

In the beginning heaven and earth are nameless;
when named, all things become known.

So we should be free from desires
in order to understand the internal mystery of the divine law;
and we should have desires

in order to observe its external manifestations.

Internal mystery and external manifestations

come from the same origin,
but have different names.

They may be called essence.

The essential of the essence
is the key to the understanding of all mysteries.