

Darko R. Suvin

## Parables

PARABLES FROM THE WARRING STATES PERIOD\*/  
(1984-87, slightly revised 2001)

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The Sternest Teacher

10: Mean Means and Fair Ends

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How to Prepare For Earthly Paradise – Publ. W94

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The Impatient Cultivator

Clutching at Measuring Straws – Publ. Abiko Review [later Abiko Annual]

The Lemmings in Bad Season – Publ. Matrix (Canada)

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## PARABLES FROM THE WARRING STATES PERIOD\*

### The Lord Who Loved Dragons

Lord Heh was famous for being fond of dragons. Dragons were painted on the inside and outside walls of his house. They were carved on its pillars. They were on his tables as curios from quartz, jade, and other varicoloured semi-precious stones. They were embroidered on his linen bedspreads and on his silken robes. They were shown in all possible positions and attitudes fancy could imagine: benevolent and awesome, crouched and flying. Each year, master craftsmen competed to add new dragons to Lord Heh's gaze.

Once a real dragon heard how much Lord Heh loved its kind and flew down to his house. It stuck its head thru the north window and coiled its tail around the courtyard to the south window. When Lord Heh saw this dragon, he shivered from top to toe and quickly hid in a dark closet.

Fu Wen laughed at Lord Heh for preferring image to reality. But when he related the story to his friend Wu Mei, the latter disagreed: "Surely painting and carving is here in order to show us gods and demons without terrifying and endangering us? In order to tame unicorns and dragons?" Fu Wen scratched his head: "I guess in that case we have to decide whether representation in tranquillity is preferable to presentness with all dangers but also with all opportunities of a living contact. If in our experience dragons have proved dangerous, the former is preferable; if the pleasure was worth the risk, the latter. Perhaps we can then judge the humaneness of a society by its ability to integrate dragons?"

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\* Some of these parables have been stimulated by classical Chinese tales and all by their attitudes, which they are variations on, usually counterprojects to.

## The Quality Wine and the Uncertain Ferry

There was a wine-shop during the Warring States period whose wine was delicate and mellow. It was just over the river from a large town, and the connoisseurs all knew that the owner pressed the grapes himself, always gave generous portions, and treated customers with the greatest care. You would suppose business would be booming in such a wine-shop. Yet very few people came back to drink or buy wine. It had to be stored away in vats, and after some time it turned sour. One day, the worried owner went to see the Sage Fu Wen:

"Reverend Sir, please advise me! The grapes are my own, my wine tastes good, the price is right, and I am polite with my customers. Many people come but few return. Why cannot I keep them?"

Fu Wen thought for a moment: "How is the road to your shop?"

"The road is very easy. It leads from midtown by way of a ferry over the river."

"Is the ferryman old?"

"Certainly the ferryman is old, but what has that to do with selling wine?"

"When people set out to your shop with money and jug to buy or drink wine, they have to call the ferryman to carry them across. Being old, he is hard of hearing or perhaps just having a rest. Therefore, the sympathizers of your wine never know whether they'll be able to get to you in the time they dispose of. After a few failed attempts, only the most enthusiastic or the most idle won't have given up. That is why few people come back, and your wine turns sour."

The winemaker didn't quite believe Fu Wen, but he finally tried out improved communications. His life became very satisfying.

## Use Value and Exchange Value

A poor couple lived in the state of Lu. The husband, a cobbler, made very good shoes, and the wife was a skilful weaver of silk for hats. Yet they sold very little, and lived from hand to mouth. The

husband tried different kinds of hides, he even changed the form of the shoes. The wife watched over mulberries, shooing away caterpillars, watering and fertilizing the trees to get the choicest leaves and produce the best-fed silkworms. Nothing availed. They became desperate.

One day, after discussing matters, they went to see the Sage Ah Meng, newly arrived on his wanderings together with Fu Wen. "We each have a special skill," they told him. "We take great pains to constantly maintain and hone it. Why then don't people want what we do?"

"True, each of you has a good skill," Ah Meng replied. "But you don't realize that the people of your state prefer going barefoot and don't even like shoes. They let their hair grow long and their face become sunburned, and consider hats a luxury. How will you sell your shoes and hats in such a state? Why don't you try to change the habits of your fellow-countrymen?"

Some time later, the state of Lu, thoroly demoralized, fell prey to nomadic riders. When he heard that, Fu Wen hoped the couple of craftsmen had left in time. But his friend Ah Meng was sour. Fu Wen reflected, and acknowledged that, had this been possible, it would have been better to change the habits of their countrymen than to let the state go under. "But they couldn't have done it alone. They'd have needed to find or found a guild of shoemakers and hatmakers. Or at least, of shoe-friends and hat-friends, who could have become wearers of shoes and hats. Then, had they succeeded in that, they should not have left at any price!"

### A Meaningful Life?

Zhou, a rich and idealistic young man, heard one day the legend about the Peach Blossom Country of peace and contentment. He was wholly permeated by the desire to find it, though he knew that generations had searched in vain. He apprenticed to Master Mo Di, the philosopher, to learn clear thinking as a help in his search for clues, and spent ten years of his life as Mo's pupil. With the remnants of his fortune he then spent six more years wandering the length and breadth of the Middle Kingdom. Legend had it that Peach Blossom Country was a huge cavern inside a mountain range, so most of Zhou's time was passed in the Western Mountains. He became quite an expert on the mountain regions. However, he prudently went another six years to the Northern Barbarians of the desert and tundra, as well as on ships among the thousand islands of the Southern and Eastern seas. He did not find his country.

Upon his return he passed the lowest exam and became school teacher in a far-off village near to a famous Daoist abbey. He kept looking among manuscripts for indication and traces of Peach Blossom Country. Having lived to his high eighties -- an uncommon age in that time of warring states, of diseases and stress, which made him twice flee for his life -- , he died mourned by the villagers.

At the wake, his pupils fell to discussing his life over the mulled rice-wine. One, optimistic group held that it was happy. Tirelessly, he had taught the children not only calligraphy and geography but also how these could be useful for finding the absolutely necessary Peach Blossom Country. The other group, the pessimists, countered that he had failed. Not only did he squander his time and fortune, the possibility of high rank and much power, in a wild-goose chase, but further: everybody knew Peach Blossom Country was just a wish-dream of poor people or of intellectuals and cannot be found under any mountain. The debate grew lengthy: was it a life well spent or just a life of delusion?

Finally, one of his earliest pupils, who had expressly returned from across the mountains for the funeral, said thoughtfully that in a way both these opinions were right and both were wrong. True, Master Zhu had not found more than ambiguous pointers to his ideal country. Most of his evidence was by negation and by contraries. Only the most silly or the most wretched believed by now that such a country can be found by spotting a stream which carries peach-blossom petals and following it towards its source inside a mountain. Yet the old legend arising from unsatisfied people was not therefore necessarily meaningless: "Had not Master Zhu enthusiastically and in some detail described to all of us, even to a few of us who came from afar to hear him, how to recognize Peach Blossom Country? And cannot these signs be used independent of the literal belief in that country? I know that some of us are judging our villages or districts in the light of the Master's vision. We may recognize some embryos of what the Master expounded as Peach Blossom Country and help to interpret and foster them. Or we may even look at our world by seeing all the time how different it is from Peach Blossom Country and how painfully wrong that distance is. If a sufficient number of us, and perhaps also of our children's children, go on through life with such a new glance, and if we or they then band together to modify our world so that it will in some important ways resemble Peach Blossom Country, will our dear Master then not have succeeded? No doubt, this will only have been an indirect and roundabout success, too slow even for his long life. But cannot his life then be said to have had meaning? And Peach Blossom Country to have been useful not only as a happy delusion to himself but as a help to others?"

Nobody in the village inn dissented from this. Many believed it, many more wanted to believe it. The skeptics held their peace. After all, it was the old man's wake, and his spirit may still be hovering near.

1986

### Just One Small Problem

Once upon a time, a rich and powerful prince set out to travel from the Yellow River to the state of Chu. Now Chu was south of the river, but this man was travelling north. Along the way, people repeatedly told him: "If you want to go to Chu, you should be heading south."

"No matter, I have a fine horse who runs fast!"

"Look, never mind how good or fleet your horse, Chu is not that way."

"No matter, I have a lot of money for travel expenses."

"No amount of money will make you reach Chu if you continue in this direction."

"No matter, my charioteer is the greatest expert on horses in all China."

When even some of his advisors protested the dangers of coming too near the deadly Hsiung-nu (Huns) of the northern desert, he dismissed them. He went on.

Fu Wen shook his head: "The finer his horses, the more money he has, and the more expert his charioteer, the farther away he will get from Chu. I hope his whole retinue doesn't perish with him!"

1984

### The Legend of a Lasting Banquet

In Jin, Fu Wen was told this legend:

Yen Hsuefu was a slave. Master Mo redeemed him from bondage, fed him well, and took him home in his personal carriage. He showed him the required courtesy, he even asked Yen to sit in the honoured guest seat. When they arrived home, Mo jumped off the carriage and went inside without a word. Yen Hsuefu was hurt by this and decided to go away.

Master Mo asked him to stay: "I hardly know you at all. You have been a slave for nine years. When I saw you, I redeemed you. You were hungry, I fed you abundantly. On our ride, I treated you very well. Isn't that enough?"

"To be slighted by people who do not recognize my worth does not count, but I expect more from a person who understands me. Yes, I was a slave for nine years. My owner didn't understand me, so I could bear it; but when you redeemed me and treated me so well, I thought you would be the one who understood me. Yet as we arrived at your house and everyday cares overwhelmed you, you simply walked away. My position now is in a way not so different from when I was a slave. Soon, I see, I may go hungry again. If I'm to remain a slave, I can be one anywhere, but it will hurt less if I go away."

"Up to now," Master Mo replied, "I only knew your outer semblance. Now I know you also have a pure mind. The proverb says 'If one is able to repent and change, one's past mistakes may be forgiven'. I am sincerely willing to correct my attitude. Will you please not desert me?"

Thereupon, Mo ordered that the reception hall be swept and that a feast be set in honour of Yen Hsuefu. Yen had something to say about this too: "I truly don't deserve this either. I will accept it as a testimony to your magnanimity."

Often parted on pressing business, Yen and Master Mo remained nonetheless fast friends from then on. They contrived to meet at least once, and sometimes twice a year. Whoever was at the time more prosperous always gave a huge feast.

Hearing this tale, the Sage Fu Wen sighed in admiration: "What great-souled people they had in olden times! They told unpleasant truths, they did not get offended at truth-tellers; most importantly, they mended mistakes! Is such virtuous behaviour and dear love of comrades still possible today?"

### The Immortal Lays an Egg

Peng Ji raised three cranes at home and called them "Immortals." He would take all his visitors on an obligatory appreciation of his cranes and expound the reasons why they were immortal: "Ordinary birds are hatched from eggs, but these immortal cranes are born alive," he would enthuse. He had broadsides exhibiting and praising the cranes' immortal nature and attributes printed in thousands of copies and distributed free to all of his retinue and acquaintances.

One day he was taking Fu Wen to view the birds. The gardener came up to him: "Master! Your immortal crane has laid an egg last night. It's huge! Almost as a pear!" Peng Ji went hot all over. He yelled loudly at the gardener: "Nonsense! How dare you slander my immortal!" No sooner had he ceased yelling that a second crane spread its wings and sat down completely still. Peng got worried and poked it with his walking stick. The disturbed crane stood up, and from his behind fell an egg the size of a pear.

Fu Wen thought Peng Ji would now admit his mistake, and perhaps even laugh at it. But no, Peng still believed as firmly that these cranes were not supposed to lay eggs. It was only because they had eaten the food of this mortal world that their nature had been partly corrupted. "Well," he shook his head. "Things are at a sorry pass. Even immortal cranes are not what they used to be!" He excogitated a theory that there were fully immortal and partly immortal cranes. And he continued to print his broadsides, unchanged except for this correction.

Fu Wen commented sorrowfully: The poor cranes! Sure, they will die. Nonetheless, they are perhaps the most beautiful and long-lived among birds -- especially when left to fly toward the highest peaks. The cranes are as near to immortality as we are going to get in this vicious world. Why pretend more, when this is enough?

### The Lemmings in Bad Season

A bad season arrived in the Kurile Islands between Japan and Kamchatka. Ice was expanding, the food got scarcer, the mediocre began dying off more quickly, the weak very quickly, even some strong

animals got worried. The polar bears started trekking toward Alaska or Siberia; the seals and sea-lions, loudly hooting, submerged themselves into the icy ocean and avoiding the floes hurried southward. Only the lemmings, unable either to swim or to trek thru inhospitable expanses of ice with not even a brush in sight, were stuck on a Kurile island. They tried moving from coast to coast, but the situation was the same everywhere, so they mainly ran to and fro from shore to cliff heights.

Their chieftains assured them they were thinking of ways out of the problem. Finally they decided pressures should be distributed equitably and allotted to every lemming the same surface in square feet to feed on and provide for his family from. The only problem was that near the shore nothing grew, while on the cliff-tops the juiciest shrubs were to be found. As it happens, the chieftains' allotments were also to be found on the cliff-tops. The lemmings, tho well-known for their disciplined solidarity, naturally began pressing inland and upward, driven by famine. In a few months everything got grazed flat and the whole lemming mass was grouped in concentric circles round the cliff-tops. Desperate, the chieftains tried to hold them off, but panic was stronger than the voice of reason. Finally, the only source of food remaining were shrubs that grew horizontally out of the sheer cliff-sides. Drawn by hunger and pressed by their fellow-lemmings, the hardiest chieftains adventured on those sides. As the rumour of fresh food and a way out of their problems spread, all the lemmings hurried toward the cliff tops. They plunged after the leaders and met their death hurtling down the sides after them.

That is how the uncomplimentary legend of the lemmings' suicidal tendencies came about. "What else were they to do?" the Sage Fu Wen commented: "Either not to be born lemmings, or not into an ice age, apparently. Life is very unfair."

### The Sternest Teacher

Wang Anshi was a famous statesman and poet. Retired, out of favour, he decided to compile his collected works, and set about correcting, polishing, and in places recomposing his poems and essays. Altho quite old, he was extremely conscientious about this and often worked deep into the night. He even neglected frequenting new theatre performances.

His wife worried about his health. "You are no longer a little boy, and yet here you are, earnestly doing your homework. Don't tell me you're afraid the teacher might scold you?" she teased him.

"You don't know how right you are," Anshi answered, looking up from his poem about the emperor's carpenter who did not bother to use a towering tree for the great banqueting hall. "I am no longer a young pupil, but I have the sternest teacher possible. It is the future generations, those who are going to appraise my collection. I am rewriting it so assiduously because the Sage Ken-ye opened my eyes to the fact that subversives must be twice as good writers as the orthodox, who have the great current of habit to carry them along. Expending much energy to divert the current, I am afraid wrong or weak suggestions might remain in my work, so that high-minded people born after us on the river banks would not find it usable for their interests."

Just after this discussion, which forced him to formulate his deep reasons for working so assiduously, Anshi redid two of his poems "Plum Blossom on Solitary Hill" and "On the River." He read them to his wife:

*Plum Blossom on Solitary Hill*

Plum blossoms beginning to fade among thorns:  
the fairest woman clad in filthy tatters,  
a sad statesman hiding amid weeds.

Stark straight, their lone loveliness  
bears aloft the winter sun; still, soundless,  
their far-flung fragrance trails the wild wind.

Too late for transplanting, their roots  
grow old; looking back at the imperial park,  
their colors are being drained.

*On the River*

River waters shiver in the western wind  
river blossoms shed their belated red.  
A blasted maple mirrors beneath the sandy bank  
tying the boat, I notice scars from former years.

His wife liked the second poem better but held for both that the present should not be forgotten in order to luxuriate in regretting the future or the past. Reflecting on his political career and his life in the light of that critique, Wang then wrote a new poem, his famous "In the Countryside," in which the ruling class gobbles up the peasants' life:

*In the Countryside*

The sun beats down merciless. No shade left,  
mulberry leaves have been grazed clean.

On comfy reed beds silkworms loll  
grown into corpulent lazy cocoons.

Casually I inquire about the village customs  
how come that with the hard work they go hungry,

How come that with all the silk they go ragged.  
I get an oblique knowing look, and silence.

His wife liked this poem best.

Fu Wen liked to repeat this story to his melancholy fellow-intellectuals. True, Wang's powerful enemies remained in power for several generations, so that the collected works' edition was destroyed and his name maligned. Yet -- Fu argued -- Wang Anshi had found the right balance between regret

for the past, orientation toward the future and enjoyable work in the present. Circulating singly, many of his refurbished poems, and even some essays, were strong, right, and suggestive enough to survive.

84-886

\*/ Historical note: The poems are variations on actual verses by Wang Anshi (1021-1086).

### Mean Means and Fair Ends

The King of Chu was sore beset by strong enemies. He called for Feng Huan and charged him to take twenty two measures of gold and four horse carriages to the King of Chiao on the east coast in order to get his help. Feng was further to promise a future alliance with Chu against any enmities Chiao might incur.

Feng Huan threw back his head and laughed: "As I was coming to the court," he explained, "I saw by the wayside a landowner making his seasonal sacrifice. Taking up one pig's trotter and one flask of wine, he prostrated himself before the shrine. 'May the season be bounteous,' he demanded of the gods. 'May you keep your faith with me! May the granaries overflow in Summer, the wine vats in Autumn! May my wives all bear sons and my concubines delight me!' So much in return for so little, I thought. The memory of that incongruous scene is what made me laugh." Yet Feng's voice was not particularly merry.

"Do you think I'm offering too little?" asked the king.

"How would I dare to?" replied Feng. "Consider what you would do if you were the powerful King of Chiao. Would you need assurances about a far future? Consider on the other hand your present situation. What will all the husbanding of your wealth gain you if you lose your crown?"

The King of Chu gave Feng eleven hundred measures of gold, forty four horse carriages, and eleven pairs of discs made from the purest pale jade without flaws or cracks. Receiving them, the King of Chiao became Chu's fast ally. Chu's troubles were over.

Fu Wen commented upon that very ancient story: Of course, had the King of Chiao been Chu's sworn brother, he might not have needed large and timely gifts but just trusted to the friend's understanding. But even so, a messenger cannot come empty-handed and it is better not to presume too much upon past affection. Alas -- or perhaps fortunately? -- human affections need rekindling every so often by Her Majesty Matter, thru palpable proof. Fire needs friction, intellectual sympathy is re-induced and feeling revives thru sensual stimulation and feedback, a mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. We flow and fly away all the time, a swift river and its froth. How else then would a lover know that the perpetually changing partner still delights in her or him? In other words, that he or she is still a lover?

## Les Mains Sales

### *1. Les Mains Pas Assez Sales*

The knight Chu Yuan, banished from his Warring States kingdom, wandered by the Tsanglang River reciting doleful poems and composing sarcastic essays. An old fisherman met him: "Aren't you the famous Chu Yuan? What brought you to such a sorry state?"

"The streets are dirty," replied Chu Yuan indignantly; "I am clean. The palaces have distorting mirrors; I see straight. The poor are drugged by cheap rice alcohol, the mighty by expensive drugs, both by gooey musical plays; I am sober and resist addiction of any kind. False illusions and drugs sully the mind; like dirt, they shorten life. People running into an abyss just round the corner don't want to be told this, even if their life might turn out to be short and nasty. Therefore I am banished."

"A wise man should be only two steps in front of his times, not three," said the fisherman. "If people are dirty, why don't you dirty your hands, feet and face by working with them to explain why and by whom they are condemned to live in dirt? If people are drugged by cheap drinks and shows, why don't you work with them to plan better, pleasant and sobering, drinks and shows? Aren't drinks good for the body and shows for the mind?"

Chu Yuan answered: "It is ancient wisdom that after you wash your hair you should brush your hat; before a bath, shake out your shirt. How can a man submit his clean body to the dirt outside?"

I would rather jump into the river and bury myself in the belly of the fish!" Nonetheless, he was shaken by the fisherman.

The old man smiled and paddled away, singing:

When the river water's clear  
I can wash my whole self here.  
Muddied, for such use unmeet,  
There I still can wash my feet.

Fu Wen commented: Everything is impure to the pure. Perhaps Chu Yuan's problem was partly in the black-and-white division he made between clean and dirty. The old fisherman's counsels might enable him to understand why the people accept dirt and drugging, and thus to envisage a more realistic alternative than to bury himself in a sufficiently impure fish. That is, if the kings don't finish him off first.

1284-785

## *2. Les Mains Trop Sales*

After many a year, the old fisherman happened to meet again Chu Yuan. Chu had just wandered away from a high-society picnic in a meadow not far from the Tsanglang river. He recognized the old man:

"Well, I followed your advice, and much good did it do to me!" Chu remarked sarcastically.

"You look rather elegant. Aren't you successful?"

"Oh, I'm wealthy and popular. My essays are bestsellers; praised for their tone-setting acerbic wit, they are the permanent talk of the town and nobody in the capital dares not to follow them. My paintings hang in the antechambers and sometimes in the bedchambers of the wealthy. Even my old country wants me back now, but of course I'm better off where I'm now than where I was banished from."

"But you aren't satisfied," observed the fisherman. "Is it because you dirtied your hands?"

"Not really: it is because I cannot see straight any more. I smoke a lot of marijuana and most of the time I believe it isn't a drug -- not worse than sozzling oneself on rice-wine or brandy, as my high-class friends invariably do. My success is due to adopting and bettering the fashionable cynicism: I shoot down any idea pretending to practicality by referring it to the infinite flight of the signifier and by showing that it would open so many new problems that our present state, admittedly silly and bad but at least allowing us to say it is such, is finally preferable. This skews my sight. I know I don't see properly but I cannot afford to properly look. I am now writing a musical."

"How is all this my fault?" asked the fisherman innocently.

"Thinking that my way with words was too elitist, I expanded my calligraphy into painting. But even there, when I painted the night, the clients complained my colors were too dark. When I screwed up my eyes to focus better, my neighbors accused me of squinting and throwing an evil eye upon their families. Thinking of your precepts, and not being able to bear the thought of failing twice, I gave in and began washing in the muddy river. Alas, the mud infects one's sight."

The fisherman sighed and bent over his oars, singing:

When the mud has solid grown  
Only pigs will claim their own.  
When folly is in bed with might  
Success means losing your sight.

Fu Wen was playing *go* with Ah Meng when he heard this, and exploded: "Damned if you do, damned if you don't! How can a creator of any kind avoid these horns: either you contribute to the dirt and the drugging, or you don't contribute at all and die a failure? Not having expressed what may have been in you to boot?"

Ah Meng wondered: "Perhaps one should first try to find out whether one lives by a river or by a mudhole? Different poems or essays or paintings may be fit for different circumstances. Fish have no ears but can be reached thru gradients of pressure; pigs delight in tasty acorn symphonies. And then, should you find that your ears are beginning to pop from the pressure or your taste to pall

from the acorns, maybe a good part of your creativity should be turned toward turning these subjects of Circe back into humans, regardless of success with pigs and fish?"

"That's all very well," replied Fu Wen gloomily. "But in Chu Yang's case Circe had turned the people into hybrid monsters, only half-swine or half-fish. The other half was still human. How do you behave then?"

"Perhaps you use acorns but mix them more and more with bread, to arrive eventually at proper nourishment?" suggested Ah Meng meekly.

"This is goddam hard," argued the angry Fu Wen.

"So since when was creation easy?" replied his friend, smiling.

31387

### How to Prepare For Earthly Paradise

Two friends, appalled by the state of the world, became monks on Mount Emei. One managed to get into a large and rich monastery where he eventually became an elder. The other entered a small and poor monastery, but they continued to visit each other. After some years, impelled by their constant preoccupation as well as by evidence of imperial corruption and rumours of impending collapse, they decided they should set forth in search of Earthly Paradise, said to be on the far-away island of Putuo in the Eastern Ocean. Nothing less than an open line to such a radically better place, they concluded, could save the Middle Domain from an incalculable relapse into barbarism. They agreed to begin preparing for the voyage.

A short time later, the poor monk came laboriously thru the Winter snowdrifts to see the rich one, and announced he was ready to set out in a few days, as soon as the snows thawed on Emei. His friend was amazed:

"Wait! How do you know in which direction to go? The Eastern Ocean stretches from the freezing to the scorching zones! How should we guess where to look for Putuo without reading all the ancient travelogues for pointers? You know that I've been engaged in this enterprise even before

we retired here; believe me, it is complex and, alas, time-consuming. Let us study the matter thoroughly before setting off quite probably in a wrong direction!"

"I don't know where Putuo is," confessed the poor monk. "But since we agreed it is not only absolutely necessary but also urgent to find it, I propose we go to the main port and take the best opportunity that we find on the spot to explore the ocean on any merchantman, regardless of where it sails to. If we don't find guidelines or openings to Putuo in the north, we'll then turn south, or vice versa. What matters is to begin actually moving."

His friend could not disagree but begged for time to prepare some things to take along and a syncretic map incorporating the best data from the past voyagers and thinkers, as help in such a long, arduous, and uncertain voyage. He promised to visit the other's small monastery as soon as he would have completed these preparations. But Spring having already grown a few weeks old, the impatient friend came back first to knock at the gates of the more famous monastery. He was dressed for the voyage, carrying a stout staff that also doubled as parasol-cum-umbrella, an extra robe and a begging bowl, a knife, a jug, and some salt. The laggard one was thunderstruck:

"Is that all you need? I have for my part found a cart with buffaloes, and I've begun packing a chest with essential things such as my future map, some books for future research, some clothes for cold and heat... But then I realized buffaloes were too slow, and I went to speak to my abbot about lending me a waggon with mules and driver to go to the main port. Unfortunately, the abbot had to visit some other monasteries as soon as the road became passable, but he'll be back in a few weeks and I'm confident I can get the waggon and mules from him. We'll then be at our first destination as quickly as if we had started on foot today. Yet we'll not only get there more safely and comfortably, but with the help of my still unfinished map and some letters of introduction to the great merchants my abbot promised to pen for me, we shall -- most important -- have a better chance of finding Putuo. Do stay with me only a couple of weeks longer, I'll arrange for a visiting monkship for you -- after all, I'm an elder of this monastery!"

The poorer friend reluctantly agreed. A few days after the abbot had come back, he too returned to the charge. His better organized friend was optimistic: "My abbot is very interested in the Putuo legend! On his tour he has spoken to the military governor of our province and asked for three fast horses, for the two of us and a servant to bring them back from the port. Now the governor has sent him a letter saying he will also give us an escort against the bandits who infest the route and a

letter to the Admiral of the Ocean. We can set out as soon as the cavalry will have finished the seasonal campaign against the hill barbarians. In the meantime, he'll be inviting us to lecture to the scholars of the provincial capital on the concept of Earthly Paradise and the history of the search for it. In this way, if we find it we'll have a safe and friendly channel thru which to send messages back to the Middle Domain!"

Great was the elder's surprise when, a few days later, he found that his headstrong friend had vanished. He had left a letter saying in polite tones that he doubted a warship was the right way to find Putuo; and yet, since (as they had agreed) an Earthly Paradise **MUST** be found soon, before the world went under, he would reluctantly set forth alone, much as he would prefer company.

Fu Wen fell into a brown study upon hearing that old story. "I wonder whether the poor monk lived just before the glorious time of Wang Anshi -- almost a time of justice -- or the terrible Dark Ages which set us back for a whole kalpa. To what extent that impatient person succeeded would be a good thing to know today."

1985

### The Many Paths and the Right Direction

To Tamar

A hue and cry arose one day in Master Yang's village. A neighbour irrupted into his house: "I've lost my bell-wether! Please lend me all your disciples to help find him!"

"Why do you need all the villagers and all my disciples too for one wether?" asked Yang.

"There are too many directions it could have taken," answered the desperate villager. But even with Yang's disciples, the wether was not found. One by one, the various searchers returned to confess their failure. The neighbour's sheep milled around, disoriented.

From that day on, Master Yang grew taciturn and morose. His disciples inquired of him why a single sheep, which was not even his, should matter. But they only got a scowl.

Worried for his master, one of them hiked to Master Fu Wen. "You are his eldest disciple," said Fu, "and yet you don't see. The many paths didn't help in the search, can't you understand?"

"Of course I saw that," replied the offended disciple. "But wouldn't fewer paths have made it even more difficult? Isn't it dangerous to have too few paths when you want to get somewhere?"

"Not necessarily," cried Fu. "The bell-wether couldn't be found because all the many seekers put together had no clue in which direction to look. To catch a lost sheep many tracks are better, on condition they lead in a probable direction; to find the emperor's chariot one broad royal road is the place to go on, either backward or forward. But it is in all cases certainly bad not to have an orientation toward the useful, and therefore right, compass point. One may then end up in the black north while the wether is in the white south. Nothing can be found in that headless way, by searchers for sheep, imperial chariots, or truth."

"That opens up an awful lot of awfully big questions," said the worried disciple.

"Of course it does," replied Fu, "which is why your master grew silent. But opening up is better than keeping the lid on. At least we know now that such questions exist and must be posed."

"How can we know in which direction is it useful and therefore right to look?"

"We could begin by asking whether the bell-wether went off on his own, to look perhaps for greener grass or younger ewes," mused Fu. "Or was he carried off by a tiger? Are there any signs or tracks of either? Where could fresh grass or a tiger usually be found? And so on. In short, many paths can in some cases be better than one -- but only if the general, right direction is known or at least striven for."

Yang's disciple then understood that his thoughts had been no less disoriented than the milling sheep. His face flushed scarlet, and he turned to go back. Master Fu saw this with pleasure: "Friend Yang may have a good successor, after all," he thought.

## The Bowyers and the Fletchers

A quarrel developed one day in the capital between two equally proud artisans, a bow-maker and an arrow-maker. "Just look how strong the wood is," cried the bowyer handling his bow. "How well the string fits it at both ends, and what tension I can achieve without breaking any part: the wood bends into two parallel ends, it grows bell-shaped!"

The fletcher would not be bested: "Look rather at my arrows," he responded making them whiz thru the air. "Each is feather-light on one end, sharp and weighty on the other, yet the shaft is perfectly balanced! Every single one of them can pinpoint the bow of a bull's eye, and what is more, penetrate the tough bone to the vital center and drop the wild bull dead in his tracks!"

Both went to the imperial court clamouring for primacy in honours and payments. The quarrel spread. Each profession despised the other. The fletchers first impressed the multitude by running around and stabbing successfully at targets with their arrows, but they were finally laughed out of court by the spearmen. Then the bowyers gained favour, drawing wonderful topological curves to prove their point and mumbling about "the intrinsic esthetics of bowyery." However, the opposition of the fletchers, who snidely accused the bow-makers of only drawing the long bow and crudely asked them how many bulls' eyes they had pierced, could never be fully silenced. Factions and supporting fandoms built up: the eunuchs favoured the bowyers, the old families inclined to the fletchers. The matter was finally brought to Wang Anshi himself, the prime minister.

Wang was surprised and rather annoyed: "These professional specialists truly live in little closed worlds of their own! Isn't it clear to any person of good will and common sense that without bows, there is no method to send the arrows far and deep enough to matter? And that without arrows, the beautiful potentialities of curved bows would serve no end?" He commanded that all bowyers and fletchers be forthwith trained as archers.

After they had actually used the weapon for a clear purpose, their good bows and good arrows became better by fitting each other, by becoming unified in a good weapon, uniquely usable for useful goals. Having experienced the ends and means of archery, the split specializations were brought together as bowmen. Nobody could seriously threaten the Middle Domain while Wang's precepts ruled.

### Informed and Enlightened

A joyous group of young women were following the tradition of contributing equal shares of lamp-oil money for the evenings they sewed together. At these gatherings in the village Women's House they also gossiped about village affairs, not forgetting their prospective suitors. One of them, tho' industrious and well-liked, was so poor that she could not pay her share. At some point, the richer participants got fed up and told her to leave the sewing bee.

Departing, the excluded one protested: "This is unjust! True, I contributed no money, but I always came first, swept the hall, arranged the chairs around the lamp, and cleaned its wick and glass." The others replied that fair share was fair and remained adamant.

Yet, strangely enough, their eyes seemed to tire more quickly thereafter. Their desultory adjustments in the room, they decided, were indeed inferior to their excluded companion's arrangements. Besides, having worked in most of the richer families, she had been contributing much inside information which held a great interest for the prospective brides. She had on occasion even supplied satirical verses against unwanted suitors or mothers-in-law, of which she seemed to have an efficient stock. Altogether, the young women found their excluded comrade could not be dispensed with. They decided to remove this shadow from their mutual understanding.

Being clever, they also hit upon the argument that the oil bought with their contributions shapes a circle of light wide enough to admit their impecunious friend, even if she contributed no money. They called her back with handsome apologies. All embraced and their eyes blurred with tears.

Fu Wen grew quite excited when the poorer girl (whom he had taught some prosody) laughingly told him the story while cleaning his house. He rushed to his friend Ah Meng and said: "These young women have just updated the age-old precepts of materialism. It is not only matter that has to be

shared justly and on the basis of equal rights to it: what matters equally is that information be thrown into the pool for sharing, otherwise matter cannot be distributed properly either!"

"Perhaps you already have a name for this new materialist school, which will throw new light on masters Lucretius, Mo Di, and Ma?" suggested Ah Meng slyly. "Well, we could call it enlightened or informed (informative?) materialism to begin with, I suppose. It would speak as much of light lines as of oil consumption, as much of channels as of water," enthused Fu. "And as much of information about mothers-in-law as of young women eager to marry," murmured Ah Meng.

Fu Wen, scarcely listening, rushed back home to jot down notes for a treatise. His lamp had just been cleaned by the clever young woman. One detail only marred his festive mood as he sat down by his ink-stone and thought of the sensation the announcement of this new dispensation will provoke in the capital. She had also informed him that the sewing of her trousseau will now be finished and she would marry soon. So he will have to look for a new cleaning woman, just when he had grown used to that girl. Bother it all!

### The Impatient Cultivator

In the southern kingdom of Chu there lived an impatient man. He had an acute sense of time's winged chariot swooping down on him, and believed he could prolong his life by cramming its every moment full of events and doings. Therefore, he seemed always in a hurry and always late.

He was particularly anxious that the rice-plants he grew should grow fast. He would have best liked to seem them shoot up visibly, as in a time-lens. Imagine his impatience when one year his rice was insufficiently watered and didn't grow at all! He found out that his son, absorbed by playing, had forgotten to open the water sluices in that anyway dry year. He pulled the boy's ears hard and managed to recuperate the lost time by abundant watering. Still, the rice didn't grow fast enough for his taste.

A few days later he saw to his horror that only the merest trickle of water was coming down the channels, tho the sluice gates were properly raised. The main sluice, he discovered, had been used by the local feudal overlord to divert the scarce water to his own fields; not enough was left for the small cultivators like himself. In his rage, he rushed to the paddy and gave a tug to each and every

rice-shoot, to help them shoot up from the earth. He came home quite crushed by the fatigue. But the poor rice-plants merely began wilting. The cultivator grew so enraged he had a fit, and had to be restrained.

His fellow-villagers repaired with him to the famous healer La Ma-reng: was this man crazy or right, they asked; what is to be done with or for him? Master La, tasting tea with Master Fu Wen, nodded thoughtfully: "He has the right general idea -- events should be steered, and most people can be educated. His son can certainly learn from the pain in the ears, tho one would hope better methods for memorizing may be found. As for the rice-plants, they cannot learn by being pulled up. If their education is to be speeded up, they must be stimulated from within, playfully. We cannot tell yet how and whether this may be done."

Fu Wen, who had in his youth followed the peasant insurgents against the Tartars and was ever since considered not quite safe by the authorities, added: "Before the properties of rice can be investigated, we must be sure to have enough water. Your rage," he instructed the distraught villager and his friends, "would be better turned toward uprooting the lords in control of the sluices. If you manage that, then you could also start building new dams, channels, and sluices, to get enough water in dry season. Then you could become rich enough to let some of Master La's disciples live in your village and devote their whole lifetimes to finding just what happens inside the rice-plants to make them shoot up fast or slow."

The impatient cultivator saw that his proper and right impatience must in great part spread thru the channels of his fellow-villagers and indeed his descendants. He was none too pleased with that: "I might perhaps accelerate my personal life up to a point, but if the power-relations are so deeply embedded into the plant and the society organisms, isn't this a very long-range program?" he inquired with ill grace. "Alas, a single human life is too brief," conceded Master La, looking with sympathy and sorrow at him. "I too find this scandalous. Perhaps our very far descendants should start considering how to finally change that also."

Clutching at Measuring Straws

A small landowner decided one day to marry a concubine. He already had children, and now, past his prime, he wanted both a helper and a bedmate. Having called a go-between, he bethought himself of sexual disappointments in previous wives, took a straw from his stall and carefully measured his penis. The go-between was given the straw and instructed to measure the prospective bride's vagina, which shouldn't be smaller than the straw. A poor woman was duly found, pronounced of right vaginal size, and married. But the landowner's repeated attempts in successive nights led to no satisfactory sex: when aroused, his penis proved too large, and the concubine found the congress painful. As the bridegroom was no monster, this lessened his pleasure too. After a month or so, he sent the concubine back to her parents with ample gifts: at that time, this was easy for a richer person. The parents opened a small fruit-selling stall with the money.

When called to task, the go-between disclaimed responsibility. She had faithfully measured what she had been asked to measure. The unhappy man therefore measured his penis in an aroused state, in the middle of a masturbatory daydream; the straw came to be considerably larger. But the second concubine proved as unsatisfactory to him: he found her smell during coitus repulsive, and his phallus did not grow to its measured size. Unsatisfied, the concubine heaped lamentations on him, which further decreased his performance. This marriage lasted only half a month, and the parting gift to the second concubine was even larger since it was partly hush-money. She opened a small tea-house with it.

The unlucky bridegroom was incensed. He took a new, more sophisticated go-between specializing in city women, and ordered her to find a third bride with a vagina neither shallower than the small straw nor deeper than the larger straw, and sweet-smelling to boot. A sing-song girl was found in the city, who had to be ransomed from her madam with a pretty penny; the landowner sold a cow. But lo and behold! -- when the newlyweds attempted their nightly games, the ex-sing-song girl's vagina was found to be so ample that neither derived much pleasure from the congress. The new concubine didn't mind, she was glad to have escaped teahouse life. But the landowner was furiously disappointed. It would be too expensive to repudiate a third concubine, especially since this one was otherwise cheerful and helpful in the house. In his impotence, he called the second go-between and berated her roundly.

The go-between grew angry: "Didn't I carry out all your conditions? Doesn't she smell sweet and help cheerfully in the house? Here are your silly straws, so go on and check by yourself whether the depth of her female tool is not in between the smaller and larger straw! But had you asked for my

opinion, I would have told you to skip all of this measuring business. First you should have come with me, conversed and sipped rice-wine with my candidate, as civilized people do; you would have found out whether you liked her voice, conversation, walk and so on. Had you after a few visits seen a woman whom you liked, and who would have liked you if treated well -- then you should have taken her home and measured her with your arms as well as with the tool you have between your legs. You would have found -- I can tell you from long experience -- that both your tools are wondrously pliable; they expand and contract, in girth and length, when your feelings fit each other well. No straws will do."

### Appetite and Preying

The Dragon King came down to Earth and changed into a fish to frolic in a river. A fisherman in need took out his trident and wounded him in the eye. Deeply offended at this injustice, the Dragon King flew off to complain to the Emperor of Heaven.

"When the fisherman threw his trident, he saw you as a fish," was the Emperor's verdict. "You have no claim against him."

"So I cannot blame this person for treating me as his prey?" asked the indignant Dragon King.

"Not on this world, where sheep must become mortified mutton before they can be of use for appeasing hunger, so that men and wolves must turn into predators," rejoined the Emperor of Heavens sadly. "How else can appetite be satisfied except by gobbling up and destroying a creature, except by taking away its identity?"

"What is my alternative then?" asked the crestfallen Dragon King. "Cannot I frolic in rivers any more except as a dragon?"

"You could, of course, choose a different world for your watery frolics," advised the Emperor. "Why don't you go to one of the Aldebaran planets? There the natives are more civilized. They satisfy their hunger by sharing identities in mutual delight, a feat Earth had at the time of one-celled amoebas but has since forgotten."

"Indeed I shall," mumbled the Dragon King "what a good idea! Even among the strange multi-celled bipeds of Earth I heard some hints about such an appetite, not reduced to preying. It is not only safer, it must be much nicer!"

Carrying the Torch, Or: si jeunesse savait

The king of Chin complained to Shih Kuang, his blind music-master and advisor:

"I would love to study music and philosophy and poetry, but it seems a little late in the day for me. The proverb says: 'Studying while young is a rising sun; studying when mature is the midday sun; studying when old is a torch.' The torch is feeble compared with the sun."

Shih smiled ruefully: "Is obscurity then better? More: doesn't the fitful torchlight differ incomparably more from full obscurity than from sunlight? And consider further: is it not possible that she who looks by torchlight sharpens her eyesight more, looks in more concentrated ways upon the circle of light and what is within it? Perhaps the torchlight seer may then see more than the sunlight seer?"

"Ah -- " exclaimed the king, taking fire from the blind sage, "it is then also possible that he who looks by torchlight delights more in what he sees? And if he sees fewer objects than by sunlight, that he looks deeper at and into each?"

"Not only that" replied Shih. "It is possible that torchlight lookings-on are not solely to the advantage of the seer but also to the delight of whoever is seen. The seen becomes precious when the seeing is effortful."

"You are right" agreed the king.

Prince Ping, the king's young son, overheard this discussion. His lips shaped a sardonic smile as he continued on his way toward a picnic on the water. The loveliest courtesans will all be there, in his royal barge, and if the sun will shine warmly enough, there'll be bathing in the nude: fun and games, much lovemaking, feasting, wine-drinking and poetry recitation. Torchlight indeed! But then,

what can you expect from a blind musician and an aging father? When he became king - - - - and he lost himself in pleasant reveries.

Shih Kuang could have told him that at his age, his father had been the same. So had Shih himself, before he lost his sight.

### The Color-Blind Kitty

For Sheila J

All kittens are born with eyes gummed shut; a very beautiful one grew up without fully unsealing its eyes. Only enough light filtered thru for her to discern dim outlines of shapes. She therefore early on withdrew into a reserved and reflexive lifestyle, which allowed her to shun comparison with other cats. She masked her apartness well, using her good nose and excellent motoric coordination. Thus she participated in games with other kittens, and later mated with a reliable tomcat, without drawing undue attention to her deficiency.

Nonetheless, once upon a time another cat, a brother from the same litter, found out that she did not see properly. He attempted to explain that something should be done about -- and against -- that:

"Look, we're all born with glued eyes; but as we grow up, they gradually get unglued, and you see not only dim shapes but all the breathtaking colors!"

"What do you mean by that?" answered the uncomprehending deviant. "I have caught my share of mice, I have borne pretty kittens, I live comfortably, I have a function in life and miss nothing."

"You may not understand that you are missing something. Yet, in fact, you are missing a whole sensual universe of deep delights -- of oxblood reds and grass-in-the-Spring greens and canary yellows and magentas and - - - -"

"All these words leave me cold," answered the obtuse kitty. "I have pounced upon and devoured a canary. It is a silly bird with little flesh. It twitters a bit and flies badly. What more is there to it?"

"You also cannot appreciate just how beautiful you yourself are," said the brother, desperately trying to get thru to her. "Your green eyes are flecked with gold and orange. If you could only comprehend how delightfully your wide shoulders and elastic step ripple your varicoloured fur! Haven't you been told that?"

"Yes I have, and of course I know I'm well-proportioned, what men and tomcats alike call pretty. But I live contented and it's no use trying to wheedle me. We are both no longer kittens, brother. You have a family too, and my eyesight is good enough to see that your fur is getting patchy and your whiskers are turning lighter. What do you have with your so-called colors that I don't?"

"In the day-by-day course of everyday events I may not have much more," admitted the rueful brother. "But from time to time I see a peculiar combination of colored shapes which I call beauty: in a sunset glimpsed walking on the gables; or when I meet somebody like you, sister. This is an intense experience of depth living. Not even catching your first mouse or singing at night during your first mating season come up to it. It is one of the very few things that partly console me in and for this brief life. True, this comes about almost, but not quite, rarely enough to make me despair. But the remembrance of such experiences warms me in the long cold nights descending upon my patchier fur, and upon all of us. I am very sad if you will go without such redeeming memories into the long night."

1984

### Clear and Useful: The Masters' Dispute

Kong Fu and Mo Di had once a deep disagreement. Master Kong reproached Master Mo for using metaphors or figures of speech:

"It is necessary to speak plainly, my friend. When I saw king Liang illicitly killing off his opponents, I didn't put down that he swatted them like flies in Summer nor that he eliminated them

but -- as simply as I could -- that the king murdered his opponents. My judgment on him will be clear to all future generations. It should be a warning to all other rulers that their name will also be judged in history. Why don't you, then, go straight to your goal without circling around it like a cat around hot milk?"

Master Mo smiled: "I fully agree with your goal, and I try to speak and write as plainly as I can. But is a straight path always possible? What is the straightest path from one point to another if there are obstacles in the way? Allow me the honor of modelling my speech on yours, dear friend, and of using metaphors such as 'going straight to one's goal'. Or, not to stop at your circling cat, aren't even your concept of 'plain' -- taken from looking over an even piece of ground -- and your concept of 'clear' -- taken from looking in good sunlight -- rooted in metaphor? How can we avoid them?"

"You are quibbling, honourable opponent," answered Kong somewhat crossly. "'Plain' or 'clear' may in far-off times have begun as metaphors; but if so, this basis has now been forgotten, like a cellar under a great palace. What 'clear' means is clear to every peasant and even to the barbarous noblemen. Nobody needs to study metaphorology or history of language to make such meanings plain. Perhaps I could tell you a little story I heard from our friend Ming-yi, the celebrated musician?"

"Proceed," agreed Mo, much amused.

"One day, Ming-yi was playing a piece of complex classical music in a field. A nearby cow went on grazing as if he were not playing. Ming-yi got annoyed that his loud and beautiful sounds did not interest her. He thereupon began imitating on his *zheng* the buzzing of gadflies and the mooing of calves. Immediately, the cow pricked up her ears, began switching her tail and moved closer. This straightforward music said something to her, concluded Ming-yi triumphantly when relating the scene to me."

"I too have heard the story from Ming-yi," responded Mo, "but by using it you are shifting your ground -- if you'll pardon my metaphor. First you were discussing whether one should use figures of speech or not. Now you talk about whether people (and cows, for that matter) should or should not communicate by using what is already familiar: whether the signs used should always be familiar, everyday signs, recognizable even to a chewer of the cud. But what would happen if, for example, the cows had grazed off the whole valley where Ming-yi found them? In order not to starve, they would have to cross the mountains in search of another valley. In that case, unfamiliar mountain

sounds on our friend's *zheng* -- say, of a waterfall or of a catamount's yowling -- would have been of more use to them than the comfortably familiar ones, wouldn't they?"

"Cows don't plan mountain crossings in search of greener pastures," objected Kong, "only people do that."

"Precisely," rejoined Mo quickly. So my argument against you is twofold. To begin with, I don't see how it would be possible to talk without transferred meanings. And furthermore, this transfer is rooted in practical needs: people are unceasingly confronted with variant situations, that can be foreseen only partly or even not at all. Thus, they have to transfer meanings and patterns from familiar fields to new situations. Therefore, the musician would have -- perhaps gradually -- to mingle new sounds with the familiar ones. Indeed, he ought to accustom the hearers to the fact that new possibilities always exist in the universe of sound."

"If you were right," said Kong sadly, "all knowledge would be in similitudes, and there would be no identities or certainties left. I refuse that possibility. Right is right and wrong is wrong -- we must hold to that, or the state will founder."

"I began by agreeing with your aims," said Mo. "I am only proposing a more realistic way of arriving at right and wrong -- a way more bound to practical necessities of given times and places. Perhaps I ought to give you a counterexample of my own. I heard it from our friend Hui-zi, who was a counsellor of the peasant insurgents against the grandson of that king Liang whom you rightly pinned down as a murderer in your immortal chronicles. This is what happened:

The peasants were successful in the countryside but could not take the fortified towns. They heard about catapults, and asked Hui-zi what were those. So he tried to describe a catapult. He said that it was like a bow where the cord is made of bamboo and which shoots rocks from its end rather than arrows from its middle. After some experimentation and mistakes, the peasant leaders had catapults working and took in the towns. As we know, this is how the glorious dynasty began under which we are living.

Now if you forbid me to take a known thing or relationship, such as a bow, and to carry it over into the describing of a new, unknown yet necessary, thing of a different kind, what can I say then to make myself understood? That a catapult is a catapult? Therefore, isn't it obligatory to add to your

requirement of clarity an overriding requirement of usefulness or applicability? Even if usefulness demands complication?"

"But shouldn't we then at a rock-bottom minimum expect that any such complication must remain ultimately understandable, if only after some thought and experiment?" objected the concerned Kong.

"Oh of course," conceded joyously Mo. "I am in favour of usefulness, and if a new description after much application remains unclear, then it cannot be useful. But 'clear' does not have to mean immediately comprehensible by everybody. It may be such, or it may be only comprehensible with some mediation by those who have applied themselves. Since people are not ruminants who always chew the same cud, your example with Ming-yi was based on a wrong metaphor. It was not applicable."

"In other words: To love clarity without loving learning is liable to lead to foolishness," concluded Kung, mollified.

"Yes. A very clear statement, reached after much detour. You were always strong at memorable encapsulation, dear friend," said Mo.

### Better Late Than Never

Voor Annemarie

Master Kung suppressed a stanza of the Shih Ching which went:

The blossoms of the cherry tree,  
How wondrously swaying!  
Not that I do not think of you,  
But your home is so far off.

He believed the verses were insincere: "If the speaker really thinks about his or her beloved, there is no such thing as being far away."

Soon afterwards, the Master died. His disciple Hua, left in charge, attempted to keep a stiff upper lip: "If we really think about the Master, there is no such thing as his being far away." Yet in the midst of supervising the funeral procession, Hua broke down and had to be led away, sobbing.

Yui, whom the Master had considered his most gifted pupil, commented ruefully: "The Master's absence pulls in an opposite direction from the Master's opinion. Just so, the lover's thought was strong but the absence of the beloved is stronger. The folk poet was right."

The disciples' piety prevented them from restoring the quatrain into the Odes. Yet they managed to preserve it: they cited it in full when relating the Master's unfavourable opinion.

884-886

### It Worked Once

The village of Jiang on the mountain slopes of Lu got ruined by war and taxes. Luckily, the lords were in those years too busy fighting each other to bother actually wiping it out. A neighbouring village, tho poor itself, loaned Jiang seed. But the villagers had to endure until the coming reaping, on grass and bark.

A farmer who had a numerous family was about to despair, when one day, weeding his small field, he saw a rabbit dash by and bump headlong into a big tree, breaking its neck. The farmer picked up the rabbit: his wife and children had a succulent meal. Nursing its remains, it lasted them many a day. They took courage and, with most villagers helping each other out, just managed to survive the bad period. Only one of the eight children died.

One generation later, the farmer's son got into similar straits. The village was again severely threatened by the lords' pressure. Like everyone else, the son remembered well the miracle that had saved his family when he was small. He laid down his hoe and sat under that big tree, hugging his knees, waiting for a rabbit to bump itself off. He waited for days on end, but no rabbit obliged. His exasperated wife tried to tell him: "Don't just sit there -- set at least a snare!" But the son fought her off, recounting the story of his father.

That year, one lord, ascendant over all others, sent an expedition to the Lu mountains. He hired a few hungry refugees from the village to act as guides. The villagers were too weakened from hunger to know what hit them. Half of the inhabitants were wiped out; the other half were reduced to serfs of the mighty lord and his quislings. The clan name had to be changed.

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### A Proper Grinding

King Chao invited Master Mo, and the Master was preparing to join him.

His most loyal disciple, Chu, said: "I have been hearing for years from you, Master, that a virtuous person does not join a man who lives off the peasants' sweat, for this would strengthen the rule of the bloodsuckers. Now Chao would not be a king if he did not defend the landlords. How can you justify enrolling under his flag?"

Master Mo sighed: "It is true I said that, but I have two replies. It has also been said, 'Hard indeed is that which can stand grinding.' Can I allow myself to be treated like a gourd which is not eaten but hangs from the end of a string? Little by little, it dries up, so that at the end children use it as a rattle to scare passers-by on the Night of the Dead.

Moreover, Chao's court and state are large and in places contradictory. Ultimately, he keeps the peasants quiet so the bloodsucking can continue. But within that, new grain strains are also developed, birds imported to eat up the noxious insects, and good seed culled from bad. I do not necessarily lose my virtue if I do some good work there, useful for a possible future self-governing peasantry too. I am paid by the bloodsuckers, but their state possesses all the grain and silver anyway: who else could I be paid by? Whether I lose my virtue depends on their wiles and mine. At the moment, the tiger is sated and can be played with. If I have a good deal of luck, I may still succeed to work without legitimating the bloodsuckers as being anything more than the real holders of power and opportunity for work -- which they really are. Truth is to be faced."

But seeing his honest disciple's troubled face, he quickly added: "Of course, I may lose my virtue and the tiger may tear me up. This truth, too, is to be faced."

Listening to Criticism (Cattle Driving and Climbing Lessons)

Kou Mien, herself a learned but also practical person, objected to Fu Wen's writing: "I think I recognize all your quotations from the classics but I don't see how they hang together: you make such big jumps in your argument. Is there anybody who understands you?"

Fu Wen quoted the ancient master Kong: "In my studies, I start from below and get thru to what is up there. If I am to be understood at all, it will perhaps be after my death." But abess Kou shot this down: "Master Kong's times were slower than ours. Can your urgent teachings afford to wait so long? Isn't some understanding right now the best guarantee of more understanding later? Why don't you give clear instructions how to follow your path?"

Respecting Kou's shrewd judgment, Fu attempted a better defence: "Life brief -- craft vast,' say the classics. I have more interests and ideas than time. If I were each time to explain more than a few of my main presuppositions, I could never get to shaping many of my ideas nor serve many of those interests -- even in what may well be an initial and sketchy way. I could at best formulate either only my views about Music or only those about the State. Now -- unfortunately for simplicity -- my ruling intuition, my *idée maitresse*, is that Music cannot be understood without grasping the State, and vice versa. Indeed, to think of State and Music as separate entities seems to me the root of our troubles."

"I can see that," said Kou pensively. "Getting my nuns to cultivate our vegetable fields in a proper order presents the same problems as getting them to sing well in choir."

"But then," rejoined Fu, "this forces me to herd my findings together concentrically, as if I were leading scattered cattle, dispersed by careless stewards, from various directions to the same fertile valley with the best grass. To get them there, I must often climb thru difficult as well as different mountain passes and tortuous paths. Sometimes my cattle have to jump from crag to crag like chamois: we have no choice. Of course, sometimes I simply lose my way and miss an easier road -- and sometimes I grow very tired and abide awhile in an intermediate valley. But how am I at the

same time to mark paths and give climbing lessons to would-be followers? I can only say humbly (as I say to you, dear Mien): Please judge my cattle from the taste of their milk and flesh. If you find it good, follow me as best you can, as far as you find it useful, on the road to your own -- perhaps greener -- pastures."

Abbess Kou was not fully satisfied, but promised to consider Fu's argument. They even started speculating whether they could write together a tract about how Music in the State relates to nuns' singing (and vice versa). Fu Wen secretly hoped this would help him to learn how to strike a better balance between positions necessary to be taken up as quickly as possible and presuppositions to be explained as thoroughly as necessary. As for the abbess, she remembered their Master, Kin-yeh: "The best way to criticize a river is to dig a new channel for it; the best way to criticize a fruit-tree is to graft new fruits on it," he had taught.

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### The Naive Hart

A hunter in the state of Chu captured a very young hart. His hunting dogs, barely tamed wolves, licked their chops at the sight of the succulent prey; the hunter had to beat them off from jumping at the hart's throat. Having decided to keep him, he thenceforth every day showed his favourite to the dogs, holding him close and training them to accept him. Little by little, the hart started frolicking with the dogs, especially with the puppies. Understanding their master's will, they too played with him. The hart grew up believing that the fierce dogs were his protectors and best friends. They lived in a close intimacy.

One cold Winter the master stayed absent for a long time. When the hart came out of his safe shed to his old friends, the dogs looked at him with a mixture of glee and fury; they threw themselves on the hart and tore him into bloody pieces.

Fu Wen commented on hearing this story: The saddest thing about this quite normal event is the fact that it is normal, that the hart dies not understanding that in this world good masters and tame wolves are exceptions. In order to be truly safe, harts would need a world in which they would

be their own masters and could keep the wolves permanently at bay. Maybe the wolves would then -- in a rather long duration -- really turn into such dogs a hart could keep company with.

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### The Decline of the Vices

"All our troubles stem from people congregating in fake collectives," said Master Kung. "This is why the Powers-That-Be can neutralize people's thoughts and deeds."

"Hasn't this been the case in all class societies?" asked Ssu. "How do our troubles then differ from, say, those of the slave-owning times?"

"Before our rich and squalid market-cities," replied Kung, "when people were conceited, they thought what they thought. Today, they think what their sub-culture, moulded by the media of the Powers-That-Be, allows them to think. Now they are usable by power.

Before our market-cities, when people were wild, they did what they did. Today, they do what can still be done against -- but also within -- our congeries of one sub-culture enmeshed in another. Now they are channelled by power.

Before our market-cities, when people were foolish, they followed a wrong thought with a consistent deed. Today, they follow a halfway wrong thought with a halfway consistent deed. Now they present no danger to power."

"Why is that so?" queried Ssu.

"Our rich tho squalid market-cities are built upon everlasting circulation, quick changes of fashion. In order not to fall out of fashion, people have to stick together in sub-cultures -- professions, corporations, hobbies -- which may absorb the unceasing shocks of market novelty so that people can go on. In such sub-cultural encapsulation, it is impossible to deviate into radically different behaviour. The quaint, defused, marketable differences present little threat to power; indeed, power can renew itself by using them. Even deviants thus broaden the market."

"Is there a way out of this?" inquired the frightened Ssu.

"Today, the power that shapes our lives exists in spite of the sub-cultures, as the military and politico-economic sub-culture bending the others to its own ends by overwhelming force acting downward from the top. Probably the only way out is to build from the by now indispensable sub-cultures upwards. Then power would be constituted by the untrammelled interaction of their clashes and compromises -- it would flow out of them, not over them."

"But all attempts at such a new power in the great insurrections of the last 80 years have so far failed," observed the practical Ssu. "What if no way out is found?"

"Then we shall have no more conceit, wildness or foolishness. Without them, without going the whole hog when thinking and doing, how can we ever have good thinking and doing? How can we then have modesty, meekness and intelligence?" concluded Kung. "No, Ssu, we must continue with the attempts, no matter how frequent and painful their failures. These attempts are difficult to think thru; but the alternative is unthinkable."

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### The Good Bear the Brunt

A wooden statue of the Emperor of Heavens was guarding the road. A passer-by in the rainy season, finding himself blocked by a ditch full of water, took the statue and laid it across the ditch for use as a plank. The next passer-by took pity on the statue and carried it back into its shelter. The god reproached him for lack of reverence: he had not reconsecrated the effigy by prayers and incense offerings. He was sent a violent headache.

The good passer-by cried out against such injustice: "Why didn't you punish the blasphemers who had trod on you?"

"First of all, his need was great," replied the Emperor of Heavens. "And more important, only good people are worth bothering about. It is the duty of pious people like you to see that ditches are

properly dredged and blasphemers punished -- having first taken away any excuse they might have from material circumstances."

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### Consistency and Small Talk

As a boy, Fu Wen was indelibly marked by a terrible war in the state of Chi. It was ended by a peasant uprising which preached that the right Way consists in first finding proper formulations about people's position in the universe, and then in translating those insights into decisive social action. Led by some artisans and scholars, followers of Master Ma who had first codified such millennial preaching, the peasants defeated the invading Hsiung-nu (Huns) as well as the large landlords who had supported the foreign invaders. Having seen the peasant movement's faith work, Fu Wen became convinced that theirs was the correct Way. He gladly served the new peasants' and artisans' king of Chi. His fame as a preacher of geometry spread: people said he carried some glimpses of the way toward the New World over into his measuring preaching.

On a visit to the geometers' guild in the state of Liang, Fu was asked to serve the king of Liang with an emolument and rank much higher than those he had in Chi. He refused indignantly. Yet ten years later he was to be found in Liang.

His friend, the she-hermit Shan Ming, asked Fu to explain his inconsistency: "Why did you leave Chi? Haven't you betrayed the Way?"

"I was dismissed three times in Chi," answered Fu. "The first time it was for being so zealous in pursuit of the Way that I offended some fellow-travellers. I accepted that, and worked my way up in another field. I was dismissed again for implementing correct formulations in my own fashion, which was found to be incorrect. I accepted that too. The third time it was for striving after directions different from the prime minister's ones. I then saw that I -- and everybody like me -- was relegated among the small talkers: allowed to comment about the Way but not to help delineating it. I could not accept that."

"But why did you go to Liang, known for its enmity toward the Way?"

"Well, most other states also disregard and dislike the Way more or less completely. Liang invited me without asking me to abandon my attitudes: in fact, some of the geometers in Liang share them. The religion here is that each person traces its own individual way, yet that all the ways are in some mystical fashion parallel. The Liang priests were quite prepared to accept me as a preacher who would hold actionless forth about the Chi Way and following Master Ma. For them, this would at best (or worst) indicate another individual way."

"But doesn't this compromise and degrade Master Ma's Way?" persisted Shan Ming.

"No doubt, this is a compromise, a poor second-best," confessed an uncomfortable Fu. "Yet it was the best among the bad choices open before me. For, if I am prevented from following the Way in the only manner I know, I can make small talk with much less heartbreak in a country that does not profess to follow the Way than in one that follows a false Way. In fact, if one is forcibly confined only to meditating about how to formulate the Way, this can be done at more depth in Liang than in Chi, where it is a matter that easily offends the prime minister: and sometimes even my still beloved king.

I must conclude, honourable Shan, it is Chi that -- inconsistently -- left the Way: not I. That was brought home to me by my final dismissal. I then had to adjust to a life without the only proper and firm delineation of the Way, which is done by walking it. I am exiled into small talk, merely thinking and dreaming about the directions the Way could and should take. External exile seemed practically preferable to internal exile."