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CLASSICAL CHINESE POETRY

AN ANTHOLOGY

Translated and edited by

DAVID HINTON

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David Hinton

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Introduction

THE CHINESE POETIC tradition is the largest and longest continuous tradition in world literature, practiced until recently by virtually everyone in the educated class and stretching from well before 1500 B.C.E. to the present. Remarkably, it has flourished not only in its homeland but also in Korea and Japan, each of which systematically adopted Chinese language and culture and thereafter developed Chinese poetic practice into their own directions. Much later, at the beginning of the modernist revolution, classical Chinese poetry made a surprising appearance in translation far from home when Ezra Pound saw in its concrete language and imagistic clarity a way to clear away the formalistic rhetoric and abstraction that dominated English poetry at the time. And its contemporary voice and sage insight have made it an influential strain of American poetry ever since.

This anthology presents more than three millennia of Chinese poetry from its beginnings sometime before 1500 B.C.E. to 1200 C.E., the centuries during which virtually all of its major innovations took place. In speaking of a Chinese poetic tradition, we are necessarily speaking of the written tradition. Nevertheless, the Chinese tradition was essentially an oral folk tradition for over a millennia, because the major written texts were primarily translations of folk poetry. This fact makes it difficult to assign a firm date for the tradition's origins. Indeed, as the written tradition is quite literally an extension of the oral tradition, its beginnings stretch back almost to the very beginnings of the culture itself. So it is not surprising when literary legend tells us that an especially brief and plainspoken folk-song called "Earth-Drumming Song" (p. 76) originated in the twenty-third century B.C.E.

After a transitional period beginning about 300 B.C.E., a mature written tradition was established around 400 C.E., its poets typically speaking in a personal voice of their immediate experience. These poets belonged to a small, highly educated elite class of artists and scholars that ran the government. From emperor and prime minister to lowly bureaucrat, from regional governor to monk or recluse in distant mountains—they all studied and wrote poetry, and their poetry was widely read among their colleagues. It was shared first on hand-copied calligraphic scrolls, ranging from a small scroll with a single poem to a set of larger scrolls containing a collection of poems, and then, after printing came into common use during the ninth century C.E., in printed books as well. These poems tended eventually to be scattered on the winds of circumstance—war, fire, neglect—with the result that a large share of work by even the most celebrated poets has been lost, and often substantial portions of the collections we now have are of uncertain attribution.

The work of men and women, illiterate peasants and urbane aristocrats, seductive courtesans and august statesmen, shamans and monks and countless literary intellectuals with an astonishing range of unique sensibilities—there is a remarkable diversity in the Chinese tradition, but underlying that diversity lies the unifying influence of the classical Chinese language. Quite different from the spoken Chinese of farm and market, classical Chinese was a literary language alive primarily in a body of literary texts, which means that it remained relatively unchanged across millennia. The most immediately striking characteristic of classical Chinese is its graphic form: it has retained aspects of its original pictographic nature, and so retains a direct visual connection to the empirical world. This was especially true for poetry, which in its extreme concision focuses attention on the characters themselves, and for the original readers of these poems, who were so erudite that they could see the original pictographs even in substantially modified graphs of characters.

The other remarkable characteristic of the language is that its grammatical elements are minimal in the extreme, allowing a remarkable openness and ambiguity that leaves a great deal unstated: prepositions and conjunctions are rarely used, leaving relationships between lines, phrases, ideas, and images unclear; the distinction between singular and plural is only rarely and indirectly made; there are no verb tenses, so temporal location and sequence are vague; very often the subjects, verbs, and objects of verbal action are absent. In addition, words tend to have a broad range of possible connotation. This openness is dramatically emphasized in the poetic language, which is far more spare even than prose. In reading a Chinese poem, you mentally fill in all that emptiness, and yet it remains always emptiness. The poetic language is, in and of itself, pure poetry:

階	下	叢	莎	看	露	光
stairs	below	clump	grass	see	dew	radiance

The grammatical openness is apparent in this line from Meng Hao-jan. And though it is not unusually pictographic, we find many images in the last four characters alone: grass (stalks and roots divided by ground level) above water 氵 (abbreviated form showing drops of water; full form 水 from the ancient form, which shows the rippling water of a stream:); the eye (tipped on its side in the second character) shaded by a hand (shown as the wrist and five fingers) for best vision; rain falling from the heavens that is mysteriously seen only at your feet (schematic picture of a foot below the formal element of a circle, showing heel to the left, toes to the right, leg above, with an ankle indicated to one side); and fire 火 (slightly formalized as the top half of the last character, the horizontal line and above), supported by a person 人 (variously described as the stylized image of a person, modified slightly in this character to give its base some structural stability).

These two defining characteristics of the language—empty grammar and graphic form—are reflected in the Taoist cosmology that became the conceptual framework shared by all poets in the mature written tradition. The cosmology must have evolved together with the language during the earliest stages of human culture in China, as they share the same deep structure, and it eventually found written expression in the *Tao Te Ching* (c. sixth century B.C.E.; see p. 36) and the *Chuang Tzu* (c. fourth century B.C.E.). Taoist thought is best described as a spiritual ecology, the central concept of which is Tao, or Way. *Tao* originally meant "way," as in "pathway" or "roadway," a meaning it has kept. But Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu redefined it as a spiritual concept, using it to describe the process (hence, a *way*) through which all things arise and pass away. To understand their Way, we must approach it at its deep ontological level, where the distinction between presence (being) and absence (nonbeing) arises.

Presence (*yu*) is simply the empirical universe, which the ancients described as the ten thousand living and nonliving things in constant transformation, and absence (*wu*) is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of presence perpetually arises. This absence should not be thought of as some kind of mystical realm, however. Although it is often spoken of in a general sense as the source of all presence, it is in fact quite specific and straightforward: for each of the ten thousand things, absence is simply the emptiness that precedes and follows existence. Within this framework, Way can be understood as the generative process through which all things arise and pass away as absence burgeons forth into the great transformation of presence. This is simply an ontological description of natural process, and it is perhaps most immediately manifest in the seasonal cycle: the pregnant emptiness of absence in winter, presence's burgeoning forth in spring, the fullness of its flourishing in summer, and its dying back into absence in autumn.

At the level of deep structure, words in the poetic language function in the same way as presence, the ten thousand things, and the emptiness that surrounds words functions as absence. Hence, the language doesn't simply replicate but actually participates in the deep structure of the cosmos and its dynamic process; it is in fact an organic part of that process. And the pictographic nature of the words, enacting as it does the "thusness" of the ten thousand things, reflects another central concept in the Taoist cosmology: *tzu-jan*, the mechanism by which the dynamic process of the cosmos proceeds, as presence arises out of absence.

The literal meaning of *tzu-jan* is "self-ablaze," from which comes "self-so" or "the of-itself." But a more revealing translation of *tzu-jan* is "occurrence appearing of itself," for it is meant to describe the ten thousand things arising spontaneously from the generative source (*wu*)—each according to its own nature, independent and self-sufficient; each dying and returning into the process of change, only to reappear in another self-generating form. This vision of *tzu-jan* recognizes the earth, indeed the entire cosmos, to be a boundless generative organism. There is a palpable sense of the sacred in this cosmology: for each of the ten thousand things, consciousness among them, seems to be miraculously emerging from a kind of emptiness at its own heart, and emerging at the same time from the very heart of the cosmos itself. As it reflects this cosmology in its empty grammar and pictographic nature, the poetic language is nothing less than a sacred medium. Indeed, the word for poetry, *shih*, is made up of elements meaning "spoken word" and "temple." The left-hand element, meaning "spoken word," portrays sounds coming out of a mouth: 言. And the right-hand element, meaning "temple," portrays a hand below (ancient form:) that touches a seedling sprouting from the ground (ancient form:): 寺. Hence: "words spoken at the earth altar": 詩.

Although radically different from the Judeo-Christian worldview that has dominated Western culture, this Taoist cosmology represents a worldview that is remarkably familiar to us in the modern Western world (no doubt part of the reason the poetry feels so contemporary): it is secular, and yet profoundly spiritual; it is thoroughly empirical and basically accords with modern scientific understanding; it is deeply ecological, weaving the human into the "natural world" in the most profound way (indeed, the distinction between human and nature is entirely foreign to it); and it is radically feminist—a primal cosmology oriented around earth's mysterious generative force and probably deriving from Paleolithic spiritual practices centered on a Great Mother who continuously gives birth to all things in an unending cycle of life, death, and rebirth.

By the time the mature written tradition began around 400 C.E., Buddhism had migrated from India to China and was well established. Ch'an, the distinctively Chinese form of Buddhism, was emerging in part as a result of mistranslation of Buddhist texts using Taoist terminology and concepts. Ch'an was essentially a reformulation of the spiritual ecology of early Taoist thought, focusing within that philosophical framework on meditation, which was practiced by virtually all of China's intellectuals. Such meditation allows us to watch the process of *tzu-jan* in the form of thought arising from the emptiness and disappearing back into it. In such meditative practice, we see that we are fundamentally separate from the mental processes with which we normally identify, that we are most essentially the very emptiness that watches thought appear and disappear.

Going deeper into meditative practice, once the restless train of thought falls silent, one simply dwells in that undifferentiated emptiness, that generative realm of absence. Self and its constructions of the world dissolve away, and what remains of us is empty consciousness itself, known in Ch'an terminology as "empty mind" or "no-mind." As absence, empty mind attends to the ten thousand things with mirrorlike clarity, and so the act of perception itself becomes a spiritual act: empty mind mirroring the world, leaving its ten thousand things utterly simple, utterly themselves, and utterly sufficient. This spiritual practice is a constant presence in classical Chinese, in its fundamentally pictographic nature. It is also the very fabric of Chinese poetry, manifest in its texture of imagistic clarity. In a Chinese poem, the simplest word or image resonates with the whole cosmology of *tzu-jan*.

The deep structure of the Taoist/Ch'an cosmology is shared not only by the poetic language but by consciousness as well. Consciousness, too, participates as an organic part of the dynamic processes of the cosmos, for thoughts appear and disappear in exactly the same way as presence's ten thousand things. And the generative emptiness from which thoughts arise is nothing other than absence, the primal source.

Consciousness, cosmos, and language form a unity, and in the remarkably creative act of reading a Chinese poem we participate in this unity, filling in absence with presence, empty mind there at the boundaries of its true, wordless form:

不	覺	初	秋	夜	漸	長
not	aware	beginning	autumn	night	gradually	long
清	風	習	習	重	凄	涼
clear	wind	steadily/ gently	steadily/ gently	double	icy	cold

炎	炎	暑	退	茅	齋	靜
blaze	blaze	summer heat	withdraw	thatch	study	quiet
階	下	叢	莎	看	露	光
stairs	below	clump	grass	see	dew	radiance

The occasion for this poem is a kind of non-occasion: Meng Hao-jan's self-absorbed failure to notice the world around him, which is a kind of exile from the very nature of language and consciousness. It is autumn that attracts Meng's notice, bringing him back to that unity of cosmos, consciousness, and language—the autumnal world dying into winter, season of *wu*, that pregnant emptiness. His "thatch hut grows still," an outer stillness that reflects an inner stillness, an emptiness. This empty self is also alive in the language, for Meng exists in the grammar only as an absent presence, almost indistinguishable from *wu*'s emptiness. He is felt in the first and last lines, where we can infer his presence only because of the convention that such a poem is about the poet's immediate experience. In the last line, we can fill in the grammatical subject to get: *below the stairs, in bunchgrass, [I] see dew shimmer.* But the poet remains more absence than presence. Essentially an act of meditation, the poem ends with a perfectly empty mind mirroring the actual—a person become, in the most profound way, his truest self: *wu*'s enduring emptiness and *tzu-jan*'s ten thousand shimmering things:

AUTUMN BEGINS

Autumn begins unnoticed. Nights slowly lengthen,
and little by little, clear winds turn colder and colder,

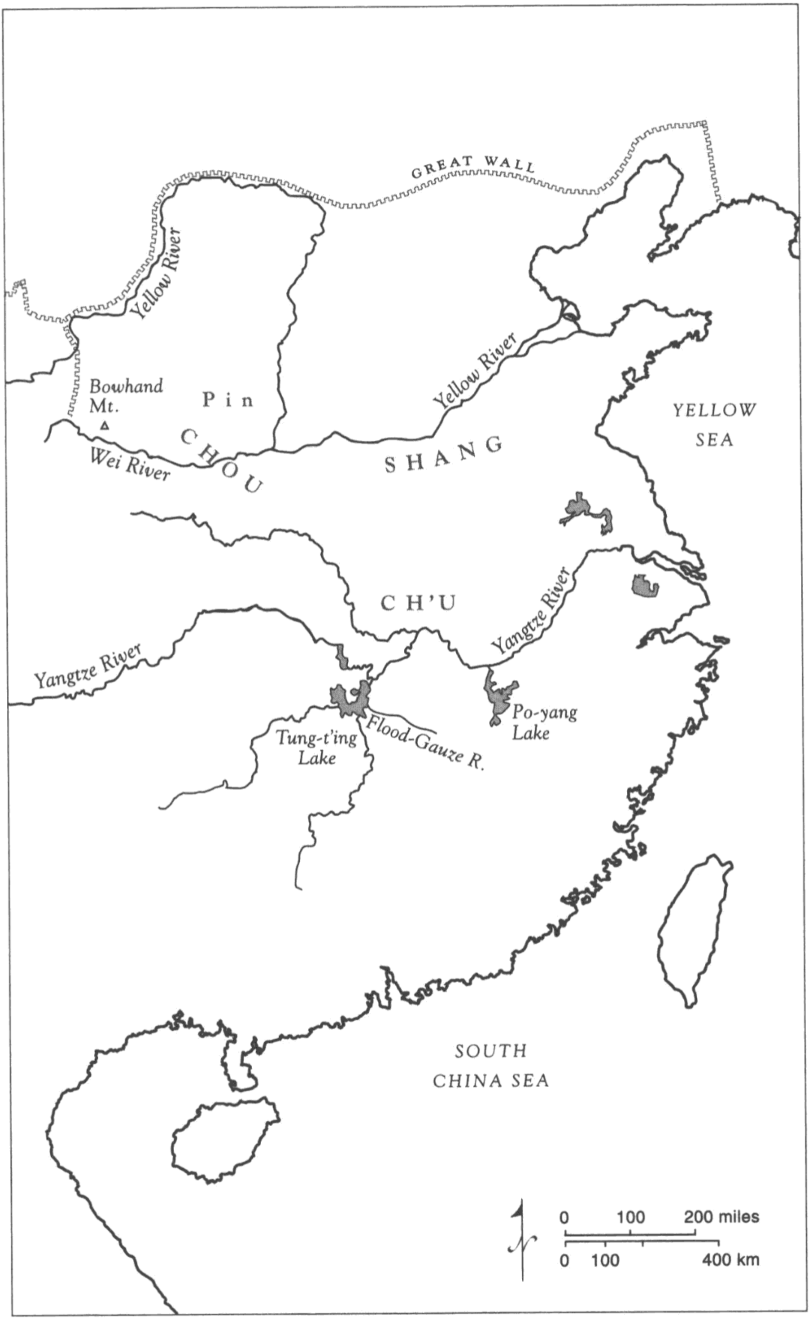
summer's blaze giving way. My thatch hut grows still.
At the bottom stair, in bunchgrass, lit dew shimmers.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

ALTHOUGH IT MEANS ignoring the hundreds of noteworthy poets whose work makes up the evolving texture of China's poetic tradition, and therefore missing much important transitional material, this anthology presents Chinese poetry as a tradition of major poets whose poetics created new possibilities for the art, which is to say, gave new dimensions to the Taoist/Ch'an unity of cosmos, consciousness, and language. In this modern age, vast environmental destruction has been sanctioned by people's assumption that they are spirits residing only temporarily here in a merely physical world created expressly for their use and benefit. This makes the Taoist/Ch'an worldview increasingly compelling as an alternative vision in which humankind belongs wholly to the physical realm of natural process. The range of work gathered in this anthology addresses every aspect of human experience, revealing how it is actually lived from within that alternative perspective—not in a monastery but in the always compromised texture of our daily lives.

EARLY COLLECTIONS: THE ORAL TRADITION

(c. 15th century B.C.E. to 4th century C.E.)


GREAT WALL
Yellow River
Bowhand Mt.
Pin
CHOU
Wei River
Yellow River
SHANG
YELLOW SEA
CH'U
Yangtze River
Yangtze River
Po-yang Lake
Tung-t'ing Lake
Flood-Gauze R.
SOUTH CHINA SEA
0
100
200 miles
0
100
400 km

ANCIENT CHINESE POETRY survives as a textual tradition written in a literary, as opposed to vernacular, language. Nevertheless, for its first millennium, it was essentially an oral tradition of the nonliterate people. This oral tradition extends back many thousands of years into prehistory, of course, but beginning around the sixth to seventh centuries B.C.E., members of the intellectual class gathered samples of this vast poetic corpus a number of times, recording a few brief moments from its ongoing evolution. Each of the collections in which the oral literature survives is remarkably unique, focusing on a particular dimension of that literature. The range and diversity of these poetries suggests just how vast China's oral tradition was, as well as how much must have been lost.

In terms of content, the recorded poems are probably quite close to the folk originals, but formally they differ considerably. Spoken Chinese is a very different language from literary Chinese, and to complicate matters, the poems were gathered from many different regions of China, each of which spoke its own distinct dialect. So the poems needed to be translated into the standard literary language not just from spoken Chinese but from various dialects of the spoken language. Additionally, this process of translation no doubt involved substantial amounts of editing and reshaping. But however distant they are from the original material, the written versions represent an impressive body of poetry in their own right, constituting nothing less than the foundation upon which the entire Chinese tradition is built.

THE BOOK OF SONGS

(c. 15th to 6th century B.C.E.)

THE EARLIEST GATHERING from China's oral tradition is *The Book of Songs* (*Shih Ching*), an anthology of 305 poems. This collection was compiled, according to cultural legend, by no less a figure than Confucius (551 to 479 B.C.E.), who selected the poems from a total of about 3,000 that had been gathered from China's various component states, each of which spoke its own dialect. The poems are traditionally dated between the twelfth and sixth centuries B.C.E., but any poem in the oral tradition evolves over time, and the origins of the earliest *Shih Ching* poems no doubt stretch back well beyond the twelfth century. The *Songs* can be seen as an epic of the Chinese people from the origins of China's earliest historical dynasty, the Shang (traditional dates 1766 to 1122 B.C.E.), to the unraveling of the Chou Dynasty (1122 to 221 B.C.E.) in Confucius's age, a span of time during which Chinese culture underwent a fundamental transformation from a spiritualized theocratic society to a secular humanist one.

Religious life in the Shang Dynasty focused on the worship of ancestors, and the Shang emperors ruled by virtue of a family lineage that connected them to Shang Ti, literally "High Lord" or "Celestial Lord," a monotheistic god very like the Judeo-Christian god in that he created the universe and controlled all aspects of its historical process. In the mythological system that dominated Shang culture, the rulers were descended from Shang Ti and so could influence Shang Ti's shaping of events through their spirit-ancestors, thereby controlling all aspects of people's lives: weather, harvest, politics, economics, religion, and so on. Indeed, the Chinese people didn't experience themselves as substantially different from spirits, for the human realm was known as an extension of the spirit realm—a situation very similar to the Judeo-Christian West, where people think of themselves as immortal souls, spirits only temporarily here in a material world before they move on to heaven, their true spirit-home.

Eventually the Shang rulers became cruel and tyrannical, much hated by their people, and they were overthrown by the Chou, a people living on the Shang border who had recently adopted Chinese culture. The Chou conquerors were faced with an obvious problem: if the Shang lineage descended directly from Shang Ti, and so had an absolute claim to rule Chinese society, how could the Chou justify replacing it, and how could they legitimize their rule in the eyes of the Shang people? Their solution was to reinvent Shang Ti in the form of Heaven, an impersonal divine power of the cosmos, thus ending the Shang's claim to legitimacy by lineage. The Chou rulers then proclaimed that the right to rule depended upon a "Mandate of Heaven": once a ruler became unworthy, Heaven withdrew its Mandate and bestowed it on another. This concept was a major event in Chinese society: the first investment of power with an ethical imperative.

The early centuries of the Chou Dynasty appear to have fulfilled that imperative admirably. But the Chou eventually foundered because its rulers became increasingly tyrannical, and they lacked the Shang's absolute metaphysical source of legitimacy: if the Mandate could be transferred to them, it could obviously be transferred again. The rulers of the empire's component states grew increasingly powerful, claiming more and more sovereignty over their lands, until finally they were virtually independent nations. The final result of the Chou's "metaphysical" breakdown was, not surprisingly, all too physical: war. There was relentless fighting among the various states and frequent rebellion within them. This internal situation, so devastating to the people, continued to deteriorate after Confucius compiled the *Shih Ching*, until it finally led to the Chou's collapse two and a half centuries later.

By Confucius's time, the old social order had crumbled entirely, and China's intellectuals began struggling to create a new one. In the ruins of a grand monotheism that had dominated China for over a millennium, a situation not at all unlike that of the modern West, these thinkers created an earthly humanist culture: Confucius and Mencius crafting its political dimensions, Lao Tzu (see p. 36) and Chuang Tzu its spiritual dimensions.

This remarkable cultural transformation is reflected in the *Songs*. Although the situation was complex, with developments evolving differently in different regions and strata of society, the general movement appears to have been from poems of spiritualized power (ritual hymns and historical odes that celebrate the ruling class and its power) to secular folk-songs. The book's older hymns and odes tend to focus on the ruling class and its concerns: the historic and religious framework that legitimized the Shang and Chou rulers, the Chou overthrow of the Shang, and finally the Chou's rule.

Unfortunately, there is only a small group of five poems relating to the Shang Dynasty. They must have originated back in the Shang, eventually evolving into their *Shih Ching* forms, which were performed in a region of the Chou empire that maintained its connection to the Shang. With this one exception, the hymns and odes all relate to the Chou Dynasty. According to legend, a majority of them (nearly seventy) were written by the Duke of Chou, the last of the three revered rulers from the founding of the Chou, and the one credited with expanding and consolidating the Chou empire. He was also widely thought to have composed many of the folk-songs (see Lu Yu's reference on p. 398). This is legend. The concept of a fixed written text composed by a particular individual did not exist at the time, so this attribution must have been invented much later, when that concept did exist. But as with so much of early Chinese culture, this legend became part of the reality upon which the culture was built, so the Duke of Chou might be considered China's first great poet. This remarkable figure is further credited with inventing the concept of the Mandate of Heaven, and so might also be considered the first of China's great philosophers.

It was the Duke of Chou's concept of a Mandate of Heaven that led to the most celebrated and enduring section of *The Book of Songs*: the later folk poetry that makes up nearly two-thirds of the collection. According to Chou ideology, Heaven bestowed its Mandate on a ruler only so long as that ruler successfully furthered the interests of the people, and it was thought that the best indication of the people's well-being was their poetry. So noble rulers would send officials out among the people to gather folk-songs in order to gauge how their policies were succeeding. These songs were translated from regional dialects into the standard literary language by government officials and performed with music at the court. It should, therefore, be remembered that this is not folk poetry itself, but folk poetry that was substantially reshaped by the poet-scholars who edited and translated it.

The organization of the *Songs* reflects China's overall cultural development, though in rough and reverse chronological order, beginning with the more recent folk-songs and ending with the ancient Shang hymns. The selection translated here is arranged chronologically, beginning with hymns and odes that move from Shang origins (pp. 9–10) through the rise of the Chou people and their eventual overthrow of the Shang (pp. 11–17), a period during which all cultural value was focused on the ruling class. It then continues through the troubled Chou, where the increasing value accorded the common people is reflected in the collection of folk-songs, with their quotidian themes and almost complete lack of Shang metaphysics. So at the end of this process, once the spiritualized social framework had been replaced by a secular humanist one, the poetry too had moved from religious hymns and historical odes celebrating the ruling class's interests to a plainspoken poetry of the common people. This latter poetry contains the two fundamental orientations that came to shape the Chinese poetic mainstream: it is a secular poetry having a direct personal voice speaking of immediate and concrete experience, and it is a poetry that functions as a window onto the inner life of a person.

DARK-ENIGMA BIRD

Heaven bade Dark-Enigma bird
descend and give birth to Shang,
our people inhabiting lands boundless and beyond,
then our Celestial Lord bade brave and forceful T'ang
establish boundaries to the far corners of our lands,
bade him then rule these lands,
these nine regions in splendor.
So T'ang, first emperor of Shang,
received the Mandate. Ever safe,
it has passed now to Wu Ting's
sons, to his sons and grandsons,
our emperors brave and forceful,
nothing they will not overcome—
their lords with dragon banners
parading grains to the sacrifice,
their domain thousands of miles
offering the people sure support.
He pushed the boundaries of our land to the four seas,
and now from the four seas comes
homage, such abounding homage.
And our far frontier is the river.
That Shang received the Mandate was due, right and due,
and its hundred blessings continue.

ANCESTORS MAJESTIC

Majestic, O ancestors majestic
ablaze shaping blessings this
bounty on and on stretching
boundless across your lands:
we bring you crystalline wine
and you answer our prayers.
We bring well-seasoned soup,
approach mindful and tranquil
and hushed in silent homage,
leaving all strife far behind,
and you ease our pained brows,
letting old age grow boundless.
Hubs veiled and harness inlaid,
eight phoenix-bells clittering,
we offer sacrifice and homage.
The Mandate we received is vast and mighty.
It's from Heaven—this rich ease,
this life abounding in harvests.
We offer homage, and you accept,
sending boundless good fortune,
honoring autumn and winter
offerings from T'ang's children.

BIRTH TO OUR PEOPLE

Birth to our people—it was she,
Shepherdess Inception, who
gave birth to our people. How?
She offered sacrifice, prayers
that she not be without child,
wandered the Lord's footprint, quickened
and conceived. She grew round,
dawn-life stirring there within,
she gave birth and she suckled,
and the child—it was Millet God.

And so those months eased by
and the birth—it was effortless.
Free of all rending and tearing,
free of pain and affliction, she
brought forth divine splendor.
The Celestial Lord soothing her,
welcoming sacrifice and prayer,
she bore her son in tranquillity.

And so he was left alone in a narrow lane,
but oxen and sheep nurtured him.
And so he was left alone on a forested plain,
but woodcutters gathered round.
And so he was left alone on a cold ice-field,
but birds wrapped him in wings,
and when the birds took flight,
Millet God began to wail, he
wailed long and wailed loud,
and the sound was deafening.

And so he soon began to crawl,
then stood firm as a mountain.
When he began to feed himself,
he planted broad-beans aplenty,
broad and wind-fluttered beans,
and lush grain ripening in rows,
wheat and hemp thick and rich,
and melons sprawled everywhere.

And so Millet God farmed, understanding
the Way to help things grow.
He cleared away thick grass
and planted yellow treasure.
The seeds swelled and rooted.
Planted well, they grew lovely,
grew tall and lovely in bloom,
they ripened to a fine finish
and bent low with rich plenty.
He built a house there, in T'ai, and settled.

And so he gave to us exquisite
millet: midnight and twin-seed,
red-shafted and white-frosted.
He grew midnight and twin-seed
far and wide, cut acre after acre,
cut red-shafted and white-frosted,
hauled it in, shoulder and back
home to begin offering sacrifice.

And so our offerings—how are they done?
Some thresh and some sweep,
some winnow and some tread;
we wash it clean, whisper-clean,
and steam it misty, misty sweet.
Pondering deeply, thoughts pure,
we offer artemisia soaked in fat,
offer rams to spirits far and wide,
and meat smoke-seared we offer
to bring forth another new year.

We offer bounty in altar bowls,
in altar bowls and holy platters,
and when the fragrance ascends,
fragrance perfect in its season,
our Celestial Lord rests content.
Millet God began these offerings,
and free of trespass always they
continued down to our own time.

SPRAWL

Melons sprawl from root.
In Pin riverlands, earth
gave birth to our people.
Our true old father T'ai
made us shelters, kiln-huts,
for houses were unknown.

Then T'ai our true father
went early on his horse,
following the Wei River
west to Bowhand Mountain,
found Lady Shepherdess
and with her shared roof.

Chou plains rich and full,
thistle-weed and bitterroot
like honey-cake, he began
planning. Tortoise shells
said: *This place. This time.*
And soon houses were built.

He comforted and he settled
his people on every side,
laid out bounds and borders,
shaped fields, sent farmers
east and west, everywhere
fashioning his project well.

He called master builders,
master teachers, bade them
build houses, plumb-lines
taut and true, bade them
lash timbers into that regal
temple ancestors would love.

We hauled earth in baskets,
crowds swarming, measuring,
packing it hard *hunk, hunk*,
scraping it clean *ping, ping*:
a hundred walls built so fast
no work-drum could keep up.

Soon outer gates stood firm,
outer gates looming up, lofty,
then inner gates stood firm,
inner gates regal and strong.
And soon the Earth Altar too,
where all our endeavors begin.

True T'ai—his righteous anger never faded,
and he never let his great renown falter.
He cleared oak and thorn-oak
and opened roads far and wide.
And the mud-faced tribes, they
fled in broken-winded panic.

Our neighbors in Yü and Jui pledged peace:
Emperor Wen always kindled native nobility.
And so we call him sovereign near and far,
sovereign we call him over before and after,
sovereign too over those who flee or return
and even over those who ridicule and resist.

Emperor Wen resides on high,
all radiance there in Heaven.
Though it's an ancient nation,
Chou's Mandate is new: Chou
the illustrious, the Celestial
Lord's Mandate well-deserved,
Emperor Wen rising and setting
on the Lord's left, on his right.

It kept on and on, his resolve,
and now his renown lasts: such
bounty granted Chou, granted
Emperor Wen's heirs, his sons and grandsons,
Wen's sons and his grandsons
through a hundred generations.
And Chou officers throughout
future generations illustrious,

through generations illustrious,
their ardent counsels reverent:
O admirable the many officers
who founded our regal nation,
nation they brought into being.
Those pillars supporting Chou,
officers stately and legion, they
brought Emperor Wen repose,

majestic and reverent Wen, O
we stand in the enduring light of his splendor,
pay Heaven's Mandate homage.
Shang sons and grandsons rose,
sons and grandsons of Shang
a hundred thousand and more,
then came our Lord's Mandate
and they succumbed to Chou,

to Chou they quickly succumbed.
Heaven's Mandate is not forever:
Shang officers diligent and pure
offered libations in our capital
then, offered libations wearing
their old caps and hatchet robes.
You ministers pure and devoted,
always remember your ancestor,

always remember your ancestor,
cultivate yourselves his integrity,
and ever worthy of the Mandate
you'll flourish in such prosperity.
Before its armies were torn apart, Shang too
was worthy of the Celestial Lord.
Look at Shang: it's a mirror. Look:
the lofty Mandate's hard to keep,

the Mandate so very hard to keep.
Don't bring ruin upon yourselves:
radiate duty and renown abroad
and ponder all that Heaven visited upon Shang.
The workings of celestial Heaven—
they have no sound and no smell,
but do as Wen did and you'll earn
the trust of ten thousand nations.

SEVENTH MOON

Seventh moon, Fire Star ebbs away,
and ninth, we share out warm robes.
By the eleventh moon, chill winds howl,
and by the twelfth, it's bitter cold, killing
cold, rough-quilt robes a blessing:
they warm us through those months.
Then, by the first moon, we ready plows,
and by the second, we're out in the fields:
I stroll out with my wife and kids,
carry offerings into southern fields,
where the field-foreman is smiling.

Seventh moon, Fire Star ebbs away,
and ninth, we share out warm robes.
Spring days bring the sun's warmth
and orioles full of song, of restless
song, as girls take their fine baskets
and go wandering on subtle paths
in search of tender mulberry leaves.
Spring days lazy and slow, they stroll
along, picking white southernwood
blossoms, a flock of heartsick girls
longing longing for their noble loves to take them home.

Seventh moon, Fire Star ebbs away,
and eighth, we cut reeds for weaving.
Silkworm moon, mulberry branches
tumble—axes and blades swinging
high up and out, they tumble down,
mulberry leaves so lush and tender.
Seventh moon, shrike is full of song,
and eighth, we spin thread again,
spin yellow-earth and azure-heaven
thread, and reds bright as the sun:
cloth to sew my noble love a robe.

Fourth moon, needle-grass ripens,
and fifth, cicadas rise into song.
Eighth moon, we harvest grains,
and tenth, autumn leaves scatter.
By the eleventh moon, we hunt
badgers, shoot foxes and wildcats:
furs to sew my noble love a coat.
Then by the twelfth, we muster
the great hunt, practice for war.
And keeping the young ourselves,
we offer an old boar to our lord.

Fifth moon, grasshoppers stretch legs and leap,
and sixth, locusts are out fluttering their wings.
Seventh moon off in the wildlands
and eighth sheltering under eaves,
ninth moon sunning at the door
and tenth sneaking inside—crickets
hide under beds, and sing and sing.
I seal up all the windows and doors,
plug holes, and smoke out the mice,
then call over to my wife and kids:
Year's end is coming, it's coming—
time we lived our lives inside again.

Sixth moon, we dine on sparrow plum and wild grape,
and seventh, savor steamed mallow greens and beans.
Eighth moon, we pick dates clean,
and tenth, harvest fields of rice,
rice we make into fine spring wine,
long life for age-tangled eyebrows.
Seventh moon, we dine on melons,
and eighth, cut bottle-gourds to dry.
Ninth moon, we gather hemp seed,
thistle-weed, ghost-eye for firewood,
and then feast the field-hands well.

Ninth moon, we turn gardens into threshing-yards,
and tenth, bundle the harvest in from our fields:
summer millet and autumn millet,
rice and hemp, beans and wheat.
Then I call over to the field-hands:
The harvest is bundled up and gathered in,
let's head inside and put the house to rights.
We gather thatch-grass by day
and tie it into sheaves by night,
then hurry it up onto the roof,
for it's soon time to sow the hundred grains again.

By the twelfth moon, we take ice-chisels out, cracking and zinging,
and by the first, we haul it in, blocks of it crowding the icehouse.
By the second moon, we rise early,
offer a lamb sacrificed with leeks.
Ninth moon, we're awed by frost,
and tenth, sweep our threshing-yard,
then we lift winecups two by two,
kill young sheep for a harvest feast,
and parading up to the public hall
raise cups of wild-ox horn for a toast:
Ten thousand lifetimes without limit!

MY LOVE'S GONE OFF TO WAR

My love's gone off to war,
who knows how long gone
or where O where.
Chickens settle into nests,
an evening sun sinks away,
oxen and sheep wander in—
but my love's gone off to war
and nothing can stop these thoughts of him.

My love's gone off to war,
not for days or even months,
and who survives such things?
Chickens settle onto perches,
an evening sun sinks away,
oxen and sheep wander home—
but my love's gone off to war
if hunger and thirst spared him that long.

NOTHING LEFT

Nothing left, O nothing left,
why not head for home?
Nothing but a lord's whimsy—
why else are we stuck here, warriors drenched in dew?

Nothing left, O nothing left,
why not head for home?
Nothing but a lord's vainglory—
why else are we stuck here, warriors all muck and mud?

IN THE WILDS THERE'S A DEAD DEER

In the wilds there's a dead deer
all wrapped in bleached reeds,
and there's a girl feeling spring
as her fair love brings her on.

In the woods there's thicket oak,
in the wilds there's a dead deer
tangled tight in bleached reeds,
and there's a girl, skin like jade.

Slowly—oh yes, slip it off slowly,
my skirt, oh yes, don't muss it,
and don't start that dog barking.

GATHERING THORN-FERN

Gathering thorn-fern, bitter
thorn-fern still green, all we
talk of is home, going home.
Autumn's ending, and there's
no shelter for us, no family,
thanks to those dog-face tribes,
no time to sit, no ease for us
thanks to those dog-face tribes.

Gathering thorn-fern, bitter
thorn-fern still tender, all we
talk of is home, going home,
hearts grief-stricken, hearts
bleak and cold grief-stricken,
hunger dire and thirst worse.
Frontier war drags on and on,
no hope they'll send us home.

Gathering thorn-fern, bitter
thorn-fern now tough, all we
talk of is home, going home.
Winter's begun, and still there's
no pause in the emperor's work,
no time to sit, and no ease for
hearts stricken sick with grief.
When we left, we left for good.

What's all this lavish splendor?
It's a plum flaunting its bloom.
And that, there on the road?
It's our noble lord's war-cart,
war-cart all harnessed up to
four stallions fiery and strong.
How will we ever stop and rest?
Three battles a month we fight,

four stallions all harnessed up,
four eager and strong stallions.
A noble lord driving them on,
we little ones shielding them,
four surging stallions attack,
ivory bow-tips, sealskin quiver.
We keep watch. Those dog-face
tribes—they can strike so fast.

It was long ago when we left.
Fresh willows swayed tenderly.
And now we come back through
driving sleet tangled in snow,
the road long and deathly slow,
hunger dire and thirst worse.
Grief has so slashed our hearts
no one could fathom our cries.

A DOVE

A dove in the mulberry tree,
its young sevenfold, sevenfold.
People fine and noble-minded—
they're at one in their ways,
one in their ways, and constant,
and O their hearts intertwined.

A dove in the mulberry tree,
its young off in winter plums.
People fine and noble-minded—
their robes are made of silk,
made of silk, and quite lovely,
and O their hats of dappled fur.

A dove in the mulberry tree,
its young off in thorn-dates.
People fine and noble-minded—
their ways without any flaw,
without any flaw—they perfect
our nation border to border.

A dove in the mulberry tree,
its young off in brierwoods.
People fine and noble-minded—
perfecting our nation's people,
our nation's people—O this our
future ten thousand years long.

RATS SO FAT

Rats so fat, rats so grand
feasting on our millet—
three years your slaves
and we're nothing to you.
We're dying to leave you,
leave for that joyous land,
that joyous joyous land,
and live out our dreams.

Rats so fat, rats so grand
feasting on our wheat—
three years your slaves
and to us you're heartless.
We're dying to leave you,
leave for that joyous nation,
that joyous joyous nation,
and live out our true way.

Rats so fat, rats so grand
feasting on our sprouts—
three years your slaves
and you give nothing back.
We're dying to leave you,
leave for those joyous fields,
those joyous joyous fields,
and end all this mourning.

IN THE WILDS THERE'S A GRASS MAT

In the wilds there's a grass mat
damp with dew, damp and cool,
and there's you, O so beautiful:
eyes crystalline, face exquisite.
We happened upon one another
and O you gave all that I wanted.

In the wilds there's a grass mat
thick with dew, thick and cool,
and there's you, O so beautiful:
face exquisite as crystalline eyes.
We happened upon one another,
and hidden away here, we shine.

HE BUILT HIS HUT

He built his hut on the stream,
that stately man so far-seeing,
sleeps alone, wakes and speaks:
a timeless bond not forgotten.

He built his hut on the mountain,
that stately man so lean-eyed,
sleeps alone, wakes and chants:
a timeless bond not surpassed.

He built his hut on the heights,
that stately man so self-possessed,
sleeps alone, wakes and abides:
a timeless bond beyond telling.

OSPREYS CRY

Cheereek! cheereek! ospreys cry
ospreys above their riverside nest.
That fine lady, exquisite mystery—
what a match for a worthy man.

The floating-heart's ragged leaves
drift this current here and there.
That fine lady, exquisite mystery—
waking and sleeping I sought her,

sought her but never reached her,
waking and sleeping, all devoted
longing and longing on and on,
tossing and turning side to side.

The floating-heart's ragged leaves,
from every side I gather them in,
and my fine lady, exquisite mystery—
with quiet *ch'in* song I befriend her.

The floating-heart's ragged leaves,
from every side I bring them in,
and my fine lady, exquisite mystery—
with drums and bells I delight her.

I CLIMB A HILLTOP

I climb a rock-strewn hilltop
and gaze, gaze out toward my
father, O father calling: *My child, my child dragged off to war,*
no rest all day and all night.
Take care, take care and be ever
homeward, not stuck out there.

I climb a grass-patch hilltop
and gaze, gaze out toward my
mother, O mother calling: *My little one, my little one dragged off to war,*
no sleep all day and all night.
Take care, take care and be ever
homeward, not lost out there.

I climb some windblown ridge
and gaze, gaze out toward my
brother, O brother calling: *My brother, my brother dragged off to war,*
formation all day and all night.
Take care, take care and be ever
homeward, not dead out there.

CUT AN AXE HANDLE

How do you cut an axe handle?
Without an axe it can't be done.
And how do you marry a wife?
Without a matchmaker you can't.

Cut an axe handle, axe handle—
the pattern's close at hand.
Waiting to meet her, I lay out
offerings in baskets and bowls.

WILLOWS NEAR THE EAST GATE

Willows near the east gate
grow lush and full: at dusk
we were to meet, but now
the morning star's alight.

Willows near the east gate
grow deep and dark: at dusk
we were to meet, but now
the morning star—it burns.

WE CUT GRASSES

We cut grasses, hack brush,
and plow fields so rich, rich,
thousands clearing out roots,
clearing dikes and paddies,
some lords and some elders,
some parents, some children,
some strong and some weak,
all sharing farmland meals,
men adoring beautiful wives
and wives beside their men,
men that hone ploughshares
and till these southern fields.
We sow the hundred grains,
those seeds so quick with life
they sprout in no time at all
and rise up sturdy and tall,
rise sturdy and lush and tall,
weeded over and over again
until we harvest such plenty,
such rich plenty stacked up
a thousand million and more
and more, to make deep wine
we offer lavish to ancestors
according to a hundred rites:
and its scent full of sweetness
brings our homeland splendor,
and its fragrance full of spice
brings our agèd long repose.
This isn't just this one harvest,
and this isn't just this one day:
we live all antiquity in this.

EASTERN MOUNTAINS

Sent off to eastern mountains,
to war unending and no return,
I'm finally back home again,
and the rain drizzles on and on.
Rumors about us heading home
kept me longing for the west,
for the cutting of new clothes
far from our gagged night-raids,
but green caterpillars ravaged
mulberry orchards inside out,
and I spent lonely nights alone
sleeping under those war-carts.

Sent off to eastern mountains,
to war unending and no return,
I'm finally back home again,
and the rain drizzles on and on.
Vines heavy with rife-melons
draped in tangles across eaves,
sowbugs taking over the rooms
and spiderwebs the doorways,
courtyard become a deeryard,
flicker-bugs haunting the night:
nothing so fearful in such things,
but O they bring back memories.

Sent off to eastern mountains,
to war unending and no return,
I'm finally back home again,
and the rain drizzles on and on.
A crane calls from an anthill.
A wife mourns in her rooms.
Plaster, sprinkle, and sweep—
we're back now, we're back!
Bitter melons, bitter melons
sprawling over the woodpile:
it's already been three long
years since I saw them there.

Sent off to eastern mountains,
to war unending and no return,
I'm finally back home again,
and the rain drizzles on and on.
An oriole sets out into flight,
its wings flickering, flickering,
and a lady readies for marriage,
horse dappled sorrel and bay,
her mother tying bridal sashes,
packing wedding gifts aplenty.
Her new marriage looks grand,
but what about the old one she shared with me?

TAO TE CHING

(c. 6th century B.C.E.)

LIKE *The Book of Songs*, the *Tao Te Ching* derives from the oral tradition, but its origins lie in a very different dimension of that tradition. Rather than the folk and political poetries of *The Book of Songs*, the *Tao Te Ching* grew out of an ancient wisdom tradition. The earthly humanist culture that replaced early China's otherworldly theocratic culture was shaped by a spirituality of our immediate empirical experience, and this spirituality was first articulated in the *Tao Te Ching*. The *Tao Te Ching* is generally considered more a book of philosophy than poetry, and the system of thought that it articulates came to shape the conceptual world of China's intellectuals, including poets. Its widespread influence continues today in the West, where new translations appear regularly. Indeed, in terms of the number of people and the amount of cultural production it has influenced, the *Tao Te Ching* may well be the single most influential spiritual text in human history.

According to cultural legend, the *Tao Te Ching* was written by Lao Tzu (c. 6th century B.C.E.), an elder contemporary of Confucius. It is said that they met once, and that after the meeting an awestruck Confucius exclaimed: "A dragon mounting wind and cloud to soar through the heavens—such things are beyond me. And today, meeting Lao Tzu, it was like facing a dragon." But Lao Tzu, whose name simply means "Old Master," was in fact probably constructed out of fragments gleaned from various old sage-masters active in the oral tradition during the centuries prior to the sixth century B.C.E. Perhaps Lao Tzu was the last in that line of sage-masters, and it was he who cobbled the text together. More likely it was a series of sage-editors. Whoever was responsible, they realized that the surprisingly modern sense of fragment and collage was the perfect embodiment of Lao Tzu's mysterious thought, and they managed to weave those fragments into a remarkably personal presence. If we look past the fragmentary text and oracular tone, we find a voice that is consistent and compassionate, unique, and rich with the complexities of personality.

The actual sayings that make up the book may predate Lao Tzu by several centuries, but their origins must go back to the culture's very roots, to a level early enough that a distinctively Chinese culture had yet to emerge, for the philosophy of Tao embodies a cosmology rooted in that most primal and wondrous presence: earth's mysterious generative force. In the Paleolithic period, the mystery of this generative force gave rise to such early forms of human art as vulvae etched into stone and female figures emphasizing fecundity. This art was no doubt associated with the development of humankind's earliest spiritual practices: the various forms of obeisance to a Great Mother who continuously gives birth to all creation and who, like the natural process she represents, also takes life and regenerates it in an unending cycle of life, death, and rebirth. This spiritual system appears to have been ubiquitous among Paleolithic and early Neolithic cultures, where it was integral to gynocentric and egalitarian social structures.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, this venerable generative force appears most explicitly in Lao Tzu's recurring references to the female principle, such as "mother of all beneath heaven," "nurturing mother," "valley spirit," "dark female-enigma." But its dark mystery is everywhere in the *Tao Te Ching*, for it is nothing other than *Tao* itself, the central concept in Lao Tzu's thought. It is a joy to imagine that the earliest of the sage-poets woven into Lao Tzu, those responsible for the core regions of his thought, were in fact women from the culture's proto-Chinese Paleolithic roots.

Lao Tzu's spiritual vision, his philosophical system, is described in the general introduction (pp. xxi–xxiii). But it is interesting to note here how the concept of Heaven evolved in the *Tao Te Ching*, for in it we can see the end result of the historical process of secularization described in the introduction to *The Book of Songs* (p. 5), a process that began only a century or two ago here in the West. The most primitive meaning of *heaven* is simply "sky," a meaning the word continues to have. By extension, it also came to mean "transcendence," for our most primal sense of transcendence must be the simple act of looking up into the sky. By association with the idea of transcendence and that which is beyond us, *heaven* also comes to mean "fate" or "destiny" (this is the Heaven that had been used in the early Chou to replace the personal monotheistic Shang Ti with a more generalized divine force). This complex of ideas was transformed completely when Lao Tzu added "nature" or "natural process" to the weave of meaning (in the translation, this secularization calls for the term to be translated without a capital: *heaven*). And so, *heaven* became an organic sense of destiny: things working out their fates according to their own inborn natures and in interaction with other such destinies. As such, it was almost synonymous with *Tao*. This dramatic transformation infuses the empirical cosmos with sacred dimensions. In it Heaven becomes earth, and earth Heaven. Earth's natural process is itself both our fate in life and our transcendence, for we will soon take on another of earth's fleeting forms, thereby transcending our present selves. And indeed, our truest self is all and none of earth's fleeting forms simultaneously.

The *Tao Te Ching* offers not only a spiritual vision but a social vision as well. Lao Tzu imagined a society in which a benevolent and selfless emperor is all but invisible: he simply establishes a framework within which the people live simple and contented lives as integral parts of *tzu-jan*'s perennial burgeoning forth. And Lao Tzu spoke of this society as existing at some time in the distant past, in what we would now call the early Neolithic. It is an idealized version of the simple agrarian culture we see in *The Book of Songs*, and one might almost imagine the more bucolic of those folk-songs emerging from the society Lao Tzu described. But needless to say, the war and injustice that play so large a role in the *Songs* continued into Lao Tzu's time. According to legend, the agèd Lao Tzu was heartbroken by this ongoing situation. In the end, his is not so much a practical political philosophy as a political poetry, a lament that only grows more poignant as stratified societies continue to thrive on social injustice. Overwhelmed by the intractable suffering of the people, and his inability to change the situation, Lao Tzu set out into the western mountains. It is said that we have the *Tao Te Ching* only because a gatekeeper high in a mountain pass convinced Lao Tzu to leave behind his five-thousand-word scroll of wisdom before vanishing beyond the mountains into the dusk-lit mists of the far west.

1

A Way you can call Way isn't the perennial Way.
A name you can name isn't the perennial name:

the named is mother to the ten thousand things,
but the unnamed is origin to all heaven and earth.

In perennial absence you see mystery,
and in perennial presence you see appearance.
Though the two are one and the same,
once they arise, they differ in name.

One and the same they're called *dark-enigma*,
dark-enigma deep within dark-enigma,
gateway of all mystery.

2

All beneath heaven knows beauty is beauty
only because there's ugliness,
and knows good is good
only because there's evil.

Presence and absence give birth to one another,
difficult and easy complete one another,
long and short measure one another,
high and low fill one another,
music and noise harmonize one another,
before and after follow one another:

that's why a sage abides in the realm of nothing's own doing,
living out that wordless teaching.
The ten thousand things arise without beginnings there,
abide without waiting there,
come to perfection without dwelling there.

Without dwelling there: that's the one way
you'll never lose it.

3

Never bestow honors
and people won't quarrel.
Never prize rare treasures
and people won't steal.
Never flaunt alluring things
and people won't be confused.

This is how a sage governs.
Fill bellies and empty minds,
strengthen bones and weaken ambition,

always keep the people from knowing and wanting,
then those who know are those who never presume to act.

If you're nothing doing whatever you do
all things will be governed well.

6

The valley spirit never dies.

It's called *dark female-enigma*,
and the gateway of dark female-enigma
is called *the root of heaven and earth*,

gossamer so unceasing it seems real.
Use it: it's effortless.

7

Heaven goes on forever.
Earth endures forever.

There's a reason heaven and earth go on enduring forever:
their life isn't their own
so their life goes on forever.

Hence, in putting himself last
the sage puts himself first,
and in giving himself up
he preserves himself.

If you aren't free of yourself
how will you ever become yourself?

10

Can you let your spirit embrace primal unity
without drifting away?

Can you focus *ch'i* into such softness
you're a newborn again?

Can you polish the dark-enigma mirror
to a clarity beyond stain?

Can you make loving the people and ruling the nation
nothing's own doing?

Can you be female
opening and closing heaven's gate?

Can you fathom earth's four distances with radiant wisdom
and know nothing?

Give birth and nurture.
Give birth without possessing
and foster without dominating:

this is called *dark-enigma Integrity*.