

Selected Passages from the Huainanzi

Presented to the Han court in 139 BCE by Liu An, the king of Huainan and the work's editor and sponsor, the Huainanzi is a compendium of contemporary knowledge compiled from a series of scholarly debates held at his court. Intended as a guide for the Han emperor Wu, the work's twenty-one chapters cover a wide range of topics deemed essential for a sagely ruler, from cosmology to geography to military affairs to the art of rulership. Although syncretic in nature (the work quotes from a wide variety of sources), it draws extensively on the Daodejing, the Book of Odes, the Yijing (Changes), the Book of Documents, and the Zhuangzi for its core messages. Liu An was a member of the imperial family, the grandson of Liu Bang, the first Han emperor, and no doubt he hoped to use this work as a recommendation for office. Alas, while it earned the praises of the hard-nosed Emperor Wu, it garnered no official position for Liu. He returned to Huainan, where he was later accused of plotting against the throne, and committed suicide in 122.

A country that can be said to be lost is not one without a ruler but one without laws.

1.1

As for the Way:

It covers Heaven and upholds Earth.

It extends the four directions
and divides the eight end points.

So high, it cannot be reached.

So deep, it cannot be fathomed.

It embraces and enfolds Heaven and Earth

It endows and bestows the Formless.

Flowing along like a wellspring, bubbling up like a
font,

it is empty but gradually becomes full.

Roiling and boiling,

it is murky but gradually becomes clear.

Therefore,

pile it up vertically: it fills all within Heaven and
Earth.

Stretch it out horizontally: it encompasses all within
the Four Seas.

Unwind it limitlessly: it is without distinction between
dawn and dusk.

Roll it out: it expands to the six coordinates.

Roll it up: it does not make a handful.

It is constrained but able to extend.

It is dark but able to brighten.

It is supple but able to strengthen.

It is pliant but able to become firm.

It stretches out the four binding cords and restrains
yin and yang.

It suspends the cosmic rafters and displays the Three
Luminaries.
Intensely saturating and soaking,
Intensely subtle and minute,
Mountains are high because of it.
Abysses are deep because of it.
Beasts can run because of it.
Birds can fly because of it.
The sun and moon are bright because of it.
The stars and timekeepers move because of it.
Qilins wander freely because of it.
Phoenixes soar because of it.

1.5

Therefore,
the affairs of the world cannot be deliberately
controlled.
You must draw them out by following their natural
direction.
The alterations of the myriad things cannot be
fathomed.
You must grasp their essential tendencies and guide
them to their homes.

When a water mirror comes in contact with shapes, it is not because of wisdom and precedent that it is able to flawlessly reflect the square, round, crooked, and straight. Therefore, the echo does not respond at random, and the shadow does not independently arise. They mimic sounds and forms and tacitly grasp them.

That which is tranquil from our birth is our heavenly nature. Stirring only after being stimulated, our nature is harmed. When things arise and the spirit responds, this is the activity of perception. When perception comes into contact with things, preferences arise. When preferences take shape and perception is enticed by external things, our nature cannot return to the self, and the heavenly patterns are destroyed.

Thus those who break through to the Way do not use the human to change the heavenly. Externally they transform together with things, but internally they do not lose their genuine responses.

They attain Nothing, but their needs are provided for.
They are always on the move but find a place to lodge
for the night.

Small and great, tall or short, each has its proper role. The myriads spring forth and leap and prance in profusion, yet they do not lose track of their norms.

So when they rest above, the people do not find them
heavy.
When they are located in front, the multitudes do not
injure them.

All the world returns to them
The wicked and perverse fear them.
It is because they do not compete with the myriad things
that none is able to compete with them.

1.17

The mind is the master of the Five Orbs. It regulates and directs the Four Limbs and circulates the blood and vital energy, gallops through the realms of accepting and rejecting, and enters and exits through the gateways and doorways of the hundreds of endeavors. Therefore if you do not realize it [your intrinsic nature] in your own mind and still want to control the entire world, this is like having no ears yet wanting to tune bells and drums and like having no eyes and wanting to enjoy patterns and ornaments. You will, most certainly, not be up to the task.

Thus the world is a spiritlike vessel: you cannot act deliberately on it; you cannot control it. Those who attempt to deliberately act on it will be defeated by it; those who try to control it will lose it. Now the reason that Xu You devalued the world and would not trade places with Yao was because he had the intention of leaving the world behind. Why was this so? Because he thought that you should act on the world by adapting to it [and not trying to force your own will on it].

The essentials of the world:
do not lie in the Other
but instead lie in the self;
do not lie in other people
but instead lie in your own person.

When you fully realize it [the Way] in your own person, then all the myriad things will be arrayed before you. When you thoroughly penetrate the teachings of the techniques of the mind, then you will be able to put lusts and desires, likes and dislikes, outside yourself.

Therefore [if you realize the Way],
there is nothing to rejoice in and nothing to be angry
about,
nothing to be happy about and nothing to feel bitter
about.
You will be mysteriously unified with the myriad
things,
and there is nothing you reject and nothing you affirm.
You transform and nourish a mysterious resplendence
and, while alive, seem to be dead.

Two accounts of creation

3.1

When Heaven and Earth were yet unformed, all was ascending and flying, diving and delving.
Thus it was called the Grand Inception.

The Grand Inception produced the Nebulous Void.
The Nebulous Void produced space-time;

Space-time produced the original *qi*.

A boundary [divided] the original *qi*.

That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven;

That which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth.

It is easy for that which is pure and subtle to converge but difficult for the heavy and turbid to congeal.

Therefore

Heaven was completed first; Earth was fixed afterward.

The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced *yin* and *yang*.

The supersessive essences of *yin* and *yang* caused the four seasons.

The scattered essences of the four seasons created the myriad things.

The hot *qi* of accumulated yang produced fire; the essence of fiery *qi* became the sun.

The cold *qi* of accumulated yin produced water; the essence of watery *qi* became the moon.

The overflowing *qi* of the essences of the sun and the moon made the stars and planets.

To Heaven belong the sun, moon, stars, and planets;

To Earth belong waters and floods, dust and soil.

In ancient times Gong Gong and Zhuan Xu fought, each seeking to become the thearch. Enraged, they crashed against Mount Buzhou;

Heaven's pillars broke; the cords of Earth snapped.

Heaven tilted in the northwest, and thus the sun and moon, stars and planets shifted in that direction.

Earth became unfull in the southeast, and thus the watery floods and mounding soils subsided in that direction.

7.1

Of old, in the time before there was Heaven and Earth,

There were only images and no forms.

All was obscure and dark,

vague and unclear,

shapeless and formless,

and no one knows its gateway.

There were two spirits, born in murkiness, one that established Heaven and the other that constructed Earth.

So vast! No one knows where they ultimately end.

So broad! No one knows where they finally stop.

Thereupon

they differentiated into the *yin* and the *yang*

and separated into the eight cardinal directions.

The firm and the yielding formed each other;

the myriad things thereupon took shape.

The turbid vital energy (*qi*) became creatures;
the refined vital energy became humans.

Therefore,
the Quintessential Spirit is of Heaven;
the skeletal system is of Earth.
When the Quintessential Spirit enters its gateway
and the skeletal system returns to its root,
How can I still survive?

For this reason, the sages
model themselves on Heaven,
accord with their genuine responses,
are not confined by custom,
or seduced by other men.

They take
Heaven as father,
Earth as mother,
yin and *yang* as warp,
the four seasons as weft.
Through the tranquility of Heaven, they become pure.
Through the stability of Earth, they become calm.

Among the myriad things,
those who lose this perish;
those who follow this live.
Tranquility and stillness are the dwellings of spiritlike illumination;
emptiness and nothingness are where the Way resides.

For this reason,
those who seek for it externally lose it internally;
those who preserve it internally attain it externally as well.

It is like the roots and branches of trees: none of the thousands of limbs and tens of thousands of leaves
does not derive from the roots.

3.2

The Way of Heaven is called the Round;
the Way of Earth is called the Square.
The square governs the obscure;
the circular governs the bright.

The bright emits *qi*, and for this reason fire is the external brilliance of the sun.
The obscure sucks in *qi*, and for this reason water is the internal luminosity of the moon.

Emitted *qi* endows;
retained *qi* transforms.

Thus *yang* endows and *yin* transforms.

The unbalanced *qi* of Heaven and Earth, becoming perturbed, causes wind;
The harmonious *qi* of Heaven and Earth, becoming calm, causes rain.

When *yin* and *yang* rub against each other, their interaction produces thunder.

Aroused, they produce thunderclaps;
disordered, they produce mist.

When the *yang qi* prevails, it scatters to make rain and dew;
when the *yin qi* prevails, it freezes to make frost and snow.

Hairy and feathered creatures make up the class of flying and walking things and are subject to *yang*.
Creatures with scales and shells make up the class of creeping and hiding things and are subject to *yin*.

The sun is the ruler of *yang*. Therefore, in spring and summer animals shed their fur; at the summer solstice, stags' antlers drop off.

The moon is the fundament of *yin*. Therefore when the moon wanes, the brains of fish shrink; when the moon dies, wasps and crabs shrivel up.

Fire flies upward;
water flows downward.

Thus,

the flight of birds is aloft;
the movement of fishes is downward.

Things within the same class mutually move one another;
root and twig mutually respond to each other.

Therefore,

when the burning mirror sees the sun, it ignites tinder and produces fire.

When the square receptacle sees the moon, it moistens and produces water.

When the tiger roars, the valley winds rush; when the dragon arises, the bright clouds accumulate.

When qilins wrangle, the sun or moon is eclipsed; when the leviathan dies, comets appear.

When silkworms secrete fragmented silk, the *shang* string [of a stringed instrument] snaps.

When meteors fall, the Bohai sea surges upward.

3.41

When Heaven and Earth were founded, they divided to make *yin* and *yang*.

Yang is born from *yin*;

yin is born from *yang*;

they are in a state of mutual alternation. The four binding cords [of Heaven] communicate with them.

Sometimes there is death;
sometimes there is birth.

Thus are the myriad things brought to completion.

[Of all creatures that] move and breathe, none is more prized than humans.

[The bodily] orifices, limbs, and trunk all communicate with Heaven.

Heaven has nine layers; man also has nine orifices.

Heaven has four seasons, to regulate the twelve months;

Man also has four limbs, to control the twelve joints.

Heaven has twelve months, to regulate the 360 days;

Man also has twelve joints, to regulate the 360 nodes.

A person who undertakes affairs while not obeying Heaven is someone who deviates from what gave birth to him.

4.14 (in part)

Wood overcomes Earth, Earth overcomes Water, Water overcomes Fire, Fire overcomes Metal, Metal overcomes Wood. Thus,

grain is born in the spring and dies in the fall.

Legumes are born in the summer and die in the winter.

Wheat is born in the autumn and dies in the summer.

Green vegetables are born in the winter and die in midsummer.

When Wood is in its prime, Water is old, Fire is about to be born, Metal is paralyzed [imprisoned], and Earth is dead.

When Fire is in its prime, Wood is old. Earth is about to be born, Water is paralyzed, and Metal is dead.

When Earth is in its prime, Fire is old. Metal is about to be born, Wood is paralyzed, and Water is dead.

When Metal is in its prime, Earth is old, Water is about to be born, Fire is paralyzed, and Wood is dead.

When Water is in its prime, Metal is old, Wood is about to be born, Earth is paralyzed, and Fire is dead.

7.14

Shallow scholars in this declining age do not understand how to get to the origins of their minds and return to their root. They merely sculpt and polish their natures and adorn and stifle their genuine responses in order to interact with their age. Thus,

when their eyes desire something, they forbid it with measures;

when their minds delight in something, they restrict it with rites.

They hasten forth in circles and formally scrape and bow

while the meat goes bad and becomes inedible

and the wine goes sour and becomes undrinkable.

Externally they restrict their bodies;

internally they belabor their minds.

They damage the harmony of *yin* and yang

and constrain the genuine responses of their nature to fate.

Thus throughout their lives, they are sorrowful people.

Those who penetrate through to the Way are not like this.

They regulate the genuine responses of their natures,

cultivate the techniques of the mind,

nourish these with harmony,

take hold of these through suitability.
They delight in the Way and forget what is lowly;
They find repose in Potency and forget what is base.
Since their natures desire nothing, they attain whatever they desire.
Since their minds delight in nothing, there are no delights in which they do not partake.
Those who do not exceed their genuine responses do not allow them to tie down their Potency.
Those who find ease in their natures do not allow them to injure their inner harmony.

Thus with
 their relaxed bodies and untrammelled awareness,
 their standards and regulations,
they can become models for the empire.

8.3

The people of antiquity made their *qi* the same as that of Heaven and Earth; they wandered in an era of unity. At that time,

 there was no garnering advantage by praise and rewards,
 no intimidation by mutilations and punishments.
Ritual and Rightness, purity and modesty, had not yet been established;
slander and flattery, Humaneness and contempt, had not yet been set up;
and the myriad peoples had not yet [begun to] treat one another with fraud and oppression, cruelty and exploitation—it was as if they were still immersed in turbid obscurity.

 Coming down to the era of decline, [it transpired that]
 people were abundant, but wealth was scarce;
 people labored to the utmost, but their nourishment was insufficient.

Thus competition and strife were born, and Humaneness was valued. The Humane and the petty minded were, however,] not treated equitably.

 Neighbors formed groups,
 and friends formed cabals.
They promoted falsehood and deceit,
cherished a spirit of contrivance and artifice,
and lost [their] natural tendencies.

Thus Rightness was valued.

None of [the people's] feelings associated with *yin* and yang [i.e., sexual feelings] were free from the stimulation of blood and *qi*. Men and women [therefore] gathered in places and promiscuously dwelt together without distinction. Thus Ritual was valued.

Instinctive feelings overflowed and were mutually conflicting. They could not stop themselves and therefore were discordant. Thus Music was valued.

Thus, Humaneness, Rightness, Ritual, and Music, though able to save [the world] from ruin, are still not the perfection of comprehensive governance.

 Humaneness is able to save people from strife;
 Rightness is able to save people from errors;
 Ritual is able to save people from lewdness;

Music is able to save people from melancholy.
When spirit illumination is established in the world,
then minds revert to their original state.
When minds revert to their original state, then
people's natures become good.
When people's natures become good, they are followed by Heaven and Earth and by *yin* and yang.

Wealth then becomes sufficient. When wealth becomes sufficient, the people are respectful;
covetousness, petty mindedness, anger, and competition have no occasion to arise. From this, one can
see that [under these circumstances,] there is no need for Humaneness and Rightness.

When the Way and its Potency are established in the world, then the people become pure and
simple.
Thus their eyes are not fixed on beauty;
their ears are not drawn to sounds.

9.1

The ruler's techniques [consist of]
establishing non-active management
and carrying out wordless instructions.
Quiet and tranquil, he does not move;
by [even] one degree he does not waver;
adaptive and compliant, he relies on his underlings;
dutiful and accomplished, he does not labor.

Therefore,
though his mind knows the norms, his savants transmit the discourses of the Way;
though his mouth can speak, his entourage proclaims his words;
though his feet can advance, his master of ceremonies leads;
though his ears can hear, his officials offer their admonitions.

Therefore,
his considerations are without mistaken schemes;
his undertakings are without erroneous content.
His words [are taken as] scripture and verse;

his conduct is [taken as] a model and gnomon for the world.
His advancing and withdrawing respond to the seasons;
his movement and rest comply with [proper] patterns.
His likes and dislikes are not based on ugliness or beauty;
his rewards and punishments are not based on happiness or anger.
Each name names itself;
each category categorizes itself.
Affairs emerge from what is natural;

Nothing issues from [the ruler] himself.

Thus kings in antiquity wore caps
with strings of pearls in front so as to mask their vision
and silk plugs in their ears so as to obstruct their hearing.

The Son of Heaven surrounded himself with screens so as to isolate himself.

Thus,

what the ruler patterns himself on is far away, but what he grounds himself in is nearby;
what he governs himself with is great, but what he preserves is small.

Now,

if his eyes looked recklessly, there would be profligacy;
if his ear listened recklessly, there would be delusion;
if his mouth spoke recklessly, there would be disorder.

One cannot fail to guard carefully these three gateways.

If you wish to regulate them, that is in fact to distance yourself from them;
if you wish to embellish them, that is in fact to injure them.

9.23

Law is the standard of measurement for the world, the level and the marking cord of the ruler.

[He who] proclaims the laws does so to [impose] law on the lawless;
[He who] sets up rewards does so to reward those who deserve rewards.

After the laws are set,

those who obey the laws are rewarded,
and those who fall short of the marking cord [’s line] are punished.
For the honorable and noble, the punishments are not decreased,
And for the lowly and base, the punishments are not increased.
If someone disobeys the law, even if he is [otherwise] worthy, he must be punished.
If someone meets the standard, even if he is [otherwise] unworthy, he must be found innocent.

Thus the Way of the public good will be opened up, and that of private interest will be blocked.

In ancient times,

a system of responsible officials was established so as to restrain the people and thus prevent them
from
doing just as they pleased.
The position of ruler was set up to control the officials so that they could not carry out [policy] on
their own.

Laws, records, propriety, and Rightness were used to restrain the ruler so that he could not exercise
absolute authority.

When none of the people could blindly follow their own desires, the Way was triumphant.

When the Way was triumphant, Patterns were apparent.

Thus government returned to non-action. Non-action does not mean [that the ruler] froze and was inert
but that nothing any longer emanated from the ruler personally.

Now the inch comes from the millet grain; the millet grain comes from physical forms. Physical forms come from shadows; shadows come from the sun. This is the root of standards of measurement.

Music comes from the [pentatonic] notes; the notes come from the pitchpipe tones; and the pitch-pipe tones come from the wind. This is the ancestry of sound.

Law comes from Rightness. Rightness comes from what is appropriate for the people. What is appropriate for the people accords with the human heart. This is the *sine qua non* of government.

Thus,

those who penetrate to the root are not confused about the branches.

Those who see the fundamental are not confused about the details.

Law is

not a gift of Heaven,

not a product of Earth.

It was devised by humankind but conversely is used [by humans] to rectify themselves. Thus,

what you have in yourself you must not criticize in others;

what you lack in yourself you must not seek in others;

what is established for inferiors must not be disregarded by superiors;

what is prohibited to the people must not be practiced by [the ruler] himself.

A country that can be said to be lost is not one without a ruler but one without laws.

To twist the law does not mean to have no laws [at all] but, rather, that the laws are not employed. That is equivalent to not having laws. Thus when the ruler first establishes laws, he begins by making himself an example and a standard; thus the laws are implemented in the world. Confucius said,

“If the ruler himself is upright, even though he does not issue orders, they are carried out;

if he is not upright, though he issues orders, they are not followed.”

Thus when the prohibitions apply to [even the ruler] himself, then his orders will be carried out among the people.

[translated and edited by John Major, Sarah Queen, Andrew Meyer, Harold Roth, 2012]