THE DAO OF CRISIS

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TAIWAN'S DIGITAL Minister Audrey Tang 唐鳳, in a 23 July 2020 interview with *WIRED*, quoted the *Dao De Jing* 道德經 extensively to illustrate her self-described 'Daoist approach to political and social action'.[1] The fourth-century BCE Daoist classic, widely translated abroad and often taken as a spiritual guide, has a separate tradition of being read as a guide to governing, albeit a highly ambiguous one.[2] Tang had brought together the Taiwan government's pandemic response team and 'civic tech hackers' to create a rational system of facemask distribution and availability mapping. To describe her role, she quoted from chapter eleven of the *Dao De Jing*: '"Hollowed out, clay makes a pot. Where the pot isn't is where it's useful." All I did,' she added, 'was hollow out the clay to make a pot.'[3]

The hollow pot is one of several well-known metaphors for the Daoist theory of governance, which emphasises the passivity, 'inaction' 无為 and even invisibility of political leaders. The *Dao De Jing*'s most famous and paradoxical line has it that the true adept, like the Dao itself, 'does not make anything happen, yet there is nothing that does not get done' 无為而无不為.[4] Some philosophers argue that Daoism is fundamentally

Audrey Tang by Camille McOuat
Source: Audrey Tang, Flickr

anarchistic, while others argue the extreme opposite — that it is a form of paternalistic authoritarianism. This is a long-running debate in the field of Chinese political philosophy.[5] The answer may depend on whether one focuses on the empty space inside the pot or on the clay that shapes that space. Tang implicitly weighed in on this debate; in a later interview, with the global tech journal *Rest of World*, she described herself as a 'conservative-anarchist' seeking to build a 'radically transparent digital democracy'. While she did not define what she meant by 'conservative', she described her anarchism as a rejection of all 'top-down coercion'.[6] It is a value she shares with g0v ('gov zero'), a collective of civic hackers of

which she is a member; it also accords with at least some interpretations of the *Dao De Jing*.

Taiwan's success in containing the COVID-19 pandemic relied on an approach expressed in another precept of the *Dao De Jing*: '[P]lan for difficulty while it's still easy; accomplish big things while they are small' 圖難於其易, 為大於其細.[7] If you stop a pandemic at the airport, you deal with a few dozen cases rather than millions. If you have a solid pandemic plan that is deployed without hesitation at the first sign of trouble, you set yourself up for success. For Taiwan, the pandemic was neither unforeseen nor unprecedented: a 2017 article in the *Journal of Microbiology, Immunology and Infection* described how Taiwan's

'collaborative' and 'whole of society' model of pandemic preparedness was developed in response to successive threats from SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009), and others, and suggested that the island offered a valuable model of collaborative governance in the area of public health.[8]

Less fortunate countries have endured alternating waves of lockdowns, travel restrictions, and drastically changed lifestyles. Yet the 2020 lockdown experience in many places ironically approaches another *Dao De Jing* ideal, the small, stable community that takes shape under the guidance of a sage ruler:

> Make the people fear death and go not far abroad …
> They'll savour their food, and beautify their clothing;
> they'll feel secure in their own dwellings, and delight in their own customs.
> Though neighbouring states be within sight of each other —
> so close they can hear each other's dogs and chickens —
> the people live out their old age without visiting back and forth.

> 使民重死而不遠徙 … 甘其食, 美其服, 安其居, 樂其俗. 鄰國相望, 雞犬之聲相聞, 民至老死, 不相往來.[9]

In rural areas of the People's Republic of China (PRC), many villagers voluntarily, and in some cases even illegally, built blockades, posted guards, and barred outsiders from their communities as early as January. Even before government-mandated lockdowns, they imposed quarantines on their own returning residents. Some even destroyed the roads into their villages to prevent the infected from getting in. When asked by journalists whether they were worried about running out of food, they retorted that they grew their own.[10] As the *Dao De Jing* counsels: 'Block the roads, shut the door, and you'll never get worn out. Open the roads, meddle in affairs, and you'll end up incurable' 塞其兌, 閉其門, 終身不勤. 開其兌, 濟其事, 終身不救.[11]

The PRC government's response, when it did come, was muscular and swift, including draconian lockdowns, boosted funding for medical research and the production of needed equipment. These measures, together with fine-grained tracing techniques such as the Alipay Health code system,[12] seem to have effectively controlled the

The *Dao De Jing*
Source: Wikimedia

pandemic (global scepticism about official statistics notwithstanding), while advancing the government's massive technology-assisted project for the consolidation of authoritarian control. It brings out the darker strand of *Dao De Jing* paternalism, expressed in a line that refers to 'straw dogs' 芻狗 — objects of no intrinsic value, temporarily elevated for ceremonial use and unsentimentally discarded thereafter:[13] 'Heaven and earth are not humane; they treat the myriad things as straw dogs. Sages are not humane; they treat the common people as straw dogs' 天地不仁, 以萬物為芻狗; 聖人不仁, 以百姓為芻狗.[14] Some rulers employ co-optation: they 'empty the hearts [of the people], fill their bellies, weaken

their will, and strengthen their bones' 虛其心, 實其腹, 弱其志, 強其骨.[15] One way to effect non-coercive rule is to make resistance unthinkable.

The failures of most democratic societies, including the United States and much of the European Union, in response to the pandemic crisis undermine their critique of authoritarianism. Although China seems to be the exception here, with Brazil and Russia, for example, badly mishandling the pandemic. In this fraught ideological moment, Taiwan's strategy of crisis management offers an example of robust success without paternalistic authoritarianism.

Globally, female leaders have performed exceptionally well in the COVID-19 crisis.[16] Again, the *Dao De Jing* anticipates this development. Sarah Flavel and Brad Hall have proposed that the ancient classic's political theory should be described as 'maternalism'.[17] They refer to the text's pointed disapproval of coercive rule and its claim that the role of the ruler is to nourish the people without demanding recognition for so doing. The *Dao De Jing* frequently refers to the Dao as a mother: '[T]he mother of the state' 國母, 'mother of the world' 天下母 or even 'a nursing mother' 食母. The successful ruler deals with the people as the Dao does with the world's myriad things: 'It brings them up and rears them, completes them and matures them, nourishes them and protects them' 長之育之; 成之熟之; 養之覆之.[18]

Flavel and Hall are careful to dissociate this maternalism from 'gender essentialism'; and maternalist techniques employed by both male and female leaders have enjoyed success — for example, by using state resources to 'nourish' sick workers so they can afford to quarantine themselves.

Audrey Tang's vision brings out its softer maternalistic side, a vision of a state that nourishes its people and cultivates not only their trust, but also their trustworthiness: 'I trust the trustworthy. I also trust the untrustworthy. In this way I can get trust' 信者, 吾信之; 不信者, 吾亦信之; 得信.[19] Or, as Tang told *WIRED*: 'To give no trust is to get no trust' 信不足, 有不信.[20] As is seen most starkly in the United States, where COVID-19 denialism and resistance to government efforts to control the pandemic have been rampant, with no trust, there is no access to the nurturing power of the Dao; there is only crisis.