The Emperor’s Teacher:  
Lessons from China for Managing Oneself, One’s Household,  
and “All Under Heaven”

Writing Sample  
Robert André LaFleur

Please Note:  
Since this is a writing sample, and not a free standing chapter, it is organized as a juxtaposition of materials. Part One provides a background for thinking about Sima Guang and the Comprehensive Mirror. Part Two takes the analysis back to the Warring States period and provides examples of managerial strategies used in early China. Part Three returns the narrative to Sima Guang and the theme of “being the emperor’s teacher.” These sections will appear in different places, and in different forms, in the book itself. This writing sample is meant to give a sense of some of the themes envisioned for the full project.

I  
Opening the Book, Breaking the Vessel,  
and Learning From the Past

In the early spring of 1026, a precocious young seven-year old named Sima Guang sat reading classical historical documents in his father’s well-appointed study. Surrounded by walls of woodblock texts and elegant scrolls, he studied both the details and the “big picture” of China’s past, and admired the literary style, organization, and lessons of the great histories. He was the very picture of the diligent young scholar in a culture that admired lifelong learners. Little Sima certainly had been told the famous stories—recounted every generation for many centuries—of the sleepy young man who was so devoted to his studies that he continually pricked his thigh with an awl in order to stay awake, or the poor farm child who would practice writing Chinese characters with a stick in the dirt, even as he worked the fields for his struggling family. And everyone had heard the tale of the lad who, not content to stop reading after sunset, captured fireflies in a bag so he could shine their collective light on his text. Young Sima Guang was hardly alone in being a studious child.
Not alone, but certainly not typical. On that spring afternoon, Sima Guang read his texts in the study, even as shouts and cries of children at play came from the large courtyard surrounding the family compound. Imagine the sprawling household of a wealthy extended family in China’s eleventh-century Song dynasty, with gardens, ponds, contoured hillsides, and elaborately manicured trees, as well as the children of multiple brothers, their wives, and even the employees who kept the complex operation running. Blended with the natural beauty were works of art and architecture—both large and small buildings spread out around the grounds and large decorative vessels painted with elaborate designs of auspicious symbols from Chinese civilization. While Little Sima Guang read from his texts, the children played a game much like “hide and seek” on the rolling terrain of the family’s grounds. Suddenly, cries of confusion came from the courtyard. Sima Guang’s biography in the Song Dynasty History tells what happened next.

A group of children was playing in the courtyard when one child climbed onto a large, decorative urn. His feet slipped and he fell into deep rainwater in the vessel. The other children fled in fear and confusion, but Sima Guang grasped a stone and broke the vessel, saving the child’s life.

The passage shows that it was precisely the little reader—the gifted student of the classical histories—who was able to move directly from text to action, from clear knowledge of his books to conduct in the world that had human value. Far from presenting an image of a young scholar retiring from the world to study, it shows that only little Sima was able to take action and save the life of the drowning child. The other, presumably less serious, children were unable to cope with the enormity of the problem and fled, even though they likely had far more experience in the world (and with playing “hide and seek” in courtyard vessels filled with rainwater) than their
seven-year old friend with a knack for expounding upon dusty classical texts. Only little Sima was able to bridge the fundamental gap between learning about the world and living in it.

*Teaching and Learning the Lessons of History*

Forty years later, after passing the highest state examinations at a breathtakingly early age and moving quickly through the administrative hierarchy, Sima Guang found himself in another study—that of the emperor himself. The immensely talented Sima held the prestigious position of chief tutor to the emperor Yingzong (r. 1064-1067), a sure route to the premiership, the highest civilian office in the empire. His official task was to explain the lessons of the past in a way that could help his listener function smoothly in difficult political and managerial situations. Forty years earlier, while explaining historical lessons to his own family members, he was said to have done this quite effectively. Sima’s *Song Dynasty History* biography explains:

> When Sima Guang was seven years old, he already appeared to be a highly accomplished individual. He would hear the classical histories recounted by the family tutor; he admired them, and explained their contents to his family, all the while highlighting the broad outlines and teachings for them. From that point onward, he was never without a book in his hands, to the point that he paid no attention to hunger or thirst, heat or cold.

Now, in 1066, a mature Sima Guang highlighted the broad outlines of the classical histories not for his family, but for the person known in China as the Son of Heaven. He distilled the lessons from China’s tumultuous past as a way of commenting upon how government should be managed in the present. He had spent a lifetime in study, and throughout that life had constantly sought to translate study into meaningful results in the world around him. Even as an adult, it might be said, echoing the
quotation above, that Sima was never without a book in his hands or a perspective on contemporary leadership in his heart.

***  ***

In 1067, the emperor Yingzong died, and his eldest son, Shenzong (r. 1067-1085) succeeded him. Sima’s message of careful reflection and slow growth had appealed to the new emperor’s father, but he quickly learned that he would have a difficult time convincing the son of his perspective. The young emperor was intent on effecting rapid change in China’s society and economy. Sima Guang redoubled his teaching efforts, yet it was for naught. A year later his influence was on the wane and his chief rival, Wang Anshi, was given the premiership over him. Sima Guang, whose entire career had been marked by enormous success in all spheres, found himself on the outside, unable to convince his new ruler of his teachings. He had used every argument he could, both publicly and privately, yet he had lost.

Sima had argued that government should be limited and should focus on protecting the economic welfare of the people; Wang sought to transform the political landscape with a series of innovations called the New Laws. By 1070, Sima Guang admitted defeat, realizing that he had lost the ear of the new emperor, as well as control of state politics, to his rival. As the balmy early autumn weather in Kaifeng began to turn colder, Sima Guang—at fifty years of age, one of the most talented scholars and government officials of his generation—packed his bags and moved to a self-imposed exile in the ancient capital of Luoyang, about two hundred miles from the current center of power. Sima Guang had lost a pivotal political battle, but he was determined to show that his approach was correct. Indeed, he felt it to the very core of his being.
Sima Guang hardly eschewed politics, and he did not shy away from pointing out what he regarded as the failed policies of his rival, Wang Anshi (he was meticulously careful never to criticize the emperor, though). Although he stayed in-tune with the politics of his day, by far the greatest part of Sima’s time in exile was spent in reflection. Feeling deeply the loss of his position and voice of influence, he sought to show, in a clear, even permanent, fashion, just how right he was, and how wrong were his critics. He settled down in Luoyang and began work on what would become one of the greatest historical and managerial works China would ever see—the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Ruling*. It was the logical continuation of a life of learning and action that began in his father’s study, with a book in his hands, which, on one fateful afternoon, he exchanged for a rock. Writing his great history would take him seventeen years, with the help of five talented assistants. He worked to create a definitive text that made clear, to his mind, that his was the correct perspective, and that those who failed to heed the lessons of history would always be doomed to failure. It was beautifully researched, and the examples pointed toward the lessons of ruling the complex enterprise that was the Chinese state.

Indeed, Sima himself saw his time in exile as a chance to build for the future. After his resignation from court, Sima Guang was in no way willing to concede that his place in the great issues of the day was lost. In the poems and essays that he wrote in Luoyang, there is a distinct self-consciousness of his place in a long tradition of Chinese officials who had been temporarily forced from office, only to gather themselves to return triumphantly—withrightness on their sides—to the political stage. Several admiring sources speak of Sima Guang’s devotion to a life of study in preparation for this task and, indeed, he supplemented his work on the *Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Ruling*.
Mirror with research on diverse classics, from the earliest writings of Chinese
divination to the “Divided Schools” of thought that dominated early Chinese history.
In a poem from his exile in the 1070s, Sima writes of gardens, of classics, and of careful
study in preparation for later service. He was determined that his view would prevail.

I emulate the classical scholar Dong Zhongshu
While mastering the classics he maintained deep seclusion.
Although his house had a vast garden
He did not look out on it for three years.
Evil conversation far from his hearing
He was full of sagely thoughts.
When his completed work was carried to the audience hall,
The divided schools of thought began to melt away.

He was determined to live his period in exile and write an influential book that would
vindicate him. Vindication, he was convinced, would come with time.

Not everyone agreed—then and now. Nine centuries later, in the autumn of 2000,
I was invited to give a lecture on Sima Guang’s historical thought at the University of
Michigan’s Center for Chinese Studies. Having studied his Comprehensive Mirror for
two decades, I was prepared to speak to the audience about Sima Guang’s “exilic
response”—the manner in which Sima Guang’s historical writing was a way of
answering his critics, and showing them, to his mind, how very wrong they were for
forcing him from office. I gave my lecture, answered the questions from the students
and professors in the audience, and was preparing to pack up my notes and leave for
lunch when a young man confronted me—blocking the doorway with arms outspread
as I tried to leave the room. He was visibly angry; he explained that he was a doctoral
student in engineering from China, and demanded an explanation as to why I would
speak in a positive (I would argue “neutral”) way about a “traitor” such as Sima
Guang. Wang Anshi, he told me, was clearly right, and had the best interests of the economy and the social order in mind. Wang’s “New Laws” would have transformed China, if only Sima Guang would not have interfered—if only he would have been quiet in exile, and had not criticized Wang…or written his book.

Although I was taken aback, I should not have been surprised. These arguments have gone back-and-forth in China, and even the last thirty years have seen twisting differences of opinion about who was on the side of the people nine hundred years ago. Sometimes it is Wang, and sometimes it is Sima. Almost no one lacks an opinion. Imagine debating the New Deal with almost anyone on the street—in fact, imagine debating the Council of Trent. I have often had such discussions about Sima and Wang with cab drivers, shopkeepers, and coffee shop patrons when traveling in China. The issues are alive for people, and still matter in often-profound ways many centuries later. The experience in Ann Arbor gave me pause. I was again reminded of how even mundane activities in Chinese history, such as a debate at court in the eleventh century—could have far-reaching implications.

Lessons for the Ages

To be sure, there are times when the world seems far too complicated—and matters far too pressing—for business-as-usual, times when phrases such as “considering lessons of the past” seem not just quaint, but downright irresponsible. Just eleven months after my lecture on Sima Guang came the most profound crisis in recent American history. In September 2001, at a loss for how I could make a difference, I spent much of my time thinking that I had little to offer from a career spent studying history and culture. Indeed, I could not help but think that I had
actually gotten it right the first time, when I was just five years old—I should have been a fireman. I did not say that lightly. The need for immediate action was great, and there was little time for reflection. Yet as weeks and months eventually turned into years, it again became clear to people of all political persuasions that there are needs for both action and reflection. There are times when the former takes precedence, to be sure—when we need to drop our books and rush to help—but planning and study will both always be necessary. The question is not which one, action or reflection, is most important. The question that will not go away is how the two are connected. How do we learn and then transform that learning into action in the world around us? How do we think about our world…and transform it? How, in short, do we learn to move from our studies to (rock in hand) meaningful action?

***  ***

As I struggled with these issues, I returned, almost imperceptibly, to the work to which I have devoted my life. I have been studying Chinese history and culture for more than two decades now, and I have been teaching approaches to Chinese managerial thought for about as long as that. China’s imperial history is filled with examples of action and reflection—heroic successes, tragic failures, and even peculiar forms of mediocrity that barely kept the enterprise alive, at least for a time. Chinese readers of history have been told just as often as Westerners (and, indeed, for many more centuries) that those who don’t understand the past will fail utterly in the present. For the Chinese schoolchild as much as for the Western student there are lessons to learn from the past.
But that is the problem with lessons. What do we do with them? When I think about the matter, it reminds me of something W. Somerset Maugham once said about the writing process:

There are three rules for writing the novel; unfortunately, no one knows what they are.

I often feel the same way when I try to convey to others why all of the time I spend reading, writing, and reflecting upon the lessons of history is useful. It might be easier simply to say “it’s my job,” and leave it at that. Still, most people involved in historical study, policy-making, and business management do think that there is a level of meaning in their case studies that goes well beyond personal fulfillment. Articulating just what that is, and how it happens, is the difficult part. It is difficult to convince anyone that studying the past will result directly in future success—that reading a case study about German automotive innovation or fast-food restaurant management will show up in next month’s bottom line. Yet only the very literal and gullible state that the “school of hard knocks” is the only true one, and that lessons studied do not matter. Life and learning are more complex than that, and thinkers have tried for centuries to understand how they relate.

*Warring States and Divided Messages*

It often takes a time of crisis to glimpse the relationship between thought and action, learning and living, so I shall describe one that is half a world and two millennia distant in time and space—the world of Warring States China. This is precisely the place where Sima Guang chose to begin his own chronology in the *Comprehensive Mirror*—in a period of confusion, anger, slaughter, and urgency. In the autumn of 2001, the world was in turmoil and problems seemed too close for sustained reflection.
Those who lived in China from the fifth through the third centuries before our era saw a world in disarray, with small, independent territorial governments striving for ascendancy. They armed themselves and bitterly disputed their borders. Allies turned against each other and as many states were brought down from within as from without. It, too, was a time that made reflection difficult, and seemed to call for action above all.

Through it all, a number of major thinkers stubbornly addressed questions of how learning affects the life one leads and the government under which one lives. Several bookworms (or “scroll worms,” to be more accurate) imagined a better life for future generations by looking far back into the Chinese past. Others argued that people need only look at the present, then calmly follow the path (or Way) of least resistance. These views were highly contested, as were the battles between their states. Confucian thinkers disdained Daoist ideas for their simplicity while Daoists mocked the rules and regulations Confucians created. Both sides advised states that won and lost. As Sima Guang knew by starting the *Comprehensive Mirror* in the same period, there is much we can learn from them about crafting a life and making a difference in the world at the complex intersection of thought and action, learning and living.
Please Note:
The section that follows contains perspectives on the early Chinese philosophy that would be familiar, at least in outline, to business readers who have studied works such as The Art of War, Confucius’s Analects, and the Classic of The Way and Virtue. It is not meant to follow directly upon the preceding section in the final manuscript (this is a writing sample, after all). It is meant to show how The Emperor’s Teacher might link what business readers have already studied with broader issues of how we learn from each the world and from each other. Parts of this section have been presented at conferences, and a version of it has appeared in an essay read by Beloit College first year students.

II
Text and Action in China’s Warring States Period—Confucians, Daoists, and Legalists

Learning (and Living)—A Confucian Approach

Among early Chinese philosophers, those lumped together under the term “Confucians” perhaps best represent the ideal of steeping oneself deeply in the works of earlier writers (the sages are strongly preferred) and moving outward in an ever-widening circle toward meaningful action in one’s family and one’s work. Confucius himself could be cranky about the state of education in his time, but many of his frustrations ring true several millennia later:

The Master said: Those who studied in ancient times sought to improve themselves; those who study today seek to impress other people.

Living in the generation just before China erupted in warfare, Confucius observed the world around him, one slowly moving from petty warfare among small states to large-scale struggles for control of all under heaven, as the Chinese referred to their territory then. He did not like what he saw. He imagined a better time, five hundred years before his own, when the Duke of Zhou set the standards for a state and society that led to harmony among the people. Confucius is said to have put his study into action by writing philosophical works and a major history of his period—the Spring and
— that showed how dangerous a path his contemporaries were on, as they “pitted sons against fathers and ministers against rulers.”

Confucius also set demanding standards for his students—from their intellectual abilities to their personal habits. He had no patience for disciples who needed to have entire arguments explained to them before they understood, and his standards for preparation were formidable.

The Master said: If a disciple does not rage with excitement, I do not instruct him; one who is at a loss for words, I do not enlighten. When I raise one side of a problem—one corner of a square—and he does not give me in return the other three, I will not raise it again.

The great sage valued active and engaged learning, and his example of expecting the student, or reader, to supply three-quarters of the meaning from the kernel of his teaching would persist in all of the great treatises written in China since his time. He also had no patience for what he regarded as sloth.

Zai Yu slept during the daytime. The Master said, “Rotten wood cannot be carved; walls of excrement cannot be troweled. As for Zai Yu, what is the point of even bothering to punish him?”

The criticism of poor Zai Yu is even greater than it may first appear, moreover, because Confucius continues by explaining that his entire attitude toward people changed because of his disciple who slumbered at midday.

In the beginning my attitude toward people was that I listened to their words and trusted that their actions would follow. Now my attitude toward people is that I listen to their words and observe their actions. It is because of Zai Yu that I changed my behavior.

At the heart of Confucius’s terse observations lies the ideal that constant reading and reflection would transform one’s knowledge, character, and actions in the world—that truly capable students (and early risers) would exhibit in their actions the same
qualities of incisive thinking and virtuous conduct that they had acquired from their reading and recitation. Nonetheless, moving from books to life, from learning to living, is fraught with difficulty, and Confucius realized that such a connection did not take place of its own accord. For Confucius, the word “study” implies action; there is no clear separation between thinking and doing.

If a person can recite the three hundred Songs, yet when given official responsibility he fails, or when sent to distant quarters he is unable to act—then although he knows so much, what good is it to anyone?

Study, for Confucius, was more than mere bookishness. It had to be used when disciples entered the “real world.” For Confucius, discharging one’s responsibilities as a government official or functioning adeptly in a far-off position can emerge from the memorization and recitation of the Book of Songs, but he never explains how it is to be done. He only states that it is the very purpose of learning. Confucius, of course, provides us with a portion of the explanation. We are to provide the other three-fourths. So how do we translate knowledge into action? How do we really move from the lessons of history to life?

Stumps

The problem for Confucian thinkers is that few people were as capable as the great master. Less diligent students too often skipped from study to action and back again with little sense of purpose—or merely recited the Book of Songs. In the heart of the Warring States period, the “Legalist” philosopher Han Fei’s example of a farmer in the state of Song sums up every negative quality of procrastination, silly hopefulness, and fatalism that can be found in early Chinese thought—and our own. The farmer and
the stump in the state of Song is one of the most memorable examples in Chinese literature of missing the point—of seeing only yesterday while tripping over today:

Among the people of Song there was a farmer who tilled the land. In his field was a stump. A rabbit ran across the field, hit the stump, broke its neck, and died. Seeing this, the farmer cast aside his plow and stood guard at the stump, hoping to get another rabbit. He would find no more rabbits in this manner, and the farmer was mocked by people in the state of Song.

Han Fei went on to criticize those who merely looked to the past for models of good government as no better than the farmer in Song. He mocked the kinds of extremes that any bookish tradition can create. For every thoughtful, meaningful action that emerges from careful study, there are many more people who get caught in a morass of detail, or fail to see the other three quarters of a problem placed before them. They stare at stumps and wait for events to charge at them.

Many of our educational extremes, from busywork to narrow focus—even taking what one reads much too literally—fit under Han Fei’s stumpwatching umbrella. Even the ever-vigilant Confucius did not explain how studying by day would transform Zai Yu. As Chinese critics of book knowledge noted, the past may have been important—a model, sometimes an inspiration—but it is never the moment in which one lives. The critics of “learning in order to live” simply saw all of the books of China’s great intellectual tradition as rows and rows of stumps.

*Living (and Learning)—A Daoist Response*

Han Fei criticized the gullible and excessively literal. Going several steps further, China’s Daoist philosophers delighted in showing the flaws in all textual learning and all rule making. A major theme in their writings is that by striving too much—by being too literal, too result oriented—one will forget to live, and forget to be part of the
larger world, leaving one’s best thoughts, insights, and efforts amongst the dusty
shelves of one’s private study. The Daoist critics focused on the process of living—and
learning from that experience.

Finding the Way

One of the most memorable critiques of bookish education comes from a lowly
wheel builder of ancient China, by way of the philosopher Zhuangzi.

Duke Huan was reading upstairs in the hall while Pian the wheelwright
was hewing a wheel in the courtyard below. Pian set aside his chisel and
went upstairs, where he said to Duke Huan, “Dare I ask what words are in
the book my Duke is reading?” The Duke responded: “They are the words
of the sages.” “Are these sages alive today?,” asked the wheelwright. The
Duke answered, “They have been dead for some time.” The wheelwright
said, “Thus what your Excellence is reading is like the dregs of dead
sages!”

Duke Huan said, “How may a wheel chiseler have opinions about my
reading? Explain, and I will allow it; if you cannot explain, you will die.”
The wheelwright replied, “I, your servant, understand things from the
perspective of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if I move slowly, it
will not stay put; if I go fast, it will not carve. I find the way somewhere
between a pace of fast and slow—I grip the chisel in my hands but
respond with my heart. I cannot articulate it, yet something is contained
within me. Your servant cannot teach it to his son, nor can his son learn
it from him. In this manner I have put this into practice for seventy
years, growing old carving wheels. Men of antiquity could not pass on
what they practiced, and died. Because of this, what your Majesty is
reading is the dregs of men of antiquity.”

For the Wheelwright Pian, the duke is a stumpwatcher—one who pondered the
dregs of dead sages, waiting for the moment of inspiration. Pian’s hands-on learning is
something quite different. He chisels and shapes his world from it. Think for a
moment about the great teachers you have had, especially when they have been “in the
zone”—another way of saying that they are “one with the Way.” There is an
effortlessness, an ease, a oneness that cannot be written down, cannot be passed
on...only experienced. What if the best teacher you ever encountered were to write a book of reflections about teaching? Many of us would read it for its insights and “secrets.” But it is *not the teacher teaching*. Wheelwright Pian might tell us that the book is simply the teacher’s dregs. The teacher teaching or Pian chiseling *is* the Way; talking about it is something else. The Daoists focus on living—and learning from that experience in a completely different way.

There are many examples of “the zone” that is the Way—Wayne Gretzky behind the net, Michael Jordan in transition, Yo Yo Ma in concert. I once learned about the Way on my bike. A decade ago in Boone, North Carolina, I brought my racing bike to an academic conference in the Appalachian Mountains. I arrived on a Thursday morning and jumped on the bike, knowing that I had all day to ride (my paper was to be delivered on Saturday). I saw the first big climb and attacked it. I slowed, only to redouble my effort and reach the summit through sheer force of will. By the end of one hour, I was utterly defeated. I pushed. I weaved. I panted. I slowly made my way back to the conference hotel.

I wheezed throughout the opening reception that night. Unable to sleep, I thought about the paper that I was to deliver on negative examples in Chinese historiography—on how leaders failed in moments of great opportunity. I thought about how Daoists made fun of Confucians who tried too hard. Then it hit me. *I failed because I strived.* The next morning I got on the bike again, a bit more tired and sore than I had felt twenty-four hours earlier. Echoing the Daoist writers, I kept a single goal in mind—be one with the mountain. I rode within myself, and with a feel for the inclines, cycling for three hours each of the next three days. I gained a vital new
perspective on my academic work as well as my life. My conference paper became “real” for me, as I adapted to the Way.

When we fumble with our keys as we hurriedly try to open our car doors, we are fighting the Way. Relax. The key fits perfectly, if only we follow its path. Think about golf. If you try to keep your head still, your left arm straight, and your weight on your right instep while attempting to carry the water with a five iron from 180 yards, you will likely break the relaxed, even flow of the perfect swing. Tiger Woods just flows...and eagles the fifteenth at Augusta. Lance Armstrong just sails, and flies up the Col de la Madeleine to another yellow jersey.

I find my best example in speaking Chinese. Many years ago, after spending a year in Taiwan, followed by a six-month hiatus among my Norwegian roots in North Dakota, I returned to the island, got into a taxi, and spoke Chinese with an effortlessness that shocked me when I reflected upon it later. I was not thinking about grammar, about tones, or about sounding like a Norwegian lost in Taipei. I was happy to be “back” with a language that only occupied my dreams on the Dakota prairie. I was not thinking, but my spoken Mandarin and my “self” were one. Mountains, keys, golf swings, language facility—they all have their Ways.

The real value of learning the lessons of present and past is in achieving this completeness, this effortlessness, in our own Ways—and that goes far beyond what any pedestrian sayings about life and learning could ever do. In my classes I ask my students to find their own examples. I have heard examples that range from ironing to making doughnuts, from working a cash register to fly-fishing. Chinese philosophers found theirs, too. Zhuangzi, the author of the wheelwright anecdote, delighted in showing the Way in the most offbeat of examples:
Cook Ding was carving a cow for Duke Wenhui. His hands darted, his shoulders leaned, his feet tapped, and his knees bent—performed, without missing a beat, to the tune of The Mulberry Grove Dance and the Jingshou Suite—as his knife sliced the meat. Duke Wenhui said, “How excellent it is that your skills have reached this level!” Cook Ding wiped his knife, put it aside, and responded. “What your servant loves most is the Way, which surpasses mere technical ability. When I began carving oxen all I saw were whole oxen. After three years, I never again saw an oxen whole. At present, I, your servant, encounter it with my spirit, and do not see it with my eyes. Knowledge stops and the spirit follows its course. Relying on the natural, heavenly pattern, I pierce the large openings leading to the largest cavities, following that which is inherent. I never cut a tendon or ligament, much less a bone. A good cook changes knives each year—he cuts. A so-so cook changes knives every month—he hacks. Now your servant has already had this knife nineteen years. It has carved several thousand oxen, and yet the blade appears to have just come from the grindstone… Duke Wenhui said, “Excellent. After hearing Cook Ding’s words, I have obtained knowledge of nurturing life!”

If there is oneness—if there are lessons for living—in chopping up dead cows, we can be sure that it lies there waiting for our personal chiseling, crafting, and cutting as well. Every action has its Way, as any Daoist could tell you, but it is only in action that you find it. Once you “jot it down,” it is something else. Once you try to make a lesson of it, it is lost. It is only real when it is in motion. The first line of the Daode jing (The Classic of the Way and Virtue) states the case in memorable fashion: “The way that can be articulated is not the constant way”—道理非常道也。

*Losing the Way—Confucians and Daoists Meet Their Matches*

How one deals with losing one’s Way is a further dimension of learning and living. What do we do when we are cutting a cow with a dull blade, or hacking away at a fast-spinning wheel? There will always be times of conflict and challenge (remember the tumult of the Warring States period when most of the above quotations were written) when someone else’s chariot runs you right off your calmly followed path. It is the
very example of the key not fitting the lock, the golf swing resulting in a nasty hook, or
the deeply embarrassing use of language, when you just cannot get it right—not unlike
the day, on a street corner in Taipei, when I attracted a monstrous crowd that was
eager to hear a foreigner speak Mandarin, and, by confusing the words kuzi (trousers)
and kouzi (buttons), insistently asked a shopkeeper “why don’t your shirts have trousers
on the collars like we have back in the United States? They are very convenient!”

As adept as you might “learn” to be at crafting your path, your Way, you will
occasionally shank it in life. Or, worse yet, someone who has little concern for you will
hit your Titleist® into the deep rough, and you will have to play it from there. You may
be minding your business, even trying to do good deeds, but you cannot control those
who—either through nastiness or “mere” clumsiness—cough during your backswing,
forget to rake the sand traps, or leave unsightly divots on your fairway.

Mr. He, a man of Chu, came upon a piece of jade in the mountains. He
got to court and presented it to King Li. King Li ordered a jeweler to
examine it. The jeweler reported that it was only a stone. The king,
angry that Mr. He had deceived him, had He’s left foot amputated as a
punishment. After King Li died, and King Wu ascended the throne,
Mr. He again attended court and presented his jade piece to King Wu.
King Wu ordered the jeweler to examine it, and he again declared that it
was a stone. The king again assumed that Mr. He had deceived him and
ordered that his right foot be amputated. When King Wu died and King
Wen ascended the throne, Mr. He clutched his jade piece and sobbed at
the foot of the mountain for three days and three nights. He cried tears,
after which he cried blood. The king heard of this and ordered an
official to ask for the reason that he was sobbing. The official said,
“Those who have had their feet amputated in punishment are numerous;
why do you weep with such sorrow?” Mr. He responded, “I do not
weep over my penal amputations. A precious jade is held up as a mere
stone, and a loyal servant is called a deceiver—these are the reasons
why I weep.” The king then ordered the jeweler to polish the piece, and
its precious nature was, at last, seen. The piece then came to be called
Mr. He’s Jade.
Overcoming adversity is something that Daoists and Confucians answer in different ways, and both are far cries from “turning cheeks.” We have all been told that life is not fair, and Mr. He had a more concentrated lesson in it than most people. Everyone who has ever lived…and learned…however, has faced grave conflict. Every social group and government has as well. Everyone will again.

Water

*Regaining* the Way, getting back on the road after being run onto the shoulder—like poor Mr. He—is the skill that we all must learn to refine. The key, many early Chinese thinkers agreed, is to mirror the ways of water. As the early philosophers are fond of noting, calm waters form to their landscapes—moving around and embracing stones, logs, and vegetation. Yet rushing water can move rocks with speed and ferocious intensity. Water is hard, yet pliable—always adaptable and changing to circumstances. Perhaps the quintessential poet of the Way, Laozi, said it best:

There is nothing under heaven more weak and pliant than water, yet in attacking things that are rigid and strong, nothing can surpass it…As for the weak overcoming the strong and the pliant overcoming the rigid, there is not one who lacks the knowledge of how to do so—yet none are able to put it into practice.

So conditioned are we to expect the harsh to dominate the quiet, that it comes as a surprise when we see the rigid and overconfident—from the Qin dynasty eunuch Zhao Gao to our relative contemporary Joseph McCarthy—undone seemingly by their own hubris and webs of allegations. Laozi notes “simply by not contending, rancor is avoided.” Confrontation often escalates. One bad turn, followed by another in response, can lead to deep hostility. Perhaps the most-read conflict management book of all remains one of the least understood—Sunzi’s *Art of War*. There, one of the most
important lessons to be learned is when to advance, when to retreat, when to step back, and when to run like hell. The key to *that* lies in understanding water.

The principle for deploying soldiers is to emulate water. Water flows from higher to lower ground. Water changes according to terrain. Water does not have one shape. Flowing water constantly changes directions with the terrain—it responds, it carves.

Formulated in this way, we can see that it is not just “softness” or receptivity that works change in times of conflict—it is water’s focus and endurance, its unrelenting pressure over time, which cannot be withstood by the rigid or arrogant. Many phrases have been used to approximate the idea—integrity, staying above the fray—but Sunzi simply maintains that the concentrated attacks of those who would do harm are no match for those who stay on course, on the path, on the Way. It is not pugilism, but it is certainly not pacifism, either. Sunzi’s book focused on success in warfare. His advice was meant to give practical aid to rulers who lived in a contentious environment. For him, military success and patience were parts of a whole.

A hint of how hard this is to grasp is evident in an advertisement I have seen for a major consulting firm. It has a large sword with the following caption beneath it:

Does your consultant quote the *Art of War*, yet shy away from battle?

My answer would be that, yes, if she has *read the book*, she does indeed. Understand the difference here—this is neither stoicism nor turning of cheeks. It is simply “not contending,” and relying on the virtues of “formlessness.” As that great North Dakota-born “Daoist,” former Secretary of State Warren Christopher, once said: “Only show anger when it is in your own best interest to do so.” Like Sunzi, Secretary Christopher understood water’s capacity to effect change.

***  ***
“Water’s” power and resilience is one of the hardest things for all students of life’s challenges to understand, so conditioned are we to meet words with words, weapons with weapons. A sensitive grasp of water’s power is an offensive, as well as a defensive, tool—and an extraordinarily effective one at that. For years I have tried to explain this as an active concept, and my latest chance came in a recent lecture series I gave at Waseda University in Tokyo. After three weeks of listening to my analyses of the theory and practice in East Asia of “remonstrance”—the responsibility of underlings to criticize superiors who have made serious errors—one young Japanese student was delightfully unwilling to think only of my historical examples. She asked how she might express such criticism, even if she were far outranked in an office setting. In times of relative peace, criticizing one’s boss is as big as crises get. I spent over twenty minutes doing my best to answer her question with practical advice drawn from historical and contemporary examples. I suspect, however, that my brief, initial answer might have been the best. “Be like water, knowing when to flow gently and when to unleash torrents.”
Please Note:
This final section is meant as a brief connection back to the themes that have been woven throughout the text. After introducing Sima Guang and the Comprehensive Mirror to the reader—not to mention the main themes of Confucian and Daoist learning—it is necessary to reconnect to the main message and show how the case studies in the Comprehensive Mirror will give the reader powerful new perspectives. By creating the ideal of “being the emperor’s teacher,” the potential for real managerial change becomes apparent.

III
Patching the Vessel, Rereading the Text, and Polishing the Comprehensive Mirror

Sima Guang and the Lessons of the Warring States

Knowing how to flow gently and how to unleash torrents—these can be useful skills in everyday life, as well as in leading an organization as complex as the Chinese state. The arguments of the Warring States period would reverberate throughout Chinese history, and extend to this very day. More than a millennium after these first great territorial and intellectual battles were fought, the period would find a great synthesizer in Sima Guang, the now grown student of history who once tossed aside his book and picked up a rock. He studied the Warring States period as a whole—from the early worries of Confucius and his followers to the pointed critiques of the Daoists. Although it could be argued that Sima “took sides”—he was a scholar in the Confucian tradition, after all—a great deal had changed in the thousand years since the Warring States period. The stark contrasts between Confucian textual study and Daoist “non-action” had given way over the centuries to a blending of doctrines, a syncretism that would prevail in all subsequent dynasties. The meticulous work of Sima Guang, one of the great historians of China, would put these teachings together in a text of such breadth and ambition that it would connect the Warring States period
to his own day, and teach its readers to connect their self-conduct to the nurturing of their families and, ultimately, of the Chinese empire itself.

As we have seen, Sima Guang, from young reader to mature statesman, was a lifelong student of history. He knew the lessons of both sides of the Warring States fence—Confucians who ordered their worlds in strict hierarchical fashion and Daoists who mocked them, seeking to tear down the structures that they deemed shallow and artificial. In Sima Guang, we see living and learning come together, with a message that blends precise policy and clear articulation of principles with the relentless momentum of cascading water. To recall the first great crisis of Sima’s life, we will remember that, of all the children in the courtyard, it was only little Sima who was able to take action and save the life of the drowning child. Mere experience in the world counted for little in a tradition that emphasized that one must learn deeply from the experience of others—observed and textual—in order to be truly capable of action in the world.

Indeed, the *Analects* of Confucius contain numerous passages illustrating the complex combination of individual effort, experience in the world, and study that contributes to the formation of the most accomplished individuals.

The Master said: When walking with even three people there are certainly things that I can learn from them—what is good I select and follow, and what is bad I inwardly correct.

The anecdotes we have encountered from the Warring States period bring us to the verge of understanding the relationship between learning and living—and how individuals can act to change the world around them. They are tantalizing, and the hints are powerful. Yet they remain just hints. The stories do not tell us precisely how the gap between study and action is to be bridged, but they crystallize what Chinese
writers of history sought to accomplish. From Confucius to Sima Guang, the ideal reader was one who was able to reflect upon both positive and negative models found in the classics, philosophies, and histories and turn that knowledge toward action that integrates the individual, the family, and the enterprise. In short, they show how people can, with proper training, learn from living and live from their learning.

In an essay written in middle-age, Sima Guang gives a clear example of the readers for whom he wrote—noting that they studied the books of early kings not merely to master their commentaries or minute details, but rather to seek their principles and broad outlines. He continues his essay by making the situation even more complex. Once readers have understood the key principles (a formidable task in its own right) their mere recitation in lectures, explanations, or history books—“studying for the test,” as it were—would deceive people. Note the term used here; he speaks of deception being the result of “mere” study. Here, Sima Guang shows a delightful Daoist streak. The true scholar, he wrote, must practice these principles, both in personal life and in his relationships with his peers, his seniors, and his juniors. Sima Guang thus emphasized not mere knowledge of facts (or success on exams) but the working out of principles, even as one studied examples in history.

The culmination of Sima Guang’s lifetime of historical study—The Comprehensive Mirror for Aid in Ruling—can thus be seen very much as a book of Chinese “organizational management”—a series of examples of past management actions from which readers could learn for their own purposes. The ultimate goal of careful study, like that exemplified by young Sima’s saving of a drowning child, was not mere knowledge, but action. Sima Guang considered history to be much more than a way to garner factual information about the past. He ultimately perceived it to be a tool for
creating better people, better families, and better institutions—a way to connect an individual to the larger elements of society that gave a single life (a child struggling in a rain-filled urn) its meaning.

***  ***

So how do we live our lives “like the emperor’s teacher?” First, we must learn that “merely” triumphant accounts (just the child breaking the vessel) teach us less than lived complexity (the older statesman struggling with rejection and articulating his viewpoints in writing). Every example we have seen in the pages above shows the multi-faceted nature of real managerial problems. The whole point of education is to teach us that we have a great deal to learn—and then to learn for ourselves how much we have to learn…and then to pass it on to others. This is what I mean by “being” the emperor’s teacher—allowing ourselves to be taught, teaching ourselves, and teaching others. Describing “the emperor’s teacher” is not a way of arguing that one’s goal should be to function as an advisor in the shadows (to aspire to be a Senate aide or undersecretary of something). Yet on some level, we are all—and we are always—undersecretaries, and that is as it should be. Sometimes we are “in charge.” Almost always, even when “in charge,” we are accountable to others. For every stint we serve as “secretary,” we serve ten times as “undersecretary,” at home or at work. Persuading others and learning from them is the heart of the matter, and a nuanced understanding of it will pay enormous rewards. It is to a deeper study of these questions—and the life and great text of this vessel breaker—that we now turn.