

Self-Transformation and the Ruler's Handle in the Huashu

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Abstract The Huashu commends the people's self-transformation while declaring that the "handle" of transformation rests with the ruler. Frugality explains how these claims belong together: the ruler can influence popular life by restraining his own demands and conduct. His example affects popular desires, while his expenditure draws upon the means available for livelihood. Humility and contentment, however, must arise through the people's own responses. Close readings of the political essays show how criticism of appropriation and resentment directs the ruler toward correcting his contribution to disorder. "Jiehuo," "Huabing," and "Rutong" connect this self-restraint with transformation, while "Diaolong" specifies its effects on labor, resources, and time. Dialogue with scholarship on Daoist cultivation and authority, together with a comparison of selected Han Feizi passages, places these arguments within broader discussions of effective rule. The Huashu gives the ruler a task he can perform himself: reducing the burdens and changing the example through which he shapes the conditions of popular response.

Keywords Huashu; Tan Qiao; self-transformation; frugality; rulership; wuwei

1. Introduction

The Huashu 化書, a tenth-century work conventionally attributed to Tan Qiao 譚峭, gives political advice that appears to pull in two directions. "Diaolong" 雕籠 criticizes attempts to settle the people through imposed arrangements and recommends their self-transformation (zihua 自化; [1, 237]). Yet "Jiehuo" 解惑 contrasts demands for humility and frugality with the ruler's own practice of these qualities, then declares that "the handle rests with the ruler, not with others" [1, 245]. If the people's transformation cannot be performed for them, in what sense does its handle remain with the ruler? The question concerns how governing can influence popular conduct and why the person above should begin by changing his own¹.

Didier's reconstruction of the Huashu's transmission places frugality at the beginning of recovery within its account of transformation [2, 105, 144–145 n. 110]. His reading establishes why frugality belongs within a larger project of cultivation. Kohn's translation of the Neiguan jing 內觀經 illustrates another conjunction of cultivation and government in a text she dates to the Tang: a purified mind supports adherence to

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political regulations [3, 168, 171–173]. Scholarship on the Laozi addresses the scope of political action more directly. Ames and Hall describe order emerging through the people's own activity while retaining a role for rulers within the relations that sustain it [4, 166–167]. Michael distinguishes the sage from the political ruler and grounds legitimate rule in submission to the Dao's authority, with frugality central to that submission [5, 18–20]. These accounts connect cultivation and restraint with popular flourishing and the continuation of rule. The specific interpretive problem in the Huashu is how transformation attributed to the people themselves can still have its "handle" in the ruler. Explaining this relation requires identifying what he can change when the dispositions sought below cannot simply be imposed. The essays locate this work in his own conduct and demands, whose consequences extend into popular desires and livelihood.

In the Huashu, a ruler's frugality changes the example he sets and the demands he makes. His humility and restraint can encourage similar conduct below, while reductions in expenditure and warfare preserve the means through which the people sustain their lives. The text directs correction toward the ruler through explicit criticisms of appropriation and resentment. The discussion begins with the limits of imposed dispositions and the influence that governing nevertheless exerts, then follows the redirection of scrutiny toward the person above. The final section connects the two uses of "handle" through the practice of frugality. Selected Han Feizi passages provide a comparison for the question that remains: how can restraint preserve the efficacy of rule?

2. Self-Transformation and the Forms of Political Influence

"Zhidou" 止鬥 examines what happens when an effort to end conflict reproduces the antagonism it seeks to remove. Its warning is forceful: "The heart cannot be subdued; subdue it and it becomes more disordered. The people cannot be put in order [in this manner]; order them and they become more resentful" [1, 170]. The repetition connects an intervention with its adverse result. Subduing someone may obtain outward compliance while leaving resentment unsettled, and increasing the force of an intervention may aggravate that resentment. The essay's ensuing comparison with water clearing itself directs attention to a process that cannot be completed simply by extending the intervener's activity. Its closing recommendation, "not going against the conditions of the myriad things" (不逆萬物之情), asks the person acting to attend to how the recipient responds. Here qing 情 concerns the conditions and tendencies encountered in action. The advice asks the ruler to judge an intervention by the response it elicits.

"Diaolong" makes a similar point through a keeper whose provision fails to satisfy its recipient. An elaborately carved cage and fine grain leave a yellow sparrow unhappy. The essay then places ritual, music, rewards, and punishments alongside these arrangements: despite their use to teach the people, the people remain unsettled. It continues: "The heart cannot be made at peace; let it find peace on its own. The Way cannot be maintained [through imposition]; let it be maintained on its own. The people cannot be made to transform; let them transform on their own" [1, 237]². The parallel clauses 自安之—自守之—自化之 redirect a practical concern with settling, maintaining, and transforming toward processes marked by zi 自. The translation with "let" brings out this change of orientation: governing must attend to processes occurring in those it

addresses. The recommendations about royal expenditure that follow specify what the ruler can change.

The carved cage is attractive from the keeper's perspective, yet the bird remains unhappy. By extending this comparison to ritual and rewards, "Diaolong" questions measures intended to educate or benefit the people as well as those intended to punish them. The people's peace depends on how they live under these arrangements. The essay therefore turns to restraint in construction, precious goods, and warfare. Its sequence makes a practical connection between self-transformation and material demands: the ruler is asked to reconsider his own undertakings when even elaborate provision leaves the people unsettled.

"Jiehuo" makes example an explicit part of that alternative. The first clauses state, "Make them humble and they certainly will not be humble; make them frugal and they certainly will not be frugal." These give way to "If I am humble, the people become humble on their own; if I am frugal, the people become frugal on their own" [1, 245]. The shift to the first person changes the immediate object of correction. Shi 使, making or causing, gives way to qualities practiced by the ruler himself. His conduct supplies an example to which others respond. The passage places that influence inside its account of self-transformation: the people become humble or frugal through their response to a changed ruler.

"Sanhuang" 三皇 gives exemplary influence a wider social sequence. The ruler's frugality is followed by ministers' contentment; ministers' frugality by the contentment of those below them; and the sequence continues through the people to the world. The essay links contentment with the disappearance of acquisitiveness and rivalry, then describes ritual and righteousness arising, military activity ceasing, and cultivation of the fields resuming through repeated expressions involving zi [1, 233]. Effects pass through ranked relationships, with each level providing an example for the next. The frugality of those above can also reduce expenditure and demands on livelihood. Emulation and changes in available resources offer different routes of influence. A ruler's expenditure makes their interaction particularly visible, since what burdens the people can also become an object of their admiration.

"Dahua" 大化 reveals a different route through which political action can produce change. Its extended sequence begins with transformations of spirit, qi, and form, passes through distinctions of rank and the arrangements surrounding elevated status, and moves from luxury to accumulation, deception, punishment, disorder, warfare, contention, and destruction. The later passage describes those above using moral and political means to protect the state and their wealth, yet "teaching the people deceit," "transforming the people into rebels," and "driving the people into theft" [1, 33]. The recurrent hua carries the sequence from intended protection into deceit and antagonism. Read beside "Jiehuo," this accusation makes the distinction precise: the ruler's failure to impose humility or frugality coexists with his ability to encourage deception and rebellion through the way he governs. Political influence remains consequential even when it fails to produce its intended result.

These effects arise through the people's responses to concrete practices. Construction and warfare can impose coercive demands whose consequences include resentment; a conspicuous palace can also invite emulation. A ruler's frugality,

meanwhile, can influence conduct without an order to imitate him. Coercion concerns the originating practice, whereas the route of influence concerns how people respond to it. The Huashu's criticism thus reaches both the attempt to impose a disposition and the demands or examples through which governing makes peace harder to attain.

Slingerland treats wuwei 無為 as an ideal of effortless, normatively appropriate action whose range extends beyond political noninterference [6, 295–297]. The Huashu places the ruler's cultivation within a relationship between different agents. He can change his own activity, while the humility or contentment sought below must arise in the people. "Jiehuo" locates his work in his own conduct and attributes the resulting frugality below to the people themselves. The identity of the person addressed also matters. Michael cautions against identifying the Laozi's sage indiscriminately with a political ruler [5, 19]. In "Jiehuo," the closing reference to jun 君 explicitly assigns the preceding first-person counsel to the ruler. His position enables him to change both the example set above and demands made below. The question therefore concerns a particular exercise of authority: how does the ruler's treatment of the people help or obstruct the ends he seeks? The following essays answer by tracing that treatment into the responses it elicits.

3. Popular Responses and the Ruler's Self-Correction

"Jiuli" 酒醴 states the relation between treatment and response explicitly: "Those who suppress others are suppressed by them; those who accommodate others are accommodated by them" [1, 133]. In each clause the recipient becomes an agent of the returning action. The opening illustration concerns drinking: pressing someone to drink makes them less willing, whereas treating them with forbearance makes them more inclined to drink³. The paired actions of suppression and accommodation then give the relation its clearest expression. Political examples follow within the same essay: those granted remission respond willingly, and the ruler and the people depend upon what each receives from the other. Its final criterion for governing the multitude is understanding the "way of fanfu" 反覆之道. Here the term describes the returning movement illustrated by suppression and accommodation⁴. The advice is to attend to what one's treatment elicits from others.

Pardon and remission give this advice a political purpose. "Jiuli" commends treatment from which the ruler can expect willing service, including willingness to render what is owed. He hopes to secure cooperation by changing the people's experience of his demands. The response remains theirs, but its anticipated benefit gives him a reason to change his conduct. The paired phrase 民盜君之德, 君盜民之力 places this interaction within mutual dependence. Dao 盜 ordinarily suggests stealing, but Zhu glosses it here as borrowing. The neighboring examples of remission and willing response support rendering it as drawing upon: the people draw upon the ruler's de 德, while the ruler draws upon the people's strength [1, 133]⁵. Governing is sustained through what comes from below. Treatment that damages the people's willingness or capacity can undermine the resources on which rule relies. The essays on royal expenditure examine when this dependence becomes excessive appropriation.

"Junmin" 君民 identifies the asymmetry within this dependence. It begins by placing ruler and people on common ground: their names differ, while their enjoyment of riding, music, beauty, precious possessions, and fine food is alike. The subsequent sequence of

admired ornaments locates these shared desires within ranked positions. Those wearing plain clothing admire the adornments of officials; further examples lead upward to the ruler's regalia. The ruler occupies the most conspicuous position in this field of comparison. The essay then turns from admiration to expenditure: ornamented vehicles "take away their goods" and lofty buildings "take away their strength" [1, 224]. Shared desires acquire unequal consequences because the ruler can turn his wants into demands on other people's labor and possessions.

Royal expenditure also teaches others what to want. "Junmin" describes costly display as both summoning resentment and teaching desire, a pairing that allows the people to resent luxury's burdens while continuing to admire its objects. "Minqing" 民情 develops both effects. Its calculation of the grain consumed by an additional servant leads to a warning about accumulated demands; its examples of vehicles and elevated dwellings concern how the ruler's manner of living changes what the people consider acceptable [1, 220]. "Shixiang" 食象 follows a similar movement from the ruler through ministers and other ranked groups to the people, treating dissatisfaction as something with a source and a beginning [1, 218]. Its escalating comparisons connect enlarged wants with exhaustion of the available world of things. People who never aspire to a palace may still supply its labor, while its display can stimulate desire well beyond those engaged in building it. Both effects return attention to the conduct of those above.

The essays turn the effects of royal expenditure into reasons for self-restraint. "Junmin" identifies goods and strength taken from the people, describes the resentment thereby summoned, and concludes with the necessity of frugality. "Yangmin" 養民 directs that restraint toward the speaker: "Preventing others' theft is not as good as preventing my own theft" (防人盜不如防我盜; [1, 137]). The comparative *buru* 不如 evaluates the alternatives; the shift from "others" to "my own" identifies the conduct to be corrected. The comparison directs scrutiny toward the appropriation practiced by the speaker. Together with "Junmin," it makes the people's deprivation and resentment reasons for the ruler to change what he takes from them.

"Taihe" 太和 makes the same direction of scrutiny confrontational. After shifting attention from the prey's cunning to the hunter and from popular deceit to officials, it warns: "Do not resent thieves; I am the one who summons them. Do not resent rebellion; rebellion receives its lesson from me" [1, 150]. The accusation is turned back upon the speaker who would govern. Its first-person formulation matters because it interrupts the convenient attribution of failure wholly to those below. Read with "Dahua," the warning concerns a sequence of political practices whose harmful results escape or contradict their professed purposes. Read with "Yangmin," it leads to a concrete reversal of attention from preventing others' conduct to restraining one's own appropriation. The accusation challenges the ruler to examine measures that exhaust livelihood or multiply antagonism in the name of peace. His treatment of the people belongs among the causes of the disorder he condemns.

The first-person injunctions in "Yangmin" and "Taihe" ask the person condemning popular misconduct to inspect his own appropriation and example. Stamatov finds a comparable movement from oppression to resistance and renewed oppression in his reading of the Laozi [7, 134–136]. The Huashu traces this movement through particular acts of expenditure, the desires they encourage, and the resentment they summon.

Changing the ruler's conduct addresses a source of disorder that his position places within his reach.

4. Frugality as a Handle of Transformation

The two occurrences of *bing* 柄 at the center of this inquiry make different, complementary assertions. "Jiehuo" locates the handle: 柄在君不在人, "the handle rests with the ruler, not with others" [1, 245]. "Huabing" 化柄 identifies a practice capable of serving as one: 儉可以為萬化之柄, "frugality can serve as the handle of the myriad transformations" [1, 229]. The former answers where the change in practice should begin; the latter answers through what means transformation can be approached. The practices recommended in these essays give substance to the connection between their uses of *bing*. In "Jiehuo," the preceding contrast is between demands directed at others and qualities practiced by "I." The paired "here" and "there" in "the pivot lies here, not there" direct attention back to that contrast. Locating the handle in the ruler consequently identifies his own conduct as the starting point, while leaving the people's transformation expressed through *zi*.

"Huabing" supplies a practice that fits this starting point, although its scope exceeds government alone. The essay applies *jian* to listening, seeing, speech, private and public affairs, gates, guards, official positions, palace women, and finally the heart. Some clauses concern preserving the capacities of the person; others concern arrangements associated with authority. The concluding reference to passing beyond life and death further extends the horizon beyond ordinary administration [1, 229]. Restraint reaches across this list of activities and arrangements through which a person's desires operate. The gates, guards, and offices make the passage relevant to the ruler, while the senses and the heart explain why correcting his conduct cannot be reduced to an isolated fiscal measure. "Jiehuo" addresses the ruler's own humility and frugality; "Huabing" develops the range of practices that frugality can govern. Both passages direct the agent toward his own activity as the object of restraint.

"Rutong" 乳童 provides a closer connection between this restraint and the people's response. It first argues that respect can arise without impressive ritual clothing or punitive arrangements, and then describes the ruler's defenses, stores, and barriers. These arrangements are linked to designs against the people and private interests that require concealment and protection. The remedy is expressed through paired clauses: "Deploy the pivot of frugality, and the people cease deceiving on their own; apply frugality to private concerns, and I cease suspecting on my own" [1, 226]⁶. The phrase 儉之機 joins frugality to the language of the pivot also used beside *bing* in "Jiehuo." The ensuing 民自不欺 and 我自不疑 join that practice to changes on both sides of the ruler-people relationship. "Rutong" specifies the relationship between the ruler's altered conduct and responses expressed through *zi*; "Jiehuo" identifies the person who should begin; "Huabing" gives the proposed practice its broad scope. The connection rests on this shared account of what frugality changes in the ruler-people relationship.

"Diaolong" makes the practical consequences of this relationship unusually precise. After the caged bird and the parallel clauses on peace, maintenance of the Way, and self-transformation, it continues: "Be frugal in terraces and pavilions, and the people's labor will remain available; be frugal in precious goods, and the people's resources will remain available; be frugal in warfare, and the people's time will remain available" [1,

237]. The connective *suoyi* 所以 makes these recommendations part of the preceding argument about how transformation is to occur. Each clause pairs something undertaken above with something retained below. *Minli* 民力 concerns the people's capacity for labor and exertion; *mincai* 民財 concerns their possessions and material means; *minshi* 民時 concerns the time required for their activities and livelihood. *Youyu* 有餘 indicates what remains available after demands are reduced. The benefit consists in means of living retained by the people when royal demands diminish.

Reducing a building project changes how much labor must be committed to it. Reducing acquisition leaves goods with those from whom they would otherwise be obtained, while restraint in warfare preserves time for ordinary activities. These effects reach people regardless of whether they consciously admire the ruler's frugality. The same restraint also changes the visible standard of consumption and ambition described in "Junmin," "Minqing," and "Shixiang." In their commentary on Laozi 67, Ames and Hall understand frugality as respect for the integrity of things and reluctance to compromise them [4, 184]. "Diaolong" gives that orientation a concrete political expression in the resources preserved below. Example and reduced demands can reinforce one another, although neither guarantees a uniform response. The ruler creates more room for popular life by limiting activities that draw upon it.

"Taiping" 太平 places this relation within an explicit account of desirable order. It calls frugality "the way of making nourishment even" (儉者均食之道也), then connects even nourishment with benevolence and righteousness, the ordering of ritual and music, the absence of popular resentment, and peace [1, 212]. *Junshi* 均食 makes the distribution of sustenance relevant to governing. Its inclusion of ritual and music clarifies their place in the argument: they flourish within an order sustained by nourishment. Didier's account of frugality as a beginning of recovery is pertinent here [2, 105, 144–145 n. 110]. Frugality changes the conditions under which other valued practices can function.

The conclusion of "Diaolong" preserves a political interest within this advice. "Not giving is like giving; not taking is like taking" is followed by the images of a sea spirit's lost fish remaining in the sea and a ruler's lost horse remaining in the state [1, 237]. Immediate possession differs from continued existence within a larger domain. Leaving resources with the people can therefore be compatible with the ruler's advantage: what he refrains from acquiring remains within the community on which his position depends. The people benefit from resources left available, while the ruler can regard the domain's continued flourishing as serving his own interests. "Huabing" similarly includes preservation of wealth, rank, and life among the effects of restraint [1, 229]. Michael's reading of Laozi 59 connects frugality with the ruler's submission to the Dao and the continuation of his rule [5, 20]. Such restraint can sustain political authority. In "Diaolong," its benefit is explained through what remains available within the domain when the ruler takes less.

Selected Han Feizi passages offer a comparison for the question of how a ruler's restraint preserves political efficacy. "Erbing" 二柄 places authority in punishments and rewards: "The ruler uses punishments and rewards to control his ministers" [8, 5]. Its tiger-and-dog analogy warns that surrendering those instruments reverses the relation of command. "Zhudao" 主道 advises that "The lord ought not to make his

desires apparent” [8, 16], since visible preferences invite ministerial deception⁷. Restraint protects judgment and command. Pines relates this discipline to the distinction between the ruler’s institutional position and the limitations of its occupant [9, 78–79]. Galvany, meanwhile, shows how incentives can elicit habitual, spontaneous responses [10, 95]. The comparison concerns the practices used to influence others, including the demands rulers place on themselves.

“Jie Lao” 解老 supplies a closer parallel to frugality. In Queen’s translation of its commentary on Laozi 67, economical expenditure enriches the household, care of the spirit nourishes vital essence, and caution in deploying troops allows the people to proliferate [11, 243]. These forms of conservation culminate in the growth of the state. Queen’s account of the collection’s varied composition helps situate this argument alongside its recommendations for controlling ministers [11, 197–198]. The comparison thus shows that restraint can serve both command and the conservation of life. It also brings the Huashu’s question into sharper focus: which practices should the ruler restrain to make popular peace possible?

“Jiehuo” answers by turning demands for popular frugality toward the ruler’s own practice. “Rutong” connects that change with diminished deception and suspicion. “Diaolong” specifies the labor, goods, and time left to the people. Read together, the essays explain why effective rule may require relinquishing particular demands: their reduction enables changes that the ruler seeks but cannot perform for the people. The handle identifies where his work begins.

5. Conclusion

Frugality explains how the Huashu can affirm the people’s self-transformation while locating its handle in the ruler. His example influences popular desires, and his demands affect the means through which people sustain their lives. “Rutong” connects restraint with changes on both sides of this relationship; “Diaolong” identifies the labor, resources, and time left available below. Self-transformation directs the ruler’s immediate work toward his own conduct. He can alter the conditions of popular response, while the humility and contentment he seeks must arise in the people themselves.

This reading gives political detail to the place of frugality in recovery identified by Didier. Scholarship on the Laozi and the comparison with the Han Feizi show that conserving life and sustaining rulership are shared concerns. The Huashu develops them through scrutiny of the ruler’s part in producing the disorder he condemns. Exercising the handle requires him to examine what he takes from the people and teaches them to desire. He retains his position, but using its influence well requires correcting the practices through which he obstructs the peace he seeks.

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Notes

- 1: The analysis concerns the received Huashu. For attribution, transmission, and organization, see Didier [2, 99–105, 142–145]. Huashu quotations are translated here from the Chinese in Zhu Yumin's bilingual edition [1]; Zhu's translations have also been consulted. Self-translations are located by essay title and printed Chinese-text page. Characters are normalized to traditional forms, punctuation is adjusted, and interpretive supplements appear in square brackets. The title "Taihe" follows the essay's closing phrase 太和; Zhu's heading prints 大和 [1, 150].
- 2: The Chinese reads 心不可安而自安之, 道不可守而自守之, 民不可化而自化之 [1, 237]. The repeated 而 links each negative clause to a clause containing 自 自. "Made to" and "through imposition" explicate the contrast with the preceding account of instruction. The rendering with "let" follows the passage's practical orientation toward governing and the recommendations that ensue.
- 3: The Chinese reads 迫之飲愈不飲, 恕之飲愈欲飲 [1, 133]. Zhu's modern Chinese paraphrase and English translation understand the second clause as preventing someone from drinking [1, 133–134]. The present rendering takes shu 恕 as forbearance. The ensuing contrast between 抑 and 容 supports this reading without making 恕 and 容 exact equivalents. The argument rests on those explicit paired actions and the political examples that follow.
- 4: In "Jiuli," "returning responses" describes the pattern illustrated by 抑人者人抑之, 容人者人容之 [1, 133]. It is a contextual explanation of fanfu, not a fixed equivalent throughout the Huashu: "Zhuanzhou" 轉舟 uses the word of overturning heaven and earth [1, 76].
- 5: Zhu glosses dao 盜 as borrowing (借用; [1, 133 n. 3]). "Drawing upon" follows the paired dependence illustrated by remission and service; de denotes beneficial treatment in this setting. The explicit criticism of appropriation in "Junmin" and "Yangmin" is examined separately below.
- 6: The paired clauses read 張儉之機, 民自不欺; 用儉之私, 我自不疑 [1, 226]. "Apply frugality to private concerns" reads the second clause in light of the preceding 有私于己, 不得不防, which connects private interests with the need for defensive measures.
- 7: The two short Han Feizi quotations reproduce Goldin's English translations [8, 5, 16]. The account of "Jie Lao"

below paraphrases Queen's translation [11, 243]. References are to particular chapters of the received collection; neither shared terminology nor thematic resemblance is taken as evidence that the Huashu directly depends on them.