

River Hawk! River Hawk!



A Translation of *The
Constant Pivot* from the
Confucianist Tradition

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River Hawk! River Hawk! is a new translation of the larger part of *The Constant Pivot*, a scripture of the Confucian school, less well known than the *Analects*. Along with *The Great Task* and the writings of *Mencius* (Mengzi) these four books comprised the quadrivium studied by any aspiring Chinese youth, intent on advancement. The oldest material (in *The Great Task*) dates back to the *Book of Rites*, predating Confucius' birth in 551 B.C.E. Revered through seventy generations, until communist China, these works are now again finding favour. Full of pithy sayings, these were the first texts I studied. *The Constant Pivot* supplied any young people, aspiring to the role of government; the moral rule against which they were to be measured, that of 'integrity'; also it supplied that which was not meant to exist - a Confucian metaphysic - the 'realms beyond', or the numinous. But, in addition, Confucian spirituality was in essence *inseparable* from reverence - deference to a superior. The primary motive 仁 *ren*, 'human-heartedness' or 'love' is a very animal instinct. In this sense, Confucius also embraced the Taoist idea of a 'primal' 元 *yuan qi*: untamed, unborn, unnamed and unarmed. But I'll leave discussion of Taoist and Confucian merging to another time! I commend this tiny scripture. It was the first Chinese text I ever worked - ready after thirty years.

River Hawk!

River Hawk!

'.....to say true is to true yourself,
likewise to Tao is to Tao yourself' ...

Confucian saying

Translated
Richard Bertschinger

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Introduction

There is mild dispute over the authorship of *The Constant Pivot* but it was probably written by Zi Si, one of Confucius' disciples. The twentieth-century philosopher Fung Yu-lan even suggests that the first chapter, the 'guts' of the work, and some of the later chapters were written by Mencius; the rest by Zi Si. Both writers however share a similar point of view. Mencius represents the rather more 'introverted' wing of the Confucian school. He emphasised the 'human mind', motive and nature. He was followed much later by the great Wang Yangming in his Ming 'idealist' school, much influenced by Buddhism.

In contrast, Zeng Zi, another of Confucius's disciples, who could have penned *The Great Task*, and the theologian Zhuxi, who followed him, were more 'extrovert'. They emphasised 'human action' and achievement, and represented the 'rationalist' wing, reaching its greatest expression during the Song and Yuan.

Chapter One, on its own, comprises a thumbnail sketch of the whole work. It describes the Way (*dao*), and path for each individual; its unchanging nature, and the task of preserving and nourishing this nature constantly by self-scrutiny. Virtue is thus carried into action and has a transformative affect on the world. Chapters Two to Eleven make up the second section. They illustrate the ‘constant pivot’, both within the individual and within the world. Chapters Twelve to Twenty make up the third section, which concerns its wider application through ‘hidden’ qualities. The remaining chapters are simply ramifications, quoting and commentating on poems from the Confucian collection, the *Book of Odes*.

The main import of the work may be summed up in the opening to Chapter Twenty-five: ‘Sincerity (or ‘integrity’, *cheng* 诚) is that by which we find completion - and it is the Way, the Way on which we must direct ourselves.’

Another translation would be ‘to say true is to true yourself, likewise to Tao is to Tao yourself’. Think about it.

The Confucian scriptures are above all concerned with sincerity and authority, and in Imperial China, authority could only mean one thing: the authority of the Emperor, the family and ultimately Heaven - seen as the supreme cause of all¹. Nowadays, especially in a material and grasping world, authority rests, more often than not, in the individual’s sense of right and wrong, his or her wants and needs.

But the Chinese were concerned, as always, with justice, and propriety in human discourse - how to get on together and build a proper world. And it is in this context that we should read the text. It is a guide on how to be true; on *sincerity* in human conduct. This is no time for Judeo-Christian moralising over right and wrong, good and evil; there is no interest in an afterlife; no interest in retribution, or ‘settling a score’.

¹ Heaven that is as representing the ‘ways of Nature’, not as the abode of a patriarchal and *vengeful* Christian God – with all its ramifications of sin, blame, guilt, etc.

The position of authority in the democratic 21st Century is ready for reevaluation. I believe it revolves around the idea of joint responsibility, for ourselves, our communities, our planet. In this respect Confucius has much to teach us - about truthfulness, getting on together, and who we are as people - and about the pursuit of excellence. It all hinges on *respect*, for our own selves and for others. Working on our selves we may then help others. In this sense 'to say true is to true yourself.... And then comes the social bond.....

Following the Ezra Pound translation, I have omitted the last seven chapters – a long eulogy on the transformative powers of Confucius, the sage. They will be issued later, in a separate booklet.

And the title? *River Hawk! River Hawk!* translates the first two characters of the opening song to the *Book of Odes*, the collection of common folk-songs, verses, ceremonial prayers and court-pieces of the early Chinese people. It was the book praised above all others by Confucius. Within these simple pieces of verse, he believed, rested the message of true love and human-heartedness. *Kuei! Kuei!* ('river-hawk! river-hawk!') is the cry

of the osprey. The song of the river-hawk calling for its mate depicted the progress of the prince in ancient times.

The Constant Pivot

(AN INNER GUIDE)

The Neo-Confucian Scholar Zhuxi¹ introduces the text: *My master Cheng said: 'Not inclined one way or another, is what is meant by a 'pivot'. Admitting of no change is what is meant by 'constant'. To act as a pivot is the proper and correct Way (dao) for all things in the world. To be constant in character is the fixed principle (li) which guides the whole world. This book contains 'the rule of the mind' (xin fa) as handed down by the Confucian school. Zi Si feared lest in the course of time it would be mislaid, and so committed it to writing in which form it came down to Mencius. The book begins by speaking of the one principle (li). In the middle section it spreads this out to cover all possible things. Finally it again gathers it up as one principle. Roll it out and it fills the universe. Roll it up and it lies in hiding.*

¹ dates 1130–1200 CE

The sense of it is inexhaustible. And all of it is solid learning. If you can enjoy the reading of it, and turn it over and over in your mind, you will achieve an understanding. Then, to the end of your days, you can use this one principle, without it ever giving up!¹

¹ What follows is the Confucian Text.

Chapter One

1. Our destiny, which Heaven has conferred upon us is called our ‘inborn nature’ (性 *xing*). The realization of this inborn nature is what we call the ‘Way’ (道 *dao*). The regulation of this Way is what is meant by ‘education’.
2. The Way itself cannot be left for an instant. If you could leave it, it would not be the Way! Therefore the fellow of true virtue is cautious about those things he has not yet seen, and apprehensive about those things he has not yet heard.
3. Nothing is more visible than what is hidden; nothing more evident than what is concealed. Therefore the fellow of true virtue keeps watch over his heart when he is alone.
4. Pleasure, anger, grief and delight - to keep these emotions unexpressed signifies the pivot,

to express them but with due restraint signifies harmony.

The pivot itself stands as the great root to this world while its harmony signifies the world's outspread process of existence. If you attain both the pivot and the harmony, heaven and earth come into order, and all the myriad creatures and things are thereby nourished.⁴

⁴ Zhuxi comments on this chapter: *Zi Si wished that any scholar would turn back and seek within his own self, and become self-supportive in this matter. Then they might put aside all outward things which lead to selfishness and thus fill themselves up with the innate goodness which exists within them.*

Self-examination and scrutiny to the fore. Not learning for learning's sake.

Chapter Two

1. Confucius said: The true individual (*junzi* 君子) embodies a constant pivot; the lesser fellow is always tipping over.
2. The true-hearted individual embodies a constant pivot and because he is true-hearted he finds his center, watching the times and seasons. The petty fellow attempts the constant pivot, but being small-minded has no sense of needing caution.

Chapter Three

Confucius said: To find the constant pivot is certainly an enormous task! Few people are able to hold to it!

Chapter Four

1. Confucius said: This Way of mine is not practiced - and I know why. Those who have an idea of it, go over-board on it, while the ignorant never get started. This Way of mine is not clearly understood - and I know why. The talented, in their efforts, pass it by, while the untalented never get started.
2. There is nobody who does not eat and drink. But few can discern flavours.

Chapter Five

1. Confucius said: This Way of mine is not practiced. Alas indeed!

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day by day, the chunzi self-strengthens accordingly!

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