Of Books and Wheels and Words and Ways

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Our friends from afar / 自遠方來之朋
Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright Pien, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, "This book Your Grace is reading—may I venture to ask whose words are in it?"

"The words of the sages," said the duke.
"Are the sages still alive?"
"Dead long ago," said the duke.
"In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!"

"Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?" said Duke Huan, "If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, it's your life!"

Wheelwright Pien said, "I look at it from the point of view of my own work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold. But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge. Not too gentle, not too hard—you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow. I can't teach it to my son, and he can't learn it from me. So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels. When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old."
Duke Huan [of Qi] was reading in the upper part of his hall while Wheelwright Flat⁶⁶ was hewing a wheel in the lower part. Setting aside his hammer and chisel, the wheelwright asked Duke Huan, “I venture to ask what books you are reading?”

“The books of the sages,” said the duke.

“Are the sages still alive?”

“They already are dead,” said the duke.

“Then what you are reading are merely the lees and drags of the sages.”

Flushing in anger, Duke Huan replied, “How dare you, a wheelwright, presume to criticize the books I am reading? If you can explain yourself, all right. If you cannot explain yourself, you shall die.”

“Yes, I can explain. I will put it in terms of my occupation as a wheelwright,” said Wheelwright Flat. “If [the blows of the mallet] are too hard, [the chisel] will bite and not budge; if they are too gentle, [the chisel] will slide and not take hold. To make the chisel neither slide nor stick is something you can sense with your hand and feel with your heart.⁶⁷ Then you can get it down to the utmost subtlety. But I have not been able to teach it to my son, and my son has not been able to learn it from me. That’s why I am an old man still hewing wheels after sixty years. Now what the sages have said contains some truth, but since they are dead and long gone, all that remains is the lees and drags [of their teachings].”⁶⁸ Therefore the Laozi says:

“The Way that can be spoken
is not the constant Way;
the Name that can be named
is not the constant Name.”⁶⁹ [12/110/1–8]
Laozi said: “There are constants in ruling the kingdom, but benefiting the people is the root. There are theories of governing, but simply putting commands into effect is the most ancient. If it is of benefit to the people, then it is not necessary to imitate antiquity; if it is universal in its application, it is not necessary to follow convention. Therefore, the laws of the sages have always changed with the times and the rituals have always evolved with the conventions. Clothing and machines are all adapted to their uses, and laws and regulations are all based on what is appropriate. Therefore, precedents have never been unchangeable, and convention has never sufficed to be in the majority.

Chanting the books of the ancient kings is not as good as hearing their words, and hearing their words is not as good as getting what they had to say. Getting what they had to say can’t be put into words. Therefore, “dao ke dao, fei chang dao ye; ming ke ming, fei chang ming ye.” Therefore what the sages follow is called the Way, which is like bronze bells and stone chimes: once they have been tuned, they can’t be changed. Service is like lutes and zithers: when the song is finished, you change the tune. Laws and regulations, rites and music are the tools of governing, but they are not why we govern. Therefore, one cannot discuss the Ultimate Way with a mere tunesmith, who is mired in convention and tied to dogma.
Is there a point to all of this for our deliberations over the next three days? I think there is. It is that as times change, the ways that we use to transmit knowledge change as well. This is as true of writing as it is of laws and regulations, rites and music. Turtle scapula and ox bone may have been sufficient media for certain needs in the Shang dynasty, but they were soon supplanted by bamboo and silk, which were in turn replaced by paper, which is now in the process of being supplanted by our new digital media. These media are all appropriate to their ages. And yet, each age builds on the preceding ages; we never stop learning from the past. Although Wheelwright Pian said ancient writings are but the “dregs of the ancients,” still we need to preserve them. Our meeting is intended to explore different ways to do so. I very much look forward to hearing your ideas about this and to learning from all of you. In closing, allow me simply to wish you all a very pleasant and productive stay in Chicago.

這些故事對我們三天的討論有沒有教訓？我覺得一定有。正如時間一直在變化，同樣我們傳授知識的方法必須不斷地改變，不但法制、禮樂如此，典籍文字也一樣。在殷商時代，龜甲和牛骨可能適應某些需要，但是不久之後就被簡帛排擠，簡帛使用一段時間以後又被紙張代替。現在我們正在走出紙張時代，進入數字媒介時代。每一媒介都適合它自己的時代。然而，我們不應該忘記過去之時，每一代都立於前代之上。輪扁雖然把古書視作“古人之糟誣”，但是我們還是需要保之。我們這次會議的目標是探討保護古書的不同方法。我本人非常期望聽到各位專家的寶貴意見。順便祝福大家在芝加哥一切快樂、健康。