

# TRANSLATION

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## A SELECTION FROM THE T'SAI KEN T'AN ("VEGETABLE-ROOT DISCOURSES")

The *Ts'ai Ken Tan*<sup>1</sup> is a book of some three hundred and fifty-nine short pieces of verse and prose, the work of Hung Tzu-ch'eng<sup>2</sup>, who lived during the Wan Li<sup>3</sup> Period (1573–1620) of the Ming Dynasty. He was from the province of Szechwan, and seems to have led a wild and dissolute youth after which he became a Ch'an Buddhist monk. Beyond this, details of his life are meager.

The title, *Ts'ai Ken Tan* (literally "Vegetable-Root Discourses"), was suggested by the words of a Sung Dynasty scholar, Wang Hsin-min<sup>4</sup>, which assert that only a man who can appreciate a diet of vegetable roots can understand the meaning of life. Chu Hsi<sup>5</sup>, the great Sung Confucian, attributed his contemporaries' degeneracy to their inability to live on a diet of vegetables. This reminds us of Socrates, who was reported to have said that those who want fewest things are nearest to the gods.

Hung Tzu-ch'eng picked from the flower of all Chinese culture that had gone before him, with his main influences coming from the Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist traditions. The attempt to

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<sup>1</sup> 菜根譚  
<sup>2</sup> 洪目猷  
<sup>3</sup> 万曆  
<sup>4</sup> 王信民  
<sup>5</sup> 朱熹

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fuse these into a kind of unity is not always successful. Yet even where they are not one, they are still not three.

In China, there was a similar "vegetable tract" later in the Ming Dynasty, and in the following Ch'ing Dynasty there were at least two more, all patently modeled after the one by Hung Tzu-ch'eng. In Japan, where Chinese literature has been studied as assiduously as Japanese literature, the *Ts'ai Ken Tan* (or *Saikontan* as it is called in its Japanese reading) has been more widely known and studied than in its native China.

The book probably came to Japan very soon after it appeared in China, most likely brought by merchants or Buddhist priests travelling between the two countries. In most editions it is divided into two parts; the first of two hundred twenty five pieces, the second of one hundred thirty four. The passages are in an epigrammatic form that employs almost universally the devices of antithesis and parallelism.

As an epitome of the three great traditions of China there is little that is original here. The author has instead tried to attain to the definition of a teacher as given by Confucius:

The true teacher knows and makes known the new by revitalizing the old.

Several Japanese editions have been used in translating the present selection, principal among them that of Kōyō Dōnin<sup>1</sup> (Tokyo, Nishō dō, 1927).

### PART I

❁ 6. In strong winds and pounding rains, even the birds are ill at ease. On a cloudless day with a light warm breeze, even the trees and plants rejoice. Obviously, just as Nature cannot endure even one day of discord, so the human heart cannot bear a single day of unhappiness.

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<sup>1</sup> 實徳道人

7. Strong wine, rich meat, food that is peppery or very sweet, are without real taste ; real taste is plain. Superhuman, extraordinary exploits do not characterize a Perfect Man ;<sup>1</sup> a Perfect Man is quite ordinary.

21. A person of sincerity and peace, who is amiable and soft-spoken, who brings to his family complete harmony in body and mind, is immeasurably superior to someone who practices breath-control and mind-contemplation.

24. Manure worms are unclean, yet become the cicadas that drink dew in the autumn breeze. Rotting grasses have no luster, yet are transformed into the fireflies that flicker in the summer night. Here we perceive that purity frequently comes from impurity, and that light often proceeds from darkness.

32. After you have been to the bottom you will know the hazards of the climb to the heights. After you have been in darkness you will know the dazzling brightness of light. After you have led a tranquil existence you will know the strain of worldly activity. After you have dwelled in silence you will know the cacophony of many words.

33. When you can overcome desire for wealth and honor you can cast off the world. When you can subdue intentions of morality, humanity and love you can join the sages.

36. To treat common people with strictness is easy ; to avoid despising them is difficult. To revere a sage is easy ; to do so with propriety is difficult.

45. All men possess great compassion. A Bodhisattva<sup>2</sup> and a Butcher are of one mind. All places have a genuine flavor and interest. A Palace and a Cottage are one place.

53. Only a mind that is pure is properly suited to read the Classics and learn from the Ancients. If it is otherwise, a man

<sup>1</sup> 至人

<sup>2</sup> 觀摩

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will see in the good deeds of the Ancients ways to attain his own selfish ends, or use their words to cover his shortcomings. This would be like lending weapons to attacking brigands, or furnishing supplies to robbers.

✿ 64. To a clear and open mind, a dark room will have a blue sky ; to a mind that is somber, broad daylight will breed demons and evil spirits.

✿ 69. An impatient, quick-tempered man is like a blazing fire, burning all he encounters. A man with a merciless, antagonistic nature is like ice, killing all he touches. A dogmatic, bigoted man is like stagnant water or rotten wood ; once the life spirit is destroyed, meritorious works and enduring prosperity and happiness are impossible.

✿ 81. Wind rustles through a bamboo grove ; when it has passed, no sound remains. Migrating geese transverse a wide lake ; when they are gone, no shadow is left. The mind of a superior man also reveals itself when things arise ; things pass and it becomes empty once again.

✿ 92. An ordinary man who shows kindness and willingly cultivates virtue is a prince without kingdom, a minister without office. A man of eminence and court rank who is greedy for power and traffics in patronage is nothing but a titled beggar.

✿ 101. When literature attains highest perfection, there is nothing unusual about it, it is simply appropriate. When a man's character reaches its highest plane it is nothing special, it is his natural condition.

✿ 106. Heaven and Earth are eternal ; your body you have but once. A man's life is but a hundred years, his days pass with the greatest ease. Those given the blessing of life must realize the joy of life. They must also remember the grief that is an aimless and useless life.

✿ 171. You become eminent and are respected by others ;

but the respect is for your high hat and broad sash. You live humbly and are scorned ; but the insult is to your cotton clothing and straw sandals. In reality, then, it is not you they respect, so why become happy? It is not you they scorn, so why become angry or resentful?

✿ 194. The work of slanderers and malicious talebearers is like those small clouds that hide the sun for a short time and then move on, leaving brightness once again. Fawners and flatterers resemble those drafts that come through small wall openings to invade the flesh little by little — their injurious effects are imperceptible.

✿ 195. There are no trees in the mountain heights, but all round the valleys the trees and grasses grow thick and shaggy. There are no fish where the stream is swiftly flowing, yet where the water deepens and collects in still pools the fish and turtles are numerous. With special care the wise will avoid narrow-mindedness and impetuosity and refrain from behavior that is excessively lofty and superior.

✿ 199. The perched eagle seems to be sleeping. The tiger's movement appears to reveal weakness and infirmity. In reality, these are artifices through which they seize their prey. So a superior man should not reveal his wisdom or unduly exercise his talents. Only then will he have the capacity to shoulder the burdens of state and to engage in great and significant undertakings.

✿ 205. View men with a cool eye, listen to their words with a cool ear. Experience things with a cool heart, consider truth with a cool mind.

✿ 225. When the wind subsides and the waves are still, the true condition of human existence is seen. Where the taste is plain and the voices few, the mind's essential nature is known.

PART II

✿ 1. Those who talk of the pleasures of a quiet life among the mountains and forests do not necessarily acquire the true taste of the mountains and forests. Those who speak of their disdain for fame and profit do not always relinquish all thought of fame and profit.

✿ 2. Although angling is an idyllic pastime, it causes the destruction of life. Although a game of chess is an innocent and refined diversion, it arouses thoughts of contention and struggle. This shows that idleness is more suited to man than such amusements, that his original nature of unskillfulness is more desirable than great skillfulness.

✿ 8. Men know how to read written books, but not those that are unwritten. They are able to play stringed lutes, but not those that are stringless. Making use of the appearance instead of the spirit of things, how can they understand music or poetry?

✿ 23. Alone, staff in hand, I walk along a valley river bordered all around with pine trees. Pausing, clouds rise up about my ragged monk's clothing. With a book as my pillow, I sleep beneath a window with the bamboo rustling just outside. Awakening, moonlight has illuminated my floor-coverings.

✿ 30. Not content with his share of gold, a greedy man grieves over an unattainable jade. Conferred with a marquise, he is resentful because he did not obtain a dukedom. He has wealth and influence yet is content to be a beggar. A man who is really satisfied finds a broth made from grasses more appetizing than rich foods, and is warmer in cotton clothing than in fine furs. Such a man is truly princely.

✿ 35. The Zen Sect says, "Eat when you are hungry, sleep when you are tired." Poetry is the description in common language of the scenery that is before you. That which is most sublime

dwells in that which is most commonplace. What is most difficult derives from what is easiest. Whatever is self-conscious or affected is far from the truth. Whatever is mindless and natural is near.

✿ 42. If my life is passed in a continual state of retired and peaceful idleness, how can thoughts of honor and disgrace, gain and loss, manipulate me? If my mind is composed and tranquil, then how can ideas of right and wrong, advantage and disadvantage, deceive or disconcert me?

✿ 47. A man with a poetic mind can understand the true meaning of poetry though he knows not a single word. A man with the flavor of Zen can be enlightened to the ultimate meaning of Zen though he is without knowledge of a single *gatha*.

✿ 51. My hairs fall out. My teeth grow few. Soon this transitory body will cease to exist. The birds sing. The flowers blossom. They affirm the real, eternal and unchangeable truth of their essential natures.

✿ 53. Great hoarders are great losers. Know, therefore, that an unworried poverty is superior to wealth. High steppers are quick stumblers. Know, therefore, that the constant peace of a humble life is preferable to distinction.

✿ 62. Know that successes are invariably reversed, and you will not strive too stubbornly for success. Know that all life perishes, and you will not be overly attentive to the protection of your own existence.

✿ 63. An Ancient Worthy said; "The shadow from the bamboo sweeps the steps, yet the dust does not move. The disk of the moon penetrates the surface of the lake, yet there is not a ripple on the water." One of our Confucians says: "A stream flows on swiftly, yet all about is silent. I watch the flowers fall and scatter, yet I remain undisturbed." If a man grasps the meaning in these words and constantly applies it to all things, how quiet and peaceful he will be in mind and body!

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✿ 67. Fish swim in the water and seem to be unmindful of the water. Birds soar in the wind and are not conscious of the wind. Know the significance in these examples and you will be capable of transcending the world and of being content with the Ways of Nature.

✿ 69. Foxes sleep on the ruined and decaying stone steps of the Palace. Hares scurry across the overgrown terraces. Once a setting of music and dance, now dewdrops are cold on the yellow chrysanthemums, mist strays over the withered grasses where long ago a battle raged. How constant is the law of flourish and fade! Now where are the weak? Where are the strong? To reflect on this turns man's heart to ash.

✿ 70. Untroubled by thoughts of favor or disgrace, I leisurely gaze on the flowers in the garden blossoming and falling. Without concern for loss or preservation of office I follow the ways of the clouds rolling and unrolling in the farthest regions of the sky.

With the clear sky and bright moonlight, the heavens are surely wide enough for soaring and fluttering about, yet moths still fly into the flame of the night lamp. With green grasses and clear pure springs, all things should have enough to eat and drink; and yet the owl has a fondness for putrid rat-flesh. Alas! In the world of men, how few there are who are not moths or owls!

✿ 77. In winter, after the trees and plants have returned to their trunks and roots the evanescence of their leaves and branches and flowers is realized. When a man's affairs have been covered with a coffin lid, the futility of children, wealth and property is known.

✿ 86. When seen by an unenlightened eye, all things, emotions, and events that occur are variable and dissimilar. Viewed by an enlightened eye, all this is uniformity. Why should we distinguish things, why accept some and reject others?

✿ 90. When all things are hushed, a bird's sudden song awakens in us a deep sense of stillness. When all the flowers have

gone, we see a single unexpected flower and feel the infinity of life.

✿ 99. The actor's powder and rouge yield results of beauty or deformity at the tip of a brush. Suddenly, the melody fades and the stage curtains fall. Now where is the beauty, where is the ugliness? Chess players compete for supremacy with their chessmen. The game soon ends, the chessmen are gathered up and put away. Now where is the victory, where is the defeat?

✿ 106. A life of peace and retirement clears and purifies the heart and imparts a joy and interest to all things. When I see a solitary drifting cloud or a crane in flight, I am lifted to an incomparable state of mind. I encounter a mountain torrent rushing its rocky course, or a flowing spring, and my thoughts are moved to purity. I run my hand over a noble old cypress or a pristine plum tree blossoming in the frost and snow, and feel an indomitable constancy strengthen within me. I associate with the beach gulls and the big-tailed deer of the marshlands, and scheming thoughts are promptly forgotten. But once I return to the dirt and dust of the world, my relations with the things around me become immaterial and even my body seems encumbering and superfluous.

✿ 107. When the inclination comes, I set aside my shoes and walk bare-footed through the sweet-smelling grasses of the field. Birds, unafraid, accompany me. My heart is one with nature as I sit immobile beneath a tree of falling flower petals. As I loosen my neckband, white clouds silently flow up around me as if wishing to detain me.

✿ 112. Seen just after a rainfall, the colors of the mountains are especially fresh and beautiful. Heard in the stillness of night, the booming of a bell is extraordinarily pure and majestic.

✿ 113. Climbing to a high place makes man's mind expand. Looking over a flowing river his thoughts grow distant. Reading a book on a night of rain or snow his heart is purified.

✿ 118. The thoughts of a busy, excited mind are apt to

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stray from the truth. But if we sit quietly, generating no thoughts, with our mind pure and still, when the clouds rise up, we freely go along with them. The rains begin to drop and we too are cleansed and refreshed. A bird sings and we feel a cheerful understanding. A flower falls and we perceive our own true nature. Every place is a place of truth, every thing is an agent of truth.

✿ 119. When a child is born, the mother is imperiled. When great wealth is amassed, thieves gather and gaze. What pleasure is without anxiety? Poverty teaches moderation and frugality. Illness leads one to care for one's body. What hardship is without advantage? The wise, therefore, regard prosperity and adversity with uniformity, and disregard the dualism of joy and grief.

✿ 121. Bound and knotted with desires for honor and gain, men are moved to speak of "this dirty, dusty world," or "this bitter sea of life." They do not know the white clouds and blue mountains, the rivers that flow along, the towering rocks. The flowers invite the birds to sing. The valleys are alive with echoes of wood-cutters' songs. The world is not 'dusty and dirty', the 'sea' is not bitter — it is they who make their own hearts so.

✿ 122. Flowers when they are only half-opened, wine when one is only slightly intoxicated, are most pleasant. If the blossoms are full-blown, if the intoxication is complete, this pleasantness disappears. Those at the height of prosperity should contemplate this.

✿ 123. Wild vegetables are not watered or cultivated, wild fowls are not fed or cared for, yet their flavors are surpassingly fine. Those who are capable of remaining untainted by the ways of the world, have not their characters an exceptional and transcendental flavor?

✿ 129. A loose and lustful woman may in the end decide to become a nun. A schemer, his ambitions disappointed, may

enter a monastery. It thus often happens that sanctuaries become dens for the lewd and depraved.

✿ 133. My tea is not the very best, still my tea-pot is never dry. My wine is not of matchless quality, but the jar is not empty. My lute is plain and has no strings, but I can always sing along in harmony with it. My flute is short and has no holes, yet I can play it whenever I want. It may be impossible for me to excel the excellent Emperor Fu Hsi, yet still I should be able to equal those Worthies of the Bamboo Grove, Juan and Hsi.