
THE POWER OF FĀN 反:

Reversal, Rebellion, and Return

in the *Star Wars* Saga

Realizing Resistance Keynote Address

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1. The Way of Reversal

TURN HER AROUND. I SAID, TURN HER AROUND!

– HAN SOLO

Despite the supposed animosity between fans of *Star Trek* and fans of *Star Wars*, the two science fiction franchises have much in common. Both rely upon instantly-exotic, quasi-Asian gestures and code words to signify the audience's passage from a familiar Eurocentric universe into a realm populated and controlled by alien others. Reflecting on the decade in which each established itself as a popular culture juggernaut – *Star Trek* only gradually, via syndicated television reruns, and *Star Wars* almost immediately, via a blockbuster run in cinemas -- also helps us understand why wise, vaguely-Oriental aliens offering redemptive knowledge to primarily-white male protagonists held such enormous appeal for post-Viet Nam American youth.¹ Both reversed our mainstream expectations: in the spiritual language and alien faces of the Asian enemy, we found unexpected allies for our own battles on the home front.

Even for those as young as I (born in 1972), it was obvious that tragedy and failure now haunted the U.S. cultural landscape in ways that were unimaginable (and even unacceptable) to many in our parents' and grandparents' generations. As the oil crises, hostage crises, and general cultural crises of late 1970s America gave way to the reactionary, neo-conservative 1980s, *Star Wars* as well as *Star Trek* were there to offer alternative visions of quest and fulfillment – conceived by auteurs born in the 1920s and 1940s, but eloquently and powerfully speaking to the concerns of those born after the 1960s. Much as the stories told by Stan Lee (born 1922)



and Roy Thomas (born 1940) in the pages of ‘60s-‘70s era Marvel Comics spoke not only to those who resembled them, but also to those who shared neither Lee’s New York Jewish background or Thomas’ white Southern small-town origins, the stories told onscreen about Captains Kirk and Picard and Luke and Leia Skywalker became meaningful to girls as well as boys, people of color as well as whites, immigrants as well as the native-born – cultural outsiders as well as cultural insiders.

In the end, however, while both *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* may speak to our hopes, it is *Star Wars* that speaks more clearly to our fears – especially the deep-seated fears that drive much of our political culture in Trump’s America. We are the children of tragedy and failure, and these are the great themes of the best *Star Wars* stories. *Star Trek* tells us that the struggles of the past and the present are ancient history to the future, where everything is sleek, shiny, and noble. *Star Wars* tells us that our present and perhaps our future look much like an ancient past, set in an era “a long, long time ago” when everything is rough edged, worn out, and soiled by scum and villainy. The cultural landscape of *Star Wars* is one that is haunted by tragedy and failure, and the cultural heroism of *Star Wars* is a kind that sculpts hope and nobility out of such unlikely cultural clay. We arrive in the *Star Trek* universe of the far future with the dirty work of redeeming the past far behind us; we are deposited in the *Star Wars* universe of the deep past with those labors still left for us to do.

The latest *Star Wars* film, *The Last Jedi* (2017), unflinchingly embraces tragedy and what Ivan Morris calls “the nobility of failure.”² This is what makes it, along with *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), among the most spiritually mature and philosophically consistent chapters of the series. These films celebrate the (not unlimited) power of the feminine, the hidden, the receptive, and the organic – in a word, what traditional East Asian thought names as *yīn* 陰 – in ways that help the warmed-over cafeteria Zen Buddhism/Daoism that is George Lucas’ Jedi mumbo-jumbo to actually hold together and work to provide a meaningful worldview. If these movies work as art – as opposed to fun action fantasy or fanboy service – then they do so as *yīn* tragedies. If their protagonists function as authentic heroes – as opposed to adolescent wish-fulfillment or mere signifiers of hegemonic power – then they do so with *yīn* nobility. That is, they acknowledge and embrace the realities of weakness, obscurity, vulnerability, and fragility in order to discover and develop the virtues of adaptability, resilience, transformation, and growth.

The key to understanding both tragedy and nobility in *yīn* terms may be found in the Chinese Daoist concept of *fǎn* 反 (Korean *pan*, Japanese *han*). *Fǎn* means “inversion” or “reversal,” among other things. The earliest versions of the graph depict *yoù* 又, meaning “right hand,” contained within *chǎng* 厂, a high bluff abruptly terminating in a steep cliff, meaning “reverse.”

In classical Chinese texts, *fǎn* has multiple, albeit related, meanings.³ In its most general sense, it describes the “inversion” or “reversal” of motion – going back the way one originally came on a journey, or retracing one’s path to one’s home. In historical documents, it describes “inversion” or “reversal” in political terms – rebellion against a regime, or mutiny against a commander. In Confucian writings, it describes “inversion” or “reversal” in moral terms – upending right and wrong. But it is in Daoist texts that we find all three senses of *fǎn* combined into one use of the term, which provides its most provocative meaning for interpreting the *Star*

Wars films as a kind of *yīn* epic – a saga that ultimately is all about “turning her around,” albeit probably not in the way that Han Solo imagined.

2. The Rebel Way

STRIKE ME DOWN, AND I WILL BECOME MORE POWERFUL THAN
YOU COULD POSSIBLY IMAGINE.

– OBI-WAN KENOBI

Like the Hindu and Shintō traditions, the Daoist tradition is a kind of “non-tradition tradition”⁴ – too hybrid, and too disorganized, to function in the monolithic way that “tradition traditions” such as Christianity or Buddhism tend to do, yet like those more codified and organized traditions, capable of impressing its distinctive and recognizable brand on art, literature, politics, and other expressions of culture. Because of the way in which China’s Daoist traditions soaked into the cultural soil of China’s neighbors, especially Korea and Japan, and became both invisible and influential, talking about Daoism as a transnational or global tradition is even more difficult. Any definition of Daoism is an invitation to an argument. But one way to define this elusive yet persistent tradition of thought and practice is in terms of perhaps its two most consistent concepts: *daò* 道 and *fǎn*, often combined into the compound *fǎndaò* 反道. *Fǎndaò* can be read as “the Way of reversal,” “the rebel Way,” or “return to the Way,” and in Daoist texts, it usually means all three of these at once.

Fǎndaò plays a central conceptual role in Daoist thought, imagery, and practice. This may be seen in texts that might be called “proto-Daoist”⁵ -- such as the 4th century BCE *Lǎozǐ* 老子 (“Old Masters,” later dubbed the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經, “Scripture of Way and Power,” reflecting its scriptural status in later, institutional forms of Daoism) -- early sectarian Daoist scriptures such as the 3rd century CE *Lǎozǐ zhōng jīng* 老子中經 (“Central Scripture of Lǎozǐ”), and the writings of the *Shàngqīng* 上清 (“Highest Clarity”) sect that was the dominant form of Daoism through China’s Táng 唐 dynasty (618-907 CE). The basic understanding is laid out in chapter 25 of the *Lǎozǐ*:

<i>yǒu wù hǔnchéng</i> 有物混成	There was something undefined yet complete --
<i>xiān tiāndì shēng</i> 先天地生	before Heaven and Earth were born, it existed....
<i>kěyǐ wéi tiānxià mǔ</i> 可以為天下母	It may be regarded as the Cosmic Mother.
<i>wú bùzhī qí míng</i> 吾不知其名	I do not know its name;
<i>zì zhī yuē dào</i> 字之曰道	I call it by the label of the Way [<i>dào</i> 道]....
<i>wéi zhī míng yuē dà</i> 為之名曰大	or by the category of Greatness....
<i>dà yuē shì</i> 大曰逝	Greatness may also be called passing on;
<i>shì yuē yuǎn</i> 逝曰遠	passing on may also be called going far away;
<i>yuǎn yuē fǎn</i> 遠曰反	going far away may be called returning [<i>fǎn</i> 反].

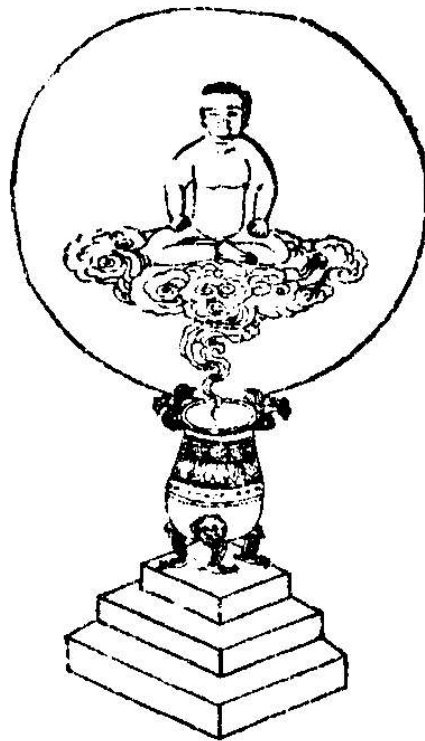
Here, *dào* itself – some kind of primordial, non-binary yet maternal, cosmic wholeness that is beyond human naming or knowing – is characterized in terms of a manifold process that culminates, and starts over again, with *fǎn*. The “greatness” of the Way lies precisely in its endless capacity to reverse itself, rebel against its own innate power, and conceal itself so far away from its starting point that it returns to its own beginning. Chapter 40 of the *Lǎozǐ* is more succinct in making the same argument:

fǎn zhě dào zhī dòng 反者道之動 Return [*fǎn*] is the motion of the Way [*dào*].

Later developments in the Daoist tradition elaborate upon and extend this basic understanding of *dào* as *fǎn* – that is, of the Way as that which reverses, rebels, and returns in order to nourish, balance, and unify all things. For example, Daoist political thought -- often characterized as “anarchistic” or “utopian” -- imagines the ideal human society as one in which the cosmogonic processes of differentiation (into *yīn* 陰 and *yáng* 陽, female and male, submissive and dominant, etc.) are reversed (*fǎn*) so that human beings can live in harmony with one another as undifferentiated aspects of a primeval whole (*dào*).⁶ Meditation manuals of the *Shàngqīng* sect guide the Daoist practitioner through successive stages of visualizing and actualizing a “return to the Way” (*fǎndaò*) by which one reverses the aforementioned cosmogonic process of binary differentiation, rebels against ontogeny and teleology by embracing and re-becoming one’s weak, receptive, inner “newborn child” (*chìzǐ* 赤子) who is one’s “true self” (*zhēnwú* 真吾), and thus returns to the fundamental unity of *dào*.⁷



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But this “return” is not a trip back in time, but rather a journey forward in the ultimate development of the self, which can help bring about a transformation of society. As the contemporary Chinese philosopher Wáng Zhōngjiāng 王中江 puts it:

The place where civilization degenerates is also the place where it should change. When things return to themselves they rebuild a better self. This happens over a progressing course of time rather than in a repetition of the past.... Laozi’s philosophy of return, on the surface, may seem to be saying that things ought to return to themselves by returning to their past. However, what this philosophy actually strives for is change in the present and advancement in the future.¹⁰

What may look like regression actually is progression. What may appear to be failure turns out to be achievement. To return the focus to *Star Wars*, when Obi-Wan Kenobi tells Darth Vader, “Strike me down, and I will become more powerful than you could possibly imagine,” he is engaging in exactly the sort of rhetorical reversion that Daoists might recognize as typical of those who understand the true nature of the self and its developmental trajectory in the light of *dào*. When, Han Solo meets an end similar to that of Kenobi’s in *The Force Awakens* (2015), it closes a narrative circle that began in the very first *Star Wars* film (1977).

3. Return to the Way

THE GREATEST TEACHER, FAILURE IS.¹¹

-- YODA

In one of the most powerful scenes from *The Last Jedi*, Yoda reminds Luke Skywalker that failure is the greatest teacher. Only when Luke reverses his developmental course as a Jedi learner, rebels against the self-imposed burden of Jedi mastery, and returns to the source of Jedi lore on the planet Ahch-To is he able to emulate his mentor, Obi-Wan Kenobi. Just as Kenobi did, Luke recognizes true greatness of purpose, gets out of the way of a younger, stronger, more capable protagonist, sacrifices himself in a selfless but bloodless confrontation with a Sith, and becomes one with the Force – humbling the aggressive power of evil and guaranteeing the survival of hope in the process. He must fail in order to succeed. In both cases, the younger, stronger, more capable protagonist – the noble cause for which he tragically fails -- turns out to be a woman. *The Last Jedi* helps all of us finally understand what some of us knew all along: that women are the true heroes of the *Star Wars* saga – specifically, Leia and Rey.¹²

The reaction of some male fans to *The Force Awakens*, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, *The Last Jedi*, and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018) is telling and, for me, confirms the truth of this revelation.¹³ Presumably, these viewers wanted a more conventional phallogocentric narrative, in which male aggression overcomes all obstacles and triumphs absolutely in absolute terms: power over weakness, good over evil, male over female, conqueror over conquered. But as Kayti Burt has written of *The Last Jedi*, “Toxic masculinity is the true villain.”¹⁴ There’s something deeply, toxically American and masculine about these “trolls” and the movies that they wanted but in the end did not get, just as there’s something deeply, subversively Asian and feminine

about what might be considered the best of the *Star Wars* films: *Rogue One*, the original *Star Wars* (also known as *A New Hope*), and *The Empire Strikes Back*.

In these three films, which may well form the perfect *Star Wars* trilogy, the heroes — Jyn Erso and her merry band of rogues, Obi-Wan Kenobi and his rebel recruits, and the Luke-Leia-Han triad — incur losses, wounds, and even death as the cost of their redemptive actions. What makes these protagonists heroic and redemptive is their fully-realized capacity to pay the tragic costs required to become noble women and men. Their failure is the guarantee of their nobility. They are heroes — but they are *yīn* heroes, not the *yáng* heroes for which the trolls petulantly pine.

In the saga of *yīn* heroism that forms the series' richest narrative core, the original films' crypto-East Asian elements (especially their pervasive Japanese influences) transcend kitsch and cultural appropriation to become the building blocks of an authentic narrative spirituality. The protagonists of these films all are rooted in some kind of relationship to what the franchise names "the Force," which seems at some times to be analogous to *dào*, and at others to be more like the concept of Buddha-nature. (Just as in East Asian cultural history, these concepts -- which might seem distinct from one another in theory -- merge seamlessly in practice. Like people in traditional Chinese society, denizens of the *Star Wars* universe don't have to choose between Buddhism and Daoism, but can have it both ways.) This transcendent anchor paradoxically frees our heroes to become fully immanent, fully realized in their imperfect worlds. They become what Ivan Morris, writing about the heroic aesthetic in Japanese literary tradition, called

another type of hero... whose career usually belongs to a period of unrest and warfare... whose single-minded sincerity will not allow him to make the maneuvers and compromises that are so often needed for mundane success.¹⁵

Such heroes always die, either literally or figuratively, but their apparent defeats are the basis of their invincible nobility. Many, if not most, of these heroes are *samurai* 侍, such as the doomed Taira no Atsumori 平敦盛 (1169-1184), who died on a beach at the hands of an enemy who admired his beauty so much that he wished to spare his life, but was forced by social custom and political pressure to behead him, or Saigō Takamori 西郷隆盛 (1828-1877), who rebelled for the imperial cause, only to become a rebel without a cause when he felt betrayed by the emperor for whom he fought the Meiji 明治 revolution. They are *yīn* heroes: natural rather than artificial, open and attuned rather than closed and tone-deaf, hidden rather than obvious — all of which ultimately makes them feminine rather than masculine, according to the binary logic of *yīnyáng* thought.

How natural, tuneful, and elegant it is, then, that these finest of the *Star Wars* films consistently place women in charge when the men around them fumble and flounder! In *The Last Jedi*, we even get to see one of these *yīn* heroes, Leia, achieve a kind of Daoist apotheosis. Outnumbered and outgunned by the toxically masculine First Order, whose forces blow the bridge of her command ship, the *Raddus*, into cosmic dust, Leia tumbles into the icy void, frost instantly encasing her presumably dead body. But then we see her right hand twitch slightly before reaching out, sending out the Force user's equivalent of a grappling hook to latch on to her ship and propel herself to safety.



That this scene unfolded on cinema screens nearly a year after the untimely death of Carrie Fisher, the actor who portrayed Leia from the mid-1970s onward, made it all the more poignant and gratifying. Predictably, the churlish fanboys went mad with rage, singling out this moment for particular scorn in their online screeds. It seems that the fanboys were not familiar with chapter 6 of the *Lǎozǐ*, which affirms that:

gǔ shén bùsǐ 谷神不死
shì wèi xuán pì 是謂玄牝

The spirit of the valley [i.e., *dào*] never dies;
this is why it is called the Mysterious Female.

Of course, while Leia is revived, her comrade Admiral Holdo dies, as do what seem like hundreds, if not thousands, of Resistance fighters as the film's body count mounts. Their *yīn* heroism, like these three films, accepts and embraces tragedy as necessity and noble. It recognizes that no salvation is achieved without enormous cost – that no healing can take place without reversal, rebellion, and return.

The promised conclusion to the *Star Wars* saga has not yet been released -- Episode IX, *The Rise of Skywalker* -- will not come to theaters until December 20, 2019. But already we have been given glimpses of ways in which this newest entry in the series might confirm the argument of this essay. In the trailer for *The Rise of Skywalker*, the theme of *fǎn* – reversal, rebellion, return -- is made manifest in visual terms when Rey runs away from Kylo Ren's menacing TIE fighter, only to execute a backwards flip in the air and confront her nemesis head-on.



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Is Rey reversing roles here, transforming her flight into an attack and Ren from her predator into her prey? Is she rebelling against the old Jedi maxim that the Force should be “used for knowledge and defense, never for attack”? By facing a foe with whom she often seems to be twinned – perhaps as sibling, perhaps as lover -- is she returning to the “place where civilization degenerates,” which “is also the place where it should change”? “When things return to themselves they rebuild a better self,” says Wáng Zhōngjiāng. Perhaps this balletic flight into the face of death is how the *Star Wars* saga’s latest *yīn* hero will show us the power of *fǎn*, which can change *yáng* into *yīn*, masters into disciples, sidekicks into saviors, and students into masters.

If so, then *The Rise of Skywalker* may join *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* in forming a worthy second trilogy of tragic, noble *yīn* heroism. Understanding what arguably are the finest of the *Star Wars* films as parables about *fǎn* not only explains how they work most powerfully, but it also explains why some audience members have reacted so negatively and violently to the evolving saga, in which women have played unprecedentedly large creative and directive roles.¹⁷ Not all the films’ fans, it turns out, like *fǎn* films.

Notes

¹ See Steve Haruch, “Mr. Spock, Mixed-Race Pioneer,” National Public Radio, March 1, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/03/01/389543692/mr-spock-mixed-race-pioneer>.

² Ivan Morris, *The Nobility of Failure: Tragic Heroes in the History of Japan* (New York: New American Library, 1975).

³ See Lú Yùsān 卢育三, “Fǎn zhě dào zhī dòng’ chuyì” 「反者道之动」刍议 [The Ideology of ‘Return is the Movement of the Way’], *Zhōngguó zhéxué shǐ yánjiū* 中国哲学史研究 [Studies in the History of Chinese Philosophy] 1 (1987): 26–31.

⁴ I borrow this phrase from Herman Ooms, who uses it in reference to Daoism and Shintō. See Ooms, *Imperial Politics and Symbolics in Ancient Japan: The Tenmu Dynasty, 650-800* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 167.

⁵ In recent scholarship, the term “proto-Daoist” is used to denote texts that predate the rise of organized, sectarian Daoist communities, but which relate in some way to the ideas, institutions, and practices found in those later movements. See James Miller, *Daoism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2008), 1-2, 5-9.

⁶ See Dominic Steavu, “Cosmogony and the Origin of Inequality: A Utopian Perspective from Taoist Sources,” *The Medieval History Journal* 17/2 (2014): 298.

⁷ See Fabrizio Pregadio, “The Alchemical Body in Daoism,” forthcoming in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Material Religion*, eds. Manuel Vasquez and Vasudha Narayana (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 10-12, http://www.fabriziopregadio.com/files/PREGADIO_The_Alchemical_Body_in_Daoism.pdf.

⁸ Here, the *chìzǐ* is depicted as materializing out of vapors emanating from an alchemical crucible: https://www.goldenelixir.com/jindan/ill_neidan_child.html

⁹ Here, the *chìzǐ* is depicted as materializing within the Daoist practitioner's meditative mind: https://www.goldenelixir.com/taoism/ill_red_infant.html

¹⁰ Zhongjiang Wang, “Abnormalities and Return: An Exploration of the Concept *Fan* 反 in the *Laozi*,” *Religions* 9/32 (2018): 19.

¹¹ Not only does Yoda's syntax resemble that of Japanese (subject, followed by predicate and verb), but here Yoda actually paraphrases a Japanese proverb: *Shippai wa seikō no haha* 失敗は成功の母 (Failure is the mother of success).

¹² Is it coincidental that these names, when pronounced in Japanese, sound virtually the same (*Reia* レイア and *Rei* レイ)?

¹³ See Daniel Goldstraw's historical overview of “toxic” male *Star Wars* fandom in “*The Phantom Menace: When Fandom Got Toxic*,” *The Overtake*, May 19, 2019, <https://theovertake.com/~beta/the-dark-side/>.

¹⁴ Kayti Burt, “Toxic masculinity is the true villain of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*,” *Den of Geek*, May 4, 2018, <https://www.denofgeek.com/us/movies/star-wars/269657/toxic-masculinity-is-the-true-villain-of-star-wars-the-last-jedi>.

¹⁵ Morris, 1.

¹⁶ *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker Teaser Trailer #1* (2019), https://youtu.be/AXbP_toJWqo, 1:07.

¹⁷ See Nathalia Holt, “The Women Who Run the ‘Star Wars’ Universe,” *The New York Times*, December 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/movies/star-wars-last-jedi-women-run-universe.html>.