

The Gun-Crazed Hermit of the Applegate: Chinese Philosophy, Machismo, and Gun Violence

By Nick Gier

Guns may not kill people (on their own), but disaffected men with easy access to guns and little understanding of how to safely express their frustrations with the world certainly do.

—Emma Gray, *The Huffington Post* (12/18/12)

The school shooters and domestic terrorists all exhibit male rage. They attempt to resolve a crisis of masculinity through violent behavior, demonstrate a fetish for guns or weapons, and represent a situation of guys and guns amok.

—Douglas Kellner, UCLA Professor of Education

The things of the world carry Yin [female] on their backs, and embrace the Yang [male]. They exhaust their qi [cosmic energy] in harmony.

—*Dao De Jing*, #42 (trans. Robert Eno)

It was the summer of 1960, I was a naïve 16-year-old, and I was smitten. Even though a family friend's daughter had a mad crush on me, I had been seduced by something even more alluring and far less complicated than teenage romance.

A Guy and His Gun: A Love Story

I had bought an army surplus .30-06 Springfield rifle and I was in love. I spent many dollars on a new stock and a 3 x 7 Bosch & Lomb scope. A gun smith had completely refurbished the bolt action and barrel. There was a spring in my step when I picked up boxes of army ammo at the Railway Express Station.

The single shot .22 rifle that my dad bought me when I was 12 was just a plinker. This army rifle made me feel like a man for the first time. Instead of having a picture of a girlfriend in my wallet, I had a picture of my reblued, scoped rifle.

The Bushmaster Man Card

According a two-year ad campaign by Bushmaster, the maker of the AR-15 semi-automatic rifle, I was a “card carrying man.” One of the principal qualifications for getting your card is being able to stare down a tough 5th grader. Adam Lanza started with first graders, but I'm sure that he was still allowed to carry his Bushmaster Man Card.

If I could have bought an M-1 Garand, the semi-automatic assault rifle of my gun-crazed days, perhaps I would become even a greater male. But the real men of today would be terribly disappointed with its 8-shot magazine. Today that unsuspecting deer, intruder, or grade schooler must end up like Swiss cheese.

The .30-06 was gun enough for me. There were lots of squirrels out at an abandoned army base near my home town of Medford, Oregon. Not realizing the ricochet dangers, I shot up dozens of boxes of ammo at the squirrels in the concrete foundations of dismantled barracks. I don't remember killing a single animal, and I never became a good shot. That and my poor fly fishing skills have kept my karmic debt fairly low.

During my short hunting career I was lucky enough to get two deer at very close range. The one buck was lame (I kid you not). One chilly afternoon in Oregon's Blue Mountains, I shot my first and only elk, a 500-pound spike bull. I emptied my 5-round magazine on him and I was amazed that he dropped. All the machismo drained out of me, however, when I went over and shot him in the head with my .22 revolver. The hollow-point shells simply bounced off his skull.

My Slow Descent Into Unmanliness

Thus began my slow but steady descent into unmanliness. Any card-carrying man can send a request to Bushmaster to revoke another man's card. If you are "a cry baby," "a cupcake," "on a short leash," or "just plain unmanly," you are unfit for male duty and cannot be trusted with a gun.

My first step on this slippery slope was a cowardly transfer from the hard sciences to the soft humanities at Oregon State University. Then I received a Rotary fellowship for a year in Denmark, where the citizens, softened by sissy socialism, refuse to protect their homes with firearms.

Denmark's gun death rate of 1.45 per 100,000 stands in stark contrast to the U.S. at 10.2, but that is a small price to pay for the freedom to pack heat. For every Dane who kills himself with a gun, there are six Americans who go out in glory with their handy firearms.

Bushmaster's "short leash" must mean that proverbial wifely tether. Well, here I must also plead guilty. When we arrived in Moscow and settled in, I brought out my .30-06 to show to my new Danish bride. She was not impressed. She told me that it was either her or the gun. For 16 years I chose her and a safe home for our wonderful daughter. Homes with guns have far higher child deaths.

Armed homes are not safe for women either. A study by the *American Journal of Public Health* concluded that women were eight times more likely to be killed in the

home by abusive men if they were armed. In the same year Douglas Wiebe of the University of Pennsylvania found “that females living with a gun in the home were 2.7 times more likely to be murdered than females with no gun at home.”

The Final Straw: Tofu and the Land of Hindu Effeminate

About 30 years ago I lost my taste for beef, and then pork, chicken, and finally turkey as I slid into male oblivion. Preferring tofu to meat means, according to Bushmaster, instant disqualification as a man, even though it is some of the healthiest protein known to humankind.

Securing my fate even more, I went on sabbatical to India. According to the British, Indian males—except for the Sikhs and the Gurkas in Nepal—are the most effeminate in the world. I guess Bushmaster would have called them “cupcakes.”

Perhaps the macho men of the world have not heard about the Hindu Goddess and her great powers. I would bet on her in any contest with the Jehovah of the Old Testament. She instills holy terror in the hearts of all male gods. Every drop of blood that is spilled in battles with her turns into yet another fierce female warrior. She is impossible to defeat, so forget your 100-round magazines.

Lederhosen, Kilts, Barbies, and Mounties

The NRA points to Switzerland and Finland, which have are third and fourth in the world for gun ownership. In 2007 for every 100 Swiss 46 owned a gun; the Finns had 45; but Americans were highest with 89 per 100 residents. Why is the gun death rate so low for the Swiss (3.84) and the Finns (3.64), but so high for Americans (10.2)?

Maybe it is the effeminate lederhosen and the family saunas that prevent the Swiss and the Finns from killing each other less frequently. The Aussie’s low gun death rate (1.25) is no doubt due to feminizing everything from “waste tidies” to “barbies.” A real man would bellow “garbage can” and “grillin’.”

Does having “Mounties” to enforce the law lead to the lower gun death rates in Canada (1.25)? Scotland, however, has an amazingly low .25, so it must those kilts with no underpants. No doubt a *Braveheart* mooning is much more humiliating than brandishing an AR-15.

An army-issued semi-automatic rifle is found in nearly every Swiss home, but only in America are there frequent mass shootings in public places. Only eight countries in the world—mostly violent Latin American nations and Swaziland—have higher gun death rates than the U.S.

Balance the Yin with the Yang for Less Bang

Pastor Anthony Robinson has taken issue with the NRA's slogan: "The only thing that stops a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." Robinson reminds Christian Americans of the doctrine of original sin—that all of us are basically bad people and that we are good only by the grace of God. So Robinson believes that we should put weapons only in the hands of well trained and mentally healthy (=grace-filled?) professionals.

Robinson's "everyone is a sinner" is no better a solution than the NRA's "good guys vs. bad guys," or the equally Manichean diagnosis of one evangelical pastor about mass killings: "The Devil did it." Far too many Christians fall into the heresy of giving that much power to Satan. Martin Luther was right to preach that Satan and every evil person act only with divine permission. Just read the Book of Job.

Even though they have not necessarily practiced their own philosophy, the Chinese have a much better theory about where evil comes from. Nothing is either inherently good or evil, but the latter is due to a lack of balance. This is the key to Chinese medicine, most notably acupuncture, a therapy now gaining credibility among Western doctors.

In Chinese philosophy Yin is a symbol for the female, the soft, the passive, the dark, and the empty, whereas Yang stands for the male, the hard, the aggressive, the light, and the full. They are neither good nor evil, but social peace and cosmic harmony come about as a balance between the two. Persons of virtue live in the Golden Mean between Yin and Yang, but those of vice fall to the extremes.

Many Chinese sages have been mountain hermits who eat berries and roots, and eschew the "five grains" and pork of city slickers. The sage is unarmed and his inner peace tames bears and tigers. He also prefers crooked mountains paths to the straight streets of towns. The sage balances the Yin and the Yang perfectly.

North and South American culture is the most Yang of any in the world. Mass killers are not evil (certainly not Satan's agents), but some of them are terribly unbalanced. I agree with the NRA that violent movies/TV and video games are symptoms of a society that has not nurtured its people—especially its young men—properly. Dysfunctional families, especially those with absent fathers, have given us a generation of far too many disaffected and alienated youth.

The Gun-Crazed Hermit of the Applegate

In June of 1962 I graduated fourth in my high school class of 442, and I had earned two scholarships to attend Oregon State University. But I was a loner, had few friends, and showed my disgust with modern society at every turn. At the end of the summer I told my dad that I was going to take my guns and build a hermit's cabin on the Applegate River. When my dad asked me how I was going to make a living, I said that I

was going to pan for gold. My father, brother, and I once had a very good day on the Applegate with our home-made sluice boxes.

My dad was never forceful or authoritarian (quite the opposite), but he was still able to convince me that this was a crazy idea. Was this smart kid just several steps away from becoming a Ted Kaczynski? Good parents and their basic moral education saved me. In the worst case scenario, at least many lives would have been saved by my very poor aim.

Nick Gier did get his degree at Oregon State and taught philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years.