

Zhuangzi: The Inner Chapters

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Additional Translations
and Other Materials

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Note for readers

This translation was originally prepared for use by students in a general course on early Chinese thought. My initial intention was simply to provide my own students with a version that conveyed the way I thought the text was probably best understood. Of course, I was also happy to make a reasonably responsible rendering of the text available for my students at no cost. I later posted the text online with this latter goal in mind for teachers who wished to select portions of the text for classroom discussion without requiring students to make additional costly purchases or dealing with troublesome issues of copyright in assembling extracts. The current version was posted in 2010, with revisions made in 2016 and further slight changes in 2019.

This online text represents only the first of three major divisions within the received text of the *Zhuangzi*: the first seven of 33 total chapters. As explained in “A Note on the Text” (p. 6), many scholars, including myself, feel that these “Inner Chapters” are governed by a single creative vision (although they almost surely reflect contributions from multiple authors). That vision we ascribe to the thinker whose name the text bears, Zhuangzi (4th century BCE). The remaining sections resemble more an anthology of early writings, later classified loosely as “Daoist,” that sometimes reflect a vision significantly different from that conveyed by the Inner Chapters: the mode of Daoism specifically associated with Zhuangzi. However, there are passages outside the Inner Chapters that resonate closely with this Zhuangzian style of thought, and I have appended a few of these at the ends of Chapters 3 and 4; there are many others that could be included as well.

In the case of the *Zhuangzi* Inner Chapters, I have over time developed and published a particular theory of the overall logic of the text and the way I believe it can be optimally understood when read as an integrated work. That theory is reflected in my translation choices and articulated through the commentary that I have included from time to time, which reflects the approach to the text that guided my classroom lectures and that informed discussions with students.

The *Zhuangzi* is an unusually rich and suggestive text, and superb scholars and translators have developed and published impressive English versions based on interpretations different to greater or lesser degrees from mine, A.C. Graham and Burton Watson among them. While I could not ask students in a general survey course to read multiple translations of the *Zhuangzi*, I do urge any reader with a serious interest in Chinese thought to consult published translations by such scholars.

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Introduction

Apart from the fact that we feel certain that, unlike Laozi, Zhuangzi existed, we do not know much else about him. His full name is recorded as Zhuang Zhou (“Jwahng Joe”), and judging from statements about him in other early works, he seems to have lived during the fourth century BCE. But from his book we know that he was by all measures the most creative of all early Chinese thinkers. No other philosopher approaches him in pure brilliance of thought, and no other Classical book of any kind compares with the literary originality of the *Zhuangzi*.

Tales about Zhuangzi, some of which appear in his book and are presumably insertions by other authors, portray him as a hermit, living with his wife and perhaps one or two followers in a remote area of China. But so many of the tales in *Zhuangzi* are clearly meant to be fictional that we cannot be certain even of these facts.

The nature of the *Zhuangzi*

The literary style of the *Zhuangzi* is unique, and the format of the text needs to be understood before you begin reading selections from it. Most of the chapters are a series of brief but rambling essays, which mix together statements that may be true with others that are absurd, and tales about real or imaginary figures. It is *never* a good idea to assume that when Zhuangzi states something as fact that he believes it to be true, or that he cares whether we believe it or not. He makes up facts all the time. It is also best to assume that every tale told in the *Zhuangzi* is fictional, that Zhuangzi knew that he had invented it, and that he did not expect anyone to believe his stories.

Every tale and story in the *Zhuangzi* has a philosophical point. Those points are the important elements of Zhuangzi’s book (for philosophers, at any rate; the book is famous as a literary masterpiece too).

The world in which the events of the *Zhuangzi* occur is not the world in which we live. From its opening passage, which tells us about a ten-thousand mile long bird and what a cicada and dove have to say about it, we enter a world filled with fabulous beasts, imaginary plants, and flying immortals. The human population of Zhuangzi's world is unusual as well. His society is filled with sorcerers, hunchbacks, and mysterious hermits, talking rivers, swimmers who can dive down steep waterfalls without fear, and a butcher who carves up ox carcasses with the same pizzazz as a virtuoso violinist attacking a Bach sonata. Zhuangzi's world is not the real world, is it a fantasy cartoon world that he uses as a dream ground to act out the issues of life without fear that the facts will get in the way.

One of the most interesting aspects of the *Zhuangzi* is that one of its chief characters is Confucius. Sometimes Confucius is pictured as a buffoon, a pompous fool despised by characters more in tune with Daoist ideas. But frequently Confucius acts as a spokesman for Zhuangzi's point of view, and we are left to wonder whether this is just Zhuangzi's way of taunting his Confucian intellectual adversaries or whether he did not, in fact, feel that his ideas shared certain features with those of Confucius.

Knowledge in the *Zhuangzi*

The *Zhuangzi* is a big book, about the same size as the *Xunzi*. But it is far more diverse and disorganized than the *Xunzi* and its major ideas much harder to summarize. In this section we will try to capture the most basic premises of the *Zhuangzi*, and the methods Zhuangzi uses to lead us towards accepting them.

Zhuangzi's chief strategy as a writer seems to have been to undermine our ordinary notions of truth and value by claiming a very radical form of *fact and value relativity*. For Zhuangzi, as for Laozi, all values that humans hold dear -- good and bad; beauty and ugliness -- are non-natural and do not really exist outside of our very arbitrary prejudices. But Zhuangzi goes farther. He attacks our belief that there are any firm facts in the world. According to Zhuangzi, the cosmos is in itself an undivided whole, a single thing without division of which we are a part. The only true "fact" is the dynamic action of this cosmic system as a whole. Once, in the distant past, human beings saw the world as a whole and themselves as a part of this whole, without any division between themselves and the surrounding context of Nature.

But since the invention of words and language, human beings have come to use language to say things about the world, and this has had the effect of *cutting up the world* in our eyes. When humans invent a name, suddenly the thing named appears to stand apart from the rest of the world, distinguished by the contours of its name definition. In time, our perception of the world has degenerated from a holistic grasping of it as a single system, to a perception of a space filled with individual items, each having a name. Every time we use language and assert something about the world, we reinforce this erroneous picture of the world.

We call this approach “relativism” because Zhuangzi’s basic claim is that what we take to be facts are only facts in relation to our distorted view of the world, and what we take to be good or bad things only appear to have positive and negative value because our mistaken beliefs lead us into arbitrary prejudices.

The dynamic operation of the world-system as a whole is the Dao. The partition of the world into separate things is the outcome of non-natural, human language-based thinking. Zhuangzi believed that what we needed to do was learn how to bypass the illusory divided world that we have come to “see before our eyes,” but which does not exist, and recapture the unitary view of the universe of the Dao.

Like Laozi, Zhuangzi does not detail any single practical path that can lead us to achieve so dramatic a change in perspective. But his book is filled with stories of people who seem to have made this shift, and some of these models offer interesting possibilities. One of the most well known of these stories is the tale of Cook Ding, a lowly butcher who has perfected carcass carving to a high art. In the *Zhuangzi*, Cook Ding describes how the world appears to him when he practices his dance-like butchery:

When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now -- now I meet it with my spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are.

Another artistic master who appears in the book is a hunchback who has perfected the fine art of catching cicadas on the end of a pole with sticky grease smeared on it, a skill he performs in a clearing deep in the woods. Zhuangzi composes the following description of the hunchback’s experience:

I hold my body like a bent tree trunk and use my arm as an old dry limb. No matter how huge heaven and earth or how numerous the things of the world, I'm aware of nothing but cicada wings.

These exemplars seem to have found a way to re-perceive experience through the mastery of certain types of skill, and this may be one route that Zhuangzi is suggesting to guide us towards the new world perspective that escapes the prison that language has built for us. In another section, Zhuangzi has Confucius formulate the following regimen, called “the fasting of the mind,” for his disciple Yan Hui:

Make your will one. Don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, listen with your *qi*. Listening stops with the ears, the mind stops with recognition, but *qi* is empty and waits on all things. The Dao gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind.

Confucius's description seems to suggest some form of meditation practice – *qi* denotes a pervasive force of energy that animates living things – but the results look similar to the outcome of Cook Ding's more athletic performance of ox-carving.

These portraits of ways towards wisdom suggest that while Zhuangzi believes that our ideas about facts in the world are fundamentally distorted forms of knowledge, he does not hold a completely relativistic view of knowledge. Cook Ding and Zhuangzi's Confucius do seem to have reached some level of wisdom, but their knowledge seems to be of a very different kind from the knowledge people more ordinarily prize.

There is no single Zhuangzi syllabus that can compare to the elaborate ritual syllabus that Confucius devised for his school. But Zhuangzi does seem different from Laozi in trying to give concrete hints about the path to his vision of perfected wisdom.

Other major themes in the *Zhuangzi*

Sometimes the playful humor of Zhuangzi's writing and the cartoon-like simplicity of his tales hide the philosophical seriousness of his ideas. As his book twists its way through bizarre anecdotes and oddly phrased ruminations, Zhuangzi employs his central interest in picturing our knowledge and values as relative to explore a variety of interesting and important themes. Among these are the following:

1. *Relative magnitudes in time and space.* Zhuangzi uses the tale of the Peng Bird, which opens his book, to attack ordinary confidence in basic categories of dimension. He considers the different ways the world appears to very large and very small beings, and the different perspectives on life of short and long lived species. Ordinary human life exists in arbitrary dimensions of size and duration. Why should we believe that the human perspective has any intrinsic validity, and why should we not wonder whether we could experience the world from other standpoints?

2. *The emptiness of words.* Zhuangzi presents the most sophisticated analysis of the way language operates in all of Classical Chinese thought. In an extended and often dizzying series of arguments and prose experiments, Zhuangzi attempts to show not only the arbitrary way that words “slice up” the unity of the cosmos, but also the way our faith in words gradually undermines our sensitivity to lived experience. Several tales in the *Zhuangzi* claim that Zhuangzi was best friends with the most famous logician of the Classical period, a man named Huizi, who was a thinker in the relentlessly rational tradition of Mozi, a fifth century BCE figure. When Chuangzi and Huizi are portrayed in philosophical debate, Zhuangzi always emerges victorious (unsurprising: it’s his book). The interplay between these two does alert us to the fact that though Zhuangzi is the foremost advocate of the view that words and argument can only distort and never lead to knowledge, he nevertheless *argues* this point, and with skills that only Xunzi among early Chinese thinkers can match.

3. *The imperative of self-preservation.* The Daoist movement originally grew out of the impulse to escape from the dangers of Warring States society. Zhuangzi applies his concept of linking up with the Dao through skill mastery to picture the perfected social actor as the person who learns to dance towards self-preservation in every act, never allowing empty values such as loyalty, righteousness, or *ren* (the cardinal Confucian virtue of reciprocal moral empathy) to distract him from his main task of evading the dangers of the political world.

4. *The non-distinction between life and death.* Despite his commitment to self-preservation in the context of dangerous times, Zhuangzi claims that the line human beings draw between life and death is a non-natural one, and there is no reason for us to cling to life or fear death. The Dao embraces all as one, and once we come to view who we are only in terms of our participation in the Great Dao, we discard the illusion that somehow participation as a live human being is somehow more important or more desirable than participation as a rotting corpse fertilizing the fields, or in any of the endless forms that we may emerge as thereafter.

Zhuangzi

The Inner Chapters (1-7): A Note on the Text

The *Zhuangzi* is a book in 33 chapters, and it has long been recognized that these chapters seem to fall into groups; within each group, the chapters share an intellectual outlook and certain textual features, but the three groups are to some degree different in their orientations. The first of these groups, chapters 1-7, form the most coherent section of the text, and many would argue that this is also the most philosophically interesting section as well. These are called the “Inner Chapters”; chapters 8-22 are called the “Outer Chapters”; 23-33 are known as “Miscellaneous Chapters.” Some scholars believe that the Inner Chapters – and only these chapters (together with, perhaps, a few exceptional passages scattered in other sections) – may be the work of a single author: the person we know as Zhuangzi. There is, however, much variety of style and thought within these chapters as well, and it is possible that the *Zhuangzi* is at heart and in every section a multi-authored work.

However one construes the issue of authorship, it is possible to recognize that the Inner Chapters are not only the most outstanding in philosophical and literary terms, but that most of the seven chapters are also loosely organized in a topical progression:

Chapter 1 (Free and Easy Wandering) focuses on ideas of relativity and the limits of normal human perspectives;

Chapter 2 (Treatise on Making Things Equal) analyzes language in light of issues of relativity and demonstrates its unreliability in any quest for certainty;

Chapter 3 (The Pivot of Nurturing Life) concerns the experience of absolute certainty in action provided by skill mastery;

Chapter 4 (In the World of Man) discusses strategies and skills that allow for ease and success of action in the context of the human world of danger;

Chapter 5 (The Mark of Full Virtue) portrays the ideal human actor in terms of deviations from the norms of human expectations;

Chapter 6 (The Prime Master) concerns death and our mistaken belief that the divide between life and death is a form of absolute;

Chapter 7 (In Response to High Kings) appears to be a brief miscellany, its title derived from initial sections on formulas for effortless rule.

The translation here consists of the Inner Chapters along with a few added selections from other portions of the text.*

*It is not possible to render the *Zhuangzi* into English without being deeply influenced at every turn by the translations of Burton Watson and A.C. Graham, and their readings are reflected at so many points in this online teaching version that it is not possible to enumerate them. Naturally, Chinese commentary on the text also provided a fundamental interpretive resource. The two sources most frequently consulted were Guo Qingfan's *Zhuangzi jishi* (a standard collected commentary edition, first published in 1895) and Chen Guying's *Zhuangzi jinzhū jinyi* (1983).

Chapter 1

Free and Easy Wandering

1.1 *The Peng Bird*

In the dark sea of the north there is a fish; it is named the Kun. The Kun is so huge no one knows how many thousand *li* he measures. Changing, it becomes a bird; it is named the Peng, so huge no one knows how many thousand *li* he measures. Aroused, it soars aloft, its wings like clouds hung from the sky. As the sea shifts, it turns to set its course toward the dark sea of the south, the Pool of Heaven.

Kun means “roe,” or fish-egg, the tiniest form of fish. Beginnings are important: the location of the story of the Kun-fish / Peng-bird at the head of his book leads us to expect great meaning from it. What that meaning is has been debated for millennia. When you have read through this section on Zhuangzi, see whether you can imagine some possibilities. (Note: A *li* is a unit of measure, a length of approximately one-third mile.)

As a convention in this translation, Tian will generally be translated as “Heaven” (in the sense the sky it will not be capitalized).

The *Riddles of Qi* is a record of strange marvels. It tells us, “When the Peng sets its course toward the dark sea of the south, the beating of its wings roils the waters for three thousand *li*. It rises ninety thousand *li* stirring the wind into a gale that does not subside for sixth months.” Shimmering vapors, hovering dust, small breathing creatures blown to and fro in the wind – the blight blue of the sky: is that its true color, or merely the appearance of limitless distance? When the Peng looks down from above, is this what he sees as well?

The *Riddles of Qi* (the title is itself a riddle; Burton Watson translates quite differently: *Universal Harmony*) seems to be fictitious text. Why is Zhuangzi giving careful references to imaginary books?

Now, when water is not deep it lacks the strength to bear a big boat. Pour a cup of water into a hollow on the ground and a twig floats there like a boat, but if you set the cup down there it will sink to rest on the ground – the water is shallow so the boat’s too big. Just so, when air is not deep it lacks the strength to bear up great wings, and thus the Peng must soar upwards until, at ninety thousand *li*, the wind beneath is deep enough to bear it. Only then, bearing on its back the azure sky and free of all obstacles before it, can it at last set its course toward the south.

The style of speculation in this passage is very unusual in ancient China. The *Mozi* seems to pioneer the hypothetical thought experiment in ethics, but the *Zhuangzi* is applying this method to the natural world in a scientific manner, hypothesizing the buoyancy of air.

The cicada and the dove laugh at the Peng, saying, “When we take off with all our might we may reach the limb of an elm or a *fang* tree, or sometimes we’ll short and land back on the ground. What’s the point of soaring up ninety thousand *li* to fly south!” If you’re just hiking out as far as the green wilds beyond the fields, you can carry food for your three meals and return in the evening with a full stomach. If you’re going a hundred *li*, you’ll need a night’s worth of

grinding to prepare your grain. If you're going a thousand *li*, you'll be storing up provisions three months in advance. What do these two creatures understand?

Do you recall animals talking in the *Analects*, or in any of the other works we have read? What sort of world are we inhabiting here in the *Zhuangzi*?

Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long-lived. How can we know this is so? The morning mushroom can understand nothing of the alternation of night and day; the summer cicada can understand nothing of the progress of the seasons. Such are the short-lived. South of Chu one finds a lizard called the Dimspirit which counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. In high antiquity there grew a great rose that counted eight thousand years as one spring and eight thousand years as one autumn. Such are the long-lived – yet today Pengzu is the best known exemplar of longevity, whom crowds of men wish to equal. How pitiful!

Pengzu was a well-known legendary person whose name in folk tradition is comparable to Methuselah's in the West. Cults dedicated to the arts of longevity sprang up during the late Warring States era, and the *Zhuangzi* ridicules them here and at other points in the text.

The Questions of Tang to Ji records this as well. Tang questioned Ji saying, “Is there a limit to height or depth or to the four directions?”

The Questions of Tang to Ji (like the *Riddles of Qi*) seems to be an authoritative text invented by Zhuangzi, purporting to record conversations involving the Shang Dynasty founder Tang. Passages very close to the text here are found in the “Questions of Tang” chapter of the Daoist text *Liezi*, but that book is generally taken to be derivative of the *Zhuangzi*. In any event, the *Zhuangzi* here seems to be providing a second version of the opening tale of his book, perhaps parodying scholarly pedantry by documenting in duplicate the facticity of a fantasy.

Ji replied, “Beyond the limits of the limitless lies a further limitlessness. In the bald and barren north there is a dark sea. This is the Pool of Heaven. There is a fish there that is thousands of *li* wide – none has ever discovered its length. Its name is Kun. A bird lives there; its name is Peng. Its back is like Mount Tai and its wings are like clouds hung from the sky. It spirals upward ninety thousand *li*, stirring the wind into a gale. Breaking through the clouds and bearing on its back the azure sky, and it can at last set its course toward the south. Breaking through the clouds and mist, bearing on its back the azure sky, it sets its course for the south and heads for the dark sea of the south.”

The quail laughs at it saying, “Just where does he think he's going? I bound with a leap and fly up – perhaps twenty feet, never higher – but then I come down to flap around among the bushes and brambles. That's the epitome of flying, yes indeed! Now, where does he think he's going?”

Such is the difference between big and small.

A man who knows enough to fill some office, or whose conduct is the standard in some village, or whose talents match the taste of some lord whose domain he is called upon to manage, sees himself as the measure precisely like the quail. How heartily Song Rongzi would laugh at such a one! Song Rongzi could not be persuaded by the whole world's approval nor deterred by the whole world's objection. To him, the line between the internal and external was set, and the

distinction between noble and shameful conduct was simply clear as could be. Nothing in the world could stir anxiety within him. And yet there were levels he did not reach.

Song Rongzi is a name associated with a Warring States thinker who may have been a Mohist, but it is unclear whether this is supposed to be the same man. Does he resemble a Mohist here?

Now Liezi, he mounted the wind as his chariot and drove it with skill for fifteen days before returning. No matter of fortune could stir anxiety within him. But still, although he escaped the trouble of walking, he was still dependent on something.

Liezi appears several times in the *Zhuangzi*, but the portraits of him do not seem consistent. His name was given to a text that draws heavily from the *Zhuangzi*, as mentioned above.

He who mounts the balance of Heaven and Earth, rides on the changes of the six *qi*, and wanders the inexhaustible – what would such a man be dependent on? Thus it is said: the Perfect Man lacks all self; the Spirit-like Man lacks all merit; the Sage lacks all fame.

In this passage, the term *qi* denotes vapors or forces that flow through the world. One traditional commentary identifies the six *qi* as *yin* and *yang*, wind and rain, darkness and light; another claims they are Heaven, Earth, and the four seasons. The exact formula cannot be determined and is, in any event, less interesting than the fact that the term *qi* may equally denote essential forces of the cosmos and of the body.

1.2 Yao and Xu You

Yao ceded the empire to Xu You. “A small torch burning on after the sun is out finds making the day brighter a difficult task indeed. A man who keeps on irrigating fields after the seasonal rains have come finds making the crops richer tedious indeed. If you, sir, once took the throne, thereupon would the world be in order. Yet I like an imposter continue in charge, despite seeing my own inadequacy. I beg to turn the world over to you.”

Xu You said, “You rule the world and the world is already well ruled. Would I want to replace you for reputation’s sake? Reputation is merely the guest of reality – would I want to play the guest? When a wren builds its nest, although the woods may be deep it uses no more than one branch. When a mole goes to drink though it goes to a river it fills its belly and drinks no more. Go home and let the matter drop, my lord! I have no use for the world. Though the cook may not manage his job well, the sacrificial priest doesn’t leap over the altar wine and meats to take his place.”

The final phrases suggest that quite apart from Yao’s adequacy as a ruler, we are to understand Xu You as attending to things much weightier than merely ruling the world. We know nothing of Xu You, but the Emperor Yao we have met before many times as a legendary founder of Chinese civilization and a great hero of Confucianism. Who is the hero for *Zhuangzi*? What sort of values do Xu You and Yao each represent?

1.3 *The immortal on the mountaintop*

Jian Wu questioned Lian Shu saying, “I’ve been talking to Jie Yu, and he speaks nothing but tall tales that go on and on without making sense or coming to a point. I found it most alarming – his nonsense stretched on endless as the Milky Way, veering every which way, completely at odds with human commonsense!”

Jie Yu is the “Carriage Greeter” whom we met in the *Analects* (passage 18.5) There he is a “madman of Chu” who crosses the path of Confucius’s carriage and intones a poem urging him to heed the dangers of the time and withdraw (in the manner of the other hermits encountered in Book 18). There is little reason to think he is an historical figure; how is it that the same fictional character turns up in both texts? The others here are certainly fictional as well (we meet Jian Wu and Jie Yu again in section 7.2).

“Why, what did he say?” asked Lian Shu.

“He says that far way on Guyi Mountain there dwells a spirit-like man with skin like icy snow, lovely and chaste as a virgin. He eats no grain, but sucks the wind and drinks the dew. He mounts the *qi* of the clouds and wanders beyond the four seas riding a flying dragon. By concentrating his spirit he protects things from illness and damage, and ripens the fall harvest. So I refuse to believe the crazy things he says.”

Lian Shu replied, “Just so. They say a blind man just can’t take in beautiful patterns, nor a deaf man the music of bell and drum. And it’s not only the physical body that suffers from blindness and deafness – understanding may as well. That perfectly characterizes a man such as you! But a man such as he, with virtue such as his, can roll the world of things into one. Though all in the world seek a way out of its chaos, what business is it of his that he should wear himself down with responsibility for the world? Nothing can harm such a man. Though flood waters rise to the sky, he will not drown. Though a great drought melt metal and stone and scorch the soil and the mountains, he will not be burned. From the mere dirt and dust his body sheds you could mold a Yao or a Shun! Why should he agree to take on responsibility for the world?”

1.4 *The hat salesman of Song*

There was a man from Song who sold ceremonial hats of the ancient style for a living, and he traveled to market his goods among the Yue peoples of the south. But the Yue peoples wear their hair cut short and tattoo their bodies – they had no use for his hats.

The Emperor Yao set the people of the world in order and unified governance throughout the lands within the seas. Then he traveled to visit the Four Masters who lived on distant Guyi Mountain north beyond the River Fen, and in bewilderment he lost track of the world he possessed.

The state of Song was proverbially the home of dolts, perhaps a Zhou prejudice against the Shang people, whose descendants lived there (some commentators believe the hats in question were Shang ritual hats). How does the misguided enterprise of the hat salesman relate to the predicament of Yao?

1.5 *Huizi's gourd*

According to legend and many passages in this text, Zhuangzi's closest friend was a man named Huizi. Huizi was a famous man of fourth century BCE China. His name was Hui Shi, and he was a logician – one of the few in Chinese history – who seems to have held Mohist beliefs. The brilliance of Hui Shi's logical powers is frequently mentioned, but of his writings, only a few fragmentary paradoxes survive (we encountered these in our earlier reading on logic; a number of them very much resemble the paradoxes of the Greek thinker Zeno). In the *Zhuangzi*, he is recognizably the same clever logician, but Zhuangzi always seems to make him appear ridiculous. It is interesting to ask whether these stories, in which Zhuangzi himself appears, referred to by his honorific title (Master Zhuang), could have been written by Zhuangzi – Zhuang Zhou – himself.

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “The King of Wei gave me a seed from a huge gourd. I plant it and the fruit ripened into gourds that weighed half a ton. I used one for a sauce jug and it was too heavy to lift; I split another into a ladle and there was no room in the house to set it down. It isn't that their size wasn't wonderful, but I saw they were useless so I smashed them to pieces.”

Zhuangzi said, “You are certainly clumsy when it comes to making use of what is big! There was once a man from Song who was skilled at making ointment for chapped hands. For generations, his family had made their living by washing raw silk. A traveler happened to hear of it and offered to purchase the formula for a hundred catties of gold. The man called his family into conference and said, ‘For generations we've made our living washing silk and never earned more than a few pieces gold. Now we can sell our formula and earn a hundred catties of gold in an instant. Let's give it to him!’ Once the traveler had the formula, he went to the court of Wu to persuade the king to use it in dealing with his troublesome neighbor state of Yue. The king put him in command of his forces to engage Yue's navy in a midwinter river battle and the forces of Yue were routed. The King of Wu carved a slice from his newly gained territory and rewarded the traveler with a fief. The traveler and the silk washer were alike in possessing the formula of preventing chapped hands; one used it to gain a fief, the other to wash silk – it was in the use of the thing that they differed.

“Now you have a half-ton gourd: why didn't you think of making it into a big boat and sailing the rivers and lakes, instead of worrying about having room in the house to set it down? Really – your mind is no better than a tumbleweed!”

1.6 *Huizi's ailanthus tree*

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “I have a huge tree of the type people call an ailanthus. The main trunk is gnarled and knotted from the root up, you can't align it with a plumb line, and the branches are all so twisted and bent that no compass or square can mark them. Even if it were growing by the roadside no passing carpenter would think of using it. Now, your words are just as big and useless, so everyone spurns them too!”

Zhuangzi said, “Have you ever observed the wildcat? It crouches concealed and waits for its prey to wander in range – then it springs left or right, heedless of heights and chasms. And yet wildcats spring our traps and die in our nets. Or take the yak, big as a cloud hung from the sky – it's skilled at being huge, but it can't even catch a rat. Now you have this big tree but its uselessness is a trouble to you. Why don't you plant it in the village of Nothing-at-All or the plain of Broad-Void and amble beside it doing nothing at all, or wander free and easy lying asleep beneath it? No

ax will ever cut short its life, nothing will ever harm it. If there's no use for it, what hardship could ever befall it?"

Most of the tales in the *Zhuangzi* are parables; that is, they are stories about small events or ideas with much greater implications. This discussion with Huizi is particularly famous for the final phrases, the implications of which are very important to Daoism, and resonate in the tale of Crippled Shu which appears in section 4.6.

Chapter 2 Treatise on Making Things Equal

The second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* begins and ends with famous and relatively straightforward anecdotes, but the long central sections are among the most philosophically challenging in all of Chinese literature and have attracted and puzzled very learned thinkers of many cultures.

2.1: Nanguo Ziqi and the pipes of heaven and earth

Nanguo Ziqi sat leaning upon his armrest. He looked up at the sky and sighed in a dazed manner, as though he had lost his double.

Yancheng Ziyu stood in attendance before him. “What is this?” he said. “Can one truly make one’s form like a withered tree. Can one truly make one’s mind like dead ashes? The man who is reclining here now is not the one who was reclining here before!”

Ziqi said, “Well may you ask such a question. Just now, I lost myself – you understand? You may have heard the pipes of man but not the pipes of earth; you may have heard the pipes of earth but not the pipes of heaven.”

“May I inquire the method for this?”

Ziqi replied, “The Great Clod belches forth *qi*: it is called by the name Wind. It has no point of arising, but having arisen, the myriad hollows begin to howl. Have you never heard their long drawn cry?

“The twistings of the mountain woods, the caverns of great trees a hundred spans round – like nostrils, like mouths, like ears, like sockets, like bowls, like mortars, like gullies, like pools: rushing, shooting, roaring, sucking, shouting, moaning, chortling, wailing. The first gust cries out *hoooo*, the winds that follow cry out *ooooh*. A small harmony in a tinkling breeze becomes the grand chorus of a whirlwind.

“When the fierce wind is past all the hollows are left empty – haven’t you noticed their trailing cries?”

Ziyu said, “By the pipes of earth you mean the hollows; by the pipes of man you mean the braces of bamboo flutes. May I inquire about the pipes of heaven?”

Ziqi replied, “They whistle through the myriads of different things and let each be like itself, each taking all that is appropriate to each – but who is it who blows them?”

2.2: The withering of the heart

Great understanding is broad,
small understanding is picky.

Great words overflowing,
small words haggling.

Asleep the bodily soul goes roaming,
awake it opens through our form.

Our day by day encounters
become the wrangling of our hearts –
overgrown, encaverned, dense.

Small fear all startled,

great fear spreading out.

“Shooting forth as from the trigger of a crossbow” –
such are judgments, “that’s so, that’s not.”

“Kept like an oath or a treaty” –
such is the way we hold fast to prevailing.

“Its death is as by autumn or winter” –
describing its daily deterioration; what drowns it cannot revive it.

“It is engulfed as though sealed up” –
describing its desiccation in age; the heart near death cannot be returned to *yang*.*

The final series appears to apply clichés of common speech to descriptions of the workings of the *xin*; the “heart” or “mind” – a single Chinese term denotes both affective and cognitive dimensions of the sentient function that in English are distinguished by two terms. (See the online [Glossary](#). Some translators render *xin* as “heart-mind.”)

Pleasure, anger, sorrow, joy, forethought, regret, change, stubbornness, ease and dissipation: these are like music emerging from air or mists congealing into mushrooms. Day and night they revolve before us and none knows whence they spring. Enough! Enough! It is the very coming of them, dawn and dusk, from which they are born.

2.3: *The true self and its fate*

This section begins a series of closely analytic exercises that bring into question the status of the self, the possibility of knowledge, and the nature of meaning. The Dao is framed as a perspective that escapes these questions. In 2.3, the examination begins from the self as an embodied identity. (This portion of the text extends through section 2.15; it is the philosophical core of the chapter, and some would say of the “Inner Chapters” as a whole.)

“Without ‘other’ there is no ‘me’; without ‘me’ there is no reference point” – this certainly comes close to it, but we don’t yet know what brings ‘me’ about. It appears that there is something truly in control, but we just can’t find a trace of it. It can act itself out, true enough, but we cannot see its form – it possesses a true nature but lacks form.

The hundred joints; the nine orifices, the six organs, all these are complete within – which do we take as closest kin? Are you pleased with them all, or partial to one? Do they all take parts as servants and consorts? But they would be unable to rule one another in this way. Do they take turns acting as ruler and subject or is there one who abides as a true ruler? Though we may fail to seek out its true nature, that has no bearing on whether it truly is there or not.

Once we have received its completed form we can never lose awareness of it all the time we await its extinction. It grinds itself down against things and races towards its end at a gallop, none can stop it – how sad!

**Yang* here denotes health. The underlying concept relates to the dualistic model of *yin* and *yang*, which comes to have a pervasive influence on Chinese cosmology. *Yin* and *yang* stand in for a string of dyadic relations based on polarities of dark/light, female/male, wet/dry, soft/hard, and so forth. *Yang* represents forces associated with male qualities, among which is youthful health, which the text draws on here.

To the end of its days it labors without ever seeing any accomplishment; all hemmed in, it labors to exhaustion without ever knowing where it shall return to in the end – is this not sorrowful! Men call this immortality: what’s the use of it? As the form changes so the heart changes with it: can this not be called great sorrow?

Is man’s life inherently befuddled in this way, or is it I alone who am befuddled while there are others who are not?

2.4: *The fully formed mind and judgment*

The chapter now turns to the status of the *xin* (mind).

As for following one’s fully formed mind and taking it as a teacher – who is without such a teacher? But why must one first understand alternatives? The mind can spontaneously select, and even the ignorant have such a mind.

That there should be judgments of “that’s so; that’s not” before alternatives are fully formed in the mind is akin to the old saying about “going to Yue today and arriving yesterday”^{*} – this is taking what is not for what is. To take what is not for what is: though one be the spirit-like Yu^{**} one could not understand this, and whatever could I make of it?

^{*}One of Hui Shi’s paradoxes.

^{**}The legendary founder of the Xia Dynasty

2.5: *Daos and words*

Pronounced sayings are not just puffs of wind – sayings consist of things said – it is only that what their words refer to has not been fixed. Do they really say anything? Have they never said anything? We think our speech is different from the chirping of baby birds, but is there a real distinction, or is there none?

How do *daos* come to be obscured, such that they are subject to judgments of “authentic” or “inauthentic?” How do spoken words come to be obscured, such that they are subject to judgments of “true” or “false?” How can a *dao* be walked and not really exist? How can words exist and be “unallowable?”^{*}

^{*}‘Allowable’ and ‘unallowable’ are technical terms of early Chinese philosophy of language. They indicate whether a verbal phrase possesses coherent meaning.

In this section, I am following the lead of Chad Hansen, who has argued the cogency of reading the word *dao* in the plural in passages such as this one (ancient Chinese does not generally distinguish singular and plural nouns). In the reading here, the text works with two overlapping notions of the term: the Dao – a notion of some universal order or perspective – and a *dao*, a teaching, path, or skillful practice (for Hansen this would be a primarily pattern of naming – a lived-through language – rather than a skill). There is a contemporary debate concerning the degree to which the text stakes out an absolute relativist stance in this and surrounding chapters: do all *daos* lead to “the Dao?” Is there no overarching Dao at all? This translation sees the text as promoting *daos* that have not been undermined by patterns of assertion and denial (for example, “My *dao* [teaching] is *the* Dao [Great Way]”) as “authentic” and providing access routes to a sustained experience of action in the world – not a “thing” – referred to as the “Dao.”

It is that *daos* become obscured in minor perfections; words become obscured in flowery speech. Thus it is that you have Confucians and Mohists, each with their own “this is it” and “this is not.” What is “it” for the one is “not” for the other.

If you would affirm their denials and deny their affirmations, view them in the light.

The phrases “this is it” and “that is not,” which appear in several formulations in this chapter, refer to verbal assertions and denials about “facts” in the world, an interpretation of the text’s unusual and difficult use of these phrases that was developed by A.C. Graham. The relation between single terms (nouns) and “things,” and between sentences about the world of things (assertions / denials) and the world as it is, is the central problem of the chapter.

2.6: On the relativity of assertion and denial

There is nothing that is not a “that”; there is nothing that is not a “this.” One cannot see oneself as a “that,” but if one knows oneself, one knows what it is to be an other. That is why it is said, “That arises from this, and this also relies on a that.” This is the explanation of how this and that are born in the same instant.

The close analysis of the function of language begins with this examination of the relativity of pronouns.

However, “The instant one is born one is dying”^{*} – and the instant one dies one is being born; the instant we allow we prohibit; the instant we prohibit we allow; to rely on what we assert is to rely on what we deny; to rely on what we deny is to rely on what we assert.

So the Sage does not proceed by this path. He lays all open to the light of heaven – and yet saying this is also to assert a “this is so.”

^{*}The quoted paradox is attributed to Hui Shi in the final chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

“Opening to the light” here signals that in addition to its skepticism about the possibility of knowledge gained through assertion and denial, the chapter will also propose a positive view about how knowledge – some kind of certain knowledge – can be attained. But even here, as the notion of seeing things in a new and certain light is introduced, the text alerts us to exercise our own skepticism, since the idea is, after all, being “asserted.”

2.7: Escaping relativity through the non-assertion

A this is a that; a that is a this. That implies one set of assertions and denials; this implies another set of assertions and denials. After all, is there this and that or, after all, is there no this and that? When neither this nor that possesses its double it is called the pivot of the Dao.

The pivot first grasps the center of the ring and thereby responds without end. Asserting “this” is one endlessness; denying it is another endlessness. That is why I say, “Nothing is better than opening to the light.”

Rather than use meaning to argue “the meaning is not the meaning,” use “not the meaning” to argue “the meaning is not the meaning.” Rather than use horse to argue “a horse is not horse,” use “not horse” to argue “a horse is not horse.”^{*} Heaven and earth are one meaning; the things of the world are one horse.

^{*}These are references to Logicians’ paradoxes.

2.8: *Dividing through assertion; uniting through practice*

“Allowable” lies in allowing; “unallowable” lies in not allowing. A *dao* is created as we walk it; things become so as they are referred to. Wherein are they so? In being affirmed as so. Wherein are they not so? In being denied as so. Things inherently are in some way so, things inherently are in some way allowable. There is no thing that is not so, no thing that is not allowable.

We contrive an asserted “this is so” and distinguish a stalk from a pillar, a leper from the beauty Xi Shi. But with the grandness of the bizarre, the Dao comprehends them together as one.

When the one is divided, things are brought to completion, and in being brought to completion, the one is destroyed. When things are not subject to completion or destruction, they are once again comprehended as one. Only the man of attainment knows how to comprehend them as one. He asserts no “this is so.” His assertion is lodged in ordinary practice. Ordinary practice means use; use is comprehension; to comprehend is to grasp – once you grasp it, you’re nearly there! Reliance on assertion ends, and when it ends and you do not even know it is so – that is called *dao*.

The final word here may be construed with equal cogency as denoting “an authentic *dao*” or “the Dao.” References to “the one” in this section could equally well be rendered “the One,” denoting either a holistic experience of *dao*-guided action without any instrumental goal or the intrinsic holism of all the experienced world (echoed in 2.10 below).

2.9: *Three in the morning*

To wear out one’s spirit-like powers contriving some view of oneness without understanding that it is all the same is called “three in the morning.” What do I mean by “three in the morning?”

A monkey keeper was handing out nuts. “You get three in the morning and four in the evening,” he said. All the monkeys were furious. “All right,” he said. “You get four in the morning and three in the evening.” The monkeys were all delighted.

There was no discrepancy between the words and the reality yet contentment and anger were stirred thereby – it is just thus with assertions of “this is so.”

Therefore, the Sage brings all into harmony through assertion and denial but rests it upon the balance of heaven: this is called “walking a double path.”

2.10: *Transcending perfection and imperfection*

The knowledge of the ancients reached the limit. What was the limit? There were those who believed that no thing had yet begun to be. The limit! Exhausted! Nothing to add! The next believed there was something, but there had not yet begun to be boundaries. The next believed there were boundaries, but there had not yet begun to be an affirmable “this” or deniable “that.” It is in the patterns of affirmation and denial that a *dao* becomes imperfect. The source of this imperfection is what brings to perfection attachment. But after all, is there perfection and imperfection or is there not?

Let us say that there is perfection and imperfection. This is like the master lute player Zhao Wen playing the lute.* Let us say that there is truly neither perfection nor imperfection. This would

be like the master lute player Zhao not playing the lute. Zhao Wen playing the lute, Music Master Kuang beating the time, Hui Shi leaning on the *wutong* tree: the knowledge of these three men was close to perfection. It flourished in them, and they bore their knowledge to the end of their days. Only, different from others in their love of their knowledge, from love of their knowledge came a wish to enlighten others. But they enlightened others by means of that which was not the means of enlightenment, and thus Hui Shi ended with the darkness of logical disputations, and in the case of Zhao Wen, in the end his own son was left with merely the strings of the lute. And so, in the end, these masters achieved no perfection after all. If what they achieved was perfection, then even I have perfection. And if such as they cannot be said to have achieved perfection, then neither have I nor has any thing.

*We do not have fuller reliable information on Zhao Wen or his story. For the following examples, Music Master Kuang was a musician of Lu in Confucius's time, and Hui Shi (Huizi) was a famous logician and Zhuangzi's friend.

We cannot fully interpret this paragraph without knowing the legend of Zhao Wen, what problem with Music Master Kuang the text leaves unstated, or the full context of the reference to Hui Shi and the *wutong* tree (though the image reappears in section 5.6, apparently with a different import). But all three are pictured here positively as masters of some art who, in some manner, distorted that art in attempting to convey it to others. We are on safe ground in stating that in Hui Shi's case, and perhaps therefore in all three cases, this involved words, which may then be the problem the voice of the text ascribes to itself, returning to the idea expressed at the end of section 2.6.

Thus the Sage sees by the glimmer of chaos and doubt. He does not affirm of anything: "this is it"; his affirmation is lodged in ordinary practice. This is to view things in the light.

2.11: *An experiment in different levels of language*

Now I am about to make a statement. I don't know whether it is in the same category as assertions that are so or not in the same category as assertions that are so. "Being in the same category" and "not being in the same category" both belong to a single category type, hence the statement is actually no different from its contrary.

Nevertheless, let me state it.

There is that which has begun; there is that which has not yet begun to begin; there is that which has not yet begun to begin to begin. There is that which is; there is that which is not; there that which has not yet begun to be that which is not; there is that which has not yet begun to begin to be that which is not. Suddenly, there is that which is not, but I don't yet know whether being that which is not is being or not being.

Now I have said something, but I don't yet know whether what I have said has actually said anything or whether it has actually not said anything.

2.12: *Critique of the monistic paradoxes**

“Nothing in the world is bigger than the tip of a strand of hair sprouting in autumn, and Mount Tai is small.”

“None is longer lived than one who dies as a baby, and Pengzu died young.”

“Heaven and earth were born together with me and the ten thousand things of the world and I are one.”

Now that we are all one, can I still say anything? Now that I have called us all one, can I have not said anything? One plus speech is two; two plus one is three. If we proceed on from this even an expert calculator cannot reach the end of it, how much less a common man?

Hence we can go from nothing to something and then to three; how much further may we go if we start by going from something to something?

Do not take this step – the reliance on an asserted “this is so” will come to an end.

*A number of the paradoxes that appear in this section are attributed elsewhere to Hui Shi.

2.13: *The limits of speech*

The Dao has never begun to possess boundaries and words have never yet begun to possess constancy. Once a “this is so” has been contrived there are boundaries.

Let me name these boundaries. There is recording and there is not recording; there is discussing and there is judging; there is distinguishing and there is debate; there is competing and there is wrangling. These are called the eight virtues. What lies beyond the realm of the six directions, the sage records but does not discuss. What lies within the realm of the six directions the sage discusses but does not judge. The *Spring and Autumn Annals* chronicles the records of the former kings; the sage judges but does not debate.

The *Spring and Autumn Annals* is the chronicled court records of the state of Lu, which later came to be viewed as a wisdom book in which Confucius, as editor, had inscribed hints pointing to full moral understanding of the past. (It is also possible that this reference is actually only to “court chronicles,” which were generically known as “spring and autumn annals.”) The final sentence appears to cite and parody a Confucian hermeneutic “reading rule” concerning the text, another example of the text using humor unexpectedly and thus ironically undermining its own “assertions.”

2.14: *Escaping the infinite regress of adjudication**

Now let’s say that you and I debate. If you prevail over me and I do not prevail over you, does that mean that what you say is so and what I say is not? If I prevail over you and you do not prevail over me, does that mean that what I say is so and what you say is not? Or is it that one of us is right and one of us wrong? Or are both of us right or both of us wrong? If you and I are both unable to know, then others will become muddled as we are.

Whom shall we call upon to put it right? Shall we call upon one who agrees with you? But if he agrees with you, how can he put it right? Shall we call upon one who agrees with me? But if he agrees with me, how can he put it right? Shall we call upon one who differs with both you and

me? But if he differs with both you and me, how can he put it right? Shall we call upon one who agrees with both you and me? But if he agrees with both you and me, how can he put it right?

Thus you and I and these others all cannot know – shall we await yet another? Harmonize all of these by the horizon of heaven. Relying on it to stretch forward is the way to live out your full lifespan; forgetting the years, forgetting all judgments, stirring within the boundless.

What do I mean by the horizon of heaven? It is to say, assert what is not true; affirm what is not so. Were what is true so different from what is false, there would be no arguments; were what is so that different from what is not, there would be no arguments. The mutual dependence of shifting voices is the same as if they were not mutually dependent.

Therefore lodge all this in the boundless.

*There are difficulties with the ordering of the text at this point. I have located section 2.14 here following Graham rather than Watson and Chen.

2.15: *The non-verbal Storehouse of Heaven*

Hence amidst distinctions there is that which is not distinguished; among that which may be debated there is that which is not debated. Why? What the sages cherish the mass of men debate over to show off to each other. Thus it is said, “Those who debate do not see.”

The great Dao is not named; great debate is not spoken; great *ren* is not *ren*; great honesty is not modest; great valor is not aggressive. When the Dao shines bright none follow it; when words are precise they fail to convey; when *ren* is constant it is imperfect; when honesty is pure it is not trusted; when valor is aggressive it does not prevail. These five are round yet almost match the square.

Hence when one knows to dwell within what one does not know, one reaches the limit. Who understands the debate without words, the Dao that is not uttered? If there is one who can have such understanding, it may be known as the Storehouse of Heaven. Pour into it and it is never full; pour out from it and it is never exhausted – yet who knows where it comes from? This is called preserving the brilliance.

2.16: *Yao and Shun: the power of light*

Yao once asked Shun, “I wish to punish the states of Zong, Kuai, and Xu’ao, as I sit uneasy on my throne. What is the cause of this?”

“These three rulers,” Shun replied, “are still living in the midst of brambles. Why should they make you uneasy? Of old, ten suns rose together and the things of the world were all illuminated. How much more true of virtue that approaches the brilliance of the sun?”

2.17: *Nie Que and Wang Ni: going beyond species understanding*

Nie Que asked Wang Ni, “Do you know of something that all agree in affirming?”

“How would I know that?” replied Wang Ni.

“Do you know what you do not know?”

“How would I know that?” replied Wang Ni.

“Then do you know nothing?”

“How would I know that?” replied Wang Ni. “Nevertheless, let me state this. How do I know that what I term knowledge is not in fact ignorance? How do I know that what I term ignorance is not in fact knowledge?”

“Moreover, let me ask this of you. When a man sleeps in the damp, his waist pains him and one side loses all sensation. Is that so of the loach? When he dwells in a tree he trembles in terror. Is that so of the ape? Which of these three knows the proper place to dwell? Men eat grain-fed beasts; deer eat grasses; centipedes relish snakes; owls and crows have a taste for mice. Which of these four has the proper sense of taste? Apes mate with other monkeys, deer couple with deer, loaches roam alongside fish. Lady Li and Lady Mao were beauties in the eyes of men, but when fish saw them they swam down to the depths, when birds saw them they flew high, when deer saw them they bolted away at a gallop. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world?”

“As I see things, the sprouts of *ren* and righteousness, the paths of what is so and what is not, are all hopelessly confused. How could I know the distinctions between them?”

Nie Que said, “If you do not know benefit from harm, then the True Man surely does not know benefit from harm!”

“The True Man is spirit-like,” said Wang Ni. “Were the great lakes to burn he would not feel the heat; were the Yellow River and the River Han to freeze he would not feel the cold. Were terrific thunder to rend the mountains and whirlwinds stir up the seas he would not be startled. One like this would ride the *qi* of the clouds as his carriage and mount the sun and moon. He would wander beyond the four seas. Death, life: these would make no change in him – how much less the sprouts of benefit and harm!”

2.18: *Ququezi and Changwuzi: the sagely conundrum*

Ququezi inquired of Changwuzi saying, “I have heard it from the Master that he regarded as wild and excessive teachings that hold that the Sage does not strive towards any goal, does not pursue benefit or evade harm, takes no pleasure in seeking for things and does not stick to the Dao; that when he is silent he is speaking and when he is speaking he is silent, and that he roams beyond the world of dust. But I regard these as the practice of the marvelous Dao. What do you think, sir?”

Changwuzi replied, “Such teachings would have confounded even the Yellow Emperor; how could Qiu ever understand them! And you are making your own plans far too early – at the sight of a hen’s egg you’re waiting for cock crow, at the sight of a pellet of shot you’re expecting roast pheasant.

“Now I’m going to speak some wild words to you; listen to them wildly, too.

Why not lean on the sun and moon,
with time and space tucked under your arm?
Make a perfect fit
by setting up random disorder.
Honoring one another as slaves
the mass of men are ever laboring.
The Sage is ignorant and dumb,
the match of ten thousand years, a simple lump.
Thus it is with all things of the world,
and thereby are they generated.

“How do I know that delight in life is not a confusion? How do I know that in hating death we are not little ones who have lost our way home? Lady Li was the daughter of a border officer of Ai. She was first taken as a mate for the ruler of Jin, her tears coursed down upon her garments. But once she reached the king’s palace, shared the bed of the king’s chamber, and eaten the meat of grain-fed beasts, she repented of her tears. How do I know that the dead do not repent of their former prayers for life?”

“He who dreams of drinking wine weeps when he awakes; he who dreams that he is weeping is off to the hunt at dawn. When he dreamt he did not know it was a dream, and in his dream he may even divine about a dream he dreams he dreamt; only waking will he know it was a dream.

“There will come a great awakening and only then shall we know the great dream that all this is. Yet the ignorant are sure that they’re awake, sure as sure can be! This one’s a ruler, that one’s a shepherd – they’re absolutely certain of it!

“Qiu and you, you’re just dreams, and my telling you that you’re a dream is a dream too. This teaching he told you about is called a conundrum. If one sage in ten thousand generations understands it, it’s like encountering him in the space of a day.”

*Qiu refers to “the Master.” It is Confucius’s personal name. Use of it here implies great disrespect, by the author as much as by Changwuzi.

2.19: *Penumbra and shadow*

The penumbra questioned the shadow. “Just now you were moving, now you’ve stopped. Just now you were sitting, now you’re up. How is it you’ve no settled control?”

The shadow answered, “Is it because there is something upon which I depend, or that what I depend on has something upon which it depends too? Am I dependent on a snake’s sloughed skin or a locust’s tossed away wings? How can I tell why I am as I am? How can I tell why I’m not as I’m not?”

2.20: *The butterfly dream*

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting gaily.* He knew nothing of Zhou. Suddenly, he awoke, and all at once he was Zhou. But he didn’t know whether Zhou had dreamt he was a butterfly or a butterfly was dreaming he was Zhou. Surely there is a difference between Zhou and a butterfly – this is what we call the transformation of things!

*Zhou was Zhuangzi’s personal name. The text adds at this point, “Was he conveying to himself his own wishes?” This is almost certainly a later commentary insertion and I have omitted it.

Chapter 3

The Pivot of Nurturing Life

A small selection of sections from the Outer Chapters is appended at the end of Chapter 3. Chapter 3 is unusually brief and commentators have speculated that portions of it may have dropped out of the text. The additional sections amplify, with some different perspectives, some of the themes developed in section 3.2, the tale of Cook Ding.

3.1 *Living the full span*

Our life spans are bounded, but knowledge knows no bounds. Chase the boundless with the bounded and you will wear yourself out – those who persist will just fall in exhaustion.

Stay clear of fame if you do good, of the jailer's knife if you do bad. Take the natural middle as your steady path and you can preserve your body and fulfill your life, nurture your kin and live your full span.

This short introductory paragraph may have set a broad theme, or it may provide specific context for the tale of Cook Ding. The “natural middle” it refers to is an obscure and poorly understood term that one great seventeenth century commentator noted could refer in medicine to the axis of the spine, which remains balanced in meditation.

3.2 *The tale of Cook Ding*

Cook Ding was carving an ox carcass for Lord Wenhui. With each touch of his hand, heave of his shoulder, step of his feet, thrust of his knee – whop! wish! – he wielded his knife with a whoosh, and every move was in rhythm. It was as though he were performing the Dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping to the beat of the Constant Source music.

“Ah, marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Surely this is the acme of skill!”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What your servant loves, my lord, is the Dao, and that is a step beyond skill.

“At the beginning, when I first began carving up oxen, all I could see was the whole carcass. After three years I could no longer see the carcass whole, and now I meet it with my spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding cease and spirit moves as it will. I follow the natural form: slicing the major joints I guide the knife through the big hollows, and by conforming to the inherent contours, no vessels or tendons or tangles of sinews – much less the big bones – block my blade in the least.

“A good cook changes his knife once a year, but this is mere slicing. An ordinary cook changes his knife once a month, because he hacks. I've been using this knife now for nineteen years; it has carved thousands of oxen, yet the blade is as sharp as one fresh off the grindstone. You see, there are gaps between these joints, but the blade edge has no thickness. If a knife with no thickness moves into a gap, then it's wide as need be and the blade wanders freely with plenty of leeway. That's why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is as sharp as one fresh off the grindstone.

“But nevertheless, whenever a tangled knot lies ahead, I spot the challenge and on the alert I focus my sight and slow down my hand – then I flick the blade with the slightest of moves, and before you know it the carcass has fallen apart like earth crumbling to the ground. I stand with

knife raised and face all four directions in turn, prancing in place with complete satisfaction. Then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“How fine!” said Lord Wenhui. “Listening to the words of Cook Ding, I have learned how to nurture life!”

The tale of Cook Ding is in some respects the central tale of the Zhuangzi. It belongs to a set of stories that are sometimes referred to as the “knack passages” of the text. In these tales, individuals penetrate to a state of some sort of unity with the Dao by means of the performance of some thoroughly mastered skill, which they have acquired through long practice of an art (which may be called a *dao*, as in “the *dao* of archery,” and so forth). The passages celebrate the power of spontaneously performed skill mastery to provide communion with the spontaneous processes of Nature.

3.3 The Commander of the Right

Wengong Xuan saw the Commander of the Right and cried out in surprise, “What sort of man is this! How is it that he is one-footed? Was this the doing of Heaven or of man?”

The Commander of the Right replied, “This is Heaven’s doing, not man’s. It was the life that Heaven gave me that caused me to lose my foot. The appearance of a person is bestowed upon him by Heaven, so you can be sure this was the work of Heaven and not man.”

3.4 The wild marsh pheasant

The marsh pheasant must walk ten paces for every sip it takes and a hundred paces for every long drink. Yet it would never wish to be well nurtured within a cage – though it were treated like a king, its spirit would never be content.

3.5 The death of Lao Dan

When Lao Dan (Laozi) died, Qin Yi paid a visit of condolence, but merely shouted three wailing cries and left. His students said, “Was this man not your friend, Master?”

“Yes,” said Qin Yi, “he was.”

“Then why was condolence so perfunctory? Is this acceptable?”

“It is. From the start I treated him as the person he was, but now he is a person no longer. Just now when I went in to pay my respects, there were old people wailing as if they were mourning their sons and young people wailing as if they were mourning their mothers. The character that attracted them to join together here was certainly not one that sought that they speak, and yet they speak, and certainly not one that sought that they wail, and yet they wail. In acting thus they are disobeying Heaven and turning their backs on natural feelings. To forget what they have received in this way is what the ancients called the punishment of disobeying Heaven.

“Master Lao came to life when it was his time and he departed life in compliance with his time. When one is at ease with time and dwells in compliance, how can sorrow or joy find a way in? The ancients called this the divine release from bondage.

“You can see it in firewood dying to ash: it passes the flame along and who can tell when it will ever be truly extinguished?”

Sections from the “Outer Chapters” related to 3.2

A.1 *The Hunchback and the Cicadas*

Confucius was on the road to Chu when, emerging from a wood, he saw a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as if he were plucking them down with his hand.

“How skillful you are!” said Confucius. “Is there a *dao* for this?”

“Yes, I have a *dao*,” said the hunchback. “For five or six months I practiced balancing balls on top of each other on the end of my pole. Once I could balance two balls without them falling, I knew I would miss very few cicadas. Then I balanced three balls and, when they didn’t fall off, I knew I’d miss only one cicada in ten. Then I balanced five balls – once they didn’t fall off, I knew it would be easy as grabbing them with my hand. I hold my body like a twisted tree and raise my arm like a withered limb. No matter how huge heaven and earth or how numerous the myriad things, I perceive nothing but cicada wings. Never stumbling, never tilting, letting nothing else in the world of things take the place of those cicada wings – how could I fail to catch them?”

Confucius turned to his disciples and said. “‘His will undivided, his spirit coalesced’ – would that not describe this venerable hunchback?”

(from Chapter 19)

Although few of us have mastered this hunchback’s particular art, his description of the psychological phenomena that accompany performing a skill to perfection is not necessarily as bizarre as his chosen activity. In this and the following passages, it is worth asking whether these descriptions match up with ordinary experience.

A.2 *The Ferryman*

Yan Yuan said to Confucius, “I once crossed the gulf at Shangshen and ferryman handled the boat with spirit-like skill. I asked him, ‘Is handling a boat so well something a person can learn?’ and he replied, ‘Yes, indeed. Once good swimmer has acquired his ability through repeated practice, he can swim below water like a drowned man, he may never have seen a boat before and still he’ll know how to handle it!’ I asked him about this, but he wouldn’t tell me more. May I ask you what it means?”

Confucius said, “‘A good swimmer has acquired his ability through repeated practice’ – that’s to say he’s forgotten the water. ‘Once he can swim below water like a drowned man, he may never have seen a boat before and still he’ll know how to handle it’ – that’s because he views water as he does dry land, and regards the capsizing of a boat as he would the overturning of a cart. The myriad things could all be capsizing and toppling right before him; it would not affect where he dwells within. Where could he go and not be at ease?”

“In archery, when you’re betting tiles on your shots, you perform with skill. When you’re betting fancy clasps, you grow cautious. When the bet is for gold, you’re a nervous wreck. Your skill is the same – but when the prize means a lot to you, you let outside considerations weigh on you. One who values what’s outside gets clumsy on the inside.”

(from Chapter 19)

A.3 *The Swimmer*

Confucius was touring Lüliang, where the water falls from a height of thirty fathoms and churns for forty *li* in rapids that no fish or water creature can swim. He saw a man dive into the water and, taking him for one whom despair had driven to suicide, he ordered his disciples to line the bank and pull the man out. But after the man had swum a few hundred paces, he emerged from the water with his hair streaming down and strolled beneath the cliffs singing. Confucius rushed to question him. “I took you for a ghost, but now I see you’re a man. May I ask if you have some special *dao* of staying afloat in the water?”

“No,” replied the swimmer. “I have no *dao*. I began with my original endowment, grew up with my nature, and let things come to completion with fate. I go under with the whirlpools and emerge where the water spouts up, following the Dao of the water and never thinking about myself. That’s how I go my way.”

Confucius said, “What do you mean by saying that you began with your original endowment, grew up with your nature, and let things come to completion with fate?”

“I was born on the dry land and felt comfort on the dry land – that was my original endowment. I grew up with the water and felt comfort in the water – that became my nature. I’m not aware what I do but I do it – that’s fate.”

(from Chapter 19)

Chapter 4 In the World of Man

“In the World of Man” seems to be an amalgamation of two chapters. The first part (4.1-4.3) is composed of relatively long passages addressing strategies for surviving in the tumultuous world of Warring States society. It includes two major tales in which Confucius serves as the *Zhuangzi*’s spokesman. (The *Zhuangzi*’s Confucius – as well as its portrait of the disciple Yan Hui – generally bears little resemblance to the person we know from the *Analects*; the author(s) of the texts may have assumed that we would understand that this Confucius lived only in his imagination, and have intended that we read the passages in a framework of humor and irony.) The second part (4.4-4.7) includes generally briefer passages addressing the theme of the usefulness of the “useless,” a theme we have encountered in the two passages ending Chapter 1. It may be that these chapters derived from a common source and were split up and appended to chapters that were essentially complete without them.

4.1 Confucius instructs Yan Hui

Yan Hui went to see Confucius and asked for permission to travel.

Confucius asked him, “Where are you going?”

“To the state of Wey.”

“What will you do there?”

“I have heard that the lord of Wey is in the prime of youth and his behavior is impetuous. He is quick to send his armies off to war and fails to see his faults. He regards it as a light matter that his people should die; corpses fill the marshlands like dried reeds and there is nothing his people can do. I have heard it from you, Master: ‘Depart the well ordered state and go to the state in disarray. The gate of the doctor is filled with the ill.’ I wish to put into practice the teachings I have learned, and so, perhaps effect some healing in Wey?”

Note that Zhuangzi here turns the Confucian doctrine of timeliness on its head, and attributes to Confucius a type of Mohist voluntarism.

“Ach!” said Confucius. “You’re just going to get yourself executed. What you don’t want in a Dao is some assortment of teachings. An assortment is just a profusion of notions, and if you follow a profusion of notions you’ll lose control of them. When you lose control you’ll be governed by anxiety, and once that happens you’re beyond help. In the old days the Perfect Person cultivated the way within himself before he tried to cultivate it in others. When you haven’t yet settled what’s within you yourself, what leisure have you to concern yourself with the conduct of a tyrant?”

“Do you know what staggers virtue and what intellect comes from? Virtue is staggered by fame and intellect arises from strife. People crush one another with fame and wisdom is a weapon of struggle. These are two tools of ill omen, they are not tools for success. Though your virtue may be deep and your good faith unshakable, you’ve yet to grasp the nature of men’s *qi*. You are known as a man who does not contend with others, but you’ve yet to grasp the nature of men’s minds. If you appear before a tyrant stubbornly peddling the standards of *ren* and righteousness, you’ll simply be using his faults to show off your own superiority. Such a person is called a disaster to

others, and others will surely bring disaster to him in return. It seems to me you're heading this way.

“And then again, if it actually turns out that he is one who can be pleased by worthy men such as you and who detests the unworthy, then what need is there for you to seek to change him?”

“You had best not undertake to remonstrate at all. You see, ruling lords seize the advantage they have over men to attack any lapse in argument and prevail. Your sight will become dazzled, the blood will drain from your face, you'll begin to babble in your defense, your bearing will become more and more submissive, and then you'll find yourself agreeing with him. This is like fighting fire with fire or pouring water on a flood; it is called ‘adding to excess,’ and once you start to give in to it, there will be no stopping. On the other hand, if you were to put yourself in danger by repeating the earnest advice that he refuses to accept, such a tyrant would simply have you cut down in front of his eyes.

“In times past, Jie, the king of the Xia, put Guan Longfeng to death and the Shang king Zhòu put Prince Bi Gan to death. Both Guan Longfeng and Prince Bi Gan cultivated in themselves the ability to be humble in bringing comfort to the people below them, while challenging the rulers above them. Their rulers trapped them by exploiting the very virtues they had cultivated – it was all because those men valued their reputations. Again, in times past Emperor Yao attacked Cong, Zhi, and Xu'ao, and Emperor Yu attacked Youhu. In the territories of these chiefs their cities were left in ruins, their people slaughtered, and they themselves were punished with death. For these men, the cause was their ceaseless warfare and insatiable search for gain. These are examples of both men who sought good reputation and men who sought gain – are you the only one who hasn't heard about them? Even sages can't overcome the pursuit of reputation and gain, much less a person like you!

“However, you must have some plan in mind. Why don't you tell me what it is?”

Yan Hui said, “If I remain formal and unperturbed, steadfast and focused, will that work?”

“What!” said Confucius. “How could that work? This is a man whose power fills his bearing, and because his temper is completely unpredictable, no one ventures to cross him. So you will seek to anticipate his responses and accommodate his dispositions. You'll say this is using ‘virtue enough to lead him forward each day.’ But that won't work – much less great virtue. He will hold to his habits and resist change. Though outwardly he may seem agreeable, inwardly he'll accept nothing. How could that work?”

“All right,” said Yan Hui. “But what if I am inwardly upright, outwardly accommodating, and tie my speech to the lessons of the past?”

“Inwardly upright – such a one is a disciple of Heaven. He understands that the Son of Heaven and he are alike in being sons of Heaven. What concern would such a person have whether his requests will meet with approval or not? Though people may dismiss me as a naive child, this is merely to say that I am a disciple of Heaven.

“Outwardly compliant – such a one is a disciple of man. Kneeling to raise one's tablet of credentials, bowing with hands clasped – such are the ritual *li* of the minister. Everyone performs them, how could I fail to? If I do what other people do they certainly have no basis to criticize me. This is to be a disciple of men.

“Tying speech to the lessons of the past – this is to be a disciple of antiquity. Though my words may in effect be admonitions and reproaches, they belong to antiquity, not to me. In this way, though straightforward I cannot be faulted. That is to be a disciple of antiquity.

“If I go proceed in this manner, will that work?”

“What!” said Confucius. “How could that work? You have an excess of strategies, but no insight. Indeed, although your plans are simpleminded, you might escape blame this way, but that’s the extent of it. How could these methods actually transform him? You are still letting your own mind be your teacher!”

Yan Hui said, “I have nothing more to offer. May I ask the proper method?”

Confucius said, “You must fast! Let me tell you. Can any action be accomplished with ease if pursued by means of the mind’s intentions? If you think it is, bright Heaven will not befriend you.”

Yan Hui said, “My family is poor, and I have not drunk wine or eaten meat for several months. Doesn’t that constitute fasting?”

“That is the fasting one does before performing rites of sacrifice. It is not the fasting of the mind.”

“May I ask, what is the fasting of the mind?”

Confucius said, “Unify your will. Don’t listen with your ears, listen with your mind – don’t listen with your mind, listen with your *qi*. The ears are limited to listening; the mind is limited to sorting. But the *qi*, all empty it awaits things. The Dao gathers in emptiness – emptiness: that is the fasting of the mind.”

“Before hearing this,” said Yan Hui, “and grasping it in full, I was solidly I myself. But now that I have grasped it – why, there has never been any I at all! Is this the emptiness you mean?”

“You’ve got it!” said Confucius. “I tell you, now you may go to roam inside his coop, and you’ll never be moved by fame. If he listens, then sing; if not, be still. Have no gate, have no doorway – make oneness your home and lodge in the unavoidable. That’s as close to it as can be!”

It’s easy to walk without leaving footprints; it’s hard to walk without touching the ground. Deceit is easy when you work for men, but hard when you work for Heaven. You’ve heard of flying with wings, but you have never heard of flying without wings. You’ve heard of understanding by means of knowledge, but you have never heard of the understanding that comes from not knowing. Look into the closed room, the empty chamber where light is born. Fortune and blessings gather where there is stillness. But if you do not keep still – that is called galloping where you sit. Let your ears and eyes communicate with what is inside and put mind and knowledge on the outside. Then even the spirits will come to dwell with you, not to speak of men. Such is change in the world of things – the pivot of Emperors Yu and Shun, the constant practice of the sages Fu Xi and Ji Qu. How much more should it be a rule for others!

In this passage, Confucius’s idea of “timeliness” (‘When the Dao prevails in the world, appear; when it does not, hide’) has become a theme through which the *Zhuangzi* improvises new and interesting motifs.

4.2 *Zigao seeks instruction*

Zigao, grandee of She, was sent as an emissary to Qi. He asked Confucius, “The king has sent me on this assignment of grave importance, but I know that their way in Qi is to treat emissaries with apparent respect while paying no attention to the urgency of their mission. It is difficult enough to move a common man to action, much less the ruler of a state! I feel such anxiety about this! You have instructed me many times, saying, ‘Whether in matters great or small, few have happy outcomes that do not accord with the Dao. Those that fail will surely lead to disruptions in one’s career, and those that succeed will surely lead to disruptions in the *yin* and *yang* forces that govern one’s health. Only a man of virtue can ensure that no such troubles will ensue whether successful

or not.’

“Now I am a man who eats plain food; I seek no delicacies and ask nothing exceptional of my cook, but having received the king’s orders in the morning, by evening I was gulping down water, so strong was the burning in my gut! I haven’t even gotten to the heart of my mission and already I’m suffering the disruptions of *yin* and *yang* – if the affair goes badly, I will most certainly face the disruption of my career. For a king’s servant like me, these two things are more than I can bear. Have you perhaps some wisdom you can impart to me?”

Confucius said, “There are in the world two great charges: one is destiny (*ming*) and the other is duty (*yi*). Your love of your parents was destined, something you could never escape in your heart. Your service as a minister to your ruler is a matter of duty; there is nowhere you can go where he is not still your ruler, there is nowhere in the world you can escape. This is why these are called the Great Charges. Thus to feel content in serving one’s parents regardless of place or circumstance is the utmost of filiality; to feel content in serving one’s ruler regardless of task is the fullness of loyalty. But to serve one’s own heart so that neither grief nor joy deflects you as you go forward, to feel content in full awareness of the constraints about which you can do nothing and regard them as your destiny, this is the acme of virtue. Certain things are inherently unavoidable when one is in service as a minister. If you set forth to tackle the circumstances of your task and forget about yourself, what leisure will you have to long for life or fear death? Go ahead now and you will be fine!

“But allow me to add to this something else I have learned. When the relations between two parties are close, they inevitably form bonds of trust, but if they are distant, mutual loyalty must be expressed through words, and for those words there must be a person to convey them. To convey words that will please or anger both parties is one of the most difficult things in the world. For if the words are pleasing they inevitably exaggerate on the side of praise, and if they are angry words they inevitably exaggerate on the side of hatred. All forms of exaggeration are untrue and trust is thereby lost, and when trust is lost the one who has conveyed these words suffers the consequences. Hence the proverb tells us: ‘Convey the truth of the matter with no words of exaggeration and you will stay whole, more or less.’

“Moreover, when men test their skills in matches of strength things are sunny at the start but end in the dark: things ultimately get out of hand and dirty tricks take over. When men join to drink in ritual *li* things are well ordered at the start but end in disarray: things ultimately get out of hand and wanton sport takes over. It is the same with all things: what starts out decorous ends in vulgarity, what starts simple will always grow gross by the finish.

“Words are like wind or waves; action is like fulfillment and loss. Wind and waves are easily moved; fulfillment and loss easily turn to danger. In this way, anger may burst out for no reason when a clever speaker utters deceptive phrases. A dying animal does not choose the sound it cries, it simply bursts forth and a fierceness of heart comes alive in one breath. Press a man too closely and he too will respond to you with a savage heart, though he himself is all unaware of it – and if he himself is all unaware who can say where it will end? Hence the proverb tells us: ‘Don’t alter from your orders, don’t press for success.’ Going too far means overshooting the mark. To alter from your order or press for success will put the affair in jeopardy. A good outcome lies takes time; a bad end cannot be undone. Can you afford to be careless!

“So let your heart loose to wander by riding events and nurture what lies within by following the unavoidable – that is the ultimate. What effort is needed to fulfill your mission? Simply follow your duty – yet how hard that is!”

4.3 *Yan He consults Qu Boyu*

Yan He was to become the tutor of the son of Duke Ling of Wei and sought advice from Qu Boyu. “By virtue of his natural dispositions the prince is a cruel youth. If I do not redirect his inclinations I put the state in danger, but if I try to redirect them I bring danger to my own person. He is intelligent enough to recognize when others make mistakes, but he cannot understand the reasons people err. In light of this, how should I handle this assignment?”

Qu Boyu said, “A question well asked! Be alert, be careful! You have to keep yourself finely balanced. It is best to follow along with him outwardly while your mind is focused on bringing him to harmony. But there is also peril in these two. In following, you must not be sucked in; in harmonizing, you must not let your intention come out. If in following you are sucked in, he’ll topple and trip you, and you’ll be destroyed and extinguished. If your intentions come out, he’ll take you for a fame-seeking deceiver, and you’ll be cut down for it before your time.

“So if he wants to be a child, be a child along with him; if he wants to be unconstrained, be unconstrained along with him; if he wants to be boundless, be boundless along with him. In this way steer him through to the flawless.

“Haven’t you heard about the mantis who flailed his arms in anger to stop the carriage coming in his path? He didn’t know he was simply not up to the task, believing his abilities to be so very fine. Be alert, be careful! If through pride of your fine abilities you cross him, you’ll be good as finished!

“Haven’t you heard about the tiger tamer? He doesn’t dare to feed his charge living things for fear of the rage aroused in the killing. He doesn’t dare feed him whole carcasses for fear of the rage aroused in ripping them apart. He times his taming to the tiger’s appetite and so steers his raging heart. Tigers are very different from men, but you can lead one to behave well under your training if you follow along with him at first – it’s the trainers who confront them who are killed.

“The lover of horses may save a steed’s droppings in baskets and his urine in shells, but if he swats a fly on his butt at the wrong time the horse will snap his bit and jerk bridle and halter till they split his head and chest. Though the intent was all kindness, the result is destruction. So be careful!”

4.4 *The altar oak*

Woodworker Shi was on his way to Qi. As he came to Qu Yuan he saw an oak planted as the village altar tree. It was so huge that a herd of several thousand cattle could have stood in its shade – its trunk was a hundred arm-spans round, tall as the hills, and a hundred feet straight up to the lowest limb. A dozen of its branches were so big that a boat could have been built from each one. The throng of gawking sightseers was big as the crowds on market days, but the woodworker did not so much as glance at it and walked right past without stopping. His apprentice, however, stood and gazed his fill before running to catch up. “Master, since I first picked up my ax and hatchet to follow you I have never seen lumber of such fine quality! Yet you were unwilling to look at it and walked right past without stopping. Why?”

“Enough!” said Woodworker Shi. “Say no more about it. It’s waste wood! Make a boat from it and it will sink; make a coffin from it and it will rot; make a utensil from it and it will break; make a gate from it and it will run sap; make a pillar from it and insects will infest it. You can’t make lumbar from such a tree; it’s useless! That is why it has lived to such an age.”

After Woodworker Shi returned home, the altar oak appeared to him in a dream. “What were you comparing me to? Did you mean to compare me to those lovely trees, like the sour cherry and pear, the tangerine and pomelo – fruit bearing trees that are ripped apart once their fruit ripens? Disgraced by all that ripping, their limbs split and their branches torn, they find only bitterness in life and end by dying before their natural years are up. They bring it on themselves, being torn up by the common crowd. It is thus for all types of things. Now, I have sought to be useless for a very long time, and though I came close to death I have now reached my goal – for me that is of great use indeed! Were I useful could I ever have grown so big? And after all, you and I are both things – what sort of thing are you to go sizing up another thing this way? You near dead waste of a man, what do you know of waste wood?”

Woodworker Shi awoke and was explaining his dream. His apprentice said, “If it sought to be useless, how could it serve as an altar tree?”

“Hush!” said the woodworker. “You should keep your mouth shut. It surely planted itself there knowing that it wouldn’t be recognized by the mocking crowd. If it were not an altar tree, wouldn’t it risk being cut down? Moreover, it protects itself differently from the common run; if you try to understand it by the common standard you’ll be far wide of the mark!”

4.5 *The huge tree of Shangzhiqiu*

Nanbo Ziqi was wandering the region of Shagnzhiqiu and saw an extraordinarily large tree. A thousand teams of chariot horses could have been tethered to it and stood in its shade. “What type of tree is this?” said Ziqi. “It must have some extraordinary properties.” When he peered up into its foliage, he saw that its branches were gnarled and twisted, unfit for roof beams and rafters, and when he examined its main trunk, he found it was knotted and split, unfit for coffin wood. When he licked a leaf it was so hot that it blistered his tongue, and the odor was strong enough to make a man raving drunk for three days. “So it turns out to be a worthless tree – that’s how it has come to grow so large. Ha! This is the worthlessness that is employed by the Spirit-like Man.”

The region of Jingshi in Song is perfect for catalpas, cypresses, and mulberry trees. Trees an arm’s length round are cut down to make monkey cages, three or four spans and they’re cut down to make roof beams for the homes of prominent men; if they grow to seven or eight spans, they’re cut down as side planks for the coffins of great merchants. So in the end they die by the blade of an ax or a hatchet before their natural years are up. This is the peril of being good lumbar. In rites of exorcism, the ox with a white patch on the forehead, the pig with a crooked-up snout, and the person with piles are all deemed unfit to sacrifice to the river spirits – they are all viewed as inauspicious, understood by every shaman and priest. And this is what the Sprit-like Man views as highly auspicious.

4.6 *Crippled Shu*

Shu the Deformed – his cheeks are in the shadow of his belly, his shoulders rise above his head, his pigtail points up at the sky, his five viscera are top-wards and his thighs hug his ribs. But by sewing and washing, he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten. When the ruler calls up the troops, he stands in the crowd and waves good-bye; when they draft workers for state projects, they pass him over because he’s a chronic invalid. But when they are doling out grain to the disabled, he gets three measures and

ten bundles of firewood. Those with deformed bodies are thus able to care for themselves and finish out the years Heaven gave them. And how much better to possess deformed virtue!

Zhuangzi's heroes are often hunchbacks, cripples, or criminals who have lost some limb to the jailer's axe. In a chapter called "The Sign of Virtue Complete," we encounter a series of these deformed people – why does Zhuangzi link a twisted body to full-bodied virtue?

4.7 Confucius and the madman of Chu, Jie Yu

Confucius traveled to dwell in Chu and there the madman Jie Yu came wandering to his gate.

“Phoenix! Phoenix! How virtue has declined.

It can't wait for the future or catch up with what's behind.

When the Dao works in the world, the sage man works his ways,

When the Dao has disappeared the Sage lives out his days -

In times like these just keep far from the shackles and the blade.

Good fortune's lighter than a feather, but none knows how to bear it,

Disaster's heavier than the earth, but none knows how to dodge it.

Enough! Enough! These toils of virtue serving man,

Danger! Danger! Escape! – draw the line in the sand.

Brambles, brambles, don't cut me as I go,

Twisting, twisting, my feet stay free of woe.

“Mountain trees plunder themselves, torch grease burns itself up. Cinnamon is good to eat and the cinnamon tree is felled; lacquer is good to use and the lacquer tree is hacked.

“Men all know the utility of usefulness, but none knows the utility of uselessness!”

Jie Yu (the mad “carriage greeter,” a literal translation of his name) appears elsewhere in the Inner Chapters (sections 1.3 and 7.2). This passage is either an elaboration of his famous appearance in the *Analects* (18.5) or, perhaps, taken from a source that the *Zhuangzi* and *Analects* elaborate in different ways.

The following passage is appended from the “Outer Chapters.” It is added here because it relates to the major theme of Chapter 4, but more simply because it is famous and entertaining. Its valorization of Zhuangzi is a function of the fact that, as an Outer Chapters passage, it is unlikely to have any connection with the historical Zhuangzi as author.

A section from the “Outer Chapters” resonant with Chapter 4

A.4 Zhuangzi receives a job offer

Once, when Zhuangzi was fishing in the River Pu, the king of Chu sent two officials to appear before him and convey these words: “I would like to burden you with the administration of my realm.”

Zhuangzi held on his fishing pole and, without looking round, he said, “I have heard that Chu possesses a sacred turtle, dead for three thousand years. The king keeps it wrapped in cloth and boxed, and stores it in the ancestral temple. This turtle, now, would it prefer to be dead with its bones preserved and honored, or to be alive with its tail dragging in the mud?”

“Alive with its tail dragging in the mud,” answered the two officials.

“Then go away,” said Zhuangzi. “I mean to drag my tail in the mud!”

(from Chapter 17)

Chapter 5

The Mark of Utmost Virtue

The first three passages set the theme for this chapter. All concern men who have, for some offense against a ruler's government been sentenced to the mutilating punishment of amputation of the foot. This mark, a wretched stigma in ancient society, is for the *Zhuangzi* a reflection of utmost virtue (*de*), a shockingly graphic way of symbolizing his alternative system of values.

5.1 Criminal amputee Wang Tai

There was in Lu a man named Wang Tai whose foot had been cut off in punishment for some crime. Those who followed after him in his travels were as numerous as those who followed Confucius. Chang Ji asked Confucius about this. "Wang Tai is a criminal amputee, yet his following in Lu is equal to yours, Sir. When he stands up he does not teach and when he sits down he does not expound, yet they go to him empty and return home full. Can it be so that he has some wordless teaching that invisibly brings the mind to completion? What kind of man is this!"

Confucius said, "This master is a Sage, and for my part, I've simply been lagging and have failed to pay him my respects. And if I mean to take him as my teacher, how much more should anyone who is not up to my level! I don't just mean men of Lu – I plan to lead all in the world to become his followers."

"A criminal amputee and he can lord it over you, Sir?" said Chang Ji. "How far beyond the ordinary man he must be! If this is so, what special art of the mind does he possess?"

Confucius said, "Life and death are great indeed, yet they can bring no change to him. Though heaven and earth should topple he would not fall with them. He has penetrated non-dependence and does not alter as things change. He follows with their transformations, staying fixed on their ancestral source."

"What do you mean?" said Chang Ji.

"If you see things according to their differences," said Confucius, "then the liver and gall are as distinct as the states of Chu and Yue, but if you view them in their commonality then the things of the world are all one. Having this perspective he is unaware of the separate functions of ear and eye because his mind roams in the harmony of virtue. He looks at things and, seeing unity rather than absence, he viewed losing his foot as he would a clod of dirt."

"All this, then, is directed towards his own purposes, employing his understanding to grasp the mind and employing the mind to grasp the constant mind – why would other things gather round him?"

Confucius said, "No man takes flowing water as his mirror, he observes himself in still water. Only the still can still the stillness within the multitude. Of things that are commanded to life (*ming*) by the earth only the pine and cypress carry out their commands aright, that is why they stay green summer and winter. Of those who receive their commands from Heaven only Yao and Shun carried out their commands aright and became leaders to the things of the world. By good fortune they were able to set their lives aright and rectify the lives of all thereby.

"The mark of one who preserves what he has from the start is the fruit of fearlessness. Thus a single brave warrior may plunge like a hero into the nine armies of the enemy. If one who seeks fame and can grip himself in this way, how much more a man who commands heaven and earth,

makes a treasury of the world of things, views the six parts of his body as a traveler's inn,* regards ears and eyes as empty images, unifies what he knows through his understanding, and has never let death enter his mind. He can set the date for his ascent to the skies.** Men will follow such a one, but as for him, how would he consent to regard such things as his concern?"

*The six parts of the body are the four limbs, trunk, and head.

**The term "ascent to the skies" borrows a term from cremation practices of non-Zhou peoples (according to the *Mozi* text) to refer to a belief in levitation as a power possessed by men who have transcended the limits of the body. "Immortalist" cults of this type proliferated during the late Warring States period; the *Zhuangzi* sometimes articulates their ideas to make a point while mocking them elsewhere. During the late second century CE these cults emerged as the first sources of "religious Daoism," a temple religion of self-transformation that competed with Buddhism for influence in medieval China. Some scholars see these cults as foundational to the earliest "philosophical" texts of Daoism, the *Dao de jing* and *Zhuangzi*. In these translations such references are viewed as appropriations to convey a point, just as the Confucian paragons Yao and Shun are appropriated here to reflect a "Zhuang-ist" point.

5.2 Criminal amputee Shentu Jia

Shentu Jia was a man whose foot had been cut off, and he was a fellow student of Bohun Wuren, along with Zichan of Zheng.* Zichan said to him, "If I leave first, you wait awhile before going out; when you leave first, I will wait." The next day they were again together at their master's gate, seated side by side on one mat. Zichan said again, "If I leave first, you wait awhile before going out; when you leave first, I will wait." He went on, "I'm going to go now – are you going to wait or not? After all, do you mean to show no deference to chief minister of the state? Are you the equal of a chief minister?"

Shentu Jia said, "At the gate of our Master could there really be a chief minister like this? Do you really esteem yourself so as minister that you despise others in this way? I have heard it said, 'A polished mirror is bright because no dust has settled on it; once dust has settled on it, the mirror is not bright – dwell long among worthy men and you shall have no flaw.' Now you are here seeking what is great, Sir, and yet you still utter words such as these. Haven't you missed the mark?"

"Why, just look at you!" said Zichan. "Yet you still try to compete with Emperor Yao when it comes to goodness? Calculate your level of virtue - perhaps some self-reflection should be your next step!"

Shentu Jia said, "Those who justify their mistakes and argue that they should not lose their feet are many; those who do not defend their mistakes and admit that they should not be left whole are few. To recognize what can't be helped and accept it calmly as if it were fate (*ming*) – only a man of virtue can manage this. Wander into the target range of Archer Yi and walk right to the center of the bullseye – if you don't get hit it's simply a matter of fate. Plenty of people laugh at me because I've lost part of my leg while theirs is whole and it does make my blood boil, but when I come here to the Master's place I'm able to cast my rage aside and return without it. Perhaps it's because he washes me with goodness. I have been the Master's pupil for nineteen years and never has he looked at me as an amputee. Now you and I are here to wander in the realms that lie deep within our bodily forms, yet you judge me according to the outer appearance of my body - isn't that missing the mark?"

Zichan's brow furrowed and he altered his expression and stance. "You need say no more."

*The name of the Master means “elder-dark no-man”; readers would have understood this was not a real name or person. On the other hand, Zichan was indeed a real person – the prime minister of the state of Zheng in the mid-sixth century BCE, and, judging by the *Analects*, a man much admired by Confucius. Here and in the next section, it is the Confucian vantage point that is under attack.

5.3 *Criminal amputee Shushan the Toeless*

There was a man of Lu named Shushan the Toeless whose foot had been cut off. He came hobbling to pay a visit to Confucius, who said to him, “You failed to be careful, and having run afoul of trouble this is the result! Isn’t it too late to be coming to see me?”

“I failed to apply myself and was careless of my body; that indeed is why I lost my foot. I have come to you now because I still possess something more important than a foot and I wish to apply myself to making that whole. ‘There is nothing that the heavens do not cover, nothing the earth does not carry.’ I took you, Sir, to be heaven and earth – how could I have known you would turn out to be like this?”

“I have behaved crassly,” said Confucius. “Please come in, Sir, and recount for me what you have learned.”

But Shushan the Toeless left. “You disciples, pay attention!” said Confucius. “This toeless man lost his foot in punishment, yet he applies himself to learning in order to patch up the errors of his past conduct. How much more so should men whose powers (*de*) are still whole!”

Shushan the Toeless reported all this to Lao Dan. “Confucius is still far from attaining perfection, isn’t he? Why does he keep entangling you by coming here to study with you? He’s just hoping to become famous through some bizarre and illusory process. He doesn’t realize that the perfect man would see that as locking himself in shackles.”

Lao Dan said, “Why not simply lead him to see death and life as a single strand and the permissible and impermissible as a single thread. That would release him from his shackles, would it not?”

“Heaven is punishing him,” said Shushan the Toeless. “How can I release him?”

Lao Dan is the Daoist figure Laozi. Legendary accounts tell us that as a younger man, Confucius paid a visit to Laozi to learn his wisdom. Here, Laozi’s suggestion to Shushan the Toeless appears to turn a formula that the *Analects* celebrates as Confucius’s back against him: “I link all on a single thread” (clothing imagery seems to appear at several points).

5.4 *The ugly Aitai Tuo*

Duke Ai of Lu questioned Confucius. “There was in Wei an ugly man named Aitai Tuo. When men were together with him their minds were fixed on him and they could not leave. When women saw him, they begged their parents, saying, ‘I would rather be the concubine of this man than the wife of any other!’ – a dozen cases reported and it was still going on. But when in conversation, no one had yet heard this man take the lead – he just agreed with other people. He held no position over other men that would allow him to help them escape death; he had amassed no wealth that would allow him to fill men’s bellies. Frighteningly ugly, just agreeing and never leading, his wisdom in no way exceeding the ordinary, yet men and women alike gathered before him – surely he must possess something different from other men!

“So I summoned him to court to take a look at him. Sure enough, he was frighteningly ugly. But he had been at my court for less than a month when I began to have the feeling that there was something special about him, and before the year was up I had complete faith in him. When a vacancy occurred in the office of the chief minister of state I offered it to him. He responded only after sitting in silence awhile, and then seemed to accept very casually, almost as though declining. I merely took him to be feeling humbled and turned the administration of the state over to him. But in no time he left me and traveled away. I was overcome with depression, as though someone close to me had died, as though there was no one left with whom I could share the joys of possessing the state. What sort of man is he?”

Confucius said, “I once traveled south to Chu and saw there a litter of piglets suckling at the teats of their mother, who was dead. After a short time they all seemed to awaken with alarm and fled from her. They no longer saw themselves in her; they could no longer recognize what kind of thing she was. What they had loved in their mother was not her form but the thing that moved her form. So it is that when men bury on the battlefield the bodies of those who have been slain, they use no coffin wraps, and men whose feet have been cut off have no love of sandals – the thing at the root has been lost.

“Consorts of the Son of Heaven must not cut their nails or pierce their ears; men in service posted to distant lands are not sent on missions when they are newly wed. Such pains are taken for these persons because they are valued for being whole of body – how much more we value those who are whole of virtue (*de*)!

“Now this Aitai Tuo is trusted before he speaks and people cleave to him without his effort; when a ruler wishes to entrust him with the state, the ruler’s only fear is that he will not accept. This is surely a man whose abilities so whole that his virtue is beyond outward show.”

“What do you mean by saying his abilities are whole?” asked Duke Ai.

Confucius said, “Death and life, existence and extinction, failure and success, poverty and wealth, worthiness and unworthiness, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and warmth: all these are the action of fate (*ming*). They appear in turn before us night and day, yet understanding cannot compass their origins. Thus, these are not things worthy of determining our state of harmony or disorder: one must not allow them to enter into one’s spirit storehouse. Let them penetrate you with equanimity and do not lose your sense of joy – remain sealed off from care of the changes of night and day, and join with the world of things in springtime. One who is like this ever encounters the world with newborn timeliness in his heart. We say of a person like this that he is ‘one whose abilities are whole.’”

“What do you mean by saying his virtues are beyond outward show?”

“Nothing is so level as water at rest, and it can serve as a model for man: preserve what is within and let nothing outside stir you. Virtue is the cultivation of complete harmony, and the person of virtue beyond outward show is one who is never separated from the world of things.”

The following day, Duke Ai spoke with Minzi. “Initially, I felt I had truly grasped how to sit facing south on the throne and rule the world, holding the lifelines of the people in constant alertness against the things that threatened them with death. But now I have heard the words of a man of full perfection and I fear I lack the real qualities of a ruler and have merely been putting my person at risk and bringing my state towards ruin. Confucius and I are not like subject and ruler, we are simply friends in virtue.”

Confucius’s initial response to the Duke steers us in an unexpected direction, and begins a series of variations on the theme of hidden *de* (which in some cases here might have been translated as “power,” though I have kept to the term “virtue” throughout). These initially

highlight the idea that the body is of no importance except as the embodiment of an animating spirit (as coffin covers mean nothing without coffins, sandals nothing without feet), moving to the issue of wholeness (of body for royal concubines and emissaries, of abilities for the Sage), and finishing with depictions of the path to perfect wholeness.

Minzi, who is addressed at the close, was a disciple of Confucius.

5.5 *The deformed persuaders*

There was a lipless hunchback with a club foot who counseled Duke Ling of Wei. Duke Ling was so pleased with him that when he looked at men who were whole of body he felt their necks were too long and thin. And when a man with a tumor as big as a jug counseled Duke Huan of Qi, he too felt that whole bodied men were a thin-necked.

Thus it is said, “When there is virtue at its utmost, all sense of bodily form is lost.” When men do not forget that which they have forgotten, but instead forget that which they cannot forget – that is true forgetting.

Hence when the Sage sets off on his wanderings, knowledge is an obstacle, bonds of faith are like binding lacquer, personal favors (*de*) are social commerce, and craft is merely market trade. The Sage makes no plans, what use would he have for knowledge? He cuts nothing to shape, what use would he have for lacquer? He has nothing to lose, what use would he have for favors? He sells no goods, what use would he have for market trade? These four qualities of the Sage are his Heavenly nurturance, and Heavenly nurturance is Heavenly nourishment. Since he is already being nourished by Heaven, what use to him are human goods? He has the form of a man, but none of the feelings of a man. Having the form of other men he keeps company in their midst, but since he has none of the feelings that other men have, matters of right and wrong cannot gain any grip on his person. How insignificant it is that he is numbered among other men – and how magnificent that he alone perfects what is Heavenly!

5.6 *Huizi in perplexity*

Huizi said to Zhuangzi, “Can a man really be without feelings?”

“Indeed,” said Zhuangzi.

“But if a man is without feelings,” said Huizi, “how can he be called a man?”

Zhuangzi said, “The Dao gives him a face and Heaven gives him human form – how could he not be called a man?”

“But if we call him a man, how can we say he is without feelings?”

Zhuangzi said, “That is not what I mean by ‘feelings.’ What I mean is that such a man will not allow love and hate to enter into him and harm his person. He always follows things the way they are naturally and does not add anything to living.”

Huizi said, “If he did not add anything to living, then how could he provide for himself?”

“The Dao gives him a face and Heaven gives him human form; he does not allow love and hate to enter into him and harm his person,” said Zhuangzi. “Now you stand apart from your own power of spirit and labor away your essential energy. You lean babbling on trees and fall into a stupor leaning on your bench –

Heaven picked out the form that brought you to light,
You use it to chirp of the ‘hard’ and the ‘white’.”

The word for “feelings” carries an important technical sense, referring to those properties or responses that emerge from us spontaneously. It generally refers to dispositions and

emotions that respond without premeditation. In this passage, Huizi is clearly using it to refer to the set of such features that are common among members of the human species. In referring to Huizi leaning on a tree, the text seems to be drawing on the same otherwise unknown anecdote about Hui Shi that is referred to cryptically in section 2.10. The final couplet is a bit forced in translation, but reflects the fact that Zhuangzi's ultimate response to Huizi is a rhymed barb.

Chapter 6

The Prime Master

6.1 *The True Man*

To know what is the work of Heaven and what is the work of man: that is perfection. One who knows the work of Heaven lives according to Heaven; one who knows the work of man takes that which he knows to nurture that which he does not. To reach the end of your Heaven-allotted years and not die in the middle of one's journey is the utmost of wisdom.

Although this is so, there remains a problem. Knowledge has that upon which it relies for accuracy, but that which it relies on is not fixed. How can I know that what I consider Heaven is not actually human and what I consider human is not actually Heavenly?

In the end one must be a True Man to have true wisdom. What do I mean by a True Man? The True Man of antiquity did not try to stave off poverty, did not try to force success, did not try to devise schemes. A person like that feels no regret when he errs and no self-satisfaction when his actions are on target. He feels no fear when he climbs to great heights. He can plunge into water and never get wet; he can walk into fire and never feel the heat. Wisdom that can ascend to the Dao itself is like this.

The True Man of antiquity slept without dreaming and woke without anxiety; he sought no sweetness in his food and he breathed as deeply as could be. The True Man breathes from his heels, where the common person breathes from his throat. Those who have surrendered gasp out speech as though choking; their desires are deep, but their Heavenly sensitivities are shallow.

The True Man of antiquity did not know to take pleasure in life or to detest death. He took no pleasure in the actions he did and he put up no defense against the doings of others, he simply came and went in freedom. He did not forget his beginnings and he did not seek to know his end. Happy with what had been given to him, returning to it in forgetfulness: of his it said that he did not allow his mind to deplete the Dao, and he did not allow the human to assist the Heavenly. One such as this is called the True Man. Such a one has a heart that forgets and a countenance that is calm; his neck rising straight and high. He is cool like autumn and warm like spring; his emotions follow like the seasons. His action always aligns appropriately with affairs and no one knows his limit.*

The True Man of antiquity was thus: In his bearing he towered, but never buckled; seemed as though lacking, but took nothing to add. Compliant, he was solitary but not rigid; expansive, he remained empty and never showy. Warm, he seemed pleased by anything; pressed, acting only when unavoidable. Collected, he seemed to welcome us; kind, he was a host for our virtue (*de*). Stern, how he differed from the world; proud, how he could not be controlled. Focused, he appeared deep in silent thought; muddled, he appeared foolish in forgetting to speak.

In liking things he was unified; in disliking things he was unified. His unity was unified, his disunity was unified. In his unity he was a follower of Heaven, in his disunity he was a follower of man. Heaven and man never prevailing over one another: that is what we call a True Man.

*A section of text appears at this point that seems almost certainly a late insertion, tying the "True Man" to certain political ideals and contrasting him to tragic historical figures whom Confucian moralists viewed sympathetically. Following Chen and Graham, it is omitted here. A second such section following the subsequent paragraph is also omitted.

This description of the “True Man” – a term that appears only in Chapter 6 of the Inner Chapters, is not easy to make full sense of, but the main message is clear. The chapter sets up a duality between Heaven (what is natural and spontaneous) and man (what is social and premeditated), and while celebrating Heaven, its depiction of the True Man as an embodiment of a string of seeming contradictions creates as a model the person who is able to exemplify a second-level unity of the two realms, unifying both unity and disunity themselves. The strategy of seeking a higher level perspective that will unite contradictions in a way that words cannot recall the method of Chapter 2.

6.2 *Death and the Dao*

Life and death are matters of fate (*ming*). That they have the certainty of morning and night: that is Heaven. Human beings cannot influence the inherent natures of things. Men take Heaven as their father and cherish it all their lives; how much more should it be so for something grander! Men take their rulers to be more important than they are and are even willing to give their lives dying for him; how much more should it be so for something more authentic!

When the stream runs dry, fish lie upon the bank and breathe on one another to stay moist, wetting themselves with their spit. How much better when they can forget themselves in the rivers and lakes! Rather than celebrating Emperor Yao and vilifying Emperor Jie, how much better when men forget themselves in the transformations of the Dao.

When a man hides his boat in a ravine or his fishnet in a marsh, he says they are secure. But if at midnight a strong man makes off with them on his back, while the first is all ignorant, unaware. Hiding a small thing in a large place is well enough, but the thing may still get away. Now if you were to hide the world in the world it could never get away: this is the ultimate character of an unchanging thing. We have happened to take on human shape and we are pleased enough with that. But our human shape will undergo ten thousand future changes and not even begin to reach the end – those joys are beyond calculation. So the Sage wanders where things cannot get away and all are preserved. He takes death in youth to be good; he takes old age to be good. He takes life’s beginning to be good; he takes life’s end to be good. People try to emulate him nevertheless – how much more should they do so for that to which the things of the world are tied, that on which every single transformation depends.

The Dao – it has its intrinsic character and is reliable. It is without action (*wuwei*) and without form. It can be transmitted but not received; it can be grasped but not seen. It is its own root, rooted in itself, before heaven and earth, from antiquity it has persisted as it is. It inspires ghosts, it inspires the Lord. It gives birth to heaven, it gives birth to earth. It lies above the great roof of the cosmos, yet it is not high; it lies beneath the six ends of the earth, yet it is not deep. It was born before heaven and earth, but is not of long duration; it has stretched longer than the greatest antiquity, but is not old.*

* A paragraph listing mythical figures who “grasped the Dao” follows here, but as it is likely a late interpolation, I have omitted it, as Chen does. Earlier, preceding the passage on hiding a boat in a ravine, there following sentence occurs: “The Great Clod burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death.” This sentence reappears in 6.4, where it fits far better, and I have again followed Chen in deleting it in 6.2 as a textual slip.

Section 6.2 introduces the major theme of Chapter 6: the division between life and death. If we see 6.1 and 6.2 as a single text (they are so treated by Watson), then the True Man’s embodiment of opposites prefigures the theme here of aligning with the Dao which

embodies that greatest of opposites, the transformations to life and to death. This holistic identification with all the dynamic transformations of the cosmos, including the eternal changes that the elements of our bodies have undergone to reach human form and will undergo after leaving human form, seems to be the perspective grasped by the person who “hides the world in the world.”

6.3 *The Hunchback Woman*

Nanbo Zikui asked the hunchback woman, “You are old in years and yet your complexion is like a child’s. Why is this?”

“I have heard the Dao,” she said.

“May I study the Dao with you?” said Nanbo Zikui.

“What!” said the woman. “How could you? You’re not the man for it. Now, Buliang Yi, he possesses the qualities of a Sage, but not the Dao of the Sage. I possess the Dao of the Sage, but not the qualities of a Sage. So I would like to teach him – why, I’d turn him into a Sage in the end, don’t you think? To tell the Dao of a Sage to a person with the qualities of a Sage is simple! I’d instruct him and keep at him – in three days he’d be able to treat the world as something outside his concern. Once he treated the world as outside him, I’d keep at him seven days more and then he’d treat things as outside his concern. Once he treated things as outside his concern, I’d keep at him nine days more and then he’d treat life as outside his concern. Once he treated life as outside his concern, then he could break through like the dawn, and breaking through like the dawn he could perceive that he is solitary. Once he perceived that he was solitary he would have no sense of the ancient and the present, and without the ancient and the present he could enter into the state of non-dying and non-living. That which kills the living does not die; that which gives birth to the living is not born. Its character is that there is nothing it does not send off and nothing it does not welcome, nothing it does not destroy and nothing it does not complete. Its name is Strike-Peace. Strike-Peace is perfected only after it strikes.”

“Where did you learn all this?” asked Nanbo Zikui.

“I learned it from the son of Assistant Ink, and Assistant Ink’s son learned it from Rote Recitation’s grandson. Rote Recitation’s grandson learned it from Clear Sight, and Clear Sight learned it from Whispered Permission. Whispered Permission learned it from Waiting Laborer, and Waiting Laborer learned it from Balladeer. Balladeer learned it from Dark Obscurity, and Dark Obscurity learned it from Triadic Mystery. Triadic Mystery learned it from Doubt-How-This-Started.”

This passage is one of the more obviously parodic passages in a book filled with parody. The string of names at the end seems equally to satirize the bookishness of the Confucian school and the exaggeratedly mysterious rhetoric of Daoist texts like the *Dao de jing* and the *Zhuangzi* itself.

6.4 *The Four Friends*

Zisi, Ziyu, Zili, and Zilai were talking together. “Who can look upon Nothing as his head, upon life as his back, upon death as his rump? Whoever knows that life and death, existence and annihilation are all a single body, I will be his friend.”

The four men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and the four of them became friends.

Soon, Ziyu fell ill. Zisi went to see how he was. “How remarkable!” said Ziyu. “The Creator of things is making me into this hooked shape. A hump has thrust up from my back, my five viscera are top-wards, my cheeks are in the shadow of my belly, my shoulders rise above my head, and my pigtail is pointing at the sky! It must be some dislocation of my yin and yang *qi*.” Yet he was calm at heart and unconcerned. Crawling to the well, he looked in at his reflection. “Oh, my! The Creator’s made me even more crooked!”

“Do you resent it?” asked Zisi.

“Why, no! What is there to resent? If this goes on perhaps he’ll turn my left arm into a rooster and I’ll keep watch over the night. Or perhaps in time he’ll transform my right arm into a crossbow pellet and I’ll shoot down an owl to roast. Or perhaps he’ll turn my buttocks into cartwheels and I’ll ascend into the sky with my spirit as my horse! Why would I ever want a new carriage again?”

“I received life because the season had come. I will lose it in the flow of time. Content with the seasons and dwelling in the flow of time, neither sorrow nor joy can get within me. In ancient times this was called ‘untying the bonds.’ There are those who cannot free themselves because they are bound by things. Besides, no thing can ever prevail over Heaven – that’s the way it has always been. What would I have to resent?”

Then suddenly, Zilai grew ill and lay gasping at the point of death. His wife and children had gathered round in a circle wailing when Zili came to call. “Shoo!” he shouted. “Stand back! Don’t disturb the process of change!”

Then he leaned against the doorway and spoke to Zilai. “How marvelous is the Creator of change! What is he going to make out of you next? Where will he send you? Will he make you into a rat’s liver? Will he make you into a bug’s arm?”

Zilai said, “A child obeys his father and mother and goes wherever he’s told, east or west, north or south. And the yin and yang – they are no less to a person than father and mother! Now that they have brought me to the verge of death, if I should refuse to obey them, how perverse I would be! What fault is it of theirs?”

“The Great Clod burdens me with form, labors me with life, eases me in old age, rests me in death. So if I think well of my life, for the same reason I must think well of my death. Were a skilled smith casting metal, if the metal should leap up and say, ‘I insist on becoming a Moye-type sword!’ the smith would regard it as most inauspicious metal indeed. Now having had the audacity to have once taken on human form, I should now say, ‘I won’t be anything but a man! Nothing but a man!’ the Creator would surely regard me as a most inauspicious person.

“So now I think of heaven and earth as a great furnace and the Creator as a great smith. Where could he send me that would not be acceptable? My life complete, I will fall asleep, and then suddenly, I will wake up.”

The Four Friends and the following tale on the Three Friends both invoke the image of the “Creator” (more literally, “the maker of transformations,” as reflected in the initial reference: “Creator of Change”). The self-defining nature of the name of this “deity” and the playful language of the passage probably signal that this Creator is a literary rather than a religious object – we certainly know of no religious worship of such a deity. Even so, the term itself requires some clarification. There is a long Western scholarly tradition that holds that early Chinese culture was distinctive in the fact that there was no concept of *creation ex nihilo* – the type of fundamental creation concept expressed in the opening of the Biblical *Genesis*. The term the *Zhuangzi* uses here is not consistent with such a notion. Rather, this creator is more like a manufacturer, a personified force that reshapes the raw material of physical existence into new forms, the materials it molds being given by a pre-

existing and uncreated cosmos, as the image of the smith in this passage suggests: in this sense, the phrase “creator of change” may be more informative than the term “creator of things.” Given the central role of humor, irony, and poetic imagery in the *Zhuangzi*, a more conservative interpretation here is that the Creator is not a systematic philosophical concept, but a literary device. It tells us that the notion of a master deity in charge of the form and destiny of all things in the world was an intelligible to readers of the time, but should probably not be taken as informative of contemporary religious practices.

6.5 Zigong and the Three Friends

Zisanghu, Meng Zifan, and Ziqinzhang were talking together. “Who among us can join together in that which cannot be joined and act together in that which cannot be enacted? Who can climb to Heaven and ride on the mists, cavort beyond the roof of the cosmos, and join together in a life of forgetfulness without any end?”

The three men looked at each other and smiled. There was no disagreement in their hearts, and the four of them became friends.

After some time had passed, Zisanghu died. Before his funeral had taken place, Confucius heard about it and dispatched Zigong to go offer assistance. When he arrived, one friend was chanting a melody while the other was plucking away at a zither, then both joined in harmony, singing:

Hey there, Zisang!
Hey there, Zisang!
You’ve returned to your true form
And we are still men!

Zigong hurried forward. “May I ask,” he said, “is singing by the side of the corpse the proper *li*?”

The two men looked at one another and began to laugh. “What does this one know about *li*?” they said.

Zigong returned and reported to Confucius. “What kind of men are these?” he asked. “They have no trace of cultivated behavior and treat their own bodily forms as something unconnected to them. They sang by the side of the corpse without any alteration in their expression! No words can describe such men – what kind of men are they?”

Confucius said, “These are men who roam beyond the outer bounds, and I – I am one who roams within the bounds. The outer and inner cannot reach one another, and I was a fool to send you to pay respects! These men are companions of the Creator, and they roam amidst the single *qi* of heaven and earth. They regard life as an extraneous growth, and for them death is like the removal of a tumor or the lancing of a boil. For men such as these, how could they even retain awareness of whether life or death comes first? They appropriate as they please from those with forms different from their own, reliant on our sameness as one body. They forget their own bodies down to liver and gall, leave behind their senses, hearing and sight, and tumble back to the endless cycle of end and beginning without any awareness of the point between them. Unbounded they toss about beyond the realm of dust, free and easy in the workings of effortless action (*wuwei*). How could such as they be bothered with following the petty customs of *li* in order to impress the sight and hearing of the common mass of men?”

Zigong said, “If this is so, then what bounds are guides for you, Master?”

“As for me, I am among those who suffer the punishment of Heaven,” said Confucius. “Even so, I will share my guiding methods with you.”

“I presume to ask, Sir.”

Confucius said, “Fish thrive together in water; men thrive together in the Dao. Thriving in water is a matter of penetrating the pools and finding nourishment there; thriving in the Dao is a matter of abandoning all effort and finding one’s life settled therein. They say, ‘Fish forget themselves in rivers and lakes; men forget themselves in the arts of the Dao.’”

Zigong said, “May I ask about exceptional men?”

“Exceptional men,” said Confucius, “are those who are exceptions among men but companions to Heaven. They say, ‘The small man to Heaven is the *junzi* among men; the *junzi* to Heaven is a small man among men.’”

This section uses the metaphor of fish in water, as in section 6.2, which may indicate that the two sections are closely related; however, as noted above, in the Chinese text as it now exists a portion of section 6.4 also appears in 6.2, and it may be that the tales of the Four Friends and Three Friends were an original “doublet” at the core of the chapter, and the essay on Death and the Dao was prefixed to them as a type of introduction, with the intervening comic section on the Hunchback Woman inserted later. The two Friend tales capture most of what the chapter has to say about its main them: the natural transformation of death, the Prime Master of the traditional title for chapter 6.

6.6 Mengsun Cai mourns his mother

Yan Hui asked Confucius, “When Mengsun Cai’s mother died he wailed for her, but shed no tears. He was not grieved at heart. Moreover, he conducted her funeral without mourning. Yet lacking on all three of these counts, he nevertheless is renowned throughout the state of Lu for the excellence with which he observed the mortuary rites. Can one really gain such a reputation without the slightest substance behind it? I am amazed to see it!”

Confucius said, “Mengsun Cai exhausted all that there was to do. He went beyond ordinary awareness. When others try to bring simple order to these rites they are not able to, but he brought to them his own simplicity. Mengsun Cai doesn’t not know how he came to be born and or how he will come to die. He does not know which comes earlier and which comes later. It is as if he had been transformed into a thing and simply awaits his next transformation all unaware. If one is on the brink of transformation how could one be aware of the unchanging? When one is not about to be transformed, how could one be aware that all has already been transformed?”

“For you and me, it’s simply that we have not yet begun to wake from our dream. For him, his body may be threatened, but his heart remains undamaged; his household may be distraught, but his inner energy is undiminished. Mengsun Cai alone has awakened. When others wail, he wails; in this he is just naturally following what they do and making them part of his “I.” And how do we know anyway that the “I” we take to be “I” is not in the end not “I?” You dream you’re a bird bursting into the sky; you dream you’re a fish plummeting to the depths – but you can’t be sure when you’re talking about it now whether you’re the wakened one or the dreamer.

“Rushing about is not as good as laughing. Breaking into laughter isn’t as good as pushing things to the side. To be content to push things aside and go on with one’s transformations, that is to enter into the vacant oneness of Heaven.”

After the series of passages on death above, the chapter closes with the following three short tales, all of which seem to be “doublets,” reprising in some form tales told to greater effect in versions that occur earlier in the text, though in each case, something new is added. Section 6.7 recalls the conversation of Yao and Xu You in 1.2; 6.8 seems like a radical

condensation of 4.1, and 6.9 finds pithier parallels in 6.4 and 6.5 in this chapter, though unlike it, the theme is poverty and the random path of life, rather than death.

6.7 Yi Erzi visits Xu You

Yi Erzi went to visit Xu You. “What lessons has Yao provided you?” asked Xu You.

Yi Erzi said, “Yao said to me, ‘You must submit your entire person to humanity (*ren*) and righteousness (*yi*), and clearly state right and wrong.’”

“Why have you come, then?” asked Xu You. “Yao has already branded your face with humanity and righteousness and sliced off your nose with right and wrong.* How are you going to roam along the free and swerving path of change?”

“Even so,” replied Yi Erzi, “I’m willing to roam along its borders.”

“No,” said, Xu You. “One who is blind cannot appreciate the beauty of graceful eyebrows and a lovely face, nor can a man without eyes enjoy the colorful robes of ritual finery.”

Yi Erzi said, “The beauty Wuzhuang lost her looks, muscle man Ju Liang lost his strength, the Yellow Emperor lost all understanding, all reshaped in the smelter’s cauldron and by smith’s hammer – how do you know that the Creator won’t fade my brand and patch my nose and restore me to wholeness so that I may follow you, Master?”

“Ah, indeed!” replied Xu You. “I cannot be sure. So I will lay it out for you in bare outline. This teacher of mine – oh, this teacher of mine! He mixes together the myriad things of the world like a dish of pickles, but does not present his recipe as right (*yi*). He provides sustenance to the myriad things but does not see his action as *ren*. He is older than highest antiquity, but does not play the elder’s role. Like heaven and earth he covers all and bears all, carving everything to its shape without any claim of skill. It is in this that I roam.”

*Branding the face and slicing off the nose were two forms of mutilating punishment under the early Chinese legal code.

The tales behind the references to Wuzhuang and Ju Liang are lost. The Yellow Emperor became a focus of legend during the Warring States period, and a recovered manuscript from the second century BCE reports his temporary withdrawal from the world to reflect and reshape his wisdom; there may be some resonance with this reference, but it seems more likely that here all three figures are being reshaped by a process akin to death.

6.8 Yan Hui improves

Yan Hui said, “I’ve improved!”

“What do you mean?” asked Confucius.

“I have forgotten ritual and music!”

“That’s fine,” said Confucius,” but still not enough.”

Another day, Yan Hui came again and said, “I’ve improved!”

“What do you mean?” asked Confucius.

“I have forgotten *ren* and right (*yi*)!”

“That’s fine,” said Confucius,” but still not enough.”

Another day, Yan Hui came again and said, “I’ve improved!”

“What do you mean?” asked Confucius.

“I sit and forget.”

Confucius frowned and said, “What do you mean by ‘sit and forget?’”

Yan Hui said, “I smash my limbs and drive out sight and hearing; I leave my form behind and flee intelligence. I join as one in the Great Breakthrough. That’s what I mean by ‘sit and forget.’”

“If you join all as one then you have no preferences among things,” said Confucius, “and being in this state of transformation you have no constancy. You are worthy after all – I beg to follow as your disciple!”

The “Great Breakthrough” translates a term that serves at once to denote a road that extends through everything (like a thread that links all), communication that reaches the object sought, and a penetration of understanding.

6.9 *The Two Friends*

Ziyu and Zisang were friends, and once, when rain came pouring down for ten days straight, Ziyu said, “I bet Zisang is in trouble!” He wrapped up a packet of food and went off to feed his friend. When he reached Zisang’s gate he heard a sound like singing and sobbing to the tones of a zither bring plucked. “Oh, Father! Oh, Mother! Oh, Heaven! Oh, Humanity!” – like a man barely able to gasp out the snatches of song.

Ziyu went in. “Why do you sing such a song in this way?” he said.

“I have been pondering who it is who has brought me to this pass,” said Zisang, “and I have failed to grasp the answer. How could my parents have wished me to be poor? And heaven and earth – heaven covering all without bias and earth bearing up all without bias – what bias would lead them to make me poor? Seek though I may for the one who has done this, I cannot find him. What has brought me to this pass – it must simply be fate (*ming*)!”

Chapter 7 In Response to High Kings

7.1 Puyizi instructs Nie Que

Nie Que asked Wang Ni four questions and four times replied that he did not know the answer.* So Nie Que leapt up in great delight and ran off to tell Puyizi.

Puyizi said, “Do you understand now? Emperor Shun of the Youyu clan cannot equal the emperor from the Tai clan. Shun stored up humaneness (*ren*) in order to gain sway over humanity. Indeed, he gained sway over humanity, but he never began to escape from the world of all that is not human. The emperor from the Tai clan lay down to sleep in comfort and ease and woke in tranquil satisfaction. One moment he saw himself as a horse, the next as an ox. His understanding was pure and trustworthy, his power (*de*) so genuine – and he never began to enter into the world of all that is not human.

*Nie Que questions Wang Ni in section 2.17; Wang Ni three times replies, “How would I know?” If section 7.1 is referring to that text, we may wonder where the fourth reply came from.

Puyizi (the master of the reed jacket) compares the Confucian hero Shun unfavorably to the emperor of the Tai clan (or the “Great” clan), an apparent invention of the *Zhuangzi*. The world of the “not human” seems likely to refer of the world of values, in which people are motivated by desire for material goods that ultimately control them.

7.2 Jian Wu visits Jie Yu

Jian Wu went to see the madman Jie Yu. Jie Yu asked him, “What did Rizhongshi tell you?”

Jian Wu said, “He said that one who rules over other men creates governing rules and formal regulations based on his own standing – who then dares to disobey and fail to change?”

“That type of power (*de*) is fraud!” said the madman. “Trying to govern that way is like trying to ford the ocean, dig a river, or make a mosquito lift a mountain on its back! Now, when the Sage governs does he govern by external things? He acts only after he is properly set himself and simply sets each person on precisely the task they can do.

“Birds fly high to escape the wound of the archer’s arrow, and the mouse burrows deep below the mound of the spirit altar to dodge the danger of those who dig down to smoke him out. Do you have less sense than these two creatures?”

Jian Wu and Jie Yu are characters we first met in section 1.3 (Jie Yu is best known from his cameo walk-on in *Analects* 18.5, but that brief passage is expanded in the *Zhuangzi* [see section 4.7]). Like them, Rizhongshi is a fictional character; his name literally means Noon’s Beginning.

7.3 The man with no name

Heaven-root roamed on the south slope of Mt. Yin until he came to the River Liao. There, he happened to encounter a man with no name and questioned him. “May I ask about ruling the world?”

“Get away from me, you bumpkin!” said the man with no name. “What a dreary question! I am just now becoming companion to the Creator, and when I’ve had enough of that, I will mount

the back of the bird of distant vacuity, travel beyond the poles of the six directions, wander in the country of Nothing Whatever and settle in the wilds of Boundlessness. How dare you rile up my mind with ruling the world!”

He asked again.

“If you let your mind wander in the limpid,” said the man with no name, “join your *qi* with the clear. Follow things the way they are in themselves, free from selfish bias, then the world will be ruled.”

7.4 Lao Dan on the sage king

Yang Ziju went to visit Lao Dan. “Let’s say there were a man quick and brave, whose insight into things was clear, who understood affairs, and who studied the Dao untiringly. Could one such as this be compared to an enlightened king?”

Lao Dan replied, “From the point of view of a Sage, such talents are the skills of the clerk, wearing out his body and exhausting his mind with alarm. It is the patterned pelts of tigers and leopard that attract the hunters; it is the agility of monkeys and dogs that attract the leash-bearing captors. How can such a one be compared to an enlightened king?”

Yang Ziju’s brow furrowed. “Then may I ask about the governance of the enlightened king?”

Lao Dan replied, “The work of the enlightened king’s rule covers the earth, but it as if he played no part in it; his transformations supply people with everything, but they feel no reliance upon him. He is present, but none praise him; he lets the things of the world find their own delight. He stands in the unfathomable and roams where Being is not.”

Lao Dan is Laozi. The passage resonates with chapter 17 of the *Dao de jing*: “The best: those below are aware that he is there. Next best: they love and praise him. Next best, they fear him. Next best: they insult him. . . . Far off, he speaks but rarely. When the work is accomplished and the task is complete, the people all say, ‘We did it ourselves.’”

7.5 Liezi’s teacher Huzi meets a shaman

In the state of Zheng there lived a spirit-like shaman named Ji Xian. He could foretell whether men would live or die, grow old or be cut down young, prosper or perish. He could foretell these things to the year, month, and day, like magic - like a spirit. When the people of Zheng caught sight of him they would drop everything and run away. But when Liezi saw him, he was intoxicated with him. Returning home, he told Huzi about him.

“I used to think that your *dao* was the ultimate, Master,” he said, “but now I find there is one more perfect yet.”

Huzi replied, “I have shown to you so far only its pattern and not its substance. Have you indeed grasped this *dao*? If you have all hens and no rooster, what eggs can you expect? You have taken what you know of this *dao* and gone swaggering self-assured into the world; naturally, anyone would be able to read your fortune on your face. Bring him here. I’ll show him mine.”

The next day, Liezi presented the shaman to Huzi. When the shaman emerged from the interview he told Liezi, “Alas! Your master will soon die – he cannot live! It’s just a matter of a week or a few days more. I have seen the prodigy in his face – I have detected the damp of dying ash.”

Liezi returned with tears streaming down to his collar and told Huzi. “Just now I showed him the pattern of earth,” said Huzi, “all barren, unstimulating, unrelenting. Most likely he saw in this a blockage of the trigger of my power (*de*). Have him come again.”

The next day the shaman visited again with Huzi. When he emerged he told Liezi, “How fortunate it is that your master met me! There is some improvement and he will remain whole enough to live. I detected that his blockage has been counterbalanced.”

Liezi returned to tell Huzi. “Just now I showed him the fertile field of Heaven.” said Huzi. “Names and substance cannot enter there and the trigger shoots from the heels.* Most likely he saw the trigger of what is good in me. Have him come again.”

The next day the shaman visited again with Huzi. When he emerged he told Liezi, “Your master is in an unsteady state and I cannot read him in such a condition. Let him steady himself and I will come read him again.”

Liezi returned to tell Huzi. “Just now I showed him the Grand Emptiness that cannot be conquered. Most likely he saw the trigger of my balanced *qi*. The depths where the whale turns is an abyss; the depths where water lies still is an abyss; the depth where water flows is an abyss. There are nine kinds of abyss; I have shown him three. Have him come again.”

The next day the shaman visited again with Huzi. His feet had barely come to a standstill when he lost control of himself and ran away. “Go after him!” cried Huzi, but Liezi could not catch up with the shaman. When he returned he told Huzi, “He’s disappeared, I lost him. I just couldn’t catch up with him.”

Huzi said, “What I showed him just now came before the first emergence of our ancestor. I took him with me into emptiness, yet twisting and turning; he no longer knew who he was. Now wavering reeds, now tumbling waves – so he fled.”

After this, Liezi concluded that he had not yet begun to learn anything. So he went back to his home and did not leave it for three years. He cooked for his wife and fed his pigs as he would feed guests. He abandoned all preferences and reverted from a man carved and polished to an uncarved block. Like a clod of earth he simply stood alone in his body, amidst the tangles of the world he stayed sealed up - and so he remained till the end of his days.

*“Names and substance” are logicians’ terms distinguishing language and reality. This sentence contrasts those who reason through language from those who “breathe from their heels,” like the True Man in section 6.1.

We heard Liezi praised in section 1.1, but the portrait there is very different. Liezi is a figure closely associated with Zhuangzi in early texts: a text bearing his name emerged about a century or two after the *Zhuangzi*, and the two books incorporate some identical sections.

7.6 The Perfect Man as mirror

Do not be the host of fame; do not be a storehouse of schemes; do not be in charge of affairs; do not be the master of knowledge. Embody to the full the limitless and wander where nothing is foreshadowed. Exhaust what you have received from Heaven and be free of all gain – just be empty, that’s all.

The mind of the Perfect Man is like a mirror: it does reach out, it does not welcome in: it responds and stores nothing. Therefore, he prevails over all things and suffers no harm.

The language of the final sentence is military. More literally: “He conquers things and is unwounded” – a statement resonant with the *Dao de jing* theme of the soft and weak prevailing effortlessly over the hard and strong.

7.7 The gods of the north and south thank Hundun

The god of the Southern Sea was Swift; the god of the Northern Sea was Sudden. The god of the center was Hundun. Swift and Sudden would often meet in the land of Hundun, and Hundun would host them with great courtesy. Swift and Sudden made a plan to return Hundun’s generosity. “All men have seven orifices,” they said, “so that they can see and hear, eat and breathe. Hundun alone has none. Why don’t we bore these for him?”

Each day, they bored one orifice, and on the seventh day, Hundun died.

These are not traditional deities in Chinese religion, and the tale is very likely an invention of this text. Hundun’s name means “chaos,” and the image of Hundun is derived from an unlikely source – if you have ever had *wonton* soup in a Chinese restaurant, you have had a taste of Hundun. Like Hundun, a *wonton* dumpling mixes up many different ingredients together in a ball that is sealed without openings. A scholar of Chinese religious tradition named Norman Girardot wrote a wonderful study of Daoism that illustrated the pervasiveness of such imagery in the texts – think of Huizi’s gourd in chapter 1 – to symbolize the primordial Oneness of the Dao, which is destroyed, as we are told in chapter 2, when man cuts the world with “boundaries.”

The Inner Chapters close with the image of the divine *wonton* meeting death at the hands of the well meaning forces of the seas of the North and South. This creates a bracket with the book’s opening image of the Kun, the huge fish of the dark sea of the north – a fish whose name means “roe,” or fish egg, and is a near homophone with the first of the rhymed syllables of Hundun’s name. The silent, spontaneous transformation of this round immensity and his journey from the watery northern darkness to the Pool of Heaven in the southern darkness begins the intellectual journey of the Inner Chapters; the death of another round and featureless immensity through kindness and planning on the part of the gods of the northern and southern seas brings our journey to its close.