New Visions of the *Zhuangzi*

edited

by

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Preface

LIVIA KOHN

This book grew out of the 9th International Conference on Daoist Studies, held at Boston University in June, 2014. Having just published *Zhuangzi: Text and Context*, I sent out a call for papers to create a panel on the *Zhuangzi* and was astounded to receive a large number of submissions—all presenting fascinating, new, and insightful work that ended up filling all of four panels. The vibrancy of the response immediately suggested the compilation of a volume, and participants agreed to write their papers with publication in mind. In the end, not all presentations made it into the book, and three contributions joined the effort after the conference, but altogether the thirteen contributions here offer a new dimension of studying the ancient classic, looking at both the overall text and specific topics within it with new eyes and often highly creative methodology.

The first contribution, by Mercedes Valmisa, begins by repositioning the *Zhuangzi* as a whole within pre-Qin thought under the impact of newly excavated materials. Moving away from the traditional classification of texts according to schools, it focuses instead on varying approaches to life issues. Centering the discussion on life situations and changes we have no control over, including the unpredictable vagaries of fate (*ming* 命), it outlines several typical responses. One is adaptation, finding ways to go along with what life demands, and even avail oneself of the new opportunities it brings about. Another is a turning inward, a focus on the inner self, holding on to ethical and other standards and making sure one does the right thing regardless of the outcome of one's actions.

While the former appears in several chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, notably in chapter 6, the latter is central to the *Qiongda yishi* 窮達以時 (Failure and Success Depend on Opportunity), a manuscript excavated at Guodian. However tempting it may be to characterize one approach as Daoist and the other as Confucian, they both appear within the *Zhuangzi* together with a third approach to fate, showing the fluidity of philosophical discussion and the futility of thinking along the lines of traditional boundaries.

Taking a similar approach of focusing on themes rather than schools, Agnė Budriūnaitė discusses the problematic relationship between the notion of nature and the understanding of death, offering a new and more

encompassing definition of both. Nature here includes *tian* 天 as the natural order of things, *xing* 性 as personal character tendencies, and *ziran* 自然 as the inherent flow of things. If nature is seen as part of the divine order, death is understood as the transition from a temporary, incomplete existence to a higher and more perfect state. If nature is reduced to physical, psychological, and rational elements, death becomes the dissolution of the human being.

The article opens the multi-dimensional notion of death in the *Zhuangzi* and its relationship to its variegated perceptions of nature. From this perspective, it discusses various paradoxical relationships between the natural order of things and the immortality of the sage, the emotional nature of humanity and Zhuangzi's conception of mourning, as well as the relationship between individual and common nature. It culminates in a new vision of reducing the tension between nature and death through the philosophical notion of emptiness, the non-metaphysical concept of Dao, and the attainment of no-self.

Examining issues of control and adaptation in life from a position of contemporary ethical theory and adducing recent theories formulated by Thomas Nagel, Charles Larmore, and James Griffin, Chris Fraser next focuses on the heterogeneity of value in the *Zhuangzi*. He argues that this ethical position is at the center of Zhuangzi's vision of the overall fluidity of a flourishing life and that this outlook can make an important contribution to modern thinking. Rather than looking for permanent, stable values to follow, Zhuangzi emphasizes working with contingency, giving up all efforts at control, and adapting to each situation with a unique response. The ideal state that allows the most fluid adaptation is one of clarity or brightness (*ming* 明), creating a generalized "skill of living," the authentic, free exercise of agency, grounded in personal power (*de* 德).

Exploring the notion of clarity in more detail, Alan Fox understands it as an epistemological stance that sees through dichotomy to polarity, through the superficial to the subtle, from the manifold to the pluralistic, by privileging the concrete over the abstract. In the *Zhuangzi*, this stance is adopted to reconcile apparent contradictions. This emphasis on what might be called a "virtue epistemology" is consistent with Zhuangzi's particular presentation of acting in nonaction (*wuwei* 無為). Moving beyond the practical, he also explores the implications this has for linguistic theory.

Understanding the concept of power (*de*) as "health" Hans-Georg Moeller looks at its paradoxical illustrations—or parodies—in the *Zhuangzi*. The fifth chapter famously introduces a number of severely "crippled" characters as personifications of a supreme form of health or

"complete power" (*quande* 全德). From a philosophical perspective, these passages may be seen as parodies of the Confucian ideal of matching social constructs with a sincere commitment while at the same time also depicting a particular Daoist conception of health and power.

The same shaking up of conscious thinking through presentation of the human body is also at the center of the contribution by Lucia Q. Tang. She uses the cripple passages in the *Zhuangzi* to read a highly controversial work of avant-garde fashion that has long stumped Western fashion theorists. In 1997, the Japanese fashion house Comme de Garçon took to the Paris catwalks with an experiment in "designing the body," cutting through the fashion world's preoccupation with surfaces.

The collection showcased sheath dresses swollen with padding—burdening its models with humpbacks, tumors, and postpartum bellies. Perturbed fashion critics cried "Quasimodo," and the collection's meaning has been contested every since. Reconsidering it in light of the *Zhuangzi*, she emphasizes the text's aestheticization of the ugly and suspicion toward costume as a system of signification. Examining its reading of deformity as both a sign of power and a challenge to the Confucian virtue of social utility, in a highly creative new vision of the *Zhuangzi*, she places these axioms alongside Comme's subversion of what it means to create "fashion."

A somewhat different, more metaphorical take on the same passages appears in the work of Robert E. Allinson, who speaks of the deformed as "monsters" and argues that their appearance in the text serves two philosophical functions. First, they present a living counterexample to the norm, whether cultural, biological, or both; second, they represent a bridge between purely mythical creatures and historical or legendary characters. This occurs in several stages. First, there is pure fiction parading as fact (myth); second, there is a selected version of reality, portraying an unlikely story or ideal of reality; third, there are historically real figures from the past used unhistorically as myth, i.e., a blend of the past quality of myth and the real quality of history.

Within this framework, there are four kinds of deformities: crippled limbs or lameness, such as being one-footed or no-toed; miscellaneous deformities, i.e., hunchbacked, missing lips, and other physically contortions; simple ugliness, including simply being unbeautiful; and madness, mental deformity and social deviation. Figures representing these features, moreover, do not appear at random but present a systematic progress of understanding, expressed uniquely in the metaphorical language of the text. At the same time, his chapter provides a template for how metaphors can be cognitive and that if, and only if, metaphors are cognitive, then the goal of spiritual transcendence of the Zhuangzi can be achieved.

Similarly focusing on Zhuangzi's unique literary style, his extensive use of fables, humor, analogies, paradoxes, and generally the avoidance of direct clear-cut statements, Roy Porat examines the text's underlying "mistrust" of language. To him, a careful reading reveals that the various passages where Zhuangzi appears to denigrate and ridicule language actually manifest several distinct models of how language corresponds to the world, rooted in some different and even conflicting worldviews. His work presents a general typology of the problem of language as depicted in the different parts of the texts. After demonstrating some of these views, he analyzes the *Qiwulun*, finding that the chapter's author held a rather unique view of the problem, i.e., that language is not merely a tool to convey reality, but essential in its conceptualization. The problem with language, therefore, is not simply that it fails to describe reality properly, but that it actively shapes the very reality it supposes to describe.

Taking a different approach and seeing language in the *Zhuangzi* as an art of persuasion, Jung Lee next examines the narratives that feature sages and "realized persons" (zhenren 真人). Bernard Faure suggests that early Daoist figures can be considered as precursors to the "trickster" type of the later Chan Buddhist tradition, but this way of describing the nature and function of literary characters in early Daoist texts marginalizes the artistry and philosophical acumen that many dialogues and stories reveal.

He argues that the *Zhuangzi* contains various modes of rhetoric to establish and legitimate normative authority and identifies three such modes. The first is "contextual authority," a situation where a character accepts the judgments of another as normative based on a context of shared norms. The second is Socratic influence: a speaker prods listeners to think along certain lines and come to their own conclusions, typically found in master-disciple interactions. The third are "epiphanic pointers." Here the speaker persuades the listener through a performance of some kind, which suddenly reveals the essence of the matter. All of these different modes of rhetoric, then, serve to establish the normative authority of Zhuangzi's moral vision.

Looking at the interaction between masters and disciples from a concrete point of view, in an effort to pinpoint what kinds of people actually undertook the practices Zhuang describes, Thomas Michael focuses on the mastery of a program of physical cultivation, often called *yangsheng* 養生, undertaken in organized groups linked by master-student relationships. He distinguishes reclusive Daoism centering on something like networks of mountain communities from individual practitioners who remained within society but liberated themselves through oblivion.

Unlike the recluses of the Confucian tradition, early reclusive Daoists left next to no historical records, finding expression only in stories of legendary sages who seem to spend a lot of time in mountains. Seeing the *Zhuangzi* as a documentation of the life and work of such mountain hermits and looking into their shared forms of behavior, with particular attention to common themes, images, and consequences cohering around their textual episodes, he explores how the text reveals an early Daoist tradition of reclusion.

Boring even deeper to explore the minds of Zhuangzi hermits from the perspective of modern science, Livia Kohn examines the neurological and perception changes practitioners had to undergo to reach the ideal state, focusing on the key meditation practice of *zuowang* 坐忘, literally "sit and forget" or, more formally, "sitting in oblivion." As described in the classical passage in chapter 6, it involves actions of release: let fall away (*duo* 墮), do away (*chu* 黜), separate (*li* 离), let go (*qu* 去), and so on.

In actual reality, however, practitioners do not eliminate their cognitive or memory abilities. They are quite different from patients who have sustained injuries to their hippocampus and now experience "forgetfulness," the inability to remember what happened even a few hours ago. While this renders people detached and amused but also completely helpless and socially inadequate, the perfected in the *Zhuangzi* show enhanced skillfulness and capability.

Their neurological changes, it becomes evident, occur in emotional memory as processed in the amygdala. Normally leading to neuron loops of stress, amygdala processing can be altered and its responses controlled by a shift in attention, notably by focusing on a higher, more permanent value, like Heaven or life. This leads to the inhibition of automatization or, as psychologists call it today, emotion regulation. Neurologically, this is the core process of *zuowang*. In other words, rather than a dismantling of consciousness, the practice involves a conscious reprogramming and refinement of mental reactions.

The result is a childlike mind, an open curiosity and inherent radiance that connects the person to the world in exciting and stimulating ways. As Erin Cline shows, early Daoist texts present infants and children as models of what humans in their natural state look like, prior to the destructive interference of socialization, and also as models for how we should live and act in the world. Examining what exactly the texts see in infants and children that is so admirable and why using cognition in its early stages is a good way of being in the world, she focuses particularly on early Chinese views on infants and children. Arguing that there is more to them than first meets the eye, she also opens the ancient understanding to

contemporary relevance and argues that it has constructive value for us today.

The contemporary relevance of Zhuangzi's social and political philosophy is also at the heart of the work by Eske Møllgaard. Connecting it to Giorgio Agamben's *The Coming Community*, he argues that the *Zhuangzi* presents a clear picture of community, one that is just as substantial as the well-known Confucian conception. To him, Zhuangzi may offer a better vision of the coming community in our age of globalization than the widely promoted Confucian ideal, the Chinese dream of the rise of a splendid, prosperous, and powerful China, a nation to create a civilization that will outshine anything as yet seen in the modern world. Rather than falling in line with this ideology, Zhuangzi offers a way of life where we follow our particular existential situation without the shelter of a particular communal identity.

St. Petersburg, Fla., January 2015