

Article

Birds and Beasts in the Zhuangzi, Fables Interpreted by Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying

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Abstract: Birds and beasts often appear in the Zhuangzi, in fables and parables meant to be read analogically as instructions for human thought and behavior. Whereas the analogical significance of some fables is obvious, in others it is obscure and in need of explication, and even the readily accessible can be made to yield more clarity thanks to commentaries. This paper explores contributions made by the commentaries of Guo Xiang (252–312) and Cheng Xuanying (ca. 620–670) to the understanding of such fables. Guo Xiang and Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249) are the two most important figures in the xuanxue 玄學 “arcane learning” or “Neo-Daoism” movement of early medieval China (third to sixth century C.E.), which combined elements of Confucianism with the thought of Daoist foundational texts, especially the Daode jing (Classic of the Dao and Virtue) and the Zhuangzi (Sayings of Master Zhuang). Focus of the movement was the promotion of the concept and practice of the sage-ruler as a catalyst for the regeneration of self and society, leading to the foundation of a worldly utopia. Guo’s is the earliest intact philosophical commentary to the Zhuangzi and one of the most widely read during premodern times. Cheng Xuanying composed the only subcommentary to Guo’s commentary. Its more explicit style is most helpful in deciphering Guo’s too often cryptic and elliptical statements. However, it also tends to shunt Guo’s statecraft reading of the Zhuangzi more in the direction of explicating philosophical and religious dimensions of the text. Whereas Guo’s observations about sagehood, self-fulfillment, and the good life largely focus on the sage-ruler and his relation to his people, Cheng’s approach tends more to explore issues of personal self-realization and individual enlightenment, and, as such, is far more “religious” than Guo’s. However, when it comes to accounts of birds and beasts, parodies and satires, which address the limitations, failures, delusions and faulty assumptions, narrow-mindedness, and other human foibles, both Guo and Cheng see them all rooted in self-conscious thought and knowledge, and thus deadly impediments to enlightenment. Other passages about beasts and birds use animal fables as exemplars of truth concerning endowed personal nature and the natural propensity to stay within the bounds of individual natural capacity. Since the commentaries of Guo and Cheng add important dimensions to these accounts, this study explores these as well.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; Guo Xiang; Cheng Xuanying; Dao; Daoism; fable; parable; spontaneity; birds and beasts; commentaries

The *Zhuangzi* (Sayings of Master Zhuang),¹ an extraordinary text in many ways, has throughout the ages attracted attention as a repository of fables and parables. Its fables include not only animals—both real (fish, turtles, snakes) and imaginary (Kun fish and Peng bird)—but also plants (trees that talk) and inanimate objects and phenomena (such as the wind), and forces of nature (Earl of the Yellow River and

¹ The author’s *Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang* is in preparation and will be published by Columbia University Press in 2020. All translations in this essay of the *Zhuangzi*, its commentaries, and other Chinese texts are by the author.

North Sea Ruo). Moreover, such passages feature not only human characters met in supposedly real and believable situations but also mythic, divine, and otherwise superhuman figures such as the Yellow Thearch, Hundun (primal Chaos), as well as such mythical heroes as Fu Xi (Domesticator of Sacrificial Animals) and Shennong (Divine farmer, inventor of agriculture). Such fables and parables address the limitations, failures, delusions, faulty assumptions, and narrow-mindedness of benighted mankind, human foibles rooted in self-conscious thought and knowledge and, as such, deadly impediments to self-fulfillment, happiness, and the good life—all of which may be achieved only unselfconsciously and free from conscious effort. Fables and parables also use such human and nonhuman characters at times positively, as exemplars of truth to endowed nature (*xing* 性) and celebration of the natural propensity to stay within the bounds of natural capacity (*xingfen* 性分), for both rulers and ruled—both essential concerns in Guo Xiang’s and Cheng Xuanying’s readings of the *Zhuangzi*.² Guo and Cheng expand and elaborate the text of the *Zhuangzi* in such a way that passages become elements of a comprehensive treatise of statecraft—advice to the ruler. Such an “applied wisdom” reading of the *Zhuangzi* is consistent with the major trend in Neo-Daoism in general to read such texts as the *Daode jing* and the *Yijing* 易經 (Classic of Changes) as repositories of political wisdom and practice.³

Although many references to animals mentioned in the *Zhuangzi* also appear in works authored or edited by Roel Sterckx,⁴ none of these focus on the nature and function of the role of animals in its fables and parables, that is, how animals are used as literary motifs and rhetorical devices, but instead explore the perception and textual representation of animals as animals in ancient and later premodern Chinese works, the *Zhuangzi* included, of course, as a major such work rich in animal reference. Moreover, the views of Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying play no part in the surveys and analyses of Sterckx and his colleagues.

Fables and parables have long been recognized as major features of the discourse of the *Zhuangzi*. As Lu Deming 陸德明 (556–627) observed: 大抵皆寓言。歸之於理。不可案文責也。 (Guo 1997, Xu 序 [Prefaces], vol. i, p. 4) “For the most part, he [Master Zhuang] conveys what he wants to say in fables and parables, which he uses to set forth principles, so he may not be censured on the basis of what is literally said in the text.” And Cheng Xuanying, has this to say: 莊子寓言以暢玄理。故寄景與罔兩。明於獨化之義。 (Guo 1997, vol. i, p. 110) “Master Zhuang used fables and parables to express the arcane principles of things, which is why he relies here on Shadow and Penumbra to clarify the meaning of independent transformation (*duhua*).”

Guo Xiang himself occasionally refers to his own view of the nature and use of fables and parables in the *Zhuangzi*, as, for example, in his commentary to a passage concerning the most famous of fabulous creatures that appear in the *Zhuangzi*, the Kun and Peng:

北冥有魚。其名鯤。鯤之大。不知其幾千里也。化而為鳥。其名鵬。In the North Sea there is a fish, whose name is the Kun. The Kun’s size is so great that no one knows how many tricents big it is. It changes into a bird, whose name is the Peng. 鵬鯤之實。吾所未詳也。夫莊子之大意。在乎逍遙遊放。無而自得。故極小大之致以明性分之適。達觀之士。宜要其會歸而遺其所寄。不足事事曲與生說。自不害其弘旨。皆可略之耳。⁵ Whether the Kun and the Peng really exist I really do not know. The main idea in the *Zhuangzi* is that one should let himself go in spontaneous free play and achieve self-fulfillment through the practice of unselfconscious action. Therefore, the text focuses on the most extreme examples of small and great in order to illuminate what is appropriate to one’s natural capacity. Scholars who

² Guo’s *Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子注 (Commentary to the *Zhuangzi*) and Cheng’s *Zhuangzi shu* 莊子疏 (Sub-commentary to the *Zhuangzi*) are both contained in their entirety in (Guo 1997).

³ (Chan 1991, pp. 119–58, 159–91; Lynn 1994, pp. 14–5; Lynn 1999, pp. 11–5; Lynn 2015, pp. 382–3; Hon 2010, pp. 71–95). For the affiliations between Cheng’s thought and the concept and practice of the “sage-ruler” and practical statecraft, see (Assandri 2009, pp. 127–9).

⁴ (Sterckx 2002; Puett and Sterckx 2005; Sterckx 2011; Sterckx et al. 2018).

⁵ Bold face is used for the text of the *Zhuangzi* and non-bold for Guo’s and Cheng’s commentaries.

look at things with equanimity and insight should concentrate on the deep and universal significance of what is said and disregard the particular words that convey it. One should not have to come up with something to say for every little detail, for as long as such omissions do no harm to the main idea, they are always acceptable. (Guo 1997, vol. i, pp. 2–3)

Our concern here is with the appearance of birds and beasts in the *Zhuangzi*, where fables involving them often appear, and we have to ask why the authors of the text, Master Zhuang himself, his immediate disciples, as well as later followers, included so many of them, and why they seem so effective in conveying Zhuangzian teachings. Let us look at a few examples, the first from *Qiushui* 秋水 (Autumn Floods, Chapter 17):

莊子釣於濮水。楚王使大夫二人往先焉。曰。願以境内累矣。莊子持竿不顧曰。吾聞楚有神龜。死已三千歲矣。王巾笥而藏之廟堂之上。此龜者。寧其死留骨而貴乎。寧其生而曳尾於塗中乎。二大夫曰。寧生而曳尾塗中。莊子曰。往矣！吾將曳尾於塗中。 **Once when Master Zhuang was fishing in the Pu River, the King of Chu dispatched two officers of state to go to him in advance and announce on his behalf, “I wish to burden you with the administration of my realm.” Master Zhuang held on to his pole and without turning his head said, “I have heard that in Chu there is a sacred tortoise, already dead for three thousand years, kept by the king wrapped in cloth and preserved in a bamboo hamper at the ancestral hall. Would this tortoise rather be dead and have its bones left behind to be venerated or be alive so it could drag its tail in the mud?” The two officers of state replied, “It would rather be alive so it could drag its tail in the mud.” To which Master Zhuang said, “Get you gone! I am going to drag my tail in the mud!”** 性各有所安也。The nature of each would thus be content. (Guo 1997, vol. iii, p. 604)

Tortoise shells, used in pyromancy for their supposed numinous properties, were thus “sacred” and kept with other sacred ritual objects in ancestral halls. The fable succinctly summarizes the contrast between the simple joys of the secluded life of the recluse fisherman and the prestigious yet dangerous and ultimately empty existence attendant on high rank and office, represented by the ritual tortoise shell, a central theme of the *Zhuangzi* as a whole, here and elsewhere conveyed in a variety of ways, including a more detailed fable that soon follows in the same chapter:

惠子相梁。莊子往見之。或謂惠子曰。莊子來。欲代子相。於是惠子恐。搜於國中三日三夜。 **When Master Hui was prime minister of Liang, Master Zhuang went to see him. Someone said to Master Hui, “Master Zhuang is coming because he wants to replace you as prime minister. At this, Master Hui was so afraid that he had the capital searched for him three days and nights.** 揚兵整旅。So he mustered troops and instructed them to do this。莊子往見之。曰。南方有鳥。其名鶡鷄。子知之乎。夫鶡鷄。發於南海而飛於北海。非梧桐不止。非練實不食。非醴泉不飲。於是鷓鴣得腐鼠。鶡鷄過之。仰而視之曰。嚇。今子欲以子之梁國而嚇我邪。 **Master Zhuang went to see him and said, “In the south there is a bird, whose name is phoenix fowl [yuanchu]. Do you know it? When the phoenix fowl flies out from the Southern Sea all the way up to the Northern Sea, it perches on nothing but the paulownia tree, eats nothing but bamboo seed, and drinks nothing but sweet spring water. But then there was an owl that had just got a rotten rat, and as the phoenix fowl happen to pass by, it raised its head and, seeing it, cried out ‘shoo.’ Now do you want to shoo me away for the sake of this Liang state of yours?”** 言物嗜好不同。願各有極。This addresses how the tastes of creatures are so different—each limited to what it desires. (Guo 1997, vol. iii, pp. 605–606)

The mythic “phoenix fowl” symbolizes the refined courtier and aristocrat whose impeccable tastes set him apart from the common run of mankind. The owl, on the other hand, is a scavenger whose indiscriminate tastes associate it with base mankind at its worst. The forceful analogical thrust of the parable with its immediate sting has delighted readers for ages, its humorous contrast of greed for vile

advantage versus lofty personal taste effectively encapsulates the Zhuangzian nonworldly critique of the lust for power, wealth, and prestige—all no better than a dead, rotting rat! The mechanism by which the humor works combines both a juxtaposition of unlikely pairs of referents—rotten rat with feudal state and owl (carrion eater) with prime minister—as well as a reversal of expectation—administration of a state is surely a noble endeavor, not at all comparable to the revolting tastes of an owl! Master Zhuang addresses Master Hui in this way surely to instruct him (and, vicariously, all readers ever since), so in addition to the shock value inherent in the rhetoric, casting the argument in terms of a parable allows the instructed the comfort of viewing their own failings at a distance, couched as they are in terms of the vile tastes of an inferior animal.

Also from the same chapter is the oft-quoted and referred to exchange between Master Zhuang and Master Hui about the joy of fish. Here, imagination is championed by Master Zhuang as a vital form of cognition, defended on empathetic and creative grounds, and discredited by Master Hui in terms of the rational intellect as pretension and fantasy. Although it is clear from both the text of the *Zhuangzi* and Guo's commentary that the vehicle of cognition is empathetic imagination, neither use specific terminology to identify it. However, Cheng Xuanying refers to it as: *da wuqing suoyi* 達物情所以 “understand how the innate character of creatures is as it is” and *ti wuxing* 體物性 “embody the inherent nature of others.” *Da* might also be rendered “have unimpeded access to,” and *ti* is thus employed surely with the meaning of such binomials as *tihui* 體會 “bodily understand” or *ticha* 體察 “bodily apprehend,” functions that involve the whole body, its physical sensations, and workings of the mind and heart, all of which involve empathetic imagination:

莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上。莊子曰。儻魚出遊從容。是魚之樂也。惠子曰。子非魚。安知魚之樂。莊子曰。子非我。安知我不知魚之樂。 Whilst Master Zhuang and Master Hui were walking about on Hao Bridge, Master Zhuang remarked, “The *shu* fish emerge to wander so free and easy, for such is the joy of fish.”⁶ Master Hui then said, “You are not a fish, so wherein [*an*] can you know the joy of fish?”⁷ Master Zhuang replied, “You are not me, so wherein do you know that I do not know the joy of fish?” 欲以起明相非而不可以相知之義耳。子非我。尚可以知我之非魚。則我非魚。亦可以知魚之樂也。 By saying this he wants to cast light on the proposition that because one is not another he cannot know that other: If despite not being me you still can know that I am not a fish, then it must be true that even though I am not a fish, I too can know the joy of fish.⁸ 惠子曰。我非子。固不知子矣。子固非魚也。子之不知魚之樂。全矣。 Master Hui then said, “I am not you, so I definitely do not know what it is to be you, but as you are definitely not a fish, this proves perfectly that you do not know what it is to be a fish.” 舍其本言而給辯以難也。 Abandoning his original thesis, he tries to use nimble disputation to refute him. 莊子曰。請循其本。子曰。汝安知魚樂云者。既已知吾知之而問我。我知之濠上也。 Master Zhuang responded, “May I get back to your original thesis? When you said ‘wherein do you know the joy of fish,’ you already knew wherein I knew it but asked me anyway: I knew it above the Hao.” 尋惠子之本言云。非魚

⁶ Cheng Xuanying: “The Hao is the name of a stream in Zhongli prefecture 鍾離郡 in the Huainan 淮南 region . . . Where rock cuts across water a *liang* 梁 [“bridge”] is formed, but the text here may also refer to an actual bridge over the Hao River . . . Fish move about in water, while birds perch on land; each complying with its inherent nature, they all enjoy spontaneous freedom. Master Zhuang was deft at understanding how the innate character of creatures is as it is [*wuqing suoyi*], thus he knew the joy of fish” (Guo 1997, vol. iii, p. 606). The *shu* 儻 may be identified with the *Hemiculter leucisculus*, the common sharpbelly or sawbelly of East and Southeast Asia, adult average size about 30 cm./12 in. Although the consensus of modern lexicography has *shu* for the name of the fish, traditional commentators suggest other pronunciations.

⁷ Cheng Xuanying: 惠施不體物性。妄起質疑。莊子非魚。焉知魚樂。 “Failing to embody the inherent nature of other creatures, Hui Shi presumptuously challenged him: Master Zhuang, you are not a fish, so wherein can you know the joy of fish” (Guo 1997, vol. iii, 3:607)?

⁸ Cheng Xuanying: 若以我非魚。不得知魚。子既非我。何得知我。若子非我。尚得知我。我雖非魚。何妨知魚。反而質之。令其無難也。 “If I cannot know what it is to be a fish because I am not a fish, since you are not me, wherein can you know what it is to be me? But if you are not me yet can still know what it is to be me, although I am not a fish, what prevents me from knowing what it is to be a fish? Master Zhuang turns Master Hui’s argument back on him, which allows him to refute his objection”. *Zhuangzi jishi*, 3:607.

則無緣相知耳。今子非我也。而云汝安知魚樂者。是知我之非魚也。苟知我之非魚。則凡相知者。果可以此知彼。不待是魚然後知魚也。故循子安知之云。已知吾之所知矣。而方復問我。我正知之於濠上耳。豈待入水哉。夫物之所生而安者。天地不能易其處。陰陽不能回其業。故以陸生之所安。知水生之所樂。未足稱妙耳。 He gets back to Master Hui's original thesis, in which he said, "Since you are not a fish you have no means to know what it is to be one." Now [to paraphrase Master Zhuang], "You are not me yet still ask wherein do I know the joy of fish, which means that you know that I am not a fish, and if you know that I am not a fish, this in general means that mutual knowing [between self and other] is such that a this one can know a that one, and one need not depend on being a fish and only then know what it is to be a fish. Therefore I went back to what you said about wherein could I have known such a thing, which means that you already knew what I knew! But just when you persisted in interrogating me, I knew it exactly there above the Hao, so why did I have to depend on entering the water!" That creatures live where they feel safe and secure is because Heaven and Earth cannot exchange places and yin and yang cannot interchange productive activities. Therefore, one living on land may by reference to how he feels safe and secure can know how those that live in water feel joy—there is nothing especially profound or mysterious about this at all!⁹. (Guo 1997, vol. iii, pp. 606–8)

Although humans and fish are obviously very different in many ways, Master Zhuang's argument is based on the firm conviction that a commonality exists at the level of basic, fundamental nature: the capacity to feel joy, and that this capacity is not only observable across species but also open to empathetic understanding. Guo Xiang turns this apparently casual conversational exchange into a sophisticated treatise on cognition, the rules of argument in terms of logical syllogism, as well as the power of empathy in human and nonhuman relationships, and, along the way, clarifies the elusive meaning of *an* 安 "wherein", which might seem on the surface a mere pun, so that it reveals itself instead as the key to understanding the gist of the passage as a whole.¹⁰

Again from Chapter 17, where the erudite sophist Gongsun Long 公孫龍 confesses to Prince of Zhongshan Mou of Wei that, despite all his learning and cleverness, he is so utterly confounded by the teachings of Master Zhuang that he knows not what to do:

公子牟隱机大息。仰天而笑曰。子獨不聞夫培井之乎。謂東海之曰。吾樂與。出跳梁乎井幹之上。入休乎缺甃之崖。赴水則接腋持頤。蹶泥則沒足滅跗。還軒蟹與科斗。莫吾能若也。且夫擅一壑之水。而跨時培井之樂。此亦至矣。夫子奚不時來入觀乎。 Prince Mou slouched against his writing desk, heaved a great sigh, and looking up at the sky laughed and said, "Is it just you who has not heard of the frog in the derelict well? It said to the great turtle of the Eastern Sea, "How pleased I am! I come out to jump along atop the railing of the well or go back in to rest in the edge where a tile is missing. When I go in the water, I let it reach my armpits and hold up my chin; when I trip about in the mud, I sink my feet into it and let my insteps disappear. When I look around at the bloodworms, crabs and tadpoles, none can equal what I can do. Moreover, I have hegemony over this entire pit of water and all the joy in straddling this dilapidated well—how perfect is that! Why don't you come in and take a look around some time!" 此猶小鳥之自足於蓬蒿。 This one seems just like the little bird that is self-satisfied with its wild grass.¹¹ 東海之左足未入。而

⁹ *An* 安 here is translated "wherein" instead of the more usual "how" because a deliberate pun on the word is involved that exploits the range of meanings of *an*: content, contentment, safe and secure, where, and wherein. "Wherein" can suggest both "how" and "where": Master Zhuang deliberately (and mischievously) misconstrues Master Hui's questioning so he has him asking "where do you know the joy of fish", which leads to Master Zhuang's concluding remark, "I knew it there above the Hao".

¹⁰ This *Zhuangzi* passage is analyzed in more detail as part of a general study of imagination in the Chinese tradition in Lynn (2019).

¹¹ *Xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊 "Spontaneous Free Play", Chapter 1: "斥鴳笑之曰。彼且奚適也。我騰躍而上。不過數仞而下。翔蓬蒿之間。此亦飛之至也。而彼且奚適也。 The marsh quail laughed at it [the giant trans-continental Peng 鵬], saying: 'Where is that one

右膝已繫矣。When the great turtle of the Eastern Sea had not quite got its left foot in, its right knee was already stuck. 明大之不游於小。非樂然。This clarifies how something large may not play about in something small—it is no fun at all to do so. 於是逡巡而卻。告之海曰。夫千里之遠。不足以舉其大。千仞之高。不足以極其深。禹之時十年九潦。而水弗加益。湯之時八年七旱。而崖不加損。夫不頃久推移。不以多少進退者。此亦東海之大樂也。於是埴井之聞之。適適然驚。規規然自失也。 Thereupon, it hesitated and withdrew to tell the frog about the sea, “The space of a thousand tricents is inadequate to encompass it, and a height of a thousand fathoms is inadequate to reach its entire depth. At the time of Yu, great flooding occurred nine years out of ten, yet its waters never increased. During the time of Tang, great drought occurred seven years out of eight, yet it shorelines never receded. Not to keep changing no matter how short or long the time, not to advance or recede regardless of how little or much the water, this likewise is the great joy of the Eastern Sea.” At this, the frog in the dilapidated well, astonished and utterly confounded, was so bewildered that it lost all self-possession. 以小羨大。故自失。As something small it so yearned to be large that it lost all self-possession. 且夫知不知是非之竟。而猶欲觀於莊子之言。是猶使蚊負山。商鉅馳河也。必不勝任矣。且夫知不知論極妙之言而自適一時之利者。是非埴井之龜與？“Moreover, though your intelligence isn’t even up to recognizing the boundaries between is and is not, you still want to analyze what Master Zhuang has to say. This is like a mosquito trying to carry a mountain on its back or a millipede race the Yellow River—you surely are not equal to the task.” 物各有分。不可強相希效。Since each person has his own unique allotted capacity, one can’t by force hope to equal what another has. (Guo 1997, vol. iii, pp. 598–601)

The frog in the well represents the narrow and shallow perspective of a person smug with self-conscious learning; the great sea turtle, an ocean dweller of broader perspective and informed observation is meant to suggest Prince Mou himself; the mighty ocean so described is infinite in breadth and depth, and, as such, becomes a metaphor for the Dao. Since Master Zhuang is one with the Dao, he is far beyond Gongsun Long’s reach, and no amount of learning or clever tricks of rhetoric will ever equip him to be his equal.

His observation of creatures in nature brings Master Zhuang to an understanding of his own shortcomings in the following passage from the same chapter:

莊周遊於雕陵之樊。睹一異鵲自南方來者。翼廣七尺。目大運寸。感周之穎而集於栗林。莊周曰。此何鳥哉。翼殷不逝。目大不睹。蹇裳躩步。執彈而留之。睹一蟬。方得美蔭而忘其身。螳螂執翳而搏之。見得而忘其形。 When Zhuang Zhou was wandering through Eagle Hill Park, he spied a strange-looking magpie approach from the south, its wingspan seven feet and its eyes an inch around. It brushed against his forehead to settle amidst chestnut trees. Zhuang Zhou remarked, “What kind of bird is this! Wings so big it can’t go far and eyes so large it does not see!” Gathering up his robe he strode quickly toward it, his pellet catapult held at the ready, waiting for the right moment [to shoot it]. But then he saw a cicada that had just found such a fine piece of shade that it failed to watch out for its own body, so a praying mantis, taking advantage of its own cover, grabbed it. However, the mantis, letting itself thus be seen, also failed to watch out for its own body. 執木葉以自翳於蟬。而忘其形之見乎異鵲也。 Though it used a leaf to shield itself from the cicada, the mantis failed to watch out for its own body, which now became visible to the strange-looking magpie. 異鵲從而利之。見利而忘其真。 And the strange-looking magpie then took advantage of this, but, in doing so, failed to watch out for its own body. 目能

going? I get up with a jump, never get farther than a few yards, and then come down. To flutter through a stretch of wild grasses—this is really is the best kind of flying! So where is that one going?’ Such is the difference between small and great” (Guo 1997, vol. I, p. 9).

睹。翼能逝。此鳥之真性也。今見利。故忘之。 Eyes that could see and wings that enabled it to flee were features of its authentic nature, but now seeing an advantage to be had, it forgot all about them. 莊周恍然曰。噫。物固相累。 **Zhuang Zhou said with alarm, “Alas! How creatures really do cause each other trouble,** 相利者。恆相累。 Since they try to take advantage of each other, they constantly cause one another trouble. 二類相召也。 **just as these two brought it one on the other!”** 夫有欲於物者。物亦有欲之。 As the one coveted the other, something else coveted it.

Only constant vigilance allows one to survive in a dangerous world. The enticement of “advantage” in such a world inevitably leads to danger, for it causes one to overreach oneself—just as when the cicada, seeking greater comfort, exposes itself to the mantis, the mantis, leaving the safety of its cover, grabs the cicada but becomes prey for the magpie. The magpie, in turn, now exposes itself to Master Zhuang and his catapult. Master Zhuang, about to shoot, himself becomes prey:

捐彈而反走。虞人逐而諍之。 **He then threw aside his catapult, turned and ran, since a gamekeeper chased to accost him.** 諍。問之也。 Accost [*sui*] means to interrogate [*wen*] him. 莊周反入。三日不庭。藺且從而問之。夫子何頃間甚不庭乎。莊周曰。吾守形而忘身。 **After Zhuang Zhou returned home, he remained upset for three days. Lin Ju went to attend him and asked, “Why, Master, have you been so unhappy recently?” Zhuang Zhou replied, “Concerned with my bodily existence, I failed to keep watch over my person.”** 夫身在人間。世有夷險。若推夷易之形於此世而不度此世之所宜。斯守形而忘身者也。 His person was among men, a world fraught with danger and adversity. Although he advocated a life of bodily serenity and ease in such a world, he failed to gauge what was appropriate for that world. This is what the text means by “taking care of one’s bodily existence but failing to keep watch over one’s person.”

One’s “person” (*shen*身) indicates not one’s bodily existence but the psychological, moral, spiritual, and sociological aspects of personal existence. Subject to guilt and shame, it is marked by the presence or absence of an inner sense of self-worth and an outer reputation for honor or disgrace. Master Zhuang, intent on bagging the big, fat magpie (good eating, apparently), was thus looking after his “bodily existence,” but in doing so, he failed to keep watch over his authentic “person” (his fundamental nature), thus exposing himself to shame and disgrace:

今吾遊於雕陵而忘吾身。異鵲感吾顙。遊於栗林而忘真。栗林虞人以吾戮。吾所以不庭也。 **Now when I was wandering about in Eagle Hill Park, I failed to keep watch over my own person, so when a strange-looking magpie brushed against my forehead, forgetting my authenticity, I wandered into the chestnut trees. The chestnut grove gamekeeper then accosted me as a poacher, which is why I am upset.** 以見問戮。夫莊子推平於天下。故每寄言以出意。乃毀仲尼。賤老聃。上掎擊乎三皇。下痛病其一身也。 His being accosted as a poacher here is used metaphorically to express how in promoting serenity and ease throughout the world, Master Zhuang always relied on words to express those ideas. In doing so he vilified Confucius and scorned Old Long Ears [Master Lao]. And when he attacked the Three Thearchs of antiquity, this then brought painful blame on his own person. (Guo 1997, vol. iii, pp. 695–99)

Whereas Guo Xiang praised Master Zhuang for his great facility in describing and analyzing sagehood, he emphatically denied that Master Zhuang was a sage himself.¹² Creatures in nature thus

¹² 夫莊子者，可謂知本矣，故未始藏其狂言，言雖無會而獨應者也。夫應而非會，則雖當無用。言非物事，則雖高不行。As for Master Zhuang, it may be said that he really did understand the very essence of things, and, as such, never kept his wild talk about it just to himself. Nevertheless, I have to say that he failed to unite with it [the Dao] and only resonated with it as a person apart (Guo 1997, *Prefaces*, p. 3).

constitute a mirror of human behavior, a graphic and unambiguous analogy that effectively can jolt even a Master Zhuang, who is portrayed here with common human failings, into drastic change of thought and behavior. The implications of the analogy are far-reaching: Observing first, the cicada, then, the praying mantis, and, finally, the odd magpie—all of which seek some advantage while ignoring the worldly danger lurking nearby—Master Zhuang finally becomes aware of his own danger in the person of the gamekeeper, who comes from the very world he is consciously trying to change. Realizing that he himself has been tied to “advantage” no less than the cicada, mantis, and magpie before him, Master Zhuang flees home to ponder his shortcomings—all stemming from his failure to remain true to his “authenticity.” Guo Xiang interprets this passage in a more radical way: The *Zhuangzi* is replete with episodes in which Master Zhuang upbraids and ridicules Confucius and his followers, as well as the sage-kings of remote antiquity, models for the later Confucian tradition. By “going after” them, Master Zhuang, in Guo’s view, thus exposes himself to two dangers: (1) the world of conventional morality, firmly in the grip of the Confucians, so offended, will fight back to Master Zhuang’s detriment and defeat and (2) Master Zhuang himself is undermining the foundation of his own philosophy by consciously attacking the Confucians. Self-conscious action of any kind subverts the basic core of his thought, at the center of which is *wuwei* 無 “unselfconscious effort.” Once engaged in self-conscious effort, “serenity and ease” vanish, leaving even a Master Zhuang open to the worst of human failings: the desire for advantage.

Renjian shi 人間世 (The Ways of the World, Chapter 4) contains stories of the praying mantis that would stop a cart and the tiger keeper and his tiger, good advice for those who would rashly promote worldly reform:

顏闔將傅衛靈公太子。而問於蘧伯玉曰。有人於此。其德天殺。與之無方。則危吾國。與之有方。則危吾身。Yan He was going to become tutor to the son and heir of Duke Ling of Wey, so posed a question to Qu Boyu: “There is a man here whose virtue by nature makes him a killer. If I just let him act unruly, he will endanger our state, but if I provide him with rules to follow, I shall endanger my own person.” 夫小人之性。引之軌制則憎己。縱其無度則亂邦。A petty man’s nature is such that if you try to impose rules on him, he will hate you, but if you indulge his lawlessness, such a ruler will reduce the country to chaos. 彼且嬰兒。亦與之嬰兒。彼且無町畦。亦與之無町畦。彼且無崖。亦與之無崖。達之。入於無疵。[Qu replied] “When he behaves as a child, you too be a child with him. When he behaves as if he were out in the open country, you too be out there with him in the open country.¹³ When he behaves as if he had no banks, you too be with him with no banks.¹⁴ To get through to him, penetrate in such a way that it does not hurt.” 不小立圭角以逆其鱗也。Do not in the least set yourself up as a pointed jade tablet to ruffle his dragon’s scales.¹⁵

Qu Boyan’s solution of how to deal with autocracy is to outwit him: play along with the tyrant and, while ingratiating oneself with him, take advantage of his likes and dislikes, hopes and fears, and manipulate him in such a way to mitigate harm and, if possible, enhance chances to do good. In doing so, the courtier must take extraordinary care not to confront or offend:

汝不知夫螳螂乎。怒其臂以當車轍。不知其不勝任也。是其才之美者也。Don’t you know about the praying mantis? It raised its arms in anger to block the turn of a wheel in a carriage rut, but failed to realize it was not up to such a task—because of the splendid opinion it had of its own resourcefulness. 夫螳螂之怒臂。非不美也。以當車轍。顧非敵耳。

¹³ “Open country” translates *wu tingxi*, “fields with neither large or small boundary paths”, which serves as a metaphor for reckless behavior that respects no distinction between one’s own person and property and those of others.

¹⁴ “Have no banks” translates *wuyu*, which serves as a metaphor for boundless appetite—just as a river without banks overflows without limit.

¹⁵ Such jade tablets have sharp points and edges: Yan He is thus advised not to rub Kuai Kui the wrong way, with the conventional morality befitting his office.

今知之所無奈何而欲強當其任。即螳螂之怒臂也。As for the praying mantis raising its arms in anger, it is not that it is not splendid, but it is just not equal to the task of blocking a carriage rut. Now here, though realizing nothing may be done about it, if he [Yan He] obstinately insists in fulfilling his obligations, he would be just like a praying mantis raising its arms in anger. 戒之。慎之。積伐而美者以犯之。幾矣。So protect yourself from him and treat him with care! As for the talents stored in you, if you brag about how splendid they are, you are sure to offend him, and that will just about be the end of you! 積汝之才。伐汝之美。以犯此人。危殆之道。To offend this man by bragging about your store of talents and how splendid you are is to pursue the path of danger.

The praying mantis defends itself against predators by standing up tall, raising its large front legs, and opening its wings to look as big as possible—trying to appear larger and stronger than it really is. As the mantis is helpless faced with an oncoming cart wheel, the courtier, no matter how impressive his talents, is equally helpless before an autocratic tyrant.

汝不知夫養虎者乎。不敢以生物與之。其殺之之怒也。Don't you know about the tiger keeper? He dares not provide it with live animals because of the rage it will feel when killing them. 恐其因有殺心而遂怒也。He fears that because it has a mind bent on killing this will provoke its rage. 不敢以全物與之。其決之之怒也。And he dares not provide it with a whole animal because of the rage it will feel when tearing it apart. 方使虎自齧分之。則因用力而怒矣。As soon as he allows the tiger to tear it apart with its own teeth, the effort involved will provoke its rage. 時其飢飽。達其怒心。He keeps track of the times it is hungry or full, and so gets at what makes its mind angry. 知其所以怒而順之。Knowing what makes it angry, he complies with it. 虎之與人異類而媚養己者。順也。故其殺者。逆也。Although the tiger is a different kind of creature from man, the reason it still fawns on its keeper is because he complies with it. Therefore, why it would kill a keeper is because he thwarts it. 順理則異類生愛。逆節則至親交兵。If one complies with principle, this provokes love in different kinds, but if one thwarts natural law, this results even in close friends taking up arms against each other.

Cheng Xuanying elaborates:

夫順則悅媚，虎狼可以馴狎；逆則殺害，至親所以交兵。媚己之道既同，涉物之方無別也。If one complies with their wishes, even tigers and wolves can be tamed, but if one thwarts them, they become vicious killers, just as when close friends take up arms against one another. Since the stratagem of ingratiating oneself with them [vicious animals] works just like this, it is no different from the way one should engage with other people. (Guo 1997, vol. 1, pp. 164–8)

Ingratiation on the part of the courtier can generate fondness in the autocrat, but how complicated and precarious the path involved, for it involves timing, presentation, degree and kind of indulgence, manipulation of anger, and satisfaction, to name but the most obvious. But as the most dangerous of beasts may be tamed, so the most vicious tyrant can be handled—as long as the recipe is just right and the timing impeccable.

Perhaps the best known episode in the entire *Zhuangzi* is the “Butterfly Dream,” which occurs right at the end of *Qiwu lun* 齊物論 (On Regarding All Things Equal, Chapter 2)

昔者莊周夢胡蝶。栩栩然胡蝶也。自喻適志與。Once when Zhuang Zhou dreamt that he was a butterfly, a butterfly happy as can be, a state that utterly suited what he wanted to be! 自快得意。悅豫而行。Happy and content with himself, he flutters about with pleasure. 不知周也。But he was not aware that he was Zhuang Zhou. 方其夢胡蝶而不知周。則與殊死不異也。然所在無不適志。則當生而係生者。必當死而戀死矣。由此觀之。知夫在生而哀死者誤也。Dreaming he was a butterfly and thus unaware that he was Zhuang Zhou is no different

than if he had died. However, no matter which state he was in, it never failed to suit him comfortably. Therefore, since when alive one is attached to life, so surely when dead one should love death. Looking at it from this point of view, we realize that to be distressed about death while one is alive is an error.

This passage has attracted much attention throughout East Asia for two millennia, and at least for the last two hundred years once it became known in the West. Whereas Guo's commentary suggests there is consciousness after death, that is not the main point here, but that one should be content and happy no matter what state one finds oneself in.

俄然覺. 則蓬蓬然周也. **When he awoke suddenly, he was astonished to be Zhuang Zhou,** 自周而言. 故稱覺耳. 未必非夢也. It is only because this is addressed from Zhuang Zhou's point of view that it is said that "he awoke." He was yet unsure that it might be still a dream. 不知周之夢胡蝶與. 胡蝶之夢周與. **but he did not know whether he was Zhuang Zhou who had been dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly now dreaming he was Zhuang Zhou.** 今之不知胡蝶. 無異於夢之不知周也. 而各適一時之志. 則無以明胡蝶之不夢周矣. 世有假寐而夢經百年者. 則無以明今之百年非假寐之夢者也. His not being self-conscious of being a butterfly now is no different from his not being self-conscious of being Zhuang Zhou while he was dreaming. However, since each state suited him comfortably at the time, he had no way to be certain that he was not a butterfly now dreaming that he was Zhuang Zhou. It commonly happens in the world that someone takes a nap and dreams the experiences of an entire lifetime, so there is no way such a one is sure that one's present lifetime is not just something dreamed during a nap.

According to Guo Xiang, as long as the state of mind, one's consciousness, remains unselfconscious, as long as one is unaware of one's awareness, all is well whether in dream or awake. Note that "lucid dream" (a dream during which the dreamer is aware that he is dreaming) seems unknown here (the modern term for which in Chinese is *qingxing meng* 清醒夢). The literature and lore of dreaming in China goes back to a time long before the *Zhuangzi*, and includes, of course, dream interpretation and its interest in omens and messages from the dead.¹⁶

周與胡蝶. 則必有分矣. **But between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there had to have been a difference.** 夫覺夢之分. 無異於死生之辯也. 今所以自喻適志. 由其分定. 非由無分也. The difference between being awake and dreaming is no different from the distinction between life and death. The reason why he is conscious that one state suits his aspirations is because it is set off from the other—and not because of a lack of difference between them.¹⁷

That is, each state—awake or dreaming—provides its own state of consciousness, and it is these different states of consciousness that differentiate one state from the other.

此之謂物化. **And this is known as the transformation of things.** 夫時不暫停. 而今不遂存. 故昨日之夢. 於今化矣. 死生之變. 豈異於此. 而勞心於其間哉. 方此則不知彼. 夢胡蝶是也. 取之於人. 則一生之中. 今不知後. 麗姬是也. 而愚者竊竊然自以知生之可樂. 死之可苦. 未聞物化之謂也. Since time does not stop even for an instant, we cannot preserve the present no matter how much we might wish to do so, which is why last night's dream transformed into the present. As for the change between life and death, how could it be any different! Yet people worry so much about the gap between them! Just now one is in this state and thus unselfconscious of that state—which is just what dreaming of being a

¹⁶ For dream in the Daoist tradition, see (Radpour 2017); for a more general survey see (Ong 1985). The "Introduction to (Strassberg 2008, pp. 2–27), contains an informative and insightful essay, "The Evolution of Chinese Dream Culture".

¹⁷ That is, each state—awake or dreaming—provides its own self-consciousness, and it is these different states of self-consciousness that differentiate one state from the other.

butterfly signifies. And taking an example from human experience, throughout life one never knows now what might happen later—which is what the story of Concubine Li signifies. However, the stupid think it is absolutely clear that they know that life is delightful and death painful—this because they have never heard about the transformation of things. (Guo 1997, vol. i, pp. 112–4)

Concubine Li figures in a narrative earlier in the same chapter:

麗之姬。艾封人之子也。晉國之始得之也。涕泣沾襟。及其至於王所。與王同筐床。食芻豢。而後悔其泣也。 **Concubine Li was the daughter of the Ai district border defense commandant. When the state of Jin first captured her, she cried so much that tears soaked the whole front of her garment, and it was only after she had arrived at the palace, shared his master bed with the ruler, and eaten his fine meats that she regretted she had ever cried.** 一生之內。情變若此。當此之日。則不知彼。況夫死生之變。惡能相知哉。 Throughout a lifetime, one's emotions change as much as this. Since on any given day one never knows how he might feel on any other day, how much the less can one know what the change between life and death might bring! 予惡乎知夫死者不悔其始之蘄生乎。 **So how do we know that the dead don't regret that they had ever first pleaded [qi] for life!** 蘄, 求也。 "Pleaded" [qi] means "begged" [qiu].

Cheng Xuanying here expands slightly on Guo's remarks: 麗姬至晉。悔其先泣。焉知死者之不卻悔。初始在生之日求生之意也！ "After Concubine Li had arrived in Jin, she regretted she had earlier cried. So how do we know that the dead might not actually regret that earlier while they still lived they had begged for life!" (Guo 1997, vol. i, pp. 103–4). However, at the beginning of the butterfly passage, Cheng comments:

夫生滅交謝，寒暑遞遷，蓋天地之常，萬物之理也。而莊生暉明鏡以照燭，泛上善以遨遊，故能託夢覺於死生，寄自他於物化。是以夢胡蝶，栩栩而適其心；覺乃莊周，蘧蘧而暢其志者也。 Birth and extinction yield to one another, cold weather and hot give way in turn, for such is the constancy of Heaven and Earth and the basic principle of all things. Yet Master Zhuang, a torchlight shining forth from the bright mirror of his intelligence, floated along atop the highest good, and, as such, managed to invest dream and waking with the meaning of life and death and entrust self and other to the transformation of all things. As such, he used dream to become a butterfly, a state in which he fluttered about and which utterly pleased him. And when he awoke to be Zhuang Zhou, though startled, he still was ready to go along, free and easy, just on his own way. (Guo 1997, vol. i, p. 112)

That Cheng here used the term "highest good" (*shangshan* 上善) is particularly telling, for it alludes to the *Daode jing* of Master Lao, Section 8:

The highest good is like water. The goodness of water lies in benefitting the myriad things without contention, while locating itself in places that common people scorn. (Lynn 1999, p. 63)

"Without contention" (*buzheng* 不爭) is also significant: when water courses along and meets an obstacle, it does not contend with it but merely goes around or over it—wearing it away as it does so—for this is how the sage deals with people and the problems of humankind. It is apparent throughout his subcommentary that Cheng, unlike Guo, does regard Master Zhuang as a sage, a model for the self-realization and enlightenment of the individual—a major concern of Cheng throughout his subcommentary.

Conclusions

From butterflies to tigers, frogs and owls to high officials and would-be sages, the rhetorical power of fables expounds the sometimes subtle, sometimes arcane teachings of the *Zhuangzi* in ways that its straightforward prose discourse often leaves readers, if not baffled, at least struggling hard to

understand. Its fables, a delight to read, have thus enlightened and entertained countless generations, first in the East, and now for quite some time increasingly in the West. The commentaries of Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying expand and explicate the meaning and significance of the fables in important ways: Guo largely uses such fables to illustrate strategies for, if not success, at least survival in an unpredictable and hostile world. Although Cheng's remarks, as subcommentary, largely follow the basic drift of Guo's views, they often add different and more subtle dimensions to what Guo says, for they seem directed more at individual, personal spiritual concerns. However, this does not mean that such concerns are absent from Guo's views of Master Zhuang. Let us allow Guo himself to speak for himself and conclude discussion here:

故觀其書，超然自以已當，經崑崙，涉太虛，而游惚恍之庭矣。雖復貪婪之人，進躁之士，暫而攬其餘芳，味其溢流，彷彿其音影，猶足曠然有忘形自得之懷，況探其遠情而玩永年者乎。遂綿邈清遐，去離塵埃而返冥極者也。 Therefore, if one reads this book, he will transcend the common world to realize that he already has what is just right in himself. He will cross over Mount Kunlun and ford the Great Void to wander at ease in the Garden of the Dim and the Dark. Even the insatiably greedy and the rashly ambitious will for a time pick from its overabundant fragrant blossoms, savor its brimming richness of flavor, and lose themselves amidst its sounds and images; enough so that with expanded thought and sensibilities one achieves a state of mind in which physical existence is forgotten and self-fulfillment achieved. So how much the more capable of this will those be who have plumbed their deepest feelings and made sport of longevity! Profound and far-sighted, these will then abandon the dusty world and find their way back to the arcane fulfillment of individual limits. (Guo 1997, Prefaces, p. 3)

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