

The Composite *Zhuangzi*

by

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Abstract

Despite the viability of a comparative study, the open-endedness throughout *The Zhuangzi* defies a simple categorization as a species of scepticism. First, I show through Zhuangzian fictionalism that the imposition of a particular interpretation is self-undermining to the textual strategies of *The Zhuangzi*. *The Zhuangzi* values natural sceneries, animals of supernatural qualities, routine tasks, as opposed to investment in careerism, chasing of reputation and social status. Its aporia manifests itself in an ataractic mindset that facilitates and maintains appreciation for even the most insignificant elements of daily life. Second, I show that *The Zhuangzi*'s emphasis on supposedly apolitical, asocial, arational, and even agnostic rhetoric underlies the marginalized role of Taoism under the dominance of Confucianism. *The Zhuangzi* chooses silence over participation in state affairs, serves as a trailblazing model for healing traumas, and exemplifies the therapeutic value of a quiet life. I aim to highlight the open-endedness of *The Zhuangzi* that draws cooperative endeavors of comparisons, despite that the methodological disproportionality diminishes the comparability. Meanwhile, the prominent interpretations that closely aligned Pyrrhonian scepticism with *The Zhuangzi* is an oversimplification that is nevertheless not easily dismissed. Instead, the comparison emphatically brings out our philosophical allegiance to the ancient Greco-Roman world.

Acknowledgements

This thesis wouldn't have been possible without Professor Sara Ahbel-Rappe. Thank you so much, Sara!

I wasn't going to write a thesis in classical studies. I was, as a matter of fact, planning to write a philosophy thesis at the beginning of last fall. But I was afraid to discuss what truly interests me. I worried my interests in feminist philosophy, philosophy of education, aesthetics, and other non-dominant areas would give the impression of unseriousness. In this mindset, I came across Sara when I was hovering at Angell Hall Living Room in one of the days in September:

Sara: Do you want to do comparative studies between Confucianism and Plato?

Me: O no Confucianism is so corrupt! I don't want to talk about them.

Sara: Okay, what about the other guy..... Zhuangzi?

Me: I don't know. I don't want to talk about Chinese philosophy. I aim to assimilate with American culture.

Sara: GOODBYE. (Then she walked away).

During my brief immersion in classical studies, I noticed the self-reflectiveness of classicists. I have been deeply fond of western civilizations since I moved to Shanghai. I have volunteered to write 7-8 volumes of journals in *English* since middle school (mostly complained about my transition from Kunming to Shanghai and the peer pressure there), spent free time exploring the architectures left behind by the French settlement in the city, and jogged, biked alongside the insanely vain yet magically enamoring *bund* across the river. I am impressed that people here have already embarked on decolonization. My highly colonized education appears insignificant. My lack of knowledge in Chinese philosophy looms large. I turn around and notice the lack of momentum in learning anything about the country that I was born and raised in for 18 years. I feel ashamed and confused. I decided to search for what I may have eluded.

Coincidentally, I just went through a class on skepticism in the semester before, which is constantly compared to Zhuangzi. That's how I started.

*** **

Every part of studying Attic Greek is equally challenging and equally rewarding. Fortunately the pain of grammatical memorization dampened as soon as we moved on to study Plato and Homer. After 4 semesters – a mix of setbacks, readjustments, and (~~minor~~) accomplishments – I find more affinity not only with Attic Greek, but also with English and language as a whole. As the only Asian surrounded by Caucasian classmates, I feel proud of being the cultural ambassador who brings in the experiences and angles from afar. While Marco Polo narrates his Venetian tales to the Mongolian Khan, I exchange tales of China with the classicists here and learn from their equally refreshing tales of America.

Truth be told, studying classical Chinese is a distant memory for me. I haven't touched classical Chinese texts since I left for the IB program at 15. I remember spending hours painstakingly transcribing, memorizing, and dictating them time after times in middle school. Since then I would intentionally divert myself away from any similar mechanical tasks. I feared becoming a robot.

This project reconnects me to the non-Anglophone side of classics. I aim to show that *The Zhuangzi* deserves the same level of respect and attention as Plato and Aristotle. It will be such a pity to bypass *The Zhuangzi*. The fantastical aspect shows what it is like to be a social outcast, the therapeutic aspect shows the invulnerability in the admission of vulnerability, and the linguistic aspect shows the limit of language in expressing traumatic events. I hope my addition to the heritage of classical studies will prove the value of *The Zhuangzi* and encourage more people to study the ever-changing, ever-updating *Zhuangzi*.

I am tremendously indebted to Profs. Netta Berlin, Ruth R. Caston, Victor Caston, Ian Fielding, Sara Forsdyke, Margaret Foster, Benjamin Fortson, Richard Janko, Donka Markus. I am grateful to graduate instructors Drs. Anna Cornel, Alex Tarbet, Lianghua Zhou. I am thankful to Ms. Michelle Biggs for managing our registration. I am thankful to my cohort in Greek: Garrett Ashlock, Danielle Canan, Daniel Cross, Jordan Drayer, Nicholas Fannin,

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
Glossary	vii
List of References & Abbreviations	viii
Timeline For <i>The Ancient Saints</i>	ix
0. Introduction	1
0.0. Motivation	2
0.1. Vision & Methodology	3
0.2. Current Scholarship	4
0.3. Key Features	6
0.3.1. Non-Discursiveness	7
0.3.2. Rhetorical Detour	7
0.3.3. Invocation of Alternative Metaverse	10
1. The Hellenophonic <i>Zhuangzi</i>	12
1.1. Epistemological Intersections	13
1.1.1. The Modes of Scepticism	15
1.2. The Point of Epistemological Bridges	17
1.2.1. Reflections of Hellenophonic Allegiance	17
1.2.3. Maintenance of Philosophical Modesty	19
2. The <i>Zhuang-Topia</i>	22
2.1. “Doing Nothing is the Hardest Thing To Do”	23
2.1.1. <i>Wuwei</i> & The Ruled	24
2.2. The Usefulness of Uselessness	25
Epilogue: The Composite <i>Zhuangzi</i>	27
Bibliography	28

Glossary

Attic Greek - Transliteration - English Translation

Ἐποχή - *epochē* - suspension of belief

Ἴσοσθενία - *isostheneia* - equipollence

Ἀταράξια - *ataraxia* - tranquility

ἀπορία - *aporía* - open-endedness

Mandarin/Transliteration/English Translation

无为 - *wuwei* - non-action

逍遥 - *xiaoyao* - tranquility

Chinese	Also Known As	English Translations
庄子	庄周	Zhuangzi/ Chuang-tze/ Zhuangzhou/ Master Zhuang

List of References & Abbreviations

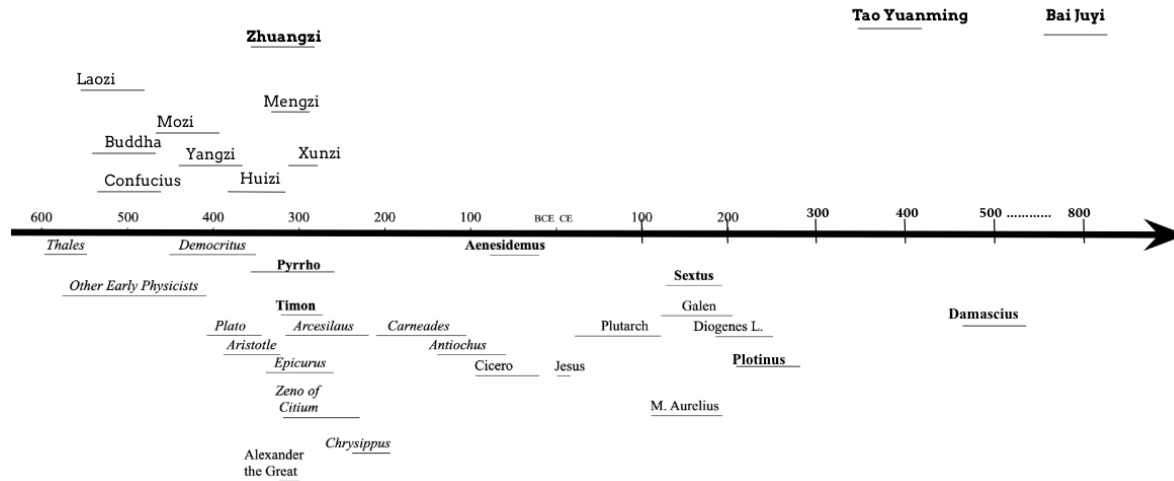
Inner Chapters of The Zhuangzi¹:

1. *Xiaoyao You* - “Free and Easy Play”
2. *Qiwu Lun* - “On Regarding All Things Equal”
3. *Yangsheng Zhu* - “The Mastery of Nurturing Life”
4. *Renjian Shi* - “The Ways of The World”
5. *Dechong Fu* - “Sign of Virtue Complete”
6. *Dazong Shi* - “The Great Exemplary Teacher”
7. *Yingdi Wang* - “Fit To Be Sovereign”

Outlines of Pyrrhonian Scepticism, PH

¹ I reference the edition of Richard John Lynn from 2023 primarily because it includes the commentaries of Guo Xiang. Graham’s translation and Watson’s translation are also consulted but not quoted in the thesis. All quotes come from Lynn’s translation.

Timeline For The Ancient² Saints³



² I named the above as “*Timeline For The Ancient Saints*”. It is originally based on the chart at *PH*. I adapted it by adding the Greeks’ eastern counterparts at the top of the line. The ancient worlds might be insulated from each other. Still, it is essential to acknowledge the intellectual contributions from non-anglophone cultures. It would be unfair and harmful to exclude either side, since this would result in the deprivation of a more holistic perspective. I believe it is the obligation of a scholar to present the truthful image of ancient philosophy. It would be misleading to dignify or mystify the ancient people in a way that implies our own retrogradation from the ancient time.

³ The chart above, by dividing the world into the east and the west, is subject to the fallacy of a colonizer. The multiplicity of the world is thus reduced and simplified into two dominant parts. The chart I adapted merely represents the scope of this thesis, rather than a just, holistic portraiture of the history of philosophy. Note that the chart intends not to emulate the Anglophone tradition. As a Chinese-born, Chinese-raised person who now studies in America, I don’t intend to lean toward either side. I argue that there is no moral or epistemological superiority between Zhuangzi and Pyrrhonist scepticism. My intent is to demonstrate each of their idiosyncrasies as impartially as I can. I will list out criticisms for each side.

0. Introduction

The Zhuangzi, consisting of three sections: the seven *Inner Chapters*, *Outer Chapters*, and the *Miscellaneous*, is presumably written by Zhuangzi (369 BCE - 286 BCE), an intellectual in the Warring State period.⁴ Political alliances were constantly broken up, created, recreated, and broken up again to match the conquests of the Qin Dynasty. *The Zhuangzi* raises concerns against routine instability and its afflictions on the wellbeing of citizens. An urge to recover peacefulness of mind in a turbulent time aspires to counteract traumas. *The Zhuangzi* constitutes the therapeutic motivation to redirect citizens into a non-artificial alternative.

I discuss the sceptical understanding for *The Zhuangzi*, to approach *The Zhuangzi* through the epistemological frameworks of Pyrrhonian scepticism. I show that the epistemological resonances between *The Zhuangzi* and Pyrrhonian scepticism illuminate on the salient features of each side. Despite the viability of a comparative study, the open-endedness throughout *The Zhuangzi* defies a simple categorization as a species of scepticism. First, I show through Zhuangzian fictionalism that the imposition of a particular interpretation is self-undermining to the textual strategies of *The Zhuangzi*. *The Zhuangzi* appeals to natural sceneries, animals of supernatural qualities, routine tasks, as opposed to investment in careerism, chasing of reputation, status. The *aporia* manifests itself in an ataractic mindset that facilitates and maintains appreciation for even the most basic elements of daily life. Second, I show that *The Zhuangzi*'s emphasis on supposedly apolitical sources underlies the marginalized role of Taoism under the dominance of Confucianism. *The Zhuangzi* chooses silence over participation in state affairs, serves as a trailblazing model of a hermit, and exemplifies the therapeutic value of a quiet life. I aim to highlight the open-endedness of *The Zhuangzi* that draws cooperative

⁴ The discussion of the authorship of *The Zhuangzi* is not a focus of this thesis, although I have to point out it is a subject of much debate. *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Zhuangzi* discusses the epistemological inconsistencies in the *Outer Chapters* of *The Zhuangzi* with the *Inner Chapters*.

endeavors of comparisons, despite that a closer investigation diminishes the comparability of a juxtaposition. Meanwhile, the prominent contemporary interpretations that closely aligned Pyrrhonian scepticism with *The Zhuangzi* is an oversimplification that is nevertheless not easily dismissed. Instead, the comparison emphatically brings out our philosophical allegiance to the ancient Greco-Roman world.

0.0. Motivation

Sextus Empiricus' *Outlines of Scepticism* has remained agitating to me since I first encountered it in a class on ancient skepticism in the winter of 2022. Even though I was first drawn to its unusual resemblance with Buddhism—as argued in Christopher Beckwith's *Greek Buddha*—I started to become increasingly uncomfortable, annoyed, and dissatisfied with Sextus' insistence on *epochē* (suspension of judgment) as a means to *ataraxia* (tranquility). As is well known, Sextus' overall strategy focuses on the fallibility of human perception and its effect together with unreliability of the world that our fallacious perceptions encounter. No doubt Aenesidemus' ten tropes and Agrippa's five tropes are compelling grounds for *epochē*.

And yet, one of the most salient counterarguments centers on the self-undermining quality of Sextus' approach to *ataraxia*. His repeated endeavors to achieve detachment, in fact, leads to extra anxiety which is the artificial product of his pursuit of *ataraxia*, the telos of the skeptic enterprise to begin with.

It was not until I read *The Zhuangzi*—the supposedly eastern embodiment of ancient skepticism—that I started to be able to decode my aversion. *The Zhuangzi* facilitates an infinite stream of interpretations with its fable style, mystical metaphors, and open-ended dialogues. Instead of using consistent discursiveness as showcased in Sextus' *Outlines*, *The Zhuangzi* draws our attention to disability, natural landscapes, and routine tasks that Sextus may have been dismissive of. I documented the trajectory of my searching in this senior thesis. I am thankful for Sextus illuminating on my own cultural and philosophical identities.

0.1. Vision & Methodology

David Sedley, identifying philosophical allegiance, or attachment to a sectarian leader, as most characteristic of Hellenistic philosophy, presents Pyrrhonian sceptics in their veneration of the charismatic pioneer Pyrrho:

[...] The role of scriptural authority was to provide a philosophical movement with a *raison d'être* and a framework within which it could preserve its cohesion *while* continuing to inquire and debate. [...]. Likewise Pyrrhonists could invoke Pyrrho their patron saint merely because, as portrayed by his pupil Timon, he had embodied in his own life the detached tranquility to which their debates represented a means.[...]

(Sedley 1989: 102)

Sedley, meanwhile, concedes with a notable exception, Seneca, “a self-proclaimed Stoic, yet seems to pride himself on disavowing reverence for his school’s founder”(Sedley 1989). Still, the general pattern of philosophical allegiance in the ancient Greco-Roman world, unquestionably exists.

This thesis centers on the sceptical interpretation for *The Zhuangzi*. I invoke Sedley’s passage to prove a similar stream of philosophical loyalty in the scholarship for *The Zhuangzi*. By no means do I intend to devalue the heritage of the ancient Anglophone world. I merely show that our intellectual loyalty to Greco-Roman (as well as an array of other European) philosophy manifests itself in our readings of *The Zhuangzi*. The *Zhuangzi* is filtered and thus shaped by our training in the ancient Anglophone world. The themes, features that we identify as salient reflect more about our own philosophical allegiance. My reading of *The Zhuangzi*, likewise, follows the methodologies, thinking modes of my highly westernized training that spans from Shanghai to the United States.

The mirroring of self is by no means detrimental to interpreting *The Zhuangzi*. Cross-cultural studies exchange and project our own philosophy to the unfamiliar side. In this case, Pyrrhonian scepticism and *The Zhuangzi* associate with each other via epistemological bonds. It is nevertheless necessary to rule out and discard inept suggestions as the level of sophistication grows and prospers, since the application of scepticism proves to minimize the breadth of *The Zhuangzi*. Needless to say, my reference to Sedley’s idea of philosophical allegiance is a projection of my own philosophical disposition to enforce a more updated vision

for the scholarship of *The Zhuangzi*. If the sceptics lay out the groundwork of Pyrrhonian scepticism by means of aligning with the Platonic tradition, the epistemological propensity of Zhuangzian scholars likewise commits to a habitual allegiance to systems and jargons of Anglophone philosophy—my own position included.

What is Sedley’s message to prospective classicists? To reach utter impartiality? However, does that sort of absolute impartiality even exist? If not, shall we gently acknowledge our philosophical allegiance, follow up with *philosophical modesty*, and admit that our reading of ancient philosophy is irregardless of that allegiance, inevitably an exploration of our inner self, our shared heritage? Our options are: (A) We shall not; (B) we shall be honest about our philosophical trajectory, beware of stumbling arbitrarily on an authority that proves the legitimacy of our own argumentation, and examine carefully our choice of interpretation. That way the authoritativeness of the ancient sources will not remain unquestioned.

0.2. Current Scholarship

The *Zhuangzi* has been unanimously interpreted as a blueprint for living the noble life, a life that has affinity with naturalistic landscapes, appreciation for craftsmanship, and alliance with the quiet life of a recluse. The otherworldliness of *The Zhuangzi* offers us a gateway to imagine and emulate such a rare approach to living that values the mundanity of routine tasks, the natural landscapes and animals that are physically unchained to move around in the water and fly in the sky. Taoist scholars have highlighted the Zhuangzian approach to eudaimonia that sustains a healthy, resilient recognition for the self and others.

I show that different scholars pick out the eudaimonic feature that appears salient to their own philosophical allegiance. The abundant open-endedness of *The Zhuangzi* allows creativity in interpretations. Some say that self-refinement through closeness to nature and routine life demonstrates Taoism’s approach to alternative readings of eudaimonia, as contrasted with the Confucian eudaimonia that advocates for filial responsibilities, political contributions. Robert Elliott Allinson, in his reordering of *The Zhuangzi*, indicates “spiritual transformation” to be the core gist among the animal-related metaphors and dream metaphors (Allinson 2015). Wai Wai Chiu suggests that the shared spontaneity of the craftsman characters reveals navigational searches amid the vicissitude of life (Chiu 2019). Chris Fraser, likewise,

argues that the physical movement of animals in *Xiaoyao You* represents a model to life that is in fact experienced “ignorantly and incompetently” (Fraser 2014). Earlier he identifies *The Zhuangzi* with “practical Skepticism”, with the latter which values adaptability and tolerance (Fraser 2009). Edward Slingerland argues Zhuangzian effortlessness to be an ideal state of mindset (Slingerland 2003). On the other hand, Ivanhoe thinks the alleged “effortlessness” is embedded with a moral self-cultivation that requires careful discipline and training (Ivanhoe 2010).

The immense input of eudaimonic notions in *The Zhuangzi* includes not only the approaches to eudaimonia, but also the assumptions underlying such eudaimonic outline. In *The Regime of Self-Cultivation and the Tragedy of Personal Freedom*, Tao Jiang indicates the unusualness of *The Zhuangzi*'s investment in eudaimonia, while justifying the unusualness through associating the Zhuangzian eudaimonia with Isaiah Berlin's idea of negative freedom (Jiang, 2021). In *Sorrow and Sage: Grief in Zhuangzi*, Amy Olberding highlights the Zhuangzian self-mockery in poignant circumstances of bereavement, and associates the surpassing of a previous self with Seneca's scorn for death (Olberding 2007). The Zhuangzian sagehood refers to the avoidance of conceited stupidity (Moeller & D'Ambrosio 2017). Sagehood entails the exact opposite quality of its nominal implication – the lack of the supposed benevolent, divine characteristics that attach to sagehood.

A further stretch of interpreting the Zhuangzian eudaimonia consists of an explanation for the silence within. Lincoln Rathnam, in *Wandering in the Ruler's Cage*, believes the Zhuangzian harmony to be nourishing for human interactions in an unstable political regime (Rathnam, 2019). He stresses the high frequency of dynastic shifts in Zhuangzi's time and endows a normative interpretation for *The Zhuangzi*'s repeated attempts to side with constancy in nature that is otherwise corrupted and deprived by the tumultuous society.

I show the multiplicity in the scholarship of *The Zhuangzi*. I demonstrate the wide range of interpretational possibilities. Such plasticity in the readings of *The Zhuangzi* allows us the diversity of interpretations. Additionally, to search for the relativistically authoritative interpretation implies our private approach to *The Zhuangzi*. I suggest the impossibility of annihilating the interpretational pluralism in *The Zhuangzi*. The discussion of *The Zhuangzi* will

invariably involve the insertions of alternative philosophical influences. As shown in the section below, one popular way to decode *The Zhuangzi* is through Pyrrhonian scepticism.

0.3. Key Features

The epistemological overlaps between the two are apparent at the first glance. I draw epistemological correspondences for the three stages of Pyrrhonian scepticism in *The Zhuangzi*: (1) *epochē* vs. *wuwei*; (2) *isostheneia* vs. *shifei*; (3) *ataraxia* vs. *xiaoyao*. First, *epochē*, the suspension of judgements, can be epistemologically expanded and enriched by incorporating the meaning of *wuwei*, non-action. Amid the phenomena that we perceive, Taoism's advice is not to be psychologically, physically, or emotionally engaged. Doing nothing means not to be upper-handed by the invariably confusing, changing phenomena. (2) *isostheneia*, the least addressed concept in Pyrrhonian scepticism, corresponds to *shifei*, the lack of an absolute answer to the changing scenarios in our perception. The freedom of a definitive attitude emancipates us from landing a conclusion for or against. The equal status of opposing statements shields us from an absolute judgment and saves us from epistemological commitments. The ultimate states that both *The Zhuangzi* and Pyrrhonian scepticism strive to achieve but never reach so, *ataraxia* and *xiaoyao*, are in symphony with each other's pursuit for freedom, happiness, and fulfillment on a spiritual, intellectual, and worldly level.

Unlike Sextus, *The Zhuangzi* fetishizes narrative. Scholars could all disagree what exactly *ataraxia* means, or what logical fallacy Sextus has committed to, or how impractical or impossible it is to actually live like a skeptic (Barnes, 1985). Yet they are not confronted with the same extent of plasticity in the investigation of Pyrrhonian scepticism. Sextus wrote his treatises in a strictly ordered and analytical way. Sextus follows the logical rule of premise and conclusion. He spends tremendous efforts in denying and refuting the dogmatists. However, we are left with a magnitude of open-endedness as when we approach *The Zhuangzi* due to its omnipresent fictional tone that goes exactly against non-discursiveness. We have to equip our interpretations with imaginations and nontraditional philosophical methods from literature, art, and culture. The Zhuangzian texts are less predictable.

0.3.1. Non-Discursiveness

I argue that the non-discursiveness of *The Zhuangzi* poses a prominent obstacle in comparative studies, since the freedom of argumentation infers doubts on the degree of comparability. The legitimacy of comparability rests on the assumption that Pyrrhonian scepticism and *The Zhuangzi* share a common ground more than a mere resemblance of their epistemological appearances. Their comparability relies on their methodologies to philosophy. In this case, their difference on discursiveness raises the question of whether they are comparable. The freedom from analytical writing in Chinese philosophy causes such a problem.

The Zhuangzi takes an entirely opposite trajectory, unlike the usual composition of a treatise. Rather than discursive discourse, it is written as a novel. It takes the stance of a fictionalist, a narrator, and a dialoguer (or more of a presenter of dialogues). Julianne Chung identifies the role of fictionalism in *The Zhuangzi* in transgressing the conventional making of epistemology (Chung 2007). The philosophical approach of *The Zhuangzi* explains its interpretational elasticity, on top of the existing elasticity that arises from the open-endedness that it proposes to follow in an eudaimonic life. Youlan Feng, in *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy*, points out that there is seldom any logical arrangement in Chinese philosophy, unlike Anglophone philosophy. Chinese philosophy's tendency to be extremely succinct, opens up every possible attempt to interpret the multiplicity within (Feng 1937).

Due to the asymmetry of philosophical approaches, *The Zhuangzi* is less straightforward about the presentation of an attitude, compared to Sextus. *The Zhuangzi* doesn't involve the use of dialectics. The absence of discursiveness in *The Zhuangzi* is in direct contrast with the unabashed exposition of positions and views of Sextus.

0.3.2. Rhetorical Detour

The Zhuangzi prefers to transmit messages of an enormous extent of ambiguity. One couldn't help but follow up with questions regarding the arbitrariness in Zhuangzian choice of allegories: why transform to a butterfly, rather than a Kafka insect?

I show that a product of non-discursiveness is the reservation of opinion in *The Zhuangzi*. *The Zhuangzi* applies rhetorical devices that reinforce the open-endedness of implications. I

argue that the building of metaphors and its allegorical meaning dominates the explication of viewpoints in *The Zhuangzi*.

The Zhuangzi's multi-modal states of being and interpenetration of forms of life result in a lived experience that both invokes real distinctions between beings and also shows the possibility of transgressing those distinctions through forms of consciousness that penetrate beyond individuality. These forms of consciousness can be encapsulated by the term dreaming.

One couldn't have possibly avoided talking about the butterfly metaphor at the end of *Qiwu Lun*, on account of its high frequency of appearances in both scholarly endeavors and popular culture:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt that he was a butterfly, [...]. But he was not aware that he was Zhuang Zhou. When he awoke suddenly, he was astonished to be Zhuang Zhou, but he did not know whether he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt that he was a butterfly or a butterfly which was dreaming that he was Zhuang Zhou.

(*The Zhuangzi*, 2.35.1-2.35.4)

Regardless of the aesthetic dimension of the metaphor, the significance of this anecdote is less associated with the aesthetics, more with the inward mysticism of *The Zhuangzi*. Harold Roth interprets identity fluidity as it demonstrates “the distinct quality of psychological freedom and concomitant total concentration” in Zhuangzhou's dream (Roth 2013). Zhuangzhou is oblivious to the fact that he is a person rather than a butterfly. He incorporates himself with the reality of the butterfly. The reality of Zhuangzhou as a person is fungible with the one of the butterfly. Yet both parties here are aware of their association with the other alternative reality. Their exchange entails interchangeability, despite the note that the butterfly and Zhuangzhou are not aware of the other's alternative perspective. Even at the moment when Zhuangzhou is integrated as the butterfly, he can merely bear the discretion of the latter, not that of the former. The fluidity is not present in the mutual understanding between the two. Each of them can perceive none other than their own reality. Zhuangzhou already dissociates himself with the reality of a person when he becomes a butterfly. The validity of bimodality proves partially true. The detachment from the other entity instead demonstrates the very existence of boundaries between entities. Similar types of oxymorons are present in *The Zhuangzi*.

I show that the allegory of fish/bird in *Xiaoyao You* involves the linguistic ambiguity that enriches the body of interpretations, on top of the metaphorical ambiguity. The mentioning of

Shu, a fish which magically shifts to a new identity, a bird, *Peng*, suggests the possibility of a language game underlying the sophistications of the allegory. We have to pay attention that the text encompasses a single source of identity for the two, and one prominent interpretation of this allegory lies in the unanimous source of the same identity. The fish and the bird are said to be free to cross the boundaries of identities. Otherwise, another angle to interpret the metaphor is that their exchange of identity indicates their exact deprivation of freedom, since their agency during the exchange is amiss:

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.

(*The Zhuangzi*, 1.1.1.)

North of the barren wastelands is a dark sea, the Pool of Heaven, in which exists a fish whose breadth is several thousand tricents wide, and no one has ever figured out how long it is. Its name is Kun. A bird is also there, whose name is Peng. Its back is like Mount Tai, and its wings are like clouds hanging down from the sky. [...].

(*The Zhuangzi*, 1.6.2.)

The recapitulation at a later point of the text suggests that *Shu* and *Peng* are not associated with each other at all. In other words, they may have not conducted the identity exchange as the text first suggests. The play of language in *The Zhuangzi* is conducive to the ambiguity of meaning. Regardless of how each of us reads into the allegory of fish/bird here, *The Zhuangzi* shows the unbounded dimension of interpretations in the service of metaphorization and language games. A further reading into the ambiguity of *The Zhuangzi* leads us back to the traits of non-discursiveness, that the texts don't want us to reach a definitive answer.

Xiaoyao You demonstrates the illusion of boundaries:

Such is the distinction between small and great. [...]. He fixed what belongs to the inner and the outer and differentiated the boundary between honor and disgrace, but stopped at that.

(*The Zhuangzi*, 1.6.2-1.7.6)

The Zhuangzi wants us to be aware of the illusion of boundaries, which shall be distinguished from the freedom from boundaries. The former refers to the natural non-existence of boundaries, whereas the latter means the artificial non-existence of boundaries. The latter significantly differs from the former. It is not transferable with the former because the freedom

from boundaries implies endeavors of conceptual reconstruction in order to reach an end. The natural sense of lack of boundaries stands for the exact awareness of the existence of boundaries and another layer of consciousness for the restraints of oneself. Thus the humility arisen from the exact awareness of not-knowing rather broadens one's access to knowing the world.

0.3.3. Invocation of Alternative Metaverse

I propose that behind the bewildering mazes of *The Zhuangzi* underlies the vulnerability of citizens who are traumatized by the tumults and changes of political reigns and dynasties. The invocation of animals of supernatural qualities infers a supposedly lighthearted approach to detach oneself from further compromises. *The Zhuangzi* draws a paralleled metaverse of tranquility, non-artificiality that is deprived by the political and systematic unrest. *The Zhuangzi* builds an utopia that is nonexistent in the real world of unrest.

The *Zhuangzi* values simplicity. By simplicity, I refer to the minimization of worldly disturbances, including pursuits of social status and political achievements. The *Zhuangzi* directs people to an active perceptiveness of our surroundings, in particular mother nature. Notable examples include the fish/bird allegory mentioned above in Xiaoyao You, where the animals are characterized at least as physically emancipated to swim around in the water and fly in the sky. In Qiwu Lun, Zhuangzhou dreams that he is a butterfly. Sonya Özbey, in a comparative study between *The Zhuangzi* and Spinoza's *Ethics*, indicates the former's potential to inspire equal treatment of non-human beings that entails cross-species transgression of perceptions (Özbey, 2022). *The Zhuangzi* challenges the conventional assumption on human's dominion upon animals, of the latter's perceptions being insulated from the supposedly superior human. *The Zhuangzi*, on the other hand, suggests an egalitarian position that celebrates the underrepresented, marginalized people, who are metaphorized through animality. Opting out indicates a sign of distrust propelled by unhealthiness.

The making of an alternative universe in *The Zhuangzi* sheds light on the unsaid subtexts that are dominated by ambiguities. The contextual background that the metaverse alludes to provides the readers the moral psychology of *The Zhuangzi* and open up the interpretations for motivations of building a distinct landscape.

1. The Hellenophonic *Zhuangzi*

One very prominent feature of both Sextus and *The Zhuangzi* is their resort to cross species epistemologies in order to frame questions of identity and reality. In this chapter, I explain the modes of Aenesidemus and how Sextus uses them in relation to comparisons between human and animal perception. I will then discuss some famous chapters from *The Zhuangzi* related to animal transformation. I argue that, despite this fascinating parallelism, some scholars mistake *The Zhuangzi* for a sceptic or sceptical relativist. Instead, we are better off understanding the purpose of *The Zhuangzi*'s naturalistic philosophy as expressive of a hidden political philosophy. Here, the animals whose identity *The Zhuangzi* emphatically inhabits are shown to be oppressed by the constraints occasioned by the very form of their existence, habitats, etc. In other words, *The Zhuangzi* is not doing epistemology. Instead, his tour of other modes of life is an expression of compassion and a silent, subtle protest against the Confucian idea of rank, authority, caste, and privilege.

First, I outline the use of the modes. Then I will explore the *Inner Chapters*, apply the interpretation of Özbey and others, and I will conclude by suggesting that *The Zhuangzi* is trying to take refuge from the constraints of an authoritarian method of defining what is human.

While *The Zhuangzi* proposes to maintain the mystical, ineffable part of the sage, Sextus, instead, leans more to dissect a concept and break it into nameable, identifiable subparts. References to one side will potentially zoom into their respective values and understanding for concepts of abstrusity. Comparable vocabularies may be identifiable with each other in namesake. In fact, on account of cultural references, their comparability proves thin. Still, I insist on juxtaposing two sides in order to complement the depth of our understanding for each side. We will be rewarded and intrigued by salient features that we are more likely to be neglected without a comparison. For instance, the fact that Sextus restrains us from an

intuitional, straightforward approach and *The Zhuangzi's* refusal to symbolic logic adds overabundant pressure for a consistent interpretation.

1.1. Epistemological Intersections

The pioneer of Pyrrhonian scepticism, Pyrrho of Elis (360 BCE - 270 BCE), is known to practice the impossible standards of being a skeptic in real life, although his anecdotes serve more to the mysterious charisma of his personality than to the biographical facts of a person. Pyrrho never leaves behind any writing. We get to know the tales of his from Timon of Phlius (320 BCE - 235 BCE), a pupil and proponent of Pyrrho. Timon, a choral dancer and a playwright, documents the anecdotes of Pyrrho in *Lampoons (Silloi)*, a satire that derides professional philosophers. Pyrrho, in the eyes of an enamored disciple, remains an idolized figure, whose tales of practicing scepticism prove to be more trailblazing than truthful. He is known to be so apathetic that he refuses to be distracted by an apparent emergency, when his teacher falls into the water and needs help. Instead, he just keeps walking past that. Diogene Laertius (180 BC-240 BC) therefore avoids using Timon's writings as a source and rather documents Pyrrho's anecdotes in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (Βίοι καὶ γνῶμαι τῶν ἐν φιλοσοφίᾳ εὐδοκμησάντων).

Sextus Empiricus (160 CE-210 CE) builds on the ten tropes of Aenesidemus (80 BCE -10 BCE), updates Pyrrhonian scepticism into a more systematic school of philosophy, and attaches the modal analysis to Pyrrhonian scepticism. Sextus demonstrates that the three major stages of Pyrrhonian Scepticism are *epochē* (suspension of belief), *isosthenia* (equal strength of opposing argument), and *ataraxia* (tranquility). In the *Outlines of Pyrrhonian Scepticism (PH)*, a Pyrrhonian skeptic shall be undisturbed by the appearances (*phainomenon*) in life, remain detached, refrain from jumping into any conclusion. She can hopefully reach a state of tranquility, the goal of scepticism.

Sextus' his ridiculing of dogmatists is likewise manifested in his disagreement with everyone in every discipline shows his ridiculing of dogmatists. In *Against Those in The Disciplines*, including *Against Mathematicians (M)*, *Against Logicians*, *Against Professors*, *Against Musicians*, *Against Ethicists*, etc, he critiques the professionals and voices his disapproval of each of them. I identify that Sextus applies a uniform pattern of argumentation throughout his

critiques of other disciplines. His references to Anesidemus' *Ten Tropes* and Agrippa's *Five Tropes* share a consistent skeletal structure and logic. His arguments thus devote themselves significantly to the justification of *epochē*, resulting in more of a collection of strategies that, in fact, cause extra anxiety. Sextus' aversion to dogmatists contaminates and contrarizes the initial purpose of Pyrrhonian scepticism.

Sextus's inquiry for *epochē* is self-undermining to *ataraxia*. He believes our perception to be an unreliable source of judgment. What we perceive is not what actually that thing is. What that thing is, seems to be unknown and hangs in the air. He believes in the fundamental fallibility of our perception. I focus on Sextus' distrust for appearances (*phainomenon*) and human's perceptual inaccuracies wherein there is no provable correlation between perception and the perceived.

The Zhuangzi and scepticism are epistemologically complementary to each other's limits. *Epochē* refers to a pause of opinions in face of the multiplicity, instability, and inaccuracy of our perceived world. Sextus Empiricus invokes modes of perception, reminds us of the fallibility in both the world we perceive and our own perception, and proposes *epochē* as an antidote that leads to peace of mind. The ataractic state would be otherwise compromised by the variability of phenomena (*phainomenon*) perceived through our biased minds. The interpretational endeavors for *The Zhuangzi* highlights that what we perceive could well be what our mind chooses to perceive. Through a wide application of fictional tales, dialogues, and metaphorizations of an artificial world, *The Zhuangzi* delineates the contextual evidence for scepticism. Our mind consists of our idiosyncratic empirical experiences and personality. Our reading of the phenomena could be no more than a mirror of ourselves. The *Zhuangzi* sheds light on an alternative approach to the maximum extent of human flourishing in a politically vice atmosphere that is almost impossible for citizens to generate tranquility of mind. *The Zhuangzi* also proves to the ancient scepticism the viability to engage with the readers without any application of symbolic logic. Instead, the readers are encouraged to find out the subtexts by using their own empirical experiences, which are usually forbidden in the reign of discursive writing.

1.1.1. The Modes of Scepticism

I reorganize the ten tropes of Aenesidemus and the five tropes of Agrippas through two charts in order to present scepticism's reasoning for their choice of detachment. I show that Sextus formulates his argumentation based on (1) perception is not authoritative or trustworthy, (2) neither is the reality we perceive via such perception. I identify his trajectory of reasoning as an application of mathematical logic: reasoning \rightarrow consequences. In proof writing, Sextus' reasoning consists of a monotonous stream of symbols that are transferable to infinite other epistemologies: $\therefore \rightarrow \therefore$. *The Zhuangzi*, on the contrary, shall not be categorized as scepticism. Despite the epistemological symmetries, I disagree that *The Zhuangzi* and scepticism are epistemologically comparable to each other. Such a juxtaposition reduces the contextual complexity of *The Zhuangzi*, weakens its aporatic tone, and undermines the political views that it implies but chooses not to say aloud.

I don't intend to invalidate the logical reasoning in Sextus' application of the tropes. In fact, I commend his endeavors to exhaust the possible reasoning for a refusal of cognitive commitment to one's perception. Sextus' reference to the modes of Aenesidemus suggests the inconsistency of perception as a primary reason to suspend judgments. Trope (1), (2) are based upon the variability of the subjects. The differences between subjects infer the possibilities of a different reception of things. They perceive things in their own way. The butterfly's perception is different from the fish's; John's perception of an object is different from Tony's perception of it. Trope (3) suggests that the differences of sense organs could explain the differences of the subjects' perceptions. The physical distinctions could serve as an alternative explanation on why butterfly sees the world differently from the fish, and why John perceives differently from Tony. Tropes (4)-(7) dissect the phenomena perceived into parts, typically translated as "circumstances", "positions and intervals and places", "admixtures", "quantities and preparations of existing things". Those three tropes lay out the possible conditions that could sway our perception of them. Trope (8) condenses the previous modes into a generic source, "relativity", including what I have sketched above, (a). relativity of a subject's perception, (b). relativity of the perceived phenomena. Tropes (9)-(10) suggest the conditions that are contingent upon the circumstances, "frequent or rare encounters", "customs, laws". The unpredictability

within entails an ever-changing, context-based assessment of perception and its relativity, which I call “the relativity within relativity”

(1) the mode depending on the variations of animals
(2) on the differences among humans
(3) on the different constitutions of sense organs
(4) on circumstances
(5) on positions and intervals and places
(6) on admixtures
(7) on the quantities and preparations of existing things
(8) that deriving from relativity
(9) that depending on frequent or rare encounters
(10) that depending on persuasions and customs and laws and belief in myths and dogmatic supposition.

Chart 1: The Ten Tropes (PH, I)

The ten modes justify a non-commitment to conclusions or the assertion of judgments as true. Each subject’s perception is idiosyncratic. When they perceive the same object, the result of their perception could lead to different impressions of the objects. Sextus is a source of correspondence to *The Zhuangzi* in their seemingly relativity. In *The Zhuangzi*, the butterfly wouldn’t have known what it is like to be Zhuangzhou, if it didn't participate in the empirical experiences of Zhuangzhou. Likewise, the fish wouldn’t have known what it is like to fly in the sky if it wasn’t a bird. Thomas Nagel phrases this question in the name of a bat and suggests that our perception is inaccessible to any other than ourselves. We are not qualified to speak on matters that we haven’t personally experienced.

(1) the mode deriving from discrepancies
(2) that throwing one back <i>ad infinitum</i>

(3) that deriving from relativity
(4) the hypothetical mode
(5) the reciprocal mode

Chart 2

Another discussion of “the older sceptics” centers on the five tropes of Agrippa.⁵ The five tropes outline another set of possible approaches that we use to draw an argument. Sextus hopes to exhaust the options of fallibility in symbolic logic. The five tropes reinforce the validity of *epochē*. A production of judgments is unworthy. Sextus Empiricus’ dissection of *epochē* will be shown to complement *The Zhuangzi*’s vagueness in structure and meanings.

1.2. The Point of Epistemological Bridges

To understand *The Zhuangzi* through its Anglophone reflection is itself an immensely commendable achievement, since a comparative study will not only draw endeavors to search for a common heritage between two geographically and culturally divergent ways of thinking; a meaningful comparison, which presupposes the acquisitions of the ancient languages and cultures, will also reposition academia’s recognition for non-dominant themes that are historically overshadowed by the Anglophone side.

Yet we have to be wary of equaling the two together, especially not to overlook the role of philosophical context and cultural context in *The Zhuangzi*. As Bryan Van Norden has pointed out in his *Taking Back Philosophy*, “departments are failing their students in a crucial way: they are not teaching the profound, fascinating, and increasingly relevant philosophy that is outside the traditional Anglo-European canon” (Van Norden 2017). We shall draw meaningful, non-cursory comparisons based on more than a generic attitude of non-discrimination.

1.2.1. Reflections of Hellenophonic Allegiance

The Zhuangzi inspires a new understanding for Sextus’ slighting of professionals. In comparison to *The Zhuangzi*’s tolerance and empathy for the vicissitudes of the world, Sextus’

⁵ Sextus’ repeated attempt to draw distinctions between his predecessors (Anesidemus, Diogenes), his contemporaries (the dogmatism, the academics), and himself (who he assumes to be quite nuanced and updated from the former two) is a recycling theme of philosophical arrogance in Sextus.

writing may expose his own arrogance towards those in the disciplines. Sextus's philosophy thus exemplifies a sense of nihilism that devalues everyone else except himself. His philosophy manifests a typical trap of philosophy, wherein his thoughts turn unnecessarily hostile against everyone else to prioritize his own. A comparison on the grounds of epistemological resonations is thus facile in the case between scepticism and *The Zhuangzi*:

Zhuangzi makes his own recommendation of skepticism based on a different set of epistemological and evaluative assumptions, described above, that we can refer to collectively as his "naturalism".

(Kjellberg 1994:16)

Meanwhile, pointing to scepticism's blindspot of being vulnerable to their own attacks, Paul Kjellberg concedes that scepticism is "parasitic" onto the particular epistemologies listed in the tropes. Sextus' philosophical arrogance is shown in his dismissal for all the professionals. Sextus fails to embrace the diversity, multiplicity that his texts imply. His interpretation of *epochē* is subject to a self-conflicted imprisonment within a logic run amuck, as opposed to a respectful attitude to the unknown, the open-ended that *epochē* reveals to. He shows that his own thoughts prevail over other judgments. The hierarchical structure deduced by the superiority of *epochē* further diverges his supposed equipollence from an egalitarian, pluralistic position. The superiority of his own view again demonstrates rather a self-conflicting feature of scepticism, proving that scepticism is its own worst enemy.

On the other hand, identifying *The Zhuangzi* with skepticism proves more plausible than narrowing it down to Pyrrhonian scepticism. Chris Fraser, in an application of Anglophone vocabularies, offers three ways that correct an exclusively skeptical or an exclusive perspectivistic understanding for *The Zhuangzi*: (1) the Zhuangzian skepticism on the privileged or authoritative status of values; (2) the contextual responsiveness of intuitions without an ultimate standard of values; (3) the rejection of the mystical, non-conceptual acquisition of knowledge through monism (Fraser 2009; 2014; 2015). I want to highlight the heterogeneity of interdependence between completion and deficiency in Fraser's argument. He describes *The Zhuangzi*'s approach as "the implicit acknowledgement for the justification of or value for alternative practices" (Fraser 2009). I understand it as a coexistence of contrasting *phainómenon*. We find ourselves distinguishing *phainómenon* differently as the circumstances, times evolve,

and as our own selves update and change. Fraser interprets that *The Zhuangzi* proposes adaptability, open-mindedness, and tolerance for progress to show appreciation and recognition for views that are distinct from our own. Fraser's interpretation is dependent upon his normative understanding of *The Zhuangzi* on interacting with others involve "pluralism", "avoiding arrogance", "inevitable relations", "ideal relations", and "avoiding harm". The supposed impartiality that *The Zhuangzi* searches for may not be realizable. Fraser's response alludes to the practicability of actively accommodating to the circumstances.

A more generic form of skepticism, as suggested by Fraser, proves to match the elasticity of the epistemological backgrounds of *The Zhuangzi*, if we must approach *The Zhuangzi* through a skeptical attitude at all. Sextus Empiricus' scepticism overdraws the skeptical ingredients, induces philosophical arrogance, betrays the philosophical modesty of the aporetic part in his proposed skeptical attitude. The Zhuangzian skepticism, instead, becomes the savior of Pyrrhonian scepticism, counteracts its pompousness, and stresses the indispensable role of open-mindedness.

1.2.3. Maintenance of Philosophical Modesty

The Zhuangzi and his intellectual lineage complements the absence of contextual evidence in Sextus' writing. *The Zhuangzi* illuminates the therapeutic value of unworldliness to which Sextus has paid less attention, although the portrayal of the hermit life could be *The Zhuangzi*'s romanticization of the alternative metaverse. Indeed, *The Zhuangzi* could be understood as empathetic with underdogs, or those whose non-conventional approach to life is undervalued. Ironically, their life usually merely becomes recognizable and trailblazing long after they have undergone demise. Only after their death do they receive the societal recognition that they should have received or have been craving for within their lifetime.

Burton Watson, in his *Preface* to the translations of *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, refers to poet Bai Juyi's banishment from a governmental position, after Bai has offended the authorities for his outspoken dissents of policies (Watson 2013). Watson notes the unusual equanimity of Bai. Bai implies his resort to Zhuangzian tranquility in his exile poem:

Leaving homeland, parted from kin, banished to a strange place,
I wonder my heart feels so little anguish and pain.

Consulting Zhuangzi, I find where I belong:
surely my home is there in Not-Even-Anything land.

(Watson 2013)

Bai's experience is ubiquitous to intellectuals in the history of China. The authority grants no recognition but disservice to the honest opinions of intellectuals.

Likewise, Tao Yuanming's experience manifests the underappreciation for talents. Born in the Six Dynasty, Tao Yuanming underwent three dynasty changes and at least three rounds of career shifts. Tao, who has openly declared to misally with careerism, chooses to quit the official title that grants him money, reputation, and other material gains. He seeks solace and peace in a private life on the outskirts of his city, away from the seductions of status, fame that deprive him of the dream life as a hermit. In *Returning Home*, where "home" refers to the withdrawal of political ambition and the return to a pastoral life in the suburban areas, Tao Yuanming lifts up the minds of those who are similarly upset by the unpredictable political shifts. Their life aims deviate from the social expectation. They rather wish to hide from the world and escape into nature. The return to nature, animals, and music is seen as a homecoming journey that endows them a sense of belonging and settlement:

Ah, homeward bound I go! Let me from now on learn to live alone! The world and I are not made for one another, and why drive round like one looking for what he has not found? Content shall I be with conversations with my own kin, and there will be music and books to while away the hours. The farmers will come and tell me that spring is here and there will be work to do at the western farm. Some order covered wagons; some row in small boats. Sometimes we explore quiet, unknown ponds, and sometimes we climb over steep, rugged mounds. There the trees, happy of heart, grow marvelously green, and spring water gushes forth with a gurgling sound. I admire how things grow and prosper according to their seasons, and feel that thus, too, shall my life to its round.

(Translated by Lin Yutang)

Detachment serves as a source of empowerment that uplifts the minds of social outcasts.

Detachment evolves to be an emulation for non-mainstream groups, whose vulnerabilities are valued and respected rather than marginalized. Tao Yuanming exhibits detachment of willingness. Tao has little ambition in pursuing a public life. Traumatized and overshadowed by the political shifts, he finds home in a politics-free environment. His hermetic life signals the

embracement of social misalliance and misplacement. He sees the reclusive life as intellectually and morally apt.

Whether and how one ultimately achieves the absolute degree of tranquility, still remains contentious. The state of tranquility could entail ingredients more than tranquility itself, where the coexistence of grievances, regrets counteracts the attempts to reach *ataraxia*. History shows us that his detachment reattaches him to the recognition and approval of the society that once neglected and excluded him. Posterity who is politically overshadowed and undermined has been modeling on his otherworldliness.

2. The Zhuang-Topia

In *The Zhuangzi*, the importance of mental wellbeing and spiritual belonging supersedes that of hierarchical positions, competition of excellences. *The Zhuangzi* mitigates the burdens of social impositions and illuminates otherwise for a Thoreauian life amid naturalistic surroundings. Such emphasis on apolitical, asocial, agnostic features leaves the impression that *The Zhuangzi* doesn't want to discuss the state, at least not directly and explicitly. As opposed to Confucians who see serving in political office when the timing is right as one of the most fulfilling and meaningful aspects of an eudaimonic life, *The Zhuangzi's* general attitude toward serving the state was that of futility and aversion, despite occasional forays into the tactics of political persuasion or performance.

Serving in political office for *The Zhuangzi* resembles a sacrificial tortoise put at the altar of power. Tao Jiang, in *Zhuangzi's Lone Project of Personal Freedom*, identifies the unabashed rejection of political service in an autocratic climate:

[...]. Not recognizing the social, political, and moral aspects as central to *the Zhuangzi* can diminish its philosophical significance during the formative period of Chinese philosophy, as well as its continuing lure and profound impact in subsequent Chinese intellectual history.

(Jiang, 2021:334)

I agree with Jiang's recognition of the underlying message beneath the supposedly mystic, irrational *Zhuangzi*.

I urge an association between the Zhuangzian subtext and the rhetorical devices. As discussed in the *Introduction*, *The Zhuangzi's* writing style diversifies the range of its potential readers. The open-mindedness within attracts and fits in interpretations of various sorts, from Sextus Empiricus to Isaiah Berlin. *The Zhuangzi's* allegorical feature attracts and stimulates an abundant body of interpretations. The Zhuangzian elasticity tolerates, includes, and embraces

distinct manifestations of philosophical allegiances. Its political philosophy is an important benchmark beyond the flexibility of interpretations.

Allusion, a literary device that is pervasively spread throughout *The Zhuangzi*, permits the free ground for guesswork and provides a key to its avoidance to deliver a clear, unambiguous viewpoint. *The Zhuangzi* hides itself behind the practice of detachment. What is left unsaid, and why is it left open-ended rather than argued straightforwardly?

2.1. “*Doing Nothing is the Hardest Thing To Do*”

We shall take into account the motivational sources of the *aporia* in *The Zhuangzi* and conduct an inquiry on the underlying assumptions for such a wide application of detours, indirectness, and subtextual interpretations.

I discuss *wuwei* (typically translated as *non-action*) and its contextual affiliations with Taoism. I show that there are at least two separate meanings for *wuwei*: (1) *wuwei* in the sense of the ruler; (2) *wuwei* in the sense of the ruled. First, I approach *wuwei* through sceptic’s *epochē*. I show, again, both the resonations and divergences between scepticism and *The Zhuangzi*.

Indeed, the meaning of *wuwei* is partially transferable with that of *epochē*. Their overlap situates in a shared inertia, a lameness of actions, and an inactivity. For the ruler, it infers the abandonment to act on one’s desires and the prudence to restrain oneself from making self-gratifying decisions that compromise the interests of the ruled. In this case, *wuwei* suggests non-imposition of constraints on the citizens.

I propose a double-edged interpretation of *wuwei*. I approach it through the short interjection of Laozi in *Yingdi Wang*. *Yingdi Wang* outlines the expectations of a virtuous ruler through their mouthpiece Lao Dan (Laozi), the pioneer of Taoism:

“The government of the enlightened sovereign is such that his achievement [gong] covers the entire world yet it seems not of his own doing. [...]. He stands in the unfathomable [buze] and wanders in the nonexistent [wuyou].”

(*The Zhuangzi*, 7.13.1 - 7.13.2)

Later in the text, Laozi reveals the name of this quality as *wuwei*. *Wuwei* means “not seem of his own doing”. Guo Xiang (252 CE - 312 CE), a commentator and a cataloguer of *The Zhuangzi*,

highlights the potential for self-fulfillment and self-empowerment under such enlightened sovereign:

Making it possible for them to attain self-fulfillment really marks the enlightened sovereign's achievement, for such achievement lies in unselfconscious action [*wuwei*], which returns responsibility [*ren*] for all in the world to themselves. It is because all in the world thus attains self-empowerment [*ziren*], it seems this does not depend on the enlightened sovereign.

(Lynn, 2022:169)

My interpretation for *wuwei* arises at the aid of Guo Xiang's commentaries on the impartiality of a ruler. The secret of a good ruler in Laozi's prophecy refers to the self-determination of citizens. A good ruler shall allow her citizens to self-grow, self-actualize, and reach their own fulfillment in their own idiosyncratic approaches. Her citizens have agency of choice and independence of thinking. The meaning of "not of his own doing" implies the freedom from impositions of the good ruler.

The ruler shall not dictate the self-fulfillment of the citizens. She shall not impose intellectual restraints or outlaw creativity. *Wuwei* constitutes the undoing of restricting citizen's agency and choice. The impartiality of such a ruler may not come naturally to a usual person of egocentric desires. Laozi thus refers specifically to the "enlightened" ruler who attains the harsh demand of distancing herself from corruptive, non-altruistic behaviors.

The citizens of such an enlightened sovereignty are thus granted the agency to voice refusal without being penalized. I suggest referencing the paradigm of a democratic system to evaluate *wuwei*. *Wuwei* arises from a caring ruler, supported and respected by the citizens. Such a ruler prioritizes the wellbeing of her citizens over her own. She fosters the decision-making ability of each citizen and understands the futility of forcing a monotonous process to the populations.

2.1.1. *Wuwei* & The Ruled

For the ruled, *wuwei* aligns more with *epochē* in a hermetic sense. In face of wars, turmoils, resettlings, *wuwei* suggests calm adaptability to the changing situations as a strategy of self-protection and self-maintenance. Citizens shall equip themselves with mental shut-off of politics, retreat to the safe domain of a pastoral ambience, and remain distanced with the

underdeveloped, problematic system. *Wuwei*, in this sense, suggests self-therapeuziation in an unfulfilling, infrastructurally barren environment. In the next section, *wuwei* of the ruled further sheds light on non-participation of worldly affairs.

2.2. The Usefulness of Uselessness

Another passage that is straightforwardly invested with politics appears at the beginning of *Renjian Shi*, where exchanges of views between Confucius and his pupil Yan Hui are exhibited with immense charitability and without the intervention of any Taoist judgment—its charitability to Confucianism is performative rather than supportive. The infamous metaphor on the useless tree follows in:

“[...] It is an unfit tree. If you use it to make boats, they will sink; if you use it to make coffins, they will quickly rot; if you use it to make vessels, they will be quickly ruined; if you use it to make doors, and they will ooze sap; if you use it to make posts, they will be riddled with bugs. [...]”

(*The Zhuangzi*, 4.35-4.37)

Now we have witnessed two variations of *wuwei*: (1) the not doing of a good ruler; (2) the not doing of a carpenter. The useless tree positions us again in the rhetorical reservation of *The Zhuangzi*. Similar to the metaphorization of butterfly and fish/bird, we confront the challenge of a hermeneutical openness.

I argue that a plausible interpretation of the useless tree is dependent upon our understanding of *wuwei*. *The Zhuangzi* is perhaps exhibiting exchanges of dialogues between characters who are least associated with governments, as the useless tree supervenes the alleged wisdom of Confucianism. The transgression of empirical experiences is consistent in the interchangeability of perspectives between people and animals, people and nature. *Renjian Shi* commends the uselessness of a tree, supports the carpenter’s decision for not using the tree, and demur at the conventional symbiosis between the craftsman and his means. The Taoist absence of political utterances is a mental derivative of distancing oneself from potentially compromising situations. *The Zhuangzi*’s application of allegories can help it achieve the most viable extent of personal fulfillment.

Following Carpenter Shi’s refusal to cut out a robust oak tree, the tree appears in the carpenter’s dream and voices another allegorical tale:

“[...], when the fruit is ripe, they are stripped, and when stripped they are injured, with large branches broken and small branches ripped off. They are such that their lives are made miserable because of their capabilities. [...] they attract abuse and attack from the crass and the vulgar—this is the same for all things.”

(*The Zhuangzi*, 4.38.2)

Initially the carpenter’s reluctance to use the tree appears a foolish decision to his apprentices. He is apparently squandering a legitimate source of wood that will bring him business. The tree, anthropomorphized in the dream of a carpenter, reveals that the carpenter’s decision adheres with the principle of uselessness. If he cut the tree, the tree would have been deprived of a longer life span. Thus it would be profitable for the tree to stay unused as it stays intact away from changes. The uselessness proves a profitable end to the tree. *The Zhuangzi*’s interpretative flexibility does not aim at reorganizing the cognitive value of the readers. Whether it serves as a trick or a fable is in the minds of the readers. Dorothy H. B. Kwek, in *Critique of Imperial Reason: Lessons from the Zhuangzi*, reminds us of the complicity of the sages and their ideas. To achieve *wuwei* represents a virtuous, conscientious ruler, yet, for the citizens, *wuwei* means the withdrawal from social life, non-intervention, and silence for usurpation and manipulation. The non-resistance of citizens tightens the control of the authoritative government. The question of whether the citizens’ hermit life is an escape or a self-salvage from the adverse atmosphere and to what extent the normativity of such a hermetic act is sustainable to the society remains debatable:

Further, *the Zhuangzi*’s refractory stance can be understood in light of its audience— those who would have been capable of deciphering the text would have been precisely the ones charged with implementing the oppressions we have seen.

(Kwek, 2019, 427)

Epilogue: The Composite *Zhuangzi*

The Zhuangzi doesn't enjoy exposing its views in the nude. It intends to bewilder us and arouse our confusions. I show that there is no particular answer to its metaphorical labyrinths. Even if there is one, *The Zhuangzi* would not want to say it out loud nor want us to grasp the exact vocabularies. It doesn't intend to dominate or dictate our thinking.

The Zhuangzi alludes in its idiosyncratically secret, mystic approach to a fantastical reading for failures, disability, and competitiveness. *The Zhuangzi's* attention to mental wellbeing makes it a rare precursor of therapy. It identifies the role of trauma manifested in acts of withdrawal. It venerates phenomena of non-artificial origins rather than contrivance. We are uplifted to the imaginative regime that doesn't actually exist, similar to the fantastic tales of Italo Calvino, where the baron chooses to live in a non-existing dimension up in the trees and builds his own empire. Whichever way we decide to read into the allegories of *The Zhuangzi* is dependent upon our own philosophical allegiance, hopefully sustained and accompanied consistently by philosophical modesty.

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