

Skilful Practice in the *Zhuangzi*: Putting the Narratives in Context*

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Abstract

The *Zhuangzi*, like many other early Chinese texts, is a composite work consisting of relatively short textual units. Despite its composite nature, the *Zhuangzi* is often approached as a philosophical work, which (at least in part or parts) can be viewed as philosophically coherent. As a result, the *Zhuangzi* as a whole (or several wholes) is usually taken (at least implicitly) as the context in which all the textual units are read and understood.

In contrast, this paper explores alternative ways to establish context for individual textual units in the *Zhuangzi*. The famous short narratives about skilful practice (often introducing the idea of perfect craftsmanship) are taken as an example, and the possible contexts are examined along two lines of inquiry: 1) the narratives are read within their immediate context of the textual unit; 2) the vocabulary used in the narratives is checked against other textual units in the *Zhuangzi* where the vocabulary appears. The paper argues that diverse contexts can be established for seemingly similar narratives. The narratives about skilful practice are viewed as a literary device that can be used in various contexts for various purposes. The paper thus demonstrates that the received *Zhuangzi* can be read as a process of putting shared narratives and terms in contexts and using them for different ends. The paper concludes by suggesting that the proposed reading highlights and retains meanings that are necessarily obscured by any reading that establishes the whole *Zhuangzi* as the primary context.

Keywords: Zhuangzi, Daoism, philosophy, textuality, reading strategy

Veščinske prakse pri Zhuangziju: postavljanje zgodb v kontekst

Izvleček

Zhuangzi je, kot mnogo drugih kitajskih besedil, sestavljeno delo, ki je sestavljeno iz razmeroma kratkih besedilnih enot. Kljub sestavljenosti se *Zhuangzi* pogosto obravnava kot filozofsko delo, ki se ga, vsaj delno ali znotraj posameznih delov, lahko dojema kot

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filozofsko koherentno. Tako se *Zhuangzi* kot celota (ali več celot), (vsaj implicitno) razume kot kontekst, v katerem se berejo in razumejo vse enote besedila.

V nasprotju s tem pa članek raziskuje alternativne načine določanja konteksta za posamezne enote besedila znotraj *Zhuangzija*. Kot primeri služijo slovite kratke zgodbe o veščinskih praksah (ki pogosto vpeljujejo idejo popolne obrti), kontekste pa se proučuje v dveh smereh: 1) zgodbe se berejo znotraj neposrednega konteksta posamezne enote besedila; 2) besedišče, ki se ga uporablja v posameznih enotah, se preverja tudi v primerjavi z drugimi enotami besedila v *Zhuangziju*, kjer se pojavlja. Članek trdi, da se za navidezno podobne zgodbe lahko določijo različni konteksti. Zgodbe o veščinskih praksah so razumljene kot literarni pripomočki, ki se jih lahko uporablja znotraj različnih kontekstov in z različnimi nameni. Tako se pokaže, da splošno sprejet *Zhuangzi* lahko razumemo kot proces postavljanja skupnih zgodb in pojmov v kontekste in uporabe za različne namene. Članek se sklone z mislijo, da predlagani način branja poudarja in ohranja pomene, medtem ko jih vsako drugačno branje, ki vzpostavlja celoto *Zhuangzija* kot primarni kontekst, nujno zastira.

Ključne besede: *Zhuangzi*, daoizem, filozofija, tekstualnost, načini branja

Introduction

The narratives on skilful action represent one of the most well-known and often discussed topics of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子.¹ Although interpretations of these narratives vary widely, most of the scholarship seems to share two basic (and in my view, problematic) assumptions concerning the reading of these passages. Firstly, the narratives are usually read simply as vehicles carrying meaning(s) emblematic of the *Zhuangzi* as a whole, and thus conveying important features of its philosophy. More specifically, they are typically read *in the light* of the whole work, which is constructed by other means, and not (or at least not primarily) by the narratives in question. Secondly, all the skilful action narratives are generally supposed to convey a similar meaning. This paper explores the limits of these two assumptions and problematizes them. By doing so, it suggests an alternative strategy for reading these narratives, one that does not read them primarily as instantiations of the *Zhuangzi's* philosophy but, instead, focuses on the meaning constructed from the narratives themselves, read *against* the *Zhuangzi*, and not *in the light of* it. It is argued that this kind of analysis may suggest a context which does not necessarily include the other narratives on the same topic, and not even the *Zhuangzi* as a whole, but rather *some parts* of the work (against other parts) and even other texts.

1 Livia Kohn lists twenty-eight scholarly works discussing Cook Ding's story, the most famous of these narratives (Kohn 2014, 211).

Both the abovementioned assumptions are based on another, broader assumption, concerning the coherence of the text and its supposed authorship. This assumption is applied not only to the *Zhuangzi*, but also to many other early Chinese texts, especially those designated as “Masters” or “Master texts” (*zi* 子)—a category where the *Zhuangzi* is traditionally placed. These texts have been identified with their supposed authors,² which in turn creates the image of coherence across the works. This practice is, however, in contrast with the content of these texts. The texts themselves usually do not create the image of coherence or homogeneity. Instead, they very often appear more like collections of texts of variable length, ranging from short paragraphs to full chapters. Moreover the sequence of paragraphs within chapters and chapters within books typically does not reveal any apparent pattern. The Master texts as wholes, as well as their individual chapters, often look like a random collection of sayings, short narratives, dialogues, or expositions, only loosely tied thematically.³ This combination—seemingly unstructured texts, which are read as authorial texts—often results in a selective reading that picks out isolated sections of the text and puts them together (sometimes quite wilfully) as “building blocks” of a philosophy that is then presented as the essence of text by the related scholar.⁴ Since the *Zhuangzi* is very often subject to this kind of approach, it is the aim of this paper to problematize it and offer an alternative reading strategy for selected parts of the text.⁵

2 This practice is first attested in the *History of Former Han Dynasty* (*Hanshu* 漢書), chapter *Yiwen-zhi* 藝文志 (*Hanshu* 30).

3 This is definitely valid for the books (Master texts as wholes). As for the coherence of individual chapters, there are, of course, differences among the texts. A typical chapter from the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 is more coherent than a typical chapter from the *Analecets* (*Lunyu* 論語). Moreover, as two recent publications have shown (Meyer 2015; De Reu 2015), a careful analysis can construct a meaningful structure even for a text (a chapter, *pian* 篇, not the whole book) that looks, in an uninformed reading, like a random collection.

4 Matthias Richter (2014, 1026) points out this problem in a recent article: “Systematizing accounts of ancient Chinese philosophers tend to be constructed by relating representative extracts from the texts attributed to these philosophers to each other as building blocks of a consistent philosophy.”

5 There is already a number of (mostly recent) works questioning the author-oriented approach to the Masters. Richter (2014) criticizes the “building block” approach to reading the Masters. Defoort (2012, 459–62) stresses the link between writing and practice in early China: “Writings were usually not self-contained, consistent, theoretical constructions, but rather footnotes to living practices” (*ibid.*, 460). Klein (2011) questions the validity of the “core text” approach to the *Zhuangzi* in principle, and proposes “that the most appropriate textual unit to use in analysing the *Zhuangzi* is not “inner/outer” or even whole chapters, but rather some subset of a chapter” (*ibid.*, 317). The “building block” approach to the *Zhuangzi* is the target of two recent articles by Dirk Meyer (2015) and Wim De Reu (2015). These authors analyse individual chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, which they construe as structured wholes, and thus read the individual sections of each chapter in the context of its whole structure. This re-contextualisation has a profound impact on the meaning of many of the sections.

There are many textual features shared across the text of the *Zhuangzi*—shared vocabulary and terminology, literary *topoi*, narrative structures and topics, ideas. Naturally, these shared features form the basis of most attempts to read the *Zhuangzi* as a whole or wholes (as a philosophical work or works).⁶ In this paper, however, I would like to argue that these shared features *do not construct the meaning of the text directly*. Instead, I take them as a repertoire of literary devices available to the text’s authors, who used them to make a point that does not necessarily amount to one coherent philosophy that underlies the text and is advocated by it. This means, above all, that any term, metaphor, narrative, dialogue, or other type of expression formulated by the text must be adequately understood within its textual context (primarily, textual units⁷ within the chapters). Only when this is done are attempts at linking passages across the text possible.

The narratives on skilful action, which are the topic of this paper, are taken as literary *topoi* that can be used to convey diverse meanings. It is argued that despite similarities in content, narrative structures, and terminology, these narratives should be read (at least primarily) not as vehicles conveying an abstract philosophy, but rather as texts making a point, communicating a specific instruction, that vary in different instances of this type of narrative. This view is further underpinned by the fact that most of the skilful practice narratives are simultaneously “instruction scenes”.⁸ Typically they depict dialogues between the skilful person and an observer marvelling at the skill performed, with the latter usually a person of high social or intellectual status (a ruler or Confucius in most cases). Most importantly, the instruction is clearly implied (if not directly stated, in some cases) within the scene, aimed at both the fictional observer and the reader of the text. In

6 The prevalent assumption is that the *Zhuangzi* as a whole is not an authorial work, and not one which is entirely coherent—it contains parts of diverse origin and intention. Those scholars who address the question of the origin and authenticity of the *Zhuangzi* divided the work into several parts according to the text’s supposed authorship (see Graham 1990; Liu 1994; Liu 2014, 129–58; Roth 1991a, 122–3). This approach thus tries to overcome the incongruity of the *Zhuangzi* as a whole by identifying partial wholes that themselves are supposedly coherent. In addition, this approach to the text typically tries to elevate one of these partial wholes to the position of the core text—the “true” *Zhuangzi*, the textual layer identified with Zhuangzi (Zhuang Zhou) as the author, or at least considered the most “authentic” layer identifiable with his intellectual heritage. There is a general consensus that the “Inner Chapters” (*nei pian* 内篇) as well as some of the “Outer Chapters” (*wai pian* 外篇) are the “core text”.

7 By “textual unit” I refer to parts of the *Zhuangzi* that can be identified as textual wholes by internal criteria (continuous narrative or dialogue, continuous exposition on a given topic, short sections linked together by formal means, like the simple “therefore” *gu* 故, etc.) Of course, in some cases setting the boundary between units can be controversial. The narratives about skilful action analysed in this paper usually form a clear whole identifiable as a “textual units”.

8 See Defoort 2012 for the term “instruction scene” or “instruction dialogue” and an analysis of the genre of “instruction dialogue” in the *Zhuangzi*.

this paper, the instruction (or the point made by the narrative) is regarded as the primary import of the text. Textual analysis is thus undertaken in order to better understand the instruction.

Wheelwright Bian

The passages that I have been referring to as showing “skilful action” in the *Zhuangzi* have in previous scholarship been discussed using terms such as “knack-passages” (Needham 1956, 121), “effortless action” (Slingerland 2003), “skill stories” (Yearley 1996, 163), or “skilful spontaneity” (Kohn 2014, 209). All these labels point to the most obvious characteristics all these narratives share. They always depict a skilful person engaged in an activity performed with enigmatic mastery and ease. This mastery usually involves no effort, it is completely integrated in the person of the perfect craftsman, boatman, swimmer, or even a cicada catcher.

Lee Yearley, in his article on this issue, distinguishes three fundamental elements of the skilful action in these narratives: adaptive responsiveness to change, unification of the physical and mental, and resistance to being communicated by normal means (Yearley 1996, 165). All these characteristics can be found in the following section:

桓公讀書於堂上，輪扁斲輪於堂下，釋椎鑿而上，問桓公曰：敢問公之所讀者何言邪？公曰：聖人之言也。曰：聖人在乎？公曰：已死矣。曰：然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫！桓公曰：寡人讀書，輪人安得議乎！有說則可，無說則死。

輪扁曰：臣也，以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫。

Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright Bian, who was in the yard below chiselling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan: “This book Your Grace is reading—may I venture to ask whose words are in it?”

“The words of the sages”, said the duke.

“Are the sages with us?”

“Dead long ago”, said the duke.

“In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!”

Duke Huan said: “Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read? If you have some explanation, well and good. If not, you die!”

Wheelwright Bian said: “Let me look at it from the point of view of my work. When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and will not take hold. But if they are too hard, it bites in and will not budge. Not too gentle, not too hard—you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind. You cannot put it into words, and yet there is a knack to it somehow. I cannot teach it to my son, and he cannot learn it from me. So I have gone along for seventy years and at my age I am still chiselling wheels.”

When the men of old died, they took with them the things that could not be handed down. So what you are reading there must be nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old.”⁹ (*Zhuangzi* 13; Guo 1985, 119)

All three basic characteristics of skilful action narratives mentioned above are clearly present in this section. Chiselling a wheel is an activity that requires adaptive responsiveness to change, a “knack” that can be described only in negative terms—“not too gentle, not too hard”. It requires unification of the physical and the mental—“you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind” and it cannot be expressed in words. The narrative structure, however, makes it clear that the skilful action (the mastery of chiselling the wheel)¹⁰ is not the focus of the narrative. The description of the craft and inherent problems it entails form a major part of the section but its point (the instruction) is something else—it is the resistance of a certain kind of human experience to being communicated. In this case we can safely say that the instruction the Duke Huan is given is communicated to the reader as well. The whole section uses the literary device of the skilful action narrative in order to promote the main idea of the section—human experience cannot be passed on in its fullness. Above all, it is inexpressible in words.

As we shall see below, this narrative structure and the point the section makes are not typical of the skilful action passages in the *Zhuangzi*. Another dissimilar point

9 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 152–3), adapted.

10 It should be noted that Wheelwright Bian’s skill is not in fact described as “enigmatic mastery” (comparable, for example, to that of Cook Ding). It is simply a skilful craft, nothing extraordinary. The point of this story is also different—that such skills cannot be expressed and passed on in words.

is the section's lack of any terminology concerning perfect skill. We do not know how wheelwright Bian attained his skill or what kind of psychological features it consists of. All we have is a vague description of the “knack”—“not too hard, not too gentle”, which can be “got in your hand and felt in your mind”—and the rest of the section is focused on the main point—the inexpressibility of human experience.

Cook Ding

The next section is by far the most well-known of all the skilful action narratives, indeed, it is one of the most famous passages of the whole *Zhuangzi*:

庖丁為文惠君解牛。手之所觸，肩之所倚，足之所履，膝之所踣，砉然騞然，奏刀騞然，莫不中音。合於桑林之舞，乃中經首之會。文惠君曰：嘻！善哉！技蓋至此乎？

庖丁釋刀對曰：臣之所好者道也，進乎技矣。始臣之解牛之時，所見无非牛者。三年之後，未嘗見全牛也。方今之時，臣以神遇，而不以目視，官知止而神欲行。依乎天理，批大郤，導大窾，因其固然。技經肯綮之未嘗，而況大軋乎！[...] 雖然，每至於族，吾見其難為，怵然為戒，視為止，行為遲。動刀甚微，謦然已解，如土委地。提刀而立，為之四顧，為之躊躇滿志，善刀而藏之。文惠君曰：善哉！吾聞庖丁之言，得養生焉。

Cook Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui. At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Jingshou music.

Lord Wenhui said: “Ah, this is marvellous! The skill must have reached perfection at this point?”

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied: “What I care about is the way (*dao*), which is more advanced than a mere skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I approach it with spirit and do not look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit (*shen*) moves where it wants. I go along with its “heavenly structure” (*tianli*), strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest

ligament or tendon, much less a main joint. (...) However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I am doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety,—flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

Lord Wenhui said: “Excellent! I have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!”¹¹ (*Zhuangzi* 3; Guo 1985, 119)

The structure of this section is typical of skilful action narratives. The craftsman performs his skill and is marvelled at by an observer (a prince, in this case). The skilful person then talks about his skills and reveals its underlying principles. The explanatory part forms the core of the narrative and the focus of its instruction. In this section, the instruction is made explicit in the last sentence—the prince has learned from Cook Ding not how to cut oxen, but how to care for life. The principles underlying the perfect skill obviously have a general significance and could be applied to other activities, not just cutting oxen. The instruction is clearly aimed at the prince in the narrative, although the reader also receives the same advice.

The explanatory part of the narrative employs a specific terminology, which we find not only in other skilful action narratives, but in many other passages in the *Zhuangzi*. It is the self-cultivation terminology that is used often in early Chinese texts, especially those labelled as “Daoist”—“spirit”, *shen* 神, as a source of superhuman perception (See Roth 1991b and Roth 1994).¹² Besides this terminology another common discursive strategy is used, which we will also encounter in other skilful action narratives—the description of the gradual closing of the conventional ways of perceiving the world that leads to a more effective way of perceiving things.¹³

This famous story of Cook Ding is in my view exceptional, in a way that may seem trivial but in fact is crucial to the narrative’s reception by the reader. Compared to the other skilful action narratives and many other textual units in the *Zhuangzi*, it is remarkably clear and easy to understand. Cook Ding’s mastery is based on two

11 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 50–51), adapted.

12 Roth argues that the *Guanzi* 管子 chapter *Inner Training* (*Neiye* 內業) and the self-cultivation process described there is the core of all Daoism. This self-cultivation is based on cultivation of one’s “vital energy” (*qi* 氣), accumulation of “vital essence” (*jing* 精) and reaching the state of “spirit” (*shen* 神), in which the adept acquires certain superhuman cognitive abilities. See also Puett 2003 for the term “spirit” in the *Zhuangzi*.

13 At first, he saw the whole ox (with his “senses”, *guan* 官), then “not the whole ox”—only the parts (“rational analysis”, *zhi* 知), at the end he approached the ox with his “spirit” only.

interconnected factors: on one hand, the subject—Cook Ding—has exceptional skill (conceptualized as “approaching the ox with spirit”), and on the other hand, the object—the ox—is not just a mass of flesh and bones but is structured (it is endowed with “heavenly structure”, *tian li* 天理).¹⁴ The text makes clear that by using the “spirit” a man can discern the “heavenly/natural structure” and thus be capable of highly refined and miraculously effective action. Reality is thus structured (intelligible), but only a uniquely trained individual can see and make use of it. This is, I believe, the point of the instruction and the main significance of the narrative.¹⁵ It presents a universally comprehensible image of a “master”,¹⁶ and thus it is perhaps no wonder that it is exactly this version of skilful action narratives that is the most well-known. As we shall see, most of the others present more obscure and less easily digestible examples of this literary *topos*.

The terminology used in this section can be put into the context of other *Zhuangzi* passages as well as other texts. It has been suggested by other scholars¹⁷ that the three-step sequence leading to “approaching the ox with spirit” can be read as parallel to another famous passage from the *Zhuangzi*, a conversation between Confucius and Yan Hui in Chapter 4. (*Zhuangzi* 4; Guo 1985, 147; Watson 1970, 57–58) In this dialogue the process of attaining true understanding is called “fasting of the mind” (*xinzhai* 心齋), a three-fold sequence of “listening” with one’s ears (sensory perception), then with the mind (discursive understanding)—and finally with the vital energy (*qi* 氣) (instead of *shen*), which is the final state representing a superhuman understanding of the world. Putting *shen* and *qi* together in this way further puts into play the widely shared (in traditional Chinese culture in general,

14 Or simply “natural structure”. The meaning of the word *tian* 天 ranges between “heaven” as the deity or cosmic power, and “nature” as the sum of natural cycles and processes. In the *Zhuangzi* it very often means the latter. However, I still often translate *tian* as “heaven” (heavenly, heaven-like, etc.) because I find the translation “nature” strangely ambiguous, among other reasons because “nature” is the standard translation for *xing* 性—which also appears frequently in the *Zhuangzi*.

15 There are, however, many authors who include the Cook Ding story into a broader concept of “immersion” in reality, which in their view informs all the skilful action stories: Kohn 2014, 209–19; Yearley 1996; Slingerland 2003, 197–203 (although Slingerland’s position is more complicated, and we get back to it below); Graham 1981, 135–42. As I argue below, I take “immersion” as an important metaphor informing many of the skilful action narratives, but not all of them, and not Cook Ding’s story.

16 In this general evaluation of Cook Ding’s story, I basically follow Robert Eno’s analysis in his article “Cook Ding’s Dao and the Limits of Philosophy” (Eno 1996, 135–6). Eno notices that Cook Ding’s skill is actually a mix of enigmatic, effortless action and a more conventional way of action, a conscious concentration, which is based on senses and cognition. According to Eno, “in its imperfection, Cook Ding’s level of mastery bears a recognizable relationship to levels of human skill performance that we encounter in actual life, the skills of great athletes or performing artists” (ibid., 136).

17 Slingerland (2003, 201), who refers to Pang Pu (1994) as to the origin of this idea.

beginning with several early Daoist texts) self-cultivation sequence of “vital energy” (*qi*)—“vital essence” (*jing* 精)—“spirit” (*shen*).¹⁸ In these texts, *shen* represents a state of mind with superior cognitive abilities transcending the ordinary human sensory and cognitive processes. It attunes the sage’s mind to cosmic processes due to energetic and material continuity—everything is made of “vital energy” (*qi*) and “vital essence” (*jing*), which gives rise to the subtlest reality called “spirit”: “Generally speaking, the vital essence (*jing*) of things is what gives them life. Below it gives life to five grains, above it creates stars and constellations. When it flows between Heaven and Earth, it is called “ghosts and spirits” (*guishen*). When it is hidden in the breast, it is called the Sage (*shengren* 聖人).¹⁹ The human mind, endowed with the quality of “spirit”, is then capable of superhuman understanding of the world. For example, according to the famous chapter of the *Guanzi* known as “Inner Training”, a person with such abilities will be able to foretell good and bad fortune without resorting to divination.²⁰

Finally, it should be noted that part of the specifically Daoist concept and terminology of self-cultivation, the general meaning of *shen* as “superior cognitive abilities” (distinct from “mind”, *xin* 心), appears often in early Chinese texts. In these, “spirit” or “spiritual insight” (*shenming* 神明) often refers to a highly refined perception, characteristic of the sage (*shengren*), and this is conceived in various ways, not only in the context of Daoist self-cultivation set out above. For example, in the *Xunzi* 荀子, the superior perception and understanding of the sage is described as follows:

If you accumulate earth and make a hill, wind and rain will arise there.
If you accumulate water and make a pool, dragons will be born there.
If you accumulate goodness and make moral charisma, the spiritual insight (*shenming*) will be naturally attained and the sagely mind (*shengxin* 聖心) will be complete.²¹

Or *Guanzi* 管子, Chapter 41: “It was due to the utmost spiritual insight (*shenming*) of the Yellow Emperor that he obtained these six ministers and established order in the whole world.”²²

18 See note 12 above.

19 *Guanzi* 49, Chapter “Inner Training” (*Neiye*): 凡物之精, 此則為生。下生五穀, 上為列星。流於天地之間, 謂之鬼神, 藏於胸中, 謂之聖人。(Li 2009, 931; Cf. Rickett 1998, 39)

20 *Guanzi* 49, Chapter “Inner Training” (*Neiye*). (Rickett 1998, 51)

21 *Xunzi* 1.6: 積土成山, 風雨興焉; 積水成淵, 蛟龍生焉; 積善成德, 而神明自得, 聖心備焉 (Wang 2010, 7; Cf. Knoblock 1988, 138)

22 *Guanzi* 41: 黃帝得六相而天地治, 神明至。(Li 2009, 943; Cf. Rickett 1998, 123)

In sum, Cook Ding's story conveys the idea of superior cognitive abilities, termed "spirit", by which one can recognize the true structure of things, and thus act with miraculous efficiency, transcending the abilities of ordinary men. The process of reaching the state of mind called "spirit" is described only very vaguely as a gradual "stopping" (*zhi* 止) of the conventional capacities of perception (*guan* 官) and understanding (*zhi* 知). It can, however, be put into the context of other passages in the *Zhuangzi*, as well as other texts, where the meaning of "spirit" as a refined and miraculously effective power is often applied.

Woodworker Qing

The following skilful action narrative seems to be very similar to that of Cook Ding in terms of narrative structure, terminology, social setting, and the implied reader's response:

梓慶削木為鐻，鐻成，見者驚猶鬼神。魯侯見而問焉，曰：子何術以為焉？

對曰：[...] 臣將為鐻，未嘗敢以耗氣也，必齊以靜心。齊三日，而不敢懷慶賞爵祿；齊五日，不敢懷非譽巧拙。

齊七日，輒然忘吾有四肢形體也。當是時也，無公朝，其巧專而外骨消；然後入山林，觀天性；形軀至矣，然後成見鐻，然後加手焉；不然則已。則以天合天，器之所以疑神者，其是與？

Woodworker Qing carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand, and when it was finished, everyone who saw it marvelled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits. When the marquis of Lu saw it, he asked: "What art is it you have?"

Qing replied: "(...) When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have fasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles or stipends. When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness.

"And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away. After that, I go into the mountain forest and examine the heavenly nature (of the trees). If I find one of superlative form, then I imagine a bell stand in it, and then I put my hand to the job of carving;

if not, I let it go. This way I am simply matching up heaven with heaven. That is probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits.”²³ (*Zhuangzi* 19; Guo 1985, 658–9)

Just like the Cook Ding story, this is a narrative about a perfect craftsman who is admired by his ruler. The ruler asks him for the principles of his craft and the woodworker gives him an explanation. The explanatory part is the core of the section, and the instruction given to the ruler in the fictional dialogue is also given to the reader in the act of reading. All these features also appear in the Cook Ding narrative. Moreover, the explanatory part itself is also very similar to the same part in the earlier text. According to the woodworker’s words, his skill is attained in a three-fold sequence of “fasting” (*qi* 齊) and a similar pair of terms is employed—“spirit” (*shen*) and “heaven” (*tian* 天). Moreover, just as Cook Ding is able to discern the “heavenly/natural structure” (*tianli*) of the ox, Woodworker Qing is able to see the “heavenly/natural condition” (*tianxing* 天性) of trees, and thus select those suitable for carving a bell stand.

There are, however, important differences between the two passages.²⁴ These can be found in the sequence of the three-fold self-cultivation and in the meaning of two key terms: *shen* and *tian*. I will analyse these in turn, as follows.

In Cook Ding’s story, the three steps of self-cultivation consist of gradual transformation of one’s perceptive and cognitive abilities. This is a long-term process that, most likely, occupied most of Cook Ding’s life. The result is “approaching the ox with spirit”, which enables one to discern the “heavenly/natural structure” of the ox, although it can be surmised that this kind of training could be done with any other focus, or with life as a whole, as Duke Wenhui notes. The “spirit” seems to be a profound and active cognitive ability. Besides the perception and cognition, no other transformation of Cook Ding’s personality is hinted at. By and large, despite the “metaphysical” nature of the terms “spirit” and “heavenly/natural structure,” this passage presents a widely acceptable description of life-long training to acquire a highly specialized skill, which results in the attainment of mastery.²⁵

23 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 205–6), adapted.

24 Eno (1996) identifies the difference between Cook Ding’s story and the other skilful action narratives as based on the imperfection of Cook Ding vs. the perfection of the others, who are perfect due to “immersion in nature/heaven”. Slingerland (2003, 197–203) distinguishes between metaphors of “Self as irrepressible force” (i.e. “spirit” in Cook Ding) and “Self as allowing the world of normative order to do the work” (i.e. immersion in “heaven” in the other stories). Finally, however, he stresses the continuity of both as just different metaphors of “effortless action”.

25 “Mastery” itself is a term equally difficult to grasp. A “spiritual” understanding of the hidden “natural structure” of things may well serve as a description of “mastery” in any context.

Woodworker Qing, on the other hand, undergoes a very different three-fold self-cultivation process. While the result is a similar spiritual insight into the inner condition of things, unattainable by normal means, the steps involved are different. What Woodworker Qing gets rid of is not his ordinary sensory and cognitive abilities, but instead the *social and cultural values and relations* that normally define a person as a social being. Then, in the final step, he loses his awareness of his body. The whole process is called “fasting in order to still the mind,” and in the state of a still mind it is possible to acquire spiritual insights into trees. The process is obviously short-term, as the woodworker repeats it each time he needs to find a tree trunk for carving a bell stand, and it requires a profound existential transformation of the craftsman’s personality, albeit only for the duration of the action. An important term is used for the last step of the process: the woodworker *forgets* (*wang* 忘) his limbs and his body. This term is often used in the *Zhuangzi* to refer to a profound existential transformation that results in a specific state of mind enabling one to act more effectively, as we shall see below.²⁶

Both the Cook Ding and Woodworker Qing narratives make use of the term “spirit” (*shen*). It should be noted, however, that the term is used in a very different sense in each section. As I argued above, in Cook Ding’s story, the “spirit” simply means superior cognitive abilities, a meaning that is often used in early Chinese texts. However, *shen* is used differently in Woodworker Qing’s story. At the beginning of the narrative, the observer marvels at the woodworker’s mastery, wondering if the bell stand is not the work of spirits (*guishen* 鬼神). At the end of the explanatory passage, where Woodworker Qing explains the secrets of his mastery, he adds: “That is probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits (*shen*).” Clearly, “spirit” here does not refer to a supernatural cognitive ability. Rather, it belongs among many examples in various early Chinese texts where “spirit” (*shen*) refers to the unknown cause or the principles of a (seemingly) miraculous action, which thus seems to be “as if” done by spirits, or simply looks magical or daemonic. An example from the *Zhuangzi* runs as follows: “In the state of Zheng there was a spirit-like shaman (*shenwu* 神巫), named Ji Xian. He knew whether people will live or die, perish or survive, be lucky or unlucky, die young or live long. He could predict the year, month, week, and the day, as if he was a spirit (*ru shen* 如神).”²⁷ (*Zhuangzi* 7; Guo 1985, 297–306) While “*shen*” in Ji Xian’s appel-

26 See also the similarity with the famous dialogue between Confucius and Yan Hui, where Yan Hui explains the state of “sitting and forgetting” (*zuo wang* 坐忘) (*Zhuangzi* 6; Guo 1985, 282–5; Watson 1970, 90–91). The structure is similar. Yan Hui “forgets” social and cultural values (rites, music, etc.) and, in the final step, he forgets his body and merges with the “Great Thoroughfare” (*datong* 大通), i.e. with the Dao.

27 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 94–97), adapted.

lation “spirit-like shaman” may refer to his superhuman cognitive abilities (which he clearly has), the second “*shen*” is different—it refers to his abilities viewed from outside, without the knowledge of their principles. The situation is similar to the prince wondering about the principles behind Woodworker Qing’s work.²⁸

The usage of the word *tian* is also different in both sections. On the one hand it is used as an adjective in both—“heavenly/natural structure” (*tianli*) and “heavenly/natural condition” (*tianxing*). These expressions both refer to the true inner nature of things unattainable by conventional means. They thus seem to serve the same function in both sections. However, in the Woodworker Qing narrative *tian* is used once more in a different way. It is the core of the explanatory passage—after the process of “fasting,” the craftsman reaches a state in which he gains insight into the nature of trees by “matching up heaven with heaven (*yi tian he tian* 以天合天).” This is a peculiar expression that requires careful examination. Most scholars agree that “heaven” in this context refers to both the inner state of the craftsman (a state reached by “fasting”), and the inner nature of the trees. Therefore, “matching up heaven with heaven” means that reaching the state of “heaven” by the subject (in this case, Woodworker Qing) results in the ability to “see” the “heavenly” (i.e. true, genuine) nature of things. Realizing a quality of “heaven” in one’s personality is in fact a very typical and common topic in the *Zhuangzi*. The word “heaven” is often used in the work in the sense of the sum of cosmic cycles and processes, as opposed to human society with its institutions, norms and values. According to the text, “heaven” should be adopted by people, so that each person can fulfil his/her natural potential and live better (or more effectively, in some instances) than within the confines of human society.²⁹ “Heaven” is thus viewed as the alternative setting of human life with an (implied) alternative set of values, radically different from the established social and cultural values—which a person embodying “heaven” in his/her life or a certain activity must get rid of. As we can see, this is the same as the description of “fasting” in the section of the text discussed above.

To sum up, the key point (or the instruction given) of Woodworker Qing’s narrative proves to be radically different from that of Cook Ding in certain important aspects. Both narratives depict the perfect and effortless skill of a craftsman, and

28 *Xunzi* 17.2 puts this explicitly. In a section describing the workings of Nature (“heaven”, *tian*), he states that every being is born and nurtured by Nature, while “we do not perceive the process, but perceive the results—this is why we call it divine 不見其事而見其功，夫是之謂神” (Wang 2010, 309; Cf. Knoblock 1994, 15)

29 For example, in Chapter 6 the image of the True Man (*zhenren* 真人) includes his independence from anything concerning human society, which is called “not using man to assist heaven” (不以人助天). (Guo 1985, 262; Watson 1970, 78)

present an explanation of the process through which the skill was attained. In the case of Cook Ding we have a mastery built on a life-long effort, which results in a miraculous skill brought about by a specially trained mental capacity, termed “spirit” (*shen*). In the case of Woodworker Qing, on the other hand, we have an individual capable of a much more obscure (and short-term, meditational) activity, “fasting,” which results in the “forgetting” of established social and cultural values and immersion into nature (or “heaven”). In this state, superhuman cognition is possible, which entails the “spirit-like” skilful action.

I conclude that these two skilful action narratives are in fact based on very different views of human existence and its relation to culture and nature. The two narratives share terminology but use it differently, which in turn opens very different contexts for both sections within the *Zhuangzi*, as well as beyond it. *Shen* as a supernatural cognitive ability dominates in Cook Ding’s story, while *tian* as a realm devoid of established social values (and as such a source of superhuman powers) dominates the story of Woodworker Qing. Both stories share the same literary *topos*, but base it on different philosophical grounds and present different key points to the reader.

Skilful Eccentrics

The following section also employs the skilful action *topos*, and again it seems quite similar to Cook Ding’s story, at least at first glance:

仲尼適楚，出於林中，見侏儒者承蜩，猶掇之也。仲尼曰：子巧乎？有道邪？曰：我有道也。五六月累丸，二而不墜，則失者錙銖；累三而不墜，則失者十一；累五而不墜，猶掇之也。

吾處身也若厥株拘，吾執臂也若槁木之枝，雖天地之大，萬物之多，而唯蜩翼之知。吾不反不側，不以萬物易蜩之翼，何為而不得！孔子顧謂弟子曰：用志不分，乃凝於神，其侏儒丈人之謂乎！

When Confucius was on his way to Chu, he passed through a forest where he saw a hunchback catching cicadas with a sticky pole as easily as though he were grabbing them with his hand. Confucius said: “What skill you have! Is there a special way to this?”

The hunchback said: “I have a way. For the first five or six months I practice balancing two balls on top of each other on the end of the pole and, if they do not fall off, I know I will lose very few cicadas. Then I balance three balls and, if they do not fall off, I know I will lose only one cicada in

ten. Then I balance five balls and, if they do not fall off, I know it will be as easy as grabbing them with my hand. My body is to me no more than the stump of a broken trunk, and my shoulder no more than the branch of a rotten tree. Great as heaven and earth are, and multitudinous as things are, I take no notice of them, but only of the wings of my cicadas; neither turning nor inclining to one side. I would not for them all exchange the wings of my cicadas—how should I not succeed in taking them?”

Confucius looked round, and said to his disciples: “Where the will is not diverted from its object, then it is concentrated through the spirit—this might have been spoken of this hunchback gentleman.”³⁰ (*Zhuangzi* 19. Guo 1985, 639–41)

This is the story of a very peculiar “master”—a hunchback skilled in catching cicadas with a stick who trains for this by balancing balls on the end of the stick—but it still presents the *topos* of skilful action, like the two sections analysed above. The narrative section is similar—a skilful person admired by someone of higher status, here Confucius. The explanatory part forms most of the section and it is clearly the focus of the narrative. The first part of the explanation consists of a description of completely ordinary training—the skilful person simply trains hard and with increasingly difficult objects (in this case, he increases the number of balls to be balanced on a tip of a stick). No special terminology is employed.

It is the second part of the explanation that makes the most important statements. It turns out this is a story about *concentration of will*, which consists of several aspects. A certain disregard for one’s body is presented—the hunchback likens his own to a broken trunk, and limbs to the branches of a rotten tree. However, no terminology known from elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi* is used, so it is hard to tell if this refers to the same phenomenon as “forgetting” one’s body in the previous passage. Then we learn that the skill of catching cicadas depends on the exclusion of all other thoughts. The cicadas thus became the sole preoccupation of the hunchback. Once the will is concentrated like this, his skill reaches a level of mastery. In the final sentence, Confucius mentions the only term we know from the previous stories—“spirit” (*shen*). Here, Confucius draws a lesson from this encounter with the hunchback, and presents it to his disciples. He states that a will concentrated in this manner becomes “concentrated through spirit”. This may be read as another approach that leads to the same spiritual state as the one enjoyed by Cook Ding, although the whole story is a little too vague to be sure of this connection.

It is perhaps more plausible to read this tale as another story of “forgetting”,

30 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 199–200), adapted.

although the term *wang* is not used here. Moreover, the idea of forgetting is recalled by the comparison of the body to a withered tree, and especially by the way the story describes the concentration of will. Having an absolute focus on cicadas means that everything else is “forgotten”. This state is called “spiritual,” and is understood as the crucial component of the hunchback’s training.

The skilful action presented in this narrative thus seems to be a combination of key aspects of the previous narratives. The hunchback’s training is a life-long enterprise (like that of Cook Ding), but it is based on forgetting (like the case of Woodworker Qing). In turn, this combination accounts for the most conspicuous feature of the hunchback’s story. Life-long forgetting of the social and cultural values (and everything else except cicadas) implies an idiosyncratic personality, one whose behaviour is not only unusual but often weird, as with the hunchback at first glance. The philosophical background of this narrative is unclear, but it is probably closer to the one seen in the story of Woodworker Qing than that of Cook Ding.³¹ The lesson that Confucius, his disciples and the reader obtains is not clear in this narrative. What makes this narrative distinctive is the peculiar personality of the hunchback. Both Cook Ding and Woodworker Qing are full-fledged masters, skilled in their craft but also fulfilling their social roles. Instead of a skilful *master*, we have a skilful *nerd* in this section,³² and no doubt this shapes the reader’s response to the story. For instance, it is easy to understand why Cook Ding, and not the hunchback, became the exemplar of Zhuangzi’s skilful masters in general awareness.

In the *Zhuangzi* we find another interesting story that deals with the problem of a “skilful nerd” and also suggests a solution. The first part of this narrative from Chapter 22 is very similar to the hunchback story.

大馬之捶鉤者，年八十矣，而不失豪芒。大馬曰：子巧與？有道與？曰：臣有守也。臣之年二十而好捶鉤，於物無視也，非鉤無察也。

是用之者，假不用者也。以長得其用，而況乎無不用者乎！物孰不資焉？

The grand marshal’s buckle maker was eighty years old, yet he had not

31 We do not know if the hunchback’s existence is conceived of as “immersion in the nature” (*tian*). The *tian* imagery is not used in this section, but is also not excluded. However, this might as well simply refer to the exclusion of all distractions, and nothing more.

32 In this light, it seems possible to read Confucius’ endorsement of the hunchback’s approach to self-cultivation as a subversive form irony directed at Confucius himself. In the *Zhuangzi*, traditional values of contemporary society are often undermined by putting them in provocative context. Crippled thus persons become the models of moral virtue (see Moeller 2015), a butcher (i.e. Cook Ding) becomes a teacher of a prince (see Graziani 2005), and so on.

lost the tiniest part of his old skilfulness. The grand marshal said: “What skill you have! Is there a special way to this?”

He replied: “I have a way. From the time I was twenty I have loved to forge buckles. I never look at other things—if it is not a buckle, I do not bother to examine it.”

This kind of using things relied on not using other things. This is why he could use it for so long. And how much greater would a man be if he reached the point where there was nothing that he did not use! All things would come to depend on him.³³ (*Zhuangzi* 22; Guo 1985, 760–1)

The buckle master is not as peculiar as the hunchback from the previous section. There is nothing special about his skill (making buckles), what is remarkable is his age and the fact he has lost none of his abilities. The connection to the hunchback’s story is the explanatory part—the buckle master has excelled in his craft for so long because he “never looks at other things”, the buckles are his sole interest. It is this “forgetting” of other things enables him to excel in his work.

The second part of the section presents a turn not present in the previous narratives. The buckle master’s skill admired by the grand marshal in the first part (conventionally, as is within the genre of skilful action narratives), is now questioned and disparaged. A different kind of skilful practice is suggested, one which we might call *universal*—it is no longer a particular craft or skill, but the complete transformation of one’s existence that has a profound impact on one’s surroundings. The author points to the limits of buckle master’s skill—the fact that beyond his mastery he can do nothing else. The concept of universal mastery that is then presented implies a master who is skilled at *everything*, and not just one particular activity.

Universal Skilfulness

Before I present more material contextualizing the topic of *universal* skilfulness, we will turn to one more type of skilful action narrative, which describes a particular skill once more:

顏淵問仲尼曰：吾嘗濟乎觴深之淵；津人操舟若神。吾問焉曰：操舟可學邪？曰：可。善游者數能。若乃夫沒人，則未嘗見舟而便操之也。吾問焉而不吾告，敢問何謂也？

33 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 244–55), adapted.

仲尼曰：善游者數能，忘水也。若乃夫沒人之未嘗見舟而便操之也，彼視淵若陵，視舟之覆猶其車卻也。覆卻萬方陳乎前而不得入其舍，惡往而不暇！

以瓦注者巧，以鈎注者憚，以黃金注者蹇。其巧一也，而有所矜，則重外也。凡外重者內拙。

Yan Yuan said to Confucius: “I once crossed the gulf at Goblet Deep and the ferryman handled the boat with supernatural skill (like a spirit). I asked him: ‘Can a person learn how to handle a boat?’ He replied: ‘Certainly. A good swimmer will in no time get the knack of it. And, if a man can swim under water, he may never have seen a boat before and still he will know how to handle it!’ I asked him what he meant by that, but he would not tell me. May I venture to ask you what it means?”

Confucius said: “A good swimmer will in no time get the knack of it—that means he has forgotten the water. If a man can swim under water, he may never have seen a boat before and still he will know how to handle it—that is because he sees the water as so much dry land, and regards the capsizing of a boat as he would the overturning of a cart. The ten thousand things may all be capsizing and backsliding at the same time right in front of him and it cannot get at him and affect what is inside—so where could he go and not be at ease?”

When you are betting for tiles in an archery contest, you shoot with skill. When you are betting for fancy belt buckles, you worry about your aim. And when you are betting for real gold, you are a nervous wreck. Your skill is the same in all three cases—but because one prize means more to you than another, you let outside considerations weigh on your mind. He who looks too hard at the outside gets clumsy on the inside.”³⁴ (*Zhuangzi* 19; Guo 1985, 641–2)

The narrative structure here is similar to most of the sections discussed above, except that here the skilful actor appears only briefly in the first part of the section, and most of the explanatory part is presented as a dialogue between Confucius and Yan Yuan (i.e. Yan Hui, Confucius’s favourite disciple).

Several terms appear here that we discussed above. The boatman is said to handle the boat “like a spirit” (*ruo shen* 若神). Here the term clearly has the meaning identified in Woodworker Qing’s story—the action is “like a spirit” in the eyes of the observer, who can see the action but not the principles that it relies upon—that

34 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 200–1), adapted.

is why it appears “daemonic”. The second term is “forgetting” (*wang*). In the first part of the section, the boatman says to Yan Hui that a good swimmer can become a skilled boatman immediately (simply by being a swimmer). Yan Hui is confused, and Confucius explains that it is because a swimmer “has forgotten water” (*wang shui* 忘水). The rest of the explanation, as well as the final part about archery, makes it clear that “forgetting water” means “getting rid of fear.” Someone who “forgets water,” and thus sees it dry land, loses clumsiness, which is normally the result of fear. This section employs the opposition of “inner” (*nei* 内) and “outer” (*wai* 外). One’s actions must not be inhibited by the “outer” (which damages the “inner” with fear, or simply with “too much thinking”). “Forgetting” thus means guarding the “inner” against detrimental impacts from the “outer”.

It is not difficult to notice that the kind of skilful action presented in this section is different from that discussed in previous sections in several fundamental aspects. Above all, the skill is not conditioned by training and/or a psychological process of self-cultivation that would be aimed directly at attaining the skill. Instead, a transformation process is required that would change one’s attitude towards the environment. The environment must be “forgotten” because any awareness of it elicits destructive mental processes. If a person thinks about the water (or even is just aware of it), then he/she will never swim or ride a boat well.

The image of the boatman in this narrative is not necessarily incompatible with that of Cook Ding or the hunchback. Cook Ding, when using “spirit” to cut an ox, is perhaps also required to close his mind against distractions from the environment. The focus of the boatman’s narrative (and the key point of the story, the instruction given) is, however, directly opposite to that of Cook Ding. In the latter, everything depends on the right way of cutting (guided by the “spirit”), and the environment is not mentioned. In the former the opposite is true—the skill of handling a boat relies solely on “forgetting water;” the handling itself is not mentioned. Moreover, what in my view is crucial in this section—since the importance of handling the boat is actually played down—a good swimmer can handle a boat without any specialized training, and could probably handle anything involving deep water just as well. This moment leads us back to the idea of *universal* skill. Being attuned to the environment (here: “forgetting water”) is a way to achieve *any* skill within the environment. Notice how different this is from the skill of Cook Ding or the hunchback. Those masters concentrated their powers (termed “spirit” in both narratives) on the object of their skill. In contrast, with the boatman the skill lies in mastery of the environment. Within the limits of water “there is nothing the master cannot do”—which is exactly the idea of *universal* skill put forth in the conclusion of the buckle master section.

It should be noted that what I call “universal skill” here is actually present in many sections in the *Zhuangzi*, even those that are generally not considered skilful action narratives. The following passage is a good example, as although it is usually not regarded as representing a skilful action (for good reasons, one must admit), it is nevertheless based on a similar idea—being completely attuned to one’s environment, as brought about by “forgetting” it, leads to a perfect action:

夫醉者之墜車，雖疾不死。骨節與人同，而犯害與人異，其神全也，乘亦不知也，墜亦不知也，死生驚懼不入乎其胷中，是故選物而不懼。彼得全於酒而猶若是，而況得全於天乎！聖人藏於天，故莫之能傷也。

When a drunken man falls from a carriage, though the carriage may be going very fast, he will not be killed. He has bones and joints the same as other men, and yet he is not injured as they would be, because his spirit is whole. He did not know he was riding, and he does not know he has fallen out. Life and death, alarm and terror do not enter his breast, and so he can bang against things without fear of injury.

If he can keep himself whole like this by means of wine, how much more someone who can keep himself whole by means of heaven! The sage hides himself in heaven—hence there is nothing that can do him harm.³⁵ (*Zhuangzi* 19; Guo 1985, 636)

The forgetfulness of the drunken man in this passage is complete. Nothing can harm him because he has a total lack of fear (or, truth be told, any other mindful mental process). He is completely immersed in his environment (by means of alcohol), and thus is capable of perfect action (in the sense of not getting harmed). The word “spirit” is used as follows—“his spirit is whole” (*qi shen quan ye* 其神全也). This is a peculiar usage of the word, and it is obvious that no supernatural cognitive ability is meant here. Instead, “wholeness” of the spirit clearly means the drunken man is immune to all outside distractions.

The last part of the section is reminiscent of the buckle master narrative. It makes clear that while becoming whole by means of alcohol is valuable, it is still of limited value. The possibility of another, more perfect and *universal* wholeness is suggested—being whole by means of “heaven” (*tian*). Immersion in “heaven” (that is, into the whole of natural process) is the absolute wholeness, and it is clearly implied that this represents a kind of *universal* attunement to one’s environment (i.e., the whole cosmos, not just water or any other specific environment).

35 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 198–9), adapted.

The drunken man passage is just a final part of longer section, and the earlier part reads as follows:

子列子問關尹曰：至人潛行不窒，蹈火不熱，行乎萬物之上而不慄。請問何以至於此？關尹曰：是純氣之守也，非知巧果敢之列。[...] 則物之造乎不形，而止乎無所化，夫得是而窮之者，物焉得而止焉！彼將處乎不淫之度，而藏乎無端之紀，遊乎萬物之所終始，壹其性，養其氣，合其德，以通乎物之所造。夫若是者，其天守全，其神無郤，物奚自入焉！

Master Liezi said to the Barrier Keeper Yin: “The Perfect Man can walk under water without choking, can tread on fire without being burned, and can travel above the ten thousand things without being frightened. May I ask how he manages this?”

The Barrier Keeper Yin replied: “This is because he guards the pure breath—it has nothing to do with wisdom, skill, determination, or courage. (...) But things have their creation in what has no form, and their conclusion in what has no change. If a man can get hold of this and exhaust it fully, then how can things stand in his way? He may rest within the bounds that know no excess, hide within the borders that know no source, wander where the ten thousand things have their end and beginning, unify his nature, nourish his breath, unite his virtue, and thereby communicate with that which creates all things. A man like this guards what belongs to heaven and keeps it whole. His spirit has no flaw, so how can things enter in and get at him?³⁶ (*Zhuangzi* 19; Guo 1985, 633–4)

(The drunken man narrative follows.)

The section as a whole has the standard structure of the skilful action narratives. A skilful person (Master Liezi) is introduced, who is admired by an observer and asked to explain his abilities. This is then followed by the explanatory part.

The terms “spirit” and “heaven” make the core of the argument (besides a range of subtle references to self-cultivation practices and cosmological concepts known from many early Chinese texts, as well as some of the sections discussed above in this paper). Both these terms are used in a similar fashion—Liezi “keeps his heaven whole” and “his spirit without flaw.” These expressions evoke forgetful immersion in one’s environment (just like the boatman or drunk, as well as Woodworker Qing). There is, however, an important difference—Master Liezi’s immersion and forgetfulness is universal and complete. He does not depend on any particular

36 Translation by B. Watson (1970, 198), adapted.

environment and does not excel in any particular skill. His environment is the universe, and he lives in perfect attunement with it—as such, nothing can harm him. Moreover, he is presented as a being with superhuman capabilities (even water or fire cannot hurt him, and he can travel “above ten thousand things”).

Conclusion

In this paper we identified interesting differences among various examples of skilful action narratives in the *Zhuangzi*. The most important dividing line seems to be formed by the terms “spirit” (*shen*) and “heaven” (*tian*). The former has been read as generally referring to a spiritual state consisting of superhuman cognitive abilities, leading to a refined understanding of the outer world and, consequently, to more effective action. The latter is usually seen as consisting of a profound transformation of human personality and immersion in the environment (ultimately immersion in “heaven”). Although both approaches result in “skilful action,” the process leading to this outcome is completely different and implies different philosophical backgrounds (or, more precisely, different forms of self-cultivation and cosmological backgrounds). Furthermore, both ways bring into play different contexts—*shen* can be contextualized in a broad range of early Chinese texts, while *tian* remains almost exclusively in the context of the *Zhuangzi* itself.

In the chapter on the *Zhuangzi* in his *Effortless Action*, Edward Slingerland (2003, 197–203) also analyses the difference between *shen* and *tian*,³⁷ and states: “(...) all of the various and sometimes literally incompatible metaphor schemas used to convey a given idea such as wu-wei must be considered together if we are to arrive at a full understanding of the concept” (ibid., 198, italics in original). For Slingerland, “effortless action, or *wuwei* 無為” is a single *concept* expressed by various metaphors in the *Zhuangzi* (and other texts). He approaches the individual sections with a pre-established concept and reads the concept into the text. In this approach, the individual sections are nothing but vehicles conveying the concept. If we state, for example, that the *Zhuangzi* contains a “philosophy of spontaneity” (another pre-established concept), we can quote all the sections analysed in this paper (despite their differences) to illustrate the point.

The concepts can be “pre-established” for good reasons, I do not mean to question the validity of this common approach. If we wish to approach a fragmented text like the *Zhuangzi* as philosophy, we probably have no other choice. However,

37 Slingerland (2003, 200) conceptualizes them as two different metaphor schemas ESSENTIAL SELF AS IRREPRESSIBLE FORCE (*shen*) and NORMATIVE ORDER AS IRREPRESSIBLE FORCE (*tian*).

we should be aware of the fact that this approach is necessarily reductionist—reading a single concept or a single world-view into the textual diversity we find in the *Zhuangzi* necessarily obscures certain meanings that can be retained by unit-by-unit reading undertaken in this paper. These meanings are embedded in the “instruction scenes” unfolded by the individual narratives. Nevertheless, they still have some generalizing potential—they can bring into play specific contexts revealing underlying cosmologies or self-cultivation ideas the instruction scenes draw upon. Instead of philosophy, we arrive at archaeology—we may thus try to recover the worldviews that underlie and inform these instruction scenes.

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