Subversive Sages: A Paradoxical Ideal in the Zhuanzi

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
San Francisco State University
In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for
the Degree

Master of Arts
In
Philosophy

by
Justin W. Lau
San Francisco, California
December 2021
Copyright by
Justin W. Lau
2021
Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Subversive Sages: A Paradoxical Ideal in the *Zhuangzi* by Justin W. Lau, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in Philosophy at San Francisco State University.

________________________

Justin Tiwald, Ph.D.
Professor,
Thesis Committee Chair

________________________

Jeremy Reid, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor
In the Confucian tradition, a "sage" is someone has perfected their own virtue to such a degree that, through their presence alone, they are able to influence and lead others to be virtuous themselves. This paradigm is turned on its head in the *Zhuangzi*. Yao and Shun, two sage-kings of antiquity venerated by the Confucians, are disparaged in numerous dialogues. Virtuosity and its corresponding powers of influence are instead exhibited by people we would normally consider to be outcasts of society--people who have been punished through mutilation for committing a crime, or those born with egregious physical defects. Why this should be the case is not readily apparent. The purpose of this paper is to uncover what it means to be a "sage" in the Zhuangzian tradition. By taking a holistic approach to interpreting the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, I argue that the most salient features of being a Zhuangist sage is the adoption of an enlightened perspective and being freed from human conventions.
Preface and/or Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Justin Tiwald for his guidance and support over the course of this project. I would also like to thank Jeremy Reid for his contributions to the final draft of this thesis. Finally, I want to extend a special thanks to Rick Schubert for starting me on my philosophical journey.
# Table of Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 1

Relativism and Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi* ................................................................................ 6

Reconciling the Inner Chapters ....................................................................................................... 15

Da Zong Shi and the Zhenren ........................................................................................................ 21

Skill and Caring for Life ................................................................................................................ 29

Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 37

References .................................................................................................................................... 38
Introduction

The Master said, 'Great indeed was Yao as a ruler! How lofty! It is Heaven that is great and it was Yao who modelled himself upon it. He was so boundless that the common people were not able to put a name to his virtues. Lofty was he in his successes and brilliant was he in his accomplishments!'

(The Analects 8.19)

A man of Sung who sold ceremonial hats made a trip to Yüeh, but the Yüeh people cut their hair short and tattoo their bodies and had no use for such things. Yao brought order to the people of the world and directed the government of all within the seas. But he went to see the Four Masters of the faraway Ku-she Mountain, [and when he got home] north of the Fen River, he was dazed and had forgotten his kingdom there.

(The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, 34)¹

According to Confucian thought, the answers to the problems of contemporary society could be found in the past, which they considered to be a "Golden Age". By studying the documents of antiquity and modelling society in the ways which they prescribe, society's ills could be alleviated. In particular, the past ruler, Yao, and his successor, Shun, were revered as paragons of rulership. The Confucians regarded Yao and Shun as sage-kings who, through the power of their virtue, were able to unite the people and achieve social harmony. The two sage-kings serve as models for Confucian virtue ethics, and the Confucians held that if another could cultivate their virtue to such heights, they would be able to bring order to the people just as Yao and Shun had.

¹ Henceforth, all passages are quoted from Burton Watson’s The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu.
The *Zhuangzi*'s whimsical allegory of Yao visiting the Four Masters of the Ku-she Mountain has a far different tone from Kongzi's unequivocal praise of Yao in the *Analects*. While this fictional tale appears on the surface to agree with the Confucian's account of Yao being an effective, unifying ruler, a hermeneutic reading reveals a vastly different perspective on Yao's accomplishments. The allegory begins with a parable of a man who travels to Yüeh in order to sell ceremonial hats. When he arrives, he finds that the people there have no use for his wares; their customs of cutting their hair short and tattooing their bodies make the hats unnecessary. This story acts as an analogue to Yao's visit to the Four Masters of the Ku-she Mountains. Yao, faithfully portrayed as "having brought order to the people of the world", travels to meet a group of mythical figures. Presumably, he makes this pilgrimage with the same intent that the man of Sung possessed—to "peddle his wares", as it were. In the case of Yao, what he is offering to the Four Masters is his supreme virtue, his idealized Confucian *dao* which allowed him to unify the world. But we can surmise that Yao discovered the same thing about his prospective "buyers" as the man of Sung—the Four Masters had no need for what Yao was selling.

When Yao returns home, he is said to be "dazed and had forgotten his kingdom". We, the reader, are left no less bewildered. Who are these mystical Four Masters of the Ku-she Mountain, and what sort of virtue might they possess that would look upon Yao's virtue as

---

2 The fact that the man's wares are ceremonial hats is significant. For the Confucians, adhering to social and ceremonial protocol, li, is paramount for cultivating virtue. Ceremonial hats would have certainly played a part in Confucian rituals. The fact that the people of Yüeh have "no use for such things" is a symbolic rejection of Confucian ritual. In the same vein, the Four Masters reject Yao's accomplishments, of which Confucians extol the highest praise.
insignificant? What could Yao have beheld which would cause him to forget about his own kingdom? In typical Zhuangzian fashion, we are left with more questions than we had when we began.

The enigmatic tale of Yao's visit to the Four Masters of the Ku-she Mountain is by no means an isolated incident. Confucius encounters a madman while visiting Ch'u, whose seemingly inane ramblings belie some enlightened perspective (66). Shu-Shan No-Toes, a man whose foot has been cut off for committing a crime, seeks wisdom from Confucius. But when Confucius rebukes him for his past offense, Shu-Shan turns around and criticizes Confucius for failing to see that what he seeks is more valuable than his lost limb (71). Yao is hailed by a border guard while visiting Hua, and after Yao refuses the prayers the border guard offers up to him, he is left befuddled by the border guard's observation that a true sage would not fear the harm that fortune might bring (130). Time and time again in the *Zhuangzi*, our preconceptions about who and what is considered sagely are subverted, and sagely wisdom is instead imparted from unexpected, and often times unseemly, sources. And frustratingly, each of these episodes end as abruptly as they begin, and the reader is left wondering what sagely qualities or insights these unorthodox characters have achieved which their interlocutors, as well as the reader themselves, apparently lack.

The purpose of this paper is to bring these fleeting passages together in order to construct a full-fledged account of what it means to be a sage according to the *Zhuangzi*. Interspersed throughout the text are allusions to the “Perfect Man” (*Zhiren* 至人), the “Holy Man” (*Shenren* 神人), and most notably, the “True Man” (*Zhenren* 真人). While I think it appropriate to interpret each of these entities as some form of “sage”, the descriptions of these figures are so
filled with obtuse, and often cryptic, aphorisms that one must wonder whether they ought to be taken literally. So, while I will take into account these lofty descriptions of sages, I will also inspect the more grounded episodes between those seeking sagely wisdom and the unlikely sources which impart it. By identifying the common underpinnings of each of these episodes, as well as taking a step back and understanding Zhuangzi’s project as a whole, I hope to establish the Zhuangzian ideal of sagehood and how we ought to act in relation to it.

However, here I encounter a threat at the very foundation of the question of sagehood. Bringing together all the disparate passages of the *Zhuangzi* into one cohesive picture is a monumental, perhaps even impossible, task, and it is far beyond the scope of this paper to attempt such an undertaking. Instead, I will tentatively focus on the three most widespread interpretations of the *Zhuangzi*—the relativist, skeptical, and mystical interpretations. But herein lies the problem: for two of the aforementioned interpretations—the relativist and skeptical—it is problematic to regard a particular way of living as sagely. According to the relativism on offer in the *Zhuangzi*, any claim about sagehood can be valid so long as there is some perspective from which it is true, and the same claim about sagehood can also be false from other perspectives. So how can the text recommend any particular account or picture of sagehood to people who have different perspectives? A different but equally troubling problem holds for the skeptical reading. Skepticism states that we can never know the truth of our claims. If Zhuangzi is committed to thinking that we can never know what the best way to live is, how can we know what person, if any, is a sage? If either the relativist or skeptical interpretations of Zhuangzi are correct, it would seem impossible to form a coherent account of the Zhuangist sage.
Thus, the first necessary step for this project is to provide an interpretation of Zhuangzi which allows warranted claims to be made about the ideal form of living. I will begin by first presenting the evidence for relativist and skeptical readings of Zhuangzi, and then I will show that those interpretations are incoherent with much of the rest of the text. I will then draw upon the therapeutic skepticism interpretation of several philosophers, as well as the skeptical interpretation of Chad Hansen, in order to reconcile the seemingly disparate messages in the Inner Chapters. Once that is done, I will turn my attention to two potential candidates for sagehood, the “True Man” and Cook Ding, in order to fill out the picture of the Zhuangist sage.
Relativism and Skepticism in the *Zhuangzi*

Relativist thinking is featured most prominently in chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (*Qi Wu Lun* 齊物論). The chapter begins with a scathing critique of the way people ordinarily go through life:

"In sleep, men's spirits go visiting; in waking hours, their bodies hustle. With everything they meet they become entangled. Day after day they use their minds in strife, sometimes grandiose, sometimes sly, sometimes petty. Their little fears are mean and trembly; their great fears are stunned and overwhelming. They bound off like an arrow or a crossbow pellet, certain they are the arbiters of right and wrong. They cling to their position as though they had sworn before the gods, sure that they are holding on to victory." (37)

We form beliefs and convictions about the world, and we believe ourselves to know the way that the world truly is. This is a pitiable circumstance, as Zhuangzi sees it, for by acting on these vacuous convictions we are like a "galloping steed... Sweating and laboring to the end of his days and never seeing his accomplishment, utterly exhausting himself and never knowing where to look for rest" (38). Zhuangzi then gives his prognosis for this condition, which contains unmistakable relativist overtones:

"Where there is recognition of right there is recognition of wrong; where there is recognition of wrong there must be recognition of right. Therefore the sage does not proceed in such a way, but illuminates all in the light of Heaven. He too recognizes a 'this', but a 'this' which is also 'that,' a 'that' which is also 'this'. His 'that' has both a right and a wrong in it; his 'this' too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a 'this' and 'that'? Or does he in fact no longer have a 'this' and 'that'? A state in which 'this' and 'that' no longer find their opposites is called the hinge of the Way." (40)
At the heart of this discussion are shifei —our judgments of what is right and what is wrong, of what is-so and not-so. Zhuangzi observes that there is no consensus as to what is shi or fei—for example, the Confucians and the Mohists cannot reach consensus on numerous issues. But then he makes an extraordinary suggestion: that all things be seen as both shi and fei. This is what he means when the sage "illuminates all in the light of Heaven". Instead of judging things to be either shi or fei, the sage sees how the same thing can be both shi or fei—that is, how something can be both right and wrong, can be both so and not-so.

How is this sort of perspective possible? Zhuangzi explains:

"What is acceptable we call acceptable; what is unacceptable we call unacceptable. A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so makes them not so." (40)

According to Zhuangzi, shifei judgments are merely conventional. Whether something so or not so is dependent solely on what judgment has been made by people; the act of judging something to be so or not so makes it thus. The sage knows this, and so can see that everything is both so and not-so. As Zhuangzi puts it, the sage knows how to make all into one. The ordinary person, on the other hand, believes that things are either shi or fei, so or not-so, and does not see that they are one and the same. They are like the monkeys who are enraged by receiving three acorns in the morning and four in the evening, but then are delighted to receive four acorns in the morning and three in the evening. Judgments of shi are like receiving three in the morning and four in the evening; judgments of fei are like receiving four in the evening and three in the morning. The unenlightened person mistakenly believes the two are distinct, and just like the monkeys, out of this confusion they become provoked.
After adopting a seemingly healthy relativist stance in the first half of the *Qi Wu Lun*, Zhuangzi appears to then switch to a skeptical position in the latter half:

"There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is nonbeing. But I do not know, when it comes to nonbeing, which is really being and which is nonbeing." (43)

Here, Zhuangzi is deconstructing three terms which we commonly think of as absolutes—beginning, being, and nonbeing. We think of a 'beginning' as a temporal point or stage which is preceded by no other. But by merely appending 'not yet' to 'beginning', Zhuangzi uncovers an infinite regress of 'not yet beginning' stages. What we thought of as the absolute 'beginning' must itself have a beginning, which in turn had a beginning, etc. Zhuangzi then applies this same linguistic trick to being and nonbeing. Being and nonbeing are dichotomous terms; a thing can be said to have 'being' or 'nonbeing' (i.e. a thing either exists or does not exist), but it cannot be said to be both. But by again appending the phrase 'not yet', Zhuangzi illustrates the indeterminacy of these supposedly dichotomous terms. We can imagine a stage, 'nonbeing', which is immediately preceded by a stage, a 'not yet beginning to be nonbeing', which itself is immediately preceded by another stage, a 'not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing', ad infinitum. As we follow along this infinite regress, we move further away from nonbeing and closer to its dichotomous opposite, being. But Zhuangzi observes that we cannot determinately say when we have crossed over from “nonbeing” to “being”. Rather than being mutually exclusive states, Zhuangzi shows us that “being” and “nonbeing” are really two indeterminate phases along a continuum (Coutinho, 90).
Zhuangzi follows this skeptical scrutiny of absolutes with a series of paradoxical statements:

"There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount T'ai is tiny. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and P'eng-tsu died young. Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me."

(43)

These statements become intelligible once we embrace the relativity of our judgments. From the perspective of a being which is incredibly small, then something which seems minute from a human perspective would instead appear insurmountably large. Conversely, from the perspective of that which is far greater in size than humans, a mountain would be seen as minuscule. A similar Gestalt switch allows us to make sense of the statements about the lifespans of those we ordinarily view as the short and long-lived, respectively. The final, and arguably most important, perspective to adopt is one in which all distinctions are set aside, and so all things are seen as a single, unitary thing. From such a perspective, a "person" does not have an independent existence from everything else, and so we may say that a "person" is born when Heaven and earth began. And conversely, there is nothing which exists independently of a "person", so all the myriad things are also one with them.

Now, having planted the seeds of both relativist and skeptical thought, Zhuangzi combines the two in one final jocular cogitation:

"We have already become one, so how can I say anything? But I have just said that we are one, so how can I not be saying something? The one and what I said about it make two, and two and the original one make three. If we go on this way, then even the cleverest mathematician can't tell where we'll end, much less an ordinary man. If by moving from nonbeing to being we get to
three, how far will we get if we move from being to being? Better not to move, but to let things be!” (43)

Zhuangzi observes that, once we adopt the perspective from which all things are one, some puzzling paradoxes emerge. In order for a statement to be made, it needs to be situated in a certain schema. But from the 'global' perspective from which Zhuangzi is now seeing the world from, there is no such schema present. Consequently, no statements can be made from such a perspective. But the descriptive statement that all the world is one is itself a statement, so it follows necessarily that a statement can be made. Now, there is not just one thing which exists, but two: the one which encompasses the myriad things, and then the statement that the myriad things are one. Then, to compound on this problem, we must take into account the source of the myriad things: the nonbeing from which the being came from. You add this to the one and the statement of the one, and now we have three. By undertaking this metaphysical exercise, Zhuangzi amusedly notes that we are even further away from making sense of things than when we began. He leaves us with one final, playful quip: "Better not to move, but to let things be!"

It should be quite evident at this point why Zhuangzi is typically read as being either a relativist or a skeptic. Zhuangzi's claim that all things have both a right and a wrong—both shi and fei—sounds ideologically proximate to the relativist notion that things are only true or false relative to a certain framework, so that (in a world of multiple frameworks) one and the same thing can be both true and false at the same time. His description of the sage who sees the right and wrong of all things and proceeds to "relegate all to the constant" seems like a tacit endorsement of relativism. The paradoxical statements he makes are only comprehensible if we recognize the contextual dependence of our judgments. And in the exchange between Nieh
Chʻüeh and Wang Ni later on in the *Qi Wu Lun*, the discussion on what animal is qualified to determine standards of good sleeping quarters, taste in food, and beauty is undeniably an argument for relativism (45-46). Meanwhile, Zhuangzi’s frequent expression of reservations about whether words have any meaning and whether or not he is able to say anything gives good grounds for a skeptical interpretation. But the most pointedly skeptical passages are found near the end of the *Qi Wu Lun*. The story of Lady Li questions our preconceived notions about death; specifically, our existential fear towards it (47). In Zhuangzi's version of the problem of the criterion, he suggests that there is no objective way with which to settle a dispute between two parties (48). And in the Butterfly Dream passage, the reader is left bewildered as Zhuangzi finds it impossible to tell whether he had just dreamed he was a butterfly, or if he is a butterfly who is now dreaming of being Zhuangzi (49). In all of these passages, there appears to be no way for us to affirm a conviction that we believe to be self-evident. And so, the message from Zhuangzi seems clear: we cannot grasp what is really true.

But while the *Qi Wu Lun* strongly suggests that Zhuangzi is endorsing relativism and/or skepticism, neither position seems reconcilable with much of the other Inner Chapters. The next chapter, entitled “The Secret for Caring for Life” (*Yangsheng Zhu* 養生主), begins with unequivocal advice on how to live out one’s natural years. Then, we are presented with three short stories, each with a similar narrative structure. An unenlightened party engages with another party who, on the surface, seems unremarkable. But when they speak, they each impart some sagely wisdom to their audience—the secrets for caring for life. There is no trace of relativist or skeptical thought in these exchanges; the stories are conveying a clear message about how best to approach one’s life. The same can be said of the following chapter, “In the World of
Men” (*Renjian Shi* 人間世), which features three dialogues wherein a party who is confronting a difficult political task seeks counsel from another. Again, in each exchange the inquiring parties—as well as the reader—is given sage advice about how to best approach and navigate their situations so that their own well-beings can be secured. The latter half of the chapter is then dedicated to stories which extol the virtues of uselessness; "uselessness" is useful in the sense that that which is viewed as useless will be left alone, and thus will not be endangered. Great emphasis is placed on being able to live out one's natural lifespan. For a relativist or a skeptic, this normative claim should not be privileged over any other, yet living out the years allotted to you by Heaven is a recurring maxim throughout the Zhuangzi.

Many of the stories contained in chapter 5 of the Zhuangzi, "The Sign of Virtue Complete" (*De Chong Fu* 德充符), feature disfigured persons which are portrayed as possessing some intangible power of influence which gains them the esteem of others without putting forth any conscious effort. These stories, alongside several others in which a disfigured person triumphs in a dialectical exchange in a would-be intellectual, seem to suggest strongly that there are certain qualities in a person, or how they go about their lives, which are preferable to others. The final Inner Chapter, "Fit For Emperors and Kings" (*Ying Di Wang* 應帝王) contains a number of descriptions of the ideal ruler, and while they are quite cryptic, it certainly is not the case that any type of person can be conceived as a good ruler, nor should we think that the qualities of an ideal ruler are unknowable.

At first glance, chapter 1, "Free and Easy Wandering" (*Xiao Yao You* 逍遙遊), appears to convey relativist themes. We are introduced to the great bird, P'eng, who flies ninety thousand
li up in the sky (29). When viewed from the perspective of the cicada and the little dove, such a feat sounds like a flight of fancy. An analogy is drawn between these small fliers and men who think themselves great for finding success in some small segment of the socio-political sphere. Neither can fathom the perspective from someone or something greater, from which their "achievements" would appear small and insignificant. The lesson we might take away from this allegory is that everyone's perspective is limited by their circumstances, and so we ought to tolerate all different perspectives. But given the tone of the passage, it seems more plausible to read it as a criticism of perspectives which are limited, and particularly of those with limited perspectives which erroneously believe their perspective to be infallible. The perspectives of the small animals and the small accomplishments are not tolerated, but disparaged. More evidence of this is found later on in chapter in the exchanges between Chien Wu and Lien Shu, and Hui Tzu and Chuang Tzu (“Chuang Tzu” being Watson’s Romanization of “Zhuangzi”). Chien Wu expresses derision about claims of a Holy Man with mystical abilities living in the Ku-She Mountains, but he is then rebuked by Lien Shu for having blindness and deafness of the understanding (33). Hui Tzu complains to Chuang Tzu that the gourd seeds he had planted bore fruit which were too large to be of any use, and Chuang Tzu chides him for being unable to think of a novel use for them—such as using them to float along a river (35). The first chapter of the Zhuangzi does not ask us to recognize a multitude of perspectives; it asks us to break free of our limited perspectives to and inhabit a greater one.

With the exception of chapter 6, "The Great and Venerable Teacher" (Da Zong Shi 大宗師), the Inner Chapters do not appear to build upon or even agree with the relativist and skeptical themes put forth in the Qi Wu Lun. So now we are confronted with the looming question: how
can the relativist and skeptical passages within the *Qi Wu Lun* be reconciled with the rest of the Inner Chapters? And for the purposes of this paper, how does relativist and skeptical thought factor into the Zhuangzian idea of sagehood? I will be tackling these two questions in what follows.
Reconciling the Inner Chapters

A common method for reconciling the Inner Chapters is to read the relativist and skeptical passages as being therapeutic, as opposed to doctrinal. When read doctrinally, the *Qi Wu Lun* would suggest that we ought to abandon all our preconceptions and judgments of the world, for all of our knowledge is conventional and there is no means of determining what is really true. This, of course, leads to inconsistency with the rest of the Inner Chapters. On the other hand, if we read the *Qi Wu Lun* as being therapeutic, then we no longer need to accept a radically relativist or skeptical conclusion. Instead, the relativist and skeptical passages should be understood as a means of changing our attitudes towards the judgments we make about the world. We need not do away with all of our judgments and claims to knowledge; we need only to see that they are conventional, and thus fallible.

If the therapeutic reading is correct, the relativist and skeptical passages in the *Qi Wu Lun* are not meant to advocate for a relativist or skeptical conclusion, and thus the Inner Chapters are saved from inconsistency. While many philosophers agree with this interpretation, they disagree with what end this so-called therapeutic skepticism is trying to achieve. This issue is crucial to the evaluation of sagehood, for the attitude which one holds towards their own beliefs and the beliefs of others is a central feature of the Zhuangist sage. For this reason, I will now examine several accounts about what Zhuangzi hopes to achieve in shaking our convictions in what we purport to know.

Bryan Van Norden believes that the *Zhuangzi's* therapeutic skepticism is employed to get us to rid ourselves of our ordinary, everyday preconceptions and judgments (Van Norden, 1996). For Van Norden, the Zhuangist sage is a person who no longer holds any of the things which we
take to be "common sense". This includes suspension of all evaluative judgments and all commitments, which, as Van Norden points out, are characteristic of being human. Skepticism is thus supposed to facilitate this transformative process, in which we shed our humanistic concerns in order to open ourselves to the possibilities of new, mystical ways of living. The Zhuangist sage, then, is radically different from the non-sage. They have discarded those things which we might believe are essentially human, and so their way of life seems incomprehensible to us, just as the great P'eng's flight is incomprehensible to the cicada and little dove.

By contrast, Philip J. Ivanhoe believes that becoming a sage involves returning to a more natural state. Our reliance on judging things and making distinctions has caused us to adopt a narrow and distorted view of the world. Therapeutic skepticism is meant to free us from limited perspective so that we may understand and appreciate our proper place in the world. According to Ivanhoe, Zhuangzi views humans as being intrinsically benign (Ivanhoe, 1996). It is out of our misuse of our intellectual capacities that we stray from our nature and disrupt the natural order, which leads to conflict and suffering. Thus, the Zhuangist sage lives in accordance with their own nature and the nature of all other things, which is the best, and ostensibly easiest, way to live.

Zhuangzi's skepticism is targeted at the Confucians' and Mohists' fixation on establishing standards of correctness, argues Wai Wai Chiu (Chiu, 2019). The sceptical passages within the Qi Wu Lun are meant to highlight the fact that there is no way of determining whether a standard is truly correct. There is no objective criterion which we can use to determine correctness; all of our judgments are products of the conceptual schemes that we have developed within our intellectual environment. The inability to recognize the conventional nature of our norms causes
us to become entrenched in a particular point of view. This is to form the "completed heart" 
(cheng xin 成心), which is considered to be an ideal state for the Confucians and Mohists.

However, Zhuangzi objects that in fully internalizing a single perspective, we close ourselves off 
different perspectives and ways of living. The Zhuangist sage, then, is one who is "free from her 
completed heart", writes Chiu. Such a person sees the indeterminacy of all points of view, and 
thus is open-minded and can flexibly adopt new perspectives depending on the circumstances at hand.

David Wong observes that we, as human beings, place too much faith in our intellectual 
abilities and arrogantly presume either that we know or that we will be able to find out.
Zhuangzi's skeptical passages are a therapeutic way to knock us down a peg, as it were. Wong 
observes that the tools which we use to understand the world do so by organizing and 
simplifying it into a mode which we can comprehend. Through this process, we are left with a 
limited and incomplete perspective on the world. Zhuangzi seeks to remind us of this fact so that 
we become more open-minded and let go of our desire for not only epistemic superiority, but 
moral superiority as well. Wong argues that no single ethical system can exhaust all moral 
possibilities. That is, in extolling one value over others, it necessarily excludes something else 
which may be equally valuable from another ethical perspective. We ought to recognize the 
value in moral viewpoints which do not coincide with our own, for in doing so we are able to 
reevaluate and refine our own moral commitments (Wong, 2017).

Hitherto I have looked only at therapeutic interpretations of the Zhuangzi. There are also 
interpretations which read the relativist and skeptical passages of the Qi Wu Lun as being 
doctrinal, yet maintain that that they are fully consistent with the seemingly absolutist passages
found elsewhere in the Inner Chapters. Chad Hansen offers one such account. According to Hansen, Zhuangzi is in fact calling our ability to make distinctions and judgments of shifei into question. In order for us to make distinctions, that is, distinguish things into categorical opposites, we must have a standard with which to guide us. However, we cannot know whether the standard which we have chosen is the correct one. Similarly, a shifei judgment can only be evaluated within the context of other shifei judgments. There is no objective means of determining whether a shifei judgment is right; shifei judgments thus have a relativistic dependence on one another. Consequently, all of our most basic conceptions about the world and how we should navigate it can be called into question. However, Hansen does not believe that what follows from this is to let go of all the judgments which we subscribe to. Instead, we ought to recognize that, though our own set of distinctions and judgments cannot be justified, no other discrimination set, no other dao, can be justified either. Thus, we can maintain our epistemological commitments while acknowledging their dependency on a regress of other norms. This type of mild skepticism should lead us to be tolerant of all different ways of living, for they are just as conventionally dependent as our own (Hansen, 2003).

Hansen concludes that since there is no standpoint from which we can deem one way of life as the best, it cannot be the case that Zhuangzi is recommending a certain way of life over any other. There is no Zhuangist sage whose way of life exemplifies the paragon of human living. This seemingly poses a direct challenge to the purpose of this paper, and so I feel it prudent to raise some objections in its defense. First, I will object on the grounds that Hansen's interpretation does not preclude the possibility of there being a distinctly Zhuangist sage. Although Hansen denies that we can ever authoritatively claim that one way of life is better than
all others, we may still judge ways of life as better or worse with respect to a certain standard, relative as they may be. So, although we cannot claim that the way of life embodied by Yao is the objectively best way to live, we may still judge, with respect to Confucian ideas of how we should live, that the way of Yao is better than the way of Chieh. Similarly, although we cannot claim that the way of life posed by Zhuangzi is the better than all others, we may still evaluate certain ways of living within the confines of the Zhuangist framework. The person who best exemplifies the way of living which Zhuangzi advocates would thus be considered the Zhuangist sage.

But this begs the question: is Zhuangzi advocating for a certain way of life? Here is where I believe I depart from Hansen. Hansen seems to think that there is no single coherent view of life being depicted in the Inner Chapters. In his view, the passages in which certain persons are presented as possessing a more profound way of life are meant only to show that there are many, equally unjustifiable ways of living. Furthermore, the fact that we may view such people as strange, unseemly, or fantastical merely highlights how limited our own perspectives are. I disagree; I believe that Zhuangzi does offer a distinctive way of living and that the eclectic characters to which our attention is drawn each embody some small part of it. If they were meant only to show the plurality of acceptable ways of living, we would expect them to exhibit a myriad of different perspectives and lifestyles. But instead, there appears to be some defining characteristics which are shared among all those who receive praise in the Zhuangzi.

---

3 Chieh is considered to be a tyrannical ruler
Given the striking similarities in these characters and the stories in which they are featured in, it seems implausible to suggest that there is no coherent view which Zhuangzi is developing.

I have now recounted a number of approaches to understanding the role of the relativist and skeptical passages of the *Qi Wu Lun* in Zhuangzi's overall project. In doing so, several promising descriptions of the Zhuangist sage have come to light. What remains to be done is to inspect the descriptions of sages and episodes involving sagely figures found in the rest of the Inner Chapters. In doing so, the most coherent interpretation of Zhuangist sagehood can be discovered and then refined further. I turn now to chapter 6 of the *Zhuangzi, Da Zong Shi*. 
Da Zong Shi and the Zhenren

I now turn to some passages that suggest a certain kind of qualified knowledge is possible for Zhuangzi, over and against the more skeptical remarks and arguments of chapter two. I begin with a passage from *Da Zong Shi* (chapter six):

He who knows what it is that Heaven does, and knows what it is that man does, has reached the peak. Knowing what it is that Heaven does, he lives with Heaven. Knowing what it is that man does, he uses the knowledge of what he knows to help out the knowledge of what he doesn't know, and lives out the years that Heaven gave him without being cut off midway--this is the perfection of knowledge. (77)

Given the lengthy discussion of skepticism above, this passage seems entirely out of place. In what appears to be a complete reversal from the *Qi Wu Lun*, the *Da Zong Shi* begins by not only positing the possibility of knowledge, but also suggesting that having the correct kind of knowledge is necessary for the highest form of living. The passage then states that he who knows what Heaven does lives in harmony with Heaven. This is an unusual claim, and it's unclear how exactly to interpret it. Heaven (*Tian* 天) is seen as that which makes the natural world the way it is—we might say that it gives all things their intrinsic natures, including humans. The way things are by nature cannot be changed; for example, the cycle of day and night and the four seasons are inherent and inescapable parts of the world we inhabit. So, one plausible interpretation of "knowing what it is that Heaven does" is knowing what parts of our life circumstances are shaped by the nature of the world we live in and not readily susceptible of human intervention. If we recognize and make peace with that which we cannot change, we can live peaceably with Heaven. The 'action' of Heaven is contrasted with the actions of humans.
These are the circumstances in our lives which stem from human action—the society which we live in, for example. The perfection of knowledge, then, seems to consist in being able to distinguish between those factors in our lives which we can do nothing about—what Heaven does—and those factors which are contingent—what man does.

The above interpretation makes for an adequate account of Daoist metaphysics. However, it does little to reconcile the passage with the skepticism of the *Qi Wu Lun*. Furthermore, I don't see how it can make sense of the line, "he uses the knowledge of what he knows to help out the knowledge of what he doesn't know." If one has knowledge of Heaven and knowledge of the human, what other knowledge are they missing? Another interpretation is required to resolve these two issues.

If the therapeutic interpretations are correct, then Zhuangzi’s goal is to shake us out of our ingrained perspectives so that we can become open to newer ones. This seems to be the key to reconciling the epistemological claims made in this passage. Instead of thinking of 'knowing' as acquiring some sort of propositional knowledge, we should think of it as acquiring a different perspective. "Knowing what it is that Heaven does" is to see the world from the perspective of Heaven. What is the perspective of Heaven? It is the 'objective' perspective from which the relativity and epistemic limitations of all other perspectives is ascertained. When one sees the world in this way, they can properly be said to be living with Heaven. The perfected person sees things not only from the perspective of Heaven, they also retain their human perspective. They can still see the world in terms of what is best for humans, and make distinctions and judgments based upon human conventions. What about the 'knowledge' which one does not know, and how could human 'knowledge' help in knowing it? What one doesn't know are the myriad of
perspectives which one does not inhabit—the perspectives of other human beings, as well as the perspectives of nonhumans. One cannot occupy all perspectives, but by recognizing the relativity of all perspectives, one can come to understand how the world might be viewed from a different perspective. That is to use the knowledge of what one knows to help out the knowledge of what one doesn't.

By rallying perspectivist insights, the Da Zong Shi has been saved from inconsistency for the time being. In the next paragraph, it's observed that the truth of a knowledge claim depends on something else, and that which it depends on is equally indeterminate. To quote from the Paul Kjellberg translation of this passage, “[T]here is a problem. Knowledge depends on something before it can be fitting. But what it depends on has not yet been fixed” (Ivanhoe and Van Norden 2001, 235). This echoes the skeptical probing in the Qi Wu Lun. But then a troubling claim is made: there must exist some “True Man” or zhenren 真人 which acts as a fixed standard in order for there to be true knowing.

The zhenren is described at length. He was stoic in the face of hardship, humble when he meets with fortune. He did not make plans, he did not regret his mistakes, he did not take pride in success, he did not experience fear. He “slept without dreaming and woke without care; he ate without savoring and his breath comes from deep inside” (Watson, 77). The zhenren had supernatural qualities: he "could enter the water and not get wet, could enter the fire and not get burned... [he] breathes with his heels; the mass of men breathe with their throats" (77-78). The zhenren “knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death” (78). He is carefree and empty-minded. In being like this, he is "not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven" (78). He "goes along with what is right for things", which allows him to wage
war without losing the support of his people (78). He brings prosperity despite having no love for men. Those who take pleasure in doing things for others, or does things for the sake of reputation, are not sages. The zhenren was “lofty and did not crumble; he appeared to lack but accepted nothing; he is dignified in his correctness but not insistent; he was vast in his emptiness but no ostentatious” (79). He wore his emotions on his sleeve. He was part of the world, yet he could not be bounded. The zhenren was both one and not one, yet both “his being one was one and his not being one was one” (79). This allows him to live in harmony with both Heaven and man: “when man and Heaven do not defeat each other, then we may be said to have the zhenren” (80).

By contrast, ordinary humans are likened to fish who have been stranded on the ground. Whereas the fish "spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit" in order to maintain themselves, human beings latch on to artificial conventions—we praise Yao and condemn Chieh—believing that they are what we should live by (80). What we fail to see is that such a way of living is as unnatural as fish living on land. The fish would be better off being back in the river and streams; humans should 'transform' themselves with the Way.

Unlike the zhenren, we fail to see the oneness of the world in which we reside. This is why we think ourselves clever to hide little things inside big things, when instead we could "hide the world in the world" (81). This is why we take delight in life, when in reality life is just a temporary state in the world's endless series of transformation. The sage, realizing this, never suffers loss: "he delights in early death; he delights in old age; he delights in the beginning; he delights in the end.” (81)
The sage serves as a model for humans, but even they pale in comparison to the Way. The Way has its reality and things which signify its existence. However, it does not act, nor does it have form. It can be passed along, but it cannot be received; it can be gotten but not seen. It is its own source; it existed before Heaven and earth and gave birth to them. It exists beyond the highest point, but it is not lofty. It exists past the limits of the six directions, but it is not deep. It has existed before the earliest time, but it is not old. Those who have possessed the Way have ascended into mythical beings (82-83).

The Da Zong Shi paints an unmistakably mystical vision of the sage. We are told, in no uncertain terms, the qualities which the sage possesses, some of which defy physical laws. But the most important feature of the sage is that they have, in a sense, grasped the Way. They 'see' the world as it really is; the oneness of the ten thousand things, the constant transformations of the Way. Once this perspective is attained, the sage is no longer susceptible to things which would normally affect us from a “human” perspective. Gain and loss, pride and shame, and life and death are all just seen as transformations of the Way, and so the sage remains unaffected. The sage is “empty” in that they have shed their human concerns and desires.

Van Norden's interpretation of the sage appears to be vindicated by this discussion. Recall that for Van Norden, the purpose of the skepticism is to chip away at our ordinary ways of thinking so that we may become receptive to the Way, which defies all attempts at rational comprehension. On the interpretation that I propose, we can say that the purpose of the skepticism in the Qi Wu Lun is to chip away at the ways of thinking that are characterized as merely “human” in the Da Zong Shi, so that we can be more receptive to a mystical sort of knowledge that the latter characterizes as sagely. Once this knowledge is grasped, the sage
transcends their human perspective in favor of a radically different way of life. This idea is given credence in the numerous stories of sages found later on in the *Da Zong Shi*. Master Ssu, Master Yü, Master Li, and Master Lai become friends after they share the same carefree perspective toward being and nonbeing, and life and death. When Master Yü falls seriously ill, he is completely unfazed; in fact, he is excited to observe the transformations his body is undergoing (84-85). Master Lai grows ill, and he notes sagely that the same entity which had given him life is also responsible for granting him death, and so it would be foolish to curse his fate (85). Master Sang-hu, Meng-tzu Fan, and Master Ch'in-chang become friends, and when Master Sang-hu dies, the two others are seen singing jovially at his funeral (86). Master Yü goes to visit his friend Master Sang during a ten-day long rainstorm, and finds him in the process of trying to ascertain who or what is responsible for his present circumstances. Master Sang concludes that, since Heaven and earth are partial to all, it must be fate (91). In each of these stories, the masters are portrayed as being not only indifferent, but fascinated, by circumstances which would normally cause us to despair: debilitating and grotesque illness, the death of a friend, or abject poverty. They are able to respond in this way because they have attained a higher perspective, in which these overwhelming sources of pain are instead seen as the workings of the Way. There is a truly remarkable difference between how the sage views the world and the way ordinary humans view it, so much so that we might question whether the sage is still 'human' at all.

We have finally arrived at an answer to our initial inquiry. However, I cannot help but be troubled by the mode of presentation in the *Da Zong Shi*, specifically the opening passage. The *Qi Wu Lun* criticizes the Confucians and Mohists for failing to recognize that their theories were
ultimately groundless. What each considered to be a standard for deeming right action cannot be
determined to correct, which leads to intractable disputes between groups which espouse
different standards. In particular, we may think of the Confucians as extolling the virtues of Yao
and Shun, while the Mohists revered Yu. There is no objective basis for determining which of
these kings is the best model to follow. Yet the approach to explicating the way of the sage in
the Da Zong Shi falls directly into this trap! The Da Zong Shi claims that, in order to make a
distinction between Heaven and man, there must be a zhenren which fixes all epistemological
claims. But how could we know that the zhenren, as described in the Da Zong Shi, is the correct
standard for us to use? Why should we believe that it is better to model ourselves after the
zhenren and not Yao or Yu? And more generally, how can the Zhuangzi criticize the Confucians
and Mohists for developing their theories in such a manner, and then turn around and develop its
own in the exact same way!

One might argue that the skepticism of the Qi Wu Lun, being therapeutic, is not actually
meant to make one doubt the credibility of the Ruist and Mohist positions. The doubt is meant
only to make one open-minded, but not critical of certain viewpoints. Therefore, it is
unproblematic for the Da Zong Shi to explicate a way of life in a similar vein to the other
schools. I find this argument unconvincing. If the skepticism in the Qi Wu Lun is to have any
effect, one must come to see the relativity of all evaluative judgments and distinctions. Such a
person would have no identifying the same relativistic dependence in the claims in the Da Zong
Shi. And while this may not completely undermine those claims, at best it suggests that the way
of the zhenren is only as justifiable as the way of the Ruists or Mohists. This is an untenable
position. It seems clear from the Qi Wu Lun that Zhuangzi doesn't just believe the Confucian or
Mohist ways are equally good; they are equally flawed. Thus, the way of life Zhuangzi advocates cannot just be an alternative way; it must be a better one. It cannot be subject to the same criticisms which he levies against the opposing schools.

There is no trace of irony in the *Da Zong Shi*, either. It seems to be sincerely describing the highest form of being, and it seems consistent with the more mystically inclined passages found elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*. So how should we deal with the hypocrisy of employing a methodology which was soundly criticized in the *Qi Wu Lun*? My tentative solution is to treat the *Qi Wu Lun* and the opening passage of the *Da Zong Shi* as having separate authors. Aside from the methodological problem, the passage contains a couple of suspect claims. That said, I do not think it necessary to dispense with all the insights from this chapter. The mystical vision of the sage is highly plausible, as evidenced by the popularity of the view among interpreters. I think the best way to proceed is to scour the rest of the Inner Chapters for glimpses into what might be considered the highest form of living, and then compare them to the mystical version of the sage endorsed by the *Da Zong Shi*. In that vein, I turn now to Cook Ding and his secret to caring for life.

---

*That the *zhenren* employs rites and punishments, and the suggestion that there is something greater than Heaven.*
Skill and Caring for Life

Your life has a limit but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger. If you understand this and still strive for knowledge, you will be in danger for certain! If you do good, stay away from fame. If you do evil, stay away from punishments. Follow the middle; go by what is constant, and you can stay in one piece, keep yourself alive, look after your parents, and live out your years. (50)

So begins the Yangsheng Zhu. The crux of the passage is found at the end: "Follow the middle [and] go by what is constant." What is constant is the Way, the unchanging reality which underlies the myriad things and their transformations. The appeal to follow the middle seems to be a rather straightforward warning against going toward extremes. One who does good is prone to achieving fame, but having too much fame is a threat to one's life. One who does evil is prone to being punished, and given that punishments were often mutilating, one would do well to stay clear of them. Fame and punishments are not the only threats to one life; the pursuit of knowledge is as well. It's somewhat puzzling why this would be the case, but I take the pursuit of knowledge to mean forming an entrenched epistemological stance. This is dangerous since conflicts between opposing positions, or even a discrepancy between how one believes the world to be and how the world really is, leads to suffering. So, it is best to remain centered in all ways so that one can safeguard their own life.

We are then thrust into the episode between Cook Ding and Lord Wen-Hui. Lord Wen-Hui is watching the former carve an ox. Ding's skill is remarkable; his display of his craft is likened to a performance of the Mulberry Grove dance, or as if he was keeping time to the Ching-shou music (50). Lord Wen-Hui is enthralled at how a person can possess so much skill. Cook Ding responds:
What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond 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 go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. (50-51)

Cook Ding's reflection on his own ability is profound, and interpreters have offered various accounts on the type of experience Ding is describing. Some philosophers, such as Lee Yearley, interpret Cook Ding as describing a mystical experience which is the highest form of fulfillment. Such a view seems unavoidable given the spiritual language used within the passage. However, others, like James Sellmann, believe that such language is only being used metaphorically. They interpret Cook Ding's performance as an instance of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" experience and sees Zhuangzi as advocating for this sort of effortless and spontaneous mode of activity in all of one's interactions with the world. Both of these interpretations, I will argue later on, place too much emphasis on the experience itself as opposed to the cognitive shift which gives rise to it. Cook Ding continues:

A good cook changes his knife once a year—because he cuts. A mediocre cook changes his knife once a month—because he hacks. I've had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I've cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there's plenty of room--more than enough for the blade to play about it.(51)

By "follow[ing] things as they are," Cook Ding has been able to use the same knife to cut oxen for nineteen years, and the blade is still as sharp as if it had been freshly sharpened. He
comments that the blade does not have any thickness, which makes the space between the joints expansive by comparison and gives the blade plenty of space to "play about it".

However, when 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'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—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 the knife and put it away. (51)

Lord Wen-Hui ends the episode by exclaiming that, in hearing Cook Ding's words, he has learned how to care for life. How he came to attain such insight from a description of how to butcher an ox, we are left to wonder for ourselves. I believe that the most plausible explanation is to regard Cook Ding's blade as a metaphor for one's life. In doing so, Cook Ding's description is reframed as advice on how to preserve one's life. Cook Ding remarks that when he first began cutting up oxen, he could only see the ox itself. This is symbolic of the way an unenlightened person sees the world as being full of distinctions. Such a person differentiates between themselves, the knife, and the oxen. After three years, Cook Ding stops seeing the whole ox. At this stage of development, one starts to see the world without the filter of artificial distinctions, though they are still reliant on human faculties. Eventually, Cook Ding surpasses even this stage—he no longer uses his eyes but is guided by his spirit instead. At this final stage, one is completely freed from their limited perspective. They are no longer bound by perception and understanding and instead are free to wander with their spirit. This allows them to "go along with the natural makeup" and "follow things as they are"; they are free to wander the Way. In cutting up oxen in this way, Cook Ding has preserved the sharpness of his blade for nineteen years. Analogously, if we live out our lives in this way, we will be able to live out our natural
years. Cook Ding's way thus stands in contrast with the way of men as depicted in the *Qi Wu Lun*.

Cook Ding's lesson bears a striking resemblance to the advice Confucius gives Yan Hui in a dialogue in the following chapter. Yan Hui seeks counsel from Confucius on how he should approach mentoring the brash young ruler of Wei. Confucius tells him "don't listen with your ears, listen with your mind. No, don't listen with your mind, listen with your spirit... Spirit is empty and waits on all things. The Way gathers in emptiness alone. Emptiness is the fasting of the mind." (57-58) In order to be guided by one's spirit, one must sever their reliance on their senses and their mind. The "mind" can be understood as the conscious, deliberative mental processes which ordinarily dictate the way we interact with the world. By "fasting the mind", we open a direct, unmediated access to the world—we allow the Way to gather within us. This is why Cook Ding observes that the blade really has no thickness. After we empty ourselves, we too have no "thickness", so to speak. By having no thickness, Ding comments that the blade has plenty of room to play about. This sentiment is echoed by Confucius, who tells Yan Hui, "You may go and play in his bird cage." (58) Once we empty ourselves, we become more attuned to the world around us. This heightened attunement allows us to flexibly respond and adapt to the circumstance at hand. What once seemed like a difficult or restrictive circumstance—be it cutting up an ox or reforming a ruler—can be navigated effortlessly, as if it were play.

It appears that we have uncovered yet another facet of the Zhuangist sage. The sage has emptied themselves of their conscious, deliberative mind, which gives them heightened powers of efficacy—they are able to effortlessly adapt to whatever circumstance they may find themselves in. Comparing this picture of the sage to the one illustrated in the *Da Zong Shi*, we
find a certain level of coherence. The *zhenren* has made themselves one with the Way—they see
themselves as one small part of the interconnected whole which is constantly transforming.
Ostensibly, this transformation leaves them empty; they no longer possess a human point of
view. After Yan Hui hears Confucius' advice, he tells Confucius, "Before I heard this, I was
certain that I was Hui. But now that I have heard it, there is no more Hui." (58) It seems Yan
Hui has undergone this very transformation in the midst of the episode! This state of no-mind
will allow Hui to react appropriately to the ruler of Wei's temperament. We may compare Yan
Hui's situation to the situations of the masters in the *Da Zong Shi*. In each story, one or more of
the masters find themselves in pitiable circumstances that would ordinarily leave us distraught.
However, having released themselves from human attitudes and concerns, they take their
'misfortunes' in stride; they reflexively respond to the situation at hand. Of course, the
circumstances which the masters are responding to are far greater in scope than those of Yan
Hui. Yan Hui is only responding to the way of a single person; the masters are responding to the
Way as a whole.

Still, there are troubling differences between the *zhenren* on the one hand, and Cook Ding
and Yan Hui on the other. The *zhenren* is only empty in the sense that they are no longer bound
by human concerns or desires; but they have replaced this human perspective with a loftier and
more expansive perspective which embraces the Way. The emptying which Cook Ding and Yan
Hui undergo only goes so far as to undercut their deliberative, human ways of thinking; they do
not then proceed to adopt a more global perspective. Moreover, it seems that Cook Ding and
Yan Hui only seem to set aside their human mode of thinking temporarily. We are told that
Cook Ding reluctantly moves on after he finishes cutting up an ox, and we can imagine that Yan
Hui would reorient himself once his task with the prince is finished. Now, it might be argued that Cook Ding and Yan Hui are not truly sages; after all, the text makes no claims about their sageliness. Therefore, the fact that they do not maintain an enlightened perspective only shows that they are not fully realized sages, and so does not conflict with the account of the zhenren.

Notice, however, that this defense falls flat if one maintains that the state which Cook Ding and Yan Hui achieve is, in some sense, the ideal state. Such is the view of many philosophers which emphasize the importance of skill. We are thus left with two similar, but ultimately divergent, pictures of the sage. There is the zhenren, who embraces an elevated perspective of the world; and then there is the skilled master, who sets aside their perspective in order to fully engage with the world.

If we restrict our purview to only the Inner Chapters, then it is evident that it is the zhenren who best encapsulates the Zhuangist sage. What is championed is not the skillful activity which one can achieve through the suspension of conventional ways of thinking, but the insight one gains by adopting newer and more encompassing perspectives. This can be seen in the remaining stories of sagely figures in the Inner Chapters. When Tzu-kao consults Confucius over an important mission which he is highly distressed over, Confucius advises him to recognize that there are circumstances in life that one can do nothing about and so to be content with them (59-60). Carpenter Shih encounters a giant oak which he dismisses as being too old and large to be useful; the oak then confronts Shih in a dream and mocks him for his narrow perspective and not being able to see that his so called 'uselessness' is what enables the tree to live so long (64). Ch'ang Chi asks Confucius how Wang T'ai, a man with a foot cut off, is able to attract so many followers, and Confucius explains it is because life and death and the constant
changes of heaven and earth do not disturb him (68). The recurring theme in all these stories is
the shifting to a broader perspective which opens up new ways of approaching the world. On the
other hand, very little attention, if any, is paid to the type of experience which is given rise by
inhabiting such a perspective. The vast majority of the sagely figures in the Inner Chapters
possess little in the way of skill. In fact, it is the absence of remarkable qualities, at least by
conventional standards, which make them stand out.

Consequently, Cook Ding is not a sage. Though he is able to achieve a state where
human perception and thought gives way to a deep attunement with the world, he lacks the all-
embracing perspective of the Way which is essential to the zhenren. Though it is not made
explicit in the text, we can imagine that Cook Ding still holds onto at least some human
conventions. He is employed as a cook for the king of Wei, thus making a living within the
confines of human society. And while his skill is otherworldly, it is used in the service of his
conventional occupation. Also, the preamble to Ding's story mentions looking after one's
parents, which is a distinctly human convention to follow. All of these preoccupations would be
unfitting for a zhenren, a person who has discarded their human concerns in the process of
becoming one with the Way.

Still, the stories of Cook Ding, as well as those of Yan Hui and Tzu-Kao, play a crucial
role in the Zhuangzi's overarching narrative. All of these stories concern characters who are still
deply engaged in human affairs. Yet, despite their human attachments, they still benefit from
embodying some small aspect of the ideal sage. Cook Ding is a master of his craft because he
cuts without any interference from his deliberative human mind. By letting go of the notion of
his self, Yan Hui is able to entertain the ruler of Wei without letting any harm befall him. Tzu-
Tzu-kao's story is particularly noteworthy, as the things which are deemed fated are one's love for one's parents and one's obligations to one's ruler. By merely adopting a different perspective, say that of a person who has never known their parents nor lived under monarchical rule, we can clearly see the contingency of these two so-called “great decrees”. Yet given the particular social context which Tzu-kao finds himself in, it is more appropriate to proceed as if they really were unavoidable. The focus on addressing the concerns of ordinary, unenlightened persons, coupled with the dampening of relativistic tones within these stories lead me to believe that Zhuangzi is ultimately a pragmatist. Like his philosophical opponents, Zhuangzi's goal is to offer a solution to society's ills. But instead of deeming some way of life as correct, Zhuangzi instead offers a way to live harmoniously irrespective of one's prior commitments or circumstances. He presents a highest form of living which is utterly divorced from human affairs, but only as a theoretical ideal that would be reached if his therapy is taken to its logical extreme. We are not meant to pursue the life of the Zhuangist sage. We are only asked to see how we might find peace within our lives if we take a step in the sage's direction.
Conclusion

We can finally make sense of Yao's reaction to the Four Masters of the Ku-She Mountains. When Yao first embarked on his journey, he brought with him the conceptual baggage of the Confucian worldview. As such, he was utterly bewildered by the Four Masters, who have embraced a way of living that has no basis in human conventions. However, it seems that Yao is left better off from the shock. When he returns home, he is dazed, with his kingdom forgotten. In forgetting, he has taken the first step towards letting in the Way.

The Four Masters represent the Zhuangist sage. They are beings who, in shedding their humanity and becoming one with the Way, maintain existences which confound and defy our rational attempts of understanding them. But unlike the Confucian sage, we are not meant to emulate them. Instead, the confusion which they wrought upon us is the goal of the Zhuangian project. We are meant to be shaken and jarred from our preconceptions about the way the world is and how we ought to be. This is done in the hopes that we come to thrive without the burden of conventional, and ultimately restrictive, ways of thinking.
References


Ivanhoe, Philip J. *Was Zhuangzi a Relativist? Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, 1996


Van Norden, Bryan W. “Competing Interpretations of the Inner Chapters of the ‘Zhuangzi.’”
