

Zhuangzi's Way of Thinking through Fables

Wang Keping

Abstract: Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu)^[1] is an ancient Chinese thinker renowned for being a founder of early Daoism (Taoism). His philosophizing is preoccupied with how to perceive and attain the Dao (Tao) as the highest form of wisdom from the Daoist (Taoist) viewpoint. As it features a fable-based presentation, it is read and reread with new observations and rediscoveries in different times. According to Zhuangzi the Dao mainly embodies such ideals as spirited emancipation and independent personality assumed to facilitate the fulfillment of humanity by nature. His proposed approach to pursuing these ideals is two-dimensional: spiritual transformation and cognitive equalization.

Among all the Chinese thinkers from antiquity onward, Zhuangzi, an early Daoist, is fond of using fables to explicate his ideas. His writing style is metaphorically engaging and suggestive, but shrouded in considerable ambiguity. Hence it often leads to a diversity of interpretations. A serious reader of the *Book of Zhuangzi* tends to be inspired each time when scrutinizing it and consequently comes out with new findings in accordance with one's lived experience, individual perspective, and ever deepened understanding of human existence *per se*.

No matter what semantic variances people may encounter when reading the book, they are able to get hold of the primary message provided they explore along Zhuangzi's path of thought. This path winds through all his writings, and reflects his constant preoccupation with the Dao (Tao, Way) of attaining spirited emancipation and independent personality. These two aspects of the Dao can be identified with the two sides of the same coin termed as absolute freedom. The freedom as such is assumed to facilitate human fulfillment that is conceived of as the ultimate *telos* for life. All this is largely grounded on a sincere and supra-utilitarian attitude toward the pursuit of spiritual transcendence. Keeping this keynote in mind, one will find it less perplexing when trying to pinpoint what Zhuangzi claims as "a happy and boundless excursion" by searching through his philosophizing saturated with thought-provocative fables.

Let us look into two fables among many others. Although the narrative structure of each appears distinct, the hidden scheme stays interrelated such that it encourages a doublefold freedom from both inward and outward confinements. This does not necessarily mean to deny their respective focus and locus in the process of speculation concerning the human condition in general, and personal cultivation in particular.

1. The *Peng* and Happy Excursion to the Infinite

Regarding the complete works of Zhuangzi, the *Inner Chapters (Nei pian)* are considered to be the most authentic in terms of his authorship.^[2] Of the seven entries in the *Inner Chapters*, what stands out first is the discourse on the *Xiao-Yao-You*. The title is made up of three Chinese characters that signify the main theme of the entire argument in question. Here *Xiao* implies the abolishing of all confinements and constraints imposed from both within and without; *Yao* refers to the boundlessly remote, and *You* to the act of excursion as a special genre of roaming or wandering. They are brought together to indicate literally a free and joyful travel to a far-reaching place. Employed as a compound by Zhuangzi, *Xiao-yao-you* connotes more than its literal and separate meanings. This is noticeable in an annotation as follows:

"By the term *You* is meant nothing but a free excursion between the sky and the earth. It is self-enjoyment in everything. It ignores the distinction between the great and the small. It is freed from any practical purpose and dependent of nothing at all. Say, it does not rely on anything, any enterprise or any action in order to establish oneself, make social achievement and gain worldly fame. It serves to equalize the great and the small, apart from abiding with the Dao as the principle of all principles. It is therefore an experience of *Xiao* and *Yao*. Terminologically, *Xiao* indicates not only the terminating of all the confrontations in action, but also the forgetting of all the matters on mind; *Yao* suggests not merely going beyond the surroundings into the boundlessly remote, but also liberating oneself from the bondage to knowledge and opinion. By so doing, all things would be equalized. Accordingly life is to be cultivated, body is to be forgotten, virtue is to be fulfilled, the human world is to be lived through without harm, the sage-

ruler is to be responded with the tranquility of peace, and all beings are to be identified with the Dao as the principle of all principles. Hence life and death alike are to be put out of mind. Under such circumstances, excursion (*You*) occurs to all, and all is but excursion." [3]

As a matter of fact, Zhuangzi composed this concept to denote a pursuit of absolute freedom or a search for "perfect happiness" (*zhi le*) according to his own claims. It is a kind of spirited excursion characteristic of being independent of all bounds in one way, and in the other, being enlightened with insights into the Dao of taking-no-action, making-no-distinction, self-forgetfulness, and above all, Oneness with the universe. For the sake of convenience in expression, a relatively economical, even though far-fetched, English rendering could be "the happy and boundless excursion". [4] This may well capture more of what it means in the context concerned.

As is read in the *Xiao-Yao-You*, the notion of "happy and boundless excursion" (*xiao yao*) turns up as many as six times. Contextually it is used three times to celebrate the happiness and boundlessness in terms of "taking-no-action" (*wu wei*), and another three times to embrace the happiness and boundlessness in the transcendent way of life. They both imply self-adaptation to and self-identification with all things under the sky. However, they all commence with a grotesque image of "happy excursion" emerged from a *mythos* as follows:

"In the Northern Ocean there is a fish, by the name of *Kun*, which is many thousand miles in size. This fish metamorphoses into a bird by the name of *peng*, whose back is many thousand miles in breadth. When the bird rouses itself and flies, its wings obscure the sky like clouds...When the *peng* is moving to the Southern Ocean (*Nanhai*), it flaps along the water for 3,000 miles. Then it ascends on a whirlwind up to a height of 90,000 miles, for a flight of six months' duration

There is the wandering air; there are the motes; there are living things that blow one against another with their breath. We do not know whether the blueness of the sky is its original color, or is simply caused by its infinite height. When the *peng* sees the earth from above, just as we see the sky from below...

Without sufficient density, the wind would not be able to support the large wings. Therefore, when the *peng* ascends to the height of 90,000 miles, the wind is all beneath it. Then, with the blue sky above, and no obstacle on the way, it mounts upon the wind and starts for the south.

A cicada and a young dove laugh at the *peng*, saying: 'When we make an effort, we fly up to the trees. Sometimes, not able to reach, we fall to the ground midway. What is the use of going up 90,000 miles in order to fly toward the south?' (He who goes to the grassy suburbs, taking enough food for three meals with him, comes back with his stomach as full as when he started. But he who travels a 100 miles must grind flours enough for a night's halt. And he who travels a 1,000 miles must supply with provisions for three months. Small knowledge is neither to be compared with great knowledge, nor a short life to a long one...)

A quail also laughs at it, saying: 'Where is that bird going? I spring up with a bound, and when I have reached no more than a few yards I come down again. I just fly about among the brushwood and the bushes. It is also perfect flying... There is the difference

between the great and the small." [5]

What the story suggests is ambiguous and polysemous. In one sense, the enormous discrepancy between the great and the small is observable in their respective qualities and pursuits. The *peng* has large wings and flies that high and far. The cicada or quail has tiny wings and flies that low and short. It is ostensibly impossible to make the *peng* follow the cicada and its like to fly low and short among trees or grassy suburbs. Likewise, it is out of the question to make the cicada and its like follow the *peng* to fly that high and afar to the remote Southern Ocean. Accordingly, what the great experiences and achieves is not the same with what the small does. This is also true of what they need and enjoy each. If they all go against nature by imitating each other in either life style or flying mode, they will invite distress and frustration for certain. Therefore self-enjoyment arises in due and relative degrees because of inborn capacity, respective momentum and conditioned circumstance.

In the other sense, the great and the small are discerned to be different by nature. They move and live in distinct ways simply because they just comply with their own nature and behave in accord with their inborn power. They both indulge in what they are doing and enjoy themselves to their fullest extent. Such self-enjoyment on either side can be equated in value if no distinction is made between superior and inferior. Accordingly, their experience of self-contentment is of similar intensity in the measurement of their own feeling. It is just like two equally pleased guests to a royal banquet. It makes no difference in their enjoyment even though one differs from the other in the size of appetite and the amount of food and wine taken in. In actuality, Zhuangzi often advocates the notion of

"equalizing" (*qi*) as the fundamental principle of his philosophy. [6] He argues that people like to make distinctions between such things as "this" (*ci*) and "that" (*bi*) merely due to their opinions. They stick with the distinctions as much as they hold fast to their opinions. Hence they are so single-minded as to distinguish between great and small, high and low, long and short, right and wrong, true and false, good and bad, superior and inferior, and so on. With these distinctions the Dao becomes obscured and people grow confused such that they argue ceaselessly with one another, and even slip into the mire of conflicts. The distinctions thus made are consequences of overlooking the fact that all is on the constant move or in the eternal flux of change. To solve this problem, we have no other choice

but recourse to the Dao. That is, all things and opinions ought to be equated with the Dao.

Then, what exactly is the Dao in his mind? It is, in short, the way of making-no-distinction. Just as Zhuangzi himself affirms, “That the ‘that’ and the ‘this’ cease to be opposites is the essence of the Dao. Only the essence, an axis as it were, is the center of the circle responding to the endless changes. The right is on endless change. The wrong is also on endless change. Therefore it is said that nothing is better than using the light of reason (*yi ming*).”^[7] In the final analysis, the way or Dao of making-no-distinction is a synonym for the Supreme One (*tai yi*), serving as the ultimate unity or fusion of all in the universe. Its service is as dramatic as “the magic sack” in Chinese mythology: when set to use by its master, it is automatically enlarged to swallow up the enemy’s weapons in all and deprive them of their entire functions.

Although the two respects of the story are plausible in general, a cluster of implications and associations are to be further explored. First of all, the great and the small are set shoulder by shoulder in striking contrast. The great is represented by the *peng*, and the small by the cicada, dove and quail. Regarding “the happy and boundless excursion”, neither of them fulfils it to its fullest extent. Practically both of them are engaged in a kind of lopsided excursion. The *peng* is self-pleased with an excursion from the north to the south. However, the excursion is remote enough but not free enough because the flight relies so much on the wind. However powerful the *peng* may be, it could not fly up into the sky without the wind to support its wings. This confinement to the wind not only reduces the degree of freedom and happiness, but also deconstructs the possibility of boundlessness. Instead, the cicada and its like are self-pleased with an excursion from one tree to another, which is easy-going enough but not remote at all. Representing the small, they call what they do “the perfection of flight” according to their living circumstances. In fact, they never bother about their flying distance and height. They are so ready to tie themselves up to their natural capability and living situation, with no slightest attempt to alter or derail their beaten track. Instead, they deride the *peng* who attempts to turn into a “new leaf” by venturing out of its birthplace in the Northern Ocean and heading for a new destination in the Southern Ocean. The geographical description is contextually meaningful on this occasion. For the Northern Ocean is allegedly more gloomy while the Southern Ocean more bright. That is why Zhuangzi terms the Southern Ocean as the Heavenly Lake (*tian chi*) to symbolize an imagined paradise. All this may help justify the endeavor and the will to pursue both brightness and happiness as are demonstrated by the *peng*. It is therefore inferred from their distinct attitudes and actions that life without a change is not worth living in the case of the *peng*, but in the case of the cicada and its like life is an easy comfort and meager satisfaction. Consequently, the *peng* is in the process of becoming what it wants to become in the direction of the great and active, whereas the cicada and its like remain to be what they are in the direction of the small and passive.

Secondly, both sides are ignorant of their own limitations but disdain for one another. As is discerned in the story, what enables the *peng* to ascend out of the Northern Ocean and up into the sky is the whirlwind produced when the ocean moves. Even when it is flying at the height of 90,000 miles with the wind beneath it, “the blue sky” is still above the cock-sure monster. The blueness of the sky is caused by its infinite height. It signifies infinity or boundlessness, so to speak. All this manifests that the *peng* performs at its best a limited transcendence since it still stays trapped within the finite. In addition, when it sees the earth from above, it is just like we see the sky from below. Neither can obtain a clear sight owing to “the wandering air”, “the motes” and the distance involved. Yet, the giant bird is feeling so pleased and conceited that it looks down upon anything else below itself. Around it there flows the air of hidden pride and unexpressed contempt pointed to other creatures. On the contrary, the cicada and its like are pleasure-seeking and comfort-oriented among trees or grassy suburbs. They play safe and cling to their immediate circumstance, never giving a thought about going beyond their natural limits. Nothing should be blamed if they were only self-contented with their status quo. But their self-contentment inflates so much as to put on an air of self-importance. This is shown through their mockery at the *peng* and their arrogant remarks, which turn up as self-defensive bias and self-centered comparison. In the final analysis, both the great and the small birds appear to bestow themselves with a privilege to over-stretch their own standards to measure the conduct of all other beings. This in turn intensifies their egoism in different manifestations and widens their gap in value judgment as well.

Thirdly, both the big and small birds cynically laugh at one another as a result of lopsided judgment in their own favor. However, they are hardly aware of the fact that they themselves are all laughable if viewed from the *Dao* of happy and boundless excursion. It is surely an ironic parody. Just as is detected in the story, the *peng* embodies the great. It looks down upon the cicada and its like from above. Conversely, the cicada exemplifies the small. It sneers at the *peng* from below. This is apparently due to their perception of “the perfection of flying” in terms of their natural capacity and living circumstance each. They both hold fast to the difference between the great and the small because they maintain their faith in *xiaozhi buji dazhi*. This phrase of Zhuangzi is not as straightforward as it is thought to be. Its literal translation, such as “the small knowledge is not to be compared with the great knowledge” for example, is rather misleading. It tends, contextually, to mean that the small cannot understand the great. For what the small knows and experiences is almost always discrepant from what the great knows and experiences. This is the same with what they can do and expect with reference to self-adaptation and self-enjoyment. That is why Zhuangzi makes such a comment following the quail’s mockery of the *peng*. It runs,

“There are some people whose knowledge is sufficient for the duties of some office. There are some people whose conduct will secure unity in some district. There are some people whose virtue befits him for a ruler. There are some people whose ability wins

credit in the country. In their opinion of themselves, they are just like what is mentioned above." [8]

What is most noteworthy here is the analogy drawn between the birds and human beings. It suggests that all come out to be succumbing to the principle of relativity. Just like the birds of either small or great size, they enjoy themselves each in their own scope. They are self-satisfied with what they can manage according to their individual ability. The situation as such sounds so natural and reasonable as though no more argument about it would be needed. Yet, there comes up Song Rongzi who gives them no credit but mocks at them both. Acting as a mouthpiece of the so-called worthy men (*xian ren*), he discards all the social norms and lives a life in considerable peace, free from any disturbances and ambitions. Just as Zhuangzi portrays,

"He [Song Rongzi] would not be encouraged thereby if the entire world should praise him. He would not be discouraged thereby if the entire world should condemn him. He pinpoints but never bothers the discrimination between the internal and the external. He knows but transcends the boundary between honor and disgrace. This is the best of him. In the world such a man is rare, yet, there is still something which he fails to establish himself." [9]

In this context what is meant by "the internal" is the inward self, and what is meant by "the external" is the outward things or outside world. Song Rongzi is highly conscious of the difference between them but deliberately keep it out of his mind in order to secure a spiritual tranquility. Furthermore, he crosses the borderline between honor and disgrace, and treats them alike under any circumstances. By so doing, he has no intention to gain anything and hence has no fear of losing anything, either. This is chiefly an exercise of the Daoist philosophy of "No gains therefore no losses", which is usually applied to self-preservation or self-protection. This notwithstanding, he stops progressing ahead and retains a distance away from the sphere of happy and boundless excursion. Probably he does not realize the gap and his limitation, but stands still with self-appreciation while lavishing contempt to others. He turns himself into a laughing stock just as the cicada does. Actually Song Rongzi's situation reveals no more happy and boundless excursion than that of Liezi, another cited character in the story as is described in the following:

"Liezi can ride upon the wind and pursue his way far ahead, in a refreshing and good manner, returning after fifteen days. Among those who attained happiness, such a man is rare. Yet, he is still dependent upon something (*you dai*) even though he is able to dispense walking." [10]

Like the monstrous *peng*, the supernatural Liezi appears to be free and able to fly afar. But both of them rely on the wind, without which they fall down for sure. In addition, the *peng* has its "light of six months' duration" and Liezi has his of "fifteen days". All this evinces their limited capacity and relative freedom because they are both hindered by the external factor of wind. In a word, they are both dependent beings after all.

Now how can the happy and boundless excursion be possible in any case? We have Zhuangzi's hypothesis:

"Suppose there is one who chariots on the normality of the universe, rides upon the change of the six elements, and thus makes excursion in the infinite, what has he to depend upon? Therefore, it is said that the perfect man has no self; the spiritual man has no achievement; and the true sage has no name." [11]

The conditions are clarified at two levels. Objectively, one must possess a good command of "the normality of the universe", which means to follow the Dao or the nature of all things. At the same time one must be able to control "the change of the six elements", which means to make most of the potential power of such natural elements as "the Yin, the Yang, wind, rain, dark and bright". [12] If able to do all this, one is sure to employ at one's disposal whatever he encounters to fulfill personal purposes. On this point one is well in the position to rid himself of the external constraints as a whole and no longer depends upon anything at all for free motion. This renders possible the happy and boundless excursion with regard to the outer conditions. Subjectively, one must act upon the supreme principle of taking-no-action and making-no-distinction so as to achieve the Dao for complete enlightenment. Such personality is virtually idealized by Zhuangzi in a tripartite model. It is ascribed to "the perfect man without self" (*zhiren wuji*), "the spiritual man without achievement" (*shenren wugong*), and "the true sage without name" (*shengren wuming*). The perfect man without self indicates that one has purified oneself of all selfishness, desires and egoism to the degree that he makes no more distinction between his self and its other. The spiritual man without achievement denotes that one has thrown away all his ambitions and has no intention to go in for any social establishment or take up any commitment. He regards them as nothing but self-invited bounds and fetters detrimental to personal freedom. The true sage without name signifies that one has liberated oneself from all the this-worldly values and therefore ignores any form of fame, honor, social status or ranking, because such things foster a rather self-defensive psychology or mental tension. That is to say, he who hankers after all this social capital in various forms will come across at least two possibilities: failure or

success. It is self-evident that failure is most conducive to a negative experience of frustration whilst success is most conducive to a positive feeling of delight. Yet, it is liable that he has no sooner enjoyed such delight than he grows worried about what to do in order not to lose what has been gained. On many occasions a winner this time fears to be a loser next time, especially in the case of personal fame and status. He would be most apt to fall a victim into the abyss of care and anxiety. Life as such is no fun for certain. Comparatively, “the perfect man” who has achieved thorough enlightenment by virtue of the *Dao* tends to abandon his own self, makes no personal achievement, and ignores any fame. He equalizes whatever differences in this regard. All this ends up with a complete detachment (*wudai*) from the secular values or the mundane affairs. It is at this stage that he transforms himself from a dependent being into an independent one, that is, from the state of self-confinement into the state of self-emancipation. Correspondingly, he moves out of the finite sphere and then steps into the infinite sphere. He thereby sets his feet on the road for the happy and boundless excursion. The significance of being independent in this respect is exposed and fortified by the comment that reads:

“If one has to depend upon something, one cannot be happy and free, unless one gets hold of the thing which one depends upon. Although Liezi could pursue his way in such a fine manner, he still had to depend upon the wind, and the *peng* was even more dependent. Only he who ignores the distinction between things and follows the great evolution can he be really independent and always free... The independent man has no self, achievement or name. He therefore unites the great and the small as he makes no distinction between them. He embraces life and death alike as he equalizes them... Consequently he who makes excursion in the non-distinction of the great and the small has no limitation. He who ignores the distinction between life and death has no terminal. Those whose happiness is attached within the finite sphere will certainly have limitation. Though they are allowed to make excursion, they are unable to be independent.” [\[13\]](#)

In other words, they have no way to enjoy the happy and boundless excursion. This situation is further formulated by another observation:

“If things enjoy themselves only in their finite spheres, their enjoyment must be finite. For instance, if one enjoys only in life, he would suffer in death. If one enjoys only in power, he would suffer at the loss of it. The ‘independent man’ transcends the finite. He ‘hides the universe in the universe,’ as mentioned by Zhuangzi in the *Da Zhongshi* (The Great Vulnerable Teacher). He thus becomes infinite, and so is his happiness. ‘The perfect man has no self’ because he has transcended the finite and identified himself with the universe. ‘The spiritual man has no achievement’ because he follows the nature of things and lets everything enjoy itself. ‘The true sage has no name’ because his virtue is perfect; every name is a determination, a limitation.” [\[14\]](#)

Finally, the anecdotic narrative is utilized to exemplify Zhuangzi’s notion of the happy and boundless excursion. But its symbolism signifies more than that. As its descriptive structure shifts from the fish *kun* to the bird *peng*, then from the cicada and its like to human beings of different types, we find a meaningful incarnation of the spirit of life along with a deep concern with the possible development of personality. The whole process features three general phases, namely, bodily transformation, dynamic transformation and spiritual transformation.

The first phase is attributed to a dramatic bodily transformation, which is embodied in the metamorphosis of the *kun* into the *peng*. The *kun* is originally a small fish. But Zhuangzi makes it into a giant one. It naturally metamorphoses into a great bird, preparing to get out of the Northern Ocean and cover a long distance to the Southern Ocean known as the Heavenly Lake. Such a transformation is necessary for three reasons. (1) The bird of enormous size finds the current habitat a confinement for its free movement. (2) It wants to have a change for better conditions. (3) It wishes to adventure out for a happy and boundless excursion. In the case of human race, all persons are supposed to be born free, but bounded in one way or another through acculturation or socialization. As one grows from childhood into adulthood, one comes across more constraints, pressures and cares of any conceivable kind. More often than not, one’s life style is so routinized that one can hardly get off the beaten track. This fashion of life is, in the eyes of Zhuangzi, not merely pathetic and intolerable, but also not worth living at all. Hence along his line of thought, an analogy can be drawn between the *peng* and a type of person who strives for self-emancipation. The story is deliberately dramatized. It seems to characterize the great bird into a model for human beings, encouraging those who are keen on freedom and independence to display an adventurous spirit and start off for a happy and boundless excursion. A human cannot transform into a bird in a physical sense. But in imagination everything is possible. All this depends on an individual initiative.

Subsequently, there comes the dynamic transformation. It is at this stage that the *peng* as the transformed figure makes tremendous endeavors when enfolding its wings and flying up to the sky. It thus demonstrates its monstrous size and power and consequently creates such a grotesque image. It flaps along the waters of the Northern Ocean for 3,000 miles. With a back as huge as the Mount Tai, and wings like clouds across the sky, it rides on a whirlwind and ascends up to a height of 90,000 miles, for a flight of six months’ duration toward the Southern Ocean, the Heavenly Lake (*tian chi*). The greatness or sublimity is revealed fully in all

aspects: strength, speed, size, manner, and height.... The dynamic element is prevailing through its intended remote excursion and intensified by its spatial movement. The expectation is justified by its craving for a change accompanied with adventures. The resolution is shining through its persistency of going along its own way even when it is misunderstood and derided by such species as cicada, quail, and its like. In this organic context the Heavenly Lake as its destination stands out as a paradise with Utopian fantasy. The whole ambiance under Zhuangzi's pen is filled with excitement, stimulation and temptation. Its hidden message is strikingly brought forth to motivate people to lift up their spirit for self-emancipation and sublimation altogether. It is inspiring to those who crave for happy and boundless excursion. Yet, it is not enough for what Zhuangzi acclaims as the happy and boundless excursion. In his mind those who have succeeded in reaching this stage are expected to push forward for further transcendence. For the freedom undergone so far is still limited within the finite sphere, just like the *peng* that is soaring high over others but still below the blue sky itself. In addition, such freedom is still dependent upon people's control of thought about social values, and upon their initiative to break free from the values in all. It is just like the *peng* that is also dependent upon the wind to sustain its large wings. Hence a spiritual transformation is advisable at this point.

Spiritual transformation *par excellence* is presupposed by both bodily and dynamic transformation. It is chiefly meant to facilitate an ultimate development of personal cultivation, which then leads to a complete enlightenment and happy excursion of infinity. To fulfill this requirement proposed by Zhuangzi, people will treat all values alike as they make no distinction, view all things alike as they take them as one, and be free from any confinement as they follow the nature of all. Like "the perfect man without self", they lose themselves as they discard their body and learned knowledge. Like "the spiritual man without achievement", they have no sense of self-establishment as they ignore any form of gains or losses. Like "the true sage without name", they are neither encouraged by honor nor discouraged by disgrace as they embrace the two things alike. They simply identify themselves with the universe. They hereby enjoy their happy and boundless excursion by "charioting on the normality of the universe" and "riding on the change of the six elements" as is expressed in Zhuangzi's hyperbole. That is to say, people of this type are ontologically free beings with independent personality. Specifically, they are free to the extent that they live in oneness with the myriad things by equalizing them all in one sense, and in the other, they are independent to the extent that they ride over whatever they meet with and therefore have nothing to depend upon. In a word, they are living and reposing within the Dao and *vice versa*.

As a result of his thought that deviates from the mainstream, Zhuangzi is labeled in a number of ways by the reader of different times. Xunzi^[15], for instance, criticized him for "being obsessed with the law of nature without knowledge of mankind" (*biyu tian er buzhi ren*). Under his influence some approach Zhuangzi as a naturalist rather than a humanist. This critique could be only valid if it were meant to relate it to Zhuangzi's advice of "abandoning knowledge" (*qu zhi*) after "having knowledge" (*you zhi*). The knowledge here referred to is the knowledge about human affairs (*ren shi*) in close connection with social norms and this-worldly values. It is true that Zhuangzi regards such knowledge as troublesome because it tends to get one entangled in social bound. Additionally it works to plunge one into a restless and dilemmatic mentality of desiring to gain while fearing to lose. In actuality, Zhuangzi has insights into the human condition as such and explores the human world philosophically as a humanist. His philosophy as a whole contains a deep concern with the human condition and quality of life. Quite obviously he feels pity for the burdensome human existence that bears the cross of social commitment, and even stays all along resentful against such social norms as reflected in personal achievement, status, name or honor, etc. He calls them as "external things" (*wai wu*) since they mean little to living a truly happy life. Instead they function much to enslave or alienate people. He therefore advocates the way of happy and boundless excursion to counterbalance social alienation and confinement all together.

Since Zhuangzi maintains a sarcastic attitude towards the role of human knowledge and civilization in life, some others crown Zhuangzi as a skeptic. But this viewpoint is not amply holding because he publicly negates and repeatedly derides the social norms in general and the Confucian values in particular. Meanwhile he is so sure about his value system that he offers a generous wholesale in a preaching tone. This is quite prominent in the foregoing discussion.

Moreover, some others cynically points out that Zhuangzi proposes his way of so-called happy and boundless excursion as an escapist. Despaired with the hopeless society and harsh environment, he turns a blind eye to all and purposefully retreats into his inner world as a refuge for spiritual detachment, which is rhetorically called "happy and boundless excursion". Such excursion embodies absolute spiritual freedom and can be only accessible to the independent personality like "the perfect man" (*zhiren*). "The perfect man is", says Zhuangzi, "spiritually mysterious. He would not feel hot were the great forests burned up. He would not feel cold were the great rivers frozen hard. He would not be frightened were the mountains being shaken with thunder or the seas being thrown into waves by a storm. Being such, he would mount upon the clouds up in the sky and ride on the sun and moon, and would thus ramble at ease beyond the four oceans (i.e. the world). Neither life nor death can affect him (as he treats them alike); how much less can bother him the consideration of what is beneficial and what is harmful?"^[16]

Hence Sima Qian^[17] concludes that Zhuangzi "exaggerates his ideas in boasting and pompous terms for the sake of self-enjoyment". I would hereby reckon that so long as what he says does have the service for self-enjoyment, either poetically or philosophically, it is still of value and relevance especially to those who happen to take it amusingly or seriously. As to whether they would go into the happy and boundless excursion, it is rather a question of individual experience, if not wishful thinking, about which

there is of far less need to bother too much.

2. The Butterfly and Self-emancipation

As has been detected in the discourse *On the Equality of Things and Opinions*, Zhuangzi constantly emphasizes the principle of Oneness (*yi*) as the unity of opposites and differences. This Oneness is the ideal outcome of the act of equalizing (*qi*) things and opinions.

On one occasion, Zhuangzi analogizes that “the universe is a finger (*yi zhi*); all things are a horse (*yi ma*).” [18] By this generalization is meant that the Dao makes no distinctions and all things are thereby united into the One. The One can be incarnated in either a finger or a horse. Hence he claims that “only the truly wise knows the oneness of things (*zhi tong wei yi*). They therefore do not make distinctions, but follow the common and ordinary. The common and ordinary are the natural functions of all things, which express the common nature of the whole. Following the common nature of the whole, they are happy. Being happy, they are near perfection. Such perfection is for them to take no action. When they take no action, they even do not know they take no action. This is the Dao.” [19]

Ironically, some people who prefer to make distinctions dispute with one another all the time. They often wear out their mind and intelligence to seek an agreement out of disagreements but go nowhere. It is simply because they do not know things are by nature united into the Dao as the One. With regard to the discrimination of right and wrong, for instance, they behave more or less like the monkeys when it comes to the arrangement of acorn rations, so to speak in Zhuangzi’s terms. The monkeys are very angry when their keeper let them have “three [acorns] in the morning and four [acorns] in the evening” (*zhaosan er musi*). But they are very pleased when allowed to have “four [acorns] in the morning and three [acorns] in the evening” (*zhaosi er musan*). They react so differently even though the actual number of acorns all together remains the same. Therefore the sage harmonizes the systems of right and wrong and rests in the evolution of nature. That is, they just do what is most proper in accordance with the specific situation by leaving the different opinions alone. Furthermore, they have no intention to rule out the different opinions but just go beyond them. This is called, according to Zhuangzi, “following the two courses at once.” [20]

On the other occasion, Zhuangzi stresses the idea of Oneness (*yi*) by claiming that “Heaven and Earth and I came into existence together, and all things with me are one.” [21] To justify this argument, he uses as many as five fables in succession. Among them the first is about ten suns that are said to come out together once upon a time and illuminate all things alike without any preference. This is apparently excelled by the power of virtue. Such virtue suggests the comprehensiveness of the Dao. It makes no discrimination and embraces all things alike, only to let everything follow its own course and enjoy its own nature.

The second fable tells of a factual absence of any common standard or taste of judging things in the world. For instance, “Men eat meat; deer feed on grass. Centipedes enjoy snakes; owls and crows delight in mice...Mao Qiang and Li Ji were admired by men as the most beautiful of women, but at the sight of them fish dived deep in the water, birds scored up in the air, and deer hurried away in fear.” [22] Hence it is better to wipe out any form of egoism and leave all things alone in their own place.

The third tale exposes the dream quality of human life and describes the spiritual realm of the Daoist sage. The sage asserts that life is nothing but a dream. He has no interest in seeking such gains as self, achievement or name, and detaches himself from the world affairs. He even does not purposely adhere to the Dao of making no distinction. Therefore, he not simply roams beyond the limits of the dusty world of immediate reality, but holds the universe in his arms. In order to do so, he blends the myriad things into a harmonious whole, rejects the confusion of distinctions, ignores the differences of social rank, and remains innocently naive, purely simple and without knowledge. In the end he finds enjoyment in the realm of infinite, and settles down with tranquility.

The next story is concerned with the dramatic movement of the Shadow. The Shadow seems to be dependent upon something (*youdai*) in appearance. But it affirms its actual independence (*wudai*) because it never bothers about its identity in any sense. It just becomes spontaneously what it is without asking why it is so and not otherwise.

The last fable is about the butterfly and self-transformation. Compared with all the other ones, the butterfly image is the most influential but ambiguous as well. It reads,

“Once upon a time, Zhuang Zhou (Zhuangzi) dreamed that he was a butterfly. The butterfly was flying about and enjoying itself. It did not know it was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly he awoke, and veritably was Zhuang Zhou again. We do know whether it was Zhuang Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or whether it was the butterfly dreaming that it was Zhuang Zhou. Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is a case of what is called the transformation of things.” [23]

The key to this passage is basically doublefold. It is on the one hand related to the last statement about “the transformation of things” (*wu hua*), because the myth itself is deployed for the exemplification of this abstract conception. On the other hand, it is hidden

in the interaction between dreaming and awakening. According to Guo Xiang, “the transformation of things” is “delightful” (*ke le*) to the extent that life and death are natural phenomena determined by the principle of change. Like all the other things, they are involved in the process of transformation, thus coming and going as suddenly as the interplay between dreaming and awakening. One should therefore be happy by not making any distinction between life as a cause of possible joy and death as a cause of plain misery. In other words, one should emancipate oneself from the unnecessary cares and worries that stem from the love for life and fear of death. The discrimination between dreaming and awakening is, as it were, identical to that between life and death. They can all be discriminated. But if one treats them alike and remains happy to accept them as such, there is no much difference between their discrimination and non-discrimination.^[24]

Many other interpretations exist for this notion. As Wang Fuzhi puts it, “The transformation of things’ is pointed to the change of things. For instance, the *kun* transforms into the *peng*, the dung beetle into the cicada and the eagle into the vulture.... The great transforms into the great while the small into the small. As for the mutual transformation between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly, it implies that all is transformable in the world (via dream). One must keep in mind that, although distinctions come into being when transformation of things takes place, it is by nature the same in the respect that they all follow their own course each.”^[25]

Regarding the story as a whole, Fung Yu-lan deems that “This shows that, although in ordinary appearance there are differences between things, in delusions or in dreams one thing can also be another. ‘The transformation of things’ proves that the differences among things are not absolute.”^[26] Chen Guying even goes further to affirm that “what ‘the transformation of things’ really means is that the distinction between the self (subject) and its other (object) is swept out and all things are fused into one.”^[27]

In my mind, “the transformation of things” should be placed in the context of Zhuangzi’s philosophizing as a whole and meanwhile approached from his primary preoccupation with self-emancipation or spiritual freedom. His conception of such “transformation” refers to all things including human beings. It metaphorically denotes the process of self-transformation from a bounded self into an unbounded self, say, from confinement to freedom in plain language. This freedom is two dimensional: it is not merely from the externally imposed constraints related to social values, but also from the internally added hindrances based on personal wants. In respect to the distinction between dreaming and awakening, it is similar to the distinction between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly. Here distinctions are made in either case. Otherwise, it is no point of talking about “the transformation of things”. But such distinctions mean only too little against the Dao of making no distinction as Zhuangzi thinks. It is equally true of it if viewed from the recommended self-transformation for the sake of spiritual freedom. It can be therefore affirmed that the literal distinctions between dreaming and awakening will cancel each other out due to the effect of “the transformation of things”. Correspondingly, the borderline between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly will get blurred and eventually removed by the underlying principle. This principle is *a priori* and predetermined. Just as it is aforementioned at the outset of this section, it is coupled with the correlation between the idea of Oneness (*yi*) as the unity of all opposites and differences and the act of equalizing (*qi*) all things and opinions.

After all, Zhuang Zhou, the dreamer, is self-satisfied with the butterfly image and feels all the way happy about his experience of self-transformation. This is self-evident and stirs up more associations. His experience, for instance, has two aspects: aesthetic and spiritual. The aesthetic aspect is associated with the beautiful image of the butterfly due to its glamorous form and color. In fact the butterfly is a wonder of natural creation and serves as a symbol of the beautiful. The employment of the butterfly as a metaphor is by no means a coincidence because the little creature has been traditionally leagued with the idea of beauty, charm and grace alike in terms of its sense image. The idea of beauty carries much value with it. It transfuses so much significance into the butterfly image that its effect captures the Chinese mentality and evokes their aesthetic ideal of appreciation. On the other hand, the spiritual aspect is proportionately originated from the self-transformation as the threshold of self-emancipation or spiritual freedom. The self-transformation is from the old into the new in identity; likewise, the self-emancipation is from the confined into the unconfined in spirit. They both are incarnated through the butterfly image. Here in the context the butterfly is not simply a symbol of metamorphosis from a caterpillar, but also as a symbol of freedom reflected in its easy and playful flying manners. When Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly and did not know he was Zhuang Zhou, the self-transformation was thus accomplished allegorically. When he was happy to see himself flying around freely as a butterfly, the self-emancipation was thus fulfilled spiritually. Judging from an objective perspective, one argues that such a process is false and all in fantasy. But this plausible argument will lose its target in question and its logic as well so long as the dreamer himself adopts the Dao of making no distinction and bends his mind to his self-inventive way of seeking spiritual freedom. Obviously this experience as a whole is neither scientific nor mysterious, but rather esoteric in close connection with one’s self-cultivation and spiritual nourishment, so to speak according to Zhuangzi’s philosophy of life.

Incidentally, it is ever since Zhuangzi that the butterfly dream has been highly influential and significant in the Chinese literary heritage. Perceived as an archetypal symbol of beauty, freedom and even love, the butterfly image frequents many poems and dramas. The Chinese tragedy of the *Liang-Zhu*, the shortened form for the romance of *Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai* that is often likened to *Romeo and Juliet*, makes a sensational use of the butterfly image at its climax. To cut the long story short, once there were two lovers who were prevented by feudal conventions from meeting and marrying each other. After a harsh separation and fruitless struggle for being together, the heroine died in deep sorrow and was buried underground outside her hometown village. Upon hearing about her death, the hero came all the way to her graveside to mourn his beloved. He was so sad and heartbroken when cherishing the memory

of their good off days together. His tragedy moved the Heaven. All of a sudden a mighty thunder struck the grave apart, and he immediately threw himself into it for a reunion. Soon afterwards a couple of beautiful butterflies ascended out of the tomb, flying together so happily and freely into the blue sky. Thus incorporated to the butterfly image are the ideas of togetherness, love and devotion, apart from beauty and freedom.

All in all, when illustrating his notions of self-transformation and self-emancipation, Zhuangzi deploys two most prominent metaphors. One is the *peng*, an ambitious and powerful monster. The other is the butterfly (*die*), a delicate and graceful creature. The *peng* is great, sublime, dependent and engaged in its journey to an intended destination, and the transformation it goes through is incomplete and therefore finite. In striking contrast, the butterfly is little, beautiful but independent and free from any intended destination. Consequently its transformation is complete and therefore infinite, symbolizing the closest to the ideal of happy excursion to the boundless remote. Moreover, the butterfly as a twofold symbol of beauty and freedom well embodies the integration of the aesthetic and spiritual aspects. It is because of such integration that the highest form of the spiritual freedom is both corresponding to and identified with the intellectual enlightenment and aesthetic *Erlebnis* in Chinese aesthetic culture and psychology.

Notes:

[1] The specific life span of Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) remains a controversy among the Chinese historians and Zhuangzi scholars. Fung Yu-lan assumes it ranges approximately from 369 to 286 BC. Cf. Fung Yu-lan. *A History of Chinese Philosophy*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), vol.1, p.408. Ren Jiyu proposes it from approximately 335-275 BC. Ma Xulun thinks it from 369 to 286 BC. Fan Weilan holds it from 328 to 286 BC, and Wen Yiduo reckons it from 375 to 295 BC. Cf. Ren Jiyu. *Zhongguo Zhaxueshi* (A History of Chinese Philosophy). (Beijing: Renmin Chubanshe, 1979), vol. 1, p.153. From what has been suggested above, Zhuangzi can be generally claimed to live from the late 4th century to the early 3rd century BC. That is ascribed to the Warring States Period.

[2] The complete works of Zhuangzi comprises 33 chapters in total. Judging from the lexical choice, style and structure, Chinese scholars mostly agree to the division between the *inner Chapters* (*Neipian*), the *Outer Chapters* (*Waipian*) and the *Macellanious Chapters* (*Zapian*). The first part is made up of seven chapters, the second part of 15 chapters and the third part of 11 chapters. The seven *Inner Chapters* are said to be written by Zhuangzi because of the sufficiently shared vocabulary, style and thought in a complete unity. The *Outer* and *Macellanious* chapters are assumed to be written by the followers of Zhuangzi and completed by the late years of the Warring States Period before 225 BC. Cf. Wang Fuzhi. *Zhuangzi Jie* (Commentary on the Book of Zhuangzi). (Beijing, Zhonghua Shuju, 1976); Chen Guying. *Zhuangzi Jinzhu Jinyi* (A New Annotated and Paraphrased Version of the Book of Zhuangzi). (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983); especially Liu Xiaogan. *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters* (tr. William E. Savage, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1994).

[3] Cf. Wang Fuzhi. *Zhuangzi Jie* (Commentary on the Book of Zhuangzi). (Hong Kong: Zhonghua Shuju Hong Kong Fenju, 1985).

[4] There exist several English renderings for *Xiao Yao You*. For instance, Fung Yu-lan translated it as “*The Happy Excursion*”, and Burton Weston put it into “*The Free and Easy Wandering*”.

[5] Cf. Fung Yu-lan (tr.). *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989), pp. 25-29.

[6] Cf. Zhuangzi. “On the Equality of Things and Opinions,” in Fung Yu-lan (tr.). *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. pp. 39-55.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 44.

[8] Cf. Zhuangzi. “The Happy Excursion,” in Fung Yu-lan (tr.). *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. p. 29.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[12] This is based on Sima Biao’s interpretation. Cf. Chen Guying. *Zhuangzi Jinzhu Jinyi* (A New Annotated and Paraphrased Version of the Book of Zhuangzi). (Beijing: Zhongguo Shuju, 1983), p. 17.

[13] Cf. Guo Xiang. *Zhuangzi Jishi* (Commentary on the Book of Zhuangzi). See Fung Yu-lan (tr.) *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. pp. 30-31.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 31.

[15] Cf. Xunzi. (c. 298-c.238 BC), mainly a Confucianist thinker during the Warring States Period.

[16] Cf. Fung Yu-lan (tr.). *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. p. 52.

[17] Sima Qian (145-? 86 BC), author of *Shi Ji* (The Historic Records).

[18] Cf. Fung Yu-lan (tr.). *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. p. 45.

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 46.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp. 54-55.

[24] Cf. Guo Xiang. *Zhuangzi Jishi* (Commentary on the Book of Zhuangzi). Vol. 2, p. 39.

[25] Cf. Wang Fuzhi. *Zhuangzi Jie* (Interpretations of the Book of Zhuangzi). p. 29.

[26] Cf. Fung Yu-lan (tr.). *The Taoist Classic: Chuang-tzu*. (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1989), p. 55.

[27] Cf. Chen Guying. *Zhuangzi Jinzhu Jinyi* (*The Book of Zhuangzi Paraphrased and Annotated*). (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1983), p. 92.

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