

Encountering the *Zhuangzi*: Adaptability and Emptiness in the Story of Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi

Thaddée CHANTRY-GELLENS*

Abstract

The *Zhuangzi* 莊子 often uses its multicoloured characters and imaginative stories to make its points. So much so that one of these characters is, I wish to argue, a stand-in for the text of the *Zhuangzi* itself. Huzi 壺子, when he meets Jixian 季咸 through the intermediary of his student Liezi 列子, exhibits the kind of emptiness that characterizes the text. This emptiness pertains to his ability to change forms as he wishes, for he is never fixed into one singular shape. He represents the adaptable and flexible behaviour which enables one to use specific schemes of valuation with parsimony, when they are adapted to the context, and never to remain fixed on one single such scheme. Jixian and Liezi are, in my interpretation, two readers of the text who come at it from different yet fixed angles. Their backgrounds and reactions while reading the text teach us the ways one can deal with that emptiness. One could try, like Jixian, to apply one's own standards to the text, witness its resistance, and leave in frustration. Or one could, like Liezi, realize that the text's emptiness is an invitation to leave the text behind and to discard fixed and single-minded valuation schemes. In the end, this cautionary tale aptly represents the text's non-judgmental openness as well as its subtly subversive critique of the attitudes to learning and applying what one has learned prevalent in its time.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Huzi 壺子, adaptability, emptiness, Daoism

Srečanje z Zhuangzijem: prilagodljivost in praznina v zgodbi o Huziju, Jixianu in Lieziju

Izvleček

Zhuangzi 莊子 svoje pisane like in domiselne zgodbe pogosto uporablja za ponazoritev svojih spoznanj. Trdim, da je tako celo v tolikšni meri, da eden izmed likov deluje kot nadomestek za samo besedilo *Zhuangzi*. Ko Huzi 壺子 prek svojega učenca Liezija 列子 sreča Jixiana 季咸, predstavlja vrsto praznine, ki zaznamuje celotno besedilo. Ta praznina se kaže v Huzijevi sposobnosti, da po želji spreminja svojo obliko, saj nikoli ni omejen na eno samo, določeno podobo. Predstavlja prilagodljivo in prožno vedenje,

* Thaddée CHANTRY-GELLENS, The Chinese University of Hong Kong 香港中文大學.
Email address: t.chantrygellens@gmail.com



ki nam omogoča varčno oziroma preudarno uporabo določenih vrednostnih shem, kadar so ustrezne glede na kontekst, pri čemer nikoli nismo omejeni na eno samo shemo. V tem smislu Jixian in Liezi nastopata kot dva bralca *Zhuangzija*, ki k besedilu pristopata z različnih, toda določenih zornih kotov. Njunjo ozadje in odzivi med branjem besedila nas učijo različnih načinov soočenja s to praznino. Bralec lahko, tako kot Jixian, na besedilo poskuša aplicirati lastne kriterije, naleti na odpor in v frustraciji odneha. Lahko pa tudi, tako kot Liezi, spozna, da je praznina besedila povabilo k preseganju samega besedila in opuščanju togih, enostranskih shem vrednotenja.

Navsezadnje ta opozorilna pripoved ustrezno ponazarja *Zhuangzijevo* neobsojajočo odprtost ter njegovo subtilno subverzivno kritiko tedanjih pristopov k učenju in uporabi pridobljenega znanja.

Ključne besede: *Zhuangzi* 莊子, Huzi 壺子, prilagodljivost, praznina, daoizem

This essay proposes a novel analysis of the penultimate story of the *Zhuangzi*'s 莊子 so-called "Inner Chapters" (*neipian* 內篇). I wish to claim that the encounter between Huzi 壺子, his disciple Liezi 列子, and the shamaness¹ Jixian 季咸 can be read as an instance of the text speaking about itself. Put simply, in this passage, Liezi and Jixian can be seen as two people encountering the *Zhuangzi*—which Huzi is a stand-in for. They both react in very different (albeit similarly confused) ways to what they find within the lines of Huzi's face. This paper will begin by presenting the story in its context, the "Yingdiwang 應帝王" ("Sovereign Responses for Ruling Powers") chapter.² Some lines will be devoted to a historical account of the social role attributed to shamanesses, as I find this status to be of particular importance for my interpretation of the passage. I will introduce previous readings of the focal passage before presenting mine. For instance, I believe this interpretation to be complementary to that of others such as Defoort (2012) or Moeller (2016). In the view I propose, Huzi's emptiness and changing forms generate two related but dissimilar types of behaviour in the "readers" of the text. Jixian is a closed-minded person who fixes things—she can, after all, define with precision the moment someone will die. While encountering the text, she goes through a progression which begins with applying her own standards to the *Zhuangzi*. But as she progresses through it, she becomes increasingly confused and eventually decides that, unable to impose her own meaning on the text, she

1 The term "shamaness" poses a few problems in the Chinese context. However, so do other alternatives in English. Whatever way *wu* 巫 is translated, however, does not impact the overall point I am trying to make. See for instance Lai (2015) or Davis (2001) for their analyses of what the *wu* were and were not.

2 All translations of the *Zhuangzi* text are taken from Ziporyn's (2020) version unless stated otherwise. All references to the original text are from the Harvard-Yenching *Zhuangzi* Yinde, which can be accessed on <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>.

may as well stop reading it. Liezi, for his part, begins as someone flaunting his *dao* 道, which is only a tiny portion of what Huzi has to offer to him. But as the meetings between his master and the shamaness progress and reach their climactic end, he realizes that he has never even started to learn anything. He is originally eager to learn (possibly for the “wrong” reasons) but understands, after a while, the futility of this endeavour. The eventual shift in his attitude to education is mirrored by his changed behaviour. I will end this paper with some comments on the significance I believe this passage, read in such a way, has for the text of the *Zhuangzi*. It can be seen as a cautionary tale for readers who have just gone through the “Inner Chapters”, an exposition of possible ways to read the text and of their shortcomings. Thus, I understand the story of Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi as a kind of gentle nudge away from fixating ways of reading the *Zhuangzi* that the text left there for us to enjoy.

The Story Itself

The encounter between Jixian and Huzi is recorded in the seventh chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the “Yingdiwang”, but also in the second section of the *Liezi* 列子, the “Huangdi” (黄帝) chapter, in very similar wording. There is however significant evidence that the editor of the *Liezi* was working with a copy of a *Zhuangzi* source—probably the same or a similar version to the one Guo Xiang 郭象 edited (Littlejohn 2011, 32). This confrontation is also mentioned in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, but its later composition and the short amount of time devoted to their meeting indicates once again that the *Zhuangzi*’s version is the original one. It will therefore be the focus of my attention.

The story begins with Liezi hearing of a shamaness from Zheng 鄭 named Jixian. She “could discern whether people would live or die [...] knew how long their lives would be and what turns their fortunes would take, giving the exact year, month, week and date for each event like some kind of god [*shen* 神]” (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/15–16). Liezi, who had been studying under Huzi, is captivated by her, and tells his master that he found someone whose *dao* was superior to the one he had been taught so far. Hearing this, Huzi criticizes his student for his foolishness and asks him to bring the shamaness along so that she may practice her art of physiognomy on him. She does, and after the first time, sees only death within the master. After coming a second time, she detects liveliness in him. The third instance throws her in the grasp of confusion and uncertainty, and before the fourth can even take place, she flees. Every time, Huzi showed her something different of himself. After witnessing this, Liezi “realized he had not yet begun to learn. He returned to his home and did not emerge for three years [...] letting all the chiselled carvings of his character return to an unhewn blockishness”

(Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 21/7/30). We will need to come back in more detail to some aspects of this story as the argument progresses. But before this, I wish to quickly introduce a feature of the historical background of this conversation, namely, the oft-ignored profession of Jixian, and why it matters.

The Role of Shamanesses in Ancient China

The role of shamanesses (*wu* 巫) in ancient China shifted mightily over the centuries that span the Shang 商 and Zhou 周 dynasties and end in the establishment of the Han 漢. It should be noted from the start that this term was mostly applied to women. Lin Fu-shih (2008, 397) mentions a commentary of the *Zhouli* 周禮 (*Rites of Zhou*) by Zheng Xuan 鄭玄 which states that men who the gods would “descend into” were called *xi* 覡, whereas such women were named *wu* 巫.³ In fact, “most mediums in Bronze Age China were female” (Schafer 1967, 59), and one of their primary roles was, notably in the arid expanses of the north, to summon rain. Other tasks, and this is especially salient in Jixian’s case, included fortune-telling. This function was taken so seriously that it was often they who were offered for sacrificial burning if a drought could not be alleviated through their work (*ibid.*).

Before the Warring States (*zhanguo* 戰國) period, shamanesses and shamans were particularly central to the practice of governance (Boileau 2002). They “were a crucial part of every state court; in fact, scholars of ancient China agree that the king himself was actually head shaman” (Chang 1983, 45). Now, the reason for this standing is a transformation of the way communicating with the spirits was envisaged by Shang and Zhou society. Li Zehou puts it this way: this period corresponds to a moment when Chinese society transitioned “from [the point of view of] ‘everyone being shaman and historian’ (*jia wei wu shi* 家為巫史) to [that of the] ‘severance of communication between earth and heaven’ (*jue ditian tong* 絕地天通)” (Li 2018, 15). That is to say, shamanesses progressively became the privileged intermediates between the human and the spiritual realms, the visible and the invisible. This evolution happened in a cultural context in which the separation “between the living and deceased, between human and spirit was never fully and clearly drawn” and where these “two realms were mutually interactive” (*ibid.*, 14). Shamanesses, through dances and ceremonies, had access to spirits and could thereby communicate human desires and questions to them, providing the rest of the community or clan with the answers of the ancestors.⁴ Not only

3 This explains why, despite most English translations using the pronoun “he” for Jixian, I believe this character is a woman.

4 Li reminds us that “ancestors were people, and once dead they became spirits, or half divine and still living in a sense” (Li 2018, 14). These spirits could protect the clan and had an influence over events in the world of the living, which partly explains the devotion with which they were revered.

that, but they also managed the connection and the integration of these two parts of the world—which were not seen as neatly separate, as mentioned earlier—and thus justified their position of power. The *wu* were part of a bureaucracy of officials whose role spanned divination, prayer, supplication, etc.

However, the Warring States period saw their influence decrease significantly. It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine the reasons for this shift, and significant work has already been done on this topic.⁵ This marginalization is, however, nuanced by the integration of shamanistic influences in later forms of governance, such as ritual ceremonies. Shamanesses may have well gone from eminent members of a bureaucracy to being associated with pariahs and outcasts, but their codes and practices were nonetheless incorporated, albeit in new forms, into the Western Han governmental structure (Lagerway 2019, 9). Therefore, when reading the encounter between Huzi and Jixian, it is important to bear in mind that the latter is not simply a village witch or a countryside wise woman with a few tricks up her sleeve. She is, at the time when the *Zhuangzi* was composed, a member of a receding tradition whose influence was nonetheless still felt within society at large. This status is important to understand both her relationship with Huzi and the way in which her interactions with him are depicted.

Previous Interpretations of the Story

Exegetical engagement with this passage is not new. Guo Xiang, as well as numerous medieval and modern Chinese commentators, have proposed interpretations of the purported message of this episode. However, as Moeller points out, “interpretations of this narrative have paid special attention to the poetic and rather obscure self-descriptions of Huzi’s changed countenance”, and portrayed the story as “primarily concerned with the presentation of different forms or stages of spiritual and physiological cultivation” (Moeller 2016, 382).

A great example of alternative engagement with the text is Carine Defoort’s (2012) paper on what she calls “Instruction Dialogues”. She does not follow the aforementioned tendency to see in the story a narrative of self-cultivation and instead emphasizes its description of the relationship between master and student. In it, we are reminded of the shifting nature of the masters. She also evokes the importance of the fictional nature of this encounter, as well as the *emptiness* of the master figure.

Hans-Georg Moeller (2016) also understands the passage as a didactic tale, but as a parodic one. In his interpretation, Liezi is a “fool” and a buffoon, Jixian a hack whose incompetence and self-assured manners are met with ridicule, and Huzi a jester who teases out “the stupidity and preposterousness of Liezi and Jixian”

5 See for instance Li (2018) and Lagerway (2019).

(ibid., 385). Huzi is, under this interpretation, an example of a successful practitioner of “genuine pretending” who “acts as a mask-changer: he enacts shifting roles with great skill without personally adopting any of them” (ibid., 388).

David Machek goes a different route. His understanding is that Huzi is skilled at “restructuring [his] unstructured self into various roles and identities” (Machek 2016, 61)⁶¹. He is not, contrary to what Moeller would argue, donning different masks, but instead gives us a way of showing oneself, indeed one’s “true internal self” (ibid., 56)⁵⁶ to one’s interlocutor.

Be that as it may, I wish to propose another alternative, one that is in some ways compatible—and indeed can be fruitfully articulated—with previous interpretations of the text.

Encountering the *Zhuangzi* by Meeting Huzi

By now, it is almost a *cliché* to point out that many of the *Zhuangzi*’s points are made through storytelling. However, there are good reasons why this aspect of the text has been pointed out so often. Jixian, Huzi, and Liezi are not simply characters. They all stand for something—or possibly someone—the *Zhuangzi* wishes to deal with. My claim is that we can understand these three characters in the following way: (1) Huzi as a stand-in for the text of the *Zhuangzi*; and (2) Jixian and Liezi as representing two types of people encountering and being befuddled by the text, albeit in different ways. To justify this claim, a closer presentation of the three members of the interaction is needed, starting with the first one.

Huzi’s role in the story is given by his name. “Master Calabash” or “Master Gourd” is—and this is crucial—hollow, i.e. *empty*. This metaphor is important, since “only as an empty vessel, devoid of conventional values and attitudes, can a person store elements of the Heavenly *dao*” (Lai 2015, 108). But Huzi is not only a vessel because he is a proficient teacher whose unavailability towards his student is a symbol of the provocativeness and appeal of his teaching, as Defoort (2012, 468) proposes, because this feature of his (understood as a stand-in for the *Zhuangzi*) is also applicable to the text itself. The *Zhuangzi* is “empty”. That is not to say, of course, that its words are devoid of all content. On the contrary, they offer a multitude of alternatives and possibilities. But none of them are *fixed*: that is the meaning of emptiness in this context. The authors never propose one singular and optimal way to follow *dao*, do not give *the dao* that must be adhered to.⁶ Instead, the text proposes multiple ideas and alternatives, always encouraging its

6 Though it is broadly accepted that the “Inner Chapters” are the work of one individual thinker, I pluralize “authors” to allow for the multiplicity of voices (whether it be writers’ or editors’) in the *Zhuangzi* to come to the fore.

readers to follow *dao* a certain way at a certain point in time and space, but once the situation does not require this specific *modus operandi*, one may simply let it go and behave differently. This will become even more salient in the last section of this paper.

In contrast, it is because of Liezi's fullness, i.e. his fixity, that he is so readable by Jixian. "Huzi explains that Lie's physiognomy can be easily read by the shaman because it mirrors everything that can be found in Lie's heart-mind" (Iwanowska 2017, 38). And what is Liezi's *xin* 心 ("heart-mind") filled with? A specific way to follow *dao* that he goes by permanently, thinking it to be ultimate and applicable to everyone. Huzi even tells his student that he uses "the Course [*dao*] to browbeat the world, insisting that they believe in it, and that is why this [woman] can get a grasp of you and read your fortune on your face" (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/18-19). Flaunting and sure that the way *he thinks* he was taught is correct, Liezi misses this central point of the *Zhuangzi* about adaptability which Huzi goes on to manifest: emptiness enables one to follow *dao* more closely and effectively, and that can only be done by only provisionally following any given method. Such emptiness is the reason why, contrary to Liezi's case, Jixian is unable to successfully analyse Huzi's physiognomy. She cannot fix anything about him definitively, for there is no such "thing" within him.

This emptiness-*qua*-unfixatedness is central to the *Zhuangzi*, and Huzi is a perfect symbol of this core idea: there is not one way to follow *dao*, but many. The many forms that Huzi takes throughout the passage could even arguably be understood as reflecting this multiplicity. It is not only because of its composite nature, but primarily due to the points made by various parts of the *Zhuangzi* on distinctions, perspectives, and the like, that one can always come out of the text with something different. Of course, the fact that a single text can be interpreted in numerous alternative ways is not idiosyncratic to the *Zhuangzi*. But, and herein lies the Zhuangzian specificity, its authors embrace this multiplicity of interpretations: it is a feature of engaging with the text. The text "wants" the readers to come out of it with a renewed appreciation for other perspectives and for going along with this variety.

Of course, the *Zhuangzi* does criticize others, for instance in the famous passage about Confucians and Mohists in the "Qiwulun" (齊物論) ("Equalizing Assessments of Things") chapter.⁷ What the *Zhuangzi* chastises is precisely the alleged fixation on one's own way of following *dao* that the members of

7 "But courses *qua* courses get concealed behind the small formations that they themselves succeed in shaping, and speech *qua* speech gets concealed behind the garlands of honour it itself brings on. Hence we have the rights and wrongs of the Confucians and Mohists, each affirming what the other denies and denying what the other affirms." (Zhuangzi 14; 4/2/25-26)

these two schools exhibit in their debates. The authors of the text may have an appreciation for some points made by the *ru* 儒 and the *mo* 墨, just as they may appreciate Peng's broad perspective when it reaches the highest skies at the beginning of the *Zhuangzi*. But they are also very aware that this bird's-eye view does not encompass all the details of the world. That its perspective is not ultimate, or even necessarily the broadest. And if it were, it would still remain that: one perspective amongst many. When Huzi castigates Liezi for flaunting his specific way of following *dao* to the world, it is exactly for this reason: he has read into Huzi's teaching only a singular, single-minded interpretation instead of remaining open to other alternatives. But before dealing with Huzi's student, let us present his "contradictor" in more depth.

Jixian: the "Old School"

The first character introduced by the story, Jixian, is a *shenwu* 神巫, which indicates that she deals with spirits. And this is the first of many problems that she faces. Her role as an interpreter between humans and spirits means that she provides people with interpretations of certain phenomena—be they "natural" events or the cracks on a turtle's shell—for human purposes.⁸ She is tasked with giving a social meaning to that which, at first sight, is devoid of it. Now, one may argue that this is running the risk of applying modern and post-modern forms of rationality to a context where other such forms were appropriate. People did indeed believe it was a fact that spirits could communicate with humans and influence their plight. Jixian's role as an intermediary used to be seen as crucial to the wellbeing of the community. But that only creates another, related problem. The dynamic which Li Zehou describes (from "everyone being shaman and historian" to the "severance of communication between Earth and Heaven") is something that the *Zhuangzi* would arguably decry. An important reason for this is that such a separation creates a rift within the unity of the *wanwu* 萬物. As mentioned earlier, the delineation between human and spiritual realms was indeed blurred. But we need to remember here that the *Zhuangzi* goes against the unqualified separation of the "ten-thousand things" into specific, fixed sets of "this" and "that", of *bi* 彼 and *ci* 此. This does not mean that no separation can ever be relevant or useful. Simply, these distinctions must be understood as fluctuating, momentary, and ephemeral.

8 There is no single word in classical Chinese that "nature" or "natural" would be a fully adequate translation of. That is due to the way the human place within the *wanwu* was conceived (at least in Daoism and the traditions that inspired it): as one amongst ten thousand, and not, as was and is the case elsewhere, as a master over a non-human, wild natural world. This question requires more nuance than the space here allows, and others have dealt with the topic of "nature" in early Chinese thought at length. See for instance Chai (2018).

The special status that was bestowed upon the shamanesses, one which was the symbol of their privileged access to the *shen*, pertains to a much more fixed separation. It is not just a social one—those who may make demands on the *shen* on behalf of the community *versus* those who may not—and I do not wish to claim that this is where the brunt of the *Zhuangzi*’s critique lies. More importantly for the authors of the text, the problem would be the unwarranted gulf between different members of the collective *wanwu*. As blurry as the dividing line may be between humans and spirits, the shamanesses’ role rendered the relationship between them more mediated. And this role of intermediate, which had become exclusively theirs, meant the institutionalization of a specific set of “this” and “that”, of acceptable practices, of proper ways to make requests, of roles, etc.

Another way fixity is introduced in the passage is through the description that is given of Jixian. She can define with precision the moment of someone’s death, thereby determining that person’s fate. But it is made clear that this “skill” is both far from infallible and dependent on the other person’s being already clogged with fixity. Other parts of the *Zhuangzi* do evoke the idea of a natural or allotted lifespan, and the objective of living it in its entirety. But this somewhat “fated” longevity is often shortened by being subjected to fixed valuation schemes.⁹ Clearly, this does not fit what Jixian is doing. She is in fact introducing an incredible degree of fixity into the lives of the people she analyses, and the shamanesses’ role in divination also comes to mind here. Her interpretation of certain phenomena leads her to draw assured conclusions on the time of someone’s passing. Until she meets someone too empty of definite content for her to read: then, her skill is proven to be limited. Jixian does not claim to do such ordaining, of course. Defoort rightly points out that Jixian “cannot influence the course of events” (Defoort 2012, 473). But she does take credit when, after her second visit, Huzi seems to be reinvigorated. Her ego, as pointed out by Moeller, is a part of her problems.

The decision taken by the authors of the text to make her a *wu* is not an anodyne one. As established earlier, her profession was, until quite recently at the time of the *Zhuangzi*’s composition, a key part of Zhou governance. She is a symbol of the past, but not the kind of mythical golden age of virtue described, for instance, in the so-called “Primitivist” chapters. Instead, Jixian is a representative of the moment in Chinese history where, according to the *Zhuangzi*, people and more specifically “sages” started to impose human interpretations over everything. Jixian’s role is to make demands on behalf of humans. Li Zehou argues that one of the central aspects of shamanism in early China was the proactive requests made to the spirits. “The fortune and prosperity of the people was imagined to occur through the functioning, influence, coercion, and even control or governance of

9 See for instance the useful trees who fail to fully live out their natural lifespans in the “Renjianshi” (人間世) chapter.

the spirits and natural forces by the ritual ceremony” (Li 2018, 21). Their spiritual activity was far from passive. On the contrary, it was purposeful, proactive, and hands-on. It was not just a matter of communicating human wishes to the spirits. Shamanesses, through their rituals, *made* the spirits answer and act. And, as Ivanhoe points out, one of

the most interesting and distinctive aspects of early Daoism is its rejection of the value of direct, magical control over Nature [...] Liezi is presented as someone who is naively enthralled with the more practical or *purposive* abilities that accrue to one who has attained some type of control over Nature” (Ivanhoe 2011, 139–40; emphasis in original).

Where does this leave us with regard to my interpretation of Jixian’s role within the passage? I wish to argue that she represents the kind of closed-minded person who ossifies and congeals all possibilities into a single one, discarding all alternatives. She sets everything in stone and comes to Huzi (that is, the text) with this frame of mind. Here, I wish to focus not on the progression of the transformations that she sees Huzi undergo—although they are important—but rather on that of her reactions to them, and in fact to what she finds inside of him, i.e. the text.

At first, she sees death, as usual. After all, this is a business she is an expert in. She believes she can read Huzi by analysing certain fixed facts about him and does not yet understand that there are no such facts in the empty “master”. In my analysis, this would be her first encounter with the *Zhuangzi*. She reads it like she would any other text, expecting to see fixity, set ideas, and definite *shifei* 是非 distinctions, that is, stable “rights” and “wrongs”.¹⁰ There may be a few pleasant stories in the text, but, in her mind, all of its contents can absolutely be fixed, like the rest of the *wanwu*. For her, there is nothing particularly obscure about the *Zhuangzi*.

When she comes again, Huzi is “recovering, there are healthy signs of life! [She] could see his blockage moving into balance” (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/22-23). She attributes that to her visit the previous day, thereby showing that she still has in mind the potency of her analysis. Two things have changed, however: instead of knowing quite precisely when he will die, Huzi will live; and she does not say until when. The reaffirmation of her skill is therefore accompanied by a first step back in her ability to discern precisely Huzi’s form and destiny. According to my reading, this would be the moment when she discovers the liveliness of the *Zhuangzi*—what Guo Xiang called its “overabundant blossoms” and “brimming

10 Much can be said about what *shifei* actually means, and whether “right” and “wrong” are not too loose of a translation, but this issue goes beyond the scope of my essay. For an insightful discussions of this topic as it pertains to the *Zhuangzi*, see Fraser (2015).

richness of flavor” (Lynn 2022, 566).¹¹ But at this point, she is imposing and applying her own ideas on the text. It is starting to make sense, but only because she comes at it with a *chengxin* 成心 filled with set ideas of her own. Indeed, this could be the signification of her arguing that it is thanks to their encounter that Huzi is feeling better and that his wet ashes have been dried and set aflame. Now of course, it is impossible to come to the text without one’s own *shifei* distinctions. And this confrontation between different valuation schemes and sets of ideas is a great feature of any intellectual encounter. But instead of letting them dissolve into the sea of possibilities and alternatives, Jixian keeps her *shifei* distinctions close to her heart-mind. She does not want to let go of this fixity and therefore engages with the text within her own framework, not the *Zhuangzi*’s. Huzi remarks that she “must have seen in me the incipient pulsion that can develop into all [she] regards as good” (Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 20/7/24-25).

The third time she comes back and “reads” the text, she is confused.¹² She tells Liezi “[your] master is an incoherent mess, I have no way to read his face” (Zhuangzi 2020, 71; 20/7/24-25). The expression she uses, *buqi* 不齊, can also be translated as “uneven”, “unsettled”, or “unstable”. And that can indeed be said of the *Zhuangzi*. The text, notably due to the differing voices of its multiple authors, presents ideas which are sometimes contradictory, sometimes responding to and criticizing each other. But most importantly, as mentioned earlier, it does not propose *the* way to follow *dao*. It makes a series of such ways accessible and acceptable, using a specific set of values and ideas when appropriate all the while permanently abiding by none. Importantly, as Defoort reminds us, on “[the] third day [Jixian] is troubled, but attributes this to his patient: Calabash is out of balance, but the shaman promises to return as soon as this is resolved” (Defoort 2012, 466). Jixian realizes during this third encounter that interacting with the text with a fixed mindset will not do. It resists ossification through a multitude of alternatives, and she sees this richness as a “mess”. This is symptomatic of a closed-minded person whose conservatism blinds them to the possibilities afforded to them by different points of view. She could arguably be compared to the frog in the well from the “Qiu shui 〈秋水〉” (“Autumn Waters”) chapter: unable to fathom other possibilities because of the narrowness of her perspective, she is confused and worried.¹³

Finally, before even the fourth meeting with Huzi, she flees. Was it out of fear? In a bout of anger, like Moeller suggests? Whatever the case may be—the text

11 There is a possibility that the preface these quotes are taken from and attributed to Guo Xiang may not have been written by him. I wish to remain neutral on this topic, but for the sake of simplicity, will consider Guo Xiang to have penned it.

12 I wish to clarify that although it is sometimes also translated as “to read” in the context of Jixian’s physiognomic analyses, the word *xiang* 相 cannot be applied to the reading of a text.

13 I wish to thank David Chai for this very helpful comparison.

only says that she loses herself and flees before having settled down [立未定，自失而走]. My reading has it this way: after having attempted to impose her own meaning onto the text and realizing this to be a lost cause, she decides to remain within her certitudes. She closes the book and does not pick it up again. Instead of indulging in the potential that was opened to her by the *Zhuangzi*, she decides to stay within the boundaries. Huzi attempted to show her the “unbegun-to-emerge-from-my-source [以未始出吾宗], where I and [she] both together are a vacuity [...] admitting of no understanding of who is who and what is what” (*Zhuangzi* 2020, 71; 21/7/28-29). The vacuity (Ziporyn’s translation of *xu* 虛) that she saw is the emptiness mentioned above. It is the possibility of resting on the *daoshu* 道樞 (the “axis” or “hinge” of *dao*), and to be adaptable in one’s practices, using a certain *shifei* scheme when adequate and another one when the situation requires it. She cannot accept this, of course, so she leaves. She is a disgruntled reader fed up with what she perceives to be some kind of unfixed, meaningless gibberish. Her fixed ways do not fit what the *Zhuangzi* has to offer, and the *shen* she used (also for the purposes of determining Huzi’s fate) cannot help her here.

So in the end, who is Jixian? In my reading, she is exactly who the text tells us she is right from the start: a *wu*, with all of the attendant implications this entails. She is outdated but retains the certainty that the old role of her profession is not obsolete—this is why I used the term conservatism earlier. She is the “old school”. The representative of a dying system. Now that Warring States society is replacing her with other experts and shifting away from its formerly wide-ranging use of shamanistic practices, she scoffs at the present and the future. And herein lies a possible reason why Liezi was not able to catch up with her: her time is done. She is the one dying, and her growing irrelevance banishes her from the story before it even ends.

Before going on to tackle Liezi’s role in the story, I wish to point out a caveat to this reading of mine. “Daoism” as it coalesced into a structured movement is rooted in the shamanistic traditions (notably those of the state of Chu 楚) that preceded its arising as one of China’s preeminent schools of thought *and* religions. As Lin puts it, “[most] students of the origins of Daoism see it as having built on the foundations of shamanism, or at the very least consider many of Daoism’s techniques, rituals, and beliefs as deriving from the shamanistic tradition” (Lin 2010, 276). Isabelle Robinet describes the influence that shamanism had in the formation of later Daoist concepts—which are sometimes adaptations of practices previously undertaken by the *wu*. More pointedly for the *Zhuangzi*, she writes that it is “possible and even probable that Zhuangzi is only the visible member of a once widespread movement that has left few traces”, the *Chuci* 楚辭 (“Songs of Chu”), which “are the product of the ‘shamanism’ of the south of China” (Robinet 1997, 35). So much so that some poems amongst the *Chuci* “allude to practices characteristic of later Taoism: the appearance of gods; mystical journeys of the

soul in distant, mythical countries, which recall those of Zhuangzi and Liezi [...] and feeling on cosmic effluvia, to which Zhuangzi referred and which have names that will be the same in certain Taoist texts” (ibid., 36). Moreover, references to these origins may be found elsewhere than in the text’s mentions of the *wu*. For instance, the *Dazongshi* mentions a series of sages who “got *dao*”. Amongst them, the “Queen Mother of the West” (*Xiwangmu* 西王母), a central member of the shamanistic tradition, is placed in parallel with other figures such as Fuxi 伏羲 or the Yellow Emperor.¹⁴ She “got it and thereby took her seat on Mt. Shaoguang—none knows her beginning or her end” (Zhuangzi 2020, 57; 16/6/34).

It would therefore be incorrect to see the *Zhuangzi*’s critique of Jixian as a whole-sale rejection. And, without getting too much ahead of ourselves, I propose in the last section of this paper that the text’s assessment is subtler than simply describing Jixian (or Liezi) as “wrong”. However, that critique remains, and is a first reason why I do not subscribe to the idea that Jixian is in fact a representant of a dying proto-Daoist tradition being pushed aside by the growing influence of the Confucian class of officials and scholars. Even though this alternative also provides a historical explanation for her disappearance before the end of the story, I do not believe this fits the story neatly. Of course, a first counterpoint lies in remembering that, when the “Inner Chapters” were written, there was no notion of Daoism as a unified tradition. And even after it had taken shape, centuries after the *Zhuangzi*’s composition, although many Daoist practices descended in direct line from shamanistic and *Chuci* traditions, practitioners and priests insisted that this heritage was inexistent or irrelevant (Robinet 1997, 36). In their 2nd century CE struggle against popular religion, the Celestial Masters (*Tianshi* 天師), “[used] old practices to their advantage [and] assumed an exorcistic role that connected them once more, *despite claims to the contrary*, to the ancient *wu* shamans” (ibid., 64; my emphasis).

Another reason why I argue that the text does not view the *wu* as this venerable class of inspirators is that in the one other instance the term appears in the “Inner Chapters”, they are made to look foolish again.¹⁵ The authors of the “Renjianshi” (人間世) (“In the Human World”) write that “[in] the expiation ceremony, cows with white spots, pigs with upturned snouts, and humans with haemorrhoids are considered unfit to be offered as sacrifices to the river god. All shamans [*wu* 巫] know this, and thus they regard these as creatures of bad fortune. But this is exactly why the Spiritlike Person [*shenren* 神人] regards them as creatures of very

14 See, for instance, Despeux (1990) for an account of the importance of the *Xiwangmu* for Daoism. The fact that she is another woman does not elude me, and Despeux’s work is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the role of women in Chinese religious groups throughout history.

15 The term appears only once more in the whole text, in the “Tianyun” (天運) (“The Spinning of the Heavens”) chapter, in a possible reference to Jixian. This very limited presence in the entire text further limits the idea that the *Zhuangzi* is particularly deferential towards the shamanesses.

good fortune indeed!” (Zhuangzi 2020, 42; 12/4/81-83). Here, shamanesses are seen as imposing socially accepted meanings on things that they wish they could use for sacrificial purposes, but do not because of some arbitrary features said things possess. The cows, pigs, and humans would be better off being left alone, and in fact *are* thanks to the hasty judgment of the shamanesses who consider them unworthy of being sacrificed. That someone being disvalued leads to their preservation is a recurring theme in the *Zhuangzi*, and in this case it is the shamanesses who are the object of the text’s critique.

If I were to integrate the legacy of the *wu* on the *Zhuangzi* with my reading of this passage, I would suggest that, though this influence is present, the ways the *Zhuangzi* proposes to tread on *Dao* are more apt and adaptable. The authors go beyond these origins, which also contain misguided principles, such as this idea of control over and fixed application of standards to the rest of the *wanwu*. The *Zhuangzi* could in fact be using Jixian as a background to present its new, rising, radical alternative. It proposes a new way to deal with and articulate ourselves within the *wanwu* that is already leaving its forebears behind.

Liezi: The “New School”

Jixian may be the one who is obviously castigated by the story, but Liezi is not outdone in that respect. Moeller perceptively reminds us that it “has been frequently noted that in both of [his] appearances in the ‘Inner Chapters’, Liezi is depicted somewhat critically as ‘misled by the glamour of magic’, to use the words of A. C. Graham [...], or in other words he represents a flawed Daoist practitioner” (Moeller 2016, 381). He further presents Huzi’s student as a silly fellow who reacts too quickly to the news of his master’s impending doom. However, Moeller argues that his reaction to this episode is to give up “studying the Daoist arts altogether” and to turn into “a caricature of a Confucian” (ibid., 384). I do not believe this to be what is at play here, and in fact wish to propose the opposite.

One of Liezi’s roles in the story is that of an intermediary. It is he who introduces the shamaness to his teacher, he who is first bedazzled by her and listens to her descriptions of his master’s health, and he as well who Huzi tells about his various forms and shapeshifting. It is also not mentioned whether he is present or not during the attempts at reading physiognomy that the shamaness led. He does not speak much—although his words are as “full” as they are few—and yet we can glean a wealth of information from his reactions. Liezi gets to know, thanks to his teacher, what Jixian misses out on. Now what he is told is poetic, mysterious, and quite inscrutable. But he can learn, nonetheless. The way that is done is one of the topics of Defoort’s paper. However, I wish, like I did with Jixian, to focus on *who* Liezi represents as a student.

He is a representative, not of the “old school” of the shamanesses, but of the “new school”, that of the *shi* 士 (“official-scholar” or “warriors”), of those who present themselves as sages and educated by other sages, who offer their services to the numerous rulers of pre-Qin China.¹⁶ He is an overly keen student who wishes to learn from Huzi and then apply this teaching to the problems of the world. The historical Confucius’ practice of educating disciples for them to then spread his principles in the courts of princes and dukes comes to mind when one considers how Liezi seems to conceive of the education he is getting. Thinking he has already gotten something out of the text, he practices the *dao* he believes Huzi was teaching him without realizing that he still has much to learn, since his understanding remains shallow. Speaking of his *dao*, his master tells him: “I have only finished showing you its outward ornament, not yet its inner reality. Have you really mastered this Course?” (Zhuangzi 2020, 70; 20/7/18). We should remember that it is through this fullness, which is derived from Liezi’s usage and practice of *dao*, that Jixian is able to read him. We do not know whether Jixian did indeed analyse Liezi’s physiognomy, but it is made clear that he went to see her—and thereby became “intoxicated” (*zui* 醉) with her. As it were, the text presents Liezi as wearing his heart-mind on his sleeve for everyone to see, including the expert *wu*.

Understood this way and in my interpretation, his approach to the text is at first glance similar to Jixian’s. His unwieldy *dao*, which he “browbeats” the world with, is the result of his fixating engagement with the text. Instead of understanding the text’s questioning of *shifei* and *bici* distinctions in themselves, he just thinks of the *Zhuangzi* as offering him a new, improved set of *shifei* and *bici* to live his life by. An alternative to other masters, to be sure, but one as fixed and inflexible as theirs. Again, having such a scheme at any given time may be unavoidable. Guo Xiang, in his introduction to the “Qiwulun”, says as much: “To affirm that one is a ‘this one’ [*shi*] and deny that one is a ‘that one’ [*bi*], to praise oneself and to vilify the other, no one ever fails to behave like this” (夫自是而非彼，美己而惡人，物莫不皆然) (Lynn 2022, 19). Guo Xiang is here pointing out the problem that every person is keen to see their own valuation scheme as the only valid one, or at least as the most valid one. Liezi acts like this with the *dao* that he thinks he has learned from Huzi, which is but a fragment of the substance that his master actually has to transmit. His scheme of values does not shift, is not able to evolve and adapt to fluctuating circumstances.

These themes may remind us of another story from the “Inner Chapters”, namely, the dialogue between Yan Hui and Confucius that begins the “Renjianshi”

16 It is important to note that the historical evidence on the existence of Lie Yukou 列御寇 (Liezi’s name as given in the *Zhuangzi*) is inconclusive. Although it is never said that he served in a court or was a *shi* himself, the fact that he may be entirely fabricated by the authors of the *Zhuangzi* could justify the rather flexible use of this character.

chapter. In it, Yan Hui asks for advice on how to deal with the ruler of Wei, who has become tyrannical. Confucius urges his student to be cautious, then a long conversation about how and whether one should have an influence on rulers ensues. This passage has numerous similarities with the story we have been dealing with so far. For instance, parallels can be drawn between the relationship linking Huzi and Liezi on the one hand and that of Confucius and Yan Hui on the other.

Firstly, and most obviously, they are both moments of teaching. Even though Confucius gives much more pointed advice than Huzi does, their reasonings are similar. In both cases, the emptiness of the masters—their lack of settling on any given set of standards—is at the heart of the story. In the case of Confucius, this is done so implicitly through one of the most central ideas introduced in that story: the fasting of the heart-mind (*xinzhai* 心齋). What this fasting pertains to is beyond the scope of this essay, but one of its results is the “vacuity” that Ziporyn translates *xu* as. After fasting one’s heart-mind, the “vital energy is then a vacuity, a waiting for the presence of whatever thing may come. The Course alone is the gathering of this vacuity. This vacuity is the fasting of the mind” (Zhuangzi 2020, 37; 9/4/27-28). And the reason why Yan Hui should pursue this emptiness is because he is behaving very much in the same way as Liezi, akin to a scholar-official. He tells his master of a few techniques and manipulations he is thinking of employing to influence the ruler without putting himself in harm’s way.

But each time, Confucius tells him that this would not do. That his “high-handed display of regulating words about humankindness and responsible conduct in the face of such a tyrant would just be a way of showing off [his own] beauty at the expense of [the ruler’s] ugliness” (Zhuangzi 2020, 35; 8/4/7-8). That if he were to “cling without [himself] transforming, externally accommodating but internally impervious to critique” (Zhuangzi 2020, 36; 9/4/17), that would lead to trouble. And most importantly, Confucius points out that Yan Hui is still treating his heart-mind as his “teacher and master” (Zhuangzi 2020, 36; 9/4/24). Fasting his heart-mind would instead enable him to effectuate real change all the while remaining safe from the sort of harm that having a name (*ming* 名) creates. As Yan Hui puts it after getting Confucius’ point, “when I am not yet able to make something happen in the actual world, I regard myself as this person named Hui. But just when something is actually made to happen there, this Hui has not yet begun to exist” (Zhuangzi 2020, 37; 9/4/28-29). Through emptying himself, Yan Hui could get rid of his fixations and of the objectives they lead him to pursue, instead remaining safe and effective.

We are not told if Yan Hui follows his master’s advice. Liezi, for his part, eventually goes beyond his behaviour. Moeller argues that the realization that he had not even started to learn anything is the final humorous twist in the tale:

As the ultimate simpleton, Liezi lives out his years in blissful ignorance and unwittingly adopts a ‘primitivist’ Daoist way of life out of ignorance. Ironically, he could only become a Daoist after he gave up trying what he could never learn. [...] Only in his retirement, and only after distancing himself from Daoist cultivation ambitions and training efforts, is he able to coincidentally—or perhaps “naturally” (*ziran* 自然)—partake in a Daoist experience. (Moeller 2016, 385)

But in my interpretation, Liezi’s behaviour is actually the opposite of what Moeller suggests. He does not go from “failed” Daoist practitioner to Confucian caricature who nonetheless adopts a Daoist primitivist lifestyle. The movement goes the other way around: he goes from a Confucian attitude towards learning and acting to applying the advice of Huzi-*Zhuangzi*. He begins as an inflexible Confucian student who applies what he thinks is his master’s *dao* to the world. But when he realizes that he had not yet begun to learn anything, he does not redouble his efforts but instead leaves his master behind. That is, in my interpretation, he *stops reading the Zhuangzi*.

This may remind one of a passage in the “Tiandao” (天道) (“Heaven’s Course”) chapter, namely Wheelwright Bian’s statement to Duke Huan that what he is reading (a book whose authors are dead) “is no more than the dregs and dust of the ancients” (Zhuangzi 2020, 116; 36/13/70). What Bian practices requires responsiveness and adaptability, and he cannot explain it in words, nor can he teach it to his son. This attitude to education as something which the student does not acquire *directly* from their master is prevalent in the *Zhuangzi*. And it is at play in Liezi’s decision to go home. After witnessing the exchanges between Jixian and Huzi, Liezi, in a sense, “begins to *lose his self*” (Iwanowska 2017, 37; emphasis in original). This self is the distinction-making self which resolutely adopts one single scheme of valuation. In his commentary on Liezi’s behaviour, Guo Xiang claims that he “forgot all distinctions between noble and base”, that he “rejected gorgeous elaboration and adopted unadorned simplicity”, and that he “allowed all others to live out their natural lives to the end” (Lynn 2022, 173). This last point is a significant change from the person who used to want to impose his views on the world. He realizes the futility of his previous behaviour and stops using the fixed *shifei* schemes he mistakenly attributed to his master’s *dao*. But in a society as patriarchal as Warring States China, serving one’s wife goes beyond a reversal of roles. I do not, however, wish to suggest any proto-feminism in this passage.¹⁷

17 This being said, there is much within the *Zhuangzi* that can and should be used for feminist purposes. See for example Ha (2016) it explores alternative paths to equality suggested in the Daoist wisdom tradition. Zhuangzi’s subversive wisdom, characterized by radical pluralism based on the respect for difference and otherness, and by an alternative identity politics based on interdependence and mutual transformation between things, provides an alternative to the collectivism rooted in the

In fact, Liezi does not reverse the roles. He destroys them by not giving them currency. The teacher who is not a teacher taught him to be a husband who is not a husband married to a wife who is not a wife.¹⁸

Liezi originally behaves like a scholar who wishes to learn from specific masters of the hundred schools (*baijia* 百家). He begins the story as a representative of the “new school”, of the system of governance that had emerged throughout the Warring States period. He conceived of himself, misguidedly, as needing to be someone’s disciple before going on to tackle the world with his master’s teachings as a weapon. His fullness is shared by Confucian scholars, albeit in different ways (for their own fixed *Dao* are probably quite different regardless of their shared fixity). But he does not leave the frame like Jixian does. Beyond the idea that, being from the “new school”, he is much more current and modern than her even at the beginning of the story, there is a change in him which the shamaness does not undergo. Both her and his fixed self are silly and injudicious. But when both of them were offered a third way, beyond the old and the new, a third way which was indeed made up of ten thousand ways, she remained within her own realm, whereas he discarded the realm entirely.

Role In the Text

While this may all be satisfactory, the significance of this interpretation beyond textual analysis has not yet been fully fleshed out, and that is the purpose of this last section.

As mentioned earlier, this story is the penultimate one of the *Zhuangzi*’s “Inner Chapters”. If we accept the broadly canonical idea that these seven chapters represent the words actually written by Zhuang Zhou 莊周, the Huzi passage can be seen to serve as a conclusion to what has just been read.¹⁹ Not in the sense of a

Confucian tradition and to the individualism rooted in modern Western thought, both of which reflect hierarchical worldviews that create the dichotomy of the subject/self/human and the object/other/nature and marginalize “the Other,” including women.”,”container-title”:”QUEST: Studies on Religion & Culture in Asia”,,”language”:”en”,,”source”:”Zotero”,,”title”:”Alternative Paths to Equality in the <i>Zhuangzi</i>: an Asian Feminist Perspective”,,”volume”:”1”,,”author”:[{“family”:”Ha”,,”given”:”SungAe”}],,”issued”:[{“date-parts”:[[“2016”]]}],,”citation-key”:”haAlternative-PathsEquality2016a”}],,”suppress-author”:true}],,”schema”:”https://github.com/citation-style-language/schema/raw/master/csl-citation.json”} .

18 This is reminiscent of *Analekts* (12.11), where Confucian role ethics takes its most obvious expression. Confucius argues that good government requires the gentleman to behave as such, the minister as such, the father as such, and the child as such. The *Zhuangzi*, in my reading, completely short-circuits this recommendation.

19 We do not need to accept this delineation of the text. As a matter of fact, it has been the subject of contention for quite some time now, some contributors to the debate being Liu (1994), Graham

final, logical step that the entire text has been leading up to thus far, but instead as an occasion for the reader to reflect on what has been proposed in the previous chapters. And in fact, my reading makes this passage particularly apt at providing such an opportunity. Having gone through the seven chapters, one may fall prey to behaving a little bit like Liezi: taking their points without fully grasping them, applying them without adaptability or nuance, ossifying the text's recommendations. The authors of the text's chapters, whether "Inner", "Outer", or "Miscellaneous", are aware of this tendency to almost blindly follow the points made by "masters", and that is indeed one of the reasons for the emphasis that they put on teaching, learning, and emptiness. But the story of Huzi is a cautionary tale against this possible outcome. A sort of manual to understand what would happen if the text were to be read in the way either Jixian or Liezi do at first. It is also a reminder that this book too is doomed to become the "dregs and dust of the ancients", and that it will inevitably need to be left behind for the reader to go further—the way Liezi leaves Huzi behind. It may remind one of the last passage from the "Waiwu" (外物) ("External things") chapter.

A fish trap is there for the fish. When you get the fish, you forget the trap.
A snare is there for the rabbits. When you get the rabbit, you forget the snare. Words are there for the intent. When you get the intent, you forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words, so I can have a word with him? (Zhuangzi 2020, 224; 75/26/48-49).

Along with the clearly humorous tone of this passage, we can detect the sort of idea also at play in Liezi's decision to leave Huzi. That decision, which paradoxically enables him to learn more and renders his practices more adaptable and less fixed, is at the heart of the *Zhuangzi*'s understanding of itself as a text. Sooner or later, it must be abandoned in favour of actually, effectively practicing what it proposes.

Of course, this is not the *final* story of the "Inner Chapters". That honour goes to the famous tale of Shu 儵, Hu 忽, and Hundun 渾沌. However, the murder of Hundun by the two well-meaning but foolish kings can be read in a very similar

(2003), and Klein (2010; 2022) that they already formed a coherent unit in the Warring States, and that they came from a single hand. After reviewing what is known about the early history of the *Zhuangzi* text, various arguments that have been made in support of early, coherent inner chapters, are examined. Taking the Shiji portrait of the *Zhuangzi* as the starting point, it is shown that Sima Qian's description and use of the *Zhuangzi* already gives us reason to question the importance, or even existence, of the inner chapters in the Western Han. It is then shown that pre-Han and Han references to Zhuang Zhou, and parallels with the *Zhuangzi* text, do not necessarily even require (or support) I do not think that this changes the substance of the point that I am trying to make. Even if the "Yingdiwang" chapter was not written by Zhuang Zhou, the story of Huzi can still be seen as the cautionary tale I describe below.

fashion. What Shu and Hu do is to impose onto Hundun standards that they think are universally applicable, such as the need to repay (*bao* 報) their host for his “bounteous virtue” (*de* 德), as Ziporyn translates it, but most importantly that one should have seven holes to see, hear, eat, and breathe (Zhuangzi 2020, 72; 21/7/33-35). There are many interpretations for this passage.²⁰ A common thread that runs through them is that the superimposition of standards, ideas, practices on Hundun is a form of violence that leads to this character’s demise. That also applies to the *Zhuangzi*. The text would suffer from having ideas forcibly superimposed onto itself, *even its own ideas*, which would thus be used in ways that run counter to the authors’ recommendations. In this way, Shu and Hu can be compared to Jixian, who also comes at what she encounters with her own pre-conceptions and does not deviate from them. But in her case, it is not Huzi who “dies”, as it were, but herself.

Finally, this cautionary tale is also in itself another instance of the text’s refusal to give its reader a single way to adhere to *dao* or a single set of standards. Understood as such a story, the tale of Huzi still does not tell us what the best or most effective way to read the *Zhuangzi* is. If it had done so, we would be facing the same problems I mentioned earlier. But no, instead it presents possible attitudes towards itself, shows alternatives and what they may lead to without offering a single obvious judgment of value on either the shamaness or the overkeen student. They may be foolish and fixed, but they are not depicted as being “wrong”. Through a poetic and at times humorous passage, the text gently nudges us away from ossifying, fixating ways of considering it without ever telling us exactly how we should read it – as there is no single proper way to do so. This is not a fault but an intrinsic feature of a text that found in emptiness the way to always resist absolutism.

Conclusion

The *Zhuangzi*’s wealth is to be found within the ever-shifting fluctuation of its words. It gives us a quest to find ever more varied possibilities for distinction and *shifei* alternatives. How we respond to that quest can be read as one of the topics of the encounter between Huzi, Jixian, and Liezi. I started by offering a quick introduction to the story and then went on to provide its historical background. The shamanesses were shown to be members of a disappearing caste of government officials, and this status comes into play in the subsequent description I gave of Jixian’s role in the tale. I then introduced a few examples of previous

20 Examples of engagement with that passage include Girardot (1983) and Moeller (2017) amongst many others. Possible interpretations may see it as a social satire, a tragedy, a cosmogonical statement about the universe, all of these possibilities and none of them.

engagements with this passage, notably Defoort' and Moeller's articles, arguing that my reading was at least in some ways compatible with and building upon some of the points that they made. I then presented my own theory, arguing that Huzi can be seen as a representation of the *Zhuangzi*, whereas Jixian and Liezi are two people coming at the text from different angles and with different attitudes. Huzi's emptiness is a feature he shares with the text, and it enables him to always propose alternatives: he teaches a multiplicity of ways to follow *dao*, not *the dao*. Jixian is the representative of the "old school", of the way things were dealt with before the Warring States period and all its changes took over. She comes at this text full of certainties, applies her own distinctions and set of values to it and, when she cannot fully master and understand it, she leaves it to the side and disappears, like the world she belongs to. Liezi also has set ideas, but he got them from the *Zhuangzi* itself. Instead of understanding the fluidity of *shifei* distinctions, he switches from one fixed valuation scheme to another, not understanding the depth of the *Zhuangzi*'s critique of valuation. But he then starts to learn to use the text properly, and eventually not to use it at all. He discards his past fixity and the arguably Confucian attitude he had to education in order to live his life of simplicity. This tale, at the end of the "Yingdiwang" chapter, at the conclusion of the "Inner Chapters", pushes the reader to reflect on themselves, all the while speaking *of itself*. It is a brilliant exercise in fourth-wall trickery, and a fantastic reminder that the *Zhuangzi* always encourages us to rest a while on the axis of *dao*.

References

- Boileau, Gilles. 2002. "Wu and Shaman." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 65 (2): 350–78.
- Chai, David. 2018. "Rethinking the Daoist Concept of Nature." *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 43 (3–4): 259–74.
- Chang, K C. 1983. *Art, Myth, and Ritual: The Path to Political Authority in Ancient China*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Davis, Edward L. 2001. *Society and the Supernatural in Song China*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Defoort, Carine. 2012. "Instruction Dialogues in the *Zhuangzi*: An 'Anthropological' Reading." *Dao* 11 (4): 459–78. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-012-9294-x>.
- Despeux, Catherine. 1990. *Immortelles de la Chine ancienne: Taoïsme et alchimie féminine*. Collection Destins de femmes. Puiseaux: Pardès.
- Fraser, Chris. 2015. "Zhuangzi and the Heterogeneity of Value." In *New Visions of the Zhuangzi*, edited by Livia Kohn, 40–58. Three Pines Press.

- Girardot, N. J. 1983. *Myth and Meaning in Early Taoism: The Theme of Chaos (Hun-Tun)*. Hermeneutics, Studies in the History of Religions. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Graham, Angus C. 2003. "How Much of Chuang Tzu Did Chuang Tzu Write?" In *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, edited by Harold D Roth, vol. 20. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Ha, Sung Ae. 2016. "Alternative Paths to Equality in the Zhuangzi: An Asian Feminist Perspective." *QUEST: Studies on Religion & Culture in Asia* 1.
- Ivanhoe, Philip J. 2011. "The Theme of Unselfconsciousness in the Liezi." In *Riding the Wind with Liezi: New Perspectives on the Daoist Classic*, edited by Ronnie Littlejohn, and Jeffrey Walter Dippmann, 127–49. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.
- Iwanowska, Joanna. 2017. "Can a Daoist Sage Have Close Relationships with Other Human Beings?" *Diametros* 52 (June): 23–46. <https://doi.org/10.13153/DIAM.52.2017.1057>.
- Klein, Esther. 2010. "Were There 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the Zhuangzi." *T'oung Pao* 96 (4): 299–369. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156853210X546509>.
- . 2022. "Early Chinese Textual Culture and the Zhuangzi Anthology: An Alternative Model for Authorship." In *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*, edited by Kim-chong Chong, vol. 16, 13–43. Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-92331-0>.
- Lagerway, John. 2019. "Intellectual Change in the Warring States and Han (481 BC–220 AD)." In *Paradigm Shifts in Early and Modern Chinese Religion: A History*, vol. 34, 1–55. Handbook of Oriental Studies. Leiden: Brill.
- Lai, Karyn L. 2015. "Cosmology, Divinity and Self-Cultivation in Chinese Thought." In *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Graham Oppy, 93–113. Routledge.
- Li, Zehou. 2018. *The Origins of Chinese Thought: From Shamanism to Ritual Regulations and Humaneness*. Translated by Robert A. Carleo. Leiden: Brill.
- Lin, Fu-shih. 2008. "The Image and Status of Shamans in Ancient China." In *Early Chinese Religion: Part One: Shang through Han (1250 BC–220 AD)*, edited by John Lagerway, and Marc Kalinowski, 397–458. Leiden: Brill.
- . 2010. "Shamans and Politics." In *Early Chinese Religion: Part Two: The Period of Division (220–589 AD)*, edited by John Lagerway, and Pengzhi Lü, vol. 2, 275–318. Leiden: Brill.
- Littlejohn, Ronnie. 2011. "The Liezi's Use of the Lost Zhuangzi." In *Riding the Wind with Liezi: New Perspectives on the Daoist Classic*, edited by Ronnie Littlejohn, and Jeffrey Walter Dippmann, 31–50. Albany, New York: SUNY Press.

- Liu, Xiaogan. 1994. *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lynn, Richard John. 2022. *Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang*. Translations from the Asian Classics. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Machek, David. 2016. “Beyond Sincerity and Pretense: Role-Playing and Unstructured Self in the Zhuangzi.” *Asian Philosophy* 26 (1): 52–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09552367.2015.1136202>.
- Moeller, Hans-Georg. 2016. “Liezi’s Retirement: A Parody of a Didactic Tale in the Zhuangzi.” *Dao* 15 (3): 379–92. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-016-9502-1>.
- . 2017. “Hundun’s Mistake: Satire and Sanity in the Zhuangzi.” *Philosophy East and West* 67 (3): 783–800. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2017.0063>.
- Robinet, Isabelle. 1997. *Taoism: Growth of a Religion*. Translated by Phyllis Brooks. Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Schafer, Edward H. 1967. *Ancient China. Great Ages of Man*. New York: Time-Life Books.
- Zhuangzi. 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Translated by Brook Ziporyn. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.