

New Visions
of the
Zhuangzi

edited

by

Livia Kohn

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Beyond Our Control? Two Responses to Uncertainty and Fate in Early China

MERCEDES VALMISA

Like all men in Babylon, I have been proconsul; like all, a slave. I have also known omnipotence, opprobrium, imprisonment. Look: the index finger on my right hand is missing. Look: through the rip in my cape you can see a vermilion tattoo on my stomach. It is the second symbol, Beth. This letter, on nights when the moon is full, gives me power over men whose mark is Gimmel, but it subordinates me to the men of Aleph, who on moonless nights owe obedience to those marked with Gimmel. In the half light of dawn, in a cellar, I have cut the jugular vein of sacred bulls before a black stone. During a lunar year I have been declared invisible. I shouted and they did not answer me; I stole bread and they did not behead me. I have known what the Greeks do not know, incertitude.”

—Jorge Luis Borges, *The Lottery in Babylon*

Common approaches to early Chinese philosophy include distinguishing virtue ethics from deontology, metaphysics from political philosophy, religious versus secular views, Daoist versus Confucian thought, and other conventional categories of thinking that serve the purpose of classification.

The distinction between Daoism (*daoia* 道家) and Confucianism (*ruzhe* 儒者), the two most prominent ancient philosophical and religious traditions of China, has proven to be particularly resilient. Arguably invented in 2nd century BCE by Sima Tan 司馬談 or his son Qian 遷 and used in the *Shiji* 史記 (Historical Records; esp. 130.3289-92), it is still one of the main ways of classification and hermeneutical analysis of early texts today. Scholars place even newly found textual materials into either of these two traditions as soon as appear in print. Although they have associated some manuscripts discovered in the last decades with other philosophical categories, such as Legalism or Huang-Lao thought, they tend to rely on Daoism and Confucianism as the two pillars of thought central to early Chinese society.

Still, the study of excavated manuscripts has also persuaded many scholars not only that pre-imperial texts typically go back to compilation by different hands over long periods of time, but also that many works are composites of pre-existing materials. Texts surviving often did not have a stable or closed form until much later, and the book-and-chapter format they have today is misleading in that it invites the presumption of an un-

due degree of linearity, unity, identity, and coherence.¹ Therefore, we should not treat texts compiled under a single title as inherently sharing an intellectual identity and coherence by virtue of their purported authorship and subsequent ascription to a certain intellectual lineage. Neither should we consider a given text necessarily opposed to others that happened to be handed down in a different compilation and under the classification of a different school of thought.

The very notion of schools of thought is of dubious applicability for the pre-imperial and early imperial periods. The composite nature of pre-imperial texts begets textual variation and internal contradictions. More often than not, there is not one mind behind the text, controlling it. Instead, as has been argued, Warring States masters should be seen as a creation of the “author function” through the text, rather than a creation of a text by an author (see Lewis 1999a). In the process of inventing the masters, Han critics reflected their own factional disagreements, reconstructing philosophical ideas as lineages of the late Warring States that held different moral and political positions (Nylan 2000).

Although the *Shiji* hints at different schools or intellectual traditions (*jia* 家), the division of pre-imperial texts into text-centered lineages does not appear in full maturity until later. It is found in the imperial bibliographies of Liu Xiang 劉向 (ca. 77-6 BCE), Liu Xin 劉歆 (50 BCE-23 CE), and Ban Gu 班固 (32-92 CE), contained in the *Hanshu* 漢書 (History of the Han Dynasty) “*Yiwenzhi*” 藝文志 (Treatise on Literature). In the process of producing the bibliographies, editors typically identified the author of a text with the founding master (*zi* 子) or family lineage (*shi* 師) of the tradition, to which they assumed a specific set of texts belonged.

This held true for master texts as well as for commentarial traditions. On the other hand, editors seldom assigned technical writings (*shushu* 數術) to a particular author or tradition. Being aware of these limitations and the ways in which early texts have come down to us is fundamental in order to avoid erroneous judgments with regard to the status, production, and use of texts in pre-imperial China. These misconceptions are precisely what have led scholars to interpret pre-imperial texts as “master texts” and texts within a distinct intellectual lineage. However, authorship and intellectual affiliation ascription as a textual phenomenon did not emerge until the Western Han, and, thus, Confucian and Daoist are not useful classifications for pre-imperial and early imperial texts.

¹ See Boltz 2005; Nylan 2005; Nylan and Csikszentmihalyi 2003; Owen 2006; Richter 2013; Smith 2003; Yu 1985.

Textual Classification

The texts under discussion here are the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, notably its sixth chapter, “Dazongshi” 大宗師 (Great Ancestral Master), and a text excavated from Guodian tomb no. 1, the *Qiongda yishi* 窮達以時 (Failure and Success Depend on Opportunity). Scholars have ascribed them to Daoism and Confucianism respectively, each under different circumstances.

According to extant materials, the term “Daoism” (*daojia* 道家) first appears in *Shiji* 130 (Postface). Here, *jia* might best be read “specialist” rather than “intellectual tradition.” Sima Tan did not refer to textual or intellectual lineages but rather to categories of methods and expertise—clearly reflected in that the “Postface” does not mention any canonical work or founder with regard to the different *jia*, but rather their different methods and techniques (Nylan and Csikszentmihalyi 2003). In the first extant reference to the *Zhuangzi* as a text, also in the *Shiji* (ch. 63), the text is said to have more than 100,000 words, although only three chapters are mentioned by name (“Quqie” 祛箒, “Daozhi” 盜跖, and “Yufu” 漁父).

The *Hanshu* “Yiwenzhi” says that the *Zhuangzi* consists of fifty-two chapters;² here it appears for the first time directly under the rubric “Daoist,” an ascription that would mark it forever. In the 20th century, scholars have paid increasing attention to ideological contradictions and differences in writing style and literary quality; they have also attempted to match the various hands behind the work with different intellectual groups and/or philosophical trends (see Fischer 2007; Fraser 1997; Graham 2001; Hansen 2003; Klein 2011; Liu 1994a). Nevertheless, the *Zhuangzi* is still today, together with the *Daode jing*, largely and undoubtedly identified as a foundational Daoist text.³

The ascription of the *Qiongda yishi*, excavated in 1993 in Guodian (Jingmen City, Hubei Province), to Confucianism is not as old.⁴ The tombs date from around 300 BC, the *terminus ante quem* the texts came into being. Early manuscripts generally come to us without title, authorship, date, or intellectual affiliation (see Giele 2003; Meyer 2009); yet modern scholars have developed efficient ways of inserting them into convenient, pre-established categories. Based on parallels with received texts and perceived intellectual affinities, ever since their first publication by the Jing-

² Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Hanshu buzhu* 漢書補註 30.1731 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji).

³ *Zhuangzi* and Laozi are first associated with each other in the *Shiji* (see Barnwell 2012).

⁴ For the excavation report, see Jingmen 1997. The most recent and complete account of the tomb discovery in English is found in Cook 2012, 1-96.

men City Museum (1998, 1), they have divided the texts of the Guodian corpus into Daoist and Confucian materials. The wave of studies that followed the publication of the manuscripts continued to employ these rubrics in organizing the texts (Li 1999; Li 2000). Moreover, Li Ling associates all Guodian “Confucian” works with Zisi 子思, and claims that they fill the gap in the transmission chronology between Confucius and Mencius; he and others have repeatedly linked the *Qionгда yishi* with this school (Li and Jiang 1999).

Paul Goldin identifies the Guodian manuscripts as the missing link in the transmission of Confucianism, specifically as anticipating ideas in Xunzi’s 荀子 philosophy (2000, 113-46). He thus separates himself from those who ascribe them to Zisi, but also from those who would rather relate them to Mencius (Pang 1998; 2000). Recently Lai Chen (2010) opened a fourth path by arguing that the Guodian materials present a view on human nature previous to, and different from, those of both Mencius and Xunzi, and more in line with that of Confucius as represented in the *Lunyu*, which he thinks are earlier.⁵ Other scholars have adopted a still different approach to the Guodian texts. Scott Cook (2012) argues that there is a higher degree of homogeneity among the Guodian “Confucian” texts than expected among Confucian texts in general; he concludes that they are the tomb occupant’s personal and highly selective corpus of a particular philosophical orientation. Kenneth Holloway (2009) takes a more radical position; he argues that the texts of the Guodian corpus all share a consistent religious belief and, to some extent, political stance. He finds a principle of unity and homogeneity by virtue of a shared provenance, a means of classification different from the traditional one,⁶ calling attention to the anachronism and fuzziness of the traditional classification into Confucian and Daoist categories.

We would do better to reject the notions of author, book, and school of thought as hermeneutic principles for the early period. Once all arbitrary categories retrospectively imposed on early Chinese texts—such as those of “master” as opposed to non-philosophical texts, Confucian as opposed to Daoist texts, or those written by Zhuangzi as opposed to ones by Mencius—are gone, we can openly face the domain of all formulations.

⁵ For a critique of the traditional view that the *Lunyu* is the foundational work of Confucianism, written by subsequent generations of disciples of Confucius, see Hunter 2012.

⁶ For reflection on the notion of “tomb library” and the possibility of the tomb to become a meaningful context for the interpretation of the objects found within it, see Meyer 2009. He argues against taking the tomb as a reference point to understand texts from a particular angle.

This domain can yet be defined (and needs to be defined) with a new classification. Indeed, understanding the different nature of each material is fundamental to define the kind of discourse we are dealing with in every instance, and hence to analyze the texts. We need to differentiate and classify the texts by types of discourse, intended audience, and targeted issues.

The difference between the old classification and the new is that the latter is upward or empirical, whereas the former was downward, imposed on texts on a theoretical, preconceived basis. Upward classification consists of studying the features of the formulations in their own context by paying attention to the divisions they call upon rather than starting from a set of fixed distinctions and then fitting materials into them (Bagley 2008). In order to accomplish this, the primary necessary step is “the project of a pure description of discursive events as the horizon for the search for the unities that form within it” (Foucault 1969, 29).

Facing the wide domain of all formulations, what new relations, connections, or regularities can we see? Some formulations appear related to others, even if not by the same author and even if the originally named authors were not aware of these connections. Some groups of formulations established as such reveal particular relations, even if they do not concern the same domains and if they do not share the same formal features. Some formulations and events of a different order show specific relationship—social, economic, political, and so on (see Foucault 2002). Looking at things afresh, we can reestablish new and meaningful connections, build new boundaries to map early Chinese thought.

When we know almost nothing about the history and society of a given period, as it is the somewhat case with the Zhou dynasty, the only context we can put texts in is textual, i.e., the plane of early Chinese textuality.⁷ In this broad textual context, we can pursue patterns to establish connections and from there build new means of understanding. Willard Peterson (1988) has suggested mapping Chinese thought through the metaphor of “square and circular sources of knowing.” Others, such as Mark Edward Lewis (1999b) and Donald Harper (1999), divide early Chinese texts by themes and expertise. Another option is to differentiate between performative and theoretical texts (see Yu et al. 2000).

⁷ There is some material context for the pre-imperial period, invaluable to understanding society and intellectual affairs. For an analysis, see Bagley 1987; Rawson 1990; So 1995. On society, see Falkenhausen 2006; Chao 2003; 2011.

Coping with Fate

There are, therefore, many ways to divide and analyze early Chinese texts. Each might be useful for a particular purpose, but none replaces all others and can monopolize our understanding. For the purposes of this study, I would like to make a basic, broad attempt at creating a way of mapping early Chinese texts that does not employ notions of authorship, textual identity, ideological consistency, or the traditional idea of schools of thought. I will work from the assumption that there are texts with or without philosophical temperament and approach this distinction from the perspective of coping with fate. One of the most prominent early Chinese patterns of thinking in this regard is that of following calendrical and cosmic rules to ensure a proper way of action when dealing with potential future events, particularly distressing ones. That is to say, the individual accommodates his actions to some larger pattern and abides by the stable rules derived from it. To me, these practices are “non-philosophical” insofar as they do not entail personal reflection and thoughtful, creative responses.

It seems that the most common methods of dealing with daily life events and ordinary decision-making in early China involved calendars and divinations. Hemerology offers a conventional method for action patterns and ordered behavior. It creates routine in decision-making, calendrical rules that claim to apply the order of nature to the order of society offering an easy model for deciding when and how to act. Examples of this appear in the “Yueling” 月令 (Monthly Ordinances) chapter of the *Liji* 禮記 (Book of Rites) and the “Shize” 時則 (Seasonal Rules) chapter of the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (Book of the Master of Huainan) as well as in various excavated almanacs (*rishu* 日書) (see Loewe 1988). Divination by yarrow stalks, typically linked with the *Yijing* 易經 (Book of Changes) and apparent in some anecdotes in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 (Mr. Zuo’s Transmissions), also involved the interconnection between the natural and human orders and helped people to decide among different courses of action in various situations. However, calendars and divination do not account for unpredictable and sudden (non-cyclical, non-patterned) changes, for turns of destiny such as sudden death, sickness, misfortune, punishment, or disgrace. Here the philosophical proposals I examine are at play, offering different programs for dealing with changes, fate, and the unpredictable.⁸

⁸ Broadly speaking, “fate” in early China includes the following two categories: the set of capacities and features that one has by birth, i.e., whether one is born rich or handsome; and the opportunities or challenges one encounters in life, in-

It is not difficult to consult an almanac or the calendar to figure out an appropriate time to cut down the mulberry tree in the backyard without causing misfortune, such as the wife's death (Harkness 2013). However, it is not so easy to know how to react to, or to cope with, unexpected events that the calendar makes no allowance for, something we cannot control or prepare for in advance. When we see the unexpected as a positive and fortunate event, we never wonder how to deal with it: we simply welcome it and rejoice. However, how can and should we react to what we consider disaster or disgrace?

This paper presents two different philosophical answers to this issue. One works with "adaptation," a turning outward; the other is by means of self-vigilance, often called "being watchful over oneself" (*shenqidu* 慎其獨), which implies a turning inward. *Zhuangzi* 6 serves as the main example of adaptive behavior, whereas the *Qionгда yishi* presents an instance of self-vigilance.

Both texts call on the individual to develop a psychological response, as opposed to relying on something external, such as the calendar or divination, to restore mental peace and supply tranquility. In philosophically tempered texts, amelioration of the conditions of living comes from the individual's inner work rather than from an external technology that may provide an illusory sense of control. Only after dispensing with the artificial classification of these texts as Daoist and Confucian can we begin to establish a distinction between texts of philosophical temperament that emphasize reflection and self-cultivation and texts without philosophical temperament that focus on the establishment of fixed and predictable rules for conduct.

Zhuangzi, "Dazongshi"

Some parts of the *Zhuangzi* propose adaptive responsiveness as the best way to deal with changes and situations not under one's control. One needs to adapt purposively to changes, moving along with them and making best use of new opportunities. This response appears in the "death dialogues" in *Zhuangzi* 6, "Dazongshi," notably in the conversation between the four masters, who ask the core question, "Who can take nothingness as the head, life as the backbone, and death as the rump-bone? Who un-

cluding social success, punishment, and sickness. Both are considered as "things that cannot be avoided" (*wuke naihe* 無可奈何). For extended studies, see Lupke 2004; as well as the recent issue of *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* (vol. 6, 2014), which focuses particularly on "Changing Fate in Daoism" (http://dao.crs.cuhk.edu.hk/ch/drhs_index.html).

derstands that life and death, existence and disappearance are one single body? I would become his friend.”

Their friendship based on this attitude to life, they soon confront the unexpected. One of them, Master Yu, falls seriously ill, being deformed in a most hideous way. Still, he maintains a positive attitude.

Why should I resent it? If [the maker of things] were to transform my left arm into a rooster, I would avail myself of this change to keep watch on the night. If he were to transform my right arm into a slingshot, I would avail myself of this change to shoot down an owl and roast it. If he were to transform my rump-bone into a cartwheel, and my spirit into a horse, I would avail myself of this change to mount it—why, I would never need another carriage! (see Wang 1982, 6:62)

The text continues with the general conclusion that one needs to recognize appropriate timing and accommodate to the various changes of body and world without allowing “sorrow or joy to enter.” It calls this state “liberation from the bonds” and emphasizes that there is no way one can ever “win over Heaven.”

The key teaching in this story is that, however big the changes, even if they involve terminal disease, we should not fear or hate them but adapt to them and see in them a window of opportunity. By adaptation, I mean the attitude of purposively adjusting oneself to match some outside tendency in order to successfully deal with it. The opposite would be to refuse taking the features of the object or situation into consideration and act either as if they were not there or in opposition to them. In other words, one would try to ignore reality or attempt to force the situation to one’s will. One might also submit to it but in a resentful, grumbling manner, deploring fate and invoking the gods for help. The latter is reflective of traditional popular religion as reflected in hemerology and divination. Both supposedly offer a forewarning and provide time for preparation, and if caught unawares, one resorts to divine supplication as a remedy.

In contrast, the *Zhuangzi* proposes a thoughtful and creative personalized response, a mode of action that served as a relevant proposal for coping with fate in ancient China. Adaptation is about accepting a particular situation as it occurs—as opposed to its prediction—and deciding for and by oneself the course of action that suits the situation best. In this regard, it is also the opposite of following a pre-established set of rules or behavioral guidelines, and thus relates to freedom. Master Yu accordingly describes his attitude as “freeing of the bonds” (*xianjie* 縣解), as opposed to going against Heaven (fate, the unavoidable) and “being tied to things” (*wu you jiezhi* 物有結之).

The adaptive person liberates himself from all the prejudices engrained in conventional morality that qualify certain things, states, or situations as inherently bad and others as inherently good. Able to go along with whatever life, fate, or Heaven bring without making axiological judgments, he breaks the bonds that kept him tied to things “as they are supposed to be,” that is to say, to his (and society’s) acquired idea of things. Thus, he becomes open to changes and does not resent them. On the contrary, he may even see a new situation as an opportunity.

Adapting to life’s changes as they come is the only reasonable and efficient response for the author of this passage. This is evident as the story continues, with Master Lai getting sick to the point of death. He says,

The Great Clod loads me with form, labors me with life, eases me with old age, and rests me with death. Therefore, what makes good my life makes good my death. Now, if a great caster was casting metal, and the metal leapt up and said, ‘I must be made a [famous sword] Moye,’ the great caster must consider it to be inauspicious. (Wang 1982, 6:64)

Master Lai depicts the maker of things (Great Clod) as a caster and the non-adaptive person as a rebellious piece of metal. He explains how inadequate and useless any effort would be to go against fate, agreeing with his friends’ sentiment that “nothing can ever win over Heaven.” Nevertheless, this does not serve to invoke passive acceptance of the conditions of being and the vagaries of fate, nor does it support a resignation to the limits of reality. Partly because of this and similar passages, scholars have labeled the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* deterministic, conformist, and fatalist, seeing it as a philosophy of contentment with destiny rather than liberation (see Graham 1989; Liu 1994b; Slingerland 2003).

Instead, the story proposes acceptance of whatever comes and adaptation to any situations Heaven brings, so that nothing becomes a limitation. It shows the unforeseen and unavoidable as conditions of possibility, of new dimensions of being in this world. The reality of how things are and what they become always determines the way we can deal with them. Nevertheless, the goal of the philosophical proposal of adaptation is to understand that this determination can turn into conditions of success in life. Therefore, we should take advantage of those conditions rather than let them become limitations.

Adaptation as going along and accommodating to the timing and features of things requires the realization that we cannot force things to be different, but we are always able to modify our response. Moreover, it requires the acknowledgment that no conditions are *a priori* good or bad. Anything can be good or bad depending on our perspective. In this sense, the text presents an ontological and epistemological approach to reality

that leads to a particular philosophy of life. It combines the idea of phenomenal neutrality with epistemological equanimity, for only equanimity gives a person the opportunity to approach phenomena with an unprejudiced mind. The same set of given conditions can bear good, bad, or mediocre fruit, depending on how the person adapts to, takes advantage of, or deals with them. According to the *Zhuangzi*, there is no such thing as misfortune or disgrace. All situations are *a priori* axiologically equal. It is up to the individual to turn it into something beneficial.⁹ Thus, Master Yu claims that, were the maker of things to transform his left arm into a slingshot, he, far from resenting the change, would use it to catch owls.

In chapter 1, Zhuangzi tells Huizi 惠子 a parable on making good use of things that illustrates this point. A Song-based family of silk dyers had developed a salve to prevent chapped hands. A stranger heard of this and bought the recipe for a goodly amount of cash, then he went to King Wu and suggested that he use to improve the performance of his navy. As a result, the navy won a major battle, the kingdom expanded, and the man received a fiefdom. Zhuangzi concludes, “The capacity of the remedy to prevent chapped hands was the same in both cases, but in one it led to a fiefdom, while in the other it did not go beyond bleaching silk. This is because the different use they made of it” (Wang 1982 1:6-7).

The first thing to note here is that it is a stranger who realizes the salve’s potential and decides to use it for a different purpose. His mind is more open because he is not accustomed to the accepted use: he is unprejudiced in approaching the conditions of the object he is dealing with. The moral of the story is that the same set of conditions might bear different fruit, depending on the use we make of them. Taking the inevitable as the starting point, we can develop a creative approach to it, taking advantage of conditions, whatever they are, and using them in our favor. This works even when conditions seem to be bad, as in the case of Master Yu’s tumor. In his reaction, he demonstrates the ability to turn what an apparently unfortunate situation into conditions of possibility for a new kind of life. Adaptation, then, is not passive resignation, but a creative attitude that allows the person to make the most of what is given and to retake control over what seems unassailable.

When it comes to coping with fate, this is the opposite of the *Qionгда yishi* message. The *Zhuangzi* chapter begins with a statement at first sight parallel to the opening lines of the *Qionгда yishi*: “Understanding what Heaven does, and understanding what man does, this is the ul-

⁹ Many other passages throughout the *Zhuangzi* argue for the *a priori* non-axiological value of things (e.g., Wang 1982, 12:100).

timate” (Wang 1982, 6:55). Humanity and Heaven each have their particular task—true knowledge consists of knowing the difference. However, the illusion of similitude falls ends with the first paragraph, which asks how one can be sure what belongs to Heaven and what to humanity, given that they are not set. The true man (*zhenren* 真人) with true knowledge does not act against Heaven and does not rebel against what is beyond his control; therefore, nothing can affect or harm him. Indeed, the ideal state is “when Heaven and humanity do not defeat each other,” that is to say, when the heavenly and the human are not separate.

The true man acts Heaven-like while keeping his humanity, thus he has a chance to overcome Heaven, precisely by not trying to overcome it. The only thing we can do to overcome the uncontrollable is to merge with it, to become one with it, “to hide the world in the world:” “The sage wanders in the realm of things that cannot be taken away from him, and by which they are all preserved. He considers youth and old age, beginning and end as equally good” (Wang 1982, 6:59). Opportunity, success, fame—all the things people tend to pursue—can be taken away, the text argues. Even consistently virtuous behavior does not guarantee a reward. While the *Qiongda yishi* proclaims this a calamity and proposes a self-reflective turn inward in order to overcome it, the *Zhuangzi* suggests embracing it in its full externality as a means to retake control over one’s life, in other words, turning outward.¹⁰

The *Qiongda yishi*

According to the *Qiongda yishi*, when the unexpected happens, we should turn to our inner self, make sure that we are doing the right thing, and disregard the outcome. There are good and bad deeds, as well as good and bad outcomes, but good deeds do not always bear good fruit. There is an established axiological system but no moral justice. The way to regain control over the lashes of fate is to disregard them, focusing only on correcting what is in our hands, that is, our own actions. The text begins¹¹:

¹⁰ Other passages, e.g., the dialogue between Confucius and Laozi in ch. 14, propose adaptation as the most efficacious way to react towards destiny. *Zhuangzi jijie* 14:126-28.

¹¹ There are different arrangements for the *Qiongda yishi*. I follow the order of the manuscript in Meyer 2012, 53-76. For a reconstruction that follows Chen Jian and Chen Wei’s emendations, see Cook 2012, 451-64. For Meyer’s arguments, his arrangement, and criticism of the Chens, see Meyer 2005. For my translation and understanding of particular characters, I have also consulted the critical editions of Tu and Liu 2001; Liang 2003; and Li 2007.

There is Heaven and there is humanity, 有天有人
 Heaven and humanity each have their lot. 天人有分
 By examining the different lots of Heaven and humanity,¹² 察天人之分
 we understand the actions we should undertake. 而知所行矣
 If there is a person but it is not his appropriate time, 有其人無其世
 even if he is a worthy he will not carry out. 雖賢弗行矣
 In turn, if there is the appropriate time, 苟有其世
 what difficulties can there be? 何難之有哉
 (*Guodian chumu zhujian* 27:1-2)

Heaven and humanity are distinct entities with distinct lots or charges in life. Understanding this basic ontological difference is necessary so we can understand our role and field of activity in this world. The idea of an “appropriate time” relates to that of Heaven as expressed in the parallelism construction of the text. Heaven, understood as fate or the given, determines the appropriate time for actions to succeed. The individual must be ready for an appropriate time as it is bound to arise by cultivating himself and becoming virtuous. However, even for the virtuous ones, the coming of the appropriate time is not certain. Success and failure depend on opportunity, on meeting the appropriate time or person. The text clarifies this in a series of six illustrations. Here are the first two:

Shun used to plough at Li Mountain, 舜耕於厲山
 and make pottery along the Gu River. 陶埴於河汭
 He was established as Son of Heaven 立而為天子
 due to his encounter with Yao. 遇堯也
 Shao wore shabby clothing and a hemp blanket, 邵繇衣枲蓋
 in a mourning hat, he covered his head with hemp clothes. 帽經蒙巾
 He was released from the task of building walls 釋板築
 and became an assistant to the Son of Heaven 而佐天子
 due to his encounter with Wu Ding. 遇武丁也 (*Guodian* 27:2-4)

¹² The separation between Heaven and humanity is a common *topos* in early China. The “Letter to Ren’an” 報任安書 attributed to Sima Qian also emphasizes the need to understand the boundaries between Heaven and man as the basis of theodicy (*Hanshu* 62.2735). There are also parallels in *Xunzi* 17.308: “He who is discerning in the difference between Heaven and man can be called a perfected person” (see Wang Xianqian, *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解; Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1989), and *Wenzi* 11.1A: “Laozi said: It is a fact that people of learning can discern the difference between Heaven and man, and understand the roots of order and chaos” (Du Daojian 杜道堅, *Wenzi zuanyi* 文子續義; Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1989).

All six illustrations share a common structure: they show people standing in low positions whose fate changes by virtue of an encounter. A chance encounter at the right time with the right person is the turning point. As the text later suggests, an encounter is a timely opportunity.¹³ As opposed to the *Zhuangzi*, which advocates the creation of opportunity through adapting to circumstances, the virtuous person here does not *create* opportunity, but merely *awaits* it. This notion of awaiting opportunity, moreover, resonates with the following passage from the *Zhanguo ce* 戰國策 (Warring States Strategies; ed. Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1978):

The sage cannot create opportunity, but when opportunity arrives, he should not miss it. Shun was virtuous, but had he not encountered Yao, he would not have become Son of Heaven. Tang and Wu were virtuous, but if not for the inappropriateness of Jie and Zhou they never would have reigned. Therefore, it is the case that the virtue of Shun, Tang, and Wu would have not made them rulers, had they not encounter the right opportunity. (5.171)

The *Qionгда yishi* further emphasizes the lack of correlation between correct moral behavior and high social standing, the rupture of the often assumed causal link between action and consequence.

At first they lay low, 初韜晦
then their names were elevated. 后名揚
This is not because their virtue had increased. 非其德加
Zixu started with many merits, 子胥前多功
then he was put to death. 后戮死
This is not because his wisdom had decayed. 非其智衰也

The thoroughbred horse feared Zhang Mountain, 驥厄張山
and the black-mottled grey horse halted at the Thorns of Shao. 騏控於邵棘
This is not because they had lost their physical condition. 非亡體狀也
They exhausted the four seas, reaching as far as a thousand *li* 窮四海至千里
because they encountered Zao Fu. 遇造[父]故也
To encounter or not to encounter lies with Heaven. 遇不遇天也
(*Guodian* 27: 9-10)

The first stanza underlines the rupture of the causal link between virtuous conduct and social standing. The elevation of Shun, Shao, Tang, and other figures was not due to an increase in their virtue, as Wu Zixu's sentence

¹³ As Cook notes, citing the *Lunheng* 論衡 (Balanced Discussions), “Feng yu” 逢遇 (Encountering Circumstances), “the term *yu* 遇 often carries the sense of random fate or unforeseeable circumstances” (2012, 430).

was not a response to moral failure. The second stanza uses the image of fine horses to represent the virtuous person and reaches the conclusion that whether he succeeds or fails depends not on his virtue but on the encounter of opportunity. Whether there is an opportunity to flourish or not depends upon Heaven, not humanity.

It is not clear what kind of Heaven the text depicts—natural or personal—but, no matter what, it is equal to fate. If natural, it is the same as fate; if personal, it is a deity that creates fate. Either one is different from Heaven in Western Zhou bronze inscriptions and the odes of the *Shijing* 詩經 (Book of Odes)—a god who actually rewards good deeds and punishes bad ones. The whole idea of the “mandate of Heaven” relates to a personal Heaven who oversees human action and responds to it accordingly.¹⁴ Yet according to the *Qionгда yishi* there is no moral justice in the world. The philosophical program offered in this text indeed requires the nonexistence of moral justice. Because the realms of Heaven and humanity are separate and do not necessarily correspond, humanity must search his independence and self-control by himself, without depending upon the turns of Heaven-fate. The *Qionгда yishi* develops this idea:

[The virtuous person] moves not in order to succeed, 動非為達也
 which is why he does not [resent] when he fails. 故窮而不[怨]
 [The virtuous person] hides not in order to achieve a name, 隱非]¹⁵為名也
 which is why he does not care when nobody knows him. 故莫之智而不吝
 The orchid grows in deep and secluded valleys. [芷蘭生于幽谷]¹⁶
 It is not because there are no people to smell it [非為無人]¹⁷
 that it is not fragrant. 嗅而不芳
 The beautiful jade is covered in mountain stones, 蒼莖愈寶山石
 It is not because no one knows its goodness 不為[無人知其]
 that it neglects itself. 善負己也 (*Guodian* 27:11-14)

¹⁴ Among classical passages, this is evident in the *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (Garden of Sayings; see Lu 1977, 17.580) and the *Hanshi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 (Master Han’s Outer Commentary to the Book of Odes; see Lai 1972, 7.282). For more detailed discussions, see also Lupke 2004.

¹⁵ Li Ling adds the three graphs 怨隱非 where the bamboo strip is broken (2007, 114).

¹⁶ Li Ling adds the six graphs 芷蘭生于幽谷, based on passages in *Xunzi* and *Hanshi waizhuan* (2007, 114).

¹⁷ The graphs 非為無人 are added by Li Ling based again on *Xunzi* and *Hanshi waizhuan* according to context and following the pattern “failure, yet not x,” visible throughout the passage (2007, 114).

Each item here, be it orchid or jade, misses an encounter of opportunity. The teaching is that, even if one does not encounter the opportunity (for someone to smell the flower or see for the stone), virtue remains undiminished. We can read this on two levels. First, the descriptive level speaks of virtue as an inherent quality, a permanent and inseparable element that belongs to the object and not the perceiver. Without external perception, the inherent qualities still shine, recalling the verse of the mystic poet Angelus Silesius: “The rose is without why; it blooms because it blooms. It pays no attention to itself, asks not whether it is seen” (Heidegger 1996, 35).

Much as the rose, the virtuous person does not engage in an action to achieve a particular result—“he moves not in order to succeed”—but simply because it is the right thing to do. His virtue is an inherent quality regardless of whether or not anyone sees it or what reactions it might provoke. Second, the normative level indicates that the virtuous person must never neglect his virtuous conduct even when he is certain that no one can appreciate it: “It is not because no one knows its goodness that it neglects itself.” This idea connects with the last stanza:

Failure and success depend on opportunity, 窮達以時
 Virtuous conduct may be constant, 德行一也
 Yet praise and slander rest on something else. 譽毀在旁
 If acuity reaches the one mother, 聽之一母
 black and white need not be distinguished. 緇白不釐

Failure and success depend on opportunity, 窮達以時
 dark and bright do not get reiterated along with them. 幽明不再
 This is why the gentleman 故君子
 is committed to self-examination. 敦于反己 (*Guodian* 27: 14-15)

The recalcitrant lack of control of the individual over the fruit of his actions leaves him in a state of absolute uncertainty and powerlessness. The only thing he can control is his actions. Hence, actions belong to humanity, while consequences belong to Heaven. Those who advocate the text as holding a Confucian idea of Heaven insist on the reading that humanity begins an action, but Heaven (fate) completes it. Therefore, humanity must await Heaven’s decision and always depends upon it. Li Ling (2007) makes this argument alluding to the popular saying, “Humanity proposes but God disposes,” attested for the first time in the Ming novel *Sanguo yanyi* 三國演義 (Romance of the Three Kingdoms).

In the “Confucian” vision, Heaven is as a rhetorical justification for the lack of success of the virtuous man. The gentleman must accept Heaven’s order (fate), even when it seems unfair and incomprehensible. Robert

Eno (1990) represents this view when he argues that “early Confucians” legitimated both their moralizing worldview and their failure to change the world through the notion of Heaven. The idea of humanity’s complete dependence on Heaven justifies failure and disgrace. It is as a means of creating contentment and acceptance in an unruly world. Scott Cook (2012) also emphasizes the role of Heaven as fate in the *Qionгда yishi*, although not as a means for self-justification. Rather, he reads the message as one of constant self-cultivation. Given that a life-changing chance encounter might happen any time, the gentleman must keep his virtue constant so he is ready when opportunity calls. In this reading, humanity depends on Heaven, and the line of separation between the two is not easy to determine.

In contrast, I read the *Qionгда yishi* to emphasize the moral autonomy of humanity with respect to Heaven. In the last stanzas, the individual does not await Heaven’s judgment to prove him right. Instead, he acts with moral correctness without expecting any reward or return, keeping to virtuous conduct even in the face of slander and failure. Human responsibility turns back on the person: given that no exterior sign can be read as a direct reflection of his actions, he must become his own judge. Since the only thing the gentleman can control is his own actions, straightening his behavior and conducting himself in a morally right way is the only issue that preoccupies him.

Still, despite the fact that the text puts weight on Heaven’s part when it comes to the outcomes of human action, it does not take away human autonomy. On the contrary, it reinforces it, saying that even if there is something that we cannot overcome, we may yet go beyond it by means of exercising our agency within the human sphere of activity. By acting purely as humans and not trying to accomplish a Heaven-like degree of control over outcomes, we can overcome Heaven in the sense of achieving autonomy from its charge, the lot it has assigned us, the fate it has in store for us. The *Qionгда yishi* gives humanity a sphere of moral autonomy that goes beyond human achievement. This represents a “turning inward.” In this manner, the virtuous person copes with fate and uncertainty, and is able to (re)gain control upon what seemed far beyond it.

Approaches to Fate

The two texts present different philosophical approaches to fate and control. To me, they belong on the plane of philosophically tempered texts, as distinguished from texts that do not offer ontological or psychological means to reflect thoughtfully and creatively upon human behavior and

develop it in the world. Both present different philosophical programs as answers to the same issue: how to take control over our lives when they seem swamped by uncertainty. The *Zhuangzi* chapter has a “turning outward” approach by means of adaptation; the *Qionгда yishi* proposes a “turning inward” as the only way to overcome fate. Interestingly, other chapters of the *Zhuangzi* contain passages that contradict the teachings of chapter 6; they are in ideological consonance with the moral approach of the *Qionгда yishi*.

For example, the story of Confucius’s sojourn between the two states of Chen and Cai.¹⁸ Although he is in distress, expelled from his native state of Lu, lacking food and water, and driven to exhaustion, he keeps singing and playing the lute as if nothing had happened, provoking his disciples to accuse him of being “a complete failure.” Confucius responds:

What kind of talk is that! When the gentleman succeeds in penetrating the way, it is called “success”; when he fails in obtaining the way, it is called “failure.” Now you see that I, Qiu, embrace the way of humanity and righteousness in order to face the intricacies of a chaotic age. How can this be considered failure? It is the case that I engage in inner reflection and do not fail in pursuing the way, that when I face difficulties I do not lose my virtue. When the cold weather arrives and the frost and dew fall, I understand how luxuriant pines and cypresses can be. This strait between Chen and Cai is my delight! (see Wang 1982, 28:257)

Redefining success and failure with a subjective turn, Confucius proclaims his moral autonomy. He is not dependent upon external conditions to prove his righteous moral conduct. He himself is his only judge, working through “inner reflection” (*neixing* 内省), another way of referring to self-examination (*fanji* 反己/ *shenqidu*). Instead of proposing to look outward as chapter 6 suggests, this passage matches the position of the *Qionгда yishi* in proposing an inward turn to overcome calamity by means of moral autonomy and independence from external conditions, including Heaven. The same holds true of the following passage in *Zhuangzi* 16:

How can people of Dao raise themselves in this age! How can this age raise itself in Dao! When Dao has no means to rise in the age, and the age has no means to rise in Dao, although the sages are not hiding in mountains and forests, their virtue is obscure. . .

¹⁸ The story of Confucius’s journey between Chen and Cai is found in different versions in many early sources, including *Zhuangzi*, *Lüshi chunqiu*, *Xunzi*, *Lunyu*, and *Mozi*. Each version offers a different take on the story, Confucius’ image varying accordingly from sage hero to hypocrite fool. See Makeham 1998; Chen 2004; Li 2011.

If only the fate of the times were appropriate, [the sages] could carry out great moral actions in the world. They could bring back a state of unity without leaving a trace. Since the fate of the times is not appropriate, all they find is failure in the world. All they can do is to deepen their roots in tranquility and wait. This is the way to preserve oneself . . .

With a sense of autonomy, they keep to their places and reflect on their nature. What else is there for them to do? . . . Therefore, we say, they simply rectify themselves. (Wang 1982, 16.136-7)

Other *Zhuangzi* passages, too, speak of taking control over fate through self-reflection and by improving the only thing we control, i.e., our own behavior. Examples include the stories of Shen Tujia who has lost a foot (ch. 5) and of Confucius traveling to Kuang (ch. 17), both representing an attitude in clear opposition to the position represented in chapter 6.

There is, moreover, a third position in the *Zhuangzi*. Chapter 11 links fate with inner nature so that “letting fate be” is a way of realizing our true nature. People lose their original nature and proper fate when they try to impose an external order upon things, which really should be self-regulating. Concerned with rewards and afraid of punishments, they lose their ability to act in accordance with their inner nature and fate. Therefore, it is best to live by non-constrictive or non-assertive action (*wuwei* 無為), also the best way for the ruler to govern his state. Only by “cutting off sageliness and abandoning knowledge,” can we return to our original state and ultimately realize our proper fate. All attempts at control can only lead to chaos and artificiality. Therefore, “the sage comprehends Heaven but does not assist it” (Wang 1982, 11.98). This is yet a third view with regard to fate and the uncontrollable in the *Zhuangzi* where what is not under our control is always the best that can happen, and where all attempt to take control over it leads to chaos and artificiality.

A heterogeneous compilation, the *Zhuangzi* thus contains materials holding different and even opposing intellectual and philosophical positions. Unfortunately, the fact that both the ancient texts and the organized, religious tradition of Daoism are multifaceted and encompass a number of different views and perspectives, outlooks and positions, tends to bypass scholars in their desire—like the Dialecticians in the *Zhuangzi*—to create integrated systems, establish limiting classifications, and generally make traditional views conform to their expectations.

With regard to uncertainty and fate, notions of adaptation (turning outward) and self-vigilance (turning inward) widely permeate early Chinese texts, crossing traditional categories of schools of thought and intellectual affiliations. Looking at different philosophical proposals for coping with life’s vicissitudes in various early Chinese texts unbound by lineage

structures provides a strong argument against all traditional distinctions and opens the doors to a new and more fluid vision of the *Zhuangzi* and other early sources.

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