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Chinese Cultural Studies:
Zhuangzi Chuang-tse (c. 286 BCE)
Selection from The Zhuangzi

From Patricia Ebrey, *Chinese Civilization : A Sourcebook*, 2d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1993), pp. 28-31

Hui Shi said to Zhuangzi, "I have a large tree, of the sort people call a shu tree. Its trunk is too gnarled for measuring lines to be applied to it, its branches are too twisted for use with compasses or T-squares. If you stood it on the road, no carpenter would pay any attention to it. Now your talk is similarly vast but useless, people are unanimous in rejecting it."

Zhuangzi replied, "Haven't you ever seen a wildcat or a weasel? It crouches down to wait for something to pass, ready to pounce east or west, high or low, only to end by falling into a trap and dying in a net. But then there is the yak. It is as big as a cloud hanging in the sky. It has an ability to be big, but hardly an ability to catch mice. Now you have a large tree but fret over its uselessness. Why not plant it in Nothing At All town or Vast Nothing wilds? Then you could roam about doing nothing by its side or sleep beneath it. Axes will never shorten its life and nothing will ever harm it. If you are of no use at all, who will make trouble for you?"

How do I know that enjoying life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death we are not like people who got lost in early childhood and do not know the way home? Lady Li was the child of a border guard in Ai. When first captured by the state of Jin, she wept so much her clothes were soaked. But after she entered the palace, shared the king's bed, and dined on the finest meats, she regretted her tears. How do I know that the dead do not regret their previous longing for life? One who dreams of drinking wine may in the morning weep; one who dreams weeping may in the morning go out to hunt. During our dreams we do not now we are dreaming. We may even dream of interpreting a dream. Only on waking do we know it was a dream. Only after the great awakening will we realize that this is the great dream. And yet fools think they are awake, presuming to know that they are rulers or herdsmen. How dense! You and Confucius are both dreaming, and I who say you are a dream am also a dream. Such is my tale. It will

probably be called preposterous, but after ten thousand generations there may be a great sage who will be able to explain it, a trivial interval equivalent to the passage from morning to night.

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly. What fun he had, doing as he pleased! He did not know he was Zhou. Suddenly he woke up and found himself to be Zhou. He did not know whether Zhou had dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly had dreamed he was Zhou.

Between Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction. This is what is meant by the transformation of things.

Cook Ding was cutting up a cow for Duke Wenhui. With a touch of his hand a lunge of his shoulder a stamp of his foot a bend of his knee, zip, his knife slithered. never missing a beat, in time to "the dance of the mulberry forest," or the "Jingshou Suite". Lord Wenhui exclaimed "How amazing that your skill has reached such heights!

Cook Ding put down his knife and replied What I love is the Way, which goes beyond skill When I first butchered cows, I saw nothing but cows. After three years, I never saw a eat as a whole At present, I deal with it through my spirit rather than looking at it with my eyes My perception stops and my spirit runs its course I rely on the natural patterning striking at the big openings leading into the main cavities By following what is inherently so I never cut a ligament or tendon, not to mention a bone A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he cuts An ordinary cook changes his knife every month, because he hacks. This knife of mine is nineteen years old. It has carved several thousand cows, yet its blade looks like it had just came from the grindstone. There are spaces in the joints, and the blade has no thickness So when something with no thick ness enters something with space it has plenty of room to move about This is why after nineteen years it seems fresh from the grindstone

However when I come to something complicated I inspect it closely to prepare myself I keep my eyes on what I am doing and proceed deliberately,

moving my knife imperceptibly. Then with a stroke it all comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling. I stand there, my knife in my hand look all around, enjoying my success. Then I clean the knife and put it away

Lord Wenhui said, Excellent! By listening to Cook Ding I learned how to nurture life."

Consider Cripple Shu. His chin is down by his navel His shoulders stick up above his head. The bones at the base of his neck point to the sky. The five pipes of his spine are on top: his two thighs form ribs. Yet by sewing and washing he is able to fill his mouth; by shaking the fortune-telling sticks he earns enough to feed ten. When the authorities draft soldiers, a cripple can walk among them confidently flapping his sleeves; when they are conscripting work gangs, cripples are excused because of their infirmity. When the authorities give relief grain to the ailing a cripple gets three measures along with undles of firewood. Thus one whose form is crippled can nurture his body and live out the years Heaven grants him. Think that he could do if his virtue was crippled too!

Root of Heaven roamed on the south side of Mount Vast. When he came to the bank of Clear Stream he met Nameless Man and asked him. "Please tell me how to manage the world."

"Go away you dunce." Nameless Man said. "Such questions are no fun I was Just about to join the Creator of Things. If I get bored with that, I'll climb on the bird Merges with the Sky and soar beyond the six directions. I'll visit Nothing Whatever town and stay in Boundless country. Why do you bring up managing the world to disturb my thoughts? "

Still Root of Heaven repeated his question and Nameless Man responded "Let your mind wander among the insipid, blend your energies with the featureless, spontaneously accord with things, and you will have no room for selfishness. Then the world will be in order."

Duke Huan was reading a book in the hall. Wheelwright Pian, who had been chiseling a wheel in the courtyard below, set down his tools and climbed the stairs to ask Duke Huan, "may I ask what words are in the book Your Grace is reading?"

"The words of sages." the Duke responded.

"Are these sages alive?"

"They are already dead"

That means you are reading the dregs of long gone men, doesn't it?"

Duke Huan said How does a wheelwright get to have opinions on the books I read? If you can

explain yourself I'll let it pass otherwise, it's death."

Wheelwright Pian said "In my case I see things in terms of my own work. When I chisel at

a wheel, if I go slow the chisel slides and does not stay put; if I hurry, it jams and doesn't move properly When it is neither too slow nor too fast I can feel it in my hand and respond to it from my heart. My mouth cannot describe it in words but there is something there I cannot teach it to my son and my son cannot learn it from me So I have gone on for seventy years, growing old chiseling wheels The men of old died in possession of what could not transmit. So it follows that what you are reading is their dregs."

When Zhuangzi's wife died and Hui Shi came to convey his condolences, he found Zhuangzi squatting with his knees out, drumming on a pan and singing "You lived with her she raised your children, and you grew old together, Hui Shi said "Not weeping when she died would have been bad enough. Aren't you going too far by drumming on a pan and singing ?"

"No," Zhuangzi said, "when she first died how could I have escaped feeling the loss? Then I looked back to the beginning before she had life Not only before she had life but before she had form. Not only before she had form, but before she had vital energy. In this confused amorphous realm, something changed and vital energy appeared,- when the vital energy was changed, form appeared; with changes in form, life began. Now there is another change bringing death This is like the progression of the four seasons of spring and fall, winter and summer. Here she was lying down to sleep in a huge room and I followed her sobbing and wailing. When I realized my actions showed I hadn't understood destiny, I stopped."

When Zhuangzi was about to die, his disciples wanted to bury him in a well-appointed tomb. Zhuangzi said, "I have the sky and the earth for inner and outer coffins the sun and the moon for jade disks the stars for pearls and the ten thousand things for farewell gifts. Isn't the paraphernalia for my burial adequate without adding anything?"

"We are afraid the crows and kites will eat you master," a disciple said.

"Above ground, I will be eaten by crows and kites; below ground by ants. You are robbing from the one to give to the other. Why play favorites?"

Translated by Patricia Ebrey