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Mastery, Authority, and Hierarchy in the “Inner Chapters” of the Zhūāngzǐ

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Modern Western convictions that freedom, equality, and personal autonomy are all crucial human goods structure both our thinking and our practice in deep and pervasive ways. Even when these values do not thoroughly shape our politics, we tend to judge this as a failing. While there is much to celebrate about these ideals and even their imperfect realization in various spheres of modern life, they also cast long shadows that confuse our self-understanding and muddle our interpretation of alien cultures and the possibilities they present. These shadows also obscure crucial ethical and political issues, notably regarding interpersonal authority and hierarchical social relations.

For instance, a dominant modern Western tendency, especially among intellectuals, is to exalt individual autonomy and to be suspicious of hierarchical relations, which are often conceived in terms of domination that is either direct and forceful or subtle and soul-crippling. This tendency to interpret hierarchy in terms of domination echoes and reinforces the attention given to justifying coercive authority in political theory. In other words, much contemporary political theory concerns the question of who might be justified in ruling, and thereby controlling the state’s power to compel obedience (e.g., through military, legal, and penal systems).
These tendencies, however, easily trick social critics into reading any sort of hierarchy as by definition an exercise in domination that is at best a necessary evil—something that needs to be tolerated but limited as much as possible. But certain sorts of hierarchy are not only necessary in the negative sense that we have not figured out how to live communally without coercive force; they are also necessary in a more positive sense, because human flourishing relies on certain forms of hierarchy. It would help contemporary Westerners to better understand these issues, both so that we are not tempted to attack one of the conditions of our own happiness, and so that we may also avoid the reactive temptation to defend too many kinds of hierarchical authority as good.

The larger project from which this essay derives aims to explore the pursuit of mastery as a potentially compelling justification for hierarchical relationships, one that avoids certain pitfalls familiar from Western justifications and critiques of various kinds of social authority, including slavery and the subordination of women. Reflecting upon what it might mean to master an activity, art, or mode of being can show what sorts of hierarchical relations are necessary and constructive for creatures like us, with relatively adaptable instincts that are inevitably and dramatically shaped by culture, language, and practice. Human flourishing, it would seem, requires investment in the practice of mastery, both of self and of various activities.

Despite this, liberal political theory, which represents the mainstream of American political philosophy, has little interest in or sympathy with attempts to cultivate human potentials in any organized, public way. Such efforts are often seen as smacking of “perfectionism,” the supposedly futile and destructive effort by government to demand a heroic level of virtue from the general populace. The fear behind these criticisms is of tyrannical government, a fear nurtured over centuries in the modern West through struggles against oppressive kings, religious leaders, and other elites, against slavery as a paradigm of unjust domination, and finally against totalitarianism. There are very real dangers here that should not be overlooked.

In this essay I explore these issues by moving through a sequence of steps. First, I briefly expand and nuance the claims made above about “the modern West” and our suspicion of hierarchy, through historical arguments about the development of a view of people as free makers of contracts rather than as holders of birth-related statuses. The point of this first section is to make plausible the idea that contemporary Westerners need to rethink our
understanding of authority and hierarchy. In the second section I argue, perhaps surprisingly, that ancient Chinese thought, especially a number of implicit and explicit early accounts of salutary teacher–student relations, offers important and underutilized resources for reexamining these issues. In the third section, I consider one influential early Chinese text, the “Inner Chapters” of the Zhuāngzǐ. This text might at first seem to fit poorly with the account of teaching relations discussed in the second section, but I argue that we should be suspicious of anachronistic readings of this text as advocating freedom and even liberation. Instead, the Inner Chapters seem to suggest that human beings need teachers to attain crucial insights into life, and that we should conform to at least some powers, forces, and authorities, but reject others as counterfeit.

Modern Western Problems with Hierarchy

Needless to say, the history of the development of the modern world is so complicated that it is far beyond the scope of this essay to grapple with it adequately. Instead, I propose to briefly discuss the ideal of autonomy as a central feature of modern consciousness, one that is probably the most important cause of our difficulties in comprehending and properly evaluating relations of authority and dependence. Let us begin with a landmark in intellectual history, Sir Henry Maine’s (1866) Ancient Law: Its Connection with the Early History of Society, and Its Relation to Modern Ideas.\(^5\)

Maine’s book established the historical study of law as a worthwhile intellectual endeavor, and it was a classic and extremely influential version of world-spanning, evolutionarily inclined, nineteenth-century European comparative argument. Maine’s central thesis was that human social history could be summarized as the move “from status to contract,” with the invention of contractual relations and their attendant legal and institutional support system being a distinctively modern development. In contrast, ancient law, which mostly enumerated custom from time immemorial, reflected a society based on the status of various persons, such as wives, children, and slaves, within patriarchal households. Only the father could enter into legal contracts; all others were unfree dependents without the legal and property rights of the father. Maine’s key motif is gradual emancipation: over time more social relations are conceived on the model of a contract entered into
freely by equal citizens under the rule of law, and fewer relationships are defined by the status, with associated duties and prerogatives, of the parties involved.

In this account, autonomous agents who can own property, control their own activity, and freely enter into binding contracts regarding, for example, their own labor, become the modern norm. Other relations, such as slavery or the dependence of wives on husbands, are marked as archaic. Maine thereby demarcates the modern liberal realm of the public and contrasts it with a private realm where ancient survivals lingered on, perhaps out of biological necessity. This mapping of social life continues to capture central features of the modern cultural imagination. A crucial consequence of these developments is a sense that hierarchical relations are somehow strange and questionable because they deviate from the model of autonomously chosen agreements between equals.6

The political and moral appeal of autonomy as an ideal is found in the thought that domination of other human beings is wrong and should be prohibited to the greatest extent possible; protecting individual autonomy has seemed to many to be an essential, defining component of struggles against oppression. Suspicion of domination, even in seemingly benign forms, has very deep roots in the West, which are discernible in two large and complex historical trends: the repeated debates over the practice of slavery and the gradual growth of the “social contract” tradition of political theorizing, which takes the autonomous household head as its basic unit.

The central place of slavery in classical Greek and Roman culture, including the formative era of Christianity, is historically indisputable; this heritage was the backdrop for both the growth and gradual dismantling of the transatlantic slave-based economy. Both the defense of slavery as natural (drawing primarily on Aristotle) and/or divinely ordained (drawing on Paul’s epistles and other New Testament texts), and the criticisms of it as inhuman and evil, have shaped much Western thinking about subordination, authority, and obedience.7

The social contract tradition served historically as a counterweight to conservative efforts to support slavery and other status-centered conceptions of social life, and helps to explain the broad appeal of Maine’s narration of modern history. The social contract tradition is quite rich and complex in its
own right. This variety matters because only some conceptions of autonomy, such as Kant’s, make strong contrasts between autonomy and “heteronomy,” designed to call into question any kind of obedience and submission as intrinsically degrading. Kant also roots this insistence on autonomy in equally strong assumptions about human nature as defined and constituted by rational agency, seen as true regardless of culture, history, individual effort, or any other empirical factor. However, some sophisticated liberal theorists, particularly in the philosophy of education, have recognized that liberal democracy itself constitutes a cultural tradition, with a set of norms and practices, which shape people and actively cultivate citizens’ habits of autonomy, understood in various ways.

The basic idea of this work, with which I concur, is that becoming free and autonomous is not spontaneous or necessary, but a project of human training and formation that requires amazing investments of time, practice, energy, and resources. Autonomy is, in other words, a project of self-mastery, which partakes of a long tradition of practices of personal formation. Such projects are almost invariably social, relying on teachers, guides, and a community of aspirants. Thus, a defensible conception of autonomy will recognize the crucial importance of formation and even what might seem to be “paternalism” in the care and training of aspiring autonomous agents.

At a deeper level, however, one can question whether a commitment to individual autonomy, whether nuanced and socially informed or uncompromising and Kantian, provides the best basis for thinking about relationships of authority, or even human relationships in general. Henry Rosemont in particular has argued that relationship-centered conceptions of the person in early China, especially in early Confucianism, provide a strong, helpful contrast to modern Western assumptions about “autonomous individuals.” Though suggestive, Rosemont’s work unfortunately oversimplifies and even caricatures Western advocacy of autonomy, and furthermore, it neither recognizes nor considers the subtle similarities between early Confucian accounts of self-cultivation and more nuanced conceptions of autonomy as a human achievement. A sufficiently sophisticated comparative engagement between modern Western accounts of autonomy and alternative traditions of ethics would be a book-length project, but we can pursue a preliminary exploration here.
Seeking Other Relationship Models: the Case of Early China

A number of strategies might suggest themselves to people trying to imagine other ways of thinking about hierarchy and authority. One could start from an abstract model of proper authority, a direct dialectical engagement with current ideas, or a historical retrieval of some past Western theory or tradition. However, I propose a careful engagement with early Chinese ideas about hierarchy, particularly as manifest in writings about teacher–student relationships. This might seem bizarre. Since at least the nineteenth century, many Westerners have seen China as a paradigm case of “oriental despotism,” purportedly marked by a widespread culture of authoritarian leadership and alarming subservience among the populace. However, simple Western portraits of China often have more to do with observers’ anxieties than any deep insight into the complex realities of East Asia. And while there are certainly authoritarian strands in Chinese culture, they hardly serve as the timeless essence of China; there are other aspects of Chinese civilization that can help us escape from dichotomies like authoritarian/liberating.

For several reasons, reflecting on ancient China provides a particularly suitable opportunity for reevaluating these issues. First, the social order was in considerable flux for hundreds of years, and basic questions about ethics and politics were being actively debated, with numerous possibilities explored and tried. Second, one of the most objectionable justifications for hierarchy in the West was never used: no text suggests, as Aristotle does in the Politics, that different classes of humans possess different “natures,” which justify their social roles, infamously including those apparent humans who are supposedly “natural slaves.” Instead, justifications for social hierarchy were made on other grounds. Kingship, for example, was often based on familial lineage or divine favor (grounded in a positive but reversible judgment about a leader’s moral character and ritual responsibility). Most notably, early Chinese thinkers invented the idea of meritocracy, a theory of government suggesting that those who are most talented and perform the most effectively should be systematically given greater power and responsibility, and various thinkers debated different versions of such a system as ideas of merit came into conflict. Not surprisingly, various hierarchical relationships, such as the lord–minister and teacher–student relationships, were socially problematic and contested, and hence widely debated.
Teaching relationships are particularly relevant for comparative ethical analysis. Unlike in famously tense and dangerous lord–minister relations, teachers were not primarily concerned with a need to control the behavior of their subordinates. In lieu of the quest for control, such relationships could rely on other modes of interaction and seek other ends. The primary explicit end of such relationships was frequently the cultivation of 德, which is usually translated as “virtue,” but which also has strong connotations of leadership and charisma. However, before examining depictions of teaching relationships in one such text, the Zhuangzi, in greater detail, we should first introduce its social and intellectual context more fully.

The most fertile period in early Chinese intellectual history is aptly characterized as the Warring States period (481–221 BCE). The previous era, known as the Spring and Autumn period (780–481 BCE), was characterized by the gradual collapse of efforts to defend a centralized Zhou empire, and the social system of familial, “feudal” methods of government. Old loyalties to the Zhou king were gradually replaced by self-interested efforts to gain power by a host of smaller states that engaged in increasingly fierce warfare in a contest for dominance. These problems were replicated within states as ministers, supposedly loyal to their local lord, would plot rebellion and seize states for themselves and their families. By the Warring States period, seven large states had emerged and were engaged in nearly continuous wars for territory and influence. Intense interstate competition on all fronts led to a market for educated men who could staff growing state bureaucracies, for skilled military strategists and diplomats, and for intellectuals who could provide compelling visions of good or at least effective government.

Relations between rulers and their ministers were quite fraught, and opportunities for treachery abounded. From blood oaths of fealty to careful specification of job requirements and performance that would yield either ample salary or harsh punishment, numerous novel arrangements to recruit, retain, and control loyal, hard-working subordinates were tried in order to replace older methods of enfeoffing relatives. In this context educated talent was in demand, and this stimulated a market in educational services, arguably started by Confucius himself (i.e., Kōngzǐ, c. 551–479 BCE).

Warring States texts appear to have developed in tandem with various teaching groups, and these writings provide ample evidence that “masters,”
of quite various “arts” or “techniques,” *shù* 術, trained students and consulted with leaders. Historian Mark Edward Lewis (1999, 53–97) sees the whole phenomenon of early Chinese extra-governmental writing as centered on “master” figures, whom he thinks are largely constituted by their respective textual traditions. Lewis focuses on the “teaching scene” that characterizes texts like the *Analects* and *Mèngzǐ* as the defining formal feature of such texts; he thinks these dramatic encounters between wise masters and aspiring learners expose deep commitments in these traditions about the character of true wisdom and sageliness, the limited adequacy of language, and proper methods of teaching and leadership.35

Lewis overstates the sense in which famous masters like Mèngzǐ were constituted as characters in and through the texts that bear their names, which were written by their disciples and perhaps others. He also understates the power of particular theories, ideas, and practices in motivating and guiding the various early Chinese textual traditions. Nevertheless, he is right to point to the widespread formal conceit, especially in earlier texts, of the texts’ words being presented as transcriptions of the master’s authoritative speech. To some degree this seems to reflect a social situation in which older men set themselves up as teachers and accepted younger men as students. Early Confucian texts, for example, depict close ongoing relationships between a master and his students, who seem to have lived together, or at least in close proximity, for many years.

Different textual traditions reflected different social groups and ideologies. For my purposes here, there is a crucial boundary between textual traditions that advocate cultivating or attaining “virtue,” *dé* 德, and those that regard such efforts with suspicion or derision. Noteworthy *dé* advocates include texts written by the Confucians, or Rú, as well as proto-Daoist texts such as the *Daōdéjīng* and the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Because of their conviction that humans should possess *dé*, one could call these texts humanist, although the label better fits the Rú. Other textual traditions show little interest in *dé*, or are downright skeptical about its utility or value. These anti-humanist texts include the *Mòzǐ*, *Sūnzǐ*, *Shāng Jün Shū*, and *Hánfēižì*.

These two ideological families have strikingly different attitudes toward hierarchical relations. The texts that advocate cultivating *dé* emphasize the
ideal of sagehood, and seem to invite readers to seek a higher realization of human potential. Although the details vary, these texts (with the exception of the Daodejing) often portray hierarchical relationships within teaching groups as characterized by the activities of questioning, debate, and justification, and the virtues of loyalty, respect, and shared reverence for the Dao, or Way. Teachers in these texts tend to speak with authority, relying on the trust and willing compliance of their audiences, although sometimes only after aggressive questioning. Some thinkers also hoped political leaders would operate in the same way, ruling authoritatively by means of virtue, although they clearly recognized the difference between their ideals and the brutal reality of their social context.

By contrast, the dé skeptics describe and advocate methods of control that they contend are well suited to political and military affairs. They view human beings more often as tools to be used than as agents to be cultivated. A fundamental aim in these texts, regardless of their broader goals, is to attain effective and reliable control of subordinates. To this end these texts explore and advocate various methods for coercing obedience, including rule by means of law, the strict regulation of rewards and punishments, and administrative theories about bureaucratic responsibilities and performance. These texts, in other words, care more about power, in the sense of the ability to compel others to obey a ruler’s will, than they do about authority, willing loyalty, and shared reverence, which they view as questionable luxuries that will fail under stress with most people.

I have written at length elsewhere on aspects of early Rú texts that are relevant to these themes (Stalnaker 2006; 2010). Most of the early Rú seem to have advocated personal attainment of virtue, which they construe as not only good character but also skilled and charismatic moral leadership. The Analects and Mèngzǐ both constantly depict their respective masters answering questions and dispensing advice and admonition to students, most of whom are portrayed as loyal and thoughtful, even if imperfect. They also depict generally long-standing relationships between masters and their students, and celebrate the process of education and personal formation as a lifelong dao. All of these characteristics will be utilized, although often ironically, in the celebrated early text Zhuàngzǐ, to which I now turn.
Teaching and Learning in the *Zhùngzǐ*

The *Zhùngzǐ* is a composite text usually classified as “Daoist” on the basis of subsequent bibliographical tradition, starting in the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE). It has been enormously popular and influential in later East Asian civilization, particularly in Daoist, Buddhist (especially Chan/Zen), and literary traditions. The earliest stratum of the text is known as the “Inner Chapters” and appears to be mostly the work of one author, the historical Zhuàng Zhōu (c. 4th century BCE), although later compilers edited the whole of the text, probably including the Inner Chapters. I focus on this early layer here, although other material in the book is relevant to this essay’s central themes.

A large number of stories in the Inner Chapters (not to mention the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters) of the *Zhùngzǐ* are various sorts of “teaching scenes,” which sometimes include surprising characters cast as masters and students, as well as a sustained, ironic hijacking of Rú traditions about Confucius and his disciples. It is hard to count precisely the number of such passages in the text, but probably at least half of the Inner Chapters consists of these dialogical teaching scenes. These come in an impressive profusion of configurations, with many sorts of people teaching in quite various ways. Relations of master to student are simply presumed as the social matrix in which much of life happens in the *Zhùngzǐ*.

The text appears to mark a definitive shift toward self-consciousness about this common literary form, and a playful but thorough exploration of its possibilities. And despite what is often characterized as the “skepticism” about value judgments in the second chapter, “A Discussion That Evens Things Out,” the Inner Chapters seem to be fascinated by questions of superiority and inferiority. Stories pose pointed questions about which characters from the past are really admirable, and which “masters” in the present should be attended to, and which laughed at.

Before attempting to chart how Zhuàngzǐ thought about the possibilities of teaching via various hierarchical relations, let me first discuss some of the striking interpretive challenges the text presents to readers. The most serious single issue concerns what to make of the text’s use of characters. Much of the treatment of teaching relationships comes in narratives driven by fictional or fictionalized characters, such as Confucius and other historical figures whom
Zhuāngzī revivifies for his own purposes. In contrast to most other early texts, where there is no question who the sage master answering questions is, one of the defining features of the Zhuāngzī is the great variety of characters who play some role as teacher or student, sometimes multiple times. The “characters” do not seem to be perfectly consistent, but the scenes do rely on readers’ knowledge of these characters and their commonly presumed attributes. For example, Confucius and his disciples seem to operate differently in different stories. Thus Kōngzī deftly teaches his favorite and most talented disciple Yán Huí what appear to be Zhuangzian points about how to use his heart and interact with power holders (C 106–21; W 54–58), but also serves as a clumsy moralist when in chapter 5 he scolds “Toeless Shūshān” about his misbehavior, and then attempts to turn this encounter into a cautionary tale for his disciples (C 153–55; W 71–72). Yet another persona appears in the story in chapter 6 where Kōngzī sends his disciple Zigōng to mourn “Master Sānghū” — there Kōngzī is cast as someone yearning to follow the utmost Way, who understands it in some sense, but who has been “condemned” by Heaven to “roam within the boundaries” (C 193–98; W 86–87).

Thus, we are not dealing here with an elaborate, coherent scheme like one finds in the pseudonymous writings of Kierkegaard, where each pseudonym is supposed to represent a certain sort of outlook on life, or “stage on life’s way.” Instead, different stories seek to make different points; in this sense the Inner Chapters are reminiscent of the procedure of Kōngzī, the master of the Analects, who would sometimes give conflicting advice to particular disciples depending on what they needed to hear at any given moment, in his judgment (e.g., 11.22) — indeed, it is perhaps a more radical version of that same tendency. Thus, as interpreters, we should not try to achieve premature closure by harmonizing different stories’ “main points” or expect key words or phrases to always cohere into a clearly specifiable philosophy. The text is more like a kaleidoscope than a map, and any attempt at a fully unified reading will need to take account of conflicting textual evidence.

One important consequence of this variation is a pervading sense of uncertainty about what to make of any given teacher, especially given the possibility that the supposed master might turn out to be more suited to the role of student, as Kōngzī is, for example, in relation to Wáng Tái or Yán Huí (C 144–45, 205–6; W 68–69, 90–91). So the reader is not just perplexed...
by the mysterious “reckless words” of some unknown figure (C 85; W 47), or some well-known figure acting strangely; he or she is constantly thrown into a posture of hermeneutical uncertainty concerning the degree of insight a given character actually possesses. Zhuăngzì appears to strongly prefer this state of uncertainty, at least when compared to blind faith in one of the daös singled out for criticism in chapter 2 (such as those of the Confucians and their consequentialist critics, the Mohists).

One last issue deserves comment. Readers need to remember that the stories about teachers and students are above all stories, rather than straightforward, trustworthy representations of turn-of-the-third-century BCE behavior and mores, even if some minor details can show what would have been a believable account of master–student behavior at the time. The fictional nature of most of the narratives in the Inner Chapters suggests that the goals of particular passages may not be obvious and straightforward, given the indirectness of the genre. Compared with modern novels, characterization is often quite rudimentary, but it is still unprecedented in the literature of the time, especially in the range of characters, which include the grotesque and fantastic, as well as several personified animals. Moreover, some stories are clearly parodies, and many are quite humorous, but not all of them. The balance between seriousness and lighthearted playfulness is a striking feature of the text. Frequently, narratives in the text seem to work on multiple levels at once, making jokes about alternative daös while also putting forward various positive ideas.

We can now begin to explore the various statements and intimations in the Zhuăngzì about hierarchy, authority, and teaching relationships. In terms of general orientation, I am suspicious of common modern readings of the text as advocating absolute freedom and liberation from all constraints. Such interpretations seem to me to be anachronistic, projecting our own obsessions back into a very different context. Zhuăngzì does suggest multiple times that certain outstanding people can “wander” beyond various boundaries; this theme is part of his critical attack on various daös 道, “teachings” or “ways” of life, that were actively promoted by others in his day, and on the habits of mind, feeling, and action that he thinks they all cultivate. But there is a more positive side to the text as well, advocating what is often described in commentarial literature as the “spontaneity” or “naturalness” that comes from living
as a zhēnrén 真人, “true person,” in harmony with tiān 天, Heaven, and its own Daō.

What I attempt to provide here, however, is not a full interpretation of the meaning and import of the Inner Chapters, but rather an analysis of the text’s treatment of various types of and candidates for authority, as well as the repeated dramatization within the text of teaching relationships of various sorts. In brief, I think Zhuāngzī suggests that humans need real teachers, spiritual midwives who can help us see the true nature of life and our place in the cosmos, but that such teachers often come in unlikely forms. In the end, I read the text as putting itself forward as a guide to and even substitute for such teachers, should truly wise ones prove difficult to find. I also argue that Zhuāngzī does not advocate rebellion against either the social or natural order, but rather a qualified sort of submission to some powers and authorities, such as Heaven and “the inevitable,” although not to others, such as celebrated wise men of the past, political leaders, and the advocates of competing, all too human daōs. Once we truly grasp the problems with typical human ways of life, the text suggests, we will at last be able to learn for ourselves how to skillfully navigate the world as we wander through it.

We should perhaps start with the obvious: Zhuāngzī repeatedly makes fun of conventional political and cultural authorities. The famous sage king Yáo seems particularly feckless until he wanders off to a mountain where he forgets his kingdom (C 18–25; W 32–34). The political leader of the state of Zhèng, Zīchān, is exposed as a status-obsessed bully who desperately needs the rebuke given him by Shēntú Jīā (C 150; W 70–71). The powerful king Lord Wēnhuì learns the secret of nurturing life from a menial laborer—the butcher usually called “Cook Ding” (C 95–6; W 50–51). Lady Jū, who possesses and can teach the “way of a sage,” gives an account of her intellectual lineage that is mostly a joke on the very idea of a pristine transmission of sacred knowledge, although it is perhaps not completely ironic in suggesting suitable sources for wisdom (C 183–84; W 82–83). And the very first story in the book cites an imaginary holy book as a basis for a fantastic tale of a giant fish transforming into a giant bird and flying to the other end of the earth when the season and prevailing winds are right (C 3; W 29).

Beyond these send-ups of famous sages, kings, traditions, and sacred texts, the Zhuāngzī also offers fierce criticisms of rival intellectual tendencies,
particularly in chapter 2. For example, Zhuāngzī argues that the subtle arguments of the sophists or “logicians” do not actually establish any important metaphysical or ethical positions, and lead only to mental exhaustion and confusion. And the central contrast between benefit and harm, upon which the consequentialist Mohists base their prescriptions to benefit the state, cannot actually be discerned if one looks carefully, since the consequences of our actions are impossible to predict in a constantly changing world, and it is impossible to fix a stable evaluative scheme that would reliably distinguish the truly harmful from the truly beneficial. Even the Confucians are criticized as deluded, urging an improperly obedient and deferential attitude to past authorities, clinging to misguided death rituals, and pestering others with their talk of benevolence and righteousness in such a way that they endanger themselves and others by provoking wrath from the powerful. However, Zhuāngzī’s attitude toward Confucianism and especially Confucius is more nuanced than his contempt for Mohists and logical disputers when taken as a whole.

In other words, many well-known “masters” do not know what they think they know, and just cause harm by trying to teach others. What is left to fill this vacuum? Zhuāngzī offers dramatic and arresting alternatives through his many hints and stories about amazing sages. By association, then, his strange but beautiful writings can slide into the empty role of authority. They are certainly mystifying, promising a higher wisdom and better life that cannot be portrayed in a straightforward way, but only obliquely. This does not strike me as accidental; Zhuāngzī is indirectly claiming the authority to communicate elusively about what really counts as the highest Way, with the strong and repeated suggestion that many others in the same business are fools. Zhuāngzī has no other authority but his literary brilliance, the power of his persuasive, mesmerizing writing—but as the many who have become enraptured by the text can report, this is still a very effective kind of authority. Despite this decimation of the more obvious candidates for positions as teacher and authority, the text makes it quite clear that some people really do have insight and can really help others, at least in part by teaching them how to “unlearn” what they already know. Strikingly, Confucius is presented repeatedly in just this authentic teacher role. The two most famous of the imaginary Kǒngzǐ-Yán Huí dialogues are paradigmatic. The first, in chapter 4,
is a perplexing and lengthy demolition of a tempting set of reflections by Yán Huí, here cast as the well-meaning activist out to “make a difference” in the world by changing the mind and policies of the powerful (C. 107–17; W. 54–58). The payoff of this critical devastation is to reduce the student to a state of bewilderment and openness to new ideas. At the climax of the story Kǒngzǐ scolds Yán Huí for continuing to “take his heart/mind as his master/teacher,” and then swoops in to provide explicit instructions in “mental fasting” designed to “empty” one’s heart/mind so that one can begin to perceive reality through attention to qì 氣, “vital energy,” rather than using one’s rational, socially formed and educated mind to assess and measure things and scenarios in the world. As a brilliant student, Yán Huí catches on immediately, to Kǒngzǐ’s evident satisfaction.

The second, much briefer dialogue, on “sitting and forgetting,” makes clear that conventional Confucian duties and practices should be “forgotten” if one wishes, like Yán Huí, to “make progress” (C. 205–6; W. 90–91). After a few days of practice Yán Huí turns the tables on Confucius by going beyond these initial steps to simply “sit and forget” everything, including his own body and understanding, in order to 同於大通, “become the same as the great pervader.” Confucius immediately recognizes Yán Huí’s superiority, and politely asks to become his follower.

The majority of explicit teaching scenes in the Inner Chapters follow this pattern: a relatively brief encounter or liaison leads to the student realizing a dramatic negative epiphany, which frees him from some sort of delusional attachment to a conventional daò, opening him up to a new life in harmony with the world as it is, rather than as humans imagine it to be. Sharp criticism and rebuke appear to be perfectly acceptable modes of teaching in the text, designed to produce confusion, openness, and insight (although perhaps these are narrative devices, designed to work indirectly on a reader). The goal seems to be not the imparting of information, nor any sustained training in the mastery of a skill, but rather the giving of insight and a new vision, a changed perspective. This theme of “sudden enlightenment” reverberates through later Chinese religious history.

At least occasionally, however, other sorts of teaching relationships are dramatized in the text. “Uncle Dim Nobody” helps Shēntū Jīá forget about his fury over the disrespect he suffers from others in the wake of having his foot
cut off as a punishment, and this relationship has gone on for nineteen years (C 150; W 70–71). And the opening story of chapter 5 describes one Wáng Tái, who despite having no feet (presumably due to penal sanctions), not “teaching” or even talking, is able, through the spontaneous effects of his “stillness,” to calm anxious hearts and help at least some followers return to an inner state of equilibrium and peace. Confucius declares him to be a sage, and describes his excellence at some length (C 144–45; W 68–69).

Despite occasional mention of a “wordless” teaching, as for example with Wáng Tái, most of the teaching in the Inner Chapters is rather wordy, going on extensively to critique errors and describe a higher gnosis, however obscurely. This verbosity suggests that words may in fact be the most effective teaching tools available if the targets are human beings; or perhaps this is simply an artifact of the textual form itself, which leaves Zhūāngzǐ with no other tools to use as he tries to communicate his vision.

One surprising feature of these teaching scenes is how rarely they dramatize any sustained course of training, or involve any demonstrations of capability by the teacher figure. Given the prevalence of interpretations of the positive side of the text in terms of the notion of skill or “knack,” one would expect there to be a richer array of material to analyze. Two stories in the Inner Chapters seem at least to allude to the idea of extended practice, and so deserve fuller analysis: the encounter between the cook and Lord Wénhuí that makes up most of chapter 3, and the sequence of teaching contests in chapter 6 between Húzǐ and the divination specialist as they vie for influence over the student Lièzǐ.

The story of the cook explicitly describes a fairly lengthy period of practicing a craft, and seems to suggest this is very important (C 95–96; W 50–51). In the tale Lord Wénhuí observes the beautiful spectacle of his cook carving up an ox, which he does so smoothly and well that the text likens him to a dancer harmonizing with two celebrated classical musical pieces. The lord exclaims over the cook’s skill, but the cook says that he loves the Dàozǐ, and has “advanced beyond skill.” He then explains how he got to this point: at first he saw nothing but oxen, but after three years of practice he no longer saw each ox as a whole, and eventually arrived at his current state, where he uses his shén, “spirit,” to perceive rather than his senses, and lets “spiritual” desires proceed in place of his perceptual knowledge. He then
discusses at some length how much more effective he is than lesser cooks, who have to sharpen their knives repeatedly—he, by contrast, no longer needs to sharpen it at all. In normal butchering he is able to zip along by relying on the “Heavenly patterns” in the ox, in easy accord with “how it necessarily is” (依乎天理 . . . 因其固然). In difficult and unusual situations he has to slow down and pay careful attention, then in a moment of insight he sees what he must do, and cuts through the difficulty in one precise stroke. After this display and discussion, Lord Wénhuǐ exclaims that through listening to the cook’s words he has attained insight into the “nurture of life” (吾聞庖丁之言，得養生焉).

Several aspects of this narrative deserve comment in relation to present concerns. First, it is yet another teaching scene, but with the cook in the role of teacher, which is an extreme inversion of usual social hierarchies and expectations. The teaching itself consists of a lecture, which only begins subsequently to the demonstration of mastery with which the story opens. The student, in this case a king, learns an apparently important lesson on “nurturing life,” a topic that at the very least is in some tension with the skill of butchering. The king thus arrives at an epiphany, although in this case positive, an insight rather than a disillusioning realization. The dissonance of a butcher teaching the nurturing of life suggests that his mastery is not merely to be taken literally, but as a metaphor for good living in general. Perhaps the knife symbolizes his heart/mind, in its ability to jié 解, “cut through,” “resolve,” or “understand” difficulties (the word is used in this sense in several places in the Inner Chapters). Insofar as it never needs “sharpening” but is always ready for any situation, he uses his knife, and by extension his heart/mind, with mostly effortless perfection and effectiveness, and needs no further development or cultivation. Such a reading could explain the otherwise mysterious “moral” of the story that the king draws from the lecture, which suggests broad applicability to the cook’s capabilities, which “go beyond skill” and reflect a love for the Heavenly Dào itself.

The cook does describe a lengthy period of practice before his present state of mastery, but during this time he apparently did not have a teacher and seems to have learned how to handle his knife on his own. He is particularly focused on perception, and his distrust of normal human perception and judgment echoes Kǒngzī’s teaching to Yán Huí to “listen by means of vital energy” rather than with his mind and ears, which are guided by preconceived notions and only seek what “matches up” with such notions (C 117; W 58).
The crucial question is exactly how to generalize from the cook’s speech to the grand conclusion derived from it by Lord Wénhui. Should one become a butcher to live well? Should one become a disciplined expert in some craft? Should one learn how to perceive, act, and smoothly “cut through” life’s difficulties after the manner of the cook? I incline toward the last interpretation and suggest that the story reflects a sensibility in which one can be inspired to self-reflection by others but must do considerable work by oneself to learn how to see “Heaven’s patterns” and “what is necessarily so” clearly within one’s own life and work, whatever it might be, without obscurations introduced by socially formed prejudices about correctness or incorrectness.

The story of the cook raises the question of whether Zhuāngzǐ thinks one ever truly needs to submit to a teacher who guides one over a period of time to a deeper understanding of anything, whether life itself, some art or craft, or the ability to “listen by means of vital energy,” or “use one’s heart like a mirror” (see C 227; W 97). It appears that the prevailing view in the Inner Chapters is that people need a teacher to jolt them out of their all-too-human frenzy or stupor (depending on how they have internalized whatever daò they have been taught is correct), and some at least benefit from a more lengthy relationship. This is so because normal education and even just enculturation seem to make us submit to the wrong authorities in the wrong way, that is, too obediently and rigidly, and we need corrective intervention. In the second “positive” story I consider here, Húzǐ 壺子, the “wine pot” master, analogizes people who have not had a real teacher to hens laying eggs with no rooster around to impregnate them; without a teacher, it seems, our efforts to live well will be sterile and barren (C 220–21; W 94–97).

In this story, the character Lièzǐ has been a student of Húzǐ for some time, but stumbles across a shén wū 神巫, or “spiritual wizard,” who is expert at the widespread divinatory practice of xiāng 相, “physiognomy,” whereby he can foretell people’s time of death with great precision. Lièzǐ meets with the diviner, and his heart becomes “drunk,” amazed and enraptured by the diviner’s powers. (In contrast, regular people fear and shun the diviner—this is in diametric opposition to the various deformed or unusual “masters” throughout the rest of the Inner Chapters, who are all powerfully attractive to other people because of their ample dé.) Lièzǐ tells Húzǐ that he has found a new teacher with a “more ultimate” daò than Húzǐ’s. Húzǐ immediately berates
Lièzì for his ignorance and arrogance, telling him that he has only shown him his dao’s wén 文, “form,” “ornament,” or perhaps even “text,” but not yet shown him its shí 實, “reality” or “substance.” This is quite intriguing, because it suggests that Húzì has been gradually teaching Lièzì more and more about the Daò, over time, but has not yet arrived at the most important lessons, and so Lièzì does not even realize how far he yet has to go. Húzì explicitly questions whether Lièzì has really dé 得, “gotten” or “attained” it yet. Húzì contends that Lièzì’s arrogant broadcasting of what little he knows allows lesser masters like the diviner to scan and physiognimize him.

As the story develops, Húzì asks Lièzì to bring the diviner to see him several times, and each time Húzì presents a different appearance to the diviner, and each time the diviner reports a rather different fate awaiting Húzì. Húzì’s descriptions of the states he is showing to the diviner are quite mysterious, perhaps intentionally so, but seem to be about different sorts of vital energy flow. Consider the following report from Húzì at the penultimate stage:

Just now I showed him the great surging flow where nothing triumphs. He must have seen me balancing the impulses of the vital energies. The salamander’s swirl is an abyss. The place where still water pools is an abyss. The place where water flows is an abyss. The abyss has nine names, and I have settled in three of them [during these three visits from the diviner]. (C221; W96)

To speculate about what this could possibly mean, one might guess that Húzì is a master of his own flows of vital energy, able to allow it to pool deep within his body but also flow in various ways. He is in other words not just able to read others’ flows, like the diviner, but can assume various “forms” as he wishes, in this case to demonstrate his radical superiority over the lesser arts and capability of the diviner.

In the end Húzì shows the diviner a state in which he “has not yet emerged from his ancestor,” which so alarms the diviner that he flees, and Lièzì cannot catch him. Lièzì then realizes that he “had not yet begun to learn” and “returned,” perhaps to Húzì’s tutelage, probably to his own home. Lièzì stays there for three years, cooking for his wife and feeding the pigs as if serving people. He “returned to simplicity from carving and polishing,” “taking his
position like a clump alone in his own form,” remaining “scattered but sealed” until the end of his life. This remarkable conclusion uses language loaded with connotations related to self-cultivation. He leaves behind the “carving and polishing” of his character and demeanor as advocated by Confucian readings of the Odes for a return to “simplicity,” or more literally the “uncarved block” celebrated in the Daodejing and similar texts. Lièzī disregards normal human conventions, roles, and rules, and simply lives out his days.

This story seems to suggest that a more lengthy apprenticeship is possible, and that some version of mastering human living involves a gradual mastery of one’s own energy flows, although it is far from clear exactly how this is to be accomplished, and the text spends no time advocating particular techniques other than “mental fasting” and “sitting and forgetting,” neither of which are very precise at the level of technical details, focusing more on effects and stages of a progression of “forgetting” the self. So in the end, the Lièzī–Hūzī story represents not a positive apprenticeship where skills are gradually developed, but another epiphany story, with a decisive turning point after which Lièzī seems basically perfected as a Zhuangzian sage.

What are we to make of these mysterious descriptions and hints at exceptional capabilities? I think they may be allusions to mystical states of various sorts, but they are clearly advertisements for Zhuāngzī’s own take on life, making it sound as grand and fulfilling as anything could be. And they may very well be evocative, poetic descriptions of the case, delight, and relaxed tranquility of the sort of consciousness and mode of life that Zhuāngzī celebrates in his many tales of unusual exemplars. The teaching scenes in the Zhuāngzī seem to hinge over and over again on breakthroughs in consciousness, epiphanies that reorient a “student” away from social conventions and toward a deeper reality of some sort. Teachers exist in the text in order to provoke these epiphanies.

Where does this leave the question of Zhuāngzī’s views of personal “freedom” and submission to authorities? Just as we should read the occasional tales of superhuman sages who are invulnerable to harm as parables about the mindset of the fearless, unattached sage, rather than as hints at actual superpowers, we should similarly read talk of “roaming beyond the four directions” not as literally describing amazing journeys, nor as parables of absolute freedom from any and all constraints, but rather as the promise of “release
from the bonds” of human conventions that are understood wrongly. This is emphatically not release from what is “inevitable,” such as death, and perhaps even certain roles and obligations in society, if we are to take Confucius at his word in chapter 4 as he is instructing Zīgāo about how to handle his inevitable duties as a governmental envoy (C 122–23; W 59–61). Such human conventions would be understood not as binding norms that demand obedience, but rather as something akin to land formations or weather patterns, realities that must be recognized and negotiated as one moves through the human-populated world.

The ultimate submission, finally, is to Heaven and its lǐ 理, “patterns,” and nì 倪, “distinctions,” as well as what is bùdéyǐ 不得已, “inevitable,” and gùrán 固然, “necessarily so.” As Master Yú tells Master Sì on his deathbed in chapter 6, “things [including human beings] do not ultimately triumph over Heaven,” and the paradigmatic example of this subjection is our vulnerability to death. One should not “hate” or rebel against the workings of Heaven and its decrees, but instead 安時而處順, “be at peace with the time and dwell in what is suitable,” accepting whatever changes come, however “good” or “bad,” “auspicious” or “inauspicious” they might seem (C 189; W 84–85).

Within the text, if a character manages to grasp the elusive truth about the Daò, then a new mode of relationship appears to open up. Particularly in the stories concerning the friendships of the “masters” in chapter 6, we are presented with a vision of human relationships that is contrasted dramatically and explicitly with the foolishness of wives, children, and inept disciples. These stories are somewhat formulaic: a group of men recognize each other as Daò adepts through exchanging mysterious but presumably true pronouncements such as “Who is able to take lack [or nonbeing] as the head, life as the backbone, and death as the ass? Who knows the one body made by life and death, survival and destruction? I will be friends with him” (C 188–89; W 84). Others hear this and smile or laugh, “with no rebellion in their hearts,” and they all become friends (C 189; W 84). Then, skipping over their life together, all the stories proceed immediately to the climax, the moment of impending death, and the reactions of the “masters” to what they view as an intriguing spectacle of change, in contrast to weeping disciples, wives, and children, who lament their dying. These friends (you 友) do seem to challenge one another over whether they might “hate” or “detest” the process of change that is killing them,
as discussed above, but they generally pass these tests easily. Perhaps these friendships are all that “true people” really need, once a teacher has helped to catalyze their transformation into acceptance from stubborn rebellion.

Thus, even in the Zhuāngzī we find the advocacy of teaching and learning, albeit in a distinctive mode. And while there is a sort of liberation promised in the text, it is not simply the removal of all constraints and the leap into a realm of unrestrained freedom. Delusory, socially constructed norms are “forgotten” in the sense that they no longer provoke anxiety, fear, or yearning, but instead are seen clearly as aspects of the social landscape, projected into being by humans, who usually still loom large for human beings, who must navigate their way through society (as if “walking without touching the ground,” in Zhuāngzī’s famous phrase [C 117; W 58]), but are not nearly as important to the broader universe as most think themselves to be.

The ideas of liberation or even autonomy do not capture the “conforming” activity of the Zhuangzian sage as he responds to phenomena like an echo or a mirror, free of schemes, greater purposes, and anxiety, as well as most human emotions. Rather than generating his or her own plans, goals, or maxims for action, the sage simply flows along “according” with things. In contrast to the early Confucians, who do strive within lengthy apprenticeships in the practice of ritual, music, and moral and political judgment, Zhuāngzī is not advocating the cultivation of stable dispositions and commitments in any usual sense, nor does he suggest that people should seek out a teacher and remain loyal and obedient to him and his teachings. People need specific kinds of teaching, Zhuāngzī seems to be saying, in order to bring about the negative epiphanies that reorient them from human concerns to a grasp of things as they are, and the flexible, creative equanimity that goes with this transformation—but we do not ordinarily need lengthy apprenticeships nor the virtues that might be thought to accompany these, especially obedience. On the contrary, such counterfeit “virtues,” including Confucian values such as benevolence and righteousness, are a sign of inflexibility and delusion.

Within the Inner Chapters of the Zhuāngzī, positive accounts of cultivation are quite rare and seem to focus on either purifying one’s negation of delusory convictions or personal practice in the mastery of some craft, which is understood as a metaphor for the art of living more generally. This latter sort of practice can often be done alone, even if teachers can catalyze the process with their strange, penetrating words that lead to flashes of insight.
In the end, human masters are for the most part recast in the *Zhuāngzǐ* as crucial but transient figures. One character, Xu Yóu, composes an impromptu poem to explain the “broad outlines” to the aspiring but previously misguided student Yiézǐ, describing his “teacher” or “master,” *shī* 師, as follows: “He chops fine the myriad things but not for justice, he gives moisture to myriad ages but not for benevolence, he has lasted longer than high antiquity but isn’t old, he covers heaven and supports earth, and carves up a multitude of forms but isn’t skillful—this is where to roam” (C202–3; W89–90). It would appear that the Heavenly *Dāo* itself is Xu Yóu’s teacher. This sort of master acts not for the sake of normal human excellences, instead aimlessly creating and destroying in wondrous profligacy. And the best verb to describe Xu Yóu’s attitude toward his teacher’s “guidance” is one of Zhuāngzǐ’s favorites: *yóu* 遊, “roam” or “wander.” This implies not the following of clear directions but rather rambling about exploring, with no fixed destination.

Even though this description of the “orientation” of the sage might suggest that people are “free” to discover the truth for themselves, the rest of the text sharply undercuts such a reading. Regular people are depicted as benighted, lost in dreams even when seemingly awake (C84–85; W46–48). Even those with the “talent of a sage” still need training to achieve their potential (C183–84; W82–83). Zhuāngzǐ’s vision undercuts certain key presumptions of most pictures of humans as autonomous and free, instead suggesting that we need assistance to become “true people.” The text itself seems to function as a guide for evaluating candidates for mastery, mocking and attacking many famous contenders, and refiguring Confucius himself as its most prominent spokesman. Ultimately, it seems, the Inner Chapters offer themselves as a substitute for actual flesh and blood teachers, drawing careful readers through a sequence of unusual lessons, with the apparent hope that at least some of them will be suitable and effective, stripping away the pseudo-knowledge that readers bring to the text but must learn to leave behind if they are to follow Zhuāngzǐ’s *dāo*.

**Conclusion**

Zhuāngzǐ’s radical diagnosis of the human condition is unlikely to convince everyone, or even very many. For my larger concerns about authority relations, Zhuāngzǐ presents an intriguing test case. In his own day he was a fierce critic
of other intellectual tendencies; for our purposes the most striking contrast is with the early Confucians, for whom he has a complex blend of sympathy and disdain. Although I have not tried to argue for this here, early Confucian accounts of teacher-student relations focused on the cultivation of aesthetic and ethical mastery of their daō conflict with at least strong visions of autonomy such as Kant’s, in some fairly clear ways. Compared to a Confucian vision of communal harmony and solidarity built on clear, justified hierarchies that reflect an aristocracy of virtue, Zhuāngzǐ’s vision has seemed to many interpreters to celebrate the freedom, even liberation, of the individual from constraints.

Despite this, I do hope to have shown that even in this early Chinese text most likely to be interpreted today as advocating personal freedom or autonomy, there are serious tensions between typical versions of modern Western views of autonomous agency and the accounts of both normal and sagely human activity in the Zhuāngzǐ. In particular, Zhuāngzǐ argues that human beings, even the most talented, need assistance from others, specifically teachers with superior insight (however unusual such teachers may be), in order to fulfill whatever promise they may have. And once awakened, “true people” are not “free” to do whatever they desire, but instead spontaneously “accord” with the natural and social worlds as they objectively are, even if a clear vision of the world allows plenty of room to “roam” around in most situations. Moreover, several stories are premised on the existence of stark hierarchies of religious or philosophical attainment, where only a few have mastered the arts of “forgetting” and perceiving necessary to respond to situations like a mirror. Nor is this vision used to justify dismantling or even critiquing existing social forms; if anything, social forms are to be left as they are and simply interpreted and responded to differently. In the end, just like the Confucians, Zhuāngzǐ celebrates his own distinctive brand of mastery, and the teaching hierarchies it creates and requires.

Notes

1. By “hierarchy” I mean to refer to various social relations of superiority and inferiority, such as ruler/ruled, manager/worker, parent/child, and teacher/student, as well as the classic master/slave pattern. By “authority” I mean being sufficiently
trusted by one’s audience that one’s communications are judged truthful and important, at least \textit{prima facie}, and thus should be acted upon.

2. For a fuller statement of this sort of vision of human beings, see Midgley (2002).

3. The idea of “mastering” something suggests a number of possible dangers, including (1) a model of total control and possession akin to that of the slave owner, and (2) a delusional sense of perfect capability that denies human finitude and frailty. I intend to explore these more thoroughly in the larger project, but not here.

4. The person most responsible for the post–World War II liberal democratic suspicion of perfectionism is probably Isaiah Berlin, the celebrated philosopher and intellectual historian. See especially Berlin (1998).

5. The first edition was published in 1861, and it has gone through numerous British and American editions since. It is still in print today.

6. For more historical insight into these developments, see Benton (2002) and Brewer (2005). I thank Kirsten Sword for discussions of these points and guidance into the scholarly literature.

7. For a fine introduction to some of these issues, as well as the vast literature on slavery in the West, see Harrill (2006).

8. Social contract thinking begins with initial formulations in Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Kant, for example, but continues all the way to the present, most notably in the political philosophies of John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas and their defenders. Needless to say, adequately addressing differences between the accounts of autonomy in these thinkers, or in other liberals such as J. S. Mill, is far beyond the scope of this paper.

9. See especially Callan (1997) and Gutmann (1987). On liberal democracy as a cultural tradition, see Stout (2004). Note also important feminist studies that argue for similar points about autonomy from different points of view. See, for example, Griffith (1997), Mahmood (2005), and Bucar (2010).

10. Even Kant recognized this to a certain degree, for instance in his shorter text \textit{On Education} (2003). For a more recent attempt to articulate such a position, see MacIntyre (1999).

11. See most recently Rosemont and Ames (2009), especially the lengthy introduction.

12. The reasons for the gradual change in Europeans’ views of Chinese civilization from a typically laudatory, even envious early modern interpretation (in Leibniz and Voltaire, for example), to later more frequently contemptuous views of China as hidebound, corrupt, and authoritarian, are very complex, and obviously beyond the scope of this paper.

13. Despite this lack of explicit theoretical justification for social hierarchies in terms of differential “natures,” early Chinese cultural groups were agrarian kingdoms with stark class divides and frequent recourse to corvée labor, and are aptly described as patriarchal. I have no desire to idealize them as social models.

14. For a good overview of early Chinese history, see Loewe and Shaughnessy (1999).

15. My own sense is that different texts need to be analyzed individually, rather than assuming that all early texts were put together in the same way, for example, through gradual “accretion.”
16. The Daödejing is something of a boundary case in my schema, since strands in it advocate both a version of ruling by virtue and coldly strategic calculations of effectiveness.

17. For textual issues in the study of the Zhuangzi, see Graham (1980); Liu (1994); and Roth (1991). For a recent iconoclastic argument, see Klein (2011).

18. References to the Zhuangzi will be keyed to two editions: Chen (1990), hereafter referred to as “C”; and Watson (1968), hereafter referred to as “W.” All translations are my own.

19. I borrow this idea from Yearley (2005), who puts a similar point more strongly in terms of a “hermeneutical crisis.”

20. For examples of such readings, see Feng (1959) and Shang (2006). For apt criticisms of this tendency, see Puett (2003) and Slingerland (2003, 204–10).

21. On Zhuangzi’s critique of obedience, see Gottine (n.d.).

22. For an introduction to the range of the long commentarial tradition on the Inner Chapters, see Ziporyn (2009).

23. In the Analects, Yan Hui is presented as Confucius’s most promising student, an avid learner, exceptionally talented and good-hearted, unconcerned by his own poverty, and dedicated to study and practice of the Way. However, he dies young, with his vast potential unrealized, which leads Kongzi to express extravagant grief at his passing, to the alarm of his other disciples. See 2.9, 5.9, 6.3, 6.7, 6.11, 9.11, etc.

24. For pithy commentary on this aspect of the Zhuangzi, see Carr and Ivanhoe (2010, 105–9).

25. For representative interpretations along these lines, see Eno (1996) and Yearley (1996). There are several more skill stories in the Outer Chapters, which appear to be the work of later followers exploring the possibilities of this theme.

26. On the mirror metaphor in the Zhuangzi and elsewhere, see Cline (2008).

27. For different meditation- and mysticism-friendly readings of these passages, see Harold Roth (2003) and Yang (2003). For a critique of Roth in particular, see Carr and Ivanhoe (2010, 86–109). Although I cannot argue the point here, I think the question of how to interpret this sort of qi mastery relates crucially to depictions of the emotions and desires of Zhuangzi’s sages.

28. The story of Lady Ju talking about teaching Bu liang Yi the “way of a sage” in chapter 6 is similar, describing a brief apprenticeship that is focused on a particular sequence of stages of putting aspects of the world and the self “outside” oneself, which leads over a few weeks to strange metaphorically described developments like “the dawn pervading [him]” and “seeing [his] aloneness” and “entering the undying and unliving.” The passage concludes with what appears to be a description of the Heavenly Dao (C 183–84; W 82–83).

29. The last word, shun, here glossed as “what is suitable,” also means “obedience,” and that connotation seems to be present as well.

30. The intriguing outlier in this series of narratives is the last one, where Master Yu begins to worry about Master Sing, his friend, after ten days of incessant rain, and compassionately brings him rice, but then is nonplussed by his self-pitying
song in which he laments his poverty. Master Sâng in the end regards his current situation as a manifestation of *mìng* 命, the “decree” of Heaven. Presumably this is a way to accept the inevitable, but the story provides no clear resolution of his lament (C 208; W 91).

31. I borrow the language of “conformity” from Brindley (2010). Brindley unfortunately reverts to language of freedom and autonomy when describing Zhuângzi’s ideas, despite the “ironic” contrast with his Dao-conformity (58–59).

32. The relation of their views with more subtle versions of an autonomy ideal is complex, and deserves a fuller treatment elsewhere.

References


