

Diluvian Discourses: *Zhiyan* and Therapeutic Scepticism in the *Zhuangzi*

Abstract

Chapters 27 (*Yuyan*) and 33 (*Tianxia*) of the *Zhuangzi* contain curious moments of reflection on the use of language in the text. They list three modes of communication, of which *zhiyan* [危言] may be read as the dominant, if not underlying. Traditional interpretations of this, following Guo Xiang's commentary, understand *zhi* [危] as a goblet which self-empties in a context of consumption. However, Daniel Fried has argued in an article from archaeological and cross-textual evidence for the possibility of interpreting *zhi* as an ancient tipping-vessel used in the irrigation of crops. In my paper, I will argue that Fried's interpretation of *zhiyan* may contribute to an understanding of how Zhuangists, at the tail-end of the textual tradition, may have read earlier chapters of the *Zhuangzi* to not only avoid succumbing to their own professed scepticism about language (e.g. in the *Qiwulun*), but effect life-affirming transformations in its readers. I will do this by examining a number of closely related passages and argue that these suggest that *zhiyan*, with its agricultural connotations, is meant to achieve scepticism-avoidance and reader-transformation through humour.

Presentation

(1) The central aim of my paper today is, hopefully, on the modest end of the myriad discussions on the *Zhuangzi*. I merely wish to suggest that with a certain understanding of what *zhiyan* means we are better able to draw important internal connections between its humorous rhetoric and its therapeutic scepticism.

(2) So here is how my presentation will proceed. I will first make a few brief remarks about what I mean by therapeutic scepticism and how it raises a question about the mode of language used in the text. I will then look at interpretations of the function of *zhiyan* in the text, and how this turns on the two ways *zhi* itself may be understood. Finally, I will try to understand *zhiyan* as poetic jest by looking at connections between related key passages (namely, in the *Qiwulun*, *Dazongshi*, and *Qiushui pian*). So, again, the aim here is to show how *zhiyan* provides a connection between the *Zhuangzi*'s humour and its therapeutic scepticism.

I should first note that the term ‘*zhiyan*’ occurs only within the Miscellaneous Chapters (*Zapian*) of the *Zhuangzi*, which were supposedly added on to the textual canon at the tail-end of the Zhuangist tradition. Given the complexities and complications surrounding the *Zhuangzi* as a text, I admit that what my coherentist approach will be offering here may perhaps be best thought of as one possible way to understand what later Zhuangists might have thought of the earlier chapters and the text as a whole.

(3) The linguistic scepticism in the *Zhuangzi*, in raising questions about whether words secured any meaning, brings up the issue of the text’s own use of language. Do the words used in raising these questions themselves have any meaning? Without making reference to *zhiyan*, as we will, many scholars (such as Eric Schwitzgebel and Lisa Raphals) have noted what I will term a therapeutic aim to the scepticism. With such an aim, the *Zhuangzi* is not purely concerned with the negation of language but sees it as a means to an end. In this way, the *Zhuangzi* may be read not to endorse a wholesale rejection of language, even though it is not committed to the language it criticises.

What the linguistic scepticism is meant to attack, then, is the taking of words seriously. The scepticism is meant to free the reader into a receptivity which is less fixated with one’s own beliefs and the beliefs of others. For in taking words seriously, one takes a word, *ming* [名], to correspond directly, and immutably, to a thing in reality, *shi* [实], which it is meant to designate (e.g. the signifier ‘horse’ for a horse). With such designations as foundational units of language, discourses are premised on *shi/fei* [是/非] binaries: that something is *shi*, or is *fei* depends on whether it corresponds to the world (e.g. whether a white horse is a horse or not), and this extends to ethical designations—whether something is right or wrong (*shi* or *fei*). This is described as being internalised as static tallies, *fu* [符], in the heartmind, where words are to match things in the world. A system of these form a course, *dao* [道]. However, the problem is that one might live rigidly in terms of the static daos and discriminative *shi/fei* binaries. The critique launched in the *Zhuangzi* against the serious use of language is that it leads to a high degree of inflexibility and lack of responsiveness in acting and living in a world which we do experience as flux.

The therapeutic goal in the *Zhuangzi*, for this paper, is therefore for one to go beyond “[halting] at whatever verifies [the heartmind’s] preconceptions” (tally-matching), to become receptive to the myriad things in the world and the (heavenly) Course, *Dao*—to “[respond] to all the endless things [one]

confronts, thwarted by none” and thus be the same as the *datong*, or Great Openness, to respond appropriately to the flux.¹

The concern is that with a rejection of serious uses of language, the use of language in order to articulate this very rejection has to be non-serious. Therefore, the question, which is meant to be answered in turning to *zhiyan*, is how exactly the language used in the *Zhuangzi* to understood to be non-serious and instrumental to achieving the overall therapeutic goal.

(4) *Zhiyan* appears in Chapters 27 and 33 of the *Zhuangzi* (*Yuyan* and *Tianxia*). In it, we see *zhiyan* spoken of alongside two other modes of communication, the titular *yuyan* and *zongyan*.

yuyan and *zongyan*, in Chapter 27, are described as constituting “nine-tenths” and “seven-tenths” of its words, while *zhiyan* is meant to be used everyday (including *yuyan* and *zongyan* within itself). An examination of *zhiyan* therefore may provide us a means to understand the communicative mode of the text as a whole—which has to be non-serious.²

yuyan is meant “for broad acceptance” or “to impart greater breadth,” and *zongyan* is meant “for verification” or “to give a ring of truth.”³

(5) However, the purpose of the use of *zhiyan* is less clear. What does it mean for it to ‘pour forth day after day’? and how does it relate to the endless changes of things?

(6) Its only other occurrence, in the *Tianxia* chapter, hardly clarifies it either. In order to figure out what *zhiyan* is then, requires us to figure out what is meant by *zhi* to begin with.

(7) There are two ways to understand *zhi*. One is as a goblet and the other as an irrigation vessel.

(8) Guo Xiang’s comments that *zhi* is a vessel which “tips over when filled to the brim and then rights itself,” and “has no uprightness of itself but depends on the one who drinks.”⁴ Many subsequent interpreters have taken the vessel to mean a goblet, or a ‘spill-over goblet’. These include scholars such as A. C. Graham, Wang Youru and Wu Kuang-ming. Their understanding of *zhiyan* is that they are

¹ Brook Ziporyn, trans. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2009), 26, 12, 49.

² *Ibid.*, 114.

³ *Ibid.*, 123; Burton Watson, trans. *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 296.

⁴ A. C. Graham, trans. *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company Inc., 2001), 26; Ge Ling Shang, *Liberation as Affirmation: The Religiosity of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche* (Albany, New York: State University of New York, 2006) 43.

words which are characterised by self-emptying and the fluidity of its meanings, according to our experience of the world as flux. An upshot of this is that *zhiyan* is not understood according to its content but its function. The underlying trouble with this interpretation for the purposes of achieving the therapeutic aim is that fluidity and self-emptying alone is insufficient to effect the reader to be affirmatively receptive to the flux. It is only a partial understanding of the role of *zhiyan*.

(9) More recently, Daniel Fried argues from recent archaeological finds (on Neolithic Yangshao culture which goes back to mid-5th millennium BCE) and cross-textual evidence (the *Han Feizi*, *Xunzi*, *Wenzi*, and Guo Xiang's commentary) that the meaning of *zhi* had evolved over time. So we should understand *zhi* in the authorship of the *Zhuangzi* not as a 'spillover-goblet' but an ancient tipping-vessel used in the irrigation of crops. While *zhi* here still retains its characteristics of self-emptying and fluidity, the significance of this discovery is that the focus on *zhi* is no longer as a vessel which empties itself in a context of consumption, but about a container which empties itself in a context of agriculture.

(10) Fried notes the 'close relation' between Chapters 2 and 27 by way of the recurring notion of *tianni* [天倪]. The main hermeneutical thrust by Fried is that rendering *zhi* as 'goblet' misses out on explicating the remarks in the latter part of the passage that "[i]f there were not *zhiyan* to pour forth daily, harmonized from the heavenly beginnings" (*tianni*) no one "could last long."⁵ Here, he notes that to read *zhiyan* as 'tipping-vessel words' would fit better with the imagery that "[a]ll things are seeds"—and are thus irrigated by the *Zhuangzi*'s words.⁶ Importantly, *zhiyan* is cyclical, filling up and emptying, as a language which is "itself unstable and does not grasp at nature," and "[participates] in the self-productive cycles of the world of things"—things which "create each other, form yielding to form, in endless cycles."⁷ Contrary to the Watson translation we see here, Fried interprets *tianni* in this organic agricultural context as "heavenly beginnings" and couples it with *qiongnian* [窮年], interpreted as "finishing out the years," to suggest the "cycle of any given agricultural year from planting and watering to reaping and emptiness; and also the timelessness of that cycle, oscillating back and forth from the beginning until the end of time."⁸ The figure of Zhuang Zhou, then, in Chapter 33, is seen as a farmer who irrigates the fields with his *zhiyan* which operates according to the seasonal transformations. Further, as in Chapter 27, while he irrigates, he is himself participating in the heavenly transformations.

⁵ Daniel Fried, "A Never-Stable Word: Zhuangzi's 'Zhiyan' 卮言 and 'Tipping-Vessel' Irrigation," *Early China* 31 (2007): 165.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸ *Ibid.*

(11) We see this motif of seasonal transformations also in the *Qiwulun*, wherein the *Zhuangzi* describes harmonization with *tianni* to involve the exercise of forgetting and leaping into the boundless.

With this, I will now go beyond Fried to observe how this agricultural notion of *zhiyan* fits with an understanding of non-serious language as poetic jest. I will begin with how the notion of forgetting connects up with the passage in Chapter 6 on Yan Hui's exercise of forgetting.

(12) Here, we see Yan Hui taking the advice of Confucius from a few passages earlier to fast his heartmind.

(13) Yan Hui 'fasts the heartmind' [*xinzhai* 心齋] and forgets distinctions, from *shi/fei* distinctions internalised as virtues (benevolence and righteousness [*renyi* 仁義]), to codifications of *shi/fei* distinctions ("rituals and music" [*liyue* 禮樂]), to embodied distinctions and abandoning the faculty of distinction ("understanding" [*zhi* 知]) entirely.⁹

But how does *zhiyan* conduce the reader to move himself beyond an emptiness into a oneness with the Great Thoroughfare? (as Watson translates) In addressing this, I turn to Chapter 17 (*Qiusui*) while noting that the meteorological context of the *Zhuangzi* was "a very wet late autumn bringing two-thirds of the whole year's precipitation and causing great erosion if not serious floods" (the main crop, millet, required flooded fields, and the natural form of irrigation were autumnal floods).¹⁰ *Zhiyan* itself was meant to parallel autumn floods.

(14) Notably, the autumn floods in Chapter 17 were equalising, such that "a horse on the other bank could not be distinguished from a cow."¹¹ We have seen how self-emptying *zhiyan* parallels this heavenly irrigation by equalising the reader's *shi/fei* binaries, mapping on to the first half of the therapeutic aim: to fast the heartmind and the loosen fixations. But why would Yan Hui be happy about forgetting distinctions? Ordinarily, despair seems to be a more plausible response when faced with such emptiness. How would *zhiyan* make one adopt an affirmative, receptive stance to the myriad transformations?

(15) It is important to note that the streams which poured into the river removed its distinctive boundaries and allowed it to come into contact with the larger whole of the hydrosphere. In his

⁹ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 49.

¹⁰ Joseph Needham, Wang Ling, and Lu Gwei-Djen, *Science and Civilisation in China Vol. 4: Physics and Physical Technology: Part III: Civil Engineering and Nautics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 246, 269.

¹¹ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 68.

encounter with the expanse of the Northern Sea, the Lord of the River, in his haughtiness over encompassing everything on land in himself, has his preconceptions ‘taken away’ and finds himself in a state of wonder. Wonder, here, is understood as “the sudden loss of the sense that we understand what is going on,” where “we are not fitting what is in front of us into the explanatory structures that normally guide our lives” such that we “[take] in the things just as they are.”¹² Wonder, further, is pleasant. With this, we note the importance of the literary dimension of the *Zhuangzi*. We can understand *zhiyan* to parallel *tianni* not only in terms of the flooding-equalising function, but also conducting contact with the Great Thoroughfare insofar as it leaves one in wonder, and thereby receptive to the transformations as such. *Zhiyan* is meant to evoke wonder at the transformative chaos of the myriad things, against the Human [*ren* 人] fixation of the Heavenly [*tian* 天], against the imposition man-made *daos* onto the Heavenly *Dao*—which “[destroys] the Heavenly.”¹³ Importantly, once the anthropic distinction itself is ‘unfixated’, the position from wonder treats as insignificant, as humorous, the now-equalised positions which was once fetishised.

(16) The artistry of the *Zhuangzi*’s words present to its reader a look (or looks) at the dynamic world (not definitively of course) which is not only one freed from the rigidity of the tallies of the heartmind which are now regarded as comic. *Zhiyan*, achieves these by acting as an intermediary by which the reader is imaginatively dislodged from the anthropic bias. In this way, the reader discharges the question of the absurdity of existence in a burst of laughter. So the reader is hoped to “rest securely in [his] place in the sequence, however things are arranged” and “not use the Human to destroy the Heavenly.”¹⁴ So even deformity, death, and decay are often portrayed beautifully and with a peculiar light-heartedness in the *Zhuangzi*—as opposed to the gravitas of, say, Ruist funeral rites. Non-serious language is poetic jest.

(17) Therefore, with this, we may now better understand how *zhiyan* is instrumental to the therapeutic aim, given the agricultural dimensions which were left out by the goblet-readings. Just as the River God, flooded by the streams, comes to marvel at the Northern Sea, and in virtue of which undergo self-transformation, so the reader of the *Zhuangzi*, flooded by *zhiyan* (negative half of the therapeutic aim), are invited by its artistry to occupy a position of wonder, and in virtue of which come to dislodge from the anthropic bias to participate in the Great Thoroughfare (positive half). In this participation, nothing is fixated upon. But this means even the content of *zhiyan* itself is to be left behind. Just as how you don’t keep telling the same joke over and over again.

¹² Joe Sachs, “Introduction,” in *Poetics*, trans. Joe Sachs (Newburyport, MA: Focus Publishing, 2006), 16.

¹³ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi*, 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 48, 73.