

Connecting Robber Zhi with Zhuangzian Primitivism

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Abstract: Welsh sinologist Angus Charles Graham identified Chapters 8–11 of the *Zhuangzi* (莊子) as having a sole author, a ‘Primitivist’, advocating for a stateless, agrarian society. These chapters are of prime interest to scholars searching for Daoist and consequently primitivist accounts of *xing* (性). Commonly translated as human nature, *xing* expresses the processes of growth and natural dispositions of a living thing. Employing Esther Klein’s identification of a possible “Core *Zhuangzi*” containing Chapters 10 and 29, conflicting accounts of *xing* which emerge from the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* could be reconciled. These chapters reference the notorious bandit leader Robber Zhi (盜跖), and this paper argues that an examination of references to Robber Zhi in the *Zhuangzi* yields a connection between Chapters 8, 10, 11, and 29, which describe *xing* as the easiest or most natural spontaneous course of development. These chapters present a cohesive account for the preservation of *xing* and rejection of essentializing moralism which seeks to codify the means of bringing human *xing* under order. The Zhuangzian perspective elucidated by the examination of Zhi considers such moralizing efforts highly noxious to *xing* and even life itself.

Keywords: Zhi (盜跖), *Zhuangzi* (莊子), Daoist primitivism, *xing* (性),

This BCE) in presents a study of the character of Robber Zhi (盜跖), a notorious bandit leader from the Spring and Autumn period (c. 770–c. 481 BCE) in the *Zhuangzi* (莊子) and his relation to a Daoist philosophy of protecting *xing* (性).¹ Commonly translated as human nature, *xing* expresses the processes of growth and natural dispositions of a living

¹ Prior to the Han dynasty, the term was rarely distinguished from a similar term life or growth, *sheng* (盛). When the two became distinguished, at the time of the 4th century BCE, the Yangist school developed the term *xing* with reference to the proper course of a thing’s development or process of life. For more information on *xing*, see Angus Charles Graham, “The Background of the Mencian Theory of Human Nature,” in *Tsing Hua Journal of Chinese Studies*, 6 (1967).

thing. I understand *xing* to be something akin to the easiest or most natural development of a given thing or person, which can be arrested or altered by external influence. References to *xing* within the *Zhuangzi* (莊子) are only present in the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters. Following the assessment of Welsh sinologist Angus Charles Graham, the author or authors of Chapters 8–11 of the *Zhuangzi* are known by convention as primitivists. While Zhi appears in the primitivist Chapter 10, he serves as the mouthpiece of Yang Zhu (楊朱; 440–c.360 BC) in Chapter 29. In this regard, he is used to speak not only for the primitivists but also the Yangists.

The literature on Daoist primitivism focuses on identifying an account of *xing* within the *Zhuangzi*. Robber Zhi is consistently used in apparently incongruous comparisons with more esteemed moral exemplars to identify pernicious elements of codified moral systems and their deleterious effects upon *xing*. The juxtaposition of the reviled Zhi and notable Confucian worthies points to an epistemic complaint about the moralists,² which belies their complete misunderstanding of *xing* and an overreach in presuming to know whether it is good or bad or how it must be correctly cultivated. The Zhuangzian perspective on the matter is that codifying moral standards according to the pretense of knowing what is right or wrong brings harm to everyone and disorders their *xing*. Nothing other than the spontaneous and uninterrupted development of one's *xing* is what is "best" for it.

In this article, I will rely on Richard John Lynn's translation of the *Zhuangzi* and Guo Xiang's (郭象; 252–312 BCE) commentaries,³ as well as Brook Ziporyn's *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*.⁴ The article is divided into six sections, beginning with a review of the literature focusing mostly on debates in English-language scholarship about *xing* in the *Zhuangzi*, as well as the question of their authorship. Certain chapters highlighted by Esther Klein as constitutive of the *Zhuangzi* that 2nd-century historian Sima Qian (司馬遷) had access to are identified.⁵ Next, I examine the comparison of

² These are Confucians and Mohists and in some cases even Yangists. The label "moralist" is chosen to denote these schools' efforts to define and implement a unified ethical and political order based on traditional morals. For more on the dynamics of this period, see Angus Charles Graham (trans.), *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2001), 197–198.

³ Richard John Lynn (trans.), *Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

⁴ Brook Ziporyn (trans.), *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009).

⁵ These chapters also conform closely with the biography of Zhuang Zhou (莊周; c. 369–286 BCE), who is credited with authorship of the *Zhuangzi* featured in Sima Qian's *Shiji* (史記 or *Records of the Grand Historian*, 91 BCE). For more details, see Esther Klein, "Were There 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*," in *T'oung Pao*, 96 (2010).

Robber Zhi with the historical figure Bo Yi (伯夷; c. 1046 BCE) in Chapter 8, which identifies the *Zhuangzi* as strongly valuing preservation of one's *xing* over all else. Following this, the depiction of Robber Zhi in Chapter 10 is considered, noting how the *Zhuangzi* frames its rejection of arbitrary notions of right and wrong because they empower coercive action through moral disputation and benefit robbers.

The article next turns to Chapter 11 to examine how Zhi is used there to denounce moralist disciplinary systems like Confucianism, which encourage people to abandon their *xing*. Proceeding from this, Chapter 29 is shown to repudiate sagely wisdom as hypocritical pretext for robbery and violence with a shocking contrast between Zhi and Confucius. Finally, the article concludes that whoever the author or authors of these allegedly "Core Chapters" of the *Zhuangzi* may have been, the undercurrent that unifies their thought is that one should not abandon one's *xing* to emulate a moral exemplar or otherwise submit to the moral discipline strongly associated with the wisdom of the sages. A Zhuangzian understanding of *xing* criticizes most moralist epistemic assumptions, lampooning sagely wisdom with thought-provoking comparisons to Robber Zhi which demonstrate how harmful attempts to codify or shape *xing* are.

Connecting *Xing* and Questions of Authorship in the *Zhuangzi*

This section seeks to parse the scholarly discourse on *xing* and bring close attention to the disputed attribution of authorship of the chapters in *Zhuangzi* stemming from the work of Graham. It observes how Esther Klein's essay, titled "Were There 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*," identifies several chapters of a possible "Core *Zhuangzi*," with Chapters 10 and 29 referencing Robber Zhi. Robber Zhi is relevant for each of the different authorship theories, and this section identifies that the chapters which reference Zhi—Chapters 8, 10, 11 and 29—should be examined for a cohesive Zhuangzian account of *xing*.

Graham, in his translation and analysis of the *Zhuangzi* in *Disputers of the Tao*⁶ and later reiterated in *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*,⁷ categorized the *Zhuangzi* chapters based upon authorship. The primitivists and the Yangists are responsible for the four chapters in this study. Graham's decision to label the author of the Outer Chapters "primitivist" is because these chapters reference the agrarian and stateless society of the Shen-Nong (神農) paradigm. Taking its name from the mythological figure Shen-Nong, known as the father of agriculture, the Shen-Nong paradigm is characterized by an

⁶ Angus Charles Graham, *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argument in Ancient China* (Open Court, 1989).

⁷ See Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*.

ideal albeit technologically and administratively limited agrarian society, hence the name “primitivist.”

Deriving the name of their school from Yang Zhu, the Yangists believe keeping one’s nature intact, preserving *xing*, and not allowing oneself to be subdued by worldly affairs.⁸ For the Yangists, *xing* is the capacity to live out the term of life which heaven has destined, though it may be injured or degraded by exterior influences. The objective of life for a Yangist thinker would be to keep one’s *xing* intact, so it is noteworthy that the primitivist chapters reference Yang Zhu. The ostensibly Yangist author of Chapter 29 uses Zhi to denounce everything that followed from the golden age at the very roots of Confucian historiography, before the prehistoric sage kings Yao (尧) and Shun (帝舜) (c. 24th century BCE). This refers to the very same paradigm of Shen-Nong exhorted by the primitivist author, indicating some overlap in their beliefs. This overlap and the shared use of the character Robber Zhi point to a shared concept of *xing*.

Scholarship on the matter since Graham has departed significantly from his construal of the *Zhuangzi*. The most significant challenges to Graham’s model are represented by Liu Xiaogan and Esther Klein. Rather than use the primitivist label, Liu labels the author of those chapters “anarchist.”⁹ These chapters indicate belief in a designated sovereign—an emperor with innumerable tiny fiefs, each of which effectively attends to the needs of its residents such that they feel no need to leave. This is not necessarily an anarchist arrangement.

Klein emphasizes a deviation from Graham’s argument that elements of stylistic difference and disparities of sophistication¹⁰ between the Inner, Outer, and Miscellaneous Chapters delineate separate authorship¹¹ and a clear break in the date of composition. Klein argues that Sima Qian (c. 145 BC–c. 86 BC) likely recognized something like a “Core *Zhuangzi*,” a subset of chapters that would most likely include parts of Chapters 28, 29, and 31, as well as possibly parts of Chapters 10, 14, 17, and 23. Noting how Chapters 10

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53–55.

⁹ See Liu Xiaogan, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Klein argues a variety of textual parallels between the *Zhuangzi*, and other pre-Han and early Han texts justify reclassification of the *Zhuangzi* according to sub-chapter divisions. For more, see Klein, “Were There ‘Inner Chapters’ in the Warring States?”

¹¹ Zhang Dejun argues in parallel with Ren Jiyu that the seven Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* are not works that represent Zhuang Zhou’s thoughts but have their origins in the Huang-Lao School of the early Western Han Dynasty. For more, see Zhang Dejun, “Is the Inner Chapter of ‘Zhuangzi’ Written by Someone from the Early Western Han Dynasty?,” in *Zhuangzi Philosophy Discussion Collection* (Zhonghua Book Company, 1962). As well as Ren Jiyu, “Exploring the Origins of Zhuangzi – From the Materialist Zhuang Zhou to the Idealistic ‘Late Zhuangist School’,” in *Zhuangzi Philosophy Discussion Collection* (Zhonghua Book Company, 1962).

and 29 both reference Robber Zhi, and how Zhi is relevant both to Graham's primitivist and Yangist authors as well as the "Core *Zhuangzi*" that Klein outlines, I am strongly inclined to develop a syncretic reading of the text with an emphasis on Zhi.

Additionally, Harold D. Roth and Dan Robins both contend that the author of the Outer Chapters was not one sole primitivist.¹² While "primitivist" has come to designate a subgenre of Daoist studies loosely called "Daoist primitivism," some scholars¹³ claim *Zhuangzi* as Confucian or associate it with a more proto-communist interpretation.¹⁴ I argue that close attention to Zhi's use across these chapters may present a coherent account of *xing* which accommodates the primitivist position as well as incorporating Yangist elements from Graham while conforming with Klein's scholarship and Graham's assertion that the political polemics in these chapters are responding to the revival of the moralist schools like Confucianism sometime during the Chu-Han Contention from 206 to 202 BCE.

The rest of this section documents disparate accounts of *xing* in the *Zhuangzi*. Frank Saunders and Chiu Wai Wai each indicate that there is no unified single notion of *xing* to be found in the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters, but several. Saunders finds "three distinct approaches to human nature, which in turn serve as the foundation of their political and ethical thoughts."¹⁵ Saunders explains that Zhuangzian primitivism centralizes around the idea that cultural artifice erodes *xing*. Chiu argues that the tensions within the *Zhuangzi* with regard to defining *xing* establish an underlying theme that one should resist parochial and rigid methods of establishing norms whatsoever.¹⁶ These are both primitivist and Yangist points.

Divergent accounts about *xing* throughout the text seem to convey a message of non-intervention in other people's *xing*. Jacob Bender argues that

¹² See Harold David Roth, *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003). See also Dan Robins, "The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China" (PhD Thesis: The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, 2001).

¹³ Yang Rubin and Chen Guying have instead situated *Zhuangzi* within the humanist tradition of Confucianism itself instead of a subgenre of Daoism. For more in-depth treatment of this issue, see Yang Rubin, *Zhuangzi in Confucianism* (Taipei: Lian Jing Publishing Co., Ltd., 2016). See also Chen Guying, *The Humanist Spirit of Daoism*, ed. by David Jones and Sarah Flavel, trans. by Hans-Georg Moeller (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

¹⁴ For more on this, please see Ren Jiyu, "Exploring the Origins of Zhuangzi." See also, Ren Jiyu, "The Course of Development of the History of Chinese Philosophy," in *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, 41 (2010).

¹⁵ Frank Saunders Jr., "Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*: An Introduction," in *Philosophy Compass*, 15 (2020), 2.

¹⁶ See Chiu Wai Wai, "The Debate over *Xing* in the Outer Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*," in *Dao*, 21 (2022).

the *Zhuangzi* is talking about alienation from nature when it comes to *xing* in the Outer Chapters.¹⁷ Chong Kim-chong argues that the Outer Chapters eschew evaluations of right or wrong and refuse to give an account of *xing*. Chong points to the stakes of the *xing* debate; the supremacy of particular normative systems—Confucian or Mohist. This appears to strike at the heart of the issue for the authors of this era. He argues, “the social and ethical norms espoused by the Confucians and Mohists were themselves a part of the problem,”¹⁸ and that when explaining the complexities of *Zhuangzi*’s stories, “there may often not be any ethical or moral solution to a state of affairs, no matter which system of norms prevails or is appealed to.”¹⁹ One current emerges across these different interpretations; a normative moral system is more troublesome than not, and this is both a Yangist and primitivist position.

Reinforcing this, Hans-Georg Moeller writes that early Chinese philosophers were preoccupied with defining order and identifying the means by which to achieve it or otherwise avoid disorder.²⁰ The *xing* discourse can be understood in relation to this philosophical proclivity, and I believe the Zhuangzian position on *xing* calls into doubt the epistemic overreach of the moralists to claim that their provisos for cultivating *xing* were universal. Realizing this, the authors proposed a philosophy of preserving *xing* and resisting attempts to codify or interfere in its development, presenting the primitivist Shen-Nong paradigm as a sociopolitical alternative.

This section has sketched the landscape of the scholarly discourse on the authorship of the Miscellaneous and Outer Chapters as well as the landscape of secondary literature on Daoist primitivism, which seeks to identify a Zhuangzian account of *xing*. Connecting Graham’s accounts of the ‘Primitivist’ and Yangists with the notion of a “Core *Zhuangzi*” suggests that a Zhuangzian account of *xing* may be found in Chapters 10 and 29. The similarities between the different references to Zhi across the Chapters featuring him—8, 10, 11, and 29—present a synthesis of both primitivist and Yangist views in a distinctive Zhuangzian account of *xing*. The following section begins outlining the Zhuangzian account of *xing*, starting with Zhi’s appearance in Chapter 8.

¹⁷ See Jacob Bender, “Alienation and Attunement in the *Zhuangzi*,” in *Sophia*, 62 (2023).

¹⁸ See Chong Kim-chong, “Zhuangzi and the Issue of Human Nature,” in *Dao*, 22 (2023).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ See Hans-Georg Moeller, “Gangster Zhi: Comedic Daoist Philosophical Practice,” in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 50 (2023).

Webbed Toes: The Extraneous and Arbitrary

This section centers on the comparison between Robber Zhi and Bo Yi made in Chapter 8 of the *Zhuangzi* and its relation a Daoist philosophy of protecting or cultivating *xing*. The rest of the chapter is considered in context of this observation, highlighting the dangers to one's *xing* which may result from the overvaluation of conventional wisdom. Rather than claiming that people's *xing* is inherently good or bad, this chapter explains that *xing* should be left alone and that good and bad are arbitrary, conforming in part with Saunders, Chiu, Bender, and Chong to different degrees.

The *Zhuangzi* explores the danger of arbitrary moral exemplars by juxtaposing two figures. The first, Bo Yi (伯夷) (c. 1046 BCE), is generally heralded to be an example of a great man, and he is a celebrated figure in the Confucian literary tradition. The second is Robber Zhi. The author explains that Bo Yi valued honor more than his own life, while Robber Zhi valued riches:

Bo Yi died in pursuit of fame at the foot of Mt. Shouyang, while Robber Zhi died in pursuit of profit at the top of Mt. Dongling. They died for different things, but they were alike in damaging their lives and harming their inborn natures. So why must we say that Bo Yi was right and Robber Zhi was wrong? Everyone in the world is sacrificing himself for something or other.²¹

Guo Xiang explains that since the result is the same, whether this sacrifice ought to be considered noble or condemnable does not warrant our consideration.²² Saunders explains that the primitivists insisted that, while according to their own custom people like Bo Yi believed they are living fulfilling human lives, "their cultural fetishes leave them blind to the harmful reality of their situation, in which their *xing* is utterly ruined, and yet they consider themselves to be flourishing."²³ It is because of the normative standards that people are tricked into believing that what Bo Yi did is considered superior behavior while despite having the same result, Zhi's self-sacrifice is considered petty.

The *Zhuangzi* asks the reader to note that because there is sacrifice and loss of life in each case, this judgment regarding who should be esteemed or condemned is an arbitrary one. The *Zhuangzi* continues:

²¹ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 59.

²² Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 186.

²³ Saunders, "Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*," 5.

Those who do so [self-sacrifice] for Humanity and Responsibility [仁義 *renyi*]²⁴ are praised by the vulgar as exemplary men, while those who do so for wealth are condemned as petty men. But they are all alike in sacrificing themselves. So are there really any such things as “exemplary men” and “petty men”? In that they damage their lives and harm their inborn natures, Robber Zhi is no different from Bo Yi. Why should one be praised and the other condemned?” So to subordinate your inborn nature to Humanity and Responsibility, even if you succeed like Zeng and Shi, is not what I call good.²⁵

The truth of the matter is that both Robber Zhi and Bo Yi each destroyed their lives for the sake of something superfluous to their natures. A Yangist would argue that one’s life is never considered commensurate in value with anything else, so sacrificing oneself for the sake of something like *renyi* is a terrible waste. Chiu elaborates, “It is always the case that things’ *xing* differ, so they develop into a variety of shapes, functions, and dispositions. In short, the enforcement of rigid standards inevitably violates things’ *xing*.”²⁶ Things like *renyi* do not represent what is best for everyone; to the Zhuangzian perspective, they are neither descriptive or constitutive of *xing* for all people nor the means of developing it.

Specifically, the overvaluation of conventional morality, such as the ideals exhibited by exemplars of *renyi*, pose significant danger to one’s *xing*, tempting one to abandon it for rewards like honor and esteem. The eponymous “Webbed Toes,” which the title of Chapter 8 refers to, are like those qualities in that they are totally superfluous to one’s *xing*. Expounding, Chiu states, “Social norms create pain and suppression precisely because they are external to people’s *xing*, regardless of whether they succeed in stabilizing society.”²⁷ *Renyi* are a lot like having extra fingers or webbing between one’s toes: not only are these unnecessary developments in the first place, once they are fully developed they feel as necessary and as much a part of oneself as webbed toes or extra fingers.²⁸ Like extra fingers, they are also painful to dispose of and subsequently live without once one has become accustomed

²⁴ Ziporyn uses Humanity and Responsibility as the translation for *renyi* (仁義) here although it is also commonly translated as Benevolence and Righteousness.

²⁵ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 59.

²⁶ Chiu, “The Debate over *Xing*,” 554.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 556.

²⁸ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 308–309.

to living with them. Once these norms are adopted in a place or internalized in a person, they are very hard to remove without doing harm.

Bo Yi alienated himself from his *xing* which ended his life prematurely. Bender notes how the behavior of both men “damages how they are naturally predisposed to the world” and the author of this chapter is explicit that neither man should be considered a role model.²⁹ Trying to emulate either man would be against one’s own *xing*, and one should desire to be oneself. Echoing this, Ziporyn writes that “the original human nature is here regarded as prior to the distinction between good and evil but ultimately, if left to itself and undisturbed by interfering ‘ideals’ of goodness, is a higher source of Good.”³⁰ This is the main primitivist point; alienation from that prior human nature predisposes us to act coercively, making others conform to society and particular notions of right or wrong which are situated in particular perspectives.

Highlighting this tension, the author of the chapter points to the 5th-century Confucian role models Zeng Shen (曾參) and Shi Yu (史魚) because they encouraged the whole kingdom to abandon their *xing*.³¹ This might have been quite taboo for, as Bender identifies, the “most unusual claim in Chapter 8 is the accusation that the ‘sage’s’ are just as responsible for social ills as the ‘robbers’ and ‘thieves’.”³² In an initially apparently incongruous comparison, Zhi turns out to be far less malicious than Zeng and Shi when harm to *xing* is considered. As Chong writes, the “sages who instituted *renyi* and *liyue* destroyed the ‘constant nature’ (*chang xing* 常性) of people” while by comparison Zhi is merely a bandit.³³ Even if one tries to lead a good or morally upright life according to convention, the *Zhuangzi* argues that abandoning one’s *xing* can cause tremendous harm.

In summary, from a Zhuangzian perspective, attempts to conform with external moral systems guarantee harm to one’s *xing*. While successful conformity with *renyi* and the standards of the sages might be valued by society, any rewards one receives are worthless compared to the cost to life of losing one’s *xing*. The author of this section further criticizes these systems of right and wrong by deploying Zhi in an apparently incongruous comparison with Bo Yi as well as with the sagely architects responsible for it. In the process, the chapter demonstrates that such people and their conventions are hardly any less responsible for harm than Robber Zhi. The

²⁹ Bender, “Alienation and Attunement in the *Zhuangzi*,” 180.

³⁰ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 60.

³¹ Zeng Shen (曾參) refers to Zengzi (曾子), a disciple of Confucius who would later teach the grandson of Confucius, who was in turn the teacher of Mencius. Shi Yu 史魚 (also written Shi Qiu 史鱗) was a historiographer and patrician of Wei (魏) mentioned in *Analects* 15:7 as a moral paragon.

³² Bender, “Alienation and Attunement in the *Zhuangzi*,” 180.

³³ Chong, “Zhuangzi and the Issue of Human Nature,” 242.

following section echoes this point about the danger to *xing* and the hypocrisy of the conventions established by sagely wisdom.

Chests, States, Sages, and Thieves

This section shows that Chapter 10 of the *Zhuangzi* exhorts the reader to disentangle themselves from common sense wisdom. Like the webbed toes chapter, the author's clear focus in Chapter 10 is on presenting and countervailing the conventional understanding of what is good. Robber Zhi and another notorious thief Tian Chengzi (田成子) are used to demonstrate that the commonsense wisdom, or the "sagely wisdom," (聖知之法)³⁴ and the regulations and norms established by it are of greater assistance to the great thieves than it is to anyone else.

The Zhuangzian perspective emphasizes great similarity between robbers and sages, suggesting that the cultural artifice which enables their antics and erodes human *xing* should be discarded. The *Zhuangzi* claims that a good man cannot stand without the *dao* of the sage, but Robber Zhi cannot operate without it either. While Zhi's virtues are not the five Confucian virtues in verbatim, this shows that Robber Zhi is adroit at using the "wisdom of the sages" for the purposes of moral disputation. He benefits from the wisdom and laws of the sages: they increase his profits and give him the ability to act with impunity.

The chapter argues this by way of satire, targeting social convention and sagely wisdom, highlighting how they seem clever on the surface but are deeply unhelpful or, at worst, augment great thieves. The chapter begins:

To protect your trunks, your sacks, your cabinets from thieves who would break into them, rifle through them, bust them open, no doubt you will bind them with seals and ropes, secure them with latches and locks. This is what the conventional world calls wisdom (知/*zhi*).³⁵

Ironically, the rigorous securing of one's possessions does not actually stop thieves. In fact, it only makes it easier for greater thieves to walk off with loot. A small thief may be deterred by strong locks and chains, but a great thief is simply going to pick up the chest and haul it off in its entirety. At that moment, the thief's main concern is that the locks are strong enough

³⁴ Refer to *Daodejing* Chapters 16, 19, 20, 38, and 55 for how this "sagely wisdom" or sagely regulations are a misappropriation of the wisdom of the sages and misunderstanding of the *dao*.

³⁵ Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 62.

to keep all the loot safe while it is hauled away. The teachings of the sages are very much like these locks and chains which are used to secure chests.

On this model, the chests are likened to states. According to conventional wisdom, one would imagine that moral principles—such as *renyi* and the teachings of the sages—are there to protect the state, but in reality, they only make it much easier for great thieves to seize it. The main concern of such a great thief is that these moral principles successfully shield him from the repercussions of his theft and preserve the fruits of his looting. The *Zhuangzi* says that safeguarding the state with things like *renyi* is in truth only safeguarding it for someone else to take. The example provided is the theft of the state of Qi by Tian Chengzi in 481 BCE during the Spring and Autumn Period.

Qi was a prosperous state regulated by the rules of the sages. One day, Tian Chengzi had the ruler of Qi killed and usurped his position as the head of state. What Tian Chengzi stole in doing so was not simply the state, but what the *Zhuangzi* calls the “laws and regulations devised by the sagely wisdom.”³⁶ He was able to live just as securely in his position as the original sage-kings Yao and Shun despite his blatant skullduggery. Rather than preventing crime, the author of this chapter states that laws and property only serve to protect people with enough wealth and power to break those rules. The legal and moral order, as well as their corresponding social institutions, are organized to only support the wealthy and powerful. In this regard, the author of the chapter argues that what convention considers the acme of wit is nothing more than preparing a carefully wrapped gift basket for the next great thief.

All the things that Zhi steals, such as jade and pearls, are only artificially valued so highly, and the same is true of the state stolen by Tian Chengzi. The *Zhuangzi* argues that if sages were eliminated and their wisdom forgotten, and if jade and pearls were destroyed and discarded, there simply would not be anything to enable, protect, or indulge great thieves. This forgetting implies a return to the Shen-Nong paradigm, and Saunders notes that this is an important primitivist point: “the ideal society for the primitivists is one in which people are wholly satisfied with having only their basic necessities met, without corruption by the sages and their cultural trappings.”³⁷ He explains that this sort of natural spontaneous flourishing, characteristic of a plain people living in accordance with their *xing*, is only possible “without moral education, an invasive ruler, or a strict set of explicit norms and rituals,” in other words, without the wisdom of the sages.³⁸ This is core to the primitivist argument, as without grand states and esteemed

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁷ Saunders, “Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*,” 7.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

courts there would be nothing for people like Tian Chengzi to seize and no competition for moral renown or the luxuries of courtly appointments.

This section has aimed to demonstrate that the rejection of sagely wisdom coincides with a Zhuangzian doctrine of preserving *xing*. Chapter 10 of the *Zhuangzi* exhorts the reader to recognize that even though the conventions of sagely wisdom may believe themselves to be well-intentioned in their aim to order society and protect it and the people from harm, the very artifice which supports this project are most invaluable to great thieves. Zhi was used here in conjunction with Tian Chengzi to explore how sagely norms empower and defend the worst sorts of people.

Against Codification: Letting Things and *Xing* Be

The following section examines Chapter 11 of the *Zhuangzi*, which draws on Zhi once again to reinforce arguments found in the preceding chapters. Robber Zhi is compared directly with sagely worthies Zeng and Shi to demonstrate that sagely wisdom endangers one's *xing* and produces coercion and strife. This echoes the Zhuangzian account advanced by the previous sections of this article about preserving and protecting *xing* by abandoning codified moral systems.

Robber Zhi is deployed in Chapter 11 to emphasize that trying to emulate other people, even good ones, is harmful to one's nature. These people may be esteemed, but they have different *xing*—to uncritically emulate their behavior is to try and copy their *xing* rather than following one's own. Not only this, but the competition for recognition and moral accolades brings people into conflict. And like Chapter 10, which was discussed in the previous section, such a system produces bandits and tyrants. The author laments:

I am not so sure that sagely wisdom is not the yoke for cangues and benevolence and righteousness are not the mortise and tenon for shackles. And how do I know that Zeng and Shi are not whistling signal arrows for Jie and Robber Zhi! Therefore I say, abandon sagemess and discard wisdom, for then the whole world will find great and perfect order.³⁹

Moral conditioning of this sort draws people away from their *xing*, whether by discipline (as with shackles) or by temptation. In a coercive system based on sagely wisdom, people like Zeng and Shi may arise, but

³⁹ Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 213–214.

these conditions just as easily create folks like Robber Zhi. This is because not only do people compete to be rewarded and dement their *xing* in the process, but those adroit at moral disputation can secure these rewards through what amounts to theft. In that way, Zeng and Shi are whistling arrows for the likes of the notorious tyrant Jie (桀; 1728–1675 BCE) of the Xia dynasty⁴⁰ and Robber Zhi. With the Xia as a template for organizing society according to sagely wisdom, the fact that these moral teachings produced Jie (and the corresponding immiseration of society) should be considered a complete condemnation of the whole system according to a Zhuangzian account of *xing*.

In speaking of the primitivists in the first two sections of this chapter, Chiu explains, “Their discourses revolve around two themes: first, preserving people’s inborn *xing* and preventing it from being injured by cultural products and social norms; second, exalting a utopia in which government control barely exists and people live together with their inborn *xing* intact.”⁴¹ In this latter element, the primitivist and Yangist arguments overlap. The

Zhuangzi explains that even if the whole world were to conform and reward the good people, it would truly never be sufficient to reward their goodness. Likewise, the morally unworthy could not be punished enough.⁴² If these moral standards were truly successful at making people good, then following the footsteps of Yao would guarantee happiness, but so far following these guidelines have given rise to folks like Robber Zhi with an even greater frequency than people like Zeng and Shi. Systems of rewards and punishments based on sagely wisdom have caused people to cease to pay attention to their own sense of what is right and wrong, or what is best for their own natures.⁴³ The *Zhuangzi* argues that honoring standards such as these is nothing more than deception on a mass scale. Not only are people encouraged to corrupt their *xing*, but they are also directed to celebrate their subordination to things extraneous to their *xing*.

This section has noted that enacting moral guidelines to make people good has instead given rise to folks like Jie and Robber Zhi. Zhi was used to demonstrate that the venerated systems of reward and punishment and corresponding dogma about moral and immoral behavior ultimately produce

⁴⁰ Jie was the final ruler of the Xia. The *Huainanzi* explains that Jie built a lake of wine and was notorious for his misrule and wanton execution of loyal ministers, ultimately collapsing the dynasty.

⁴¹ Chiu, “The Debate over *Xing*,” 556.

⁴² This may also be a further reference to the late Qin dynasty’s apparent penchant for reward and punishment, but it is more likely that the author resists the notion of reward and punishment for the ways in which it alters one’s behavior and response; this artificial “second nature” is no longer a person’s original *xing*, if it is still *xing* at all.

⁴³ If people were to instead rest upon the instincts of their nature, the *Zhuangzi* says they would be indifferent to these sorts of things.

the very “ne’er-do-wells” that such a system should allegedly prevent. The Zhuangzian perspective insists on abandoning systems which encourage people to abandon their *xing* in pursuit of honors and acclaim or avoid punishments. The next section explicitly makes clear how this moralist hypocrisy found in Confucian teaching can even turn people who try to do good and encourage others to behave morally into unwitting bandits of a surprisingly diabolical sort, and Zhi will put forward an alternative social order which leaves *xing* unperturbed.

Robber Zhi or Robber Confucius?

This section addresses Chapter 29 of the *Zhuangzi*, which details a humorous albeit fictitious confrontation between the Robber Zhi and Confucius (c. 551–c. 479 BCE). Zhi is deployed as the mouthpiece for the author of the chapter, who makes the ironic point that the exhortations of Confucius do not produce moral order but enable Confucius to live as a robber. The hypocrisy of the Confucian position makes Zhi by comparison appear much more honest and sensible. While identifying Confucian ideas as violently hostile to life and noxious to human *xing*, the chapter also uses Zhi to outline a moral and political alternative in the Shen-Nong paradigm prior to Yao and Shun.

While Zhi bears the name robber, this chapter insists that Confucius is also a kind of thief. Zhi accuses Confucius of

arbitrarily spouting your own rights and wrongs in order to confuse rulers all over the world and prevent its learned men from recovering their original natures. You absurdly fabricate notions of filial obedience and fraternal duty in the hope that you will gain the patronage of some enfeoffed (*sic*) lord or some wealthy and eminent personage. Your crime is so great it should be punished by death.⁴⁴

Speaking of Confucius’s treatment elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, Saunders notes: “The idea seems to be that Kongzi’s own aggressive campaign to encourage people to meet his standard of benevolence will inevitably harm people by disrupting or even destroying their *xing*, when instead the regularities they are born with, just like those in nature, are

⁴⁴ Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 509.

perfectly sufficient to guide us to flourishing."⁴⁵ Zhi here condemns Confucius's actions for much the same reasons:

Now here you go cultivating the Dao of King Wen (Civilization) and King Wu (Warfare), manipulating opinion all over the world, so you can become teacher to all generations to come; using your fine-stitched robe and broad-waist sash, deceitful words and hypocritical behavior, to confuse and mislead rulers all over the world, so you can get wealth and honor from them. Since no robber is worse than you, why does the whole world not call you Robber Qiu instead of calling me Robber Zhi?⁴⁶

Confucius convinced people that he is an arbitrator of upright moral conduct, yet Zhi catches him in the process of employing deceit and flattery to rehabilitate a bandit's character in order to present him as a paragon of virtue and install him in office.

This duplicity makes Zhi livid, and he recounts many of the other men who bought into Confucian virtues but met terrible ends. These men were what the world considered, according to sagely wisdom, men of excellent character and virtue. Rather than preoccupying oneself with things like the five sounds and flavors and sights,⁴⁷ Zhi explains the importance of following one's *xing*, saying, "anyone who fails to gratify the aspirations of his will or neglects to nourish his longevity can't possibly be in step with the Dao."⁴⁸ This conforms completely with the primitivist viewpoint on *xing*, explained by Saunders:

The primitivists worry that culturally determined ways of organizing sensory phenomena and the culturally determined exemplars, goals, stimulus responses, and attitudes that grow out of them cause widespread anxiety throughout society, eventually leading to chaos, while a better course of action is to let people be and leave them alone (*zai you* 在宥).⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Saunders, "Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*," 5.

⁴⁶ Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 511.

⁴⁷ Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 199, 222. Graham explains that these patterns of concepts arranged in groups of five would have been the acme of Han dynasty thought and disputation, and Zhi may be shown to employ them to demonstrate his familiarity with the methods of argumentation of that era.

⁴⁸ Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 511.

⁴⁹ Saunders, "Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*," 4–5.

The author or authors of Chapter 29, through Zhi, argue that attuning oneself to goals and standards exterior to oneself, or sacrificing one's own health and wellbeing for any reason, are clearly not in-line with the *dao*. This points to a congruency between primitivist and Yangist doctrines regarding *xing*.

Compared to the *dao* that Zhi values, which preserves *xing*, Confucius's *dao* is called "muddled and frenetic, a cunningly deceitful, hypocritical affair, and not at all useful for perfecting one's authenticity, so what good is there in saying any more about it!"⁵⁰ This Confucian *dao* does not affirm life and one's inborn nature or *xing*, so as Guo Xiang writes in his commentary, there is little reason to waste one's breath discussing it.⁵¹

Zhi next presents an alternative to the Confucian moral order: the Shen-Nong paradigm. In the time before the sages, the era of perfect virtue, people had simple things and simple desires and lived in harmony.⁵² Rather than compete for moral accolades or seizing states and wealth, the people did not have an inkling of harming or stealing from each other. This era of perfect virtue subsided into an era of warfare and domination in the reign of the Yellow Emperor, and the resulting violence of the system he established—the system of sagely wisdom—is what Zhi condemns and Confucius exhorts.

Zhi proceeds to criticize Yao and Shun. These two sage-kings are by commonsensical Confucian consideration the epitome of sagely governance, but their behavior was awful: "Yao killed his oldest son and Shun exiled his mother's youngest brother—are there any normal relations between close and distant kin here?"⁵³ By Confucian standards, even these two are hardly as filial as their reputations suggest. As far as the *Zhuangzi* is concerned, whoever followed the way of the sages has either conducted violence, engendered it in the world, or died an awful death.

The relatively bombastic debate between Confucius and Zhi is certainly a fabricated exchange, but this section has pointed to an underexplored degree of duplicity in Confucian moral dogma. Confucius's remarks, if rendered realistically as Zhi outlines, use moralism as a guise to manipulate and rob people. Before the moral regime that enabled that behavior, in the Shen-Nong era, people lived in harmony. Since the

⁵⁰ Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 512.

⁵¹ Graham, *Disputers of the Tao*, 58–59. Graham explains that this idea that one should never sacrifice one's life or body for any external reason likely originates from the Yangist school attributed to Yang Zhu, or Yangzi, whose principle was mentioned by Mengzi. This conforms with the understanding of the value of one's life over that of material things outlined here, although there is humor in the fact that Zhi is presumably materialistic because he is a bandit.

⁵² Under these conditions, *xing* and potency (*de*) were undisturbed, and the people did not even engage in ancestor worship.

⁵³ Lynn, *Zhuangzi: A New Translation*, 514.

introduction of Confucian teachings, a hypocritical moral veneer has obscured the violence inherent in exerting moral discipline. Though the moralists presume to know what is best for *xing* and claim to bring order to society, from the Zhuangzian perspective, there could not be a moral system more hazardous to *xing*, and the even sage-kings who engineered it cannot themselves satisfy their own standards.

Conclusion

This article concludes by suggesting that a normative position might be derived (somewhat ironically) from the preceding reading of a Zhuangzian account of *xing* and repudiation of normative moralizing in the *Zhuangzi*. The Yangist notion of valuing *xing* and allowing one to live out the full term of one's allotted life over all else must be considered in tandem with the primitivist utopian Shen-Nong paradigm. The congruence between the different references to Zhi across Chapters 8, 10, 11, and 29 of the *Zhuangzi* presents a synthesis of primitivist and Yangist claims which produce a cohesive Zhuangzian account of *xing*. Consistently, Zhi is used to demonstrate the danger to *xing* posed by moralist exemplars and the hypocrisy of conventions established by sagely wisdom. Pursuant to the Yangist argument, the material rewards or moral recognition one may glean from conformity with such cultural artifice are worthless compared to the cost to one's life of corrupting one's *xing*. The *Zhuangzi* repeatedly exhorts the reader across these chapters to recognize that what society holds to be good and bad, and especially the sagely wisdom it venerates, are both noxious to *xing* and empowering to unscrupulous thieves. Not only do such conventions and systems of reward and punishment fail to protect people who conform, but they form a hypocritical moral veneer that has obscured the violence inherent in enforcing that system in the first place.

At the heart of this Zhuangzian criticism is resistance to the moral discipline associated with the wisdom of the sages and the moralist regime which perpetuates its cultural hegemony. The moralists are so derided by the authors of these chapters because they assumed that they knew what was best for *xing*; they thought that there were objective standards for right and wrong which *xing* could conform to. From the Zhuangzian perspective, this demonstrates a profound misunderstanding of what *xing* is. The above focus on Robber Zhi has demonstrated that a philosophy of non-intervention and preservation of *xing* in the *Zhuangzi* is motivated by a sincere aversion to the very notion of robust ethical and political philosophy. What is best for human *xing* is for it to be left alone to develop spontaneously without interference, which it will do naturally as a matter of course if a person's basic needs are met, such as the Shen-Nong paradigm. A return to a state of society even

more primordial than that of the prehistoric sage kings would have been as politically unfeasible for the authors in 205 BCE as it is today, but the anxiety with which they lament the rise of moralists vying for political office may resonate even now. From the Zhuangzian perspective, such moralizers look much more like thieves than sages.

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