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Analysis of Zhuang Zhou's Image in the Fables of *Zhuangzi*

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Dear Provost, Good morning. Today my topic is about the fables in *Zhuangzi*. As we all know that in the book of *Zhuangzi*, there are many fables. Those fables are very interesting and have deep meaning. In this presentation, we will explore and analyse the image of Zhuang Zhou in those fables. And the article divides into five parts, as outlined in the contents.

1. Introduction

Zhuang Zhou (369–286 BCE), also named Master Zhuang and Zhuangzi, was an influential Chinese philosopher during the Warring States period. According to *Records of the Grand Historian* 史記, Zhuang Zhou lived in a town of Meng 蒙 (in modern Anhui) in the state of Song 宋 and worked as a minor official in Qiyuan 漆園吏. He wrote the book of *Zhuanzi*, a work that contains over 100,000 words, which inherited the main ideas of Laozi 老子.

During the Warring States period, the prestige and power of Zhou State declined. Different States engaged in conflicts for fame and wealth. Ritual collapsed, and bad deeds like regicide and patricide became common. Consequently, the people suffered greatly due to the war. On the other hand, this period saw significant developments in Chinese philosophy. Various schools of thought emerged to address the chaos and alleviate the suffering of people. This period is often referred to as 'the Hundred Schools of Thought' (百家爭鳴).

So in the book of *Zhuangzi*, we can find the philosophical thoughts of Zhuang Zhou. *Zhuangzi* comprises a rich collection of stories, metaphors, moral tales, and fables, presenting in a

humorous and unconventional manner. According to many ancient texts¹, we can have a basic image of Zhuang Zhou. Within those fables related to himself, which may provide us with a deeper understanding. Through this, we can also delve further into Zhuang Zhou's philosophical thoughts.

2. the Definition of 'Fable'

According to Oxford Reference, the definition of fable is 'A short story, typically with animals as characters, conveying a moral; a story, typically a supernatural one incorporating elements of myth and legend.'²

For the Western culture, it has a long history of fables. For example, *Aesop's Fables* (620–564 BCE) 伊索寓言 in ancient Greece, *The Classic of hundred Metaphors* (c.400–450) 百喻經 in ancient India³, *The Arabian Nights* (c.9th century) 一千零一夜 in ancient Persia, and *Just So Stories for Little Children* of Rudyard Kipling (1965–1936), *Animal Farm* of George Orwell (1903–1950). Those fables consist of various short stories that use animals or people to convey educational and moral meaning. Also, those fables are collected into one book.⁴

For Chinese fables, Chen Puqing 陳蒲清 divided them into five stages⁵. According to chapter *Yuyan* (Fable 寓言) of *Zhuangzi*, 'Fables account for 90 percent, Quotation account for 70 percent, and Casual words are everywhere, conforming with nature.' (寓言十九，重言十七，

¹ Like *Records of the Grand Historian* 史記, *Han Shu* 漢書, and *Lvshi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋.

² Oxford Reference: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095807244>.

³ 陳洪、趙紀彬 (2011)。原文本《百喻經》成書時代以及傳譯諸況略考。宗教哲學，(58)，87-96。
[https://doi.org/10.6309/JORP.201112_\(58\).0006](https://doi.org/10.6309/JORP.201112_(58).0006)

⁴ From the definition, fables refer to animals as character, not include people. But if we add other fables in ancient Persia, ancient Indian and China, the definition of fables should include people.

⁵ Including Philosophical fables of pre-Qin Dynasty, admonishment fables of Han Dynasty, transition fables of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties, satirical fables of Tang and Song Dynasties, humorous fables of Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties. It is to be mentioned that those fables are not collected into one book, but separately in different traditional Chinese classics.

卮言日出，和以天倪。) There are many fables in *Zhuangzi*. The Fables of Zhuangzi used brief and fictitious stories (some may real) to imply another thing, conveying his philosophy thought. Hence from his fables, we can realise Zhuang Zhou and lots of myth and legend in pre-Qin Dynasty.

3. Analysis of Zhuang Zhou's Image in the Fables

This article primarily focuses on the analysis of Zhuang Zhou's image in the fables of *Zhuangzi*.

3.1 Choosing a Simple Life Over Politics

In the first part, we delve into the narrative found in Chapter *Waiwu* 外物. It presents Zhuang Zhou's modest circumstance. On one occasion, he visited Jianhe Hou (the Supervisor of the River 監河侯), to borrow some grain. Jianhe Hou responded, 'Very well, I will soon go to my fief to collect the rent, and then I can lend you three hundred taels of gold. Is that acceptable?' Upon hearing this, Zhuang Zhou was angry and said, when he was on his way to see Jianhe Hou, he heard a shout. He turned around and spotted a crucian fish in a rut.

He asked the crucian fish, "Crucian, what brings you to this place?" The crucian replied, "I used to serve in the East Sea, but the waves forced me out here. Could you fetch me a cup of water to save my life?" Zhuang Zhou responded, "Certainly. I'm planning to tour the Wu (modern Jiangsu and Anhui 吳) and the Yue State (modern Zhejiang 越). I will persuade the Kings of Wu and Yue to divert water from the Xi River (西江) to rescue you. Is that acceptable?" The crucian wore a disappointed expression and retorted, "I've already lost the water, and I have no place to live. All I request now is a small cup of water, which would be enough to save my life. If you mock me with such nonsense, you might as well head to the dried fish market sooner,

where you'll eventually find me!"

From the fable above, we can realise that Zhuang Zhou's financial situation was very poor, so he had to borrow grain from Jianhe Hou. His situation is the same as the crucian fish's. What he needs is just little grain, which is enough to survive, instead of painting a rosy picture.

However, another fable was in chapter *Qiushui* 秋水, while Zhuang Zhou was fishing beside Pu River 濮水, King Wei of Chu State 楚威王 asked two officers to employ him. The two officers said, 'we are willing to entrust the state affairs to you!' However, Zhuang Zhou did not turn around, holding the fishing rod in his hand and responded: 'I've heard of a legendary tortoise within the Chu State that has been deceased for 3,000 years. The King of Chu has carefully preserved its bone armor, adorned with brocade, enclosed within a bamboo box in the Imperial Temple. Given the choice, would this tortoise prefer to pass away, leaving behind its honoured bone armor, or would it rather endure life and drag its tail through the mud?' The two officers replied, 'it would choose to crawl in the mud and drag its tail.' Zhuang Zhou then said, 'Please return to your country, I shall continue to crawl in the mud with my tail.'

We can find that despite his financial challenge, he declined King Wei's invitation to join politics. Because he does not want to go with the flow, and he has his inner persistence. Comparing to the deceased and venerated tortoise, he prefers to crawl in the mud with tail. So rather than pursuing wealth, he opted for a simple life.

3.2 Zhuang Zhou's Ideal State

Next, we must ponder: what is the essence of the Dao within Zhuangzi's inner world? What kind of ideal state would lead him to give up material indulgence and pursue spiritual refinement. Maybe from the fables in Chapter *Xiaoyao you* (逍遥遊), we can gain further insight into Zhuang Zhou's ideal state.

It is recounted that in ancient times, there was a fish named Kun 鯀 in the North Sea. Kun was

immense, we did not know how many thousands of miles it was. Then Kun changed into a bird which named Peng 鵬. Peng's wingspan was also thousands of miles long. When it unfurled its wings and soared aloft, it was like clouds suspended on the horizon. As the winds swept across the waters, Peng would embark on migrations to the South Sea. Another fables is about Lie zi 列子 who rode on the wind and flied, floating easily, and came back after fifteen days.

Xiaoyao You is the first chapter of *Zhuangzi*. In this chapter, it sets the foundational cornerstone of the entire book. For the subsequent chapter, Zhuang Zhou talks lot of topics, ranging convers from small fish to the vast Heaven and Earth. It can be argued that Zhuang Zhou's primary message is in the ideal states of Kun and Peng outlined in the very first chapter.

These ideal states transcend the human realm, offering a glimpse into a higher spiritual plane. So Zhuang Zhou prefer to pursuit an infinite spiritual world over material enjoyment. That's the reason why he said 'The morning fungus does not understand the change cycle of day and night, and the cicada does not know the shifts between seasons'. (朝菌不知晦朔，蟪蛄不知春秋)

Furthermore, when compared to Liezi's act of flying, Zhuang Zhou emphasize more on the significance of living without dependency. So he said. 'Zhiren (people who reaches the highest level) does not have the idea of self, Shenren (extraordinary people) does not have the idea of contribution, and Shengren (sages) does not have the idea of name.' (至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名)

3.3 Attitude to Life and Death

Beyond what has been discussed above, it is valuable to delve into Zhuangzi's perspective on life and death. There are two fables in chapter *Qiwu lun* 齊物論 and chapter *Zhile* 至樂 which can shed light on this concept.

Zhuang Zhou once had a dream. In this dream, he became a butterfly, fluttering happily. When he was the butterfly, he had no idea of who was Zhuang Zhou. And after he woke up, he realised

that he was Zhuang Zhou. So was the butterfly real, or was Zhuang Zhou real? This also called ‘wuhua’—the transformation of things, the transition from existence to spirit (物化). It means death is not the end of life, but a transformation, from one life form to another one.

This is also the reason why, when Zhuang Zhou's wife passed away and Hui Shi came to offer libations, he found Zhuang Zhou sitting on the ground with his legs crossed, beating on a basin and singing. Zhuang Zhou's behaviour might seem unusual, but it is a reflection of his unique perspective.

Much like the changing of the seasons –from spring to summer, autumn, and winter – Zhuang Zhou realised the law of nature. Everything in nature follows the course of sprouting, growth, and eventually withering. He recognized that death is an integral part of this process. It's not the termination of life but a transition to another form. As the passing of his wife is the natural order, he also behave with nature.

4. Differentiating and Analyzing Zhuang Zhou's Image

From the fables, we've gained a basic understanding of Zhuang Zhou. But there are certain aspects that require further discussion to analyse and differentiate.

4.1 The Meaning of ‘Wuwei’: Beyond Doing Nothing

From Zhuang Zhou's fables, we know that he did not join the politics, but why he chooses that? Must we not participate in politics, if we are interested in *Zhuangzi*?

According to chapter *Shanmu* 山木, One day, Zhuang Zhou passed through a hill and saw a big tree with lush leaves. Woodcutters stopped beside it but did not cut it down. When Zhuang Zhou asked the reason, woodcutter replied, ‘Because it is useless.’ Zhuang Zhou then told students, ‘This tree is able to live out its life because it is useless.’

Then Zhuang Zhou visited an old friend. The old friend was delighted, and he prepared a feast and ordered a servant to kill a goose. The servant asked, ‘Some goose can cackle, and some

cannot. Which one would you like to kill?’ The host replied, ‘killing the goose who cannot cackle.’

The next day, the students asked Zhuang Zhou, ‘Yesterday, you mentioned that the big tree in the mountains could live out its life because it was good-for-nothing. Yet, the host's goose was killed for the same reason. What is your position?’ Zhuang Zhou replied: ‘I stand between useful and useless, success and failure. Because no matter useful or useless, it still has one side, which could be a burden. Only if you follow morality, which will not be so. Because you can choose to hide or present like a dragon and snake, with no praise or slander, at any time to change.’

This story conveys that if we believe Zhuang Zhou merely favoured the idea of being 'good-for-nothing' or not participating in politics, it would be a misunderstanding. Because he could change in different situation. As the philosophy of Daoism is also the wisdom in troubled times. The Warring States period was indeed a chaos period. Thus, if we insist that Zhuang Zhou abstained from politics, maybe we do not know him. In his idea, the meaning of ‘wuwei’(being good-for-nothing) is beyond doing nothing.

4.2 Understanding ‘Wuqing’: The Essence Beyond Non-feeling

Hui Shi once asked Zhuang Zhou, ‘As it is named humans, how can he be wuqing (have no feelings 無情)?’ Zhuang Zhou replied, ‘What you are referring to as 'wuqing' is not what I mean by it. My concept of “wuqing” is that people should protect their inner nature from the harmful effects of personal preferences and aversions. They should always conform to their own state with nature, rather than deliberately pursuing external gratifications.’

We might have the same question as Hui Shi. Must someone be ‘wuqing’? Being non-feeling to other people and things? Maybe it is not true, the ‘wuqing’ does not advocate the absence of feeling but rather aims to shield one's nature from the harm of personal desires. What Zhuang

Zhou advocates is to return to the state of nature.

If we observe Zhuang Zhou beating on a basin and singing after his wife's passing, we might think that he was heartless. But just as he said, 'That's not true. I was profoundly sad when she passed away!' (不然。是其始死也，我獨何能無慨然！) 'Now she rests peacefully between heaven and earth, while I weep beside her. I think this a lack of insight into destiny, which is why I ceased my tears.' (人且偃然寢於巨室，而我噉噉然隨而哭之，自以為不通乎命，故止也。) Because Zhuang Zhou understood the natural law, he chose to sing and accompany his wife on her final journey.

Another illustration can be found in chapter *Xu wugui* 徐無鬼. In the wake of Hui Shi's passing, Zhuang Zhou attended his funeral. As he passed by Hui Shi's tomb, he turned to his students and start to tell a fable. 'There was a man in Ying city 郢都 with a speck of mud stuck to his nose. Then he asked a stonemason to cut the mud off. The stonemason swung his axe, and the mud removed but nose was not hurt. At that time, the man remained still, looking as usual.

When King Yuan of Song State 宋元君 heard about this, he invited the stonemason to Song and said, "Try to do it for me again, please." The stonemason replied, "It is true that I once remove a mud from the man's nose, but now my rival has been absent for a long time." Zhuang Zhou then added, since Hui Shi's passing, I no longer have a rival, and there's been no one to debates with me.'

It is commonly believed that Hui Shi always on the opposed of Zhuang Zhou and debates with him, so we regard them as opponents or rivals. However, from Zhuang Zhou's view, he treated Hui Shi not only as a rival but also a friend. Their conversation is interesting and unusual, but they are also diamond cut diamond. So how can we say that Zhuang Zhou is a heartless person? So I would rather say Zhuang Zhou has a genuine disposition rather than being a heartless person.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this article presented various fables in *Zhuangzi* to have a more detailed image of Zhuang Zhou himself. From the stories discussed above, we can find that Zhuang Zhou was poor, but he did not choose to pursue an official position.

Firstly, it is because there is higher ideal state like great Kun and Peng or Liezi flying with wind. There are more important great Dao for spiritual pursuit, so he declines the invitation of King Wei of Chu. Secondly, it is because the chaotic social state in Warring States. Zhuang Zhou did not hold a fixed belief that one must go into the society or leave the secular world. The choose between leave and stay was flexible and adaptable, much like the ‘good-for-nothing’ tree and goose.

It is also evident that Zhuang Zhou has a different attitude to life and death. He thinks death is a transformation of life. So he beats on a basin and sings after his wife’s passing. But it is not an expression of heartless, rather, it was his way of acknowledging the natural course of life. Just as he mourned the death of Hui Shi, he also grieved for his wife but expressed it differently, in a way that was in harmony with the natural order. So Zhuang Zhou was a men with genuine disposition than a heatless person.

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Analysis of Zhuang Zhou's Image in the Fables of *Zhuangzi*

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1. Introduction



清光绪刊本《庄子》



Zhuang Zhou
(369–286 BCE)

1. Introduction



the Warring States



**the Hundred
Schools of Thought**

02

the Definition of ‘Fable’

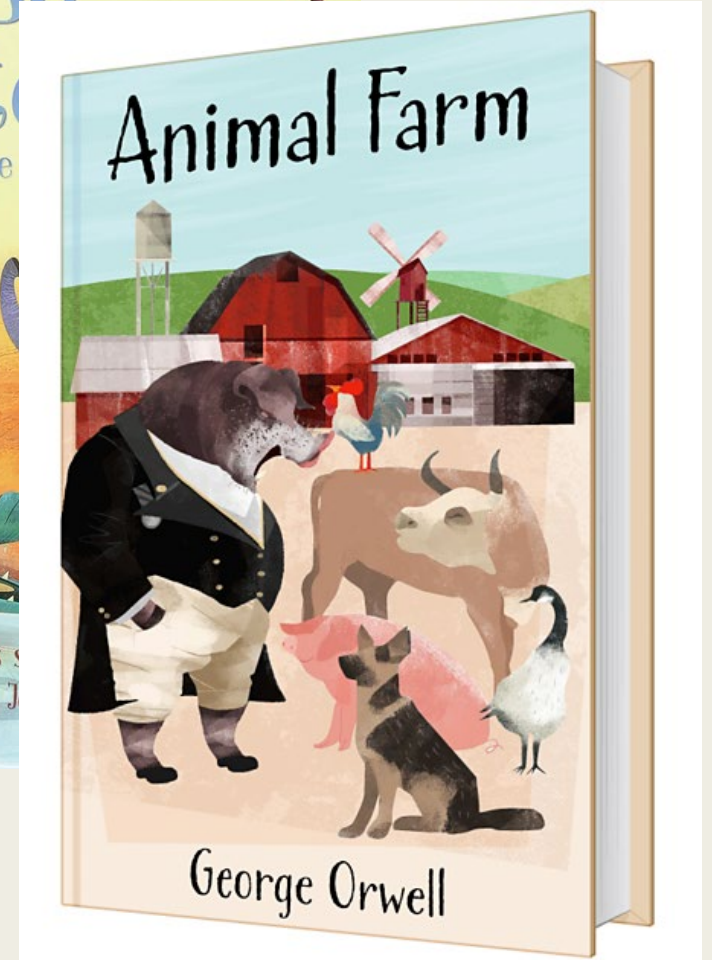
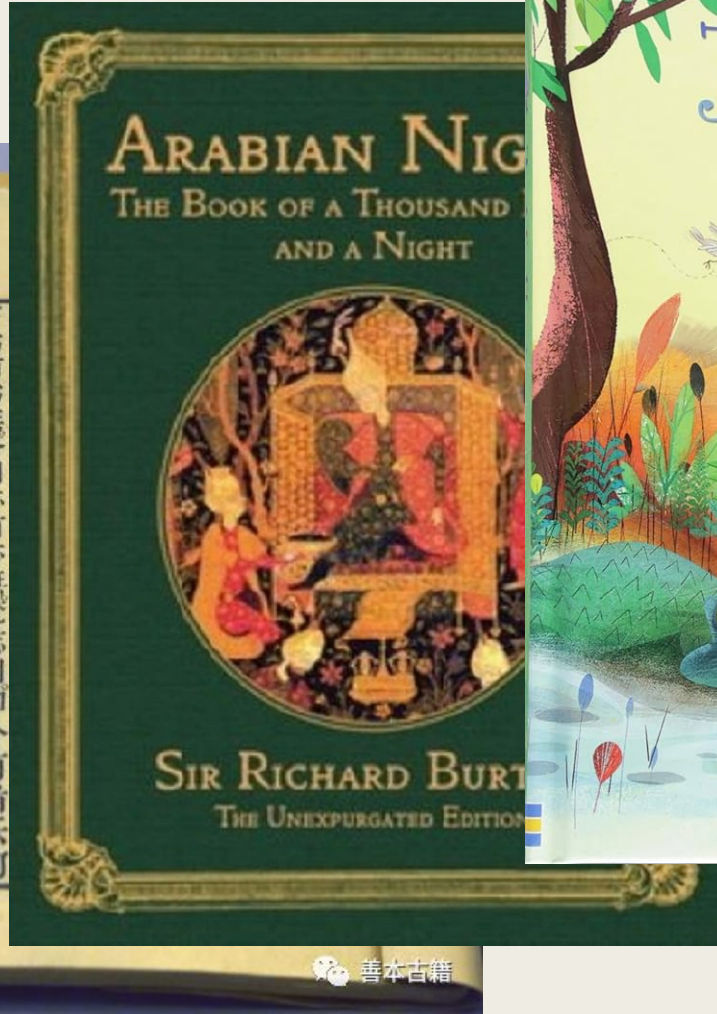
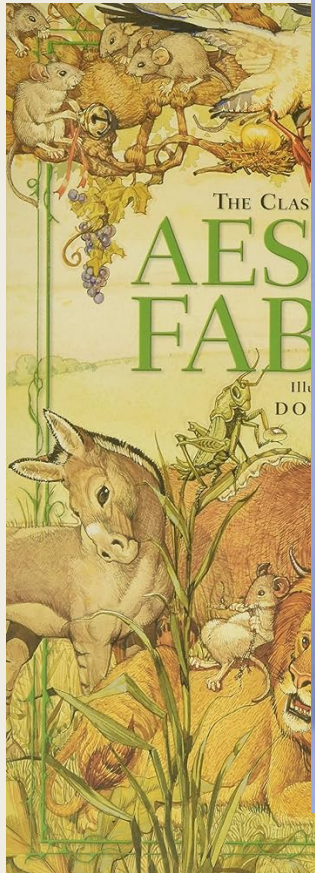
2 the Definition of 'Fable'

Fable:

'A short story, typically with animals as characters, conveying a moral; a story, typically a supernatural one incorporating elements of myth and legend.'



2 the Definition of 'Fable'



Chinese Fables:

- I. Philosophical fables of pre-Qin Dynasty
- II. Admonishment fables of Han Dynasty
- III. Transition fables of Wei, Jin, Southern and Northern Dynasties
- IV. Satirical fables of Tang and Song Dynasties
- V. Humorous fables of Yuan, Ming and Qing Dynasties



2 the Definition of 'Fable'

'Fables account for 90 percent, Quotation account for 70 percent, and Casual words are everywhere, conforming with nature.'

(寓言十九，重言十七，卮言日出，和以天倪。)

——*Zhuangzi*



03

Analysis of Zhuang Zhou's Image in the Fables

3.1 Choosing a Simple Life Over Politics



3.1 Choosing a Simple Life Over Politics



3.2 Zhuang Zhou's Ideal State



3.2 Zhuang Zhou's Ideal State



‘The morning fungus does not understand the change cycle of day and night, and the cicada does not know the shifts between seasons’.

(朝菌不知晦朔，蟪蛄不知春秋)

‘Zhiren (people who reaches the highest level) does not have the idea of self, Shenren (extraordinary people) does not have the idea of contribution, and Shengren (sages) does not have the idea of name.’

(至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名)

——*Zhuangzi*

3.3 Attitude to Life and Death



‘wuhua’ — the transformation of things, the transition from existence to spirit (物化).

3.3 Attitude to Life and Death



04

Differentiating and Analyzing Zhuang Zhou's Image

4.1 The Meaning of 'Wuwei': Beyond Doing Nothing



4.2 Understanding 'Wuqing': The Essence Beyond Non-feeling



-Hui Shi: 'As it is named humans, how can he be wuqing (have no feelings)

-Protect one's inner nature from the harmful effects of personal preferences and aversions.

4.2 Understanding ‘Wuqing’: The Essence Beyond Non-feeling



‘That's not true. I was profoundly sad when she passed away!’

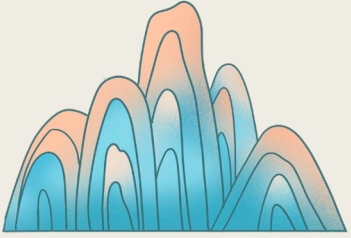
(不然。是其始死也，我獨何能無慨然！)

‘Now she rests peacefully between heaven and earth, while I weep beside her. I think this a lack of insight into destiny, which is why I ceased my tears.’

(人且偃然寢於巨室，而我噉噉然隨而哭之，自以為不通乎命，故止也。)

4.2 Understanding 'Wuqing': The Essence Beyond Non-feeling





**I would rather say Zhuang Zhou
has a genuine disposition rather
than being a heartless person.**



5. Conclusion



- I. Poor but not be an officer.
 - Higher ideal state
 - Chaotic society
- II. Different attitude to life and death
 - Natural order
 - Genuine disposition

Thank you.