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Looking for the True Self

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My ruminations on the problem of “the true self” are inspired by an entry in Gu Yanwu’s 顧炎武 (1613–1682) *Rizhi lu* 日知錄 (Record of knowledge accrued daily). In that passage he laments late Ming moral decline, as evinced by (possibly unconscious) allusions to *Zhuangzi* 莊子在 examination essays.¹ Gu points out that “the word *zhen* 真 (genuine, real, true, authentic)² does not exist in the Five Classics; it first appears in the writings of Laozi and Zhuangzi” 五經無真字，始見老莊之書。³ He goes on to parse the associations of *zhen* with death, transformation, immortality, transcendence, and mystical experience in Daoist writings (*Laozi* 老子, *Zhuangzi*, *Liezi* 列子), *Shuowen* 說文, and the accounts of aspirants to immortality and Daoist transcendence. Gu argues that the other common meanings of *zhen*—truth, reality, fact—emerged only in the Han dynasty, when the issue was often the correspondence or the gap between the name

1 Gu Yanwu, “Po ti yong Zhuangzi” 破題用莊子, in *Rizhi lu*, 18.659.

2 Of course these words have different valences in English, but instead of adhering to one English translation of the word *zhen*, I will use different words depending on the context.

3 The word *zhen* also does not appear in the *Analects*, *Mengzi* 孟子, and *Liji* 禮記.

or the appearance and the reality.⁴ This set of meanings engage him less, however, than the notion of a person's inwardness or "true core."

For Gu Yanwu, the symbolic harbinger of the fall of the Ming dynasty was a model examination essay from 1568, in which the examiner expounds the idea of knowledge by drawing from *Zhuangzi*: "The Sage teaches the worthy man about true knowledge, which is nothing more than refusing to block his heart and mind" 聖人教賢者以真知，在不昧其心而已。Gu concludes darkly: "Scholars of our times avowedly adopt Mencius' 'innate moral knowledge' but secretly embrace Zhuangzi's 'true knowledge'" 今之學者明用孟子之良知，暗用莊子之真知。⁵

Taking my cue from Gu Yanwu, I will examine the reverberations of the word *zhen* in late Ming (late 16th to mid-17th century) culture and literature, juxtaposing confident assertions of spontaneity and freedom with hidden anxieties and uncertainties. In looking for the roots this dialectic, I will explore notions of the "true being" (*zhenren* 真人) and "true knowledge" (*zhenzhi* 真知) in *Zhuangzi*. Such a radical temporal gap is in part justified by the resurgence of interest in *Zhuangzi* during the late Ming.

1. The Problem of the True Self in Late Ming Culture

When Gu Yanwu decries allusions to the idea of "true knowledge" in *Zhuangzi*, perhaps he has in mind some version of Daoist transcendence

4 Gu Yanwu quotes examples from *Shiji* 史記. The context of adjudicating value or telling the real from the fake also underlies the discussions of *zhen* in other Han texts. In *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露, the context is often the relationship between "name" and "reality" (*Chunqiu fanlu yizheng*, 35.290–293, 36.312–313). In *Lunheng* 論衡, the word is embedded in discussions of nature and cultivation (*Lunheng jiaoshi*, 7.60–62, 67, 8.70, 75–77), knowledge and judgment, truth and falsehood (ibid. 2.19, 5.37, 16.167, 31.474, 63.887, 83.1174, 84.1179–1181), and affective responses to mere images or representations (ibid. 26.363, 27.381, 32.511, 47.694–706, 50.722, 64.923–924).

5 The terms *liangzhi* 良知 and *zhenzhi* are often used interchangeably in Wang Yangming's 王陽明 (1472–1529) writings. For Gu, this mixing of vocabulary meant that Ming Confucianism was "contaminated" by Daoism and Buddhism. All translations in this essay are mine.

that hides the pitfalls of self-indulgence, self-obsession, the abeyance of tangible moral concerns, or the severance of ties with socio-political order. He implies that the discourse of the quest for inner truth and genuine self-expression, so pervasive in late Ming culture, is morally problematic, not least because of its roots in non-Confucian writings. Gu's critique, typical of early Qing retrospection on the late Ming, emphasizes the deleterious effects of the quest for the "true self," which is precisely what comes to be celebrated in modern views of that cultural moment.⁶ Histories of late Ming culture and literature are still filled with truisms on "individualism," "romanticism," "authenticity," and "freedom of spirit."⁷ Such epithets suggest excess, confidence, and spontaneity, but even a cursory survey would show that late Ming writers are keenly aware of the problems and paradoxes in the celebration of genuineness.

1.1 Inward and Outward Trajectories

Genuineness seems least problematic when it is identified as the goal of moral self-cultivation, as in the discourse of innate moral knowledge in the "learning of the heart and mind" (*xinxue* 心學) propounded by Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529) and his followers. Wang defines "true core" (*zhenwu* 真吾) as "innate moral knowledge," the opposite of the "selfish core" (*siwu* 私吾) dominated by worldly concerns and desires.⁸ In response to a disciple's qualms about the difficulty of "overcoming the self" (*keji* 克己), Wang Yangming urges the recognition of the "true self" (*zhenji* 真己) as "the master of the body" 軀殼的主宰 and the potential realization of "heavenly principle" (*tianli* 天理).⁹ In a letter to his friend Lu Cheng 陸澄 (dated 1521), Wang redirects the latter's interest in the "genuine me" (*zhenwo* 真我) as enshrined in Daoist practices to Confucian self-cultivation: "As for

6 See, e.g., Wu Chengxue and Li Guangmo 2002.

7 There are also critiques of this position, e.g., Gong Pengcheng 2008.

8 Wang Yangming, "Congwu Daoren ji" 從吾道人記 (*Wang Yangming quanji* 王陽明全集 1: 250).

9 Wang Yangming, *Chuanxi lu* 傳習錄 (*Wang Yangming quanji* 1: 35–36).

what you call the ‘genuine me,’ so long as one can indeed be vigilant even with what is not seen, fearful even with what is not heard, and focus one’s intent on this [i.e., inner power], then spirit, vital energy, and essence will all go the same way” 原靜所云真我者，果能戒謹不睹，恐懼不聞，而專志於是，則神往氣往精往。Wang implies that the Daoist “genuine me” has a more compelling Confucian version: the inner moral resources whereby one can attain transcendence.¹⁰

Wang Yangming’s invocation of lines about vigilant mindfulness from the *Zhongyong* 中庸 (The mean)¹¹ reminds us that the idea of spontaneous illumination or direct access to inner truth is built on internalizing unrelenting focus (*gongfu* 工夫). Thus Wang Yangming’s disciple Wang Ji 王畿 (1498–1583) describes innate moral knowledge as “the spiritual root of moral nature” 性之靈根: “it is the true face and form that has always been there; it does not need to depend on cultivation to become perfect” 本來真面目，固不待修證而後全。However, this “true face and form” is not to be confused with mere impulses: “But if one only follows impulses and regards that as abiding by one’s moral nature, relies on emotions and judgments and regards that as communing with subtle truths, and fails to attain constant focus so that it can become the guiding force, then one would change from one moment to the next, becoming adrift with no place of return.” 若徒任作用為率性，倚情識為通微，不能隨時翕聚以為之主，倏忽變化，將至於蕩無所歸。¹² In a similar spirit, he commends the “true

10 Wang Yangming, “Yu Lu Yuanjing” 與陸原靜 (*Wang Yangming quanji* 1: 187). For Lu Cheng (1517 *jinshi*), see Huang Zongxi 黃宗羲, *Mingru xue’an* 明儒學案 (*Huang Zongxi quanji* 7: 335–336).

11 *Zhongyong* 1 (*Zhuji zhangju* numbering): “That is why the noble man is vigilant even with what is not seen, fearful even with what is not heard.” 是故君子戒慎乎其所不睹，恐懼乎其所不聞 (*Sishu jizhu*, 17).

12 Wang Ji, “Shu tongxin ce juan” 書同心冊卷 (*Wang Ji ji* 王畿集, 121–123). *Benlai mianmu* is a Buddhist term that first appears in the *Tan jing* 壇經 (Platform Sutra); the emphasis on self-cultivation here may be a deliberate amelioration of the Chan overtones. Wang Yangming equates *benlai mianmu* with “innate moral knowledge;” see *Chuanxi lu* (*Wang Yangming quanji* 1: 67). References to Buddhist and Daoist ideas are even more pervasive in Wang Ji’s writings (Chung 2010).

naturalness” 真自然 of King Wen as the realization of these lines from the *Shijing* 詩經 (Classic of poetry): “With mindful vigilance, he serves the god on high” 小心翼翼，昭事上帝.¹³ He compares the recovery of one’s “true original nature” (*benlai zhenxing* 本來真性) from the crust of worldly concerns and desires to the process of smelting metal. Just as gold buried in ore requires the application of a strong flame, one’s true nature can only be liberated from worldly desires by self-examination and self-cultivation.¹⁴

The analogy of metallurgy or alchemy is useful for visualizing the inward trajectory of attaining or recovering one’s true moral nature in *xinxue* discourse. It provides an illuminating contrast with writings more concerned with the expression or communication of “the true self.” Li Zhi 李贄 (1527–1602), known for writings that sometimes articulate subversion and iconoclasm, often presents “true nature” as something that needs to be expressed rather than attained—that is, the trajectory is outwards rather than inwards. Expression comes with the burden of confronting potential misunderstanding. It is not surprising, therefore, that Li Zhi’s essay “The Childlike Mind” (Tongxin shuo 童心說),¹⁵ usually celebrated as a paean to the true self, should focus on questions of evaluation and misjudgment (rather than self-cultivation).

The essay begins with an apologetic statement from Li Zhi’s friend Jiao Hong 焦竑 (1540–1620), who wrote (under the pseudonym Longdong shannong 龍洞山農, Mountain Farmer of the Dragon Cave) in his 1582 preface to the Yuan play *Xixiang ji* 西廂記 (The western chamber, ca. 14th century): “Those with real understanding must not say that I still have a childlike mind” 知者勿謂我尚有童心可也. Here “childlike mind” is negative: the reader recalls examples of classical usage, such as the dire prediction for Lord Zhao of Lu 魯昭公 (r. 542–510 BCE, exiled 517 BCE)

13 Wang Ji, “Lun xue shu” 論學書, cited in Huang Zongxi’s *Mingru xue’an* (*Huang Zongxi quanji* 7: 291). The lines are from “Da ming” 大明 (Mao 236).

14 Wang Ji, “Nanqiao bieyan” 南譙別言 (*Wang Ji ji*, 685–686).

15 *Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 276–277. For translations of this essay, see de Bary, “The Childlike Mind-and-Heart,” in de Bary 1999, 867–868; Handler-Sptiz, Lee, Saussy 2016, 106–113.

in *Zuozhuan* 左傳 as one who “would not be able to come to a good end” 不終 because he “still had a childlike mind” 猶有童心 even at the age of nineteen, as evinced by his ritual impropriety during his mother’s funeral.¹⁶ Li Zhi refutes this implicit denigration of “the childlike mind” by upholding it as “the genuine mind” (*zhenxin* 真心), the untarnished beginning of consciousness:

夫童心者，絕假純真，最初一念之本心也。若失卻童心，便失卻真人。人而非真，全不復有初矣。

The childlike mind cuts off all fakery and is pure genuineness—it is the original mind behind the first glimmer of consciousness. If one loses the childlike mind, then one loses the genuine mind. To lose the genuine mind is to lose the genuine person. If a person is not genuine, then he will no longer recover his beginning.

At first glance, “the childlike mind” echoes “the heart and mind of the newborn child” 赤子之心 in *Mengzi*, an idea valorized by Wang Yangming and his followers, notably Wang Gen 王艮 (1483–1541), Wang Ji, and most pointedly Luo Rufang 羅汝芳 (1515–1588).¹⁷ It is also possible that the image of the child here evokes associations with Daoist transcendence, as with the baby in *Laozi* and the one called a child because he is “the companion

16 “By the time of the burial, he had changed his hempen mourning clothes three times, but the hempen lapels still looked soiled.” See *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 31.4: 1186; *Zuo Tradition*, 3: 1275.

17 Wang Yangming emphasizes the child’s moral nature in *Chuanxi lu* (*Wang Yangming quanji* 1: 34). Wang Ji suggests that the Confucian notion of the “newborn child” encompasses analogous Buddhist and Daoist ideals (“Nan you hui ji” 南遊會記, *Wang Ji ji*, 154). Luo Rufang identifies the “heart of the newborn child” as “heavenly principle” (*Mingru xue’an*, in *Huang Zongxi quanji* 8:6). Li Zhi wrote about Wang Ji and Luo Rufang with deep admiration (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 327–329, 335–346). He referred to Wang Gen’s son Wang Bi 王襞 (1511–1587) as his teacher (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 3: 276). Huang Zongxi did not include Li Zhi in his history of Ming Confucian scholars, *Ming ru xue’an*, but Ji Wenfu 嵇文甫 (1895–1963) put him in the category of “Radical Wing of the Wang Yangming School” 王學左派 (Ji Wenfu 2013). Cf. Zuo Dongling 2000: 336–377, 405–437, 545–601; Luo Zongqiang 2006: 265–343.

of heaven” 與天為徒 in *Zhuangzi*.¹⁸ But it soon becomes obvious that Li Zhi is not interested in “the childlike mind” as the goal of quest or as the impetus for moral action. The beginning polemical stance (arguing against a negative understanding of “the childlike mind”) persists throughout the essay. This oppositional mood underlies the diatribes against “fake people” (*jiaren* 假人), “fake words” (*jiayan* 假言), “fake deeds” (*jiashi* 假事), and “fake writings” (*jiawen* 假文). Li Zhi does not explain how one reaches the childlike mind, except perhaps by implication through the process of its “unblocking” by removing obstacles such as acquired principles and information (*daoli wenjian* 道理聞見) and the desire to gain a good name or to avoid a bad one. Instead he celebrates how this childlike mind produces great works as unconscious craft, the “natural generation of finely patterned writing” (*ziwen* 自文).¹⁹ This elision comes about because his prime concern is the manifestation (rather than the attainment) of “the childlike mind” and its opposite as well as the authority to elevate one and decry the other.

Li Zhi’s essay is famous for its valorization of *Xixiang ji*, *Shuihu zhuan* 水滸傳 (Water margin), and Ming examination essays²⁰ as being rooted in “the childlike mind” and its heretical rejection of the canonical classics (“Six Classics, *Analects*, *Mengzi*”) as “topics and excuses for Confucian scholars, the gathering place for fake people” 道學之口實，假人之淵藪。 While the praise of fiction and drama recurs in his oeuvre, his condemnation of canonical classics is obviously belied by his extensive commentaries on these works. Why then did he strike this pose? Perhaps contemporary hypocrisy drove him to extremes.²¹ Perhaps he obeyed the dictate of his

18 *Laozi* 55 (*Laozi jiaoshi*, 39); *Zhuangzi jishi* 4.143 (“Ren jian shi” 人間世). The child commanding transcendent perspectives also appears in *Zhuangzi jishi* 24.830–833 (“Xu Wugui” 徐無鬼).

19 Li Zhi also eulogizes untrammelled literary creation in “Zashuo” 雜說, “Du lü fushuo” 讀律膚說 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 272–276, 364–365).

20 The inclusion of examination essays (*juziye* 舉子業) may seem incongruous, but it fits into Li Zhi’s argument pitting contemporary and recent genres against hallowed ancient ones.

21 A provocative and paradoxical stance can encourage critical judgment (Handler-Spritz 2017).

oppositional stance vis-à-vis society—the very titles of his books, *Fen shu* 焚書 (A book to be burned) and *Cang shu* 藏書 (A book to be hidden), convey defiance. What seems obvious is that while being genuine seems to imply the spontaneous manifestation of “the childlike mind,” its expression is inevitably mediated by the anticipation of how one’s words and actions are perceived. It also involves a sense of radical difference, the awareness of the gap between one’s views and “consensual opinion” and of the corollary struggle to claim the authority of judgment.

In that sense Li Zhi’s essay is intensely dialogic and proleptic: the argument proceeds by refuting its imagined detractors. It is an act of communication that presumes misunderstanding, hence the concluding line: “Alas, how can I get to have a word about writing with the true great sage, the one who has not yet lost his childlike mind”? 嗚呼！吾又安得真正大聖人童心未曾失者而與之一言文哉。 It echoes the last line of “External Things” (Waiwu 外物) in *Zhuangzi*: “How can I get to have a word with one who has forgotten words?” 吾安得乎忘言之人而與之言哉?²² The paradox of transcending language through language in *Zhuangzi* becomes the paradox of spontaneity and mediation, individual difference and authority in Li Zhi’s essay. The question becomes: How can the genuine core that defies external constraints find external validation?

Declarative intent can thus be fraught with irony when the focus shifts to the authority of speaking and the context of communication. These latent issues in “The Childlike Mind” are more self-consciously articulated in “Rhapsody on Crossing the River” (*Shejiang fu* 涉江賦) by the poet, playwright, painter, and calligrapher Xu Wei 徐渭 (1521–1593):²³

爰有一物	There is this one thing:
無罣無礙	Without cares, without burdens,
在小匪細	Not so trivial when it comes to smallness,

22 *Zhuangzi jishi* 26.944.

23 *Xu Wei ji* 1: 1–2.

在大匪泥	Not so implacable when it comes to greatness.
來不知始	Coming, one knows not how it begins,
往不知馳	Leaving, one knows not whence it veers.
得之者成	He who obtains it succeeds,
失之者敗	He who loses it is defeated.
得亦無攜	Obtain it and there is nothing to carry,
失亦不脫	Lose it and there is no casting off.
在方寸間	Existing in the heart and mind,
周天地折	It encompasses heaven and earth.
勿謂覺靈	Do not call awakening numinous—
是為真我	This is the genuine me. ²⁴
覺有變遷	Awakening comes with changes,
其體安處	Where will its body find a place?
體無不含	There is nothing the body does not encompass,
覺亦從出	And from it awakening also emerges.
覺固不離	Awakening is of course not detached from the body,
覺亦不即	But it is also not attached to it. ²⁵

This “genuine me” can be lost if not properly guarded: “The external bandit is easy to fend off, / The stealth uprising cannot be borne” 外寇易防，竊發莫支. Nurturing it is like building a high terrace: “Of imposing height, but missing one basket of earth, / It finally becomes a mere mound. / This is what I worry about, / How can anything else grieve me?” 九仞一虧，終為阜丘。予斯之憂，他奚愴懷？ The idea of inner naturalness (“Without cares, without burdens”) that nevertheless requires careful nurturing is reminiscent of *xinxue* writings.²⁶

24 The term “genuine me” (*zhenwo* 真我) first appears in Buddhist sutras (ca. 4th century).

25 *Yuanjue jing* 圓覺經 (p. 30): “Not attached, not detached; no binding, no letting go” 不即不離，無縛無脫.

26 Xu Wei develops similar ideas in “Du ‘Long ti shuo” 讀龍惕說 (*Xu Wei ji* 2: 677–679). Ji Ben’s 季本 (1485–1563) “Long ti shuo” emphasizes the need to balance “naturalness” (*ziran* 自然) with “vigilance” (*ti* 惕), and Xu Wei further elaborates on their convergence.

Xu Wei wrote this rhapsody in 1552 on his way home to Shanyin (Zhejiang) after failing in the provincial examination. He begins by invoking Pan Yue's 潘岳 (247–300) “Rhapsody on Autumn Meditation” 秋興賦 (*Qiuxing fu*). Despite similarities of circumstances (both Pan and Xu were thirty-two when they composed their pieces, both suffered adversities and lamented graying hair), Xu notes a basic difference: whereas Pan remains attached to mundane glory and pleasures while professing a desire for withdrawal, Xu is sincere in avowing detachment.²⁷ The details of Xu Wei's life suggested otherwise. Stung by injustice, repeated failures in the civil service examination, and the calumny surrounding his patron Hu Zongxian 胡宗憲 (1512–1565), Xu Wei was driven by passionate engagement and rancor. Madness, self-mutilation, attempted suicide, the verdict of murder, and incarceration dogged his tragic life. Although that biographical context had yet to unfold, Xu Wei's disappointment even here is unmistakable. “Crossing the River” abides by, but ultimately eludes, the convention of “the consolation of philosophy,” whose prototype may be Jia Yi's 賈誼 (200–169 BCE) “Rhapsody on the Owl” (*Funiaofu* 鵩鳥賦), in which Jia Yi calls upon the supposedly inauspicious bird to help him transcend worldly vicissitudes.²⁸

Deliberation on the attributes of the “genuine me” (*zhenwo* 真我), cast in the form of a riddle reminiscent of Xunzi's proto-rhapsody, is framed by an almost comical exchange between Xu Wei and his older cousins.²⁹ They spot his gray hair and try to pull it; he slips away before submitting. They urge equanimity about his recent failure, and he responds with a defensive

27 Pan Yue's insincerity is famously portrayed in Yuan Haowen's 元好問 (1190–1257) “Lun shi sanshi shou” 論詩三十首 (6th poem): “The lofty feelings of the ‘Rhapsody on Reclusion’ last for a thousand years, / Who could have believed that Anren (Pan Yue) groveled in the roadside dust?” 高情千古閒居賦，爭信安仁拜路塵 (*Yuan Haowen quanji*, 338).

28 *Shiji* 84.2496–2500. The title is a later addition.

29 *Xunzi* 26 consists of a series of riddles presented in a question-and-answer form (*Xunzi jijie* 26.472–484). Its beginning line (“There is this great thing” 爰有大物) is only slightly modified in Xu Wei's rhapsody. The term *bozhong* 伯仲 usually means older brothers, but by this point both of Xu Wei's half-brothers had died.

excursus replete with Daoist and Buddhist allusions. Xu Wei claims to care only about the “genuine me,” but instead of simply upholding it like an indomitable spirit capable of transcendent perspectives, he ends up affirming its corporeality. How then can one “rise above” physical decline? The piece ends with comic dismay and a quasi-apology. “Heaven-endowed lack” 稟其缺 makes him look forty-eight at age thirty-two:

又予視髮	Again I look at my hair:
玄綢白希	It's mostly dark, with a few white strands—
遠窺不得	From afar almost imperceptible,
逼視始知	Discernible only upon close inspection.
不審其變	One does not know the time or season
在何歲時	When this change came about.
豈以茲秋	How can you seize on this autumn
謂予憂為	And say that it's the cause of my sorrow?

Most modern interpreters read Xu Wei's celebration of the “genuine me” as a profession of faith and a bulwark against the lack of external validation.³⁰ He honored his cousin Wang Ji and Ji Ben 季本 (a follower of Wang Yangming) as teachers. Their close association began four or five years earlier,³¹ and the “genuine me” here can thus be read as the fruit of a spiritual quest. It also tallies with Xu Wei's emphasis on “the true color” (*bense* 本色), sincerity, and the rejection of imitation in his literary prefaces and postscripts.³² However, although Xu seems to uphold assiduous self-cultivation with the image of building a terrace, he also juxtaposes (and implicitly qualifies) the transcendent “genuine me” with circumstantial

30 See, e.g., Zhou Qun and Xie Jianhua 2006: 139–159.

31 Xu Wei, “Ji pu” 畸譜, in *Xu Wei ji* 4: 1328, 1332. For Xu Wei's biographies of Ji Ben, see *Xu Wei ji* 2: 628–629, 643–650. The poems Xu Wei addressed to Wang Ji are *gatha*-like summaries of *xinxue* principles (*Xu Wei ji* 1: 228, 2: 348–349). Ji Yun 紀昀 (1724–1805) characterized Xu Wei as the “transmitter of the expansive, unrestrained side of Wang Yangming” 傳姚江縱恣之派 (*Siku quanshu zongmu* 178.1606).

32 Xu Wei, “Xiaofu shi xu” 肖甫詩序, “Shu Caoxuan tang gao hou” 書草玄堂稿後, “Zeng Cheng weng xu” 贈成翁序, “Xixiang xu” 西廂序 (*Xu Wei ji* 2: 534–535, 579, 3: 907–908, 4: 1089).

constraints and ineluctable mundaneness and corporeality. The impetus behind defining the “genuine me” is to protest the misunderstanding that he is so small-minded as to succumb to self-doubt or frustration because of his failure in the examination in 1552. Xu Wei is trying to explain himself to his interlocutors, and the rhetorical context of self-justification and self-revelation is important to many formulations of genuineness.

1.2 Self-Division

As a corollary of the “outward trajectory” outlined above, works like “The Childlike Mind” or “Crossing the River” pointedly address the implied or represented reader. Does this sense of audience compromise genuineness? In Xu Wei’s case, sometimes the original target audience (his patron) sets limits on “the true self” he hopes to convey to an ideal audience. How much “genuineness” can one express in commissioned writings? Xu Wei reflects on this question in the prefaces for collections of his writings composed during his tenure as Hu Zongxian’s secretary (1557–1564).³³ Li Zhi often declares that he is following his own inclinations as he defies conventions or that he is writing only for his own pleasure,³⁴ yet the obsession with how he will be judged or understood (or misjudged and misunderstood) is never far from the surface. Li Zhi maintains that to be “self-consciously natural” 有意為自然 is no different from “forced correction” 矯強.³⁵ The discourse of innate moral nature is filled with images of spontaneity and continuity. This emphasis may be rooted in Mencius’ idea that “acting from humaneness and dutifulness” 由仁義行 is superior to “acting humanely and dutifully” 行仁義³⁶—that is,

33 See Xu Wei, “Chao dai ji xiao xu” 抄代集小序, “Mu chao xiao xu” 幕抄小序, “Chao xiao ji zixu” 抄小集自序, in *Xu Wei ji* 2: 536–537.

34 See, e.g., Li Zhi’s letter to Yuan Zongdao (1592): “In general my books were all written for my pleasure; they were not written for others” 大凡我書皆為求以快樂自己，非為人也 (“Ji Jing you shu” 寄京友書, *Li Zhi quanji zhu*, 1: 171).

35 Li Zhi, “Du lü fushuo,” in *Li Zhi quanji zhu*, 1: 364–365.

36 *Mengzi yizhu* 8.19: 191.

virtue should ideally be a natural motivating force rather than a goal-oriented code. But what if naturalness and the ideal moral action fail to converge?

The sage king Shun 舜, upheld as the paragon of “natural virtue” in *Mengzi*,³⁷ raises the issue of defining genuineness as intention or as natural force for Li Zhi. In a letter dated 1596 sent to Yuan Zongdao 袁宗道 (1560–1600), Li Zhi argues that Shun’s love for his evil brother Xiang 象 is fake and genuine at the same time. In *Mengzi*, Wanzhang 萬章 asks Mencius: is Shun’s happiness fake when his brother Xiang sees him and assumes the appearance of comity, having been foiled in his plot to murder Shun and to take over his property and wives? Mengzi claims that Shun knows about Xiang’s plot because of his complete fraternal empathy with Xiang: “When Xiang worries, he worries; when Xiang is happy, he is happy” 象憂亦憂，象喜亦喜. “He (Xiang) has come by [assuming] the way of fraternal love, that is why Shun is sincerely happy about it. How can it be fake?” 彼以愛兄之道來，故誠信而喜之，奚偽焉?³⁸ Li Zhi disputes this in his letter to Yuan:³⁹

若如軻言，則是舜不知象之殺己，是不智也；知其欲殺己而喜之，是喜殺也，是不誠也……故僕謂舜為偽喜，非過也。

If it is as Meng Ke (Mencius) says, then Shun, being unaware that Xiang is trying to murder him, is unwise. If he is happy knowing that Xiang wants to murder him, then he is happy being murdered and is insincere ... That is why it is not wrong for me to say that Shun’s happiness is fake.

But Li Zhi equivocates:

夫舜明知象之欲殺己也，然非真心喜象則不可以解象之毒，縱象之毒終不可解，然舍喜象無別解之法矣。故其喜象是偽也，其主意必欲喜象以得象之喜是真也。

37 See, e.g., *Mengzi yizhu* 8.19: 191; 13.30: 314.

38 *Mengzi yizhu* 9.2: 210.

39 Li Zhi, “Yu youren shu” 與友人書, *Li Zhi quanji zhu*, 1: 181–182. Yuan Zongdao was the oldest of the three Yuan brothers famous for their advocacy of the “natural spirit” (xingling 性靈) in literature.

For Shun knows full well that Xiang wants to kill him, but unless he is genuinely happy with Xiang, he cannot dispel Xiang's venom. Even if Xiang's venom cannot ultimately be dispelled, there is no other way to dispel it except by being happy with Xiang. That is why while his happiness with Xiang is fake, his recognition that it is imperative to be happy with Xiang in order to make Xiang happy with him is genuine.

Here logical reasoning introduces discontinuities, and genuineness undergoes an inevitable bifurcation as natural, emotional reaction and moral intention.

Shun's fraternal love involves the overcoming of aversion. Such intermediary steps sometimes get lost in the exaltation of the "true self." "Anybody can be Yao and Shun" 人皆可以為堯舜:⁴⁰ but if natural expression takes priority over conscious effort to imitate the sages, how is the transformation going to be achieved? Li Zhi's account of the "True Being" (*zhenren* 真人) as one moving between receptive "emptiness" (*xu* 虛) and steadfast "substantiveness" (*shi* 實) seems somehow abstract.⁴¹ If the childlike mind gives rise to works that celebrate desire and rancor such as *Xixiang ji* and *Shuihu zhuan*, then it by definition encompasses emotions and impulses outside the parameters of pristine moral consciousness. Elsewhere Li Zhi links sensual desires (*haose* 好色) and the desire for gain (*haohuo* 好貨) to "the original heart and mind" (*benxin* 本心) and "simple and immediate words" (*eryan* 邇言).⁴² He also affirms self-interest (*si* 私) and "the heart concerned with power and profit" (*shi li zhi xin* 勢利之心) as "endowed nature" (*bingfu zhi ziran* 稟賦之自然).⁴³ His critic quotes him: "For becoming Buddha and attaining sagehood, the only thing that matters is illuminating the mind. If the original mind is illumined, then to accept a thousand pieces of gold in one day is not avarice; to have coitus with ten women in one night is not licentiousness" 成佛證聖，唯在明心。本心若

40 *Mengzi yizhu* 12.2: 276.

41 Li Zhi, "Xu shi shuo" 虛實說 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 287–289).

42 Li Zhi, "Da Deng mingfu" 答鄧明府 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 94–101).

43 Li Zhi, "Deye ruchen houlun" 德業儒臣後論; *Daogu lu* 道古錄 10 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 6: 526, 14: 255).

明，雖一日受千金不為貪，一夜御十女不為淫。⁴⁴ Designed to malign Li, the quotation may or may not be authentic, but it does not sound too different from his affirmation of self-interest or sensual desires cited above.⁴⁵ Despite his ostentatious unconventionality, Li Zhi did not seem to have been guilty of real licentiousness. Yet he flaunted the negative epithets his critics inflicted on him to dramatize the odds he faced, fulfilling their label of him as “heretic” (*yiduan* 異端) to “let those fools make their name” 成彼豎子之名 so that he could despise them even more.⁴⁶ Some questions remain unresolved: How exactly does the frank avowal of worldly desires lead to moral transcendence? Does inner illumination combined with outward transgression amount to self-division? What “true self” is Li Zhi claiming by reveling in the gap between the two?

The sense of deliberate paradox in Li Zhi is mixed with heightened emphasis on pleasure in the writings of the Yuan brothers from Gong'an 公安 (Hubei), proponents of the so-called “natural spirit” (*xingling* 性靈) in literary creation. One of them, Yuan Hongdao 袁宏道 (1568–1610), younger brother of the aforementioned Yuan Zongdao, links ineffable “élan” (*qu* 趣) to genuine self-expression in a preface (1597) to his friend Chen Suoxue’s 陳所學 collection. Those who master the ornaments of literati culture with self-conscious refinement or engage in abstruse philosophical speculations are said to be far from such élan. Instead Yuan upholds the child’s joyous, unself-conscious movements as its epitome. He mentions Mencius’ “heart of the newborn child” and Laozi’s “baby” as the highest order of such élan. Recluses living the life of freedom are said to approximate it. Yuan seems most interested, however, in the élan of the defiantly unconcerned:

44 Zhou Yingbin 周應賓, *Shixiao lu* 識小錄, quoted in Zhang Jianye 2013, 107.

45 Cf. Li Zhi, “Shu Xiaoxiu shoujuan hou” 書小修手卷後 (1601): “All the wine, lust, and wealth of this world cannot pollute me in the least” 凡世間酒色財半點污染我不得 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 3: 201–202). Li was responding to his friend Yuan Zhongdao’s 袁中道 (sobriquet Xiaoxiu 小修, the youngest of the three Yuan brothers) request that he should abide by a vegetarian diet. At that point Li Zhi had shaven his pate (although he kept his beard) and was living in a Buddhist monastery.

46 Li Zhi, “Yu Jiao Ruohou (Jiao Hong)” 與焦若侯 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 152–153).

愚不肖之近趣也，以無品也，品愈卑故所求愈下，或為酒肉，或為聲伎，率心而行，無所忌憚，自以為絕望於世，故舉世非笑之不顧也，此又一趣也。

The stupid and worthless can come close to *élan* by being without standards. The lower their standards, the baser their quest—it could be wine and meat or entertainers and courtesans; they follow their heart and act without any inhibitions. Having no more to ask of the world, they can therefore be oblivious even if the whole world laughs at them or censures them. This too is a kind of *élan*.⁴⁷

It is easy to read this simply as a testament to the late Ming “spirit of rebellion,” whereby shedding inhibitions allows the true self to unfold. However, by using the same word (*qu*) to characterize moral and philosophical transcendence as well as defiant sensuality, Yuan points to secret affinities linking these disparate categories. It is this pose of mastery (i.e., the ability to claim that indulgence is not *merely* indulgence) that hints at anxiety, as much as Yuan’s renunciation of sensual excess in his later writings that would justify the conception of self-division behind the celebration of self-expression.

1.3 Sickness, Flaws, Obsessions

The presumed gap between one’s genuine core and social or conventional expectations leads to the glorification of flaws and deviance. Thus Zhang Dafu 張大復 (1544–1630):

木之有癭，石之有鸛鵒，皆病也。然是二物者，卒以此見貴於世。非世人之貴病也。病則奇，奇則至，至則傳。天隨生有言：「木病而後怪，不怪不能傳其形。文病而後奇，不奇不能駭於俗。」

47 Yuan Hongdao, “Xu Chen Zhengfu *Huixin ji*” 敘陳正甫會心集 (*Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 1: 463–464). He offers a similar logic in his letter to his uncle Gong Weichang 龔惟長: he claims that “there are five kinds of true happiness” 真樂有五, among which he counts intellectual and sensual pleasures as well as shameless revelry in having wasted one’s patrimony (*Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 1: 205–206).

For trees to have swellings and for stones to have “mynah eyes” are all flaws. But for these two things, they are ultimately prized by the world because of these flaws. It is not because people of this world prize flaws. To be flawed is to be extraordinary, to be extraordinary is to be extreme, to be extreme is to be transmitted. Tiansui Sheng once said, “A tree becomes strange only with flaws; without being strange it will not succeed in having its form transmitted. Writings become extraordinary only if they are flawed; without being extraordinary they cannot startle the world.”⁴⁸

The cross section of a tree’s “swelling” (i.e., the outgrowth on its trunk close to its roots) yields interesting patterns, just as unusual patterns of “mynah eyes” indicate the potential to become a superior ink-stone. Zhang must be aware that the very designation of the swelling or the “mynah eyes” as “flaws” or “sickness” is itself based on an arbitrary human perspective. But instead of dwelling on that, he chooses another line of reasoning: deviation from norms is the source of value and by implication conveys essential truths. One of his cognomens is “Sick Layman” (Bing jushi 病居士). He quotes the 9th-century poet Lu Guimeng’s 陸龜蒙 (sobriquet Tiansui Sheng 天隨生 or “The Follower of Heaven”) “Encomium on the Painting of the Strange Pine” (*Guaisong tu zan* 怪松圖贊).⁴⁹ Lu praises the twisted and bent pine as the symbol of indomitable life force that overcomes adversities. Zhang seems to go further and lauds deviance itself as the source of value.

Yuan Hongdao also articulates the idea that flaws confirm a person’s genuine emotions and individual spirit in his preface (1596) to his younger brother Yuan Zhongdao’s 袁中道 (1570–1623) poetry collection:⁵⁰

大都獨抒性靈，不拘格套，非從自己胸臆流出，不肯下筆……其間有佳處，亦有疵處，佳處自不必言，即疵處亦多本色獨造語。然予

48 *Meihua caotang bitan* 1: 235–336.

49 *Quan Tang wen*, j. 801, 8410–8411. Instead of “having its form transmitted” 傳其形, Lu has “having its likeness painted” 圖其真.

50 Yuan Hongdao, “Xu Xiaoxiu shi” 敘小修詩 (*Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 1: 187–190).

則極喜其疵處，而所謂佳者，尚不能不以粉飾、蹈襲為恨，以為未能盡脫近代文人習氣故也。

In the main he stands alone in expressing his natural spirit without being bound by modes and conventions. Unless it is something that flows forth from his heart, he refuses to write about it ... There are excellent parts but also flawed parts in it. The merits of the excellent parts go without saying, but even the flawed parts are full of his distinctive, original words. But I am especially partial to its flawed parts, for one cannot help regretting the adornment and imitation in what is considered excellent, because in such cases he cannot fully free himself from the habits of the literati in recent times.

Yuan then disparages advocates of classical literary models, predicting the oblivion of imitators and applauding contemporary popular songs: “they are still created by genuine persons unburdened by knowledge and learning, that is why genuine sounds still prevail” 猶是無聞無識真人所作，故多真聲.⁵¹ If this may be compared to his brother’s “true poetry” 真詩, it is because of the unself-conscious flaws in the latter’s voice of rancor. It is “overly explicit” 過露: but Yuan Hongdao argues that in apparently flouting precepts of restraint and order, Zhongdao is but inheriting Qu Yuan’s 屈原 plaint and embodying the “Chu style” 楚風. (The Yuan brothers hailed from Hubei, which was part of the ancient Chu kingdom.) Flaws confirm immediacy and genuine spirit because individuation is conceived of as deviation from the norm.

51 Yuan compares his own style, laced with colloquialisms, to that of popular songs. Cf. Feng Menglong’s 馮夢龍 (1574–1645) preface to his collection of “mountain songs”: “Although we are now in a declining age, there are only fake poetry and prose, no fake mountain songs. For mountain songs are not vying for fame with poetry and prose, hence they don’t deign to be fake. If they don’t deign to be fake, would it not be acceptable for us to use them to preserve what is genuine?” 且今雖季世，而但有假詩文，無假山歌，則山歌不與詩文爭名，故不屑假。苟其不屑假，而吾藉以存真，不亦可乎？(Feng Menglong *quanji* 10: 1). Proponents of the idea that “true poetry is to be found among the common people” 真詩乃在民間 include the defender of ancient literary models Li Mengyang 李夢陽 (1472–1529), the playwright and scholar-official Li Kaixian 李開先 (1502–1568), and the literatus and critic He Yisun 賀貽孫 (1605–1688).

The pursuit of genuineness thus leads to the valorization of follies and obsessions (*chi* 癡, *pi* 癖) as tokens of superior sensibility. Zhang Dai 張岱 (1597–1679) famously declares: “One cannot befriend a person without obsessions, for he would lack deep feelings. One cannot befriend a person without flaws, for he would lack the spirit of genuineness.” 人無癖不可以交，以其無深情也。人無疵不可以交，以其無真氣也。⁵² Yuan Hongdao explains:

嵇康之鍛也，武子之馬也，陸羽之茶也，米顛之石也，倪雲林之潔也，皆以癖〔癖〕而寄其磊傀俊逸之氣者也。余觀世上語言無味、面目可憎之人，皆無癖之人耳。若真有所癖，將沈湎酣溺，性命生死以之，何暇及錢奴宦賈之事？

The way Ji Kang was with forging iron, Wang Ji (Wuzi) with horses, Lu Yu with tea, Mi Fu (the Mad Mi) with rocks, or Ni Zan (Yunlin) with cleanliness—in all these cases they were using their obsessions to lodge their uncompromising, distinct, soaring spirit. From what I have seen, the ones whose words are insipid and whose countenances are unappealing are all people without obsessions. If one is truly obsessed with something, then one would immerse and indulge in it, one would put life and soul to realize it—how could one have time to spare for things such as money, servants, officialdom, or trade?”⁵³

A well-known anecdote from *Shishuo xinyu* 世說新語 (A new account of tales of the world, 5th century) describes how the famous poet Ji Kang 嵇康 (223–262) “hammered away without stopping, as if there were no one around him” 揚槌不輟，傍若無人 when his political enemy, the aristocrat Zhong Hui 鍾會 (225–264), visited him. Ji Kang, defiantly absorbed in “forging iron,” challenges Zhong Hui to respond to his refusal to communicate. Zhong has enough wit to bolster his dignity with an evasive

52 Zhang Dai, “Wu yiren zhuan” 五異人傳 (*Zhang Dai shiwen ji*, 267–268); *Tao'an mengyi*, 80.

53 Yuan Hongdao, *Ping shi* 瓶史 (*Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 1: 826).

and non-committal reply.⁵⁴ Wang Ji 王濟 (3rd century), a discerning judge of horses, also humanizes them.⁵⁵ Lu Yu 陸羽 (733–804) is famous for his *Cha jing* 茶經 (Classic of tea). The great painter and calligrapher Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107) was obsessed with strangely shaped rocks, so much so that he would don official robes and bow to an interesting rock, calling it “elder brother.” Another great artist, Ni Zan 倪瓚 (1301–1374), is featured in a number of stories detailing his obsessive fear of contamination. Yuan Hongdao is thus linking obsession to a range of attributes, including political defiance (Ji Kang), empathetic understanding (Wang Ji), connoisseurship (Lu Yu), and artistic powers (Mi Fu and Ni Zan). Their common denominator is the idea of a self inventing its own order that displaces the vulgar concerns shared by the common run of humanity.

Single-minded focus on an external object seems to purge the self of contingencies, yet this is ultimately about the vagaries of the self. Feng Menglong 馮夢龍 (1574–1645), in his collection *Tan gai* 談概 (Basics of conversation), includes Yuan Hongdao’s comment on Mi Fu’s love of rocks: “Chrysanthemums for Tao Yuanming, plum blossoms for Lin Bu, or rocks for Mi Fu are not about loving chrysanthemums, plum blossoms, or rocks—in all these cases it is the self loving the self” 陶之菊、林之梅、米之石，非愛菊、梅與石也。皆吾愛吾也。⁵⁶ Obsessions are said to mark a person’s genuineness, which is thereby realized in unmediated value judgments that defy social norms and sometimes even rational understanding. Yet a possible dimension of self-regard qualifies the supposed immediacy and urgency.

54 “Moments passed and they did not exchange any word. Zhong [Hui] rose to leave, and [Ji] Kang said, ‘What have you heard that made you come? What have you seen that made you leave?’ Zhong Hui replied, ‘By coming, I have heard what I heard. Upon leaving, I have seen what I saw.’” 移時不交一言。鍾起去，康曰：「何所聞而來，何所見而去？」鍾曰：「聞所聞而來，見所見而去。」 (*Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 24.3: 767–768).

55 *Shishuo xinyu* 20.4, *Yulin* 語林, cited in Liu Xiaobiao’s notes on the entry (*Shishuo xinyu jianshu*, 705).

56 Feng Menglong, *Tan gai*, in *Feng Menglong quanji*, 6: 152.

Yuan Hongdao uses the word *ji* 寄 (lodge) to describe the ways whereby restless discontent and proud defiance seek solace and recompense in obsessions. The word *ji* suggests a temporary abode, a choice to come and go as one pleases—quite the contrary of the idea of a person succumbing to obsessions. In other words, with *ji* the self regains a measure of control. The obsessing self tries to banish the flux and uncertainties of existence in order to forge its own logic or system; the observing self veers between validating this as “higher order” and being detached from it. Indeed, the imagination of ultimate control and the fear of real disequilibrium underline the discourse on eccentricity, passions, extreme emotions, and obsessions during the late Ming. In Yuan Hongdao’s affirmation of obsession cited above, for instance, the context is “obsession with flowers” (*huapi* 花癖), of which he absolves himself. Those with a true passion for flowers brave dangers and hardships to acquire rare specimens, observe every phase of flowering with intensity, and gain vast and intuitive knowledge about flowers. Yuan considers such persons “true connoisseurs” (*zhen haoshi* 真好事) whom he cannot emulate:

若夫石公之養花，聊以破閒居孤寂之苦，非真能好之也。夫使其真好之，已為桃花洞口人矣。尚復為人間塵土之官哉。

As for the way I keep flowers, I just use them to dispel the affliction of withdrawal and solitude. It is not that I can be truly passionate about it. If I could, I would have become the one by the entrance to the Peach Blossom Cave! Why would I be still an official in the dusty human realm!⁵⁷

Yuan’s treatise details necessary choices and rules of taste with methodical meticulousness typical of obsession, yet he is claiming the cultural space of shared taste and eschewing the radical subjectivity of the truly obsessed. The self-observation, the concern with control, and the social dimension of aesthetic standards are symptomatic of intrinsic divisions in the idea of obsession.

57 Yuan Hongdao *ji jianjiao*, 1: 826.

1.4 Self-Conscious Fictionality and Theatricality

Self-division is sometimes the implicit theme in the many genres of autobiographical writings (e.g., self-account 自傳, self-accusation 自訟, self-elegy 自祭文, encomium on one's portrait 自贊、自題小像, and funereal essay or tomb inscription for oneself 生壙自志、自題墓誌銘) that flourished from the late Ming to early Qing, as evinced by the frequent pose of bafflement in such writings.⁵⁸ The writer claims to fail to grasp his constant and unpredictable transformations or to be struck by how his contradictions escape categorical judgments. Sometimes he focuses on the gap between the self as the source of judgment and its object. There are moments of deliberate disconnection between the subject of autobiography and his interlocutor (e.g., Li Zhi, in *Zhuowu lun lue* 卓吾論略 [A brief account of Zhuowu], uses an obviously allegorical narrator whose name implies that he is either deceptive or authoritative),⁵⁹ of a break between the speaker and his articulated opinions (e.g., Xu Wei's *Ziwei mu zhiming* 自為墓誌銘 [Tomb inscription for myself]),⁶⁰ and of elaborate fantasies deemed necessary for truth telling (e.g., Chen Jiru's 陳繼儒 [1558–1639] account of choreographing his mourners and his postmortem magical transformation in *Kongqing xiansheng mu zhiming* 空青先生墓誌銘 [Tomb inscription for Master Kongqing]). To what extent can “the true self” accommodate inconstancy, inconsistency, or contradictions? If one is torn by conflicting motives and desires, which “true self” does one express? One can of course characterize (or even dramatize) the process of conflict as itself the “stuff” of

58 On 16th- and 17th-century autobiographical writings, see Du Lianzhe 1977; Wu Pei-yi 1990; Nakatani 2010; Chen Baoliang 2014: 269–294.

59 *Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1:233–235. Zhuowu was Li Zhi's sobriquet. The narrator, Kong Ruogu 孔若谷, is a supposed friend who explains Li Zhi's life, but the name does not appear elsewhere in Li Zhi's writings and seems transparently allegorical. It has been glossed as “an aperture as large as a valley” (Wu Pei-yi 1990: 21). But “Kong Ruogu” may also imply the voice of wisdom (with Kong suggesting Confucius) and humility (as in the expression *xu huai ruo gu* 虛懷若谷). In other words, Li Zhi is positing a narrator who is at the same time unreliable and wisely empathetic.

60 *Xu Wei ji* 2: 638–640. Xu Wei attempted to sum up his contradictions as he prepared for suicide.

genuine expression (as indeed seems to be the case with the aforementioned authors of autobiographical writings), but that is not admissible if the genuine is valorized as something pristine, indivisible and “expressible,” as in Li Zhi’s essay on the childlike mind.

The late Ming was the great age of Chinese drama and fiction, genres for which ideas about masking, delusion, self-deception, and self-transformation are endemic. Authors may profess lyrical self-expression or claim to represent characters who enact such ideals, but self-conscious theatricality and fictionality often introduce inevitable irony. Take for example Xu Wei’s one-act play *Kuang gushi* 狂鼓史 (The mad drummer), which glorifies the literatus Mi Heng’s 禰衡 (173–198) confrontation with the warlord Cao Cao 曹操 (155–220).⁶¹ Historical and anecdotal sources tell the story of Mi Heng’s defiance of Cao Cao, who in revenge brings about Mi’s death.⁶² The scene of Mi Heng cursing Cao Cao while beating the drum thus celebrates the poetic vindication of the disempowered, righteous man. However, Xu Wei sets his play in the underworld, where the ghosts of Mi Heng and Cao Cao reenact the drumming and cursing for the edification and amusement of the infernal judge. Past, present, and future perspectives converge to infuse the actions of Mi Heng and Cao Cao with memories and foreknowledge, charging immediacy with the specter of self-division. Tang Xianzu’s 湯顯祖 (1550–1616) *Mudan ting* 牡丹亭 (Peony pavilion), widely recognized as the paean to untrammelled passion, nevertheless offers a complex picture on facets of desire, and its heroine answers different modes of self-expression and self-realization.⁶³ Perhaps the image of Monkey in *Xiyou bu* 西遊補 (Supplement to *Journey to the West*) by Dong Yue 董說 (1620–1686) best sums up the ambiguities in the quest for

61 The full title of the play is *Kuang gushi yuyang san nong* 狂鼓史漁陽三弄, *Xu Wei ji* 4: 1177–1185. For recent studies of the play, see Kwa 2012, He Yuming 2008.

62 *Sanguo zhi* 10.311, *Hou Hanshu* 80B.2652–2658, *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 2.8: 64.

63 On this issue, see, e.g., Li Wai-ye 1993, 2010; Lu 2000; Chapter 8 in this volume.

the true self.⁶⁴ In this novella, Monkey enters a dream world with a Tower of Myriad Mirrors, where endless worlds open up. Almost as a response to this multiplicity, Monkey also undergoes confusing and sometimes involuntary transformations, turning into his own impersonator, confronted with stories of his supposed past that he cannot remember, losing control of the very “hair-monkeys” that used to symbolize the infinite expansion of his powers in *Xiyou ji* 西遊記 (*Journey to the West*).

Suffice it to say that these works reflect intrinsic divisions in the idea of *zhen* (or *zhenwo*). Our earlier examples show tensions between aspects of the “true self” as transcendent and mundane (as in Xu Wei’s “Crossing the River”), as impulse and intention (as in Li Zhi’s discussion of Shun’s relationship with Xiang), as unconscious unfolding and deliberate valorization (as in Li Zhi’s discourse of the childlike mind), as self-evident manifestation or hidden constraint and aspiration (as in Yuan Hongdao’s discussion of obsession). “The one who acts by following innate nature can be called a genuine person” 率性而行，是謂真人: this apparently straightforward adage becomes complicated when embedded in the social context of mutual evaluation.⁶⁵ Genuineness should signal a single-minded relationship with oneself and with others, yet the pervasive concern with genuineness also breeds the hermeneutics of suspicion. To hold genuineness as an ideal has the potential for self-division, since to articulate and seek this ideal is to be already removed from it. Late Ming writers like to unmask

64 *Xiyou bu* tells of Monkey’s dream, induced by the breath of the *qing* fish, after the pilgrims cross the Flaming Mountain by borrowing the fan from Princess Iron Fan (chapter 61 in *Journey to the West*). Some scholars suggest that *Xiyou bu* might have been written partly by Dong Yue’s father Dong Sizhang 董斯張 (1587–1628). Interesting recent studies include Li Qiancheng 2004; Zhao Hongjuan 2006; Yang Yucheng 2013; Struve 2019.

65 Yuan Hongdao, “Shi Zhang Youyu zhenming hou” 書張幼于箴銘後 (1596) (*Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 1: 193). *Xing* in *shuaixing* here does not imply moral core (as it does in *Zhongyong*). Zhang Xianyi 張獻翼 (sobriquet Youyu 幼于) was defiantly eccentric, but Yuan praised him for forthrightly following his modest and careful nature. Elsewhere he argued with Zhang about whether his description of Zhang as *diankuang* 顛狂 (mad, wild) should be considered a compliment (*Yuan Hongdao ji jianjiao* 1: 145–146, 1: 501–504).

the ostentatiously genuine, target the conventionally unconventional, and establish the distinction between themselves and others whom they accuse of bad faith and pretension. Not infrequently, they also turn the irony upon themselves. There are also moments of stringent self-criticism. Yuan Hongdao, in his later writings, criticizes his own glibness and sensual indulgence from a Buddhist perspective. In a letter to Qian Qianyi 錢謙益 (1582–1664), Yuan Zhongdao ruefully upholds the “genuineness” born of going against oneself. One seeks pleasures beyond the world, he writes, because worldly pleasures are unattainable or dangerous: “There are many instances when, being hunchbacked, one assumes the attitude of respect, which then becomes genuine respect.” 因僂為恭，遂成真恭，世多有之。⁶⁶ Genuineness can be a nexus of correspondences driven by circumstance; it may yet be something imposed from without rather than emanating from within.

2. Beginnings of the Pursuit of Genuineness

Gu Yanwu offers a scathing critique of Li Zhi in *Rizhi lu*, but does not mention late Ming literati such as Xu Wei or the Yuan brothers.⁶⁷ His retrospection on allusions to *Zhuangzi* in late Ming examination essays is part of a broader critique of *xinxue*—his real target is how the idea of “true knowledge” or “true core” masks insidious Daoist and Buddhist influence on the discourse of Confucian moral self-cultivation.⁶⁸ In other

66 Yuan Zhongdao, “Da Qian Shouzhi” 答錢受之 (*Kexue zhai ji* 珂雪齋集 3: 1025).

67 For Gu’s critique of Li Zhi, see *Rizhi lu* 18.660–662, 667–668. Gu also directed vitriol against Zhong Xing 鍾惺 (1574–1625), who was influential because of his popular poetry anthologies and commentary editions (*Rizhi lu*, 18.668–669).

68 On Gu Yanwu’s critique of Wang Yangming and *xinxue*, see *Rizhi lu*, 18.653–657. Gu claimed that Ming scholars used the methods and mentality of Wei-Jin (220–420) “abstruse conversations” (*qingtan* 清談) to approach Confucian texts (“The abstruse conversations of time past talk about Laozi and Zhuangzi, the abstruse conversations of these days talk about Confucius and Mencius” 昔之清談談老莊，今之清談談孔孟, *Rizhi lu* 7.240).

words, he sets out to reveal the moral and metaphysical pitfalls of bringing the valence of truth, reality, and substance to a word (*zhen*) rooted in the quest for transcendent experience. Mere literati antics on “being genuine” are thus for him beyond the pale (and not even worth attacking). In that sense one may question whether there is any justification in conjoining the above discussion (which often addresses materials that devolve into some version of “to thine own self be true”) with the uses of the word *zhen* in *Zhuangzi*. Mere assertion of influence would be vapid: *Zhuangzi* was of course familiar to any educated person. There were more commentaries on *Zhuangzi* produced during the 16th and 17th centuries than any other period in Chinese history, including quite a few by the authors mentioned above.⁶⁹ Their explicitly articulated arguments about *Zhuangzi*, however, may not be the best guide to their true affinities with *Zhuangzi*. (For example, an author’s “transcendent reading” may be belied by dramatized angst and unresolved contradictions in his writings.) My modest question is simply this: is there any room for mutual illumination when we juxtapose issues in the above discussion with the meanings of the word *zhen* in *Zhuangzi*? Would it help us chart a trajectory of “the quest for the true self” as a self-consciously articulated problem?

2.1 Paradoxes of *Zhen* in *Zhuangzi*: True Arbiter, True Ruler, True Being, True Knowledge

One of the most famous passages on the idea of *zhen* as being related to interiority is the problematic proposition of transcendence in “The Discourse on Making Things Equal” (Qiwu lun 齊物論) in *Zhuangzi*. It comes in the wake of the enumeration of myriad, ever-changing mental states, like “music rising out of emptiness (i.e. empty holes), vaporous mist forming mushrooms” 樂出虛，蒸成菌—their source is elliptically designated as “this” (*ci* 此), which commentators gloss variously as the

69 For a comprehensive list, see Fang Yong 2008 and 2015.

heart-mind, the natural course (*ziran* 自然) or external things (*waiwu* 外物).⁷⁰ “This” seems to have become “that” in what follows:

非彼無我，非我無所取。是亦近矣，而莫知其所為使。若有真宰，而特不得其朕。可行己（已）信，而不見其形。有情而無形。百骸、九竅、六藏，賅而存焉，吾誰與為親？汝皆說之乎？其有私焉？如是皆有為臣妾乎？其臣妾不足以相治乎？其遞相為君臣乎？其有真君存焉。如求其情與不得，無益損乎其真。一受其成形，不亡以待盡。與物相刃相靡，其行盡如馳，而莫之能止，不亦悲乎。終身役役而不見其成功，荼然疲役而不知其所歸，可不哀邪。人謂之不死，奚益。其形化，其心與之然，可不謂大哀乎？人之生也，固若是芒乎？其我獨芒，而人亦有不芒者乎？

Without “that” there is no “me,” without “me” there is nothing to draw from. This seems close enough, and yet one does not know what brings this about. It is as if there is a True Arbiter, yet one is singularly unable to get its signs.⁷¹ What one believes of it can be put into action, and yet one does not see its form. There is truth but no form. The hundred bones, nine apertures, and six organs exist in all their completion. To which should I be kin? Do you take delight in all of them? Is there any partiality? In that case, should all be treated as subjects and concubines? And do subjects and concubines not have what it needs to govern each other? And do they take turns to be ruler and subject? Is there a True Ruler in existence? Whether one seeks to obtain the truth or fails to do so does not add to or diminish its genuineness.

The defined form, once received, cannot be changed as one waits for the end. Chipping and grinding against things, one speeds forward as if galloping, without being able to stop—is that not lamentable! One toils the whole life without seeing what has been accomplished. Desolate and

70 See comments by Guo Xiang 郭象 (252–312) and Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (608–669) (*Zhuangzi jishi* 2.56); Hu Yuanjun 胡遠濬, cited in *Zhuangzi zuanjian* 莊子纂箋, 12; Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, *Zhuangzi jie* 莊子解 (*Chuanshan quanshu* 13: 98).

71 Cf. *Huainanzi*: “All things have signs, only the Way has no signs. The reason why it has no signs is because it does not have a constant configuration and direction” 凡物有朕，唯道無朕。所以無朕者，以其無常形勢也 (*Huainan honglie jijie* 15.493).

worn out, one does not know where to return, how can it not be woeful! What good would it do for people to say that one does not perish? The form changes, and the heart and mind go along with it, how can this not be called the great woe? Do humans live only to be so benighted? Or am I alone in being benighted and there are others who are not benighted?⁷²

I quote this passage at some length to draw attention to the rhetorical functions of *zhen*, which may matter more than its paraphraseable meanings.⁷³ The argument gains momentum not by definition but by unanswered (or unanswerable) questions. The True Arbiter 真宰 or True Ruler 真君 is posited as a response to the conundrum of conceptualizing an absolute determinant beyond the mutual dependence of the “self” and an activating force. How can one ascertain the existence or attributes of this True Arbiter when it has no tangible manifestations? How does its “truth” or “reality” (*qing* 情) correspond to the components of a person? The implied speaker poses a series of questions to himself and his imagined interlocutor: how does one adjudicate the claims of the different constituents of a person? How does one part control another? The idea that a True Ruler may exist seems no more than a tentative attempt to resolve the sense of anarchy and contradictions emerging from a vision of a multifarious entity arbitrarily designated as a “self.” This may be the first time in Chinese thought that the search for the ultimate source of being yields only hypothetical analogies of political hierarchy (master and subject). The True Arbiter and True Ruler are introduced to forestall greater disorder, not to bring real resolution. The tone then shifts and becomes declarative: whether one can determine the “reality” of this elusive higher explanation or not does not affect its “genuineness” (*zhen*). This statement about *zhen* is more emphatically affirmative, yet it is followed by lamentations of inevitable death, oblivion, and misunderstanding. We are presented with the promise of an absolute akin to a true core within the self (the sense of interiority being heightened

72 *Zhuangzi jishi* 2.56–57.

73 On the formal realization of the idea of change and reversal in *Zhuangzi*, see Graziani 2011.

by references to physical components of the body), and yet it is a quest dogged by inevitable negativity. Indeed, the sense of the struggle between, as well as the mutual implication of, transcendence and mortality is much stronger in the “Inner Chapters” than in the later chapters.

The same sense of rhetorical necessity drives the description of the True Being (*zhenren* 真人) in “Great and Venerable Teacher” (Da zongshi 大宗師). Perhaps more than other sections in *Zhuangzi*, this chapter relentlessly confronts the implacability of death and the limits of knowledge. It begins by grandly affirming the supremacy of “knowing how heaven works” 知天之所為 and “knowing how humans work” 知人之所為 but proceeds to skepticism.

雖然，有患。夫知有所待而後當，其所待者，特未定也。庸詎知吾所謂天之非人乎？所謂人之非天乎？且有真人而後有真知。

However, there are worries. For knowledge has to depend on something in order to become pertinent, and that which it depends on cannot yet be fixed. How can one know that what I call heaven is not human? That what I call human is not heaven? Further, only when there is a True Being can there be True Knowledge.”⁷⁴

The True Being is thus posited to facilitate the conception of True Knowledge, the counterpoint to the preceding avowal of uncertainty. He embodies the point of reference that always anticipates the next question or negation—he must remain abstract and elliptical. The question “What can be called a True Being” 何謂真人 is answered through negation,⁷⁵ implied

74 *Zhuangzi jishi* 6.224–226.

75 “He does not reject the meager, he does not crow over achievement, he does not plan how affairs unfold” 不逆寡，不雄成，不譽士; “Sleeping, he does not dream; awakened, he has no worries; eating, he takes no pleasure” 其寢不夢，其覺無憂，其食不甘; “He does not know about being enamored of life, he does not know about abhorring death” 不知說生，不知惡死; “He does not forget where he begins, he does not seek where he ends” 不忘其所始，不求其所終; “This is called not using his heart and mind to diminish the Way, not using human efforts to aid Heaven” 是之謂不以心捐道，不以人助天 (*Zhuangzi jishi* 6.226–229).

conditionals,⁷⁶ semblance,⁷⁷ and paradoxical combinations.⁷⁸ The function of going beyond opposites and fixity seems to take precedence over the actual existence of the True Being. Thus Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692):

夫真人者豈真見有人，真知者豈真有其知哉？人皆天也，知皆不容知也，乃可恍惚而遇其知于滑潛。

As for the True Being, how can it be as if one truly sees such a being? Or for True Knowledge, how can it be as if one truly has such knowledge? All things human are also of heaven; in all cases, knowledge cannot be known. One can only, in uncertainty, encounter such knowledge at Flowing Dimness.⁷⁹

76 “Being like that, he exceeds the limits without regrets and matches his lot without self-satisfaction. Being like that, he scales heights without fear, enters water without getting wet, enters fire without being burnt” 若然者，過而弗悔，當而不自得也。若然者，登高不慄，入水不濡，入火不爇; “Being like that, his mind is focused, his mien, still, his forehead, austere; he is melancholy like autumn, warm like spring; his joys and anger commune with the four seasons, finding things fitting without knowing their limits” 若然者，其心志，其容寂，其顙顙，淒然似秋，煖然似春，喜怒通四時，與物有宜，而莫知其極 (*Zhuangzi jishi* 6.226, 230–231). On the emendation of *zhi* 志 (“his mind is focused”) as *wang* 忘 (“his mind forgets”), see Wang Fuzhi, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan* 莊子校詮, 1: 212; *Zhuangzi zuanjian*, 48. For arguments against that reading, see Wang Fuzhi, *Zhuangzi jie* (*Chuanshan quanshu* 13: 160). Guo Xiang glosses *kui* 頽 as “austere” but explains it as “protruding and impressive” in “Tian dao” 天道。

77 “Shining bright, he seems to be glad” 邴邴乎似喜乎, “afflicted, he seems to be like the rest of the world” 厲厲其似世乎, “connected, he seems to like closing up” 連乎其似好閉也 (*Zhuangzi jishi* 6.234).

78 “He seems inadequate but will not receive more. Moving easily, he stands alone but is not firm. Opening up, he is empty but has no outward glory” 若不足而不承，與乎，其觚而不堅也。張乎，其虛而不華也; “That is why what he is fond of is one, and what he is not fond of is also one. His oneness is one, and his negation of oneness is also one. In his oneness, he is the companion of Heaven. In his negation of oneness, he is the companion of man. When Heaven and man do not overcome one another, that is called the True Being” 故其好之也一，其弗好之也一。其一也一，其不一也一。其一與天為徒，其不一與人為徒。天與人不相勝也，是之謂真人。 (*Zhuangzi jishi* 6.234–235). I read *jian* 堅 as *gu* 固, following Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying. Yao Nai reads this line as *jian er bu gu* 堅而不觚, “firm but not standing alone,” cited in *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, 1: 216–218.

79 Wang Fuzhi, *Zhuangzi jie* (*Chuanshan quanshu* 13:157). The term *huanghu* (in uncertainty) refers to the Way in *Laozi* 21 (*Laozi jianshi*, 88). “Flowing Dimness” 滑潛, like “the illumination of Flowing Doubt” 滑疑之耀 (*Zhuangzi jishi* 2.75), use the image of slippery ground and ambiguity to designate transcendent positioning.

In the “Outer Chapters” and “Miscellaneous Chapters,” we have mostly more straightforward definitions of the True Being: paradoxes are often stated rather than played out through rhetoric. “Sharpening the Will” 刻意, for example, delineates different ways of being in the world and concludes with a definition of the True Being as one “who can embody unalloyed purity” 能體純素.⁸⁰ Tian Zifang 田子方 in the eponymous chapter describes his teacher Dongguo Shunzi 東郭順子: “His way of being is true. Human in appearance, he yet has heavenly emptiness. Compliant, he preserves his genuineness. Pure, he accommodates things” 其為人也真。人貌而天虛，緣而葆真，清而容物。⁸¹ “Xu Wugui” 徐無鬼 offers more elliptical formulations reminiscent of “Great Venerable Teacher” but also adopts declarative statements: “He embraces virtue and nourishes harmony in order to go along with the world. This is called a True Being” 抱德煬和，以順天下，此謂真人。⁸² *Huainanzi*, even while paraphrasing or quoting *Zhuangzi*, manages to purge the *zhenren* of paradoxes in creating a transcendent image.⁸³ In accounts of the quest for immortality in *Shiji* and “biographies of immortals” that flourished from about the 3rd century onwards, *zhenren* simply means a transcendent immortal or being who has reached perfection.⁸⁴

2.2 Zhen in Zhuangzi: Performance, Communication, Sincerity

Anecdotes about conveying the quality of *zhen* or about the *zhenren* in action are premised on the gap between appearance and meaning—this

80 *Zhuangzi jishi* 15.546. Cheng Xuanying: “who can intuitively understand unalloyed purity.”

81 *Zhuangzi jishi* 21.702.

82 *Zhuangzi jishi* 24.865. I read *yang* 煬 (burn) as a loan word for *yang* 養 (nourish), following Xi Tong 奚侗 (*Zhuangzi zuanjian*, 207).

83 *Huainan honglie jijie*, 2.50, 58, 61–62, 71, 6.193, 210, 7.227, 230, 8.260–261, 14.631. The term appears once in *Lüshi chungiu*, where it refers to a sage of great virtue (*Lüshi chungiu jiaoshi*, 3.144).

84 In Chan writings, the True Being or the True Being Without Position 無位真人 is the enlightened one who flouts all attempts to define him; see *Taishō shinshū Daizōkyō* 大正新修大藏經 47: 496, 676, 720, 729, 755, 806–807, 823, 842, 857, 987; 48: 12, 16, 22, 80, 83, 99, 135, 171, 201, 252–253, 288; 49: 643–644; 51: 276, 290, 300, 447.

is true throughout *Zhuangzi*. An interlocutor or mediator has to explain what might have been misunderstood, especially because expressing or communicating the attribute of *zhen* almost always involves flouting expectation, convention, and tradition—we recall mourners who sing instead of lament at a funeral, embodiments of truths who evade answers, thigh-slapping roamers who revel in oblivion. The interpreter is the one who names an inexplicable gesture as *zhen*. In one example, eager and respectful artisans answer the Song ruler’s call for making pictures. When the Song ruler sends someone to spy the doings of a nonchalant latecomer, the latter “had taken off his clothes and sat spreading his legs, all naked” 則解衣般礴. To this the ruler responds: “This will do. This is a true picture maker” 可矣。是真畫者也。⁸⁵ The artistry of the naked man, observable in his oblivious self-containment, needs a spy and an interpreter to be known. Along similar lines, Gap-toothed 齧缺 falls asleep while Piyi 被衣 is explaining to him the mysteries of the Way, and Piyi commends this apparent indifference: “His form is like a withered corpse, his heart like dead ashes.”⁸⁶ The truth is what he knows,⁸⁷ he does not hold on to explanations” 形若槁骸，心若死灰。真其實知，不以故自恃。⁸⁸

Speaking of *zhen* always requires substitution, perhaps implying a shift of attention from *zhen* as the object of knowledge to *zhen* as a cognitive process. Such displacement defines the anecdote about Xu Wugui and Lord Wu of Wei. Lord Wu begins by expressing sympathetic concern for the material deprivation of Xu Wugui’s life as a recluse. Xu counters by pitying Lord Wu’s exertion, torn as he is between succumbing to desires and steering away from them—that is, between the danger of imperiling his spirit and that of diminishing his senses. When Lord Wu seems at a loss for reply,

85 *Zhuangzi jishi* 21.719.

86 This description of the person with “true knowledge” (sometimes in slightly different wording) also appears in chapters 2 (“Qiwu lun”), 23 (“Geng Sangchu” 庚桑楚), and 24 (“Xu Wugui”).

87 Following Wu Rulun 吳汝綸 (1840–1903) and reading *shi* 實 as *suo* 所 (真其所知). Cited in *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, 2: 815–816.

88 *Zhuangzi jishi* 22.738.

Xu Wugui regales him with his expertise in assessing dogs and horses. He enlarges on their rankings and concludes: the most superior dogs “seem to have relinquished their oneness” 若亡其一, just as the best horses under heaven “seem to have lost their oneness” 若喪其一. “Lord Wu was greatly pleased and laughed” 武侯大說而笑. Ru Shang, who facilitated Xu Wugui’s audience with Lord Wu, confesses his bafflement: Ru Shang appealed to authoritative traditions as tools of political persuasion, but Lord Wu ignored him. Xu Wugui explains his success: the longer an exile has been away, the more eager he is to seize on any association with his hometown. “For a long time, there has not been one who uses the words of a True Being to chat and laugh by our ruler’s side” 久矣乎。莫以真人之言，譬歟吾君之側乎。⁸⁹

The anecdote begins with Lord Wu’s concern for Xu Wugui’s rustic hardships and ends with Xu comparing Lord Wu to an exile in the wilderness surprised by the joy of human contact. The underlying power struggle between the ruler and the persuader, so pervasive in Warring States writings, seems to be operative here.⁹⁰ Lord Wu’s delight and laughter are part of this dynamic: they vindicate Xu Wugui but also put him in the role of entertainer. Yet “the words of a True Being” also promise to transcend the agonistic momentum underlying remonstrance. The self-forgetfulness of dogs and horses suggests a kind of true knowledge to which Lord Wu should aspire. This anecdote is followed by another exchange: Xu Wugui convinces Lord Wu to forego human intervention, even if it is for a good cause like putting a stop to wars. “Cultivate the sincerity inside yourself so that you can respond to the reality of Heaven and Earth without tampering with it” 修胸中之誠，以應天地之情而勿撓。⁹¹ The talk of dogs and horses launches a psychological process that makes Lord Wu receptive to

89 *Zhuangzi jishi* 24.821.

90 On the role of paradoxes and semantic uncertainty in the power dynamic of remonstrance, see Graziani 2012; Li Wai-ye 2013.

91 *Zhuangzi jishi* 24.827. *Cheng* (translated here as sincerity) also means “(impersonal) truth”: “With you I will ride the truth (*cheng*) of heaven and earth and not let things tamper with it” 吾與之乘天地之誠而不以物與之相撓 (*Zhuangzi jishi* 24.858).

the message of relinquishing subjective imposition. “The words of a True Being” bear fruit as an injunction to sincerity (*cheng* 誠).

The two iterations of remonstrance in “Xu Wugui” move between a sense of deliberate paradox in the True Being’s words and an earnest lesson in sincerity. But “sincerity” in that case means the optimal state of mind that allows one to respond correctly. Defining sincerity as urgent emotions and equating it with *zhen* come to the fore in the exchange between Confucius and his interlocutor in “The Fisherman” (Yufu 漁父). The chapter begins with the fisherman being drawn to Confucius’ zither music, the appreciation of which leads him to conclude that Confucius “exhausts his heart and mind, enervates his body, and therefore imperils his genuineness” 苦心勞形，以危其真. Confucius explains his endeavors and adversities, and the fisherman advises him: “Carefully cultivate your person and cautiously guard your genuineness” 謹修其身，慎守其真.⁹²

孔子愀然曰：「請問何謂真？」客曰：「真者，精誠之至也。不精不誠，不能動人。故強哭者雖悲不哀，強怒者雖嚴不威，強親者雖笑不和。真悲無聲而哀，真怒未發而威，真親未笑而和。真在內者，神動於外，是所以貴真也。其用於人理也，事親則慈孝，事君則忠貞，飲酒則歡樂，處喪則悲哀。忠貞以功為主，處喪以哀為主，事親以適為主。功成之美，無一其跡矣。事親以適，不論所以矣。飲酒以樂，不選其具矣。處喪以哀，無問其禮矣。禮者，世俗之所為也。真者，所以受於天也，自然不可易也。故聖人法天貴真，不拘於俗。愚者反此，不能法天而恤於人，不知貴真，祿祿而受變於俗，故不足。惜哉。子之早湛人偽，而晚聞大道也。」

Confucius said with a disconsolate mien, “May I ask what is meant by ‘genuine?’” The fisherman said, “The genuine is the intent of essential sincerity.”⁹³ Without essence and sincerity, it is not possible to sway others.

92 *Zhuangzi jishi* 31.1025, 1031.

93 I read *zhi* 至 (fullest extent) as *zhi* 志 (intent), following Wang Shumin, *Zhuangzi jiaoquan*, 31.1242. For the connection between “essence” and “sincerity,” see also *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi*, 9.507–508 (“Le cheng” 樂成), 17.1225–1226 (“Jubei” 具備).

That is why those forced to wail are not woeful even when lamenting; those forced to be angry are not forbidding even when being severe; those forced to be affectionate are not congenial even when smiling. Genuine lamentation is woeful without any sound; genuine anger is forbidding before manifestation; genuine affection is congenial before any smile. He who has genuineness within manifests his spirit without. That is why genuineness is valued. In terms of application to human principles, [with genuineness] one is loving and filial in serving one's parents, loyal and constant in serving one's ruler, one is joyous while drinking and grieves while in mourning. For loyalty and constancy, the main point is accomplishment; for drinking, pleasure; for mourning, grief; for serving one's parents, ease. The beauty of successful accomplishment is that it leaves no traces. Providing ease in serving one's parents, one does not debate the means. Drinking wine with pleasure, one does not choose the utensils. Grieving in mourning, one does not ask about the ritual. Rituals are what are formed by the world. The genuine is what is received from Heaven—it is natural and cannot be changed. That is why the sage models himself after Heaven and values genuineness. The foolish ones are the opposite—they cannot model themselves on Heaven and worry about people. Not knowing how to value genuineness, they are compliant and are transformed by customs. That is why they are inadequate. What a pity! From early on you have immersed yourself in human artifice and are late in hearing about the Great Way.”⁹⁴

This is a surprisingly mundane definition of *zhen*. Instead of an ineffable higher truth, it is linked to sincerity and singleness of purpose and used as an adjective to authenticate affective states. Further, its application in human affairs means eschewing conventions, ritual, and “mere form” to achieve the goal of efficacy. The goal may be effective political persuasion, especially since the context of the encounter is Confucius’ woeful tale of political failure—hence the fisherman’s emphasis on being able to “sway (or move) others” 動人. Despite the injunction to “follow the model of Heaven and

94 *Zhuangzi jishi* 31.1032.

value genuineness” and the fisherman’s aura as someone beyond the world of human affairs, this is an excursus on *zhen* with broad worldly implications.

2.3 Trajectories of Notions of Genuineness (*zhen*) and Sincerity (*cheng*)

In the previous section we began with instances of *zhen* in *Zhuangzi* that refer to a tantalizing absolute, almost synonymous with the Way,⁹⁵ and concluded with its equation with *cheng* and relatively stable notions of true nature and sincere expression. The word *cheng* becomes common from late Warring States onwards, and in many cases functions adverbially to mean “truly” or “really.” In ritual contexts, it refers to good faith in serving the spirits and correspondence between reverence and ritual protocols.⁹⁶ Intimations of its transcendent dimension first appear in *Mengzi*: “The myriad things are all complete within me. There is no greater joy than returning to oneself and being sincere” 萬物皆備於我矣。反身而誠，樂莫大焉。⁹⁷ “Return” is tantamount to self-examination; to ascertain sincerity in oneself is to “illuminate inward goodness” (*ming hu shan* 明乎善)—such sincerity then extends outwards as filial devotion, good faith with friends, and success in gaining recognition from those in power.⁹⁸ Xunzi describes sincerity as the paramount principle of “nourishing the heart” (*yangxin* 養心). To “fulfill the fullest potential of sincerity” (*zhicheng* 致誠) is to actualize moral principles and attain the transformative powers of “heavenly virtue” (*tiande* 天德).⁹⁹ Unlike other virtue words, *cheng* rises above specific application to particular situations

95 The *bei* 貝 component of the graph *zhen* is related to *ding* 鼎 (cauldron). Ji Xusheng 季旭昇 glosses *zhen* as “a spoon getting food from a cauldron.” Qiu Xigui 裘錫圭 connects *zhen* to *dian* 顛 or *ding* 頂 (a person’s head). Cf. <http://humanum.arts.cuhk.edu.hk/Lexis/lexi-mf/search.php>? Edward Shaughnessy suggests that the graph is linked to *ding* 丁, *tian* 天, *zheng* 正 (private communication).

96 *Liji jijie* 1.9, 3A.170, 4B.292, 10B.652, 11A.670, 11A.689, 11B.707, 25.1237–1238.

97 *Mengzi yizhu* 13.4: 302.

98 *Mengzi yizhu* 7.12 : 173–174.

99 *Xunzi jijie* 3.46.

to become the guiding force illuminating inner truth and concretizing virtues, hence its crucial role in mapping the steps of self-cultivation and in underwriting social, political, and even cosmic transformation in *Daxue* 大學 (The great learning) and *Zhongyong* (The mean).¹⁰⁰ Images of continuity and oneness recur in the delineation of *cheng* as a force that links the self to others and to things. By contrast, as we have seen, in some sections in *Zhuangzi*, *zhen* evokes associations with discontinuity, fragmentation, and epistemological uncertainty.

By elevating *Daxue* and *Zhongyong* as foundational texts that deserve special attention, Song Neo-Confucians confirm “sincerity” as the principle of co-incidence between self-cultivation and external order. Ming *xinxue* thinkers (and literati in their *xinxue* moments) also embrace the metaphysical dimension of sincerity. Their uses of the word *zhen*, even when it introduces Daoist and Buddhist echoes, are supposed to complement *cheng* and to augment the unity of and continuity between inwardness and transcendence. However, for many writers who articulate the quest for the true self and its expression, the preferred word is *zhen* rather than *cheng*, perhaps because the latter’s valence of moral certainty does not admit of the sense of disjunction and opposition between the self and its social, political, moral, or religious contexts.

Yet it is important to remember that even in the context of literary creation and literati lives, *zhen* often does not convey anxiety. The fisherman’s definition of *zhen* as “essential sincerity” and the inevitable communication of deeply felt emotions in *Zhuangzi* is not very different from the affirmation of irrepressible verbal expression of emotions and intent in the “Mao Preface” to the *Shijing*, a foundational text in Chinese literary thought. (Granted, the “Mao Preface” also focuses on remonstrance, governance, and political cohesion, which draw attention to function rather

100 *Daxue* 1 and 6 (*Sishu jizhu*, 3–4, 7); *Zhongyong* 20–26 and 32 (*Sishu jizhu*, 28–35, 38–39). On the role of *cheng* in socio-political order, see also *Lüshi chunqiu jiaoshi* 18.1225–1226. Cf. Sato Masayuki 2009.

than the inevitability of expression.) The rejection of artifice, convention, and external validation in the idea of “returning to the genuine” (*fan qi zhen* 反其真) in *Zhuangzi*¹⁰¹ finds endless reverberations in the Chinese literary tradition. Late Ming literary thought, for example, is full of assertions about the need for emotional authentication and unmediated expression.

Zhen as fulfillment of nature, when nature is not defined in moral terms, means that such unlikely characters as Brigand Zhi in the eponymous chapter in *Zhuangzi* can denounce Confucius for failing to “preserve his genuineness” (*quanzhen* 全真).¹⁰² As noted above, in later periods the term “True Being” (*zhenren*) often just means immortals, but it can also refer to the simple and unschooled, the sensualist, the iconoclast, the one who “follows his nature.” The late Ming is particularly rich with eccentrics and counter cultural types. Pervasive fascination with the vagaries of the authentic can also be seen in fictional commentary. The commentary on *Shuihu zhuan* attributed to Li Zhi, for example, often lauds the mindlessly violent Li Kui as “true sage” (*zhen shengren* 真聖人) and “true Buddha” (*zhenfo* 真佛). The commentator seems to affirm bloodlust as the untrammelled expression of righteous anger.¹⁰³

Most literary and cultural histories see the late Ming concern with the true self as the unproblematic iteration of the celebration of “the freedom of the spirit” in *Zhuangzi* and the Wei-Jin cultural types of wild unrestraint it inspired.¹⁰⁴ But perhaps the more interesting resonances are found in the contradictions of genuineness. Coherent interiority remains a question in the search for the “True Arbiter” and “True Ruler” in “The Discourse for Making Things Equal.” “True knowledge” and “True Being” in “The Great and Venerable Teacher” offer the promise of absolute truth, but somewhat

101 *Zhuangzi jishi* 9.330, 17.590–591.

102 *Zhuangzi jishi* 29.1000. By a similar logic, Zichan’s 子產 hedonistic brothers are praised as *zhenren* (*Liezi jishi*, 7.224–227). The Quanzhen sect in religious Daoism uses the term *quanzhen* differently: it is understood as “complete perfection.”

103 Cf. Zuo Dongling 2010: 226–241.

104 See, for example, Song Kefu and Han Xiao 2002, Hu Xuechun 2009, Lin I-Jung 2010.

evasively. Xu Wugui, who refers to himself (by implication) as the “True Being,” resorts to an excursus on dogs and horses to convey his meanings to the ruler. In general, disguise and deception are prevalent in *Zhuangzi*. The indeterminacy of reality means that expressing, communicating, or divining the truth about oneself and another can be playful and uncertain.¹⁰⁵

And yet this is not how *Zhuangzi* is understood in the tradition. Later commentators see skepticism and negativity as obstacles whose *raison d'être* is their overcoming. It is when its “ways of being genuine” become a cultural model that questions of mediation, problematic communication, or self-division arise. Ruan Ji 阮籍 (210–263), for example, wrote essays on *Zhuangzi* elucidating its transcendent ideals with no hint of irony.¹⁰⁶ But anecdotes about him and his biography in *Jin shu* 晉書 tell of an intriguing mixture of unrestraint and calculation. Consider the well-known example of his unconventional mourning. He feasts on a suckling pig, only to spit blood afterwards, presumably from irrepressible sadness.¹⁰⁷ Being true to the spirit of defying norms and flouting conventions means also going against the genuine need to express grief. *Zhuangzi* might have invented the very idea of irony, but the ironic implications of being genuine with spectators in mind (or performing genuineness) can only come into full play with the kind of social and political contexts we have for later periods. Primal Vastness 鴻蒙 “slapping his things, hopping about like a sparrow and roaming” 拊髀雀躍而遊 in *Zhuangzi* is an emblem of freedom.¹⁰⁸ But Li Zhi’s defense of the late Ming thinker Yan Jun 顏鈞 (1504–1596), who expressed his illumination about innate knowledge by “rolling on the ground right there” 就地打滾, takes us to the treacherous boundary between the sublime and the grotesque. Yan’s critics found this

105 This is unusual in early Chinese thought, notable for its “epistemological optimism” (Keightley 2014: 283–310).

106 Ruan Ji, “Da Zhuang lun” 達莊論, “Daren xiansheng zhuan” 大人先生傳 (*Ruan Ji ji jiaozhu* 阮籍集校注, 133–158, 161–192).

107 *Shishuo xinyu jianshu* 23.2: 728; *Jin shu* 49.1361.

108 *Zhuangzi jishi* 11.385–386.

exhibitionism absurd. Li Zhi applauded this as a sign of Yan Jun “having gained for himself the true joy of innate knowledge” 自得良知真趣.¹⁰⁹ How mediated or immediate is the absurd gesture deemed necessary for the joy of attaining the moment of truth? Is this also self-revelation or an act of communication? For late imperial writers, the question of the true self is compounded by belatedness, for they are in dialogue not only with *Zhuangzi* but also the cultural models it inspired through the ages, including Ruan Ji and his cohort of ostentatiously genuine characters from the Wei-Jin period.¹¹⁰ Perhaps it is the self-division and potential bad faith in being consciously “genuine” or following cultural models of genuineness, in addition to simple heedless self-indulgence, that inspired Gu Yanwu’s critique with which we began this essay.

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109 Li Zhi, “Da Zhou Liutang” 答周柳塘 (*Li Zhi quanji zhu* 1: 218–226).

110 Sixteenth and seventeenth-century anecdotal collections tell of Ming literati who modeled their behavior on Wei-Jin prototypes (Qian Nanxiu 2001: 247–282). Extant Ming (1535, 1580, 1586) editions of *Shishuo xinyu*, including one duo-color commentary edition, testified to an abiding interest in cultivating eccentricity and discerning the continuity or rupture between surface and genuineness. Numerous late Ming and early Qing imitations of *Shishuo xinyu* confirmed the 16th- and 17th-century revival of the text as one index to the sensibility of the era. On the problem of “performing genuineness” in *Shishuo xinyu*, see Li Wai-ye 2004, Cheng Yu-yu (Zheng Yuyu) 2006.

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