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"I Lost Myself": Variations on Ziqi, a Name Wandering Through Zhuangzian Landscapes

Thomas Michael

School of Philosophy, Beijing Normal University, Beijing 100875, China; maike966@gmail.com

Abstract

For two millennia, scholarship on the *Zhuangzi* has extracted doctrines, analyzed concepts, and dissected arguments, all of which is valuable and necessary. But in doing so, it has lost something essential: that these words are spoken by someone, that they emerge from lives, and that they belong to figures who appear, disappear, and reappear across textual landscapes. This study restores the drama to the doctrines by tracking a single name. Ziqi appears across eight chapters of the *Zhuangzi* as Nanguo Ziqi, Nanbo Ziqi, Nanbo Zikui, Dongguo Ziqi, Sima Ziqi, and simply Ziqi. His name wanders. Following him through caves, courts, scenes of instruction, vertiginous spirals into pity, armrest reveries, drunken collapses under trees, family picnics, and palaces of nothing whatsoever, this paper uncovers what a purely doctrinal approach cannot: that the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* is inseparable from the lives that live it. Ziqi is not just a mouthpiece who robotically voices the abstract proposition "I lost myself" but a figure whose journey through the text gives those words their weight. More than illustrating doctrines, his journey creates the philosophy and constitutes its meaning. By reading Ziqi across his eight appearances and their variations, this study offers a model for reading the *Zhuangzi* as a textured literary world in which figures wander, words spill over, and meaning is made through the lives that live it.

Keywords: Zhuangzi; Daoism; wandering; philosophical fiction; Nanguo Ziqi; Nanbo Ziqi; Sima Ziqi

1. Overture: Philosophical Fiction and the *Zhuangzi*

In the introduction to his masterful study entitled *Le Petit Monde du Tchouang-tseu*, Jean Levi presents an enticing stage for the immersive experience in reading the orchestral writings gathered under the name of Zhuangzi:

> The prose of the *Zhuangzi* resembles, in its formal structure, a musical score. A theme is sketched in the opening, then abruptly abandoned, only to be taken up again either with subtle variations or entirely reworked, undergoing profound alterations in rhythm or tempo. These modulations of the same motif throughout a collection of essays, seemingly disparate, create effects of echoes and correspondences; they weave a kind of melodic counterpoint within the work and give it its true metaphysical depth, its meaning being conferred not by the content of any particular piece but by its resonances with others. Furthermore, researchers have shown that Zhuangzi, through fables and baroque dramaturgies, circumvents the pitfalls of dogmatic pronouncement to express, through other modalities that are discontinuous and polyphonic, a thought that seeks to be the

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> dynamic manifestation of a bubbling, tumultuous, and ardent creation, thereby elevating forms such as the apologue, the fable, and the anecdote to a noble status; he thus created a new genre suited to his subject, which some have called "philosophical fiction." (Levi 2010, p. 11)

Establishing the *Zhuangzi*'s musical, polyphonic, and philosophically fictional nature,[1] Levi's overture builds to the threshold of a naturally following key question: if this is the nature of the work, what are the implications for how we approach it? The distinction between fiction and philosophy offers an appropriate *point d'appui*, as the text[2] seems to actively resist these categorizations.

Throughout the ages since its first appearance, readers of the *Zhuangzi* have been at pains to recognize the text as primarily literature or philosophy, and this hesitation is itself instructive. It points to a fundamental uncertainty about where meaning resides and how it is properly conveyed. To pose the question is already to operate within a framework that the *Zhuangzi* continuously, and with great humor, destabilizes.

A conventional distinction might run as follows: philosophy aims for transparent, univocal propositional truth. It seeks to say what it means directly, building arguments from premises to conclusions, aspiring to a clarity that can be judged true or false. Its ideal is a kind of conceptual purity, where the medium is a vehicle for the message of the argument. Literature, by contrast, revels in the opacity and multiplicity of its medium. It shows rather than tells, dwelling in the particular, the metaphorical, and the ambiguous. Its truths are not propositional but experiential, revealed through narrative, character, and imagery. Its meaning is inseparable from its medium.

From a Zhuangzian perspective, however, this tidy division is a kind of elaborate joke. For if the *Zhuangzi* is philosophy, it is a philosophy that constantly mocks the idea of direct, dogmatic pronouncement; as Levi notes, it "circumvents the pitfalls of dogmatic pronouncement," since it chooses instead to speak through "fables and baroque dramaturgies"(Levi 2010, p. 11). It is a philosophy that sings, jokes, and performs itself. And if it is literature, it is a literature of immense and unsettling intellectual rigor, one whose familiar myths and metaphors encompassing useless trees, a dream of the butterfly, and even Cook Ding carving the ox as prelude to his enlightening a king, function with the precision of a philosophical argument, albeit one that refuses to argue in any conventional sense.

Perhaps, then, the *Zhuangzi* is not one or the other, but a meditation on the failure of the distinction itself. It suggests that the deepest insights might not be statable as propositions, but only performable through narrative. In this view, the literary modes and the recurring characters both set in "discontinuous and polyphonic" forms with their "effects of echoes and correspondences" are not an ornamentation of the thought, for they are the thought, and the music is the meaning. The text thus invites us not to decide whether it is philosophy or literature, but to recognize that for it to be the kind of philosophy it is, it must become literature. And to be the kind of literature it is, it must be philosophical through and through.

The title of *ZZ* 2, "Qiwulun" 齊物論, already establishes itself within a house of mirrors that extends throughout the entire text. The phrase can be read in two ways: as "Discourse on Making Things Equal" (*qiwu lun*), or as "Equalizing Things and Discourses" (*qi wulun*). The difference is slight but significant: it is a single pause that shifts the entire weight of meaning. In the first reading, we have a treatise about equality; in the second, equality becomes an activity that swallows up the idea of treatise itself. The title thus performs what it names, refusing to settle into a single, stable position.

The figure who speaks in the chapter's opening section is no more stable than the title he introduces. He appears in the *Zhuangzi* under slightly modified names, and in each

appearance he plays a different role: cave-dweller, counsellor to kings, enlightened meditation master, affectionate father, lone wanderer of remote hills, and philosopher-sage. He is, in other words, a single name dispersed across multiple landscapes, a recurring character whose recurrence only deepens the question of who he really is.

Approaching this figure, we can once more turn to Levi, who writes of the *Zhuangzi*'s recurrent characters:

> Not only does the *Zhuangzi* express itself through the mouths of allegorical or historical figures, but these figures recur from one chapter to another, even from one passage to another within the same chapter, performing variations around a theme that is their own, here suggested or sketched as in a prelude, here fully developed, there amplified, there modulated into a different register, there still blended with other motifs to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Thus, not only is the fabric of a philosophy woven, one which, like a ray of light diffracted by a prism, is nonetheless coherent even when exposed in a fragmentary and discontinuous mode, but also, through the intermittent appearances of the figures to whom the author lends his voice—or rather his voices, for they are sometimes discordant—and their occasional encounters, a network of worldly relations is tied together across the pages. (Levi 2010, p. 12)

Levi's description of recurring characters "performing variations around a theme that is their own" finds no better illustration than the particular figure who appears in this network under different names given in bare outline in the following passages:

ZZ 2.1: Nanguo Ziqi 南郭子綦
ZZ 4.5: Nanbo Ziqi 南伯子綦
ZZ 6.4: Nanbo Zikui 南伯子葵
ZZ 22.6: Dongguo Zi東郭子
ZZ 24.8: Nanbo Ziqi 南伯子綦
ZZ 24.10: Ziqi 子綦
ZZ 27.4: Dongguo Ziqi 東郭子綦
ZZ 28.10: Sima Ziqi 司馬子綦

The traditional commentaries and modern scholars sometimes recognize some of these figures as one and the same but sometimes they recognize some of them as referring to different figures. *ZZ* 2.1 recognizes him as Nanguo Ziqi 南郭子綦 (Ziqi of the Southern Wall), and *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (hereafter *ZZJS*) notes that "people in ancient times were simple and sincere, often using their place of residence as their title. Because he lived south of the outer wall, he was called Nanguo (South Wall)" (*ZZJS*, p. 43). In *ZZ* 27.4, he is recognized as Dongguo Ziqi 東郭子綦 (Ziqi of the Northen Wall), about whom *ZZJS* comments that at that time, "he lived east of the outer wall, hence he was called Dongguo; this is the same Nanguo Ziqi from the chapter "Qiwulun" (*ZZJS*, p. 956). *ZZ* 4.5 and *ZZ* 24.10 both recognize him as Nanbo Ziqi 南伯子綦 (Ziqi the Southern Elder), and *ZZJS* comments that "this is the same Nanguo Ziqi from Qiwulun" (*ZZJS*, p. 848), while *ZZ* 6.4 recognizes him as Nanbo Zikui 南伯子葵 (Zikui of the Southern Wall), and about these uses of Nanbo, the *ZZJS* comments that "Bo means elder. His Dao is most honored; he is fit to be an elder among beings, hence called Bo—this is Nanguo Ziqi" (*ZZJS*, p. 176), which emphasizes the reverence due to his exalted status as a master. This figure is mentioned once again in *ZZ* 24.10, where he is simply Ziqi 子綦, about whom the *ZZJS* comments, "Ziqi was the Marshal of Chu named Ziqi" (*ZZJS*, p. 856), which directly identifies him with Nanguo Ziqi from *ZZ* 2.1, about whom *ZZJS* also states, "Nanguo Ziqi was a half-brother of King Zhao of Chu and served as Marshal under King Zhuang of Chu. His courtesy name was Ziqi" (*ZZJS*, p. 43). And where the commentary to *ZZ* 2.1 recognizes Nanguo Ziqi as Mar-

shal (司馬), *ZZ* 28.10 confirms this identification of him by recognizing him as Sima Ziqi (Marshal Ziqi). Unlike the versions of his name that recognize him as Ziqi (preceded either by Nanbo, Nanguo, Dongguo, or Sima), *ZZ* 6.4 calls him Nanbo Zikui, about which *ZZJS* comments, "*Kui* 綦 should be an error for the character *qi* 綦, just like Nanguo Ziqi" (*ZZJS*, p. 252).

Modern scholars have pursued the implications further. Christoph Harbsmeier and John Williams note, "A Nanguo Ziqi appears in *ZZ* 2.1 and a Nanbo Ziqi appears in *ZZ* 4.5. Cheng Xuanying tells us this Nanbo Ziqi is none other than Nanguo Ziqi, who in turn is none other than the present Nanbo Zikui" (Harbsmeier and Williams 2024, p. 173). Kuang-ming Wu writes that "Nanguo literally means 'the southern city wall' or 'to the south of the city wall' where the commoners gather. *Zi* is 'man' or 'Mr.' *Qi* is either 'very, variegated, or dark grey (or red)' or 'basis, root.' Thus, Nanguo Ziqi can mean Mr. Basics at the common throng of the plebeians, amidst their hustle and bustle. He is the man living at the unrecognized southern city wall and embodying the basic Dao" (Kuang-ming Wu 1990, p. 182).

More thematically, Wu also writes, "In any case, the name Nanguo Ziqi starts the second chapter, and this name is perhaps not without significance. Usually the name is taken to refer to some historical personage whom Zhuangzi admired. But we would not be surprised if the name *also* alluded to something symbolic" (Kuang-ming Wu 1990, p. 181). For his part, Guo Meihua writes, "In *ZZ* 2.1, Nanbo Zikui appears as Nanguo Ziqi; in *ZZ* 4.5, he appears as Nanbo Zikui; they are the same person… The stories of Nanguo Ziqi, Nanbo Zikui, and Nanbo Ziqi and their differential narratives illustrate, on one hand, the flexibility of Zhuangzi's stories, and on the other, the diversity and concreteness of the Dao itself" (M. Guo 2025, pp. 3–4).

The name-wandering extends even to Ziqi's disciple. In *ZZ* 2.1, he is introduced as Yancheng Ziyou 顏成子游 (Countenance-Completed Master Banner), then addressed simply as Ziyou. In *ZZ* 24.8, he appears as Yanchengzi 顏成子, while in *ZZ* 27.4 he is once again Yancheng Ziyou. The same flexibility that governs Ziqi's name governs his disciple's.

Guo Meihua's emphasis on the "flexibility" of these stories points toward a deeper question: What are we to make of this figure who is and is not the same, who recurs only to differ from himself? Graziani's description of the *Zhuangzi*'s readerly experience offers a clue:

> From story to story, from chapter to chapter, some questions are resumed, motifs echoed, enquiries reiterated with minor variations […] We can see a character experiencing different frames of mind, suddenly becoming mute, disappearing and then reappearing later on in another story, picking up the remark that silenced him […] In this way, the recurring characters in the *Zhuangzi* cannot be locked into a single role for purposes of proof, edification or persuasion. Their rhetorical and didactic functions change at will. (Graziani 2021, p. 79)

The commentaries mostly agree that Ziqi is one; the narratives insist that he is many. Perhaps this is the point. The *Zhuangzi* does not offer us characters with fixed identities, but names that wander through stories, gathering new meanings with each encounter. Nanbo Ziqi—or whatever we call him—is less a person than a perspective, a position from which something can be seen. And what is seen depends on where and when we find him.

For all the characters of the *Zhuangzi*, as Levi observes, "the distinction between real characters and personified abstractions is moreover not always easy to make" (Levi 2010, p. 21). Can Nanbo Ziqi be considered a historical personage? The name itself suggests a preliminary separation. The figure appears as Ziqi or Sima Ziqi in *ZZ* 24.10 and 28.10, but as Nanguo Ziqi, Nanbo Ziqi, or Nanbo Zikui elsewhere. This variation may point to

different sources or different functions, but it may simply be the text's way of keeping the figure fluid.

Oddly, a *ZZJS* comment in *ZZ* 2.1 says that "Nanguo Ziqi was a half-brother of King Zhao of Chu and served as Marshal under King Zhuang of Chu" (*ZZJS*, p. 43). This comment, which appears in no other record, is attributed to Cheng Xuanying, who lived in the seventh century, around one thousand years after Zhuangzi, who is generally placed in the fourth century BC. However, the chronology is impossible. King Zhuang reigned from 613–591 BCE; King Zhao from 515–489 BCE. A half-brother of Zhao, born in the late sixth century, could not have served as Marshal under King Zhuang a century earlier. Cheng Xuanying's comment, appearing a millennium after Zhuangzi, either conflates two distinct figures or simply errs.

Further, there are no surviving historical records of a Sima Ziqi who served King Zhuang of Chu. So we can lay this comment aside as a mistaken attribution made by Cheng Xuanying. It appears as a classic example of conflating separate figures into one, most likely because he was trying to identify shadowy philosophical figures with known historical ones to ground abstract teachings in real history. Such conflations tend to occur when different figures have similar titles or when the records or traditions about them are corrupted. Cheng Xuanying's error is understandable; commentators across traditions seek to anchor texts in history. But Zhuangzi himself seems to have relished his freedom to conflate different characters for different philosophical, historical, and allegorical impacts.

However, solid historical records identify a Sima Ziqi who was the younger half-brother of King Zhao of Chu. According to these sources, he was a significant figure in the state of Chu during the reign of King Zhao and into the early years of King Hui. He was a loyal minister and member of the royal family, whose actions during times of crisis and transition are clearly described. He held the title of Sima, Marshal or Minister of War, and he several times demonstrated immense loyalty and courage, once even disguising himself as the king to offer himself for execution to the attacking forces of Wu. He was a key strategist for the succession of King Hui, the son of Zhao, thus ensuring a stable transition of power. He was killed in 479 BCE while defending the throne against a coup attempt. The events of Sima Ziqi's life are clearly recounted in historical sources ranging from *Shuoyuan* 說苑 (Garden of Stories) and *Xinshu* 新書 (New Writings) to the *Shiji* 史記 (Historical Annals).

In spite of Cheng Xuanying's identification of Nanguo Ziqi (aka Nanbo Ziqi) with Sima Ziqi, the two figures remain widely separated. The only records of Nanbo Ziqi are from the *Zhuangzi*, which is famous for its wide-ranging literary acts of conflation. In *ZZ* 24.8, Nanbo Ziqi says that he served Tian He 田禾, whose posthumous title was Duke Tai of Qi (齐太公). According to the *Shiji*, he was de facto ruler of Qi from 404 BCE to 386 BCE, and, after being formally recognized as Marquis of Qi 齐侯 by King An of Zhou in 386 BCE, ruled de jure for two years until his death. These records give us a solid time frame for Nanbo Ziqi's life, if in fact he was a historical figure, which is certainly unclear.

The situation of Nanbo Ziqi in the *Zhuangzi* raises an important question because it touches on the boundary between historical biography and literary invention. Thus, in the "real world," it is unlikely that Nanbo Ziqi was historical, but in the "*petit monde*" of the *Zhuangzi* (to borrow a phrase from Levi), this makes Nanbo Ziqi and Zhuangzi, who supposedly lived a generation or two after Nanbo Ziqi's timeline, practically neighbors. Many commentators believe Zhuangzi was reaching back into history or myth to find a "great ancestral master" (大宗師 *dazongshi*, the title of *ZZ* 6) figure to deliver his most profound teachings, where he uses older figures like Nanbo Ziqi to give his radical ideas ancestral authority. Zhuangzi is famous for tossing linear time and historical accuracy out the window in favor of philosophical "truth." Nanguo Ziqi is presented in *ZZ* 2.1 as arguably

the single-most advanced practitioner of the *zuowang* 坐忘 ("sitting in forgetfulness") spiritual practice that Zhuangzi consistently glorifies, demonstrating his deep union with the Dao. Even if he is a historical character, he lived too early to have ever met Zhuangzi, yet Zhuangzi writes about Ziqi with such intimacy that he is often viewed as a literary alter-ego for Zhuangzi himself. This is especially poignant when Ziqi says, "I lost myself" (吾丧我 *wu sang wo*), which is the core of Zhuangzi's own philosophy.

This leaves us with two Ziqis: a Chu Ziqi from the fifth century and a Qi Ziqi from the fourth century. Does the *Zhuangzi* mean to conflate these two figures, or are they separate names wandering through Zhuangzi's mytho-philosophical landscape? What do we gain by marking a relation between them, or what do we lose by doing so? If there is a connection, does Zhuangzi mean it to be historical, or textual with unconcern with historical consistency, or thematic by portraying powerful encounters about the meeting of political power and spiritual insight, regardless of state affiliation? Given what has already been established about the text's nature as "philosophical fiction," the most Zhuangzian reading is the third: consistency of historical fact is less important than consistency of philosophical resonance. On this point, Harbsmeier and Williams remark that "it seems clear that implicitly Zhuangzi is not being historically serious" (Harbsmeier and Williams 2024, p. 173), and they write, "For commentators like Cheng Xuanying a writer had to be ultimately serious to be taken seriously. But Zhuang Zhou was not serious. Zhuang Zhou was convinced that man is quintessentially, irremediably, and indeed very seriously *deluded*. He had no room for religious or dogmatic conviction" (Harbsmeier and Williams 2024, p. 22). Nor, for that matter, historical conviction.

Moving into the accounts of Ziqi in the *Zhuangzi*, here is the tension that we have to work with. The *ZZJS* commentary, which I have established as my primary textual source, gives us specific historical claims about Ziqi's identity. However, the *Zhuangzi* text itself, in the Tian He passage from *ZZ* 24.8, presents a figure whose chronological placement cannot be reconciled with those claims. Yet, the house of mirrors that is the *Zhuangzi*, with its musical variations embedded throughout its philosophical fiction, provides the interpretive apparatus for understanding why this tension is not a flaw in the text's historical sense but a clue to its philosophical method. This has led some commentators to propose emendations or to question identifications. But within the framework of "philosophical fiction" the inconsistency is less a problem than a provocation, since the text refuses to let its figures be pinned down by historical chronology any more than by fixed rhetorical roles.

And so the commentarial tradition, seeking to anchor the figure in history, tells us that Nanguo Ziqi was half-brother to King Zhao of Chu and Marshal under King Zhuang, but when the same figure appears in *ZZ* 24.8 speaking of Tian He (a Qi ruler who came to power two centuries after the Chu kings reigned), the text quietly subverts any attempt at biographical coherence. The figure who "cannot be locked into a single role" (Graziani 2021, p. 5) also cannot be locked into a single century. His appearances trace not a life but a constellation of meanings wandering in textual space and time. Thus, the Ziqi episodes should not be read as discrete philosophical vignettes but as a comprehensive existential arc unfolding a life of the spirit across textual time.

Ziqi is not alone in this. The *Zhuangzi* is populated by figures who appear, disappear, and reappear across its landscapes, each time playing a different role. Jean Levi's tally of character frequencies reveals the sheer scale of this practice: Confucius appears forty-three times, Zhuangzi himself twenty-seven times, Laozi fifteen times, Huizi and Yan Hui ten times each.[3] Confucius shifts between confused interlocutor, unwitting sage, and earnest student. Laozi appears as a teacher, a legend, and a voice of authority. The Yellow Emperor cycles through roles as seeker, ruler, and emblem of lost perfection. Yan Hui, the Confu-

cian paragon, becomes in the *Zhuangzi* the student who learns to sit and forget.[4] Hui Shi, Zhuangzi's philosophical sparring partner, appears now as foil, now as earnest questioner. Even the author himself, appearing twenty-seven times under his two names (Zhuangzi and Zhuang Zhou), enters his own text, where he dreams of butterflies, refuses high office, and wanders in Diaoling Park. Each of these figures, like Ziqi, is a name that wanders. None is locked into a single role; each gathers new meanings with each appearance.

Scholars have long recognized this feature of the *Zhuangzi*. Gao Junhe, for instance, divides the text's characters into "characters of heavy words" (historical figures re-purposed for philosophical ends) and "characters of entrusted words" (fictional or allegorical figures created to embody ideas) (Gao 2005). What makes Ziqi special, within this broader pattern, is the sheer range of his wanderings: he is seeker and sage, minister and father, cave-dweller and constellation, a name that passes through eight variations. Yet the pattern is the same: the *Zhuangzi* does not teach through fixed doctrines delivered by fixed mouths; rather, it teaches through the recurrence of figures, through the variations they perform across the text. To read it is to follow not arguments but lives.

The arc of his journey traces the emergence of a self no longer held in place by its counterpart. This study follows that arc across four movements: as a seeker in the cave (*yangsheng* and *zuowang*), as a minister at the court (power and refusal), as a sage who speaks the words "I lost myself" (self and counterpart), and finally as a figure who dissolves into wandering, each a variation on the theme of self-loss.

2. The Seeker: *Yangsheng* and *Zuowang*, *Zhuangzi* 6.4

In *ZZ* 24.8, Nanbo Ziqi reminisces on his younger days, and he says, "I once lived in a mountain cave" (吾嘗居山穴之中矣 *wu chang ju shanxue zhi zhong yi*) (*ZZJS*, p. 848). It is to this period of his life that we find him in his first Zhuangzian landscape, where he is recognized as Nanbo Zikui. He is perceived as a seeker intent on finding a deeper experience than what he had previously encountered in his life, for what other reason would he have ventured into the mountains, far from the bustle of urban existence, in search of cave-dwellers who have mastered the Dao?

There we witness his encounter with Nü Yu 女偊, herself an advanced practitioner living in a mountain cave. As Levi writes:

> Nanbo Zikui is not the interested simpleton, as the anecdote might suggest at first glance. Even if he has not yet attained perfect authenticity, certain stories have made us understand that he possesses experience of the Dao […] Nanbo Zikui is in search of esoteric arts. He attempts to pry the secret from Nü Yu so that she might reveal to him the secret that allows her, at a hundred years old, to keep a childlike face. (Levi 2010, p. 298)

Yet Nü Yu, a great master of "nourishing life" (養生 *yangsheng*), ultimately articulates a vision of the Dao that her own practice can only gesture toward.

The unique Chinese term for what lies at the root of this deeper experience of existence is Dao, and it is with an opening prelude that the text invokes it through language that circles around it, never pinning it down. Each subsequent phrase creates a deepening layer of its presence, gesturing toward what cannot be said. The proliferation of negations (無為 *wuwei*, 無形 *wuxing*, 不可受 *bu ke shou*, 不可見 *bu ke jian*) and transcendences (不為高 *bu wei gao*, 不為深 *bu wei shen*, 不為久 *bu wei jiu*, 不為老 *bu wei lao*) points beyond itself, yet every assertion is immediately qualified, and every positive is shadowed by a negative. The passage itself reads:

> The Dao is real and trustworthy yet is without intention and without form. It can be transmitted but not possessed; it can be attained but not demonstrated. It is

> its own source and its own root. Before Heaven and Earth existed, it was already primordially, enduringly present. It gives numinosity to spirits and divinity to gods; it gives birth to Heaven and Earth. It is above the Supreme Polarity yet is not high; it is beneath the Six Extremities yet is not deep. Born before Heaven and Earth, it is not old; it is more ancient than the highest antiquity, yet it is not aged. (*ZZJS*, pp. 246–47)

The text opens with an affirmation of the real existence of the Dao, even though it is not amenable to normal human experience. After establishing that the Dao is its own source, existing before Heaven and Earth, the text describes its relation to the cosmos: it is both the source of all spiritual beings since even spirits and gods derive their power from it and the source of the world itself, because Heaven and Earth are born from it. And yet it transcends all spatial categories: it is "above" the highest yet not high, "beneath" the lowest yet not deep. This passage takes the language of cosmology (太極 *taiji*, 六極 *liuji*) and applies it to the Dao only to show that it exceeds such categories entirely. The point is not that the Dao is located somewhere, but that spatial language cannot capture it. "Above" and "beneath" are approximations that the Dao immediately exceeds. It cannot be located in space, because it is itself the ground of space.

In addition to invoking the Dao, this passage performs multiple other functions in service of Nanbo Zikui's journey as a seeker. The first is that it foreshadows his progress from seeker to sage, culminating in his famous words from *ZZ* 2.1: "I lost myself" (*ZZJS*, p. 45). This does not describe a knowledge of the Dao that the above invocation insists is beyond human capacity, but rather its embodiment in body and spirit. The one who has lost himself is precisely one who no longer measures himself against high and low, deep and shallow. He will attain what cannot be seen, become what is its own source, and enter into that which is beyond time. There he will experience the ultimate freedom of "free and easy wandering" (逍遙遊 *xiaoyaoyou*), the very title of *ZZ* 1.

Simultaneously, the evocation of the Dao points directly to Nanbo Zikui's encounter with Nü Yu, which centers on the paradox of its transmissibility: "It can be transmitted but not possessed; it can be attained but not demonstrated" (可傳而不可受 *ke chuan er bu ke shou*, 可得而不可見 *ke de er bu ke jian*). If the Dao cannot be possessed or demonstrated, what does it mean to "attain" it?

The prelude answers this question not with a definition but with a demonstration, serving as an essential bridge between the abstract invocation of the Dao and its concrete manifestation across the full spectrum of beings. It turns to a litany of figures who have each, in their own way, "attained it" (得之 *de zhi*): cosmic forces, primeval entities, nature spirits, legendary rulers, gods and goddesses, sages, and historical personages. The list is deliberately heterogeneous, moving from the cosmological to the mythological to the historical, to show that the Dao is not limited to any domain. And yet, name after name, all owe their existence and power to the Dao.

> Xiwei attained it and lifted up Heaven and Earth. Fuxi attained it and mastered the Breath Mother. The Big Dipper attained it and has never wavered. The Sun and Moon attained it and have never ceased. Kanpi attained it and made his home at Kunlun. Fengyi attained it and roamed the great rivers. Jianwu attained it and dwelt on Mount Tai. The Yellow Emperor attained it and ascended to the cloudy heavens. Zhuanxu attained it and abided in the Dark Palace. Yuqiang attained it and stood at the North Pole. The Queen Mother of the West attained it and took her seat at Shaoguang—none knows her beginning, none knows her end. Pengzu attained it and lived from the time of Youyu down to the Five Hegemons. Fu Yue attained it and became minister to Wuding, ruling all under

> Heaven, then mounted the Eastern Spoke, rode the Tail and Winnowing Basket stars, and took his place among the constellations. (*ZZJS*, p. 247)

What unites this seemingly random assembly of cosmic forces, nature spirits, culture heroes, gods, sages, and ministers is not what they are, but what they did with what they attained. Each attainment is followed by a distinctive manifestation: Xiwei lifts, Fuxi masters, the Dipper steadies, the Sun and Moon cycle, Kanpi dwells, Fengyi roams, Jianwu abides, the Yellow Emperor ascends, Zhuanxu rules the Dark Palace, Yuqiang stands at the pole, the Queen Mother sits beyond time, Pengzu endures, and Fu Yue serves and then becomes a star.

The text presents a clear pattern: attaining the Dao does not make beings alike; it makes them more fully what they are. These models of attaining the Dao do not offer a mold into which all must fit, but a source from which each draws their distinctive power: Xiwei does not become Fuxi, nor does the Big Dipper become the Sun and Moon. Each, having attained it, becomes itself more completely.

This will be the essential lesson for Nanbo Zikui as he sits in the mountain cave listening to Nü Yu. He has come seeking the Dao, perhaps expecting that attaining it will transform him into something he is not, for example a sage like the Yellow Emperor or an immortal like the Queen Mother. But the litany says something otherwise. Attaining the Dao will not make him like them; rather, it will make him fully himself as the one who will one day say "I lost myself." His attainment, if it comes, will be unique. This is why the paradox holds: the Dao can be attained but not demonstrated because each attainment is singular. No one can show another what attaining the Dao looks like, because for each it looks different. Nü Yu cannot hand Ziqi her attainment; she can only guide him toward his own.

The Queen Mother of the West has received the most elaborate treatment: "none knows her beginning, none knows her end." She who has attained the Dao becomes herself mysterious, timeless, and beyond measure. Nü Yu is her double, the same mystery, now seated before Ziqi in a mountain cave, her complexion that of a child. The cosmic mystery that is the Queen Mother becomes the present mystery that is Nü Yu, and the seeker suddenly finds himself in the direct presence of what the litany placed at an untouchable distance.

> Nanbo Zikui asked Nü Yu, "Your years are advanced, yet your complexion is that of a child, how can this be?"
>
> "I have heard the Dao."
>
> Nanbo Zikui said, "Can the Dao be learned?"
>
> "No! Impossible! You are not the person for it." (*ZZJS*, pp. 251–52)

The dialogue that follows introduces a third figure, Bu Liang Yi 卜梁倚, and with him a distinction that illuminates why Zikui is turned away. Nü Yu explains:

> Bu Liang Yi has the substance of a sage but lacks the teachings of a sage. I have the teaching of a sage but lack the substance of a sage. I wished to teach him with it, wondering if he might indeed become a sage. But it was not so: when imparting the teaching of a sage to one who has the substance of a sage, it is easy. I held fast to it as I imparted it to him. (*ZZJS*, p. 252)

The terms here are carefully chosen. "Substance" (才 *cai*) refers to innate capacity, the native equipment that makes sagehood possible. "Teaching" (道 *dao*) refers to the transmitted practices that must be cultivated. Bu Liang Yi has one, Nü Yu has the other. Neither alone is complete.

Transmission requires her ongoing presence, which is why she must "hold fast" (守 *shou*) to the teaching as she imparts it. The difficulty lies not in the teaching itself, since when it meets substance, it is easy, but in the fact that teacher and student each possess only one side of what sagehood requires.

Cheng Xuanying comments that Nü Yu and Bu Liang Yi represent complementary excellences; he writes: "Emptied heart and congealed stillness constitute the teaching; applied knowledge and sharp perception constitute the substance. This means: Bu Liang Yi has the outward application that constitutes the substance but not the inward stillness that constitutes the teaching; Nü Yu has the emptied stillness that constitutes the teaching but not the sharp perception that constitutes the substance. Each occupies one side; neither is complete" (*ZZJS*, p. 253).

Nü Yu represents a complete and legitimate tradition, Yangsheng Daoism (Michael 2015, 2022), and the text goes out of its way to establish her credentials: her childlike complexion at an advanced age, her command of lineages, and her successful transmission to Bu Liang Yi. She is, in every measurable way, a master. Thus, her "lack" (無 *wu*) is structural, not personal. She lacks substance only in the sense that she represents one pole of a complementary pair. The allegory requires that teaching and substance be distributed across two figures so that their meeting can produce the sage. This is not a deficiency in her but a condition of the drama. Cheng's phrase, "each occupies one side" (各滯一边 *ge dai yi bian*), carries no judgment; it simply describes how the allegory is constructed.

And this, finally, illuminates why Ziqi is rejected. He comes to Nü Yu asking whether the Dao can be learned, but he comes as himself alone. Unlike Bu Liang Yi, he brings no substance to receive her teaching. The *yangsheng* path requires both; Ziqi has only himself. Yet this lack is also his opening, because the *zuowang* path demands not the matching of substance and teaching but their dissolution. Ziqi must become what he seeks.

What follows is her recounting of the transmission to Bu Liang Yi: a seven-stage progression that Nü Yu guides as she "holds fast" to the teaching:

> After three days, he could put the world outside himself…
>
> After seven days, he could put things outside himself…
>
> After nine days, he could put life outside himself.
>
> Having put life outside himself, he achieved the dawn clarity.
>
> Having achieved dawn clarity, he saw the Unique.
>
> Having seen the Unique, he was able to void past and present.
>
> Having voided past and present, he entered the state beyond death and life. (*ZZJS*, p. 252)

Each stage strips away another layer of attachment: first the external world, then the things that populate it, then life itself. From this negation comes the "dawn clarity" (朝徹 *chao che*) and "the vision of the Unique" (見獨 *jian du*), and from this vision comes "the voiding of past and present" (無古今 *wu gu jin*) and "entrance into the state beyond death and life" (入於不死不生 *ru yu bu si bu sheng*). The progression is rigorous and linear, each step preparing the next.

This encounter between Ziqi and Nü Yu is one of the most complex of the entire *Zhuangzi*. With its multiple tensions and modulated motifs, it reveals not just a meeting of two individuals but a convergence of two orientations within early Daoism: *yangsheng* and *zuowang*. As the commanding but invisible presence of Zhuangzi stands behind Ziqi, so does that of Laozi stand behind Nü Yu. Lai Hsi-san writes, "The pre-Qin Daoists Laozi and Zhuangzi […] stand in a relation of inheritance and creative continuation, the latter

building upon the former. Zhuangzi inherits and expands Daoist philosophy through the crosswise unfolding of Laozi's poetic wisdom" (Lai 2010, p. 67).

Laozi's text, the *Daodejing*, is terse and enigmatic; Zhuangzi takes his core philosophy and opens it out into narrative, dialogue, and humor. Lai's notion of "crosswise unfolding" (十字打開 *shi zi da kai*) captures this dimensionality: the image is of something folded or compressed, namely the *Daodejing*'s dense aphorisms, opened out and unfolded like a fan. "Crosswise" suggests that Laozi's vertical depth becomes Zhuangzi's horizontal expanse.

Both thinkers share what might be called a phenomenological orientation. For them, the Dao is something lived and experienced, located at the pivot where non-existence and existence arise together within the manifest world. Later Daoist metaphysics, both religious and philosophical, would reimagine it as a substantive entity residing above the world, rather than a way lived within it (Michael 2023). Given their shared phenomenology, Laozi and Zhuangzi diverge in practice and goal: Laozi's highest aspiration is bodily longevity attained through *yangsheng*, whereas Zhuangzi's is a spiritual free and easy wandering attained through *zuowang*. [5]

To achieve bodily long life, Laozi advocated certain practices that came to be collectively known as *yangsheng*. These are presented abstractly throughout the *Daodejing* but point toward concrete techniques. *DDJ* 22, for example, describes physical postures: "Bending leads to intactness; twisting leads to straightness; emptying leads to fullness" (Zhu 2000, p. 91). Such movements involve guiding and stretching the body in ways that circulate breath. *DDJ* 10 highlights this breath work: "Focusing the breath and making it soft—can you make it like that of an infant?" (Zhu 2000, p. 39). The infant image is central, embodied in Nü Yu's childlike complexion. *DDJ* 28 speaks of one whose "constant circulation does not waver, and he returns to the state of an infant" (Zhu 2000, p. 112), and *DDJ* 55 adds, "One who contains the fullness of circulation is like a newborn infant" (Zhu 2000, p. 218). The goal of *yangsheng*, then, is to recover this infant-like condition through disciplined practice.

In contrast, Zhuangzi's free and easy wandering attained by sitting in forgetfulness is not based in specific bodily techniques but in emptying the mind. In *ZZ* 6.9, following the encounter with Nü Yu, Yan Hui describes this state to Confucius: "I let my limbs and body fall away, I dismiss my sight and hearing, I part with form and abandon knowledge, and then I become identical with the Great Thoroughfare. This is called sitting in forgetfulness (*zuowang*)" (*ZZJS*, p. 284). Where *yangsheng* cultivates and preserves, *zuowang* releases and forgets.

Zhuangzi was aware of Laozi's *yangsheng*, but he subordinated it to his own *zuowang*. *ZZ* 15 directly addresses such practices:

> Exhaling and inhaling, breathing out the old and drawing in the new, stretching like a bear and extending like a bird, all for the sake of longevity alone. These are the practices of the "guided-stretching" scholars, the "nourishing-the-body" men, the practices that the long-lived Pengzu prized. (*ZZJS*, p. 535)

The passage dismisses these effortful techniques (breath circulation, animal imitations, and guided stretches) as mere longevity pursuits of the sort prized by figures like Pengzu. This is the tradition Nü Yu embodies, evident in her childlike complexion, her advanced age, and her command of life-nourishing arts. Yet for Zhuangzi, this is not the true freedom of the Dao.

But Zhuangzi does not simply reject *yangsheng*, he appropriates the term and redirects it within a broader *zuowang* framework, as in *ZZ* 3 whose title is "The Primacy of Nourishing Life" (養生主 *yangsheng zhu*). The *yangsheng* techniques based on breath are repurposed and made subordinate to something else. As Rohan Sikri observes, "The *Zhuangzi* extends its model of 'nourishing life' to include practices identified with the 'empty' (虛 *xu*)

sage, whose method of division is constantly curtailed in scope by an activity described as *zuowang* 坐忘, or 'sitting and forgetting'" (Sikri 2022, p. 707). Zhuangzi does not erase *yangsheng*; rather, he takes it up and surpasses it. The empty sage does not reject the body; he simply no longer clings to it. This is what Ziqi will one day embody: not the rejection of life, but the loss of the self that held it.

Emerging from a shared phenomenology of the Dao, Laozi and Zhuangzi advocate separate practices that lead to different ends: bodily longevity versus spiritual freedom (Michael 2024). Ziqi's encounter with Nü Yu is staged as a meeting between these two regimes. The seeker who will become a paragon of *zuowang* comes face to face with an embodiment of *yangsheng*.

The *ZZJS* preserves two commentarial voices that frame this encounter differently. Guo Xiang, the Daoist philosopher who read Zhuangzi through the lens of "self-so-ness" (自然 *ziran*), offers an abstract reading with no reference to any specific practice. He writes simply: "Having heard the Dao, she lets herself live naturally; therefore, her vital energy and complexion remain whole" (*ZZJS*, p. 252). For him, hearing the Dao means ceasing to interfere, and the result follows of itself.

Cheng Xuanying, the Daoist priest, reads through a different lens entirely; he writes:

> Nü Yu was a person of ancient times who embraced the Dao… Having long heard the Ultimate Dao, she was able to regulate and nourish life. Though advanced in years, she still had the complexion of a child, her bloom forever fixed… She answered: "Because I have heard the Dao, I am able to preserve life whole. Therefore, I revert to youth and return to childhood. My complexion is that of a young child." (*ZZJS*, p. 252)

Cheng reads Nü Yu not as a philosophical abstraction but as a practitioner who has mastered the arts that preserve life and reverse age. In his voice, the commentarial tradition itself recognizes that Nü Yu belongs to the *yangsheng* world of Laozi. He makes explicit what Guo leaves implicit, and his vocabulary reveals his orientation through terms such as "preserve life whole" (全生 *quan sheng*), "revert to youth" 反少還童 *fan shao yuan dong*), "regulate and nourish life" (攝衛養生 *she wei yangsheng*). This is the language of *yangsheng*: bodily cultivation, longevity, and the infant ideal celebrated in the *Daodejing*. Where Guo reads Nü Yu philosophically, Cheng reads her as a living embodiment of the Laozi tradition. These two commentaries stage, in miniature, the tension that this encounter enacts. Guo's abstract reading moves toward Zhuangzi's own philosophical register; Cheng's reading, grounded in *yangsheng*, places Nü Yu squarely in the world of Laozi with its own integrity, its own practices, and its own goals. Ziqi, who will come to embody *zuowang*, approaches but cannot enter this world; his path, it seems, lies elsewhere.

Ziqi's rejection is a recognition that *yangsheng* and *zuowang* are different paths with different prerequisites. Nü Yu cannot teach Ziqi not because *yangsheng* is inferior but because Ziqi comes asking the wrong question in the wrong way.[6] He wants to learn the Dao as if it were a technique. The *yangsheng* path can be learned, as evidenced by Bu Liang Yi, who learns it stage by stage. But Ziqi's path, the *zuowang* path of sitting in forgetfulness, requires something else: not learning but unlearning, not acquisition but loss.

The *yangsheng* world of Laozi is complete and legitimate. It offers a genuine path, not merely a steppingstone to something higher like Zhuangzi's free and easy wandering. Nü Yu represents that world. She embodies *yangsheng* through teachings transmitted in lineages that reach back to mythic figures. The *Liexian zhuan* 列仙傳 (Arrayed Biographies of Immortals), for instance, tells of Rong Cheng Gong 容成公, whose "practices were the same as Laozi's" (事與老子同 *shi yu Laozi tong*) (S. Wang 2007, p. 14), because he transmitted them to Laozi himself. And Laozi, according to the *Shenxian zhuan* 列仙傳 (Biographies of

Divine Immortals) "was established by Heaven and Earth as the teacher for ten thousand generations" (乾坤所定萬世之師表 *Qian Kun suo ding wan shi zhi shi biao*) (Ge 1796, 1.7a).

Yet for all this talk of lineages, *yangsheng* has no single founder. Its techniques were woven into the fabric of the cosmos itself. This is attested to by Nü Yu's childlike complexion, her description of the stages of cultivation, and her recital of a lineage that is not historical but cosmically allegorical.

When Nü Yu tells Zikui how she herself attained the transmission, she uses the verb "to hear" (聞 *wen*). This word carries weight across traditions. Confucius said, "If in the morning one hears the Dao, in the evening one may die content" (Yang [1980] 2020, p. 38). Laozi said, "When the highest type of student hears the Dao, he diligently practices it" (Zhu 2000, p. 166). As Li Jinglin notes, "to hear" here means "realize" or "actualize"—to hear the Dao is to embody it (Li 2014, p. 46).

Both Confucians and Daoists take "hearing the Dao" as their goal, but their paths differ: Confucians seek it through study, Daoists through non-intentional action (無為 *wuwei*) and *no-thought* (無思 *wusi*).

The later Confucian tradition would develop this into a doctrine of "the transmission of the Dao" (道統 *daotong*) within a lineage of sages. Wang Yu observes that such transmission "is not about handing over an object" but about one who has realized the Dao awakening another to it (Yu Wang 2023, p. 80). If no suitable person appears, the transmission ceases.

It is this understanding of transmission, not as object but as awakening, that Nü Yu's lineage enacts. Her account moves from the most external forms of transmission to the most inward:

> I heard it from the Son of Deputy Ink. The Son of Deputy Ink heard it from the Grandson of Chanting Recitation. The Grandson of Chanting Recitation heard it from Gazing Clarity. Gazing Clarity heard it from Whispering Agreement. Whispering Agreement heard it from Needing Service. Needing Service heard it from Singing Joy. Singing Joy heard it from Dark Obscurity. Dark Obscurity heard it from Merging Emptiness. Merging Emptiness heard it from Doubtful Beginning. (*ZZJS*, p. 256)

The names trace a progressive interiorization: from written texts (Deputy Ink) and oral recitation (Chanting Recitation) to direct seeing (Gazing Clarity) and wordless assent (Whispering Agreement). From there, the movement passes through active practice (Needing Service) and joyful embodiment (Singing Joy) before entering mysterious depth (Dark Obscurity), union with emptiness (Merging Emptiness), and finally the origin that cannot be named: Doubtful Beginning. This lineage is authenticated not through historical figures but through the progressive interiorization of the Dao itself.

The encounter between Ziqi and Nü Yu is not just between two characters but between two worlds. Ziqi, who will become Zhuangzi's great exemplar of *zuowang*, approaches the *yangsheng* world of Laozi but is rejected. Nü Yu tells him he lacks the "substance" for her teaching, and the Laozi path is thereby closed to him.

But this is Zhuangzi's story, not Laozi's. And for Zhuangzi, rejection is rarely the end. It is often the beginning, a turning point that sends the seeker not away from the Dao but deeper into it. If the cave could not give Ziqi what he sought, perhaps the world outside the cave would. And so, rejected by the immortal, Ziqi leaves the mountain. The text does not show us his descent, but the next time we see him, he is no longer in the cave. He has entered the world. The next phase of his journey will unfold no longer in solitude but in society, where the glance of power and the example of a humble butcher will show him what the cave could not.

3. The Minister: Power and Refusal, *Zhuangzi* 24.8 and 28.10

ZZ 24.8 opens with Nanbo Ziqi leaning on his armrest, looking to the sky, and softly breathing in the posture of sitting in forgetfulness. Next, Yanchengzi 顏成子 enters and sees him, remarking on his transformed state before asking about the possibilities of actually attaining this demonstrated condition of body and mind: "Can the body really be made like withered bone, the mind like dead ashes?" (*ZZJS*, p. 43). This is virtually identical to the opening of *ZZ* 2.1. The echo between the two texts is deliberate, signaling that these are the same Ziqi figures in the same mode of self-forgotten being that is the hallmark of *zuowang* mastery. *ZZ* 2.1 is the chapter that bears the real burden of articulating the self-emptying entailed by sitting in forgetfulness. But its echo in ZZ 24.8, besides establishing a relation of identity between Nanbo Ziqi and Nanguo Ziqi, leads the reader, step by gradual step, into a meditation on the power relations embedded in the civilizing process. Romain Graziani captures the esprit that Ziqi embodied:

> This is what makes the *Zhuangzi* in part a tragic text. Tragic, indeed, to the extent that it lays bare […] the rift that had appeared since the later Spring and Autumn Period (722–481 BCE) between the norms dictated by the political-ritual order and the genuine aspirations of individuals. The accepted cartoon cliché of Zhuangzi portrays him as an apolitical, if not anarchist, thinker, a sublime aesthete, who considers all official responsibility an insufferable burden. His case is more complex than that. […] His political conscience tries to address the question of the necessary evil that is represented by any form of political authority. Power is not bad because it is poorly or perversely enacted, it is evil in its very principle. (Graziani 2021, pp. 4–7)

It is *ZZ* 24.8's sustained exploration of power and visibility that separates it from the pedagogical setting of *ZZ* 2.1. There, Ziqi responds to Yanchengzi's question with a description of sitting in forgetfulness. Here, Ziqi responds: "I once lived in a mountain cave" (*ZZJS*, p. 848). Why does Ziqi respond like this to a question about his current state of "body like withered bone and mind like dead ash"? Possibly it is because all that the writer is doing is identifying Nanbo Ziqi with Nanguo Ziqi, creating a bridge from there to here. Possibly it is because this state cannot be described, but then he actually does describe this state in *ZZ* 2.1. Possibly it is because Ziqi's cave dwelling was the precondition for attaining his current condition, even though that same cave dwelling, in *ZZ* 6.4, resulted only in his failure before Nü Yu. There is one further possibility to consider: by responding with autobiography, Ziqi will trace how he got here, and the cave was just the beginning; Yanchengzi's question is answered by the story. But the cave-dwelling reference serves a narrative function: it positions Ziqi's past within the story he is about to tell, a past he compresses into the autobiography that follows. Yanchengzi's question, far from being ignored, is answered by the entire narrative that follows. The answer to "how?" is not a technique but a life story.

Nanbo Ziqi said: "I once lived in a mountain cave" (*ZZJS*, p. 848). He did not go to Nü Yu's cave in the mountains directly in search of her; he had already committed to pursuing his own spiritual development in solitary existence, in a cave of his own, where his spiritual attainments were already substantial. Still, his request to be accepted as her disciple was rejected, but this was not a judgment on his effort so much as on fit, which nevertheless left a bad taste in his mouth. Then, "at that very time" (當是時也 *dang shi shi ye*) (*ZZJS*, p. 848) arrived the decisive act: he became the target of the glance of power.

We do not know why the ruler Tian He was there. Mountains were favored sites for royal sacrifices, so he may have come to perform a mountain ritual. The *Zhuangzi* often recounts rulers seeking out sages, so that is another possibility. Or he may simply have been surveying his lands. Whatever his purpose, his glance fell on Ziqi, who later tells

Yanchengzi, "Tian He glanced at me once" (田禾一覩我 *Tian He yi du wo*) (*ZZJS*, p. 848). Rejected by the immortal who withholds her teachings, he is elevated by the ruler who confers power without asking.

Ziqi's language emphasizes the simple, immediate, and "single glance." This glance of power reaches, it confers worldly power and transforms its recipient without supplement: it is itself a decisively complete act. Ziqi leaves the cave to enter the court, where "the multitudes of Qi thrice congratulated themselves on it" (齊國之眾三賀之 *Qiguo zhi zhong san he zhi*) (*ZZJS*, p. 848). Here the court, made up of the courtiers, the officials, and the assembled company, self-congratulate for having retained such a figure in its midst. In the end, this says nothing about Ziqi but everything about how power operates: possession, proximity, and prestige.

What follows is his self-diagnosis cast in the stark, transactional language of the marketplace, not as a metaphor but as literal accounting: "I must have been the one to bring it forth, for them to recognize it. I must have put it up for sale, for them to buy it. If I had not possessed it, how could they have come to recognize it? If I were not selling it, how could they have come to buy it?" (*ZZJS*, pp. 848–49).

Ziqi's response unfolds in four parallel movements: two assertions followed by two counterfactuals, each culminating in the eightfold repetition of the pronoun "it" (之 *zhi*). The referent is the same throughout, but what is it? Grammatically, it points to Ziqi himself, yet also to something he has, namely his state or attainment.[7] Ziqi speaks of himself in the third person, as something he "possesses" (有 *you*) (*ZZJS*, p. 849). In Chinese, this ambiguity is natural and productive; in English, a choice is forced.

Yet the shifting between "myself" and "my state" mirrors what actually happens when a person becomes a possession: self and state become indistinguishable. The interior attainment has become the visible commodity, and the tragedy is that his withdrawal to a mountain cave ironically made him more visible and desirable as a prize. By possessing wisdom, virtue, and reputation, he put himself in the position of being "bought" (賣 *mai*) (*ZZJS*, p. 849) by the ruler, precisely what a true sage should avoid. In this economy, to sell the attainment is to sell oneself. The ruler's glance turns the sage into a thing to be known, valued, and bought. To be bought is to be recognized, but recognition here is not understanding; it is acquisition. The court's recognition and purchase were only possible because Ziqi already had something to be recognized, already offered something to be bought. The fault, if there is fault, lies in having it at all.

Ziqi's meditation expresses his agony over his own self-exposure: the glance of power forced him to confront the structure of fame, recognition, and selfhood. In the continuation of this passage, Nanbo Ziqi does not tell of his political career, but *ZZ* 28.10, which turns to Sima Ziqi, in fact does. Here we see the same figure in his worldly role, serving King Zhao of Chu, advising on matters of state and principle while embedded in a world of power and obligation. Different figures by historical reckoning, yet Ziqi himself remains, as Levi would say, a theme that admits endless variations.

In this episode, Ziqi meets his true teacher. Not in a cave, not through years of discipline, but in a brief encounter with a butcher who refuses the king. Graziani situates such figures within Zhuangzi's larger project:

> *Zhuangzi* is the only work of its time to have understood with such lucidity the barriers and inhibitions that exist not only in institutionalized forms of subjection, but also in the way humans (with a few exceptions bearing the name of sages or of "ultimate men"), have become subservient to the diktat of their own conscious mind. Zhuangzi's approach, which challenges so many diverse trends and other doctrines of his time […] is as much an inventive meditation on the political and moral future of the kingdom, on the fate of bodies taken over by the

> political order, as on the chances that a few men might create, amid the human community, a lifestyle that could escape the oppression inherent in any form of social structure. (Graziani 2021, pp. 8–9)

Here is one of those "few men." But is this his story or Sima Ziqi's?

> When King Zhao returned from exile, he sought to reward those who had followed him. A butcher named Yue was among them, but Yue refused reward: "When Your Majesty lost the kingdom, I lost my job as a butcher. Now that you have regained it, I have returned to my job. My emolument is already restored, so what talk of reward?" (*ZZJS*, p. 974)

The king insisted but Yue persisted. The king demanded he be brought for an audience, but Yue declined, citing the laws of Chu, that only those with great merit may appear before the sovereign. Yet he had no such merit; he had only fled, like everyone else, saying: "Now if Your Majesty wishes to disregard the laws and violate the conventions just to grant me an audience, this is not something I would wish to be known throughout the world." (*ZZJS*, p. 974)

Finally, the king turned to Sima Ziqi: "This butcher dwells in humble station yet sets forth principles of the highest order. Offer him the rank of Three Flags" (*ZZJS*, p. 974).

Butcher Yue's response is the heart of the matter:

> "The rank of Three Flags, I know it is more exalted than my butcher's stall. A salary of ten thousand measures, I know it is richer than my butcher's profits. Yet how could I, by coveting rank, cause my lord to acquire a reputation for reckless bestowal? I dare not accept. I wish only to return to my butcher's stall." (*ZZJS*, p. 975)

He did not accept, and so he remained a butcher, free.

Sima Ziqi, the marshal, stands beside King Zhao of Chu and is commanded to offer high office to a butcher who refuses it. He is the instrument of royal power, yet the butcher's refusal exposes the limits of that power. The butcher's "no" is directed at him as recipient, through him as conduit, and past him as irrelevant. Ziqi encounters a man whom power cannot compel, where power finds its limit. As the marshal obeys the butcher declines, and the king's will is thwarted by a man who prefers his stall. The butcher is not rejecting a bad offer; he is rejecting the very structure that makes the offer possible.

This is Ziqi's teacher: a man who understands that to accept is to be possessed, that to be rewarded is to be bought, and that the economy of merit is the economy of submission. The butcher does not argue against power; he simply steps outside its logic. He has nothing the king wants, or rather, he has something the king cannot touch—himself. Ziqi, who agonized over having been "bought" by the glance of Tian He, here sees a man who was offered and refused. The butcher's refusal is not a rejection of the king but a preservation of something the king's economy cannot recognize: a life that owes nothing, claims nothing, and wants nothing. In this brief encounter, Ziqi finds what the cave could not give him: not a teaching, but a model. Not a method, but a man.

So, whose story is this, Butcher Yue's or Sima Ziqi's? The answer, in a Zhuangzian register, is yes. The butcher's story is Ziqi's story, because Ziqi is the one who hears it, who learns what refusal looks like, whose core is changed by it, and who will become, in his own way, a version of the man who refused. The anecdote is not about Ziqi, but it is for him. That is the Zhuangzian variation in action.

Ziqi now inhabits the center of a deeper aporia. According to Levi, the sage's prime directive is to *masquer sa lumière*, to conceal his light by not drawing attention to himself. Once perceived, he is targeted by the glance of power and sucked into the state apparatus with its attendant fame. Levi writes that "he enters into contradiction with his own doc-

trine, which is that of preserving the integrity of his Virtue" (Levi 2010, p. 281). *ZZJS* nicely picks up on this contradiction; it rhetorically asks, "If I had concealed my light and hidden my traces, without reputation, how could people of the world have known of me? If my name had not been prized, how could he have seen and traded on it? It is only because I was unable to efface my traces and conceal my tracks that I was sold and traded by things" (*ZZJS*, p. 849).

How can a person remain singular without being targeted by power, thereby to be bought or destroyed? In Levi's reading, this question supplies the lifeblood of the *Zhuangzi*, yet it has drawn remarkably little comment. He writes:

> Zhuangzi does not address the question in just one or two passages; the theme of the necessary concealment of one's gifts permeates almost every line; it is omnipresent to the point of becoming an obsession […] The theme thus runs like a watermark through the entire work and nourishes Zhuangzi's reflection on what the conduct of the realized man must be, so that he can both deploy his gifts and radiate his virtue while remaining unknown to everyone, or at least so that, if he is distinguished [as with those who become teachers, which is another variation on the theme that runs throughout the text] it will not lead to consequences… This theme swells to the point of invading an entire chapter, *ZZ* 28, 'The Abdication of Kings'." (Levi 2010, p. 285)

That chapter becomes the outlet for all those sages who scatter in all directions in a frantic stampede to escape fame and its deathly pomp. It is Zhuangzi's philosophical fiction at its most caustic, and it is no surprise that Ziqi appears there too, among the contested power relations between sages and rulers that pervade its pages.

The logic is relentless and inescapable: visibility is vulnerability. In the case of Ziqi as with many other Zhuangzian sages, concealment is a core motif, but the problem is that the strategy fails because the solution does not work. The sages who hide in caves get smoked out and the ones who flee to rivers drown themselves. Concealment does not actually solve anything because the real issue is not visibility but entanglement. The famous episode of Diaoling Park reveals why. There, Zhuangzi writes:

> Zhuang Zhou was wandering in Diaoling Park when he caught sight of a strange magpie coming from the south. Its wings were seven feet across, and its eyes were a full inch wide. It brushed against Zhou's forehead and then settled in a chestnut grove… He hitched up his robe, quickened his step, and, grasping his crossbow, took up a position, waiting for it. Then he noticed a cicada that had found a beautiful patch of shade and had forgotten its own body. A mantis, screening itself with a leaf, sprang forward to seize it; focused on its gain, it forgot its own form. The strange magpie, taking advantage of this, snatched at it; seeing its gain, it forgot its true nature. Zhuang Zhou, startled, said, "Ah! Beings are chained to each other, and species call to one another." He threw down his crossbow and hurried away, but the park keeper, chasing after him, accused him of theft. Zhuang Zhou returned home and for three months did not go out. His disciple Lin Ju, following him, asked, "Master, why have you been so withdrawn lately?" Zhuang Zhou said, "I was so focused on guarding external forms that I forgot my own body. I gazed into muddy water and was bewildered by the clear pool… Now, while wandering in Diaoling, I forgot my body, and the strange magpie brushed against my forehead. Strolling in the chestnut grove, I forgot my true nature, and the chestnut grove keeper treated me as a criminal. This is why I have been withdrawn." (*ZZJS*, pp. 695–98)

The Diaoling Park episode cuts deeper. The danger is not that others will see you, but that you will see, and in seeing, forget yourself. Zhuangzi watches a cicada forget itself in a patch of shade. A mantis, focused on its gain, forgets its own form. A magpie, seizing its chance, forgets its true nature. And Zhuangzi, watching this chain of forgettings, forgets himself: he takes up his crossbow, becomes a predator, and in becoming predator himself becomes the prey chased by the park keeper, accused of theft.

After finding refuge in "the clear pool" (清淵 *qing yuan*) of his own home, Zhuangzi exclaims, "Ah! Beings are chained to each other, and species call to one another" (噫! 物固相累, 二類相召也 *Yi! Wu gu xiang lei, er lei xiang zhao ye*) (*ZZJS*, p. 698). The key word is *lei* 類 (tied, linked, bound). The chain is not just of predation but of relation itself as a kind of bondage, in which each creature is caught not only by its appetites but by its own capacity to perceive and be perceived. The problem is not that Zhuangzi was seen; the problem is that he saw, and in seeing, entered the chain.

This is where concealment reveals its insufficiency. Hiding assumes that the threat comes from being seen. But the Diaoling Park episode suggests something worse: the danger comes from seeing. Perception itself is entanglement. To see gain is to desire; to desire is to forget oneself; to forget oneself is to become prey. Zhuangzi throws down his crossbow but is still chased, and the moment he tries to exit the predator role he is immediately cast as prey. There is no outside to this chain, no cave deep enough, no river swift enough to carry one beyond it.

Even the sages who flee to caves and rivers discover that hiding is not the same as freedom. This is the aporia: to live is to be visible, to be visible is to be vulnerable, to be vulnerable is to be prey. The sage who hides his light is trying to step outside this logic. But can he?

The structure of predation in Diaoling Park is abyssal: the bottom cannot be found and there is no outside to be located. Every observer is observed and every predator is prey. This is *mise en abyme* as trap. But Ziqi, who in the conclusion of *ZZ* 24.8 grapples with "pity" (悲 *bei*) (*ZZJS*, p. 849), turns inward and finds—what? More pity, because the recognition of suffering contains the recognition of more suffering. The self that pities is also the self that is pitied. There's no bottom to it. His own *mise en abyme* now becomes legible as the emotional recognition of this structure. The sage who pities is not hiding; rather, he is seeing clearly, and seeing clearly means seeing entanglement, suffering, and the impossibility of escape. He says:

> Alas! I pitied (悲人者) those who lose themselves; then I pitied those who pity (悲夫悲人者) them; then I pitied those who pity those who pity them (悲夫悲人之悲者). And I grew more distant day by day. (*ZZJS*, p. 849)

This recursive lament does not go unnoticed by the commentaries collected in *ZZJS*. They illuminate not only Ziqi's abyss of pity but also its alignment with the Daoist tradition, some of them nodding to Laozi as they do. Cheng Xuanying writes, "Ziqi pities and sighs that people in the world abandon themselves and admire others, thereby losing the Dao. The Dao itself has neither gain nor loss, but beings have pity and joy. Therefore, those who pity those who lose themselves are also to be pitied." (*ZZJS*, p. 849).

Cheng's gloss reveals the trap: because the Dao is beyond loss, any emotional response, including pity, remains within the realm of things. The one who pities is caught in the same net as those he pities. Pity, far from being a solution, is itself a symptom of the condition it mourns.

Guo Xiang then offers a paradoxical way forward: "Ziqi understands that acting to save them would not be enough to rescue them and would only harm himself. Therefore, he pities them with non-pity, and thus his pity gradually fades away. He becomes tranquil

and mindless, his form like withered wood; this is how he 'daily grows more distant'" (*ZZJS*, pp. 849–50).

The sage does not abandon pity but transforms it, not by systematic undoing but by detachment. "To pity with non-pity" (以不悲悲之 *yi bu bei bei zhi*) (*ZZJS*, p. 849) is to respond without attachment, to see suffering without being drawn into its vortex. This non-pity allows the pity to fade on its own, leaving the sage tranquil and mindless. For Guo, this is not a technique but a natural consequence of dwelling in the pivot where opposition dissolves.

Cheng Xuanying's sub-commentary amplifies Guo's insight by expanding it into a full mystical register grounded in the opening chapter of the *Daodejing*. He writes:

> The Mysterious Dao is empty and tranquil; it has no loss and no joy. Therefore, whether one pities those who lose themselves or pities those who pity, though the objects of pity differ and the depth varies, none has yet attained union with the Dao. Hence each is still to be pitied. Pity upon pity, relinquishing upon relinquishing. Once the teaching is made manifest, the principle of mystery upon mystery is thereby revealed. It aligns with All Wonders, and so daily it becomes more profound and far-reaching. (*ZZJS*, p. 850)

For Cheng, the recursion of pity is not a trap to be escaped but a path to be followed to its end. "Pity upon pity, relinquishing upon relinquishing" (悲之又悲, 遣之又遣 *bei zhi you bei, qian zhi you qian*) in conjunction with "All Wonders" (衆妙 *zhong miao*) (*ZZJS*, p. 850) echoes the *Daodejing*'s own recursive structure: "Mystery upon mystery, the gateway of All Wonders" (玄之又玄, 衆妙之門 *xuan zhi you xuan, zhong miao zhi men*) (Zhu 2000, p. 7). Just as one moves from mystery to deeper mystery, one moves from pity to the relinquishing of pity, and to the relinquishing of relinquishing itself. Each layer of pity, recognized as still caught in attachment, becomes something to be relinquished in turn.

This "daily deepening" (日深 *ri shen*) (*ZZJS*, p. 850) is not a movement toward more pity but toward the Dao itself, where pity finally dissolves. The term deliberately echoes Ziqi's own "day by day" (日以遠矣 *ri yi yuan yi*) (*ZZJS*, p. 849) from the original passage, showing how Cheng's commentary works in dialogue with the base text. Ziqi's recursion, his personal *mise en abyme*, is not escaped but undone, layer by layer, until nothing remains to be pitied and no one remains to pity.

This is Ziqi's destination. The one who once agonized over being seen, over being bought, over being entangled, now stands at the edge of the abyss and finds that the abyss, too, dissolves. Not because he has fled the world, but because he has passed through it, through the cave, through the court, through the glance, through the pity, through the abyss itself, and emerged on the other side. The journey through the world has prepared him for the dissolution of his own world. What remains is not a self that has been perfected, but a self that has been lost. It is in the famous opening of ZZ 2.1 that Ziqi finally speaks the words toward which his entire life has been tending: "I lost myself."

4. Part 4: The Sage: Self and Counterpart, *Zhuangzi* 2.1 and 27.4

> Nanguo Ziqi leaned on his armrest, looked up to heaven, and sighed softly. His body went limp, as though he had lost his counterpart. (*ZZJS*, p. 43)

Thus begins ZZ 2.1, the curtains rising on the identical *mis en scène* as ZZ 24.8. The echo is unmistakable, except now the figure bears a different name.

In neither chapter does Zhuangzi analyze or explain "sitting in forgetfulness." Instead, Ziqi's physical placement directs attention to the visual, spatial, and embodied dimensions of the scene. This is how philosophical fiction works: not by asserting doctrines but by repeating figures across landscapes, letting the variations do the work. As the same

posture frames two different responses, the same question receives two different answers. And the figure himself, whether Nanguo Ziqi, Nanbo Ziqi, Sima Ziqi, or Dongguo Ziqi, is and is not the same. His identity is not a fixed essence but a pattern of recurrence, a name that wanders.

In *ZZ* 24.8, the visual scene of Ziqi reclining is a stage to be cleared so the real action of language, dialogue, and philosophical exposition can begin. There, the *mise en scène* is preparatory. Here in *ZZ* 2.1, the *mise en scène* itself is the message. Ziqi's bodily state, the withered form, the ashen stillness, and the scattered bearing, leads nowhere beyond itself.

Standing before him in attendance, Yancheng Ziyou speaks:

> "How can this be? Can a man's body really be made to become like a withered tree? Can a man's mind really be made to become like dead ashes? The man who leans on the armrest today is not the man who leaned on the armrest in the past!" (*ZZJS*, p. 43)

Ziyou's description of Ziqi's condition signals a subtle shift from *ZZ* 24.8. There, he described it as "a body like a withered skeleton, a mind like dead ashes" (形固可使若槁骸, 心固可使若死灰乎 *xing gu ke shi ruo gao hai, xin gu ke shi ruo sihui hu*) (*ZZJS*, p. 848). Here, it is "a body like a withered tree, a mind like dead ashes" (形固可使如槁木, 而心固可使如死灰乎 *xing gu ke shi ruo gao mu, xin gu ke shi ruo sihui hu*) (*ZZJS*, p. 43). The difference between "withered bones" and "withered tree" is not a copyist's error but a deliberate modulation; the terms vary with the context. The same posture, the same *mise en scène*, leads to two different trajectories.

This is where both texts plot their different courses. The "withered bones" draw attention to what remains after death: the skeletal structure of Ziqi's mortality, stripped of flesh. Ziyou is not asking about the meditative state but about the body that looks dead, and Ziqi responds with his own history: the cave, Tian He's glance, his spiral of pity, and his growing distance. The bones are what remain after everything else has been peeled away.

"Withered tree" conveys a different register. A tree that once lived now stands as mere shape, a stillness without movement or growth, a materiality without animation. It is not a corpse but something that has ceased to live its own life. Ziyou observes that the body persists, but the animating self has departed.

This is the scene that Ziyou's question opens onto; Ziqi's response will be the verbal counterpart to a state that has already said everything without words.

With the scene set, the dialogue continues. Ziyou asks, "How can this be?" Nanguo Ziqi answers, "Yan [Ziyou], what an excellent question you have asked! Just now, I lost myself—do you understand?"

The traditional reading of Ziyou's question and Ziqi's answer follows Cheng Xuanying's interpretation, which states,

> Ziqi acknowledges his question, hence says, "What an excellent question." Ziqi has forgotten both realm and knowledge, cut off both things and self. Ziyou, not yet awakened, is startled and filled with doubt. Thus, Ziqi displays the attainment of leaning on the armrest—"do you perhaps understand?" (*ZZJS*, p. 45)

Cheng's interpretation frames the scene this way: Ziqi is awakened, having transcended subject-object; Ziyou, not yet awakened, is startled and doubtful; Ziqi affirms that the question is good because it shows Ziyou notices something; and Ziqi's response is a teaching that draws Ziyou toward awakening. This interpretation represents the traditional reading, which remains dominant in modern scholarship. Numerous studies examine Ziqi's exclamation, "I lost myself," but their approaches focus primarily on notions of the self. This focus is understandable, because "I lost myself" connects directly to

the *Zhuangzi*'s philosophy of forgetting, a constant theme throughout the work. Its most prominent expression appears in ZZ 6.4, where Yan Hui over several days tells Confucius: "I have forgotten benevolence and righteousness… I have forgotten ceremony and music… I sit and forget." This passage sets the experiential template for the condition of absolute freedom Zhuangzi calls free and easy wandering.

ZZ 2.1 presents Nanguo Ziqi in the midst of sitting in forgetfulness. He is not the student like Yan Hui who has just experienced it but the master who lives it. This is why Nanguo Ziqi appears in so many academic papers on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*, both for his mastery of sitting in forgetfulness and for his ability to teach it, in this case to Ziyou.

However, the scholarship on "I lost myself" has been almost exclusively concerned with the philosophical implications of self-loss and forgetting and what it means for theories of the subject, for politics, for ethics, and for language. Nanguo Ziqi, the figure who speaks these words, appears in these readings only as a convenient mouthpiece, a placeholder for the doctrine. For example, Liu Xiang (2014) compares "I lost myself" to Baudrillard's "disappearance of the subject" in the dissolution of subject-object; Ryan Harte (2022) compares Zhuangzi's "I lost myself" to Simone Weil's "decreating the self" and Jenny Hung (2019) compares it to Galen Strawson on process metaphysics; again, abstract philosophical comparison. Shao Mingyao (2025) writes on "I lost myself" and social governance, connecting self-loss to political philosophy; the articles by Chen Shaoming (2014) and Thomas Ming (2016), focused on the "metaphysics of the first-person pronoun," pursue a grammatical analysis of "I lost myself"; the works by Kuang-ming Wu (1990), Shanshan Ma (2023), and Ziqiang Bai (2025) discuss "I lost myself" in the context of mysticism and cultivation; Youru Wang (2021) discusses "I lost myself" from the perspective of ethics; Franklin Perkins (2023) discusses it in the context of epistemology; and Linna Liu and Sihan Chew (2019) discuss "I lost myself" in the context of psychology.

In every instance, Ziqi appears only as the one who utters the phrase "I lost myself." He is simply a mouthpiece, mentioned only to attribute the words before moving on to the ideas. By prioritizing doctrine over drama, these readings ignore his multi-dimensional character, with his own trajectory, his own story, and his own transformations across the text. But this is how the *Zhuangzi* treats him. He appears again and again, under different names, in different landscapes, playing different roles. Before he says "I lost myself" he is a seeker rejected in a cave, a sage confronted by power, a minister watching a butcher refuse a king, and a man caught in the abyss of pity. The phrase does not float free; it is his own personal revelation. And his journey, coursing from *ZZ* 6.4 to *ZZ* 28.10 to *ZZ* 24.10 to *ZZ* 2.1, then back to *ZZ* 24.8 and onward to *ZZ* 27.4 and *ZZ* 4.5, is the context that gives the phrase its weight. This study follows that journey by restoring the drama, arguing that the doctrine only makes sense within the drama.

To see what this means, we can return to the opening exchange. The traditional reading focuses on Ziyou's questioning ability, praising the student for his perceptive inquiry: "How can this be?" Cheng Xuanying glosses the scene this way: "Ziyou, seeking instruction, rises and stands in attendance, asking: 'How can you be so at ease? Your spirit and consciousness are concentrated and still, suddenly different from before, so that your body appears no different from a withered tree, and your mind no different from dead ashes. There must be a marvelous art, please show me the way'" (*ZZJS*, p. 45).

To this, Ziqi responds, "Yan, is it not wonderful, this question that you have asked!" (*ZZJS*, p. 45). Then comes the teaching itself: "Just now, I lost myself—do you understand?" (*ZZJS*, p. 45). From here, Ziqi introduces the doctrine: "You have heard the pipes of men, but not yet the pipes of earth; you have heard the pipes of earth, but not yet the pipes of heaven" (*ZZJS*, p. 45). In keeping with his role as disciple, Ziyou responds, "I dare to ask the technique" (*ZZJS*, p. 45). What follows is Ziqi's famous exposition on the

human, earthly, and heavenly pipes (籟 *lai*), which is woven into a cosmology of sound unfolding from the silence of the withered tree.

But the traditional reading, for all its influence, is not the only one. In the Ming dynasty, the monk Hanshan Deqing saw something else and offered a different interpretation. Ziqi's words, he claimed, were not praise but criticism: "the question was very inappropriate" (問之甚不善 *wen zhi shen bu shan*) (cited from G. Chen 2024, p. 260). For Hanshan, Ziqi was not commending Ziyou's insight but questioning why he needed to ask at all.

Whether or not one accepts Hanshan's full interpretation, his reading shifts attention from Ziyou's questioning to Ziqi's embodied state. Recent scholarship gives Hanshan's intuition new support. Chen Guihong, analyzing the grammar of 不亦…乎 *bu yi… hu* ("is it not…?") in Warring States texts (G. Chen 2024, pp. 269–74), argues that the grammatical structure more typically points back to a preceding state, not forward to the act of asking. The sense, on this reading, is not "You ask well" but "Yan! Is not this state good? And yet you ask?" The praise belongs not to the question but to the condition the question interrupted.

Nan Huaijin, reading as a practitioner rather than as a philologist, arrives at a similar place. He reads the opening physically: "leaning on the armrest" means sliding down (溜下去 *liu xia qu*), becoming "languid to the point of having no bones" (懶得沒有骨頭 *lan de mei you gutou*) (Nan 2007, p. 82). The state is embodied, not merely mental. Paraphrasing Ziqi's response, he writes: "You think this state of mine is not good? In other words, this state of mine is very good! Is there doubt? I tell you, right now, at this very moment, I no longer have a self; I have forgotten myself. Do you understand?" (Nan 2007, p. 84). The question is not about Ziyou's skill but about Ziqi's condition that manifests as the withered tree, the dead ashes, and the self that has been lost.

Chen Guihong draws out the implications of both readings. The traditional reading, interpreting Ziqi's words as the positive evaluation "the question is very good," he suggests, would have us believe that Zhuangzi affirms a straightforward relationship between Dao and speech, a position the text itself repeatedly complicates. The alternative, by contrast, shifts our attention to Ziqi's "disintegrated body" (身體支離形象 *shenti zhili xingxiang*) (G. Chen 2024) and remains neutral about Ziyou's questioning. Yet if we follow Hanshan all the way, the stakes become even sharper. As Chen notes, "we must carefully consider why Ziqi criticizes Ziyou's act of questioning as bad or improper" (G. Chen 2024, pp. 277–78).

Entertaining this second reading creates a compelling tension whereby Ziqi's words affirm what Ziyou's language describes: his withered and ashen condition; however, the very act of Ziyou's describing, together with his questioning, has interrupted that state. If Ziqi is in the condition Ziyou described, why would he praise the question that interrupted it? Yet he still affirms his bodily state even as he prepares to leave it for speech. There is an inherent paradox here, one that feels authentically Zhuangzian within the interplay of silent manifestation and linguistic expression: language simultaneously capturing and disrupting the reality it seeks to address.

The text states that he "嗒焉" *da yan* [left untranslated for the moment] "as though he had lost his counterpart" (似喪其耦 *si sang qi ou*) (*ZZJS*, p. 45). Du Yi observes that scholars typically focus on the psychological dimensions of "I lost myself" and use that to interpret "seemed to have lost his counterpart." In doing so, they lose the deeper significations of "counterpart" (耦 *ou*), which, coming first in the narrative, ought to set the terms for interpreting "I lost myself" rather than the other way around.

A glance at Western translations of the phrase "*da yan* as if he had lost his counterpart" confirms this psychological bias. Translators consistently interpret counterpart in terms of an authentic self that transcends the relationality of social roles, conceptual distinctions,

and physical identification, setting it against a constructed self defined by those relationalities. Their translations themselves are revealing: Burton Watson translates it as "vacant and far away, as though he'd lost his companion," which he glosses as "his associates, his wife, or his own body" (Watson 2013, p. 7). Kuang-ming Wu as "vacant, seemed to have lost his counterpart," where he explains counterpart as "as the self's counterpart that is recognizable, identifiable, and objectifiable as 'self'" (Kuang-ming Wu 1990, p. 155). Chris Fraser translates it as "vacant, as if he'd lost part of himself" (Fraser 2024, p. 47); A. C. Graham as "in a trance as though he had lost the counterpart of himself" (Graham 2001, p. 48); and Brook Ziporyn as "all in a scatter there, as if loosed from a partner" (Ziporyn 2020, p. 11).

These translations capture something of the mental state, but they risk psychologizing what the Chinese presents as profoundly physical. The character that I left deliberately untranslated, 答焉 (or 嗒焉), is pivotal here. It means "to slump, to be limp." It is the physical correlative of losing the counterpart, where the slump is the counterpart's absence made flesh. It describes the visible manifestation of someone who has entered a deep state of absorption: the body goes slack, the head drops, the spine releases. As Nan Huaijin puts it:

> "Going limp" (荅焉) depicts lowering the head, slipping down under the armrest, then tilting the head up and blowing a long whistle. With that exhale, everything inside the mind is blown out. Then the head drops, "as if he had lost his counterpart." This counterpart does not refer to a spouse, but to all external circumstances, all opposing things. All external circumstances are gone, and the person just slides down softly… languid, languid to the point of having no bones. (Nan 2007, p. 82)

When Ziyou sees Ziqi "go limp, as if he had lost his counterpart," he is observing a physical and behavioral change, a glimpse of what Chen Guihong calls Ziqi's "disintegrated body." Counterpart is the bridge between the external posture of leaning and sighing and the internal state of its absence. "Going limp" names the visible effect of the invisible transformation. Without it, we have only the actions; with it, we see what those actions mean: the body has surrendered and the self has loosened its grip. Counterpart perfectly captures this sense of a missing paired relationality that once completed him.

The problem is that it too easily falls victim to a psychologized interpretation, especially in the context of Ziqi's sitting in forgetfulness in which he lost himself. However, as Du Yi shows, counterpart is the ancient Chinese logical principle of paired relationality itself that expresses the fundamental structure of the cosmos; she writes:

> The concept of counterpart was very important in the cosmological understanding of the Shang and Zhou people. It almost served as the fundamental logic for every extension of cosmic space: first, heaven and earth are opposite (相对 *xiangdui*, literally "facing each other"); then space has four directions, paired in opposition (两两相对 *liang liang xiangdui*); extending from physical space, the four directions are each paired with the four seasons. According to the content of the Zhou dynasty ritual system, for an individual to define themselves, they had to rely on external things and other people, starting from their relational roles relative to others… If the relational network around them were removed, the individual might instead lose their way at the center. (Du 2023, pp. 97–98)

Du Yi's analysis reveals that the counterpart was both a personal partner and the logic of cosmic and social order. Accordingly, to exist was to exist in relation. The self was not an isolated atom but a node in a network of obligations and identities. When Ziqi loses his counterpart, he is not losing a specific partner but shedding the mode of thinking and

being that relies on paired relationality or relational dualism. He is stepping out of the framework of relativity itself, which connects directly to the core of Zhuangzi's Daoist philosophy. As *ZZ* 2.4 puts it:

> There is no thing that is not 'that,' and there is no thing that is not 'this.'… 'That' emerges from 'this,' and 'this' also depends on 'that.' This is the theory that 'that' and 'this' are mutually produced.
>
> 物无非彼，物无非是。自彼则不见，自知则知之。故曰：彼出于是，是亦因彼。彼是，方生之說也。 (*ZZJS*, p. 66)

All distinctions, this/that, good/bad, self/other, arise through the mutual dependence of opposites. Later in the same chapter, Zhuangzi names the goal: "When 'that' and 'this' lose their paired relationality (偶 *ou*, the same character as "counterpart" 耦 *ou*, with the radical shifted), that is called the pivot of the Dao" (彼是莫得其偶，謂之道樞 *bi shi mo de qi ou wei zhi dao shu*) (*ZZJS*, p. 66). Ziqi's losing the counterpart is precisely this: reaching the pivot point where "this" and "that" no longer stand in opposition, where the entire structure of paired relationality is transcended.

But this is a bodily enactment, not a mental achievement. Ziqi does not sit in stillness; he collapses into it. His form goes slack because the paired relation of self and world that he held upright has dissolved. His posture, his breathing, and his boneless languor all enact the loss of the counterpart. The body, in its collapse, shows what words cannot say. The doctrine that follows ("I lost myself") is simply the verbal articulation of what the body has already demonstrated.

Ziqi's loss of the counterpart is therefore a radical act. It is a refusal to let one's existence be defined by externally imposed relations, the network of obligations and identities that, in Zhou cosmology, gave the world its intelligibility. To lose the counterpart is to step outside that entire framework.

Yet the body's demonstration, however complete, is not the end of the matter, because the paradox that *ZZ* 2.1 signaled between silent manifestation and linguistic expression has left too much unsaid. The circle demands closure, but the only way to do that is to release it, to let it dissolve in the pivot of the Dao, the place where "this" and "that" lose their pairing. For if Ziqi has truly lost his counterpart, what remains of the teacher-student relation? How can one who has stepped outside the framework of paired relationality speak to one still within it?

This question will find its full expression in *ZZ* 27.4, when Ziyou returns to report on his own nine years of cultivation. But by then Ziqi's name has shifted: he is now known as Dongguo Ziqi. The movement from Nanguo (South Gate) to Dongguo (West Gate) shadows his own free and easy wandering. Furthermore, where previously he embodied this loss of his counterpart in silence, here he will speak about it; or rather, he will speak about speaking itself, about how words derive their authority from the very relations he has left behind.

So, the same two figures, master and disciple, meet again years later in a different conversation altogether. The student who once stood perplexed before Ziqi's withered form and asked, "How can this be?" now, with newly acquired flamboyance, confidently announces his own attainments:

> Since I heard your words, in the first year I became rough, in the second year I followed along, in the third year I opened up, in the fourth year I became a thing among things, in the fifth year I began to gather, in the sixth year spirits descended into me, in the seventh year I completed the heavenly in me, in the eighth year I no longer recognized death or life, and in the ninth year I attained the great mystery. (*ZZJS*, p. 956)

Having completed his training, Ziyou speaks of what he has become. This is the student's report on his own cultivation, speaking with a clarity that would be admirable if it were not so deeply problematic.

The problem is not in what Ziyou describes, for the nine stages themselves echo the progression Nü Yu outlined in *ZZ* 6.4, the *yangsheng* path that leads to "dawning clarity" and "seeing the Unique." The problem is in how he describes it. He speaks of his *zuowang* cultivation as if it were a linear sequence of achievements, each neatly enumerated and crisply named: "in the first year I became rough, in the second year I followed along…" The language is precise, confident, and linear, but it is the language of *yangsheng* applied to *zuowang*. Ziyou has mastered the *yangsheng* grammar of attainment, but it is the wrong grammar for *zuowang*.

But let us look more closely at the name Yancheng Ziyou 顏成子游 (Countenance-Completed Master Banner). The name is almost certainly a deliberate philosophical construction. It echoes the name of Confucius's disciple Yan Yan 言偃 (*yan* 言 and *yan* 顏 are homophones), whose courtesy name was Ziyou 子游, identical to Ziqi's disciple. Where Yan Yan's name means "Speech Complete," Yancheng suggests "Countenance Completed," shifting the emphasis from words to the face, and from speaking to appearing. And the *you* 游 of Ziyou, whether read as "banner" (游 *you*) or as the "wandering" (遊 *you*) that names the *Zhuangzi*'s highest ideal, carries its own ambiguity. A banner waves freely with the wind yet remains tethered to its pole: a waving without wandering yet a freedom without root.

The historical Ziyou appears eight times in the *Analects*. He is an interlocutor with Confucius on filial piety (*Analects* 2.7) (Yang [1980] 2020, p. 14), a participant in debates about education (*Analects* 19.12) (Yang [1980] 2020, p. 214), and the recipient of Confucius' praise for his excellence in literary studies (*Analects* 11.3) (Yang [1980] 2020, p. 116). He is twice shown as "the governor of Wucheng" (武城宰 *Wucheng zai*) (*Analects* 6.14 and 17.4) (Yang [1980] 2020, pp. 63, 192–93), where Confucius goes to visit him. He is, in other words, a figure known for Confucian service and philosophical engagement. By giving this name to Ziqi's disciple, Zhuangzi performs a pointed appropriation. He takes a figure firmly situated within the Confucian tradition, one who governs a city and debates the Master, and places him at the feet of the Daoist sage. The question then becomes: what does this Confucian disciple see in the one who has lost his counterpart?

In doing so, the *Zhuangzi* extends its own textual landscape to encompass the *Analects* itself. A name borrowed from another tradition, Ziyou becomes a walking allusion, a living thread woven into the fabric of Zhuangzi's philosophical fiction. The musical score that Levi describes now includes themes not composed by Zhuangzi, borrowed melodies, variations on Confucian motifs, all resonating within the same polyphonic work. The *petit monde* of the *Zhuangzi* expands to absorb the world of its rival, transforming it into another voice in its endless chorus.

Kuang-ming Wu, after rejecting Akatzuka Tadashi's reading of Ziyou as a mere city-dweller without deep understanding, writes:

> Nanguo Ziqi praised him; he cannot be a shallow person. Yancheng may mean someone as accomplished as Yan Hui, the best disciple of Confucius; Ziyou may refer to another disciple of Confucius [i.e., Yan Yan]; he was a man of literary sensitivity, and forty-five years younger than Confucius. He must be an inquisitive young man with fine Confucian sensitivity. His inquiry may signal Zhuangzi's intention that Zhuangzi's ideal man is beyond the Confucian ideal, recognizable as a strange ideal, yet unintelligible in Confucian terms. (Kuang-ming Wu 1990, p. 182)

If we take the homophonic allusion seriously, then Yancheng Ziyou stands at a crossroads. As "Completed Speech," he is master of language; as "Master of the Banner," he appears free yet remains fixed. Wu asks: "What strange thing did this sensitive young Confucian see in Nanguo Ziqi?" (Kuang-ming Wu 1990, p. 182). We might ask a parallel question: What strange thing did the sensitive young Zhuangzian Ziqi see in the Laozian Nü Yu? If Nü Yu's rejection sent Ziqi toward Zhuangzi's sitting in forgetfulness, could Ziqi's rejection of Ziyou have sent his disciple toward the Confucian world of ritual, service, and governance in which he would later find himself?

The *Analects* itself records that Ziyou governed Wucheng. If Zhuangzi's reader knows this, and the original audience surely would, then the stakes of the dialogue shift. Ziyou is not merely an inquisitive student; he is a figure with a future, one who will go on to hold office, apply principles, and put words into practice. And yet here, in the presence of Ziqi, his polished recitation of nine years of cultivation proves hollow. He has mastered the grammar of attainment, but the grammar is not the thing itself.

Ziqi's response, when it comes, is not praise but a series of questions that undo every category Ziyou has just used. It is exactly here that the paradox of *ZZ* 2.1 returns. If Ziqi's state, displayed through the withered tree, the dead ashes, and the loss of the counterpart, is one that words can only ever approximate but never capture, then Ziyou's confident enumeration is not a sign of success but of failure. He has learned to talk about the journey, but the journey's end is precisely where talking stops. The future governor of Wucheng, master of speech and service, stands before the Daoist sage and speaks; yet his speech is exactly what he must, but does not, unlearn.

This is Ziqi's response, separated into its component parts:

"In life, to act is to die. I urge you to be impartial—their death has a cause."

"生有為, 死也. 勸公: 以其死也, 有自也." (*ZZJS*, p. 958)

Here, Ziqi directly addresses Ziyou by admonishing him to be "impartial" (公 *gong*) (*ZZJS*, p. 958). Guo Xiang's comment says: "It is because of purposeful action that one dies; it is because one is selfish about one's life that one acts purposefully. The reason I now urge you to be impartial is that the death of all things comes from selfishness" (*ZZJS*, p. 958). Cheng Xuanying's comment says: "The reason people in life move toward death is that they selfishly love their lives and cannot be impartial; therefore I counsel and guide them" (*ZZJS*, p. 958). Ziqi is cautioning Ziyou against the importance he is attaching to his own accomplishments, his own life.

"But life is *yang* and has no cause. Is this really so?"

"而生陽也, 無自也. 而果然乎?" (*ZZJS*, p. 958)

Here, *yang* 陽 denotes the active, vital principle. Guo Xiang comments: "The *yang* of life follows its traceless non-action and suddenly stands alone; it has no cause" (*ZZJS*, p. 9580. Life, unlike death, is not the result of purposeful action, it simply arises. Ziqi's question, "Is this really so?", is not a request for information but a challenge. Can Ziyou see that his "attainments" are not his at all? That they arise from nowhere and return to nowhere?

"What is appropriate for it? What is inappropriate?"

"惡乎其所適? 惡乎其所不適?" (*ZZJS*, p. 958)

Cheng Xuanying glosses in terms of *qi* 氣, the vital energy that constitutes life: "When *qi* gathers, there is life, but life is not worth joy; when *qi* disperses, there is death, but death is not worth grief. Since life and death are equalized, grief and joy are extinguished. Therefore, where can it be appropriate, and where can it be inappropriate?" (*ZZJS*, pp. 958–59).

The questions are rhetorical. They have no answer within the framework of "appropriate" (適 *shi*) and "inappropriate" (不適 *bushi)*, since that framework itself has dissolved. Yet Cheng, not leave them hanging, answers them from the other side of the dissolution: "Everywhere one is, it is appropriate" (*ZZJS*, p. 959).

Guo Xiang adds further weight: "But if it is indeed so, then there is no appropriate and no inappropriate; after this, all is appropriate, and being all appropriate, one arrives" (*ZZJS*, p. 958).

Ziyou's nine-year progression, with its neat stages and clear achievements, operates entirely within that framework, but it is exactly what Ziqi's questions dismantle.

> "Heaven has its calendrical numbers, Earth has its human dwellings—what do I seek from them?"
>
> "天有曆數, 地有人據, 吾惡乎求之?" (*ZZJS*, p. 958)

Guo Xiang comments: "All are already self-sufficient" (*ZZJS*, p. 959). The cosmos is complete and nothing is lacking. Ziyou's quest for attainment presupposes that something was missing, that he needed to become something he was not, yet Ziqi's question suggests otherwise: what could possibly be sought when everything is already here?

> "No one knows where it ends—how could it not have fate? No one knows where it begins—how could it have fate?"
>
> "莫知其所終, 若之何其無命也? 莫知其所始, 若之何其有命也?" (*ZZJS*, p. 958)

Ziqi's paired questions enact the pivot, and each affirmation is shadowed by its opposite. "Fate" (命 *ming*) is both affirmed and denied, not because Zhuangzi can't make up his mind, but because the concept of fate itself belongs to the framework of paired relationality. From the pivot, both statements are true, and neither is.

> "There is that by which things correspond—how could there be no ghosts? There is nothing by which they correspond—how could there be ghosts?"
>
> "有以相應也, 若之何其無鬼邪？無以相應也，若之何其有鬼邪?" (*ZZJS*, p. 958)

The same structure is seen again: ghosts exist; ghosts do not exist. The questions do not seek resolution; they are the pivot speaking.

The effect of Ziqi's cumulative words is vertiginous. Ziyou speaks from the position of one who has completed the journey, but Ziqi responds from the position of one for whom the journey never ends, because there is nowhere to arrive. Just when Ziyou thought he had arrived, exclaiming "I attained the Great Mystery," Ziqi dissolves the ground beneath him.

The dialogue explores the fundamental question of agency and source: Who speaks? What authorizes speech? Ziqi asks, in effect: Who is the "I" that attained? And what is this "Mystery" you claim to know? His words become a kind of meta-commentary on the entire paradox, the place where the figure who has lived it now speaks about it. But his speech is not doctrine. It is a series of questions that undo the idea of doctrine, returning Ziyou and the reader to the pivot again and again.

This is the pivot of the Dao in action. The counterpart is not lost once and for all; rather, it must be lost again and again, every time the mind reaches for a fixed position. Ziyou's nine-year progression is a narrative of attainment, but attainment, for Zhuangzi, is just another trap. Ziqi's questions return him to the pivot, to the place where "this" and "that" lose their pairing.

And this is where the nature of language itself becomes the theme. Ziyou speaks from within the framework of paired relationality, including teacher and student, before and after, and attainment and non-attainment. It is from these relations that his words derive their authority; Ziqi, however, speaks from the other side of the loss. His words do

not claim but question; they do not fix but dissolve. They are what the *Zhuangzi* calls "spill-over words" (卮言 *zhiyan*): words that flow from the pivot, taking the shape of whatever vessel they fill and leaving no trace behind.

The circle, then, is not closed but dissolved. The paradox that *ZZ* 2.1 opened, namely language simultaneously capturing and disrupting the reality it seeks to address, is not resolved in *ZZ* 27.4; it is enacted. Ziqi does not explain; he performs, and in his performance, he shows Ziyou (and through him, the reader) that the only way to speak of the Dao is to speak in a way that unsays itself.

This is the state Ziqi has been seeking all along, through the cave, through the rejection, through the glance of power, through the abyss of pity. The one who once asked, "Can the Dao be learned?" now has become the Dao, embodied, self-forgotten, and free.

5. Coda: Free and Easy Wandering, *Zhuangzi* 4.5, 24.10, and 22.6

The name Ziqi has been wandering through a multitude of Zhuangzian landscapes. He first appeared as Nanbo Ziqi, and though his name has passed through the North Gate and circled back to the South, his identity begins and ends with the Southern Elder. So it is as Nanbo Ziqi that he arrives at his destination.

But is it not contradictory, after losing his counterpart, after losing his self, that there can be a final destination at all? Yet there he stands, in *ZZ* 4.5, as Nanbo Ziqi, face to face with the giant, useless oak, on the hill of Shang. One useless thing next to another, physically immobile save for the hair on his head and the leaves on the tree gently swaying in the breeze, and locked in place for three entire days.

> Nanbo Ziqi was wandering on the hill of Shang, when he saw a great tree there, different from all the rest. A thousand teams of horses could find shelter under its shade. Ziqi said, "What tree is this? It must have extraordinary timber!" Looking up at its lesser branches, he saw they were all twisted and fit neither for beam nor rafters. Looking down at its great roots, he saw they were gnarled and split, fit neither for inner coffin nor outer coffin. He licked one of its leaves, and it blistered his mouth and left a wound. He sniffed it, and it knocked him silly, dead drunk for three days. Ziqi said, "This is indeed a useless tree, and so it has grown so great. Ah! The spirit-person is like this: useless." (*ZZJS*, p. 176)

Did anything happen in those three days? The hair still swayed, and the leaves still stirred. But between one useless thing and another, something passed that could not be held. We recall the evocation of the Dao that preceded Ziqi's encounter with Nü Yu: "It can be transmitted but not possessed." Here, in the stillness, it was transmitted.

This moment stuns in its strangeness and specificity. Ziqi does not just look at the giant oak; he licks it and sniffs it. It is almost comical, yet deeply intimate. He is anything but the detached observer analyzing from a distance; his entire body, his whole being engages the tree through senses normally beneath philosophical notice, and the result is far from knowledge.

This is transmission of an entirely different order: neither teachings nor words, for the tree gives nothing that can be named, yet something passes between them. It is a direct, kinesthetic communion that leaves him "dead drunk for three days" (狂醒三日 *kuang cheng san ri*). An absolute negation of Ziyou's recited nine-stage progression, this encounter is immediate, ridiculous, even absurd, and utterly transformative.

But this is no final destination; it is the threshold, the launching point from which there is no return, because there is nowhere left to return. There is only the vast world within which to wander endlessly. Nanbo Ziqi has attained his confirmation in the Dao, something that "can be attained but not demonstrated."

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Ziqi's final destination has become a dissolving point, like the pivot, like the circle that does not close but opens to the world.

He passed three days in stillness before the tree. Now he moves toward his sons, toward supper, toward the small agreements of ordinary life. The wandering has not left the world behind; it has finally found a way to be in it. Jean Levi reads the sage not as one who has found refuge, but as one who has learned to move within the storm. It is not an answer for those who seek certainty, but enough for those who can live without it. The storm is not somewhere else; it is the world itself. And Ziqi, having learned to move within it, now does so with his sons. In *ZZ* 24.10, Ziqi puts it simply:

> "What I do with my sons is wander in Heaven and Earth. I seek delight with them in Heaven; I seek food with them on Earth. I do not join with them in affairs, I do not join with them in schemes, I do not join with them in oddities. I join with them in riding the sincerity of Heaven and Earth, and do not let things tangle us. I join with them in following along, and do not let affairs prescribe what is fitting." (*ZZJS*, pp. 857–58)

And then, beyond even family, comes the one who set him wandering. In *ZZ* 22.6, the name finally falls away. He appears simply as Dongguo Zi, Master of the East Wall, no longer Ziqi at all. The name has not just wandered, it has frayed. What remains is just a place, a direction, a marker without a self.

> Dongguo Zi asked Zhuangzi, "This thing called the Dao, where is it?"
>
> Zhuangzi said, "It is nowhere not."
>
> "If you must name a place, then name one."
>
> "It is in the ant."
>
> "How can it be so low?"
>
> "It is in the millet."
>
> "How can it be lower still?"
>
> "It is in the tile."
>
> "How can it be even lower?"
>
> "It is in the piss." (*ZZJS*, pp. 749–50)

And then, in a move that would be called *trompe-l'œil* if this were a painting, or authorial intrusion if this were a novel, Zhuangzi himself steps forward. Not as the philosopher behind the text, but as a character within it, suddenly present, suddenly addressing the figure who has wandered through so many names and so many landscapes. The frame collapses, and the author who wrote "I lost myself" now stands beside the figure who spoke it. The distinction between creator and creation dissolves, just as the distinction between "this" and "that" dissolved at the pivot. The philosophical fiction reveals itself as fiction, and in that revelation, it becomes something else: an invitation.

This is not an invitation to more teaching but to the teaching's end: a series of final landscapes in which Ziqi no longer seeks, no longer speaks, and no longer even appears as a discrete self. He stands before a useless tree and is still for three days. He wanders with his sons, seeking only delight and food. He asks where the Dao is and receives an answer that shatters the question itself. Finally, he dissolves into the text, becoming not a character but a companion who, having lost himself, now shares in the enjoyment of free and easy wandering. And then Zhuangzi speaks the words that gather all of Ziqi's journey into a single invitation:

> Let us wander together in the palace of nothing whatsoever, joining in discussion that never comes to an end! Let us be together in non-action! Calm and still! Vast

> and clear! Harmonious and at ease! My will is emptied. I go nowhere and do not know where I arrive; I come and go and do not know where I stop; I have already come and gone and do not know where it ends; I hover in vast emptiness. Great knowledge enters here and does not know its limit. (*ZZJS*, p. 752)

The one who set Ziqi wandering through so many landscapes now wanders beside him. The name has dissolved into the wandering. There is no more to say, only to go. And the reader, having followed Ziqi through all his wanderings, is invited to go as well.

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Notes

1 Shuen-fu Lin writes, "It might be even more fitting to use an existing musical term, the technique of variation, to replace Sun Yizhao's 'cross-referential and complementary mode of writing'… In musical terminology, variation refers to a kind of repetition that keeps some parts of the original form of music, but at the same time deletes, changes, or replaces other parts. What it keeps, deletes, or changes might be a theme, harmony, section and so on. Because what is changed is usually only a part of the theme, harmony or section, a person with good musical knowledge and training will not find it difficult to discern the original melody from its varied forms. If we examine Zhuangzi's art in light of musical variation, we can not only identify the various cross-references and repetitions in the Inner Chapters, but also learn to appreciate his achievement as a prose writer" (Lin 2022, p. 14).

2 Original text from and commentaries on the *Zhuangzi* quoted and cited in this study are taken from the *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Collected Explanations of the *Zhuangzi*, first printed in 1894, hereafter *ZZJS*) that was compiled and edited by Guo Qingfan (郭慶藩, 1844–1896) (Q. Guo 1961), a prominent scholar of the late Qing dynasty. In addition to Guo's own commentary, this work also gathers and synthesizes materials from Guo Xiang's (郭象, d. 312 CE) main commentary, Cheng Xuanying's (成玄英, fl. 631 CE) sub-commentary, and Lu Deming's (陸德明, d. 630 CE) phonetic and glossarial notes. In this study, general comments taken from *ZZJS* are not attributed; however, I will identify specific comments as attributed either to Guo Xiang or Cheng Xuanying when appropriate.

3 (Levi 2010, pp. 22–23). Levi's list includes Confucius (43), Zhuangzi (27), Laozi (15), Huizi (10), Yan Hui (10), Zigong (8), Yao (8), Zizhang (6), Shun (6), Liezi (6), and the Yellow Emperor (5), among others.

4 (Cook 1997, p. 521) notes that Yan Hui "is a recurring figure throughout the *Zhuangzi*, especially in the 'inner chapters,' and in nearly all cases is made either to speak important bits of wisdom himself, or else to serve as the recipient for edifying instruction from his master, Kong Zi (Confucius, 551–479 b.c.)."

5 A reviewer for this journal noted that the *yangsheng*/*zuowang* distinction may be drawn too starkly and oversimplify the relation between the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*, as both texts contain elements of both practices. While I maintain the heuristic value of the distinction for tracing Ziqi's arc, I am grateful for the observation and leave the fuller question open for further exploration.

6 A reviewer for this journal noted the parallel with Guang Chengzi in *ZZ* 11.4, where a *yangsheng* master does teach a questioner after an initial rebuke. There, the Yellow Emperor asks first about governing the world through the Dao and is harshly dismissed: "What you want to ask about are the dregs of things; what you want to govern are the remnants of things. With the fawning heart of a flatterer, how could you be worthy to hear of the Perfect Dao?" (*ZZJS*, p. 380). After withdrawing, purifying himself, and returning to ask instead "how to regulate the body so as to be able to live long," Guang Chengzi, who by this point has lived twelve hundred years, praises the question and delivers a sustained teaching on guarding stillness, preserving life, and achieving longevity. The parallels with Nü Yu's scene, both involving an initial harsh dismissal, are striking, though the outcomes differ and deserve fuller treatment. What matters for the present study is the difference in the questions themselves: the Yellow Emperor's second question stays within the *yangsheng* framework ("How to regulate the body" 治身奈何), while Ziqi's question ("Can the Dao be learned?" 道可得學邪?) already points beyond technique to the problem of transmission itself. His rejection is thus not a judgment on *yangsheng* but on the kind of question he asks.

7 *ZZJS* p. 849 identifies the *zhi* with Ziqi's reputation, but that also refers back to himself: "My reputation came first, thus making others know of me. I was the one who sold my reputation; therefore, Tian He saw me and traded on it."

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