



# Gangster Zhi: Comedic Daoist Philosophical Practice

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## Abstract

This paper argues that the *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》 represents a specific type of Daoist practical philosophy: It is medicinal or therapeutic and seeks to promote existential ease, often by means of humor. Part of its approach to practical philosophy consists in pointing out the impracticality of many early Chinese philosophical doctrines, and, especially, Confucian political and ethical teachings. To illustrate this understanding of the *Zhuangzi*, the narrative of Confucius' visit to the legendary Gangster Zhi (*dao zhi* 盜跖) is analyzed in some detail.

## Keywords

Daoism – *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》 – practical philosophy – humor – Gangster Zhi (*dao zhi* 盜跖)

## 1 Introduction

Early Chinese philosophy was thoroughly practical. If pressed to point out a main difference between ancient Greek and Chinese philosophy, I would say that while Greek philosophical questioning was often informed by the guiding distinction between truth and appearance – and thus focused on ontological and epistemological problems – a basic distinction informing many early Chinese philosophical discourses was order/disorder, or *zhi* 治 / *luan* 亂. In short, early Chinese philosophers were not as much experts in finding out what is “true” as in defining “order” and suggesting ways to

achieve it or to avoid “disorder.” Order could refer in a wide dimension to the world or the cosmos in general (*zhi tianxia* 治天下), in a narrow dimension to body and mind (*zhi shen* 治身), or, more often than not, to the sociopolitical realm (*zhi guo* 治國). Confucians, Mohists, Legalists, Daoists, and other (often mixed) philosophical schools all presented competing versions of practical order. Many philosophers, such as Confucius 孔子 (ca. 551–479 BCE), Mencius 孟子 (ca. 372–289 BCE), or Hanfeizi 韓非子 (ca. 280–233 BCE), served as political and ethical consultants to rulers of their times. Most early Chinese philosophical texts, at least in part, present what today is called “applied philosophy” by giving concrete advice on matters of political leadership, strategy, and morally correct behavior in concrete situations.

The central Daoist text *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》, attributed to the philosopher Zhuang Zhou 莊周 (ca. 369–286 BCE), may at first sight appear to be an exception to the rule by not offering much specific political, strategic, or ethical guidance. In a short biographical note on Zhuang Zhou, the famous historian Sima Qian 司馬遷 (ca. 145–86 BCE) emphasized that Zhuang Zhou's writings “could not be utilized by the rulers and the powerful” (*wang gong da ren bu neng qi zhi* 王公大人不能器之),<sup>1</sup> indicating their distinct “non-practical” nature. After closer inspection, however, it turns out that significant parts of the *Zhuangzi* are indirectly practical by critiquing

1 *Shiji* 《史記》 63: 9. *Chinese Text Project* database: <https://text.org/shiji/lao-zi-han-fei-lie-zhuan>, accessed March 13, 2022.

the practical philosophy of others, and especially, of Confucians. In this way, the *Zhuangzi* presents a kind of “negative practical philosophy.” Its value consists in pointing out the impracticality of much of early Chinese practical philosophy. Sima Qian’s biography of Zhuang Zhou contains a short anecdote illustrating this. When offered a high government position, Zhuang Zhou refuses it by comparing government officials to sacrificial oxen who are well treated for a long time only to be eventually killed and eaten. He declares that he prefers a simple life over public office in order to “keep my mind happy” (*yi kuai wu zhi* 以快吾志).<sup>2</sup>

This anecdote is paradigmatic for a peculiar Daoist approach to practical philosophy. While critiquing the impracticality of, especially, Confucian political philosophy, the *Zhuangzi* shifts its attention to issues of physical health and mental ease. In line with many other texts associated with philosophical and practical or “religious” Daoism (*daojiao* 道教), the *Zhuangzi* is, as Norman Girardot put it, thoroughly “medicinal”<sup>3</sup> – or therapeutic.

A popular saying in English (with many equivalents in other languages) is: “Laughter is the best medicine.” A prime method in the *Zhuangzi* for promoting an existential “lightness of being” via philosophical literature is humor. In an often satirical, ironic, or parodic fashion, the text produces what it philosophically argues for: ease – or, as the *Zhuangzi* calls it, *you* 遊.

This paper presents a case study on Daoist practical philosophical humor. It discusses the parodic story of a fictitious meeting between Confucius and the early Chinese arch villain Gangster Zhi (*dao zhi* 盜跖), included in the *Zhuangzi*. In a typical fashion, the story advocates existential ease “theoretically” while practically making its readers smile. I present here a partial translation of

the narrative, divided into three “episodes” each of which is followed by a textual analysis.<sup>4</sup>

## 2 Episode One: The Visit

Confucius had a friend named Liuxia Ji 柳下季, the elder brother of the Gangster Zhi 盜跖. Gangster Zhi had about 9000 men: They rampaged throughout the land, raided the territories, and assaulted the local overlords. They crashed through walls, broke into houses, drove away the cattle and the horses, and took the wives and daughters of men. Their greed made them forget all family bonds. They heeded neither fathers nor mothers and paid no respect to elder brothers. To the ancestors, they did not sacrifice. (...) Confucius said to Liuxia Ji: “A father needs to be able to chastise his son, and an older brother must be able to teach his younger brother a lesson. (...) You are a man of high standing, but your younger brother is the Gangster Zhi. He causes all sorts of trouble, and you have not managed to set him straight. You make me ashamed. I am going to talk some sense into him in your stead.” Liuxia Ji replied: “(...) That gangster has a heart like a hot spring, and a mind like a hurricane. He’s strong enough to take anyone out, and he’s smart enough to put a nice spin on his wrongs. If someone manages to please him, he’ll be glad; but if rubbed the wrong way, he’ll get mad and embarrass anyone he is talking to. Just don’t go there.” Confucius didn’t listen. He went to see the Gangster with Yan Hui 顏回 as his driver and Zi Gong 子貢 as support. They found Gangster Zhi resting with his gang at the southern side of Mount Tai 太. He was snacking on a man’s

<sup>2</sup> *Shiji* 《史記》 63: 10. Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Girardot states that the “best way to characterize the Daoist idea of salvation is to see it as being fundamentally ‘medicinal’ in intention and structure.” Norman J. Girardot, *Myth and Meaning in Early Daoism: The Theme of Chaos (Hundun)* (St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>4</sup> Animated videos of the three episodes based on the following translations and interpretations are made available on the author’s YouTube channel “Philosophy in Motion:” <https://www.youtube.com/@philosophyinmotion>.

minced liver. Confucius stepped out of the vehicle and approached the camp.<sup>5</sup>

The tale of Confucius' visit to Gangster Zhi is the longest coherent narrative in the whole book of *Zhuangzi*. It reads almost like a modern short story and delineates its protagonists with lively details and within a quite elaborate dramatic setting. It constitutes the bulk of the 29th chapter, also titled "Gangster Zhi," which is part of the so-called "miscellaneous chapters" that tended to be regarded as peripheral or even inauthentic. However, the piece is mentioned in Sima Qian's note on Zhuang Zhou. He says that Zhuang Zhou wrote "Gangster Zhi" along with two other texts now included among the "outer" and "miscellaneous chapters," to "mock the followers of Confucius and to illustrate the arts of Laozi 老子."<sup>6</sup> Given this record, it makes sense to assume that, far from being a later addition to the core of the *Zhuangzi*, the Gangster Zhi story may actually be one of the earlier and more "original" segments of the book.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Sima Qian's note clearly shows that already in early China, Zhuang Zhou was not merely seen as a serious philosopher, but also as a skilled writer with a satirical bent who liked to make fun of "mainstream" Confucians – and who did so from a Daoist background.

The main protagonists of the tale were all known as historical figures at the time, and in this way, it follows the common pattern of narratives in early Chinese philosophical texts. From a purely formal perspective, it is presented like a true story that the reader is supposed to learn something from – either a moral message illustrated by good or bad exemplars, or a strategic lesson on how to achieve success or avoid failure. However, the very first sentence already contradicts its formal historicity and sets a fictional and humorous tone.

5 *Zhuangzi* 29: 1. *Chinese Text Project* database: <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi/robber-zhi>, accessed March 13, 2022.

6 *Shiji* 《史記》 63: 9. *Chinese Text Project*.

7 See Esther Klein, "Were there 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*," *T'oung Pao* 96 (2010): 299–369.

Liuxia Ji, a respected politician of old, could not have been friends with Confucius – the sage, government official, and ethical advisor – as Confucius is believed to have been born in the sixth century BCE, nearly a century after Liuxia Ji's death.

The curious assertion that Gangster Zhi, a notorious criminal in early China about whom many legends were circulating, was Liuxia Ji's younger brother is not supported by other sources. It is a quite frivolous invention of the *Zhuangzi*, it seems, made in order to connect the vicious lowlife with a virtuous ancient aristocrat. It is precisely this brotherly bond connecting the highest and lowest strata of society and the opposite poles of the ethical divide between good and evil, however, that signals the main philosophical theme of the story: the carnivalesque mixture of noble and base, and the incongruent fusion of moral opposites.

The historical Liuxia Ji is mentioned by the most famous early Confucian philosophers. Confucius commends him in the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語), and Mencius praises him in his works.<sup>8</sup> In both

8 See *Analects* 15: 14, 18: 2; 18: 8 and *Mencius* 5B: 1. In all these cases Liuxia Ji is referred to as Liuxia Hui 柳下惠, but commentators have commonly pointed out that the two names indicate the same person. The passage in *Mencius* (translated by James Legge) goes: "Hui of Liu Xia was not ashamed to serve an impure prince, nor did he think it low to be an inferior officer. When advanced to employment, he did not conceal his virtue, but made it a point to carry out his principles. When dismissed and left without office, he did not murmur. When straitened by poverty, he did not grieve. When thrown into the company of village people, he was quite at ease and could not bear to leave them. He had a saying, 'You are you, and I am I. Although you stand by my side with breast and arms bare, or with your body naked, how can you defile me?' Therefore when men now hear the character of Hui of Liu Xia, the mean become generous, and the niggardly become liberal." (*Chinese Text Project* database: <https://ctext.org/mengzi/wan-zhang-ii>, accessed March 12, 2022) *Analects* 18: 2 (translated by James Legge) says: "Hui of Liu Xia, being chief criminal judge, was thrice dismissed from his office. Some one said to him, 'Is it not yet time for you, sir, to leave this?' He replied, 'Serving men in an upright way, where shall I go to, and not experience such a thrice-repeated dismissal? If I choose to serve men in a crooked way, what necessity is there for me to leave the country of my parents?'" (*Chinese*

cases, he appears as a calm person of great integrity, unperturbed by three consecutive dismissals by corrupt superiors he had been forced to serve. He mirrors a similar character in the *Zhuangzi* (22:10) named Sunshu Ao 孫叔敖 who is equally stoic when fired three times from his high office and promoted again later. In the Gangster Zhi tale, Liuxia Ji seems to function as a dispassionate Daoist observer who, despite his involvement with the other protagonists as brother and friend, manages to distance himself from their respective follies. He keeps a cool head in the midst of immoral desires and corrupt power struggles which he is incapable of reining in.

Confucius is introduced in the tale as a man strictly committed to the emblematic “family values” that his philosophy has been commonly associated with at least since the time the *Zhuangzi* was written. He emphasizes the roles of father and son, and older and younger brother. Fathers and sons represent the hierarchy between successive generations of a patriarchal kinship group where the young must serve the old. Similarly, within the same generation, the later born siblings are subordinated to those born before them. Social order, it is presumed, hinges as much on the obedience of those at the bottom of the hierarchy as on the capability of those higher up to enforce their positions of power. Otherwise, things may soon get out of control – as the case of the un-authoritarian Liuxia Ji and his gangster kid brother so clearly shows. Confucius points out most unambiguously to the “soft” Liuxia Ji that his Daoist passivity is not only disrupting the stability and the peace of society, but, more importantly, that it is an ethically intolerable *shame* (*xiu* 羞). In line with a Confucian ethics that seeks to ensure social and political order by means of moral instruction and behavioral training, Confucius decides to take charge of the matter himself. He is going to teach (*jiao* 教) the Gangster how to change his evil ways.

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*Text Project* database: <https://ctext.org/analects/wei-zi>, accessed March 12, 2022).

Ignoring Liuxia Ji’s advice that he better not mess with the Gangster, Confucius sets out on his educational mission. Wisely, though, he does not go alone, but takes his two most trusted and well-known disciples, Yan Hui and Zi Gong, along to back him up. Escorted by them he arrives at the Gangster’s camp, ready to confront the rogue.

Gangster Zhi is mentioned in many early Chinese texts and is almost always depicted as the embodiment of crime, cruelty, and chaos. He is contrasted with paragons of virtue functioning as ideal rulers. Such contrasts show history as a struggle between forces of civilization, often represented by Confucian sages, and forces of barbarianism threatening to viciously destroy this precarious social order out of personal depravity and brutish inhumanity. Gangster Zhi’s initial description fits this image perfectly: He is the leader of a huge crime gang acting like an army from hell. They torture the country and its people for sheer greed and sadistic enjoyment. What is more, the murderous mob blatantly disrespects the cornerstone of Confucian civilization: its family values. Not only do they destroy families by stealing wives and daughters, but on top of this desecration, they have lost all respect for their own kinship relations. Like Gangster Zhi, his gang members have disassociated themselves from all the elder figures of authority. They have cut themselves off from their kinship ties and have set themselves free from all related restrictions. Completely uninhibited, they go as far as neglecting the duties of ancestral worship, thereby, in effect, starving the spirits of the very predecessors to whom they owe their existence. In effect they not only kill everyone who gets in their way, but also their own kin.

When Liuxia Ji speaks about his brother, the image of the villain begins to change. While he does confirm the Gangster’s criminal nature and frightening characteristics, Liuxia Ji also stresses the man’s mindset. His violence betrays a sort of unbound vigor and unhinged energy. He may be susceptible to some flattery, but if he dislikes a person’s attitude, he will straightforward and

mercilessly “embarrass” (*ru 辱*) them. Clearly, he neither respects rank nor social convention. In Liuxia Ji’s portrayal, Gangster Zhi is both raw and sensitive, aggressive and smart, volatile and direct, wild and eloquent. This nuanced and ambiguous picture corresponds to the Gangster’s features in other sections of the *Zhuangzi* showing him as a complex and contradictory combination of good and evil.<sup>9</sup>

When the Gangster appears in the story he is put under the spotlight right away. The “southern side” of a mountain where Confucius finds him is called Yang 陽 in Chinese which is associated with the sun, light, and masculinity as opposed to Yin 陰 which is associated with the moon, shade, and femininity. This introduction highlights the Gangster’s virility, while his ferocity is exaggerated and becomes grotesque: He is a cannibal casually devouring a human liver.

The incongruent characteristics of Gangster Zhi in the *Zhuangzi* gave rise to modern interpretations of his historical significance that deviate decisively from his traditional picture as an arch villain. Based on Marxist dialectical materialism, Chinese Maoists regarded Gangster Zhi as a rebel representing the revolt of the early Chinese peasantry against their feudal oppressors and the Confucian value system that legitimized them.<sup>10</sup> This begs the question: How will Confucius fare when trying to straighten out this unwieldy rebel?

### 3 Episode Two: The Proposal

“I am Confucius from Lu,” said the Master introducing himself to the Gangster’s musclemans while respectfully bowing down twice, “and I know of your general’s great

righteousness.” (...) When Gangster Zhi heard this, he fumed with anger (...): “This is the cunning hypocrite Confucius from Lu, right? (...) You make up words and empty speeches boasting those idol kings from the past. You wear a hat with branches like a tree and a belt from the ribs of a dead cow. You talk too much of fancy doctrines. You eat but you don’t plough, and you dress but you don’t weave. Your lips always move, and your tongue is like a drumstick beating into others your inventions of right and wrong. With them, you’ve conned those in power and perverted those keen on learning. You fake family values to suck up to the rich and the rulers.” (...) Confucius replied: “You are more than six feet tall, your eyes shine bright in your face, your lips glow red, your teeth are like rows of shells, your voice sounds like a golden bell, and still, they call you the ‘Gangster Zhi.’ To be honest, general, this makes me cringe, and I reject that name. General, please hear me out. (...) Let me talk to the rulers of Wu 吳 and Yue 越 in the south, of Qi 齊 and Lu 魯 in the north, of Song 宋 and Wei 衛 in the east, and of Jin 晉 and Chu 楚 in the west. I’ll make sure, general, to get you a decent chunk of territory with a nicely sized population. Then, general, you’ll be a Lord, too. You’ll get a fresh start in the world and you can let your troops have a rest. You will take good care of your brothers and kin, and sacrifice to the ancestors with them. This is the way all the great and talented men have been doing it, and everyone loves it.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Analects* of Confucius, presumably put together by later generations of his followers, are a collection of records of what the Master said and did. They focus heavily on his teachings on propriety or ritual – aesthetically refined and often highly formalized manners supposed to adequately express emotions and ensure moral correctness

9 This is especially the case in the section in *Zhuangzi* 10: 1 where Gangster Zhi explains that “gangsters have their *dao*, too” (*dao yi you dao* 盜亦有道) – a phrase which later became a common Chinese proverb.

10 See Deborah Sommer, “Images for Iconoclasts: Images of Confucius in the Cultural Revolution,” *East-West Connections* 7 no. 1 (2000): 1–23.

11 *Zhuangzi* 29: 1. *Chinese Text Project*.

in human interactions. What is more, they show Confucius' actual behavior in some detail. A person's character, the Confucian emphasis on ritual assumes, shows itself in virtually every activity and posture. One whole chapter (chapter 10) of the *Analects* describes Confucius' daily life from such a ritual perspective. It includes many specifics ranging from eating and drinking etiquette to sleeping positions. One of the most important behavioral gestures in ancient China (and on some occasions still today) was bowing. It was a way of greeting which, though much more elaborate, is comparable in function to how we shake hands today. The manner of bowing, and the number of bows, was considered highly significant, and the *Analects* attest that Confucius, too, took bowing very seriously. One passage reads: "Bowing below the hall is prescribed by the rules of ceremony, but now the practice is to bow only after ascending it. That is arrogant. I continue to bow below the hall."<sup>12</sup>

Bowing was a central part of meeting others, especially in political contexts. Like in today's diplomacy, one would not simply meet with anyone, particularly not if they were considered of dubious moral reputation or low standing. One passage in the *Analects* shows Confucius making a point of *not* receiving a visitor he apparently deemed inappropriate: "Ru Bei wished to see Confucius, but Confucius declined to see him, on the ground of being sick. When the bearer of this message went out the doors, the Master took his lute and sang with it, in order that Bei might hear him."<sup>13</sup>

Given the moral delicacy of whom to visit or not in early Chinese culture, the very notion of Confucius travelling to see the Gangster Zhi is quite surreal. To then have Confucius, the prime expert on greeting ceremony, bow twice in front of the arch villain's security detail, is rather sacrilegious, or better: bizarre. From the start, the diplomatic setting of Confucius' call on a major

gangster is ironic. The mission becomes deeply satirical when Confucius introduces himself with an egregious lie betraying his duplicity: "I know of your general's great righteousness."

Unlike Confucius, whom the story has now outed as a parody of himself, the Gangster is, in all his uncontrolled emotionality, brutally honest. Far from replying with the same fake politeness, he immediately un masks Confucius as a "cunning hypocrite." The presumably uneducated Gangster, it turns out, is well aware of the sage's educated tricks. He knows that a favorite rhetorical device of the Confucians is to connect their own teachings with ancient heroes whom they like to namedrop to claim legitimacy for themselves. Just as hollow as this reference to a legendary past is their pompous attire. Unlike the common people they dress in absurdly extravagant ways intended to inspire awe and admiration. However, their ridiculous outfit only reveals their vanity. They make their living by constant talking that has no practical use. In fact, they live off the hard work of others without doing any labor themselves.

Gangster Zhi's portrayal of early Chinese intellectuals as exploitative ideologists who profit without producing gives some credibility to a Marxist reading of his character. At least in this story in the *Zhuangzi*, he expresses some sort of class consciousness. His critique of the idle Confucian elites may well be a response to a point made by the Confucian philosopher Mencius: "Some labor with their minds, and some labor with their strength. Those who labor with their minds govern others; those who labor with their strength are governed by others. Those who are governed by others support them; those who govern others are supported by them. This is a principle universally recognized."<sup>14</sup>

Mencius formulates this supposed "universal principle" in a disapproving remark on a communitarian collective of his time. The leader of this collective actually did participate in ploughing the fields and weaving the clothes along with

<sup>12</sup> *Analects* 9: 3, trans. James Legge. *Chinese Text Project*.

<sup>13</sup> *Analects* 17: 20. *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Mengzi* 3A: 4, trans. James Legge. *Chinese Text Project*.

everyone else. Mencius regards this “mode of production” as not only economically inefficient, but more importantly, as uncivilized, because it does not set up proper social hierarchies or so-called “human roles” (*ren lun* 人倫). For Mencius, Confucian ritual propriety is needed to establish stable distinctions between, for instance, rulers and ruled, or men and women. Only these distinctions, Mencius believes, allow humans to emerge from a state of barbarism where everyone lives almost equally – like animals do. Gangster Zhi, on the other hand, sympathizes with the “barbarians” and despises the self-appointed Confucian moralists for being parasitic.

Confucian intellectuals maintain power over those who feed and clothe them by imposing an ethical regime. This ethical regime regulates the lives of those beneath them through behavioral training in accordance with distinct “human roles.” It establishes an artificial moral code centered on respecting hierarchies by creating distinctions between right and wrong. Gangster Zhi charges Confucius with preaching an invented morality that endears him to the ruling class – because it justifies and cements their power and wealth – and that has profoundly polluted all culture and learning.

Confucius, however, proves immune to the Gangster’s scolding. He duly follows the initial advice of Liuxia Ji, the Gangster’s older brother, and flatters Zhi in the most blatant way. Shamelessly trying to gain the Gangster’s favor, Confucius bends over backwards to praise the villain’s good looks. This overt flattery leads up to an appeal to the Gangster’s self-respect. Despite the “great righteousness” and impeccable beauty that Confucius ascribes to him, the Gangster is socially despised. From a Confucian moral perspective, he is a failure – but not because of his actual qualities, which, as Confucius just assured him, are wonderful. The real problem is that he lacks a proper name (*ming* 名) in society.

The doctrine of the “correction of names” (*zheng ming* 正名) was of prime importance in early Confucianism. When, in the *Analects*, Confucius

is asked about the first thing he’d do if appointed ruler, he says it would be “to correct names.”<sup>15</sup> In short, this doctrine means not only that all words should have unambiguous meanings and be used accurately, but that a person’s title and reputation should be perfectly in line with their actions and roles. Along with propriety in behavior, such accuracy in language was regarded as the main precondition of social order. In effect, this emphasis on names and titles functioned somewhat similarly to how brand names work today: it fostered an obsession with public prestige.

In the Gangster Zhi story, Confucius assumes that while the Gangster has ample physical beauty and material wealth, he severely lacks the proper complement to it: official title and rank. From the perspective of Confucian ethics, this is a cause for great shame – and therefore Confucius cringes. He promises to fix this major moral problem for the Gangster and suggests a thoroughly corrupt “correction of names.”

Confucius was not only a philosopher, but also an experienced official and political consultant who once had a high government job in the state of Lu. He offers the Gangster a vital service: A complete make-over of his reputation that will turn him into a respected leader and beloved ruler. Using his connections, Confucius will get the Gangster his own state. Once this is done, the Gangster will be completely legit and can embrace Confucian morality. He can share his new possessions with the members of his clan and establish a feudal stronghold with them. All this will be perfectly in line with ancient religious customs. This is, Confucius says, the way crooks of

15 *Analects* 13: 3. Here, Confucius explains: “If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success. When affairs cannot be carried on to success, proprieties and music will not flourish. When proprieties and music do not flourish, punishments will not be properly awarded. When punishments are not properly awarded, the people do not know how to move hand or foot.” Trans. James Legge, *Chinese Text Project*.

all ages eventually became kings and emperors. “And everyone loves it!” But will Gangster Zhi love it, too?

#### 4 Episode Three: The Diatribe

Gangster Zhi was furious: (...) “Those who sweet-talk you to your face diss you behind your back. You speak to me of a large land with many people just to lure me with profit. (...) In the age when Shen Nong 神農 the Farmer Spirit ruled, people slept where they happened to be and woke up cheerfully. They knew their mothers, but they didn’t know their fathers. They lived side by side with the deer. They ploughed to eat and wove to dress. It was not on their mind to hurt one another. But then came the Yellow Emperor. He slaughtered the native tribes out in the wild, and their blood ran for a hundred miles. Then came the sage kings and they set up their crowds of underlings. (...) And since then, the strong have always oppressed the weak, and the many terrorized the few. (...) Now you, with your slick words and fake behavior, con and hoodwink those in power because you’re after their wealth and rank. There is no greater gangster than you. Why don’t they call you ‘Gangster Confucius’ instead of calling me ‘Gangster Zhi?’ (...) Jie Zitui 介子推 had such great loyalty that he cut flesh from his legs to feed his Duke. (...) Wei Sheng 尾生 had a date with a girl under a bridge. When she didn’t show up, the water rose, but he didn’t leave. Hugging a pillar of the bridge, he drowned. (...) They all got fixated on making names for themselves and disregarded their mortality. (...) Humans can live one hundred years at most, many live to eighty, some only to sixty. Discount the times of sickness and pain, grieving and mourning, worrying and being sad, and you end up with at most four or five days a month with a smile on your face. (...) If you are unable to be at

ease and take care of your sanity, you’re way off the Dao.”<sup>16</sup>

Gangster Zhi angrily rejects Confucius’ offer to make him a legitimate member of the feudal elite. The rebuttal, which is here abridged to roughly a quarter of its original length, takes the form of a diatribe. The diatribe is a specific genre found in philosophical texts of ancient Greece. It is an extended rant against an either absent or mostly silent opponent. It makes use of humor and sarcasm and appeals to the emotions rather than purely rational argumentation.

In a satirically exaggerated way, Gangster Zhi deconstructs the Confucian worldview, and especially its ethics, from a Daoist perspective. He focuses on three focal points of Confucian morality and inverts them ironically so that what appeared to be good and right is revealed as its opposite. Somewhat similar to Friedrich Nietzsche’s often polemic revaluations of the values of mainstream Christianity, Gangster Zhi’s diatribe reevaluates the core values of popular Confucianism: First, the supposed founding heroes of civilization turn out to be harbingers of human suffering and social injustice. Second, the invention of moral language that is supposed to distinguish the virtuous actually serves the promotion of crooks. Third, the moral exemplars who are supposed to guide people ethically are in fact twisted psychopaths whom no one should follow.

#### 4.1 *The Founders of Civilization Were Mass Murderers and Oppressors*

Gangster Zhi is no fool and easily sees through Confucius’ attempt to win him over with flattery. He unmasks Confucius’ duplicity and resists his attempt at corruption. Instead, this very corruption attempt gives rise to an account of the Confucian civilization project as a history of increasing decadence and depravity – of which Confucius is a living example. Gangster Zhi makes a philosophical point by means of a

<sup>16</sup> Zhuangzi 29:1. *Chinese Text Project*.



pseudo-historical narrative. This method is often used by Confucians, but here it is turned against them. In an ironic reversal, the Confucian tale of successive cultural founding fathers becomes a story of violence and destruction.

In Gangster Zhi's version of history, the wild "state of nature" was by no means barbaric. In line with Daoist visions of an ideal society of the past in the *Daodejing* 道德經,<sup>17</sup> it is depicted as idyllic. People lived a simple, self-sustaining agricultural life in harmony with fauna and flora, and also, importantly, with one another. Everyone was content and practiced some kind of "free love," faintly reminiscent of a modern-day hippie lifestyle. Repressive patriarchic family structures did not yet exist.

The age of non-violence and joy, however, was upended for good with the arrival of the traditional civilization heroes. Rather than leading humankind out of brutish animalism, the Yellow Emperor is, for Gangster Zhi, a mass murderer who committed genocide on the natives. He was followed by equally blood-thirsty despots who gradually set up a political ruling class. This established, almost in Marxist fashion, a permanent class struggle where the powerful are busy oppressing the powerless. Confucius himself is a product of the intellectual

class that supports this system of oppression. He supplies society with a moralistic ideology that deceives it about itself and maintains a false consciousness. As a reward, subservient and hypocritical intellectuals like Confucius are well paid and socially promoted by the rulers who fall for their fake ethics.

#### 4.2 *Moral Language Is a Tool for the Promotion of Crooks*

In a thoroughly ironic manner, Gangster Zhi not only reverses the standard Confucian narrative of the process of civilization, but also the sociopolitical doctrine of the "correction of names." Confucius had expressed his embarrassment about the Gangster's bad reputation and lack of official rank. He had offered, in essence, to totally re-brand the Gangster, and make him a venerable and publicly acclaimed leader. But the Gangster has no desire at all to participate in the crooked game of artificially elevating individuals by giving them false titles. He does not want social supremacy based on fake moral excellence. Instead, he suggests to re-brand Confucius. If Confucius is really serious about "correcting names," the Gangster stipulates, he should start with himself and accept the title "Gangster Confucius."

#### 4.3 *Moral Exemplars Are Twisted Psychopaths*

The Gangster's ironic take on Confucian ethics eventually turns from the history of civilization and ethical language to moral exemplars. While historical narratives were frequently used in Confucian texts to convey moral or strategic lessons, tales of individuals of outstanding character were used to set up behavioral and psychological ideals. Everyone should try to emulate those role models as much as possible in one's own life.

In his diatribe, Gangster Zhi works through a rather long list of moral exemplars, but instead of looking up to them, he dismantles them and shows how pathetic they really are. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Gangster Zhi bangs on these idols with a hammer so that everyone can understand that

17 See chapter 80: "In a little state with a small population, I would so order it, that, though there were individuals with the abilities of ten or a hundred men, there should be no employment of them; I would make the people, while looking on death as a grievous thing, yet not remove elsewhere (to avoid it). Though they had boats and carriages, they should have no occasion to ride in them; though they had buff coats and sharp weapons, they should have no occasion to don or use them. I would make the people return to the use of knotted cords (instead of the written characters). They should think their (coarse) food sweet; their (plain) clothes beautiful; their (poor) dwellings places of rest; and their common (simple) ways sources of enjoyment. There should be a neighbouring state within sight, and the voices of the fowls and dogs should be heard all the way from it to us, but I would make the people to old age, even to death, not have any intercourse with it." Trans. James Legge. *Chinese Text Project*. <https://ctext.org/dao-de-jing>, accessed March 15, 2022.

they are hollow inside. Similarly to the way in which Nietzsche, the self-ascribed physiologist and psychologist, revealed the nihilistic life-denial of the Western idols he hammered against, Gangster Zhi exposes early Chinese exemplars as pathological and/or literally *in-sane*.

One of the exemplars Gangster Zhi picks out is Jie Zitui, known for his extraordinary devotion to both his mother and his ruler. Once, when the country was suffering from a famine, Jie Zitui fed the ruler with a chunk of meat he had taken from his own leg. Yet, not only did the ruler not reward Jie; he eventually had him killed, albeit unintentionally. A man named Wei Sheng was so dedicated to his bride that he got himself drowned in a river for no good reason. For Gangster Zhi these and so many other similar cases are not illustrations of personal virtue, but, to the contrary, of moral zealotry. He regards these seeming exemplars as obsessed with virtue signaling. They yearn so intensely for moral recognition that they are driven to extremes. Being fundamentalist Confucians, they die as ethical martyrs in the perverse hope of gaining fame for themselves.

Gangster Zhi points out that in their moral bigotry the Confucian moral exemplars “disregarded their mortality” (*qing si* 輕死). This expression occurs twice in the *Daodejing*<sup>18</sup> and indicates an insufficient concern for physical and mental well-being. People who do not care for their health do not appreciate life enough. They lack “virtue” or *de* 德 in the amoral sense that the term often has in Daoist texts, meaning “vitality” or “efficacy” – as, for instance in the book title *Daodejing*, which can be translated as “Scripture of the Way and Vitality.”

Life is short, Gangster Zhi concludes, and, as he realistically stresses, most of the time it’s difficult to really enjoy it. As opposed to the Confucian pursuit of moral fame, Gangster Zhi simply wishes to achieve, as far as is possible, well-being. Well-being

for him, as in the *Zhuangzi* in general, consists not only in physical health, but, importantly, in ease and existential sanity. It seems such a state of ease and sanity is hardly achievable in a society dominated by a Confucian ethical and sociopolitical regime.

We should remember that Gangster Zhi speaks in the form of a diatribe here – that is, in a humorous mode. He is not a Daoist exemplar as an alternative to the Confucian exemplars he critiques. Instead, he is a comedian. Some scholars have read the Gangster Zhi chapter as a straightforward argument of a Daoist “primitivist” demanding a return to an ideal golden age characterized by simplicity.<sup>19</sup> But Gangster Zhi is not a Daoist ideologue – he is an incongruent, deeply ambiguous and parodic figure: a Daoist cannibal with an attitude, a ferocious gangster looking for peace of mind.

## 5 Conclusion

In comical form, the story of Confucius’ visit to Gangster Zhi in the *Zhuangzi* deconstructs three main tenets of Confucian moral philosophy: the historical narrative of a civilization process initiated by sage kings who led humanity out of an animalistic past and ordered society by establishing ethical relationships and hierarchies; the doctrine of producing social order by “correcting names”; and the didactic strategy to impose behavioral regimes with reference to role models exemplifying utmost dedication to moral values. The carnivalesque character of Gangster Zhi dismisses all these traditional foundations of a Confucian practical philosophy and points out in drastic language how they have corrupted society and created pathological individuals. Rather than

18 See chapter 75: “As to the people disregarding their mortality: because they strive so intensely in life therefore they disregard their mortality.” Ibid.

19 See for instance Angus C. Graham’s translation and interpretation of the Gangster Zhi chapter in his *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 234–243.

introducing an alternative vision for sociopolitical order or any ethical imperatives, the story instead functions in a medicinal or therapeutic way. By means of humor it provides existential relief, and hints at a different type of practical philosophy. The function of philosophy may not be to promote various sociopolitical and ethical regimes,

but to emphasize physical and mental well-being. The practical use of the Daoist philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* does not lie in helping rulers to sustain their power, but in spreading ease. Reading the *Zhuangzi* may hopefully add a few more days to one's life that can be spent "with a smile on your face."