Dao
https://doi.org/10.1007/s11712-023-09892-w

Kill Stories: A Critical Narrative Genre in the *Zhuangzi*

Hans-Georg Moeller[1]

Accepted: 30 May 2023

Abstract
This essay suggests that a narrative genre of "kill stories" has a prominent philosophical function in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Kill stories depict the domestication and disciplining of "wild" living beings eventually resulting in their death. They typically show an incongruity between the moral attitude of the perpetrators and their destructive deeds. Thereby, they illustrate a critique of a broader sociopolitical "master narrative" associated with the Confucian tradition that had a strong impact on ideology and ethical values in early China. In the diagnosis of the kill stories, ritual practice and civilizational ordering inevitably produce discontent and unease. A second narrative genre that I call "survival stories" corresponds to the kill stories and connects with the medicinal orientation of the Daoist tradition. As therapeutic allegories, the survival stories reflect strategies for maintaining sanity and ease within society. Rather than advocating escapism or a return to a primitivist state, they promote the cultivation of immunity against consumption by social demands and pressures based on an insight into the inescapability and contingency of social roles.

Keywords Zhuangzi 莊子 · Daoism · Ritual · Kill stories · Confucianism · Survival stories

1 Killing a Bird with Kindness

Chapter 18 of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 is titled "Zhi Le 至樂," or "Reaching Utmost Happiness" in Brook Ziporyn's translation (Ziporyn 2020). Despite this uplifting title, however, the chapter contains several stories about death

✉ Hans-Georg Moeller
hmoeller@um.edu.mo

[1] Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, University of Macau, Room 4112, FAH Building E 21, Avenida da Universidade, Taipa, Macau, China

Published online: 29 June 2023

and dying, including this short allegory about the strange killing of a bird (*Zhuangzi* 18.5)[1]:

> In olden times, a seabird came to roost in the outskirts of Lu [魯]. The marquis of Lu took it riding in his chariot to the temple, where he prepared a banquet for it, having the music of the Nine Shao [韶] performed for making it happy and supplying it with the best chops from the butcher for doing it good. The bird looked at it all with glazed eyes, worried and distressed, not daring to eat a bite, not daring to drink a sip, and after three days of this, the bird was dead. (Ziporyn 2020: 147; translation modified)[2]

The, arguably, academically most influential current philosophical interpretation of this story has been developed over the span of nearly two decades in numerous publications by Huang Yong (Huang 2005, 2010a, 2010b, 2014, 2015, 2018, 2022). Huang now reads it as expressing a "patient moral relativism." This patient moral relativism is distinct from both "agent relativism (moral judgments are relative to the standards of the agent or the agent group)" and "appraiser relativism (moral judgments are relative to the standards of the appraiser(s) or appraiser group(s)" (Huang 2018: 877). Unlike agent and appraiser relativism, patient relativism "puts the patient at the central stage of both our moral actions and our moral assessment of these actions." (Huang 2018: 892). From this perspective, the moral mistake of the marquis of Lu was his inability to respect the relative validity of the way of life of his "patient," the seabird.

While affirming the legitimacy of Huang's understanding of the seabird allegory, I suggest a different interpretation of the story in this essay. My interpretation does not contradict Huang's and is quite compatible with it. However, it takes Huang's assertion that the *Zhuangzi* "is much richer, involving far more topics than ethics" (Huang 2022: 479) seriously. I will therefore propose a reading of the story that goes beyond moral philosophy. Rather than assessing the potential significance of the seabird allegory for formulating normative claims in today's academic ethics, I will try to contextualize it within the narrative genres of the *Zhuangzi* and their historical function as sociopolitical critique. By focusing on narrative genres, I depart from Huang's formal categorization of the seabird story. Huang distinguishes between two kinds of philosophical narratives in the *Zhuangzi:* the often so-called "skill" or "knack stories" (see Lai and Chiu 2019) and "difference stories" represented by

[1] All references to early Chinese texts in this essay follow the online database *Chinese Text Project* (Sturgeon 2006–2023).

[2] The allegory appears in a larger and somewhat obscure narrative framework: Confucius brings it up to express his worries about one of his disciples intending to visit and presumably educate a ruler about Confucian morality and politics. He is afraid that the ruler may not respond well to his disciple's admonitions and that these may eventually result in someone's death. It is unclear, however, who Confucius thinks may end up dead: will the disciple be executed for offending the ruler (as most translators of the passage assume), or will the ruler fall victim to a Confucian "conversion"? The latter interpretation seems to fit the seabird story better, since here, too, a "Confucian" treatment leads to the death of the bird. The story is followed by a lengthy exposition outlining in further detail that the seabird died because the marquis "was trying to use what was nourishing to himself to nourish the bird, instead of using what was nourishing to the bird" (Ziporyn 2020: 147).

the seabird allegory. According to Huang, "While the former tells us how to do a thing well, the latter tells us what is the right thing to do" (Huang 2022: 475). Huang clearly implies that the right thing the "difference stories" tell us to do is to make the different standards of the patients of our actions the standards of our different treatment of them. While, as mentioned, such a moral conclusion can certainly be drawn from the seabird story—and is supported by the comments following it in the text[3]—it abstracts from the narrative components of the tale. It treats the story like a thought experiment in analytic philosophy by reducing fictional prose to a theoretical problem or argument while regarding its literary elements as contingent, arbitrary, or meaningless. In the famous "trolley problem," for instance, the narrative element of the *trolley* has no particular meaning at all. It could be replaced with any other object potentially crushing people to death without effecting the thought experiment to the slightest. Philosophical tales in the *Zhuangzi*, however, differ from thought experiments. Their narrative elements do not only matter but are of crucial importance for understanding the historical context and the concrete philosophical significance of the stories beyond a more or less abstract "moral."

I propose that the seabird allegory is an example of a hitherto hardly recognized but nevertheless important narrative genre in the *Zhuangzi*: kill stories. Like other similar narratives in the text, it depicts the killing of an untamed or amorphous living being by a civilizing, domesticating, or disciplining power. More often than not, the victims in the kill stories are living in the wild and/or symbolically challenge the human/animal distinction, while the killing perpetrators tend to be associated with the governmental practice of (court) ritual. Quite importantly, several kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* point to morality not as a potential remedy against killings, but as an integral part of the repressive arsenal of the killers. When read as a kill story, the seabird allegory is not so much an ethical fable meant to express a timeless moral principle, but a subversion of a deadly sociopolitical regime that actually existed in the historical period the *Zhuangzi* was composed. The marquis of Lu, the home state of Confucius, kills a wild bird by forcefully subjecting it to *ritual practice*. What he perceives as an act of hospitality is in effect an act of murder. And this murder results from the exercise of the standard governmental means of his time for imposing order and conformity onto society.

The main significance of identifying a kill stories genre in the *Zhuangzi*, in distinction to other narrative genres such as the skill stories and the difference stories mentioned by Huang, is to highlight their critical rather than their normative purpose. Unlike skill stories, kill stories do not demonstrate excellent Daoist practice; and unlike difference stories, they do not suggest a moral maxim. Instead, their function is *critical* in two ways: (1) they reveal and decry violence, hypocrisy, and other harmful effects of the exercise of power; and (2) they analyze and subvert in the form of allegorical narratives the repressive function of concrete sociopolitical procedures, such as ritual practice.

[3] The exposition of the allegory in the *Zhuangzi* says, for instance, that "differently constituted beings necessarily have different preferences. That is why the ancient sages did not require the same ability of everyone, did not assign everyone the same task" (Ziporyn 2020: 147).

Kill stories are found throughout the *Zhuangzi*; the examples discussed in this essay are taken from the "inner chapters" (*nei pian* 內篇), "outer chapters" (*wai pien* 外篇), and "miscellaneous chapters" (*za pian* 雜篇). These examples all include killings and the death of one or more victims as a central narrative motif; but, importantly, the killings are, from the perspective of the perpetrator, an integral, and sometimes unintended, aspect of a *moral* course of action: the killings happen while something supposedly "good" is being done. This *incongruity*, or contradiction, between a moral attitude and harmful behavior is a common dramatic characteristic of the kill stories. Similar ambiguities between the moral and the immoral, the good and the bad, or the beautiful and the ugly, are present in many stories in the *Zhuangzi*. Therefore, it is difficult—and perhaps counterproductive—to "isolate" the kill stories from other narrative genres in the *Zhuangzi*, as a reviewer of this essay has suggested. To the contrary, my hope in pointing out a kill story genre in the *Zhuangzi* is to encourage scholars to explore how this genre merges and mixes with other narrative genres to produce complex and yet poignant philosophical tales revealing and deconstructing the ambiguities of life.

2 Kill Stories in the *Zhuangzi*

Upon closer inspection, many narratives in the *Zhuangzi* turn out to be kill stories. Here, I discuss some of the most obvious cases.

2.1 Zhuang Zhou and the Sacrificial Ox

The mother of all kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* is the famous anecdote of Zhuang Zhou 莊周 declining an offer to take on a position in the government by comparing state officials with sacrificial oxen (*xi niu* 犧牛) killed and eaten at court rituals. Although treated luxuriously for a while and given all kinds of preferential treatment, these animals are eventually murdered. A short version of the story is included in the outer chapters of the *Zhuangzi* (32.15), and a longer one in the biographical note on Zhuang Zhou in the *Shiji* 史記 (*Records of the Historian*, 63.10).[4] I take this anecdote to be a paradigmatic kill story for two reasons. First, it is about Zhuang Zhou, the presumed author of the *Zhuangzi* himself. It therefore identifies and personalizes this genre as "Zhuangist." What is more, its inclusion in the *Shiji* indicates that it was regarded as representative of a Zhuangist attitude in the early stages of the history of the text.[5] The

[4] Another paradigmatic kill story is *Zhuangzi* 17.11: "Zhuangzi was once fishing beside the Pu [濮] River when two emissaries brought him a message from the King of Chu [楚]: 'The king would like to trouble you with the control of his realm.' Zhuangzi, holding fast to his fishing pole, without so much as turning his head, said, 'I have heard there is a sacred turtle in Chu, already dead for three thousand years, which the king keeps in a bamboo chest high in his shrine. Do you think this turtle would prefer to be dead and having his carcass exalted, or alive and dragging his tail through the mud?' The emissaries said, 'Alive and dragging his tail through the mud.' Zhuangzi said, 'Away with you then! I too will drag my tail through the mud'" (Ziporyn 2020: 141).

[5] As Esther Klein has argued, the depiction of the *Zhuangzi* in the *Shiji* suggests that the view that the "inner chapters" represent the most original version of Zhuangzi's philosophy is not well supported by early sources (Klein 2010).

Shiji predates the received version of the *Zhuangzi* by several centuries and testifies to the fact that this kill story was already well known in the 2nd century BCE. Moreover, both the short version of the narrative in the *Zhuangzi* and the longer one in the *Shiji* explicitly present the ritual killing of an animal as a political metaphor. This sets up an allegorical sociopolitical framework that the other kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* repeat, vary, or allude to.

2.2 Bo Le, the Horse Killer

One of the most elaborate kill stories in the *Zhuangzi*, which unfolds throughout Chapter 9, is titled "Horse Hooves (Ma Ti 馬蹄)." Its protagonist, the killer, is Bo Le 伯樂, a legendary horse expert and trainer.[6] He was well-known in early China (and still is today) and is mentioned in a variety of texts of the era, including, for instance, the *Xunzi* 荀子 (12.9), the *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 (23.1, 50.5), the *Zhan Guo Ce* 戰國策 (Strategies of the Warring States) (*Chu Ce* 楚策 4), the *Lü Shi Chunqiu* 呂氏春秋 (*Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*) (45.4), and the *Lunheng* 論衡 (*The Balanced Inquiries*) (40.3, 65.2). Typically, Bo Le is presented as a man of exemplary skill and knowledge; he is a sagely figure. However, in the *Zhuangzi* his positive image is reversed, and he appears as a villain. He boasts that he is good at "ordering" (*zhi* 治) horses (*Zhuangzi* 9.1), a crucial term in early Chinese philosophy indicating not only the political ordering and ruling of society (*zhi tianxia* 治天下, "ordering the world"), but also the geographical ordering of nature to make it inhabitable and fit for agriculture (*zhi shui* 治水, "ordering the waters") as well as human biological "self-ordering" or corporeal cultivation and discipline (*zhi shen* 治身, "ordering the body"). Bo Le's claim to be good at ordering connects him symbolically with the larger civilization project of establishing sociopolitical order that many of the early Chinese philosophical discourses focus on, and especially those comprising the Confucian tradition. The "Ma Ti" chapter, however, outlines that Bo Le's horse training does not at all improve the quality of the lives of the horses under his control. To the contrary, his extended "ordering"—ironically paralleling the extended spiritual and bodily cultivation periods described in many skill stories in the *Zhuangzi* and other Chinese texts—gradually leads to the death of the animals: after some time, more than half of them have been killed. Similarly, the same section in the *Zhuangzi* suggests, carpenters and potters violate the "nature" (*xing* 性) of wood or clay when reshaping them for use in human society.[7] At the center of Bo Le's deadly practice is a literal act of *domestication*: naturally, the horses live freely in the wild and "even if given fancy terraces and great halls, they would have no use for them"; Bo Le, however, *houses* them: he "proceeds to brand them, shave them, clip them, bridle them, fetter them with crupper and martingale, pen them in stable and stall" (Ziporyn 2020: 81).

[6] Huang Yong repeatedly refers to the story of Bo Le as well and reads it as another "difference story" in the *Zhuangzi* (Huang 2015, 2018, 2022).

[7] On narratives about the destruction of wildlife in the *Zhuangzi* see Chapter 2 on "zoocide" in Graziani 2021.

Importantly, the end of the chapter (9.3) explicitly likens Bo Le's domestication of animals to the civilization of native populations by a sociopolitical regime employing "ritual and music" (*li yue* 禮樂) and the moral codes of "humaneness and righteousness" (*ren yi* 仁義) promoted in many Confucian texts. The analogy clearly suggests that a peaceful state of "wild" bliss and contentment is violently replaced with brutally enforced discipline that creates misery and destroys life. Perversely, both Bo Le and the "civilizing" sages (*sheng ren* 聖人) are praised by the mainstream ideology of the time as ethical exemplars and regard themselves as benevolent. They lack any insight into the murderous consequences of their actions. The Bo Le kill story in *Zhuangzi* 9.3, however, reveals these supposed moral heroes as criminals (*zui* 罪).

2.3 Gangster Zhi Revises History

The 29th chapter of the *Zhuangzi* revolves mostly around another legendary character of early China well known from many anecdotes until today: an infamous leader of outlaws called Dao Zhi 盜跖, or "Gangster Zhi."[8] Although it is part of the final group of the miscellaneous chapters in the received version of the *Zhuangzi*, it is explicitly mentioned in Zhuang Zhou's *Shiji* biography (63.9), indicating that it was considered to be originally authored by him and regarded as an integral part of the textual corpus (see Klein 2010). The chapter depicts in great detail and with ample satire a fictional meeting between Gangster Zhi and Confucius (*Zhuangzi* 29.1). In typical Zhuangzian fashion, the moral evaluation of the characters rearranges their common reputation in a carnivalesque way. Confucius is portrayed as cunningly corrupt while Dao Zhi is highly ambiguous—he is honest and shrewd but also violent and volatile. The tale includes a lengthy diatribe by the Gangster where he humiliates, chastises, and ridicules the sage and exposes him as a moralistic hypocrite and selfish schemer. As part of the diatribe, Gangster Zhi ironically retells the standard historical narrative associated with Confucianism that traces the emergence of civilization back to a number of ancient sage rulers and their cultural, moral, and political inventions. In Gangster Zhi's alternative version of history, however, what appears in mainstream ideology as a process of cultural ordering by well-meaning political heroes is turned into a succession of brutal suppressors. He says:

> In the age of Shen Nong [神農], 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. … This was when utmost vitality was abundant. But then came the Yellow Emperor. … He slaughtered the native tribes out in the wild, and their blood ran for a hundred miles. Yao [堯] and Shun [舜] arose … and since then, the strong have always oppressed the weak. Since Tang [湯] and Wu [武] everyone brought disorder to humankind. (*Zhuangzi* 29.1)[9]

[8] Gangster Zhi is mentioned, for instance, in *Mengzi* 3B15, *Xunzi* 1.17 and 3.1, and numerous times in the *Hanfeizi* and the *Lunheng*. On the use of the character in the Cultural Revolution in modern China see Sommer 2007.

[9] Unless specified, all the English translations in this essay are mine.

Gangster Zhi's antihistory culminates in another kill story. A blissful state of "utmost vitality" (*zhi de*至德), characterized by the absence of families, free sex, and a commonality of humans and animals is destroyed by the genocidal intervention of violent rulers "out in the wild." These mass murderers are not harbingers of order but of havoc and disorder (*luan* 亂).

2.4 Butcher Ding

As outlined in more detail elsewhere (Moeller 2020), I agree with other sinological studies (Graziani 2005) that the famous tale of Butcher Ding (Pao Ding 庖丁) (*Zhuangzi* 3.2) is not simply a skill story. In my view, the numerous incongruities of the story—such as a sacrificial slaughter being visibly enacted in front of a ruler in violation of etiquette, the bloody dismembering of the ox blended into a musical and dance performance, the supposedly Daoist butcher boasting elaborately about his skills, an act of killing presented as an illustration of "nourishing life" (*yang sheng* 養生), and a butcher's knife (*dao* 刀) symbolizing Dao 道—preclude the standard reading of it as an emblematic depiction of Daoist spiritual elevation and bodily excellence. The core narrative components of the Butcher Ding story speak directly to the paradigmatic kill story of Zhuang Zhou and the Sacrificial Ox discussed above. It depicts the killing of the very ox that Zhuang Zhou refused to become. In my view, the Butcher Ding tale is best read as an intentional variation of Zhuang Zhou's symbolic critique of ritual as a performative manifestation of governmental corruption and of the perfidy of civilizational domestication.

In line with other kill stories in the *Zhuangzi*, the tale of Butcher Ding depicts the killing of an animal through the exercise of political ritual. Importantly, the negative character portrayal of Butcher Ding in the *Zhuangzi* connects with its depiction of Bo Le. Butcher Ding is mentioned together with Bo Le in two of the early Chinese sources (*Lü Shi Chunqiu* 45.4 and *Lunheng* 65.2) where the latter occurs. In both cases, Bo Le and Butcher Ding are introduced as a pair of exemplars of skill representing the successful domestication of animals and their utilization as resources for human life. Just as with Bo Le, the *Zhuangzi* radically contradicts Butcher Ding's positive evaluation in mainstream culture and shows him not as virtuous but as vile. As in other kill stories, qualities or actions commonly considered as morally good are shown to be incongruent by also being immoral or harmful.

2.5 Hundun's Death

The story of Hundun's 渾沌 death at the end of the inner chapters depicts another killing (*Zhuangzi* 7.7).[10] In this case, the victim is a mythological figure. Hundun is an amorphous blob whose shapelessness corresponds to the Daoist notion of *pu* 樸, representing a primordial and pristine state of formless potentiality and "nonaction" (*wu wei* 無為) frequently embellished in the *Laozi* 老子 and other texts. The amorphous primordial Hundun corresponds to the untamed animals and native tribes

[10] See Moeller 2017 for a detailed analysis of the story.

exterminated in the stories discussed above. As in these stories, the killers are associated with the exercise of political power. Unlike Hundun, they do not practice non-action, but engage in a civilizing activity. After having been hosted by Hundun, they agree to reciprocate by boring seven holes into him to supply him with a face that will make him look like a proper human being. This act parallels the domestication regime of Bo Le as well as the destructive interference of the sage kings mentioned in Gangster Zhi's diatribe: both violently "humanize" their wild victims and make them conform to cultural expectations.

The Hundun story connects with the kill stories of Butcher Ding, the sacrificial ox, and the seabird by taking place at court: they all feature or point to (pseudo-) rulers and the exercise of ritual behavior (hosting guests, conducting sacrifices, or exchanging favors). A core sociopolitical function of ritual was to performatively manifest power relations and bonds between hosts and guests, resulting in reciprocal obligations and dependencies. Many early Confucian texts, including the *Book of Rites* (*Liji* 禮記) and the *Analects* (*Lunyu* 論語) of Confucius, outline ritual conventions or depict the offering and giving of gifts. In connection with the ritual setting, the Hundun story shares one of the core narrative motifs of the seabird allegory and many other kill stories: the killing is unintentional, resulting from acts meant to be kind and beneficial to the eventual victim. The killers conform to conventional morality and accordingly think of themselves as "doing good" (*wei shan* 為善), as the seabird story puts it. In the Hundun story, too, norm-oriented moral thought and action incongruently results in disaster.[11]

3 Civilization and Its Unease: The Sociopolitical Meaning of Kill Stories

Although animals are the victims in many kill stories, I generally agree with Huang Yong's view that their main purpose is not to advocate animal rights, but that "by showing how we humans should treat or interact with other species of animals, the *Zhuangzi* is primarily trying to tell us how we human beings should treat each other and not how we human beings should treat other animals." (Huang 2022: 473). Of course, those kill stories featuring animals are in various ways compatible with today's animal rights discourse, but it would be anachronistic to assume that there was a similar discourse in early China that the *Zhuangzi* addressed. Given that the protagonists of the kill stories vary, and range from humans to mythological figures, it makes sense to assume, as Huang does, that they functioned as parables and were

[11] Huang Yong categorizes the Hundun allegory as another "difference story" (Huang 2018: 884). For him, "if we think that what is good for us must also be good for others and thus impose our standard of good upon them, calamity would likely result," and this is "precisely the moral of the story" (Huang 2010a: 74). I am not so sure about how "precise" it is here. In my view, the killers of Hundun do not really consider what is good for *them as individuals* but what is *commonly regarded as proper* in society. The story points out explicitly that the reasoning of the killers is that Hundun *alone* (*du* 獨) differs from *all* (*jie* 皆) other human beings (*ren* 人). Quite clearly, the moral standard they apply in treating Hundun is not personal, but more precisely speaking, conventional.

intended to be metaphorically related to human society. The context of the seabird story makes this explicit: it is told by Confucius to explain why he is worried about a political mission of one of his students.[12]

Similar to indigenous tribes or the figure of Hundun, animals in the kill stories represent an undomesticated, wild state of contentment, well-being, and ease. Politically speaking, this state corresponds to an ideal form of social organization paradigmatically formulated in Chapter 17 of the *Laozi* where rulers may exist but remain completely unnoticed, so that the common people feel they can live their lives completely "naturally" or "self-so" (*ziran* 自然). Their carefree way of existence, it is implied, is due to the enactment of the paradoxical governmental strategy of nonaction (*wu wei*) which, as Chapter 3 of the *Laozi* states, is how a Daoist sage brings about order (*sheng ren zhi zhi* 聖人之治). Rather than striving toward the realization of such a "primitivist" (Graham 2001) utopia, however, the kill stories' main purpose seems to be critical: they can be understood as allegorically depicting what Sigmund Freud called an *Unbehagen* ("discontent," or, perhaps better, "unease") inevitably and irreversibly produced along with the process of civilization or culture (Freud 1930). Whereas the *Laozi* sometimes, as in Chapter 28, calls for a "return" to an unspoiled state of simplicity (*fu gui yu pu* 復歸於樸), the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* typically refrain from such demands. They are not soteriological or ideological, but diagnostic: they allegorically depict sociopolitical pathologies.

The culprits in the kill stories, such as the Marquis of Lu, Bo Le, or Butcher Ding almost always impose some form of "cultured" practice on those under their control. Often this practice is either explicitly or implicitly related to the central disciplinary tool for bringing about sociopolitical order promoted in the Confucian tradition: *ritual* (*li* 禮). To be sure, as allegories the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* do not engage in any explicit discussion of any specific text or presumed author elaborating Confucian doctrines on political order or ritual. Instead, they refer or allude to symbols representing those doctrines, including legendary sage rulers like Yao and Shun, individuals like Confucius or his students, the state of Lu where Confucius came from and was believed to have held political office, or the performance of (court) rituals. Perhaps vaguely comparable to Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, the Zhuangzian critique of what is nowadays called "Confucianism" takes on the form of a philosophically oriented cultural and "genealogical" (i.e., historically framed) critique of repressive effects of a broader "master narrative" that had a dominant impact on the sociopolitical ideology and the ethical practice (including psychological and physiological regimes) at the time.

A pseudo-historical anecdote appearing in the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (1.4) sets up a sociopolitical horizon within which the kill stories gain their specific significance. The anecdote, which is found in different variations in other early Chinese texts as well, has the emblematic sage emperor Yao approaching a legendary sage named Xu You 許由, who in this and other stories in the *Zhuangzi* represents a Daoist position. Yao wishes to cede the throne to Xu You, but Xu You rejects the offer, saying: "You have been ordering the world, and thus the

[12] See note 2.

world has already been ordered (in a certain way)." Xu You acknowledges that the dominant (Confucian) master-narrative represented by Yao has irrevocably established a certain sociopolitical and cultural "order" (*zhi* 治). Although this order is from a Zhuangist perspective a disorder, as expressed in Gangster Zhi's revisionist historical account discussed above, it has shaped society beyond repair and must be accepted as a *fait accomplis*. Daoist figures like Xu You in the *Zhuangzi* are not proposing to undo the civilization process that they hold Confucian cultural heroes like Yao responsible for, but, not dissimilar to Nietzsche or Freud (or Foucault, for that matter), reveal the unpleasant "side effects" that a protracted cultural, ideological, and political ordering practice has produced. This ordering practice, which is associated with the Confucian master-narrative and its symbolic representations, constitutes in my view the background of the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi*.

A dense paradigmatic version of the Confucian metanarrative of social order occurs in Chapter 3A3–4 of the *Mengzi* 孟子. Here, Mencius first establishes a foundational distinction between those who order (*zhi* 治) others and those who are ordered by them:

> If there were no nobles, no one would order the savages. If there were no savages, no one would feed the nobles. … As to the ordering of the world, … those who labor intellectually order the others. Those who labor physically are ordered by the others. The who are ordered by others feed these others. Those who order others are fed by these others.

Those who order others include the feudal rulers and the officials and intellectuals supporting them. They are the "nobles" or *junzi* 君子. Their counterparts are the farmers and laborers who are identified here as the (former) "savages," or, literally, the "wild people" (*yeren* 野人). The wild and "uncivilized" natives, animals, or mythological figures in the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* represent these "wild people" who have been subjected to the ordering by the (Confucian) "nobles." The kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* express sympathy for the plight of these "savages" who have been subdued by the imposition of social order.

The same passage in the *Mengzi* continues to outline in further detail the process of civilization. A succession of sage rulers, inevitably including Yao and Shun next to several others, first ordered nature by regulating the rivers to enable agriculture through irrigation. In this way, a distinction between wilderness and cultivated land was created. Along with this distinction, a similar distinction is introduced to the animal kingdom: domesticated animals are distinguished from wild animals. The "biopolitical" distinction between wild land and animals and land and animals cultivated by humans to materially support socialized life parallels a distinction between uncivilized natives or "barbarians" who live like animals and proper humans. To firmly establish this all-important final distinction and to decisively propel humans to the state of civilization, the Confucian sages established the so-called "human relationships" (*ren lun* 人倫) between husband and wife, (political) superiors and inferiors, parents and children, older and younger siblings, and between friends. These relationships represent rigid gender, power, generational, and age distinctions, along with duties of reciprocity. The

main function of ritual is to train people to habitualize and, importantly, internalize these relationships to shape their sense of identity or personhood. Roger T. Ames has called this cultural system a "role ethics" (Ames 2011). Alternatively, it has been called a "regime of sincerity" (Moeller and D'Ambrosio 2017) because it is based on instilling sincere personal commitment to the social roles constituting the sociopolitical order.

A defining function of the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* is to symbolically express the discontent, unease, and suffering produced by the enforcement of a Confucian role ethics or regime of sincerity by means of political power and the practice of ritual. The kill stories are short narratives of domestication and discipline ending up with the death of a "wild" victim. These victims are the "savages" (*yeren*) who do not survive the "ordering" procedures inflicted upon them by the "nobles" (*junzi*).

4 Tales of Survival

Once the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* are understood as diagnostic narratives depicting the discontent and harm inevitably produced by a sociopolitical and ethical cultivation regime enforcing civilizational order, one can ask: what does a Daoist philosophy propose as a remedy? If, unlike, for instance, the *Laozi*, the *Zhuangzi* does not advocate a return to a utopian "primitivist" ideal, what can it offer its readers, if anything? Do the kill stories leave us in utter despair, or is there an antidote to the painful side effects of the domestication regime they describe? I believe that the *Zhuangzi* does not formulate any ideological or ethical alternatives to the Confucian civilization project, but instead, in line with Norman Giradot's understanding of the Daoist tradition as "fundamentally medicinal" (Girardot 2008: 33), provides therapeutic treatments for chronic civilizational unease (see also Graziani 2014). These treatments are once more expressed allegorically—in a narrative genre that complements the kill stories and may be called "tales of survival."

Survival under difficult conditions or in a hostile environment is a theme in many Daoist texts. An early example of a poetic description of a Daoist art of survival is included in Chapter 50 of the *Laozi*:

> It is heard of those who are good at holding on to life: When they walk in the hills, they avoid neither rhinos nor tigers. When they go into battle, they carry no armor or weapons. The rhino has no spot to jab its horn. The tiger has no spot to put its claws. For weapons there is no spot to lodge a blade. And for what reason? Because they have no spots of death.

Similar to the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi*, where animal victims do not necessarily indicate that the issue at stake is animal rights, this passage in the *Laozi* does not need to be taken literally as referring to an escape from dangerous animals. An allegorical reading of the passage can interpret it as a parable of the lethal dangers of life in society. Read in this way, it sets up a precedent for allegories of survival in the *Zhuangzi*. Here, I will discuss a few examples.

4.1 The Tiger Trainer, Outspread the Discombobulated, and the Shrine Tree

The fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi* contains stories of a number of survival artists, among them a tiger trainer who manages to remain uneaten by the predators surrounding him (*Zhuangzi* 4.4); Zhi Li Shu 支離疏 or "Outspread the Discombobulated" (Ziporyn 2020: 42), a disfigured person who avoids conscription as soldier or laborer (*Zhuangzi* 4.7); and several trees whose unusual constitution and texture spares them the common lot of being felled by woodcutters (*Zhuangzi* 4.6, 4.9). The most famous of these stories is about an enormous tree functioning as a local shrine (*Zhuangzi* 4.5). A carpenter and his apprentice walking by the tree do not even consider cutting it down because its grotesque shape makes it unfit for any woodwork. As in other survival stories in this chapter, the uselessness of the tree is identified as the negative quality that saves it. And yet, the tree is not completely useless and "wild." In fact, it occupies a quite prominent position by serving as a religious site for the villagers. Like the tiger trainer and Outspread the Discombobulated, the shrine tree does not flee its potentially lethal surroundings (after all, it cannot run away) but manages to survive within them. The paradoxical "usefulness of uselessness" (*wu yong zhi yong* 無用之用) illustrated by the various survival stories in this chapter expresses a strategic insight. On the background of a sharpened awareness of the dangerous pitfalls of human civilization it indicates the development of a protective tactic. This tactic focuses on immunizing oneself against the destructive forces "in the human world" *(ren jian shi* 人間世), as the chapter is titled (Ziporyn 2020), by becoming, in one way or another, *inconsumable*.

4.2 The Diver

The tale of a miraculous diver who thrusts himself down a spectacular waterfall (*Zhuangzi* 19.10) "which plummets several hundred feet, whitening the waters for forty miles around, so that fishes and turtles cannot swim there" (Ziporyn 202: 153; translation modified) is commonly regarded as a skill story. The extraordinary skill it undoubtedly depicts, however, is not just about diving, but, allegorically, also about unlikely survival under most perilous circumstances. While a serious narrative of both skill and survival, the story has a satirical bent as well and slightly ridicules Confucius (Galvany 2019). It features the Master as a witness to the diver's feat. Confucius mistakes the leisurely dive for a suicide attempt and sends his disciples on a rescue mission. However, his worries turn out to be completely unwarranted. The diver emerges from the water not only unharmed, but cheerful and relaxed, "walking along the bank singing, his hair streaming down his back" (Ziporyn 2020: 154). The difference in attitude between Confucius and the diver contrasts a certain Confucian social anxiety, fueled by a misplaced moral urge, with Daoist ease and joviality. The diver's outstanding capacity to "go with the flow" also clearly suggests a knack for adaptation to nature as well as physical and spiritual virtuosity.

At the end of the story, the diver briefly explains his survival skills to a flabbergasted Confucius. He says: "Born among the hills, I first came to feel safely at home there among the hills—that's the given. Gravitating toward the water as I grew up,

I then came to feel safely at home in the water…" (Ziporyn 2020: 154). The word translated here as "to feel safely at home" is *an* 安, a term for ease and contentment widely used not only but especially in Daoist texts. What is more, the story highlights that in contrast to even fishes and turtles, the diver is able to "swim," or *you* 游, through the waterfall. *You*, however, not only means "to swim," but is also an emblematic notion in the *Zhuangzi* expressing a state of existential contentment and well-being. It occurs in the title of the first chapter of the book, "Xiaoyao You 逍遙遊," which Burton Watson translated as "free and easy wandering" (Watson 1964). The diver's extraordinary ability to swim clearly alludes to a heightened capacity for Daoist well-being.

The clue to the diver's survival skills is his capability of making himself at ease in whatever environment he happens to find himself in. Precisely this ease distinguishes him from Confucius who, in the story, is in a state of worry. Confucius fears that the diver is killing himself and cannot believe that someone can survive in the turbulent waters of the cataract. Read as a sociopolitical parable, the story not only contrasts a relaxed Daoist virtuosity with an overeager Confucian moralist concern. It can also be understood as a symbolic depiction of a Daoist state of contentment within a hazardous society where such contentment has become elusive for most—and practically unimaginable for Confucians.

4.3 Sunshu Ao's Promotions and Dismissals

While not literally about life or death, the story about a government official named Sunshu Ao 孫叔敖 in *Zhuangzi* 21.10 is a mental or spiritual survival story. It focuses on maintaining ease in a sociopolitical context. The story reports that Sunshu Ao has been promoted three times to higher government ranks only to be dismissed three times as well. And yet, he remained perfectly calm about his changing fate. Asked by a surprised interlocutor how he "operates his mind" (*yong xin* 用心), he explains:

> When (a position) came about, I realized it could not be refused, and when it was taken away, it couldn't be stopped. I understood that gaining or losing it had nothing to do with me. … And then I don't know if (the honor) belongs to the position or to me. If it belongs to the position, then it has nothing to do with me. If it belongs to me, then it has nothing to do with the position. … What leisure have I to care about whether others regard me as of high or low rank?

The story continues with Confucius analyzing and evaluating Sunshu Ao. Confucius likens him to Daoist exemplars or "genuine persons" (*zhenren* 真人) whose "spirits passed through Mount Tai without getting stuck and entered into the abysmal springs without getting wet …" (Ziporyn 2020: 172). This poetic depiction of spiritual survival skills mirrors similar hyperbolic passages in the inner chapters. *Zhuangzi* 6.1 states that "genuine persons" were able to "ascend the heights without fear, submerge into the depths without getting drenched, enter the flames without feeling hot" (Ziporyn 2020: 54). *Zhuangzi* 1.5 describes some Daoist sages saying: "Such persons are harmed by no thing. A flood may reach the sky without drowning them,

a drought may melt the stones and scorch the mountains without scalding them" (Ziporyn 2020: 7). Reminiscent in style of Chapter 50 of the *Laozi* quoted earlier, all these poetic survival images depict a remarkable equanimity in the face of "heat" or "cold," "highs" or "lows." The story of Sunshu Ao clearly suggests that such heat or cold, or highs and lows, refer metaphorically to social success and failure.

Moreover, the tale of Sunshu Ao resonates well with the story of the diver if the latter is read as a sociopolitical allegory. Just as the diver can be at ease (*you* 游) and "feel safely at home" (*an* 安) in raging waters, Sunshu Ao copes calmly with social troubles and the potentially resulting psychological stress. He easily survives such challenges by realizing the transitoriness and incongruities of the social roles, ranks, and positions that are inescapably imposed onto him by the social order associated with Confucianism. In both stories Confucius himself eventually praises a Daoist survival artist for his ability to overcome adverse (social) conditions and to achieve contentment in their midst against all odds.

Like the shrine tree or the diver, Sunshu Ao is no escape artist, but accepts the positions he is faced with. The key to achieving ease for Sunshu Ao seems to be an insight into the fact that social roles are always played and do not constitute a stable or essential "me" or "self" (*wo* 我). This insight has the therapeutic effect of allowing him to deal well with the discontent produced in his society. The capability to distance oneself from one's social positions while taking them on complements the therapeutic social survival tactics in the *Zhuangzi* that focus on making oneself inconsumable, or usefully useless. Taken together, these tactics may help individuals to avoid suffering the seabird's fate, who fell victim to the social domestication and political discipline that disguises itself as culture.

5 A Short Conclusion

As mentioned at the outset of this essay, I do not see any problem in interpreting narratives in the *Zhuangzi* from the perspective of discourses in contemporary (analytic) philosophy and to employ them as illustrations of certain normative propositions, such as "patient moral relativism." In fact, I believe that such a post-comparative methodology is highly commendable for making early Chinese texts philosophically relevant today.

While this essay is not meant to challenge the validity of a normative ethical reading of a particular story in the *Zhuangzi*, namely the tale of the death of the seabird, it points out certain limitations when abstracting from the story's narrative features and focusing solely on a more or less timeless "moral" like a "copper rule." By reading the story as a "kill story," I hope to show how it represents a whole genre of similarly structured narratives in the *Zhuangzi*. This narrative genre, I suggest, is not primarily concerned with metaphorically expressing a distinct philosophical ethics, but rather based in a historically grounded and philosophically oriented sociopolitical critique. The sociopolitical context of the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* becomes obvious when taking their imagery, their narrative setting, and their rhetorical means—which importantly including satire and humor—seriously.

Concretely, the kill stories in the *Zhuangzi* express a metaphorical critique of the social and psychological pathologies produced by the imposition of a cultural order by means of a disciplinary and domesticating regime. This regime was imposed by the exercise of political power, and, importantly, by the practice of ritual primarily associated with the Confucian tradition. Ritual practice focused on the habitualization and internalization of roles which supplied individuals with an identity founded on gender, power, generational, and age distinctions. Typically, the kill stories show how a "wild" or "uncivilized" being becomes the victim of an often moralistically glorified and yet violent and destructive cultivation process.

As a counterpart to the kill stories, the *Zhuangzi* presents numerous tales of survival connecting with the medicinal orientation of the Daoist tradition. Importantly, contrary to some interpretations of Daoism, these tales of survival neither promote a primitivist utopia nor encourage escapism. As therapeutic allegories, they devise strategies for eluding consumption by society and for maintaining an existential ease by avoiding overidentification with the success or failure of one's contingent roles.

Declaration The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

Ames, Roger T. 2011. *Confucian Role Ethics: A Vocabulary.* Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Freud, Sigmund. 1930. *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag.

Galvany, Albert. 2019. "The Swimmer: Panic, Parody, and Pedagogy at the Waterfall: Morality as a Misleading Principle for Moral Actions." In *Skill and Mastery: Philosophical Stories from the* Zhuangzi, edited by Karyn Lai and Wai Wai Chiu. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield International.

Girardot, Norman. 2008. *Myth and Meaning in Early Daoism: The Theme of Chaos (Hundun)*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press.

Graham, Angus C. 2001. *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters.* Indianapolis: Hackett.

Graziani, Romain. 2005. "When Princes Awake in Kitchens: Zhuangzi's Rewriting of a Culinary Myth." In *Of Tripod and Palate: Food, Politics, and Religion in Traditional China*, edited by Roel Sterckx. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

_____. 2014. "Of Words and Swords: Therapeutic Imagination in Action—A Study of Chapter 30 of the *Zhuangzi*, 'Shuo jian' 說劍." *Philosophy East and West* 64.2: 375–403.

_____. 2021. *Fiction and Philosophy in the* Zhuangzi*: An Introduction to Early Chinese Taoist Thought*. London: Bloomsbury.

Huang, Yong. 2005. "Copper Rule versus the Golden Rule: A Daoist-Confucian Proposal for Global Ethics." *Philosophy East and West* 55.3: 394–425.

_____. 2010a. "The Ethics of Difference in the *Zhuangzi*." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 78.1: 65–99.

_____. 2010b. "Respecting Different Ways of Life: A Daoist Ethics of Virtue in the *Zhuangzi*." *Journal of Asian Studies* 69.4: 1049–1069.

_____. 2014. "Toward a Benign Moral Relativism: From Agent/Appraiser Centered to the Patient-Centered." In *Moral Relativism and Chinese Philosophy: David Wong and His Critics*, edited by Yang Xiao and Yong Huang. Albany: State University of New York Press.

_____. 2015. "Respect for Differences: The Daoist Virtue." In *Routledge Companion to Virtue Ethics*, edited by Michael Slote and Lorraine Besser-Jones. London: Routledge.

_____. 2018. "Patient Moral Relativism in the *Zhuangzi*." *Philosophia* 46: 877–894.

_____. 2022. "Patient Moral Relativism in the *Zhuangzi* Defended: A Reply to Jianping Hu." *Philosophy East and West* 72.2: 472–482.

Klein, Esther. 2010. "Were There 'Inner Chapters' in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*." *T'oung Pao* 96.4–5: 299–369.
Lai, Karyn, and Wai Wai Chiu. 2019. *Skill and Mastery: Philosophical Stories from the* Zhuangzi. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield International.
Moeller, Hans-Georg. 2017. "Hundun's Mistake: Satire and Sanity in the *Zhuangzi*." *Philosophy East and West* 67.3: 783–800.
_____. 2020. "The King's Slaughterer—Or, the Royal Way of Nourishing Life." *Philosophy East and West* 70.1: 155–173.
Moeller, Hans-Georg, and Paul D'Ambrosio. 2017. *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the* Zhuangzi. New York: Columbia University Press.
Sommer, Deborah. 2007. "Images for Iconoclasts: Images of Confucius in the Cultural Revolution." *East-West Connections* 7.1: 1–23.
Sturgeon, Donald, ed. 2006–. 2023. *Chinese Text Project*. https://ctext.org/ (last accessed on April 24, 2023).
Watson, Burton. 1964. *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*. New York: Columbia University Press.
Ziporyn, Brook. 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett.