

Liezi's Retirement: A Parody of a Didactic Tale in the *Zhuangzi*

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Abstract The seventh chapter of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 contains a narrative about Liezi 列子, his teacher Huzi 壺子, and a physiognomist named Jixian 季咸. Traditionally, the story has been read as a didactic tale about how to become a true Daoist sage or as an illustration of attaining spiritual perfection. This essay will argue for an alternative reading of the story as a humorous parody about failed sages, and, at the same time, as an illustration of the benefits of a playful facelessness—or genuine pretending. It thereby turns out to be a counterpart of the following narrative of Hundun 混沌 which completes the Inner Chapters. The story about Liezi's retirement illustrates how his teacher Huzi remains unharmed (*bu shang* 傷) by virtue of being a faceless “genuine pretender” whereas Hundun's demise is due to his failure to maintain his facelessness.

Keywords Zhuangzi 莊子 · Humor · Genuine pretending · Sanity · Face · Hundun 混沌

1 Introduction

The humorously inverted myth of Hundun's 渾沌 death ends the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 with the briefest of tragicomedies. This story is preceded by a much longer one which has been understood as a didactic tale about how to attain spiritual perfection, or how to become a true Daoist sage. The present essay, however, aims to show that this story, too, can be read in a humorous key. If so, it turns out to be a comical depiction of how Liezi 列子 fails in his eager attempt to study Daoism and, ironically, attains some sort of a Daoist “way of life” only after he has long given up learning and withdrawn into retirement—or when he has, unintentionally, succeeded in “trying not to try” (Slingerland 2015).

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Although thoroughly comical, the story is not merely a joke; it also contains a philosophical dimension. When seen from a philosophical perspective, its focus shifts toward another protagonist: Liezi's teacher Huzi 壺子. This character, as I will argue, beautifully illustrates a playful Daoist approach to life that we can understand, as I will explain, as “genuine pretending.”¹

Interpreters of the *Zhuangzi* have frequently made note of the humorous nature of the text, its use of multiple comic literary devices, and have identified a number of witty passages and puns. David Knechtges once went so far as to claim that “the entire work is made up of a series of incongruities strung together in the aimless manner of sustained humor” (Knechtges 1970/71: 97).² Knechtges's sweeping assertion may find some support in the *Zhuangzi* itself. After all, if one follows Brook Ziporyn, it opens with a quote from a fictitious *Equalizing Jokebook* (*Qi Xie* 齊諧) from which the first allegory about Kun 鯤 and Peng 鵬, the giant fish and bird, is said to be taken (Ziporyn 2009: 3). Perhaps this is an invitation to try out an approach to the *Zhuangzi* that sees it as such an *Equalizing Jokebook* and reads it humorously. If so, one would not have to assume with Knechtges that the *Zhuangzi*'s humor is aimless and collateral. Instead, it can be taken as crucial for making the text make sense. It may be possible to philosophically understand, if not literally the entire work, then at least substantial parts of it from a humorous point of view.³ This understanding includes the Inner Chapters, but is by no means limited to them.⁴

¹ The term “genuine pretending” has been coined by Paul D'Ambrosio 2012. It connects with Brook Ziporyn's image of the “wild card” (Ziporyn 2015) as an exemplification of a core philosophical element of the *Zhuangzi*.

² Much earlier than Knechtges, LIN Yutang 林語堂 published an influential essay in 1932 called “On Humor” (“Lun Youmo 論幽默”), wherein he identified various humorous traditions in ancient China and pinpointed Daoism (mostly referring to Laozi 老子 and Zhuangzi as the “humorous faction” in the history of Chinese thought. Among the Daoists, he singled out Zhuangzi as “the father of Chinese humor” (Sample 2011: 173). He thereby seems to have set the tone for many similar judgments, such as that of YUE Xiao Dong, who stated that Zhuangzi “is recognized as the very first humorist in China” (Yue 2010: 403). Despite the common acknowledgment of the presence of humor in the *Zhuangzi*, there are very few in-depth studies on this issue. Notable reflections on the philosophical function of humor in the *Zhuangzi* are found in Schwitzgebel 1996; Carr and Ivanhoe 2000; Y. Wang 2003; Yearley 2005; and Moeller 2008.

³ As already suggested above and again toward the end of this essay, and as outlined in more detail in a forthcoming case study (Moeller, forthcoming), the philosophical humor of the story of “Liezi's retirement” in the seventh chapter of the *Zhuangzi* is directly connected with the equally humorous narrative of Hundun's death that follows. What is more, the fifth chapter can be read more or less entirely as satire, as I have tried to show in another study (Moeller 2015). Both studies are in conjunction with the present one insofar as they aim at showing how humor-centered readings of core narratives in the *Zhuangzi* provide an overall picture of a Daoist philosophy of genuine pretending.

⁴ The *Zhuangzi* is not only a multidimensional text open to readings in different keys, but also highly complex and comprised of heterogeneous strata. However, these strata do not neatly divide the book into clearly differentiable segments of precisely identifiable origins. I share the doubts of other researchers regarding the widely held belief that the Inner Chapters represent a fully coherent segment of the book written by a single author, namely the historic ZHUANG Zhou 莊周. These “Inner Chapters skeptics” include, among others, ZHANG Hengshou 張恆壽, Chris Fraser, David McCraw, and Esther Klein (Zhang 1983; Fraser 1997; McCraw 2010; and Klein 2010). I concur with Klein's assumption that there is no clear evidence that, for instance, the “Robber Zhi” (“Dao Zhi 盜跖”) chapter (Chapter 29)—which, as I hope to show in a future work, also lends itself to a humor-centered reading that exemplifies genuine pretending—is historically later or less authentic than the Inner Chapters (Klein 2010). Of course, there is also no clear evidence to the contrary. Issues of authorship, date, or of the “authenticity” of the text and its parts more generally remain very much open for discussion, and may well never be sufficiently resolved. Notwithstanding these philological problems, a Daoist type of humor comes to the fore throughout the whole book as soon as a reader is willing and able to perceive it.

Humoristic readings of the *Zhuangzi* are not meant to contradict or replace other readings, such as practice-centered, spiritual, religious, metaphysical, or political readings, but rather to complement them and open up a further dimension of Daoism. In fact, a *dao jiao* 道教 (practical/spiritual/religious) and humoristic reading of the same passage are often equally plausible, as I hope to show. A guiding hermeneutic assumption here is that the *Zhuangzi* is a multidimensional text that we can make sense of by using both humorous and nonhumorous readings; the resultant understandings will differ, but will not be mutually exclusive.

2 The Story

As in the case of the Hundun narrative, the “cast” of the story about Liezi’s retirement as it appears in *Zhuangzi* 7.5 (a variation is found in *Liezi* 2.13)⁵ consists of three characters. First, there is Liezi who, next to Laozi and Zhuangzi, was and is considered the third major representative of ancient Daoism. He appears a number of times in the *Zhuangzi*, including in two sections in the Inner Chapters. In addition to the passage discussed here, he is mentioned in the first chapter (Section 1.3), wherein he is famously characterized as “riding the wind” (Ziporyn 2009: 5). It has been frequently noted that in both of these appearances in the Inner Chapters, Liezi is depicted somewhat critically as “misled by the glamour of magic,” to use the words of A. C. Graham (Graham 2001: 290), or in other words he represents a flawed Daoist practitioner. Second, there is a “Master Hu 壺” (Huzi), or “Master Calabash,” if his name is translated literally (Defoort 2012: 466). He is depicted, as in *Liezi* 1.1 and *Huainanzi* 淮南子 10.19, as Liezi’s spiritual teacher. Third, there is a “shaman” (*wu* 巫) named Jixian 季咸 who specializes in the art of ancient Chinese physiognomy (*xiangshu* 相術), which attempted to predict the future of individuals on the basis of their physiological and, in particular, facial features (Raphals 2013: 142–146). Jixian, as the passage tells us, could tell someone’s fortune with extreme temporal precision, and the common people were so shocked by his supernatural powers that when they saw him “they would turn and run” (Ziporyn 2009: 52).

The narrative begins with Liezi meeting Jixian. Liezi is so impressed with the physiognomist that he tells his master Huzi that he, Huzi, is no match for Jixian. Huzi, obviously not too happy with Liezi’s impudence, seems a bit offended and expresses his dissatisfaction with Liezi’s progress in studying the Dao 道. Then he challenges Liezi to take on Jixian in order to test his skills. Jixian accepts the invitation and, after having checked up on Huzi, Jixian informs Liezi that his master is in serious condition and about to die. When Liezi relates the bad news tearfully to his master, Huzi explains in colorful language how he merely displayed a countenance labeled “the patterns of the earth” (Ziporyn 2009: 52), thereby suggesting that he deliberately misled Huzi as to his true state. He then asks Liezi to have Jixian come again. Jixian indeed returns, and now offers an entirely different diagnosis. He says that Huzi has made a total recovery and remarks that this is probably because he saw Huzi on the previous day—thus crediting himself for the presumed healing. When Jixian has left, Huzi explains in once

⁵ Chapter and section numbers correspond to the now widely-used Internet database *Chinese Text Project* (www.ctext.org).

more colorful language to Liezi that this time he displayed a different countenance, called “Heaven’s soil” (Ziporyn 2009: 52) to Jixian. Still, he asks that Jixian may come again. When Jixian comes on the next day, he is deeply confounded, as Huzi’s appearance has changed once more. Frustrated and unable to make an assessment, he blames Huzi for his incoherent and always changing state. Later, Huzi explains to Liezi how he now displayed the countenance of a “vast gushing surge” (Ziporyn 2009: 52). Once again, he asks Liezi to have Jixian return yet another time. When Jixian arrives the following day and sees Huzi, the physiognomist panics and runs away at first sight. Huzi asks Liezi to go and see where he went, but Jixian has vanished and is nowhere to be found. In the usual mysterious terms, Huzi explains that the countenance he displayed was of the state prior to having “emerged from the source,” and that it was this very countenance which was “something empty ... admitting of no understanding of who or what” (Ziporyn 2009: 53) that made Jixian flee. Then the story concludes:

Liezi realized he had not yet learned anything. He returned to his home and did not emerge for three years, cooking for his wife, feeding the pigs as if he were serving guests, remaining remote from all endeavors, carved back into unhewn blockishness. Solitary like a clump of soil, he planted his physical form there in its place, a mass of chaos and confusion. And that is how he remained to the end of his days. (Ziporyn 2009: 53; translation modified)

3 Standard Interpretations

Typically, interpretations of this narrative have paid special attention to the poetic and rather obscure self-descriptions of Huzi’s changed countenance. These interpretations portray the story as primarily concerned with the presentation of different forms or stages of spiritual and physiological cultivation and thus read it from what can be called a *dao jiao* 道教 perspective. Karyn L. Lai, for instance, regards Huzi’s metamorphoses as expressing “elements of the Heavenly dao” which he, as a “Master Calabash,” was able to store and reproduce: namely, “earthly patterns, heavenly grounds, vital energies, and the origins prior to the rise of the ancestors” (Lai 2015: 108). Similarly, Livia Kohn considers Huzi’s performances to be paradigmatic illustrations of the “origins of Qigong [氣功]”; for her, Huzi is an early master practitioner displaying his extraordinary skills and proving that he “is completely at one with the Dao” (Kohn 2015). In the same vein, Michael Puett takes the story to show how Huzi, “through cultivation of his *qi* [氣], is able to reach a state ... in which the very concerns of life and death become irrelevant” (Puett 2002: 130). Thereby, Puett argues, Zhuangzi intends to show how a Daoist practitioner “gains access to the state that nothing can overcome” (Puett 2002: 130). Read in this way, the narrative contrasts the inadequate practices of shamanism and physiognomy as represented by Jixian with the true Daoist cultivation of Huzi that enables one to reach extraordinary states that can only be described in extraordinary language since they transcend the boundaries of normal experience.

There is no doubt, historically speaking, that interpreters such as Karyn Lai, Livia Kohn, and Michael Puett are justified in reading the story in the context of Daoist cultivation efforts and transformative ambitions. The passage has exerted a profound

influence on Daoist practices and has been taken most seriously in this regard. The version of the story in the *Liezi* sees Huzi describing some of his transformations in even more detail and may have helped direct earlier interpreters' main focus of attention to these elements. In the appendix to his edition of the *Zhuangzi*, Brook Ziporyn presents a selection of translations from numerous traditional commentaries which are mostly concerned with explaining Huzi's colorful descriptions of his respective appearances. Commentaries on the passage by Lǚ Huiqing 吕惠卿 (1032–1111), CHU Boxiu 褚伯秀 (12th c.?), LIN Xiyi 林希逸 (1193–?), SHI Deqing 釋德清 (1546–1623), LI Xiangzhou 李湘洲 (1573–1633), FANG Yizhi 方以智 (1611–1671), WANG Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692), and CHEN Shouchang 陳壽昌 (19th c.) as listed by Ziporyn all present glosses on terms and expressions such as the “reservoir,” the “patterns of the earth,” the “froth of the salamander's swirl” (which is alternatively understood as a “whale in the depth of the ocean” or a “swarm of small guppies”; see Ziporyn 2009: 53, n13 and 208), “Heaven's soil,” or the “incipient impulse of all that flourishes” (Ziporyn 2009: 207–210). Although most of these commentators were not known Daoist practitioners themselves, their interpretative interests reflect a traditional *dao jiao* understanding of the story. In short, discussions of the practical meaning and significance of Huzi's cryptic language have dominated the reception of the narrative. Basically, it has been approached as a cultivation riddle in need of deciphering.

Alternatively, and highlighting the methodology over the presumed potential achievements of Daoist cultivation, both Wiebke Denecke and Carine Defoort have read the story more recently as a didactic tale. For them, it is a paradigmatic illustration of the master-student relationship in Daoism. According to Denecke, the narrative is about a “new pedagogics of instruction in the *Zhuangzi*” (Denecke 2010: 274) which operates paradoxically and ends by rendering “the instructor superfluous” since, as she assumes, in the end “Liezi no longer needs any kind of instruction” (Denecke 2010: 276). Very similarly, Defoort argues that the story is an “instruction dialogue” showing how the “non-availability of the teacher and his unwillingness to teach are, paradoxically, at the core of the teaching”; accordingly, it is said to promote “a non-teaching, in which the learner learns while the teacher does not teach” (Defoort 2012: 459).

The reading of the story as a didactic tale provides an occasion for looking at it in a different light. While *dao jiao* interpretations focus more or less exclusively on Huzi, now Liezi becomes an equally important character. I, too, think that Liezi's role is quite crucial in the narrative and that the traditional *dao jiao* reading, due to its concern with deciphering the presumed riddles, tends to neglect his importance. Upon closer inspection of the text, however, I cannot fully agree with Denecke and Defoort, and feel that their reading is in need of quite a decisive modification. Both assume that Huzi and Liezi are exemplary figures representing a coherent, albeit paradoxical, Daoist educational philosophy: Huzi is a model Daoist teacher, and Liezi a model Daoist learner. After all, for Denecke, Liezi ends up in an enlightened state where he has transcended the need of any instruction, and for Defoort the story is meant to illustrate how the “learner learns” a presumably important lesson from a nonteaching teacher. Literally, however, the story ends with Liezi realizing that “he had not yet learned anything” (Ziporyn 2009: 53) or, more literally, “had not yet begun to learn” (*wei shi xue* 未始學). It seems that the paradoxical Daoist didactics illustrated by this story are even more radical than those proposed by Denecke and Defoort: following this “new pedagogics of instruction” the teacher not only does not teach,

but the learner also does not learn! Such a didactics, however, is not merely paradoxical—it is also absurd. I therefore believe that the story can in fact be read as a parody of a didactic tale.

4 A Humorous Reading

There is not much evidence, either philologically in the text itself or historically in its reception, that would justify reading the story (as it appears in the *Zhuangzi*) as a tribute to Liezi's learning success. Traditionally, commentators have read it as criticizing Liezi's limited success in Daoist cultivation. WANG Fuzhi, for instance, said that "Liezi studied only the patterns of the earth and nothing more" (Ziporyn 2009: 210). To quote Graham again, he has been understood as "misled by the glamour of magic" (Graham 2001: 290). Rather than being an exemplary learner benefiting spiritually from his teacher's mysterious and unconventional methods, Liezi seems to make no progress at all. His teacher's miraculous efforts are wasted on him. In fact, I fully agree with WANG Bo's 王博 observation that Liezi "comes out like a little clown" (B. Wang 2014: 10) in this story and is portrayed comically. He does not appear as a model Daoist learner; on the contrary, he is caricatured as a wannabe-Daoist dimwit.

At the beginning of the story, Liezi is depicted as someone who is easily impressed and eager to jump on any bandwagon: he mindlessly falls prey to or, as the text says, "becomes intoxicated by" (*xin zui* 心醉), a popular "guru" whose trade is physiognomy. He then rushes back to his teacher Huzi only to tell him quite impertinently that the fashionable physiognomist is so much better than him. Huzi returns the insult by laconically lamenting Liezi's stupidity with the proverbial exclamation that "a multitude of hens with no rooster can produce no chicks" (Ziporyn 2009: 52). This indicates right at the outset of the narrative Liezi's hopeless immunity to instruction. Liezi's stupidity is highlighted again after the first meeting between Huzi and the physiognomist. Here, Liezi uncritically and wrongly accepts the latter's diagnosis and is so shaken by it that he sobbingly reports it to his teacher. His emotional outbreak is, of course, entirely uncalled for, as the stoic master soon explains. Liezi's misplaced emotionality cannot, as the reader thereby understands, be taken seriously. It only enhances his overall goofiness. This goofiness, along with Liezi's general incapability, is later underscored when he is asked to call the fleeing physiognomist back after the final meeting with Huzi. Inept and helpless once more, he only cries out: "He's gone! I cannot catch him!" (Ziporyn 2009: 53). Throughout the whole narrative, Liezi is depicted as a buffoon.

This is also true for the satirical depiction of Liezi's eventual "retirement." Liezi's realization that he "had not yet begun to learn" (*wei shi xue* 未始學) ironically echoes the preceding statement of Huzi, who claimed that in his final transformation he had presented himself as someone who "had not yet begun to emerge from our ancestor" (*wei shi chu wu zong* 未始出吾宗). Huzi's magnificence is comically mirrored by Liezi's silliness. The grandiose but unfathomable exercises of Huzi only make Liezi despair. He gives up studying the Daoist arts altogether and turns into a caricature of a Confucian who is oppressed by his wife and practices ritual propriety with his domestic animals: we see him "for three years, cooking for his wife, feeding the pigs as if he were serving guests" (Ziporyn 2009: 53). Liezi resigns from his Daoist pursuits and

becomes a henpecked family man with comically inverted Confucian attributes, subdued even by his pigs.

To be sure, the concluding lines of the narrative play with the vocabulary of the *Daodejing* 道德經 and other Daoist texts and, as cited above, have Liezi living out his years “carved back into unheven blockishness (*pu* 樸)” (as, for example, in *Daodejing* 28) and “solitary (*du* 獨) like a clump of soil” (as, for example, in *Daodejing* 20 and 25). Taken out of context, such standard Daoist language may be seen as praising Liezi. However, applied to the hapless Liezi caricatured in his retirement and understood in the context of his overall comical appearance, these expressions clearly lend themselves to a humorous reading as well. As the ultimate simpleton, Liezi lives out his years in blissful ignorance and unwittingly adopts a “primitivist” Daoist way of life out of ignorance. Ironically, he could only become a Daoist after he gave up trying what he could never learn. Liezi emerges from this story as a failed and frustrated Daoist practitioner. Only in his retirement, and only after distancing himself from Daoist cultivation ambitions and training efforts, is he able to coincidentally—or perhaps “naturally” (*ziran* 自然)—partake in a Daoist experience.

From a humoristic perspective, Liezi is an important character in the story which, as a parody of a didactic tale, portrays him as an inept and feeble practitioner. The narrative outlines his way into retirement from his Daoist aspirations—and how he thereby, although only by default, nonetheless became a Daoist.

Liezi's comical counterpart in the story is Jixian, the quack physiognomist. Jixian's unfounded arrogance—his incompetence matched only by his unwarranted self-esteem—becomes clear after the second meeting with Huzi. Huzi, as the reader knows, is toying with Jixian, and now deliberately puts on a healthy appearance in contrast to his earlier display of sickness. Jixian not only falls into Huzi's trap by fabricating clearly ad hoc diagnoses, but shows his conceitedness by ascribing Huzi's change to his own magic healing powers. Huzi has thereby revealed the hollowness of Jixian's professed knowledge and skills and exposed him as an impostor. When Jixian sees Huzi for the third time, his arrogance turns into irritation. He is dumbfounded by Huzi's yet again changed complexion and, instead of admitting his own limitations, only vents his anger. He, too, is now helpless, but unlike the simpleton Liezi, he reacts with aggression. He is portrayed as a sore loser. At the last meeting with Huzi, Jixian is immediately brought to the end of his wits, and we only see him disappear in a cloud of steam, apparently enraged by his total defeat. He is caricatured as the fuming scoundrel who has finally been debunked and expelled.

Given the comical features of both Liezi and Jixian, it becomes possible to view the character of Huzi, too, in a humorous context. While he is not an object of ridicule like Liezi and Jixian, he can well be seen as a jester who, in a quite Socratic fashion, toys with his interlocutors and *lets them make fools of themselves*. It was already mentioned how Huzi makes fun of Liezi at the beginning of the story when he compares Liezi's cluelessness with a hen lacking a rooster. The story basically revolves around Huzi increasingly teasing out the stupidity and preposterousness of Liezi and Jixian. Rather than literally teaching them any truths or skills, he figuratively teaches both a lesson by chasing them away: the angry physiognomist flees discredited, and silly Liezi retires to serve his wife and pigs. Huzi leaves both without any message other than that they failed to deceive or convince him.

If the story is read in a humorous key, Liezi and Jixian emerge as laughingstocks, and Huzi as a jesting trickster.⁶ If Huzi is understood in this way, however, then maybe his art is not limited to changing his appearances and thereby confounding those who think of themselves as wise or as on the path to wisdom. Maybe it can be assumed that not only do his changing faces lack any ultimate meaning, but the changing words by which he describes them do as well. Maybe he is not only toying with Liezi and Jixian—both of who fail to understand him—but also with the countless readers of later generations who have tried hard to figure out what is truly behind the “froth of the salamander’s swirl” or the “incipient impulse of all that flourishes.” Maybe the heart-minds of those readers, too, have been intoxicated (*xin zui*) by magical appearances and trapped by a jester who had them make fools of themselves.

Be that as it may, Huzi explicitly states at the end in not so mysterious terms that he was showing himself as “empty” and “admitting of no understanding,” and that this made Jixian run away. He showed himself, in other words, as nothing in particular. The great riddle of who he is and what he represents is dissolved into a void. Thus the end of the story becomes reminiscent of Immanuel Kant’s explanation of laughter. In Section 54 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant states that “laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing” (Kant 2007: 133). As Günter Wohlfart has shown beautifully, Kant’s definition can be read against its grain and applied to the function of laughter in Daoism and Zen-Buddhism: it exposes the emptiness and vanity of any great philosophical expectations and ambitions that may have threatened to overburden one, and thereby it expresses the relief of regaining a lightness of being (Wohlfart 2010). At the end of our story, there is no great riddle to decipher; and while Jixian runs away dumbfounded by this nothingness, we the readers can laugh about it in relaxation.

Kant’s description of laughter as based on the dissonance between a “strained expectation” and its dissolution into nothing makes it an example of the so-called incongruity theory of humor which is generally considered today to be “the reigning theory of humor” (Smuts 2015). The incongruity theory can be traced as far back as Aristotle: in his *Rhetoric* (III, 2), Aristotle expresses the idea that “the best way to get an audience to laugh is to set up an expectation and deliver something ‘that gives a twist’” (Smuts 2015). In John Morreall’s formulation, “the core meaning of ‘incongruity’ in various versions of the incongruity theory, then, is that some thing or event we perceive or think about violates our standard mental patterns and normal expectations” (Morreall 2013).

By combining Morreall’s theory of humor with features of humor outlined by Robert L. Latta, several characteristics of incongruent humoristic communication can be identified. Humor can operate on the basis of (1) a *disengaging effect* which distances us from a serious situation or the serious protagonists of a narrative; (2) a narrative contradiction or *disappointment of initially provoked expectations*, which is brought about by (3) *instances of incongruence typically produced by paradoxical, ironic, or nonsensical statements*; (4) a *relaxation of strenuous or strong emotions*; and (5) an *experience of pleasure* resulting from this relaxation as well as from (6) the *saving of mental efforts* or the experience of *mental effortlessness* as in play (Morreall 2009; Latta 1999).

⁶ Bernard Faure has related Chan/Zen 禪 Buddhist “tricksters” to Daoist trickster predecessors as found in the *Zhuangzi* (Faure 1994). Susan Debra Blum states that “Zhuangzi in China could almost be considered a trickster” (Blum 2007: 142).

Quite a few of these six humorous triggers can be detected in the narrative of Liezi's retirement. The story disengages its readers from its protagonists (1). We do not sympathize with Liezi or Jixian; they are not models we feel forced to emulate. We are not seriously encouraged to become a student like Liezi or a physiognomist like Jixian. If the story is read humorously, we may admire Huzi, but only as a nonserious jester and not as an exemplary teacher. He is not a straightforward model sage, but someone who performs practical jokes on false sages. The story thereby contradicts the expectation of a didactic tale (2). Liezi, paradoxically, is not taught anything by his teacher and leaves him without any success. Ironically, he only finds his Daoist ways after giving up all expectation of being taught. Numerous incongruent statements and depictions are found in the narrative (3), such as Jixian's false claim to have cured Huzi or the image of Liezi treating his pigs as honored guests. Repeatedly, strenuous emotions are relaxed (4): Liezi's anguish over his master's imminent death is unfounded, and we do not empathize with Jixian's wrath. Rather than sharing Jixian's anger or Liezi's anguish, we smile in regard to both and thereby feel pleasure (5). We are also freed from certain moral pressures: teachers do not have to be venerated and figures of authority (the fake star physiognomist) are carnivalistically deprived of their reverence. Huzi's last transformation, we are eventually told, shows that there is nothing behind his changing faces, and we are no longer asked for an understanding. Thus we are left with an emptiness of meaning and can therefore experience mental effortlessness; we do not have to engage in difficult explorations of the significance of any riddle (6).

5 Huzi as Genuine Pretender

An acknowledgment of the philosophical dimension of humor highlights the role of Huzi in the story. He is a trickster capable of inciting laughter and revealing the nonserious and incongruent aspects of reality. As a trickster he is, like his comical counterparts Liezi and Jixian, not so much a full-fledged real-life character as he is a fictionally exaggerated and thus rather fantastic figure. His philosophical significance may best be understood in conjunction with the equally fantastic protagonist who immediately succeeds him in the concluding narrative of the seventh Inner Chapter. The stories of both Huzi and Hundun are about their decisively surreal, or better yet *allegorical*, faces. Hundun was faceless, but allowed others to impose a face on him. Huzi has a face, but one he can change at will so that no expert in face recognition can pin him down and identify him by its features. The two characters are mirror images of each other: Hundun is defeated because he adopts a definite face of his own, and Huzi triumphs because he does not let his face define him.⁷

Huzi engages in an ancient Chinese variation of the art of mask changing (*bian lian* 變臉).⁸ This illusionist craft evolved out of traditional Chinese opera and has performers change face masks instantly and apparently magically by swiping a fan or by a quick

⁷ Franklin Perkins has remarked in response to a presentation of this paper that Huzi's "triumph" in the story may be questioned. After all, in accordance with the reading suggested here, Huzi too bears the marks of a failed Daoist by not being able to teach Liezi. Such a reading adds yet another layer of incongruence to the story that may be worth exploring.

⁸ I am indebted to Suzanne Murphy for making me aware of the art of mask changing and its philosophical significance.

gesture of the head or hands while they are moving to theatrical music. The alternating masks represent different characters and moods. The multimedia performance of mask changing thus combines the stunning effects of illusionist art with the aesthetics of music and dance and the dramatic elements of theatre. It resembles a miniature opera where all the characters and the whole plot are compressed into one short performance by a single actor. Because of the extreme degree of temporal condensation, no coherent narrative emerges and no stage character takes shape. This amplifies what Bertolt Brecht famously called the *Verfremdungseffekt* (“distancing effect”) found in standard forms of traditional Chinese theatre. The point of the distancing effect is that “the spectator is prevented from feeling his way into the characters” (Brecht 1961: 130). The mask changer completely deprives the “roles” of any consistency so that no identification can take place. Instead, the audience is exposed to a frenzy of rapid transformations of faces, moods, and motions.

While Huzi does not change his faces with the astonishing speed of a mask-changing illusionist, his performance produces a similar effect in those who watch it: it becomes impossible to pin him down as a particular individual with essential characteristics. In this way, as Nicholas Gier has remarked, Huzi defies “any possible categorization whatever” and thus, philosophically speaking, “reflects the self-transformations of the Dao” (Gier 2000: 223). GUO Xiang 郭象 (d. 312) drew in effect a very similar conclusion nearly two millennia earlier when he commented on the passage, saying that Huzi was “following smoothly along with any circumstance without anywhere being brought to an end” (Ziporyn 2009: 208). Huzi changes faces so radically and drastically that no essential self can be ascribed to him—the whole spectrum of human behavior and appearance is at his disposal, and he is capable of putting on *any possible face*. Like a mask-changer who condenses a whole tradition of plays into one short act, Huzi condenses the “self-transformations” of human experiences into his performance. Like a mask-changing display which follows no particular narrative sequence, Huzi too is not “brought to an end” but performs whatever role fits the purpose—which, in his case, is simply to stun and eventually undermine the fake physiognomist who is, of course, the presumed identification specialist.

Seen in this way, the story contrasts Jixian’s pretence of genuineness with Huzi’s genuine pretending. Jixian pretends to be able to read people’s faces and Liezi pretends to be a Daoist practitioner. In fact both are deceiving themselves and others; Jixian cannot really read people’s faces, and Liezi is not a true Daoist. Huzi, on the other hand, acts as a mask-changer: he enacts shifting roles with great skill without personally adopting any of them. He is a genuine pretender, engaging in pure play.

The close proximity between humor, play, and relaxation has been outlined above. Playful pretending in a childlike way is not “deceptive” in nature because its purpose is not to hide a true essential nature in order to achieve some personal gain. Instead, it is an experimental and nonserious enactment of any kind of behavior for the purpose of (often collective) enjoyment. It works on the basis of not identifying with one’s roles. When, as kids, we dressed up as cowboys and got “shot” by our friends, we were not really cowboys and did not really die. We were only pretending; but at the same time, we were enjoying ourselves, and interacted most intensely with others. The same “insincerity” is involved in telling a joke or making fun: we do not tell a real story and do not really identify with any message that we convey; and this is what produces collectively experienced happiness and relaxation.

One of the most famous narratives in the *Zhuangzi*, the butterfly dream story at the end of the second chapter (Section 2.14), also illustrates the genuineness involved in nonessential playful engagement. A major point of the well-known story is that during the dream the butterfly “has no knowledge of ZHUANG Zhou” (*bu zhi Zhou* 不知周) the dreamer. It is precisely this radical forgetfulness, this radical distancing—or the total cut (*fen* 分)—between the butterfly and ZHUANG Zhou that allows the butterfly to be so genuinely a butterfly while merely pretending to be one. Only the divide between the butterfly and Zhou makes the experience of fluttering around so “free and easy,” as a Daoist may say. Dream experiences can be highly intense and real as physical reactions undoubtedly show. A wet dream is genuinely wet. At the same time, a dreamer merely plays the roles he or she encounters in a dream and is not essentially defined by them in any way. Once we awaken, the dream existence normally fades in an instant, only to be forgotten forever. In the butterfly dream allegory the nonauthenticity of the dream is by no means experienced as a lack of identity or as an insanity-induced delusion. On the contrary, it is experienced as an intensely joyful and healthy “wholesomeness”—not despite but precisely because it is “inessentially real” or genuinely pretended.

As genuine pretenders, both Huzi the face changer and the butterfly in the butterfly dream play roles without being or becoming them, and without personal commitment. They thereby contrast with an approach to roles that can be ascribed to the Confucian tradition and some of its most central texts such as the *Analects* and the *Mencius*. In the context of a Confucian Role Ethics as reformulated by Roger Ames, the “Confucian project” is oriented toward a “human becoming” (Ames 2011: 87). For Ames, this means that Confucian cultivation sees every person as involved in an “evolving configuration of roles”; humans are continuously becoming something in togetherness with and relation to others, for example a brother, father, or teacher. Ames therefore speaks of “gerundive persons,” who by living their roles attain, transform, and develop their self within the context of a community (Ames 2011: 175). This continuous process of fully engaging in one’s roles, as Ames outlines, “must always begin from a commitment to personal cultivation,” because “it is only through committing oneself to a resolute regimen of personal cultivation that one can achieve the comprehensive intellectual and moral understanding that will make most of the human experience” (Ames 2011: 92). Human “becoming” thus implies a never-ceasing commitment to roles and a continuous personal investment in them. In the final analysis, Ames claims from a Confucian perspective that as humans we are “the sum of the roles we *live*—not *play*—in our relationships and transactions with others” (Ames 2011: 96; emphasis in the original). Huzi, in his actions, reverses this Confucian moral imperative and commits to none of his faces and *plays* them all.

Characters in the *Zhuangzi* such as Huzi can be understood as humorous inversions of Confucian “role ethics models” and the cultivation of selfhood that they represent. As radical virtuosos (in the sense of Chris Fraser; see Fraser 2011) they can enact any role whatsoever, but they cannot be defined on the basis of the “social constructs” they thus display. What is more, they perfectly resist the temptation to identify themselves with their roles in society. In the case of a “good” role, identification with such may easily lead to arrogance, conceit, or hubris; whereas in the case of a “bad” one, it may lead to a loss of confidence, self-hate, or aggression. The face changer Huzi represents an immunity to any personal commitment to the roles one plays, and thereby the possibility to play them unencumbered by the socio-psychological afflictions they may bring with them.

In the *Zhuangzi*, the narrative of Liezi's retirement and Huizi, the face changer, is followed by a short paragraph that is usually interpreted as a philosophical comment on the figure of the latter. This comment contains the famous statement that "consummate persons use their minds like a mirror, rejecting nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing. Thus they can handle all things without harm" (Ziporyn 2009: 54; translation modified). This can be read as a paradigmatic formula of genuine pretending, the pure playacting that is not based on hiding or suspending a true nature. Genuine pretenders "do not store" and do not adopt any of the roles they play; they neither welcome them to make them their own nor do they reject them as unfit for themselves. Like a mirror, Huzi reflects what Jixian wants to see in him back to Jixian, and therefore makes it impossible for Jixian to identify and thereby predict and "own" him. Perhaps most importantly, the text says that Huzi's art allows him to remain *unharm*ed (*bu shang* 傷). In accordance with a reading from the perspective of a philosophy of genuine pretending, this lack of harm may refer to a relief from the potential socio-psychological afflictions of an essential commitment to roles, that is the conceit that a "good" role may evoke, or the despair that a "bad" one may cause. Ultimately, the figure of the genuine pretender as represented by Huzi is therefore not only a humorous and happy trickster, but also an illustration of a Daoist conception of socio-psychological sanity.

6 Conclusion: Funny Role Models

As an illustration of Daoist sanity immune to harm, the figure of Huzi is clearly contrasted with the protagonist of the following story, namely Hundun, the "Emperor of the Center," who perishes from the seven holes that his two fellow emperors bore into him in order to do him the favor of supplying him with a human face. In the midst of attempts at social identification Huzi remains unharmed, but Hundun perishes. The two stories end differently: one happily, the other sadly. However, upon closer inspection they share a number of features which may or may not have caused a potential composer of the text to group them together.

The primary connection between the two tales is of course the common theme of "facelessness." Furthermore, in both tales facelessness, or the capacity to remain without a defining face, is associated with sanity and survival. Where Hundun surrenders, Huzi triumphs. In the midst of a partly grotesque, partly benign, and partly hostile social environment, both Hundun and Huzi are pressured to display a "public face." Huzi, the trickster, is capable of playfully dealing with this pressure and displaying faces at will without really having one. The careless Hundun on the other hand cannot withstand the pressure of his peers who inflict a face on him.

Standard interpretations of both stories tend to take them as fully serious instructions about Daoist cultivation ideals. For Norman J. Girardot, the figure of Hundun is nothing less than a mythic model "'paradigmatic' or 'archetypal' for the theory and practice of early Daoism" (Girardot 2008: 8). As was shown, most commentators take the figure of Huzi straightforwardly as a Daoist model practitioner. Upon closer inspection, however, both stories can be read in a different key whereby their comical features come to the fore. The Hundun story begins as a creation myth but then, incongruently and ironically, ends with the destruction of its protagonist—who turns

out to be rather silly. Likewise Liezi, the inept Daoist adept, is ridiculed throughout the story, and Jixian, the pompous quack, is satirically deflated and disappears from the story with a bang like a cartoon character.

In effect, both stories are comical presentations of incompetent Daoist practitioners: Hundun turns out to be quite the opposite of an immortal and only has a very short life. Liezi, the renowned Daoist master, only becomes a Daoist by default once he has given up pretending to be one. The humorous depiction of these Daoist “antiheroes” makes them the opposite of role models. In other texts of the era, both Hundun and Liezi appear as revered figures inviting emulation and adoration. At the end of the Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, however, one is a failed Daoist sage and the other a failed Daoist student. This comical inversion may well be understood not so much as a reference to an alternative Daoist model of master-student relationship, or to an alternative kind of Daoist human exemplars, but, perhaps closer to hand, as a humorous critique of the tendency of so many other texts of the time to establish role models and to encourage emulation. As anti-role models, figures like Hundun and Liezi at the end of the Inner Chapters may present a warning to be cautious with regard to role models altogether—including, but not limited to, Confucian “role ethics models.” In fact, as humorous parodies, the two stories may well be read primarily as self-ironical warning signs to the reader and, by means of an ancient Chinese distancing effect or *Verfremdungseffekt*, help them to not become all-too-serious Daoists, all-too-devoted practitioners, or all-too-sure-of-oneseif expert Daoists.

If read humorously, the story of Liezi's retirement presents the reader with the figure of Huzi, the face changer, as an ironic anti-role model. Huzi, the genuine pretender, has no identity, and accordingly cannot be emulated. One may see in him what one wants, but we are assured that, to speak with the poet, “beyond here lies nothing, nothing we can call our own.”

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