

Fāng Yǐzhì's “Fan-Fiction,” “A Letter from Huìzǐ to Zhuāngzǐ”

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Brief Introductory Remarks

In this “Letter”, Fāng Yǐzhì stages a pseudo-Huìzǐ who writes to his friend and philosophical rival Zhuāngzǐ to address the work *Zhuāngzǐ*.

It is assumed by Fāng that the work *Zhuāngzǐ* came on the scene after the death of Huìzǐ, so the letter is written from beyond the grave.

Note that pseudo-Huìzǐ’s tone is generally sarcastic and accusatory throughout, so if I fail to capture this at times, just remind yourself of the assumed tone. (Talent is distributed unevenly among our species.)

The letter is extremely dense, but I believe I have a handle on its architecture.

While this is indeed “fan-fiction” of an established sort, one should not allow that to undersell the philosophical seriousness of the work.

That is, we have a 17th-century polymath writing philosophically serious “fan-fiction” of a sort modelled after Zhāng Zìliè’s (張自烈; 1597–1673) “Letters to the Ancients” (*Yǔ gǔrén shū* 與古人書)

Fāng also wrote “A Letter from Xiàng Zǐqī to Guō Zǐxuán” (*Xiàng Zǐqī yǔ Guō Zǐxuán shū* 向子期與郭子玄書), in which a pseudo-Xiàng Xiù (向秀; ca. 227–272) exonerates Guō Xiàng (郭象; ca. 252–312)

The Main Architecture

1. Deconstruction of Zhuāngzǐ (lines 1–33)

1.1 betrayal and misrepresentation (lines 3, 5–7)

1.2 hypocrisy about fame and death (lines 16–18, 22)

1.3 philosophical contradictions (lines 13–14, 21, 23)

1.4 social irresponsibility and corruption (lines 25–27, 31, 33)

2. Counter-philosophy and resolution (lines 34–81)

2.1 ontological and ethical reconstruction (lines 34–64)

2.2 defense of sagehood and order (lines 65–71)

2.3 affirmation of learning and talent (lines 72–76)

2.4 motive and coda (lines 77–80)

Today's Agenda

Today we will just look at Part 1 in the interest of time, but I've made my complete draft translation available online as a “handout” for those interested:

<https://philpapers.org/go.pl?aid=WILFYF>

I have also supplied a new translation of a previous work that I have since outgrown, namely, a new translation of Fāng's complete commentary on the “butterfly dream” passage:

<https://philpapers.org/go.pl?aid=WILANO-38>

Further Part 1 Architecture

Part I. Deconstruction of Zhuāngzǐ (Lines 1–33)

Subpart 1. Betrayal and Misrepresentation (Lines 3, 5–7)

Sub-subpart 1. Posthumous exploitation (Line 3): Publishing after Huizi's death for rhetorical advantage.

Sub-subpart 2. Ornamental appropriation (Line 3): Treating friendship as mere embellishment.

Sub-subpart 3. Character distortion (Lines 5–7): Accusations of jealousy, rivalry, and false anecdotes.

Subpart 2. Hypocrisy on Fame and Death (Lines 16–18, 22)

Sub-subpart 1. Death anxiety masked (Line 16): Theories that belittle life/death as self-excuse.

Sub-subpart 2. False modesty about fame (Lines 17, 22): Writing books while disavowing recognition.

Sub-subpart 3. Defensive theorizing (Lines 18): Using paradoxes to evade responsibility.

Subpart 3. Philosophical Contradictions (Lines 13–14, 21, 23)

Sub-subpart 1. Uselessness paradox (Lines 13–14): “Use of uselessness” collapses under scrutiny.

Sub-subpart 2. Great thief argument (Lines 21): Extending Zhuangzi's own critique to indict him.

Sub-subpart 3. Self-referential irony (Line 23): If all names are reviled, why not revoke his own?

Subpart 4. Social Irresponsibility and Corruption (Lines 25–27, 31, 33)

Sub-subpart 1. Convenient refuge (Lines 25–26): Doctrines serve as shelter for the lazy.

Sub-subpart 2. License for arrogance (Line 27): Excuse for unrestrained behavior.

Sub-subpart 3. Corruption of talent (Lines 31, 33): Misleading the gifted, becoming “the great thief of Chaos.”

Subpart 1. Betrayal and Misrepresentation (Lines 3, 5–7): Translation

(1) I, Shī [i.e., Huìzǐ], kowtowing at the feet of Zǐxiū [i.e., Zhuāngzǐ]: 施頓首于休足下：

(2) When I, your humble servant, was writing my “five carts” of books, you, sir, never showed me what you had written. 自僕著書五車時，足下從不以所著見示也。

(3) You waited until I was dead to publish, just for the pleasure of clever disputation! You used your friend as a mere ornamental girdle-and-kerchief (*pán shuì* 鞶帨), making later purveyors of hearsay surmise how eagerly Zǐxiū memorialized his dead friend, yet also how he did not boast of him casually. 待僕死而乃布之，快口辯耳，以其友爲鞶帨，又使後世影響之流，揣子休汲汲傳其死友如此，又不苟誇其死友如此。

(4) Alas! 嗟乎!

(5) Through all of past and present, if there is such deep misrepresentation, how can it be measured! As for the white plaster on my nose, I can wipe it off myself; there is no need to trouble you, sir, to wield your axe. 古今渺渺，若是沉誣，豈可量哉！鼻上有堊，吾拭之耳，不勞君之運斤也。

(6) As for the claim that I, as minister of Liáng, feared you would take my position and searched for three days, only understanding after hearing the owl hooting over its rotten rat, and then you used the fish to explain, I will not clear myself of this false charge; this is a disgrace you brought upon yourself! 謂僕相梁，恐君代其位而三日搜，聞鴟得腐鼠之嚇，而後以魚解之，僕不白冤，此乃足下自遺醜耳。

(7) Has there ever been a man who feared his best friend would seize his position, yet could still be your indispensable counterpart, and would also come to offer condolences upon the death of your wife? 曾有畏好友奪位之人，而能爲君質，又來唁君妻喪者乎？

...

Subpart 1. Betrayal and Misrepresentation (Lines 3, 5–7): Upshot

1.1.1 *Zhuāngzǐ* published after Huìzǐ's death for rhetorical advantage (line 3).

1.1.2 He treated friendship as ornament (line 3).

1.1.3 He fabricated anecdotes out of rivalry and jealousy (lines 5–7).

Architecture

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Subpart 3. Philosophical Contradictions (Lines 13–14, 21, 23): Translation (1 of 2)

(13) While uselessness certainly has the use of uselessness, how can that which is useful be discarded? 無用固有無用之用，而有用者詎可廢乎？

(14) The gnarled tree wishes to complete its natural years by being useless timber, but what if it suddenly encounters a forest fire, or men cutting a path through the mountain, or a dragon taking the great wood to build a nest in the sea to fend off insects, I wonder if it can still complete its natural years? 擁腫者，欲以不材終其天年，忽遇野燒，忽有伐山通道者，忽龍取大木巢海以禦蟲，不知能終天年否？

...

(20) Do you find fault with the Sage? Why not find fault with Heaven and Earth? Heaven and Earth exist out of necessity, that is the work of Chaos. Why not find fault with Chaos? 君罪聖人耶？何不罪天地？不得已而有天地，乃混沌之所爲也，何不罪混沌？

(21) Your words say: “He who steals a buckle is executed, but he who steals a state becomes a marquis; and at the marquis’s gate, benevolence [*rén* 仁 = factoring in the wellbeing of others] and righteousness [*yì* 義 = the capacity to do what is fitting/appropriate, e.g., not taking advantage of others, even when one can get away with it] reside.” I, too, say: He who steals benevolence [*rén* 仁] and righteousness [*yì* 義] is the thief of *Dào* and *Dé*. He who steals Heaven and Earth is the thief of Chaos. He who steals Chaos, is he not the great thief of all past and present? 君之言曰：竊鉤者誅，竊國者侯；侯之門，仁義存。吾亦曰：竊仁義者，道德之賊；竊天地者，混沌之賊；竊混沌者，非古今之大賊乎？

(22) The theft of benevolence [*rén* 仁] and righteousness [*yì* 義] and the theft of Chaos are one and the same theft. By reviling all the names in the world, you create for yourself a high and unreachable name. Who permits you to do this reviling? 竊仁義與竊混沌，其竊一也。詬盡世之名，以自爲高不可及之名，誰容君詬？

Subpart 3. Philosophical Contradictions (Lines 13–14, 21, 23): Translation (2 of 2)

(23) Why are you not simply Chaos and surnamed Zhuāng? Chaos and named Zhōu? Chaos and styled Zǐxiū? Whom then would you be praising? 君何不混沌而姓莊? 何不混沌而名周? 何不混沌而字之子休? 將誰稱之?

(24) In the world, for every thousand ordinary scholars there is one talented scholar. For every hundred talented scholars, there is one who is expert in Rites and Music. The ordinary scholar is content in not knowing, while the talented scholar seeks to know. The skill of the talented is sharp and plundering, while the house of Rites and Music is rooted in fundamentals, this is why they are progressively fewer. As for one who achieves Central Harmony and hits the proper measure, there is not even one in a thousand. 世之凡士千而才士一，才士百而精禮樂者一。凡士安於不知，而才士求知。才士之巧，剽剽劫劫，而禮樂之家，原原本本，此所以逾少也。中和中節者，則又千不得一矣。

...

Subpart 3. Philosophical Contradictions (Lines 13–14, 21, 23): Upshot (1 of 3)

As for 1.3.1., pseudo-Huìzǐ challenges the notion that being “useless” guarantees survival by introducing forces that are indifferent to utility:

(13) While uselessness certainly has the use of uselessness, how can that which is useful be discarded?

(14) The gnarled tree wishes to complete its natural years by being useless timber, but what if it suddenly encounters a forest fire, or men cutting a path through the mountain, or a dragon taking the great wood to build a nest in the sea to fend off insects, I wonder if it can still complete its natural years?

Here, Fāng through pseudo-Huìzǐ exposes the celebrated paradox as a situational strategy, not an absolute principle. The security offered by being “useless” to a carpenter vanishes in the face of a forest fire or a mythical beast. The critique suggests that the doctrine is a clever but ultimately fragile piece of rhetoric.

Subpart 3. Philosophical Contradictions (Lines 13–14, 21, 23): Upshot (2 of 3)

And as for 1.3.2., pseudo-Huizǐ seizes upon Zhuāngzǐ's own logic to turn the critique of conventional morality back on him:

(21) Your words say: “He who steals a buckle is executed, but he who steals a state becomes a marquis...” I, too, say: He who steals benevolence [*rén* 仁] and righteousness [*yì* 義] is the thief of Dào and Dé. He who steals Heaven and Earth is the thief of Chaos. He who steals Chaos, is he not the great thief of all past and present?

This is a brilliant extension of Zhuāngzǐ's own argument. If subverting a small standard makes one a small thief and subverting a large one makes one a marquis, then Zhuāngzǐ's attempt to philosophically subvert all standards to grasp Chaos makes him the greatest thief of all.

Subpart 3. Philosophical Contradictions (Lines 13–14, 21, 23): Upshot (3 of 3)

(23) Why are you not simply Chaos and surnamed Zhuāng? Chaos and named Zhōu? Chaos and styled Zíxiū? Whom then would you be praising? 君何不混沌而姓莊? 何不混沌而名周? 何不混沌而字之子休? 將誰稱之?

...

The question in line 23 highlights the ultimate contradiction: (1.3.3.) to argue against names and distinctions, one must use a name and make distinctions. Zhuāngzǐ, according to pseudo-Huìzǐ, is caught in his own philosophical net.

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Subpart 4. Social Irresponsibility and Corruption (Lines 25–27, 31, 33): Translation (1 of 2)

(25) People hate restraint and delight in release; they hate difficulty and delight in convenience. Your words are lofty, so those seeking release take refuge in them; they are simple, so those seeking convenience take refuge in them. 惡拘而樂放，惡難而樂便。君之言高矣，而放者遁之；簡矣，而便者遁之。

(26) There is no need for year-long investigation; no need for day-long self-discipline. 不煩終年考究，不煩終日操持。

(27) Before, if one's strength was insufficient, one's heart felt shame; if one's conduct did not measure up, one's dreams felt deferential. Now, with these words that sweep away all common standards, one can be arrogant and do whatever one desires, and none dare challenge it. In the world, is there any art more convenient, more releasing, more impossible to scrutinize, than that of your school? 向也力不能徧，心若慙之；行不能合，夢若遜之。今有此掃鄙一切之詞，而乃傲然惟所欲爲而莫敢難，世更有最便最放、最不可窮詰之術，如足下之門者哉？

(28) You, sir, have succeeded in your plan! 足下得計矣！

(29) Thinking that the people of later ages will surely delight in me[, Zhuāngzǐ,] and revere me[, Zhuāngzǐ], and that I[, Zhuāngzǐ], am sufficient to startle all of history and gain an immortal name. Even if an upright person puts up a defense and rises to criticize me[, Zhuāngzǐ], they will never overcome the talented scholars who will pity me inwardly and protect me outwardly. You, sir, have succeeded in your plan! 以爲後世之情，必樂我而奉我，我足以駭古今而得不朽之名；即有正色隄防，起而責我，終不勝才士之內憐而外護之。足下得計矣！

Subpart 4. Social Irresponsibility and Corruption (Lines 25–27, 31, 33): Translation (1 of 2)

(30) And yet, you, sir, are suffering! You, sir, are misunderstood! 雖然，足下苦矣！足下冤矣！

(31) Those in the world who admire you are all people incapable of scholarship, incapable of accomplishment, incapable of human relationships, who are merely relying on you for a clever excuse. You, sir, possess an ultimate nature; by entrusting it thus, by entrusting it thus, can there still be an ultimate nature left? 世之愛足下者，皆不能學問，不能事業，不能人倫，而詭託者耳。足下有至性存，托乎托乎，豈復有至性乎？

(32) Fortunately, there is [I], Huì Shī, to tell the world: “Only after one’s righteousness [*yì* 義] is refined and one’s benevolence [*rén* 仁] is mature can one read Zhuāngzǐ; only after being steamed and steeped in the Six Classics can one read Zhuāngzǐ.” Then, Zhuāngzǐ is perhaps akin to the tea one drinks after a full meal. 幸有惠施爲告世曰：義精仁熟，而後可讀莊子；蒸滷六經，而後可讀莊子。則莊子庶幾乎飽食後之茗菴耳。

(33) Otherwise, you, sir, having wronged the Sage, thereby wrong Heaven and Earth, and in the end wrong yourself, becoming the great thief of Chaos, Heaven, and Earth. To misrepresent one dead friend, how is that sufficient to redeem you? What I sigh for most is that one who could have saved the world has instead ended up misleading the world. 不然，君既冤聖人以冤天地，而終以自冤，遂爲混沌天地之大賊矣。誣一死友，何足雪哉？所太息者，以可以救世者而竟誤世也。

Subpart 4. Social Irresponsibility and Corruption (Lines 25–27, 31, 33): Upshot

From this final cluster of accusations arise three further charges:

1.4.1 *Zhuāngzǐ* offers doctrines as refuge for the lazy (lines 25–26).

1.4.2 He licenses arrogance and unrestrained behavior (line 27).

1.4.3 He corrupts admirers, becoming “the great thief of Chaos” (lines 31, 33).

A remedy (line 32) is suggested for the would-be reader of *Zhuāngzǐ*: Only after “righteousness [*yì* 義] is refined” and “benevolence [*rén* 仁] matured,” and after being “steeped in the Six Classics,” should one read *Zhuāngzǐ*. Pseudo-Huìzǐ’s proposed remedy is not unlike Fāng’s own, who in “A Letter from Xiàng Zǐqī [i.e., Xiàng Xiù (向秀; ca. 227–272)] to Guō Zǐxuán [i.e., Guō Xiàng (郭象; ca. 252–312)]” (*Xiàng Zǐqī yǔ Guō Zǐxuán shū* 向子期與郭子玄書) and other paratexts proposes and in *Monk Yàodì Concocts a Zhuāngzǐ* performs the syncretic “medicinal” task of combining *Zhuāngzǐ* with other materia medica from traditional *Zhuāngzǐ* commentary and the broader Chinese canon to eliminate its ill side effects adumbrated in Part 1 of the “Letter” I am today discussing.

Word for the wise: an aside on *rén* 仁 and *yì* 義

Fāng Yǐzhì saw some of his contemporaries and forbears use *Zhuāngzǐ* as a pretext for denying the importance of morality as such rather than as a critique of moralizing.

That means such people used *Zhuāngzǐ* to deny *rén* 仁 (the capacity to factor in the wellbeing of others) and *yì* 義 (the capacity to do what is fitting/appropriate, e.g., not taking advantage of others, even when one can get away with it). That is to say, they denied not just moralizing [pontificating about and making a show of *rén* and *yì*], but morality as such [the capacities for *rén* and *yì*].

On this point, Fāng's "Letter" has contemporary relevance. I caution junior scholars: one who argues they see no need for morality might in fact see no need for morality.

General Remarks

After its bitingly ironic Subpart 1, Part 1 gives us insight into Fāng Yǐzhì's views on Zhuāngzǐ through pseudo-Huìzǐ. This includes alleged philosophical tensions within *Zhuāngzǐ* and pernicious applications of *Zhuāngzǐ* by its self-styled adherents.

In Part 2, Fāng develops his own philosophical perspective through pseudo-Huìzǐ and positively (rather than critically, as in Part 1) recontextualizes Zhuāngzǐ in light of his own perspective. The interested reader should consult my complete draft translation, which I make freely available for your enjoyment:

<https://philpapers.org/go.pl?aid=WILFYF>

(NB: I have a much more polished and heavily annotated version in an essay that breakdowns the entire architecture of this “Letter” and its philosophical upshot. Hopefully that will someday see the light of day!)

Work Cited

Williams, John Robert. n.d. "Philosophical Aspects of Fang Yizhi's "A Letter from Huizi to Zhuangzi", " unpublished manuscript