

1

“What Is the Reason of Failure or Success? The Fisherman’s Song Goes Deep into the River”

Fishermen in the Zhuangzi

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Make few your needs, lessen your desires, and then you may get along even without rations. You will ford the rivers and drift out upon the sea. Gaze all you may—you cannot see its farthest shore; journey on and on—you will never see where it ends. Those who come to see you off will all turn back from the shore and go home, while you move ever farther out into the distance. . . . [R]id yourself of hardship, . . . cast off your cares, and . . . wander alone with the Way to the Land of Great Silence.
—*Zhuangzi*, “The Mountain Tree”

A variety of fishermen appear in the *Zhuangzi*,¹ ostensibly because they can utter (or non-utter) spontaneous Daoist insights² and conjure up vivid impressions of Daoist cultivation and realization in the mind of the reader.³ The fishermen thus portrayed suit Zhuangzi’s philosophic purposes because, (1) their cultivation is not an artificial regimen, nor is it ascendant in nature—it consists in the very process of their apprenticeship and work as fishermen and proceeds as a gradual deepening of their experience of rivers, lakes, and seas; (2) their realization and insight occur out of their daily interaction with and contemplation of rivers, lakes, and seas—their realization arises spontaneously through their direct experience of these waters, as limpid manifestations of *dao*.

Zhuangzi’s portrayals of fishermen have moved generations of readers. Chinese poets and painters have felt inspired to recast their images again and again

down through the centuries.⁴ Despite the philosophic and cultural importance of the fishermen in the *Zhuangzi*, this topic rarely has been singled out for consideration in the scholarship to date.⁵

Given the pristine nature of the subject, we shall embark on an exploration of fishermen in the *Zhuangzi* organized around a set of guiding questions, rather than advancing a focused argument. Questions we shall entertain below include: What is the source of the power and attraction of the image of fishermen in their element as portrayed in the *Zhuangzi*? What levels of realization do Zhuangzi's fisherman display? And how have these fishermen been recast in traditional Chinese poetry and art? What sorts of realization do the later fishermen display?

By exploring such questions, we may open the way to an understanding of the fisherman figure as a representative of the man of *dao* 道 for Zhuangzi and Chinese poets and painters.

FISHERMAN IN THEIR ELEMENT

What distinguishes fishermen from most people is that they lead their lives on the water. They spend hours, days, months, even years, on the water, working on the water, probing the shallows, plumbing the depths, contemplating the water, meditating on the water, sometimes gaining realizations and insights thereby. What, then, is it about the waters of rivers, lakes, and seas that bestows realization and insight on those who are attuned to them and contemplate them for extended periods?

The *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* offer some clues.⁶ A "practical" text, the *Laozi* presents several guiding statements about water as "close to *dao*" and as a good exemplar of features and functions of *dao*. The *Zhuangzi*, a more "imaginative" work, on the other hand, opens with a myth in which the northern sea figures as a dark, mysterious realm.

The *Laozi* reads:

That which is best is similar to water.
Water benefits ten thousand things and does not oppose them.
It is always at rest in humble places that people dislike.
Thus, it is close to *dao*. (ch. 8)

Water is the softest and meekest thing in the world.
Yet it is best able to overcome that which is strong and solid.
This is the truth that cannot be changed. (ch. 78)

Thus, by contemplating the beneficent passivity, the recessive humility, the resilient softness of water, the student of *dao* will grasp certain salient features of *dao* and nonaction as "enlightened conduct."

The water metaphor is implicitly at work throughout the *Laozi*. The following passage, for example, implies the relevance of water as a metaphor that highlights hidden, generally unnoticed features of life and conduct accentuated in Daoism:

The meekest in the world
Penetrates the strongest in the world,
As nothingness enters into that-which-has-no-opening.
Hence, I am aware of the value of non-action
And of the value of teaching with no-words.
As for the value of non-action,
Nothing in the world can match it. (ch. 43)

By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* opens with an invocation of dark, mysterious oceanic depths in describing the immensity and range of the primordial Kun fish that suddenly transforms into the great Peng bird:

In the northern darkness there is a fish, and his name is Kun. The Kun is so huge I don't know how many thousand *li* he measures. He changes and becomes a bird whose name is Peng. The back of Peng measures I don't know how many thousand *li* across and, when he rises up and flies off, his wings are like clouds all over the sky. When the sea begins to move, this bird sets off for the southern darkness, which is the Lake of Heaven.⁷

Sea and sky, the respective elements of Kun and Peng, represent yin and yang poles of *qi* 氣, the flowing fluid substratum of the cosmos and all phenomena. Primal yin and yang *qi* impulses, movements, formations, and distributions shape the world, and thus body forth primal patterns of *dao* creativity. Zhuangzi's expression "northern darkness" signifies the yin-pole of the world, whence the yang-*qi* and the *qi* of incipient phenomena begin to emerge. Zhuangzi elsewhere qualifies the expression "darkness" as "mysterious darkness," to describe the realm where phenomena—mental as well as physical—originate, the realm where they are yet-to-begin-to-exist.⁸

In Chinese culture, fish symbolize fertility, strength, prosperity, freedom, and joy; fish are also regarded as supernatural since they can survive in seemingly uninhabitable depths and move freely in any direction.⁹ Hence, the gargantuan fish named Kun manifests the principle of fertility and life in the primordial ocean.

Paradoxically, the term "Kun" means fish roe, and thus connotes something small and incipient. With this name-play, Zhuangzi at once foreshadows two principal ideas of his philosophy: the identity of opposites and the identity of multiplicity. These are exemplified for example in the doctrines of the identity

of all the phases of life, and the identity of birth and death: to be born is to die, to be an embryo is to be fully grown.¹⁰

“[The fish Kun] changes into a bird whose name is Peng.” Kun is born of the yin-pole, but bears incipient yang-*qi*; Peng rising from Kun manifests the rise of incipient yang out of yin. Notably, whereas the yin fish lies hidden and mysterious in the dark northern sea, the yang bird is out in the open—it covers the sky and flies as a companion of the prevailing winds. Peng at once churns the air and flies south toward the yang-pole, centered in the Lake of Heaven—a crystalline yang body of water. But, as “return” and “reversal” are “the movement of *dao*,” Peng eventually changes back into Kun and returns to the mysterious northern darkness.¹¹

In sum, Zhuangzi portrays sky and sea as two primal realms of fluid *qi* complements, yin and yang. These complements in their complex of interactive relationships express the full operation of *dao*. Yet, in its primary originative and closure functions, it is the dark, mysterious primordial depths of the northern waters that are closest to *dao* that the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* seek to accentuate. Accordingly:

To be aware of the positive, yet to abide in the negative is to be the abyss of the universe.

To be the abyss of the universe is not to deviate from real attainment and to remain like an innocent child.

To be aware of the white, yet to abide in the black is to be the chasm of the universe.

To be the chasm of the universe is to have sufficient real attainment, and to remain in the state of original non-differentiation.

(*Laozi*, ch. 28)

All bodies of water—streams, rivers, lakes, seas—embody to some extent the depths and mysteries of the northern darkness, and bear primal *dao* properties of purity, transparency, reflectivity, passivity, formlessness, humility, fluidity, receptivity, and fertility. Thus, contemplative fishermen in long contact with such waters will spontaneously awaken to *dao*.

This recognition of water as a source of realization and insight is a seemingly universal human phenomenon. We find philosophers and poets across cultures and across the ages enchanted by and celebrating water. To mention just a few examples: Thales, the first Greek philosopher, declared water the first principle of all things.¹² The Greek poet Pindar called water “the best of all things.”¹³ An Indian *Purana* praises water as “the source of all things and existence.”¹⁴ Sounding somewhat like a Daoist, St. Francis celebrated water as the mirror of nature and the model of his conduct.¹⁵ And Zhu Xi poeticized:

The wide pond expands like a mirror,
The heavenly light and cloud shadows play upon it.
How does such clarity occur? It is because it contains the living stream
from the Fountain.¹⁶

Mankind experiences flowing water as a living natural force. Springs and rivers display power and perpetual renewal; thus, they are deemed alive. Moreover, they vividly embody two basic features of existence: constancy and change. Between the relatively stable banks of a river, we observe waters in constant flux. As Heraclitus intoned, "We step and do not step into the same river twice, we are and we are not."¹⁷

A river's journey from source to mouth suggests the passage from innocence to experience, the sojourn from birth to death. The unity of the river thus implies the unity of the life process and the identity of life and death. When viewing a river from a position along its course, we experience its source and mouth as mysterious "beyonds." We imagine the source to be a pristine spring feeding the river from deep within the earth and the mouth as opening into a boundless sea, which absorbs the waters surging down from the river, effortlessly. Consequently, the sight of a river rouses our imaginations to deeper and wider conceptions of our worlds, our souls, our selves.¹⁸

Fish, too, are part of the fisherman's element. Fish display spontaneous, contented life. Zhuangzi tells of Confucius seeing sages who transcend society and "wander beyond the realm,"¹⁹ such as the three friends who said to each other, "'Who can join with others without doing with others? Who can do with others without joining with others? Who can climb up to Heaven and wander in the mists, roam the infinite, and forget life forever and forever?' The three men looked at each other and smiled."²⁰

In attempting to characterize such men to his students, Confucius remarks, "Fish forget each other in the rivers and lakes, and men [such as these] forget each other in the Way."²¹ Zhuangzi himself appreciated and vouched for the happiness of the fish.²² He also affirmed that the True Man, the Spiritual Man "takes his cue from the fishes."²³

From another perspective, Zhuangzi tells of Prince Ren fishing in the eastern sea for one year hoping to land a gigantic fish—a fish so big that it could feed all the people "from Zhihe east, from Cangwu north."²⁴ Through Ren's prolonged contemplation of the sea in angling for this avatar of Kun, he gains insight into *dao* and a grasp of the practical benefits of this insight, signified in his landing the colossal fish.

In sum, water, like *dao*, manifests formlessness and potential. Water spawns incipient life; fish, the fruit of their fecund element, flourish at one with their realm and manifest a free, spontaneous, contented life. Moreover, in the processes

of dissolving forms and thus providing for the appearance of new forms, new life, water awakens the contemplative mind back to its original state, at one with *dao*:

Dao is indistinct and ineffable.
 Ineffable and indistinct, yet therein are forms.
 Indistinct and ineffable, yet therein are objects.
 Unfathomable and invisible, yet therein are essences.

 Through [*dao*] we see *the beginnings of all things*.
 (*Laozi*, ch. 21, italics added)

All things are together in action,
 But I look to their non-action.
 Things are unceasingly moving and restless,
 Yet each one is proceeding *back to the origin*.
 Proceeding back to the origin is quiescence.
 To be in quiescence is to *return* to the destiny of being.
 (*Laozi*, ch. 16, italics added)

The power and attraction of the fisherman figure in the *Zhuangzi* arises through our intimation of the enlightenment associated with the fisherman's reflective life on the water.

LEVELS OF REALIZATION AND INSIGHT OF FISHERMEN IN THE *ZHUANGZI*

Chapter 15, "Constrained in Will," sets forth a classification of scholars that distinguishes and profiles six different levels. The levels form an ascending scale of realization and conduct.²⁵ This apparently *ad hoc* yet meaningful assortment of levels consists of:

1. The scholar in the mountain valley who is a sullen social critic
2. The scholar in society who devotes himself to teaching and learning
3. The scholar in court and councils who serves his sovereign and state
4. The scholar of the rivers and seas who withdraws from the world, and *idles and fishes*
5. The scholar who devotes himself to practicing yoga and breathing exercises
6. The sage who transcends yet subsumes the other levels.²⁶

In a sense the sage is beyond the scale, because he is independent and free in mind and spirit. Yet, under the sage, who acts by nonaction, the beneficial goals, actively though ineffectively pursued by scholars at higher levels, are carried out and realized.

Our fisherman scholar is situated at the center, at the pivot, of this ascending scale of realization: he is engaged in withdrawing from society in spirit as well as in body. He is in the process of turning inward and dwelling in tranquillity in order to let his mind become detached and empty:

To repair to the thickets and ponds, living idly in the wilderness, angling for fish in solitary places, inaction his only concern—such is the life favored by the scholar of the rivers and seas, the man who withdraws from the world, the unhurried idler.²⁷

Initially, our fisherman scholar needs this wild, natural setting, this tonic of wildness (to borrow an expression from Thoreau) so as to cultivate and maintain his inner tranquillity, his sense of oneness with heaven, earth, and all things. The sage, by contrast, is already free; he will possess and maintain his enlightened state of mind, fed by the tonic of wildness, no matter what setting or situation he happens to be in. “The man who is not divorced from the great source is the natural man. The man who is not divorced from the essence is the spiritual man.”²⁸ As Tao Yuanming poeticized:

To build a house in the world of man
And not to hear the noise of horse and carriage:
How can this be done?
When the mind is detached, the place is quiet.²⁹

These six levels of scholars represent an ascending scale of realization, and the higher levels comprehend and subsume the five other levels; thus, the scholars who would cultivate *dao* at the higher levels should be conversant with the lower truths associated with lower levels. This accentuation on practical efficacy, even though it is rather light-handed, departs from the purely contemplative predilection exhibited in the first seven chapters of the *Zhuangzi*, and speaks to the later composition of this part of the text, perhaps early in the Han dynasty. In this light, it is assumed that the fisherman scholar, the yoga adept and the sage will grasp and have acquired insight into the structure and function of the government and society before withdrawing themselves and turning inward. *Laozi*, chapter 48, reads:

To learn,
One accumulates day by day.
To study *dao*,
One reduces day by day.

The process of reducing is a process of unlearning—it consists, in part, in releasing mental attachments to the social, political “knowledge” one has acquired, and then placing it into larger and larger perspectives, finally the perspective of *dao*. As Carl Jung affirms, “This Daoist view is typical of Chinese thinking. It is, when-

ever possible, *a thinking in terms of the whole*.”³⁰ Thus, the student of *dao* comes to realize that the “knowledge” that had been transmitted to him through venerable texts by authority figures as sacrosanct, definite truths governing patterns of interpersonal relationship and conduct are artificial stipulations and codifications, true only for a certain time and place—even if they have a glorious history and are shrouded in tradition.³¹

The sage thus conceived will be cognizant of the rituals and proprieties of his society but he will respond to situations spontaneously according to his enlightened discernment. Even so, there is nothing to prevent his responses from according with common practice.

Now let us consider examples of fisherman in the *Zhuangzi* to see if and how they fit into this scale of realization.

First, we encounter Zhuangzi himself fishing and rejecting a generous offer to administer the state of Chu in chapter 17, “Autumn Floods.” In light of the ascending scale of realization implied in the classification of scholars above, we find Zhuangzi placing himself slightly past the midpoint, the pivot on the scale, as a person who has turned inward, withdrawn himself from society to dwell in nature, and who has begun to experience some enlightenment, some insight into *dao*. Moreover, his disdainful rejection of the offer to take over the administration of the state shows that he still *depends on* being withdrawn and dwelling in a secluded, tranquil setting to angle for contentment and deeper realization. Presumably, if he had acquired the spiritual autonomy of the sage, it would be all the same to him whether he governed or wagged his tail in the mud.

Since Zhuangzi intends to communicate insights into human life, *dao* and the condition of enlightenment to his readers through his writings, he would naturally avoid official service and intentionally position himself at the halfway point between sagehood and nonsagehood and thus truly “walk . . . two roads.”³²

Next, the account of Confucius heeding the advice of Taigong Ren in chapter 20, “The Mountain Tree,” places him poised to enter the midpoint of the ascending scale of realization.

Confucius learns from Taigong Ren that his teachings about government and society are not only a form of showing off and selling himself, but give rise to dissatisfaction and strife. Confucius then bids his friends and associates adieu, sends his disciples away, and retires to the great swamp, wearing animal skins and coarsely woven cloth and feeding only on acorns and chestnuts. He grows so “wild” (again, in Thoreau’s positive sense of the term) there, so at one with the swamp and wildlife, that he can “walk among the animals without alarming their herds, walk among the birds without alarming their flocks.”³³

Stressing his sudden turn to hermitism, the anecdote doesn’t mention Confucius angling, yet the author expects the reader to recall Confucius’s enjoyment of waters, his meditation on a stream and his preference for angling with a hook rather than with a net as recorded in the *Maotunzi*.³⁴

Next, in chapter 21, "Tian Zifang," King Wen encounters a venerable old man fishing and at once recognizes him to be a sage. That his sagehood is authentic is underscored in the description:

His fishing was not really fishing; he was not holding the fishing pole in hand in order to catch a fish. He was undertaking eternal fishing.³⁵

King Wen has the discernment to see that this old man can manage the state administration perfectly and conceives of a way to persuade his high officials and relatives to accept him as the prime minister. A veritable Daoist sage, the old man goes on to rule by nonaction. During his three-year tenure, "the regular precedents and laws remained unchanged, and not a single new order was issued."³⁶ The established hierarchies and distinctions that had characterized government and society for generations fall away and people start to interrelate and conduct their lives in a simple, direct, sincere fashion. Pleased, King Wen seeks to extend the old man's dominion to the whole world. Hearing of King Wen's plan, the old man "looked blank and gave no answers, . . . and when orders went out to make the attempt, the old man ran away . . . and was never heard from again."³⁷

As discussed above, in chapter 26, "External Things," Prince Ren makes an enormous fishhook and devotes himself to angling for the gigantic fish of the eastern sea for a full year. With its emphasis on Prince Ren's landing the fish, this story is not so much about the fisherman figure per se as it is intended to illustrate the benefits of cultivating broad-mindedness. Contemplating the wide sea for one year, Prince Ren's mind becomes so open and vast that he can comprehend and catch the giant fish: Daoist Great Understanding identifies with the cosmos and is sensitive and responsive to the pulse and rhythms of nature. Thus, the actions of the man of Great Understanding are, ultimately, more in harmony with the situation and fruitful than those of the more practical, goal-directed person.

Lastly, chapter 31, "The Old Fisherman," presents a sustained narrative of an encounter between Confucius and a nameless old fisherman sage. Confucius has brought several disciples to the Apricot Altar to study while he strums his lute and sings. The scene recalls *Analec*s 11/26 where Confucius, in a relaxed mood, asks his disciples their respective ambitions. While acknowledging the younger disciples' grand ambitions to administer a state, he shares Zengxi's wish "to go bathing in the River Yi and enjoy the breeze in the Rain Altar, and then go home chanting poetry" with several adults and youths.³⁸

Confucius settles down at the Apricot Altar; but, before he has completed playing his first song, an uncanny old fisherman pulls up in a boat, sizes him up, then lectures him on government and society, on eight faults and four evils, and finally on his need to be "diligent in improving [him]self, careful to hold fast to the Truth," Truth in the sense of inner genuineness.

The old fisherman's credentials as a sage are established at the outset of the narrative with his physical description.

His beard and eyebrows were pure white, his hair hung down over his shoulders, and his sleeves flapped at his sides.³⁹

Moreover, toward the end of the narrative Confucius identifies the old man as a Perfect Man and then as a sage.⁴⁰

Despite the disclaimer that he “will put aside his own ways for the moment and try applying [him]self to the things that [Confucius is] concerned with,”⁴¹ the old fisherman’s didactic lectures to Confucius on government and society mark him as a sage savvy about administration and society and place him squarely in our scale of scholars and realization. A genuine sage by that standard, he has transcended yet still comprehends, and perchance has impact upon, government and society in his “realm” of tacit influence. The old fisherman’s savvy incorporates the “wisdom” of a laissez-faire nonaction approach, provided that people focus on the affairs within the purview of their concern; he strongly deprecates Confucian interventionism in other people’s affairs.

The old fisherman then proceeds to espouse his own notion of Truth: Bearing Truth means being pure and sincere within so that one’s manifest feelings and responses are genuine. “When a man has the Truth within himself, his spirit may move among external things.”⁴² To stand on tradition and custom is to dissipate the purity of one’s emotions and complicate one’s intentions. By responding directly, guided by one’s spontaneous impulses, one will act appropriately and sincerely, and thus will “move” others and be appreciated by them.

Having said his piece, the old fisherman “poled away in his boat, threading a path through the weeds.” Confucius watches transfixed, “until the ripples on the water were stilled and he could no longer hear the sound of the pole,” before he ventures to mount the carriage back.⁴³ The old fisherman returns to the hidden Source whence pure waters emerge to purify himself, whereas Confucius rides a chariot back to artificial human society.

When the disciple Zilu dismisses the old fisherman in rather offhand fashion as a mere fisherman, not worthy of the profound respect Confucius has paid him, Confucius replies that to fail to treat an elder with respect is a breach of propriety, and to fail to treat a worthy with veneration is a violation of benevolence. He continues:

If the fisherman were not a Perfect Man, he would not be able to make people humble themselves before him. And if men, in humbling themselves before him, lack purity of intention, then they will never attain the Truth. As a result they will go on forever bringing injury upon themselves.⁴⁴

In concluding, Confucius identifies *dao* as the path along which the myriad things and human undertakings alike should proceed; things and undertakings that are in accord with the *Ways of the Heavens* flourish, those that do not, die and fail. Hence, the sage will pay homage wherever *dao* is to be found:

This old fisherman may certainly be said to possess [the Way]. How, then, would I dare fail to show respect to him!⁴⁵

A. C. Graham finds in the old fisherman's call to "hold fast to the Truth," to one's inner genuineness, an echo of Yang Zhu's egoistic hermitism.⁴⁶ Yang Zhu's position involves, however, an austere detachment from society and material things as well as a devotion to yogic practice. Yang Zhu would likely fall under the category of adepts devoted to breathing exercises and yoga in our scale of scholars and realization. The *Huainanzi*, chapter 13, for instance, attributes to Yang Zhu the principles of:

keeping the body intact, protecting one's genuineness, and not tying the body by involvements with other things.⁴⁷

Many pre-Qin texts go on to attribute to Yang Zhu the extreme position of refusing to give anything of the self over to the world and of despising things and treasuring one's own life.⁴⁸

The old fisherman displays none of this excessive austerity. Whereas Yang Zhu simply has no thought about society, except perhaps to eschew it, the old fisherman has a positive view of society as possibly flourishing, on condition that people stay focused on their own duties at their respective social position. He also has a positive, almost Mencian view of human affairs, on condition that people maintain pure, sincere hearts and express their feelings truly and spontaneously. His views imply a detached attitude toward material things, but that is a far cry from the outright renunciation of them espoused by Yang Zhu.

Although similar in letter to Yang Zhu's saying, the old fisherman's call to "hold fast to the Truth," to inner genuineness, is much closer in spirit to views propounded throughout the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi*. The *Laozi* tells us to "manifest simplicity and embrace original non-differentiation" in chapter 19. Similarly, the *Zhanguo* (Intrigues of the Warring States) suggests that we "return to inner genuineness and revert to original non-differentiation" ("Qice"). Moreover, the *Zhuangzi*, chapter 12, "Heaven and Earth," reads:

The man of noble attainment moves in simplicity. . . . He takes his stand in the original source and his understanding reaches to the spirits. Therefore his attainment is far-reaching. His mind goes forth only when stirred by outer phenomena. . . . To preserve the self and live out life, to experience attainment and enlightenment into *Dao*—is this not noble attainment?⁴⁹

The man with attainment is free of thoughts when at rest, and free of calculations when in action. He doesn't bear predetermined ideas of right and wrong, beautiful and ugly.⁵⁰

Above and beyond the affinity between the old fisherman and the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* at this point, the old fisherman ascribes, as noted by Graham,⁵¹ a

positive value to the feelings that stands out in the *Zhuangzi*, and that is absent from the *Laozi*. As noted, the old fisherman also displays a Mencian trust that people who have cultivated the Truth of inner purity and sincerity will be set to spontaneously express themselves with appropriate emotions and sentiments in various situations.

FISHERMAN SAGES

At this point, we would do well to pause and inquire whether the appearance of fisherman scholars and sages in the *Zhuangzi* signals a shift in the Daoist conception of sagehood. As we have seen, the ascending scale of scholars and realization into which all the fisherman figures in the *Zhuangzi* can be mapped, involves the assumption that scholars, worthies and sages at the higher levels will continue to understand and have insight into the ways of government and society. Those at the higher levels, even sages who have transcended all the mundane restrictions and concerns of society, will have a firm grasp of human affairs and will perchance exert a positive, generally harmonizing influence on government and society.

By contrast, the *Zhuangzi* usually portrays contemplative sages, figures detached from and unconcerned about mundane matters of interpersonal and social life. Emphasis is placed on the character of their enlightenment, their personal style, and their bearing and conduct. These sages tend to be elderly, with long, flowing white hair and beards, but with skin as smooth and soft as a baby's and eyes that are blank and innocent. They are as gentle and light-hearted as young girls. Their conduct is smooth and effortless and their existence in the world is never threatened; for their identity with heaven, earth, and the ten thousand things keeps them attuned to their setting and synchronized with the things transpiring around them.

Accordingly, the fisherman motif suggests an indirect shift to a slightly more practical conception of sagehood. To review, the fishing *Zhuangzi* refuses government service, preferring to wag his tail in the mud; as we have noted, this attitude was consistent with his position on the scale of realization. We, too, saw Confucius withdrawing from society to live as a hermit in the great swamp; again, this was consistent with his position on the scale. We may also observe that, whereas *Zhuangzi* would be particularly inclined, by temperament, toward a free, contemplative sagehood, Confucius would ultimately be inclined toward a more practical form. The old man fishing discovered by King Wen at first appears to be a contemplative sage, but once placed in charge of state administration he—by nonaction—infuses harmony into the realm by spurring the people to become simple, pure, sincere, and cooperative. Prince Ren's landing the gargantuan fish underscores the practical benefits of realizing *dao*. Finally, whereas the old fisherman dwells at the Source of the flowing river, alone and nameless, he displays impressive insight into government and society as well as into the subtleties of

interpersonal intercourse. The profound impression he makes on Confucius is meant to confirm the "soundness" of his insights overall to the traditional reader.

How does the fisherman motif foster this subtle shift in the conception of sagehood? We recall that meditation and other yogic practices are part of Daoist cultivation. Meditation always involves the two poles of (1) opening up and freeing the mind, and (2) focusing and concentrating the mind. Examples of meditation presented in the "Inner Chapters" of the *Zhuangzi* are relatively free-style and nondirective; they involve opening up much more than focusing the mind, which is consistent with the entirely free, unattached contemplative sages presented there.⁵² The fishing motif, on the other hand, places a new emphasis on focusing and concentrating the mind, with the point at which the fishing line enters the water providing the focal point of attention, while the fluid formless waters still act to open up and free the mind.⁵³

The act of fishing itself provides an example of Zhuangzi's "walking two roads": the reflective fisherman will undertake eternal fishing while angling for fish.⁵⁴ It also exemplifies action by nonaction, nonintentional action: the reflective fisherman remains passive and indifferent while fishing. He is not really concerned whether he lands a fish; sometimes he even neglects to use bait or even a hook.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, fishing can and does yield practical results, in realization and enlightenment as well as in fresh fish.

FISHERMEN IN CHINESE POETRY

Many traditional Chinese poets and painters adopted images of the fisherman introduced into Chinese philosophy and literature by Zhuangzi. Because Zhuangzi had already invested the fisherman figure with philosophic significance and a wealth of associations, later poets and painters had just to present the fisherman in his element, and informed readers and viewers would make the connections and perchance feel moved. Even people unaware of the implicit associations and significances could feel the vastness and openness of the horizons, the fluidity and formlessness of the waters—whether of a still lake or a flowing stream—and the boundless, unfettered, detached, free spirit of the fisherman.

The theme of fishermen in Chinese poetry and painting deserves an in-depth inquiry; for present purposes, however, it will suffice to survey a few fisherman poems by Tang masters sympathetic to Daoism. Although these poets all drew inspiration and insight from Zhuangzi's portrayals of fishermen, each one accentuated a different aspect of the fisherman figure and his element.

First, let us consider Zhang Zhihe (730–810), a well-known poet-fisherman who reputedly preferred to fish without bait. His works, in fact, inspired the Yuan painter and poet of fishermen, Wu Zhen (1280–1354).⁵⁶ Zhang was charmed by the image of the fisherman floating freely along with the current in his boat, at one with the boundless, boundless water. His poems thus intone a sense of

approaching the realm of the Immortals; they are, however, also laden with an overrichness of delight and bounty that runs counter to Zhuangzi's movement toward purity, tranquillity, and detachment. Consequently, while Zhang's poems are fine literary compositions, they do not capture the true spirit and depth of Zhuangzi's philosophy.

Zhang's fishermen take evident joy in the forces of nature and the profusion of life therein. The following is a typical example:

In Jingdao Lake the moon is full,
The Baling fisherman rows and chants.
With fishing gear and dugout canoe,
Happiness resides in the wind and wave.
No need to follow the Immortals.⁵⁷

Zhang's most famous poem, "The Fisherman's Song," celebrates the power and bounty of nature in the first two lines, but it steps back to suggest the isolation and austerity of the fisherman's life in the concluding two lines. Nonetheless, Zhang's fisherman prefers to stay on the river, feeling the wind and rain, rather than to retreat to human society:

Before Xisai mountain the white egrets fly,
Among the peach blossoms and flowing waters the Mandarin fish are
well-nourished.
Hat of bamboo,
Coat of green reeds,
The driving wind and light mist do not necessitate the old fisherman's
return.⁵⁸

Liu Zongyuan (773–819) was a Tang poet and essayist of philosophic acumen. His fisherman poems are masterpieces of the genre. More cognizant than Zhang Zhihe was of the hardship and isolation of the fisherman's life, Liu sketches imposing though secluded settings bordered by mountains that, rather than delimit and enclose, reach up and bring the earth up to the sky. Thus, Liu's poems effectively accentuate the fisherman's simultaneous seclusion in nature and access to the boundlessness of *dao*:

River Snow

Among thousands of mountain peaks,
not a single bird flies.
Among the myriad mountain pathways,
not a single person plies.
In this world of snow and mountains,
there is just an old fisherman in reed coat and straw hat,
Alone in the cold river fishing.⁵⁹

The Old Fisherman

At night the old fisherman docks his boat along the
western cliff.
Before sunrise he draws up clear river water and
burns Chu bamboo to cook.
Anon the sun rises and the fog disperses,
there is not a soul to be seen.
With the sound of the oar in the water,
the mountains and river are verdant.
Shifting our gaze, we see the waters flow out
from the horizon.
The white clouds atop the cliffs pursue each other
without intention.⁶⁰

Wang Wei (699–759) expressed the essential thought of Daoism and Chan Buddhism in his best poetry. His poetic art achieved perfection in that he conveyed the philosophy directly through the juxtaposition of images, events and feelings, without recourse to special terms or jargon. In the following poem, the image of the fisherman's song entering deep into the river highlights the poet's sense of detachment from worldly concerns and sense of oneness and attunement with *dao*, as reflected in his tranquil setting and quiescent mind:

Of late I concern myself with quiescence.
Nothing in the world concerns my mind.
The breeze from the pine woods blows my sash;
The mountain moon shines upon my harp.
You ask me the reason of failure and success;
The fisherman's song goes deep into the river.⁶¹

Finally, the poet Sikong Shu (d. c. 790) actually speaks as a fisherman in the following poem. His degree of realization is manifested in his perfect comprehension of, and attunement with, his river setting:

Ceasing fishing, I return back for the day, but
don't bother to fasten the boat to shore.
Unconcerned, I fall asleep just as the moon sets over
the village.
Even though the night wind blows,
The boat will stay in the reeds and blossoms
in the shallow water.⁶²

Why needn't the fisherman secure his boat to the shore? Why can he fall asleep easily, unconcerned whether the boat will slip away and float downstream? He is at one with the river, *the Way at the Material* the subtle ebb and flow of its

current. Thus, he knows just where to leave his boat, at just the place where, held in place both by the reeds and by an equal balance between current and counter-current, the boat will remain, even more securely than if he were to fasten it down.

This poem recalls Zhuangzi's story about attempting to hide a boat:

You hide your boat in the ravine and your fish net in the swamp and tell yourself that they will be safe. But in the middle of the night a strong man shoulders them and carries them off, and in your stupidity you don't know why it happened. You think you do right to hide little things in big ones, and yet they get away from you. But if you were to hide the world in the world, so that nothing could get away, this would be the final reality of the constancy of things.⁶³

What does it mean to hide a universe in the universe? A person who has realized *dao* is at one with heaven, earth, and the myriad things. Since he (his Great Self) is at one with the world, he and the world are mutually dependent and sustain each other. Consequently, nothing can happen to either him or the world: even if his empirical self were to die or vanish, his Great Self would continue to persist in and through the totality. Similarly, Sikong Shu's fisherman persona is at one with heaven, earth and the myriad things. He is at one with the totality and is sensitive to the ebb and flow of the river. Thus, he knows intuitively where to leave his boat, without a care, in the knowledge that it will remain in place and nothing will move it. This signifies the wisdom of the fisherman sage.

NOTES

1. The chapter title is from "Qou Zhang Shaofu," a poem by Wang Wei. Translation adapted from Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism: A Study of Chinese Philosophy, Art, and Poetry* (New York: Julian Press, 1963), p. 91.
2. There are questions concerning the authorship of the *Zhuangzi*. See A. C. Graham's discussions in *Chuang-tzu: The Seven Inner Chapters and Other Writings from the Book*, trans. A. C. Graham (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), pp. 3–5, 27–30. See also Ping Wong Chin, *A Study of Chuang-tzu: Text, Author and Philosophy* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1978), pp. 29–93. For ease of presentation, the author(s) will be treated simply as "Zhuangzi" in this paper.
3. For example, fishermen appear in chapters 15, 17, 21, 26, and 31. Fish appear in chapters 1, 6, 17 and elsewhere. Chapter 20 includes the recommendation to drift out to sea to realize *dao* (quoted at the head of this paper) and reports Confucius fleeing society to the great swamp where he becomes a bona fide hermit.

4. For a general survey, see William W. Lew, *The Fisherman in Yuan Painting and Literature as Reflected in Wu Chen's "Yu-fu T'u" in the Shanghai Museum* (Ph.D. dissertation, Ohio University, 1976), pp. 38–75, 161–81.
5. Graham provides some discussion on ch. 31, "The Old Fisherman," pp. 221 and 248.
6. Translations from the *Laozi* and the *Zhuangzi* in this paper are adopted from Chang Chung-yuan, trans., *Tao: A New Way of Thinking: A Translation of the "Tao Te Ching" with an Introduction and Commentaries* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), and Burton Watson, trans., *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968).
7. *Zhuangzi* (hereafter Z), ch. 1, p. 29.
8. Z, ch. 2, p. 43; see also Z, ch. 6, p. 83, and Z, ch. 17, p. 187 for the term *xuanming* 玄冥 (literally "mysterious darkness"), which Watson renders as "Dark-Obscurity."
9. Kuang-ming Wu, *The Butterfly as Companion: Meditations on the First Three Chapters of the Chuang Tzu* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), p. 70. Wu's glosses and meditations on the opening paragraph have benefitted this discussion.
10. See, for example, Z, ch. 2, pp. 39 & 40, ch. 6, pp. 84–88, and ch. 17, pp. 175–82. For discussion, see Chang, *Tao: A New Way*, pp. xvi–xviii.
11. *Laozi*, ch. 48: "Reversal is the movement of *Dao*. Yielding is the action of *Dao*." The term "return" (*gui* 歸) appears throughout the *Laozi*.
12. Jonathan Barnes, *Early Greek Philosophy* (London: Penguin Books, 1987), p. 63.
13. Pindar, *Olympian Odes*.
14. Quoted in Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Sheed (New York: New American Library, 1958), p. 188.
15. "The Canticle of Brother Sun," in L. S. Cunningham, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1976), p. 58.
16. Quoted in Chang Chung-yuan, *Creativity and Taoism* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1963), p. 182.
17. Quoted in Barnes, p. 117.
18. This is implied in Z, ch. 17, pp. 175–183. F. S. Colwell notes Coleridge's intriguing view of rivers and their sources as "companionable forms," and characterizes them as "agents that establish . . . our most profound discourse with ourselves, offering a measure of self-knowledge otherwise inaccessible." *Rivermen: A Romantic Iconography of the River and the Source* (Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989), p. 5.
19. Z, ch. 6, p. 86.
20. Ibid.
21. Z, ch. 6, p. 87.
22. Z, ch. 17, pp. 188–89. *Copyrighted Material*

23. Z, ch. 24, p. 277.
24. Z, ch. 24, p. 276.
25. An implied scale of levels of realization and categories which differentiate among them appear elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, for example, in ch. 1, pp. 31–33, where Song Rongzi and Liezi are profiled, then three categories are given: the Perfect Man—who has no self, the Spiritual Man—who has no merit, and the Sage—who has no fame. Song Rongzi and Liezi have not quite reached these categories. Xu Yu appears to exemplify the Perfect Man, Jie Yu the Spiritual Man, and the Holy Man of Gushe Mountain the Sage. This classification, which reflects the position of Zhuangzi himself, is further removed from the realm of practical affairs than the classification that appears in chapter 15, which reflects the position, perhaps, of early Han Daoists who were developing the political and social side of their thought.
26. Z, ch. 15, pp. 167–68.
27. Z, ch. 15, p. 167.
28. Z, ch. 33, p. 362, with modifications.
29. Given in Chang, *Tao: A New Way of Thinking*, p. xxi.
30. C. G. Jung, *Jung on the East*, ed. J. J. Clark (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 74. (Selected from “Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle,” par. 924.)
31. See, for example, Z, ch. 2, p. 40: “A road is made by people walking on it, things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so . . . There is nothing that is not so, there is nothing that is not acceptable.”
32. Z, ch. 2, p. 41. See also Z, ch. 6, pp. 79–80: “Therefore his liking was one and his not liking was one. His being one was one and his not being one was one. In being one, he was acting as a companion of Heaven. In not being one, he was acting as a companion of man. When Heaven and man do not defeat each other, then we may be said to have the True Man.”
33. Z, p. 214.
34. *Analects* 6.23: “The wise find joy in water”; 7.27: “The Master used a fishing line but not a cable (attached to a net)”; and 9.17: “While standing by a river, the Master said, “What passes away is, perhaps, like this. Day and night it never lets up.” D.C. Lau, trans., *Confucius: The Analects (Lun yu)* (Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1979, 1983), pp. 53, 63, and 81.
35. Cf. Z, p. 229. The author retranslated this passage. Thoreau suggests eternal fishing at several points in *Walden*. He writes, for example:

Time is but a stream I go a-fishing in. I drink at it; but while I drink I see the sandy bottom and detect how shallow it is. Its thin current slides away, but eternity remains. I would drink deeper; fish in the sky, whose bottom is pebbles with stars. I cannot count

one. I know not the first letter of the alphabet. I have always been regretting that I am not as wise as the day I was born. (p. 66)

On midnight fishing: At length you slowly raise . . . some horned pout squeaking and squirming to the upper air. It was very queer, especially in dark nights, when your thoughts had wandered to vast and cosmogonical themes in other spheres, to feel this faint jerk, which came to interrupt your dreams and link you to Nature again. It seemed as if I might next cast my line upward into the air, as well as downward into this element which was scarcely more dense. Thus I caught two fishes as it were with one hook. (p. 117)

Commonly [my fellow citizens] did not think that they were lucky, or well paid for their time, unless they got a long string of fish, though they had the opportunity of seeing the pond all the while. They might go there a thousand times before the sediment of fishing would sink to the bottom and leave their purpose pure; but no doubt such a clarifying process would be going on all the while. (p. 142)

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, ed. Owen Thomas (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966).

36. Z, ch. 21, p. 229.

37. Z, ch. 21, p. 230.

38. Lau, p. 105.

39. Z, ch. 31, p. 344. The description bears comparison with that of the Spiritual Man ("Holy Man" in Watson's translation) of Gushe Mountain (Z, ch. 1, p. 33), the True Man of ancient times (Z, ch. 6, p. 78), and the Sage (Z, ch. 13, p. 142).

40. Z, ch. 31, p. 351.

41. Z, ch. 31, p. 346.

42. Z, ch. 31, p. 349.

43. Z, ch. 31, p. 351.

44. Ibid.

45. Z, ch. 31, p. 352.

46. Graham, p. 248.

47. Graham, p. 221.

48. For discussion, see Fung Yu-lan, *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, vol. 1, trans. Derk Bodde (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952), pp. 133–43.

49. Z, ch. 12, p. 128. Translation modified.

50. Z, ch. 12, p. 137. Translation modified. The discussion that follows in chapter 12 goes on to parallel the old fisherman's trust in aptness of the spontaneous feelings of pure, sincere people.

In an age of Perfect Attainment the worthy are not honored, the talented are not employed. The rulers are like the high branches of a tree, the people are like the deer of the fields. They do what is right but they do not know that this is appropriateness. They love one another but they do not know that this is benevolence. They are truehearted but they do not know that this is loyalty. They are trustworthy but they do not know that this is fidelity. They wriggle around like insects, performing services for one another, but do not know they are being kind. Therefore they move without leaving any trail behind, act without leaving memory of their deeds. (Z, ch. 12, p. 138)

51. Graham, p. 248.
52. See, for example, the account of Ziji of South Wall at the beginning of Z, ch. 2, pp. 36–37. For an overview of Daoist self-cultivation practices, see Chang Chung-yuan, “Processes of Self-Realization,” *Creativity and Taoism* pp. 123–68.
53. Yoga and meditation practices implied in the *Laozi*, a text addressed to the ruler, are intended to induce both poles of opening and freeing and focusing and concentrating the mind. See chapters 10, 12, 16, 28, 56, and so on.
54. See note 35 above.
55. As noted above, the old man fishing discovered by King Wen in ch. 21 is “fishing without really fishing.” In the *Shiji*, Sima Qian tells of a scholar in seclusion, Jiang Ziya, who fished with a straight hook and no bait, intending to catch only the fish that wanted to be caught. Jiang may well have been a model for the old man character in the *Zhuangzi*; he, too, was recruited by King Wen. Jiang, however, served for over twenty years as advisor to the throne, whereas the old man only served for three years—before fleeing, never to be seen or heard from again. See Burton Watson, trans., *Records of the Grand Historian of China: Translated from the Shih-chi of Ssu-ma Ch'ien* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), vol. 2, p. 453.
56. See Lew, pp. 66–74.
57. Translation given in Lew, p. 68.
58. Adapted from translation given in Lew, pp. 21–22.
59. Translation by the author.
60. Translation by the author.
61. Chang, *Creativity and Taoism*, p. 91. See Chang’s discussion of the poem.
62. Translation by the author.
63. Z, ch. 6, pp. 8–81.