

Agnė Budriūnaite\*

## **The Tension Between Illusion and Reality in Zhuangzi's 'Dream of the Butterfly.' Philosophical Analysis of Western Reception**

### Abstract

One of the most important allegories of Daoism is the 'Dream of the Butterfly' in the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi (Qi wu lun)*. Sometimes it is supposed to be a representation of all Daoist or even all Chinese philosophy in the West. This allegory encompasses fundamental Daoist notions, such as spontaneity, 'free and easy wandering,' non-action (*wu wei*), natural self-alternation (*ziran*), the no-perspective of a sage and the understanding of correlation between life and death. The purpose of this paper is a philosophical analysis of the relationship between illusion and reality in the *Zhuangzi* looking from the 'Western' perspective. To achieve this, I will review some of the most distinct English translations of the allegory that show possible multiple meanings of the allegory and many fundamentally different, sometimes opposite interpretations of it and discuss the significance of the relationship between illusion and reality. There is a huge body of academic literature about translating and interpreting the texts ascribed to the *Zhuangzi*. I will mention only some of the commentaries and will pay more attention to other stories of the *Zhuangzi*, looking there for the explication and explanation of the main ideas found in the 'Dream of the Butterfly.'

### Key words

allegories in Daoism, Zhuangzi, illusion, reality, forgetting

---

\* Department of Philosophy, Centre for Asian Studies  
Vytautas Magnus University, Kaunas, Lithuania  
Email: a.budriunaite@gmail.com

## Translation and Understanding of the 'Dream of the Butterfly'

Reading of a Chinese text for us, Westerners, is a real challenge. Nowadays, a person able to read ancient texts in Chinese is an absolutely exceptional case. Even in the academic circles, people usually read the allegories of the *Zhuangzi* translated into European languages and use three or four different translations at best. Any translation, and particularly translation of such text as the *Zhuangzi*, is an interpretation coherent with translator's underlying presuppositions and cultural background. Accepting this, I will inquire into some Western receptions of the Daoist philosophy, appeal to some Chinese sinologists, and perform a conceptual analysis of the relationship between illusion and reality in the *Zhuangzi* without making any pretension to create the best or universal interpretation of it. Although the problem of understanding and translation is of high importance here, the article's research is conceptual but not linguistic in character. According to Victor Mair, the 'modern citizens of China are at least as far from the language of the *Chuang Tzu* as modern speakers of English are from *Beowulf*, or as modern speakers of Greek are from Plato's *Republic* – if not further.' (Mair 1998: xlvi) Consequently, translations of the *Zhuangzi* made by contemporary Chinese scientists are their own interpretations and may be influenced by their preconceived notions, for example their liking for the ideas of Confucianism. Taking this into consideration, the opinion of sinologists such as Liu Zongkun, Fung Yiu-ming, Han Xiao-qiang, and Wu Kuang-ming is considered neither better nor worse than thoughts of such Westerners like Angus Graham, Hans-Georg Moeller or Victor Mair.

One of the oldest and most popular translations of the *Zhuangzi* is that of Herbert A. Giles (published in 1889). Contemporary sinologist Hans-Georg Moeller criticizes it because of the 'westernization' of main Chinese ideas. According to him, the Giles' translation (and interpretation beyond it) has made an overwhelmingly damaging influence on understanding Daoism in the West. Moeller equates such translations to the food of Chinese restaurants in the West – it only looks Chinese. (Moeller 2006: 44) The allegory we are interested in sounds in the translation of Giles like this:

Once upon a time, I, Zhuangzi, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, to all intents and purposes a butterfly. I was conscious only of following my fancies as a butterfly, and was unconscious of my individuality as a man. Suddenly, I awaked, and there I lay, myself again. Now I do not know whether I was

then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man. Between a man and butterfly there is necessarily a barrier. The transition is called *Metempsychosis*. (Giles 1926: 47; Moeller 2006: 44)

According to Moeller, 'Giles's rendering keeps the Oriental surface of the story alive, but completely converts the philosophical content into motifs of the Western philosophical tradition.' (Moeller 2006: 47) The similar translation we may find in the writings of James Legge<sup>1</sup> (first published in 1891) and in contemporary translation of Nina Correa, (Correa: 2009) only without an exceptionally Greek concept of 'metempsychosis.' The more broad interpretations differ but the continuous activity of the consciousness stays the main theme in most translations.<sup>2</sup> Zhuang Zhou wakes up and remembers his dream, then he understands he was dreaming and starts to doubt if his perception is right and raises a question about illusion and reality.

Moeller notices correctly that this highlighted relationship between doubt, remembrance and understanding of reality, and especially consciousness (or may be soul) experiencing transformations, not to mention the concept of 'metempsychosis,' is very close to the Greek philosophy and far from the Daoist thought. (Moeller 2006: 44–45) The westerner is able to understand the allegory offered in this way. The question is how right his/her understanding is. We may even ask: is the understanding (in the Western sense of the word) the aim of Zhuangzi talking about dream and awakening?

The most extreme 'westernization' of the Daoist ideas we can find in the attempt of Robert Elliot Allinson to rewrite the allegory according to his theory of 'inner transformation.' The preconditions of his theory are remembrance and continuous activity of the consciousness that causes enlightenment. (Allinson 1989: 79) Allinson calls the oldest version of the *Zhuangzi* edited by Guo Xiang the 'raw material' one has to work with. He says that there is an illogical sequence of events: Zhuang Zhou dreams, and then awakes, and then he does not understand who is who, and finally realizes that there must be a difference between butterfly and man.

---

<sup>1</sup> One can find the entire Legge's translation of the *Zhuangzi* on the net: <<http://oaks.nvg.org/ys1ra5.html>>

<sup>2</sup> Many of contemporary translators follow similar interpretation avoiding so frequent usage of the pronoun 'I' but keeping the main perspective of the story the perspective of Zhuang Zhou. For example: Graham (2001: 61), Mair (1998: 24), Watson (1968: 49).

Allinson asserts that it is illogical to not understand who you are if you already awake. According to him, Zhuang Zhou only thinks he is awake and is confused about his own identity therefore. Allinson rewrites allegory (or maybe restores the original order of narrative as he thinks?) and counter-changes two lines – doubt and awakening:

Last night ZHUANG Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, spirits soaring he was a butterfly (is it that in showing what he was he suited his own fancy?), and did not know that he was Zhou. In fact, he did not know whether he was Zhou who dreamed he was a butterfly or a butterfly who dreamed he was Zhou. When all of a sudden he awoke, he was Zhou with all his wits about him. Between Zhou and the butterfly there was necessarily a dividing; just this is what meant by the transformations of things. (Allinson 1989: 82)

It is obvious in the version of Allinson that the entire transformation happens in the consciousness of Zhou only. He dreams and does not know who he is and everything becomes clear and logical when he awakes. It does not seem unusual or strange to our Western mind. As Allinson puts it into words: 'the transformation is a transformation in consciousness from unaware lack of distinction between reality and fantasy to the aware and definite state of awakening.' (Allinson 1989: 84) Such an indefensible treatment of an ancient original text was denounced by other academic sinologists (Lee 2007: 185–202; Yang 2005: 253–266) and I will not be paying too much attention to Allinson's theory. It is just a good example of a faulty projection of Western views onto Eastern ideas. It demonstrates how important the translation from such a complex language may be, not to mention the multidimensional character of the very text. How would the Allinson's theory have been developed if he had used a different translation, something closer to the original story?

Moeller proposes another English version of the allegory appealing to the Chinese text and commentaries left by Guo Xiang. Although the differences seem to be trivial, they change the deepest meaning of the allegory completely:

Once Zhuang Zhou dreamt – and then he was a butterfly, a fluttering butterfly, self-content and in accord with its intentions. The butterfly did not know about Zhou. Suddenly it awoke – and then it was fully and completely Zhou. One does not know whether there is a Zhou becoming a butterfly in a dream or whether there is a butterfly becoming a Zhou in a dream. There is a Zhou and there is a butterfly, so there is necessarily a distinction between them. This is called: the changing of things. (Moeller 2006: 48)

So there is even no sign of *metempsychosis*, just changing of things... Similar nearness to the original allegory we can also find in Wu Kuang-ming's translation (Wu 1990: 153, 176) but Moeller's translation is more distinct from that of Giles' and is a better example of an alternative way of translating.

### ***Cogito and Xin***

Moeller criticizes Giles because of Western interpretation of the consciousness. The whole story in the translation of Giles is told from the first person's perspective. The 'I' is used ten times in his story while it does not appear in the original at all. The narrator of the original allegory stays beyond the story as in the Moeller's version ('One does not know...'). Moeller takes our notice of the Descartes' *cogito* that appears as the ground of the allegory in Giles' and many other English translations. (Moeller 2006: 46)<sup>3</sup> The same 'I' is dreaming, waking up, doubting and remembering. The same 'I' is undergoing transformation in the Allison's version. Zhuang Zhou in the Giles' and Allinson's versions doubts about his perception and about the reality but the very doubting consciousness of Zhuang Zhou is given as undoubted. Some other translators use the third-person perspective but do not lose the stability of consciousness and oneness of the story's subject. The notion of consciousness reveals one of the main differences between Western and Eastern mode of thinking and helps us understand the distinct interpretation of the relationship between reality and illusion.

Looking at the whole body of the *Zhuangzi* we see that the author<sup>4</sup> emphasizes again and again the fictitiousness of such stable, independent and separate from the world 'I' that becomes the foundation for Allinson's theory. For example it is said in the sixth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*:

We go around telling each other, I do this, I do that – but how do we know that this 'I' we talk about has any 'I' to it? You dream you're a bird and soar up into the

<sup>3</sup> More on this theme may be found in Han (2009: 1–9).

<sup>4</sup> Sinologists and historians are sure that the *Zhuangzi* was written by several authors and went through at least one serious redaction, namely that of Guo Xiang. I will use the singular, nevertheless, talking about authorship of the *Zhuangzi* because this is not crucial issue for the theme of the article.

sky; you dream you're a fish and dive down in the pool. But now when you tell me about it, I don't know whether you are awake or whether you are dreaming. (Watson 1968: 90)<sup>5</sup>

Here we see the same dilemma: the confidence in one's wakefulness as well as in one's independent individual 'I' may reveal it to be just another dream, an illusion, not reality. Neither rational activity of consciousness nor feelings or emotions does guarantee the reality of 'I'. The autonomy and independence of the 'I' is always under suspicion in Daoism. Zhuangzi says that the True Man has no 'Self,' he is like a perfect mirror – he reflects everything but keeps nothing for himself. The 'Self' or 'I' are presented in the *Zhuangzi* just as conditional illusions:

If there were no 'other,' there would be no 'I.' If there were no 'I,' there would be nothing to apprehend the 'other.' This is near the mark, but I do not know what causes it to be so. It seems as though there is a True Ruler, but there is no particular evidence for Him. We may have faith in His ability to function, but cannot see His form. He has attributes but is without form. (Mair 1998: 13)

This 'True Ruler' is our 'self' or 'I' or 'soul' that has the main quality – reasoning as it is believed in the Western tradition. From Plato up to contemporary phenomenology, mind or consciousness is something the most 'real' in the Western conception of human being. It is concerned to be rather essence than a feature of man. This causes one of the fundamental differences between the Eastern and the Western perceptions of reality, especially keeping in mind what is considered a 'tool' and a 'method' of perceiving.

Going into the problem of human essence, Zhuangzi talks about *xin* like all ancient Chinese philosophers. *Xin* is physical heart first of all. But westerners were used to translate it as a 'mind' in support of their Western mode of thinking. We see so many different notions of 'consciousness' and 'mind' in contemporary Western philosophy that it is very difficult to decide which one of them (if any) could be most suitable for *xin*. Recently sinologists started to translate *xin* as a 'heart-mind' or leave it as untranslatable. According to Harold H. Oshima, although thinking is the property of the *xin*, it by no means exhausts its functions. *Xin* is the place not only of thoughts, but of feelings, will, faith, imagination, guilt, etc. and we will misunderstand some important fragments of the *Zhuangzi* if we will interpret *xin* only as an 'organ' of thinking. (Oshima 1983: 65)

---

<sup>5</sup> I quote from different translations of the *Zhuangzi* choosing those translations which are most proper in the context of this article.

In the *Zhuangzi*, one of the leading themes is the 'fasting of *xin*' as the way to right understanding what reality and what illusion is. As we will see further, such fasting is emptying of one's heart-mind not only from erroneous understanding and from rationalistic logically-restricted thinking but from anything what we would attribute to the concept of 'Self.' It will be obvious that the notion of 'I' as independent individuality or Cartesian *cogito* cannot be the main idea of the 'Dream of the Butterfly,' and logical analytic thinking cannot help us discern illusion and reality.

### Memory, Forgetting And Fitting

It is a usual thing that people identify reality and illusion by the means of reason independently of culture they live in. Even if they are the ultimate empiricists, they usually consider these main features of reasoning (memory, critical doubt, evaluation of facts and ideas and definition of concepts) sufficient for distinguishing between reality and illusion. Doubt is a crucial point in the mentioned westernized translations of the 'Dream of the Butterfly.' Doubt is essentially connected with memory, because Zhuang Zhou has to remember his dream in order to doubt about its reality. Thus, doubt and memory are relevant for the radical insight as westerners understand it. Such attitude is apparent in the translation of Giles, but the conviction found in the *Zhuangzi* is quite opposite.

Appealing to Guo Xiang, Moeller states that there is no act of memory or doubt mentioned in the original version of the allegory. Neither Zhuang Zhou nor butterfly is unaware of the other's existence. Both phases are totally different and separated one from another. (Moeller 2006: 48) Somebody looking from the outside could say that on a physical level there was no butterfly, just Zhuang Zhou. But if Moeller's translation is more close to the original, we shall agree that Zhuang Zhou remembered nothing about his dream. He was 'fully and completely Zhou' without any reminiscence about butterfly's existence and without any doubt about his own existence.

Kelly James Clark and Liu Zonkung speak in support of Moeller's theory, though look at the problem from another angle and consider the allegory's most important point to be the transformation of perspective. According to them, the world of the butterfly is transformed into the world of Zhuang Zhou. The 'thing' – as this concept is used in the *Zhuangzi* – is not a neutral and independent definition but refers to the whole *a priori* belief system of the person which experiences this 'thing.' (Clark & Liu

2004: 166) So, we experience any-thing from one or another perspective. The world (or perspective) of the butterfly is totally different from that of Zhuang Zhou. There are two words, not two sides of one word. Therefore there cannot be any sign remembering regardless of close relationship between butterfly and man.

We may find support for such parallel between two words in other allegories of the *Zhuangzi*, especially in the allegory of happy fish. The free and easy wandering of human being is paralleled with free and easy swimming of the fish. Zhuangzi probably didn't think that a man and a fish could change places with one another and stay alive. The main thing here is harmony with one's surroundings and being in accordance with nature. This is possible only by being 'here and now' without remembrance of anything and without future plans or dreams. There is no place for doubt in this happy harmonious state of a fish as well as of a butterfly. This ignorance of each other is the fundamental cause and sign of harmony and authentic existence, according to Moeller:

Both phases are equally authentic or real because each does not remember the other. [...] Since Zhou and the butterfly do not remember each other, because the barrier between them is not crossed, the change from one to the other is seamless, spontaneous, and natural. The harmonious 'changing of things' is dependent upon the acceptance of the distinction and not on its transcendence. (Moeller 2006: 48–49)

Thus, forgetting – not a good memory – is a sign of an authentic existence and authentic thinking. When we look at the problem from the perspective of a scientist we need to employ our rational consciousness and memory. Zhuangzi was neither analyst nor representative of natural sciences but rather existentialist if the characterizations of contemporary philosophy should be applied. (Yang 2005: 264–265) Zhuangzi criticizes logical thinking and prompts us to forget everything. We find perfect explanation of what he means in the nineteenth chapter:

When the shoe fits the foot is forgotten, when the belt fits the belly is forgotten, when the heart is right 'for' and 'against' are forgotten. [...] Easy is right. Begin right and you are easy. Continue easy and you are right. The right way to go easy is to forget the right way and forget that the going is easy. (Merton 1969: 112–113)

The fitting of shoes, as fitting of everything else, is confirmed by forgetting. Such forgetting that itself is forgotten means detachment and independence from memory as activity of our consciousness, but not its extension. We cannot feel ourselves free and easy till we remember (or



we may say – till we pay attention to) our failures and successes, our plans and desires, our attitudes and the vision of ‘Self.’ As Moeller says, ‘if one revitalizes earlier phases, for instance by way of recollection, one cannot but give up one’s presence, which diminishes the fullness of the “here and now”’. (Moeller 2006: 50)

A doubt connected to remembrance shows the attachment to temporary things (for example one’s dream) and bigger or smaller dissatisfaction with one’s existence. Such doubt should be understood as an obstacle not as a means on the way to being ‘fully and completely’ oneself as well as to right perception of reality. In the version of Guo Xiang – Moeller, there is no doubt. Zhuang Zhou is ‘fully and completely Zhou’ like butterfly is ‘self-content and in accord with its intentions.’ That means the same – authentic existence without any doubt about it. Even a third person, a narrator of the story does not doubt but rather states: ‘One does not know whether...’

## A ‘Method’ of Forgetting

What ‘method’ for distinguishing between illusion and reality do Daoists find suitable if memory and doubt are not?

As it was said earlier, the fasting of *xin* is one of the most important themes in the *Zhuangzi*. The core of this fasting is emptying one’s heart-mind, for there is said in the fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: ‘emptiness is the fasting of *xin*.’ (Mair 1998: 32)<sup>6</sup> The forgetting – not the memory – is relevant here because forgetting means process of emptying our memory. The concept of fasting helps us understand this Daoist emptiness that often is confused with vacuum or total negativity, especially when talking about the notion of ‘Self’/‘I’. During ordinary fasting, our body doesn’t become totally empty like a shelled hazelnut. It is purged from unnecessary substance. The fasting of body means simple and modest food and drink necessary to maintain one’s life, not the starvation up to one’s death. Accordingly, the fasting of *xin* is the spiritual and mental emptying: the purification from one’s convictions, remembrance, future expectations, the influence of one’s surroundings, and everyday vision of oneself.

It doesn’t mean, however, the total disappearance of consciousness or complete dissociation from environment. On the contrary, it is open-

---

<sup>6</sup> I have changed the word ‘mind’ used by Victor Mair into ‘*xin*’ trying to avoid the misunderstanding discussed before in the chapter ‘*Cogito* and *xin*.’

ness to all things and all circumstances. Such empty openness is possible only when a person is not attached to any thing and any attitude towards things or even any presuppositions. We may say everything is ‘forgotten’ when the attention (active intellection) is not concentrated on any concrete object. The ability to think logically and to concentrate one’s mind isn’t lost nevertheless. A ‘method’ of seeking *dao* is named ‘sitting in forgetfulness’ (*zuo wang*) in the sixth chapter of the *Zhuangzi* but this is not an ordinary ‘forgetting.’ Yan Hui recites steps on his way to perfection: he has forgotten about rites and music, about benevolence and righteousness, and finally he just sits and forgets. He could not have spoken to Confucius as his acquaintance and could not have explained what he was doing without employing his memory. Despite such logical inference, Yan Hui elucidates what he means: ‘I let organs and members drop away, dismiss eyesight and hearing, part from the body and expel knowledge, and go along with the universal thoroughfare. This is what I mean by “just sit and forget”’ (Graham 2001: 92)

We could easily interpret these words as a description of a practice. A Zen meditation of emptiness is similar to this. It means, however, the way of life – not just a practice – in Daoism. The practice begins after and ends with other occupations while the way of life (*ren dao*) embraces all activities and passiveness. The opposite state of mind is also called ‘sitting’ as in the fourth chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: ‘Fortune and blessing gather where there is stillness. But if you do not keep still – this is what is called sitting but racing around.’ (Watson 1968: 58) The cause and precondition of the inner silence is forgetting. A cook Ding in the third chapter and a woodcarver Qing in the nineteenth chapter of the *Zhuangzi* forget everything – surroundings, their aim, the process of work, even (and especially) themselves as workers – and only then their work goes ‘self-so’ (*ziran*) accordingly to spontaneous process of *Dao*.

## **Beyond the Oppositional Thinking**

The notion of forgetfulness helps us understand another important feature of perceiving reality in Daoism. Forgetting indicates neither a defect of perception nor any deficiency. It is rather sign of going beyond the dividing of ordinary cogitation. There is no differentiation into ‘unreal’ reality of a dream and ‘more real’ reality of wakefulness in the ‘Dream of the Butterfly.’ One of the aforementioned features of Western thinking is

definition. We try to define objects, analyze and group them in order to say we 'know' them.

There are no precise definitions or narrow terms in the Daoist philosophy, nor in Chinese language. Every word/hieroglyph is round like a sphere, the meaning of which depends on a situation, a pronunciation and an intention of the speaker. A School of Names (*Ming jia*) nevertheless appreciated oppositional thinking, as a method of solving philosophical problems and seeking a proper naming of things. Distinguishing between 'so' and 'not-so,' 'right' and 'wrong,' 'this' and 'not-this' (*shi - fei*) was considered to be the right way of cogitation. (Fung 2009: 165)

Zhuangzi considers the attempts to define things to be an inauthentic and illusory attitude because definition means separation one from another and goes against the holistic harmony with all things. Zhuangzi criticizes oppositional attitude towards perception of reality persistently. In the second chapter, named *Qi wu lun* ('The Adjustment of Controversies' or 'Discussion on Making All Things Equal'), Zhuangzi says:

Right is not right; so is not so. If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget the years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home! (Watson 1968: 49)

The boundlessness could be understood as openness to all possibilities and being unrestricted to one opinion. It could be understood as all-embracing 'forgetting' and being unattached to any opposition and to the very oppositional thinking. This doesn't mean that a sage doesn't see the conditional opposition of things or opinions. On the contrary, he doesn't take any side of argument because he sees the conditionality of the opposition. A sage doesn't care about oppositions and doesn't contend for his opinion because there is no single 'right' opinion or side for him. A sage stays in the center: equally open to all extremes and not identifying with any of them. In the seventeenth chapter, there is said about Zhuangzi himself: 'With him, there is neither north nor south, but only untrammelled release in all four directions and absorption in the unfathomable.' (Mair 1998: 163)

According to Daoists, we judge about illusion and reality and create opposition based on our vision of independent 'self.' By attaching ourselves to ideas and presuppositions, we evaluate facts and events as 'good' or 'bad,' 'right' or 'wrong' and so on. Such evaluation presupposes

our assumptive knowing what is 'more real' and 'true' and it is opposite to the openness and forgetfulness. We evaluate wakeful state as more real than a dream and life as better than death. In both cases, this evaluation is founded on our rational thinking and dependent on our 'Self.'

What if Daoists are right, and the very 'self' is an illusion? Zhuangzi warns us: 'While one is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things.' (Watson 1968: 47–48) An interpretation of a dream in a dream may be understood as a case of rational attempt to 'catch' the completeness of *dao* by the means of logic, division and definition.

It seems Zhuangzi still keeps oppositional thinking alive. He stands aside and evaluates what is real or wakeful and what is illusion or a dream. He negates this idea by saying: 'Confucius and you are both dreaming! And when I say you are dreaming, I am dreaming, too.' (Watson 1968: 48) The language is impossible without rational thinking and logic. Zhuangzi uses rationality while he talks and thinks. He is 'dreaming' like anybody else therefore. What is the 'great awakening' then?

At first glance, Daoists' focus on the oneness of Being seems to be obviously inconsistent with the 'necessary distinction' between Zhuang Zhou and butterfly that is found in all translations and commentaries of the allegory. The distinction between man and butterfly is stressed while distinction between dream and wakefulness seems to be trivial. The conviction 'I am not dreaming any more' can show up to be even a part of another dream.

Does Zhuangzi support opposition as such or denies it? Probably both. Man and butterfly are opposite to each other but all oppositions are trivial and conditional if we look from the empty *dao shu* – the 'pivot of *dao*.' All things are like spokes in the wheel – more or less opposite to one another but in the same position in regard to the hub. If man looks at everything from the perspective of a spoke, he sees opposition. If he looks at everything from the perspective of a hub, he sees the conditionality of such opposition. Since all these opposing views derive from one another are impossible one without another, Zhuangzi in the second chapter says:

The wise man therefore, instead of trying to prove this or that point by logical disputation, sees all things in the light of direct intuition. [...] The pivot of *dao* passes through the center where all affirmations and denials converge. He who grasps

the pivot is at still-point from which all movements and oppositions can be seen in their right relationship. (Merton 1969: 43)

There is no absolute opposition between reality and illusion and there is even no need to distinguish them if you are in the *dao shu*. Great awakening can be understood as seeing opposition in their right relationship. So, there is no theoretical method of differentiating between reality and illusion presented in the *Zhuangzi*. The only way to see the differences and their interrelationship is an internal act – to stand in the position of *dao shu*; in the no-position, to be precise.

### Who Has Awoken?

One can suspect that another (maybe 'higher') opposition is left in the allegory and in the example of a wheel. Somebody is telling the story about Zhuang Zhou and butterfly, thus is opposite to them as the hub is still opposite to the spokes or emptiness is opposite to things. Is the narrator of the story someone who knows the truth? Is emptiness in the hub better than materiality of spokes? Here we have to remember that *dao* embraces all things as well as space between them or thoughts about them. In Daoism, all oppositions (*yin* and *yang*, spring and autumn, light and darkness, life and death, thing and thought) are considered as creating one whole.

According to Moeller, the narrator in the original story is Zhuang-zi – a sage. Zhuangzi is another phase of the transformation process, totally different from Zhuang Zhou and from butterfly but not opposite to them. (Moeller 2006: 53) The great awakening means insight into illusion and reality and their conditionality but not their transformation into more real reality, as one may suppose. It is accepting everything as it is and not dividing or analyzing anything. Therefore a sage sees all at once – oppositions, their conditionality and the one whole. How is it possible?

Seems, in the empty *dao shu* we can paradoxically be 'really awake' and stay like 'dead ashes' at the same time. One has to empty oneself by means of the fasting of *xin*, to forget his 'I' (*wo*) and to stop identify oneself with any social or psychological role, any belief or thought. That means to lose one-self. But who or what is subject of losing the 'self'? What is left after losing everything and the 'self'? According to Wu Kuang-ming, it is a non-subject, an empty self (*wu-self*): 'the self that lets go (*shih ju*) of its obtrusive self (*wo*), that is fasting away the objectifiable, identifiable com-

panion-self. The true *wu*-self is, in turn, authenticated in this activity of self-fasting and self-losing (*wu sang wo*).’ (Wu 1990: 183)

Is this another opposition or another overstepping of the opposition? It is obvious that a sage should be such a *wu*-self. We find nevertheless sage’s joy, sorrow and even anger mentioned in the *Zhuangzi*. A sage is still a human being, a ‘thing.’ On the other hand, it is said about sage’s emotions: ‘The ultimate joy is to be without joy’ (Mair 1998: 168) and ‘his anger is exhibition of non-anger.’ (Mair 1998: 236) That means, it is not so easy to discern illusion (ordinary joy, anger or indifference) from reality (peaceful happiness, harmony with nature and non-action) looking at a sage from the outside. We cannot even tell who is a sage because we cannot see the *wu*-self externally. True Man of Daoism can be a ruler or a well-known sage as well as a pure cripple or a madman, whereas the ‘expert’ of *dao* can be only on the way to the Way.

An attempt to find a logical theoretical explanation of the empty self of a sage is even less successful than looking for definition of it in the *Zhuangzi*. What part of me could be named ‘non-subject’? Who can name me so if there is no ‘me’? Wu Kuang-ming says that existence of non-subject is of other kind than existence of Zhuang Zhou or butterfly. It should exist in some way to perform the self-losing but we cannot find it like we find things. This non-subject is ‘a radical subject that encompasses even its own non-existence, its own self-losing, as well as itself as an object of thought.’ (Wu 1990: 277) There is no concept suitable for this empty self that loses itself.<sup>7</sup> Does it belong to reality or to illusion; or maybe it belongs to both areas? The answer and the notion of human essence will depend on what do you believe to be reality and illusion, and *vice versa*.

Giles in his translation and Allinson in his attempt to rewrite the text are following the Platonic tradition while trying to distinguish what is illusion and what is reality. They are following the Cartesian tradition as well while emphasizing the autonomy of rational ‘I’ and its independence from the world. Such attitude towards illusion and reality is typical to the whole contemporary, scientific-minded society, not exceptional to these authors. While reading allegories of the *Zhuangzi*, there is the temptation to find oneself ‘understanding everything correctly.’ It is the temptation to evaluate, define and explain the thoughts of this ancient Chinese sage and to place them within one or another group of philosophical ideas. In

---

<sup>7</sup> Comparison with I. Kant’s transcendental Ego may be found in Wu (1990: 276, 390–391).

the case of the 'Dream of the Butterfly,' this temptation manifests itself in the readiness to label a sage telling the whole story as representative of a higher reality and classify everything else as illusion. But wouldn't such way of thinking mean staying in the same realm of illusion – reality opposition that Zhuangzi is trying to transcend?

## Bibliography

1. Allinson, R. E. (1989), *Chuang-Tzu for Spiritual Transformation. An Analysis of the Inner Chapters*, New York: State University of New York Press.
2. Clark, K. J. & Liu Zongkun (2004), 'Reflections on Natural Knowledge', in Wang, R. (ed.), *Chinese Philosophy in an Era of Globalisation*, 163–184. New York: State University of New York Press.
3. Correa, N. (transl.) (2009), *Zhuangzi – 'Being Boundless'*, viewed 10 June 2011, <<http://www.daosipen.com/ZhuangziTranslation.html>>
4. Fung, Yiu-ming (2009), 'The School of Names', in Bo Mou (ed.), *History of Chinese Philosophy*, 164–188. New York: Routledge.
5. Giles, H. A. (transl.) (1926), *Chuang Tzu: Taoist Philosopher and Chinese Mystic*. London: Allen and Unwin.
6. Graham, A. C. (2001), *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company.
7. Han, Xiaoqiang (2009), 'Interpreting the Butterfly Dream', *Asian Philosophy* 19 (1): 1–9.
8. Legge, J. (1891), *The sacred books of China – The texts of Taoism in two parts. The writings of Chuang Tzu*. Dover: Dover Publications. One can find the entire Legge's translation of *Zhuangzi* on the net: <<http://oaks.nvg.org/ys1ra5.html>>
9. Lee, Jung H. (2007), 'What is it Like to be a Butterfly? A Philosophical Interpretation of Zhuangzi's Butterfly Dream', *Asian Philosophy: An International Journal of the Philosophical Traditions of the East* 17 (2): 185–202.
10. Mair, V. H. (transl.) (1998), *Wandering on the Way. Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
11. Merton, T. (1969), *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, New York: New Directions.
12. Moeller, H.-G. (2006), *Daoism Explained: from the Dream of the Butterfly to the Fishnet Allegory*, Chicago: Open Court.
13. Oshima, H. H. (1983), 'A Metaphorical Analysis of the Concept of Mind' in Mair, V. H. (ed.), *Experimental Essays on Chuang-tzu*, 63–84. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
14. Watson, B. (transl.) (1968), *Chuang Tzu. Basic Writings*, New York: Columbia University Press.
15. Wu, Kuang-ming (1990), *The Butterfly as Companion. Meditations on the First Three Chapters of the Chuang Tzu*, New York: State University of New York Press.
16. Yang, Xiaomei (2005), 'Great Dream and Great Awakening: Interpreting the Butterfly Dream Story', *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 4 (2): 253–266.

