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# Concepts of the Body in the Zhuangzi

## Abstract

In this essay Sommer explores how the *Zhuangzi*, a Chinese philosophical text that dates to the third or fourth centuries BCE, uses different terms for the human body. She explores each term's different fields of meaning: the body might appear as *gong* 躬, a sanctimonious ritualized body; *shen* 身, a site of familial and social personhood; *xing* 形, an elemental form that experiences mutations and mutilations; or *ti* 體, a complex, multilayered corpus whose center can be anywhere but whose boundaries are nowhere. The *Zhuangzi* is one of the richest early Chinese sources for exploring conceptualizations of the visceral human form. *Zhuangzi* presents the human frame as a corpus of flesh, organs, limbs, and bone; he dissects it before the reader's eyes, turning it inside out and joyfully displaying its fragmented joints, sundered limbs, and beautifully monstrous mutations. This body is a site of immolation and fragmentation that ultimately evokes a larger wholeness and completeness. Drawing and quartering the body, *Zhuangzi* paradoxically frees it from ordinary mortality; boundaries between form and formlessness shift so subtly, spontaneously, and seamlessly that the physical frame becomes incorporated into a larger common body that includes both life and death.

## Keywords

Zhuangzi, Western sinological literature, human form

## Disciplines

Chinese Studies | Religion | Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion

## Concepts of the Body in the *Zhuangzi*

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DEBORAH SOMMER

Body studies has become a subject of considerable interest in Chinese studies in recent years, but many sources have yet to be explored in this area.<sup>1</sup> One of these sources is the *Zhuangzi*. Some studies that deal at least in part with Zhuangzi and the body have appeared in Western sinological literature, but many issues await further study.<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, I have considered early Chinese notions of the body and have distinguished different fields of meanings associated with such terms as *gong* 躬, *shen* 身, *xing* 形, and *ti* 體 (Sommer 2008). That study primarily considered texts such as the *Book of Odes*, *Zuo zhuan*, *Analects*, and *Mencius*. Here, however, I explore how the *Zhuangzi* uses different terms for the body, for this work is one of the richest early Chinese sources for studying conceptualizations of the physical human form. This task is rendered more complicated by the composite nature of the *Zhuangzi* and the different and even conflicting voices represented in that text, and by the obscurity of Zhuangzi's language, but one can nonetheless venture some preliminary observations. Here I also compare how Zhuangzi's views differ from those expressed in other works such as the *Analects*.<sup>3</sup>

Inspired by scholars of European folklore and body studies such as Piero Camporesi, who has explored the human body in its varying degrees of sancti-

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<sup>1</sup> For studies of Chinese notions of the body, see Ames forthcoming, chapter 3 and Ames 1993; Chen 2008; Csikszentmihaly 2004; Harper 1998; Lewis 2006; Liu 2008; Sivin 1995; Tu 1992; Robin Wang 2009; Yang 1996 and 2003; Yang ed. 1993; Zhang Xuezhong 2007; Zhang Zailin 2008.

<sup>2</sup> See Moeller 2004, 74-81 on the bodies of infants and corpses in the *Zhuangzi*, Pregadio 2004 on the notion of form, and Yang 2003 on corporeality.

<sup>3</sup> My translations from the *Zhuangzi* are based on Guo 1961, although I have also provided cross-references to the English translation in Mair 1994 for the reader's convenience. Translations of terms and proper names in the *Zhuangzi* follow Mair 1994 when possible. For translations from the *Analects*, I have used the Chinese edition in Ames and Rosemont 1998. All translations are my own unless noted otherwise. For citations for the usage of *gong*, *shen*, *xing*, and *ti* in early texts in addition to those cited below, see Sommer 2008. I use the term "Zhuangzi" not to refer to a single person but to refer to the composite collection of voices in the text in general.

fication, immolation, and mutation, in this essay I am concerned especially with the visceral corporeality of the physical human form (Camporesi 1988). I am not concerned with cerebral mind-body issues, hermeneutical questions, or linguistic approaches that favor ideation rather than the lived physical body (as in Wu 1997 and Yu 2009). Zhuangzi presents the human form as a corpus of flesh, organs, limbs, and bone; dissecting it before the reader's eyes, he turns it inside out and joyfully displays its fragmented joints, sundered limbs, and monstrous mutations. This body is a site of immolation and fragmentation—but of a kind of immolation that implies a larger wholeness, and of a kind of fragmentation that implies completeness. Zhuangzi plays with the body and inverts it conceptually, displaying what should not be looked upon, making the hidden transparent, and transforming the fragment into the whole. He turns the body upside down: his characters breathe from their heels, the bottom surface of the body, not from their throats (Guo 1961, 234; Mair 1994, 52). Paradoxically, through this process of drawing and quartering, the human form (*xing* 形) is freed from ordinary mortality as the boundaries between form and formlessness shift so subtly, spontaneously, and continuously as to become irrelevant. The human body becomes encompassed within a larger common body (*tongti* 同體), a wholeness that includes both life and death.

If one simply compares the occurrences of certain terms for the body such as *gong*, *xing*, *ti*, and *shen* in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Analects*, one will immediately notice certain differences. One of the more commonly used terms for the body in the *Analects* is *gong* (10 occurrences), a term for a ritualized body that appears only four times in the much longer *Zhuangzi*. Conversely, *xing*, or form, does not appear even once in the *Analects*, but it appears in 98 passages in the *Zhuangzi*, where it is the single most important term for the body. *Shen* appears in 13 passages in the *Analects*; in 78, in the *Zhuangzi*. *Ti* appears only once in the *Analects* but appears in 29 passages in the *Zhuangzi*. Hence, only one term for the body—*gong*—appears with greater frequency in the *Analects* than in the *Zhuangzi*. Otherwise, in general, terms for the body appear with much greater frequency in the *Zhuangzi* than in the *Analects*, even when one takes into consideration the fact that the *Zhuangzi* is a much longer text. Zhuangzi devotes proportionately more space to discussing the body than perhaps any other early work other than medical texts.

### The Sanctimonious *Gong* 躬 Body

One aspect of the human body that Zhuangzi has little use for is the *gong*. In the *Analects* and other early texts, the *gong* body is that aspect of the human body or person most closely associated with the ritualized performance and public, visual display of character, conduct, and values (Sommer 2008). As Zhuangzi severely critiques both ritual and public displays of character, it is not

surprising that the *gong* body appears so rarely in that text. When it does appear, it is usually excoriated for its sanctimoniousness, or the term is used in a pejorative context. In texts such as the *Analects*, however, the *gong* body is a vehicle for the performance of ideal values, and it there it moves in stylized, nonspontaneous ways guided by ritual conventions. Its conduct is meant to be witnessed visually by others. Consider, for example, the following excerpt from *Analects* 10.4, which is a painstakingly detailed eyewitness description of how Confucius's *gong* body stood, walked, moved, and breathed in the theater of a court appearance.

Upon entering the duke's gate, he bowed his *gong* body at the waist [to show respect], as though it were not high enough to admit him. . . . He held up the hem of his robes when ascending the hall and bowed his *gong* body at the waist, holding in his *qi* 氣 as though he were not breathing.<sup>4</sup>

Movements of Confucius's *gong* body display his reverence and gravity; here, obviously, is a person whose actions are guided by ritual (*li* 禮) and rightness (*yi* 義). Other occurrences of the term *gong* in the *Analects* similarly depict the human body displaying various kinds of virtues or ritually performing labors that benefit others, often at its own expense.<sup>5</sup> In *Analects* 20.1, for example, the *gong* bodies of the sage kings Yao, Shun, and Tang ritually take on the responsibilities of all under heaven and take on the faults of all people as their own.

The *Zhuangzi*, however, regards conventional mores as blights upon the human spirit, and hence it is not surprising that the *gong* body rarely appears there; when it does, it fares badly. In the following passage from "The Great Ancestral Teacher," the *gong* not only does not display virtues but is instead mutilated by them. Here, even the sage king Yao does not escape criticism when he recommends that others enact humaneness and rightness with their *gong* bodies—that is, when they enact things personally or with their own persons. Master Idea-uh went to see Yao, but soon thereafter,

Master Idea-uh saw Xu You. Xu You said, "How did Yao help you?" Master Idea-uh said, "Yao told me, 'You must adhere to humaneness and rightness in your own *gong* body and clarify right and wrong with what you say.'" Xu You said, "So why did you come? Yao has tattooed you with humaneness and rightness and cut off your nose with right and

<sup>4</sup> Ames and Rosemont 1998, 135. The person described is traditionally considered to be Confucius, although this passage might also be a general description of commendable conduct.

<sup>5</sup> See for example *Analects* 4.22, 7.33, 13.18, 14.5, 15.15, and 20.1, as discussed in Sommer 2008.

wrong. How can you roam freely along the flickering byways of boundlessness?" (Guo 1961, 278-279; Mair 1994, 62-63)

For Yao, the *gong* body or person enacts humaneness and rightness; for Xu You, however, humaneness and rightness are mutilating forces that stunt more sublime pursuits. Nonspontaneous, ritualized conduct otherwise characteristic of the *gong* body is, for Zhuangzi, a form of punishment meted upon the human form. Unnecessarily circumscribed by social mores, the *gong* body is prevented from entering a larger universe unbounded by superfluous conventions.

The *Zhuangzi* critiques Confucius's *own* *gong* body in a tale of an encounter between Confucius (here known by his less formal names as Qiu, or "Hillock," and Zhongni, "Second born") and Old Master Wildweed, Lao Laizi 老萊子. Tainted by condescension (*jing* 矜), Confucius's *gong* body, according to Wildweed, manifests qualities that inhibit his truly becoming a noble person (*junzi* 君子), a term no doubt intended with some irony. Wildweed's disciple tells his master that:

"[t]here's some guy out there. He's tall on top but short on the bottom; he's hunchbacked and his ears are set back. He looks around like he's in charge of everything within the four seas. I don't know what clan he might belong to."

Old Master Wildweed said, "That's Hillock. Summon him." When Zhongni arrived, he said, "Hillock! Get rid of the condescension in your person (*gong* 矜) and get rid of your knowing looks. *That's* how to be a noble person. [Guo 1961, 928-929; Mair 1994, 271-272]

Even before he actually sees Confucius in person, Wildweed is able to identify him based only on the oral description of his physical traits and demeanor provided by the disciple. And as soon as Wildweed actually sees Confucius in person, he visually perceives the condescension in his *gong* body. Wildweed continues to berate Confucius for his arrogance, dedication to self-promotion, calculated behavior, and tendency to judge and stereotype others. Confucius's *gong* body, which in the *Analects* is understood as a purveyor of ideal conduct, is perceived here as exhibiting little more than artifice. Zhuangzi, then, has little use for the *gong* body and its contrived display of conventional mores.

### The Lived, Relational *Shen* 身 Body

Whereas the *gong* body appears in only a handful of passages in the *Zhuangzi*, the *shen* aspect of the body appears in nearly eighty. Zhuangzi's usage of the term *shen* falls well within its two primary usages found in other early texts: in the first, it is the site of familial and social personhood located within one's

physical frame. It is also the site of individual personhood constructed by such factors as self-cultivation, education, and social status. In most early texts, when a human being is discussed with regard to relations with that person's parents, ruler, state, or even all-under-heaven (*tianxia* 天下), the term usually used for the human person is *shen* rather than *gong*, *xing*, or *ti*. Zhuangzi generally rejects this relational aspect of the *shen* body as contrived and artificial. In its second primary usage, the *shen* is simply the living body itself, the physical entity that exists for the duration of a human lifespan that grows old and is subject to injury. This less culturally freighted usage of *shen* is the one favored by Zhuangzi.

As a site of personhood, inwardly, the *shen* as understood in many early texts is malleable and can be self-consciously monitored and cultivated (*xiu* 修); outwardly, it exists primarily in parallel relationships with the *shen* bodies of others. One's *shen* is the accumulated sum total of one's inner life and learned conduct manifested in one's physical presence apprehended by others. These characteristics of the *shen* body are exemplified in texts such as the "Great Learning" chapter of the *Book of Rites*, where it is first developed internally through processes of self-cultivation and then stands in juxtaposition to other people and other entities: family, state, and ultimately all-under-heaven.

In the *Analects*, Zengzi exhibits both the inwardly reflective and outwardly behavioral aspects of the *shen* body when he reflects on his *shen* body three times a day to ensure that he acts properly toward friends and other people (*Analects* 1.4). He would not reflect on his *gong* body, which is usually not a site of individual contemplation or cultivation-in-process but is instead an already completed body that enacts nonspontaneous, historically transmitted ritual conduct. The *shen* body is more likely to enact individualized behavior that is created over time through a long process of decision-making and reflection. Zengzi would also not reflect on his *xing* form, which in most texts (although not necessarily the *Zhuangzi*, as explained below) exists at a more primordial, elemental level below the level of human consciousness. Nor would he reflect on his *ti* body, which is not generally associated with cultivation or behavior.

The social and relational understanding of the *shen* body appears in the *Zhuangzi*, where it is paralleled to family members, rulers, the state, all-under-heaven, and heaven itself. For example, people love heaven with their *shen* and consider it to be their father; they consider their rulers to be superior to them, and would die for them with their *shen* (Guo 1961, 241; Mair 1994, 53). Duke Ai understands that if he trifles with his *shen* body he will lose his state (Guo 1961, 216; Mair, 48). The *shen* body in the *Zhuangzi*, then, as in other early texts, is defined by parallel relationships with family, state, and so on.

Zhuangzi usually disdains, however, the cultivation (*xiu*) of the *shen*, at least in socially and behaviorally constructed forms such as those outlined in the "Great Learning" or enacted by Zengzi. Cultivating the *shen* body seldom happens in the *Zhuangzi*, and when it does it is usually either a very different

kind of process than that found in the *Analects* or is derided as a form of self-aggrandizement. Successfully cultivating the *shen* body in the *Zhuangzi* requires participating in cosmic rather than social forces. For example, Master Broadly Complete cultivates his body (*xin shen*) for 1,200 years—a *shen* with an extraordinarily long lifespan—but he accomplishes this by immersing himself in the energies of yin and yang and darkness and light, not by interacting with family, friends, or state (Guo 1961, 381; Mair 1994, 96). Here again, the body is understood in relation to the “flickering byways of boundlessness,” as Xu You would have it, not in relation to human society. Processes of cultivation more pedestrian than those practiced by Broadly Complete, however, are met with derision in the *Zhuangzi*. When Fancypants Scholar asks Laozi how to cultivate the *shen* body, Laozi implies that it has nothing to do with sagehood, rightness (*yi* 義), or contrived knowledge—all of which Laozi has eschewed in favor of a relaxed detachment (Guo 1961, 481-484; Mair 1994, 126-127). Elsewhere, Zhuangzi similarly disdains the conventional cultivation of the *shen* as a pursuit savored by bombastic people such as Confucius who use it to humiliate others by comparison (Guo 1961, 663 and 690; Mair 1994, 397-98, 191).

Zhuangzi is far more partial to the second major usage of *shen* found in early texts: as a synecdoche for the entire duration of the lifespan of a human body. This usage is seen in the expression *zhongshen* 終身, “to the end of one’s life,” an expression that alone constitutes nearly a fifth of the occurrences of *shen* in the *Zhuangzi*. In this usage, *shen* becomes nearly synonymous with life (*sheng* 生) itself. Zhuangzi’s wife grew old with him before she died, and it was her *shen* body that did so (*lao shen* 老身; Guo 1961, 614; Mair 1994, 169). Zhuangzi’s *shen* bodies are more often simply lived (*huo* 活) rather than cultivated; as lived bodies, they might be protected (*bao* 保), endangered (*wei* 危), or harmed (*shang* 傷), but they are rarely freighted with the marks of social rank, honor and disgrace, or educational achievement common to *shen* bodies found in other early texts.

If *shen* bodies are not cared for properly, they are subject to immolation—immolation, however, that does not injure a more subtle wholeness that lies beyond them. Take for instance the case of Toeless Nuncle Hill, who “was neglectful of his body (*shen*) and ended up losing his feet” (Guo 1961, 202; Mair 1994, 45). His toes were no doubt amputated as a form of punishment meted out by the state upon people who transgress against social strictures. But the fragmentation of Toeless’s body did not affect a larger wholeness (*quan* 全) that he still possessed even after his feet were gone, and he claimed that “I have something more important than feet that is still intact, and I want to maintain it whole (*quan*)” (Guo 1961, 202; Mair 1994, 45). Zhuangzi is silent about what “it” is, but it is clear that physical immolation cannot harm it.



## The Mutated and Mutilated *Xing* 形 Form

Toeless Nuncle Hill's mutilated body is but one of many that populate the *Zhuangzi*, which revels in graphic descriptions of corporeal idiosyncracies both real and imaginary. These mutated bodies, however, are far more commonly referred to as *xing* forms rather than *shen* bodies. *Xing* appears in nearly one hundred passages in the *Zhuangzi*, where it has all the attributes of *xing* forms found in other texts but has a number of additional attributes besides. The *xing* form is by far the most conceptually freighted term for the body in the *Zhuangzi*.

In most early texts, the *xing* form is in one sense a discrete, visible shape or mass whose edges and outlines stand in contrast to the formless, that is, *wuxing* 無形. In another sense, *xing* is a subtle, nonvisible structure or pattern that informs the direction and configuration of different kinds of phenomena. These kinds of forms can be found in such diverse phenomena as the human body, the inner patternings of the mind described in the *Guanzi*, or in the configuration of troops described in *Sunzi's Military Arts* (*Sunzi bingsfa* 孫子兵法). *Xing* forms are not usually associated with values or mores, nor are they associated with inner reflection: in the *Analects*, Zengzi might reflect upon his *shen* body several times a day, but not upon his *xing* form, which is not amenable to such a process. *Xing* forms are not circumscribed by culturally constructed notions of social and familial identity— notions more characteristic of the *shen* body, which is usually developed in social, educational, or ritual contexts. Animals have *xing* forms just as humans do (although they do not have *gong* bodies, as they were not generally believed to engage in ritual behavior). The *xing* form does not appear a single time in the *Analects*, which concerns itself instead with cultivatable *shen* bodies and ritualized *gong* bodies. Usually the form is a very subtle and even relatively inert or inanimate substratum that is not amenable to self-conscious cultivation, although in a rare instance in the *Mencius* it is said that one can “develop the form” (*jianxing* 踐形, *Mencius* 7A.38).

In the *Zhuangzi*, the *xing* form has all these connotations—and more besides, for he endows it with much more life energy and physical presence than found elsewhere. Occasionally Zhuangzi suggests the *xing* form is a relatively inert entity animated by something else, as in the case of the form of a dead mother pig, which was once animated (*shi* 使) by something now lost. When her piglets sensed her to be dead, they ran away, because “what they loved of their mother was not her form, but was instead that which animated her form” (Guo 1961, 209; Mair 1994, 46). But if this passage suggests the form is but an inert bearer of a life energy that comes from some other place, there are many more passages that indicate Zhuangzi's form is itself a very physical, living entity. It is more commonly imbued with a stronger corporeal presence than that

associated with *xing* forms found in other texts, and Zhuangzi sometimes uses *xing* interchangeably with *shen*, when the latter is understood as the lived *shen* body. For example, he recounts the story of a cicada that endangered itself by forgetting about its *shen* body (*wang qishen* 忘其身), upon which it was captured by a praying mantis; the mantis then forgot about its form (*wang qixing* 忘其形) and was immediately captured by a magpie (Guo 1961, 694; Mair 1994, 196). Here there is little if any difference between the usage of *shen* and *xing*. What is unusual about this passage, however, is that Zhuangzi uses the term *shen* for the bodies of nonhuman creatures, which in other texts are more likely to be called *xing* forms or, in the case of animals consumed by humans, *ti* bodies.

The relatively stronger life energy of the *xing* form in the *Zhuangzi* is also indicated by its association with nourishment or sustenance (*yang* 養), an association rarely seen elsewhere. In other texts, the aspect of the human body that receives nourishment is much more likely to be the *ti* body, a fleshy entity that is sustained by the satiation of the senses, particularly the senses of taste and touch (Sommer 2008, 314–317). Xunzi in his discussion of ritual, for example, describes how the *ti* body is nourished by comfortable furnishings (Knoblock 1988–94, 3:55), and Mencius speaks ill of those who merely “nourish mouth and body” (*yang kouti* 養口體; Mencius 4A.19). In the *Zhuangzi*, however, gratification of the senses and nourishment are more often associated not with the *ti* body but with the *xing* form. Zhuangzi states, for example, that Yao and Shun nourished the *xing* forms of all under heaven (Guo 1961, 373; Mair 1994, 93). And *xing* forms, even when fragmented and inverted (actually, precisely because they are fragmented and inverted) can even nourish the *shen* body. The mutated body of Scattered Apart, for one, is notable for its many inversions: it is configured such that his head dips below his navel and his shoulders rise above his head. But Scattered’s deformities not only release him from the ordeals of conscript labor but earn him the extra rations of food regularly allotted to the infirm. Hence, it can be said paradoxically that “Scattered Apart’s *xing* form was sufficient to nourish his *shen* body, and he lived out (*zhong* 終) the years given him by heaven” (Guo 1961, 180; Mair 1994, 39–40). His *xing* form, far from being an inactive or inert structural pattern, is an active agent that sustains the lifespan of the living *shen* body.

Zhuangzi’s own understanding of the *xing* form is not entirely consistent and is also given to reversals—a characteristic of the text’s overall philosophical direction, which aims to subvert ordinary perspectives and invert expected outcomes, even those it suggests itself. Hence, in “Understanding Life,” Zhuangzi warns against overvaluing the benefits of nourishing the form and notes how pathetic people are when they “mistakenly think that nourishing the form is sufficient to sustain life!” (Guo 1961, 630; Mair 1994, 174). To ease the form and free it from its labors, Zhuangzi adds, nothing works better than abandon-

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ing the world (*qishi* 棄世) and its affairs. This allows the form to become truly whole (*quan* 全) and facilitates becoming one with heaven. Scattered Apart might argue that he has already done precisely that: he is freed of worldly labors and lives out the time allotted him by heaven.

Zhuangzi's *xing* form is also unusual in that it toils and experiences physical hardship. In other texts, it is more likely to be the *gong* or occasionally even the *ti* body that labors. *Ti* bodies usually experience comfort, but when *ti* is used in the sense of "four *ti*," or "four limbs," it can be associated with bodily movement. In *Analects* 18.7, the only instance where the *ti* body appears in that text (and it appears in a passage spoken not by Confucius or his disciples but by an outsider, a recluse), a reclusive farmer working in the fields criticizes Zilu for "not diligently exerting his four limbs" (*siti buqin* 四體不勤) in such work and for being ignorant of plant husbandry. Zilu responds in the discourse of the *shen* body—the body that stands in relation to others—insisting that the recluse, by his choice of solitary lifestyle, is inappropriately trying to keep his *shen* body unsullied at the expense of maintaining standards of rightness appropriate to relations between subject and ruler.

In texts other than the *Zhuangzi*, however, it is more commonly the *gong* body that labors, and it exerts itself particularly on behalf of others. In *Analects* 14.5, the culture hero Yu labors with his *gong* body to work the land on behalf of humanity. But in the *Zhuangzi*, it is the *xing* form rather than the *gong* body that toils: when Yu appears in the *Zhuangzi*, he labors (*lao* 勞) not his *gong* body but his *xing* form to channel the wetlands, enduring inclement weather and wearing off the hair on his legs in the process (Guo 1961, 1077; Mair 1994, 337). This description of Yu's hardships moreover indicates that the form is sufficiently corporeal to experience sensations of physical discomfort and surface abrasion; this is far more corporeality than often accorded it in other texts, where it is instead an elemental shape, mass, or patterning with relatively little somatic presence.

In texts such as the *Analects*, the physical sacrifices of the *gong* body are considered praiseworthy; in the *Zhuangzi*, however, the labors of the *xing* form are deemed pointless and even destructive.<sup>6</sup> In "An Old Fisherman," in an encounter between Zilu, an elderly fisherman, and Confucius that mirrors the riposte between Zilu and the farmer-recluse in *Analects* 18.7, it is the old fisherman, not Zilu, who is given the last word. Upon discovering that Confucius's *shen* body is preoccupied with enacting such relational values as humaneness, rightness, and ritual, the recluse cautions that Confucius is thereby "embittering his mind, laboring his form, and imperiling the Real (*zhen* 真)" and has thus fallen far from the Way (Guo 1961, 1025; Mair 1994, 317-18). The form is here

<sup>6</sup>*Tiandi*; Guo 1961, 427-28. See a very similar discussion at *Ying di wang*, Guo 1961, 295.

taxed not so much by actual physical toil as by the praxis of pathogenic relational "virtues" that serve only to distance it from genuineness.

In one of its general usages, the form is a discrete entity whose boundaries and edges are readily visible after it comes into existence. Zhuangzi's form, when understood in this sense, is no different: the edges and boundaries of the solid mass of the form produce shadows, which run along beside it (Guo 1961, 1112; Mair 1994, 347). Zhuangzi's forms are rarely static, however, and their shapes are constantly in motion; they are ever-transforming processes that shape-shift effortlessly and naturally. Availing himself of his dead wife's form, Zhuangzi resorts to brutally graphic imagery to make this point. Banging on a tub in total disregard of ritual propriety and showing no apparent grief, he recounts how his wife has moved from conditions of lifelessness, formlessness, and back again, passing through various stages: liminality (*wanghu* 芒芴) that becomes qi, qi that becomes form, form that takes life, and life that eventually dies. These transformations, he says, are as spontaneous as the passing of the four seasons (Guo 1961, 614; Mair 1994, 169). Zhuangzi thus persistently undermines the integrity of distinct boundaries, finding instead transformative power in their sundering.

Zhuangzi does not privilege the human form above all others but understands it as only one of the many possible manifestations of the formless, which might temporarily take shape as an animal, a plant, or some other phenomena before becoming transformed into yet something else. He dissolves the integrity of the human form by repeatedly appealing to the imagery of grossly mutated or hybrid bodies that transgress the boundaries between human, animal, and vegetal shapes. The *xing* form is the only aspect of the body in the *Zhuangzi* that is subject to this kind of mutation. Characters in the *Zhuangzi* who realize that these bodies are not unnatural transgressions but are manifestations of the natural progression of things are portrayed as having insight into the workings of the cosmos. One such figure is Nuncle Slippery, who reacts without distress when a willow tree suddenly sprouts from his arm (Guo 1961, 615; Mair 1994, 169). And Sir Chariot claims he would not worry if his arms were turned into chickens or crossbows, his buttocks were turned into wheels, or if he were turned into a rat's liver or the legs of an insect (Guo 1961, 260-261; Mair 1994, 58-59). Far from being perturbed by change, Zhuangzi's characters find great joy in the innumerable transformations of forms (Guo 1961, 244; Mair 1994, 55).

The human form disappears naturally and returns to the formless, and human beings would do well to accelerate that process by forgetting about them (*wang* 忘) or sloughing them off (*duo* 墮) well in advance of actual physical death. People with mutilated or mutated forms have in a sense already been released from form, for they have long since left ordinary wholeness (*quan* 全) for a realm of unbounded wholeness. In contrast to the bodies of ordinary

people whose bodies are whole (*quanren* 全人), for example, Lipless Clubfoot Scattered's physical frame is fragmented, and Jar Goiter's body bears mutated excrescences on its neck. But both Clubfoot and Goiter have an additional, nonvisible quality that makes other people appear to have thin legs or scrawny necks by comparison: Zhuangzi implies that their inner power (*de* 德) is strong. And "when inner power is replete, the form is forgotten" (Guo 1961, 216; Mair 1994, 48). Wholeness of inner power (*quande* 全德) similarly supersedes wholeness of form (*quanxing* 全形) in the figure of Nag the Hump, a man with a hideously misshapen body who was nonetheless loved by all and was extremely attractive to women (Guo 1961, 210; Mair 1994, 46-47).

If people with mutated bodies more readily forget their forms, people such as the disciples of Confucius are crippled by the normality of their physical bodies and must be reminded to forget them. Zigong was once criticized by a farmer for his attachment to artifice and accomplishment and was advised to "forget about spirit and qi and slough off (*duo*) form and frame (*bai* 骸)" (Guo 1961, 435; Mair 1994, 111). Yan Hui applied himself assiduously to the process of forgetting the form: after forgetting the social virtues of rites, music, humaneness, and rightness, he was finally able simply to sit in forgetfulness, "sloughing off limbs and torso (*ti* 體)" and "leaving the form" (Guo 1961, 284; Mair 1994, 63-64). This allowed him to achieve a commonality with the Great Passage (*tong yu datong* 同於大通). Zhuangzi leaves "Great Passage" undefined, but it might be interpreted as a condition of liminality.

Understandings of the form in the *Zhuangzi* are nonetheless not consistent, and the form is valued differently in different passages: whereas some suggest it is best forgotten, others applaud its virtues and associate it with things Zhuangzi generally values: heaven, the Dao, inner power, and spirit (*shen* 神). One's form is given by heaven: "the Way bestows one's appearance (*mao* 貌), and heaven bestows one's form" (Guo 1961, 222; Mair, 1994, 49). And if the form is not far from heaven, it is also not far from the Dao, for Zhuangzi parallels preserving the form with making the Dao luminous (*ming* 明):

If the form is absent the Dao, then it will have no life; if life is absent inner power, then it will not be luminous. Preserving the form and living out one's life, establishing inner power and making the Dao luminous—is that not kingly inner power? (Guo 1961, 411; Mair 1994, 104)

Social virtues such as humaneness, ritual, and rightness shackle the form, but inner power sustains it. Form is moreover protected by spirit. Master Broadly Complete, for example, claims that provided one removes oneself from the world of the senses and the world of ideas, then "the spirit will protect the form, and the form will live a long life" (Guo 1961, 381; Mair 1994, 96). The

form and the *ti* body in turn protect the spirit (*xing ti bao shen* 形體保神; Guo 1961, 424; Mair 1994, 108). Spirit and form do not always work in tandem, however, and sometimes the form disappears as spirit develops. Take for example the case of the spiritual person (*shen ren* 神人): as spirit rises, mounted on light, the form disappears (*mie wang* 滅亡; Guo 1961, 443; Mair 1994, 114). So should one preserve the form or simply forget it? Zhuangzi offers different responses to this question, but he tends to favor forgetting.

## The Boundless *Ti* 體 Body

*Xing* forms have discrete boundaries, but another kind of body, the *ti* body, does not. As I have elaborated elsewhere, the *ti* body is a complex organic corpus with infinite boundaries that may be divided into many smaller increments, each of which is entirely analogous to the whole and is consubstantial with it (Sommer 2008). The part is equivalent to the whole; the focus, to the field. The *ti* body is conceptually rooted in its earliest usages in the *Book of Odes*, where *ti* usually refers to the body of a plant. Many kinds of plants may be propagated vegetatively, that is, not by seed propagation but cutting fleshy stems, tubers, or leaves into many smaller segments, each of which can grow into a new plant exactly like the parent plant. In fact, the new plants *are* in a sense the parent plant and are still organically consubstantial with it, even though they appear to have discrete forms of their own.

Similarly, a single human *ti* body is part of a much larger corpus. A human being appears to have a discrete physical form, but he or she is nonetheless organically consubstantial with the bodies of ancestors and descendants and is only one part of a larger whole, one focus of a much larger field. A human being is consubstantial with the bodies of all those people with whom it engages in exchanges of labor and food, the food commodities themselves, the resources that produced them, and even the bodies of the animals eaten by humans. Bodies of consumer and consumed overlap and are mutually embodied in an infinite range of progressions and overlaps. To participate in this range of progressions is to be embodied within it, and *ti* often functions in a verbal sense of “to embody.”

In early texts, *ti* is often that aspect of the human body associated with the senses of taste or touch, and it is the *ti* body that is nourished and eats. As a container of food, it is associated with qualities of containment. The physical boundaries of any one *ti* body cannot be determined, for it is not a discrete phenomenon as is the *xing* form. Moreover, one human being might contain several *ti* bodies within it, and one human being might participate in several larger *ti* bodies at once. Early texts are replete with instances of multiple, overlapping *ti* bodies. *Ti* bodies of ministers, for example, routinely overlap with those of their rulers and are perceived as being consubstantial with them, and

they are perceived as sharing arms, legs, and even internal organs in common. The smallest unit of the *ti* is the human form, or some smaller (usually even-numbered) division of it, such as one of the four *ti* (*siti* 四體), or four limbs. The largest unit of the *ti* is the cosmos itself. Understood in its broadest sense, it is a wholeness that can encompass life and death, heaven and earth, and all under heaven.

Zhuangzi understands the *ti* body as an entity without boundaries, but in his thought it becomes much less corporeal and much more abstract or metaphorical. He favors using the term in its broadest sense to refer to completeness, limitlessness, or totality. He less often uses the term to refer to one particularized body unless his point is to demonstrate how that body is complete or is interconnected with the larger universe. He notes how when Confucius saw Laozi, for example, he saw that he had a complete body (*chengti* 成體; Guo 1961, 525; Mair 1994, 140). And sages in general are able to interweave themselves with their surroundings such that they become “one body” (*yiti* 一體) with them (Guo 1961, 880; Mair, 1994, 255). Zhuangzi’s *ti* body is rarely if ever fragmented, mutilated, or mutated, although in one instance he employs the term to describe the torso of a hybrid entity in which “nonbeing is the head, life is the torso, and death is the buttocks” (Guo 1961, 802; Mair 1994, 233). As the “fragments” of this body are life and death itself, it can actually be considered a complete wholeness.

He also uses *ti* in a more metaphoric and less corporeal sense when he alludes to what he calls the “great body” of the ancients, who could embody the arts of the Way. Zhuangzi apparently understands this body as a kind of completeness or synthetic oneness. The ancients had wholeness (*quan*), he says, in contrast to contemporary thinkers whose approaches are fragmented, partial, or lack unity (Guo 1961, 1069; Mair 1994, 335). The *ti* body or *ti* embodiment is ultimately a steppingstone to the limitless, for Zhuangzi aspires to embody the unfathomable (*wuqiong* 無窮) and abide in vacuity (Guo 1961, 307; Mair 70-71).

A similar absence of boundaries is seen in Zhuangzi’s notion of a common body (*tongti* 同體) or of one body (*yiti* 一體) that encompasses all things. In an account in “Great Ancestral Teacher,” the discrete boundaries of the *xing* form are first inverted and eventually dispensed with as the senses are dropped and one emerges into a common body. This account is framed as a story of Confucius (who in this case represents Zhuangzi’s voice) sending his disciple Zigong to assist at a funeral. As Zhuangzi does not care for ritual propriety even in matters concerning death, one does not expect this story to turn out well for Zigong and it does not. In the *Analects*, *Book of Rites*, and *Zuo zhuan*, Zigong is depicted as someone skilled in ritual, and he often accompanies Confucius when death is the matter at hand. Zhuangzi, however, parodies Zigong’s



ritual expertise, implying that he does not understand the life or death, much less ritual.

Zigong arrives at the funeral in time to see the body of the deceased laid out for burial. The obsequies are for someone named Mulberry Door (*Sanghu* 桑戶), one of three companions whose unbound perspectives allow them to see through ordinary boundaries—as one might expect from someone with the liminal name “Door.” Zigong is disconcerted when he sees the two surviving friends happily singing over Door’s corpse, rejoicing that Mulberry has returned to the Real. Zigong interrupts their joy: “Might I ask,” he says, “whether singing right over the corpse can be considered ‘ritual?’” The two friends simply laugh at Zigong’s shallow understanding of ritual, a realm deeply associated with discrete, concrete objects and surface appearances in the visible world.

Zigong returns to Confucius, puzzled about these two people who consider their forms and frames as something external. Confucius realizes Zigong cannot fathom people who have gone beyond the boundaries between inner and outer and life and death. “They abide in the one *qi* of heaven and earth,” Confucius responds; they avail themselves of the external forms of different things, but they actually “inhabit a common body (*tongti* 同體), forget about their livers and spleens, and cast away their eyes and ears.” Why then would they engage in the tangible forms of ritual “just to give the eyes and ears of the masses something to watch?” (Guo 1961, 264-273; Mair 1994, 59-61). The companions see *through* the Door displayed before them, but Zigong does not. Door and his friends have embraced the essential commonality of the *ti* body, which contains both life and death, but Zigong, is blind to it, seeing only the surface boundaries of *xing* forms. The friends of Door, however, have turned their forms inside out, have understood wholeness, and have no need even of eyes or ears. They are like Master Hui, who understands that for those who love all things, then heaven and earth are one body (Guo 1961, 1102; Mair 1994, 344).

## Conclusion

The *Zhuangzi* uses the same terms for the human body found in other early texts, but it emphasizes particular usages, rejects others, and adds additional ones. Zhuangzi rejects the ritualized *gong* body celebrated in the *Analects* and recoils from its behavioral affectations. He moreover disdains the mannered cultivation of the *shen* body, appreciating it primarily as a lived body but wary of its social relations and obligations. He plays especially with the *xing* form, mutilating it, mutating it, and turning it inside out to liberate it from its labors and constrictions. Zhuangzi moreover gives the term additional connotations not found in other texts, transforming it from a fairly inert nonentity into a symbol of the ability to rise above the crippling afflictions of the world even while still

physically trapped within it. Zhuangzi offers the hope that people with the ability to see through the discrete boundaries of the form and participate in the common *ti* body of the universe will have access to its limitless freedoms.

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