

5 Strange and Wise Stories from Zhuangzi

Short retellings of five famous passages from the *Zhuangzi* (庄子, 4th–3rd c. BCE).

1. The Butterfly Dream 庄周梦蝶

Inner Chapters (内篇), Chapter 2, “Qiwulun” (齐物论, On Seeing Things as Equal)

What the text says

Once, Zhuang Zhou fell asleep and dreamed he was a butterfly. He fluttered here and there, perfectly happy, doing exactly as he pleased. He had no idea there was any such person as Zhuang Zhou.

Then he woke up, and there he was, solid and unmistakable: Zhuang Zhou, lying on his mat.

But now he could not be sure. Was he a man who had just dreamed of being a butterfly? Or was he a butterfly, dreaming right now that it was a man?

Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must surely be some distinction. This is what is called the transformation of things.

Key line: 昔者莊周夢爲胡蝶……周與胡蝶，則必有分矣，此之謂物化。

A later interpretation

Lu Xixing (Ming) reads “the transformation of things” as dream and waking, past and present, merging into one: “one yet two, two yet one” (一而二，二而一).

A modern reading (ours): Hold our fixed ideas of “who I am” a little more lightly.

2. Cook Ding Carves the Ox 庖丁解牛

Inner Chapters (内篇), Chapter 3, “Yangshengzhu” (养生主, The Secret of Caring for Life)

What the text says

Cook Ding was carving an ox for Lord Wenhui. Wherever his hand touched, wherever his shoulder leaned, wherever his foot stepped, wherever his knee pressed, the blade slid through with a swish. Every sound was in rhythm, as if he were performing an ancient royal dance and its music.

“Wonderful!” said the lord. “How can skill reach this level?”

Cook Ding put down his knife. “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I began, all I could see was the whole ox. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. Now I meet it with my spirit, not my eyes. I follow its natural lines, slip into the big gaps, and guide the blade through the hollows. I never touch a tendon, let alone a bone.”

“A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he cuts. An ordinary cook changes it once a month, because he hacks. I have used this knife for nineteen years and carved thousands of oxen, and the edge is as fresh as if it had just left the grindstone. The joints have spaces, and the blade has no thickness. Put something with no thickness into a space, and there is plenty of room.”

“Still, when I come to a difficult knot, I slow down. I look carefully, move gently, and with one small motion, it falls apart like a clod of earth.”

“Excellent,” said Lord Wenhui. “From Cook Ding's words I have learned how to care for life.”

Key line: 庖丁爲文惠君解牛……文惠君曰：「善哉！吾聞庖丁之言，得養生焉。」

A later interpretation

Lu Xixing (Ming) explains the parable: “affairs are the ox, the spirit is the blade”. Follow the pattern (理) of each thing and the spirit is not worn out, however many changes you meet.

A modern reading (ours): Work with the grain of things instead of forcing them, and you will not burn out.

3. The Useless Tree 栎社树

Inner Chapters (内篇), Chapter 4, “Renjianshi” (人间世, In the World of Men)

What the text says

A master carpenter named Shi was traveling to the state of Qi with his apprentice. At a place called Crooked Shaft they passed a giant oak that served as the village shrine tree. It was big enough to shade an ox and a hundred spans around; its trunk rose eighty feet up the hillside before the first branch, and a dozen of its branches were big enough for boats. Crowds gathered to stare at it as if at a market. The carpenter did not even turn his head.

His apprentice ran after him. “Master, I’ve never seen timber this fine. Why won’t you look at it?”

“Forget it,” said Carpenter Shi. “It's worthless wood. Make a boat from it and it sinks. A coffin, it rots. A door, it oozes sap. A pillar, the insects eat it. That's exactly why it has lived so long.”

That night the oak appeared to him in a dream. “What are you comparing me to? Fruit trees? Their branches are torn and broken every harvest, because they are useful. Their usefulness shortens their lives. I have been trying for a very long time to be useless. I nearly died more than once, and only now have I achieved it. My uselessness is my great use. If I had been useful, would I have grown this big?”

When the carpenter woke and told the dream, the apprentice asked, “If it wants to be useless, why does it serve as a shrine tree?” “Hush! Don't say that,” said the carpenter. “It is only lodging there, letting those who don't understand it heap abuse on it. If it weren't a shrine tree, it might well have been cut down. Its way of protecting itself is not the ordinary way.”

Key line: 匠石之齊，至乎曲轅，見櫟社樹，其大蔽牛……予求无所可用久矣，幾死，乃今得之，爲予大用。

A later interpretation

Lu Xixing (Ming): because it was useless it lived long, and because it lived long it grew great (以无用得久，因久得大). He adds that it only “lodges” at the shrine, rather than relying on the shrine to survive.

A modern reading (ours): What the world calls “useful” is not the only measure of a life.

4. The Joy of Fish 濠梁之辯 / 子非魚

Outer Chapters (外篇), Chapter 17, “Qiusui” (秋水, Autumn Floods)

What the text says

Zhuangzi and his friend Huizi were strolling on a bridge over the Hao River.

Zhuangzi looked down. “See how the little fish dart about, so free and easy. That is the joy of fish.”

Huizi said, “You are not a fish. How do you know what fish enjoy?”

Zhuangzi said, “You are not me. How do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?”

Huizi said, “I am not you, so of course I don't know what you know. And you are certainly not a fish. So that settles it: you don't know what fish enjoy.”

“Let's go back to where we started,” said Zhuangzi. “You asked me, ‘How do you know what fish enjoy?’ So you already knew that I knew, when you asked. I know it from here, standing on the bridge over the Hao.”

Key line: 莊子與惠子遊於濠梁之上……子曰『汝安知魚樂』云者，既已知吾知之而問我，我知之濠上也。

A later interpretation

Lu Xixing (Ming) calls Huizi a skilled debater and says Zhuangzi “understands the feelings of things” and sees all as one body (一體同觀).

A modern reading (ours): A playful clash between strict logic and lived experience; readers still argue about who won.

5. The Frog in the Broken Well 埳井之蛙

Outer Chapters (外篇), Chapter 17, “Qiushui” (秋水, Autumn Floods)

What the text says

(In the text, this fable is told by Prince Mou of Wei to the logician Gongsun Long.) A frog lived in a shallow, broken-down well. One day he said to a great turtle from the Eastern Sea: “I’m so happy here! I hop out onto the rim, then rest in a gap in the bricks. When I dive in, the water holds me up under my arms and chin (some commentators read this as “I keep my mouth shut”); when I step in the mud, it covers my feet up to the ankles. The little larvae, crabs and tadpoles can’t compare with me. I am master of this whole pool of water. Why don’t you come in and look around?”

The turtle tried. But before his left foot was even in, his right knee was already stuck. He backed out carefully and told the frog about the sea.

“A thousand miles cannot measure its width. A thousand fathoms cannot reach its depth. In the time of Yu, there were floods nine years out of ten, and the sea did not rise. In the time of Tang, there were droughts seven years out of eight, and its shores did not sink. It does not change with time, and it does not grow or shrink with more or less rain. That is the great joy of the Eastern Sea.”

When the frog heard this, he was startled, and stood there dazed and lost.

Key line: 子獨不聞夫埳井之蛙乎？謂東海之鰲曰：『吾樂與！……』

A later interpretation

Lu Xixing (Ming) treats this mainly as vivid wording and glosses the words, saying the passage has “no especially deep meaning” (無甚深旨). Note that he reads 持頤 as the frog keeping its mouth shut, not as the water holding up its chin.

A modern reading (ours): Don't mistake your little well for the whole world.

About this booklet

Original English retellings, written from the public-domain classical Chinese text of the *Zhuangzi* (checked against the Wikisource edition). Chapters 2–4 are from the “inner chapters”, traditionally linked to Zhuangzi himself; chapter 17 is from the “outer chapters”, which many scholars attribute to later followers. Each story has three layers: “What the text says” (our retelling, with the key line in Chinese), “A later interpretation” (from the Ming commentary of Lu Xixing, 南華真經副墨), and “A modern reading”, which is our own view, not the words of the text. Text checked against two Wikisource editions: 莊子 and 南華真經副墨. Retellings may compress or paraphrase. No modern English translation was copied. Free to read and share for non-commercial use with credit to Jojo · Tales of China.

Jojo · Tales of China · <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUTijaPGoOSCS1laDwuWtMA>