

Karl-Heinz Pohl

Who is who?

Zhuangzi and the Dead Man in Lu Xun's and Enzensberger's Rewritings of Zhuangzi

This paper, on the one hand, explores variations on a classical theme. On the other hand, it can also be seen as musings on a literary encounter that crosses millennia and continents. And yet, this encounter took place fundamentally in the 1970s. Thus, the paper deals with both the encounter *and* the variations it implies. First, Lu Xun 魯迅, the most famous writer of early modern China, rewrites Zhuangzi 莊子, one of the leading Daoist philosophers of the 4th-3rd century BC. Second, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, a renowned contemporary German poet and intellectual, rewrites Lu Xun. Hence, what will be explored is a case of intertextuality *avant la lettre*.

I. Zhuangzi - The Original Text

The text for Lu Xun's and Enzensberger's variations is a story from the book the *Zhuangzi*, from the section, "Zhuangzi Finds a Skull" (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 18):¹

When Zhuangzi went to Chu, he saw an empty skull, bleached indeed, but still retaining its shape. Tapping it with his horse-switch, he asked it, saying, 'Did you, Sir, in your greed of life, fail in the lessons of reason, and come to this? Or did you do so, in the service of a perishing state, by the punishment of the axe? Or was it through your evil conduct, reflecting disgrace on your parents and on your wife and children? Or was it through your hard endurences of cold and hunger? Or was it that you had completed your term of life?' Having

¹ James Legge (Trans.), *The Tao Te Ching of Lao Tzu. The Writings of Chuang Tzu, Books XVIII - XXXIII*. Oxford University Press 1991 (repr. 1962), with modifications concerning the Romanization of Chinese.

given expression to these questions, he took up the skull, and made a pillow of it when he went to sleep. At midnight the skull appeared to him in a dream, and said, 'What you said to me was after the fashion of an orator. All your words were about the entanglements of men in their lifetime. There are none of those things after death. Would you like to hear me, Sir, tell you about death?' 'I should,' said Zhuangzi, and the skull resumed: 'In death there are not (the distinctions of) ruler above and minister below. There are none of the phenomena of the four seasons. Tranquil and at ease, our years are those of heaven and earth. No king in his court has greater enjoyment than we have.' Zhuangzi did not believe it, and said, 'If I could get the Ruler of our Destiny to restore your body to life with its bones and flesh and skin, and to give you back your father and mother, your wife and children, and all your village acquaintances, would you wish me to do so?' The skull stared fixedly at him, knitted its brows, and said, 'How should I cast away the enjoyment of my royal court, and undertake again the toils of life among mankind?'

The story conveys an attitude of acceptance, calmness and, ultimately, freedom, in the face of death and, as such, a liberated way to live.² Even more, it is not simply the acceptance of death that leads to a liberated state of mind, death itself is here characterized as a realm of ultimate freedom. The story is typical of Zhuangzi as it delivers its philosophical message in the form of pictures or anecdotes. As we shall see below, in their rewritings the two authors were not interested in the philosophical message of this story but only in its pictorial rendering.

Important for the understanding of Lu Xun's and Enzensberger's variations of the *Zhuangzi*, however, is also a second crucial – and better known – text: Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream" (*Zhuangzi*, ch. 2):³

² For a treatment of death in *Zhuangzi*, see also Karl-Heinz Pohl, "... that to philosophize is to learn to die" – East and West. Montaignes's Views on Death compared to Attitudes Found in the Chinese Tradition." In: *Philosophieren über den Tod. Death in Eastern and Western Philosophies*. Hans-Georg Möller, Günter Wohlfart (Eds.). Köln: edition chora, 2004, S. 39-50.

³ James Legge (Transl.), *The Texts of Taoism Vol. 2. The writings of Chuang Tzū, Books XVIII - XXXIII*. Oxford University Press 1991 (repr. 1962).

Formerly, I, Zhuang Zhou [Zhuangzi], dreamt that I was a butterfly, a butterfly flying about, feeling that it was enjoying itself. I did not know that it was Zhou. Suddenly I awoke, and was myself again, the veritable Zhou. I did not know whether it had formerly been Zhou dreaming that he was a butterfly, or it was now a butterfly dreaming that it was Zhou. But between Zhou and a butterfly there must be a difference. This is a case of what is called the 'Transformation of Things.'

This is one of the most cited short texts in the history of Chinese philosophy. Its topic is the notion of change, so crucial not only for Daoism but for Chinese thought in general (such as in the classic *Book of Changes*). Zhuangzi gives the concept of change (or transformation) a particular twist: There is no single unchanging view point from which to look at reality, only perspectives which we can assume. If so, then there is also no fixed "self" or "identity" as we like to presuppose in daily life.⁴ As there are, in fact, a multitude of possible perspectives – and hence also, in modern terms, the choice of "multiple identities" – the "True Man", according to Zhuangzi, does not dwell in any of those but rises himself above these differences and rests alone in the *Dao*.

II. Lu Xun's Rewriting of Zhuangzi

Lu Xun (1891-1936), a novelist, essayist and poet, is regarded as being the most important and most influential author of modern Chinese literature. He lived through – and also did his share to shape – the formative period of modern China, the so-called May Fourth Movement (ca. 1915-1925). The *zeitgeist* of this period expressed itself as a fierce anti-traditionalism, if not radical iconoclasm. Lu Xun's concept of literature was that it had to be critical of social problems as well as of the "Chinese National Character" (as seen in his famous story

⁴ It is interesting that we have here in *Zhuangzi*, and long before the advent of Buddhism in China with its eminent idea of "no-self" (Sanskrit: *an-atman*), a Chinese pre-figuration of this important Buddhist train of thought.

“The True Story of Ah Q”). In 1930, Lu Xun was the co-founder of a “League of Left-Wing Writers,” thus expressing his political orientation. In 1935, one year before his death, he published his collection *Old Tales Retold* (故事新编). This collection, which shall concern us in the following, contains variations and rewritings of nine ancient Chinese stories and myths. Julia Lovell, the translator of the stories, characterizes it in this way:

A gentle counter-perspective on Chinese old history spiked by moments of contemporary satire, *Old Stories* is a final expression of Lu Xun’s career-long migrations between present, future and past. [...] A curious miscellany: an escapist regression from Marxist wrangles that consumed him in his final years, periodically shanghaied by provincial jibes.⁵

In his own preface to the collection, Lu Xun describes these stories as follows:

Most of the pieces are only sketches, and certainly not literary fiction. At times I base myself in historical fact; at others, my imagination roams free. And because I can’t convince myself that the ancients are as worthy of respect as my contemporaries, I’ve found myself periodically slipping into the quicksands of facetiousness.⁶

Thus, the *Old Tales Retold*, though written late in his life, according to his own view, do not mark the pinnacle of Lu Xun’s writing. And yet they are for him an interesting attempt to engage himself in the rich cultural legacy of China. Thus, after confessing that he has not progressed in seventeen years, he closes his preface with the following remark: “But as long as I haven’t made the ancients seem even deader than they already are, I suppose, this book has a flimsy justification for its existence.”⁷

The title of the last story in Lu Xun’s *Old Tales Retold* is usually trans-

⁵ Julia Lovell (Transl.), *The Real Story of Ah-Q and Other Tales of China*, London: Penguin, 2009, p. xxx-xxxi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 296.

⁷ *Ibid.*

lated “Resurrect the Dead” (起死);⁸ it is a short play modelled after Zhuangzi’s story about finding the skull. Here is a brief summary thereof:

Zhuangzi, on his way to the king of Chu, finds a skull. He wants to call the Ruler of Destiny in order to resurrect the dead man – he would like to have a talk with him. The Ruler of Destiny arrives, looking just like Zhuangzi. But Zhuangzi appears dull and naïve, arguing that the dead man should be resurrected because he has a wife and children – although they would have long been dead as well. Zhuangzi, referring to his “Butterfly Dream,” discusses with the Ruler of Destiny the unity of life and death. The Ruler of Destiny, hence, characterizes Zhuangzi as “good with words but bad with actions.” But the Ruler of Destiny fulfils Zhuangzi’s wish and resurrects the dead man; when he becomes alive he is naked. There arises a comical situation due to a misunderstanding between Zhuangzi and the dead man about the latter’s history and time before he died: The dead man doesn’t know, of course, that he had been dead; he rather believes that he had fallen asleep, and thus he is most concerned with covering his nakedness and being clothed. Therefore, Zhuangzi calls him an “egocentric.” For the dead man, however, Zhuangzi is a crook who has stolen his clothes and his bundle of belongings. But Zhuangzi is only curious: He wants to know what it was like at the time that the dead man was alive, the period he came from and so on. (From certain information gained, Zhuangzi guesses that the man must have been dead for about 500 years). All of this appears as nonsense to the dead man. The dead man, wanting to have his clothes back, threatens Zhuangzi with violence; thereupon Zhuangzi attempts to call back the Ruler of Destiny in order to send the man back into the realm of the dead. But all in vain, as the Ruler of Destiny does not return. Zhuangzi blows a whistle, and a policeman appears (alienation – *avant la lettre*). The policeman recognizes Zhuangzi as the famous philosopher, because his supervisor is a great admirer of Zhuangzi’s philosophy. Zhuangzi is now ready to depart, continuing on his way to see the king of Chu. But the dead man attempts to hinder him: He still wants to get his clothes back from Zhuangzi in order to return home to his family decently dressed. The police man suggests to Zhuangzi that he could afford to part with some of his clothes. Zhuangzi agrees, in principle, but argues that, after all, he has to meet the king and hence he would need a few more clothes.

⁸ Julia Lovell has it as “Bringing Back the Dead”; see note 5 above.

The police man also understands Zhuangzi's problems and lets him go. Now, the dead man takes his frustration out on the policeman and attacks him. The policeman desperately blows his whistle, but nobody comes to help him. This is the end of the story.

Interpreting the story, one could characterize it as a travesty of the *Zhuangzi*, for only bits and pieces of Zhuangzi's philosophy are retained and recognizable in Lu Xun's play, and if so, they are only treated satirically. The philosophical topic of life and death, so important in the original, is completely dismissed. Instead, Zhuangzi is being depicted as arrogant and conceited, in fact as a fool. In the end, Lu Xun's play entails an implied criticism of Daoist thought, i.e. its alleged lack of concern for the fate of the common people. It is seen as a philosophy that is utterly inapplicable in life. The ending might hint at corrupted officials (policemen) in Lu Xun's period, as the police officer does not care about the plight of the underdogs – thus a revolt against authority appears to be justified.

Lu Xun's treatment of Zhuangzi's original bears a great similarity to a story by Guo Moruo (1892-1978) of 1923, entitled "The Return of the Master" ("柱下史入关"). It is about Laozi, next to Zhuangzi the other great (mythical) Daoist figure. In Guo Moruo's story, Laozi revokes his Daoist philosophy and turns into a socialist.⁹ Hence, Lu Xun's rewriting of an old Daoist story is in accordance with contemporary – social and political – preferences. As mentioned, leftist ideas and writers dominated the *zeitgeist* of China in the 1920s and 30s; consequently Daoist philosophers were considered to be egocentric and – because of upholding "non-action" (无为 *wu wei*) as a principle – not concerned with solving social problems.

⁹ "The Return of the Master." Transl., B. Krebsova and R. Samsour. *New Orient* 1, 6 (1960): pp. 22-24.

III. Enzensberger's Rewriting of Lu Xun (Rewriting Zhuangzi)

Hans Magnus Enzensberger (1929-) is an important German intellectual as well as a poet, essayist, playwright and novelist. His style is marked by irony and carefully crafted form. He received a number of awards, such as the Büchner-Prize (most prestigious German literary award) in 1963. In 2009, he got the Canadian Griffin Poetry Prize as a "Lifetime Recognition Award." In order to understand Enzensberger better, one must know that he was strongly influenced by the student protests of 1968 in Germany. Furthermore, just like Lu Xun's times, exactly half a century ago, this period is marked by an extraordinary politicization of students and "leftism" at its extreme. Furthermore, in the late 60s (contemporaneous with the Cultural Revolution in China), Mao Tse-tung's China was discovered, particularly through Edgar Snow's book *Red Star over China* which became a bestseller among students at this time. Because of the popularity of Mao, we also encounter a first reception of Lu Xun in German leftist circles. The so-called *Kursbuch*, a leading left-wing periodical with Enzensberger as its editor, published its no. 15 (Nov. 1968) issue as a special edition with works of Lu Xun. Nine years later, this was followed up with an exhibition in Berlin in 1979 entitled "*Lu Xun, Zeitgenosse [contemporary]*."

Enzensberger's political stance has been subject to much debate and criticism as he started out as a distinctly left-wing intellectual but later frequently changed his roles and views. Hence, one finds the following accusation: "He's a snob, a political dandy, a conductor who calls out: 'Everybody on the train!,' but then he takes the train going into the opposite direction because it is so nicely empty."¹⁰ There was also a famous debate between Enzensberger and Peter Weiss, another leftist writer who demanded from him a clearer po-

¹⁰ Peter O. Chotjewitz, "Einsteigen bitte! Hans Magnus Enzensberger ekelt sich vor vollen Zügen. Gedanken zu seiner »Nachschrift zum Irak-Krieg«", *Der Freitag*, 25.4.2003; <http://www.freitag.de/2003/18/03181101.php>

litical commitment. Enzensberger responded to these criticisms: "I don't like political commitments. I prefer arguments. I like misgivings better than sentiments. I have no use for consistent worldviews. In a case of doubt, reality decides."¹¹

In 1978, Enzensberger wrote the radio-play, "The Dead Man and the Philosopher - Scenes Modeled after Lu Xun's Chinese."¹² What follows is a summary of Enzensberger's variation of Lu Xun:

At the beginning, Enzensberger largely follows Lu Xun's model (with the resurrection of the dead man which does not occur in *Zhuangzi*), only with a few satirical embellishments. The crucial change in regard to Lu Xun's text happens after the policeman has appeared. Still as in Lu Xun, the dead man asks Zhuangzi for some clothes but Zhuangzi turns him down with reference to his visit to the king. But then the dead man steals Zhuangzi's horse and rides off. Zhuangzi gets quite excited about this turn of events; hence the policeman exhorts him to practise equanimity - as a way to acquire wisdom. (Irony: This is exactly what Zhuangzi suggested to the dead man when the latter got excited about his lost clothes.) Zhuangzi replies: "To hell with your equanimity!" At this point, there is a switch of roles: The policeman is turning philosophical, reciting Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream." Zhuangzi, in contrast, appears as a petty-minded person. Zhuangzi exhorts the policeman to stick to his usual responsibilities, asking him to take him to his supervisor (an admirer of Zhuangzi's teachings). But the policeman admits that his *former* supervisor - a learned and wise man - had been promoted and transferred elsewhere. His *current* supervisor is of the opinion that all philosophers should be hung. The policeman also retreats and Zhuangzi is left alone. Quite desperate, Zhuangzi (accidentally) calls again the Ruler of Destiny. The latter appears, somewhat irritated, stressing: "Destiny is destiny, it's not something to fool around with." Zhuangzi asks him for a horse and for his bundle with his precious writings. The Ruler replies (according to Zhuangzi's own philosophy): "Books are not the most important things in life." Zhuangzi responds: "Good grief! I'm fed up with wisdom and all that goes with

¹¹ Joachim Schickel (Ed.), "An Peter Weiss und andere", *Über Hans Magnus Enzensberger*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970.

¹² It was published in the catalogue of the mentioned exhibition (*Lu Xun - Zeitgenosse [Contemporary]*, 1979) as well as in *Der Fliegende Robert. Gedichte, Szenen, Essays, [Flying Robert. Poems, Scenes, Essays]* of 1989.

it. I wish I were dead, then I wouldn't be sitting here in the dark without a horse and my bundle." The Ruler of Destiny is ready to grant him this wish, but Zhuangzi, suddenly frightened, wants to revoke what he unmindfully exclaimed. He fears the worms might eat him. But the Ruler of Destiny calms him saying that he would transform him into a neatly bleached white skull that had already been dead for 500 years. Change of scene: The dead man is wandering around naked on Zhuangzi's horse. He comes upon a bundle of clothes with a skull beside it. Happy about the clothes he exclaims: "There is only a minutely small step from the impossible to the possible." Then he knocks at the skull (just as Zhuangzi did at the beginning of the story) and poses the same questions. At the end he asks: "Or did you die as a result of your own stupidity?" Answering the question himself, he adds: "Sounds hollow. No reply. I think, I'm the one who is stupid. Who else? A dead man is a dead man. A dead man cannot speak." End of play.

With its reversal and change of identities (Zhuangzi becomes the dead man, and the dead man becomes Zhuangzi), Enzensberger's rewriting of Lu Xun (and Zhuangzi) can be seen as a scenic realization of Zhuangzi's "Butterfly Dream," that is, in a world of unity and the constant transformation of all things, there is no fixed identity, no fixed "self." When Zhuangzi becomes the dead man, it is because there is only "a minutely small step from the impossible to the possible" – from one identity to another. In the end, it is impossible to say who is who – who is Zhuangzi and who is the dead man. Their identities have changed just like those in the background story about the Butterfly Dream. Hence, we have here an elaboration on Zhuangzi's most important philosophical topic: "Equality of Things" (齐物论). In fact, this is the title of chapter 2 of the *Zhuangzi*, of which the "Butterfly Dream" is the last story.

At the end of Enzensberger's treatment, Zhuangzi appears to be the fool. But in a world of the "equality of things" (or continuous transformation), the step from philosopher to fool is also only "minutely small." Although Enzensberger, just like Lu Xun, ridicules Zhuangzi (as a person), we find, however, in his play – and in spite of the ridiculous treatment – a remarkable grasp of the original philosophical

content of Zhuangzi. Thus, as a piece of literature – in terms of its artistic realization and philosophical content – Enzensberger’s play appears far more convincing than that of his model, Lu Xun.

Let us compare the three stories in relation to one another. In Zhuangzi’s original story, there are only two protagonists, Zhuangzi and the skull. His topic is the question of life and death, i.e. the gaining of equanimity in the face of death. Lu Xun inserts new twists, particularly the resurrection of the dead man. In addition, we also have the appearance of a policeman and of the Ruler of Destiny. Lu Xun’s message appears to be the conceitedness of Daoist philosophers. Daoists, for him (and in line with the anti-traditionalist spirit of Lu Xun’s time), are not concerned with “social problems.” Accordingly, philosophy is not an issue in Lu Xun’s version. Zhuangzi’s “Butterfly Dream” is mentioned but it does not play a role in his play. Enzensberger has the same protagonists as Lu Xun. But there are further twists and turns in his rewriting of the story: The dead man gets away with Zhuangzi’s horse; Zhuangzi accidentally calls the Ruler of Destiny (and, inadvertently, utters a death wish). Most important, though, Zhuangzi becomes the dead man, and the dead man repeats the experiences that Zhuangzi had before. Along with these differences between Lu Xun and Enzensberger, we also get a difference in the philosophical undercurrent. Although Enzensberger, just like Lu Xun, dismisses the philosophical content of Zhuangzi’s original story about finding the skull (finding equanimity in the face of death), he applies Zhuangzi’s idea of “equality of things” (the Butterfly Dream) to his rewriting of the story, giving it a completely new turn and meaning.

As a cross-cultural afterthought, it is worth noting that, contrary to Lu Xun’s socialist distortion, his scorn of tradition and support of revolution, Enzensberger (as a Western leftist intellectual) restores Zhuangzi’s original philosophy of change and the “equality of things.” In addition, in the positive treatment of Daoist philosophy, there appears to be a remarkable similarity between Enzensberger’s

play and the concern of the German socialist writer Bertolt Brecht. In Brecht's poem "Legend of the origin of the book Tao Te Ching on Lao-Tzu's road into exile" (1938),¹³ he shows much sympathy for Laozi and Daoist philosophy – quite contrary to his Chinese communist comrade and contemporary Guo Moruo in the latter's story "The Return of the Master," as mentioned above. Hence, when we compare Enzensberger and Brecht *versus* Lu Xun and Guo Moruo, there appears to be not only a fruitful cross-cultural change of perspectives from East to West, but also an unusual appreciation of Daoist philosophy by Western leftist intellectuals – in stark contrast to the disdain and rejection it experienced by the leading left-wing intellectuals of early modern China.

To conclude, I would like to leave you with Brecht's poem, as translated by John Willett:¹⁴

Once he was seventy and getting brittle
Quiet retirement seemed the teacher's due.
In his country goodness had been weakening a little
And the wickedness was gaining ground anew.
So he buckled on his shoe.

And he packed up what he would be needing:
Not much, but enough to travel light.
Items like the book that he was always reading
And the pipe he used to smoke at night.
Bread as much as he thought right.

Gladly looked back at his valley, then forgot it
As he turned to take the mountain track.
And the ox was glad of the fresh grass it spotted
Munching, with the old man on its back
Happy that the pace was slack.

Four days out among the rocks, a barrier
Where a customs man made them report.
'What valuables have you to declare there?'

¹³ See my conclusion.

¹⁴ <http://www.tao-te-king.org/brecht.html>.

And the boy leading the ox explained: 'The old man taught'.
Nothing at all, in short.

Then the man, in cheerful disposition
Asked again: 'How did he make out, pray?'
Said the boy: 'He learnt how quite soft water, by attrition
Over the years will grind strong rocks away.
In other words, that hardness must lose the day.'

Then the boy tugged at the ox to get it started
Anxious to move on, for it was late.
But as they disappeared behind a fir tree which they skirted
Something suddenly began to agitate
The man, who shouted: 'Hey, you! Wait!'

'What was that you said about the water?'
Old man pauses: 'Do you want to know?'
Man replies: 'I'm not at all important.
Who wins or loses interests, though.
If you've found out, say so.'

'Write it down, dictate it to your boy there.
Once you've gone, who can we find out from?
There are pen and ink for your employ here
And a supper we can share; this is my home.
It's a bargain: come!'

Turning round, the old man looks in sorrow
At the man, worn tunic, got no shoes.
And his forehead just a single furrow.
Ah, no winner this he's talking to.
And he softly says: 'You too?'

Snubbing off politely put suggestions
Seems to be unheard of by the old.
For the old man said: 'Those who ask questions
Deserve answers.' Then the boy; 'What's more, it's turning cold.'
'Right. Then get my bed unrolled.'

Stiffly from his ox the sage dismounted.
Seven days he wrote there with his friend.
And the man brought them their meals (and all the smugglers were
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At what seemed this sudden lenient trend).
And then came the end.

And the boy handed over what they'd written –
Eighty-one sayings – early one day.
And they thanked the man for the alms he'd given
Went round that fir and climbed the rocky way.
Who was so polite as they?

But the honour should not be restricted
To the sage whose name is clearly writ.
For the wise man's wisdom needs to be extracted.
So the customs man deserves his bit.
It was he who called for it.