

Essay

The Hermeneutics of Contentious Imagery: What Exactly the *Zhuangzi* Has to Say about the Straw Dogs in the *Laozi*

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Abstract: The image of “straw dogs” (*chugou* 刍狗) is a simile used in chapter five of the *Laozi* (老子), in a passage generally understood as an explicit Daoist rejection of kind acts (or benevolence as *ren* 仁 was translated for a long time), well known as the basis of Confucian teachings. Further along the Daoist lineage of philosophical texts, the same image of sacrificial straw dogs also makes an appearance in the *Zhuangzi* (庄子), and this passage will become a welcome source of hermeneutic evidence for translators faced with the stark appearance of the image in the *Laozi*, that offers little elaboration on its meaning. James Legge adopted this hermeneutic approach in his early translation, offering a quote wherein the straw dogs seem to be treated somewhat cruelly, and reference to the *Zhuangzi* to interpret the *Laozi* for this particular image is a method that persists to the present day. English translations of this chapter see “not being *ren*” translated as emotively as “unkind”, “inhumane” or “cruel”. Although we cannot say that early forays in interpretation are responsible for later translation choices, we can assess the original interpretation against the broader context of the *Zhuangzi* as a whole. If we read further on in the original passage alone, we find a more developed context to consider, while searching the whole of the *Zhuangzi* for comparable passages offers an interesting foil for comparison. Beginning with a simple analysis of the term as it appears in the *Laozi* and its commentaries, this essay goes on to make a case for more thorough contextualization of challenging terms. We suggest seeking internal evidence and cross-reference between sympathetic texts, along with historical evidence, and consideration of authorial intent may be effective ways to offer a contextualized interpretation of “straw dogs” that may be more faithful to the concerns of authors employing the image.

Keywords: daoist philosophy; hermeneutics; *Laozi*; *Zhuangzi*; benevolence; ritual propriety

1. Introduction

The conceptual and linguistic distance between a text such as the *Laozi* and the modern reader is so great that it may appear at times to be insurmountable, even to a trained eye. Adding to the difficulties for interpretation and translation alike, the language of the *Laozi* is terse and jumps from image to image without necessarily describing in what way these juxtaposed images or phrases are linked. Indeed, as A. C. Graham points out, “a ‘therefore’ or ‘this is why’, almost arbitrarily placed, is no more than a signal that there is action at a distance between the aphorisms however disconnected.” (Graham 1989). Graham describes the style of writing, “It concentrates instead of explicating, starkly juxtaposes instead of filling in gaps” (ibid.). The whys and wherefores connecting lines and images in a chapter are rarely clearly stated or apparent. The way in which we interpret these apparently disconnected images contributes to the way we interpret the unspoken logic guiding their placement and relation to each other, and the meaning of chapters and the text as a whole is contained in such judgments. Displaced images and their interpretation lay claim to some of the greatest areas of controversy and

contention amongst the academic community. This particular use of language and imagery may be part of the attraction and frustration that ensures that there will always be new translations and interpretations of this classical and ancient text. The translator, in fact, faces an even greater struggle than the commentator or reader, in that they must make clear and definite judgments on finer points of meaning, pinning a sometimes complex, nuanced idea down to one suitable, equivalent term. The image of the straw dogs is just one such controversial image. Its language, perhaps particularly in translation, has been the source of some controversy. Even in a text known for its hands-off approach to government and some polemic tracts directed at conventional Confucian values, we instinctively react against emotive terms such as “cruelty”, “unkindness”. This paper will look at the hermeneutic approach of interpreting this passage of the *Laozi* with reference to the same image that appears in the *Zhuangzi*, a method adopted by James Legge, and question its effects and the importance of context.

2. On Straw and Dogs

The discovery of the Guodian *Laozi* manuscripts (in 1993) showed that they contain alternate readings such as “cut off wisdom and discard debate”¹ in place of chapter nineteen’s traditional “cut off benevolence (*ren*) and discard righteousness (*yi* 义)”, along with chapter eighteen² also preserved in the Guodian selection. These seem to provide some levity to instances of Daoist polemics on Confucian values in the standard recensions of the *Laozi*, the rejection of the formulaic pair “benevolence and righteousness (justice)”, even attributing these to the downfall of the Great Dao and as harbingers of such³. Despite the anomalies of the Guodian manuscript, generally speaking, the direct negation of *ren* comes as no surprise when attributed to Heaven and earth, the representatives of a natural Way of Heaven, and the ideal sage who mimics them.

Heaven and earth are ruthless, and treat the myriad creatures as straw dogs;

the sage is ruthless, and treats the people as straw dogs.

(Following D. C. Lau’s English translation)⁴.

天地不仁以万物为刍狗 圣人不仁以百姓为刍狗. (Wagner 2003, pp. 133–34)⁵

Reading this passage, the first issue we face is one of basic linguistics. If we turn to the *Heshanggong* (河上公) and Wang Bi (王弼) commentaries, we see that we are presented with an alternative way of parsing the characters than that which gives us “straw dogs”. We can either read them together as the compound word *chugou* (刍狗), as one object described in a single compound word, or two separate objects that are each described by one single character. This same potential divergence of readings, either as a compound or two separate characters, also occurs in the lines immediately following,

¹ Sarah Allan and Crispin Williams ed. The Guodian Laozi, (Allan and Williams 2000, p. 195). Translation made with reference to the translation of Qiu Xigui’s 裘锡圭 chapter “On the Analysis and Transcription of Early Chinese Characters” (ibid., pp. 59–61).

² (Ibid., p. 224) When the Great Dao has ceased to be observed, could there yet be benevolence and righteousness? (大道廢，焉有仁義).

³ In his detailed analysis of certain ritual elements being used as metaphors in the *Laozi*, (Boileau 2013) notes that “the *Daode jing* rejects the first aspect [the Ru 儒 conception of a ritually ordained society] but draws from ritual details in order to construct a series of philosophical interpretations.” (Boileau 2013, p. 1) So that despite the rejection of Confucian ideals, reference to rituals, such as sacrificial items and the arrangement of them, may become “reloaded” with the metaphoric meaning suitable for the *Laozi* text. His survey of metaphor in the *Laozi* encourages a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between Confucian and Daoist thought than one of simple and all round opposition that is well worth considering.

⁴ We follow the English translations of (Lau 1963) throughout for the *Laozi* unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Following the example of Wagner in his critical edition of the *Laozi* text used by Wang Bi (王弼), the base text from the Fu Yi ancient text (傅奕古本) is offered without punctuation. For this passage, the lines from the *Laozi* agree when we compare the standard Wang Bi text as it appears in Lou (2012) and the *Heshanggong* (河上公) text in Wang (1993) critical edition. The silk editions from Mawangdui (马王堆) and historic stone carvings only vary in minor details of semantically identical characters (Gao 2012), so that the lines of the text regarding the “straw dogs”, while they provoke debate about their intention, are for once relatively stable.

where the analogy offered is either for a bellows (*tuoyue* 橐籥) or two separate musical instruments (see below).

The space between Heaven and Earth is like a drum or flute!⁶

天地之间其犹橐籥[乎]. (Wagner 2003, p. 134)

As commentators, the author of the *Heshanggong* commentary and Wang Bi are not working under exactly the same principles as a translator does. A translator must provide a meaningful equivalent using the tools of a second language. In such a case, translation becomes without doubt an act of definition, whereas these ancient commentators are operating not only across a much shorter distance in temporal and linguistic terms, but in addition, at no point have they stated (either explicitly or through their exegetic methods) that providing clear definitions is their aim. This is an important point in considering the testament of commentary texts when searching for context and meaning. The aims of the commentators are not necessarily equivalent to our aims in reading their work, when we seek clear and distinct guidance regarding an obscure passage from a distant text. It has been noted that Wang Bi's commentary seems, at first glance at least, to support the division of the characters for straw *chu* and dog(s) *gou*. Rudolf Wagner represents this reading in his *Reconstruction and Critical Edition of the Laozi Text Used by Wang Bi* (Wagner 2003). His translation thus runs,

Heaven and Earth are not kindly. For them, the ten thousand kinds of entities are like grass and dogs. The Sage is not kindly. For him, the Hundred Families are like grass and dogs.⁷

天地不仁以万物为刍狗圣人不仁以百姓为刍狗. (Wagner 2003, pp. 133–35)

An 1884 translation by Frederick H. Balfour also prefers this reading, basing his parsing of the sentence on the religious commentary attributed to Ancestral Master Lü⁸ and calling for an authentic Daoist religious reading as opposed to the Confucian grammarian approach often adopted by translators⁹.

In the commentary directly appended to the first sentence, Wang Bi comments, “Heaven and Earth do not produce grass for the benefit of cattle, but the cattle [still] eat grass. They do not produce dogs for the benefit of men, but men [still] eat dogs.” (Wagner 2003, p. 135)¹⁰. Whether we take Wang Bi's commentary as intended to be a direct definition of the *Laozi* or not has important ramifications for our interpretation of these lines. Two items of food to be consumed are different to a sacrificial item that has a temporary value. If we conclude that Wang Bi's comments are intended as direct definitions of the main text, then straw and dog(s) should indeed be read as two separate but nonetheless comparable objects. Otherwise, if his aim is to borrow imagery and expand on it to create new analogical arguments along his own trains of thought, it is a different case.

Following on, the analogy for Heaven and Earth, commonly translated into English as “like a bellows”, requires reading the two characters *tuoyue* 橐籥 as a single compound word. Here Wang Bi's intention to separate these two characters is far more distinct. His commentary reads, “‘Drum (*tu*)’ is a drum to be beaten, ‘Flute’ (*yue*) is a musical flute.” we are offered a direct and clear separation of the characters (Wagner 2003, p. 136)¹¹. As a result, Wagner's critical translation of the *Laozi* reads, “[The space] between Heaven and Earth is like a drum or flute!” (ibid.). In this latter example, Wang Bi

⁶ (Wagner 2003, p. 136), using Wagner's translation here to reflect the alternative parsing seen in Wang Bi's commentary.

⁷ (Wagner 2003, p. 135), see previous footnote.

⁸ Frederick H. Balfour, *The Tao Tê Ching* (1884), accessed at Terebess Asia Online (TAO) <http://www.sacred-texts.com/tao/ttx/ttx02.htm>. His translation of chapter five reads, “If Heaven and Earth were not benevolent, they would regard creation in the light of grass [which is worthless] and dogs [which are killed]. If the Sage were not benevolent, he would likewise regard the people in the light of grass and dogs.”

⁹ More on his views can be read in the Prefatory Note to his *Tao Tê Ching* (1884).

¹⁰ (Wagner 2003, p. 133) 天地不为兽生刍而兽食刍不为人生狗而人食狗 Unless otherwise stated, where Wang Bi's commentary is quoted, the Chinese base texts used by Wagner are given for reference.

¹¹ (Ibid., p. 134) 橐排橐也籥乐籥也橐籥之中空洞.

makes use of an extremely common sentence pattern to equate one thing with another (A, B 也), stating definitively “a *tuo* is a drum”; whereas, his comments on “straw” and “dog(s)” could well be seen as reflective in tone, and not presented in any standard form for definitive comments. His remarks on the existence of straw and dogs could just as well be an extension of the thought expressed in the original line of text as they may be intended as an explanation of it. While we may hope for direct and accurate definitions from commentators, whether or not that was their ultimate aim in writing the commentary is another matter entirely, a point which seems to urge caution in making cursory judgments based on commentarial testament.

In the *Heshanggong* commentary also, there appears potential evidence for separating the characters “straw” and “dogs”, where the commentator expands the two characters (*chugou* 刍狗) to four (*chucao gouchu* 刍草狗畜), “Heaven and Earth regard them as bound grass[es,] dogs.”¹² (Wang 1993, p.18)¹³. However, the absolute lack of any character to represent a conjunction or change of tone gives us no solid clues as to whether these four characters should be read as a single object, extrapolated to four characters for clarity, or as two objects in series. As a result, my inclination is to urge caution in separating these two characters where there is a strong tradition for reading them in sequence, and to suggest the need for more thorough investigation into the intent of commentators by examining the exegetical techniques that they employ.

We hold that it is more likely that the image of sacrificial straw dogs was intended by the *Laozi*, rather than straw and dogs, and hence that the reference to straw dogs in the *Zhuangzi* and other texts to interpret them is, in the first instance, valid, but dependent on a solid contextualized reading. Straw dogs and other sacrificial items appear not infrequently in the *Zhuangzi*. As Boileau concludes at the end of his own survey of ritual metaphors in the *Laozi*, “The intrinsic symbolic value of those concrete ritual elements became available in the form of ritual imagery, which could then be integrated in other discourses, as metaphors.” (Boileau 2013, p. 53) Boileau’s careful analysis shows that ritual metaphors were stripped of their moral connotations and became effective vehicles for the author’s own ideas, effective because these ritual details were well known as a part of the social and cultural setting of the text in its time. As such, the appearance of ritual items in either the *Laozi* or *Zhuangzi* should not be considered surprising or isolated.

However, the alternate reading that takes straw and dogs as two separate items is represented to a certain extent by two major commentaries, *Heshanggong* and Wang Bi, and has also been noted and accepted by sinologists, maintaining a presence in translations from the 19th to the 20th century. It is also worth bearing in mind the reading of straw and dogs as consumable items, items of relatively little worth. This will become relevant as we continue to unravel the contextualization of the image of straw dogs.

3. *Laozi*’s Straw Dogs

Despite the possibilities that the ancient commentaries raise, the majority of later Chinese commentators and translators into the English language, from the earlier James Legge to the more recent Ames and Hall translation, favor the interpretation of straw dogs, items used in ancient sacrificial rites. In fact, when faced with this somewhat opaque piece of imagery, James Legge directs us to a more detailed description within the “Revolutions of Heaven” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (*Tianyun* 天运). Similarly, Qing dynasty scholars Zhu Qianzhi (朱谦之) and Liu Shipai (刘师培) also direct us to passages of the *Lüshi chunqiu* (吕氏春秋) and *Huainanzi* (淮南子)¹⁴, each clearly referring to the ritual

¹² Translated by the author.

¹³ (Wang 1993) The original line of the *Heshanggong* commentary is: 天地视之如刍草狗畜.

¹⁴ Despite the image of the straw dogs appearing in other Daoist related texts, namely the *Wenzi* (文子) and *Huainanzi*, we will not be consulting these texts in this paper. The *Wenzi* often offers direct and straightforward interpretations of the *Laozi*, constituting in effect an extra-textual commentary work on the classic, in this case referring to *Laozi* chapter 5 in the *Ziran* (自然) chapter; while the *Huainanzi* in some of its chapters draws heavily from both the *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi*, and refers to the straw dogs in the “Integrating Customs” (*qisu* 齐俗) and “Mountain” and “Forest of Persuasions” chapters (*shuoshan shuolin*

item of the likenesses of dogs made from bound straw, which modern translators almost unanimously translate into English as “straw dogs” (with only Legge preferring “dogs of grass”). By comparison, the translations of the concept (*buren* 不仁), for which this simile is offered, vary much more widely from the more neutral “unkind” to the more extreme “inhumane” or “ruthless”¹⁵. As a result, while the image of the ritual item for sacrifice is a matter of little contention, the connotation of this image is a matter of some debate. Surely the variation comes from some extent to what we read into the analogy, which, if we follow Graham’s idea that the images placed together make up the thinking of the *Laozi*, must be significant.

Ames and Hall’s translation with commentary provides a helpful summary of the main themes of the historic interpretations of the straw dogs in the *Laozi*. What their commentary gives us is not intended as an exhaustive list, nor do they indicate a preference for any one of these readings, instead stating that they are “complementary”. These possible readings are that, “Nature treats all things, human and otherwise, with the same degree of care”, that neither Nature or the sages indulge in unnatural systems of morality, showing preference to some over others and that finally, as sacrificial artifacts, straw dogs, like all things in the natural cycle may be revered when proper and that this time for reverence will pass (Ames and Hall 2003, pp. 84–85). The first two points may be elided into the following statement: that the “natural way” and those that would follow it practice no favoritism, with the qualification of the third point that any momentary favoritism that is shown is inconstant and will pass, as is appropriate and this sense of appropriateness we believe is very important. For the initial appearance of the term “straw dogs”, Ames provides the note, “These sacrificial objects are artifacts that are treated with great reverence during the sacrifice itself, and then after the ceremony, discarded to be trodden underfoot” (Ames and Hall 2003, p. 206). The content of this statement comes from the passage of the *Zhuangzi* that Legge refers us to in his own footnotes.

4. *Zhuangzi*’s Straw Dogs

Legge sees the passage in the *Zhuangzi*, which gives us a more detailed description of the usage of straw [grass] dogs, as a “fully developed meaning” of the simile originally given in chapter five of the *Laozi*¹⁶.

Before the grass-dogs are set forth (at the sacrifice), they are deposited in a box or basket, and wrapped up with elegantly embroidered cloths, while the representative of the dead and the officer of prayer prepare themselves by fasting to present them. After they have been set forth, however, passers-by trample on their heads and backs, and the grass-cutters take and burn them in cooking. That is all they are good for.¹⁷

Where the stark opposition of reverence and disregard is drawn from such a quotation of the passage in the *Zhuangzi*, it does indeed appear that any ‘kindness’ shown is fleeting at best, while in contrast is the image of “trampled heads and backs”. This partial quotation and shorter forms of it are favored in comments from various sources on this passage of the *Laozi*, both in the work of Chinese scholars and later in the work of translators, although interpretations vary more greatly amongst the former. Whereas Yuan dynasty Wu Cheng (吴澄) makes the comment “With the prayers completed, [the straw dogs] are discarded and are no more paid regard or cherished”¹⁸, implying that at one time

说山说林). Andrew Meyer in his summary of the “Integrating Customs” chapter notes the reference to *Laozi* and *Zhuangzi* throughout this chapter, with its main theme being a criticism of Confucian ritual activities (Major et al. 2010, pp. 391–96). In both cases, these texts offer little new interpretative material for our case study and so will not be examined in detail.

¹⁵ Representatives of the varying translations taken respectively from Victor Mair, D.C. Lau and Arthur Waley, sourced from the Terebess Asia Online (TAO) online repository at https://terebess.hu/english/tao/_index.html, accessed on December 2018.

¹⁶ Legge refers readers to the passage in the *Zhuangzi* in his footnote to *Laozi*, chapter five (Legge 1927, p. 51). Likewise in his translation of the “Revolutions of Heaven” *Zhuangzi*, he cross-references readers to chapter five of the *Laozi*.

¹⁷ As we will refer to Legge’s footnotes, we also use Legge’s English translation of the *Zhuangzi*, (Legge 1927, pp. 351–54).

¹⁸ 既祷则弃之，无复有顾惜之义。

at least the straw dogs were “cherished”; Su Zhe (苏辙) of the Northern Song comments, “though they are decorated and treated with respect, can they be said to be viewed with love . . . though they are trampled underfoot having been discarded at the close of prayers, can they be said to be viewed with distaste?”¹⁹ (Chen 2007, p. 80). Su Zhe’s reading, we suggest is closer to the meaning of both the *Zhuangzi* and the *Laozi*, it removes the discussion from the realm of “kind or cruel”, by negating the emotive content of the treatment of the straw dogs, we suggest that this kind of reading may draw closer to the original intent of the passage in the *Zhuangzi*, and also to the appearance in the *Laozi*. Although evidence in the *Laozi* is sparse, a more thorough exploration of the original passage in the *Zhuangzi* compared with the relatively sympathetic rendering shown in several other stories of sacrificial items within the *Zhuangzi*, seems to suggest. We present in this paper a more detailed re-contextualization of the passage in the *Zhuangzi*, and then ask whether this is a suitable reading for the *Laozi*.

Firstly, to allow the passage quoted to run to its conclusion.

After they have been set forth, however, passers-by trample on their heads and backs, and the grass-cutters take and burn them in cooking. That is all they are good for. If one should again take them, replace them in the box or basket, wrap them up with embroidered cloths, and then in rambling, or abiding at the spot, should go to sleep under them, if he do not get (evil) dreams, he is sure to be often troubled with the nightmare. (Legge 1927, p. 352)

Taking the description in its entirety, and considering the question of objects for emotive projection, it would appear that there is at least one more candidate for our sympathy. The troubles of the foolish man that might return the straw dog to its previous splendor and keep them in his house are described far more emotively than the trampling of the straw dogs. In addition, as a fellow human being, his troubles are perhaps more likely (although not necessarily) to naturally elicit more sympathy from the reader. Secondly, if we broaden our perspective so far as to note the speaker of this passage and the context of his comments, we will see that the foolish man serves as a simile himself for Confucius (孔子) in comments made to his disciple Yan Yuan (颜渊) by the Music Master Jin (师金), while the straw dogs as sacrificial items correspond with the ritual propriety and other ancient rites favored by Confucius. The straw dogs and the foolish person serve the purpose of reminding us to know when something is only fit to be discarded. The straw dogs perform a supporting role in a description where the foolish man instead is intended to provoke our consideration of and sympathy for the undesirable state of Yan Yuan’s master Confucius (albeit a state brought about by his own actions). This idea is reiterated and expanded on in the following passage.

If you are travelling by water, your best plan is to use a boat; if by land, a carriage. Take a boat, which will go (easily) along on the water, and try to push it along on the land, and all your lifetime it will not go so much as a fathom or two: are not ancient time and the present time like the water and the dry land?

In this extended series of analogies, we can reapply the boat/carriage framing of appropriate and inappropriate action to emphasize the idea that discarding and even trampling used straw dogs is appropriate and such actions will not result in regrettable effects, whereas cherishing and preserving the straw dogs will.

5. Other Unwilling Sacrifices in the *Zhuangzi*

To provide a foil for comparison with the sacrificial objects, straw dogs, we next examine a series of passages from the *Zhuangzi*. Objects of sacrifice or ritual reverence appear more than once in passages that read like fables within the *Zhuangzi*, making for some of the most colorful, emotive and memorable

¹⁹ 尽饰以奉之，夫岂爱之。既事而弃之，行者践之，夫岂恶之。

parts of the text. We will look at a selection of such tales and then return to the straw dogs for a final comparison looking specifically at how such items are cast in a sympathetic and emotive light.

Closest, perhaps, to the parable of the straw dogs is the tale of the sacrificial cow which appears in the “Lie Yukou” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (列御寇).

Some (ruler) having sent a message of invitation to him, Kwang-tsze (Zhuangzi) replied to the messenger, ‘Have you seen, Sir, a sacrificial ox? It is robed with ornamental embroidery, and feasted on fresh grass and beans. But when it is led into the grand ancestral temple, though it wished to be (again) a solitary calf, would that be possible for it?’.

In this parable, the author describes the feelings of the sacrificial animal with whose situation we are supposed to sympathize. The description of embroidered robes and the backdrop of the act of sacrifice are similar to the details given in the description of the straw dogs, while a presumably undesirable end is common to both sacrificial items (if we were to personify the straw dogs and give them emotions and volition). In fact, the feature of attributing emotion to the sacrificial item is entirely absent in the description of the straw dogs, whereas it is the key feature in this description of the sacrificial cow.

It may also be worth noting that the term *xi niu* (牺牛) refers exclusively to animals that meet a certain aesthetic requirement (i.e., that they be in good condition, pure of coloring and free from blemishes as discussed in (Cao 2008)). The sacrificial cow finds itself in the position described owing to certain conditions that lead to its being decreed valuable by humanity. This is another point of departure from the straw dogs that are composed of common and close to worthless materials²⁰. It is also worth remembering that in this case, the figure of Zhuangzi in the tale emotes with the sacrificial cow as the messenger invites him to take up a role in official circles. The figure Zhuangzi uses the emotions of the sacrificial cow to express his own horror at the prospect and so naturally the treatment is more sympathetic and emotive. As opposed to the straw dogs whose continued good treatment is an analogy for inappropriate action the results of which run counter to personal interests. By dissecting the analogies, we find their motivation and usage to differ quite dramatically, which in turn highlights their main features.

Another tale describing Zhuangzi’s response to invitations to enter into the official life which he so dreaded appears in the “Autumn Floods” chapter (*Qiushui* 秋水).

Kwang-tsze (Zhuangzi) was (once) fishing in the river Phû (Pu), when the king of Khû (Chu) sent two great officers to him, with the message, ‘I wish to trouble you with the charge of all within my territories.’ Kwang-tsze kept on holding his rod without looking round, and said, ‘I have heard that in Khû there is a spirit-like tortoise-shell, the wearer of which died 3000 years ago, and which the king keeps, in his ancestral temple, in a hamper covered with a cloth. Was it better for the tortoise to die, and leave its shell to be thus honoured? Or would it have been better for it to live, and keep on dragging its tail through the mud?’ The two officers said, ‘It would have been better for it to live, and draw its tail after it over the mud.’ ‘Go your ways. I will keep on drawing my tail after me through the mud.’

Here, again, we see the common factors of ritual honors and the figure of Zhuangzi stating through the anthropomorphized object of them that it were better not to be so honored. Once more, using the deceased tortoise to express his own feelings of reluctance, the author encourages sympathy with the explicitly stated emotions of the tortoise. This kind of empathetic anthropomorphism is well known from a passage wherein Zhuangzi refutes the criticism of Huizi (惠子), a passage which follows shortly after this one, as Zhuangzi claims to perceive “the enjoyment of the fishes” (*yu zhi le* 鱼之乐).

²⁰ Here, we might recall that the straw dogs interpreted by Wang Bi are emphasized as items of not great material worth that are made to be consumed.

Finally, from the “Perfect Enjoyment” chapter (*zhi le* 至乐), there is the story of the marquis of Lü who treated a marvelous seabird with every honor he could think of, to the honored bird’s mortal distress. In this case, Zhuangzi is not the subject of the empathetic description. However, again, the analogy is drawn with a human situation.

Formerly a sea-bird alighted in the suburban country of Lù (Lu). The marquis went out to meet it, (brought it) to the ancestral temple, and prepared to banquet it there. The *Kiû-shào* (Jiushao) was performed to afford it music; an ox, a sheep, and a pig were killed to supply the food. The bird, however, looked at everything with dim eyes, and was very sad. It did not venture to eat a single bit of flesh, nor to drink a single cupful; and in three days it died.

This story, for a change, is narrated by the figure of Confucius, and the object of the parable is to provoke reflection on the appropriateness of one’s actions to one’s audience. The audience to a speaker’s entreaties, treated inappropriately, might be compared with the seabird in the story. Although the ultimate aim of the story is to construct the image of Yan Hui (颜回) who may make a similar mistake in his visit to the marquis of Qi, still the emotions of the bird are described not only indirectly via its reactions, but also directly and explicitly in terms of its feeling “sad”.

From the treatment of the seabird in this story, we might infer that it was in some way remarkable and therefore considered worthy of such great honor. The tortoise that is kept in the ancestral temple is honored for its age. Along with the sacrificial cow’s being a good physical specimen, we see that these all fall into a category of animals prized for some quality or another and suffering as a result of that quality’s being admired by man. These remarkable creatures represent Zhuangzi and Yan Hui, persons worthy of respect. This is a point of departure from the image of the straw dogs that are not prized for anything pertaining to their form or other point of excellence, but only as symbols of something greater, nor do they represent a human figure in the analogy presented. The seabird, tortoise and sacrificial cow share more in common of being unhappily prized and cherished, by way of contrast with another theme in the *Zhuangzi*, that of “uselessness”, as embodied by the large, and apparently useless, Ailantus tree (*chushu* 樗树), the story of which concludes the “Enjoyment in Untroubled Ease” chapter of the *Zhuangzi* (*Xiaoyao you* 逍遥游).

Hui-tsze (Huizi) said to Kwang-tsze (Zhuangzi), ‘I have a large tree, which men call the Ailantus. Its trunk swells out to a large size, but is not fit for a carpenter to apply his line to it; its smaller branches are knotted and crooked, so that the disk and square cannot be used on them. Though planted on the wayside, a builder would not turn his head to look at it.

The tree is useless in the eyes of Huizi, who here acts as a person holding fast to the standard system of values. Being seen as useless as a building material, the huge and knotted tree manages to avoid becoming a useful article and instead grows to a great size never once bothered by the covetous gaze of man. This last gloss of meaning to the tales of the unwilling sacrificial items finally rules out the straw dogs from any comparison with them. They would only be prized by a minority deemed as foolish, not by society on the whole.

Looking closely at the features of these stories taken as a group, the description of straw dogs shares none of the points of similarity with the other stories of sacrificial items that do illicit sympathy, for example being valuable in and of themselves (even if only in the view of mainstream society) or somehow remarkable. Moreover, the tale of the straw dogs cannot be truly considered to be another one of a collection of emotive tales of sacrificial or honored items, given that much more transparent empathetic treatments are available in more than one instance in the *Zhuangzi*, whereas no emotions are attributed to the straw dogs even indirectly. Therefore, to refer to the quotation in the “Revolutions of Heaven” chapter to justify any reading suggesting sympathy with the kind or cruel treatment of straw dogs in the *Laozi* is a dangerous misinterpretation that overlooks other potential readings of this key simile as well as potentially interfering with a more accurate interpretation of the practice

of non-benevolence²¹. For an item that must be discarded to avoid misfortune, to speak of kindness or otherwise is only as correct as it would be to speak of the moral ramifications of throwing away anything past its best that if kept would impede everyday life. While one might point to further sources for more information on the straw dogs, their appearance as an emotively loaded figure in an illustrative tale should not color our reading of the behavior of Heaven, Earth or Sages.

To bring in an element of modern sinology to this case study of an early translation, if we accept that the appearance of the straw dogs in the *Zhuangzi* is constructed as a persuasive simile, we would not expect the description following to be entirely historically accurate or dispassionate. In addition, an important phenomenon to be aware of is a technique that Graham calls the “interweaving of metaphors”²². Even having identified this image as a simile, we might be additionally cautious of looking at any instance of metaphor, simile or analogy in isolation, when it is often the case that similar metaphors across a text ought to be read in conjunction with each other, or that similar or disparate metaphors presented in series are done so with the intent that the reader seeks the logic tying them together.

6. Conclusions

Although, to begin with, I do not whole-heartedly accept the split reading of straw (and) dogs as what was intended by the passage in the *Laozi*, it is worth noting the idea of their being worthless and disposable, which would appear to be closer to the correct reading of sacrificial item straw dogs. To engage in speculation, this degree of similarity may be what allows commentarial texts to make such an association or departure. Their readings may be an associated thought, which is appropriate because it is in keeping with the original image. As readers far removed from the context and setting of such an ancient text, we hope to discover reliable explanations, but should not confuse our own motivations with those of other authors, we should keep an open mind as to what their alternative activities might be. While we would not go so far as to say that Legge’s experiment in hermeneutics for this passage is misleading, the edited quote he offers us in his footnote is cropped in just such a way as to capture what could appear to be the fickle and heartless treatment of the straw dogs—one moment cherished, the next trampled. The stark contrast has the unfortunate literary effect of provoking emotive transference that we can say is most likely far from the aim of the original story in the *Zhuangzi* and which is not appropriate for interpreting the *Laozi* either. On the other hand, this unsuccessful or slightly problematic hermeneutic choice highlights the issues not only of taking a quote out of context, but how particularly dangerous that can be in texts that make strong use of expression and argument through metaphor and the less discussed blended or interwoven use of metaphor—an area that we suggest will surely become more and more important as the methods and tools at our disposal for analyzing metaphors continue to develop.

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²¹ In fact, to be clear, Legge chooses the translation “Heaven and earth do not act from (the impulse of) any wish to be benevolent”, which although not the most fluent translation on offer, does not fall into the trap of an overly emotive reading. It is just unfortunate that the *Zhuangzi* quote as he gives it lacks the context that might guide other readers.

²² Graham (1989, p. 218) uses this term specifically in relation to the use of metaphors in the *Laozi*, and in my PhD thesis (to be published, 2019), I recommend adopting this as a general term for the phenomenon. Slingerland (2005) has discussed the potential for blending with relation to ancient Chinese texts in depth, referring to the linguistic terms of ‘conceptual blending’ and ‘scope blending’, as coined by Fauconnier and Turner (2002).

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