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Reconsidering the Relationship between the Heavenly Person, the Spirit Person, the Ultimate Person, and the Sage in the *Zhuangzi*

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Abstract

Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying believed that the heavenly person (*tianren*), the spirit person (*shenren*), the ultimate person (*zhiren*), and the sage (*shengren*) in the *Zhuangzi* differ in name but in reality refer to the same figure. Later thinkers such as Yang Chengfu and Cao Chuji uphold this view. Scholars such as Xuan Ying, Gao Heng, Feng Youlan, and Tan Jiefu argued that the four are different and should not be confused with one another. However, their discussions are not very detailed, and they offer different opinions as to the exact relationship between them. In my view, the heavenly person, the spirit person, the ultimate person, and the sage are terms that represent different levels of attainment in descending order. In the “Geng-sang Chu” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the whole man (*quanren*, i.e., the Heavenly Man) is superior to the sage; in the “Waiwu” chapter, the heavenly man is superior to the sage; in the “Da sheng” chapter, the author points out that the ultimate person does not sacrifice himself for material things, whereas a sage should observe the signs to seek advantage. Moreover, as a mass of chaotic *qi*, Heaven encompasses and is broader than spirit which is a mass of vital force (*jingqi*) or harmonious *qi*. Therefore it can be concluded that the heavenly person is superior to the spirit person, and the spirit person is superior to the ultimate person. Furthermore, in the “Tianxia” chapter, the text describes the first three as “inseparable” (*buli*). To be inseparable is to be integrated into one entity. The sage, however, is described as “taking (something) as (something else).” This shows a separation of subject and object, and a distinction between Heaven and man. The meaning is that the first three conform to nature, while “Kinglyness without” is merely a circumstantial manifestation of this natural accord. However, a sage uses

wisdom to transform the world. This shows that the first three are superior to the sage. Finally, in the *Zhuangzi*, various types of people appear interchangeably or in conjunction with each other. In each case, they follow the rule that people at a higher level encompass the functions of those at a lower level.

Keywords

heavenly person – spirit person – ultimate person – sage – *Zhuangzi*

1 Introduction

Guo Xiang's 郭象 (252–312) *Zhuangzi zhu* 莊子注 and Cheng Xuanying's 成玄英 (631–655) exegesis have greatly influenced later generations' understanding of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子. Closer to the present, there have been debates among Xuan Ying 宣穎 (ca. 1655–1730), Gao Heng 高亨 (1900–1986), Tan Jiefu 譚戒甫 (1887–1974), and Feng Youlan 馮友蘭 (1895–1990) about whether the spirit person or the sage is superior. To date, no one has yet made a hierarchical distinction between the heavenly person (*tianren* 天人), the spirit person (*shenren* 神人), the ultimate person (*zhiren* 至人), and the sage (*shengren* 聖人) in the “Tianxia” 天下 (All Under Heaven) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.

In this article, based on the definitions of the four types of people in the “Tianxia” chapter and drawing comparisons from chapters like “Gengsang Chu” 庚桑楚 (Kengsang Chu) and “Waiwu” 外物 (External Things), I argue that the heavenly person, the spirit person, the ultimate person, and sages exist on a single spectrum that descends sequentially. One could say that the heavenly person fully conform to nature, forgetting everything about life and death and matters of right and wrong in the human realm. That is why the “Gengsang Chu” chapter says: “Oblivious of others, he [the spirit person] will consequently become a man of heaven.”¹

A spirit person is someone who concentrates their spirit and forgets material things. He focuses both mind and spirit, remaining detached from the world, not considering achievements and the adoration of people as important. Therefore, “the spiritual man dislikes the arrival of the multitudes”² and takes what humans perceive as bad luck as great luck. An ultimate person is

1 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (1994; repr., Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1998), 235.

2 *Ibid.*, 250.

one who forgets right and wrong, life and death. He takes the unified *qi* of Heaven and earth as his essence, “He is conversant with the Way, [and] joins with virtue,”³ leaving no trace.

The sage emulates Heaven and earth and understands the principles of the myriad things. He acts in accordance with the situation, holding no attachments, and regards the world as a unified whole, loving it as such. Although he does not seek fame, he cannot escape the marks of sagacious governance, nor can he detach himself from the people’s adulation. Therefore, the text of the *Zhuangzi* says: “The sage is adept in dealing with heaven but clumsy in dealing with humanity.”⁴

Although the first three types of people also contribute to humanity, their achievements are merely the byproducts of their self-cultivation. A sage, on the other hand, deliberately brings benefit to the whole world. However, the sage does not know whether their care and blessings reach a state of holiness, and this is what is meant by “the sage has no name” (*shengren wuming* 聖人無名).⁵

Viewing these four kinds of people as equal is clearly at odds with the distinctions among the sage, the complete person, and the heavenly person found in chapters like “Gengsang Chu” and “Waiwu.” This adds to the challenge for readers attempting to systematically comprehend the *Zhuangzi*.

2 Debating the Hierarchy of the Heavenly Person, Spirit Person, Ultimate Person, and the Sage in the “Tianxia”

The text in “Tianxia” lists the heavenly person, the spirit person, the ultimate person, and the sage. The text says:

He who is not separated from the ancestral may be called a heavenly man; he who is not separated from the essential may be called a spiritual man; and he who is not separated from the true may be called an ultimate man. He who takes heaven as his ancestor, he who takes integrity as his root, he who takes the Way as his gate, and he who is foreshadowed by transformation and evolution may be called a sage.⁶

3 Ibid., 127.

4 Ibid., 235.

5 See also Ibid., 6.

6 Ibid., 334.

Guo Xiang comments: “Overall, these four names refer to one person, merely from different perspectives.”⁷

Cheng Xuanying comments:

To merge with the ancestor and unite with the root is called spontaneity. To be pure without any impurity is called wonder. To stand firm without any support is called perfection. To use spontaneity as the ancestor, superb virtue as the root, the mysterious Way as the gate, and to discern the incipient sign of changes and transform along with things, this is called the sage. The above four men refer to just one man which has four names according to his achievement and function.⁸

Guo Xiang remarks that the four categories of person are one and the same: they differ only in terms of the perspectives from which they are described. Cheng Xuanying explains that the heavenly person accords with spontaneity; the spirit person as pure and mystically profound; and the ultimate person as relying on nothing external. He holds that the sage embodies abilities of the heavenly person, the spirit person, and the ultimate person. Cheng reiterates that the four types of people refer to just one individual. It is just that the *Zhuangzi* lists four different terms for functional purposes.

However, the commentaries and annotations by Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying seem to diverge from the original text of “Tianxia.” The original text of “Tianxia” progresses in descending order from the heavenly person to the spirit person, to the ultimate person, to the sage, to the gentleman, to the official, and finally to the common people. Although each adheres to the principles of nature, they should not be confused as one and the same due to their differing concerns. The distinctions among the gentleman, the bureaucrat, and the common people are clear.

In recent times, Yang Chengfu 楊成孚 wrote an article defending the view proposed by Cheng Xuanying. Yang held that the four categories of person all originate from the *Dao*, yet they bear distinct names. He interprets that “source” (*zong* 宗), “essence” (*jing* 精) and “truth” (*zhen* 真) refer to “*Dao*.” He explains it thus: “The heavenly person, the spirit person, the ultimate person, and the sage all embody the *Dao* and are the highest models that take the *Dao* as their fundamental origin.”⁹

7 Ibid., 334.

8 Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1961), 1066.

9 Yang Chengfu 楊成孚, “*Zhuangzi zhiren shenren shengren yiming tongshi lun*” 《莊子》至人神人聖人異名同實論, *Nankai xuebao* 南開學報, no. 5 (1996): 54–62.

We acknowledge that the four types of person are undoubtedly those who embody the *Dao*. The question is, why does the *Zhuangzi* use the terms “source,” “essence,” and “true” to describe the first three types of person? Is it merely a linguistic game? Yang says, “not departing from the source” means not deviating from the *Dao*. However, he willfully ignores the phrase “taking Heaven as one’s source” that appears in the very same passage, failing to incorporate it into his interpretation.

Although Heaven and *Dao* are used interchangeably in the *Zhuangzi*, there is still a difference when they are listed together. The term “Heaven” emphasizes chaos and non-differentiation, whereas “*Dao*” emphasizes transformation and flow. This is why the text later says, “taking Heaven as the source, taking virtue as the root, and taking the *Dao* as the door.”

Yang’s explanation of “not departing from the essence”¹⁰ as “taking the self as refined and external things as coarse” is clearly inappropriate. This is because the *jing* in “taking the self as refined” is an adjective (“refined” opposed to “coarse”), whereas the *jing* in “not departing from essence” is a noun (essence). Moreover, in pre-Qin literature, *jing* is often used interchangeably with “spirit” (*shen* 神), but less often with *Dao*. As for the phrase “You have already returned to the true”¹¹ which appears in the *Zhuangzi*, it means that one has returned to the state of genuineness. This refers to the primordial, undifferentiated condition of the circulation of the unified *qi* (*yiqi* 一氣). In other words, it signifies a return to the *Dao*. However, in the *Zhuangzi*, “genuine” does not only refer to a genuine or authentic state. In the “Shanmu” 山木 (Mountain Tree) chapter, it also carries the meanings of true nature and the self.

In sum, “ancestral,” “essence,” and “genuine” are all related to *Dao*. They are characteristics of embodying the *Dao*. However, to equate all of them directly with the *Dao* would be an oversimplification. Since *zong*, *jing*, and *zhen* are different, the first three types of person should not be conflated or regarded as the same.

Cao Chuji 曹礎基 (b.1937) asserts:

Zong, *jing*, and *zhen* all derive from the “One” of “originating in the One,” namely, the *Dao*. From the perspective of its governing all things, it is called *zong*; from the perspective of its purity and freedom from admixture, it is called *jing*; and from the perspective of its simplicity and

10 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 1093.

11 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 60.

freedom from falsity, it is called *zhen*. Therefore, the heavenly man, the spirit man, and the ultimate man are in fact one and the same.¹²

Cao's view recognizes the different aspects of the three types of persons and thus goes a step further than Yang's. However, he also too simply equates *zong*, *jing*, and *zhen* with the *Dao*. While *zong* does carry the sense of "sovereignty" (*zhuzai* 主宰), its meaning lies more in "root" or "origin." As for *jing* and *zhen*, both function as nouns in this context. However, Cao interprets them as adjectives, which does not accord with the usage in the source text.

Xuan Ying was the earliest to note the distinctions among these four types of person. He writes: "The heavenly man is the first rank; the spirit man, the second rank; the ultimate man, the third rank; and the sage, the fourth rank ... These four higher ranks all originate from the One. Yet by pursuing each to its ultimate, such distinctions arise."¹³ The "One" here refers to the *Dao*.

Later, Gao Heng regarded the heavenly man, the spirit man, and the ultimate man as all belonging to the first rank but differing in name, while the sage was placed in the second rank. His basis for this distinction is that the former are all described as "not departing" (*bu li* 不離), meaning that they arrive there naturally. However, the sage is described as "taking (something) to be (something else)" (*yi...wei* 以...為), which implies arriving there through deliberate effort.¹⁴ Gao Heng's differentiation is quite reasonable. Its limitation, however, lies in its failure to see the differences between the heavenly man, the spirit man, and the ultimate man, and in its lack of a clear basis for differentiating these three from the sage.

In contrast to the two above, Tan Jiefu and Feng Youlan regard the sage as the highest, with the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the heavenly man ranking below. Tan Jiefu holds that the sage occupies "the first level of sagaciousness," while the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the heavenly man respectively belong to the second, third, and fourth levels. He further states:

The "Tiandao" 天道 [Way of Heaven] chapter states: "Stillness is the mark of the sage; movement is the mark of the ruler." The three levels mentioned earlier are all rooted in stillness and sage-like virtue. The sage

12 Cao Chuji 曹礎基, *Zhuangzi qian zhu* 莊子淺注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2007), 387.

13 Xuan Ying 宣穎, *Nanhua jing jie* 南華經解 (Guangzhou: Guangdong renmin chubanshe, 2008), 197.

14 Gao Heng 高亨, "Zhuangzi Tianxia pian jian zheng" 《莊子·天下篇》箋證, in *Zhuangzi Tianxia pian zhushu si zhong* 《莊子·天下篇》注疏四種, comp. Zhang Fengqian 張豐乾 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2009), 174–75.

alone unites sagehood with rulership: with both stillness and action. Thus, the sage is said to discern the subtle signs of change.¹⁵

The question is: does “Stillness is the mark of the sage; movement is the mark of the ruler” describe only the sage? From the wording of the “Tiandao” chapter, this phrase also describes the heavenly man. For the heavenly man naturally encompasses both stillness and activity since he is described with phrases such as the “The Way of heaven revolves ceaselessly” 天道運而無所積.¹⁶ Moreover, the “Tiandao” chapter goes on to say that emperors and sages “Empty, they are still; still, they begin to move” 虛則靜，靜則動。¹⁷ This, likewise, is not restricted to the sage alone.

Xuan Ying gives a comment to explain the following phrase of the *Zhuangzi* text. The text reads, “the movement of the imperial way without accumulation.”¹⁸ He states: “The divine and transformation are united. The emperor is one who matches Heaven; the sage is one who models himself on Heaven.”¹⁹ This means that one who follows the imperial way is a spirit man who corresponds to Heaven. Accordingly, such a person is higher than the sage, as the sage merely emulates Heaven.²⁰

Referring to descriptions of the heavenly man, the spirit man, and the ultimate man in other chapters, these three are likewise not characterized merely as “still and thus sages” (*jing er sheng* 靜而聖). For example, the “whole man” (*quanren* 全人) in the “Gengsang Chu” chapter (equivalent to the heavenly man) unites both Heaven and humanity. In the “Xiaoyao you” 逍遙游 (Carefree Wandering) chapter, the spirit man is described as “His spirit is concentrated,

15 See also Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 120.

16 *Ibid.*, 119.

17 *Ibid.*, 120.

18 *Ibid.*, 119.

19 Xuan Ying, *Nanhua jing jie*, 96.

20 Translator's note: Tan Mingran is focusing on specific clauses at the beginning of the “Tiandao” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*. This is how they appear all together: 天道運而無所積，故萬物成；帝道運而無所積，故天下歸；聖道運而無所積，故海內服。 In a literal translation: “The Way of Heaven moves without accumulation, and thus all things are accomplished; the Way of the Emperor moves without accumulation, and thus all under Heaven submit; the Way of the Sage moves without accumulation, and thus all within the seas obey.” See also Victor Mair's translation: “The Way of heaven revolves ceaselessly, so that the myriad things are brought to completion; the Way of the emperors revolves ceaselessly, so that all under heaven return to them; the Way of the sages revolves ceaselessly, so that all within the seas submit to them.” Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 119.

saving things from corruption and bringing a bountiful harvest every year.”²¹ In the “Renjian shi” 人間世 (Human World) chapter, it says of the Way “The ultimate men of the past first sought to preserve it in themselves and only after that to preserve it in others.”²² All of these show the union of stillness and activity. Therefore, Tan’s attempt to distinguish the four types of persons in “Tianxia” by contrasting “stillness” with “the union of stillness and activity” does not seem convincing.

Feng Youlan holds that the sage embodies the culmination of the first three types of persons and surpasses them through “observing the omens of transformation.” Feng writes:

The heavenly man, the spirit man, and the ultimate man are perhaps merely one person, differing only in self-description. But the sage is different from the heavenly man, the spirit man, and the ultimate man. He possesses all that the heavenly man and the others have, yet also has what they do not.²³

However, Feng overlooks chapters such as “Gengsang Chu,” which places the “whole man” (i.e., the heavenly man) above the sage; “Waiwu,” which places the spirit man above the sage; “Xiaoyao you,” which suggests that even the spirit man’s dust and chaff could produce a Yao or Shun; and “Dechongfu” 德充符 (Symbols of Integrity Fulfilled), which places the ultimate man above Confucius.

Moreover, Feng conflates the distinction between “taking (something) as (something else)” and “not departing.” To say “take Heaven as one’s source” means that the sage regards Heaven as his origin. When the sage does this, it shows that the sage and Heaven are two distinct entities. Similarly, phrases like “he who takes integrity as his root” (*yi de wei ben* 以德為本) or “he who takes the Way as his gate” (*yi dao wei men* 以道為門) follow the same pattern. Phrases like “he who is foreshadowed by transformation and evolution” (*zhao yu bianhua* 兆於變化) refers to the sage observing the signs of change and making use of them.²⁴ This differs from the spirit man or ultimate man, who are one with change itself.

21 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 7.

22 *Ibid.*, 30.

23 Feng Youlan 馮友蘭, *Sansong tang quanji* 三松堂全集, 2nd ed. (Zhengzhou: Henan renmin chubanshe, 2001), 8.

24 See Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 334.

The “Tiandi” 天地 (Heaven and Earth) chapter describes the spirit man as follows:

He fulfills his destiny and perfects his attributes.
 Heaven and earth rejoice;
 The myriad affairs dissolve;
 And the myriad things are restored to truth.
 This is called “merging with darkness.”²⁵

Similarly, the “Tian Zifang” 田子方 (Sir Square Field) chapter says:

The relationship of the ultimate man to integrity is similar in that nothing can escape its influence though he does not cultivate it. He is like heaven which is naturally high; like earth which is naturally substantial; and like the sun and moon which are naturally bright. What need is there for him to cultivate it?²⁶

This shows that these first three types achieve spontaneous unity with Heaven without deliberate effort, naturally transforming the myriad things. A state of spontaneous unity and natural transformation is certainly higher than one achieved through deliberate emulation. Therefore, they rank higher than the sage.

3 The Respective Characteristics of the Four Types of Person in the “Tianxia” Chapter

Below, we analyze the characteristics of each of the four types of person.

Towards the start of the “Tianxia” chapter, the *Zhuangzi* gives a description of the heavenly person. The text says: “He who is not separated from the ancestral may be called a heavenly man.” Here, “the ancestral” refers to Heaven, and also the *Dao*. This means that the heavenly man is wholly one with Heaven, with no distinction between self and others. In the “Gengsang Chu” chapter, the heavenly man is described as “one who shares in the harmony of heaven” (*tong hu tian he* 同乎天和).²⁷ The text also says: “The sage is adept in dealing with heaven but clumsy in dealing with humanity. It is only the complete man

25 Ibid., 114.

26 Ibid., 203.

27 Ibid., 235.

who can be adept in dealing with heaven and good in dealing with humanity” (*liang hu renzhe* 佷乎人者).²⁸ Here, *liang* 佷 means “skillful.” This indicates that while the sage excels at conforming to the *Dao*, he cannot completely erase his trace or blend seamlessly with the world.

The whole man, however, skillfully unites with the natural order, leaving no trace, benefiting all generations while remaining unnoticed. The whole man is precisely the one who preserves the fullness of his Heaven-endowed nature, which makes him a heavenly man. Therefore, we can conclude that the heavenly man stands above the sage. This conclusion is supported by Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1731–1815), who gives the following comment on the relative rankings of ideal persons in the *Zhuangzi*: “This passage shows that the ‘Tianxia’ chapter places the heavenly man above the sage and the gentleman.”²⁹

The spirit man is one who does not depart from essence. Here, “essence” refers to “spirit.”³⁰ This means the spirit man is one who concentrates and preserves spirit. The “Waiwu” chapter says: “Nor has the spiritual person ever had to ask how the sage admonishes [*hai* 駭] all under heaven. Nor has the sage ever had to ask how the worthy man [*xianren* 賢人] admonishes the world. Nor has the worthy man ever had to ask how the superior man admonishes his state.”³¹ Here, *hai* means “to startle” or “alter the perception of the people.” In other words, matters that shock or worry the world concern the sage, but the spirit man does not meddle with them. The text relates ranks that gradually decrease from the spirit man to the sage, then to the virtuous person, then to the gentleman, and then to the petty person. As the text of the *Zhuangzi* relates it, the spirit man is clearly higher than the sage.

The “Tiandi” chapter describes the spirit man. The text says: “the highest spirit man rides the light and unites with the formless light, so it is said that he perishes with form.”³² Being formless, nothing can obstruct his light, enabling him to be empty, bright, and all-pervading. In this way, the spirit man fulfills Heaven’s mandate, understands the realities of all things, rejoices with Heaven

28 Ibid., 235.

29 Yao Nai 姚鼐, *Zhuangzi zhangyi* 莊子章義, in vol. 108 of *Zizang: Zhuangzi juan* 子藏·莊子卷 (Beijing: Guojia tushuguan chubanshe, 2011), 483.

30 From the “Neiye” 內業 chapter of *Guanzi*: “Reverently make clean the house of your heart, and the essence will naturally arrive.” From “Xinshu” 心術 chapter of *Guanzi*: “Empty your desires, and the spirit will come of its own accord; Clean your heart of impurities, and the spirit will dwell in peace.” These illustrate that “essence” and “spirit” are used as complementary concepts. See Li Xiangfeng 黎翔鳳, *Guanzi jiaozhu* 管子校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2004), 938, 759.

31 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 276.

32 Ibid., 114.

and Earth, discards all worldly concerns, and allows all things to return to their natural states. This is called undifferentiated wholeness (*hundun* 渾沌). The spirit man is depicted as close to the heavenly man, united with Heaven and Earth, and detached from the mundane world.

However, although the spirit man does not depart from essence and concentrates and preserves spirit, he still ranks below the heavenly man in terms of scope. In the “Neiye” 內業 chapter of the *Guanzi* 管子, it says: “When people are born, Heaven gives them their essence, and Earth gives them their form; combining these makes a person.”³³ This indicates that essence or spirit is only a part of Heaven, smaller in scope. The relationship is akin to that between a single drop of water and the entire lake.

In his commentary on the “Yangsheng zhu” 養生主 (Essentials for Nurturing Life) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692) says:

When a person is born, the form is created, and the spirit attaches to it. If the form obstructs and cannot accommodate the spirit, the spirit abandons it; if the spirit leaves, it is no longer spirit. It is only called “spirit” when it resides in the form; spirit that does not reside in form is simply “Heaven.”³⁴

Therefore, we can see that the spirit is a concretization of Heaven within form: although of the same substance as Heaven, its scope is much more limited.

Let us now consider where the *Zhuangzi* says, “The ultimate person is one who does not depart from the genuine [*zhen* 真].” First, it is necessary to understand the meaning of “genuine.” In the “Yufu” 漁父 chapter (An Old Fisherman), it says: “one’s true nature is that which was received from heaven, so naturally it cannot be changed.”³⁵ This indicates that *zhen* is what one naturally just has. In the “Dao Zhi” 盜蹠 (Robber Footpad) chapter, it says of the Yellow Emperor and five others: “These are the six men whom the world esteems, but if we discuss them thoroughly, they were all deluded by gain and forcefully opposed their own emotions [*li gan qi zhen* 利惑其真] and natures [*qingxing* 情性]. Their conduct is thus quite shameful.”³⁶ Here, *qing* 情 refers to reality or the natural state, and *qingxing* is one’s inherent nature. Thus, *zhen* refers to natural disposition or true nature.

33 Li Xiangfeng, *Guanzi jiaozhu*, 945.

34 Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, *Zhuangzi jie* 莊子解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 33.

35 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 322.

36 *Ibid.*, 303.

The “Shanmu” chapter provides a series of cautionary tales about forgetting one’s fundamental self in pursuit of external gain: the cicada “had just found a nice, shady spot and had forgotten all about protecting its own body”; the mantis “seeing only its prey, the mantis had forgotten to protect its own physical form”; the strange magpie “seeing only its advantage, the magpie forgot its true being.”³⁷ The text goes on to tell us of Zhuang Zhou, who says, “as I was wandering at Eagle Mound, I forgot about my body;” and also that the strange magpie, “wandering in the chestnut grove, forgot about its true being.”³⁸ In the “Da Zongshi” 大宗師 (Great Ancestral Teacher) chapter, it says: “If one destroys the body and abandons one’s true nature, one cannot be considered a person of excellence.”³⁹ From these examples, it is clear that *zhen* 真 (“what is true,” or “what is authentic”) corresponds to the body or the living embodiment of one’s true nature. Sima Biao’s 司馬彪 (240–306 CE) annotation on “Seeing only its advantage, the magpie forgot its true being [*zhen* 真]” states: “*Zhen* is the body.”⁴⁰ This further confirms the interpretation that *zhen* is the concrete, embodied self.

Since the pre-Qin period, nature (*xing* 性) was understood not only as principle (*li* 理) but also as temperament and vital force (*qi* 氣). In the “Yue ji” 樂記 of the *Liji* 禮記, it says:

At birth a person is tranquil; this is Heaven’s nature. When stirred by external things, there arises movement; this is the desire of nature. The people have the nature of blood, vital force, and mind, but no fixed emotions of sorrow, joy, anger, or pleasure. Their emotions are aroused in response to external stimuli, and then the patterns of the mind are manifested.⁴¹

This shows that nature is receptive to stimulus, and it embodies both principle and vital force. Similarly, the body also combines both principle and vital force. Xu Weiyu 許維通 (1900–1950) comments on *Han shi waizhuan* 韓詩外傳 where the text has: “In practicing ritual, moderation is essential, just as nature directs the four limbs.” He explains: “*Xing* [nature] refers to the embodied self ... The ‘Jinyu’ 晉語 section of the *Guoyu* 國語 text says: ‘His body was genuine, and his words were fitting.’ Here body [*shen* 身] means nature [*xing*”

37 Ibid., 196.

38 Ibid., 197.

39 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 232.

40 Ibid., 697.

41 Zhu Bin 朱彬, *Liji xunzuan* 禮記訓纂 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996), 564, 576.

性].⁴² Thus, body and nature can be taken as synonymous. It follows, therefore, that the phrase “the ultimate man is one who does not depart from what is genuine” means that the ultimate man does not abandon his embodied self or distort his inborn nature in pursuit of fame and profit.

Now, let us consider where the *Zhuangzi* says: “He who takes heaven as his ancestor [*yi tian wei zong* 以天為宗], he who takes integrity as his root, he who takes the Way as his gate, and he who is foreshadowed by transformation and evolution may be called a sage.”⁴³ On the surface, this appears to combine the functions of the heavenly man, ultimate man, and spirit man. Hence Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿 (1032–1111) comments: “The sage is the one who fully embodies Heaven, body, and spirit to the ultimate. Therefore, he unifies *Dao* and virtue and discerns transformation.”⁴⁴ However, this reading overlooks the subject-object dichotomy expressed in the wording of the passage.

Here, the meaning of “using (something) to be (something)” and “not departing from” are completely different. Not departing implies an integral unity, like the natural coherence of the limbs with the body. Taking (something) as (something else) implies a subjective distinction and a forced unification.

We agree with Yang Chengfu and others who maintain that all four types of persons “originate from the One” and are all embodiments of the *Dao*. However, this should not prevent us from distinguishing between them, since the *Zhuangzi* clearly differentiates these figures in several places. First, the “Tiandi” chapter lists, in an ascending hierarchy, the sage (sagacious governance), the virtuous man (*deren* 德人, one with the outward appearance of the virtuous man), and the spirit man (highest divine).⁴⁵ The sage governs by appointing “officials to posts for which they are duly suited; he makes promotions with due regard for ability ... Wherever his hand points or his gaze directs, the people from the four quarters will go there without exception.”⁴⁶ This shows that although the sage embodies the *Dao*, he must still act, still achieve, and cannot completely conceal his traces.

The virtuous man is equivalent to the ultimate man. Cheng Xuanying explains it thus: “He marvelously accords with the realm of the *Dao*, attaining being without attainment. Hence, he is called the virtuous man.”⁴⁷ From the fact that he benefits the world yet remains unknown to it, it is clear that he

42 Han Ying 韓嬰, *Han shi waizhuan jishi* 韓詩外傳集釋, annot. Xu Weiyu 許維遜 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2020), 81.

43 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 334.

44 Lü Huiqing 呂惠卿, *Zhuangzi yi jijiao* 莊子義集校 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2009), 586.

45 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 440–43.

46 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 112.

47 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 442.

stands above the sage. The spirit man, however, directly “perishes with form” and returns to “undifferentiated unity” (*hunming* 混冥). Guo Xiang comments: “Virtue is the trace of the spirit man. Hence, it is referred to as his outward appearance.”⁴⁸ This shows the spirit man is higher still than the virtuous man or ultimate man.

Second, as mentioned earlier, the “Gengsang Chu” and “Waiwu” chapters also arrange the whole man, spirit man, sage, and worthy man in a hierarchy.

Third, in the “Qiwu lun” 齊物論 (On the Equality of Things) chapter, the text explicitly divides those who embody the *Dao* into three levels. The text relates:

The knowledge of the ancients attained the ultimate. What was the ultimacy that it attained? They realized that there was a stage before there were things. This is the ultimacy they had attained, the utmost to which nothing can be added. Next, there were those who recognized that there were things, but that there was a stage before which things were distinguished. Next, there were those who recognized that there were distinctions among things, but that there was a stage before there was right and wrong.⁴⁹

From the sense of the passage, all three types of ideal person belong to “those who embody the *Dao*,” but differ as to whether they embody it “to the ultimate” (*jin* 盡) or “not the ultimate” (*bujin* 不盡). The heavenly man and spirit man correspond to those who “believed there had never yet been any things,” since the heavenly man forgets humanity, and the spirit man merges into “undifferentiated unity.” The ultimate man corresponds to someone who “recognized that there were things, but that there was a stage before which things were distinguished.” This is because the ultimate man “considers life and death as a single cord and ‘permissible’ and ‘impermissible’ as a single strand?”⁵⁰ The sage corresponds only to the third level, those who “believed there are boundaries, but not yet right and wrong.” Why?

Because in the “Qiwu lun” chapter, it says of sages: “The sages discuss what lies within the world, but do not deliberate upon it.”⁵¹ That is, the sage recognizes boundaries (the distinction between self and other) but does not fixate on right and wrong. Instead, the sage adapts naturally. The reason the sage is said to “initiate and show forth in transformation” is because he consciously

48 Ibid., 442.

49 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 17.

50 Ibid., 46.

51 Ibid., 19.

unites himself with Heaven and follows its movements, distinguishing auspicious from inauspicious, bringing benefit to the world and removing harm.⁵²

In summary, the heavenly man is wholly one, knowing no distinction between self and other. The spirit man preserves spirit and roams beyond the mundane world, like the divine recluse of Mount Guye (*Miao Guye* 藐姑射), who by concentrating spirit causes things to flourish effortlessly. The ultimate man preserves body and nature, not losing himself in pursuit of external things. Preserving body and nature means equalizing life and death, completely forgetting the self. Hence, the *Zhuangzi* says: “the ultimate man has no self.” The sage, by contrast, consciously imitates Heaven, preserves, and cultivates spirit, and observes signs of change to seek benefit and avoid harm. In the progression from the heavenly person to the spirit person to the ultimate person, the scope of their being narrows, showing that the first three descend step by step. The sage, however, falls into intentional action, and is therefore lower than the first three. Thus, we may say that these four types of persons form a hierarchy; they are not simply “four names for one reality.”

4 The Differences Emphasized by the Ultimate Man, the Spirit Man, and the Sage in “Xiaoyao you”

In the “Xiaoyao you” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the text says: “The ultimate man has no self, the spirit man has no achievement, the sage has no name.” (That is to say, the ultimate man forgets the self, the spirit man is unaware of merit, and the sage is unaware of reputation.) Cheng Xuanying comments:

The term ultimate [*zhi* 至] refers to the substance [of the sage]; spirit [*shen* 神] refers to his function; and sage [*sheng* 聖] refers to his designation. Thus, speaking of substance one calls him ultimate; speaking of function, one calls him spirit; speaking of name, one calls him sage. In truth, the three are one. Having attained the ultimate spiritual subtlety, he is called ultimate; because he embodies the unfathomable alternations of *yin* and *yang*, he is called spirit; because he rectifies the names of the myriad things, he is called sage. Within a single person all three are present, but in order to highlight the distinctions between substance, function, and designation, three different titles are used. These three

52 This concept of a sage corresponds to the “Xici xia” 繫辭下 section in the *Yijing* 易經, where the text has: “The sage brings things to completion,” marking the beginning of deliberate human action.

types are none other than those earlier described as the ones who follow the correctness of Heaven and Earth and harness the transformations of the Six Qi [*liuqi* 六氣].⁵³

Cheng Xuanying's view that the ultimate man, spirit man, and sage "are in truth one and the same" likely stems from Guo Xiang's commentary on the chapter "Tianxia," as well as from Cheng's own exegesis at that point of the text. Cheng's interpretation indeed finds some support within the *Zhuangzi*, especially in the interchangeable use of "ultimate man" and "sage." However, his specific explanations for the names, specifically, that "having attained the ultimate spiritual subtlety, he is called ultimate; because he embodies the unfathomable alternations of *yin* and *yang*, he is called a spirit; because he rectifies the names of the myriad beings, he is called a sage"—do not accord with the actual text of the *Zhuangzi*.

In the *Zhuangzi*, when it says, "the sage has no name," it means that the sage acts in accordance with his natural disposition, without knowing that his conduct accords with the state of being a "sage," without knowing the title of "sage," and certainly without trying to affix names for the myriad things. Thus, we should not interpret the *Zhuangzi*'s sage as one who "rectifies the names of the myriad things" (*zhengming baiwu* 正名百物), as Cheng does. Sima Biao's commentary explains it thus: "The sage has no name means that the sage does not establish names."⁵⁴

In the chapter "Zeyang" 則陽 (Sunny), the text says that a naturally beautiful woman only becomes aware of her beauty because others tell her so; if no one tells her, she does not know she surpasses others in beauty. It is as if she knows, yet does not know; it seems as though she has heard, yet has not heard. Her loveliness has no end, and people's delight in her has no end. This is simply her natural endowment.⁵⁵ In the same way, when the sage embodies benevolence toward others, it is only others who confer this description upon him. If no one tells him, he does not know that he is benevolent toward others. It seems as though he knows, yet does not know; seems as though he hears, yet does not hear. His benevolence toward others has no end, and people's contentment in his benevolence has no end. This too arises from his natural endowment. This provides the best explanation of where the *Zhuangzi* says: "The sage has no name."

53 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 22.

54 *Ibid.*, 22.

55 See also Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 255.

Cheng Xuanying's explanation of "The spirit man leaves no achievement" (*shenren wugong* 神人無功) seems closely connected to an idea in the *Yizhuan* 易傳. There, the commentary reads: "The unfathomable alternation of *yin* and *yang* is called spirit." However, the meaning of "leaves no achievement" (*wugong* 無功) here primarily signifies being "deemed useless" or "lacking in conventional utility." That is to say, the meaning semantically seems to communicate something more like "not suitable for worldly purposes" rather than "lacking in efficacy." Thus, in the "Renjian shi" chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, it says "Aha!—it is this unusableness that the spiritual man makes use of," elaborating:

in carrying out an exorcistic sacrifice, one cannot present oxen with white foreheads, suckling pigs with upturned snouts, or people with hemorrhoids to the god of the river. All of this is known by the magus-priests, who consider these creatures to be inauspicious. For the same reasons, the spiritual person considers them to be greatly auspicious.⁵⁶

In other words, being "useless" means being unfit for human needs such as building houses or making utensils, and being "inauspicious" means being unfit for sacrificial rites to the gods. This does not mean that overly large trees, or oxen, pigs, or men with bodily blemishes are truly without use; instead, being useless and inauspicious can protect these things from being cut or sacrificed.

Secondly, "leaves no achievement" also means not acting with deliberate effort, but succeeding naturally. This is the miraculous, transformative state of the spirit man of Mount Guye, who, "by concentrating his spirit, prevents things from falling ill, so that the grain harvest ripens." In other words, although the spirit man brings all things to fruition, his activity is invisible. Hence, Sima Biao glosses: "The spirit man leaves no achievement. This means that he cultivates naturalness and does not establish merit."⁵⁷

Chen Xuanying's meaning is not very clear where his exegesis reads: "having attained the ultimate spiritual subtlety, he is called ultimate." In the *Zhuangzi*, references to the "ultimate man" are numerous, second only to the sage. Firstly, the ultimate man "wanders beyond the four seas not even life and death have any transforming effect upon him."⁵⁸ He also "consider[s] life and death as a single cord and 'permissible' and 'impermissible'

⁵⁶ Ibid., 39.

⁵⁷ Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 22.

⁵⁸ Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 21.

as a single strand.”⁵⁹ This shows that the ultimate man forgets both life and death, as well as the distinctions of worldly right and wrong. Secondly, the ultimate man “is conversant with the Way, [and] joins with virtue,”⁶⁰ letting his “mind wander in the origin of things.”⁶¹ This shows that the ultimate man is united with *Dao*, in harmony with the unified *qi* of Heaven and Earth. If by “numinous extreme” (*lingji* 靈極) Cheng Xuanying means “*Dao*,” then his formulation is acceptable.

Let us look at the first three types of enlightened person in terms of the phrase “Names are the guests of realities” (*mingzhe, shi zhi bin ye* 名者·實之賓也). The sage is merely nameless, but cannot be without achievement, since he must “extend his beneficence to the world” (*ze ji tianxia* 澤及天下). Thus, he stands below the spirit man. The sage deliberately extends his care to the world, thereby maintaining a distinction between self and others, and so cannot equal the ultimate man, who is “without self” (*wuji* 無己). Luo Miandao 羅勉道 (d. 1367) comments: “If there are no achievements, then there are no undertakings, so how could there be fame? If there is no self, then even the person himself is absent, so how could there be undertakings?”⁶²

Luo’s note can help us grasp the distinctions among the three. Yet in the “Xiaoyao you” chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, “without achievement,” “without self,” and “without name” do not seem to form a deliberate hierarchy. Rather, the three are used to further articulate the traits of one who “wanders in the infinite” (*you wuqiong zhe* 游無窮者). As our earlier analysis and Sima Biao’s commentary indicate: “Without achievement” means that one does not deliberately pursue merit, yet merit is nonetheless accomplished; “without name” means not knowing that one may be called a “sage” even though one acts in a way that fully realizes the sage’s realm; “without self” means forgetting oneself. None refers to the state that there is no achievement, name or self in reality.

Yang Chengfu once wrote in strong support of the view that the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the sage are “different names for the same reality.” Yang argues for his position by appealing to the interpretive principle of “interlocking exposition” (*huwen yi zuyi* 互文以足義), where parallel clauses are mutually complementary and together form a full meaning. Explaining the phrase “The ultimate man has no self, the spirit man has no merit, the sage has no name,” Yang writes:

59 Ibid., 46.

60 Ibid., 127.

61 Ibid., 202.

62 Luo Miandao 羅勉道, *Nanhua zhenjing xun ben* 南華真經循本 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2016), 11.

The three clauses concerning the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the sage are written in the technique of “interlocking exposition.” What is intended is this: the ultimate man has no self, no merit, and no name; the spirit man has no merit, no name, and no self; the sage has no name, no merit, and no self. All three titles equally mean “without self, without merit, without name,” for they are all those who “ride the correctness of Heaven and Earth and harness the transformations of the six vital energies in order to wander the infinite” ... Hence, the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the sage, who are beyond dependence and embody the “three withouts” [*sanwu* 三無], are but variant names pointing to the same underlying reality.⁶³

Yang affirms the interpretation given by Cheng Xuanying that all three types of person are indeed “those who ride the correctness of Heaven and Earth and harness the transformations of the six vital energies.” He is correct in the affirmation, because the statement “the ultimate man has no self, the spirit man has no merit, the sage has no name” serves as a supplementary explanation of what it means to have reached the state of “riding the correctness of Heaven and Earth and harnessing the transformations of the six vital energies” in the *Zhuangzi*.

It may also be understood, as Yang suggests, that the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the sage are all potentially capable of “riding the correctness of Heaven and Earth and harnessing the transformations of the six vital energies.” However, it is difficult to conclude directly from the wording of “Xiaoyao you” that these three figures are “merely different names for the same reality.” Firstly, the meanings of “without merit,” “without self,” and “without name” are not identical. Accordingly, the figures characterized by them, i.e., the spirit man, the ultimate man, and the sage, cannot simply be taken as the same.

Secondly, Yang appeals to *huwen* 互文 (mutually supplementing expressions). However, *huwen* properly refers to parallel clauses that clarify and complete each other. A famous example comes from the “Mulan ci” 木蘭辭: “I open the door of the eastern chamber, I sit on the bed of the western chamber” 開我東閣門，坐我西閣床. The sentence “The ultimate man has no self, the spirit man has no merit, the sage has no name” does not clearly display the features of *huwen*. Therefore, the text does not support Yang’s conclusion that all three alike are “without self, without merit, without name.” It is like saying, “Among those admitted to Peking University, A studies history,

63 Yang Chengfu, “*Zhuangzi zhiren shenren shengren yiming tongshi lun*,” 54–62.

B studies literature, and C studies philosophy”; one cannot conclude that A, B, and C are the same, or that what they study overlaps in meaning.

Therefore, we can say that the ultimate man, the spirit man, and the sage are all persons who embody the *Dao*. However, it does not follow that they represent the same level with no distinctions in their states of attainment.

5 Mutual Reference among the Various “Types of Persons”

In the *Zhuangzi*, “sage” is often used interchangeably with “ultimate man,” “true man,” “great man” (*daren* 大人), and others, and their relationships are relatively complex. In general, one may say that a person of a higher level encompasses all the functions of a person at a lower level. Taking the sequence heavenly man, then spirit man, then ultimate man, and then sage as an example: the sage models himself on Heaven and Earth, while the first three are naturally already aligned with Heaven and Earth.

The sage educates the people and brings about a complete ordering of virtue, while the first three bring about such success spontaneously. For instance, as discussed earlier, like the virtuous man, the spirit man “dwells in thoughtlessness and proceeds without concern,”⁶⁴ and his “spirit is concentrated.”⁶⁵ As a result, the world naturally enjoys blessings and harvests naturally ripen. This is also why Yao 堯 compared his own sagely governance to the light of a torch, while regarding Xu You 許由 as the sun and moon.

If we accept Guo Xiang’s note, “Virtue is the trace of the spirit man, hence it is called his ‘appearance,’”⁶⁶ then we may conclude that the spirit man possesses all the functions of the virtuous/ultimate man. Likewise, since the heavenly man is originally one with Heaven, and according to Wang Fuzhi’s view that “the spirit is Heaven within man,” the heavenly man must possess all the functions of the spirit man. Thus, in the *Zhuangzi*, we sometimes see phenomena where the higher-level type of person is set in parallel or in mutual reference to the sage.

However, this kind of intertextuality is essentially unidirectional: the higher-level type of person encompasses the achievements of the level below. Although they thus incorporate the functions of the Sage at the lower level, one cannot infer from the fact that the Sage acts with deliberate purpose (*youwei*

64 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 113.

65 *Ibid.*, 7.

66 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 442.

有為) that the higher-level types also act with such purpose. To draw such a conclusion would be to commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent.

Looking across the entire *Zhuangzi* text, the meaning of “sage” does not change very much. Internally, it refers to penetrating the realities of life and destiny, and being at peace with the times and accepting all circumstances with serenity. Externally, it means understanding the principles of the myriad things and the signs of their transformations and thereby displaying transcendent wisdom. Yet from the standpoint of the *Zhuangzi*, although the sage possesses wisdom, he must exercise it without leaving traces and should not display it openly. Otherwise, he will be imitated by the common people and become a tool that brings disorder to the world.

It is precisely from this perspective that chapters in the *Zhuangzi* such as “Ma ti” 馬蹄 (Horses’ Hooves), “Qu qie” 祛篋 (Ransacking Coffers), and “Zai you” 在宥 (Preserving and Accepting) denounce the sage. It may therefore seem that the notion of a “sage” in these sections differs from that of other passages. However, a close reading suggests that the text’s underlying target is not sagely wisdom per se, but rather the ostentatious display of such wisdom. Thus, in the “Qu qie” chapter, it says: “The wisdom of the sage is the profitable instrument of all under heaven and is not something that should be revealed to all under heaven.”⁶⁷

If we must make a simple distinction: the *Zhuangzi* praises the sage who accords with the *Dao*, follows nature, and does not flaunt his wisdom, but it criticizes the Confucian sage who pursues benevolence and righteousness, as seen in chapters such as “Pian mu” 駢拇 (Webbed Toes) and “Qu qie.” Although both kinds of sage possess the same kind of wisdom, the difference lies in whether it is flaunted or not. The other types of persons (ultimate man, spirit man, and heavenly man) generally retain consistent meanings throughout the text of the *Zhuangzi*.

The mutual reference and interchangeable use among these various types of persons can thus be distinguished as follows.

5.1 *The Intertextual Use of the Ultimate Man and the Sage*

In the “Zhi bei you” 知北游 (Knowledge Wanders North) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the text first says: “The sage is one who probes the beauties of heaven and earth and comprehends the principles of the myriad things.”⁶⁸ It then continues: “Hence the ultimate man does not act and the great sage makes

67 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 87.

68 *Ibid.*, 213.

nothing, which is to say that they observe heaven and earth.”⁶⁹ Here, the ultimate man and the great sage are set in parallel, to be read intertextually, and thus regarded as equivalent. Yet, this intertextual meaning only emphasizes that both are characterized by “non-action” (*wuwei* 無為). By itself, this cannot prove that the two are in fact identical.

However, in the “Da sheng” 達生 (Understanding Life) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, in the dialogue between Liezi 列子 (ca. 450–375 BCE) and Guan Yin 關尹 (dates unknown), the ultimate man and the sage appear to be the same. Liezi asks: “The ultimate man can walk under water without drowning, can tread upon fire without feeling hot, and can soar above the myriad things without fear. May I ask how he achieves this?”⁷⁰ Guan Yin replies that the reason the ultimate man can do such things is “because he guards the purity of his vital breath.”⁷¹ By keeping to pure vital energy, the ultimate man naturally unites with Heaven and the *Dao*. Thus, it is said: “She [sic] will dwell in non-excessiveness, hide in noncausability, and wander where the myriad things have their beginnings and ends.”⁷² This “nonexcessiveness, noncausability, and where the myriad things have their beginnings and ends” is, of course, the *Dao*, or Heaven.

The text then adds: “The sage hides within his heavenly qualities, thus nothing can harm him.”⁷³ To “hide within his heavenly qualities” is the same as to “hide in noncausability, and wander where the myriad things have their beginnings and ends,” as outlined above. Therefore, in this story, the ultimate man and the sage are equivalent.

5.2 *The True Man Encompasses the Spirit Man, the Ultimate Man, and the Sage*

The true man appears twelve times in the *Zhuangzi*. Most occurrences are in the chapters “Da Zongshi,” “Ke yi” 刻意 (Ingrained Opinions), “Xu Wugui” 徐无鬼 (Ghostless Hsu), and “Tianxia.” In “Ke yi,” we read:

The Way of purity and plainness lies only in guarding the spirit. Guard and do not lose it, becoming one with the spirit [When oneness is essential and lucid, it is in accordance with the celestial order] ... Hence plainness may be defined as what is unalloyed, and purity as keeping the

69 Ibid., 213.

70 Ibid., 175.

71 Ibid., 175.

72 Ibid., 175–76.

73 Ibid., 176.

spirit undiminished. One who can embody purity and plainness may be called a “true man.”⁷⁴

This passage can be taken as a definition of the true man: he is one who embodies purity and guards spirit. This is basically the same as the “concentration of spirit” attributed to the spirit man. Since the true man focuses on guarding spirit, which is fundamentally identical to the “concentration of spirit” of the spirit man, he should be regarded as belonging to the same level. Furthermore, as evidenced in the following passage from “Da Zongshi,” the true man is also portrayed as encompassing the functions attributed to the ultimate man and the sage.

In “Da Zongshi” chapter, it says:

The true man of old did not oppose the minority, did not strive for heroic accomplishments, and did not scheme over affairs. Such being the case, he did not regret it when he made a mistake nor feel smug when he was right. Such being the case, he could climb high without trembling, enter water without getting soaked, and enter fire without feeling hot. Only one whose knowledge can ascend the heights of the Way can be like this.⁷⁵

This not only reveals that the true man does not calculate success or failure, right or wrong, but simply follows his natural disposition, without thought or worry. Thus, he corresponds to the spirit man, who “has no achievements.” At the same time, he also shares the characteristics of the ultimate man, who “has no self.”

Of course, that the “ultimate man has no self” is expressed even more in the true man’s lack of desires, absence of ego, and forgetting life and death. Thus, in “Da Zongshi,” it says: “The true man of old did not dream when he slept and did not worry when he was awake. His food was not savory, his breathing was deep.”⁷⁶ The text goes on to say:

The true man of old knew neither fondness for life nor aversion to death, was neither elated by going forth nor reluctant to return. Casually he went and casually he came. He neither forgot what his beginning had

74 Ibid., 146–47.

75 Ibid., 52.

76 Ibid., 52.

been nor sought what his end would be. Happily he received and forgetfully he returned.⁷⁷

The absence of dreams and worries shows that the true man is tranquil and free of desires. Treating life and death with equal indifference shows that the true man forgets life and death, and follows the natural rhythm of arising and perishing.

“Da Zongshi” also depicts the ultimate man from the perspective of “the sage has no name.” It criticizes figures such as Hu Buxie 狐不偕, Wu Guang 務光, Bo Yi 伯夷, Shu Qi 叔齊, Jizi 箕子, Ji Ta 紀他, and Shen Tudi 申徒狄 for “pursuing reputation and losing themselves” (*xing ming shi ji* 行名失己), dying for the sake of “the name of sagacious purity” (*sheng jie zhi ming* 聖潔之名).⁷⁸ They followed the paths of others, rather than their own. The text explains that the actions of the sage are like those of Heaven: whether he destroys states or brings blessings for generations, his activity is beyond naming.

This corresponds to the description of the *Dao* in “Da Zongshi.” There, the text reads: “My teacher, oh my teacher! He blends the myriad things, but is not righteous; his benefits reach to a myriad generations, but he is not humane. He is senior to high antiquity, but is not aged. He covers heaven, supports earth, and carves out a host of forms, but is not skillful.”⁷⁹ It is precisely because the *Dao* has no names such as benevolence, righteousness, longevity, or skill, that when the sage embodies and follows the *Dao*, he can “cause the downfall of a state without losing the people’s allegiance, bestow blessings upon all generations without it being called loving the people.” The sage embodies the *Dao* and follows the *Dao*. Since the *Dao* has no name, the sage naturally also “has no name.”

In sum, the portrayal of the true man in “Da Zongshi” chapter encompasses the spirit man, the ultimate man, and the sage. He takes Heaven as his standard.

In the “Xu Wugui” chapter, the text reads: “The true man of old attended the human with the heavenly instead of using the human to interfere with the heavenly.”⁸⁰ In other words, the true man uses the Way of Nature (*ziren zhi dao*

77 Ibid., 52.

78 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 232. (Note: “the name of sagacious purity” [*sheng jie zhi ming* 聖潔之名] does not occur in the text of the *Zhuangzi*. This appears to be a phrase coined by Tan Mingran, or perhaps it is a phrase used by Chinese academics when describing Zhuangzi’s philosophy about “names” and “reputation.”)

79 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 121.

80 Ibid., 251. The difference here from the description of the sage in the “Tianxia” chapter—“taking Heaven as his foundation, virtue as his root, the *Dao* as his gateway, and observing the signs of change”—is that the true man treats all things with the breadth of Heaven,

自然之道) to treat all beings and does not violate the principles of nature with human contrivance. Yet, since he treats all things with the embrace of Heaven, this also shows that he has not yet reached the state of “not departing from the source” (*buli yu zong* 不離於宗).

Therefore, Wang Fuzhi praised Laozi 老子 (571–470 BCE) as an authentic man, instead of a heavenly man.

What is called greatness is because he is like a valley stream, receiving the obedience of all under Heaven. The true man means one who has attained the “genuine.” Because of his emptiness, he naturally does not harm things. Yet, in the balanced operation of Heaven, there is something he has not yet attained. Hence, he is praised as a true man, meaning that he has not yet reached the level of Heaven.⁸¹

“The balanced operation of Heaven” (*tian jun zhi yun* 天均之運) refers to Heaven itself. Wang Fuzhi asserted that the authentic man had not achieved the realm that was naturally one with Heaven, but he could preserve and concentrate his spirit well. So the authentic man is on the lower level than the Heavenly man.

5.3 *The Great Man, the Ultimate Man, and the Sage*

In the “Qiu shui” 秋水 (Autumn Floods) chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, the text says: “the great man has no self”⁸² (*daren wuji* 大人無己). This corresponds to where the text says “the ultimate man has no self” (*zhiren wuji* 至人無己) as found in the “Xiaoyao you” chapter. In the “Zai you” chapter, the text reads: “The teaching of the great man is like the shadow from a form, like the echo from a sound. When questioned, he replies, sharing his thoughts fully and serving as the companion of all under heaven.”⁸³ Such a description corresponds to the following from the “Ying Diwang” 應帝王 (Responding to Emperors and Kings) chapter: “The mind of the ultimate man functions like a mirror. It neither sends off nor welcomes; it responds but does not retain. Therefore, he can triumph over things without injury.”⁸⁴ The above descriptions of the great man

without, like the sage, attending to the signs of change to seek profit or avoid harm. Therefore, the true man is higher than the sage. In fact, although the “Tianxia” chapter says that the first three types of persons all “do not depart from” (the *Dao*), in terms of scope, the spirit man and the ultimate man naturally “imitate” the heavenly man.

81 Wang Fuzhi, *Zhuangzi jie*, 283–84.

82 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 574.

83 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 101.

84 *Ibid.*, 71.

and the ultimate man are similar indeed. On this basis, we may generally say that the great man and the ultimate man are equivalent.

However, in the “Zhi bei you” chapter, the great man is equated with the sage. It first points out that only the great man can easily return to the root of the Great *Dao*. The text then explains that this root *Dao* is the unified *qi* that flows and transforms. The sage realizes that all beings as nothing other than different transformations of this unified *qi*. Therefore, the sage cherishes all things as one body. Here, it emphasizes that both the great man and the sage regard life and death as one, and see themselves as united with “the unified *qi* that permeates all under Heaven” (*tong tianxia zhi yiqi* 通天下之一氣).⁸⁵

In the “Xu Wugui” chapter, the sage is directly equated with the great man. The text says: “The sage embraces all of heaven and earth and his benefits reach to all under heaven, but we do not know who he is or to which clan he belongs. For this reason, he may have no titles when alive and no epithets when dead. He neither gathers riches nor establishes his fame. Him we may call a great man.”⁸⁶ Here “[the sage] may have no titles” is used to define the great man. Our analysis concludes that the ultimate man surpasses the sage. Given that the great man is essentially the ultimate man, he naturally possesses the qualities of the sage as well. This is similar to what we saw with the true man in the discussion above.

6 Conclusion

Finally, we may end our discussion of the ideal persons in the *Zhuangzi* by referring to some quotes from Wang Fuzhi’s assessment. Wang posits that although Zhuangzi 莊子 (ca. 369–286 BCE) adopted insights from Laozi, he eventually inclined towards the idea that “the *Dao* unites all as one” (*dao tong weiyi* 道通為一) and “both sides can proceed without hindrance” (*lianghang wu’ai* 兩行無礙), rather than adhering to Laozi’s themes of “gentleness and humility” (*ruruo qianxia* 濡弱謙下) and “emptiness and non-harm” (*kongxu buhui* 空虛不毀). This “*Dao* unites all” concept is what Wang calls “all-embracing Heaven” (*huntian* 渾天). Accordingly, Wang declares that Zhuangzi “thus named himself a heavenly man who does not depart from the source.”⁸⁷

85 Guo Qingfan, *Zhuangzi jishi*, 731, 733.

86 Ibid., 247.

87 Wang Fuzhi, *Zhuangzi jie*, 284–85.

Wang's interpretation of the heavenly man is indeed insightful. Nonetheless, it is questionable to assert that this was Zhuangzi's own self-reference because the "Tianxia" chapter is a summary by later followers of Zhuangzi of the teachings of earlier scholars, not the work of Zhuangzi himself. Giving Zhuangzi the accolade of "heavenly man" is better understood as the veneration of him by his later followers.

On this basis, we can affirm: the heavenly person is the highest, followed by the spirit person, then the ultimate person, and finally the sage, at the lowest level. Thus, the spirit person and the true person may also encompass the ultimate person and the sage; the ultimate person and the great person naturally embody the achievements of the sage. However, the sage fails to attain the level of the ultimate person or the great person in certain respects.

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