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Zhuangzi's Theory of “*Budeyi*” and the Worldly Character of His Thought

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Abstract

A prevalent interpretation within Zhuangzi scholarship treats *xiaoyao* (rendered by Victor Mair as “carefree wandering”) as a purely subjective realm. Such a reading effectively severs *xiaoyao* from worldly engagement and fosters an indifference to the generative processes of life. *Xiaoyao* thus becomes groundless, devolving into subjective fantasy or nihilistic extinction. A proper understanding of carefree wandering requires grasping Zhuangzi's theory of *budeyi*, or unavoidability.

For Zhuangzi, *budeyi* carries a dual meaning. First, it signifies the inescapable circumstances of human existence—its fundamental sense. Second, it denotes a natural responsiveness to the world and all things. The first meaning manifests as *yiming*, an appropriate response to destiny (*ming*), indicating both humanity's situatedness within its existential condition and the world's inherent inescapability. When facing destiny's unavoidable demands, one must respond authentically by fulfilling one's destiny (*zhiming*) and rectifying one's life (*zhengsheng*). Through this process, one also brings about the realization of things (*chengwu*). The first meaning of *budeyi* provides the foundation for the second; without the first meaning, natural responsiveness loses its grounding.

The theory of *budeyi* thus underscores the profoundly worldly character of Zhuangzi's thought. People cannot escape the constraints of their destiny and must therefore fulfill it through the engaged practice of *zhiming* and *zhengsheng*. At the same time, *budeyi* as natural responsiveness represents life's spontaneity—carefree wandering itself. Since the first meaning grounds the second, *xiaoyao* is ultimately realized within worldly activity. Far from severing the human relationship with the world, carefree

wandering is revealed to embody the intrinsic unity of achieving oneself (*chengji*) and the realization of things.

Keywords

Zhuangzi – *budeiyi* – *zhiming* – *xiaoyao* – worldly engagement

1 What Is Carefree Wandering? “Subjective Realm” or “Entering the Realm”?

Scholars typically interpret Zhuangzi’s 莊子 (ca. 369–286 BCE) concept of *xiaoyao* 逍遙 as a “subjective realm” or a purely psychological experience.¹ This interpretation requires a complete separation from the world, demanding an exclusive focus on mental cultivation. For example, Tang Yijie 湯一介 (1927–2014) argues that Zhuangzi’s references to *zhiren* 至人 (the Ultimate Man), one who “could ride upon the truth of heaven and earth” and “could chariot upon the transformations of the six vital breaths,” do not mean the perfected person depends on external conditions.² Instead, they describe a psychological activity that uses inner spiritual power to transcend external limitations and achieve the realm of heaven and earth.³ Yu Yingshi 余英時 (1930–2021) similarly contends that “society impedes individual freedom,” arguing that achieving carefree wandering requires becoming “a world spectator who does not actually participate.”⁴

This line of interpretation finds its most radical expression in what may be termed theories of existential extinction. Wang Bo 王博, for instance, interprets the concept of *wudai* 無待 (without dependence) in the “Xiaoyao you” 逍遙游 (Carefree Wandering) chapter as *wudui* 無對 (without opposition).

1 Translator’s note: This article uses the Hanyu Pinyin romanization system in its analytical text. For consistency with the primary source, concepts from the classic follow the translation by Victor H. Mair. All direct quotations are from Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (1994; repr., Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998).

2 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 5.

3 Tang Yijie 湯一介, “Lun Lao-Zhuang zhexue de neizaixing yu chaoyuexing” 論老莊哲學的內在性與超越性, in *Feichang dao, feichang ru* 非常道·非常儒, ed. Zhou Yu 周漁 (Beijing: Tuanjie chubanshe, 2007), 70–71.

4 Yu Yingshi 余英時, *Zhongguo wenhua de chongjian* 中國文化的重建 (Beijing: Zhongxin chubanshe, 2011), 158.

He argues that *wudui* eliminates "objects" by first eliminating "oneself."⁵ As Wang Bo explains:

In pursuing "without opposition," he [the Spirit Person] opposes himself to the entire world. The Spirit Person relates to nothing in this world. This person remains indifferent to the world, unmoved by it. He deliberately suppresses his sensations—no cold, no heat, no beauty, no ugliness. The originally vibrant world, with its countless colors and forms, its joys and sorrows, all become one. This oneness is nothingness.⁶

The subjective realm interpretation is deeply problematic. If severed from the world, can a person remain human? Can the world remain itself? Moreover, is it even possible to be suspended from the living, flowing processes of existence? Even if it were, both person and world would dissolve into extinction. Carefree wandering would become a withered, empty state.

This interpretation, moreover, entails perilous ethical consequences. If subjective adjustment can eliminate self and object, then all actual injustices become illusory—something to be "calmly accepted." One might remain "care-free" even when confronting real suffering.

Interpreting carefree wandering as a subjective realm also promotes world-weariness. Zhang Hengshou 張恒壽 (1902–1991) considers Zhuangzi himself to be "a negative, world-weary, cynical philosophical poet."⁷ World-weariness encourages withdrawal, and interpretations emphasizing Zhuangzi's reclusive tendencies have persisted throughout history. In this view, only through retreat can one cultivate the *Dao*, achieve virtue, and realize carefree wandering. Withdrawal, however, is fundamentally opposed to worldly engagement. Whether it takes the form of a physical retreat to the wilderness or a spiritual "heart-hiding" (*xin yin* 心隱), withdrawal maintains a distance from reality and represents a form of psychological escape.

However, did Zhuangzi actually advocate for abandoning the world through withdrawal? Zhong Tai 鍾泰 (1888–1979) offers an insightful explanation of the title of the chapter "Renjian shi" 人間世 (The Human World):

5 Wang Bo 王博, *Zhuangzi zhexue* 莊子哲學 (Beijing: Beijing daxue chubanshe, 2004), 119.

6 *Ibid.*, 123.

7 Zhang Hengshou 張恒壽, "Lun Zhuangzi Tianxia pian de zuozhe he shidai" 論《莊子·天下篇》的作者和時代, in *Zhuangzi Tianxia pian zhushu si zhong* 《莊子·天下篇》注疏四種, ed. Zhang Fengqian 張豐乾 (Beijing: Huaxia chubanshe, 2009), 407.

“Human World” refers to the human realm. “Space” [*jian* 間] indicates the horizontal dimension, like today’s “space.” “World” [*shi* 世] indicates the vertical dimension, like today’s “time.” Space means universe [*yu* 宇], time means cosmos [*zhou* 宙]. ... Why “Human World” with “human” positioned first? This shows that humans cannot exist apart from the universe. It also shows that the universe requires human understanding. The universe is humanity’s universe—hence “Human World.” Some commentators note the “Tiandi” 天地 [Heaven and Earth] chapter’s phrase about being “weary of the world for a thousand years, departing to become immortals.” They often equate Zhuangzi with Buddhism, claiming he advocates world-transcendence and harbors world-weary attitudes. This is incorrect.⁸

Zhong Tai’s view has historical precedent. Scholar Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (1193–1271) from the Song dynasty (960–1279) observed:

The previous chapter discussed “Yangsheng zhu” 養生主 [Essentials for Nurturing Life], and this discusses the human world. Having this body and living in this world, how can one completely avoid human affairs? One must handle them properly. Considering this perspective, when was Zhuangzi ever impractical or disengaged from affairs? This reflects the *Waipian* 外篇 [Outer Chapters] insight that “nothing merits action, yet one cannot avoid acting.”⁹

Zhuangzi never rejected worldly engagement. The “Renjian shi” chapter speaks of “entering his realm as a wandering persuader” (*ru you qi fan* 入游其樊, literally, “entering and wandering within the enclosure”),¹⁰ and “Dazongshi” 大宗師 (The Great Ancestral Teacher) chapter mentions “wandering along its borders” (*you yu qi fan* 游於其藩, literally, “wandering at the fence”).¹¹ Both *fan* 樊 and *fan* 藩 denote fences, borders—barriers that define a specific domain. In this context, the domain represents what the Ming dynasty (1368–1644) scholar Lu Xixing 陸西星 (1520–1606) called the “worldly net” (*shi wang* 世網).¹²

8 Zhong Tai 鍾泰, *Zhuangzi fawei* 莊子發微 (Shanghai: Shanghai guji chubanshe, 2002), 74.

9 Lin Xiyi 林希逸, *Zhuangzi Yanzhai kouyi jiaozhu* 莊子齋齋口義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1997), 56.

10 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 33.

11 *Ibid.*, 53.

12 Lu Xixing 陸西星, *Nanhua zhenjing fumo* 南華真經副墨 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2010), 60.

For humans, this "worldly net" manifests as various *budeiyi* matters. Therefore, *ru you qi fan* means engaging the worldly net itself. It means wandering within the world, achieving carefree wandering through its unavoidable circumstances.

This raises several crucial questions: What does Zhuangzi's *budeiyi* mean? How does it manifest itself? How can one achieve carefree wandering in the midst of unavoidability? And how does spiritual cultivation develop from this foundation? These issues require careful examination.

2 The Dual Meaning of Zhuangzi's *Budeiyi* Concept

Scholars have long neglected Zhuangzi's theory of *budeiyi*. Their understanding has often remained imprecise, and without a clear grasp of this pivotal term, the worldly character of Zhuangzi's thought on carefree wandering remains obscure.

To begin, let us examine the etymology of *budeiyi*. The character *yi* 已 originally meant "to stop" or "to end." Therefore, *budeiyi* means "cannot stop" or "cannot but proceed," signifying a compulsion to act. It implies a person's lack of choice in a given situation and a correspondingly passive response. The common modern expression *po budeiyi* 迫不得已, or "to be forced into unavoidability," derives from this.

In pre-Qin texts, the term *budeiyi* appears frequently, almost always with this sense of "cannot but proceed." For example, the *Analects* provides a clear case in the "Yan Yuan" 顏淵 chapter, where Confucius (551–479 BCE) discusses the necessary priorities of governance.¹³ Similarly, chapter thirty-one of the *Dao De Jing* advises restraint in war:

Weapons are tools of bad omen,
By gentlemen not to be used;
But when it cannot be avoided,
They use them with calm and restraint.¹⁴

13 *Lunyu* 論語, 12.7. Zigong 子貢 (520–456 BCE) asks what should be relinquished first if a state cannot maintain its military, food supply, and the people's trust. Confucius responds that the military should be given up first, and then the food, because "since ancient times, all must die, but without the people's trust, government cannot stand." English rendered by the translator.

14 R. B. Blakney, *The Way of Life: Lao Tzu Tao Te Ching* (New York: Mentor Books, 1955), 83. The original text reads: "Weapons are tools of bad omen, / By gentlemen not to be used; / But when it cannot be avoided, / They use them with calm and restraint. / Even in victory's

The *Hanfeizi* 韓非子 records another typical usage: “Master Kuang, having no choice, took up his *qin* 琴 and played.”

However, a significant exception exists. As chapter twenty-nine of the *Dao De Jing* states:

As for those who would take the whole world
To tinker it as they see fit,
I observe that they never succeed.¹⁵

Here, *budeiyi* carries a different meaning. The character *yi* admits two interpretations: either as “to succeed” (*cheng* 成), rendering *budeiyi* as “cannot succeed”; and as a final particle equivalent to *yi* 矣, making *budeiyi* mean simply “cannot achieve it.” Both interpretations converge on the same meaning of inevitable failure. The passage uses the term in direct response to the preceding phrase, “those who would take the whole world to tinker it.” Lao Tzu warns that such efforts are doomed because, as the text continues, “the world is a sacred vessel not made to be altered by man.”

Among the pre-Qin (before 221 BCE) philosophers, Zhuangzi alone truly expanded the meaning of *budeiyi*, giving it new significance and using it to develop the deeper implications of his thought. Traditional commentators rarely discussed Zhuangzi’s theory of *budeiyi*. It was not until the modern era that scholars such as Liu Wu 劉武 (1883–1957) and Zhong Tai began to pay it significant attention.

Both scholars placed a high value on Zhuangzi’s theory of *budeiyi*. Zhong Tai noted that the term appears “not infrequently” throughout the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, highlighting the text’s emphasis on the concept.¹⁶ Liu Wu was even more direct: “The *Dao* of Zhuangzi centers on *budeiyi*; hence, the phrase appears frequently throughout the work.”¹⁷

Both scholars interpreted Zhuangzi’s *budeiyi* not in its conventional sense of “cannot but proceed” or “forced unavoidability,” but rather as “emptiness responsive to things” (*xu er dai wu* 虛而待物)—that is, a mindless response

hour / These tools are unlovely to see; / For those who admire them truly / Are men who in murder delight.”

15 R. B. Blakney, *The Way of Life*, 81. The original text reads: “As for those who would take the whole world / To tinker it as they see fit, / I observe that they never succeed: / For the world is a sacred vessel / Not made to be altered by man. / The tinker will spoil it; / Usurpers will lose it.”

16 Zhong Tai, *Zhuangzi fawei*, 86.

17 Liu Wu 劉武, *Zhuangzi jijie neipian buzheng* 莊子集解內篇補正 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1987), 97.

to circumstances—or as “natural responsiveness” (*ganying zhi ziran* 感應之自然).¹⁸ Regarding its conceptual origins, Zhong Tai argued: “Zhuangzi’s language of *budeyi* derives from Lao Tzu, who said: ‘As for those who would take the whole world to tinker it as they see fit, I observe that they never succeed.’ Zhuangzi then further developed this.”¹⁹

Liu Wu and Zhong Tai’s attention to *budeyi* displays valuable insight. However, their interpretations contain certain problems. First, their claim that the term appears “frequently” is an understatement. In the *Neipian* 內篇 (Inner Chapters) alone, *budeyi* occurs five times, concentrated in “Renjian shi” and “Dazongshi.”

The “Renjian shi” chapter contains three instances. One passage speaks of a state where, “if you can dwell in unity and lodge in necessity, you’re close to it.”²⁰ Another states that, as ministers and children, there are matters “that are inherently unavoidable” (*gu yousuo budeyi* 固有所不得已).²¹ The third advises one to “entrust yourself to inevitability and thereby nourish what is central.”²²

The “Dazongshi” chapter contains two instances. The first appears in a description of the true man of old as “Demurring, as though he were compelled.”²³ While Mair’s “compelled” captures a sense of passivity, the original Chinese implies a more profound, natural responsiveness. The true man acts not from personal volition but in spontaneous accord with the flow of circumstances. The second instance, “those who understand timing are *budeyi* regarding affairs,” suggests that one who is wise to the flow of the times is not bound or constrained by worldly events.²⁴ Taking the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters into account, the term *budeyi* appears fifteen times in total. Although some of these passages may not be from the hand of Zhuangzi himself, and their meanings are not entirely consistent, the importance of *budeyi* to his philosophy is evident.

18 See respectively Zhong Tai, *Zhuangzi fawei*, 86; and Liu Wu, *Zhuangzi jijie neipian buzheng*, 97.

19 Zhong Tai, *Zhuangzi fawei*, 86.

20 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 33. The original reads: 無門無毒，一宅而寓於不得已，則幾矣。 Translator’s note: Mair’s full translation is, “When there is neither gate nor opening, if you can dwell in unity and lodge in necessity, you’re close to it.”

21 Ibid., 39.

22 Ibid., 35.

23 Ibid., 53. Translator’s note: The original phrase 崔乎其不得已乎, suggests an action that is “inevitable” or “necessary” rather than one born of deliberation.

24 Ibid., 53. Translator’s note: The original line is 以知為時者，不得已於事也。 Mair renders this as, “Arrogant, as though he were uncontrollable.” However, the analysis of the original author of this article, Professor Chen Hui 陳徽, follows a more standard reading of this line, interpreting it as, “Those who understand timing are *budeyi* regarding affairs.”

Another problem is that Liu Wu and Zhong Tai's interpretation of *budeiyi* in "Renjian shi" as "emptiness responsive to things" lacks precision, as the context requires distinguishing between different usages of the term. Third, Zhong Tai's claim that Zhuangzi's concept of *budeiyi* originates with Lao Tzu is even more inaccurate. As demonstrated above, *budeiyi* in chapter twenty-nine of the *Dao De Jing* means "cannot succeed"—a meaning different from both the conventional usage and Zhong Tai's "emptiness responsive to things" interpretation. Here, Zhong Tai has misread the *Dao De Jing*.

Nevertheless, Liu and Zhong's emphasis on the importance of *budeiyi* helps us to correctly understand the concept of carefree wandering. The term appears repeatedly in the *Zhuangzi*, becoming a crucial entry point for interpreting the text because Zhuangzi uses it to highlight a fundamental, *a priori* condition of human existence. Based on this quality of givenness, he then endows *budeiyi* with a new, second meaning (the one identified by Liu and Zhong), thereby intrinsically unifying existence with carefree wandering, and being-in-the-world with transcendence.

Consequently, in Zhuangzi's thought, *budeiyi* possesses a dual significance. First, it signifies the unavoidable, often helpless circumstances of human existence—this is its basic meaning. Second, it denotes a natural and spontaneous responsiveness to the world and all things. Crucially, the first meaning provides the essential foundation for the second. Without accepting life's inescapable circumstances, the natural responsiveness that characterizes spiritual freedom cannot emerge. This foundational relationship reveals how Zhuangzi unifies worldly constraint with transcendent response.

The specific passages in the *Zhuangzi* tend to emphasize one meaning or the other. When the "Renjian shi" chapter states that "one who is a subject or a son indeed sometimes has no alternatives," it is emphasizing the first meaning of unavoidable duty. However, when the "Gengsang Chu" 庚桑楚 (Kengsang Chu) chapter states that "movement in which one has no alternative is called virtue,"²⁵ and that "the type who act only when there is no alternative is on the Way of the sages,"²⁶ these statements are grounded in the second meaning.

In the "Renjian shi" chapter, all three instances of *budeiyi* should be understood in their basic, primary sense, not their secondary one. They highlight both humanity's helplessness before its existential condition and the world's inescapability. When this understanding of *budeiyi* is considered alongside the usage in the "Gengsang Chu" chapter, the core purpose of the "Renjian shi"

25 Ibid., 235.

26 Ibid., 236.

chapter is perfectly illuminated: it teaches how one can be transcendent of the world without departing from it.

The following two sections will examine the rich content and profound significance of Zhuangzi's thought on *budeyi* in greater detail.

3 *Zhiming and Zhengsheng: the Conceptual Development of Zhuangzi's Budeyi Thought*

The "Keyi" 刻意 (Ingrained Opinions) chapter provides a fundamental insight into this process: "He responds when affected, moves when pressed, and arises only when he has no other choice."²⁷ This passage reveals the essential structure of human existence. The character *gan* 感, "affected," shows that people always already exist within a specific domain rather than floating in a void. Correspondingly, everyone experiences "pressing" (*po* 迫), an urging that leads to "response" (*ying* 應) and "movement" (*dong* 動)—ultimately "arising only when there is no other choice." From another angle, however, the passivity and choicelessness that *budeyi* displays often represent the natural state of human existence. In this sense, *budeyi* does not indicate mere passivity but rather signifies a natural, spontaneous response.

The "Renjian shi" chapter illustrates the in-the-world structure of *budeyi* through the story of the mission of Zigao 子高 (546–470), the Duke of Ye 葉公, who was sent to the Kingdom of Ch'i (Qi 齊). Overwhelmed by anxiety, he approaches Confucius for guidance, asking:

"The mission entrusted to me by the king is a very weighty one, but I expect that as ambassador the treatment given to me by Ch'i, though quite respectful, will not be attentive. One cannot push even a common man, how much less a head of state! This makes me very anxious. ... Yet, this morning I received my commission and in the evening I'm drinking ice water. I feel like I'm burning up inside! I haven't even been exposed to the actual circumstances of the affair and already I'm suffering from a dislocation of *yin* and *yang*. And if I do not succeed in this affair, there will surely be a harsh rebuke from my king. Faced with both of these troubles, it is more than I as minister can bear. Tell me, sir, what I should do."

"For all under heaven," said Confucius, "there are two great precepts: one is destiny and the other is duty. A child's love of her parents is destiny

²⁷ Ibid., 145.

and is inseparable from her heart. A subject's service to his lord is duty. No matter where one goes, there is always a lord from whom one cannot escape in heaven or on earth. This is what I mean by 'great precepts.' Accordingly, one who serves one's parents and makes them secure regardless of the situation has attained the ultimate in filialness. One who serves one's lord and makes him secure regardless of the conditions has achieved the fullness of loyalty. One who attends to one's own mind and who is not easily diverted by sorrow and joy, realizing their inevitability and accepting them as if they were destiny, has attained the ultimate of integrity. One who is a subject or a son indeed sometimes has no alternatives. Then he must carry out his affairs according to circumstances and forget about his own person. What leisure has he for loving life and despising death? Thus, sir, you may proceed on your mission. ... Just ride along with things as you let your mind wander. Entrust yourself to inevitability and thereby nourish what is central. That's the ultimate course. What have you to do with the response of Ch'i? Nothing is better than to fulfill your destiny, but that's the hardest of all."²⁸

The Duke of Ye's situation reveals a universal pattern. He receives his orders but is paralyzed by anxiety before he has even departed, believing that both success and failure will lead to negative outcomes. Following his logic, the only escape from his two troubles—punishment for failure and exhaustion from success—would be to flee the human world entirely.

However, in the sage's view, the Duke of Ye's anxiety stems from a misunderstanding of the true character of human existence. He creates his own trouble by failing to recognize life's fundamental structure, what Confucius calls the "two great precepts" (*da jie* 大戒): destiny (*ming* 命) and duty (*yi* 義). "Under heaven" (*tianxia* 天下) encompasses everyone without exception, and these "precepts" (*jie* 戒) are inviolable principles that all must observe. Destiny and duty constitute the existential conditions that no one can avoid; they determine the basic structure of being in the world. The unfolding of destiny and duty manifests as the various *budeiyi* matters that characterize our daily ethical lives.

Consequently, the Duke of Ye's anxiety is neither personal nor accidental; it represents the existential worry that everyone encounters. While our specific worries may differ, all of us face inevitable concerns that are tied to our relationships with others and to circumstances beyond our control. For the Duke of

28 Ibid., 33–35.

Ye to resolve his anxiety, the solution lies not in eliminating his difficulties—an impossible task—but in properly facing destiny and duty. Proper engagement with these fundamental structures enables an authentic commitment to *budeyi* matters. As Confucius advises, one must “carry out his affairs according to circumstances and forget about his own person. What leisure has he for loving life and despising death?”

To properly face destiny and duty, one must first understand their nature and relationship. Only then can one grasp why they constitute universal “great precepts.” This comprehension enables proper engagement—accepting the inevitable as if it were destiny, even when knowing its difficulty. What, then, do destiny (*ming*) and duty (*yi*) signify? How do they relate to each other? And why does properly facing them require a full commitment to the various matters of *budeyi*?

First, let us examine *ming*. The concept of *ming*, or *tianming* 天命 (heavenly destiny), possesses deep historical roots. The *Shijing* 詩經 and *Shangshu* 尚書 discuss dynastic succession through the principle that “heavenly destiny is not constant” (*tianming mi chang* 天命靡常).²⁹ These classical texts emphasize the imperative to “urgently practice virtuous administration” (*ji jing de* 疾敬德) in order to “pray for an eternal mandate from heaven” (*qi tian yong ming* 祈天永命).³⁰ The profound concern for governance and historical consciousness embedded in these passages is of deep significance.

By the late Zhou period, *ming* had become integrated into the existential beliefs of ordinary people. Apart from the Mohists, who rejected fatalism (*feiming* 非命), virtually all philosophers of that era accepted the reality of destiny. Thinkers of the time applied *ming* or *tianming* to anything that exceeded human understanding and capability yet influenced or determined worldly affairs and human life. The *Mengzi* 孟子 provides a clear formulation in the “Wanzhang shang” 萬章上 chapter: “What happens without human action is Heaven (*tian*); what arrives without human effort is destiny (*ming*).”³¹ Zhuangzi’s statement that “a child’s love of her parents is destiny and is inseparable from her heart” aligns with this understanding.

Destiny’s content proves complex and comprehensive, encompassing everything from the flourishing or decline of the *Dao* to matters of life and death, wealth and poverty, or achievement and loss—all are determined by the mandate of heaven. In the “Dechongfu” 德充符 (Symbols of Integrity Fulfilled) chapter, Zhuangzi provides a systematic summary:

29 *Shijing* 詩經, “Daya” 大雅, “Wenwang” 文王 chapter.

30 *Shangshu* 尚書, “Shaogao” 召誥 chapter.

31 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 34.

Life and death, preservation and loss, failure and success, poverty and wealth, worthiness and unworthiness, slander and praise, hunger and thirst, cold and heat—these are all the transformations of affairs and the operation of destiny.³²

Zhuangzi, however, advances beyond a purely Confucian treatment of the heavenly mandate by identifying destiny's fundamental source. He traces *ming* to its metaphysical foundation in the *Dao* itself. As the "Dazongshi" chapter explains:

The Way has attributes and evidence, but it has no action and no form. It may be transmitted but cannot be received. It may be apprehended but cannot be seen. From the root, from the stock, before there was heaven or earth, for all eternity truly has it existed. It inspires demons and gods, gives birth to heaven and earth.³³

This understanding of the *Dao* refers to the great transformation of *yin* and *yang*, a process Zhuangzi also calls the "Creator of Things" (*zaowuzhe* 造物者). Within this mysterious process of generation, whether things come into being at all, what characteristics they possess—such as human intelligence or stupidity, worthiness or unworthiness, beauty or ugliness—and what circumstances they encounter prove equally inescapable. This "prior givenness" (*xianzaixing* 先在性) constitutes *ming*, or fixed destiny, for all things. Consequently, destiny results from this creative transformation and represents the *Dao*'s concrete "embodiment" (*xianshen* 現身) in the world.

Now let us examine *yi* 義 (duty). Human existence necessarily involves daily ethical affairs (*renlun riyong* 人倫日用). The unfolding of these affairs always manifests as a choice of what should or should not be done; every matter contains an inherent "appropriateness" (*yingdangxing* 應當性). This appropriateness is intrinsic to the affairs themselves. Even when our actions deviate from it, such deviation cannot negate its existence; indeed, it often calls more urgently for its "return." Zhuangzi's use of *yi* as one of the "great precepts under heaven" refers precisely to this inherent appropriateness. In traditional society, *yi* manifested through specific relational obligations (*wulun zhi yi* 五倫之義), such as the benevolence of a ruler and the righteousness of a minister, the kindness of a father and the filial piety of a child.

32 Ibid., 47.

33 Ibid., 55.

For individuals, *yi* also possesses a "prior givenness." Before taking any action, every person finds themselves already "thrown into" (*paoru* 拋入) an ethical-political order from which there is no escape.

Clearly, *ming* and *yi* are compatible, not contradictory. *Yi* is encompassed within the scope of *ming*; in the domain of ethical and political life, *ming* manifests precisely as *yi*. This unity is captured in the concept of *yiming* 義命, or an appropriate response to destiny. When the "Renjian shi" chapter discusses *ming* and *yi* separately, it appears to treat them as two distinct concepts, but this is merely for expository convenience. The line "a child's love of her parents is destiny" certainly involves appropriateness (*yi*), while the claim that "a subject's service to his lord is duty" equally expresses the inescapable nature of destiny (*ming*).

Since destiny is predetermined and beyond human power to change, Zhuangzi advocates for "following destiny" (*congming* 從命). As the "Dazongshi" chapter illustrates, the relationship with the fundamental forces of the cosmos is even more binding than that with one's parents: "If they urge me to die and I resist, that is my ill-temper. What fault of theirs is it?"³⁴

However, "following destiny" encompasses more than passive acceptance. Since destiny manifests as appropriateness (*yiming*) within human relationships, "following destiny" requires acting appropriately. This is what it means to "fulfill one's destiny" (*zhiming* 致命). Only through *zhiming* can one truly "follow destiny." Furthermore, since destiny unfolds into the various *budeyi* matters of existence, fulfilling one's destiny (*zhiming*) specifically manifests as "rectifying one's life" (*zhengsheng* 正生), which in turn involves committing fully to these unavoidable affairs. When an affair is brought to its proper completion, this is the "realization of things" (*chengwu* 成物). For example, if "serving parents" is carried out by "accepting any circumstances to ensure their comfort," this is both "supreme filial devotion" and the complete fulfillment of the *budeyi* matter of caring for one's parents.

The "Dechongfu" chapter employs the figure of Emperor Shun 舜 to exemplify how fulfilling one's destiny (*zhiming*) manifests as rectifying one's life (*zhengsheng*). Zhuangzi notes that "of those who receive the mandate of heaven, only Shun was correct in it. Fortunately able to rectify his own life

34 Ibid., 59. Mair's full version is: "The relationship of parents to a child,' said Sir Come, 'is such that he simply follows their commands, no matter which direction they may point him. The relationship of *yin* and *yang* to a man is no less important than that of parents to a child. If they urge me to die and I resist, that is my ill-temper. What fault of theirs is it?"

(*zhengsheng*), he thereby rectified all living things.”³⁵ Shun differed from ordinary people because he could fulfill his destiny (*zhiming*)—that is, rectify his life (*zhengsheng*)—by vigorously pursuing his *budeiyi* affairs. When farming the fields, he devoted himself completely to agriculture. As the son of Gusou 瞽叟 and the brother of Xiang 象, he committed fully to filial piety and fraternal respect. When he became the Son of Heaven, his sole concern was to rescue his people from peril. Such active engagement constitutes the hallmark of an authentic commitment to “following destiny.” To interpret *congming* as accepting the status quo, remaining inactive, or waiting passively is to fundamentally betray its true meaning (*beiming* 背命).

The theory of “fulfilling one’s destiny” does not originate with Zhuangzi. The *Yizhuan* 易傳 already contains this concept. The “Xiangzhuan” 象傳 for the “Kun” 困 (Difficulty) hexagram states: “The noble person uses this to fulfill his destiny and realize his aspirations” (君子以致命遂志). The character *zhi* 致 carries a dual meaning of both “reaching” or “arriving at” and “exhausting” or “completing.” Therefore, *zhiming* signifies either “reaching destiny” or “completing destiny.” Considered objectively, Zhuangzi’s theory of *zhiming* closely aligns with the Confucian thought on *zhengming* 正命 (rectifying destiny). The “Jinxin shang” 盡心上 chapter of the *Mengzi* discusses *zhengming* directly: “Everything stems from destiny—one should comply and accept its proper manifestation. ... Those who exhaust their way and die achieve *zhengming*. Those who die in shackles do not achieve *zhengming*.” Committing oneself fully to what must be done in unavoidable circumstances can thus be called “following destiny” (*congming*), “fulfilling one’s destiny” (*zhiming*), or “rectifying destiny” (*zhengming*). This is a fundamental existential approach that both Zhuangzi and the Confucians shared.

Nevertheless, Zhuangzi belongs to the Taoist tradition, and his discussion of destiny naturally exhibits Taoist characteristics. Beyond advocating for “following destiny” or “fulfilling one’s destiny,” he introduces the concept of “returning to destiny” (*fuming* 復命). The “Zeyang” 則陽 (Sunny) chapter describes the sage’s process in this way: “In the operation of fulfilling his destiny, he takes heaven as his teacher. Men thus follow him and style him a sage.”³⁶ Although “returning to destiny” differs from “fulfilling one’s destiny” in expression, their essential meaning converges. Destiny originates from the fundamental *Dao*, which unfolds into the myriad affairs of living existence. Committing fully

35 This translation adheres closely to the original Chinese 受命於天，唯舜獨也正，幸能正生，以正眾生, to preserve the author’s specific focus on Shun’s unique (*du* 獨) ability to “rectify” (*zheng* 正).

36 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 255.

to the matters assigned by destiny constitutes both *zhiming* (fulfilling it) and responding to the life-generating *Dao*. This response involves "returning" to one's existential root—hence, *fuming*.

Zhuangzi's theory of *zhiming* reveals a crucial aspect of his philosophy that challenges conventional interpretations. Withdrawal from or abandonment of the world is always a final resort, a forced measure taken only after exhausting all efforts to engage meaningfully with existence. Any form of self-imposed exile stems from "unavoidable" (*bu ke naihe* 不可奈何) circumstances rather than from a philosophical preference. Many readers interpret Zhuangzi as advocating withdrawal, but we cannot conclude that this was his original position. Otherwise, how could one's life be rectified (*zhengsheng*)? How could one's destiny be fulfilled (*zhiming*)?

Moreover, the "Renjian shi" chapter provides direct evidence against interpretations favoring withdrawal. As Confucius advises, one must "entrust yourself to inevitability and thereby nourish what is central." Here, "central" (*zhong* 中) refers to the heart-mind; "nourishing what is central" (*yang zhong* 養中) means cultivating the heart-mind through engagement, not separation. The unavoidable matters of *budeiyi* provide both the foundation for heart-mind cultivation and the vehicle for the "wandering mind" (*you xin* 游心). This is a fundamental insight into Zhuangzi's method: spiritual cultivation occurs not in spite of worldly circumstances but precisely through them.

If one were to sever worldly affairs and suspend oneself in emptiness, two problems would emerge. First, such an act would demonstrate indifference to the life-generating *Dao* (*shengsheng zhi dao* 生生之道). Second, carefree wandering would lose its foundation, degenerating into subjective fantasy or a state of withered emptiness (*xuji kugao* 虛寂枯槁).

Therefore, the theory of *budeiyi* fully demonstrates the worldly character of Zhuangzi's thought on carefree wandering. On the one hand, people cannot escape the *budeiyi* matters assigned to them by destiny and must commit fully to them by fulfilling their destiny (*zhiming*) and rectifying their life (*zhengsheng*), thereby helping to realize things (*chengwu*). On the other hand, the very practice of *zhiming* and *zhengsheng* is simultaneously the process of cultivating one's heart-mind and achieving personal virtue. "Nourishing what is central" through unavoidability does not mean abandoning worldly affairs and isolating oneself in solitude.

Thus, achieving oneself (*chengji*) and the realization of things (*chengwu*) are not two separate endeavors but a single, unified process: by authentically fulfilling one's own nature, one naturally allows the world to come to its own fulfillment. Worldly engagement and carefree wandering, therefore, are not opposing domains but are revealed as the inseparable aspects of a single, integrated life.

4 *Budeiyi* as Natural Responsiveness: the Virtue of the True Person

Although Confucius advises the Duke of Ye to proceed with his mission and fulfill his duties—that is, to “follow destiny” (*congming*) or “fulfill his destiny” (*zhiming*)—he emphasizes a crucial prerequisite: “One who attends to one’s own mind and who is not easily diverted by sorrow and joy, realizing their inevitability and accepting them as if they were destiny, has attained the ultimate of integrity.” This reveals that truly fulfilling one’s destiny requires “supreme virtue” (*de zhi zhi* 德之至) as its foundation. In other words, only a person who has attained this supreme virtue can authentically fulfill their destiny.

Zhuangzi calls such an individual a “True Man” (*zhenren* 真人)—one who has attained the *Dao*. In the “Dazongshi” chapter, he describes this ideal state:

Only when there is a true man is there true knowledge. What is a true man? 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.³⁷

The True Person fully engages with worldly affairs—“not opposing the minority, not striving for heroic accomplishments, and not scheming over affairs”—and yet, even when confronting the most challenging tasks, succeeds without harm to the self, as if he could “climb high without trembling, enter water without getting soaked, and enter fire without feeling hot.” The chapter then offers a more evocative, poetic portrait of the True Person’s engagement with the world:

The true man of old
Was towering in stature but never collapsed,
Seemed insufficient but accepted nothing;
Aloofly independent but not obstinate,
Amplly empty but not ostentatious,
Merry, as though he were happy,
Demurring, as though he were compelled,

37 Ibid., 52.

Suffused with an alluring charm,
 Endowed with an arresting integrity,
 Stern, as though he were worldly,
 Arrogant, as though he were uncontrollable,
 Reticent, as though he preferred to clam up,
 Absent-minded, as though he forgot what to say.³⁸

It is within this description that Zhuangzi reveals the second, profound meaning of *budeiyi*. The line Mair translates as "Demurring, as though he were compelled" is, in the original, 崔乎其不得已乎. This action, born of *budeiyi*, is what Zhuangzi identifies as the highest form of virtue. This is the second meaning of the term. The "Gengsang Chu" chapter states this explicitly: "Movement in which one has no alternative is called virtue." Here, *budeiyi* does not mean to act under external duress; it means "cannot stop" or "cannot but proceed" because the action is a spontaneous and natural response to the stimuli of the world (*ganying* 感應). This response emerges without force or artifice; it is the natural manifestation of the True Person's virtue.

It is only through the cultivation of the True Person's virtue that one's engagement with the world can assume the form of higher *budeiyi*. The True Person is therefore neither isolated from the world nor committed to a state of passive stillness. To abandon worldly affairs and refuse to act when action is called for would lead to a state of "lonely withering" (*guji kugao* 孤寂枯槁). The phrase in the "Dazongshi" chapter "Demurring, as though he were compelled," emphasizes the certain and inevitable nature of the True Person's spontaneous response to the world.

The True Person is adept at both responding to things and navigating the world, and for this reason is also called a Sage (*shengren* 聖人). The "Gengsang Chu" chapter explains: "The type who act only when there is no alternative is on the Way of the sages." The character *sheng* 聖 originally means "to penetrate"; one who can penetrate affairs and comprehend things naturally handles worldly matters with appropriateness. The Sage and the True Person are not two different ideals: "True Person" refers to the state of virtue (*de* 德), while "Sage" refers to the accomplishment (*gong* 功) that manifests from it. One must possess this virtue to achieve this accomplishment, and the accomplishment in turn reveals the virtue.

Therefore, the "Dazongshi" chapter treats the True Person and the Sage as a unified whole:

38 Ibid., 52–53.

This is what is meant by not detracting from the Way with the mind, not assisting heaven with the human. This is what we call a true man. Such being the case, his mind was forgetful, his visage calm, his forehead beamingly broad. Austere as autumn, warm as spring, his joy and anger were in touch with the four seasons. He was compatible with all things but no one knew his limits. ... Therefore, when sages employ military force, they may destroy states without losing people's hearts, and bestow benefits for ten thousand generations without acting from supposed benevolence.³⁹

“Movement in which one has no alternative is called virtue.” Virtue, in this sense, concerns the heart-mind. Thus, the “Dechongfu” chapter states: “Integrity is the cultivation of complete harmony.”⁴⁰ Cultivating the heart-mind until it reaches a state of harmony is what constitutes the virtue of the True Person. When this harmonized heart-mind responds to the world, it manifests as the action of *budeiyi*. How, then, does a harmonious heart-mind enable this mode of action?

First, a harmonious heart-mind is free from the obstruction of “false illumination” (*fuming* 浮明).⁴¹ A heart-mind that has not yet seen the *Dao* is inevitably partial, developing what Zhuangzi calls a “biased heart-mind” (*chengxin* 成心)—what Mair translates as the “prejudices” one takes as a guide.⁴² Once this biased heart-mind exists, false illumination arises, which obscures things, creates stubborn attachments, and ultimately burdens the heart-mind itself. To eliminate this false illumination, one must abandon the biased heart-mind. When the biased heart-mind disappears, the “*Dao* heart-mind” (*daoxin* 道心) remains. This is the state described in the “Qiwulun” 齊物論 (On the Equality of Things) chapter with the words, “Just now, I lost myself.”⁴³ The “I” (*wu* 吾) represents what the *Dao* heart-mind achieves, while the “self” (*wo* 我) represents what the biased heart-mind crystallizes.

39 Ibid., 52. The original text reads: 不以心捐道，不以人助天，是之謂真人……利澤施乎萬世不為愛人。Victor Mair's translation covers only the first part of this passage. To complete the quotation as analyzed by Professor Chen, the final sentence has been rendered by the present translator.

40 Ibid., 48. The full passage reads: “Integrity is the cultivation of complete harmony. We can tell that a person has integrity, even though it may not be evident in her physical form, because she is indispensable to all things.”

41 The terms “false illumination” (*fuming* 浮明) and “true illumination” (*zhenming* 真明) are borrowed from the commentary of Wang Fuzhi 王夫之 (1619–1692). See Wang Fuzhi 王夫之, *Zhuangzi jie* 莊子解 (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1964), 16–17.

42 Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way*, 14. The full passage reads: “If we follow our prejudices and take them as our guide, who will not have such a guide?”

43 Ibid., 28. The original text reads: 今者吾喪我。

When the *Dao* heart-mind manifests, "true illumination" (*zhenming* 真明) arises. Under its clear light, all things appear in their original state, without obstruction. True illumination is true knowledge—hence, "only when there is a true man is there true knowledge." The True Person's virtue may be called harmony, but it naturally contains this true illumination. Furthermore, the "Xiaoyao you" chapter states: "the ultimate man has no self."⁴⁴ "Having no self" means having no "biased heart-mind." A True Person who has eliminated these prejudices can also be called an Ultimate Person (*zhiren* 至人).

The heart-mind of the True Person is empty and unobstructed. Free from the interference of false illumination, its response to things naturally resembles a mirror's reflection. As the "Ying Diwang" 應帝王 (Responses for Emperors and Kings) chapter explains: "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."⁴⁵ To "triumph over things without injury" means not only that the ultimate person can engage with things without being harmed, but also that things themselves remain unharmed by the person. When neither harms the other, each is free to fulfill its natural life.

Second, a harmonious heart-mind responds to things with balance and manifests naturally. As the "Dechongfu" chapter explains:

Levelness is the equilibrium of water at rest. We may use it as a standard, preserving it within so that without we are not ruffled. Integrity is the cultivation of complete harmony. We can tell that a person has integrity, even though it may not be evident in her physical form, because she is indispensable to all things.⁴⁶

Here, "preserving it within" (*nei bao zhi* 內保之) means to hold or maintain, while "not ruffled" (*wai bu dang* 外不蕩) means not being swayed or agitated externally. "Integrity that is not evident in physical form" (*de bu xing* 德不形) signifies an inner state of being so stable that the heart-mind has a place to rest, undisturbed by anything. When the heart-mind can rest, it naturally harmonizes without being carried away. Thus, the harmony of the heart-mind and the stillness of the heart-mind are originally one: only through harmony can one achieve stillness, and only through stillness can one achieve harmony. When the heart-mind rests without agitation, it becomes upright and quiet, responding to things through emptiness. When it harmonizes without partiality, it becomes balanced and compliant, manifesting naturally.

44 Ibid., 5. The original text reads: 至人無己.

45 Ibid., 71.

46 Ibid., 48.

Responding through emptiness and manifesting naturally means that action becomes non-action (*wuwei*), and through non-action nothing remains undone. This constitutes the movement of *budeiyi*. The “Gengsang Chu” chapter describes this complete process:

When these four sets of six do not churn within your breast, then you will be correct; being correct, you will be still; being still, you will be lucid; being lucid, you will be empty; being empty, you will be nonactive, thus nothing will be left undone.⁴⁷

As the chapter later states, this is the very definition of virtue: “Movement in which one has no alternative is called virtue.” The chapter continues with the ultimate description of this state:

Therefore, only if a man is respected and it does not make him happy, or if he is insulted and it does not make him angry, can he be one who shares in the harmony of heaven. If someone who is not angry exhibits anger, his anger is an exhibition of nonanger; if someone who is not acting exhibits action, his action is an exhibition of nonaction. Desiring to be still, he calms his breath; desiring to be spiritous, he tames his mind. Should action be required of him, he desires that it be appropriate, and only as a result of there being no alternative. The type who act only when there is no alternative is on the Way of the sages.⁴⁸

However, achieving a harmonious heart-mind and acting from a state of *budeiyi* is the capacity of one who has attained the *Dao*; it is beyond the reach of ordinary people. They must still cultivate the *Dao* to regulate their heart-minds. The method for such cultivation is “heart-fasting” (*xinzhai* 心齋). Due to the limitations of this article, the meaning of heart-fasting will not be discussed in detail here.

5 Conclusion

The inner logic and worldly character of Zhuangzi’s thought on *budeiyi* are now clear. In its first sense, as the unavoidable circumstances of human existence, *budeiyi* reveals the *a priori* condition that all life must confront: destiny

⁴⁷ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 235–36.

(*ming*). In its second, more profound sense, as natural responsiveness, it signifies life's very spontaneity—that is, carefree wandering (*xiaoyao*).

Furthermore, since the first meaning provides the essential foundation for the second, carefree wandering is ultimately realized through the practice of fulfilling one's destiny (*zhiming*) and rectifying one's life (*zhengsheng*). Thus, achieving oneself (*chengji*) and the realization of things (*chengwu*) are not two separate endeavors but a single, unified process: by authentically fulfilling one's own nature, one naturally allows the world to come to its own fulfillment. Far from severing the primary relationship between the human and the world, carefree wandering embodies this intrinsic unity.

This analysis demonstrates that Zhuangzi's spiritual philosophy is fundamentally engaged with, not withdrawn from, worldly existence. True freedom emerges not from an escape from life's unavoidable circumstances, but through their authentic embrace.

Translated by Jenny Lu