

**PARABLE AS A TOOL OF PHILOSOPHICAL  
PERSUASION: YÙYÁN 寓言 IN THE ZHUĀNGZǐ  
IN THE CONTEXT OF LATE WARRING STATES PERIOD  
CHINESE LITERATURE**

MARCIN JACOBY

**ABSTRACT**

*Yùyán* is an important part of the legacy of pre-Qin Chinese literature, and is widely used in persuasive texts of the late Warring States Period. These narratives closely resemble Western parables, especially of the New Testament tradition. The author discusses in detail the history and uses of the term *yùyán*, and its definitions and interpretations in modern Chinese research, concluding that ‘parable’ seems the closest English-language equivalent of *yùyán*. The famous philosophical work *Zhuāngzǐ* is central in this discussion. The author discusses the persuasive function of the parables in *Zhuāngzǐ*, and points to several distinct features of these narratives compared to other works of the period. These include wide occurrence of purely imaginative texts in a quasi-mythological setting, structural complexity, and the intriguing ‘self-portrait’ of the legendary Zhuāng Zhōu. As such, parables in *Zhuāngzǐ* should be treated as a distinct group within the wider parable tradition of China, retaining the original name of *yùyán*.

**Keywords:** *Zhuāngzǐ*; *yuyan*; parable; fable; persuasion; pre-Qin literature; Warring States Period literature

From the perspective of literary analysis, the *Zhuāngzǐ* is the product of a particular historical period, deeply rooted in the wider context of stylistic developments in Warring States prose. As such, it exhibits certain traits that make it “typical” despite its unquestionable uniqueness. Perhaps the most visible connection between the *Zhuāngzǐ* and other works of the period is the preponderant use of *yùyán* 寓言, usually short narratives with allegorical content, which have been defined in numerous ways and have often been labelled as “Chinese fables”. In the present article I shall attempt to examine distinctive traits of *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* and argue that the word *parable* seems far more suited for rendering the term *yùyán* in English in its modern understanding. I shall also reflect on the unclear identity of *yùyán*, which to some scholars form a separate, independent literary genre, while to others they represent just one of many rhetorical or stylistic devices for instruction or persuasion. *Yùyán* form about two-thirds of the content of the *Zhuāngzǐ* as we know the text today. Thus, it contains more *yuyan* than other largely parable-based works, such as the *Hán Fēizǐ* 韓非子, the *Zhànguó cè* 戰國策, and the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* 呂

氏春秋。<sup>1</sup> The *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* are very distinct, and in many ways differ from those in the other texts. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these differences in the wider historical and stylistic context.

### ***Yùyán* research**

Much has been written about *yùyán* in the last forty years or so, although it seems that the topic has mainly attracted researchers from the PRC and Taiwan but not so many sinologists from outside the Chinese-speaking world. Starting with Wáng Huànbǎo and his early, ground-breaking work from 1957, and followed by Gōng Mù 1984, Níng Xī 1992, and especially Chén Púqīng 1987 and 1992, a whole group of researchers who have published dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles devoted to pre-Qín parables has emerged. Most of this research concentrates on literary analysis of *yùyán*, treating them as representatives of a separate genre or at least of a distinct device employed widely by writers of the fourth and third centuries BC.

Scholars have proposed numerous definitions of *yùyán*. Although no one denies the fact that the term itself was first used in the *Zhuāngzǐ* (Chapters 28 “Metaphors” and 33 “All Under Heaven”),<sup>2</sup> the modern understanding of *yùyán* rests heavily on the ancient Greek tradition of the fable, which somewhat adds to the general terminological confusion. Let us briefly examine the whole situation.

The original definition of the term *yùyán* presented in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is as follows (in Victor Mair’s translation): “borrowing externals to discuss something. A father does not act as a matchmaker for his son” (original: *jí wài lùn zhī; qīn fù bù wèi qí zǐ méi* 藉外論之。親父不為其子媒) (Mair 1998: 217). This definition is typically interpreted through three commentaries:

1. ‘borrowing from the outside’ (*jiè wài* 借外), as explained by Guō Xiàng 郭象 of the Jin dynasty;
2. ‘transferring to others’ (*jì zhī tā rén* 寄之他人), as explained by Chéng Xuányìng 成玄英 of the Tng;
3. ‘as people do not believe us, we entrust others with it’ (*yǐ rén bù xìn jǐ, gù tuō zhī tā rén* 以人不信己, 故託之他人), as phrased by Guō Qīngpān 郭慶藩 of the Qīng.<sup>3</sup>

And so, the traditional understanding of the term *yùyán* as used in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is ‘to say something indirectly in order to make it more understandable or credible’. Here, most Chinese authors also evoke the expression ‘to speak of something, meaning something else’ (*yán zài cǐ ér yì zài bǐ* 言在此而意在彼), which was first used by Qīng dynasty member of the literati Yè Xiè 葉燮 (1627–1703).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> There is also the *Lièzǐ* 列子, which exhibits many similarities to the *Zhuāngzǐ* and in half consists of *yùyán*, but because it is a later compilation of miscellaneous texts, it shall not be discussed in detail in the present paper. Of course there are also many other Hàn dynasty and later compilations that contain pre-Qín parables, especially the *Huáinánzǐ*, the *Yànzi chūnqiū*, and the *Shuōyüàn*.

<sup>2</sup> All English translations and references to chapter titles and passage numbers in the present paper are after Victor Mair’s translation of the *Zhuāngzǐ* (1998). Transcriptions of Chinese words have been changed to pinyin.

<sup>3</sup> All three commentaries can be found in Guō Qīngpān’s edition of the *Zhuāngzǐ* (1974).

<sup>4</sup> See Yè Xiè and Jiǎng Yīn 蔣寅 2014. It is worth noting the existence of interesting parallels between such an understanding of *yùyán* and the *Shijing* 詩經 and *Wénxīn diāolóng* 文心雕龍 tradition of the

Unfortunately, like several other terms found in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, *yùyán* is not used in other known works of the period. In fact, even though in the *Zhànguó cè*, the *Hán Fēizǐ*, and other texts we find stylistically similar passages to the *yùyán* of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the term *yùyán* does not appear in any of them. *Hán Fēi* calls his series of parables *chǔshuō* 儲說, meaning probably ‘collected stories’. The character 說 (pronounced as *shuì*) is also used across several works of the period with the meaning of ‘persuade’.<sup>5</sup> In the *Zhànguó cè*, the authors of parables are called *biànshì* 辯士, *shuìshì* 說士, or *shànshuìzhě* 善說者, terms J. I. Crump renders as “persuaders”<sup>6</sup> and which further attest to the importance of the character 說 in this context. Finally, in the *Hán* period compilation *Shuōyùàn* 說苑, in the “*Shànshuō*” 善說 chapter (perhaps better rendered as “*Shànshuì*”), we can find an interesting anecdote devoted to none other than *Zhuāng Zhōu*’s favourite rhetorical adversary, *Huì Shī* 惠施. He is portrayed as someone notorious for the constant use of *pì* 譬 in his speech. When the king of *Wèi* asks him to speak without using *pì*, *Huì Shī* declines, and responds with another *pì*, explaining:

夫說者，固以其所知論其所不知，而使人知之。

The persuaders use what is known to explain what is unknown, so as to make it known (Luó Shàoqīng and Zhōu Fèngwǔ 2009: 350)

But what is *pì*? In modern literary studies, *pì* is understood to mean ‘metaphor’. We know, however, that historical use of this and other terms indicate very flexible, or broad semantic fields. Here, I believe *pì* relates not just to metaphor, but to allegorical communication as a whole, as do *yùyán* 喻言, *pìyù* 譬喻, *bǐyù* 比喻, and other terms used across Chinese literature throughout the ages.<sup>7</sup> Although these terms were used with much ambiguity, Chinese authors seem to have been highly aware of the phenomenon of allegorical communication and to have consciously used different tools of indirect discourse. There was, however, no consensus on the terms to describe such discourse, and the word *yùyán* 寓言 was used only in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

It was only in 1902 that *yùyán* made a great comeback in the Chinese language. This term was used in the title of the first Chinese translation of Aesop’s fables by the famous translator *Lín Shū* 林紓 (assisted by *Yán Qù* 嚴璩), who chose to call his work *Yīsuo* *yùyán* 伊索寓言 (Aesop’s *yùyán*). In 1919, writer *Máo Dùn* 茅盾 (orig. *Shěn Déhóng* 沈德鴻) published the first collection of similar texts from the Chinese literary tradition under the title *Chinese yùyán* 中國寓言. From this time on, the term *yùyán* was used to denote both European fables and various Chinese narratives, including fables, parables, folk stories, and historical anecdotes. This is probably the reason behind the tendency of Chinese scholars to explain the newly conceptualized *yùyán* tradition of ancient Chinese literature using the English term *fable*. In fact, only a small number of preserved pre-Qin *yùyán* can be categorized as proper *fables* as understood in modern literature studies.

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simile and the metaphor (*bǐ* 比, *xìng* 興). Also, the whole Chinese dictionary and *lèishū* 類書 tradition of defining through words close in meaning and through analogy contains similar logical traits.

<sup>5</sup> According to the Thesaurus Linguae Serica (TLS), the character 說 should be pronounced *shuì* rather than *shuō* when it has this meaning.

<sup>6</sup> See Crump 1996.

<sup>7</sup> *Chén Púqīng* (1992: 1–2) in his discussion on *yùyán* also evokes the term *yīnyán* 隱言 used by *Liú Xié* 劉勰 in *Wénxīn diāolóng* 文心雕龍.

Therefore, as I argue later in the paper, the term *parable* seems much more fitting as the English-language equivalent of *yùyán*.

The terminological ambiguity in classical Chinese discourse should not be surprising, as we can find exact parallels in ancient Hebrew and Greek traditions. In both, there are numerous texts stylistically and functionally similar to the *yùyán* of the *Zhuāngzǐ* and the Warring States tradition of the parable as we understand it today. In Greek, the terms *parable* (*parabolē*) and *allegory* (*allēgoría*) were often used interchangeably to describe allegorical texts (Czerski 1993: 211); other terms used in a similar context include *enigma*, *symbol*, and *metaphor*.<sup>8</sup> The key term in the Hebrew tradition is *mašal* (*māšāl*), but its meaning also oscillated between proverb, maxim, and parable (see Świderkówna 2006: 127). In New Testament exegesis, *mašal* specifically denotes the parables of Jesus, which clearly stem from Hebrew tradition but form a group of texts with distinct traits of their own. Finally, through the combination of Greek and Hebrew Biblical exegesis a connection was made between the Greek *parabolē* and the Hebrew *mašal*. In fact, the term *mašal* is translated as *parabolē* for the first time in the *Septuagint*, the first translation of the Old Testament into Greek (and at the same time into any European language). Today, both Greek *parabolē* and Jesus's *mašal* as recorded in the New Testament are commonly referred to as parables.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps due to a certain reluctance of Chinese researchers to engage in Biblical studies, connections between pre-Qin Chinese parables and Jesus's parables contained in the New Testament are rarely made. At the same time, however, the Greek tradition of Aesop's fables is commonly evoked by Chinese scholars, even though Aesopian lore differs greatly from Chinese *yùyán*, or rather, the Chinese *yùyán* is a much broader term than the English *fable*. Chén Púqīng in his study of world parables *Yùyán wénxué lǐlùn. Lìshǐ yǔ yìngyòng* (Literary theory of the *yùyán*. History and usage) does mention the Old and New Testament traditions (Chén Púqīng 1992: 262–266), but fails to find similarities between Jesus's *mašal* and the Chinese *yùyán*. But the similarities are striking, both on the stylistic level, as well as in terms of social and rhetoric function.<sup>10</sup> Let us quote Ruben Zimmermann's definition of the New Testament parable, which is perhaps the best one:

A parable is a short narrative (1) fictional (2) text that is related in the narrated world to known reality (3) but, by way of implicit or explicit transfer signals, makes it understood that the meaning of the narration must be differentiated from the literal words of the text (4). In its appeal structure (5) it challenges the reader to carry out a metaphoric transfer of meaning that is steered by co-text and context information (6) (Zimmermann 2009).

This definition perfectly corresponds to the characteristics of the *yùyán*, with only one minor difference: the reality of the narrative. Zimmermann further explains:

A parable demonstrates a close relationship to reality... That which is narrated in parables could have indeed taken place in that way... Parables are clearly different from fantastic

<sup>8</sup> Domaradzki 2013: 59. For a similar discussion in English, see Cernušková 2016: 138.

<sup>9</sup> See Bartnicki (2010: 231–239) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, a more in-depth comparative analysis of Chinese *yùyán* and New Testament parables falls outside the scope of this paper.

narratives (science fiction) or apocalyptic visions. This relationship to reality also differentiates them from fables, in which, for example, animals or plants can speak and act anthropomorphically or from myths, which extend beyond the general world of experience (ibid.).

As we shall see below, many Chinese *yùyán*, especially in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, are deeply rooted in the imaginary and are far from real human experience.

Does this discrepancy discredit in any way the usage of the term *parable* in the context of Chinese *yùyán*? I argue it does not. In Western literary studies there is a strong consensus that ancient Greek *parabolē* and New Testament *mašal*, regardless of their differences, can be commonly called *parables*. While Chinese pre-Qín short narratives conceptualized as *yùyán* by modern Chinese scholars include some texts that could be perhaps better defined as fables or fantasy tales, they do not overshadow the bulk of the preserved *yùyán*, which conform to Zimmermann's definition. Therefore, the close resemblance of the Chinese *yùyán* tradition to Greek and Hebrew parables indicates that the use of the term *parable* in the Chinese context is fully justifiable.

### The *Zhuāngzǐ* and pre-Qín parables

As mentioned above, the *Zhuāngzǐ* belongs to a group of texts that demonstrate ample usage of parable as a tool of instruction or persuasion. In this respect, the *Zhuāngzǐ* is part of a wider phenomenon that made its mark on the prose of the fourth and third centuries BC. Although most Chinese scholars trace the history of the parable back to the metaphors of the *Yijing* 易經 and the *Shijing* 詩經<sup>11</sup>, the earliest examples of parables in their full, mature form can be found in the *Mèngzǐ* 孟子.

The appearance and popularity of the parable in the third century BC is the effect of two processes. On one hand, the rise of this genre bears witness to the rapid development of prose and discursive writing. Starting with the writings of *Mòzǐ* 墨子 and *Shāngjūnshū* 商君書, philosophical texts from the fifth to the third century BC became increasingly personalized and direct. Rather than merely preserving the verbal utterances and oral teachings of the masters, they began to function as truly discursive prose, written to be read, and building argumentation aimed at persuading readers rather than listeners. This change is demonstrated by the marked difference between works such as the *Lúnyǔ* 論語 and much of the *Mèngzǐ* on one hand, and, on the other, highly personalized and strongly persuasive works such as the *Xúnzǐ* 荀子 and the *Hán Fēizǐ*, where we almost feel as if we are debating their authors, Xún Kuàng 荀況 and Hán Fēi 韓非, respectively. Almost without exception, the later into the third century a text comes from, the more persuasive and the more personal it becomes.

The second factor behind the rise of the parable is closely linked with the first, but it is of a sociopolitical nature. With the increasing mobility of educated elites working as advisers, strategists, diplomats, and ministers of kings and nobles, competition for the most lucrative posts became the dominant force shaping the careers and lives of these erudite experts. Also, with growing tension between the states, and the emergence of

<sup>11</sup> See Wáng Huànbǎo 1962: 8, Gōng Mù 1984: 28–32, Chén Púqīng 1998: 6, and others.

Qín as the most powerful and expansive kingdom, the demand for knowledge among the rulers rose as well, as expertise was viewed as the most effective way to strengthen one's influence and preserve one's rule. As explicitly shown in the *Zhànguó cè*, parable became a popular tool of persuasion used in political and diplomatic discourse. More than ninety parables have been preserved in this book, in addition to a similar number of other passages that use some form of indirect, metaphorical speech. Together, they comprise nearly one-third of the *Zhànguó cè*.

The *Lǚshì chūnqiū* contains far fewer parables. This intriguing almanac was ordered by Lǚ Bùwéi 呂不韋 and was intended to have an instructive function for the Qín ruler; it therefore exhibits a very orderly structure in which there is only limited space for persuasive discourse.

Lǚ Bùwéi and Hán Fēi lived just before the brutal climax of the unification process of 'All under Heaven' under Qín rule in 221 BC. Zhuāng Zhōu, as we believe, lived a century earlier, when Qín did not yet dominate the political scene, but when the kingdoms were already engaged in ruthless rivalry and warfare. From this perspective, the wide use of *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* falls within the general tendency of prose from the period.<sup>12</sup>

So what exactly are the traits of a pre-Qín parable? Some easily noticeable characteristics enumerated by earlier scholars (but ones which are by no means distinctive), include

1. brief form: these parables can be as short as one sentence and rarely develop into several paragraphs;
2. embedded nature: most parables are embedded in longer narratives, usually the dialogues of historical characters;
3. concentration on human characters, rather than animals or imaginary characters: historical or legendary figures are usually evoked, as are the "common types" of contemporary China, such as "a man from Sòng".

There are, however, many exceptions to these generalizations. For example, many *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* are long, and not all are embedded. In the *Hán Fēizǐ* the majority of them function as fully-independent texts. Also main characters are not always human. In the *Zhuāngzǐ* they can be inanimate objects and imaginary beings, while the *Zhànguó cè* includes several fable-type animal stories.

Because formal descriptions failed to define Chinese parables successfully, in the late 1980s and in the 1990s scholars turned primarily to two aspects of such texts: their narrative form and allegorical content (Chén Púqīng 1987: 4). Other researchers also explored philosophical and moral messages (Níng Xī 1992: 4, also Lǐ Fùxuān and Lǐ Yàn 1998: 4–5). Thus, pre-Qín parables were found to be narrative in form and persuasive in their mode of communication. Their primary function is not informative, but rather instructive. They communicate a certain moral, philosophical, or political truth through indirect means (such as metaphor or allegory).

More recently, however, researchers in China, such as Ráo Lóngshǔn (2001), Cháng Sēn (2005), and Lín Wénqǐ (2006), have questioned such definitions as well, pointing out the open nature of pre-Qín parables and their complex and unobvious communicative value.

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<sup>12</sup> See especially Gōng Mù 1984: 71, and Chén Púqīng 1992: 199–202.

How do the *yùyán* of the *Zhuāngzǐ* fit into the picture? Not particularly well it seems. The vast majority of pre-Qín parables is built around historical or legendary figures and events that contemporary readers were familiar with.<sup>13</sup> The *Zhuāngzǐ* rests heavily on characters from mythology or those that we often cannot place exactly in any known context. Jiān Wú 肩吾 and Lián Shu 連叔 from chapter 1, Nánguō Zīqí 南郭子綦 from chapters 2, 4, 6, 24, and 27,<sup>14</sup> Qín Shī 秦失 from chapter 3, Bóhūn Wúrén 伯昏無人 from chapters 5, 21, and 32, Bǔliáng Yī 卜梁倚 from chapter 6, and many others figures concreate the world of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, but are hardly present in any other pre-Qín contexts.<sup>15</sup> Of course, numerous parables are built around well-known characters: kings, hermits of ancient times, and especially Confucius and his disciples (there are no less than thirty-seven *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* with Confucius as one of the main characters). Nevertheless, we can see distinctly that the bulk of *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* do not originate from the historical anecdote tradition, but are clearly creations of a literary genius of unmatched imagination. Thus, they differ greatly from the strongly political *Zhànguó cè* and from works which are built on the vast, historical knowledge of their authors, the *Hán Fēizǐ* and *Lǚshì chūnqiū*.

Another aspect that makes analysis of the *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* somewhat problematic is the fact that not all of them can be clearly interpreted from the didactic or even persuasive point of view. We have no trouble explaining why the authors of the *Zhànguó cè*, the *Hán Fēizǐ*, and the *Lǚshì chūnqiū* use particular parables. They are either well embedded in historical context (as in the *Zhànguó cè*) or in discursive context (as in the *Hán Fēizǐ* and the *Lǚshì chūnqiū*). The *Zhànguó cè* usually reveals the actual practical effect of a given parable (for example, a ruler changing his decision about an important issue or the increased effectiveness of a given action). In the *Hán Fēizǐ*'s "Chǔshuō", parables are grouped according to topics, which make their persuasive goal extra clear. In the *Zhuāngzǐ*, on the other hand, the reader is often left in the dark as to the true persuasive intention (possible interpretations?) of a certain *yùyán*. Let us just mention two passages about Nánguō Zīqí (passage 4 of chapter 6 "The Great Ancestral Teacher", and passage 9 of chapter 24 "Ghostless Xu") as two examples of texts that can be interpreted in several ways and cannot be reduced to simple tools of rhetoric persuasion.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is a very special piece of literature in respect to its use of parables as well. This fact was pointed out by Ráo Lòngsūn (2001), who calls for separating the *yùyán* tradition in the *Zhuāngzǐ* from all other pre-Qín parables. Ráo concludes that in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, the *yùyán* function as a separate, independent genre, while in other texts of the period parables (in his words "zhūzǐ yùyán 諸子寓言", or 'parables of the masters') are nothing more than a persuasive, stylistic device (Rao Longsun 2001: 200–205). To further underline this difference in the English language, I propose using the term *parable* to describe all pre-Qín allegorical narratives as defined by Zimmermann, and reserving the

<sup>13</sup> In this way they fit closely with Zimmermann's definition of "fictional text that is related in the narrated world to known reality"; see Zimmermann 2009.

<sup>14</sup> The alternative names of Nánbó Zīqí 南伯子綦, Nánbó Zīkuí 南伯子葵, and Dōngguō Zīqí 東郭子綦 probably refer to the same person.

<sup>15</sup> With the exception of the *Lièzǐ*, in which many of these characters also appear, including Nánbó Zīqí 南伯子綦 and Bóhūn Wúrén 伯昏無人. These commonalities are not surprising because both texts share many passages and show close affinity in theme and style.

untranslated term *yùrán* to refer to the very unique parable tradition of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. In this way, the term *yùrán* can symbolically “find its way back” to the original context in which it first appeared in the Chinese language.

### The unique traits of the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s *yùrán*

The *yùrán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* possess three unique features that set this work apart from other writings from this period: the wide occurrence of purely imaginative narratives in a quasi-mythological setting, structural complexity, and the intriguing “self-portrait” of Zhuāng Zhōu himself.

Eighteen *yùrán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* can be labelled as “pure fantasy”, nine of which are hardly in any way connected with ordinary human experience. They epitomize literary creativity and imagination. Perhaps the most widely known are the short passages about boring holes in Wonton (Húndùn 渾沌; *Zhuāngzǐ* 7.7) and the Amorphous (Xiàngwǎng 象罔) finding the Yellow Emperor's lost pearl of mystery (*Zhuāngzǐ* 12.4). Without elaborating too much on the content of each of these fascinating and intriguing passages, let us just list the main characters: Penumbra and Shadow (Wǎngliǎng 罔兩 and Jǐng 景, respectively; 2.13; 27.6), Anonymous (Wúmíng rén 無名人; 7.3), Vast Obscurity (Hóngméng 鴻蒙; 11.5), the Wind (Fēng 風; 17.2), Wearcoat (Pīyī 被衣 22.3), and Nonexistent Existence (Wúyǒu 無有; 22.8).

The form of these passages is consistent with other parables, but the content puts them on a completely new level of abstract thinking. As such they have absolutely no parallels in pre-Qín literature. This small sample from chapter 22 “Knowledge Wanders North” demonstrates their unique nature:

Resplendent Light inquired of Nonexistent Existence, saying, “Master, do you exist or do you not exist?”

Not getting an answer to his question, Resplendent Light looked at the other's sunken, hollow appearance intently. For a whole day, he looked at him but couldn't see him, listened to him but couldn't hear him, groped for him but couldn't grasp him.

“The ultimate!” said Resplendent Light. “Who else could attain such a state? I can conceive of the existence of nonexistence, but not of the nonexistence of nonexistence. And when it comes to the nonexistence of existence, how can one attain such a state?” (Mair 1998: 220)

Some *yùrán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* are embedded in larger narrative passages, as is the case with other texts of the period, and are clearly used to enhance the persuasive force of argumentation. This device is often employed in the *Zhànguó cè*, where parables usually depend heavily on specific situational context. In the *Zhuāngzǐ*, on the other hand, many *yùrán* function as fully independent texts. Some, such as chapters 30 “Discursing on Swords” and 31 “An Old Fisherman” in their entirety, can even be considered short stories of their own right.

There are, however, many others that are shorter and embedded in larger narrations. Apart from the more typical form of embedding present in the *Zhànguó cè* and other pre-Qín texts, some *yùrán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* are embedded in a very intricate way. In three



instances, two separate *yùyán* are placed in the very same passage.<sup>16</sup> The last passage of chapter 19 “Understanding Life” contains an interesting example of “double embedding”. The whole passage is written as a parable and tells the story of one Sūn Xiū 孫休, who visits Biān Qingzǐ 扁慶子 asking for instructions. After Sūn leaves, Master Biān converses with his students, and answers one of their questions using a *yùyán* on a bird kept captive by the ruler of the Lǚ state. This *yùyán* is embedded in the whole passage, which itself is a typical *yùyán*, hence the double embedding.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting internal passage structure found in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is that of the very opening. The first two passages contain one *yùyán* each, but these *yùyán* are embedded in a complex structure, which can be broken down schematically as follows:

1. story 1: Kūn and Péng
2. story 2: Péng
3. example 1: boat versus mustard seed = a question of scale
4. *yùyán* 1: cicada and dovelet versus Péng
5. example 2: going for a trip to the suburbs versus a long journey = a question of scale
6. explanation
7. example 3: mushroom = short life
8. example 4: locust = short life
9. example 5: tortoise Dark Spirit = long life
10. example 6: cedrela tree = long life
11. example 7: Progenitor Péng = short life, a question of scale
12. story 3: Kūn and Péng
13. *yùyán* 2: marsh sparrow versus Péng
14. explanation
15. example 8: Master Sòng = a sage, but also limited
16. example 9: Lièzǐ = a master, but also limited
17. concluding message: “the ultimate man has no self, the spiritual person has no accomplishment, and the sage has no name.” (Mair 1998: 5–6)

Three versions of the story of Péng and Kūn are provided, and the notion of scale and point of view is illustrated through no less than nine different examples and two *yùyán* (or perhaps two versions of the same *yùyán*).<sup>18</sup> These two passages arguably offer one of the most complex narrative structures found in pre-Qín prose. Also, one cannot help but wonder how badly the concluding message fits into the whole philosophical argument. This attests to the fact that the text as we know it today must have gone through numerous editorial changes.

As observed by Lǐ Fùxuān and Lǐ Yàn, the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s *yùyán* feature one more unique trait in comparison to other works of pre-Qín prose – the intriguing “self-portrait” of Zhuāng Zhōu himself.<sup>19</sup> In other texts of the period, authors appear in two ways: they

<sup>16</sup> These are the following passages: 17.4, 20.5, and 24.5.

<sup>17</sup> For some reason, the passage is excluded from this chapter in Victor Mair's translation of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, whereas it is present in all main Chinese editions of the text.

<sup>18</sup> Example is a simple device drawing parallels and showing similarities. It thus differs from parable due to lack of narration and, most of all, lack of allegorical content.

<sup>19</sup> Lǐ Fùxuān and Lǐ Yàn 1998: 102. Given the complicated history of the *Zhuāngzǐ* like that of any other ancient Chinese text, the presumed “self-portrait” has to be understood as a quality of the text, not necessarily as the “autobiography” of one single author.

are either interlocutors in dialogues or their appearance and behaviour is described indirectly by their disciples, who in this way build his image. We can find hundreds of examples illustrating the first case, as a large part of pre-Qin philosophical and political prose is in the form of dialogues. The second case is clearly visible in the *Lúnyǔ*, where Confucius's habits (his refusal to sit on an unevenly spread mat or to nap during the day), behaviour towards others (sympathy, forgiveness), character (humour, eagerness to study), and so forth are recounted by disciples. But it seems that only in the *Zhuāngzǐ* can one encounter the presumed author as a consciously created literary character. Twenty-seven passages are devoted to Zhuāng Zhōu, not including the description in chapter 33 "All Under Heaven", which is clearly a later addition. Ten of them explore the relationship between Zhuāng Zhōu and Huì Shī 惠施 (Huìzǐ 惠子) and record (often with much humour) their philosophical disputes. Others give anecdotes about the master, which of course might not be true (it is almost certain that most of them are later interpolations), but that paint a vivid picture of the eccentric thinker.

Zhuāng Zhōu is portrayed as a hermit who despises fame and career and looks down on authority; he prefers to fish in the Pú River rather than accept a post at the court of Chǔ (*Zhuāngzǐ* 17.5) and refuses a similar offer likening it to a sacrificial ox prepared for slaughter (32.13). He is portrayed as a sage indifferent to death, whether his own (32.14) or that of his dear wife (18.2). He understands human minds and hearts perfectly, ridiculing the pride and cowardice of "sages" (21.5) and exhibiting mistrust towards the true intentions of despotic rulers (32.12). Finally, he is pictured as a person full of sharp wit and inner pride despite suffering poverty (20.6, 26.2, 32.5).

Two other interesting passages can be found in chapter 20 "The Mountain Tree". In the first one, a disciple challenges Zhuāng Zhōu about the contradictory experiences of "the usefulness of being useless" (or "worthlessness and worthiness" in Mair's rendition). Two examples are given – one of a big, old tree and one of a pair of geese. The tree is not felled by a woodcutter because of its seeming uselessness as a source of timber. One of the two geese must be slaughtered. When a host has to choose which one of the two to butcher, he chooses the one that does not honk, as it is, in a way, "less useful" than the other one. And so, while a tree survives because of its uselessness, a goose loses its life for the very same reason. Zhuāng Zhōu laughs and admits that there is no absolute recipe for success in his teachings: "I suppose I'd rather find myself somewhere between worthlessness and worthiness... [although] it can't keep you out of trouble." (Mair 1998: 187) Another anecdote, similar in tone, is recorded in passage 8 of the same chapter. Zhuāng Zhōu watches animals hunt one another, each forgetting about its own safety while pursuing prey and thus falling victim to bigger predators. Ironically, he does not notice that by focusing on the animals he is making exactly the same mistake; he is caught in the act by a park watchman, who takes him for a poacher, and needs to flee. Zhuāng Zhōu is shown as a keen observer, but also as an absent-minded and perhaps slightly clumsy man. Both passages are humorous, painting a very friendly, down-to-earth, and humble picture of the poet-philosopher.

In this context the *yùyán* of the *Zhuāngzǐ* demonstrate a very unique approach to the notion of the author, who not only tries to instruct or persuade us through the use of allegorical narratives, but also decides to "walk into" the very stories themselves. It would be difficult to find similar parables in the *Hán Fēizǐ* or the *Lǚshì chūnqū*. There is but one similar narrative in the *Zhànguó cè*, "Zōu Jì fěng Qí wáng nà jiàn 鄒忌諷齊王納諫" in

the first chapter of the *Qí Strategies*, where Zōu Jì 鄒忌 recounts to King Wēi of Qí what happened to him at home and uses the story as a tool of persuasion. It is, however, just a singular example, and one which structurally resembles a humorous anecdote more than a typical parable.

## Conclusion

Parables as defined by Ruben Zimmermann occur in many major pre-Qín works of literature, including the *Zhuāngzǐ*, which through the wide use of *yùyán* proves to be well anchored in the history of discursive prose of the fourth and third centuries BC. At the same time, the *yùyán* tradition in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, with its focus on the imaginary, diverges somewhat from Zimmermann's definition and is also clearly distinct from other pre-Qín parables. Therefore, treating the *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a very special type of Chinese parable seems fully justified.

While discussions continue among scholars on whether pre-Qín parables as such can be treated as a separate literary genre or rather as a stylistic device only, the *yùyán* of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, whether a separate genre or just a tool of instruction, arguably represent the highest literary achievement of the time. The *yùyán* develop in the *Zhuāngzǐ* in a particular, spectacular way. They demonstrate a complex and heterogeneous structure, an unrivalled richness of themes, and the unmatched imagination of the (real or presumed) author, whose intriguing "self-portrait" is presented to the reader. Most importantly, the *yùyán* of the *Zhuāngzǐ* usher in a new standard of philosophical prose, where all limits on form, imagination, and concept are lifted. Thus, the *yùyán* in the *Zhuāngzǐ* prove to be much more than mere tools of persuasion, but rather a way to move philosophical essay-writing to new realms of imagination and abstract thinking.

At the same time, the *Zhuāngzǐ*'s *yùyán* do not cease to be highly effective rhetorical devices. The images created, whether it be the huge, "useless" tree or the many others not mentioned explicitly in this paper, make a lasting impression on the reader and are indeed exceptionally persuasive.

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