

## Snakes and Dragons, Rat’s Liver and Fly’s Leg: The Butterfly Dream Revisited

Robert E. Allinson

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**Abstract** The *Zhuangzi* begins with Peng, a soaring bird transformed from a bounded fish, which is the first metaphor that points beyond limited standpoints to a higher point of view. The transformation is one-way and symbolizes that there is a higher viewpoint to attain which affords mental freedom and the clarity and scope of great vision. Under the alternate thesis of constant transformation, values and understandings must ceaselessly transform and collapse. All cyclical transformations must collapse into skeptical relativism and confusion. But Peng does not turn back into a fish, and the awakened sage does not fall into a slumber of ignorance and confusion. It is only the thesis of a one-way transformation that leaves the sage in a state of knowledge.

**Keywords** Ultimate awakening · The butterfly dream · The Great Sage dream · External transformation · Skepticism · Relativism

In her article, YANG Xiaomei attempts to resurrect the external transformation thesis (Yang 2005). The fundamental problem in this attempt is that she does not seem to realize the implications set forth in my book that follow from including all values in the external transformation of things (Allinson 1989).<sup>1</sup> By definition, all values must be part of the continuous transformation since all values are clearly part of the class of all things, since the class of all values is a subset of the class of all things. This being the case, her thesis, which also refers to internal transformation as she herself argues, is self-refuting.<sup>2</sup> The result of all of this is a skeptical relativism of all values that

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<sup>1</sup>In that work I set forth the thesis that there are two fallacious interpretations of the butterfly dream to which most if not all interpreters are prey. While Yang’s article is a critique of my book, she does not make specific mention of my classification of interpretations or that hers falls under the classifications.

<sup>2</sup>Yang states that the external transformation is the truth that one wakes up to after one transforms oneself internally. She, thus, strictly speaking, makes use of my interpretation—of a genuine, one-way internal transformation—and the fallacy of external transformation. Unfortunately, the external transformation, by being included, upsets the applecart of the internal transformation, and transforms the unidirectional internal self-transformation thesis (the good thesis I propose) into the fallacy of the confusion hypothesis.

Robert E. Allinson (✉)

Soka University of America, 1 University Drive, Gandhi Hall, Aliso Viejo, CA 92656, USA  
e-mail: rallinson@soka.edu

Yang states she is not favoring, but into which her thesis, as all external transformation theses must—as outlined in my book—ineluctably collapse. Since, on her thesis of continuous transformation, no transformation can be unidirectional, this includes internal transformation as well. Thus, even if the internal transformation could be that all things are in a state of continuous transformation (an interpretation that is not textually justified), then that internal transformation will inevitably transform itself into its opposite, namely, that all things are not in a state of continuous transformation. The thesis is automatically self-refuting.

## 1 The Collapse

Yang's work is, as described in my book, a collapsed external transformation thesis. This is well borne out in her title, which collapses the dreams together since the Great Awakening occurs in the Great Sage dream story, not in the butterfly dream story, and yet the subtitle of her article is "Interpreting the Butterfly Dream Story." Hence, she is either considering that the Great Awakening takes place in the butterfly dream story, which does violence to the text, or she is collapsing the two dreams together, which would appear to indicate that they are making the same point.

Consider the concluding paragraph of Yang's article. She states that, "all things transform from one to another and hence there is no absolute dichotomy between dreaming and waking, butterfly and Zhou, subjectivity and objectivity, life and death, right and wrong, etc." (Yang 2005: 265). First of all, it is important to note that "all things" for Yang is not qualified so that "all" includes everything under it. Notice Yang includes psychical states such as dreaming and waking within her categories of transformation, thus clearly illustrating that by transformation, she does not intend simply physical transformation of physical things. By including "right and wrong" Yang intends values and truth and falsity to be subject to endless transformation. This is clearly contrary to the text as we shall see below.

The problem with Yang's interpretation is that it is not limited to its doing violence to the text. It is evident that Yang includes values in her concept of external transformation (right and wrong). There is thus the more dreadful consequence that all values will be turned topsy-turvy. Gandhi will not be different from Hitler. Yang seems to accept this consequence: "all perspectives of different beings have the [*sic*] equal status, and no one is superior to another" (Yang 2005: 261). As a result of this interpretation, Zhuangzi is plainly turned into a skeptic. Though Yang says that she does not have a skeptical interpretation of Zhuangzi, the continuous transformation thesis, willy-nilly, turns into its opposite: wisdom turns into folly. By its very nature and definition, as argued above, external transformation must collapse into confusion. Then, regrettably, the external transformation thesis will suffer from all the faults of the confusion hypothesis, one of which is the loss of all values.

Yang *asserts* that there is no collapse, but an assertion does not count as an argument. The logic of the argument as pointed out above and in my book is that when all values transform and right turns into wrong, one cannot say that the way of transformation is good. Worse yet, one may take up the position of being a false rather than a true man of old since the two are, according to Yang (contrary to the text) no different from each other. If wisdom can turn to folly, then one can revere the

false men of old. However, this is a *Reductio ad Absurdum* of Yang's thesis and is alone sufficient to set it aside.

There is another problem with the collapse. There is no way one could even be aware of the state of continuous external transformation (should it exist) or even be able to name it as such. One cannot identify transformation as transformation since to be able to see anything correctly one must have correct understanding. But, by definition, there is no difference between correctness and an error. This is why the great philosopher Spinoza said that the consistent skeptic must be mute. How can Yang keep from being a skeptic? She wants to have a non-skeptical interpretation: "I will argue that the Great Sage story does not advocate skepticism" (Yang 2005: 260). But Yang's promise of arguments that Zhuangzi argues that the Sage possesses knowledge is not enough to save Zhuangzi from being a skeptic, if the Sage awakens to endless transformation, which includes the endless transformation of meaning as well. Yang's promised arguments would only create a self-contradictory interpretation of a text. Unfortunately, they do not save Zhuangzi from skepticism; they insure that he must be understood to be a skeptic (see Allinson 1994; 1986).

The last line of Yang's article states that "one no longer remains in the mental state in which one only sees the dichotomy between things" (Yang 2005: 265). This statement implies that sometimes one sees dichotomies and sometimes one does not. How does one differentiate between the time when one does see dichotomies and the time when one does not? If there is no certain mark that distinguishes dichotomies from non-dichotomies, one remains in a state of confusion. In the actual text, there is an emphasis on the certainty of knowing that there is a difference between man and butterfly; thus, it cannot be the case that one "no longer remains in the mental state in which one only sees the dichotomy"; such a statement says too little. According to the text, one transforms to a mental state in which one must see the dichotomy. These are very different observations. One belongs to the imagination of Yang; the other, to the text. The text supports the overall theme that there is a one-way transformation to a higher state. If the difference that must exist were one that could not surely be perceived to exist, then what would be the point of claiming that it must exist? How would one know that it would have to exist unless it could be known? If the difference were (as it seems to be for Yang) the external transformation of things, then this difference would have to be known to exist. But it could not, on Yang's thesis, be known to exist, since, if meaning does not exist, knowledge cannot exist.

## 2 The Dream

Yang agrees with me that one does not need to resort to a dream metaphor to come up with the idea of external transformation: "It is true that we do not have to appeal to a dream to express the idea that everything is in a state of endless change" (Yang 2005: 257). She goes on to say, "However, this is also true of Allinson's interpretation" (Yang 2005: 257). Her argument that this is true of my interpretation as well (keeping in mind that *she agrees she does not need the dream metaphor for hers which makes Zhuangzi's use of a dream story otiose*) is solely that: "We do not have to appeal to a

dream to express the idea that there is a distinction between fantasy and reality either” (Yang 2005: 257).<sup>3</sup>

All that Yang can say on behalf of her argument that Great Awakening is not awakening to know that a dream is a dream is that “The awakening that a dream is but a dream is not a great awakening, and *anyone who is not mentally deranged knows the distinction between a dream and reality*” (Yang 2005: 260, emphasis added). First of all, it is explicitly stated in the Great Sage dream story that the Great Awakening is the awakening that all is a Great Dream. Yang’s statement is contrary to the text, which does not state that this is a story concerning an ordinary awakening in which one knows that one has awakened from an ordinary dream. This would be to take the dream analogy literally, which Yang claims she is not doing.

Yang goes further: “if this is the content of the Great Awakening, we would not be able to explain the claim in the text that Confucius and Zhuangzi himself are but a dream” (Yang 2005: 260). The point is that philosophers can (and do) philosophize within a dream. There is no contradiction here at all; it simply shows off the sophistication of the Great Sage dream story. Philosophy can and does take place prior to a Great Awakening. Are we awakened to the knowledge that humans turn into butterflies and vice-versa? Surely, this cannot be Zhuangzi’s meaning, for it would be pointless and too contrary to fact if this story were to be interpreted literally. Zhuangzi’s use of creatures is metaphorical. His use of Peng, a creature that transforms from fish into bird, is not meant as a literal description of a biological phenomenon. It is a metaphorical message. Likewise with the butterfly and man: the butterfly is no symbol of external transformation unless one interprets the dream literally and not metaphorically. It is a symbol of *internal* transformation. The butterfly transforms from an ugly worm into one of the most beautiful of creatures—so symbolic of beauty that Chinese ladies of the Court attempted to capture butterflies in their nets. Zhuangzi was not a hack poet who mixed his metaphors. He was one of the greatest of Chinese poets as well as one of the greatest of Chinese philosophers. His symbolic use of a butterfly here as an embodiment of internal transformation is no different from his use of a soaring bird transforming from a fish in chapter 1 to symbolize internal transformation.

Zhuangzi’s metaphors develop as I have argued in my book (Allinson 1989: 51–70). The story that seeds the book is the beginning of chapter 1, where a fish is transformed into a bird. It is a one-way transformation. The bird does not turn back into a fish! This physical transformation—surely a metaphor—presages the transformation from ignorance to knowledge, from unfreedom to freedom. It is my

<sup>3</sup> The point is, Zhuangzi *did* feel the need to use the dream metaphor. Zhuangzi’s key passage involves waking up from a dream, and, what is more, the dream is stated to refer to what we thought about things: “And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream.” How could the great dream be our thinking that everything did not change? Who really thinks that everything remains the same? It is plain from the *use* of the dream argument that it is not being used to stand for becoming aware of external transformation. Yang agrees with this point, but if the key dream argument is not necessary to express the idea that everything is in a state of endless change, and Zhuangzi (*not only Allinson*) uses it, Zhuangzi *must not be using it to stand for external transformation*. Yang and I agree that the key argument is the dream argument. The dream argument makes its point in waking up from the dream. If the dream argument is not necessary to express the idea that everything is in a state of endless change, then *a fortiori* the dream argument must not be intended to express the idea that what we awaken to is the awareness that everything is in a state of endless change.

interpretation, not Yang's, that makes more sense of the inner chapters as a whole.<sup>4</sup> This key story, the lead story of the *Zhuangzi*, only makes sense with the thesis of self-transformation, which is the cardinal theme of my commentary. The message of the *Zhuangzi* is a wake-up call to the fact that we can one day tell the difference between illusion and knowledge, between dream and reality, that we can and *will* be able to see the dichotomy between things. Such a statement coheres well with my alteration of the text, an alteration that Yang warns us against, although according to the great classicist and translator Burton Watson, my re-arrangement of the text is justifiable (Watson 1993).

### 3 The Loss of All Values

Yang wishes to keep my thesis of a one-way direction awakening and add to it the thesis of external transformation. The difference between us lies in Yang's assertion that external transformation is "not incompatible with the one-way direction awakening" (internal transformation) (Yang 2005: 258). However, as I have argued above, *on the contrary, endless transformation is incompatible with a one-way direction awakening*. External transformation, the merging of all values into all other values, must lead to confusion and, much worse, to relativism. When all values are topsyturvy as in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "When Fair is foul and foul is Fair," this is the prelude to evil deeds. Confusion reigns because values seem to be turned upside down. If no state of confusion is privileged, how can internal transformation be a transformation from ignorance to knowledge?

If all transformation is endless and all changes cycle into all other changes, then so do all values. There is no way to hold onto a one-way direction awakening if one's awakening is to ignorance. If one is ignorant, one cannot choose between values. One day, one may choose to follow Gandhi; the next day, one may choose to follow Hitler. In Yang's own words, "distinctions between ... wisdom and stupidity ... will be dissolved" (Yang 2005: 264–5).<sup>5</sup> If anything can mean anything at all, then we are in a state of confusion. It is precisely this sort of confusion that I argue that Zhuangzi argues against in his famous discussion of words and the chirping of birds in the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, a chapter which Yang considers to be central to *Zhuangzi*. Yet for some reason she has chosen not to consider this story despite the fact that much attention is given to it in my book, the interpretation of which Yang is supposedly set upon criticizing (Allinson 1989: 14–22).

For Yang, "The butterfly dream affirms the idea of external transformation. The idea of external transformation can well be the content of one's realization after

<sup>4</sup> Yang states: "Unlike Allinson, I believe that we can fully understand the Great Sage story through understanding the theme of the second chapter and Zhuangzi's philosophy as a whole" (Yang 2005: 262). On the contrary, it is my interpretation of the Great Sage story as the capstone of Zhuangzi's philosophy as a whole that makes sense of the previous stories such as the story of Peng, transforming from a fish to a bird, that begins chapter 1. Yang omits discussion of this chapter altogether.

<sup>5</sup> While Yang here is referring to equality and not external transformation, one must consider that, according to Yang, "Another reason that we should prefer the external transformation interpretation is that it fits Zhuangzi's idea of equality better than does Allinson's interpretation" (Yang 2005: 263). If the external transformation thesis intends this sort of equality (where wisdom and stupidity are equalized), Yang has presented another reason to reject the external transformation thesis.

waking up from the dream: one no longer remains in the mental state in which one only sees the dichotomy between things” (Yang 2005: 265). But according to the logical implications of the external transformation thesis, all distinctions can transform into their opposites. There is no way that one could see some dichotomies as every dichotomy must collapse according to the external transformation thesis. The endless transformation thesis must perforce collapse into the confusion thesis. One cannot be only partially confused. Even to see one thing changing into another requires dichotomizing. If, as Yang would like, what one wakes up to is the external transformation thesis, one inevitably wakes up to confusion. In a state of total confusion, no single case of being able to see a dichotomy is privileged.

Does Yang offer any textual examples that support her thesis of external transformation? She offers only one example of a question about literal external transformation which she does not argue to be a metaphor: “Will it make you into a rat’s liver Or a fly’s leg?” (Yang 2005: 257). Is a single example of an external transformation cited in a text sufficient to support an entire thesis of external transformation? Closely examined, even this passage is not textually intended as a literal example of external transformation. It is obvious from the context of this story that Master Li is attempting to provide solace to Master Lai on the occasion of his (Master Lai’s) imminent death. This story is designed to make a particular point, not provide the foundation for an entire interpretation of the *Zhuangzi*. Zhuangzi makes many different points in the course of his writings. Not every point made is the same.

The interpretation in my book attempted to explain that Zhuangzi sometimes talks on one level and sometimes on another (Allinson: 122–6).<sup>6</sup> Sometimes, he is addressing those who cling to particular standpoints. The fixations on particular standpoints are fraught with relativity, but the higher standpoints are not. The higher values transcend the limits placed on the argumentative stances that mark the outlook of the relative standpoints. The interpretations in my book attempt to make sense of both classes of statements that one finds in the *Zhuangzi*. Otherwise, we will be left with two seemingly conflicting sets of statements, those seemingly favoring relativism and those favoring the attainment of a higher point of being. My interpretation saves the text from incoherency. The thesis of endless transformation plunges the text into incoherency.

If the Great Sage is left in a state of befuddlement, witnessing the endless changes of all things, including his own state of transcendent knowledge, which must perforce plummet into ignorance according to the endless and thus inclusive of a two-way or reciprocal direction of transformation, then this clearly is not clarity, and manifestly this is not illumination. Endless transformation means that one’s values are endlessly changing. If one’s values are endlessly changing, then one must be in a state of confusion. If the Great Sage is to be left with knowledge, and this is a conclusion that Yang desires, she must give up her attempt to resuscitate the endless transformation thesis and let it die a natural death.

Does the Great Sage dream story support Yang’s interpretation? There is no inkling in the Great Sage dream story that the Ultimate Awakening is an awareness of external transformation. Even according to Yang, “In the Great Sage story, Zhuangzi criticizes our uncritical confidence in our judgments” (Yang 2005: 260).

<sup>6</sup> This approach, key to my interpretation, is, unfortunately, not considered by Yang.



This is what Yang takes to be the meaning of the Great Sage dream story, not an awareness of continuous transformation! Apart from this inconsistency in her argument, it is evident that any philosopher, including one who has not achieved a Great Awakening, can do this. This is the normal business of philosophy. It would be overkill if this is what the Great Awakening accomplished. It is important to remember that Yang herself does not interpret the Great Sage dream as standing for becoming aware of continuous transformation. Her argument for why the Great Sage dream is about “challenging our uncritical confidence or belief in our judgments” provides supporting evidence that even this meager accomplishment has little to do with the awareness of external transformation. Consider one of the quoted passages: “Yet fools think they are awake, so confident that they know what they are, princes, herdsmen, incorrigible!” (Yang 2005: 260). The real point here is that it is evident that the Great Sage dream is *not* about the external transformation of things. If the butterfly dream is about the external transformation of things (according to Yang), then the two stories are making contradictory points. For external transformation collapses into confusion and the Sage awakens to knowledge.

In the Great Sage dream story it states, “And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream” (Allinson 1989: 104). Most importantly, the Great Sage is said to possess knowledge. This is incompatible with confusion. If the butterfly dream ends in endless transformation, then the butterfly dream ends in confusion. *If everything were in a state of endless transformation, one could not even be aware of it.* It is not the case as Yang states “that all beings in the universe are equal, all perspectives of different beings have the equal status, and no one is superior to another. However, Zhuangzi clearly holds this belief: ‘Mao-jiang and Lady Li were beautiful in the eyes of men; but when the fish saw them they plunged deep, when the birds saw them they flew high, when the deer saw them they broke into a run. Which of these four knows what is truly beautiful in the world? In my judgment the principles of Goodwill and Duty, the paths of “that’s it, that’s not,” are inextricably confused; how could I know how to discriminate between them?’” (Yang 2005: 261).

This conclusion is unjustified by the text. The text does not say that all four are equally correct. All the text says is that the four perspectives do not know. The higher perspective to be gained by the sage is one which is able to transcend the four perspectives and to see the limitations of each. The sage does not forget the distinctions: she or he understands them. The “my judgment” here refers to the stage prior to waking up: it does not refer to the perspective of the awakened sage.

In fact, the quotation from FUNG Yu-lan that Yang cites supports my point of view, not Yang’s. For Fung says: “If we do not select some one thing as being right, the points of view of everyone in the world are all equally right” (Yang 2005: 261). It is only if we choose what is right, the way of the awakening of the sage, that we will maintain the distinction between knowledge and ignorance. If we do not select something that is right, then all points of view will be all equally right and we will have skepticism. According to Yang, “if this is the content of the Great Awakening, we would not be able to explain the claim in the text that Confucius and Zhuangzi himself are but a dream” (Yang 2005: 261). But, why not? We do not even need to have a Great Awakening to know that Confucius and Zhuangzi are in a dream. In any case, the reference to philosophers is but a metaphor. Zhuangzi philosophizing must

be philosophizing in a dream. All language, all “this” and “that,” all separation of subject and object are part of the Great Dream. The Great Awakening rises above “this” and “that,” but it does not hold that every “this” is equal to every “that.” If every “this” is equal to every “that,” this is descriptive, not normative. If all value claims are equal, then there is no normative at all. To rise above conventional value judgments is not to rise above all norms.

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