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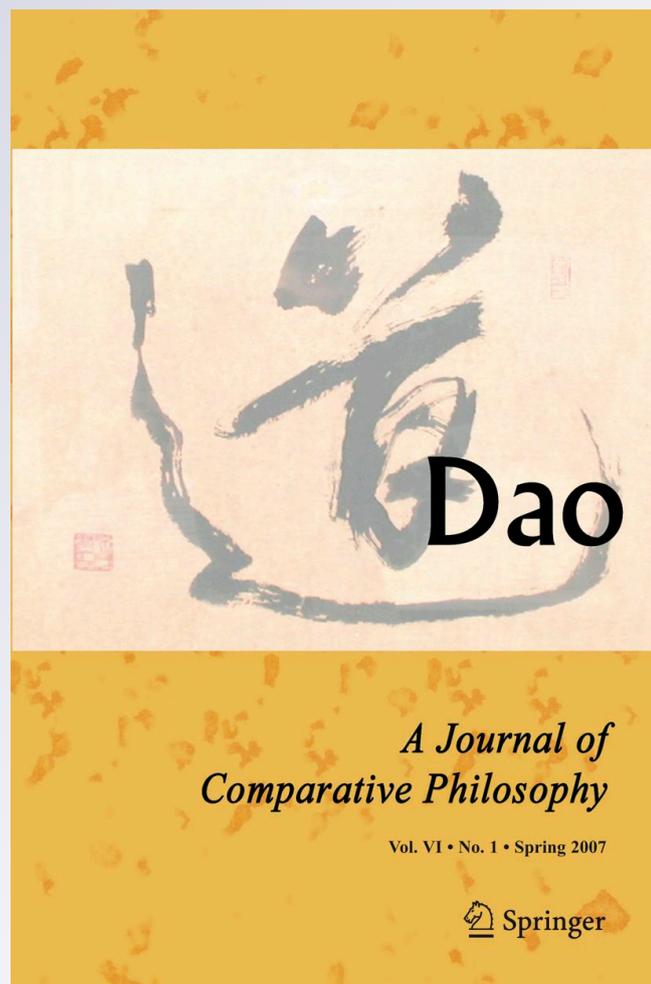
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## A Different Type of Individualism in *Zhuangzi*

XU Keqian 徐克謙

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**Abstract** Individualism is not only a Western tradition. In the *Zhuangzi* we can also identify some elements which may be appropriately attributed to “individualism.” However, due to its particular cultural and philosophical background, Zhuangzian individualism has unique characteristics, which distinguish it from the variety of other individualist thoughts that have emerged in the West. Zhuangzi has a dynamic and open view on individual “self,” considering individuals as changing and unique beings rather than fixed and interchangeable “atoms”; he sets the unlimited Dao as the ultimate source for individuals to conform to, thus releasing individual mind into a realm of infinite openness and freedom. The Zhuangzian individualism is “inward” rather than “outward,” concentrating on individual spirit rather than material interests and rights in social reality. The individualism in the *Zhuangzi* provides a spiritual space for the development of individuality in ancient China. It also provides an alternative understanding of individual as an existence.

**Keywords** Individualism · Zhuangzi · Daoism

### 1 Introduction

In Chinese academic vocabulary, “individualism” is a new term imported from the West in the modern times. Yet it has been widely used, and the discussion related to it does provide a methodological approach to the fundamental and universal issues concerning the basic relationship of human existence: the relationship between individual and society, particularity and generality, part and whole, one and many, members and body, etc. However, it has long been a controversial issue whether there is a tradition of individualism in ancient Chinese philosophy and culture. A widely accepted inference in much research concerning traditional Chinese culture and society is that collectivism or communalism is a prominent feature of traditional Chinese culture, which requires people to give priority to the general goal and interests of their family, clan, state, or nation, while the value of independence, freedom, and integrity of individuals are

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frequently neglected or even oppressed. For instance, the famous modern Chinese scholar LIANG Shuming once pointed out: “The biggest lacuna in Chinese culture is that the individuality has never been discovered” (Liang 1949: 221). Based on his “mass noun” and “part-whole” understanding and interpretation of Chinese language, Chad Hansen believes that the conceptual structure of Chinese language is not individualistic: “both metaphysical theories and methodological (philosophy of science) theories in the Chinese tradition are nonindividualistic” (Hansen 1985: 38). Consequently he declares that “we may justifiably generalize that there is no individualism in Chinese philosophy” (Hansen 1985: 54).

Contrarily, other researchers discovered a tradition of individualism in Chinese philosophy and culture as early as pre-Qin time. Wm. T. de Bary points out that in the earlier Chinese tradition the problem of the “individual” was the subject of as much thought and discussion as in the West, so the problem of “individualism” has existed in ancient China (De Bary 1991: 2). Certain kinds of individualism or elements of individualism have been spotted by researchs on the philosophy of various times and schools in ancient China, e.g. in early Confucianism (King 1985; Xu 2005), Yangism, Later Mohism, and Zhuangzi (Graham 1985; Berling 1985; Wang 1990; Yang 2005), in the Wei-Jin Neo-Daoist movement (Yu 1985), and in Song-Ming Neo Confucianism (De Bary 1985). Research with wider coverage on the topic of individualism in early China by Erica Brindley has also recently appeared (Brindley 2010).

In my opinion, individualism not only does exist in Chinese philosophy and Chinese culture, but also exhibits in different levels and forms. Whether at the level of the so-called elite culture or that of the grass root culture, the autonomy and integrity of individuals, to a certain degree and under certain conditions, have been not only recognized but sometimes even encouraged. In elite levels it is usually represented as the admiration of an independent personality of individual intellectuals. In the grass root level it often manifests as a kind of individual survival wisdom, as expressed in the common saying of “If one does not consider and do things for oneself, the person will be destroyed by the Heaven and Earth.”<sup>1</sup> Even in mainstream Confucianism, which is considered the main resource of collectivism and communalism, there has also been a continuation of self and individual concern, which may also be called a kind of individualism, as Wm. T. de Bary has correctly observed (de Bary 1991). But the most original, distinct, and influential thought on individualism in ancient China is vividly demonstrated in the book of *Zhuangzi*.<sup>2</sup> Actually, in the history of Chinese culture, the

<sup>1</sup> This Chinese common saying (*ren bu wei ji tian shu di mie* 人不為己天誅地滅) is usually translated into English as “Every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost.” But they have different cultural backgrounds and implications.

<sup>2</sup> It is widely accepted that not all the texts in the book of *Zhuangzi* were written by the man named Zhuangzi in the mid-Warring States period, despite the fact that scholars still have different opinions on what and how many parts in the book were or were not written by him. (For discussions of the textual authenticity of the *Zhuangzi*, see Ren 1962: 178–188; Liu 1993: 3–57; Graham 1990: 296–301; Also see Cui 1992: 67–103; Loewe 1993: 56–66.) However, the thoughts in different parts of the book of *Zhuangzi* still have a general consistency, and they have influenced the later generations as a whole. For the latter generations in ancient China, the thought of Zhuangzi was just the thought in the *Zhuangzi*. Since my paper is focusing on a possible tradition originated in the book of *Zhuangzi*, I use materials from most parts in the book to support my discussion, excluding only a very few fragments that have been solidly testified as not belonging to the original book at all. For convenience I sometimes use “Zhuangzi” to represent the book of *Zhuangzi* in this essay.

person Zhuangzi and his thought has often been considered an idol and symbol of individual freedom and liberty. XIAO Gongquan even believes that Zhuangzi's thought is the most thorough individualism and the most extreme liberalism of all times and all countries (Xiao 1998: 175).

However, compared with other versions of theories of individualism which appeared in different times and different places, the individualism represented in the *Zhuangzi* was bred under a quite different social and cultural background and based on a unique Daoist philosophy, which makes it distinguishable with special characteristics. These characteristics may explain why this type of individualism can frequently coexist and sometimes even mutually complement with Confucianism in the thought of one person without conflict. These characteristics may also explain why it has functioned differently in the Chinese social-cultural system and did not play the same role modern Western individualism has played in Western society.

In this essay I will analyze the concept of individual and the representation of individualist value in the *Zhuangzi*, give an account of the social-cultural and philosophical background of this kind of individualism, discuss the unique characteristics which make the Zhuangzian individualism distinguished from some of the Western versions of individualism, in order to demonstrate the special contribution and influence it has given to ancient Chinese philosophy and culture.

## 2 The Concept of the Individual and Values of Individualism in *Zhuangzi*

"Individualism" is "a word that has come to be used with an unusual lack of precision" (Lukes 1973: 1). It has "carried widely varying connotations in differing contexts and different times" (Lukes 1973: 26).<sup>3</sup> However, with its characteristics of "indeterminate shape, evocative power ... announcement of historic changes," and "incantatory use by visionaries" (Birnbau and Leca 1990: 1), this term has been widely used in different and sometimes even contradictory theories to express certain similar values or orientations for different purposes. In his excellent analysis of the component ideas variously expressed and combined by the term "individualism," Lukes has identified some core values of individualism, such as the intrinsic value or dignity of individual human beings, autonomy or self-direction, privacy, self development, etc., which he believes are the basic elements of the thought of equality and freedom. He also distinguishes different theories of "individualism" which have existed in the history and in different realms, such as political individualism, economic individualism, religious individualism, ethical individualism, and individualism in epistemology and methodology. Lukes's research also indicates that, despite the complicated relations between the core values of individualism and those different theories of individualism, one does not have to accept all of these theories in order to uphold those values. Furthermore, he indicates that if we treat those core values of individualism seriously, we have to reject some of these existing theories of individualism (Lukes 1973).

<sup>3</sup> For the varied and dynamic meanings of "individualism" in French, German, Italian, American, and British history of ideas and ideologies, see Lukes 1971 and Lukes 1973.

Enlightened by Lukes's analysis of individualism, we can find that, although in the *Zhuangzi* there may be no systematic theories that match those Western theories of individualism, especially those theories developed in modern times, all the core values of individualism mentioned by Lukes are expressed and confirmed in the thought of the *Zhuangzi*, and some of Zhuangzi's stances may even provide better or more thorough protection for those values. In this sense, therefore, we may appropriately say that there is a kind of individualism in the *Zhuangzi*.

Although the equivalent word of "individual" in modern Chinese vocabulary, i.e., "ge ren 個人" does not appear in the *Zhuangzi* (nor in any other early Chinese texts), Zhuangzi did use other ancient words to express the concept of "individual," such as "ji 己", "du 獨". However, according to Chad Hansen's "mass noun" hypothesis of Chinese language and his "part-whole" understanding of Chinese conceptual structure (Hansen 1972), the relationship between a particular individual and other individuals in the Chinese language is a relation of "part and whole" rather than that of "one and many." Therefore the concept of the individual in its Western sense seems unthinkable and thus does not exist in ancient Chinese. Hansen's inference, together with its theoretic rationale, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, is still open to question; but that is beyond the coverage of this essay. Here I only want to challenge Hansen with one point: if in Chinese conceptual structure an individual was only a part of the "whole" composed of other individuals, the individual would have never been complete and perfect when it was separated from that "whole." In other words, a person who lives alone would always be incomplete and imperfect. However, this is not the case, at least in the *Zhuangzi*. As my analysis will indicate, Zhuangzi and similar Daoist philosophers tend to think that the perfection and completeness of an individual's personality are more likely achieved in separation and loneliness. In other words, according to Zhuangzi, "self" can be an integrated and complete individual "one" existing independently from many others and the society, rather than an incomplete "part" of a general "whole."

In the text of the *Zhuangzi* the character of "du 獨" (with the meanings of "lonely," "alone," "sole," "unique," or "independent") was frequently used to indicate an independent and integrated personality,<sup>4</sup> or the ideal status of individual spirit, which was advocated by Zhuangzi. For instance, Zhuangzi admires a lofty man who is different from the common people, for "alone (*du*) he will come, alone (*du*) he will go. He may be called a man with uniqueness (*du*); a man with uniqueness (*du*) may be termed the noblest of all" (*Zhuangzi* 11: 64).<sup>5</sup> Laozi in the book of *Zhuangzi* has been described as one of the men who "discarded everything behind, left all the people in the world, and were standing alone in solitude (*du*)" (*Zhuangzi* 21: 25). Zhuangzi comments on Bo Yi and Shu Qi, the two ancient lofty noble men, as "delighting in their own will alone (*du*), not being engaged with the worldly matters; such was the ideal of these two gentlemen" (*Zhuangzi* 28: 86–87). He also describes himself as one who "came and went alone (*du*) with the spirit of Heaven and earth" (*Zhuangzi* 33: 65–66). All of these emphasize the uniqueness of an individual that Zhuangzi admires and values highly. This is obviously relevant to the concept of individual and individualism.

<sup>4</sup> Wolfgang Bauer points out that the word "du" is more characteristic of a wish for independence than of a desire for isolation (Bauer 1985:159).

<sup>5</sup> The citations of the *Zhuangzi* in this essay are from Guo 1982, and marked according to the *Zhuangzi Yin De*, no. 20 in the Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index series. English translation refers to Watson 1968, Graham 1981, Mair 1994, and Wang 1999, sometimes with my own revision.

To put it concretely, we may observe the core values of individualism, as identified by Steven Lukes, in the book of *Zhuangzi* from the following aspects.

First, individual freedom and liberty. The ultimate goal of the Zhuangzian philosophy is to pursue the “carefree wandering” (*xiao yao you* 逍遙遊) of the individual spirit without any restraints. Zhuangzi hopes that individual spirit can be rid of all the ties and bonds caused by the restrictions of social constructions such as man-made laws, institutions, rituals, moral standards, and worldly concepts. The spirits of individuals should be set free to “come and go alone with the spirit of Heaven and earth” (*Zhuangzi* 33: 65–66) and to “ascend to heaven and wander with the mists” (*Zhuangzi* 3: 61–62). In order to release the spirit and thought from all of those restrictions, he keeps criticizing and negating social constructions in reality. In the book of *Zhuangzi*, we find the fiercest social criticism in ancient China. In his opinion, rulers were just “benighted rulers and confused ministers” (*Zhuangzi* 20: 50), and legal institutions and moral standards “stand for the guard for the benefit of the big robber.” He wants to “destroy and wipe out the laws that the sage has made for the world” and “wipe out and reject (Confucian) benevolence and righteousness” (*Zhuangzi* 10: 1–41), since these are chains and shackles on the body and mind of individuals. Besides “*xiao yao you* 逍遙遊” or “carefree wandering,” Zhuangzi uses two additional terms to express his idea of freedom and liberty: “*xuan jie* 懸解” (*Zhuangzi* 3:19; 6:53), which means to release individual’s life from its current state of up-side-down hanging; and “*tian fang*” (*Zhuangzi* 9: 7), which means to liberate the individual life and let it live in a way according to its heavenly nature. The modern Chinese word “liberation”(*jie fang* 解放) is a derivation from these two terms in the *Zhuangzi*.

Second, the value and dignity of individual life, or “*Zhong Sheng* 重生” in Chinese. This has become one of the most important doctrines in the Daoist religion which developed afterward. For Zhuangzi, life itself is much more valuable than anything else, such as wealth, prestige, political power, etc. Although in the *Zhuangzi* there are some unconventional statements, such as considering death as a natural process of transformation and viewing life and death as a single cord, this can not at all be understood as depreciating the value of life and preferring death. Rather, it is a philosophy of life that tries to calmly accept death as an inevitable part of life, so birth, growing up, ageing, and death are all parts of life and should be all peacefully faced and accepted. It may also function as a psychological therapy to reduce people’s anxiety and fear of their inescapable death and better enjoy their present life. Zhuangzi never encouraged suicide; in fact, the rate of suicide in ancient China was quite likely reduced due to Zhuangzi’s philosophy of life. Therefore Zhuangzi’s opinion of viewing life and death as a single cord is not contradictory to the theory of *Zhong Sheng* 重生 in the *Zhuangzi* in particular and in the Daoist tradition in general. In Chapter 23 of *Zhuangzi*, a discussion by Lao Dan about the “basic rule of guarding life” (*Zhuangzi* 23: 34–38) has been recorded, suggesting that people should give their individual life over everything else, do their best to protect their own life, and enjoy a natural long life. In one of the famous chapters in the inner chapters of the *Zhuangzi*,<sup>6</sup> he gives this advice: “You may do something good but have to be cautious away from getting any fame; you may do something bad but have to be careful in case you would get punished. Follow the middle way as your constant. By this you will be able to protect your body, maintain your life, fend your parents, and enjoy your due years” (*Zhuangzi* 3: 1–2). In

<sup>6</sup> Chapter 3, titled “Yang Sheng Zhu,” was translated as “the secret of caring for life” in Watson 1968, and as “essentials for nurturing life” in Mair 1994.

Chapter 28, there are many examples of people who care about their life much more than anything else, such as the legendary ancient recluse XU You, the father and uncle of Zi Zhou, Shan Juan, and the Farmer of Stone Gate, etc. For all of these people, nothing, not political power, nor secular prestige, nor moral fame, nor material wealth, is comparable to the value of individual life. Zhuangzi commented: “Now the rulership of all under heaven is of supreme importance, yet he would not accept it for fear that it would harm his life! How much less would he let other things harm his life!” (*Zhuangzi* 28: 2–3). He thinks that even the biggest “instrument” such as the top political power of the empire is not worthy enough to exchange with an individual’s personal life. He criticizes that “most of the worldly men today are endangering their own body and abandoning their own life in their greed for things. Isn’t that a big sad!” (*Zhuangzi* 28: 28–29).

Third, independence, autonomy, and privacy of individuals. Zhuangzi can be considered a guru of ancient Chinese eremitism. Of course, eremitism cannot be simply equated to individualism, but just as Wolfgang Bauer pointed out, eremitism in ancient China did share some important characteristics with individualism, and it “contributed a great deal to the evolution of typically Chinese variety of individualism” (Bauer 1985: 183). It is just in the tradition of Chinese eremitism that one may hope to find the most accessible path to understanding Chinese “individualism” (Bauer 1985: 180). A recluse or a hermit may not necessarily be an individualist if his eremitism is only for religious or mysterious reason, or if he is only compelled to live a reclusive life in order to escape persecution or threat from others. But if the eremitism is for the consideration of keeping individual independency and sticking to one’s personal ideal, and if it is someone’s unconstrained self-determination and autonomous choice, such as Henry David Thoreau’s reclusive life at Walden Pond,<sup>7</sup> it is related to individualism. That is also the case in the *Zhuangzi*. Zhuangzi admires those individuals who lived an independent and autonomous life, such as Zengzi in Chapter 28, for “the Son of Heaven could not get him for his minister; the feudal lords could not get him for their friend” (*Zhuangzi* 28: 50–51). Zhuangzi himself preferred a reclusive life and refused to take a high official position offered to him by the King of the Chu State, responding to the King’s offer with the allegory of preferring to be a tortoise “alive and dragging its tail through the mud” rather than dead as a “sacred tortoise being wrapped with cloth and box, and enshrined in the King’s ancestral temple” (*Zhuangzi* 17: 81–84). It is clear that Zhuangzi’s refusal to take any official positions offered by the rulers of that time is not because by doing so his physical life might be endangered, or for some mysterious religious reason, but because he did not want to lose his independence and autonomy as a free man. If he had been banded in such a “sovereign-subject” social political relation in his time, he would certainly have to make a compromise between himself and the political authority, thus reducing his individual independence. In general, Zhuangzi believed that if you got something and at the same time were tied by the things you got, you lost your independence and autonomy. As he said: “If what you have gotten has gotten you constrained, can that still be considered as having gotten something? If so, then a pigeon or an owl being shut in a cage may also consider itself as getting something” (*Zhuangzi* 12:

<sup>7</sup> I think Henry David Thoreau shares more similarities with Zhuangzi than other Western individualists. For a detailed comparison between Thoreau and Zhuangzi, see Xu 1993.

99–100). In *Zhuangzi*'s view, politics and public affairs are just this kind of “cage.” A pigeon or an owl being shut in a cage cannot be considered as having its privacy; it can have it only when set free. Thus autonomously living a reclusive life away from politics and public life also indicates the individual privacy. Privacy, as indicated by the word itself, means a private realm opposed to the political or public realm: “The Epicureans were concerned to find the means to achieve private satisfactions and a self-sufficient, quiet life, and advocated the individual's withdrawal from public life and politics” (Lukes 1973: 61). Even in its modern sense, privacy still means a sphere of thought and action that should be free from the interference of political and public authority.

Fourth, unconstrained self-development. People are not unanimous on what should be considered as “development” for themselves. Individuals have different views of development, or simply prefer not to “develop” as most others do. One case in the *Zhuangzi* is the old man who prefers not to use the developed effective water taking machine called *gao* 槲 to irrigate his vegetable field (*Zhuangzi* 12: 52–54). *Zhuangzi* seems to believe that an individual may also have the right to not be “developed” by others. An individual may, by his own decision and choice, persist in his current state or cultivate his private life even if it is considered by others as not developed. However, if we do not understand “development” in a sense of unilinear evolution, we may find that *Zhuangzi* and his peers did pursue self-development in their own unique ways. Actually *Zhuangzi* developed himself as one of the most unique, extraordinary, and charming individuals in Chinese culture; and he has his own samples of what should be considered as a developed personality, which are visually and vividly demonstrated in the book of *Zhuangzi*. The book tells stories of those unique and extraordinary individuals, including the stories of *Zhuangzi* himself, using unique mocking and satirizing language and lavish and boundless way of speech. *Zhuangzi* is so uniquely characterized that no one can deny him as one of the most unconventional and extraordinary figures in ancient Chinese history and literature. He is in the book among a cluster of other eccentrics, who kept a distance from the society and common sense, adhering to their own ideals and pursuing self-development regardless of the judgment and evaluation of their contemporaries. They don't care about praise or denouncement from others. But by this way they do develop themselves into a kind of cultural model, which have been followed and imitated by certain people in later generations. *Zhuangzi* has even developed his own unique literature style, unmatched in the history of ancient Chinese literature. As commented by SIMA Qian in his biography of *Zhuangzi*, his writings were “vast, boundless, go-as-he-please and only to satisfy himself” (Sima 1959: 2144). In contrast with the Confucian rather rigorous attitude toward literature, which emphasizes the moral significance of writing, *Zhuangzi* seems to consider writing as only a language game to amuse himself. He wrote “with absurd expressions, extravagant words, and unbounded phrases” (*Zhuangzi* 33: 64), and he cares for neither social conventions nor moral standards. His style deeply influenced some of the later literati and artists in Chinese history and thus opened a tradition of literature which stresses free expression and demonstration of the individual character of the authors. This tradition is an important supplement to the mainstream Confucian attitude about literature.

To sum up, in the *Zhuangzi* we find the above values, identified by Lukes as basic values of individualism. Therefore, it is not improper to call the thought in the *Zhuangzi* a pattern of individualism in ancient China.

### 3 The Social-Cultural and Philosophical Background of Individualism in Zhuangzi

The individualism in the *Zhuangzi* was bred in the particular social-cultural background of Pre-Qin China and emerged in the context of Pre-Qin Daoist philosophy. Therefore, while sharing with other patterns the common values of individualism, it also has its own special historic connotations and unique features.

During the “Spring and Autumn” and the “Warring States” periods, along with the decline of the Zhou Dynasty and the dissolution of the ancient aristocratic system, a group of people called *shi* 士 arose as a new social stratum. In general the *shi* group cannot be considered one “class” since they were quite varied in individual social and economic status, skills, and professions. Some were the posterity or remote kinsfolk of feudal lords or high ranking noble families at the lower level of the aristocratic system. But they were also the first group of individuals from the old upper-class who lost their traditional privilege under the huge impact of social change and transformation. Others were from poor families at the bottom of society. They were the most dynamic and independent elements in the pre-Qin period.<sup>8</sup> They also had quite different attitudes toward the political and social transformation of that time. Some of them adapted very well to the new situation, actively looking for opportunities to serve the newly arising powers; some tried engage in social and political events, in hopes of restoring the old system. Others seemed to feel quite lost and depressed, preferring to stay away from the ongoing mainstream social development. It is very difficult to make a general description and simple value judgment of the thoughts and behaviors of these *shi* individuals, since they were so different, behaving according to their own thoughts and wills in a transforming society full of contradictions and values conflicts.

From those who preferred staying away from the new trend, a special type of ancient Chinese intellectuals, who were afterwards called “recluse” or “eremites,” appeared.<sup>9</sup> The records of this kind of people exist in many pre-Qin texts. For instance, as early as in Confucius’s *Analects*, we find the “Madman Jie Yu of Chu” (*Analects* 18.5), “The old man carrying a basket on a staff” (*Analects* 18.7), and Chang Ju and Jie Ni who were “ploughing together yoked as a team” (*Analects* 18.6), etc. In the later texts created during the Warring States period, more anecdotes of this kind of people appeared, especially in the book of *Zhuangzi* itself. Despite the fact that some of these stories and their protagonists may be fictional, it is still reasonable to believe that most of these stories are artistic reflection with some origins in reality, since quite a number of these people appearing in the *Zhuangzi* also appeared in other contemporary literary texts.

Although many of these people lived humble and shabby lives, they were not just ordinary tillers or vagrants. They were usually well-educated intellectuals with their own philosophy. Some of them might have an original noble family background, which lost its significance in the transformed society. Yet unlike other *shi* individuals of that time, they did not want to be engaged in worldly public affairs and therefore

<sup>8</sup> For a general discussion of pre-Qin *shi* stratum and its emergency, see Yu 1987: Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> For the origin of the Chinese eremitic tradition, see Vervoorn 1990. According to Vervoorn, the Chinese eremitic tradition can be traced back to the end of the “Spring and Autumn” period and became popular in the “Warring States” time.

refused to take any position in the court. They were a group of intellectuals who intended to estrange themselves from the newly rising political authorities in order to keep their independent spirit and individual liberty. They just wanted to pursue a free and unfettered life that could meet their own understandings of the meaning of life.

Is it possible for those individuals to maintain such a life and keep their independence in ancient Chinese society? Fortunately it seems quite possible, especially in the Warring States period, when a unified and centralized monarchy was yet to come. Even in the later dynasties, when there was a central government to rule the whole territory of the empire, the emperor's power and control was still far from reaching every inch of the land and every individual, as an old Chinese popular saying indicates: "The Heaven is high and the emperor is far away."

There is a talk between Confucius and his most favorite disciple YAN Hui, recorded in Chapter 28 of the *Zhuangzi*, indicating that it was possible for a *shi* to live an independent and yet not too impoverished life economically in that time:

"Come here, Hui," said Confucius to YAN Hui, "Your family is poor and your dwelling is lowly. Why don't you take office?"

"I'm unwilling to take office," replied YAN Hui. "I have fifty *mu* of fields beyond the outer walls of the city,<sup>10</sup> which are sufficient to provide me with biscuits and gruel. I have ten *mu* of fields within the outer walls of the city, which are sufficient to supply me with silk and hemp. Strumming my lute is sufficient for entertaining myself, and your doctrines which I study are sufficient for enjoying myself. I'm unwilling to take office." (*Zhuangzi* 28:51–53; Mair 1994: 291)

Although most of the stories in the *Zhuangzi* may be considered only as Zhuangzi's fictional allegories, they still deliver information of the reality of that time. It seems that the old saying that "There is no land under Heaven which is not the King's territory, and there is no man on the land who is not the King's subject" is far from being the real situation.<sup>11</sup> It is possible for a *shi* like YAN Hui in the above story to keep his own small piece of land and live an independent life, without being a substantial "subject" of any rulers. Further, the self-sufficient small-scale farming economy enables a man, if he is not so eager for a luxurious life, to support most basic living necessities for himself, without being involved in commercial exchange with others.

This social economic background made Zhuangzi's individualism possible, but it is quite different from the social economic background which bred modern individualism in the Western society. When industrialization and commercial expansion develop, it is almost impossible for an individual to live an isolated and self-sufficient life without exchange with others and with the society in general, and therefore, to draw a clear boundary of individual rights, interests, and property became necessary to protect individuality. As a result, the issues of free trade, individual competition, and private property are crucial in Western individualism.

<sup>10</sup> *Mu* is a Chinese unit of field area. Currently, one *mu* is roughly equal to one sixth of an acre, but in the pre-Qin time, it might be a bit smaller.

<sup>11</sup> This citation is a "lost poem" which is not included in the existing *Book of Songs*, but it was very popular and cited in many texts of the Warring State time, such as the *Zuo Zhuan* (*Zuo's commentary on the Spring and Autumn Annals*), *Mencius*, *Xunzi*, *Han Feizi*, *Zhan Guo Ce*, etc.

But the different pre-Qin background gave Zhuangzi's individualism different characteristics, which I will discuss in the next section of this essay.

Nevertheless, the individualism of Zhuangzi was a response to some basic and common conflicts between individuals and society, which were sharpened as human civilization developed. At the stage of social development of the Warring States Period, Zhuangzi was keenly aware of the inevitable conflicts between natural existence and individual liberty on the one hand and the development and construction of society on the other. Those conflicts are mainly represented in the following three aspects.

First, the conflicts between individual freedom and political and legal institutions. The construction of state political system and legal institutions was an important social development in the Warring States period, and it is one of the characteristics of "civilization." Nevertheless, political and legal constructions inevitably impose certain restrictions on and oppress individual freedom, especially in earlier ancient China when the basic contents of the "law" or "legal" system were mainly composed of reward and penalty regulations and criminal codes,<sup>12</sup> and represented only the will and benefits of the top rulers. Zhuangzi witnessed the cruelty of the "law" or "legal" practice of his time, asking: "Since the three Dynasties, all the rulers have been bustling and fussing on the matters of rewards and punishment, how could the people be in peace and secure with their inborn nature and life?" (*Zhuangzi* 11: 7–8). He saw that the penalty was so frequent and stern that "in times like the present, people could barely escape penalty" (*Zhuangzi* 4: 88); "In the world today, the victims of the death penalty lie heaped together, the bearers of cangues tread on each other's heels, and the sufferers of punishment are never out of each other's sight" (*Zhuangzi* 11: 25–26). In Chapter 5, Zhuangzi records several stories of those who received cruel corporeal punishment, such as WANG Tai, SHENTU Jia and "Toeless Uncle Hill," who were all mutilated by having their foot or toes cut off. They were living evidence of the cruel penalty of that time. Zhuangzi's individualism in a sense was a response to this cruel social reality and represented a desire to release individual lives from those restrictions and oppressions.

Second, besides the external penalty mentioned above, Zhuangzi also observed an "inner penalty." That was the moral dogma imposed by Confucianism, considered by Zhuangzi as spiritual shackles on the human mind. In Zhuangzi's view, all the moral and ethical standards advocated by Confucians are in conflict with people's inborn nature. He compared Confucian moral concepts of *ren* 仁 (humaneness) and *yi* 義 (righteousness) as penalty of "face tattoo" and "nose lopping": "Since Yao (a Confucian Sage King) has already tattooed you with *ren* and *yi*, and lopped off your nose with right and wrong, how will you be able to wander on your own free and untrammelled path of evolution?" (*Zhuangzi* 6: 83–84). In a sharp contrast with Mencius, a contemporary of Zhuangzi and a Confucian master who believed that moral good is innate in human nature, Zhuangzi believed that the Confucian moral standard stood against human nature. In a possibly fictive dialogue between Confucius and Lao Zi in Chapter 13, Confucius

<sup>12</sup> For instance, the earliest existing record of the ancient Chinese law, *Fa Jing* 法經, which was designed by Li Kui 李悝, a politician and legalist scholar of Wei State in the early Warring State period, as recorded in the *History of Penalty and Law* in the *History of Jin Dynasty* (*Jin Shu Xinfa Zhi* 晉書刑法志), shows that the main content of the law of the Wei State is focused on how to deal with thefts and robbers and how to arrest people and put them into prison.

asserted that: “*ren* and *yi* are really the human nature.” But LAO Zi gave tit for tat and said that Confucius just used *ren* and *yi* to disturb human nature (*Zhuangzi* 13: 47–53). According to Zhuangzi, people enforced with the spiritual shackles of moral standards could no longer be able to live freely and independently by their own nature. This argument provides a theoretic weapon for those who have inclination of individualism and liberalism in the History of China to criticize the mainstream Confucian ideology officially supported by rulers of the later dynasties.

Third, Zhuangzi thinks that there is also a conflict between the real significance of individual life and the popular worldly pragmatic goal for material gain and secular fame. It seems clear that this kind of pragmatic goal is a motive of social progress and development. The Warring State period was a time when most people admired pragmatic attitudes toward material benefits, and that is why the society was so dynamic and filled with vitality. However, Zhuangzi keenly observed that this worldly pragmatic fantasy may also contradict humans’ real nature and become a distortion of or restriction to individuals’ natural and free development. Thus on the one hand he criticizes Confucian *ren* and *yi* for jeopardizing human nature; on the other hand he also accuses “those people without *ren* tear apart the original form of their inborn nature in their greed for eminence and wealth” (*Zhuangzi* 8: 12). He believes that both types of people have “lost their selves in materials” (*Zhuangzi* 16: 21) and claims that “since the Three Dynasties, everyone in the world trade in his inborn nature for things. The petty men sacrifice their life for the sake of profit. The *shi* sacrifice their life for the sake of fame. The high officers sacrifice their life for the sake of their families; the sages sacrifice their life for the sake for the world. These various people do business in different ways, and are tagged with different names and titles, yet they are all the same in trading in their nature and sacrifice their lives” (*Zhuangzi* 8: 19–21). Therefore, in the context of “the debate among hundred schools,” Zhuangzi not only disagrees with the moral and ethic rationalism of Confucianism, but also opposes the pragmatism of Mohism, legalism, and the Political Strategists. In Zhuangzi’s view, if a man considers material gain, wealth, fame etc. as the ultimate goal and takes his life as only a means or an instrument to achieve that goal, he sacrifices his life for things, because these are all external rather than internal things, based on external standard and criteria. Therefore, to pursue the external things and meet these external standards is “to satisfy someone else’s needs rather than your own needs” (*Zhuangzi* 8: 32).

Furthermore, we should understand Zhuangzi’s individualism against the background of general pre-Qin philosophy, especially Daoist philosophy. Pre-Qin philosophers produced “*Dao*” as the fundamental philosophical concept which gradually replaced the ultimate position of “Heavenly God” in the theories of some pre-Qin schools. However, the meanings of *Dao* were varied in the thought of different schools. The core meaning of *Dao* in Daoist philosophy is “*zi ran* 自然,” as expressed in Chapter 25 of *Laozi*: “the *Dao* follows the law of *zi ran*.” The word “*zi ran*” in Chinese is now frequently translated as the English word “nature,” but the original meaning of “*zi ran*” in ancient Chinese actually emphasizes the meaning of “self-initiated” or “spontaneous,” as “*zi*” means “self,” and “*ran*” means “as such.” Therefore, when Daoist philosophy declares “*Dao*” as the ultimate rule of everything, it does not mean that everything has to obey substantial and centralized outside authority; rather, it means that everything is following its own innate spontaneity or naturalness. In addition

to that, Daoist philosophy takes a dynamic view of everything. Things exist but nothing is unchangeable. Constant change is the only unchangeable character of the universe and of everything. This philosophical view is different from certain traditional Western metaphysical philosophy, which claims that there are things that do not change and the task of philosophy is to find those permanent, unchanging, and universal things. According to pre-Qin Chinese philosophy, constant change is a result of the ceaseless dynamic interaction between Yin and Yang. This is just the Dao itself, as expressed in the *Book of Change*: “A Yin and a Yang in turns is called the Dao” (Zhu 1936: 58). These philosophical conventions also determined some special characteristics of the individualism in the *Zhuangzi*, as we will discuss in the next section.

#### 4 The Special Characteristics of Individualism in the *Zhuangzi*

As discussed previously, in *Zhuangzi* we can find some core values of individualism, and it is not inappropriate to call it Zhuangzian individualism. However, just like all varieties of “individualism” which appear in different times and places, each with its own connotations and characteristics, due to its particular social-cultural and philosophical background as mentioned above, the Zhuangzian individualism also has its own special characteristics, which make it a unique pattern of individualism and distinguishable from some of its Western counterparts.

First, Zhuangzi does not understand “individual” in a Western metaphysical way; in other words, he does not think “individual” as an abstract and permanent “Being,” like an individual “atom.” This makes it different from atomistic or abstract individualism, such as that of Thomas Hobbes. According to Chad Hansen, individuals in the Western conceptual structure are “fixed, interchangeable units” (Hansen 1985: 36). However, for Zhuangzi, individuals are neither “fixed” nor “interchangeable.” Zhuangzi has a dynamic view on individuals. Individuals do exist, but they may change their features and property during their time of existing, so an individual human being is not something similar to a “fixed” atom, nor a constant “matter-in-motion.” In Chapters 25 and 27 of the *Zhuangzi*, two paragraphs describe QU Boyu and Confucius respectively: as “growing up to his sixty years old, he has changed sixty times. There was nothing what he called right in the beginning had not been rejected as wrong by himself in the end. We do not know whether what he called right today was just what he considered as wrong when he was 59 years old” (*Zhuangzi* 25: 51–52; 27: 10–11). So QU Boyu and Confucius, as individuals, change during their lives in both body and mind; they are dynamic and living beings, rather than “fixed” atoms.

While individuals are changeable, they are not interchangeable, because every individual is unique and different. In his discussion of the ethics of difference in the *Zhuangzi*, HUANG Yong has keenly perceived that Zhuangzi “pays attention to the differences among human beings in terms of their ideas and ideals, desires and preferences, and habits and customs, etc” (Huang 2010a: 71), and “The central idea of Zhuangzi’s ethics of difference is to respect the unique natural tendencies of different things” (Huang 2010b: 131062). A resumption of this kind of ethics of difference is that every individual is unique and different. Therefore, human individuals are not “fixed unites” that are “interchangeable” in a social mechanism.

They may not function in the same way and play the same role under the same situation, as indicated in *Zhuangzi*'s allegories:

A big house beam may be used to breach a city wall, but it cannot be used to plug a small hole, which is to say the implements are different. A swift horse may gallop thousand miles a day, but for catching rats it is not as good as a weasel, which is to say their skills are different. An owl can catch fleas and discern the tip of a hair at night, but in the daytime with its eyes open it can't even see the mountains, which is to say that natures are different. (*Zhuangzi*, 17:35–37)

Therefore, no unified principles or norms can be applied to all of them without discrimination, as indicated in *Zhuangzi*: “Although the legs of a duck are too short, if we try to extend them the duck will be scared and worry. Although the legs of a crane are too long, if we try to cut them short the crane will be in horror and sadness” (*Zhuangzi* 8:9–10). These allegories in the *Zhuangzi*, as HUANG Yong pointed out, metaphorically tell us how human beings should act with each other (Huang 2010b: 1057) and be aware of the different needs, desires, and preferences of individuals. Actually, if individuals are treated as only interchangeable atoms, or just as “matter-in-motion,” it will unavoidably lead to certain general assertions on them, as well as some common principles or norms to regulate them. In terms of social politics, that will be social laws, regulations, and moral standards. This is a trend that *Zhuangzi* opposes. In other words, in the *Zhuangzi*, individuals are treated more particularly and respectively than in other theories of individualism in which individuals are understood as fixed, abstract, and interchangeable “atoms.”

Second, *Zhuangzi* thinks that the only thing that an individual mind or the “self” has to conform to is the unlimited and indefinable *Dao*. This actually has the significance of releasing the individual mind into a totally free and unconstrained realm of nothingness or emptiness, thus endorsing an infinite openness to any possible development of all individuals. Erica Brindley points out that *Zhuangzi* advocates conformism to the *Dao*: “individual relationship to the *Dao* is characterized not by dependence on political institutions or the central figure of the sovereign, but by direct, individual access to it through one's own person” (Brindley 2010: 55). At first look, this is quite similar to Western religious individualism, which claims that the individual's relation to God is direct and unmediated, and an individual builds his or her own relationship with God by self-scrutiny without any intermediaries such as a church or a sect. However, *Dao* is not the God. The essence of *Dao* is only everything's “*zi ran*” or spontaneity. The spontaneity of everything works automatically and perfectly, which is *Dao*. *Dao* does not have any will or intention, as God does. There is no clear definition of *Dao* in the *Zhuangzi*, except some descriptions of its nothingness, emptiness, infiniteness, and doing nothing: “The *Dao* has no boundaries” (*Zhuangzi* 2: 55); “The great *Dao* cannot be named” (*Zhuangzi* 2: 59); “It has no action or forms” (*Zhuangzi* 6: 29). As Brindley has also correctly observed, *Dao* is not a concrete, bounded entity; it is unbounded nothingness (Brindley 2010: 58). Therefore, individuals' conforming to *Dao* or being together with *Dao* amounts to being in a realm of the boundless and limitless nothingness, or, using *Zhuangzi*'s words, wandering in a “*wu he you zhi xiang* 無何有之鄉” or “the country of nothingness” (*Zhuangzi* 1: 46; 7: 9–10; 32: 21). In this “country of nothingness,” everything moves and changes spontaneously along with

the cosmos, which is Dao. Therefore, conforming to Dao does not mean conforming to an outside authority; it means to let the individual mind wander in an infinite realm and become what CHEN Guying has emphasized, the “open mind” (Chen 2009). Individuals in this realm are totally free and open, much freer than when bound with each other by common moralities or social contracts. It is just like the fish that, having once run aground, helped each other with their saliva and slime to survive; but it would be much better to let them return to their mutually disinterested original situation: “forget with each other in the rivers and lakes” (*Zhuangzi* 6: 22–23). It is because it conforms to Dao rather than to God or any other religious divinity that Zhuangzian individualism is not likely to be carried to the extreme and become absolutely egocentric and intolerant to others, like the Calvinists have demonstrated (Lukes 1973: 84), since conforming to Dao only means unlimited freedom and unbounded openness to the spontaneousness of every individual and unique thing.

Furthermore, since there is no need for a persistent or stubborn attitude toward anything when the individual spirit is conforming to the free, open, and dynamic Dao, one will also keep an open, free, and flexible attitude toward one's own “completed mind” (*chen xin* 成心) or already constructed “self.” This is what happened in the process of “fasting of the mind” and “sitting and forgetting,” in two episodes in Chapters 4 and 6, when YAN Hui, Confucius's favorite disciple, practiced a kind of self meditation under the instruction of his Master and finally reached the advanced stage of forgetting his body and mind (*Zhuangzi* 4: 24–34; 6: 89–93). Nevertheless, the so called “forgetting one's self”—for instance, at the beginning of Chapter 2, when NANGUO Ziqi says to YANCHENG Ziyou: “Now I have lost myself” (*Zhuangzi* 2: 3)—does not mean that the individual “self” has totally dissolved or disappeared, physically or mentally. Just as some scholars have correctly analyzed (Chen 2001; Yang 2005), there are two different “selves” in the sentence “Now I have lost myself.” The first is the original and innate self, which is as free, open, and spontaneous as the Dao itself; the other is the socially constructed self, which is fixed, closed, and constrained by his or her worldly existence. What should be forgotten and lost is the latter, not the former. Otherwise, we would not be able to understand why in other places *Zhuangzi* mocks and denounces those worldly people for “having lost their selves in materials” (*Zhuangzi* 16: 21), and “conducting for fame but having lost self” (*Zhuangzi* 6: 12). In general, when *Zhuangzi* urges an individual to conform to Dao, he actually has released the individual mind into a boundless free realm, where it will no longer be constrained by even its own socially constructed “self,” let alone any other political, social, and cultural control and restrictions.

Third, *Zhuangzi*'s individualism is a kind of “inward individualism” rather than “outward individualism.” By “inward individualism,” I mean that *Zhuangzi* advocates and pursues individuality by exploring the innate and intrinsic self of individuals, rather than claiming and expanding outside interests and rights for individuals. This feature is partly due to the autarkical small-scale farming economy of his time, as I have mentioned previously, and it also makes the *Zhuangzian* individualism different from the economic and social-political individualism in modern Western culture, which makes great effort to draw a clear boundary of individuals' ownership, encourages individuals to actively assert, pursue, and protect the interests and benefits supposed to belong to them from outside, and aggressively compete for individual success and achievement (Zhuangzi, in

contrast, cares much more about an individual's own body and spiritual freedom, rather than the individual's material interests, economic benefits, and political rights in the outside social reality. As Judith Berling has pointed out, Zhuangzi's "position is call not for the rights of the individual, but for a shift of attention from social and political issues to another dimension of life" (Berling 1985: 101).

In terms of economy, Zhuangzi's individualism advocates a care-less attitude toward any material gains and profits. This is contrary to some Western economic individualists, such as John Locke and Adam Smith, who emphasize individual ownership of property and material goods. Zhuangzi thinks that in order to preserve and nourish real individual life, one should neglect material interests, as he states in Chapter 28: "he who nourishes his bodily form forgets about gain of interests" (*Zhuangzi* 28: 51); and "he who regards life as important will look upon material interests as insignificant" (*Zhuangzi* 28: 56–57). He thinks that only when you are indifferent to those outside gains and profits will you be able to preserve your true independence, as all those material goods and outside benefits are just burdens for spiritual freedom. One should not use oneself as a tool in order to gain those things. This also makes Zhuangzi's individualism different from that of utilitarianism, represented by Western philosophers such as Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, who take a calculating attitude toward gain and loss of interests and benefits.

In politics, in contrast to the modern Western individualism in the context of political democracy, which emphasizes the individual's participation in politics and engagement in public affairs, Zhuangzi thinks that individuals should detach themselves from political institutions and public affairs. Many of his stories dissuade people from involvement in politics. Zhuangzi himself, as well as many other Daoist masters, is only interested in the issue of how to manage his own body (*zhi shen* 治身) and pursue longevity of individual life, rather than the issue of how to manage the state (*zhi guo* 治國) and society. As recorded in Chapter 11, when the Yellow Emperor came to consult Master Guang Cheng about the Way of governing the world, Master Guang Cheng was not interested and did not teach him anything. But after the Yellow Emperor gave up his throne and came back again to consult him about the "Way of governing body," Master Guang Cheng sat up with a start and talked with him about how to protect the individual spirit and body and enjoy long life, with the essential of "being cautious of what is within you; blocking off what is outside you" (*Zhuangzi* 11: 28–44). Obviously, Master GUANG Cheng's way of governing the body is to cut off as much as possible the links between the self and society, withdrawing to one's own self consciousness. Most of the men Zhuangzi admired were those who "lofty in principle and meticulous in conduct, delighting in their own will alone without serving in public affairs" (*Zhuangzi* 28: 86–87). They considered their own body much "heavier" than the state and society, and did not want to consent to the existing political authority or take political responsibility or social obligation.

As a result, Zhuangzian individualism does not encourage social-economic contention or competition. This is quite different from certain versions of modern Western individualism, which take social Darwinism as their proposition, based on the belief that if everyone contends in pursuing gain and interests for themselves, the well-being of a society will improve in general, thus justifying ruthless rivalry among individuals in business and politics (Lukes 1973: 39). Here also lies a fundamental difference between Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, despite their similarities in

other aspects. Nietzsche's "will to power" theory encourages individuals to contend and even justifies the stronger conquering the weaker. His individualism is quite outwardly expanding and aggressive, while in a general Daoist view, fighting, rivalry, and contention are all of negative significance. From the angle of state politics, the Daoist doctrine of "*wu wei* 無為" (doing-nothing, inactivity) means no intervention and letting people take their own course, which has a similar connotation to "laissez-faire." But from the angle of individual personality, "*wu wei*" also means "*bu zheng* 不爭" (no rivalry, no contention), a personal merit of no contending, no rivalry with others. There is no incentive element in Zhuangzi's thought to encourage individuals to contend for outside success and achievement. His individualism is defensive rather than aggressive, inward rather than outward. Therefore, it should be exempt from the common socialist criticism of certain Western individualism, "as arming one human being against another, making the good of each depend upon evil to others, making all who have anything to gain or lose, live in the midst of enemies" (Mill 1967: 444).

## 5 Conclusion

We have found some values in the *Zhuangzi*, which can be reasonably regarded as belonging to individualism. It is Daoist individualism. The unique Daoist individualism represented in the *Zhuangzi* has a profound and deep influence on the later development of Chinese culture. However, due to its special characteristics discussed above, it has not become a fundamental resource for thinking about social, political, or economic revolution, as some versions of modern Western individualism functioned in the West. Nor has it played any role in constructing social, political, and economic institutions based on civil rights and interests and the contracts among individuals or between individuals and institutions.

Nevertheless, Zhuangzian individualism does provide an ideological resource for those who want to take a disobedient attitude toward political authorities, criticize autocracy and absolutism, keep their own mind in a free realm, and protect their independent personality. This is especially obvious in the thoughts and behaviors of some literati and intellectuals. Almost all the extraordinary, unusual, and eccentric figures in the history of Chinese literature and culture, such as TAO Yuanming, Ji Kan, RUAN Ji, LI Po, SU Dongpo, and GONG Zizhen, among many others, are influenced by Zhuangzi and his thought. They find a cultural and spiritual space in Zhuangzian individualism, where they can reside with their unique personality and develop their individuality freely.

At the same time, due to its "inward" feature and emphasis only on spiritual individuality, Zhuangzian individualism does not cause any major collision with Confucianism, despite its disagreement with Confucianism in many aspects. It provides an alternative value choice for those who want to temporarily or permanently withdraw from the engagement required by common cultural custom or established social standards, thus to protect their individuality. Therefore, it has been an important and indispensable complement of the mainstream cultural tradition represented by Confucianism, which comparatively put more emphasis on the collectivity of family, group, state, and nation, and the value of the social order and political authority.

Furthermore, Zhuangzian individualism also provides an alternative angle for us to understand human beings as individuals different from the Western metaphysical perspective: individual persons are not like fixed, interchangeable, and forever “indivisible” physical “atoms,” individuals exist only temporarily in times, and one individual is not interchangeable with other individuals, because they are all different and unique; but it is changeable during the time of his or her existence, because the ultimate Dao is just the spontaneous change of everything. It is just this changeability that makes an individual really a free human being.

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