

Zhuangzi at Play 遊

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Abstract: 290 words

Much of our contemporary western culture conceives of play as joyful and delightfully purposeless, as belonging to the world of an idyllic childhood. But in many other times and cultures, play has been much more broadly and richly conceived. Brian Sutton-Smith in his influential work *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001) catalogues play into types, and argues that common to these multiple forms of play is that it protects or creates variability in behavior and thought, thus improving one's chances in the process of natural selection. His expansive work considers a breadth of historical sources ranging from antiquity through the present, but on the whole derives almost exclusively from study of "western" texts and cultures. Where, if anywhere, do the views of play in the *Analects*, or the *Zhuangzi*, or in the writings of Zhu Xi fall within these categories? In this article, I identify three views of play as found in the Chinese literary tradition. First I briefly describe play in the *Commentary of Zuo* 左傳 as strategy and involving imperturbability and a vision of the long-game, and then identify play in the *Analects* or the *Mengzi*, or in the commentaries of Zhu Xi, as a form of training and specifically moral training and self-cultivation. As the focus of my article, I describe play in the *Zhuangzi* as a sort of virtue and not merely one part of life but a good in all of life, and follow the discussion by comparing play as envisioned in the *Zhuangzi* to that articulated by one contemporary philosopher, C. Thi Nguyen. A difference in views of the self, what we might imagine as Nguyen's moving chess piece in contrast to Zhuangzi's spinning toy top, has important implications for our contemporary daily lives.

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Much of our contemporary western culture conceives of play as joyful and delightfully purposeless, as belonging to the world of an idyllic childhood. But in many other times and cultures, play has been much more broadly and richly conceived. If we look through nearly any part of the Chinese literary tradition, play is envisioned as belonging as much to the world of cultivated gentlemen and sages as to children, as much to the halls of kings as to a family's courtyard. In Chinese paintings of children playing with tops and kites, play is depicted as carefree and pleasurable. But play can also be cruel, as suggested in famous Chinese paintings of children torturing toads with sticks and string, stories of boys bullying crickets into fighting matches to the death, or biographies of skilled ministers plotting deceit or murder. A number of thinkers through the centuries have gestured towards the fundamental importance and value of

play. Contemporary sociologist Robert Bellah (2011: 89-97, 109-116) argues that religion finds its basis in play: "...ritual is the primordial form of serious play in human evolutionary history....religion is something that grows out of the implications of ritual...."

Within the recent growing body of play scholarship, Brian Sutton-Smith in his influential work *The Ambiguity of Play* (2001) catalogues play into types, and argues that common to these multiple forms of play is that it protects or creates variability in behavior and thought, thus improving one's chances in the process of natural selection. His expansive work considers a breadth of historical sources ranging from antiquity through the present, but on the whole derives almost exclusively from study of "western" texts and cultures. Where, if anywhere, do the views of play in Confucius' *Analects*, or the early Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi*, or in the writings of the great 12th century Confucian Zhu Xi, or the 16th century iconoclast Li Zhi fall within these categories? Are there views of play in these works? If so, could studying these views alter our understanding of play and perhaps how we live? In the following pages, I argue such views on play do exist, they both do and do not fit into the categories imagined by contemporary scholars such as Sutton-Smith, and retrieving and including these views within our repertoire of theories of play enriches our understanding of the concept and could enhance our lived lives. I begin by identifying three views of play as found in the Chinese literary tradition. First and in brief, I describe play in the *Commentary of Zuo* 左傳 as strategy and involving imperturbability and a vision of the long-game, and then turn to a second view of play, as found in the *Analects* or the *Mengzi*, or in the commentaries of Zhu Xi, as a form of training and specifically moral training and self-cultivation. I then turn to the focus of this article and identify play in the *Zhuangzi* as a sort of virtue and not merely one part of life but a good in all of life. In concluding, I compare play as envisioned in the *Zhuangzi* to that articulated by one contemporary philosopher, C. Thi

Nguyen (2020).¹ A difference in views of the self, what we might imagine as Nguyen's moving chess piece in contrast to Zhuangzi's spinning toy top, has important implications for our contemporary daily lives.

II. Sages at Play: Power 德 and Strategy

Widely known in modern times as *Go* (Jap.) or *Weiqi* 圍棋 (Ch.), the game known in early China as *Yi* 弈 is by most scholarly accounts the oldest continuously played board game in history (Lo and Wang 2004: 186-201). According to lore and described later in Sima Qian's *Shiji* 史記, the origins of the game can be traced back to thousands of years before the time of Confucius when the mythical sage-king Yao (2356-2255 BCE) ordered the game designed for his unruly son, Danzhu, in hopes he could be trained to become more virtuous and disciplined. In this brief, ancient telling, we find evidence of play thought of as a form of moral training or cultivation. Playing well is not identical to embodying moral virtue, but playing well is considered, at least as told in this story by Yao, as a powerful method for strengthening one's moral muscle and leading one to a virtuous life.

The earliest textual reference to *Yi*, or *Go*, is in the *Zuozhuan* 左傳 or *Mr. Zuo's Commentary on the "Spring and Autumn Annals,"* completed for the most part by the late fourth century BCE. One brief, single passage within this story line is of particular interest to our discussion. In chapter nine, chronicling the 25th year (548 BCE) under the reign of the ninth lord of Lu, Lord Xiang (r. 572-542 BCE), we find a Taishu Yi, an eminent minister of the

¹ See Nguyen (2020) who, like Sutton-Smith (2001), also uses the language of natural selection, adaption, choice and agency in his discussion of play.

neighboring domain of Wei presciently lamenting a younger fellow minister Ning Xi's 甯喜 plot to bring the exiled leader, Lord Xian of Wei, back to his natal domain. The passage follows:

Zuozhuan (Lord Xiang, Year 25, Section 15): Now that Ning Xi sees the ruler as of lesser importance than a game of chess (*Yi*), how can he escape disaster? If a chess player picks up a piece and then cannot decide what move to make, he will not win over his opponent 今甯子視君不如弈棋，其何以免乎？弈者舉棋不定，不勝其耦。 How much more is it so with one who is about to put a ruler in his place but is indecisive 非定？ He will certainly not escape disaster. In one stroke 一舉 a house that has held ministerial positions for nine generations will be destroyed. Lamentable indeed! (*Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* [1815] 1973)²

² See *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 25.15; *Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 春秋左傳正義, Commentaries by Du Yu and Kong Yingda, in *SSJZS*, vol. 6, 1815 (Reprint, Taipei: Yiwen, 1973). I follow the numbering used in Stephen Durrant, Wai-ye Li, and David Schaberg, tr., *Zuo Tradition: Commentary on the “Spring and Autumn Annals,”* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016), who follow that by Yang Bojun. *Zuozhuan*, Xiang 25.15 would refer to the 25th year of the reign of Lord Xiang of Lu, the 15th entry as found in the *Annals*. For an alternative translation, see Durrant, Li, and Schaberg 2016: 1157.

In this earliest literary reference to the game of *Yi* the decisive moment when one executes a move is analogized to significant moments within the high stakes political game of governance. *Yi* is perhaps even conceived of as an effective training ground for strategic thought, but in itself the game is properly placed far below in political importance to that of a minister working to maintain the power of a failing state. As with *Yi* and even more so with politics, a thoughtless, ill-conceived move could destroy generations of cultivated power. Playing a game well, like playing the art of politics well, require the same skills: *focus*, *keen observance*, intellectual and emotional *stamina*, *foresight*, and the willingness to *suspend normal moral rules*.³ In the paragraphs preceding our passage of interest, images—such as hawks hunting prey and the daily and hourly attentiveness necessary to effective farming—and literary references—to the *Book of Odes*, the *Book of Rituals*, or credited to the *Book of Documents*—are used in the service of richly describing and identifying the skills necessary to a master of governance. These specific skills include *focus*, *observance*, and mental and emotional *stamina* or the ability to “be cautious at the beginning and reverential to the end” (慎始而敬終) (*Record of Rites, Liji* 禮記, 54.918); *farsightedness* or to “think about its consequences and its continuance” (思其終也思其復也) (*Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 1973: Xiang 25.15; Durrant, Li, and Schaberg 2016: 1231); and *decisiveness* or when one acts, to strike as “hawks pounce on sparrows” (如鷹鷂之逐鳥雀也) (*Chunqiu Zuozhuan zhengyi* 1973: Xiang 25.14; Durrant, Li, and Schaberg 2016: 1231).

In the *Commentary of Zuo*, characters who play the game of politics well possess exceptional abilities to see multiple steps into the future and show us one vision of the role of

³ Thanks to Eric Hutton for this additional criteria. Ning Xi in this long-game does suspend the rule of filial piety, as a chess player intentionally leads an opponent astray.

play as a critical part of navigating life well (Schaberg 2005: 194-225; Li 2013: 100-132). In contrast, physical prowess and strength, skills more representative and characteristic of martial virtues, are never mentioned in relation to these admirable characters. In the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*, the sage or refined person possesses moral virtue. Centuries later in the late-Ming (16th century), genuine self-expression, the outpouring of one's inner feelings, is celebrated. Neither moral virtue nor unfettered self-expression describes the masterful *Go* player found in the *Commentary of Zuo*. Instead, repeatedly, the virtues ascribed to the masterful player in the world of political power are those that belong to a master chess player: emotional imperturbability and ability to see multiple moves into the future. In our second example of play, we continue with our study of the board game *Yi*, but this time, we will see the masterful *Yi* player as engaged in the act of *moral self-cultivation*.

III. Sages at Play: Virtue 德, Moral cultivation 修身, and Play

Amongst the classic ancient Chinese literary texts that scholars, who sort and catalogue, have generally considered “philosophical,” there exist but three references to the game of *Yi*, altogether comprising no more than a handful of lines on the subject. One from the *Analects*, two from the *Mengzi*. One important element to both classics is the immense attention received century after century from an exceptional diversity and quality of minds. We will examine a small handful of examples of this conversation, first in the classics themselves, and following, the sentences, paragraphs, and pages—the commentarial tradition—devoted to these passages from the Han period (206-220 CE) through present times.

A. Falling into Vices: Laziness and Craving

Our first passage of interest is *Analects* 17.22:

The Master said, ‘To simply gorge oneself all day long, this is not engaging one’s heart and mind. What a difficult situation! But aren’t there the games *Bo* and *Yi*? Take those up; even with those there is some merit. 子曰飽食終日無所用心難矣或不有博奕者乎為之猶賢乎已。

Bo 博 is shorthand for the game of *Liubo* 六博 (Selbitschka 2016: 105-166), likely invented around the middle of the 1st millennium BCE, it was popular, possibly even more so than *Yi*, during the Warring States period and reached its height of popularity during the Han but disappeared soon after.⁴ Confucius disparages gorging oneself all day long because such gluttony solely engages the mere appetitive capacity of eating, the more animal-like self, and not the individual’s higher, human capacities, the heart and mind. The games of *Bo* and *Yi* while not forms of moral cultivation or not explicit forms of moral cultivation, at least engage our thinking selves. Games offer less-undesirable forms of distraction. There may even be some merit in them as they might serve as an indirect method for *training one’s moral capacities*.

There are many English translations of the *Analects*, and if we look at some alternatives, we find 17.22 interpreted in at least two meaningfully different ways in regard to the value of playing games. In a number of translations, the games of *Bo* and *Yi* are described as lacking in merit. On such readings, games are bad, but gorging oneself on food is so much worse. Burton

⁴ For a fuller description of the rules of *Bo*, see reference to a lost *Book of Ancient Bo* 古博經 in a commentary by Zhang Zhan 張湛 (1954) to the *Book of Liezi*.

Watson translates, “The Master said, ‘Stuff yourself with food all day, never give your mind anything to do, and you’re a problem! There’s chess, isn’t there? There’s weiqi, isn’t there?—wiser at least to busy yourself with these’” (Watson 2007: 124). We do not know whether this is because games do have some merit, such as moral merit, or that at least as a distraction games can divert one from bad or evil behavior. A number of translations of 17.22 present this latter neutral interpretation of playing and games.

In one of the most widely read commentaries on the *Analects*, *Collected Commentaries on the Analects by Mr. He and Others* (*Lunyu Heshideng jijie*) dated to the Han period, Mr. He cites a Mr. Ma Rong: “To do this, [play games], is not a way to gain joy and virtue...[Games] gives birth to lewd desire 為其無所據樂善生淫欲” (He, in *SBBY*, case 7, ce 2, j. 17, p. 8).

While in the translations or commentaries we looked at above, games were seen as a *distraction* (Watson), and later we will examine translations and commentaries where playing games are seen as possessing some degree of moral *merit* (Pound, Zhu Xi), in this commentary, Mr. Ma is presenting games as *bad*: games lead to moral corruption. For Mr. Ma, games are not a benign distraction, they are in fact bad or vicious and bad because they give birth to “lewd desire.” If we were to expand on Mr. Ma’s thought, it would be just a step more to add that games are bad because they are a means for cultivating vices, such as laziness and lack of discipline, which would then easily enable one to become greedy or promiscuous or develop some other “lewd desire.” For Mr. Ma, we could imagine him extending his argument and claiming that games create the unfortunate opportunity to strengthen vices.

B. Practicing to Become a Gentleman: Playing Games and Moral Cultivation 修身

At least one translation, that by the early 20th century American poet Ezra Pound, presents games as having merit. Pound renders 17.22, “He said: Stuffing in food all day, nothing that he puts his mind on, a hard case! Don’t chess players at least do something and have solid merit by comparison?” (Pound 1951: 88) Those who play the games of *Bo* and *Yi* are doing something of merit. If we look at Chinese commentaries through time on 17.22, here too we find at least two different views on the value of play. Amongst the commentaries, one also finds scholars who, like Ezra Pound, see games as possessing some moral merit and in the commentaries, some scholars describe game playing as a way, albeit inferior, to morally cultivate the self. In support of his own views, the great 12th century Neo-Confucian thinker Zhu Xi cites a Mr. Yang, “And so while the arts of *Bo* and *Yi* are lowly, still, it is better than not exercising one’s heart-and-mind. If one uses one’s heart and mind in pursuits that are humane and righteous, then that is being a worthy” (Zhu Xi 2002, *j.* 9a).

If we move forward in time to the *Mengzi*, in the famous passage 6A9 we can find a clear example where the training involved for mastering a game is both analogized to and described as the same process as moral self-cultivation. In explaining why the King of Qi, despite Mengzi’s off-and-on presence and guidance, fails to achieve any sort of wisdom, Mengzi explains:

Now, *Go* is an insignificant craft. But if one does not *focus one’s heart* (*zhuan xin* 專心) and *apply one’s intention* (*zhi zi* 致志), then one won’t get it. “Go Qiu” was the best at go throughout the world. Suppose you told Go Qiu to teach two people go, and one focuses his heart and applies his will to it, listening only to Go Qiu. The other...with his whole heart thinks about hunting swans...Although he learns together with the other

person, he will not be as good as he. Will this be because his *intelligence* (*zhi* 智) is not as great? I answer that it is not (Van Norden 2008: 153, slightly adapted and italics mine).

The relationship between training at games and moral training is ambiguous in this passage. Playing games can be read as almost like or exactly identical to the process of moral self-cultivation. Whatever the case, the skills one must develop and the most important capacities exercised for mastery over a game are identical to that of moral mastery. As Mengzi tells us, even though the game of *Yi* is trifling, the skills one must master in order to play a game well are necessary and central to moral cultivation: “focusing one’s heart” and “applying one’s intention.” In both game playing and moral cultivation, one must exercise and strengthen the organs of the “heart and mind” (*xin* 心) and the “will” (*zhi* 志). Effort (i.e., focusing one’s mind, extending one’s will), rather than raw wisdom or native “intelligence” (*zhi* 智), is far more important to mastery of both games and morality. Unlike in *Analects* 17.22 where the games of *Bo* and *Yi* are mentioned in passing as of merit only in that they are at least better than nothing at all or better than mindlessly indulging in endless eating, in *Mengzi* 6A9, game playing is elevated in status to a project involving the very same abilities as moral training.

If we turn to the commentarial tradition, we find thinkers ranging from Zhao Qi in the Han period to Jiao Xun in the Qing in their commentary on the Chess Player Qiu and the game of *Yi* modestly expanding on the ways in which game-playing requires the same skills and exercise of the same capacities as those needed to attain sagehood. Zhao Qi, in his brief commentary, explains that one cannot learn to master a game if one does not “extend one’s will”

(*zhi zhi* 致志) (Zhao 1936). The sustained, hard work of “extending one’s will” is far more important than the quality of a person’s “intelligence.”

The Ming period scholar Li Zhi offers the briefest, yet quite memorable, commentary. In response to the description of the student in the passage within the *Mengzi* whose mind drifts towards hunting swans, Li Zhi scribbles “Vivid!” Remarking on Mengzi’s view that it is focus and not raw intelligence that determines success or failure, Li Zhi writes in the margins: “Full of life!” (Li Zhi 2010a, vol. 21: 470-471). Li Zhi’s briefest of remarks serve as a marked contrast to the many pages long commentaries we find in the work of Jiao Xun. Jiao embellishes upon the path of self-cultivation sparsely put forth in *Mengzi* 4B12. Jiao adds:

And so, one needs to focus one’s heart and mind in order to refine and strengthen one’s will. To “extend” is to refine and to strengthen. To refine and strengthen is the same as to be the finest.

故專一其心以細密其志也。致是細密細密即是精。

(Jiao Xun 1935, v. 2, p. 108).

He embellishes upon what we find in the *Mengzi* and explains the effect of focusing one’s will: “refining and strengthening the will.” Jiao Xun then further explains that refinement and strength are the marks of the most cultivated will. In the *Analects* and the *Mengzi*, and commentaries through the Qing on these texts, we have seen playing the game of *Yi* envisioned as a product of laziness or craving, and as like or identical to the process of moral cultivation. In our third example, or “case study,” on the subject of play, we will turn to the study of “play” (*you* 遊) as imagined in the great early Daoist classic the *Zhuangzi*.

IV. Zhuangzi at Play 遊

Turn to the first pages of the *Zhuangzi*, and immediately we are introduced to the ethical ideal of “Free and Easy Play” or “Wandering” (*Xiaoyao you* 逍遙遊), the title of the first chapter of the classic. One powerful concept through which to effectively read the *Zhuangzi* is that of *you* 遊, “to roam,” “to wander,” or “to play.” At present there exists a handful of articles and book chapters on the concept of *you* in the classic. One early article on *you* as “play” applies the ideas of the 20th century German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer to illuminate Zhuangzi’s view of “play” (Crandall 1983: 101-124), another interprets the *Zhuangzi* as a work that engages in “play” and “evocative indirection,” using “goblet words” to empty the reader of or re-orient readers away from ossified, inert, lifeless ways of living life (Wu [1982] 1990: 35-114). In more recent work, Alan Levinowitz examines the preceding literature that argues for *you* as akin to “play” or “roaming,” points to what he refers to as the logical (*Zhuangzi* celebrates openness, yet “play” becomes an imperative) and performative (play is boundless, yet as an ideal it is defined) problems with identifying *you* as play, and further develops the interpretation of *you* as akin to “goblet words” (*zhi yan* 卮言),⁵ an ancient vessel that tipped over when filled to a point, or in

⁵ Zhuangzi himself uses this term (Chapter 27; Watson 1968: 303). Watson also points to two additional related terms found in the *Zhuangzi*: “imputed words” (*yu yan* 寓言) and “repeated words” (*chong yan* 重言). In defining “goblet words,” Watson writes: “‘goblet words,’ words that are like a goblet that tips when full and rights itself when empty, i.e., that adapt to and follow along with the fluctuating nature of the world and thus achieve a state of

borrowing from the work of Brook Ziporyn, Levinowitz uses the term a “wild card” (Ziporyn 2022). Like the wild card, *you* is empty of content and instead, destabilizes, intensifies, negates, affirms, and in the end keeps the world in motion (Levinowitz 2012: 479-496; Mair 1983: 85-100; Mollgard 2007: 22).

One effective way scholars have read the *Zhuangzi* is through study of recurrent images and metaphors. The great Daoist classic presents us with image after image—ones of knack, wild, abundant vegetation and mythically large animals, inversion, goblet words and, as I will show in the following pages, of the “axis” or “pivot.”⁶ One can imagine that different images speak to different readers, or at different moments in each reader’s journey. Through study and description of these axis or pivot images, I identify a number of characteristics, which altogether, form a set of family resemblances that strengthens our ability to understand “play” in the *Zhuangzi*.

A. Master Lie in the *Zhuangzi*

harmony.” A.C. Graham translates the terms as “spillover saying,” “saying from a lodging place,” and “weighted saying.” See also Graham (2001: 25-26). For further definition of “spillover goblet words,” see Jullien (2000: 329). Also see Wu (1988: 1-8); Wang (2004: 195–218).

⁶ See Underwood (2021: 91-103) for suggestion that we focus on metaphors in our study of play in the *Zhuangzi*, and to consider metaphors of play other than the dominant western philosophical metaphor of play as focused on the “agonistic paradigm.”

Midway through the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, a Song Rongzi is lauded: “In his way of living in the world, he did not fretfully engage in endless calculations 彼其於世未數數然也.” Still, Song Rongzi, who possesses many qualities of the Zhuangzian sage, does not quite make the mark: “And *yet*, there was still a sense in which he was not deeply rooted 猶有未樹也” (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter One). The passage follows with the description of a different possible sage and Zhuangzi has chosen the mythical Daoist Master Lie. Could he be our paragon of the enlightened Zhuangzian sage?

Liezi could ride the wind and go soaring around with cool and breezy skill, but after fifteen days he came back to earth. As far as the search for good fortune went, he didn't fret and worry. He escaped the trouble of walking, *but he still had to depend on something to get around* 猶有所待者也. If he had only mounted on the truth of Heaven and Earth, ridden the changes of the six breaths, and thus wandered (*you* 遊) through the boundless, then what would he have had to depend (*dai* 待) on? Therefore, I say, the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame (Chapter One; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 1-2, p. 10: Watson 1968: 32, amended).

Master Lie “didn't fret and worry,” “escaped the trouble of walking,” and could “ride the wind and go soaring.” And yet, he too is not quite the Zhuangian sage. There is something he is still

lacking, something on which he still had to “depend” (*dai* 待). To fly, he relies on the wind. If he were freed of this dependence, Liezi could truly attain the state of a Zhuangzian sage and “wander through the boundless.” But what would it be to have nothing, not even the metaphorical wind, on which one must depend? If we turn to the following chapter in the *Zhuangzi*, two images help us begin to sketch out an answer.

B. Pivot of the Dao 道樞

In Chapter Two of the *Zhuangzi*, “Discussion on Making All Things Equal” (*Qiwu lun* 齊物論) the way one hooks into the Dao is imagined as a hinge finding its place within the socket:

彼是莫得其偶， When “this” and “not-this” no longer find their opposites,

謂之道樞。 They call this the axis of the Dao.

樞始得其環中， When the axis first finds its place in the Center,

以應無窮。 In this way it responds endlessly.

是亦一無窮， The “this” is also endless,

非亦一無窮也。 The “not-this” is also endless.

故曰「莫若以明」。 And so it is said, “Nothing compares to shining the light.”

(Chapter Two; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 1-2, pp. 48-49; Watson 1968: 40, amended; see also Ziporyn 2020: 14-15)

Burton Watson translates *Dao shu* 道樞 as “the hinge of the Way,” and the ideal state as when “the hinge is fitted into the socket” (Watson 1968: 40) When the axis is at the precise center point of the ring, there is no negotiation, no uncertainty. One knows one has found the single point of power, and there remains no hint of a wobble. Burton Watson’s translation of the *shu*, axis, finding its Center, *huan zhong*, as “the hinge in the socket” while not an accurate literal rendering of the terms, poetically captures the deep meaning. When a hinge is in its socket, it can rotate, potentially, the full circle. Mathematically, the number of degrees in the circle is infinite or using the words of Zhuangzi, *wu qiong*, “without endlessness.” If you watch a ballerina execute pirouettes on pointe, the one thing she must do is find that precise Center and when that happens, the pirouettes, minus the physics of friction, are “without endlessness.” Using Gilbert Ryle’s terminology, this knowledge is a knack, a “know how,” a skill that teachers can point to but ultimately you can only find it for yourself. When the dancer has found that precise Center, she “depends” (*dai* 待) on nothing. Unlike Liezi who “could ride the wind” but still “had to *depend* on something to get around” (Watson 1968: 32, italics mine), this dancer, now hooked into the Axis, no longer has an ego-bound self (*wu ji* 無己). This precise axis can be thought of, using Zhuangzi’s language, as the *Dao shu* or the “Pivot of the Dao.”

C. The Celestial Potter’s Wheel 天鈞

Throughout the 33 chapters, Zhuangzi presents us with powerful image after image each *different* than the one before. Such a use of wildly varied images can be seen as in alignment

with Zhuangzi's worldview shifting argument—moving our attention from the external world of texts, rituals, and tradition, instead to the internal world of each individual—that each and every person possesses a distinctive self. Assuming such is the case, an endlessly wide array of methods of teaching—straightforward guidance, jokes, satire, good-humored shock, and more—are necessary to engage the countless different kinds of selves reading Zhuangzi's writings. If the image of the Pivot of the Way is not effective for some, just a few paragraphs later in the same chapter (Two), Zhuangzi invokes the equally effective image of “Nature's Pottery Wheel” (*tianjun* 天鈞) (Chapter Two; Watson 1968: 41; Ziporyn 2020: 16). The passage tells the story of a monkey trainer handing out acorns to his monkeys, who while furious upon receiving three acorns in the morning and four at night, are delighted when the clever trainer changed tactics, and relayed they would receive four in the morning and three acorns at night. The storyteller then comments:

名實未虧，
 而喜怒為用，
 亦因是也。
 是以聖人和之以是非，
 而休乎天鈞，
 是之謂兩行。 *Zhuangzi*, Chapter Two

This change brought them no loss either in name or in fact,
 But in one case it brought *anger and in another delight*.

He just went along with the ‘thisness,’ relying on the rightness of the present ‘this.’ Thus, the Sage uses various rights and wrongs to harmonize with others, and yet *remains at rest in the middle of Heaven the Potter’s Wheel*. This is called Walking Two Roads. (Translation by Ziporyn 2020: 16).

Of particular interest to our discussion is the phrase *xiu yu tianjun* 休乎天鈞, “finds rest at the center of Nature’s pottery wheel.” Ziporyn translates *tianjun* as “Heaven the Potter’s Wheel.” The phrase has also been aptly translated as “celestial potter’s wheel” (Mair 1983: 17). Watson, in the company of many other scholars within the Chinese commentarial tradition,⁷ substitutes the character 鈞, “potter’s wheel,” with the homonym 均, “equal” or “equality,” and translates the phrase as “rests in Heaven the Equalizer.” James Legge, making choices similar to Watson, translates the passage as: “rests in the equal fashioning of Heaven” (Legge [1891] 1962, part 1: 185). If one reads the text as it comes down to us from Guo Xiang, we are looking at the character 鈞, aptly translated as “potter’s wheel.” In commenting on the phrase Guo Xiang writes, “[A sage has] no bias. Therefore all comes forth from the Potter’s Wheel, and that’s that

⁷ The Ming period iconoclast Li Zhi (2010a, vol. 14: 130) reads the character as 均, “equality,” and interprets the passage as calling for us to see that if left alone, in its original state each thing, including ourselves, will find the distinctive things he needs in this world.

莫之偏任故付之自鈞而之也。 ”⁸ Amongst Zhuangzi’s great literary gifts is his ability to identify and evoke precise, powerful images in the service of his philosophy. “Nature’s pottery wheel” is certainly one such image.⁹

Regarding our story under discussion, of interest to us, Zhuangzi names the emotions the monkeys experienced. Hearing the trainer would feed them merely three chestnuts in the morning, and four at night, the monkeys felt “anger” (*nu* 怒). Learning of the change in plans with four in the morning, and three at night, the monkeys in turn felt “delight.” Anger (*nu* 怒) and delight or pleasure (*le* 樂) are two of four emotions famously named within the very first lines of the canonical *Doctrine of the Mean* (*Zhongyong* 中庸):

Before pleasure, anger, sorrow, and joy have arisen—this we call perfect balance. After they have arisen and attained due proportion—this we call harmony. Perfect balance is the great foundation of the universe; harmony is the Way that unfolds

⁸ See Guo Xiang’s commentary on the *Zhuangzi*, (*Zhuangzi zhu* 1997: 13), reprint from Shanghai guji press. All recensions of the *Zhuangzi* from the Tang period on are based on the 33 chapter version edited by Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312). For discussion on editions and commentaries on the classic, see Roth (1993: 56-66).

⁹ I am grateful for discussion with Tobias Zürn on this subject.

throughout the universe. Let perfect balance and harmony be realized and heaven and earth will find their proper places therein; and, the ten thousand creatures will be nourished therein.

(Translation by Gardner 2007: 111)

喜怒哀樂之未發，謂之中；發而皆中節，謂之和；中也者，天下之大本也；和也者，天下之達道也。致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。

In the *Doctrine of the Mean*, the feeling of “anger” (*nu* 怒) is paired with “happiness” (*xi* 喜), that of “sorrow” (*ai* 哀) with “joy” (*le* 樂), the sage is one who has achieved a state where each of these four emotions “act[s] in their due degree.” Such a state is one of centrality and harmony. In our story, the monkeys are described as inclined toward two of the four emotions: anger and joy. A reader in Zhuangzi’s time would surely be familiar with the *Doctrine of the Mean* and upon reading these words, most likely recall the first lines of the classic. Such an association could only further strengthen the sense that the monkeys—absorbed in excess—lack moderation, whereas the sage within the *Doctrine of the Mean* embodies centrality and harmony (*zhong yong* 中庸). Throughout the 33 chapters, the Zhuangzian sage is one who has hooked into the Dao, finding the Pivot of the Way, the Axis of the potter’s wheel, the emotional Center where feelings achieve a harmony.

C. Peace in Strife 櫻寧

Putting aside the *Zhuangzi*, in most other classics dating to the pre-Qin period whether the *Analects*, or the *Mengzi*, or the *Daodejing*, rare if ever is the celebration of non-human animals, criminals who have suffered the punishment of a tattoo or a dismembered limb or nose, those who work with their hands such as butchers, woodworkers, or wheel makers, or individuals engaged in simple play including swimming through roiling waters or quietly catching cicadas. In the *Zhuangzi*, this world, low on the rungs of the social hierarchy of early China and outside the bounds of an anthropocentric world, is central and even celebrated. But amongst such creatures, notably absent is the presence of children and only once does a woman appear as a character in the *Zhuangzi*. The one passage on women is in chapter six, a Woman Crookback or Solostride (*Nu yu* 女僂) (Ziporyn 2020: 57), literally “woman crooked” or “woman who walks alone without a companion.”¹⁰ A Nan Bozi Gui 南伯子葵¹¹ describes her as “old in years and yet your complexion is that of a child (*ruzi* 孺子)” (Watson 1968: 82). She is asked why and she responds, “I have heard the Way!” She adds, “I have the Way of a sage but not the talent of a sage 我有聖人之道，而無聖人之才” (Watson 1968: 82). In describing the Way of the sage she names it “Peace-in-Strife” (*ying ning* 櫻寧) and describes the Way as following:

¹⁰ For use of the term in this sense, see *Liezi*, Chapter 6, “Endeavor and Destiny,” (*Li Ming* 力命). Ziporyn aptly translates the name of this character as “Lady Solostride.” See Ziporyn 2020: 57.

¹¹ “Brother-in-law Sunflower” or alternatively as Ziporyn (2020: 57) colorfully translates, “Sir Sunflower the Southside Unk.”

無不將也，	There's nothing it doesn't send off
無不迎也；	Nothing it doesn't welcome
無不毀也，	Nothing it doesn't destroy
無不成也。	Nothing it does not complete
其名為攪寧。	Its name is Peace-in-Strife. ¹²
攪寧也者，	As for Peace-in-Strife,
攪而後成者也	After the Strife, it attains completion (Chapter Six;

Zhuangzi zhu, v. 3, pp. 20-21; Watson 1968: 83, adapted).

Relevant to our discussion on *you*, play, and the Pivot, is the image of *ying ning* 攪寧, literally and aptly translated as “the tranquility within chaos.” The Dao is the place where, within the vast chaos of the infinite universe, there exists tranquility. A related and illuminating image, using the words of contemporary meteorology, is the eye of the hurricane. The eye is the calm, quiet center, the single axis around which the hurricane rotates. As Woman Crookback Solostride describes, one who has found the Dao has found this center. Woman Crookback Solostride, the fantastical Peng Bird soaring high into the Heavens who we encounter in the first

¹² Also effectively translated by Ziporyn (2020: 58) as “Tumultuous Tranquility” or “Tranquil Turmoil.”

lines of the first chapter of the *Zhuangzi*, “Free and Easy Wandering,” a tortoise at play “alive and dragging its tail in the mud,” the minnows happily darting back and forth in the River Hao (Chapter 17, “Qiushui”; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 3-6, p. 214; Watson 1968: 188), all are paragons of Zhuangzian sages at play who walk, soar, roam, and wander the Dao having found that still point where Tranquility exists within Chaos.

D. The Pivot and Early Chinese Classics

The vision of both the social world, at its best, effortlessly rotating around a single axis, as well as the cosmos or Nature pivoting around a single point can also be seen in the ancient classic the *Analects* with the center point imagined in this case as the North Star: “Conduct government in accordance with virtue, and it will be like the North Star standing in its place, with all the other stars paying court to it” (*Analects* 2.1; Watson 2007: 20). In the Han period (202 BCE-220 CE) text the *Huainanzi* 淮南子, the pivot (*shu* 樞) is envisioned positively, as a place of power. It is at the “pivot” where the person of great stature (*da zhang fu* 大丈夫) finds his home:

Above he rambles (*you* 遊) in the free and roaming vastness,

Below he goes out of the gates of boundlessness.

Having scanned all round and left nothing out,

Remaining whole he returns to guard what is within.

He manages the four corners of the earth

Yet always returns to the pivot 還反欲樞 (Lau and Ames 1998: 70-71; see also Ames 2015: 279, 289n34; LeBlanc 1993: 189-195).

In different ways than in the *Zhuangzi*, the pivot point is nevertheless commonly envisioned in both the *Analects* and the *Zhuangzi* as a place of strength and power. On the other hand, Zhuangzi's vision of the center of the Potter's Wheel as a place of power is in striking contrast to what we find in a text traditionally attributed to the 7th century BCE thinker Guanzi 管子, the *Guanzi*, where the Potter's Wheel, rather than the heart or axis from which one effortlessly creates, instead, is described as the dizzying, ever-shifting inconstant ground upon which one looks out and can determine nothing with certainty. The passage follows: "To lack understanding of principles and yet to desire to give commands is like trying to establish the directions of sunrise and sunset while standing on a revolving potter's wheel 不明於則而欲出號命猶立朝夕於運均之上."¹³ Allusion to the potter's wheel can also be found in the 5th century BCE classic the *Mozi* 墨子, and here too, as with in the *Huainanzi*, the rotating wheel is a place of instability. Mozi advises:

¹³ For comparison, also see translation by Rickett (1985: 129) and by Ziporyn (2020: 26nS). For text, see Chapter Six, "Seven Methods 七法," in the *Guanzi* (Tang 1967: 419). The classic is attributed to Guanzi (d. 645 BCE), counselor to Duke Huan of the state of Qi (r. 685-643 BCE), and compiled by Liu Xiang ca. 26 BCE.

You must establish standards. To speak without standards is like using the upper part of a potter's revolving wheel to determine the direction of the sunrise and sunset. The distinction between right and wrong, between benefit and harm cannot be achieved and clearly known. 必立儀，言而毋儀，譬猶運鈞之上而立朝夕者也。是非利害之辯，不可得而明知也 (Johnston 2010: 319; see also Watson 1963: 117-118).

Stability, certainty, and strength, in the *Mozi*, is found in unchanging external standards. In the *Guanzi* and the *Mozi*, when standing at the center of the wheel looking outwards, the view is ever changing, the standpoint outwards, the focus external.

Zhuangzi, in contrast, powerfully engages the subjective world. He asks us to “match up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven’” (Chapter 19; Watson 1968: 206; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 7-8, p. 18), our internal state with that of the Dao. He is not the only or even the first to do so in early China. The great Confucian Mengzi (4th century BCE) asked us to look inwards, to cultivate our fragile, tender, but nascent and powerful “sprouts” (*duan* 端) of morality: “...having these four sprouts within oneself, if one knows to fill them all out, it will be like a fire starting up, a spring breaking through! If one can merely fill them out, they will be sufficient to care for all with the Four Seas” (*Mengzi* 2A6; Translation by Van Norden 2008: 47). In the *Zhuangzi*, in tune with the subjective worldview in the classic, the focus is on one's internal state. When the potter has centered her clay, when the dancer has found his center, when in life we have hooked into the Dao or the axis of the universe, one can create without end. Use of the pivot image in

philosophical texts is of course not specific to the *Zhuangzi*, or early Chinese thought. If we turn from ancient China to early Greece, in Plato's *Republic* we find what is recognized amongst scholars as the first reference in western thought to a child's toy top. Like the hinge in the socket, the Center of the Potter's Wheel, and Peace-in-Strife, there is endless power when the top finds the axis. Only at this precise Center is one anchored and at rest, and yet at the same time in perpetual, endless motion:

...tops as wholes stand still and move at the same time when the peg is fixed in the same place and they spin...such things are at that time both at rest and in motion (Translation by Bloom 1968: 115; *The Republic*, Book IV, 436b).¹⁴

We have thus far pointed out just three amongst countless widely divergent images that imaginatively, poetically, and powerfully capture a key to life as *you* 遊, “free and easy wandering” or “play.” One must hook into the Dao, find one's center (*shu* 樞), become one with the axis of the universe and in this way, roam the world free and unconstrained, depending (*dai* 待), relying, waiting on nothing, wholly at ease as this larger self, the “perfect person” (*zhi ren* 至人), the “the Spirit-like person” (*shen ren* 神人), the “sage” (*sheng ren* 聖人) (Chapter One; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 1-2, p. 25), in harmony and at one with the Dao.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Kathleen Wright for showing me this reference.

V. Play: The Pivot or the Magic Circle

On the whole, play theory by contemporary thinkers conceive of play as separate, as distinct, as in a different realm, as dichotomous to work or everyday life, in a way not unlike how we might think of our worlds as divided between a private, individual, self-chosen life against the realm of the communal, agreed-upon, public sphere. In concluding this article, we focus on a comparison of the *Zhuangzi* and the play theory of contemporary philosopher C. Thi Nguyen who focuses on the subject of games. Floating down a river in a giant gourd (Chapter One; Watson 1968: 34-35), philosophical debate about the epistemic states of fish while strolling along a river (Chapter 17, “Qiushui”; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 3-6, pp. 215-216; Watson 1968: 188-89; Ames and Nakajima 2015), performing the Ming masterpiece the *Peony Pavilion*, or political machinations including mastering the art of a skilled assassin, may or may not clearly fall within most everyone’s idea of play. But games are a quite clear case. So as to forego a discussion on the question of what does and does not fall within the category of play, let us take this one clear example of play, the example of games, and compare one recent well-regarded philosopher’s views, I have chosen Nguyen’s, to those on play in the *Zhuangzi*. As Haun Saussy argues, the 300 BCE classic is a text that is “the outside of the inside of the Chinese tradition...” (Saussy 2017: 99), and as such, for our purposes it is a fitting text for which to begin a comparative discussion on the understudied subject of play in China.

A. Huizinga’s *Homo Ludens* and the “Magic Circle” of Play

If there is one critically influential book on play in the last fifty years, most play scholars will point to the Dutch anthropologist Johan Huizinga’s groundbreaking *Homo Ludens* (1950:

52, 74).¹⁵ Huizinga argues against scholarship that assumes play to be a simple diversion, or a means, of mere use, a training ground. He shows that it is mostly the sciences that have examined play, and, as he writes, “anthropology and its sister sciences have so far laid too little stress on the concept of play and on the *supreme importance* to civilization of the play-factor” (Huizinga 1950: forward, italics mine). Play, in such studies, is reduced to either the reflexive, the instinct to play, or else to the useful, as a means, as serving a purpose, whether of discharging surplus or even harmful energy, for relaxation, or training. If we look at more recent studies on play, much of such work tends to characterize play as secondary to a larger end. For example, play is thought of as a form of *experimentation, practice, or training* in the development of the individual: Childhood play, rather than work, is a critical way to discover who one is as an individual, or to cultivate skills necessary to adult life (Winnicott 1971); or play is a way to build up and preserve skills, thus increasing our fitness and improving our place in the arena of natural selection (Sutton-Smith 2001). Others theorize play as to some degree *separate* from daily life: happiness is found in attaining a state of timeless flow, and the more flow in one’s life the greater one’s happiness (Csikszentmihalyi 1990); play, like ritual, creates an as-if, subjunctive world, temporarily crossing boundaries and making whole a necessarily fragmented world (Seligman et al. 2008). Common to these imaginative and thoughtful types of play theory is the view that play takes place in a separate sphere, whether in time or space, from much of daily life. Or, play is thought of as serving the purpose of something that is not-play. In contrast, repeatedly Huizinga describes play as not reducible, a “totality” (Huizinga 1950: 3). Huizinga

¹⁵ For explicit discussions of play in China, see more recent edition (Huizinga 1980: 52, 74).

also argues that play is the basis from which culture and civilization develops, including ritual and religion. My effort is not to argue for one view of play as better than another, but rather, to extend our repertoire of views on play, with the idea that different views of play serve different needs (Underwood 2021: 91-103).¹⁶

Huizinga goes on to show the ways in which play leads to the development of laws, war, philosophy, poetry, art, and more. Again, Huizinga insists that play is at the *basis of culture*: “Civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” (1950: forward). Thus the title of his book: *Homo Ludens*. More than humans as the maker (*homo faber*), as the thinker (*homo sapien*), or perhaps an even more common view today, of humans as the producer (*homo economicus*)—humans are most truly human when at play. Reading *Zhuangzi* can nudge us into or back into imagining play, as Huizinga does in his pathbreaking work, as an irreducible aspect of our lives, and humans as at heart *homo ludens*.

Huizinga names elements necessary to his conception of play: “order, tension, movement, change, solemnity, rhythm, rapture” (1950: 17). Important to our discussion, later play scholars have tended to place emphasis on his distinction between the world of play, and that of ordinary life. There is a tension between the idea of play as irreducible, and as cordoned off within a sphere. For the purposes of our discussion, we will focus on how he has been read by later scholars, who have emphasized Huizinga’s references to a “magic circle.” Repeatedly Huizinga does indeed speak of play as happening within a “magic circle” (1950: 10, 11, 20, 77, 210, 212; see also Salen and Zimmerman 2004; Stenros 2012), a delineated space. He writes of “stepping

¹⁶ See Underwood (2021: 91-103) for critique of Huizinga for putting forth a universal concept of play. Instead, Underwood proposes we seek for pluralistic views of play.

out of real life into a temporary sphere of activity,” a temporal “interlude,” a “refrain” (1950: 8-10) in life that may be repeatable and is also separate from the ordinary. Huizinga writes:

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the playground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart (1950: 10).

Play is temporally and spatially separate from ordinary, daily life. If we look to this early and influential work on play theory, at least in the early pages of the work, we find a clear articulation of a separation of work and play, ordinary life and play life.¹⁷

¹⁷ For foundational scholarship that responds to Huizinga’s unified vision of play, see, for example, French sociologist Roger Caillois ([1958] 2001), who also defines play as circumscribed within a time and space, but as a pluralist in his view of play divides play into four types. Also, see philosopher Bernard Suits ([1978] 2014; 1967: 148-56), who, in response to Wittgenstein’s description of games as indefinable, offers a definition of games: “playing a game is the voluntary effort to overcome unnecessary obstacles” (41). Suits also argues that games are

One productive way to think of contemporary play studies is as divided into scholars who generally accept Huizinga's idea of the "magic circle," and those who amend the idea of a boundary around play, separated from ordinary life. Generally, those from the latter group argue for some form of permeability in the boundary between the magic circle and the ordinary, everyday life (Malaby et al 2007: 95-113; Taylor 2006: 151-155; Waern 2012; Montalvo, Stenros, and Waern 2009). For example, Mia Consalvo (2009: 416) writes, "...we cannot say that games are magic circles, where the ordinary rules of life do not apply. Of course they apply...in competition with...other rules and in relation to multiple contexts, across varying cultures, and into different groups, legal situations, and homes." She argues that Huizinga's view of play is based on a time when space was more easily "'set apart' from everyday life," and suggests his views have a "masculinist bias" (409-410). While in different ways critics of Huizinga envision some degree of fluidity between the ordinary and the play world, nevertheless, unlike the vision we find in the *Zhuangzi*, there still does exist separate spheres, one of the ordinary, the other of the play world. In contrast, in the *Zhuangzi* there is no delineated "magic circle" between play and everyday life lived well. Instead, all life lived well is play. The stronger one's life, the stronger one's ability to play, to *you* 遊, to engage in free and easy wandering (Nguyen 2017: 1-18; Salen and Zimmerman 2004).

B. A Contemporary Game Theorist, A Daoist, the Pivot, and the "Magic Circle"

uniquely in life that which you truly do for the sake of itself. Perhaps most influential in contemporary play studies, see sociologist Brian Sutton-Smith (2001), where he divides play into seven different "rhetorics" of play.

C. Thi Nguyen's theory of play (2020; 2019: 423-462) builds on Huizinga's pathbreaking work. Like Huizinga, Nguyen assumes the idea of play as happening within a "magic circle," while acknowledging some degree of permeability between the ordinary and the play world, and important to Huizinga's work, Nguyen too insists on the fundamental nature of play though Nguyen focuses more particularly on the development of the self rather than the development of culture and civilization. Nguyen argues that games enable us to enter a world separate from our everyday life and in this defined sphere, practice and master a "library of agencies." He continues, "Our agency turns out to be significantly more fluid and modular than we might have thought" (2019: 425). Games, and play, are not simply a frivolous pursuit. Playing games is a critical and powerful part of creating a life well lived. Through playing games, one is able to enter a separate world other than ordinary life and in this special sphere experiment with different versions of the self. Within this "magic circle," without serious consequences for one's ordinary life, one can pick up, put down, experiment with, and choose for oneself different agencies thus expanding the repertoire of resources for growing the self as well as exercising greater autonomy in choosing who one is and will be.

While playing a game, he writes, we submerge ourselves in "temporary agencies" (Nguyen 2020: 27). In each case, while playing one plays well and derives the benefits of play by giving oneself wholly over, the more wholly the better the experience, to the game or to play. Game goals are thin and precise, unlike the muddiness of life goals, writes Nguyen, where the world is complex, "subtle, flexible, and ambiguous," and "shady, ambiguous, and pluralistic" (2020: 47). Nguyen conceives of games as played within a magic circle where the rules are clearly defined and reliable. The experimentation with, the picking up and setting down of, different agencies is a main thesis running through Nguyen's substantive and nuanced work.

The idea of play as existing in a separate sphere from ordinary life, play as opposed to work, as happening within a special “magic circle,” is a seed of an idea that has been central in some form or another, and persisted throughout recent theories on play.

If we think of children’s toys, the chess piece moves across space, whereas the child’s toy top spins on an axis in rotational movement. We find these two different types or metaphors of movement in play. One crosses back and forth, between ordinary life and the world of play. In contrast, Zhuangzi envisions play as finding a Center or a Hinge in a Socket from which one is anchored, like the child’s toy top, and then roams free and easy in the vast and unknowable world. In the first, one increases play by expanding the footprint of the metaphorical chess board, actor’s stage, or soccer field. In everyday terms where work is thought of as in contrast to play, or adulthood from childhood, or the public world from the private, with playing inside a “magic circle” or playground, expanding the world of play is most often thought of as merely moving the boundary between the two spheres. The line between childhood and adulthood is strengthened, the weekend is expanded, the workday is whittled down, vacation time is increased, retirement is moved to an earlier age.

In the work of Zhuangzi, one strengthens and enhances one’s play-life by becoming more play-ful. The change begins with the internal and arrives at the moment when one hooks into the Dao, or Nature. To become play-ful in the *Zhuangzi* requires one to roam across Nature, absorb the patterns, the “ligaments, tendons and main joints” of the metaphorical ox of Cook Ding, and to eventually find the Axis, the Center. With the hinge in the socket, the self plugged into the greater Dao, one can maintain and strengthen one’s ability to play. Once one has found that point of balance, that Center, all (or much) of life is play. After watching the masterful work of Cook Ding with his knife at play, carving up an ox, Lord Wenhui exclaims about play and life: “I

have heard the words of Cook Ding and learned how to care for life!” (*Zhuangzi*, Chapter Three). Nguyen does consider that one might bring more play into one’s everyday life, thus making more permeable the boundaries between the world of play and of life: “we should try to make life more like a game, by gamifying our work, our chores, and our education” (Nguyen 2020: 21; see also McGonigal 2011). But in the end he argues life cannot be played as a game for life’s goals cannot be simplified and contained and to do such would be to live a smaller life.

Nguyen’s discussion on games as a magic space within which players are able to experiment with and grow agencies is one single thoughtful, developed, respected, and in important ways quite representative example of a view on play within contemporary scholarship. In describing the magic circle within which games are played Nguyen writes:

...[games] can offer us a clarifying balm against the vast, complicated, ever-shifting social world of pluralistic values, an existential balm against our internal sense that our values are slippery and unclear (2020: 21).

The world of games is clearly demarcated and predictable. The ideal game player in Nguyen’s play world achieves an “in-game mental state...usually *narrowed* and focused” (2020: 217, italics mine). Nguyen continues,

Narrowing helps us to acquire and add new agential modes to our inventory. Agencies are easier to find our way into when they are clearly specified, and when we are permitted to throw ourselves

wholeheartedly into them. And the narrowing is itself a pleasure and a balm—a relief from the painful and difficult deliberations of life against a landscape of rich, subtle, and conflicting values.

(2020: 217, italics mine)

Nguyen acknowledges that such a divided life, between play and real life, forces us to live a life of tension, a “bifurcated, schizophrenic life....” (Stocker 1976: 457-458). Play life is clear, focused, while Nguyen describes ordinary life as confusing, a struggle:

Life is a confusing welter of subtle values, in a vast and confusing plurality. Living our life, as fully sensitive valuing agents, involves making painful judgments, tough decision calls, and agonizing comparisons. As practical agents pursuing values, we must struggle and fight to make sense of our place and our purpose in that confusing value landscape (2020: 215).

Nguyen refers to our everyday world as the “wild” (2020: 217) in contrast to the tame, domesticated, controlled. Play, or at least game playing, happens within the latter, inside a magic circle, where the player or those who create the games have “turned the corner,” “narrowed” the world, cutting out the ambiguous, the complex, the murky. In his final chapter, Nguyen examines the danger of mistaking games for life. He notes a drawback of becoming too immersed within the magic circle of the thin and precise world of games: “Games may foster the

expectation that values be clear, simple, and easily stated—that our goals be obvious and measurable” (2020: 23).

In contrast, Zhuangzi’s world of play is similar to the ordinary life Nguyen describes as not-play: rather than clear and predictable with rules that are thin and precise, the world of play in the *Zhuangzi* is thick, complex, murky, inchoate, ever-changing. Zhuangzi’s metaphors for the world include the body of the ox which Cook Ding learns to skillfully carve around the complex tendons, ligaments, and joints, the roiling river into which jumps an unidentified swimmer with hair long and flowing, the labyrinthine forest of trees where wanders Woodworker Qing. Within this knot of ligaments and mad roil of eddies and swirls, a person who has wandered and keenly observed the natural world, absorbed the complex patterns of Nature, and hooked into the Dao, can then understand, perceive, intuit—discover—the nuanced patterns within this seeming inchoate world. As the masterful Cook Ding describes, at first he could only “see” 見 with his eyes 目, and what he saw was the complexity of the ox. In this beginner’s stage he “cuts” 割 and “hacks” 折. But in time he could follow or see with his “spirit” 神. He explains, “...now—now I go at it by spirit and I don’t look with my eyes 不以目視. Perception and understanding have come to a stop 官知止 and spirit moves where it wants 神欲行. I go along with the natural make up 依乎天理.” Seeing with his spirit, rather than his eyes, he sees the “Heavenly patterns” 天理, the metaphorical “big hollows,” “big openings,” “things as they are,” or if we turn to the story of the swimmer diving from the top of Luliang falls “where the water falls from a height of thirty fathoms and races and boils along for forty li” (Chapter 19; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 7-8, p. 16; Watson 1968: 204), the masterful Swimmer now seeing with his spirit identifies the Heavenly Patterns, the “swirls” and “eddies,” “following along the way the

water goes” (Watson 1968: 205). Seeing with the spirit, rather than the eyes, Cook Ding’s blade now no longer “hacks” or “cuts,” but rather, “plays” 遊: “If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room—more than enough for the blade to play 遊 about it” (Watson 1968: 51). The world is complex and murky, and the skilled player who has found and connected with and come into alignment with the Center 環中 or Pivot 樞 (Chapter Two; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 1-2, p. 48; also, see Chapter 24) has the skill to accurately perceive the real world as it is, and then to skillfully navigate her way through. With the spirit, the skillful player now sees a path, the “Heavenly Pattern,” where a beginner sees with his eyes and only the murky and inchoate. For Zhuangzi, one does work and train and try to get to the state of free and easy “wandering” or “play” or a related state, that of “effortless action” (*wuwei* 無為) (Slingerland 2003). The “Perfect Man,” “Holy Man,” the “Sage,” has trained herself to a level of skill, an ability to play, where she now experiences “flow,” the ability to “play,” as part of everyday life. Like the truly virtuous person who is virtuous in all parts of his life, the Zhuangzi-an sage is play-ful in all (or most) parts of life. As Zhuangzi writes, the sage is “in but not of the world.” He walks the world, and always with a sense of play.

Nguyen worries about the dangers of mistaking the clear, thin, precise, predictable, controlled play sphere for ordinary or real life. For Zhuangzi, there is no spatial division between the world of play and the world of ordinary life. If there is a meaningful boundary between one world and the other, between a not-play and a play world, it could be thought of as the difference between Nguyen and Zhuangzi as a difference between space (Nguyen) and time (Zhuangzi). The Zhuangzian player remains in the same space, but gradually through time, training, patience, keen observation, strengthens herself, becomes nimbler, lighter, attains a state

where one's "skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away" 其巧專而外澹消 (Chapter 19; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 7-8, p. 18; Watson 1968: 206), and in this state the Zhuangzian sages lives life as play. Real life can be full of stress and strife, at first bumping into obstacles, repeatedly and in Nguyen's word "painfully...agonizingly." In time, one finds one's distinctive way of becoming one with the real world, the objective world, the Dao or Nature, no longer dizzyingly revolving at the edges of the Potter's Wheel 均 but rather, in the Center 環中, at the Axis 道樞, at ease, one with the Dao. This is a substantively different way of envisioning the self and the self in relation to the world, and a different way of envisioning the role of play in life. For Zhuangzi, in its highest form, life *is* play.

Unlike Nguyen who describes the player as "narrowing" the world, or one who "turns a corner" when she plays (2020: 217, 218), Zhuangzi's sage is never required to turn the corner. Zhuangzi's metaphor is not a line, straight or curved. Rather, Zhuangzi's is the pivot, becoming one with the greater Dao. For Zhuangzi, true play is in the "wild," while mechanical living is lived within the boundaries of the regimented world, the clear, falsely constructed obstacles of "congratulations or rewards... titles or stipends," "praise or blame," or "skill or clumsiness" (Chapter 19; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 7-8; pp. 17-18; Watson 1968: 205). The self at play, in the *Zhuangzi*, is not Nguyen's self at play. Zhuangzi's self is not the autonomous agential self exercising the "capacity to pick up new ends," putting down old ends, making choices about who she is and wants to be, thinking of ends in life as "disposable ends" (Nguyen 2020: 33). Rather as the skillful swimmer in the *Zhuangzi* insists on the not insignificant role of the forces in life necessarily given and explains, "I...grew up with my *nature* 性, and let things come to completion with *fate* 命" (Chapter 19; *Zhuangzi zhu*, v. 7-8, p. 16; Watson 1968: 205).

VI. Conclusion

One aim in our exploration of play has been to begin the task of retrieving and curating just some of the countless ways writers in the Chinese literary tradition, throughout the millennia, have imagined play, and in this article I have pointed to a number of places where we might begin to look when thinking about views of play in China. In “The Influence of Symbols Upon Social Change” historian of religion Jonathan Z. Smith (1978: 143) writes:

In the conclusion to his well-known study, *Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, Professor Rostovtzeff passed under review the variety of theories which had been suggested to account for the decline of the Roman Empire...he concluded by observing that a change in a people’s outlook on the world was one of the most potent factors in social, economic and political change, and that further exploration of change in outlook was one of the most urgent tasks in the field of ancient history....The implication of these observations would be that *social change is preeminently symbol or symbolic change.*

Borrowing the idea articulated by Smith, ideas have an effect on our lived lives, and vice versa and if so, enriching our set of play theories—to include, for example, play in the *Commentary of Zuo* as strategy and involving imperturbability and a vision of the long-game; play in the *Analects* or the *Mengzi*, or in the commentaries of Zhu Xi, as a form of training and specifically moral training and self-cultivation; or Zhuangzi’s view of play as not merely a part of life but a good in all of life—has the power to substantively influence our construction of our material and lived world of play, and thus our experiences of the important act of play itself.

Few of us would argue that we need less play in our lives. If, akin to much contemporary scholarly views on play, play is a good in life because it *prepares* for real life (i.e., childhood play as training for adulthood) or, while critical to a good life, is *separate* from much of everyday existence, then to increase one's well-being one's task is to find more but mere pockets of time and space—the playground but not school, childhood but not adulthood, weekends but not weekdays, vacation and holidays but not regular life, or retirement but not work life—for play. Such efforts maintain the structure of the world as is, and aim merely to *move the defined boundary* between play and work so as to increase our time and space for play. In this view, we are a play impoverished culture because we settle for too few play spaces or too little playtime. But if we follow Zhuangzi's vision, we could argue we are a play impoverished culture because of fundamental assumptions we hold about the self, or about the distinction between work and play. Alter our *worldview*, and all (or most) of life might be play. Shedding light on the fundamental value of play and giving nuanced analysis to the function games might play in enhancing our lives (Nguyen), transforming our worldview and imaginatively re-thinking our fundamental conceptions of the self and society (Zhuangzi), or other such tools including creatively re-designing our material world (Sicart 2013, 2014), can serve as tools for enriching and supporting humans, not as *homo economicus* strategizing for, picking up, and setting down certain ends, but rather, as *homo ludens* living life as play.

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