

Introduction to Daoist Tales: DK1

“What art is it you have?”: Daoist Tales of Artists and Artisans

Developed in ancient China, Daoism is a world view that advocates living in harmony with Dao, the source and shaping principle of all reality. When Daoist texts attempt to illustrate what “living in harmony with Dao” is like, they frequently resort to stories of exceptionally skilled workmen. Collected here are several examples of such stories, culled from two Daoist classics: the *Chuang-tzu* (compiled and edited in 4th Century C.E.) and the *Lieh-tzu* (compiled and edited in 3rd Century C.E.). Each story tells of an individual who practices a manual art and raises it—often by virtue of Dao—to unsurpassable heights.

Before you continue further in this introduction, please take time now to read these Daoist stories. Acquaint yourself with their remarkable cast of characters—P’ien, the audacious, outspoken wheelwright; Cook Ting, the butcher with the grace of a dancer; woodworker Ch’ing, who enters into a mystical connection with each tree he carves; artisan Ch’u, a master of spontaneous, free-hand drawing; the dexterous catcher of cicadas (who is dubbed “the fellow with the crooked back”) and Chan Ho, who can land huge fish with a line as slender as a hair.

In a sense, these stories need no introduction; they are straightforward and concrete, rendered in a clear and accessible style. A few of them are quite entertaining. It’s hard not to smile at a wondrous tale like the one about Chan Ho, who “made a fishing line from a single thread of silk out of the cocoon, a hook from a beard of wheat, a rod from one of the pygmy bamboos of Ch’u, and baited it with a split grain of rice. He

hooked a fish big enough to fill a cart, in the middle of a swift current in waters seven hundred feet deep.” As if this were not spectacular enough, the story further tells of an archer named P’u-chu-tzu, who would tie a line to his arrow: “Using a weak bow and thin line, and shaking the line so that it rode with the winds, he transfixed both of a pair of black cranes on the edge of a dark cloud...” Preposterous! Yes. Yet, it’s a pleasure to conceive of human skill that goes beyond the boundary of what seems possible.

To witness—or even just to hear of—displays of great artistry is awe-inspiring. “Imagine skill reaching such heights,” exclaims a nobleman after watching his butcher carry out a virtuoso display of knife-work. When woodworker Ch’ing finished carving his bell stand, “everyone who saw it marveled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits.” This compels the Marquis of Lu to ask, “What art is it you have?” Furthermore, the King of Ch’u “marveled when he heard of [Chan Ho’s skill at fishing] and summoned him to ask the reason.”

That reason turns out to be Dao, the Way that generates and sustains all reality. The cook replies to the nobleman, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill.” And the cicada-catcher tells Confucius he is so good at what he does because “I have the Way.” All these artists and artisans “have the Way,” and they act in harmonious accord with it.

Sinologist Arthur Waley explains why stories of manual arts abound in Daoist literature:

The [Daoists] indeed saw in many arts and crafts the utilization of a power akin to if not identical with that of [Dao]. The wheelwright, the carpenter, the butcher, the bowman... achieve their skill not by accumulating facts concerning their art, nor by the energetic use either of muscles or outward senses; but through utilizing the fundamental kinship which, underneath apparent distinctions and diversities, unites their own Primal Stuff to the Primal Stuff of the medium in which they work (58).

Out of this vital union—what the woodcarver calls “matching up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven’”—comes freedom, spontaneity and an almost-magical adaptability to situations as they unfold.

The stories in this collection suggest three methods by which Daoist artists achieve their extraordinary skill.

They clear their minds of distractions: Woodcarver Ch’ing attributes his marvelous success as a craftsman not to any special genius within him but to his mental and bodily preparation. He says, “When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind.” Artisan Ch’ui also kept himself free from mental disturbances: “[He] didn’t let his mind get in the way. Therefore his Spirit Tower remained unified and unobstructed.” The expression “Spirit Tower” (here a synonym for “mind”) conveys the idea of a high place from which one can see all around without any barrier to vision. Cook Ting describes this sort of “higher vision”: “Now I go at [carving up oxen] by spirit and don’t look with my eyes.” He goes

on to say, “However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I’m doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety...” Cook Ting can slice his way through the smallest openings because long experience in cutting up oxen has given him “unified and unobstructed” vision.

They see only the work at hand: When the “fellow with the crooked back” sets himself to the task of catching cicadas, he says that, “Out of all the myriad things in the vastness of heaven and earth, I am conscious only of the wings of a cicada. I never turn about or fidget; I would not take the whole world in exchange for the wings of cicada.” In the same way, expert fisherman Chan Ho says, “When I overlook the river holding my rod, there are no distracting thoughts in my mind. I contemplate nothing but the fish.”

They practice their art with dedication: The stories of these men are testaments to persistence and discipline in mastering the ways of Dao. Chan Ho, the fisherman, says that “It took me five years to learn all that there is to learn about the Way.” Cook Ting says that “I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it...” Season after season, the cicada-catcher prepares for his art by balancing “balls on top of each other”—first two balls; then three; then five! Wheelwright P’ien says, “I’ve gone along for seventy years and at my age I’m still chiseling wheels.”

What these Dao-driven artists can do raises a stirring possibility—that the power they yield to in accomplishing their arts can be employed in many domains of life. The fisherman Chan-ho declares to the Marquis of Lu: “If Your Majesty is really able to rule his state in the same way, he can turn the Empire within the span of his hand; what can give you trouble?” Likewise, Lord Wen-hui, after listening to his cook explain the Dao

of cutting up oxen, proclaims, “Excellent! I have heard the words of Cook Ting and learned how to care for life!”

Works Cited

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