

INSTITUTING GESTURES, INESCAPABLE WAYS: DERRIDA AND ZHUANGZI COMPARED

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Abstract. For over 40 years, numerous scholars have engaged in comparing the philosophies of Zhuangzi and Derrida. These comparisons can either bring the two thinkers closer together or set them apart, depending on how the authors assess four key aspects: the central concepts employed by Derrida and Zhuangzi, their relationship to metaphysics, their writing styles, and the practical and therapeutic implications of their philosophies. A meta-analysis of these comparative efforts uncovers shared yet often unexamined assumptions that underpin the various comparisons. The repetition of these assumptions contributes to the consolidation of a set of fixed ideas regarding what connects and distinguishes Zhuangzi and Derrida, including their association with cultural identities shaped by philosophical nationalism. By reflecting on the insights of both Zhuangzi and Derrida regarding the processes of institutionalization within philosophy, this article argues that they both anticipated the deconstruction of the assumptions under which they have been compared.

Keywords: comparative philosophy; philosophical nationalism; philosophical institutions; deconstruction; Taoism

Derrida met with the authors of the ancient Chinese classic *Zhuangzi* – which he never read – in the virtual realm of comparative philosophy.¹ Their first encounter was staged in 1982 in an article by Michelle Yeh, titled “The Deconstructive Way: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Chuang Tzu” (Yeh 1982; Yeh 1983). The article’s title, first published in Mandarin and a year later in English, sets the tone for questions that subsequent scholars would explore: Is there a “deconstructive way” or a “deconstructive *dào* 道”? Can we speak of “deconstruction” in China? Are Derrida and Zhuangzi comparable?

At first glance, it might seem that Zhuangzi and Derrida are as distinct as their contexts: ancient China and contemporary Western thought. Comparing them without considering these contexts is an impossible task. However, to contextualize the former as an ancient *Chinese* thinker and the latter as a contemporary *Western* philosopher is to make many assumptions. Among these is the oversight that we

do not read Zhuangzi from the perspective of ancient China, just as we do not read *Of Grammatology*, for instance, from the context of 1960s France. Both contexts are already shaped by the various horizons – personal, social, or institutional – from which comparisons are made.

For example, many comparisons between Zhuangzi and Derrida assume that Chinese philosophy is oriented towards practice, while Western philosophy is oriented towards theory. While this is not a false distinction, its significance takes on a specific character due to the modern construction of the history of philosophy, which has favored a theoretical reading of the European philosophical past at the expense of a practical one. A perspective on the philosophical past based on different interests would illuminate the East-West difference in a very different light – if it does not call into question the very framework of that distinction.

Thus, this article aims to demonstrate how comparisons often overlook that the contexts of the past are also constructions of the present and, for that reason, tend to reify those contexts, introducing cultural, historicist, and even nationalist biases into the comparative work.

To tell the story of the virtual encounter between Derrida and Zhuangzi, I examined all the texts I could find that compare them: about 25 papers and two monographs published over 40 years.² My reading does not focus on philological inconsistencies or philosophical misunderstandings; therefore, I will not consider the various arguments in light of the texts by Derrida and Zhuangzi – limited space being another reason for the absence of direct references to the sources involved in the comparisons. Instead, I keep an open mind, aiming to create a typology of the problems and questions raised by these comparisons – an outline of which is presented in the first part of this article. By tracing the diverse paths paved by these comparative endeavors, I seek to grasp the meaning of this virtual encounter and reflect on its limitations. The result of this inquiry constitutes the second part.

1. Paths to an Encounter

According to Steven Burik, a scholar engaged for almost two decades in reading Zhuangzi and Derrida in the light of each other, comparisons between the two have tended to explore “commonalities between their analyses of language and its functions, with regard to ideas of identity and subjectivity/self, their deconstructive approaches to ideas of morality and purity, and lastly in their shared opposition to hierarchical thought structures” (Burik 2019b, p.103)³. In short, Zhuangzi and Derrida have been regularly compared in terms of their views on language, subjectivity, ethics, and deconstruction.

I agree with this general summary of the comparisons. However, in this paper, I adopt a different approach to organizing the available literature. Instead of focusing on the specific questions and topics compared, I identify four types of broader concerns driving these comparisons to examine the paths they open – and, at times, also close.

Conceptual Comparisons: On *Dào* and *Différance*

Many comparisons focus on concepts. A notable difference between scholars is that some claim that “*différance*” and “trace” are comparable to *dào*, while others claim they are not. The arguments for or against the possibility of such a comparison vary, but what is interesting is that, in any case, the result is an interpretation of *dào* and *différance* in mirrored terms.

For instance, Cheng (whose comparative focus is more on the *Laozi* than on Zhuangzi) tries to bring *différance* close to the ideas of underlying unity and profound interdependence of opposites. He identifies these connotations in what he sees as the equalizing and immanent principle of *dào*, of which *différance* would be a modality (Cheng 1990, 28 – 29). In her pioneering article, Yeh holds that the comparison of “*différance*,” “trace,” and other Derridean terms with Zhuangzi’s *dào* suggest that Derrida pays more attention to difference and rupture, and Zhuangzi to oneness and equality, the apparent contrast is only a difference in emphasis put on each side of what Derrida calls “double writing” and Zhuangzi “double way” (*liǎng xíng* 兩行) (Yeh 1983, pp. 106 – 115). However, in contrast to this insistence on unity, most scholars who agree that the conceptual comparison is possible interpret *dào* in the sense of trace rather than trace in the sense of *dào*, and thus underline the differential, deferring, and differing aspects of Zhuangzian philosophy (Burik 2010; Burik 2014; Burik 2016; Burik 2020; Chien 1990; Graham 1989; Owens 1993).

Those who doubt the comparison sometimes argue that *dào* is a central term in Taoism and tends towards unity (Fu 1992; Zhang 1985; Zhang 1992). In contrast, *différance* is a provisional word among the many others that appear in the different chains of substitutions that characterize Derrida’s writing: “supplement,” “writing,” “trace,” etc. By opposing the unity of the *dào* on one side to the irreducibility to the concept of *différance* on the other, those who refuse the comparison between these two words risk fixating the play of *dào* in Zhuangzi’s text, transforming it into a unifying principle and missing its subversive force.

Hence, authors like Yeh insist that comparison is possible because a similar textual logic of substitution and supplementarity can be found in the *Zhuangzi*, with its use of concepts such as “Reservoir of Heaven,” “shaded light,” “heavenly equality,” etc. (Yeh 1983, p.111). Similarly, Burik argues that comparisons need not be that unilateral and fixated on contrasting one term with another. For him, if *dào* is more a central term for Taoism than *différance* is to deconstruction, this does not mean that *dào* is less provisional or prone to dissemination (Burik 2010, p. 142).

From this brief overview, we can grasp the main difficulty faced by any straightforward comparisons of isolated concepts, a challenge that many authors recognize. Comparing words without considering their context is often pointless, and the most compelling arguments for or against comparison lie precisely in examining how Derrida’s and Zhuangzi’s contexts could ultimately be compared.

Contextual Comparisons: On Western (and Chinese) Metaphysics

To make sense of comparisons between Derrida's and Zhuangzi's words and concepts, one needs to consider the question of deconstruction. In early texts, drawing inspiration from Heidegger, Derrida inscribed deconstruction (as an event rather than a method or task) in a historical, cultural, and geographical background they termed "Western metaphysics." The encounter between Derrida and Zhuangzi invites the comparatists to pay extra attention to the identification of metaphysics with the West.

In this respect, some authors claim that Zhuangzi's critique of Confucianism, Mohism, and even Taoism is analogous to Derrida's deconstruction of Western metaphysics (Wang 2003, p.28). This approach seems to understand "Western metaphysics" as an established system of thought whose inherent limits (or closure) would be comparable to ancient Chinese systems of thought exhibiting a similar unity. Zhuangzi's self-reflexivity, resisting "metaphysical" interpretations of *dào* within the Taoist tradition itself, would confirm a singular Zhuangzian approach to deconstruction (Wang 2003, p. 30).

Such a perspective achieves an obvious symmetry, highlighting the contemporary value of the Zhuangzi. However, one must take many things for granted to construct such a precise parallelism between one metaphysics and another. Most authors agree that ancient China did not have "logocentrism" (because it did not possess the concept of "logos"), but then, why would it develop a similar taste for unity, hierarchies, and, eventually, presence – similar to that of the West?

In response, some authors believe there is no such thing as Chinese metaphysics (Burik 2010; Burik 2016). From the perspective of someone who sees "Western metaphysics" as problematic, this absence would imply that the Chinese tradition has fared better than the Western one. Therefore, A. C. Graham argues, in a text focusing on Laozi, that the Taoist *dào* "is how the Trace will look to us when we are no longer haunted by the ghost of that transcendent Reality the death of which Derrida proclaims" (Graham 1989, p.228). In this view, Taoism would be Derrida without metaphysics. As for Zhuangzi's quest for something that many authors identify as "presence," it would be a presence without a "metaphysics of presence" (Peng 2015, pp. 235 – 236). The widespread belief that the Chinese script is not "phonocentric" would explain why Zhuangzi could rely on it to overturn hierarchies more effectively than Derrida (Zhang 1992, p. 32).

But doesn't this approach make the encounter relatively futile? What would be a trace liberated from the yoke of presence and being? Why would it be a trace in the Derridian sense? Even if we (in my opinion, oversimplistically) restrict Derridean deconstruction to an event confined to so-called "Western metaphysics," a fundamental aspect of his argument is that the coexistence of heterogeneous elements in the tradition of the logos, such as those coming from Judaism and the "other" within Greek thought, make deconstruction an event that accompanies logocentrism

from its very inception (Bernasconi 2014). But if there is no “metaphysics” in China, and the *Zhuangzi* only challenges hierarchical oppositions to reveal their underlying unity and complicity – a unity foreign to Western philosophy’s fixation on presence (Nulty 2002) – what is the constitutive heterogeneity of the “Chinese cultural area” and its deconstructive event? If what Zhuangzi does is merely a criticism of Confucian values, then it is not deconstruction but rather a critique.

When I consider how comparisons, by foregrounding the backgrounds of both texts, also produce mirrored representations of what those historical backgrounds are, I cannot help but suspect that “non-metaphysical” readings of Taoism may be a teleological projection that assumes the correct way to read the *Zhuangzi* is to understand *dào* (assuming this is a central concept in it—something most authors take for granted) as fundamentally non-metaphysical. This amounts to reading the *Zhuangzi* through the opposition between “(Western) metaphysics” and the absence of such metaphysics (and, inversely, reading the history of Western philosophy in contrast to an imagined non-metaphysical outside). The problem is that this approach allows comparisons to follow a path that ultimately misses the actual encounter.

This is particularly true if, as some authors claim, Taoism does not deconstruct metaphysics at all – because it is itself a logocentric metaphysics of presence, or alternatively, a kind of “logos without metaphysics.” In this view, *dào* is better compared to logos, emphasizing the notion of a unifying principle, or even a noumenon – an ultimate and unknowable reality (Fu 1992; Zhang 1992).

Both metaphysical and non-metaphysical readings of Zhuangzi and Derrida tend to become fixated through comparison, much like the comparisons between words and concepts. Whether judging each cultural area by its own internal criteria or understanding one in terms of the other, these comparative gestures ultimately mirror each other. Against these fixations and the fascination with the problematic identities they reinforce, paying closer attention to both Derrida’s and Zhuangzi’s writing styles may open more dynamic and less constrained paths for comparison.

Stylistic Comparisons: Playfulness and Wandering

Scholars have observed that both Derrida and Zhuangzi employ a similar style that is often perceived by their contemporaries as absurd, paradoxical, or non-philosophical. This perception of their commonalities highlights an analogous approach to writing which consists of challenging and reversing accepted conceptual hierarchies, disrupting conventional oppositions like presence and absence, being and non-being, *shì* 是 and *fēi* 非, etc. This reversal of hierarchies is a key element in their writing, which serves to unsettle established ways of thinking and expose the limitations of binary thinking.

Of course, in both cases, “playing” with concepts is not a pastime but a way of challenging the philosophical conceptions they inherit; the stylistic problem becomes philosophical insofar as it is integral to the singularity of their thinking.

Both Derrida and Zhuangzi use irony and paradox to critique the idea of a “serious discourse,” understanding this as a discourse attempting to fix or control specific meanings (Yeh 1983, pp. 116-121). Puns and blended words, therefore, contain a critique of stable meanings in language. Some scholars even claim that they use language in an apophatic way, speaking about things by not mentioning them or doing things rather than saying them (Berkson 1996, pp. 110 – 111). Zhuangzi’s language is “deconstructionist” in this sense.

However, Steven Burik points out how many scholars misinterpret this comparable writing style by viewing the reversal of hierarchies as a dialectical move (Burik 2010, 176 – 181). For many, the playful reversal is a step towards a third term that would abolish the original opposition or reconcile the opposed terms, arriving at forms of thought that transcend the original duality—something that, in contrast to the temptation to prolong undecidability, can ultimately help us heal our anxiety (Saso 1990). In this perspective, the temptation arises to say which of the two plays better, and so Olson suggests that while Derrida plays in a realm defined by the representational mode of thinking, Zhuangzi has successfully worked his way to free play (Olson 2020).

Therapeutical Comparisons: Ease and Unease

Evaluating the therapeutical value of Zhuangzi and Derrida is perhaps the concern that most often confronts, rather than brings together, both philosophers and the scholars’ evaluation of them. This is connected to the distinctive goals of Taoism and deconstruction.

Many authors agree that the objectives of Derrida’s and Zhuangzi’s philosophies are similar: to introduce another way of thinking through a deconstruction of the self, leading to a notion of the subject that is more relational and open to the world and otherness, and also to liberate us from the yoke of hierarchical values and the obsession with presence by inducing a change in attitude and sensibility (Clarke 2000, p. 183). However, concerning this transformation of the self, scholars sometimes critique that Derrida does not move forward after reversing the binary oppositions and remains in a negative relation to language (Berkson 1996). He is seen primarily concerned with the history of philosophy and the limitations of language, without proposing a positive alternative or a way out or aiming at overcoming Western metaphysics insofar as the desire for a “beyond” would be a metaphysical gesture (Burik 2010, p. 177). As Burik points out, many scholars are happy to claim “that where Derrida does not offer a clear solution to the problems he addresses, Zhuangzi has somehow found a way out” (Burik 2019b, p. 103).

This way out they attribute to Zhuangzi consists of the therapeutical transformation of the self, which involves a shift in perspective toward understanding the interconnectedness of all things. This transformation is also considered necessary for social and political change. In other terms, Zhuangzi has a positive goal and his

philosophy is oriented toward practice, while Derrida would only pursue a negative goal, limited by the theoretical nature of his reading interests (Allinson 2003; Berkson 1996; Cheng 1995; Nulty 2002; Wang 2003).

To me, this is the classic “deconstruction” vs. “reconstruction” argument, by which deconstruction would only be the reverse side of a process that, in the end, needs to attain palpable positive outcomes – beyond that deconstruction. The assumption behind these views is that Derrida is primarily a philosopher of language or someone concerned mainly with the history of philosophy. At the same time, Zhuangzi would be more focused on developing a therapeutic practice. Even some of those who are aware of Derrida’s ethical and political concerns do not believe his philosophy can serve as the basis for proper ethics because of its alleged refusal of presence and its overemphasis on difference and a “perpetual unease,” in contrast to Zhuangzi’s therapeutical advice to be at ease in the world (Shepherd 2007, pp. 238 – 239). On the contrary, Zhuangzi would ultimately seek a form of presence or transcendence, a life of spontaneity liberated from moralistic self-imprisonment. This transcendence, for some, is an absolute one (delving into an idiosyncratic “metaphysics”), while, for others, it is merely a relative or perspectivist presence that coexists with absence and difference (Wang 2003). Regarding to this mysterious “presence,” Burik demonstrates how it is a mistake to understand Zhuangzi’s preference for illumination and clarity (*míng* 明) as a metaphysical fondness for light over shadow, just as Derrida’s affirmation of alterity cannot be reduced to choosing one side of the opposition between presence and absence (Burik 2019a, pp. 364 – 366).

These differing evaluations of Derrida and Zhuangzi’s therapeutic worth and goals often shape scholars’ conceptions of their philosophies. They also show how limited the scope of these interpretations can be. True, some argue that this way of contrasting both texts from the point of view of practice is way too simplistic, overlooking how they both engage in affirmative thinking: the therapeutical value of Taoism is akin to deconstruction’s affirmation of differences (Burik 2010, pp. 179, 189). For Burik and Wang, neither in Derrida nor in Zhuangzi there is an annihilation of the self, even if the former deconstructs Cartesian subjectivity and the latter advocates for the “forgetting of the self” (Burik 2016, p.42; Wang 2003, p.52). In this respect, Lusthaus claims that Zhuangzi’s ethics involves responsibility and negotiation rather than adherence to fixed standards. This is an interesting point, since it brings it closer to Derrida; Zhuangzi’s therapeutics is ethical, and not metaphysical, and what other authors identify as “transcendence,” “presence,” or “unity” in his thought, is actually an effort to produce a virtue that includes responsibility toward the other (Lusthaus 2007). Ultimately, what Derrida and Zhuangzi have in common is the way in which they aspire to forms of justice that have no place in established value systems which prioritize identity and the generality of the law over difference and singularity (Burik 2015).

2. The Instituting Gesture

The four types of comparisons I have briefly described open up a lot of questions along wildly divergent paths. I can't answer all those questions, which in turn would require choosing some comparisons over others, for some of them are better, and some go in directions that, as a reader of both Zhuangzi and Derrida, I cannot approve of. However, I do not want to evaluate the comparisons in this paper. I prefer to consider their value as a whole. What do all these debates over how and where Zhuangzi and Derrida are comparable tell us about their ongoing encounter?

Interestingly, once one introduces a comparison framework, successive comparisons will need to develop or refute its initial intuitions, creating a sort of tradition. For instance, I have shown how comparing Zhuangzi to Derrida invites scholars to consider the problem of metaphysics: is Taoism metaphysical or anti-metaphysical? Is Zhuangzi's intellectual background a logocentric-metaphysics-of-presence he deconstructs? After a path is carved for these questions, it is hard for any attempt at comparison to avoid theorizing or debating them along the way.

This may explain why, while reading all these papers, I felt an intense fatigue from the many questions they repeat, even if only to criticize them in turn. But repetition is also a sign of institutionalization—the difficulty of reversing the commonplaces and their conventions, access norms, and more or less fixed boundaries.

A passage from the second chapter of the *Zhuangzi* describes well the process by which institutions of this sort are created (here, I quote Burton Watson's translation for convenience, adding words from the original in square bracket):

The Way has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy. But because of (the recognition of a) “this,” [*wéi shì* 為是] there came to be boundaries. Let me tell you what the boundaries are. There is left, there is right, there are theories [*lún* 倫], there are debates [*yì* 義], there are divisions [*fēn* 分], there are discriminations [*biàn* 辯], there are emulations [*jìng* 競], and there are contentions [*zhēng* 爭]. These are called the Eight Virtues. As to what is beyond the Six Realms [*liùhé zhīwài* 六合之外], the sage admits it exists but does not theorize [*lùn* 論]. As to what is within the Six Realms [*liùhé zhīnèi* 六合之內], he theorizes but does not debate [*yì* 議]. In the case of the *Spring and Autumn*, the record of the former kings of past ages, the sage debates but does not discriminate [*biàn* 辯]. So (I say,) those who divide [*fēn* 分] fail to divide; those who discriminate fail to discriminate. What does this mean, you ask? The sage embraces things. Ordinary men discriminate among them and parade their discriminations before others. So I say, those who discriminate fail to see. (2007, p. 93; 2013, pp. 13 – 14)

Billeter reads this passage as a description of how meaning is produced by “our signifying activity” (Billeter 2016, p.152). By this, he means the *wéi shì* 為是, the recognition of a “this,” or any other distinction by which one starts to set boundaries, such as “left and right.” The outcomes of this signifying activity give rise to all kinds of theories, debates and disputes about things that previously had no boundaries but we now consider to be different or identical, analogous or

incomparable. Lusthaus also analyzes this passage in detail. As he explains, there is a descending spiral from the absence of distinctions in an unlimited *dào* to the most arbitrary and dogmatic disputes (Lusthaus 2003, pp. 196 – 201).

This is how the world becomes intelligible for us, linguistic beings, through linguistic institutions that create meaning by opposing terms (*shì* and *fēi*, left and right). The “signifying activity” of the *wéi shì* is an instituting gesture that, according to Billeter, Zhuangzi sees as implying that we can always modify the resulting boundaries or create new ones.

However, despite this institutionalizing and de-institutionalizing power in us, I read this passage as a description of the (relative and contextual) inescapability of already existing institutions. The sage indeed has nothing to say about things that happen *outside* the frame of references that constitute the world (to which the text refers as “the Six Realms”), but this is because linguistic fixations do not play any role there. However, in worldly affairs (“within the Six Realms”), that is, in the realm of institutions, the sage speaks to theorize, which requires passing some judgments about the distinctions in contention, even if she also strives to avoid debating about others’ arguments. The sage knows that the institutions are not grounded on a “constant language” and that their premises should not be taken for granted, but even the sage’s speech is constrained by institutions of this sort.

Returning to the comparisons between Derrida and Zhuangzi, this forty-year-old tradition is grounded in layers of institutionality of this sort, distinctions that scholars create to produce meaning, and that precede and serve as a framing for successive encounters. For instance, those who refuse to compare them because the *Zhuangzi* would be too metaphysical, or those who on the contrary read it as a non-metaphysical work, are already emulating and contesting previous disputes on “metaphysics” in relation to Chinese philosophy. “Metaphysics” is a category so framed that it becomes inescapable. Even if, just like any other institution, its borders are as groundless as those created by any instituting gesture of our “signifying activity” or *wéi shì*. It is both baseless and inescapable, because within the arena of disputes and contentions such a distinction inaugurates, one can speak about it, and even attempt to theorize it, but not attain it as such.

This is also the fate of the phrase “Chinese philosophy,” which binds both those who, in a universalistic vein, affirm the *Zhuangzi* as a work of philosophy and those who, in a historicist vein, avoid applying the word “philosophy” to it.⁴ What I mean is that regardless of who is correct (and irrespective of whether one can be right or wrong on an issue like this) the introduction of the category “Chinese philosophy” almost irreversibly determines the virtual encounter between philosophers as different and as similar as Derrida and Zhuangzi might be. But is there any ground to speak about “Chinese philosophy” as opposed to, say “Indian” or “European philosophy,” or is it already a derivative division producing interminable disputes?

Interestingly, Derrida commented on the framework of this encounter and these comparisons: he suspected that his encounter with Zhuangzi occurred within

national or nationalist institutions. This was in 1984, a couple of years after Michelle Yeh's article was published, during the opening session of his seminar on "Nation and Philosophical Nationalism," where he reflected on the paradoxical relationship between philosophy and nationalism in our time. On the one hand, scholars from different countries, schools, and research groups communicate and exchange ideas as never before; on the other hand, however,

"It is at the very moment at which there is an intensification of what takes the form of exchanges, meetings, so-called philosophical communication, at which this exposes the at least supposed national differences to influences, grafts, deformations, hybridisations, etc., at this very moment that national consciousness, search for identity, affirmation or even national demands show up more clearly, or even become exasperated and tense up into nationalism. And then, as always in such cases, there are in each national territory those who want to revive the national philosophical fibre, reconstitute the right tradition, reevaluate the corpus and the national heritage (there are examples of this everywhere, here and there, especially in France or the USA, and even in Japan where there is a flurry of articles trying to demonstrate that for example post-structuralism or what is called deconstruction is very like what Zen thinking, and especially that of Master Dogen, developed centuries ago. There has been an analogous phenomenon in China over the last few years, since a certain opening to the West is producing exactly the same effects there. [...] if I am to judge by what I've been given to read in English [...], written by young Chinese philosophers gone to study in the USA, the same phenomenon is being reproduced: an insistence on the analogy of French post-structuralism, for example, and the deconstruction of phono-logocentrism, with this or that Chinese national tradition. And these demonstrations [...] are simultaneously convincing and irrelevant, plausible and blind to their own presupposition." (Derrida 1992, pp. 6 – 7)

In this quote, Derrida is not simply expressing his mistrust of attempts to compare his philosophy with Zhuangzi – or, as he formulates it, the "*this* or *that* Chinese national tradition" (my emphasis). Instead, I read it as a reminder about the conditions or institutions under which that comparison can take place. From the first comparison onwards, the tradition of comparisons whose typology I have outlined assumes that Zhuangzi is a Chinese philosopher, and Derrida a Western one. But what does that mean? And why should one assume this? This is a fundamental question, perhaps even the founding "(recognition of a) 'this' [*wéi shì*]" of a comparative approach. More often than not, this question remains unquestioned (at least, none of the Zhuangzi-Derrida comparisons I have read do so). It is not because scholars are too lazy to ask it but because it has instituted the framework of the encounter in a relatively inescapable way. Under these conditions, one can theorize, debate, or contend. The instituting gesture or *wéi shì*, in this case, consists of the "nationalization" of Zhuangzi and Derrida in terms of "Chinese" and "European" or "East" and "West." Given that the gesture makes the comparison possible in the first place, how can theories, debates, or contentions about their

encounter be anything other than attempts to rationalize something as groundless as *this*?

And how could any self, community, or philosophical identity be better grounded than *that*? The therapeutic value – if there is any – of this “deconstruction of institutions,” which, as Burik suggests, is perhaps a shared gesture in Zhuangzi and Derrida (Burik 2019b), lies in reminding us that any therapy responds to an unease it ultimately cannot heal. Paradoxically, the encounter between Zhuangzi and Derrida exposes the limits of comparative philosophy and encounters of this sort, announcing their transformation into something else, perhaps more philosophical than comparative (Burik 2022). I would add that the encounter can potentially expose how comparative philosophy is grounded on the *wéi shì* of philosophical nationalism.

Acknowledgements

Research for this paper received financial support from the Ministry of Science and Technology of Taiwan (MOST 111-2410-H-110-048). A first draft was presented at the 4th Biennial Conference of the European Association for Chinese Philosophy in Macerata on June 16, 2023.

NOTES

1. Written by multiple authors between the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, the *Zhuangzi* is a compilation of texts originally attributed to Zhuangzi, or Zhuang Zhou 莊周, a philosopher who lived around the 4th century BC and after whom the book is named. Throughout this article, I use “the *Zhuangzi*” and “*Zhuangzi*” interchangeably to refer to the book. Alongside the *Laozi* or *Daodejing*, the *Zhuangzi* is considered one of the foundational texts of philosophical Taoism. For the romanization of Chinese terms, I use Hanyu Pinyin; in other transliteration systems, *Zhuangzi* is also spelled “Chuang Tzu” (in English) and “Tchouang-tseu” (in French).
2. Some authors have also compared Derrida with Laozi, and there is a parallel tradition of comparisons with Buddhism. Except for Tsai (2016), I am not aware of any attempts to relate Confucianism to Derrida’s thought.
3. For a more detailed summary of the comparisons, see also Burik (2010, pp. 137 – 145).
4. In fact, none of the texts referenced in this paper question the possibility that the *Zhuangzi* is a work of philosophy; here I am referring to the broader debate concerning Chinese philosophy as a historical and textual totality—one that is either territorialized from today’s perspective as “philosophy” or denied that designation. For the problem of the name “philosophy,” see Defoort (2001); for the question of how philosophical historiography territorializes the philosophical past in nationalities, periods, and disciplines, see König-Pralong (2019).

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