

輪扁故事旨趣何在？

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摘要

《莊子·天道》中輪扁斲輪故事，看似旨在說明技藝之不可言傳性；若連結到其他論及技藝與語言之《莊子》篇章來看，如此詮釋誠然有跡可循，而在現代學界也確實傾向以此脈絡來理解或應用輪扁之故事。鑒於《莊子·天道》中，另有其他段落以「書」為題，本文擬從《莊子·天道》整章的脈絡來探討輪扁故事之旨趣。本文將根據輪扁故事中有關書的問題，分別探究：書的功能何在？為何批判書？書中少了什麼？依據《莊子·天道》提供之線索探討上述諸問題時，可以發現輪扁之故事應視為政治論述之一環；換言之，技藝與語言等議題，或許無關於其宏旨。

關鍵詞：《莊子》、輪扁、技藝、語言、書

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What is the Wheelwright Bian Story About?

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Abstract

The wheelwright Bian story in chapter 13 of the *Zhuangzi* is generally read in terms of the inexpressibility of skill. Connections with other *Zhuangzi* passages on skill and language skepticism readily suggest themselves, and this is indeed the direction in which the story has been developed and contextualized in the scholarship. In this paper, we take an alternative approach. Prompted by the observation that the status of books is a topic not only in the wheelwright story but also in three other sections of chapter 13, we attempt to read the story in the context of its chapter. The three main parts of the paper correspond to questions regarding books suggested in the wheelwright story: questions pertaining to the function of books, to the reason why books are criticized, and to what is absent from books. In addressing these issues, we will draw on a variety of clues present in chapter 13. The picture that will emerge is one in which the wheelwright story is seen as part of a political polemic. To the extent that the story is part of a political polemic, it is less obviously about skill and language per se.

Keywords: *Zhuangzi*, wheelwright, skill, language, books

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I. Introduction

The wheelwright Bian story is one of the most widely quoted stories from the *Zhuangzi* (《莊子》). It is generally interpreted in terms of the inexpressibility of skill. Language skepticism and skill, the two topics that account for this reading, find echoes throughout the *Zhuangzi*. Passages on skill, often regarded as offering an easy point of entry to the philosophy of the book, abound in chapter 19 and are perhaps best known through the butcher Ding story in chapter 3. Discussions on language, often taking a reflective, critical or skeptical turn, are perhaps most famously represented in chapter 2. It is in the wheelwright Bian story that these two topics meet.

Given these readily available connections, the wheelwright story, while sometimes read in isolation, is mostly discussed in the context of familiar *Zhuangzi* passages. Together, these passages generate the *Zhuangzi* readings we are all familiar with. Along with the general theme of the inexpressibility of skill, the wheelwright story is in the literature related to a variety of topics,

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including ‘knowing how’ versus ‘knowing that,’ spontaneity, change, responsiveness, and the rigidity of rules.¹ This overall picture, it is important to note, is the result of piecing together passages that originate from different parts and chapters of the *Zhuangzi*.²

In this paper, we will take a different approach. We propose a reading of the wheelwright story that is informed by its chapter-level context. Our interest in this approach is sparked by the simple observation that the term *shu* (書, ‘books’), the target of criticism in the wheelwright story, figures prominently not only in the wheelwright story but also in three of the chapter’s other sections. Moreover, out of a total of twenty occurrences in the entire *Zhuangzi*, *shu* appears eight times in chapter 13, with the other twelve occurrences spread out over nine more chapters. These striking statistics make clear that chapter 13 has, as a matter of fact, the highest density of discussion on books in the entire *Zhuangzi*. Our aim is to analyse how ideas on books and related notions in chapter 13 can enrich our reading of the wheelwright story.

A chapter-level analysis can be performed in a number of ways. Rather than presenting the sections chronologically, we will focus on the topic of books and discuss this topic under three aspects. One consequence of this approach is that we will need to cut sections across, drawing attention to different segments of the same sections as we progress. The three aspects that frame our discussion are listed below. They correspond to the different parts

¹ Studies that mention the wheelwright Bian story, invariably in the context of broader discussions, include Berkson, Mark (1996), Fang, Wan-Chuan (2009), Graham, Angus C. (1989: 186-188), Ivanhoe, Philip J. (1993), Kjellberg, Paul (1996), Porat, Roy (2015), and Schwitzgebel, Eric (1996).

² This methodology of piecing together passages from different parts and chapters is common in *Zhuangzi* studies, especially for the later parts of the book. See De Reu, Wim (2015: 244-245) for a brief discussion of this point.

of the paper and are informed by questions one could raise in the course of reading the wheelwright story.

1. The function of books—“*Books and the guidance they offer.*” Why does Duke Huan read books and what does he find in them?
2. The critique of books—“*Two compatible critiques.*” What is problematic about books and the guidance they contain?
3. The essential left out from books—“*The essential in ruling.*” What is the essential that books or language cannot convey?

In answering these questions, we will partly draw on information found in the wheelwright story, but more importantly also look beyond this story to the chapter’s other sections. While it is not our intention to examine the other sections’ every detail—that would require a much longer paper—the chapter-informed reading presented below will give us enough context within which to place the wheelwright story. Our approach will result in a reading that brings out the political dimension of the wheelwright story and that shows how this story functions within a philosophical-political polemic.³ In addition, recontextualizing the story within its chapter context will also deflate, though not make irrelevant, the concern with language and skill found in the scholarship. To the extent that the story is part of a political polemic, it is less obviously about skill and language per se.

³ Perhaps this should come as no surprise, since chapter 13, or parts of it, have been classified as ‘Syncretist’ (Graham, 1986: 173; 313-321) or ‘Huang-Lao’ (Liu, 1987: 78-86), a group of chapters in the *Zhuangzi* with obvious political content. Despite these classifications, there is no attempt to read the wheelwright story as part of its chapter-level context.

For ease of reference, we quote the wheelwright story below and add, in appendix, an overview table with the chapter's sections. The wheelwright story can be divided into two segments. The first segment starts with the basic setting and leads up to wheelwright Bian's claim and the challenge made by Duke Huan (桓公). The second segment consists entirely of Bian's defense.⁴

桓公讀書於堂上。輪扁斲輪於堂下，釋椎鑿而上，問桓公曰：「敢問，公之所讀者何言邪？」公曰：「聖人之言也。」曰：「聖人在乎？」公曰：「已死矣。」曰：「然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫！」桓公曰：「寡人讀書，輪人安得議乎！有說則可，無說則死。」

Duke Huan was reading a book at the top of the hall, wheelwright Bian was chipping a wheel at the bottom of the hall. He put aside his mallet and chisel and went up to ask Duke Huan. 'May I ask what words my lord is reading?' 'The words of sages.' 'Are the sages alive?' 'They are dead.' 'In that case what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn't it?' 'What business is it of a wheelwright to criticise what I read? If you can explain yourself, well and good; if not, you die.'

輪扁曰：「臣也以臣之事觀之。斲輪，徐則甘而不固，疾則苦而不入。不徐不疾，得之於手而應於心，口不能言，有數存焉於其間。臣不能以喻臣之子，臣之子亦不能受之於臣，是以行年七十而老斲輪。古之人與其不可傳也死矣，然則君之所讀者，古人之糟魄已夫。」

⁴ Our translation of the wheelwright Bian story is based on Graham's translation (1981: 139-140). Unless otherwise noted, all other translations are our own.

Wheelwright Bian replied: ‘Speaking of myself, I see it in terms of my own work. If I chip at a wheel slowly, the chisel slides and does not grip; if fast, it jams and catches in the wood. Not slow, not fast; I feel it in the hand and respond from the heart, the mouth cannot put it into words, there is a knack in it somewhere which I cannot explain to my son and which my son cannot receive from me. This is how through my seventy years I have grown old chipping at wheels. The men of old and their untransmittable message are dead. Then what my lord is reading is the dregs of the men of old, isn’t it?’

II. Books and The Guidance They Offer

People read for a variety of purposes: to kill time, to expand their imagination, to enrich their language, to inform themselves about what happens around them, and to get better at what they are doing, among others. Why does Duke Huan read books? And, what is discussed in those books?

A. The Quest for Guidance

The wheelwright story itself hints at the purpose of the Duke’s reading. The purpose is not directly stated but rather embedded in Bian’s analogy. What Bian could do, but would fail to accomplish, is to explain (*yu* 喻) and in this way transmit (*chuan* 傳) his skill to his son. The purpose of communication between Bian and his son, if indeed such communication were to take place, would be to offer and receive (*shou* 受) instruction or guidance on how to cut wheels.

While the story does not spell out the implications for the Duke, the message is clear. The Duke, who corresponds to the son, cannot receive any guidance about the activity he is engaged in from the texts he is reading. At this point, we need not discuss why this is impossible. What is important here is that the Duke is portrayed as reading books with the purpose of gaining or receiving guidance. As a ruler, moreover, it seems likely that the activity *he* hopes to get better at is ruling.

A ruler's reading is not an isolated event. It is part of an institutionalized practice. Along with it comes a repository of manuscripts, officials in charge of selecting, conserving, and furthering texts, and ambitious would-be advisors who seek to lobby these officials to have their own writings or the writings they subscribe to accepted and promoted at court. This, we believe, is the likely background of section 3, one of the other sections in the chapter that mentions books.

Section 3 stages Kongzi (孔子), Zilu (子路), and Lao Dan (老聃). Kongzi seeks to deposit a set of books (*cang shu* 藏書) at the House of Zhou. Zilu, his disciple, proposes to enlist the help of Lao Dan, a former Zhou librarian who is thought to have access at court. The main part of the section consists of a multi-step exchange between Kongzi and Lao Dan. It is the final step that concerns us here. Lao Dan is of the opinion that the writings recommended by Kongzi will cause the below heaven (*tianxia* 天下) to “lose what shepherds it” (*shi qi mu* 失其牧). How could mere writings have such a profound impact? Two possible answers come to mind. They would need to be widely distributed or, a more likely answer in the present case, be made available to a ruler who could propel their influence by taking them as the basis of his rule. In effect,

both Kongzi and Lao Dan act on the assumption that books stored at court guide a ruler's policy. But where the former sees opportunity, the latter sees danger.

The wheelwright story stages a ruler who reads books; section 3 stages a would-be advisor who seeks to deposit books for the ruler to read. Both sections are set against the backdrop of an institutionalized practice whereby books are seen as an important medium for passing on guidance. That books are considered to be an important medium is the exact point of the opening line of section 6, the discursive, penultimate section of the chapter: "What the world values and takes as the Way are books" (*shi zhi suo gui dao zhe shu ye* 世之所貴道者書也). Even though the section goes on to criticize the value of books, it does acknowledge the widespread belief that books are repositories of normative guidance. Duke Huan shares this belief and consults books in search of guidance.

B. The Details of Guidance

The wheelwright story is not very informative about exactly what is to be found in the books which the Duke is reading. We may reasonably assume that the books deal with politics and the socio-political world, and we know that they contain the words of ancient sages (*sheng ren zhi yan* 聖人之言, *gu ren* 古人). If we push the story a bit further and are to accept Bian's perspective, we may perhaps also infer that books only contain simple guidelines, such as "slow" (*xu* 徐) and "fast" (*ji* 急) in the case of wheel making. But this, it seems, is as far as the story allows us to go.

The chapter as a whole, however, greatly enriches our understanding of the topic. We will first look at a group of sections that mention books *and* reveal what those books are about. In a second step, we will highlight another

group of sections that are not concerned with books yet do mention notions that we know to be topics of discussion in books. And finally, as an add-on, we will draw attention to one more section that mentions neither books nor the relevant notions but that in terms of its content may be understood as loosely compatible with some of these notions.

The first and most relevant group contains two sections. Section 1, the chapter's long, discursive opening section, is most informative. Of special concern to us here is unit 1.7, the final unit. The relevant lines deserve to be quoted in full.

書曰：「有形有名。」形名者，古人有之，而非所以先也。古之語大道者，五變而形名可舉，九變而賞罰可言也。

The books say: "There is the performance, there is the title." Performance and titles, the men of old did have them, but [these] are not what they prioritized. As to expositions on the Great Way in ancient times: [only] at the fifth step could performance and titles be mentioned; [only] at the ninth step could rewards and punishments be talked about.

The unit as a whole takes issue with those who believe that performance and titles (*xing ming* 形名) along with rewards and punishments (*shang fa* 賞罰) should be central to government. It suggests a common mistake: books mention notions XYZ and readers, taking guidance from books, elevate the importance of XYZ beyond measure. Acting as a counterbalance, unit 1.7 downgrades the status of these notions. It positions them towards the end on a scale of government priorities established in unit 1.6. According to that hierarchy, performance and titles come in fifth place, while rewards and punishments are ranked in the ninth and final position.

The hierarchy established in unit 1.6 also lists, in third place and without comment, humaneness and righteousness (*ren yi* 仁義). Humaneness and righteousness resurface in other sections, once in direct relation to books, namely, in section 3, the story that stages Kongzi in his effort to deposit books. Replying to Lao Dan's questions, Kongzi identifies the books' essential concern (*yao* 要) as humaneness and righteousness, and he defines these notions as "in your innermost heart to be in sympathy with things, to care for each and all without having a private interest of one's own" (*zhong xin wu kai jian ai wu si* 中心物愷，兼愛無私). It is this clarification of *ren yi* which prompts Lao Dan to criticize Kongzi for causing the world to "lose what shepherds it." Nevertheless, despite the criticism, it would seem that Kongzi is honestly concerned with the well-being of others.

Two more sections mention humaneness (and righteousness) without any further reference to books. Section 5 states that "punishment and bounty (*xing de* 形德) and humaneness and righteousness are twigs of the spirit (*shen zhi mo* 神之末)." Near the end, it mentions humaneness and righteousness alongside ritual and music (*li yue* 禮樂), and it calls for these two sets of notions to be demoted (*tui* 退) and treated as mere guests (*bin* 賓), respectively.⁵ The other section, section 4, stages a character named Shi Chengqi (士成綺) who travels a long way to pay his respects to Laozi (老子), only to find out that the latter does not lead a humane life (*bu ren* 不仁) because he, as Shi Chengqi sees it, is wasteful and hoards more food than he is able to finish.

⁵ We follow Victor Mair's translation of *bin* (賓) as "treat as guests" (1994: 127). His translation captures the idea of grading that is lacking in readings that replace 賓 with 擯 (*bin*, "discard"). For the latter reading, see Chen, Guu-ying (1999, vol. 2: 371-373).

Shi Chengqi, who is portrayed as a disagreeable social activist, most likely means that Laozi ought to share the resources available to him with others.

Finally, section 2, even though it does not contain any of the aforesaid notions, may be viewed as compatible with *ren yi*, or at least with one or another conception of *ren yi*. The section opens with Shun (舜) asking Yao (堯) what he applies his heart-mind to. Yao's account expresses an emphatic concern for the deprived and the bereft, a concern with others not unlike what we find in sections 3 and 4. Nevertheless, despite Yao's apparently good intentions, both Shun and the section's composer downplay Yao's social concern in favor of a grander vision (*infra*).

Up to this point, reading the wheelwright story in the context of chapter 13 has yielded two direct results. First, it has confirmed what was already implied in the wheelwright story, namely, that the Duke is reading books in search of guidance, and more broadly, that books were seen as repositories of normative guidance. Second, it has given us concrete insight into the topics likely to be found in those books. At least two sets of topics can be identified.⁶ One set is concerned with administrative order—performance and titles, rewards and punishments. The other set deals with social well-being—here, humaneness and righteousness.

In anticipation of what is to come, we can make one further observation: the books under discussion are socio-political in content. This implies that any argument about books is most likely meant to support a position on socio-political issues and on what is important in ruling.

⁶ There may be other candidates, most notably ritual and music (section 5) and the various types of *mo* (末) mentioned in unit 1.4. However, none of those are directly related to books.

III. Two Compatible Critiques

Chapter 13 presents, in our view, not only one but two critiques of socio-political writings. The first is a factual critique: they *do not* convey what is of primary importance. The second is a more substantive critique: they *cannot* convey what is of primary importance. These two critiques are compatible in that the latter justifies the former.

The substantive critique is present in sections 6 and 7 only. This basic observation not only explains why these two sections are sometimes taken together as one larger unit.⁷ It also explains why they, unlike the preceding sections, do not mention any of the aforementioned topics—performance and titles, rewards and punishments, and humaneness and righteousness. To argue that books *cannot* transmit what is of primary importance does not require a critique of content. Conversely, a factual critique, as we find it in sections 1-5, *does* need to contrast what is trivial to what is of greater relevance.

Note that the chapter *could* have started with an elaborate substantive critique and concluded with a brief factual account, the latter presented as a consequence of the former. This arrangement would have given the chapter a more theoretical outlook. That chapter 13 adopts the opposite sequence suggests that it is a polemical text whose main purpose it is to critique misguided policies and the writings on which these policies are based. The short substantive critique is added only towards the end, perhaps because the composers,

⁷ See Graham (1981: 139-140).

similar to wheelwright Bian, felt the need to defend themselves against the challenge from traditional authorities.

The sequence in which the two critiques are presented—and the difference in space devoted to them—prompts us to read the wheelwright Bian story and the section preceding it against the backdrop of the earlier material.

A. The Factual Critique

Our discussion in the first part of the paper already contains elements that are important in reconstructing the factual critique. Recall that the final unit of section 1, unit 1.7, ranks performance and titles, and rewards and punishments— notions found in books—low on the scale of government priorities.

Note, now, that in referring to “books,” the composer of unit 1.7 *only* mentions notions such as performance and titles. He does not also draw attention to other, more important, though neglected, elements in those books. This leads us to believe that the books under discussion *only* contain notions which are, on the composer’s scale of priorities, of lower relevance. The issue, then, is not one of misinterpretation, focusing on the wrong elements of books. Rather, it is that transmitted socio-political writings simply do not convey what is of primary importance.

When set against the guiding function attributed to books, it may be readily visible why it is problematic for books to only contain notions of lower relevance: they will lead the ruler to prioritize things that should only be taken care of at later stages. This, however, is only part of the picture. Section 1 is also emphatic about the point that *the ruler* should not involve himself with lower notions. Unit 1.7 argues that those who busy themselves

with lower-ranked notions are “people of a single field” (*yi qu zhi ren* 一曲之人) whose specialty “is what the lower (*xia* 下) use to serve the higher (*shang* 上), not what the higher uses to herd the lower.” These people, the text makes clear, “can be used by” (*ke yong yu* 可用於) but “are not good enough to make use of” (*bu zu yi yong* 不足以用) the below heaven (*tianxia* 天下).

The idea that not the ruler but those below him are in charge of lower-ranked notions is presented in more detail in units 1.3 and 1.4. The higher (*shang*) is there identified as the ruler (*zhu* 主) who, “being without activity (*wu wei* 無為), makes use of the below heaven” (*yong tianxia* 用天下). He is said to be the locus of the root (*ben* 本) and the essential (*yao* 要). By contrast, the lower (*xia* 下), identified as the ministers (*chen* 臣), “are active” (*you wei* 有為) and are “used by the below heaven” (*wei tianxia yong* 為天下用). They are the ones who busy themselves with lower-ranked notions, referred to as twigs (*mo* 末) and details (*xiang* 詳).

The view presented in section 1 is that of a highly stratified political reality—a scale of government priorities in conjunction with a sharp distinction between ruler and minister. This view is crystallized in the emphasis placed on *xu* (序, “order,” “sequence”). After pointing out the *xian* (先, “prior”) / *cong* (從, “following”) or *xian* (先, “earlier”) / *hou* (後, “later”) order displayed in a variety of natural and social phenomena, unit 1.5 describes these phenomena as “the sequence of the Great Way” (*da dao zhi xu* 大道之序) and insists that “talking about the Way but rejecting its sequence (*fei qi xu* 非其序) amounts to rejecting this very Way.”

On the view developed in section 1, lower-ranked notions are not intrinsically problematic, as long as they are kept in their proper places and do not preoccupy

the ruler's mind. The situation does become problematic, unit 1.7 points out, when the ruler or those who advise him “speed into talking” (*zou er yu* 驟而語) about such notions. This is also where the critique of socio-political writings fits in: since books only mention lower-ranked notions and are seen as repositories of guidance, they mislead the ruler into prioritizing issues he should not busy himself with.

Let us now briefly revisit two other sections. In section 3, Kongzi holds that humaneness and righteousness make up the *yao*, the essence, of the books he seeks to deposit at court. We saw the same term *yao* in section 1, where it refers to what is essential and of importance to the ruler, in contrast to the *xiang* (詳, “details”), taken care of by his ministers. According to section 1, humaneness and righteousness are *not* essential; while given more prominence than other notions, they only appear in third position. Lao Dan’s criticism of Kongzi, then, is consistent with the picture established in section 1. To the extent that socio-political writings advocate humaneness and righteousness as their core values, they do not contain what is of primary importance, and they should not be recommended to the ruler.

Section 5, too, contains terminology that marks rank. Most conspicuous is the term *mo* (末, “twigs”), which was used in section 1 to refer to affairs located at the level of the ministers. After having identified these twigs as punishment and bounty, humaneness and righteousness, the composer further exclaims: “If not for the ultimate person, who would be able to set them in their proper places (*ding zhi* 定之)!” The idea that said notions should be ‘set’ or ‘fixed,’ or that these and similar notions should be demoted (*tui*) and treated as mere guests (*bin*), resonates well with the scale of priorities established in

section 1. The ultimate person, we may infer, is someone who gets the priorities right and does not pay much attention to what is inessential.

The factual critique makes the point that notions propagated in socio-political writings are not of primary importance and should not busy the ruler. This view explains Lao Dan's strongly worded criticism of Kongzi's attempt to deposit books at court, and it also sheds light on why the chapter's composer may have been motivated to include a story about a Duke who takes guidance from books and is criticized for doing so. While books stored at court may contain valuable instruction for his ministers, Duke Huan, *as a ruler*, should not take guidance from them lest he should upset the proper order of government and, by extension, the socio-political world at large.

B. The Substantive Critique

The composer of chapter 13 plays a high game. He challenges the authority of transmitted socio-political writings, along with the wisdom they supposedly contain. Indirectly, he also criticizes the institutional context within which these books are valued, including the habit of rulers to turn to books for guidance. In these respects, the chapter's composer resembles wheelwright Bian, who claims that the books read by the Duke are the "dregs of the men of old" (*gu ren zhi zao po* 古人之糟魄).

Bian does more, however, than merely criticizing the Duke's reading habit. Challenged by the Duke, he argues that books simply cannot transmit what is most important—the *cannot* explains the *do not*. The stakes are high: Bian's very survival depends on his argument being persuasive. Similarly, the fate of the chapter's composer as a political advisor depends on his audience,

presumably also the ruling elite, accepting the arguments put forth in sections 6 and 7.

What, then, are the arguments for the view that books cannot transmit what is most important? Section 7, the wheelwright story, takes a highly personal approach: Bian argues from his perspective as an artisan (*yi chen zhi shi guan zhi* 以臣之事觀之). Cutting a wheel, he argues, is a highly subtle, embodied activity. It involves a complex information-response dynamic between the hand (*shou* 手) and the heart-mind (*xin* 心) regarding the speed with which to handle the chisel. Language, on the other hand, only consists of simple guidelines such as “slow” (*xu*) and “fast” (*ji*). These instructions are inadequate to describe and guide an activity that requires one to experience “not slow, not fast” (*bu xu bu ji* 不徐不疾) for its successful execution. Language, be it in oral or written form, is hence unable (*bu neng* 不能) to convey what is essential to the activity of cutting a wheel; the essential is untransmittable (*bu ke chuan* 不可傳).

Unlike the wheelwright story, section 6 does not draw on the personal, embodied experience involved in doing something. Taking on a more discursive style, it insists on an unbridgeable gap between what can be seen and heard on the one hand, and a more fundamental reality on the other. At first glance, this argument appears to be a dead end. How does it connect to language? The connection, we believe, is to think of books and language as a second pair of eyes and ears, providing access to a world that is not immediately in front of us: what is valuable in language, section 6 explicitly states, is the *yi* (意, “view,” “picture,” “idea,”) conveyed by words. Nevertheless, just as objects of ordinary perception do not suffice (*bu zu* 不足) to get to the more

fundamental level of reality, so the ideas or views formed by words merely follow (*sui* 隨) onto something that cannot be transmitted in language (*bu ke yi yan chuan* 不可以言傳). Books, despite being taken as repositories of normative guidance, do not grant access to what is really important.

Sections 6 and 7 take different approaches—sense perception and embodied experience, respectively—to argue for the position that language, and more specifically books, cannot express and transmit what is of central importance. This position, the *cannot*, is designed to justify the *do not*, the claim that socio-political writings do not contain the core principle of ruling. Whether persuasive or not, this attempt at justification is an important contribution to the chapter.

While sections 6 and 7 add a line of defense, they also build on the earlier material. In particular, two cases of word choice seem to be informed by ideas developed earlier on. The first case is the verb *sui* (“follow”) in the statement “What ideas [i.e. views expressed in language] follow onto (*yi zhi suo sui zhe* 意之所隨者) cannot be transmitted in language.” The use of the verb *sui* to express the connection between ideas on the one hand, and what cannot be transmitted on the other, is puzzling. Why do ideas *follow* onto something that is then supposed to be prior to them? Recall, however, the use of vocabulary indicating sequence or order (*xu*) in section 1: the contrasts *xian* (“prior”) / *cong* (“following”) and *xian* (“earlier”) / *hou* (“later”) functioned there to establish the general order of things. When read against this background, the use of *sui* in section 6 to indicate relative order of importance can be accounted for. What section 6 adds is that the primary, what is really important, cannot be expressed in words.

The second instance is the term *zaopo* (糟魄, “dregs”), usually taken to refer to wine sediment, something that is of no value, but here applied to the “words of sages” (*sheng ren zhi yan*). Even though the books read by Duke Huan contain the words of sages, these words are dregs because, first, what is really valuable cannot be expressed in words, and second, the sages who could point out this very fact are no longer alive (*si yi* 死矣). We will have more to say about the role which the sages could have played in the next part of the paper. For now, let it suffice that the term *zaopo* amplifies the notion of *mo* (“twigs”) as encountered in sections 1 and 5. Things recognized as twigs still have some value because they are embedded in a larger context of which they are part. Without this context, that is, without being *recognized* as twigs, those same things become worthless. Dregs are twigs devoid of context.

The final two sections do not appear to be random paragraphs attached to the end of the chapter. On the vocabulary level, *sui* (“follow”) and *zaopo* (“dregs”) are consistent with the use of terminology that indicates rank in section 1 and elsewhere in the chapter. On the argument level, Bian’s initial claim and subsequent justification offers a compressed picture of what plays out in the chapter itself—arguments for the *cannot* position (sections 6 and 7) justifying an earlier *do not* claim.

IV. The Essential in Ruling

If what is essential in ruling is not found in transmitted socio-political writings, what, then, is the essential and where do we find it? Here, it may seem like the composer of chapter 13 has painted himself into a corner, for if

the essential *cannot* be transmitted or communicated in language, how could he, as a composer of another piece of writing, and as one other political advisor, succeed in doing what he himself says is impossible? It may seem that in justifying the *do not* by the *cannot*, the chapter's composer has also cut the ground from under his own feet.

Nowhere in the text does it show that the composer is acutely aware of this problem. We do not see here the reflective bent that is on display in the famous second chapter of the *Zhuangzi*.⁸ We may attribute this lack of reflection to the polemical of chapter 13. Yet, the situation may also be less dramatic than it is portrayed above. In what follows, we will first suggest one way of reading the text that may avoid the above contradiction, or that at least makes it less prominent. In a second part, we will review what the text says about the essential.

A. Talking about The Essential

The question of how the composer talks about the essential does not need to be met head-on. We will frame an answer by drawing a parallel between Bian and the composer, and in doing so, we will also address the issue of the role the sages could have played had they still been alive.

Let us first look at Bian, for he is the only character in the entire chapter who argues that the essential cannot be put into words. In arguing that he could never explain his knack to his own son, Bian does in fact say not little about what is essential in cutting a wheel: “not slow, not fast;” “feel it in the

⁸ Chiu, Wai Wai (2015) offers a most accessible treatment of consciously employed linguistic strategies in *Zhuangzi* 2. For other references and a discussion of how such strategies function within a broader concern with coexistence, see De Reu (2017).

hand and respond from the heart;” even to say that “the mouth cannot put it into words” directs attention away from verbal instruction to what is essential. Is Bian, then, contradicting himself, doing what he says cannot be done? He is not, we think. Unlike instruction manuals that set out to teach ‘the essence of XYZ,’ Bian’s formulations do not presume to formulate the essential. They merely serve to put his audience, his son or Duke Huan, in a particular direction.

If we are to save the composer of chapter 13 from contradicting himself, we need to assume that the chapter as a whole also functions to put the audience in a particular direction. That is, the dialogues, the discursive parts, the criticisms, the more direct statements about what is essential, and even the quotations near the beginning of the chapter in unit 1.2, only one of which is attributed (to *Zhuangzi*)—none of these should be read as instruction manuals that capture and teach the essential. They are pointers that indicate the essential without formulating it. To be fair, this understanding of the chapter’s verbal content is not explicated anywhere in the chapter. Nevertheless, it is a reading which could, with some degree of plausibility, be extracted from the wheelwright Bian story.

To account for Bian’s descriptions of his own knack yields another interesting observation. It allows us to make sense of the second question to the Duke: “Are the sages alive?” (*sheng ren zai hu* 聖人在乎). This question has been a source of perplexity, with some interpreters brushing it aside as an irrelevant distraction, for neither would the sages, if they were still alive, be able to convey what is essential in ruling.⁹ Yet, while it is indeed true that the sages, on Bian’s reasoning, would not be able to convey the essential,

⁹ Schwitzgebel (1996: 94) calls it ‘a red herring.’

they could have made clear to the Duke that the books he is reading only contain the mere twigs and details of government, and they could have pointed him in the direction of the essential. Since the sages could have played this role, the question as to whether they are alive is indeed a meaningful question.

If we agree that this is the role the sages could have played, we must also accept that Bian is in effect doing what the sages could have done had they still been alive. Bian does not claim to be a sage—he emphasizes that he observes the matter as a mere artisan—but his criticism of books and his subsequent justification reframe what ought to be important to the Duke. Taking this line of reasoning one step further, we can also entertain the idea that the chapter's composer, too, assumes the role the sages could have played. He tells *his* audience that knowledge found in transmitted socio-political writings is not what is essential in ruling; he professes to know what the ancients prioritized; and he redirects the attention of his audience towards the essential. In these respects, and in the absence of sages, the composer becomes sage-like.

B. The Essential

Wheelwright Bian reasons from his profession as an artisan. He offers some insight into what is important in cutting a wheel. Cutting a wheel is a complex embodied activity. It requires sophisticated skill. But the story makes a point about the activity the Duke is engaged in. What is essential in ruling?

Here, the wheelwright story is not of much help. For an approximation of the essential in ruling, we do better to revisit some of the earlier, more content-rich sections. We will first take a look at sections 2 and 3, then return to section 1, and finally end with a brief discussion of section 5.

Section 2 opens with Shun's question to Yao about what he, the "heaven-king" (*tian wang* 天王), applies his heart-mind to. Recall that Yao's answer expresses an emphatic concern with the deprived and the bereft, and that Shun belittles the relevance of this concern for, in text's words, "not yet being great" (*wei da ye* 未大也). The next step in the conversation contrasts heaven (*tian* 天) with man (*ren* 人). Yao comes to realize that he is only "a match for man" (*ren zhi he* 人之合) while it is in fact Shun who is "a match for heaven" (*tian zhi he* 天之合). For a king to be a match for heaven, Shun's statements suggest, is for him to imitate heaven's leading role in the interaction between heaven and earth as displayed in their corresponding regularities. The text concludes that it is "heaven and earth" (*tian di* 天地) which "the ancients considered great" (*gu zhi suo da ye* 古之所大也). If the ruler can match heaven in setting things in motion on a grander scale, he does not need to concern himself with the micro-level.

Section 3, which stages Kongzi in his attempt to deposit books at court, also appears to take issue with some kind of micro-level concern. Lao Dan argues that things that constitute groupings "inherently have" (*gu you* 固有) group-level tendencies. The obvious examples are taken from the natural world—for instance, heaven and earth are both constant (*chang* 常), and plants and trees all have a vertical orientation (*li* 立). These examples are used to make a point about the human sphere. What Lao Dan is concerned with is 人之性 ("the 'nature' of humans"), an expression that refers to what human beings have in common. In the context of the section, the idea that human beings have a common tendency, and that the only thing one needs to do is to follow this common tendency, is presented as an alternative to

Kongzi's explication of humaneness and righteousness ("in your innermost heart to be in sympathy with things, to care for each and all without having a private interest of one's own"). Kongzi, it seems, is personally concerned with all people individually, one by one, and therefore loses sight of what they have in common. If a ruler were to adopt this as his primary, guiding policy, the below heaven would eventually also come to "lose what shepherds it."

Sections 2 and 3 present slightly different accounts. Shun is concerned with particular groups of people, and Yao responds by establishing the overarching framework of heaven and earth. Kongzi seems concerned with each and all on an individual level, and Lao Dan counters by drawing attention to the common in them. In spite of these differences, there seems to be a focus on the more general versus the more specific. A good ruler appears to have his mind on the general and is not directly concerned with, does not busy himself with, the specific.

Section 1 makes a similar point. The ruler should understand that there is an order (*xu*) in things. He should have a general picture of how natural and social phenomena are structured (unit 1.5). Applied to his own government bureaucracy, this means that issues such as titles and performance (*xing ming*), rewards and punishments (*shang fa*), and probably also *ren yi*—most likely some kind of social concern—are lower-ranked notions (units 1.6 and 1.7). He, as a ruler, should not busy himself with such twigs and details (1.4). Nevertheless, the ruler is part of the social fabric of government. He should therefore also know his own role—the root or the essential (unit 1.4). Following the description in unit 1.6 of ordered or structured phenomena with heaven and earth as a prime example, unit 1.7 puts heaven (*tian*) first on the scale of

government priorities. The root or the essential, the role that the ruler should take on, is that of heaven. Not unlike Shun's conception of the "heaven-king" in section 2, the ruler is to understand and imitate the role of heaven as the crucial element in his cosmos-like government.¹⁰

What it means to "understand heaven" (*ming yu tian* 明於天) or to be "in unison with heaven" (*yu tian he* 與天和) is touched on in units 1.1 and 1.2.¹¹ Running the risk of oversimplification, we could sketch the following picture: the crucial virtue embodied by somebody who comes to understand heaven is stillness (*jing* 靜). Stillness, also attained by the sages, is the state in which "the myriad things are in no instance able to perturb the heart-mind" (*wanwu wu zu yi nao xin* 萬物無足以鏡心). It is occasionally paired with emptiness (*xu* 虛) and listed in a series of related virtues, one of which is *wu wei* (無為, "being without activity"). The relation between *jing* and *wu wei* is explicated as follows: "If [the ruler] is still/imperturbed, he is without activity (*jing ze wu wei* 靜則無為). If he is without activity, then those in charge of affairs will take responsibility (*wu wei ze ren shi zhe ze* 無為則任事者責)." Just like heaven is full of unstoppable motion (*tiandao yun er wu suo ji* 天道運而無所積) for which it provides a background while itself remaining imperturbed, so the ruler, by being still and inactive, fulfills a necessary role that allows for his ministers to run their course. As a result of the ruler's inactivity, unit 1.3 states, "the world's work is done" (*tianxia gong* 天下

¹⁰ Interestingly, Graham's translation (1981: 262-263) attaches section 2 directly to the end of section 1, without section break. In addition to the emphasis on heaven, his reasons for doing so may have included a common focus on 'great' (*da dao* 大道, "the great way" in units 1.5 and 1.6) and a distinction between heaven (*tian*) and man (*ren*) also made in unit 1.2 (here not discussed).

¹¹ Except for the two opening phrases, which come from unit 1.1 and unit 1.2, respectively, the other phrases in the discussion below are all taken from unit 1.1.

功).¹² What is, according to section 1, essential in ruling is that the ruler has a clear view of the general structure of government and that he understands that it is his heaven-inspired role to lead through stillness and inaction. He should not busy or concern himself with the specifics of government.

Section 5, finally, is perhaps the most elusive section of the entire chapter. Nevertheless, it also carries, as we saw, the clear message that punishment and bounty, humaneness and righteousness, and probably rituals and music as well, are mere twigs and hence only of marginal importance to the ultimate person who “sets these in their proper places” (*ding zhi*). Two further points are worth mentioning. First, the vision of the ultimate person is inspired by a perspective, a *dao* (道), that is described in cosmic-sounding terms. Seemingly present everywhere, this reified *dao* is “wide, so wide! there is nothing it does not contain (*wu bu rong* 無不容); deep! it cannot be measured (*bu ke ce* 不可測).” Second, the ultimate person is described as not being impacted by the things around him. He “possesses the world” (*you shi* 有世) but this “is not enough to become a tie to him (*bu zu yi wei zhi lei* 不足以為之累).” “While the below heaven vies for the handles [of power], he does not join them in competing; being clear about ‘do not rely’ (*wu jia* 無假), he does not shift with the profitable.” In the context of chapter 13, this ultimate person—having an encompassing vision, regarding things like humaneness and righteousness as mere twigs, and being imperturbed—would make a fine ruler.

In sum, descriptions or approximations of the essential in ruling advocate a general viewpoint that calls for an understanding of the structure of things.

¹² Translation taken from Graham’s (1981: 261).

The ruler is to uphold this structure and realize his own role as the leading but inactive element imperturbed by what takes place around him.

V. The Wheelwright Story in the Context of Chapter 13

We started this paper with the observation that books are discussed not only in the wheelwright story but also in three of the chapter's other sections. Informed by questions raised in the course of reading the wheelwright story, we have examined the topic of books under three aspects—the function of books, the critique of books, and the essential left out from books. In addressing these aspects, we have drawn several connections between the wheelwright story and other sections in chapter 13. This chapter-context reading reframes the story and our understanding of it in two ways.

First and most important, the wheelwright story is part of a political polemic. A political reading of the story is suggested in the story itself, for Bian's interlocutor, Duke Huan, is a ruler. This clue, however, has either been ignored or not been pursued in the literature, mainly, we believe, because the story is readily read in the context of skill stories and reflections on language, few of which have overt political connotations. In effect, the story is typically read as if it only had Bian's description on how to cut, or not to cut, a wheel, including his statement that his knack cannot be put into words.

When the wheelwright story is read in the context of the chapter in which it appears, the faint sound of a political reading becomes a carillon of bells. What is typically found in socio-political writings, especially in writings from times past, are discussions of notions such as performance and

titles, rewards and punishments, and humaneness and righteousness. Rulers, sharing the common view that books contain valuable guidance, direct their policies accordingly.

The chapter offers a sharp but balanced critique of the tendency to value books and the notions they contain: said notions are not of primary importance and should not come to preoccupy *the ruler's* mind. It is rather fitting, then, that the chapter should include a story that critiques a ruler's habit to read books. Together with the section preceding it, the wheelwright story offers a defense and justification of the view that books do not contain what is of primary importance in ruling. Approaching the topic from different angles, these two sections argue that language cannot describe what is essential.

The chapter does more, however, than merely offering a critique. It also presents an approximation of the essential. We could think of the composer's position as parallel to that of wheelwright Bian, playing the role that the sages could have played had they still been alive. What is essential in ruling is that the ruler understands the general structure of things and realizes his own role as the leading but inactive element imperturbed by what takes place around him.

The chapter-context reading also has a second, more unsettling effect: skill and its inexpressibility are not topics in their own right, a view which somewhat deflates the importance attached to these topics in the literature. That language *cannot* express the essential serves the purpose of justifying the earlier, politically controversial claim that books *do not* contain what is essential in ruling. It is the latter point which resonates throughout the chapter. While the *cannot* position provides justification, it is attached to the more central *do not* claim about socio-political writings.

Skill, for its part, is one of two approaches the composer uses to argue for the *cannot* position. Throughout the first five sections, there is no attempt to conceptualize the essential in ruling as a skill. Admittedly, the ruler should understand the general structure of things and direct his rule accordingly. This may be or involve skill. But there is no need to frame it as such. That the argument from skill or embodied experience is used at all is perhaps because it works well as a support for the *cannot* position, which in turn justifies the *do not* claim. If so, skill is less important than we take it to be.

Our attempt at recontextualizing the wheelwright story within its chapter-level context yields perhaps one further insight. That is, the meaning we attribute to textual units, be they individual concepts, short phrases, or section-length stories, is partly a function of the contexts we associate them with. When the wheelwright story is read in line with the skill stories in *Zhuangzi* 19, it will be naturally interpreted in terms of skill. This may, as indicated in the introduction, give rise to discussions of ‘knowing how’ versus ‘knowing that,’ spontaneity, change, and so on. When, on the other hand, we place the wheelwright story back into its chapter-level context and examine the connections on *that* level of meaning, we arrive at a different picture which does not necessarily support the familiar readings. One lesson we could draw from this is that the field of *Zhuangzi* studies may stand to gain from examining textual materials within their chapter-level contexts, however unfamiliar those contexts may initially be.

Appendix

The table below includes the section and unit divisions in *Zhuangzi* 13 as used in this paper. Section divisions follow those adopted in Mair, Victor H. (1994: 119-129), with one exception: we merge his sections 1 and 2 into one section, thus arriving at seven instead of eight sections.

References are based on the *Zhuangzi* concordances compiled by the Institute for Chinese Studies (ICS, Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2000) and the Harvard-Yenching Institute (HY, Harvard University Press, 1956). The syntax of the references to both concordances follows the “chapter/page/line” pattern.

Section	Unit	ICS	HY
1	1.1	13/34/13-22	13/33/1-10
	1.2	13/34/22-31	13/33/10-34/17
	1.3	13/35/1-7	13/34/17-24
	1.4	13/35/9-12	13/34/24-27
	1.5	13/35/14-19	13/34/27-32
	1.6	13/35/21-25	13/34/32-36
	1.7	13/35/27-31	13/34/36-35/41
2		13/36/1-5	13/35/41-45
3		13/36/7-18	13/35/45-53
4		13/36/20-29	13/35/53-60
5		13/36/31-37/3	13/35/60-36/64
6		13/37/5-8	13/36/64-68
7		13/37/10-18	13/36/68-74

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