

Tea tales in the hermit's cave

In the dark deep stillness of the North
Swims a fish.
Huge—no one knows how huge!
Its name is *Kun*.

Changing form, the creature flies.
Its name, now, is *Peng*.

Peng's shoulders are broad—no one knows how broad!
Flying, his wings cover the sky like clouds.

When *Peng* ascends, he stirs up the waters
For three thousand miles around.
Spirals upward—a whirlwind
Which lifts him
Ninety thousand miles high.

Wheeling in majesty, *Peng* turns and heads South.
Only azure sky above, clouds and dark sea below.
Borne by the wind for six months,
He comes to rest
In the Lake of Heaven.

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

I'VE BEEN READING *Zhuangzi* again.”
“We are not going to talk about
Zhuangzi.” The fat monk was puffing
with the climb. “We are just going to have
a nice quiet time with the hermit, just the

three of us. He's barely recovered from the
last time you ...”

“But ...”

“You don't always have to talk *about*
things, you know. You could try just *being*.”

I waited for him to finish, and finally said
“*Being what?*”

He shook his head, then pointed to a side

“

Tea picked at the extremes is second-rate: picked at noon, for example, or in the rain: the extremes of yin and yang. But tea plants grown in a valley are good, very close to the Dao.

path that was just ahead. “You want another session with the pool at the pagoda?”

I shuddered. Not after last time.

By then we were almost at the hermit’s eyrie. As we came around the final bend in the mountain path, I turned and looked out: green mountains rolling off to the horizon, with a silvery ribbon threading its way between: the river the fat monk and I had crossed to reach the foot of this mountain.

Tea

“There are only a few types of people you should drink tea with,” said the hermit in his clear tenor.

When we arrived, we found that he already had visitors: the boatman and his friend. We crowded around the hermit’s large but old and battered elm wood table, looking out at the high vista through the two oval apertures that graced his comfortable cave.

“Tea is made for quiet company,” the hermit went on, “those who can appreciate the rich clarity of a fine tea, can discern the subtle variations in vintage, and have learnt to recognise the *huí wèi*—the return flavour, that only comes several seconds *after* you have already swallowed the first mouthful.”

The four of us nodded, listening to him. It was a favourite theme, and not only of the hermit’s.

The boatman said, “The best tea is picked just after dawn, you know, when the fragrance of the dew remains upon the young leaves, combining yin and yang, uniting day and night.”

His friend grunted agreement.

I had not met this friend before, but I found him strangely appealing. *Strangely* because he was gruff to the point of dismissiveness. Appealing because he carried an air of mystery about him, even more than the boatman, and that was saying something.

This friend said in a gravelly voice, “The best tea embodies harmony.” He spread his hands to the sides and lifted first one, then the other. “Balance. Tea picked at the extremes is second-rate: picked at noon, for example, or in the rain: the extremes of yin and yang. But tea plants grown in a valley are good, very close to the Dao.”



He paused and gave a little smile. “Then you’ve got the *chá wèi* and the *chá qì*, the flavour and the qi of the tea. And the *chá qì* itself has two types: the immediate aroma, also called *chá xiāng*, and the gradual sensation that that particular vintage of tea cultivates within your body.”

The fat monk gave a deep-voiced laugh. “Yes, remember the time when we had that 20-year old *pu’er*? We looked up and found that a half hour had passed without any of us saying a word. Now that was strong *chá qì*.”

The hermit giggled. “Had to be, to keep you quiet,” he said, gently teasing. “But too many people, or the wrong type of people, is anathema to good tea. You know what the *Chá Lù* says:

When drinking tea it’s best to have few guests; more is noisy and noise kills refined taste. Drinking alone is spiritual, drinking with one other is sublime, with three or four is delightful, with five or six is diffused, and with seven or eight is like a soup kitchen.¹

The hermit said “Yes, a peaceful heart and calm mind are ideal.” He got up to refill the pot, and I noticed that he wore at his waist a black stone pendant with the characters 無一物中無盡藏 carved into it.²

The boatman said: “When the hermit makes tea, it’s like a performance. We should watch!”

The Lord of Bitter Discipline

The hermit had a little *feng lu*—a wind stove. He lit the fire underneath, and placed a large clay pot of water on the top. He methodically arranged a tea pot and five tiny cups in a tray. The small teapot was a finely made *zisha* pot shaped like a melon, with a sprig of tendril winding down the side; the spout and handle thin and delicate.

We waited in silence, watching.

The hermit took the lid from the water pot and looked inside. “First degree: like fish eyes,” he said.

I looked quizzically at the boatman. He winked.

1. 飲茶以客少為貴，客眾則喧，喧則雅趣乏矣。獨啜日神，二客日勝，三四日趣，五六日泛，七八日施。*Chá Lù* (茶錄 Notes on Tea), Song dynasty, by Cài Xiāng (蔡襄), a famous calligrapher.

2. 無一物中無盡藏 wú yī wù zhōng wú jìn cáng. Nothingness, totally hidden within no object.

The hermit waited a few seconds, looked again and said “*Second degree: like a spring bubbling linked pearls up the sides.*” In one smooth gesture he lifted the pot and set it aside on a mat.

“Just right?” asked the fat monk.

“Perfect timing, right before *third degree: billowing like surging waves,*” the hermit said.

“Is someone going to tell me what he’s talking about?” I complained.

The boatman laughed. “Our friend the hermit is quoting the *Classic of Tea* while he demonstrates awareness of the different levels of boiling. The first is when tiny bubbles appear on the bottom of the pot, appearing and then ascending like fish eyes.”³

OK, that makes sense, I thought.

“The second level is when larger bubbles rise, and the third is when the water is at a roaring boil. Notice that he removed the pot at the second degree. Once you’ve reached the third degree, the water is ‘old’ and the *Cha Jing* says, um ...” He looked at the hermit.

“If the water is old it should not be drunk,” grinned the hermit. He used a wooden scoop to fill the small pot with tiny balls of hand-rolled tea, then poured the just-boiled water over it, gave it a swish, then poured it out over the cups and a glass server. He then refilled the pot and turned over a small hourglass filled with white sand.

“Usually you can just feel when the tea is right,” he said. “But guests can be distracting, so ...”

“How long do you leave it?” I asked.

“Depends on the tea,” he said. “For this *Iron Guanyin*, about 80 seconds for the first infusion. For some *pu’er* it would be only 10 seconds, but of course that depends on ...”

“On how much tea is in the pot,” the boatman said. “Measure. Balance. Timing. Awareness. It is all there in the making of tea.”

“Sort of like the Japanese Tea Ceremony,” I said.

They exchanged glances. “Beautiful, but rigid,” said the hermit carefully. “Ah!” he said as the sand ran out. He tipped the pot, holding the lid carefully, and a stream of golden fragrant liquid filled the glass server.

3. 茶經: 其沸如魚目, 微有聲為一沸, 緣邊如湧泉連珠為二沸, 滾波鼓浪為三沸, 已上水老不可食也。Chá Jing: Qí fú rú yú mù, wēi yǒu shēng wéi yī fú; yuánbiān rú yǒngquán liánzhū wéi èr fú; téng bō gǔ làng wéi sān fú; yǐ shàng shuǐ lǎo bù kě shí.

He held it up to the light. “I usually would just use another teapot, but with glass one can appreciate the colour and clarity.”

He filled the tiny cups and passed them around. “Make sure you slurp,” he said.

I thought he was kidding, but all the others slurped their drinks, loudly.

The fat monk saw my face. “Oxygenates the tea,” he said. “Exposes more of your taste buds to the flavour.”

“Besides,” grinned the boatman. “Doesn’t it sound delicious?”

His friend grunted. “Colour, fragrance, taste and sound. That only leaves the feeling, the feeling in your mouth and throat.”

“People often ignore the throat,” said the hermit. “But the return flavour, the *huí wèi*, is a taste sensation that is all in the throat; it barely involves the tongue. Some say that the character for ‘sweet’—甘 *gān*—is actually a pictograph of the throat.” He refilled the clay kettle and placed it on the stove, then fanned the fire inside.

“I love your stove,” said the boatman’s friend.

“This stove is old, very old. It’s called a Lord of Bitter Discipline (苦節君 *kǔ jié jūn*). See how its shape is square, like the earth, while the pot is round, like the sky? And in its heart is a living flame. How better to express the Dao?”

“Is the name from the *Yi Jing*?” I asked. Hexagram 60 was called 節 *Jié*, and had been variously translated as *restriction*, *limitation* or *restraint*. This hexagram had been a favourite topic of Professor Ma in Taiwan, although my friend Owen preferred the translation *measure* rather than “restriction” or “limitation”.

“Not that I know of,” said the hermit. “It is a standard name for this type of tea stove. I think it was because the usual wood for this is bamboo, and it keeps getting heated up, then cools, then heated up again. The *lord* or *gentleman* is the result of this repeated tempering.”

“But the very word 節 *jié* is highly suggestive,” the fat monk said. “Bamboo has nodes (節 *jié*) that limit but also support its unlimited growth upwards, and running through them all is a passage (通 *tōng*).”

“Not to mention the seasonal nodes 節 *jié* of the year, the four seasons, the 12 months, the 24 solar terms,” the boatman agreed. “These

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are all measures, degrees of yin and yang; if you act appropriately to the 'measure' of the time, you can progress. Go against them and you decay, even if the rot is imperceptible at first."

"But you know, now that you mention it," said the hermit, who had turned away from his stove to rustle about in some old papers he had close by, "I seem to remember that the term 苦節 *kǔ jié* does appear in that hexagram description. Yes, here we go, right there in the decision: *Bitter discipline is not to be held to.*⁴ And then in line six it says *Holding to bitter discipline is bad and you'll regret it.* All the other lines have good things to say about proper measure and discipline, but the top line in the hexagram, line six is—as usual—about overdoing it."

"That's probably why the *Yi Jing* popped into my mind," I said. "I must have subconsciously remembered that. But how can discipline be bad? I thought self control and mastery could only be a good thing?"

"Balance is the crux. Having no discipline at all is unthinkable," said the fat monk. "But asceticism, for example, doesn't work beyond a certain point; the Buddha found that out. Extreme discipline too often is just an ego trip. This is what the *Yi Jing* is trying to say, I think. Measure, in all senses."

"Harmony, like that possessed by the best tea," said the hermit, as he poured out the second infusion. There was silence as we savoured the fuller flavour.

The Classic of the True Man of Southern China⁵

"I've been reading *Zhuangzi*," I finally said. The fat monk groaned. The hermit lifted his eyebrows. The boatman glanced at his friend, whose eyes had lit up. "What bits have you been reading?" he asked.

"I started from the beginning again," I said. "But I am trying to slow down. I always seem to skim over the stories."

"Are you reading the original?"

"Sometimes," I said, reddening. More often I was reading in one or other of the many translations.

"His language is not to be missed," the

4. 苦節不可貞 *kǔ jié bù kě zhēn*.

5. 南華真經, another name for the *Zhuangzi*, as the author was known as 南華真人 (*nán huá zhēn rén*: the True Man of Southern China).

friend said in his gravelly voice. "Difficult, yes, as difficult as Laozi is easy, but only because he delights in playing with unfamiliar words. Zhuangzi's use of language is stupendous, magnificent, unrivalled." He nodded. "Take your time. Savour it."

昔者莊周夢為胡蝶，
栩栩然胡蝶也。

*Xī zhě, Zhuāng Zhōu mèng wéi hú dié.
Xǔ xǔ rán, hú dié yě!*

"And he is funny!" the hermit exclaimed. "So funny. Can you think of another philosopher with his sense of humour?"

I saw the boatman open his mouth, but the fat monk growled "No stories!" and the boatman rubbed the back of his neck, looking down.

"Exactly!" the boatman's friend said. "Zhuangzi's outlook is huge, boundless. It is like trying to catch the wind or grab a shadow. He'll fool you unless you thoroughly get his ideas."

"How can I do that?" I said, as the fat monk shifted in his seat.

"Understand Laozi. Zhuangzi is to Laozi like Mencius is to Confucius: if you totally get Laozi, Zhuangzi is Laozi expanded, transformed, illustrated. Just focus on the inner chapters, that's where the essence is, where it is most lively and subtle."

The fat monk got up and moved around irritably. The others looked at him. He blew out a noisy breath. "Do we have to talk about *Zhuangzi*?" he said.

The boatman tilted his head. "Why not?" he said. "What's the problem?"

The fat monk lifted the lid of the kettle, looked inside, then fiddled with the stove.

"Nothing," he said. "It's just ..."

We waited.

He turned to us and spread his hands. "You just never know what Zhuangzi means! First he says one thing, then he says the opposite, then he asks a question, then he denies the answer. Reading Zhuangzi just makes me feel like, like ...". He gestured vaguely in my direction.

I did not know whether to feel insulted, or amazed that the fat monk was actually stumped by something.

The others came to my rescue, laughing

loudly; the boatman even blew a raspberry. The boatman's friend smiled uncertainly, looking between me and the fat monk. The hermit said "At least Xiaoyao is not afraid to face up to what he doesn't know! I think we've found a knot of pride you've been nurturing. Careful it doesn't fester, my fat friend!"

The boatman was less kind. "Makes you feel stupid eh? Maybe you've found a mirror you can't bear to look into."

His friend said, "We all have those. Gets to be a tell, after a while: you start to notice the things you avoid, if you're paying attention, and learn to pay *more* attention to those spots, those things, those feelings."

"Isn't that just like picking a scab?" the fat monk said.

"More like cleaning the wound," the boatman's friend said, gruffly.

"Let's have some more tea," the hermit said, getting up, filling the kettle with a large scoop from an earthen tub with a wooden lid. He fanned the flame in the Gent of Bitter Discipline and put the kettle on top.

The fat monk sighed and sat down heavily. "OK," he said. "Just don't expect anything brilliant from me."

The boatman looked about to say something, but the fat monk lifted himself threateningly with a mock frown and raised his hand. "Don't push it!" he said. The boatman shut his mouth and smiled, giving me another wink.

Depths of the sea, height of the sky
We had our tea and I asked the boatman's friend to go on about understanding Zhuangzi.

"The first chapter of *Zhuangzi* is the lock," he said. "Open that and the rest of the book opens out to you. The key to the lock, though, is Laozi. In one chapter, Laozi says how easy and simple his words are, but no one can follow them. He then goes on to say *words have a source; actions have a master*.⁶ Well the source, and the master, are both the same: the Dao. Or should be. The master should not be your feckless mind, or your fickle desires. But if you can leave those aside, and *be* like Laozi, then the source of your words will be the Dao, and the master of your actions will also be the Dao."

"But in *Zhuangzi* it is just stories!" I said.

6. 言有宗事有君 (*Laozi* chapter 70).

"Like fables. There is a fish and it turns into a bird, and it flies south, and ... so what?"

The fat monk grunted sympathetically.

"So take it slow," the boatman's friend said. "The deep dark sea in the north, for example. What does it make you think of?"

Talks with Chinese medicine friends stirred in my memory. "Winter. Water element. Black. Kidneys. The *kǎn* trigram. Or even the *kūn* trigram. Isn't the fish named *Kūn*? Stillness, obscurity."

"Yes, that's right. Note how the fish is obscure: *no one knows how huge*. But then it changes! Suddenly there is *Peng*. Huge, surely, but at least you get some sense of its size."

I felt frustrated. "OK, but what does it *mean*? Or what *could* it mean?"

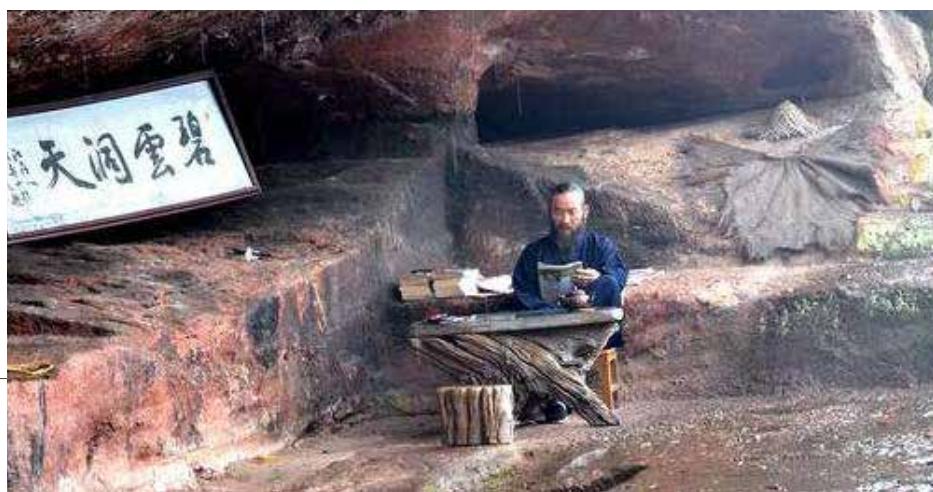
"*Zhuangzi* is meant to be suggestive, not definitive. Laozi said at the very front that you can't really use words. But you can point. Here, for example, you were right on the money with the north, that boundless area deep in the body, that vast dark sea within which a sage nourishes an indefinable *something*, an embryo of what could be.⁷ The 'water' must be deep, still, silent; this 'fish' stirs almost imperceptibly. At the right time, though, change! That's when the sage has slowly accumulated enough *dé*⁸ within that deep dark stillness to effect transformation. But note, too, that this only happens at the right time. Only at the time when the great Dao stirs can the sage emerge, adding his own effort to the *lifting whirlwind, the stirring sea*.⁹"

"A small point, but important," said the hermit. "Notice that the sage can nourish the embryonic self, but without actual transformation it can not emerge and fulfil its

7. I later found out some ancient scholars stated that 鯤 *kūn* in fact means fish eggs.

8. 德 *dé*, translated by some as spiritual potency.

9. In the midst of writing this all up, I was recounting this conversation to an old Jewish friend. When I reached this point, he exclaimed *Ruach Sa'arah!* I asked him what he meant, but he said I was too young to understand.



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The natural realm of empty nothingness is wide and made for easy wandering, but only true people can wander there: worldly people are trapped by the word 'me', hampered by the word 'mine' and the search for name and fame.

function. That only happens in conjunction with the Dao, it can't happen just by the efforts of the sage alone."

I shook my head. It just seemed to get more incomprehensible. "It's his method that's confusing," I said. "He tells this fish-transforming-to-bird story right up front. But then he repeats the story three or four times in different ways. One is from some book, then again with the comments of a couple of little bugs, or birds or something. Why do that? What's the point?"

The boatman's friend smiled. "Good! You are noticing structure. When Zhuangzi repeats something, pay attention! He tells the story from all different angles, from the distant view of the ocean, from looking down as *Peng* flies, and even from the viewpoint of a couple of little creatures, looking up and commenting."

"That's one of the funny bits I like," said the hermit, chuckling. "You've got this stupendous creature, wingspan 90 miles across, who can fly for six months all the way across the world, and the cicada says to the pigeon *Who the hell does he think he is? We can barely hop from ground to branch, and here this guy flies for six months!?* Unbelievable. The cheek."

"Zhuangzi explains it himself," the boatman's friend said with a smile. "Small knowledge can not comprehend great knowledge.¹⁰ The whole chapter is about big and small, expanding your viewpoint, shifting your point of view from different angles. That's why he repeats the story in different ways. He's trying to break up your prejudices, free your perspective."

The hermit said, "Yes, the natural realm of empty nothingness is wide and made for easy wandering, but only true people can wander there: worldly people are trapped by the word 'me', hampered by the word 'mine' and the search for name and fame. It's all so small! They just can't comprehend moving across the vastness for six months."

The boatman got up, stretched and looked out the window. Then he turned to his friend and said, "Weren't you saying something about this the last time we talked about Zhuangzi? Talking about the flight of *Peng* and what it signified?"

His friend ran his hand over his head and

■ Xiaoyao Xingzhe is a thick-skinned wandering pilgrim and not easily insulted.

10. 小知不及大知。 .

frowned. Then he looked up. "Oh, yes, I remember. I'd just been reading Fang Yizhi¹¹ and his notes on Zhuangzi that he collected from all over. This bit he had was particularly interesting. You know how the text has *for six months, he comes to rest* (以六月息者也)? This doesn't mean, Fang said, that *Peng* flies for six months and then just hangs out for half the year. Zhuangzi very pointedly picked this word 息 *xī* 'rest' because it also means 'breath'."

He looked around at us. "Zhuangzi is emphasising this double meaning. He wants us to compare big and small. So for humans, one *xī* is just a single inhalation and exhalation. But for the heavens and earth, a *xī* is six months of expanding yang and six months of contracting yin."

I just stared, my mind blown with the image of the earth as a huge entity, breathing in the *qi* of heaven for six months, then expelling it for six months, all a single breath of cosmic dimensions.

"Not only that," he continued. "It is this breath that stirs up the ocean and the whirlwind that lifts *Peng* upward."

The fat monk nodded. "Zhuangzi pointing out that activity and stillness each have their times. I'm starting to get it."

The boatman's friend smiled and rose to stand at the window by the boatman. He swept his hand outward and around.

"So," he said, "what Zhuangzi is describing is the wayfaring of the realised person through the vast processes of nature, the celestial mechanism of that-which-is-of-itself.¹² Unless the fish *Kun* transforms, the ocean does not stir. Unless *Peng* flies, the breath-like wind does not intensify. Spirit needs this vastness to roam free."

We looked out over mountains and rivers wandering away into the unfettered distance.

11. 方以智 (1611-1671) was a late Ming scholar, descended from a family of *Yi Jing* experts and personal student of the Chan masters Juelang Daosheng and Hanshan Deqing. His book on Zhuangzi (藥地炮莊 Yàodi Páo Zhuāng, Zhuangzi Processed by [Monk] Yaodi) includes viewpoints on Zhuangzi from all of these angles and was therefore, the boatman's friend said later, best taken in small doses and chewed slowly.

12. 天機自然 tiān jī zì rán. In another spot, Zhuangzi shows how this works in people, saying In those for whom sensual desires are deep, the celestial mechanism is shallow (其嗜欲深者, 其天機淺 qí shìyù shēn zhě, qí tiān jī qíán). Chapter 6: The Great Source as Teacher.