DENG Lianhe

“A Happy Excursion” and Freedom

Abstract
In modern times, academics have used the perspective of political liberty and spiritual freedom to interpret and explain Zhuang Zi’s “happy excursion” as well as the substance of all his other thoughts. The starting point of the former is the political idea of laissez-faire; the latter involves the unique character of Zhuang Zi’s philosophy on life. But it misses the spiritual deficiency contained in Zhuang Zi, and so it is difficult to respond to criticism from modern liberals. This article argues that it is not quite accurate to use “happy excursion” to express modern freedom, but the spiritual tradition of “happy excursion” as a kind of native resource could still serve as a way to introduce the idea of liberalism at the level of a life philosophy based on independence, individual consciousness and the personal conscience and virtues embraced by the “happy excursion” thought of Zhuang Zi.

Keywords
Zhuang Zi, happy excursion, freedom

1 “A Happy Excursion” and “the Retreat to an Inner Citadel”

The “happy excursion” is the soul of Zhuang Zi’s life and philosophy. Zhuang Zi believes that an individual must get rid of what he depends upon, that is, an individual should break away from oppressive social order and political circumstances, and give up what he has insisted on and what he can insist on. An individual should eliminate awareness of “success” and “reputation,” and uproot the desire for “success” and “reputation” by the “denial of the self” so as to keep the body and spirit free from danger and oppression, and to enjoy the self-constructed and self-developed independent pattern of life. As a deeply influential essence of life, the complexity of the “happy excursion” lies in a
two-fold problem. On the one hand, it includes positive factors of pride that transcend the mundane world, while on the other hand, it has a negative aspect of a retreat to the inner spirit, buckling under oppression and compromising without any struggle.

The concepts of “freedom,” “absolute freedom” or “absolute spiritual freedom” were used to explain the meaning of “happy excursion” and all of Zhuang Zi’s thoughts. Many Western scholars agree with this viewpoint. E. R. Hughes translated some chapters of Zhuang Zi into English in *Chinese Philosophy in Ancient Times* in the 1940s, calling it *Chuang Chou, The Poet of Freedom*. The American scholar Burton Watson, who published a translation of Zhuang Zi in the 1960s, believes that “the central topic of Zhuang Zi could be summarized by a single word: ‘freedom,’” and this is not “political, social and economic liberty, but the freedom of spirit and mind.” He also said that in early Chinese literature Zhuang Zi was unique in that it focused on personal life and freedom, and left social and political problems aside. The use of the translation by Watson is widespread. It is included in “Representative series of the world by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.” Because of this, some scholars believe that in the Anglophone world, it is generally accepted that Zhuang Zi is associated with the search for freedom. In the 1990s, Thomas Cleary translated the title of “Xiaoyao You” 直逍遥 ("A Happy Excursion") directly into “Freedom” in a selected translation *The Classics of Taoism* (Cf. Xu 2008, p. 9, p. 36, and p. 116).

Are these explanations correct?

Before answering this question, let us first take a look at the famous work *Two Concepts of Liberty* by the British political philosopher Isaiah Berlin. In it Berlin describes “the retreat to the inner citadel” as very similar to the “happy excursion,” and he presents arguments and analysis about the relationship between personal choice and freedom.

Berlin says that in a cruel and unjust world, where “a man seeking happiness or justice or freedom can do little,” where “he finds too many avenues of action blocked to him, the temptation to withdraw into himself may become irresistible,” so that “in its individualistic form the concept of the rational sage who has escaped into the inner fortress of his true self seems to arise.” In history, it is proven that every time a society collapsed, “those who prized the dignity of human life” begin “a kind of inner emigration” (Berlin 2002, p. 186). Berlin says: “I wish to be master of my kingdom, but my frontiers are long and insecure.” Because of this, the withdrawal of an individual after a failure is a means of “reducing or eliminating the vulnerable area,” “and therefore decides to strive for nothing that I cannot be sure to obtain” (Ibid., p. 182). This means:

I determine myself not to desire what is unattainable. The tyrant threatens me
with the destruction of my property, with imprisonment, with the exile or death of those I love. But if I no longer feel attached to property, no longer care whether or not I am in prison, if I have killed within myself my natural affections, then he cannot bend me to his will, for all that is left of myself is no longer subject to empirical fears or desires. It is as if I had performed a strategic retreat into an inner citadel—my reason, my soul, my “noumenal” self—which, do what they may, neither external blind force, nor human malice, can touch. I have withdrawn into myself; there, and there alone, I am secure...where no voices from outside need be listened to, and no external forces can have effect (Ibid.).

By some process of “deliberate self-transformation,” individuals “have fled the world, and escaped the yoke of society or public opinion,” and “remained isolated and independent on world’s edges.” These people avoid coming under attack from forces in the external world, and “care no longer for any of its values.” Berlin says: “This is the traditional self-emancipation of ascetics and quietists, of stoics or Buddhist sages, men of various religions or of none, who have fled the world” (Ibid., pp. 182–183).

Berlin is opposed to the idea that “the retreat to the inner citadel” is considered as a kind of pursuit of personal freedom. He says: “Ascetic self-denial may be a source of integrity or serenity and spiritual strength, but it is difficult to see how it can be called an enlargement of liberty” (Ibid., p. 187). There are numerous things in the empirical world which restrict and threaten the life of an individual. The logic of a person who prefers to turn inwards is that individuals must minimize the vulnerable area and retreat to inner selves, but consequentially, “The logical culmination of the process...is suicide” and we shall “suffocate and die.” In a word, “Total liberation in this sense (as Schopenhauer correctly perceived) is conferred only by death” (Ibid.). With irony, Berlin says: “what I cannot have I must teach myself not to desire.” This is a “sublime” doctrine, but it is also a “form of the doctrine of sour grapes.” He further notes that the danger of obtaining freedom by turning inwards is: “If the tyrant manages to condition his subjects into losing their original wishes and embracing (‘internalizing’) the form of life he has invented for them, he will, on this definition, have succeeded in liberating them. He will, no doubt, have made them feel free.... But what he has created is the very antithesis of political freedom” (Ibid., pp. 186–187). This means, obtaining security, liberty and spiritual freedom by retreating to the inner self is actually an abandonment of the search of true freedom and acceptance of a tyrant’s arbitrary oppression, the consequence of which is that our spirit and body will plunge into absolute enslavement.

Berlin noticed that when the idea of “the retreat to the inner citadel” appeared
at the end of the Roman Republic, people in the East were also suffering from despotism, and “the quietism of the Eastern sages was, similarly, a response to the despotism of the great autocracies” (Ibid., p. 186). Based on his analysis, this “quietism” is not a form of freedom. In Berlin’s opinion, true freedom is not internal transcendental freedom of the spirit, which is obtained by self-restriction and self-reduction. It is obtained by practical forces in the empirical world through eliminating real obstacles and oppression. True freedom is political liberty. From this point of view, freedom means positive external practice, not negative internal self-emancipation.

Based on Berlin’s position, the spirit of “happy excursion” not only involves no freedom, but also is opposed to it. After comparing the “happy excursion” of Zhuang Zi and “the retreat to the inner citadel” of Berlin, Liu Xiaogan 刘笑敢 decides that when an individual abandons society and enjoys inner unrestrained feeling, the freedom of Zhuang Zi (the happy excursion) is “indeed another kind of freedom,” and the happy excursion could be explained as freedom because the unrestrained and emancipated state implicit in this word is “identical with a modern conception of freedom.” Liu also treats the spirit of happy excursion as “traditional Chinese freedom,” and believes this “freedom” could be complementary to Berlin’s theory. The meaning of freedom in the modern West has nothing to do with individual’s spiritual freedom and how to obtain it or abandon spiritual agony in an unavoidable condition. In this aspect, the tradition of Zhuang Zi’s “happy excursion” is “complementary to modern Western political theories” (Liu 2008).

Whether or not the spirit of happy excursion is complementary to Western theories is another matter. What Berlin believes, in a strict sense, compared with Liu’s “traditional Chinese freedom,” is another concept of freedom. In his work Two Pursuits to Freedom, Liu explains the freedom of Zhuang Zi (the happy excursion), i.e., “uselessness in the real world,” as absolute inner emptiness and quiet, pure spiritual meditation or mystical experience of self-complacence (Liu 1994, p. 69, p. 73). According to Berlin’s position, this kind of freedom could only be treated as a personal psychological self-confinement, which is “the retreat to the inner citadel” and completely different from true freedom.

Berlin, Rawls and other scholars have all discussed modern political liberty from various angles. As a common concept in Western philosophy, freedom got its basic definition during the times of ancient Greece. It means unrestricted, self-determined, understanding and utilizing natural objects which are dominated by causation and necessity, etc. (Ye 1995). From this point of view, if there are common points between the spirit of happy excursion and freedom, they are unrestricted and self-determined, and the former is about the inner spiritual world.
Faced with the external empirical world which forces individuals to accept the domination of causality, individuals who seek the happy excursion must always deal with alienation and self-destruction. From “Da Zongshi” (大同師 “The Great Supreme”) of Zhuang Zi, this is “transcendence of mundane world” or “transcendence of all material existence.” So there is a strange two-way movement: The more the inner spirit of an individual is free, the more his external condition is enslaved. As Berlin points out, when individuals retreat to their inner soul, they are in fact plunged more deeply into enslavement. Therefore, we can understand why modern scholars have differing opinions about the “happy excursion” of Zhuang Zi: “the tools of the ruling class, to anesthetize the people” and “the exploration of and contribution to the free nature of human beings” (Jin 1993). The former rebukes Zhuang Zi for being lost in the shadowy, inner life and abandoning external social practices and the pursuit of political liberty; the latter applauds Zhuang Zi’s exploration of individual’s spiritual life by focusing on the inner world.

2 A Study of the History of Thoughts

The two differing views on the relationship between “happy excursion” and freedom mentioned above have their origins in the study of Zhuang Zi. It is significant that spiritual freedom, which is regarded as very important by many modern scholars, is not given much attention by early thinkers who explained the philosophy of Zhuang Zi through Western theories. Instead, they focused on bringing out the idea of political liberty.

For instance, Zhuang Zi said that “There has been such a thing as letting mankind alone; there has never been such a thing as governing mankind” (Zaiyou of Zhuang Zi). Tan Sitong 谭嗣同 interpreted this passage in this way: “Governing means to be ruled by a government; Zaiyou means not to be ruled by a government…. Zaiyou means freedom based on their pronunciation. It is absolutely correct! If we are all free people, no government can rule us.” Further on he said, “if there is no government, bifurcations and wars will be eliminated,” and the world will have “equality,” “no rulers,” “no difference between the poor and the rich,” and “the whole country will be a family, which is just like the great equal world described in Liyun 礼运 (The Movement of Propriety)” (Tan 2002, p. 161). Tan Sitong used the word freedom to express the meaning of Zaiyou.

1Translator’s note: The pronunciations of these two Chinese words, zaiyou 在宥 (tolerance) and ziyou 自由 (freedom), are similar. In ancient China, the pronunciation of words was used to presume their meanings.
This is similar to Yan Fu’s *Zhuang Zi Pingyu* (Evaluation on *Zhuang Zi*), which said: “Zhuang Zi discovered the meaning of recent Western freedom and equality” (Yan 1986, p. 1146). What he found is early modern political liberty in Western Europe. Further he commented “Ying Di Wang” 应帝王 (“Answer the Emperor”) in *Zhuang Zi*: “It says governing mankind should follow their freedom and self-determination,” “an emperor should govern the people for their own freedom and self-determination, so that the people will automatically perform their duty.” On the fable about *hundun* 浑沌 at the end of this article, he said: “It means governing should follow nature and freedom and have no much interference” (Ibid., pp. 1118–1189). On the paragraph “therefore, when a gentleman is unavoidably compelled to take charge of the government of the empire, there is nothing better than inaction” in “Zaiyou” of *Zhuang Zi*, Yan Fu explained: “there were many similar theories before the French Revolution…. Rousseau wants to destroy the legal system and return human beings to their original nature to find freedom and equality. He will agree with Zhuang Zi’s opinion.” He also said that Zhuang Zi “thinks the Dao ultimately means to follow our own nature, leaving things alone. It is individualism in modern political philosophy” (Ibid., pp. 1124–1126). Besides, he said of *Tiandao* 天道 (the tao of heaven): “A ruler should take charge of government with inaction. All things which can be determined by the people themselves should be let alone for their freedom” (Ibid., pp. 1128–1129). In contrast, he did not use the word “freedom” to evaluate the “Inner Chapters” of *Zhuang Zi* except “Ying Di Wang,” which are Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life. When he evaluated Zhuang Zi’s “Xiaoyao You” (“A Happy Excursion”), he did not include ideas about freedom either.

Yan Fu regarded Zhuang Zi’s thoughts on freedom to be of great value mainly in the political field. It means governments or rulers should not intervene in people’s affairs, and people should be free and have self-determined actions. Individual freedom, or the essence of human beings, is affirmed in *Zhuang Zi*, but Yan Fu did not explain Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life through this idea, whether it is about external living practices or the inner spiritual life of an individual. Faced by challenges from the West, Yan Fu paid more attention to socio-political problems than the lives of individuals.

During the New Culture Movement, Wu Yu 吴虞 evaluated Zhuang Zi’s rejection of the political position given by the king of Chu in the following words: “…his rejection means he refuses to be a loyal bureaucrat of fake reputation, or to be colleague with these kind of people. He enjoys his spirit in shabby clothes and plays game in dirty ponds. His unyielding spirit and free thoughts are so great!” He concluded that Zhuang Zi fights against the shackles of old morality,
which limits and restricts mankind (Wu 1985, pp. 158–159). This is his praise of Zhuang Zi’s independent personality. Wu Yu held Zhuang Zi’s freedom of spirit in high value because of his reflections on the enlightenment of human nature and reality. From his point of view, the old morality from Confucianism could not save China.

As Yan Fu, Liang Qichao 梁启超 regarded highly the laissez-faire of Zhuang Zi’s political thought on freedom. He said: “‘Zaiyou’ means letting people be absolutely free. What is the meaning of it? In ordinary words, it means to ‘leave alone.’ In traditional written language, it means ‘inaction’” (Liang 1998, p. 108). At the same time, Liang began using the concept of “free will” to explain Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life. He argued that the most notable feature of Laozi and Zhuang Zi is “to pursue the noble spiritual culture by abandoning the ignoble material culture; to teach mankind to achieve the inner life by giving up the external life.” “There would be an inner life if we get rid of external life” and it is “hard to understand in common sense.” “But we should not treat it as something impossible. The free will of mankind is not almighty, but its great power is undeniable. We can conquer most things in our life with our will, so it is possible for mankind to minimize material desires and develop spiritual life to its fullest” (Ibid., p. 113). The “free will” in Liang’s text is individual’s positive choices and spiritual attitude towards life and values, of which the essence is close to the enlightened “mind/heart” in traditional philosophy, but different from unrestricted and arbitrary spiritual freedom.

Zhang Taiyan 章太炎 might be the earliest to explain the “happy excursion” thought of Zhuang Zi from the perspective of spiritual freedom. In 1922, when he was lecturing in Shanghai, he claimed freedom and equality were universal inclinations of mankind. “Zhuang Zi clarifies the meaning of freedom and equality in his articles ‘Xiaoyao You’ and ‘Qi Wu Lun.’ The ‘happy excursion’ means freedom and ‘leveling all things’ means equality.” Modern people understand freedom in terms of the relationship between different persons. “I should not impose upon the freedom of others and they should not impose upon my freedom, too.” “Freedom designated in ‘A Happy Excursion’ is based on the concept of ‘non-dependence’.” For instance, it involves the elimination of material desire, not depending on external conditions, etc. According to Zhuang Zi, “non-dependence” means “true freedom.” His methods of realizing freedom are “holding the spirit,” “regarding one’s mind/heart as universal mind/heart” and “denial of the self,” which are all “very close to Buddhism” (Zhang 1997, pp. 34–35). It is obvious that Zhang Taiyan’s explanation of the “happy excursion” is no different from the “spiritual freedom” of recent scholars, though he does not mention the words.

After that, Feng Youlan 冯友兰 utilized “absolute freedom” and “freedom of
the spirit” to explain the concept of “happy excursion” in his Yingyi Zhuang Zi 英译庄子 (English Translation of Zhuang Zi). In the introduction of the book named “Absolute Freedom,” Feng says: “The perfect man, who is in identity with the universe and ‘goes up and down with evolution’, is absolutely free…. But the perfect man is absolutely free, because he has transcended all distinctions and is happy in any form of existence” (Feng 1933, p. 18). In the translation of “Xiaoyao You,” Feng also translated Guo Xiang’s commentaries, which explain Zhuang Zi’s thought. Feng translated Guo’s words into: “If one will chariot on whatever one meets, what will one have to depend upon? This is the happiness and freedom of the perfect man, who unites his own self with its other” (Ibid., pp. 34–35). In a word, the absolute freedom used by Feng to explain the “happy excursion” means the greatest happiness in the philosophy of life, and the most important way to reach this happiness is “non-dependence.” It is similar to Zhang Taiyan’s explanation. In the translation of Yangsheng Zhu 养生主 (The Preservation of Life), Feng explained Zhuang Zi’s thought: “These show that those who cultivate life best are those who cultivate their spirit best. To cultivate the spirit best is to set it free…. Freedom of the spirit is essential to the cultivation of life” (Ibid., pp. 67–70). Freedom of spirit, which is regarded as the essence of life in this context, is the positive state of an individual, which is not affected by the physical body or other external factors.

In his Zhongguo Zhexue Shi 中国哲学史 (History of Chinese Philosophy), which has two volumes, Feng Youlan explained that while the basic idea of Zhuang Zi’s social-political philosophy is “absolute freedom,” he began by analyzing his philosophy of life with spiritual freedom. For example, in discussing how to transform emotions with reason, Feng said: “If an educated person who knew the reality of cosmos and inevitability of what will happen, he will not be disturbed and limited and achieve ‘Human freedom’.” This freedom obviously means a spiritual condition, which is peaceful without any doubt. On the supreme man who has transcended life and death, and is hovering between heaven and earth, Feng thought that “his happy excursion is non-dependence, which is unlimited and absolute.” It is a lofty realm that “the universe and I came into being together; Everything and I therein are One.” It is also “the mysticism of Zhuang Zi,” and he wants to “abolish any discrimination in knowledge” by this lofty realm (Feng 2000, pp. 175–176, p. 180, p. 185). In his Zhongguo Zhexue Jianshi 中国哲学简史 (A Brief History of Chinese Philosophy), Feng also claimed that the thought of “A Happy Excursion” is about “different degrees of obtaining happiness.” By “exerting our natural abilities freely” and “developing our nature freely,” “we can obtain a kind of relative happiness, but the absolute happiness is achieved by higher rank of understanding of the nature
of things” (Feng 1996, p. 92). The word “free” here is practical to some degree, but it means self-development and self-cultivation of individuals in the philosophy of life instead of personal liberty at a political, practical level.

Although Feng Youlan utilized “absolute freedom” and “spiritual freedom” to explain the “happy excursion,” he did not definitively combine these two concepts into one. Unlike Feng Youlan’s explanation of Zhuang Zi’s philosophy, in 1942 Hou Wailu 侯外庐 commented on “happy excursion” by beginning with absolute freedom of spirit and criticized this eremitic philosophy of life from the points of historical evolution and political practice. Hou emphasized that “freedom is grasping of inevitability,” and “it is a denial of the whole freedom essentially that it is achieved by giving up grasping the inevitability of history in one’s own conceit. The theory of Zhuang Zi demonstrates how to obtain absolute freedom in a false way and to deny any grasping of the ‘thing in its self’ and the whole freedom in fact.” His “to obtain absolute freedom in a false way” means absolute freedom of spirit, but it is a derogatory term with a negative meaning which should be refuted. In his opinion, ideas about leveling life and death, forgetting objects and self and being one with the universe, which appear in “happy excursion,” came about from the “dystocia of innovation” in Eastern society’s mysticism. He went on to say that the harm of these ideas in this “liberation” of “intellectual forms” is a regression in the “reality of human being” (Hou 1998, pp. 155–156). This argumentation is similar to Berlin’s critique about “the retreat to inner citadel”: The more individuals withdraw into their inner spiritual freedom, the more they are plunged into enslavement in the real world. As individuals withdraw from enslavement and accept it, instead of fighting against it, it will have negative social effects and give rise to despotism and tyranny.

Following him, Guo Moruo 郭沫若 also criticized Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life for its pessimism and opportunism. He said: “In two thousand years, opportunism as talisman of the feudal landlord class has been produced by the school of Zhuang Zi.” Unlike Hou Wailu, Guo did not completely deny the free character of Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life, and while he strongly criticized Zhuang Zi, he also praised him. He thought that Zhuang Zi “shows special respect to personality and emphasizes the freedom of individuals,” and it is because of this that he disdains aristocratic rulers and “rebels against” the mundane world (Guo 1996, pp. 190–191). His opinion is consistent with Wu Yu’s praise of Zhuang Zi’s unyielding spirit and free personality.

3 Transformation and Connection
Through this brief retrospection of the recent history of Zhuang Zi research, the pursuit of freedom from an individual’s inner spiritual life and the political thoughts contained in the book of Zhuang Zi can be concluded. In another word, from an individual’s spiritual freedom or political liberty, which involves the freedom in Zhuang Zi’s “happy excursion,” scholars have very differing opinions. Scholars who have positive opinions would like to see modernity in Zhuang Zi’s thoughts or endow the thoughts of modernity by noting its similarities with modern Western theories. Yan Fu says: “The word freedom has been feared by wise men in Chinese history, and as a rule is not established by them. Westerners say: mankind can only realize its true nature through freedom.” “The healthiness of their politics and the abnormality of our politics are determined by the difference between freedom and enslavement” (Yan 1986, pp. 2–3). Although Yan Fu highly praises the freedom in Zhuang Zi’s thoughts, he thoroughly understands that liberalism does not exist in the Chinese tradition. It can also be concluded that his words, “Zhuang Zi has discovered the freedom and equality of Europe,” is a forced interpretation: He forces political liberty out of Zhuang Zi’s philosophy. In comparison, spiritual freedom, personality and individuality, which are used by other scholars in explaining Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life in modern Western terms, are frequently invoked. The argument that Zhuang Zi lacks free character also proposes that his thoughts are without modernity; the spiritual freedom involved in “happy excursion” is not only the best aspect of his philosophy, but also the worst thing in it.

As mentioned above, it is apparent that the latter opinion goes from strict academic analysis to ideological political critiques. Based on this, the spiritual tradition of “happy excursion” should have been abolished a long time ago. Its value in modern society is regarded as a negative, decaying example which serves as a mirror for us. This opinion pays more attention to the negative aspect of “happy excursion” and finds nothing good in it. Positive evaluations of the free character of Zhuang Zi’s philosophy ignore its spiritual weakness and deficiency. They infuse modern thoughts with vitality into the “happy excursion,” but the complexity of this problem lies in this: If individuals can obtain freedom in the spiritual world, then what is the point of socio-political life? If an individual ceases to positively participate in reality, how can he continue with social practices? The key to this problem is Berlin’s critique of “the retreat to the inner citadel,” which challenges Zhuang Zi’s philosophy of life and the spiritual tradition of the “happy excursion.”

To answer the above questions, we must emphasize: The “happy excursion” is a forced decision by individuals in a dark age, but not a way of existence and the ideal of life in normal society. For people like Zhuang Zi, dangerous and unstable
Socio-political realities destroyed the possibility of realizing an ideal, and pushed them to the edge of daily existence. This alienated individuals from daily life and deprived the wholeness of meaning in a cruel way, but produced an unexpected positive effect: the awakening of human consciousness. If Confucians pursued a political ideal, to “govern the state” and “give peace to the world,” by cultivation of their virtues, Zhuang Zi hopes to antagonize and surpass the monarchy through an individual’s life and reject oppressive political situations. In Li Zehou’s words, the essence and particularity of Zhuang Zi’s thoughts consist in that “he gives prominence to the existence of individuals for the first time,” “what he focuses on is not ethical or political problems, but a body (life)-mind (spirit) problem of existence of individuals” (Li 1994, p. 181). A group of intellectuals, represented by Zhuang Zi, insist on the individuality of the self and noble spiritual ideals, fighting against enslavement and bondage by authority and criticizing the society’s dark reality. In modern academic terms, this awareness is what Berlin calls “my reason, my soul, my ‘noumenal’ self,” to which individuals retreat as a last resort. As the historical context changed into modern society, the individuality of awakened individuals, who do not adhere to authority and are not willing to subject to oppression, is an essential precondition to free political practice and social participation.

In a dark age, intellectuals like Zhuang Zi have to choose retreat or turn inwards when faced with external oppression. This retreat and turning inwards is not unprincipled or aimless. They do not indulge in only imagining the spiritual world, forgetting reality, neither do they adopt a nihilistic attitude because of the difficulty of life, becoming infamous men criticized by later Confucians for not knowing the difference between right and wrong, or good and evil. Their words and nihilistic attitude are full of irony towards evil; in their hearts they still maintain the conscience and virtues of intellectuals. During the Qing Dynasty Hu Wenying said in Zhuang Zi Dujian (Specific Insight of Zhuang Zi): “Zhuang Zi’s eyes are extremely dispassionate, but his heart is full of passion. Because of dispassion, he plunges himself into right and wrong; because of passion, he has so many feelings. He knows the uselessness of action, but he could not eliminate feelings because of the passion in the heart…” (Yan 1972, pp. 516–517). This means, Zhuang Zi claims to not have feelings, but in fact he passionately cares about the chaos of politics, deeply sympathizes with mankind’s tribulations and unrealistically dreams that humanity can exist in an ideal society (Cf. Chen 1998). Under the proper historical condition, this deep understanding of duty and individuality will naturally change into the personality of a free citizen in modern society.

Some scholars believe that the concept of freedom in modern Western political philosophy is established on the assumption that society is made up of individual
people. Individuals are considered the foundation of a society and self-awareness is positive. Zhuang Zi’s perspective on the happy excursion, which attempts to deconstruct the self or reduce self-awareness through the “elimination of the self” or “denial of the self,” contradicts the Western view of freedom (Xie 2004). The problem is, “if the self was reduced from the concept of freedom, does it still mean freedom?” (Xu 2005, p. 158) In my opinion, this apparent contradiction does not mean the “happy excursion” and “freedom” are actually in conflict. Zhuang Zi seeks to deconstruct and eliminate the false “self” which is supported by nihilistic social reality and its values. A true “self” (authentic subject), which serves as the origin of human freedom, can be gradually established by eliminating the false “self” (false subject). Zhuang Zi does not deny this, but emphasizes the importance of individuality. Compared to Confucianism, Mohism and legalism, his philosophy is full of individualism.

The “modern explanation” of Zhuang Zi’s thought, which proposes that political liberty or spiritual freedom is contained within it, is very rough. When searching for native sources of liberalism, Zhuang Zi’s thought is a theoretical resource worthy of greater exploration. The spiritual tradition of “happy excursion” from Zhuang Zi can serve as a way to introduce liberalism into everyday life.

At a minimum, free citizens in a modern society need peaceful inner lives and transcendent spiritual realms. They have the right to give up political participation and focus on their inner selves. In another word, “happy excursion” as a kind of spiritual tradition still has a reason and space to exist in modern society. Due to pluralism in modern society, the possibility and space for its existence have grown.

References


2 Chen Qingchun and Yang Guorong have also had deep discussions about this issue (Cf. Chen 2005; Yang 2006, pp. 292–294).
3 Wang Junning has discussed this issue from a different perspective (Cf. Wang 2006).
A Happy Excursion and Freedom

Shanghai: Shanghai Shangwu Yinshuguan


