

A NOTE CONCERNING THE
RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN “BUTCHER
DING” AND “NOURISHING LIFE”
IN THE TRADITIONAL ZHUANGZI
COMMENTARIES

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Abstract

The present discussion aims to help corroborate recent claims that the link between nourishing life 養生 and the Butcher Ding 庖丁 vignette from chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (c. fourth to third century BCE) might be taken seriously, while at the same time falsifying recent claims that it is nonetheless uncommon for the connection to be taken seriously. This is achieved by supplying several pieces of textual evidence from leading figures from throughout the history of *Zhuangzi* studies who all explicitly make the connection and take it seriously. Beyond corroborating one claim and falsifying the other, the present discussion provides renderings of much hitherto untranslated work so as to prevent future scholars from underestimating just how common it is to take the link between the Butcher Ding story and nourishing life seriously.

Franklin Perkins, a distinguished scholar of Chinese philosophy, makes a vital point regarding the “skill” stories in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 (c. fourth to third century BCE):

The problem comes, as it so often does in the *Zhuangzi*, when we try to determine what the stories mean. We assume that the text is doing more than just telling us how to become a great artisan or cicada catcher, but what is that greater point?¹

Perkins then focuses on the one “skill” story of the Inner Chapters, namely, that of Butcher Ding butchering an ox and pontificating to Lord Wenhui. Perkins then reaches what seems to me to be the right conclusion, the point of the story is that it is about nourishing life. I aim to help further corroborate this claim by documenting many distinguished

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1. Franklin Perkins, “Skill and Nourishing Life,” in *Skill and Mastery: Philosophical Stories from the Zhuangzi*, ed. Karyn Lai and Wai Wai Chiu (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 15.



exegetes who took seriously the link between Butcher Ding's butchering and nourishing life.

But Perkins makes one claim that I think is incorrect: "Sikri gives one of the few discussions of the Butcher Ding story that takes seriously the connection to nourishing life."²

This is a curious claim. Many of the key readers over the past two millennia have found it natural to read the passage that way. (I am working with the assumption that the reader is already familiar with the key traditional *Zhuangzi* authorities, and I shall proceed to supplying textual evidence. A glance through tables of contents to the works of Fang Yong and Yan Lingfeng may help the non-specialist reader.) In the present discussion I plan to document a sample of the many readings that take seriously the link between the Butcher Ding story and nourishing life, in order to (a) help substantiate Perkins's contention that that is the point of the story, while (b) disputing the claim that it is in any sense uncommon for somebody to read the passage that way. (The latter is of course an implication of Perkins's claim, and if a claim has a false implication, then it is false via *modus tollens*.) Beyond corroborating one claim and falsifying the other, the present discussion will provide renderings of much hitherto untranslated work so as to prevent future scholars from underestimating just how common it is to take seriously the link between the Butcher Ding story and nourishing life. It is of course possible that the traditional authorities were all wrong in supporting this claim, though it at least counts in the reading's favor (as a consensus among authorities does, with the usual qualifications.)

Here are many of the leading *Zhuangzi* exegetes taking the connection between the Butcher Ding vignette and nourishing life seriously:

Guo Xiang 郭象 (c. 252–312):

One's knife comes to be deftly utilized and so it is kept intact. One's life likewise comes to be deftly nourished and so it is kept intact (刀以善用而全，生亦以善養而全也。³)

Cheng Xuanying 成玄英 (c. 608–669):

This appears to rely on Butcher Ding in order to explain the art of nourishing life (此蓋寄庖丁以明養生之術者也。⁴)

2. Perkins, "Skill and Nourishing Life," 16.

3. Fang Yong 方勇, *Zhuangzi zuanyao* 莊子纂要 (Beijing: Academic, 2009), 429. Translations throughout are the author's own. See Christoph Harbsmeier, "Review of Zhuangzi: A New Translation of the Sayings of Master Zhuang as Interpreted by Guo Xiang," *Journal of Chinese Studies* no. 76 (2023), 238.

4. Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋, 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2012), 124.

Wang Pang 王雱 (1044–1076):

Butcher Ding is indirectly speaking about nourishing life in terms of butchering oxen ... Lord Wenhui was awakened by Butcher Ding’s words and thereby understood how to nourish life, this is what we call “approaching the Way” (庖丁寓言養生於解牛 ... 。文惠君遂悟庖丁之言而知養生, 所謂庶幾於道也).⁵

Lin Zi 林自 (fl. 1085):

The ox illustrates the patterns of natural endowments, and the knife is simply a metaphor for life. When one flows along with the patterns of the natural endowments [of things] and acts unassertively, then one’s life is not harmed;⁶ when one flows along with the patterns of the ox’s body and does not exert force, then the knife is not damaged (牛喻性命之理, 刀乃生之譬也。順性命之理而無為, 則生不傷; 順牛體之理而不用力, 則刀不虧。).⁷

Chen Jingyuan 陳景元 (1035–1094):

With Butcher Ding one engages in the unadorned learning of the way of nourishing life (庖丁素學養生之道).⁸

Chen Xiangdao 陳祥道 (1053–1093):

If you enter the interstices with something that lacks thickness, then there is enough space for the roving blade. How is this any different from the way of nourishing life! (以無厚入有間, 而遊刃有餘地矣。養生之道, 豈異此哉!).⁹

Lin Xiyi 林希逸 (1193–1271):

He uses a knife that lacks thickness to enter a body that has interstices. When his roving blade is in the interstices it means that nothing impedes/obstructs it. He is illustrating that the affairs of the world all have natural guidelines as a matter of course, one just flows along and moves with them. When one’s heart/mind is relaxed in this way, then things are also unable to harm one¹⁰ Sometimes one encounters adversity and is frantically at a loss. But when he aligns himself with these twists and turns and he flows along in order to abide with them, then they do not disturb his heart/mind and the affair passes by and

5. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 427.

6. This apparent non-sequitur is common in the literature.

7. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 427.

8. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 430.

9. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 430.

10. This apparent non-sequitur is common in the literature.

transforms, all at once as though from the beginning nothing had happened, and he begins to gain strength in nourishing life (以無厚之刀入有間之體, 遊刃於其間, 言無滯礙也。喻世事皆有自然之理, 但順而行之。我心泰然, 物亦不能傷也。[...] 或遇逆境之時, 多忙亂失措, 然正當委曲, 順以處之, 不動其心, 事過而化, 一似元無事時, 始為養生得力也。¹¹

Chu Boxiu 褚伯秀 (1230–1287?):

The Butcher Ding section depicts the essential points in nourishing life most strikingly (庖丁章敘述養生要旨最為親切).¹²

Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546–1623):

This establishes the meaning of the “Essentials in Nourishing Life” chapter, only with the affair of Butcher Ding butchering the ox does he exhaust the wondrous subtleties of the essentials in nourishing life. He employs it simply as a great metaphor and nothing more (此養生主一篇立義, 只一庖丁解牛之事, 則盡養生主之妙, 以此乃一大譬喻耳).¹³

Lin Yunming 林雲銘 (1628–1697):

When Butcher Ding butchers an ox, he enters the interstices with something that lacks, he strikes guided by the cavities ... This is indeed the art of following the central meridian as a constant rule, there is no other trick or scheme to it. When it comes to the way of nourishing life, how is it any different from this? (庖丁解牛, 以無厚入有間, 批卻導馭, ... 此亦緣督為經之術, 無他謬巧也。養生之道, 豈有殊歟?)¹⁴

Sun Jiagan 孫嘉淦 (1683–1753):

This illustrates taking the central meridian as a constant rule. He can nourish his knife by following along the interstices with his roving blade, he can nourish his life by following the central meridian with his roving spirit, these are one and the same (此講緣督以為經也。因間遊刃可以養刀, 緣督遊神可以養生, 其致一也).¹⁵

11. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 433; see Lin Xiyi 林希逸, *Zhuangzi Yanzhai kouyi jiaozhu* 莊子虞齋口義校注 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1987), 49–52.

12. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 433.

13. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 433.

14. Lin Yunming 林雲銘, *Zhuangzi yin* 莊子因 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2011), 33.

15. Fang Yong, *Zhuangzi zuanyao*, 435.

Liu Fengbao 劉鳳苞 (1826–1905):

This passage relies on Butcher Ding butchering an ox to express the secret meaning of nourishing life (此段借庖丁解牛託出養生主奧義).¹⁶

The chapter gives a full explanation of the doctrine of “nourishing life,” it is entirely contained in the line “he takes the central meridian as a constant rule,” and he quotes the wonderful passage on “Butcher Ding butchering the ox” to serve as evidence (篇內說透“養生”宗旨，全在“緣督為經”句，引“庖丁解牛”一段妙文為證).¹⁷

Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1918):

Although the oxen were many, they did not damage his blade. Although things are various, they are not used to weary his mind. Both attain the nourishing Way (牛雖多，不以傷刃，物雖雜，不以累心，皆得養之道也).¹⁸

Guan Feng 關鋒 (1919–2005):¹⁹

Butcher Ding butchering the ox has many vivid descriptions, and its basic idea is this: “Those joints have interstices, and the knife blade has no thickness. If you enter the interstices with something that lacks thickness, then all is well and there is enough space for the roving blade.”—This is the way of “the essentials in nourishing life,” this is the explanation of the image of “taking the central meridian as a constant rule” (庖丁解牛，作了許多生動的描寫，而其基本思想則是：“彼節者有間，而刀刃者無厚，以無厚入有間，恢恢乎其於遊刃必有餘地矣”—這就是“養生主”之道，就是對“緣督以為經”的形象的解說).²⁰

Fang Yong 方勇 (b. 1956):

The entire chapter takes “he takes the central meridian as his constant rule” as its guiding thread, and he clarifies the doctrine of nourishing life through three fables. The story of Butcher Ding butchering the ox

16. Liu Fengbao 劉鳳苞, *Nanhua xuexin bian* 南華雪心編, 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), 73.

17. Liu Fengbao, *Nanhua xuexin bian*, 68.

18. Wang Xianqian 王先謙, *Zhuangzi jijie* 莊子集解 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1999), 30. See Christoph Harbsmeier and John R. Williams, *The Inner Chapters of the Zhuangzi: With Copious Annotations from the Chinese Commentaries* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, forthcoming), 101n34.

19. I include Guan Feng and Fang Yong, as their readings of the *Zhuangzi* are informed by the reception history, so it is significant they see it this way.

20. Guan Feng 關鋒, *Zhuangzi Neipian yijie he pipan* 莊子內篇譯解和批判 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 1961), 156–57.

illustrates the secret meaning of nourishing life (全篇是以“緣督以為經”為綱，通過三則寓言故事來闡明養生宗旨的。庖丁解牛故事，從正面闡發了養生的奧義).²¹

It is clear from this brief overview that more than a few of the most significant *Zhuangzi* scholars have taken seriously the link between the Butcher Ding vignette and nourishing life. This textual evidence helps corroborate Perkins's claim that there is a serious link, while disproving his claim that it is uncommon to take the link seriously.

Appendix: Further textual evidence

Here is further textual evidence that is more obscure than the preceding, but sufficiently fascinating to warrant inclusion.

Fang Yizhi 方以智 (1611–1671) has a “Chan (J: Zen) Buddhist” take that takes the link seriously in its own idiosyncratic way:

Complying with the patterns of Heaven/Nature, his knife cuts amid the joints [中節], he pays very particular attention, looks around, and then he wipes the blade off and puts it away.²² (Butcher Ding) is cooking a white ox on the bare ground.” (依乎天理，刀解中節，恍然為戒，四顧善藏。... 烹卻露地白牛了也).²³

The last line is the key to the whole annotation. Here is an account of “cooking the white oxen on the bare ground”:

What is the white ox on the bare ground? The expressions “white ox” 白牛 and “bare ground” 露地 derive originally from the famous parable of the burning house in chapter 3 of the *Lotus Sutra*. In the parable a rich father, in order to induce his children to leave their house that, without their realizing it, has caught on fire, promises them all sorts of toys. After the children have left the house and are sitting safely outside on the “bare ground,” he gives them each a cart drawn by a “white ox.”

Later Buddhist thinkers have often taken the two phrases out of context and given them highly philosophical interpretations.²⁴

21. Fang Yong 方勇, *Zhuangzi jiangdu* 莊子講讀 (Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2020), 64. See Harbsmeier and Williams, *The Inner Chapters of the Zhuangzi*, 96n1.

22. Reading 善藏 as a contraction of 善刀而藏之.

23. Fang Yizhi 方以智, *Yaodi pao Zhuang* 藥地炮莊 (Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2011), 153.

24. Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2009), 302.

The question becomes which of these later “highly philosophical interpretations” Fang Yizhi had in mind.²⁵ In any event, the upshot is that Butcher Ding is a symbol for removing mental hindrances, while the topos of the ox is conveniently repeated. Leading contemporary Taiwanese specialists on Fang Yizhi—Tsai Chen-feng 蔡振豐, Wei Chian-jiun 魏千鈞, and Lee Chung-ta 李忠達—make the point:

“A white ox on the ground” indicates a pure state that is free from worries and corruption. The *Lotus Sutra* uses it as a metaphor for a Buddha vehicle [i.e., a way to become a Buddha] (露地白牛，指無煩惱與染污的清淨境地，《法華經》用以比喻一佛乘).²⁶

This takes the link between the Butcher Ding vignette and nourishing life in a strange and interesting direction.

Chen Danzhong 陳丹衷 (fl. 1643) and Juelang Daosheng 覺浪道盛 (1592–1659) adopt a “Confucianist” take in terms of the *Doctrine of the Mean* that likewise takes the link seriously in its own idiosyncratic way:

The Abbott [= Juelang Daosheng] says: “Taking the central meridian as a constant rule is “the Way that is in accordance with the endowed natures [of things]”;²⁷ entering the interstices with something that lacks thickness is “when dispatched, everything is to the appropriate degree [中節].”²⁸ Shejiang [= Chen Danzhong] says: “I read these remarks, and only then did I understand that the “wisdom,” “benevolence,” and “courage” of the *Doctrine of the Mean* are “a knife blade with no thickness” and that the Five Relationships and Nine Classics are a whole ox that contains interstices. He also brings out the word “careful circumspection” [慎] as the foundation/root of “equilibrium” and “harmony”. It is a truly spiritual understanding/cutting up [解]! How is he (Zhuang Zhou) comparable to those who frivolously alter and ruin the Classics?” (杖云：緣督爲經，率性之道也；以無厚入有間，發皆中節也。涉江云：讀此提，乃知中

25. Leading specialists from Taiwan maintain Fang Yizhi has a “Gong’an (J: Koan) of Chan (J: Zen) Master Zhixian” (智賢禪師之公案) in mind that involves “cooking a white ox” (烹卻白牛); Fang Yizhi 方以智, *Yaodi pao Zhuang jiaozhu* 藥地炮莊校注, collated and annotated by Tsai Chen-feng 蔡振豐, Wei Chian-jiun 魏千鈞, and Lee Chung-ta 李忠達 (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2017), 354n40.

26. See Fang Yizhi, *Yaodi pao Zhuang jiaozhu*, 354n40.

27. The *Doctrine of the Mean* reads 率性之謂道 for 率性之道; see Wang Wenjin 王文錦, trans., *Daxue Zhongyong yizhu* 大學中庸譯註 (Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company, 2013), 19.

28. The *Doctrine of the Mean* reads 發而皆中節 for 發皆中節; see Wang Wenjin, *Daxue Zhongyong yizhu*, 19.

庸之智、仁、勇是無厚之刀刃，五倫、九經是有間之全牛。又拈出『慎』字，為致中和之本，真神解哉！豈與偷變壞經者比）。²⁹

It should be noted that it was not uncommon to read the *Zhuangzi* vis-à-vis the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Note that Juelang Daosheng and Chen Danzhong are both alluding to the same lines from the *Doctrine of the Mean*:

When delight, anger, sorrow, and joy never erupt forth, we call this “equilibrium.” When they erupt but are all to the appropriate degree, we call this “harmony” (喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中；發而皆中節謂之和)。³⁰

Juelang Daosheng and Chen Danzhong can be said to see the virtues of “harmony” and “equilibrium” displayed by Butcher Ding when carving the ox, which is yet another strange and interesting way to link nourishing life with the story.

論《莊子》傳統註釋中「庖丁」與「養生」關係的考察摘要

黎江伯

提要

本文旨在證實近期的觀點：《莊子》第三章中的庖丁解牛故事與養生之道之間存在著重要關聯，這一點應受到認真對待。同時，本文也反駁了認為這種關聯不常被嚴肅對待的觀點。本文透過提供一系列來自莊子研究歷史上的主要學者的文本證據來支持這一論點，這些證據均明確顯示了他們對此關聯的重視。不僅如此，本文也將呈現許多至今未被翻譯的相關作品，目的是防止未來學者低估庖丁解牛故事與養生之道之間關聯的重要性與普遍性。

Keywords: Zhuangzi, nourishing life, Butcher Ding
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29. Fang Yizhi 方以智, *Yaodi pao Zhuang* 藥地炮莊 (Beijing: Huaxia Publishing House, 2011), 152–53.

30. Wang Wenjin, trans., *Daxue Zhongyong yizhu* 大學中庸譯註, 19.