

TWO WAYS OF BEING AT PEACE WITH OUR FATE AND NATURE IN THE *ZHUANGZI*

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Abstract: This paper offers an interpretation of *anming* 安命 or “being at peace with fate” in the *Zhuangzi* that highlights its heterogeneous understanding and usage throughout the text. To do so, the paper focuses on two main approaches to *anming* in the *Zhuangzi*. The first approach emphasizes our relationship with the forces of the cosmos, which have no regard for our values or preferences, and encourages us to clearly understand these forces, to adopt an attitude of peace or serenity towards them, and to obey them willingly. The second approach relies on a normative conception of our individual nature that independently gives us reason to obey our own natural tendencies and respect those of others. Although each approach differs in terms of focus, both offer powerful philosophical resources for “being at peace with our fate.”

Introduction¹

The *Zhuangzi* 《莊子》, an anthology of Warring States (c. 475–221 BCE) writings associated with the Daoist school of thought, frequently celebrates figures who adopt an attitude of *an* 安, “peace,” “ease,” or “acceptance,” towards their *ming* 命 or “fate.”² These sages

¹ This paper has benefited from engagement by several sources over the past few years. In particular, I would like to thank the audience of the 10th Anniversary East Asia Workshop (2021) hosted by Yonsei University’s UIC HASS/Asian Studies division, the audience members of the European Association of Chinese Philosophy’s online conference (2021), and the audience members of the virtual session of the Society for Asian and Comparative Philosophy at the APA Eastern division. I would also like to thank Eric Hutton, Manuel Rivera-Espinoza, and three anonymous reviewers at *Philosophy East and West* for incredibly helpful feedback in the preparation of this article.

² In this discussion, I make two assumptions about the *Zhuangzi* regarding its authorship and history. First, I assume the *Zhuangzi* to be a heterogeneous anthology compiled over a period of many decades that is neither the work of a single author nor reflective of a single man’s philosophy. Second, I reject the idea that any of the chapters are especially reflective of or authentic to the text’s eponymous author, Zhuang Zhou. These and related claims about the *Zhuangzi* are defended at length in Esther Klein, “Were There ‘Inner Chapters’ in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*.” *T’oung Pao* 96, no. 4/5 (2010): 299–369. See also Chris Fraser, review of *Classifying the*

flourish in a variety of difficult situations such as carrying out uncomfortable professional tasks, pursuing self-cultivation and enlightenment in spite of severe deformities (whether by nature or through state punishment), and coping with sickness, catastrophe, or death. Scholars have identified this theme using the compound term, *anming* 安命, or “being at peace with *ming*,” and have noticed several features that make it unique among early Chinese philosophy and relevant to modern life.³ They note, for example, that it offers an ideal that frees people from the damaging emotions arising from an unfulfilled desire to control our situations.⁴ It furthermore enables people to achieve inner peace and immerse themselves in whatever situation appears before them;⁵ and it can even help people to navigate disaster and hardship by encouraging them to deconstruct their secular, conventional concepts of good fortune and misfortune and instead flourish come what may.⁶

The present study builds on existing scholarship on *anming* by offering a novel interpretation that appreciates the heterogeneity of the *Zhuangzi* anthology. That is, rather than offer a unified

Zhuangzi Chapters, by Liu Xiaogan, *Asian Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (1997): 155-159. That being said, I do not deny the rich and obvious philosophical continuity across the anthology in terms of recurring themes and interests. For a discussion of the early history of “Daoism” as a title for a school of thought, see Kidder Smith, “Sima Tan and the Invention of Daoism, ‘Legalism,’ ‘et Cetera.’” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003): 129-56.

³ The exact phrase *anming* does not appear within the *Zhuangzi* but instead refers to a cluster of passages that emphasize the attitude of *an* in relation to fate, such as “being at peace with [a situation] as though it were *ming*” (*an zhi ruo ming* 安之若命) and “being at peace with the features arising from one’s *xing* and *ming*” (*an qi xing ming zhi qing* 安其性命之情), each of which offers ethical and political ideals. The topic of *anming* as a theme for these passages has enjoyed explicit attention by scholars beginning with Tang Junyi in Junyi Tang, “The T’ien Ming [Heavenly Ordinance] in Pre-Ch’in China.” *Philosophy East and West* 11, no. 4 (1962): 195-218, p. 196; See also Xiaogan Liu, *Zhuangzi zhexue ji qi yanbian* 莊子哲學及其演變 (Beijing: Zhongguo she hui ke xue chu ban she, 1987), 143-146. Lisa Raphals also notes that the term appears in the *Baopuzi* in Lisa Raphals, “Languages of Fate: Semantic Fields in Chinese and Greek” in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005) 70-106, 78. I would like to thank both Eric Hutton and an anonymous reviewer for encouraging me to clarify this point.

⁴ Ai Yuan, “On Acceptance,” *Soo Chow Journal of Philosophical Studies* 33 (2016): 97-121, 117.

⁵ Rongkun Zhang, “Zhuangzi’s Theory on ‘Fate’ and the Humanistic Spirit within,” *Religions* 12 (2021): 115, 3.

⁶ Katia Lenehan, “Zhuangzi’s Discourse on ‘Contented Acceptance of Fate’ and its Relation to Catastrophe,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 52 (2020): 1388-1399, 1397.

interpretation of *anming* within the theoretical context of Zhuangzi's philosophy, my goal here is to offer a bifurcated reading that treats *anming* as a family of recommendations within the textual context of the *Zhuangzi*. To this end, I identify two distinct approaches to *anming* in the *Zhuangzi*. The first recommends an attitude of ease or acceptance towards the overwhelming and indifferent cosmic processes that shape our fortune. The second recommends that same attitude towards the naturally occurring features and tendencies of oneself and, indirectly, others. While both fall under the general rubric of being at peace with *ming*, they are in turn shaped by the multiple meanings of *ming* as well as the varied philosophical interests and priorities across the *Zhuangzi*. As a result, they emphasize different conceptual foci within the context of *ming* and offer different recommendations for how to live.

This interpretation has several important virtues. First, it is based on sound historical and interpretive premises regarding the authorship and textual history of the *Zhuangzi*. Second, it acknowledges the polysemy of *ming* by appreciating that our interpretation of *anming* depends on the contextually determined meaning of *ming*.⁷ Third, although it departs from holistic interpretations by offering a bifurcated one, it is largely in agreement with existing interpretations on key points, building upon previous work. Fourth, enables us to better appreciate *anming*'s historical significance within the context of Warring States thought.

In what follows, I will first engage with some contemporary scholarship on *ming* to highlight its history and the relevant meanings for the purpose of this study before briefly discussing the concept of *an*. I then survey some of the recent work on *anming* to contextualize the present study and highlight my departure from previous work. Next, I turn to the *Zhuangzi* and sketch the two relevant approaches to *anming*, which I refer to as the *ming*-as-fate approach and the *ming*-as-nature approach respectively, in turn highlighting their key similarities and differences.

Ming 命 and *an* 安 beyond the *Zhuangzi*

In some of the oldest records we have access to, including Western Zhou bronze inscriptions and turtle shell divination literature, *ming* refers to a command-like speech act that would be issued by rulers to

⁷ Here I follow Valmisa's treatment of *ming* as a polysemic term. See Mercedes Valmisa, "The Reification of Fate in Early China," *Early China* 42 (2019): 147-99, 4-5.

appointees who would receive them.⁸ Ming would also be offered by diviners to objects of divination (primarily turtle shells) to elicit support from the spirits in bringing about preferred outcomes.⁹ This early usage was retained throughout later periods where the term can be generally understood as a “command” or “decree,” such as when the *Analects* references to the “ruler’s commands” (*jun ming* 君命),¹⁰ or when the *Mozi* lauds the “decrees of the sage kings” (*sheng wang zhi ming* 聖王之命).¹¹ Throughout the first centuries of the Zhou dynasty, the *ming* or “commands” of Heaven itself, the supreme ruler of the cosmos and quasi-anthropomorphic deity figure, became an asset for political legitimization, thus giving rise to the idea of the “Mandate of Heaven,”¹² which the Zhou rulers would receive (or lose) based on their virtue (or vice).¹³ But as the Zhou dynasty gradually gave way to the Warring States period, Heaven’s mandate became inscrutable, and it was no longer obvious that the good would be rewarded or the wicked punished. Gradually, a more secular notion of Heaven based in amoral constancy (*chang* 常) and spontaneity (*ziran* 自然) appeared in Warring States texts including *Xunzi*, *Daodejing*, and *Zhuangzi*, and persisted into the Han period where it survives in texts such as *Lunheng*.¹⁴ This naturalized conception of Heaven in turn led to a

⁸ David Schaberg, “Command and the Content of Tradition” in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005) 23-48.

⁹ Edward Shaughnessy, “Turtle-Shell Divination” in *The Origin and Early Development of the Zhou Changes*, (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2022) 88-142, 120-126.

¹⁰ *A Concordance to the Lunyu* (論語逐字索引), ed. D.C. Lau, Ho Che Wah and Chen Fong Ching. ICS series (Hong Kong: Commercial Press, 1995):

13.21/35/27, 10.20/25/14. For ease of access, the concordance Chapter/Page/Line numbers can be input at <https://ctext.org/analects>. All translations of Chinese classics are my own unless otherwise noted.

¹¹ *Mozi Yinde* (*A Concordance to Mo Tzu*), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 21 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956): 8/7/9. For ease of access, the Page/Book/Line citations to *Mozi Yinde* can be input at <https://ctext.org/mozi>.

¹² For a relevant summary of the role of virtue regarding the Mandate of Heaven, see Tang, “The T’ien Ming,” 200-204.

¹³ For example, *Mozi Yinde* 32/19/30-48.

¹⁴ See, for example, *Xunzi Yinde* (*A Concordance to Hsun Tzu*), *Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22*: 17/1. Though indeed more prominent, the idea of an amoral conception of Heaven was not universal, with thinkers like Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104BCE), for example, arguing at length against it. See Michael Puett, “Following the Commands of Heaven” in *The Magnitude of Ming: Command, Allotment, and Fate in Chinese Culture*, ed. Christopher Lupke (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2005) 49-69, 61-65.

morally indifferent conception of Heaven's *ming*.¹⁵ Eventually, *ming* became a reified concept worthy of reflection in itself, being something objective, external to us in the sense that it referred to all that lay beyond human control or influence, and alienated from us in so far as it had no regard for human preferences.¹⁶ It took on the meaning of several distinct but related ideas including one's fate or destiny, expected lifespan, physical qualities, and happenstance, among others.¹⁷ As early Chinese thinkers came to accept the role of an indifferent *ming* in people's lives, they in turn developed unique approaches to handling it. Scholars have identified several attitudes towards *ming* that appear in ancient Chinese texts, and Zhuangist *anming* is one of them.¹⁸

An refers to a general state of peace, tranquillity, or ease. The term is often paired with *le* 樂, which Michael Nylan translates as "pleasure", and is often contrasted with "worry" (*you* 憂) or "apprehension" (*wei* 危).¹⁹ It is often praised in early Chinese texts as a state to be attained by the virtuous, such as in *Lunyu* 4:2 where Kongzi claims that the benevolent (*ren* 仁) person is *an* with benevolence. The *Liji*, "Yue Ji" similarly lauds *an* as an attitude to be cultivated and pursued by the virtuous, pairing it with "pleasure" 樂 and placing it next to "heavenliness" (*tian* 天) and "divinity" (*shen* 神).²⁰ *An* is also a natural human emotion, with Xunzi writing that, "all those who rule others... desire *an* and hate apprehension (*wei*)."²¹ Early Confucian texts also at times believed that ritual would lead to *an*, with the *Liji* also saying, "If people have ritual, they will be *an*, and if they lack it, they will be apprehensive."²²

¹⁵ For another brief retelling to this effect, see Michael Nylan, *The Canon of Supreme Mystery by Yuang Hsiung: A Translation with Commentary of the T'ai Hsüan Chings* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993) 34-38. For a more detailed account, see Puett, "Following the Commands of Heaven."

¹⁶ Valmisa highlights the three elements of objectification, externalization, and alienation as the main elements of a reified conception of fate. See Valmisa, "The Reification of Fate" 17-21.

¹⁷ See Lisa Raphals, "Debates about Fate in Early China" *Études chinoises* 33 no. 2 (2014): 13-42, 16. See also Raphals "Languages of Fate," 76-78. See also Valmisa, "Reification of Fate," 4-5.

¹⁸ For a very helpful survey, see Raphals, "Languages of Fate," 77-82.

¹⁹ Michael Nylan, *The Chinese Pleasure Book*, (New York: Zone Books, 2018) 55.

²⁰ *Liji*, Yue Ji, 45.

²¹ *Xunzi Yinde* 12/65-66.

²² *Liji* Qu Li I, 10.

In some Daoist philosophical and medical texts, *an* is treated as an essential component of physical and mental wellbeing. The *Huangdi Neijing* tells us the following:

Therefore, if the will is curtailed and desires are lessened, the heart-mind can be at peace (*an*) and unafraid. The body will toil but not be exhausted. The *qi* will follow and submit. Everyone would follow their desires, and each would obtain what they desired.²³

This passage recalls *Daodejing* chapter 80 and *Zhuangzi* book 10, which both mention an ideal society in which people would “rest in their dwellings” (*an qi ju* 安其居).²⁴ It also relates to *an*'s connotation of physical rest or comfort, such as when the *Huangdi Neijing* discusses the importance of “lying down restfully” (*an wo* 安臥).²⁵ All of this implies is that *an* indeed has positive connotations in Daoist texts, and so we should not be surprised to find it being applied towards *ming*. With this basic understanding of the terms *ming* and *an* in mind, we can now turn our attention to the scholarly discussion of how the terms combined to form *anming*.

Anming in the Zhuangzi

Tang Junyi first identified *anming* as a uniquely Zhuangist idea and emphasized its ethical significance, writing that the ultimate expression of *anming* lies in “using the heart-mind of a filial son to endure the circumstances that arise in the space between Heaven and Earth.”²⁶ In this way, the ideal represented by *anming* is an attitude of ease or rest towards the unalterable circumstances in one's life. However, some scholars, such as Liu Xiaogan and Li Zehou, have associated *anming* with a naïve fatalism, with the idea being that Zhuangzi encourages hopeless resignation to one's circumstances.²⁷ They view this idea a major flaw in Zhuangzi's philosophy in that it borders on misanthropy, especially when compared with the productive moral sentiments of Confucian humanism.

²³ *Huangdi Nei Jing* Suwen, “Shang Gu Tian Zhen Lun” 2.

²⁴ *Daodejing* 80. *Zhuangzi Yinde* (A Concordance to *Chuang Tzu*), Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 20 (Cambridge MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956). 10/32. For ease of access, the concordance Book/Line numbers can be input at <https://ctext.org/zhuangzi>.

²⁵ *Huangdi Nei Jing* Suwen, “Ping Ren Qi Xiang Lun” 5, 7. I would like to thank Eric Hutton for reminding me of this connotation.

²⁶ Junyi Tang, *Zhongguo Zhexue Yuanlun* 中國哲學原論, (Beijing: Zhongguo Shehui Kexue Chubanshe 中国社会科学出版社), 340. My translation.

²⁷ Zehou Li, *A History of Classical Chinese Thought*, trans. Andrew Lambert (New York: Routledge, 2019) 193-195, 196; Liu, *Zhuangzi Zhexue*, 143-153.

Happily, recent scholarship has offered more charitable interpretations of *anming*, identifying its liberating and humanistic spirit within the broader context of Zhuangist thought. Scholars such as Wang Hsiao-Teng, Ai Yuan, Katia Lenehan, and Zhang Rongkun, for example, have filled out the idea of *an* in several recent and valuable studies. Wang, for example, emphasizes how the Zhuangist approach to fate fits in to the general idea of cosmic non-opposability, whereby being at peace with fate means using an understanding of the cosmos to abandon relative and limiting distinctions because they are unreal.²⁸ Yuan goes a step further by treating *an* as a general attitude of “acceptance” and argues that *an* requires that we actively accept our fate rather than passively submit to it.²⁹ In so doing, we achieve a state of emotional equanimity and remain unaffected by our pre-existing preferences for things going one way rather than another and instead treat our circumstances as neither desirable nor undesirable.³⁰ According to Zhang, Zhuangist sages who accept their fate can harmonize with the myriad things and rely upon to the spontaneous workings of Heaven rather than impose their will upon them, leading to an altogether less combative and anxious way of carrying on.³¹ Lenehan further emphasizes the role of understanding and creativity in coping with fate, since a skillful response to fate requires “insight into the nature and changes of things” that can enable us to achieve clarity (*ming* 明) and respond to situations in novel and creative ways.³² This resembles what Mercedes Valmisa calls an attitude of “adaptive responsiveness” towards fate in the *Zhuangzi*.³³ In this way, we can understand *anming* as an attitude of entrusting ourselves to, following along with, obeying, or otherwise acceding to those uncontrollable features of the world arising from the spontaneous transformations of the myriad things as determined by Heaven.

A common thread in these studies is the assumption that the Zhuangist approach to fate can be understood as a component of Zhuangzi's philosophy more generally, and it is here that I wish to depart from previous scholarship. I want to suggest that although there is a clear sense in which all passages relating to *anming* can be understood as peacefully accepting one's *ming*, there are precise and

²⁸ Hsiao-Teng Wang, “Zhuangzi *anming* sixiang tanxi,” *Donghua Hanxue* 6 (2007) 15-50, 32.

²⁹ Ai, “On Acceptance,” 116.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116-117. Zhang, “Zhuangzi's Theory on ‘Fate,’” 13.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

³² Lenehan, “Zhuangzi's Discourse,” 1393.

³³ Valmisa, “Beyond our Control?” 8.

significant differences across the text regarding how the ideal is understood and applied. Specifically, I identify two prominent approaches corresponding to two discrete connotations of *ming* and two distinct though related philosophical themes in the *Zhuangzi*. The first approach encourages us to be at peace with our external circumstances no matter how difficult or painful doing so may be, since they are an inexorable component of the spontaneous transformation of things from the perspective of Heaven. In these contexts, *ming* is perhaps best understood as “fate”, and the main emphasis of *anming* lies on our ability as individuals to psychologically overcome our typical emotional responses to situations in favor of adopting a cosmic and neutral perspective. Elsewhere, however, the text conceives of *anming* as the ability to live in accordance with our own individual nature and to respect that of others, eschewing tasks that we are not suited for, unhealthy obsessions, and attempts to impose our will on others. Here, *ming* instead refers to a normative conception of our individual nature. As a result, distinction within the *Zhuangzi* between *ming-as-fate* and *ming-as-nature* leads to two different approaches to *anming* in the text, in turn reflecting shifting philosophical priorities in different strata of the anthology. At a high level of description, both approaches can be understood as willingly being at peace with what is beyond our control, but as we will see, the details of the pictures they paint substantially differ.

Ming as “fate”

The first view of *anming* recommends an attitude of *an* towards *ming-as-fate*. In this context, *ming* refers to the limits of human agency, or that about which nothing can be done in a general sense. Importantly, these limits do not exhibit any moral valence and instead represent the dictates of an amoral Heaven that is both spontaneous, meaning that its conduct is not governed by any predetermined principles, and is indifferent to human preferences and values. So far, this is largely in line with well-established interpretations of Zhuangist ethics regarding its emphasis on following along with nature rather than with a settled human Way.³⁴ Relevant passages on *anming* concern situations where Heaven may present us with circumstances that are truly baffling and upset even our most basic distinctions and preferences, such as the preference for life over death or for being physically whole instead of maimed. Adopting an attitude of *an* in these situations is no small feat and relies upon a radical acceptance

³⁴ See David Wong, “Identifying with Nature in Early Daoism,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 36, no. 4 (2009) 568-584.

that goes beyond equanimous indifference and instead embraces a feeling of ease or even rest in the spontaneous unfolding of the natural order without any regard for our personal desires.

I would like to emphasize three features of *anming* in the *ming-as-fate* context to highlight the contrast with *anming* in the *ming-as-nature* context. The first concerns the broad scope of *ming*. *Anming* suggests that we make peace with the specific features of our situation only in so far as they are the result of the aimless and overwhelming inevitability of the cosmos in the broadest possible sense. The second feature is *anming*'s psychological significance in that it concerns our affective responses to a situation characterized by a feeling of ease or rest—often at odds with our intuitive values or preferences. The third feature concerns our behavior in the situation, or what we should do when in a psychological state of *an* towards *ming*. The following passages illustrate how these three features come together to form a coherent approach to coping with *ming-as-fate*.

I begin with a passage from Book 6 in which four friends are ruminating about life, death, and the cosmic order when one of them, Ziyu, falls ill.³⁵ Remarkably, he revels in the transformation he is undergoing and commends his own “obedience” (*shun* 順) to the forces to which he is subjected.³⁶ The crucial line reads as follows:

In all cases of obtaining, there is a timeliness. And in all cases of losing, there is obedience. Be at peace (*an* 安) in the timeliness and dwell in obedience, and sorrow and joy will be unable to enter. The ancients called it ‘unravelling that which suspends us (in life)’, and one who cannot unravel himself is bound by things.³⁷

Here, Ziyu describes himself as deliberately embracing his passage into death without the usual affective responses of joy or sorrow, treating his own transformation as one small part of the great transformation of the cosmos. Interestingly, this example indirectly makes reference to the physical dimension of *an*'s meaning of “resting”, as *an* is paired with *chu* 處 or “to dwell.” The idea seems to

³⁵ *Zhuangzi Yinde* 18/17-18.

³⁶ For a discussion of *shun* in this context, see Lenehan, “Zhuangzi’s Discourse,” 1392-1394.

³⁷ ZZ 6/45-54. A similar and partially overlapping line appears in Book 3 regarding how Laozi’s disciples responded to his death. See, Mian Li 李勉, *Zhuangzi zong lun ji fen pian ping zhu* 莊子總論及分篇評注, (Taipei: Taiwan shang wu yin shu guan, 1973) 94, 144, 164-165, N 123-126. See also Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 48.

be that when dealing with death, one ought to adopt an attitude of restful dwelling while acting with timely obedience.

The story then describes another friend, Zilai, falling ill. As his wife and children lament his condition, another friend scolds them and tells them not to interfere with his transformation. Zilai then elaborates as follows:

A son, whether his father and mother tell him to go east, west, south, or north, merely goes where he is commanded (*ming* 命). And Yin and Yang—how much more are they to a person than father or mother! Now that they have brought me to the verge of death, if I should refuse to obey them, how perverse I would be! What fault is it of theirs?³⁸

Zilai likens his obedience to the cosmic forces of Yin and Yang to the behavior of a filial son obeying the commands of his parents. The passage emphasizes acting with timeliness and obedience when cosmic forces—here Yin and Yang in particular—issue commands, especially those pertaining to life and death. Furthermore, the text argues that we owe these forces even *more* reverence than we do our parents because the scope of the commands of Yin and Yang is so much greater than that of our parents.

Though this example focuses on accepting extreme circumstances having to do with sickness and death, *anming* can also be applied in uncomfortable situations of everyday life. One passage from Book 4 portrays Kongzi advising Zigao, a minor Chu official, before he goes on an important mission in the state of Qi.³⁹ Upon approaching Kongzi for advice, Zigao is racked with anxiety at the prospect he faces. He claims that the people of Qi are, “exceedingly hospitable but lack any sense of urgency,” (*shen jing er bu ji* 甚敬而不急), and so he expects to struggle to persuade them of his ruler’s perspective.⁴⁰ Should he fail, he will doubtless endure the wrath of his peers (*ren dao zhi huan* 人道之患),⁴¹ but should he succeed, he will incur the wrath of his Yin and Yang in preparing for and discharging his duties (*yin yang zhi huan* 陰陽之患),⁴² meaning that he would become physically ill from the anxiety he would endure throughout

³⁸ *Zhuangzi Yinde*, 6/56-57. See also Watson *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 48.

³⁹ The text refers to Zigao as the “Duke of She,” but according to Lu Deming this is an arrogation, as Zigao was only a governor (*yin* 尹) of She County. See Shumin Wang 王淑敏, *Zhuangzi Jiao Quan* 莊子校詮, (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2007) 136.

⁴⁰ *Zhuangzi Yinde* 4/35.

⁴¹ *Ibid.* 4/39.

⁴² *Ibid.* 4/38.

the process.⁴³ He laments that even before departing on his mission he is already so anxious that his insides are burning up such that he must drink ice water. He therefore asks Kongzi for advice, who responds as follows:

There are two Great Decrees in the world: The first is fate; the second is duty. A son's love for his father is *ming*—it cannot be unfastened from the heart-mind (*xin* 心). A minister's serving his ruler is duty, and from its obligation there is no escape anywhere between Heaven and Earth. These are what I call the Great Decrees. So as for serving one's parents regardless of the location and being at peace with it (*an zhi* 安之)—this is the utmost filiality. As for serving one's ruler regardless of the task and being at peace with doing so—this is the utmost loyalty. As for one who serves their own heart-mind, sorrow and joy do not move before them;⁴⁴ they know what cannot be avoided and are at peace with it (*an zhi* 安之) as though it were fate—this is the utmost virtuosity.⁴⁵

Kongzi explains the two Great Decrees as the specific forces of an indifferent cosmic order to which we must conform. First, it concerns the scope of fate, which includes the universal human emotions of love for our parents and our equally unavoidable obligations to our superiors. Both images build on Zilai's cosmic filiality but are placed under the more general sagely ideal of “one who serves their own heart-mind” (*zi shi qi xin zhe* 自事其心者). In each case, the attitude of *an* is recommended, with the final line suggesting that we “*an* [these circumstances] like *ming*,” (*an zhi ruo ming* 安之若命). I understand this phrase as meaning to be at peace with these circumstances as we would with any other decree from the cosmos.⁴⁶

⁴³ The theory here, as explained by Guo Xiang, is that, “the happiness and fear in his bosom will lead to ice and burning coals being tied up in his five viscera,” (Wang, *Zhuangzi Jiao Quan*, 137). See also Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩, *Zhuangzi Jishi* 莊子集釋 (Beijing 北京: Zhonghua Shuju 中華書局, 1961. Reprint 2013), 159-160.

⁴⁴ Understanding *shi* 施 as *yi* 移. See Wang, *Zhuangzi Jiao Quan*, 140.

⁴⁵ *Zhuangzi Yinde*, 4/39-44.

⁴⁶ There is some scholarly disagreement over what is indicated by the use of “like” (*ruo* 若). Yuan suggests that the *ruo* here emphasizes the irreversibility of *ming*, and that whether something is irreversible indicates whether we should treat it as *ming* (Yuan, “On Acceptance,” 103). Zhang, to contrast, suggests that it is evidence of ambiguity regarding the scope of *ming*, and that there is a distinction between *ming* and what we can do nothing about (Zhang, “Zhuangzi's Theory on ‘fate’,” 2-3). My own reading is closer to Yuan's in that it emphasizes the epistemic ideal of the sage knowing to treat something as an instance of *ming*.

Regarding the psychological response, the passage similarly emphasizes equanimity and resistance to emotions that may typically arise based on how well or poorly a situation conforms to our preferences. By considering such circumstances to be *ming*, we relieve ourselves of the need to try and shape things to our preferences. In practice, this enables such persons to “rely on the inevitable” (*tuo bu de yi* 託不得已),⁴⁷ which when acknowledged as part of the situation can offer a stable and supporting context within which the heart-mind is able to roam (*you* 游) rather than agonize about what cannot be helped. Once we acknowledge that our circumstances arise from the Great Decrees of an indifferent cosmic order, we can then focus our energies on what remains within our control and succeed therein.

Another story emphasizing the *ming*-as-fate approach in a practical context concerns Shentu Jia, a footless former convict and pupil of master Bohun Wuren. A fellow pupil and official, Zichan of Zheng, complains that Shentu Jia’s behavior is not respectful enough given the difference in their social rank.⁴⁸ Unfazed, however, Shentu Jia responds by accusing Zichan of being somebody who, “takes pleasure in his rank and puts others behind himself.”⁴⁹ Zichan, incensed, claims that Shentu Jia’s own character is insufficient for him to redeem himself or to restore his body to its original condition, to which Shentu Jia responds as follows:

Many would describe their own crimes in such a way as to imply that they ought not have lost [their limbs], while few would refuse to describe their crimes at all, believing that [their limbs] ought not have been spared.⁵⁰ Knowing what cannot be avoided and being at peace with it as though it were fate—only one who possesses virtuosity (*de* 德) is able to do it. To roam within range of Archer Yi’s bow and stand right before it, one would be hit at that very spot. But should someone do this and not be hit—this too is fate. There are many people with both feet who laugh at me for lacking mine,

⁴⁷ Ibid., 4/53.

⁴⁸ *Zhuangzi Yinde*, 5/13-16.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 5/17. “Putting others behind himself” is a colloquial rendering of *hou ren* 後人 which Wang Shumin interprets as an antonymous retort to Zichan’s own accusation that Shentu Jia considers himself “equal with a political officer” *qi zhi zheng* 齊執政. See Wang, *Zhuangzi Jiao Qian*, 180.

⁵⁰ Watson reads *zhuang* 狀 as “excuse”, and Ziporyn glosses it similarly, but I follow Graham in opting for the more neutral translation of “describe” in the sense of “represent.” See Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 65-66; Ziporyn, *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, 34-35, and Graham, *Chuang-Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 78.

and I am thrown into an anxious rage. But then I arrive at the place of the Master and expel these feelings and return to normal. I do not know whether it is because the Master cleanses me with goodness, or whether it was my own doing.⁵¹ I have wandered with the Master for nineteen years and not once has he noticed my missing feet.⁵²

Here, Shentu Jia explains that many convicts would seek to excuse their actions and argue that they do not deserve their punishment, but instead he has made peace with his circumstances and admits that sometimes things happen regardless of our preferences as well as our actions. (Though it remains ambiguous in the story if Shentu Jia is guilty of his alleged crimes.) Even if someone were to stand in front of the legendary Archer Yi, it would not guarantee that she would be hit by his arrows, and this would be the result of *ming* just as much as her being hit. The upshot seems to be that sometimes, things happen despite our best efforts and even reasonable expectations.

There are several other passages that emphasize the value of adopting an attitude of *an* towards *ming*, but this very brief survey should be enough to demonstrate its main components.⁵³ In terms of scope, the texts encourage casting a wide net with respect to *ming*, accepting anything we cannot control as falling under the category, whether arising from biology, external obligations, or what might conventionally be considered bad luck. Psychologically, the texts recommend an attitude of ease, peace, or comfort towards *ming* that enables one to carry out her tasks in a way that is psychologically secure, free of the chaotic influence of conventional preferences and valuations. Finally, in terms of practical advice, the texts encourage serene obedience to *ming*, or the content and peaceful carrying out of one's duties with the full confidence that things could not be otherwise than they are, as well as constant engagement with like-minded friends and teachers who remind us that we can make peace with even the most difficult situations. Overall, the attitude of *an*

⁵¹ This last clause, "or if it is of my own doing," is not found in the extant *Zhuangzi* but is inferred from Guo Xiang's commentary, which includes this second line, "or if I was able to return myself?" (為我能自反邪). Graham and Watson appear to follow this reading as well, and I follow them here. See Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 78; Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 66; and Wang, *Zhuangzi Jiao Quan*, 182-183.

⁵² *Zhuangzi Yinde* 5/19-23

⁵³ For example, the story of Zisang lamenting in his flooded house (*Zhuangzi Yinde* 6/94-97), the story of the ugly man Ai Tai Tuo (*Zhuangzi Yinde* 5/31-49), and the story of Wang Tai (*Zhuangzi Yinde* 5/1-13), another footless adept each speak to the theme of being at peace with their *ming*-as-fate.

directed towards our *ming*-as-fate encourages psychological resilience and individual self-cultivation.

Ming as “nature”

Elsewhere in the *Zhuangzi*, we find references to having an attitude of peace or acceptance towards *ming* that depart both conceptually and practically from those just discussed. The relevant texts rely on a narrow conception of *ming* as it pertains to our individual nature rather than to *ming* as a universal cosmic force. Additionally, there is greater emphasis on interpersonal interaction and social coordination, speaking more to elements of Daoist political philosophy—e.g., government by nonaction or *wuwei* 無為—instead of the individualist, psychological ideals more prominent in the *ming*-as-fate context. *Anming* in the *ming*-as-nature context serves as the preferred response to a normative conception of our own individual nature, in turn offering a method for successful engagement with others and even successful governance. As a result, being at peace with *ming* is not only a way of coping with life's harsh realities but also an essential component of a program for a flourishing life free of conflict.

The main conceptual difference between this approach to *anming* and the *ming*-as-fate approach is the narrow focus on a normative conception of our individual nature. Individual nature in this context is often expressed not only with *ming* but also with *xing* 性, the more common Warring States approximation for a thing or individual's “nature”. When understood in terms of both *xing* and *ming*, our individual nature is normative in so far as it gives us reason to do whatever it is our nature to do or be like.⁵⁴ *Anming* in these contexts refers to living in a way that respects our own nature and, as a result, does not interfere with others'. I am not the first to notice this close connection between *ming* and *xing* within the context of *anming*.⁵⁵ Scholars such as Tang and Xu Fuguan go so far as to identify *xing* with *ming* in the context of the *Zhuangzi*, and more recently Yuan and Lenehan have made similar claims when discussing several of the passages mentioned below.⁵⁶ However, I am reluctant to assume they are synonymous in this context contexts, as the relationship between

⁵⁴ Importantly, this is how claims about *xing* were often made in WS philosophy. See Dan Robins, “The Warring States Concept of *xing* 性” *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 10 (2011) 31-51.

⁵⁵ I am largely relying on Robins “The Warring States Concept of *xing* 性” for my understanding of *xing* in what follows.

⁵⁶ Lenehan and Yuan, follow Tang and Xu Fuguan in identifying *xing* with *ming*. See Lenehan, “Zhuangzi's Discourse”, 1389; Yuan “On Acceptance” 111-112; Tang *Zhongguo Zhaxue*, 547-548.

xing and *ming* may not have been settled at the time of the composition of these texts. (Mengzi 7B24, for example, goes to great lengths to distinguish them.)⁵⁷ That being said, there's no denying their close connection to one another, as the eventual prominence of compound term *xingming* clearly attests. The term appears in both Confucian and Daoist texts from at least the Han dynasty onward, including the *Lunheng* 《論衡》 by Wang Chong and the (at least partly) apocryphal Daoist text, *Wenzi* 《文子》. It also occurs much later in the context of later Daoist Internal Alchemy (Neidan) traditions.⁵⁸ During the Warring States period, however, when *xing* was emerging as a human nature concept of paramount philosophical importance, the relationship between the two is likely more complex than one of mere synonymy.

An alternative way of understanding the relationship between *xing* and *ming* is one where *xing* is understood as a subspecies or special kind of *ming*. The excavated text from the Guodian tombs known as *Xing zi ming chu* suggests as much in its claim (from which the title is derived) that *xing* comes from *ming*, implying that *ming* is the broader category.⁵⁹ This demonstrates that at least some Warring States thinkers believed that *xing* was a subset of or derived from *ming*. However, this is just one possible way of explaining the relationship between the two and might not have been an established or orthodox view. Furthermore, in certain contexts, including several in the *Zhuangzi* relevant to *anming* as well as Mengzi 7B/24, *ming* clearly refers to aspects of an individual's nature that are different from aspects due to *xing*. In this way, the relationship between the two might not be one of synonymy or scope but instead a relationship where each represents distinct aspects of a broader conception of individual nature. As for which subset of features each term refers to, several *Zhuangzi* passages seem to follow the Warring States convention that a thing's *xing* implies characteristic growth and development that contributes to its flourishing.⁶⁰ Conversely, the features of human nature associated with *ming* tend to be fixed or static (though equally important to respect for flourishing). This is not a strict distinction, but it accurately describes the approach followed the examples below.

⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion of Mengzi 7B24, see Valmisa, "The Reification of Fate" 24-28.

⁵⁸ Fabrizio Pregadio, "Destiny, Vital Force, or Existence? On the Meanings of Ming in Daoist Internal Alchemy and Its Relation to Xing or Human Nature." *Daoism: Religion, History and Society* 6 (2014) 157-218.

⁵⁹ Ulrike Middendorf, "Again on 'Qing'. With a translation of the Guodian 'Xing zi ming chu'." *Oriens Extremus* 47 (2008) 152.

⁶⁰ See Dan Robins *The Debate over Human Nature in Warring States China* (PhD Dissertation, The University of Hong Kong, 2001) 258-68.

Regardless of the precise difference between *xing* and *ming* in this context, this overall emphasis on individual nature, whether expressed in terms of *xing*, *ming*, or *xingming*, leads to different recommendations for being at peace with *ming* when compared with those of the *ming-as-fate* view.

The first text is the famous story of Kongzi and the swimmer. There, Kongzi encounters a swimmer who dives off a cliff into a swirling torrent. When Kongzi sees him emerge down the river unscathed, he asks the swimmer for an explanation of his way (*dao* 道), that is, his method of swimming, to which the swimmer responds as follows:

No. I have no Way. I began with what came first (*gu* 故), grew up with *xing*, and was completed by my *ming* 命... I was born among these hills and at peace with them—these are what came first. I grew up in the water and was at peace with the water—this is my *xing* 性. I do not know why it is so of me, and yet it is—this is my *ming*.⁶¹

The passage strongly implies that *xing* is a dynamic concept represented by a process of “growing up” (*chang* 長), while *ming* refers instead to the swimmer’s features that are “completed” (*cheng* 成) and “so” (*ran* 然). Furthermore, the developmental process referred to by *xing* is one in which no effort or interference on the part of the swimmer was required. The attitude of *an* is directed towards the swimmer allowing his environment to shape him in a way that eventually led to his skill and other features he developed over the course of his life. This adds a dimension to *anming* that more precisely identifies the processes we ought to follow and be at peace with, namely, those that comprise our immediate surroundings and those alongside which we can develop without effort or interference. Unlike in the *ming-as-fate* scenario, there is no sense here that being at peace with *ming* requires any psychological overcoming of our typical responses to situations. Rather, one who is at peace with her own natural tendencies will in turn be at peace with those features arising from them, namely, *ming*.⁶²

The second example of this use of *ming-as-nature* appears in Book 18. There, Kongzi appears melancholy after his student, Yan Hui, was

⁶¹ Zhuangzi *Yinde*, 19/52-54.

⁶² Notice that this passage implies that *ming* comes from *xing*, which is directly opposed to the idea present in the *Xing zi ming chu* that “*xing* comes from *ming*.”

sent to the state of Qi. When Zigong, another student, asks why he is upset, Kongzi responds as follows:

Guanzi had a saying that I much approve of: 'Small bags won't hold big things; short well ropes won't dip up deep water.' In the same way I believe that fate (*ming* 命) has certain forms (*suo cheng* 所成), and the body, certain appropriate uses. You can't add to or take away from these. I'm afraid that when Hui gets to Qi, he will start telling the marquis of Qi about the ways of Yao, Shun, and the Yellow Emperor and then will go on to speak about Suiren and Shennong. The marquis will then look for similar greatness within himself and fail to find it. Failing to find it, he will become distraught, and when a man becomes distraught, he kills.

Haven't you heard this story? Once a sea bird alighted in the suburbs of the Lu capital. The marquis of Lu escorted it to the ancestral temple, where he entertained it, performing the Nine Shao music for it to listen to and presenting it with the meat of the Tailao sacrifice to feast on. But the bird only looked dazed and forlorn, refusing to eat a single slice of meat or drink a cup of wine, and in three days it was dead. This is to try to nourish a bird with what would nourish you instead of what would nourish a bird.⁶³

This passage here emphasizes the importance of respecting our own and others' individual nature rather than the workings of the cosmos more generally. Interestingly, *xing* 性 is not mentioned, but the focus on individual nature is clear nonetheless. Furthermore, the text claims that our individual nature refers to "what is completed" (*suo cheng* 所成) by *ming* and "what is fitting" (*suo shi* 所適) for our shapes or forms (*xing* 形). Like in the case of the swimmer, this passage claims that our nature due to *ming* is the end result of a process; it is completed, fixed, and unalterable, like the current makeup of our bodies. However, no development or cultivation process is mentioned. The stated goal here is to live in such a way that acknowledges our nature as determined by *ming* and, importantly, does not interfere with others', both for our own sake and for theirs.

In contrast to the Great Decrees speech from the Inner chapters, this reference to *ming* highlights our unique and unalterable differences rather than our shared and universal obligations. That is, there is no sense here that *ming* provides us with a universal decree

⁶³ Translation by Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 142-143. See also *Zhuangzi Yinde*, 18/29-35.

applicable in all circumstances (aside from the meta-claim that whatever is due to *ming* is unalterable and inescapable). Rather, *ming* determines that we receive a particular form or shape by virtue of which certain courses of action are suitable for us while others are not. We can see this clearly based on Kongzi's distinct recommendations in each context. In the Great Decrees passage, Kongzi recommends that Zigao accept his fate and obey his superior as best he can, while here the implicit recommendation to Yan Hui is not to engage at all, as the respective natures of Yan Hui and the Marquis of Qi all but guarantee that Yan Hui should fail and might even get himself killed. What's more is that Kongzi does not suggest here as he does elsewhere that Yan Hui could prepare himself through self-cultivation practices to successfully carry out his mission.⁶⁴ Rather, Yan Hui's failure to understand *ming* is a matter of failing to understand his own nature and insisting on interfering with others'. The analogy of the sea bird drives this point home by emphasizing that we risk disaster by ignoring the irreconcilable differences between ourselves and those with whom we may sometimes cross paths.

Both the swimmer passage and the Yan Hui passage introduce normative, material, and interpersonal dimensions to *anming* that have been largely absent in the *ming-as-fate* texts. At the normative level, the passages emphasize the value of following and respecting our individual nature rather than following the aimless churning of the cosmos more generally. The development we exhibit due to *xing* and the resultant shapes we take and qualities we possess due to *ming* should take priority in our lives and will lead to flourishing when followed and respected. This invites a material dimension of *anming* as well: failure to be at peace with our natural tendencies and features might lead to materially adverse outcomes. This concern is largely absent from those previously discussed passages that celebrate the radical sagely equanimity of outcasts, convicts, and the sick and dying. At the interpersonal level, these passages suggest that the most effective way to live is one in which we are at peace not only with our own *xing* and *ming* but with that of others. An underlying ethical thesis in these passages is that things tend to function best when they are left to flourish in accordance with their individual or shared nature without outside interference. Interference earlier in life by Kongzi or Ruist education would have disrupted the swimmer's development of his skill, for example; interference with the sea bird's basic functioning unfortunately led to its death, and interference with

⁶⁴ Compare this passage to the one on "heart fasting" (*xin zhai* 心齋) in Book 4 wherein Kongzi suggests very different advice in a similar set of circumstances.

the Marquis of Qi might lead to Yan Hui's death. The implication seems to be that when one is at peace with *ming*, she will be less inclined to interfere with that of others, and all will be better off for it.⁶⁵ The texts never explicitly encourage being at peace with the fate and nature of others, but they do indirectly suggest that being at peace with our own *ming* will in turn allow others to be at peace with theirs.

Other passages develop this interpersonal element further by treating *anming* as a political ideal. These passages generally reflect elements of Zhuangist primitivism, which holds that all of society since the time of the ancient sage kings has made it impossible for people to be at peace with their nature and fate and thereby flourish.⁶⁶ Instead, an ideal government would not interfere with people at all and would allow them to return to a primitive existence without the damaging cultural artifices that plague modern life. This natural form of human existence would resemble that of other social animals, such as wild horses, who flourish by merely following their nature. One passage from Book 11 begins by emphasizing the importance of "letting people be" (*zai* 在) and "leaving them alone," (*you* 宥). The chief complaint throughout the opening essay is that governments both good and bad disturb, corrupt, and otherwise ruin human nature by preventing people from "being at peace with the features arising from their *xing* and *ming*" (*an qi xing ming zhi qing* 安其性命之情). Specifically, the passage refers to people taking extreme delight in eight things, their power of vision, hearing, benevolence, duties, ritual, music, sagacity, and knowledge, which are promoted by the cultural elites as ideal objects of desire.⁶⁷ To contrast, "If all under Heaven were at peace with the features arising from their *xing* and *ming*, both the presence and absence of these things would be acceptable to them."⁶⁸ The end of the passage presents us with a description of an ideal ruler rooted in the Daoist ideal of nonaction (*wuwei* 無為):

If an exemplary person cannot help but to direct and look after the world, then nothing is better than nonaction. If she practices nonaction, then she may be at peace with (*an* 安) the features arising from her *xing* and *ming*. If she values her own

⁶⁵ The Marquis of Qi presents an interesting possibility: in cases where one is determined to be incorrigible and unable to change her ways, however harmful they may be, it's best to leave that person alone. Otherwise, one might invite further unnecessary suffering.

⁶⁶ Frank Saunders, "Primitivism in the *Zhuangzi*: An Introduction." *Philosophy Compass*, August 2021.

⁶⁷ *Zhuangzi Yinde*, 11/8-10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 11/10-11.

body more than the management of the world, then she can be entrusted with the world.⁶⁹

The passage claims that only one who understands the importance of being at peace with the features of her own *xing* and *ming* can be trusted with government, as only this kind of person would see the value of governing in such a way that others can similarly be at peace with theirs. She would presumably lead by example, focus on herself, and ignore the distracting demands of cultural artifices that would interfere with her own natural flourishing. She would put herself first and respect her own *xing* and *ming* before then attempting to administer the state in such a way that respects others'. In this way, *anming* is an important virtue required for effective governance. It is a precondition for a society in which people can flourish in accordance with their natural tendencies and be at peace with their *xing* and *ming*. Again, it does not imply that an individual would be at peace with someone else's *xing* or *ming*, but it does suggest that one who is at peace with her own would be more likely to allow others to be at peace with theirs.

Overall, this approach to *anming* emphasizes the role of a normative conception of individual nature in guiding our actions. It cautions against imposing our will on others and champions following our natural tendencies. Of course, these natural tendencies are the result of the spontaneous unfolding of the cosmos, and the recommended attitude is still *an*, so we are still firmly within the purview of an ethics of *anming*. However, the focus and content of the advice indeed appears to shift to more precise advice that acknowledges the material benefits of living in a way that respects our individual features and tendencies rather than resigning ourselves to accepting and following the unfolding of the cosmos.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have offered an interpretation of *anming* in the *Zhuangzi* that appreciates its heterogeneity across the anthology. I have showed how some parts of the *Zhuangzi* recommend a contented acceptance of our lot in life, whatever it may be, as the cosmos is indifferent to our preferences. I have also showed how elsewhere, we find texts that encourage us to be at peace with our own natural tendencies and act in such a way as to allow others to do the same. Both attitudes reflect different approaches to different meanings of *ming* and to the *Zhuangzi*'s shifting philosophical priorities.

⁶⁹ *Zhuangzi Yinde*, 11/13-16. See also Watson, *The Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, 75-76.

Nevertheless, they share an undeniable common core based in the attitude of peace or acceptance towards those unalterable features of our lives. My goal here has been to pry apart the different layers of this core to identify the subtle differences in content that in turn reflect the philosophical differences across the *Zhuangzi*. These differences are the result of myriad features of the historical context within which the *Zhuangzi* authors and compilers were working that can likely never be known with certainty. However, acknowledging these differences can help us more precisely reconstruct dialectics between early Chinese texts. Furthermore, doing so gives us a broader array of resources to draw upon when looking to apply the wisdom of the *Zhuangzi* today.