

# The Influence of Chuang Tzu on Jacques Lacan's Concept of Language

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## Abstract:

Jacques Lacan is interested in Chinese culture. He studies Chinese Taoism classics through François Cheng and quotes the butterfly dream of Chuang Tzu in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*. But how much is Lacan influenced by Chuang? On what specific aspects? What is the significance of their differences? This paper explores Lacan's distant oriental origins and argues that Chuang's proposition of keeping silent is a potential solution to Lacan's dilemma of desire. First, Chuang emphasizes the relationship between language and the birth of a subject. "0" refers to original nothingness, and "1" is the primordial one ("heaven/earth/I), "2" results from one and "my speech about it" and 3 is the turning point of subjectivity. Likewise, Lacan uses "0" to indicate "an empty grave", "1" the Real, "2" the duality of (M)other in the Imaginary and "3" the "Name of the Father." After birth, the primary function of language in a child's life is to attract others' attention and express one's fondness, as is demonstrated by Chuang Tzu in hatchlings' chaotic babblings. Lacan further divides Chuang's "fondness" into Need in the Real, Demand in the Imaginary, Desire in the Symbolic and maintains that language is to "evoke" and create one's subjectivity in an inverted order. Third, if language is to express one's subjectivity, then we will face a conflict: unique personal feelings are incompatible with categorical signifiers. Chuang Tzu's concept of constant switches of birth and death of subjectivity finds its expression in Lacan's desire formula:  $f(S...S')S \cong S(-)s$ . Despite similarities, they have different conclusions. Lacan looks within language/the Symbolic to treat patients to be "normal subjects." However, Chuang examines from outside and offers a potential solution to Lacan's dilemma in the following images: a) the center of the circle opposite to binary linguistic oppositions, b) a mirror to "respond but not store."

**Key Words:** Chuang Tzu, Jacques Lacan, Language, Subjectivity, Mirror, Signifiers

Jacques Lacan is very interested in Chinese culture. He has read many texts of Chinese classical canon, and even seriously studied Chinese during the Second World War. In the later 1960s Lacan asked François Cheng (the first Asian elected to the *Académie française*) to “teach” him about Chinese classics. During their meetings, Cheng recalls, they mainly discussed selected passages from *Dao Dejing* and *Mencius* and Lacan seemed to have particular interest in Taoism teachings.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Lacan also quotes the butterfly dream of Chuang Tzu (another founding figure of Taoism) in his influential *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*.<sup>2</sup> But how much is Lacan really influenced by Taoism, especially Chuang Tzu? On what specific aspects? These are much neglected research areas. After some systematic explorations, I have discovered that many of Lacan’s concepts of language can be traced to their distant origins of *The Chuang Tzu*. Despite their similarities, Chuang Tzu and Lacan come to very different conclusions. This paper argues that Chuang Tzu’s different proposition is a potential solution to Lacan’s dilemma of desire. In the paper, I will examine some similarities and differences between two thinkers and then analyze the significance of their differences.

First of all, the birth of a subject is closely linked with numbers. Chuang Tzu writes that some people thought originally “things have never existed—so far, to the end, where nothing can be added.”<sup>3</sup> Then next to those, the second group of people thought “things exist but recognized no boundaries among them.” And the third group acknowledged that “there are boundaries but recognized no right and wrong.”<sup>4</sup> These different kinds of people in fact represent different stages of the development of subjectivity, corresponding to numerical codes of 0, 1, 2. The first group stands for the initial phase of void, the original nothingness. The second and third are adjacent to each other. That things have no boundaries is the stage of the primordial one. This

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<sup>1</sup> François Cheng, “Lacan and Chinese philosophy”, trans., Chu Xiaoquan, *Intercultural Dialogues* Vol. 8. Ed., Yue Daiyun (Shanghai: Shanghai Culture Publisher, 2002), pp.54-65.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans., Alan Sheridan (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1979), p.76.

<sup>3</sup> Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson (New York: Columbia UP, 1968), p 41. As for Chuang Tzu’s text, this paper primarily relies on Watson’s translation, and occasionally refers to Victor H. Mair’s translation of Chuang Tzu: *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii P, 1998). The Chinese original is *The Chuang Tzu*, ed., Wang Shiyao (Jinan, China: Qilushushe Publishing Group, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Chuang Tzu, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.41.

insufficiently explained idea is further illuminated by Chuang Tzu in another passage in the same chapter of “On the Equality of Things.” “Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me.”<sup>5</sup> Heaven, earth and I become the primordial one where distinctions do not come into existence. And gradually, an infant comes to dimly feel differences among things but it does not have a sense of self, and “I” still fancy myself as a part of the surrounding things. In the primitive world of the nascent subject, all things are imagined to be of equal value, without any evaluative hierarchy, or in Chuang Tzu’s words, “no boundaries among them.” In the above quoted passages, Chuang Tzu not only deliberately accentuates the presence of subjects in each phase but also emphatically associates the birth of “I” with language. “The one and what I said about it make two.” The representation of “the one”, more important than reality itself, has initiated complicated relationships between language and subjectivity. “Two and the original one make three.” Two comes from the one and my speech of it, and three consists of two plus one. And three is the vital turning point of subjectivity, because with linguistic complications, “even the clearest mathematician can’t tell where we’ll end.”<sup>6</sup> Chuang Tzu’s concept of defining developing stages of subjectivity with numbers has its irresistible attraction to Jacques Lacan. Lacan argues that human beings are void from two ends. After death, human beings are “empty graves”<sup>7</sup> because inside all graves are the same emptiness which is differentiated only by signifiers/names on the tombs. At birth, initially, there is nothing inside a mother’s womb and gradually a fetus comes into being and then an infant comes out of mother’s womb. Lacan has a detailed description of these developing phases. Before the 6<sup>th</sup> month, an infant has no concept of self. Put it in another way, its sense of self spreading everywhere, like “l’hommelet”, is fused with the things surrounding its body which are regarded to be “imaginary equivalents” in its primordial fantasy.<sup>8</sup> This corporeal mass without

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<sup>5</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.43.

<sup>6</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.43.

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Of Structure as an Inmixing of an Otherness Prerequisite to Any Subject Whatever”, in *Structuralist Controversy*, eds, Richard Macksey and Eugenio Donato (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1972), pp.186-195.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan I: Freud’s Papers on Technique 1953-1954*, ed., Jacques-Alain Miller, trans., John Forrester (Cambridge and NY: Cambridge UP, 1988), p. 82

consciousness of self has developed its blurring concept of self at “the Mirror Stage” between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> month. Regarding itself as a part of mother’s body, an infant often feels fragmented and frustrated. This sense of “bits and pieces” is further corroborated by biological evidence that an infant at the period has not developed a good sense of coordination to make his bodily parts work together. Therefore when it first sees a unified body image in a mirror, it is jubilant to identify with the image: I am that mirror image, not a part of mother; but simultaneously this jubilant identification is further doubted by his sense of being a fragment. (M)other has vividly captured the paradoxical relation between one and duality.<sup>9</sup> Terry Eagleton succinctly summarizes its contradictory psychology: “the image in the mirror both is and is not itself, a blurring of subject and object still obtains.”<sup>10</sup> After 0,1,2, the most significant number—3—occurs. Father, in his prohibition on child’s Oedipal fusion with the mother, becomes a father figure and the symbol of the Law. Father, or “the Name of the Father” in Lacan’s words, is a key signifier in the Symbolic, and with the introduction of this key signifier, a child comes to learn the binary oppositions and complicated linguistic and cultural organizations, resonant with Chuang Tzu’s claim that “even the clearest mathematician can’t tell where we’ll end.” After that, human subjects are constantly struggling with their metonymic desire in the Symbolic Order.

If language plays an important role in the birth of subjects, then what is the function of language in their life? Chuang Tzu maintains that the primary function of language is not to communicate, but to attract others’ attention to themselves. Chuang investigates the relationship between language and subjectivity in a gradual way. The difference between language and wind is that the former has a speaking subject while the latter does not, however, Chuang also leaves a suspension: is what the subject says his unique personal meaning? Then “we assume human language has difference from the peeps of baby birds. Does it have difference? Or does it have no difference?”<sup>11</sup> The linguistic emphasis of juxtaposing two equal possibilities accentuates their

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<sup>9</sup> Lacan, “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” in *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans., Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), pp1-8.

<sup>10</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2008), p.143.

<sup>11</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.39.

commonality, rather than their difference. We human beings assume that our language is different from birds' sounds; in a similar manner, the sounds of adult birds, consisting of systematic relationships between sound-reference correspondences, are different from the noises of infant birds. But Chuang reads fundamental similarity among all these languages: a subject uses signifiers to express his feelings and to attract others' attentions. "People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn't there?"<sup>12</sup> A man often thinks that his likes and dislikes differentiate himself from others, so he tries to "make clear" his fondness to others, which is the primary function of language in Chuang's view.<sup>13</sup> In a strikingly similar way, Lacan also works from infant babblings to adult language, and defines human motivations of using language in three different stages as need, demand and desire. An infant utters a sound to attract mother's attention to satisfy its biological needs in the Real and then to demand her undivided love in the Imaginary and finally to desire others' respect in the Symbolic. Linguistic redundancies further demonstrate that "the function of language is not to inform but to evoke. What is I seek in the Word is the response of the other."<sup>14</sup> Despite diverse metamorphoses, all discourse can be summarized as one question: "Am I loved?" That is, language is to build up one's subjectivity in an inverted order to invite others' attention. "The form alone in which Language is expressed defines subjectivity" and the subject "receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form."<sup>15</sup>

In the third place, if language is to express emotions, we will face a question: the conflict between personal feelings and categorical meanings of words. Chuang Tzu is going to make a personal statement, but he is not sure "whether it fits into the category of other people's statements or not. But whether it fits into the category or

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<sup>12</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans, Burton Watson, p.39.

<sup>13</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans, Burton Watson, p.42.

<sup>14</sup> Lacan, "The Function of Language of Language in Psychoanalysis", in *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans., Anthony Wilden (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1968), p.63.

<sup>15</sup> Language, for Lacan, can create "a new reality"—a new subjectivity for the speaker. Lacan uses the example of "you are my wife" to indicate "my" expected identity of "I am your husband." "As such it is enveloped in the highest function of the Word, inasmuch as the Word commits its author by investing the person to whom it is addressed with a new reality, as for example, when by a 'You are my wife' a subject marks himself with the seal of wedlock" (62). Lacan further points out that the speaker usually weaves his message in an inverted way. "Human language constitutes a communication in which the sender receives his own message back from the receiver in an inverted form." Lacan, "The Function of Language of Language in Psychoanalysis", p.62.

whether it doesn't, it obviously fits into some category," thus he concludes "it is no difference from their statements."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, unique personal perceptions, thwarted by categorical meanings of words, are sliding along signifiers. The subject senses that his subjectivity expressed in language is not quite the same as he perceives, and then he continues his frustrated efforts to express himself. "From the moment of birth death begins simultaneously, and from the moment of death birth begins simultaneously."<sup>17</sup> The birth of subjectivity in language, not quite the perceived self, is at the same time also a negation/death of one's subjectivity which means another round of efforts to express one's sliding self, and the circle continues. However language can never reach our innermost perceptions. That Mr. Chao, a master lute player in Chuang Tzu's story, could not pass his delicate and supreme skills on to his son testifies to the point. Chuang's insight is reverberant in Lacan's theory of subjectivity. A desk, Lacan contends, represents the concept of common features shared by all desks of same category, and does not refer to any specific desk. Even if we define a particular desk as "this desk", the same words can also be applied to other desks under different contexts.<sup>18</sup> Linguistic signifiers become certain arranged positions for things or human beings to fill in. When a subject speaks, he expresses himself into a signifier which simultaneously represses his non-represented part. "The signifier makes manifest the subject of its signification. But it functions as a signifier only to reduce the subject in question to being no more than a signifier, to petrify the subject in the same movement in which it calls the subject to function, to speak, as subject." In other words, the appearance of the subject is also the simultaneous disappearance of the subject, which is called by Lacan "the fading of the subject."<sup>19</sup> In communication, I have reduced myself to a signifier to be communicable to others, but it also bars my unconscious self. Likewise, the receiver of my conversation has also turned himself into a signifier to be understood. Therefore, "the first signifier [...] represents the subject for another signifier, which another signifier has as its effect the

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<sup>16</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, pp.42-43.

<sup>17</sup> Victor H. Mair, trans., *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii P, 1998), p.15.

<sup>18</sup> Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans., Alan Sheridan (NY: W. W. Norton & Company INC, 1977), p.132.

<sup>19</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p.207, p.218.

aphanisis of the subject”<sup>20</sup> and language paradoxically enables the representation of our subjectivity and causes the fading of our subjectivity. However, the subject doggedly pursues his unfulfilled desire along sliding signifiers, which dooms to be frustrated struggles. Lacan has rewritten Fiderick Saussure’s formula s/S to be S/s and emphasized the prominent place of S (signifiers) and the separation bar which makes signifiers impossible to reach the signified. The formula of metonymic desire is:  $f(S\dots S')S \cong S(-)s$ . The function of  $f(S\dots S')$  demonstrates that the subject is represented in an endless chain of signifiers and S’ as the effect of signifiers gives us an impression of the immediate arrival of the subject but it is forever deferred because the bar (—) has barred linguistic access to our subjectivity.<sup>21</sup> Desire becomes a key concept in Lacan’s philosophical edifice, but in his later years, Lacan becomes dissatisfied with the forever non-fulfilled desire.

Despite Chuang Tzu’s profound influence on Lacan, those two thinkers have their enormous differences. Chuang persuades us to keep silent and follow natural rhythms rather than speak. As is mentioned before, Mr. Chao, a master lute-player, is proficient at producing millions of music notes. However, Chuang contends that to preserve the plenitude of notes, Mr. Chao should refrain from playing the lute because no matter how excellent his performance is, he always misses billions of notes. Without performances, the plenitude of sounds will be kept intact. “The Great Way is not named; Great Discriminations are not spoken”, therefore, Chuang Tzu concludes: “If the Way is made clear, it is not the Way. If discriminations are put into words, they do not suffice.”<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, Lacan advocates speeches to express our subjectivity. The more we speak, the more we are likely to come to comprehend ourselves. The point is how to listen to our discourses. We, especially from the viewpoint of a psychoanalyst, should not just stay on the surface of words and instead we should learn to hear from the “fissures and ruptures” of language. For example, a slip of

<sup>20</sup> Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, p.218.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe have made an insightful analysis of desire formula. They contend that “signifiante” means the process of signifying but Lacan has eliminated the signified and therefore the chain of signifying process in fact becomes “nonsignifying”, which is forever going on but never arrives. Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Title of The Letter: A Reading of Lacan*, trans., Francois Raffoul and David Pettigrew (Albany, NY: State U of New York P, 1992), pp.61-61.

<sup>22</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.44.

tongue is not a mistake at all, a psychoanalyst would tell us, and it is a voice from our unconsciousness without being censored by morality and law. For another example, we hear a cry during a silent midnight. Lacan teaches us to hear the silence, not the cry: “cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence.”<sup>23</sup> To access ocean-like unconsciousness, the only available means is language, thus, Lacan insists we speak and learn to hear the silent background through the “strokes of the opening” of language.<sup>24</sup> In a broader picture, Lacan, as a psychoanalyst, is to treat patients and reorient them into society as “normal subjects.” His fundamental principle is that the “abnormal” behaviors of patients in the Symbolic have their origin in the unconscious where any possible human actions are “normal.” And discrepancies between these two realms are deemed normal, and patients should learn these gaps and accept the compromised and partially fulfilled desires. However, in the 1970s, Lacan came to be dissatisfied with metonymic desire and in the later years of his life, Lacan advocated mysterious “jouissance” as a solution to his dilemma of subjectivity, but the concept of arcane “jouissance” in his maze-like language reminds a riddle to himself as well as to critics. At this point, Chuang Tzu, the distant origin of Lacan’s philosophy, has provided a potential alternative to his deadlock.

Lacan explores his concept of subjectivity within the boundary of language or the Symbolic, but Chuang Tzu transcends the confines of language and its metamorphosis of social conventions. If we say Lacan is looking at subjects from inside to outside, Chuang Tzu is examining the same issue from outside to inside. Chuang Tzu’s concept is embodied in two kinds of images frequently appearing in his text.<sup>25</sup> The first image is the center of the circle. Language, arranged by binary oppositions in a linear order, has greatly shaped our mentality and constructed our way of reading the world. Our morality is built around good and bad, our laws around right and wrong.

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<sup>23</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-analysis*, trans., Alan Sheridan (Middlesex, England and New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p.26.

<sup>24</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p.26.

<sup>25</sup> Lee Yearly in his discussion of Chung Tzu’s “Intraworldly mysticism” has listed these two types of images, and this study, based on his research, argues for Chuang Tzu’s transcendence of language, instead of his mysticism. Lee Yearly, “The Perfected Person in the Radical Chuang-tzu” in *Experimental Essays on Chuang Tzu*, ed., Victor H. Mair (Hawaii: U of Hawaii P, 1983), pp.125-139.



But Chuang Tzu transcends language and contends that there are diverse ways of looking at the world and there is no standard to judge these perspectives, and what's more, all the perspectives are changing. As subjects, we should not have to stick to one particular way, and we should be open-minded to diversity and instability of things as if we were viewing a kaleidoscopic world from the center of the circle. The key point is, Lee Yearly informs us, "centered responsiveness": instead of judging right and wrong, we should "respond from a center to whatever occurs."<sup>26</sup> The second frequently appearing image is mirrors. Unlike Lacan's mirror onto which an infant projects his narcissistic tangles, Chuang Tzu's mirror is a natural reflection. For him, human minds like mirrors should "respond but not store" any external and internal changes. "Be empty, that is all. The Perfect Man uses his mind like a mirror—going after nothing, welcoming nothing, responding but not storing."<sup>27</sup> Chuang Tzu's wife died, and he felt very sad. After that he recalled their past life and speculated on the benefits of life and death, then he felt happy. Here his mind, like a mirror, reflects triple changes. Factually, the wife existed and disappeared; emotionally, Chuang underwent sadness and happiness; rationally, he remembered past reminiscence and reasoned her wife's change as natural rhythms. The point is that we should respond to changes in life like empty mirrors and avoid storing/dwelling too much upon any state of these changes because the values we have attached to the things are arbitrarily assigned by language and conventions.

If we zoom in the issue to gain a broader purview, we can define Lacan as a humanist and Chuang Tzu as a posthumanist. Since Renaissance, western intellectuals have been much concerned with humanism. Rene Descartes's famous "Cognito ergo sum" defines rationality as the most valuable and essential quality of man, however Sigmund Freud shows his disagreement because behind the façade of consciousness, the immense iceberg-like unconsciousness has determined all our thinking and behavior. Lacan, as an heir to Freud, has gone one step further: "I" am my desire which associates the split "I" with language. "The split between the enunciating

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<sup>26</sup> Yearly, "The Perfected Person in the Radical Chuang-tzu", p.132.

<sup>27</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.97.

subject and the subject of the statement” is “brought about by any and every intervention of the signifier.”<sup>28</sup> Lacan has advanced Freud’s unconsciousness to linguistic signifiers. His famous motto of “the unconscious is structured like a language” has established the inseparable relationship between subjectivity and signifiers. Unconsciousness, as the core of human subjectivity, finds its fullest expression in dreams and dreams, following linguistic rules, have vertically condensed their manifest contents into metaphors and horizontally displaced their latent contents along the metonymic axis. Omnipresent language has configured our subjectivity. In his analysis of Sophocles’ play of *Antigone*, Lacan discovers human subjectivity: the radical individuality of Polynices is a verbal construction. “Outside of language it is inconceivable, and the being of him who has lived cannot be detached from all he bears with him in the nature of good and evil, and of destiny, of consequences for others, or of feelings for him.”<sup>29</sup> Polynices, the brother of Antigone and also the national enemy, has done nothing memorable but still has “the unique value of his being without reference to” his actual life experience. “That purity, that separation of being from the characteristics of the historical drama he has lived through,” Lacan informs us, “is essentially that of language.”<sup>30</sup> In the same lecture, Lacan has described the phenomenon as a typical Sadean hero “between-two-deaths.” The first death is the loss of one’s intellectual and emotional activities, and the second death is the disappearance of one’s corporeal existence. In the scenarios of the Marquis de Sade, the victims are often tortured by various kinds of extreme cruelties but they are never “dismembered and destroyed.”<sup>31</sup> It seems that “the subject separates out a double of himself who is made inaccessible to destruction” and this “capacity of being an indestructible support,” Lacan writes, “is in itself nothing else

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Kant and Sade”, in *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*. trans., Bruce Fink, et al (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), pp. 645-668.

<sup>29</sup> Jacques Lacan, “Antigone between two deaths”, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book II, ed., Jacques-Alain Miller, trans., Dennis Porter (New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), pp. 270-290.

<sup>30</sup> Lacan, “Antigone between two deaths”, p. 279.

<sup>31</sup> Lacan, “The articulation of the play”, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*, Book II, ed., Jacques-Alain Miller, trans., Dennis Porter (New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992), pp. 257-269.

but the signifier of a limit.”<sup>32</sup> That is Lacan’s uneasiness: language as an ingenuous invention of human beings turns out to have enveloped our existence and constructed our subjectivity. Lacan quotes the Chorus of *Antigone* to express the greatness of human beings. “There are a lot of wonders in the world, but there is nothing more wonderful than man.” One primary purpose of Sophocles’ play, according to Lacan, is to give the “definition of culture as opposed to nature” and he consequently points out the most wonderful cultural inventions of mankind: “man cultivates speech and the sublime sciences.”<sup>33</sup> Our intention is to use language to cover our fear of death but unexpectedly we are dominated by those signifiers. In short, Lacan the humanist is much plagued by anti-humanist language.

Like Lacan, Chuang Tzu sees the decisive role of language upon our identity; unlike Lacan the humanist, Chuang Tzu is a posthumanist. Chad Hansen contends that tao in fact is the body of prescriptive discourse to regulate our conducts. This is further corroborated by “the rectification of names” which means that “shih/this is the (kind of) thing or behavior referred to by the such-and-such expression (word) in the texts.”<sup>34</sup> Hansen argues the point from a linguistic perspective. Chinese tao is not a proper noun which cannot be modified, but a classifying noun which is constantly modified in Chinese texts: “heavenly tao”, “kingly tao”, “sagely tao” etc. Each tao is “a scheme of classifications (names) which generates a pattern of behavior via its influence on affective attitudes—desires and aversions.” Hansen states, “Taos are, thus, linguistic. They are systems of names that lead to conventionally appropriate behavior.”<sup>35</sup> Different from absolutist Confucius who acknowledges only one correct way, Chuang Tzu is a “perspectival relativist” who accepts many justified ways because all things are subject to changes. Language has shaped and reshaped our experience, our thinking and beliefs. This paper argues that Chuang Tzu, more than a “perspective relativist”, is a posthumanist. Posthumanism in this study refers to “both before and after humanism.” Cary Wolfe has made a fine definition. “Before in the

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<sup>32</sup> Lacan, “The articulation of the play”, p.261

<sup>33</sup> Lacan, “Antigone between two deaths”, p. 274.

<sup>34</sup> Chad Hansen, “A Tao of Tao in Chuang Tzu”, in *Experimental Essays on Chuang Tzu*, ed., Victor H. Mair (Hawaii: U of Hawaii P, 1983), pp. 24-55.

<sup>35</sup> Hansen, “A Tao of Tao in Chuang Tzu”, p.36.

sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being” in the development of human animals with “the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture)” and “after” is associated with “the decentering of the human.”<sup>36</sup> Specifically in this study, Chuang Tzu the posthumanist insists that we go back to the infant stage before the encroachment of language. Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, writes: “To work on learning is to increase day by day; but to work on *Tao* (the Way, the Truth) is to decrease day by day.”<sup>37</sup> Taoism, instead of accumulating social discriminations, advocates forgetting of knowledge and returning back to child-like simplicity. We should learn to un-learn and de-culture our ingrained prejudices and beliefs, to discard arbitrary values and hierarchies. Only when “I dispossess my social self” will I be able to arrive at the realm of “the equality of things.”<sup>38</sup> Without the influence of language whose binary oppositions have constructed our evaluative systems, infants have regarded all the surrounding things around themselves as equals and “recognized no right and wrong” among things, or even “recognized no boundaries among them”(things without distinctions like Mr. Chaos in Chuang Tzu’s story) which is another form of “the equality of things.”

Posthumanism also means going beyond anthropocentrism. Anthropocentric, according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, means “1: considering human beings as the most significant entity of the universe; 2: interpreting or regarding the world in terms of human values and experiences.”<sup>39</sup> The centre of human beings and their yardsticks is interrogated by Chuang Tzu in his animal stories. A man sleeps in a damp place and he feels backache, but it is not true of a loach. A man stays in a tree and he is terrified, but it is the home of a monkey. “Of these three creatures, then, which one knows the

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<sup>36</sup> Cary Wolfe, “Introduction”, in *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2010), p.xv. Wolfe also distinguishes the difference between posthumanism and transhumanism. Transhumanism is the “‘cyborg’ strand of posthumanism”, “the ideals of human perfectibility, rationality.” Joel Garreau describes transhumanism as “the enhancement of human intellectual, physical, and emotional capabilities, the elimination of disease and unnecessary suffering, and the dramatic extension of life span” (qtd. in Wolfe xiii), pp. xi-xxxiv.

<sup>37</sup> The quotation is from Fung Yu-Lan. Fung maintains that the function of Taoism philosophy “is not the increase of positive knowledge (by positive knowledge I mean information regarding matters of fact), but the elevation of the mind.” Fung Yu-Lan, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (Tianjin, China: Tianjin Social Science Academy Press, 2007-2010), p. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Victor H. Mair, *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii P, 1998), p.10.

<sup>39</sup> “Anthropocentric”, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropocentric>. 10 Dec, 2013.

proper place to live?”<sup>40</sup> Men, deer, centipedes and hawks feed on different things, again Chuang Tzu questions, “Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste?” From different living and eating habits, animals have nurtured diverse intellectual yardsticks. “Of these four [among monkeys, deer, fish and men], which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world?”<sup>41</sup> Animals compel us to reexamine our accustomed way of reading the world. From a linguistic viewpoint, animals are free from language influence. Human beings are “political animals”<sup>42</sup> and we cannot escape the omnipresence of language, as is shown before. However, animals are immune from the prison-house of language. Irving Goh argues that Chuang Tzu’s animal stories are not metaphors whose major function is to familiarize strange things to cater to our anthropocentric understanding.<sup>43</sup> Rather, Chuang Tzu’s animals have provided us with a non-anthropocentric perspective to reconsider our understanding of the world. In this sense, Chuang Tzu is a posthumanist.

Finally, Jacques Lacan’s quotation of Chuang Tzu is very interesting. Lacan cites Chuang’s butterfly dream to illustrate his theory of gaze which is the seeing of things, the “stain” in human vision. “The function of the stain is recognized in its autonomy and identified with that of the gaze.”<sup>44</sup> The “stain” in human eyes metaphorically suggests the blindness of anthropocentrism, and the gaze from things in its nonhuman perspective is closely linked with posthumanism. The stain and the gaze meet each other in Chuang Tzu’s animal dream. After his dream of being a butterfly, Chuang woke up and “didn’t know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou.”<sup>45</sup> The animal image in

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<sup>40</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.45.

<sup>41</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.46.

<sup>42</sup> Aristotle, “Politics”, trans., Benjamin Jowett, *The Internet Classics Archives*, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/politics.1.one.html>, 16 Dec, 2013. Aristotle’s major argument is that city-state and political rule are “natural” to human beings. And as “political animals”, we are endowed with language to communicate our moral and legal concepts. Fred Miller has made a critique of “nature” in Aristotle and some succinct comments on “political animals”: “human beings are by nature political animals, because nature, which does nothing in vain, has equipped them with speech, which enables them to communicate moral concepts such as justice which are formative of the household and city-state (1253a1-18).” For this paper, I would emphasize the different influence of language/the Symbolic on human beings and animals. Fred Miller, “Political Naturalism”, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-politics/supplement3.html>, 18 Dec, 2013.

<sup>43</sup> Irving Goh, “Chuang Tzu’s Becoming-Animal”, in *Philosophy of East & West* 61.1 (2011), pp.110-133.

<sup>44</sup> Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts*, p.76

<sup>45</sup> *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, trans., Burton Watson, p.49.

Chuang Tzu's dream has further consolidated our posthumanism reading: the transformation between human beings and animals, the relationship based on the equality of things.

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