# THE WAY OF NATURE

Zhuangzi

# THE WAY OF NATURE

Adapted and illustrated by

C. C. Tsai

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Foreword by Edward Slingerland

Published by Princeton University Press
41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TR

press.princeton.edu



Library of Congress Control Number: 2018958696
ISBN (pbk.) 978-0-691-17974-2

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available

Editorial: Rob Tempio and Matt Rohal
Production Editorial: Mark Bellis
Text Design: C. Alvarez-Gaffin
Lettering: Meghan Kanabay
Cover Design: Michael Boland for thebolanddesignco.com
Cover Image Credit: C. C. Tsai
Production: Erin Suydam
Publicity: Jodi Price and Katie Lewis
Copyeditor: Shanti Fader Whitesides

This book has been composed in News Gothic and Adobe Fangsong

Printed on acid-free paper. ♾

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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# Foreword

EDWARD SLINGERLAND

As a student of classical Chinese in Taiwan in the late 1980s, I was asked by my tutors what texts I was interested in reading. My answer was definitive and singular: the *Zhuangzi*. Having encountered this mind-bending, life-changing text through the English-language renderings of Thomas Merton, and then Burton Watson's translation, the *Zhuangzi* was the reason I had chosen to study classical Chinese, and I was eager to begin engaging with it in the original.

It turned out to be a lot harder than I thought. The *Zhuangzi* is stylistically and conceptually unlike any other Warring States (5th–3rd century BCE) text. The brilliance of its author(s)—let's call him, her, or them "Zhuangzi" for the sake of convenience—is reflected in its distinctive and challenging language. Dissatisfied with the expressive possibilities of the classical Chinese on offer at the time, Zhuangzi created a wild array of new adjectives and adverbs, many of them onomatopoetic, that early Chinese commentators on the text struggled to explain. The concepts and characters are even crazier. Logical paradoxes, enormous mythical fish that turn into giant birds and fly south, people's organs being transformed into owls—I had chosen probably the worst possible text, in terms of easy comprehensibility, for my initiation into classical Chinese.

Somewhat discouraged by my slow progress, I was surprised to spot an intriguing-looking comic book in one of the local bookstores—an illustrated version of the *Zhuangzi* by C. C. Tsai. The drawings themselves were wonderful and really seemed to capture the spirit of the text as I'd glimpsed it in English. Probably more importantly, the *baihua* (colloquial) Chinese explanations and dialogues vividly brought to life the conversations and stories that I was struggling to comprehend as I slogged through the painfully difficult original text. The original classical Chinese appeared in the margins, so I could refer back to it, but the illustrations and lively modern Chinese gave me an easy and pleasurable way to access the ideas behind the text.

I remember thinking that, after returning to the States, I would one day translate Tsai's works into English to make them available to a wider audience. Brian Bruya beat me to it, and I'm really glad he did. The colloquial Chinese translations that Tsai puts into the mouths of his characters are very tricky to render into smooth and accessible English, but Bruya handles this challenge perfectly. It would be impossible to do better than Nie Que's "Sheesh! What a letdown . . . ," when confronted with Wang Ni's lack of knowledge ("Does Wang Ni Know?"), or the annoyed crow muttering, "Gimme a break," when different species of birds ardently debate which color is best in "Crows and Seagulls." Bruya's translation is effortless, accurate, and a pleasure to read.

And read it you should. The *Zhuangzi* is probably the most overlooked great work of world literature. It is one of the two foundational texts of a school of thought subsequently referred to as "Daoism," along with the *Daodejing* traditionally (and almost certainly apocryphally) attributed to Laozi, or the "Old Master." There are good reasons why early imperial librarians classed these two books together. Both see civilization, and Confucian culture in particular, as somehow antithetic to our true nature. Both view language with suspicion, as something that limits our worldview. And both have a basic faith in human beings' innate, untutored nature.

I would argue that the *Zhuangzi*, however, has a much more sophisticated answer to the question of how human beings

should live. Laozi urges us to get rid of learning and culture, and physically return to a primitive, utopian life of small-scale agriculture. Zhuangzi sees us as already embedded in, and inextricably tied to, civilized life. Humans will continue to write and read books, carve bell-stands and perform social rituals, argue with one another and travel to faraway lands. The key is to do this without losing your connection with Heaven, the natural force that governs the world and created our natures. One should live like the clever birds in the "Swallows Nest in the Eaves" story, being "in the world but not of it," to borrow language from the New Testament. The way to do this is to make one's mind tenuous or empty, open to the true nature of the world and people around you, so that you go along with things rather than striving to impose your will or preconceived notions on them.

The insights of the *Zhuangzi* have much to teach us today. Over the last fifteen years or so I've grown increasingly involved in various branches of the cognitive sciences. The more I learn about the nature of human cognition, the more prescient the insights of the *Zhuangzi* seem to me. The story of "Huizi's Giant Gourds," for instance, tells of Zhuangzi's logician friend Hui Shi (Huizi), who smashes some giant gourds because they are too big to be used as ladles and too shallow to use as bowls. To get the point of the story it is important to realize that these are the two standard uses of a gourd in early China: when Hui Shi hears the word "gourd," he immediately thinks of either ladles or bowls. This is a good example of what psychologists call "categorical inflexibility," where standard definitions or images associated with certain words limit our cognitive fluidity. The importance of thinking flexibly, outside the cage of conventional categories, is also the point of the various "usefulness of the useless" stories, like that of "The Useless *Shu* Tree" or "The Earth Spirit's Tree."

Similarly, the story of the monkey trainer and the chestnuts in "Three at Dawn and Four at Dusk" makes an important point about the power of psychological framing: the same facts can inspire very different emotional reactions, as well as consequent behaviors, depending upon how they are characterized. Vastly more people favor a treatment proposed for a hypothetical disease said to be affecting six hundred people when the outcome is described as "two hundred lives saved" rather than "four hundred will die." A wise person will use this knowledge to nudge others in the right direction. "The Cook Carves Up a Cow" and "The Old Wheelwright," examples of the famous "skill stories" in the *Zhuangzi*, get at the power of embodied cognition, while "Learning How to Walk in Handan" vividly illustrates the interference of cognitive control in skillful action, a central theme of the literature on choking in sports and performance. "The Caged Pheasant" hints at the danger of the hedonic treadmill—the fact that humans are built to never be satisfied by current pleasures—while "The Horse Lover" points to the danger of suffocating attachments.

All of these stories are designed to teach us how to move skillfully and flexibly through the world, engaging genuinely with what comes and living out our ordained lifespans with equanimity and grace. I hope readers will enjoy this book as much as I do.

simply because it is not that well-known. Instead, you would probably think of the *Analects* of Confucius, Laozi's *Daodejing*, maybe the great Tang Dynasty poems, or *Dream of the Red Chamber*. All good choices, but the *Zhuangzi* is no less important or influential than those others. The text is named after its author, Zhuang Zhou—Zhuangzi, for short. It is like a cross between Aesop's *Fables* and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Some of the most profound and challenging ideas are laid out in the form of colorful characters and episodes and have been so influential in Chinese literature, art, and philosophy that they have entered the language in the form of sayings that roll off the tongue of farmers and PhDs alike.

We know very little about the man Zhuang Zhou except that he lived during the 4th century BCE and was engaged with the intellectual scene of his time. That scene revolved around questions of good government. Like their Greek contemporaries, educated Chinese had a chance to influence the government in significant ways. Greeks lived in a *polis* (an independent city-state) and acted politically through a stumbling democracy. Chinese lived in a *guo* 國 (an enfeoffed state) and acted politically through a stumbling meritocracy under a hereditary monarch. Confucians and Mo-ists (followers of Mozi) dominated discussions about good government—discussions which branched out into the nature of language, the basic make-up of human beings, and how to build a moral and competent leader. Many Confucians thought they had a lock on the moral side of things, advocating a government underpinned by ritual propriety (*li* 禮). Many Mo-ists thought they had a lock on the linguistic side of things, dominating discussions through arch logical arguments. Zhuangzi came along and dropped a grenade on both schools of thought, questioning the universality of moral and linguistic categories and cautioning his contemporaries about unintended consequences stemming from overconfidence in one's way of conceiving the world and managing it through those conceptions.

Confucians traditionally held elaborate funeral ceremonies as an expression of respect for and devotion to the deceased. Mo-ists railed against the unnecessary expense. Zhuangzi's response? We see on the very last page (233) of this book Zhuangzi telling his friends to simply lay him out on the ground after he dies. Radical. Outrageous. But what is the difference between Zhuangzi's suggestion and our process today? Buried bodies—even embalmed ones—get consumed by other organisms. Zhuangzi shows us that our customs and conventions, while comfortable and even useful, tend to be arbitrary. It is, therefore, misguided to rely on them as the one and only guide for action. And so, a theme we see in the *Zhuangzi* is the flouting of convention: Zhuangzi drums after his wife dies (p. 129), a great painter strips off his clothes before working (p. 163), capable people reject offers of powerful jobs in the government (p. 122). The specific reasons for the flouting of convention in each of these episodes are different, but the general reason is the same: not all conventions are as useful, benign, or advantageous as they are often made out to be. Sometimes they can be inflexible, wrongheaded, and even personally harmful.

Conventions and customs (including the very words we use to label the world (p. 15)) can lock us into inflexible ways of thinking, and the creativity we see in Zhuangzi is the ability to see beyond them. Zhuangzi finds new uses for "useless" things (p. 19) and sees old problems from new perspectives. Can virtues be harmful instead of helpful (p. 87)? Can a valuable pearl be dangerous instead of beneficial (p. 230)? Can something be accomplished through non-action (*wu wei* 無為) instead of action (p. 103)?

What does Zhuangzi mean by "non-action"? Customs and conventions can be grouped under the umbrella category: *artificial*. To "non-" something for Zhuangzi is to undo the artificial, to return to a more natural way of doing things. Non-action, non-governing, non-thinking, non-interference—these all mean to strip away the clever, intentional, one-size-fits-all solution and to do only what the situation calls for. The cook carving up the cow (p. 41) is the classic example of non-action. We see it also in the old wheelwright (p. 96), the cicada-catcher (p. 140), and the bell-stand maker (p. 146). Each one empties himself of desire and expectation—anything that could interfere with the operation itself—and responds only to the requirements of the moment. Zhuangzi says we should use the mind like a mirror (p. 77)—reflecting only what is in front of us and not bringing

along any extraneous thoughts, worries, hopes, or fears. This is how we return to the natural.

The obvious objection you may have of equating the natural with the good probably involves the many examples of things that are natural but not good: poisons, mosquitoes, aging, earthquakes, cancer, shark attacks, etc. This is where we can see how Zhuangzi differs from so many other religions/philosophies. According to Christianity, humans are born sinful. In Islam, humans must submit themselves to the wishes of Allah. In Hinduism and much of Buddhism, the world we live in is an illusory world of suffering. By contrast, we see in Zhuangzi (and in Chinese philosophy broadly), the belief that the world is pretty darn good just as it is. Why? Because everything more or less fits together so that all things (more or less) can flourish for a time. Then they decline and other things flourish. Everything is in a particular phase of a particular cycle. Everything is always changing. It is only because of these cycles and changes that any one thing—including you and I—can ever flourish at all.

So, from a narrow point of view, focused on any particular thing that happens to be on the down side of a cycle—growing old, getting cancer, being attacked by a shark—nature can seem dangerous and unforgiving. But my aging and dying makes room for the next human being. The random mutations that result in cancer can also result in evolutionary adaptation. My being eaten by a shark feeds that shark. From the larger perspective, the cycles continue, which is a good thing—because they make all good things (as viewed from narrow perspectives) possible.

This is not a variety of pre-determined fate. There is no author, no designer, no grand plan (pp. 98, 191). There is no "reason" that I get eaten by a shark. No "reason" that I get cancer. Zhuangzi is fine with the idea that stuff just happens. That's the nature of nature. But just as nature is not determined, nature is also not entirely random. To Zhuangzi, nature (*tian* 天) is a self-organizing spontaneity (*ziran* 自然). It has a rhythm and a generativity, and we can tap into it. The word Zhuangzi (and other early Chinese) used for this generative rhythm is *dao* 道. Many times in this book, we see Zhuangzi and others refer to "the Dao." This is what they mean—a rhythm of the universe, a kind of roughly predictable logic, a way that things work, a path that each individual thing takes through its existence. The universe has the Dao, which is, more or less, good because it is the ground for all of the good things we have in life. A government or a person can be more or less in tune with the Dao; and being more in tune with it increases the chances of its people flourishing. How to be in tune with the Dao? Non-action, non-interference, non-striving, and so on. Reduce your desires and expectations. Find your own specific path and pursue that. Are you a cicada-catcher? Then catch cicadas. Are you a wheel-maker? Then make wheels. Empty yourself of all social expectations and personal desires and just be yourself. Move according to your natural mechanism (p. 114). Each particular thing has its particular Dao (pp. 33, 134). If each thing follows it, then all things will naturally flourish (more or less, at least for a time). Humans have the dubious distinction of being able to fall off their path by trying too hard, by pursuing limitless desires, by wanting too much. Scale it back, Zhuangzi says. Don't bring yourself grief (unless your path entails that for a time (p. 49)).

Getting good at non-doing can resemble a kind of spiritual practice. Zhuangzi even uses the term "spirit" (*shen* 神). *Shen* fundamentally refers to a kind of animating energy that can range in meaning from the energy that it takes to work hard (p. 103) to the vaguely supernatural (p. 122) to very definite spirits and gods. For Zhuangzi, to reduce desires, to follow your specific path, to be yourself, is to nurture your spirit rather than exhausting it. A well-nurtured spirit can come through particular practices, as in Yan Hui's account of mental fasting (p. 48) and his "sitting in forgetting" (p. 73), or it can simply be there naturally (pp. 62, 103, 139). Either way, you are getting at what is already there.

Why, by the way, is Yan Hui—Confucius's prized disciple—depicted as a follower of Zhuangzi's philosophy? Even Confucius humbles himself to Laozi. What's going on? The easy answer is that Zhuangzi is just borrowing these characters and putting them to his own use. The more complicated—and interesting—answer is that there is some overlap between the philosophy of Zhuangzi and Confucius. But wasn't Confucius a

Confucian and Zhuangzi a Daoist, and aren't those two philosophies in direct opposition to one another? Actually, no.

Confucius wasn't a Confucian because really there is no such thing as "Confucianism," per se. He is known as a *ru* 儒, a term that we translate into English as "Confucian" but which does not refer to the person of Confucius. Properly speaking, we should say that Confucius's beliefs belong to Ruism, not Confucianism. Also, Zhuangzi did not identify as a Daoist; in fact, there was no such school of thought during his time. That label came along later and was applied to him retrospectively. Both Zhuangzi and Confucius (and most other early Chinese thinkers) encouraged people to follow the Dao. In that sense, they were both little-d daoists. But what we now call Daoism has an emphasis on the very broad perspective of natural cycles and individual paths, whereas what we call Confucianism focuses more on the intermediate realm of ordering human society (but still, when done well, in harmony with natural cycles and individual human paths). The difference between the two schools of thought was more a difference in emphasis than a difference in dogma. In fact, over Chinese history, intellectuals tended to emphasize one or the other depending on their stage of life or their opportunities in a more just or less just society. If the "Dao was in the world," then they would feel safe working in government and taking on a Confucian perspective. If the "Dao was not in the world," they would retreat to the safety of a reclusive, Daoist lifestyle. Unlike so many other religions and philosophies around the world that see each other as mutually exclusive and even fight wars over their disagreements, Daoists and Confucians tend to see themselves as two sides of the same coin. But Daoists, as we see in *Zhuangzi* (pp. 62, 208), are not averse to calling out the narrowness and inflexibility that tends to crop up when Confucians over-emphasize custom and convention.

## III. THE ARTIST AND HIS WORK

When I was a kid and the daily newspaper was dropped at our doorstep, I loved reading the comic strips and the political cartoons. They could be cute, amusing, and insightful all at once. When I came across C. C. Tsai's illustrated versions of the Chinese classics, I recognized the same brilliant combination of wit and wisdom and fell in love with his books.

I would be remiss if I finished this introduction without introducing the inimitable Chih-chung Tsai (蔡 志 忠), who goes by "C. C." in English, and whose own story is as amazing as anything he depicts in his books. The way he tells it, he knew at the age of five that he would draw for a living, and, at the age of fifteen, his father gave him permission to drop out of school and move from their small town to the metropolis of Taipei, where a comic publisher had welcomed him after receiving an unsolicited manuscript, not realizing how young he was. The young C. C. developed his own humorous comic book characters, all the while honing his skills and learning from other illustrators. During a required three-year stint in the military, he devoted his free time to educating himself in art history and graphic design. On leaving the military he tested into a major movie and television production company, beating out other applicants with their formal educations. There, he had the good fortune of coming across a cache of Disney films, and taught himself animation. Soon he was making his own short films, and then decided to open his own animation studio, winning Taiwan's equivalent of the Oscar just two years later.

Always looking for a new challenge, C. C. began a syndicated comic strip, which quickly expanded to five different strips in magazines and newspapers across Southeast Asia. At the height of his popularity as a syndicated cartoonist, he turned in yet another direction—the illustration of the Chinese classics in comic book format. They were an instant success and propelled him to the top of the bestseller list. That's what you have in your hand.

According to C. C., the secret to his success is not ambition, or even hard work. It's just about having fun and following his interests. One of his interests has been studying the classics. Remember, he dropped out of middle school. By ordinary standards, he should be unable to grasp the language of ancient China. The early Chinese wrote in a language that is to contemporary Chinese as Latin is to contemporary Spanish or Italian.

But he is a tireless autodidact, with a nearly photographic memory. He knows as much about the Chinese classics as many PhDs in the field. The main difference between him and a tenured professor is that he isn't interested in the refined disputes and distinctions on which scholars spend their careers. He merely wants to understand the ideas and share them with others. This book, and others in the series, is the result of playtime in his modest studio—serious and lighthearted, whimsical and profound all at once.

In working with the classics, C. C. stays close to tradition, and in his illustrations he more or less follows the prominent commentaries. This means that the texts that underpin his books are pretty much the same as the texts that underpin other translations you will find on bookstore shelves, with incidental differences here and there that are insignificant to the overall meaning.

C. C. translated the Classical language into contemporary Chinese so that the average reader could understand it. While respecting his interpretive choices where there is ambiguity, I've also chosen to translate with an eye to the Classical language, rather than just from his contemporary Chinese. This helps avoid the attenuation of meaning that happens when communication goes through too many steps—like in the "telephone" game that children play.

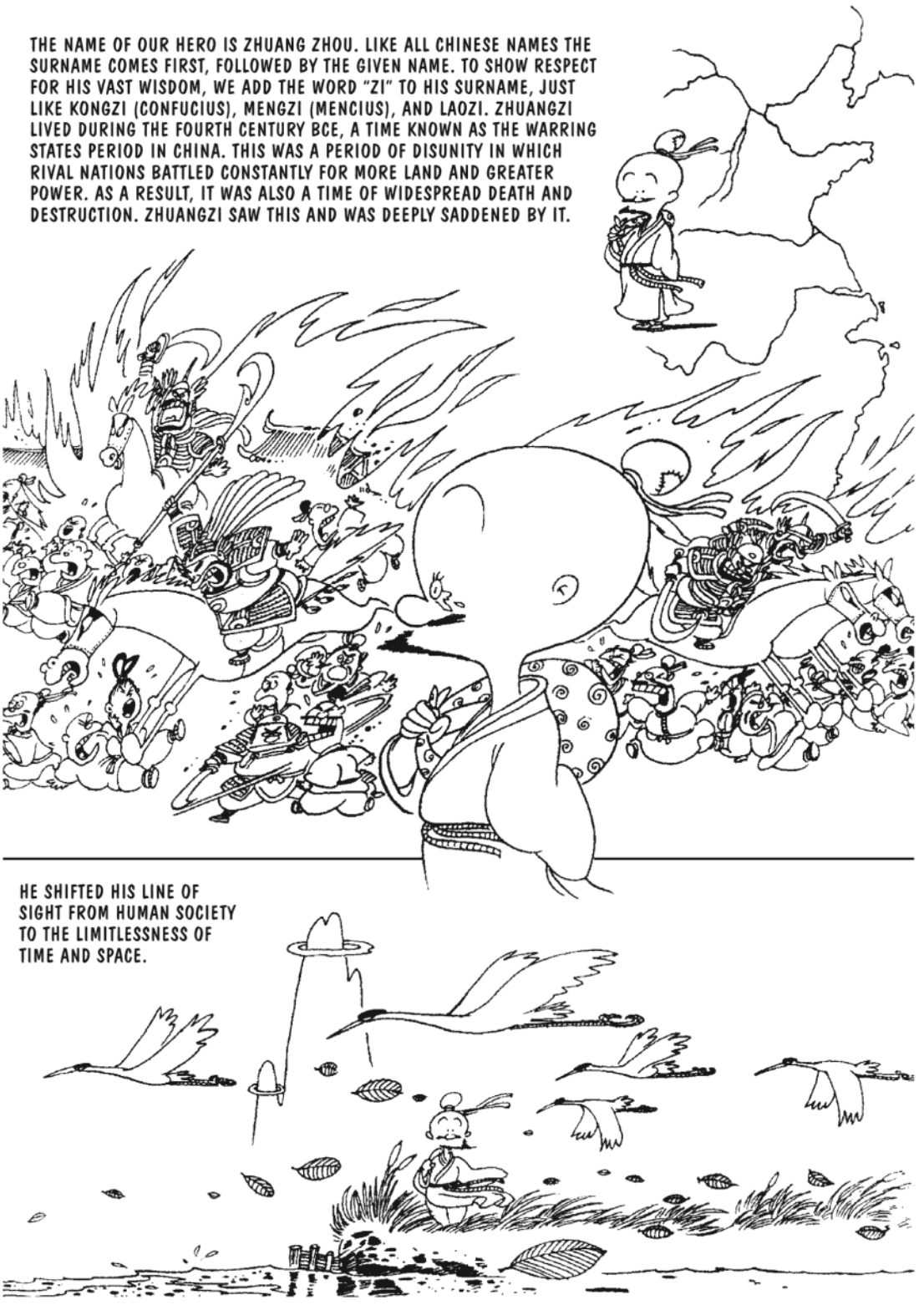
In the *Zhuangzi*, stories are used to illustrate particular points and are embedded in larger contexts. C. C. pulls the story out, illustrates it in a series of panels, and then sums up the moral of the story in the final balloon. For the summary, C. C. draws from the original context and traditional commentaries to make the idea relevant to a contemporary reader. The reader should have full confidence that each episode comes straight out of the *Zhuangzi* with little alteration. As with his other adaptations, the advantage that C. C.'s versions of the classics have over regular, text-only editions is the visual dimension that brings the reader directly into the world of the ancients.

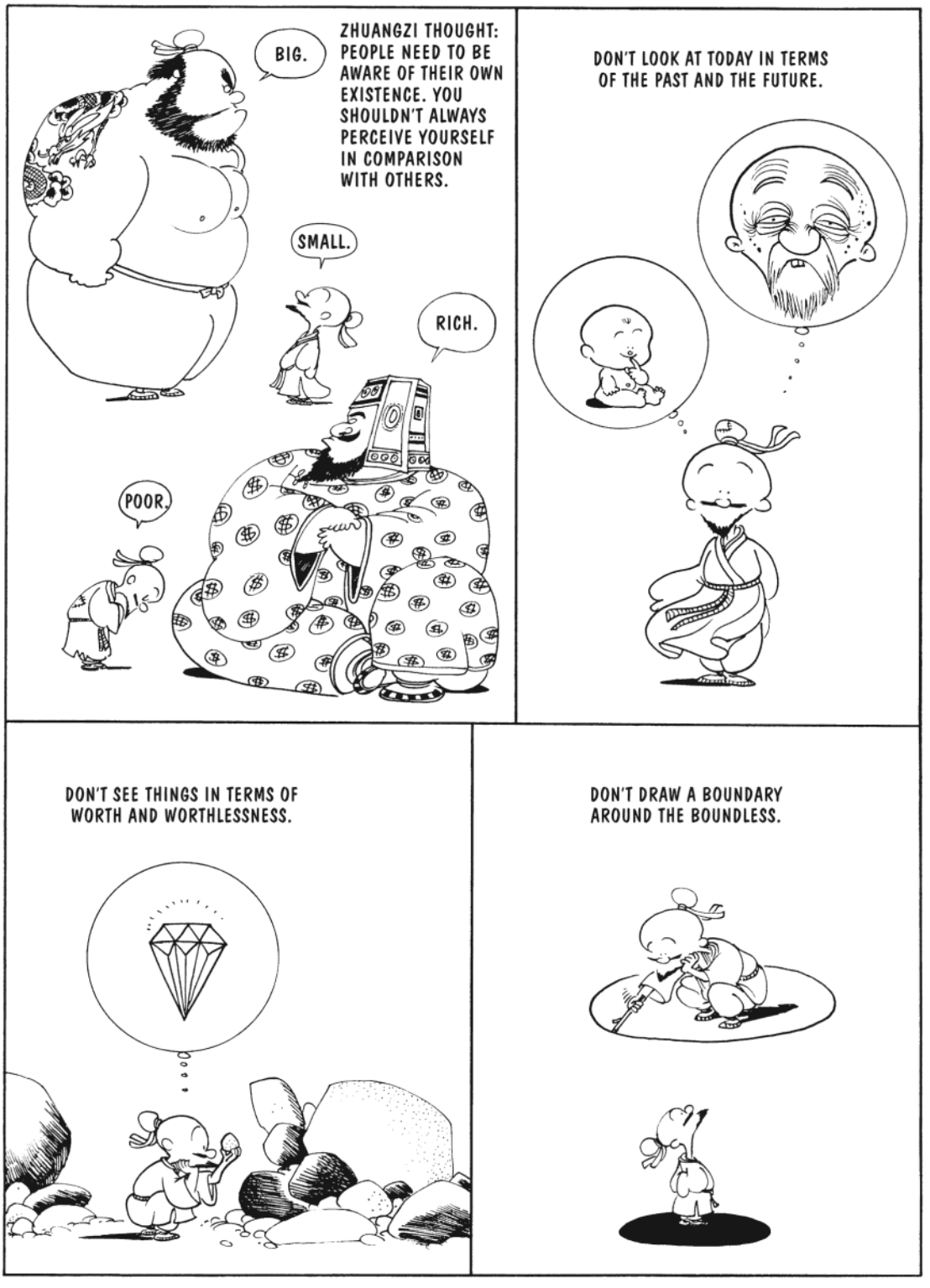
I hope that you enjoy this English version of C. C.'s illustrated *Zhuangzi* as much as so many others have enjoyed the original Chinese version.

# THE WAY OF NATURE

夫莊子者，可謂知本矣，故未始藏其狂言，言雖無會而獨應者也。夫應而非會，則雖當無用；言非物事，則雖高不行；與夫寂然不動，不得已而後起者，固有間矣，斯可謂知無心者也。夫心無為，則隨感而應，應隨其時，言唯謹爾。故與化為體，流萬代而冥物，豈曾設對獨遘而游談乎方外哉！此其所以不經而為百家之冠也。

郭象《庄子序》





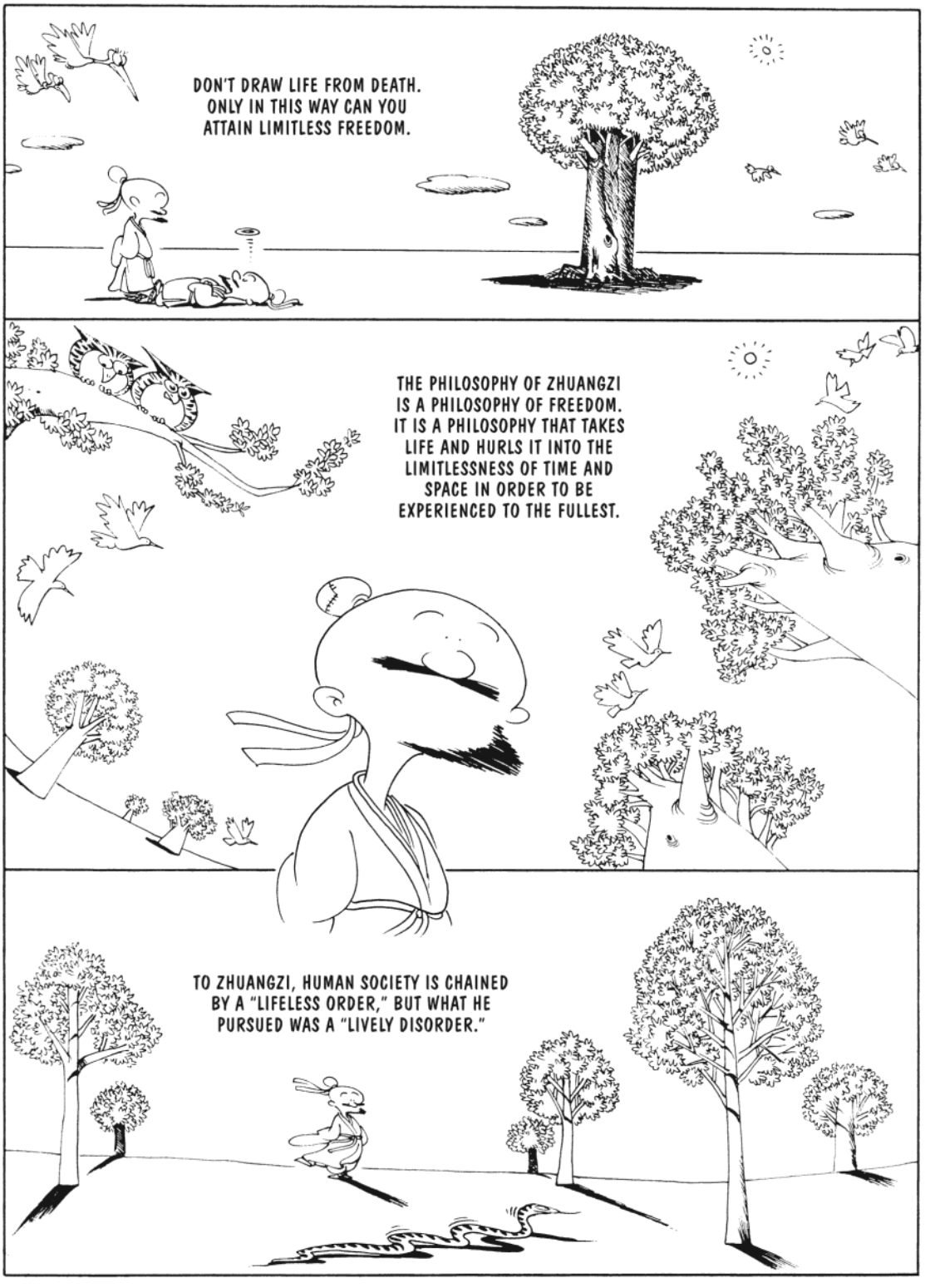

莊子者，姓莊，名周，（太史公云：字子休。）梁國蒙縣人也。六國時，為漆園吏，與魏惠王、齊宣王、楚威王同時，（李頤云：與齊愍王同時。）齊楚嘗聘以為相，不應。時人皆尚遊說，莊生獨高尚其事，優遊自得，依老氏之旨，著書十餘萬言，以逍遥自然無為齊物而已；大抵皆寓言，歸之於理，不可案文責也。

陸德明《莊子序》

夫莊子者，所以申道德之深根，述重玄之妙旨，暢無為之恬淡，明獨化之窅冥，鉗捷九流，括囊百氏，諒區中之至教，實象外之微言者也。

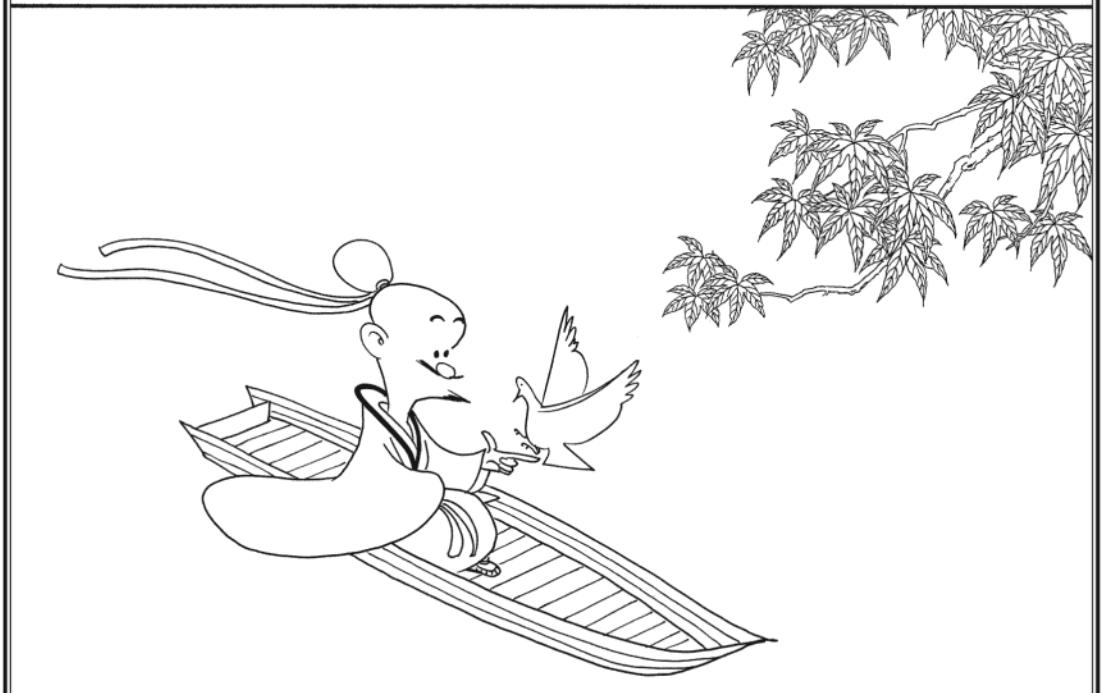
其人姓莊，名周，字子休，生宋國睢陽蒙縣，師長桑公子，受號南華仙人。當戰國之初，降衰周之末，歎蒼生之業薄，傷道德之陵夷，乃慷慨發憤，爰著斯論。其言大而博，其旨深而遠，非下士之所聞，豈淺識之能究！

成玄英《莊子序》



CHAPTER 1

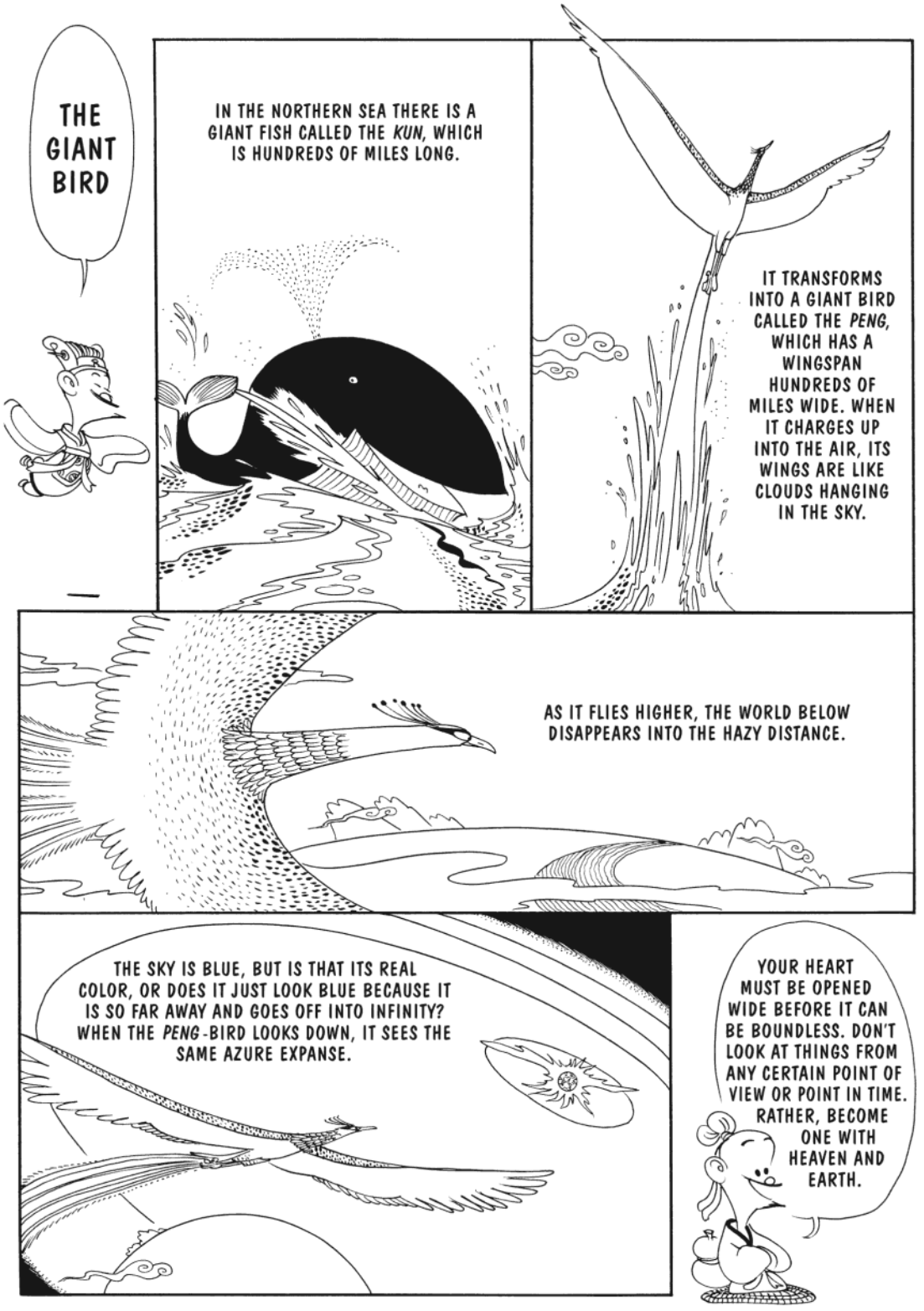
# Carefree Living



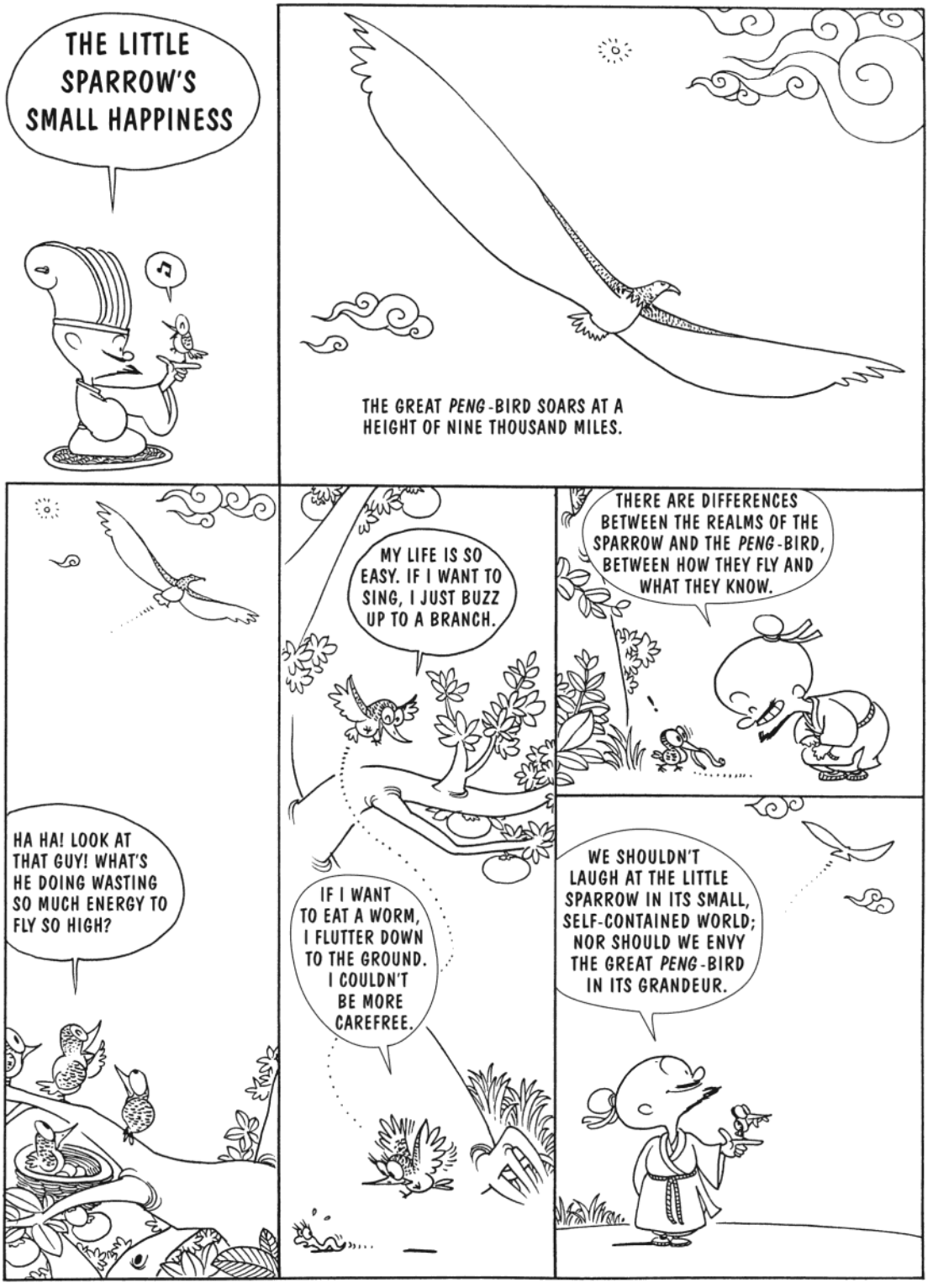
CHAPTER 1
CAREFREE LIVING

北冥有魚，其名為鯤。鯤之大，不知其幾千里也。化而為鳥，其名為鵬。鵬之背，不知其幾千里也；怒而飛，其翼若垂天之雲。是鳥也，海運則將徙於南冥……。

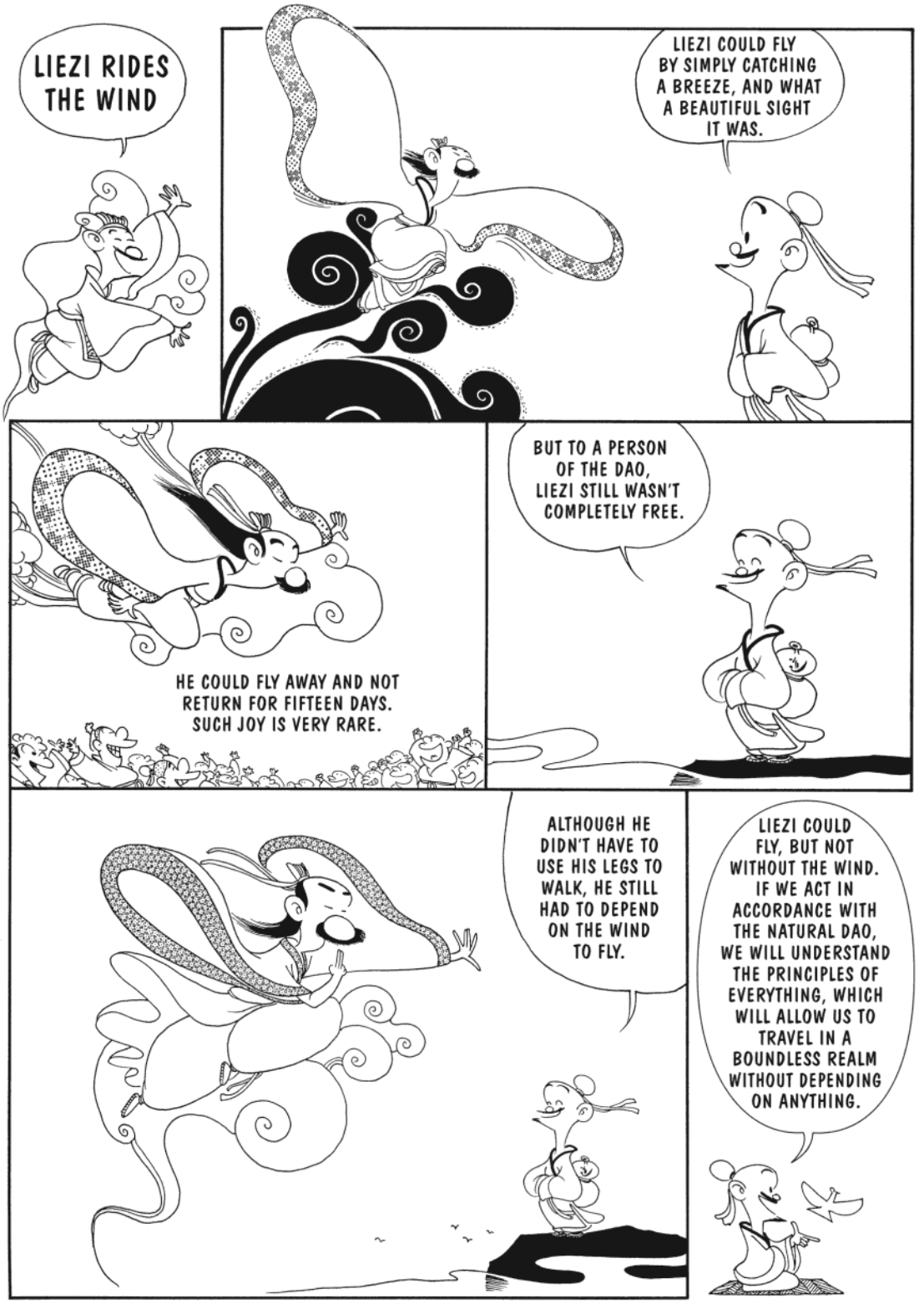
天之蒼蒼，其正色邪？其遠而無所至極邪？其視下也，亦若是則已矣。



有鳥焉，其名為鵬，背若泰山，翼若垂天之雲，摶扶搖羊角而上者九萬里，絕雲氣，負青天，然後圖南，且適南冥也。斥鴳笑之曰：「彼且奚適也？我騰躍而上，不過數仞而下，翱翔蓬蒿之間，此亦飛之至也。而彼且奚適也？」此小大之辯也。

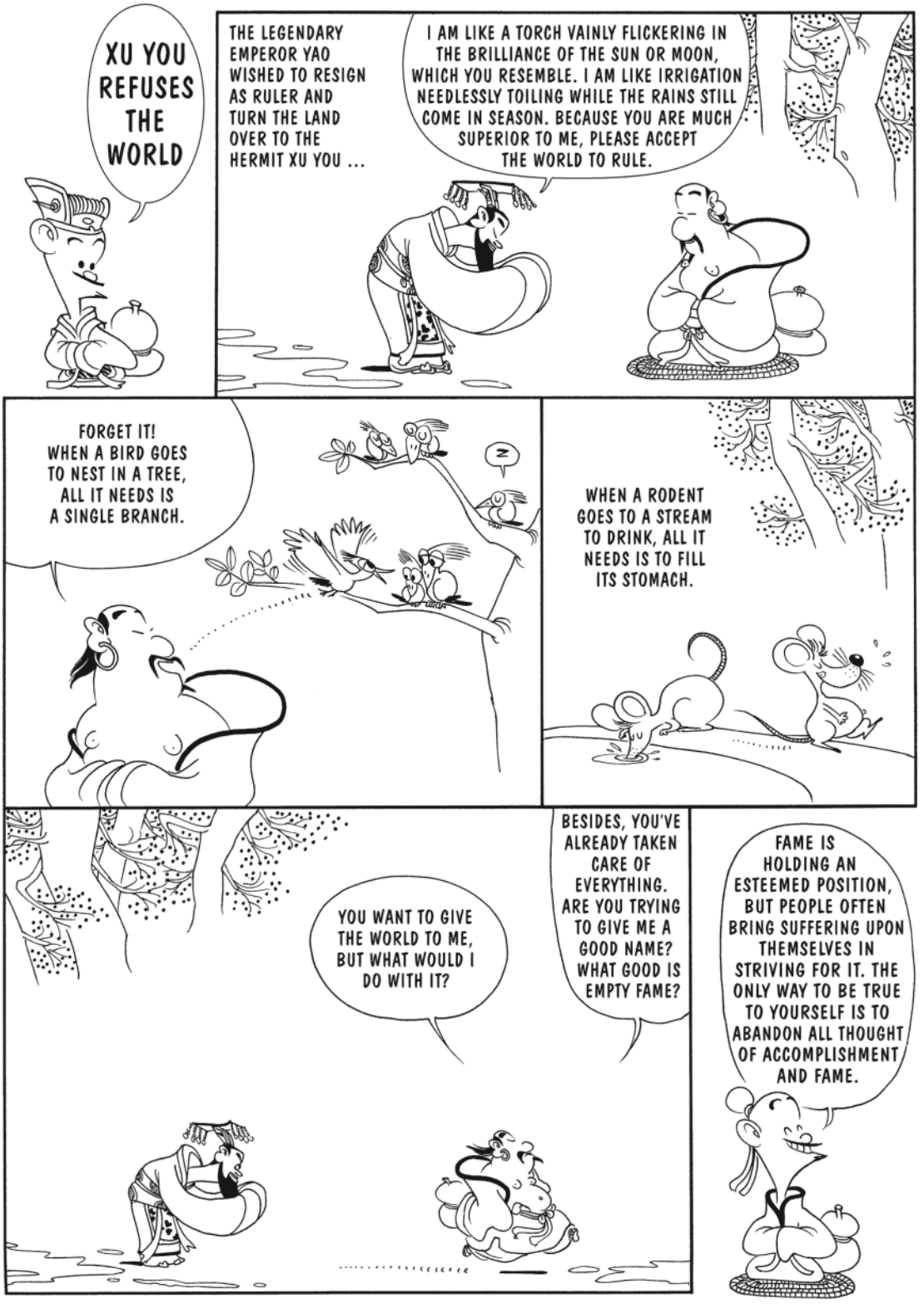


夫列子御風而行，泠然善也，旬有五日而後反。彼於致福者，未數數然也。此雖免乎行，猶有所待者也。若夫乘天地之正，而御六氣之辯，以遊無窮者，彼且惡乎待哉！故曰：至人無己，神人無功，聖人無名。



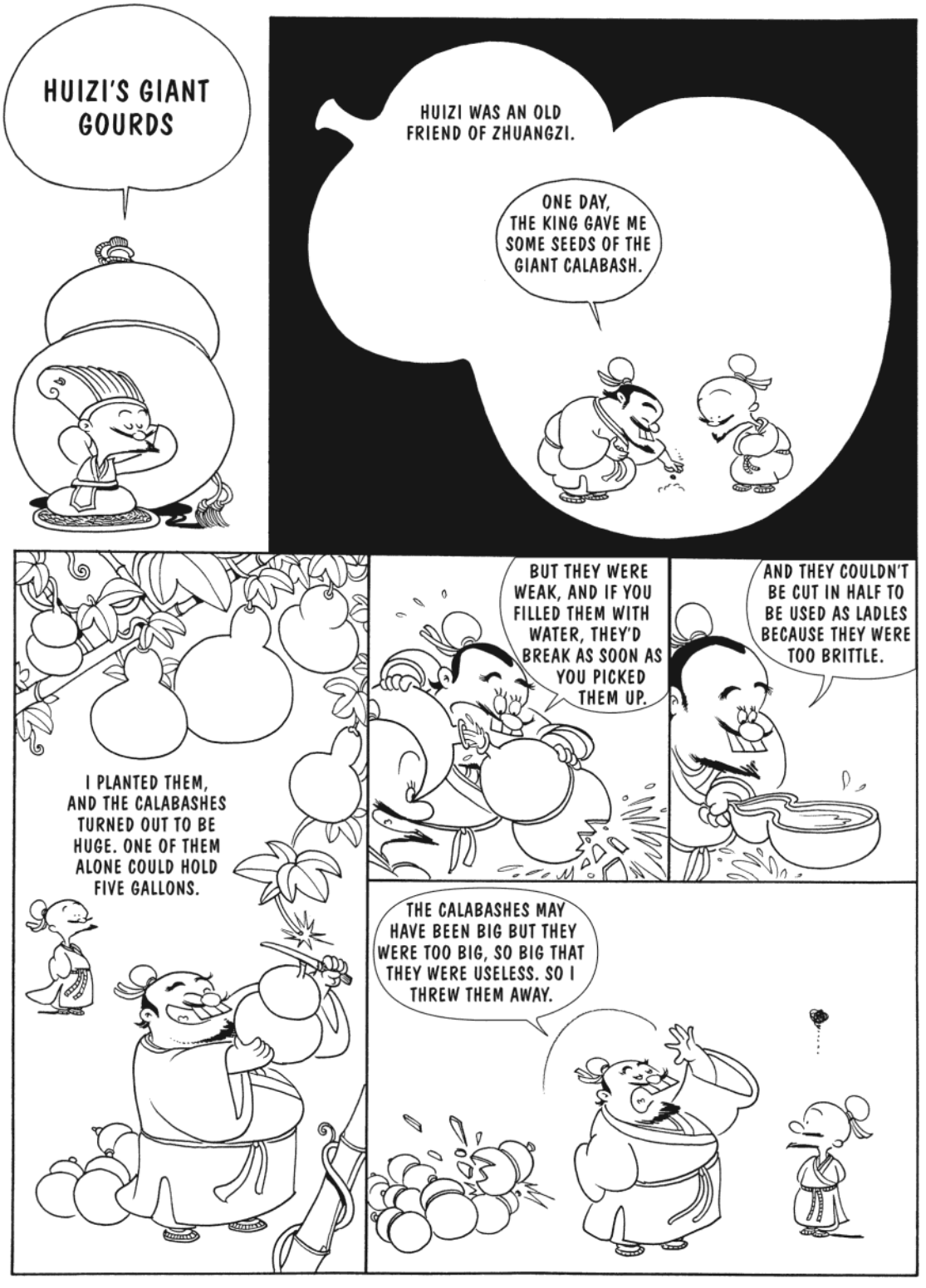
堯讓天下於許由，曰：「日月出矣，而爝火不息，其於光也，不亦難乎！時雨降矣，而猶浸灌，其於澤也，不亦勞乎！夫子立而天下治，而我猶尸之，吾自視缺然。請致天下。」

許由曰：「子治天下，天下既已治也。而我猶代子，吾將為名乎？名者，實之賓也。吾將為賓乎？鷦鷯巢於深林，不過一枝；偃鼠飲河，不過滿腹。歸休乎君，予無所用天下為！庖人雖不治庖，尸祝不越樽俎而代之矣。」

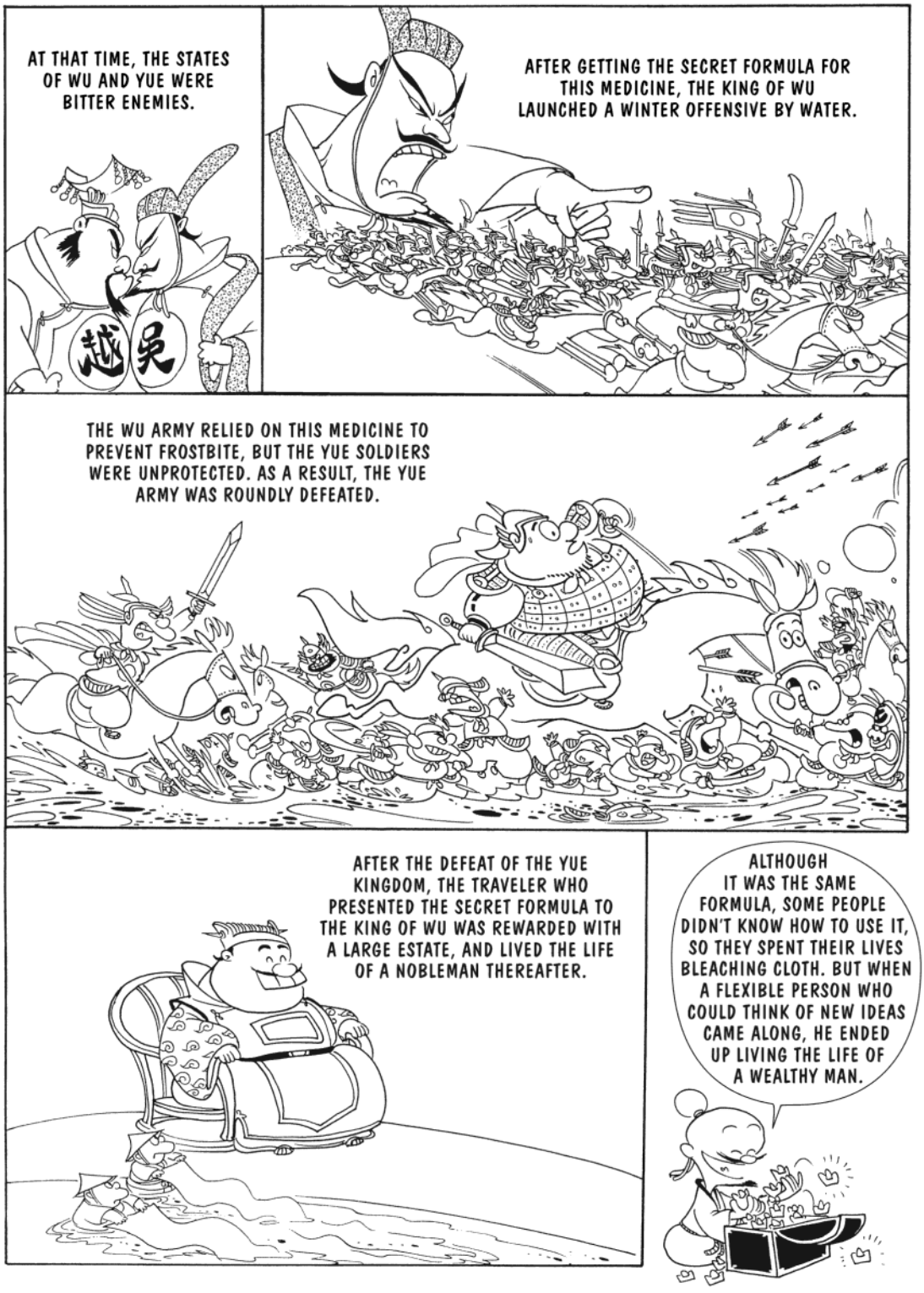


宋人資章甫而適諸越，越人斷髮文身，無所用之。堯治天下之民，平海內之政，往見四子藐姑射之山，汾水之陽，窅然喪其天下焉。

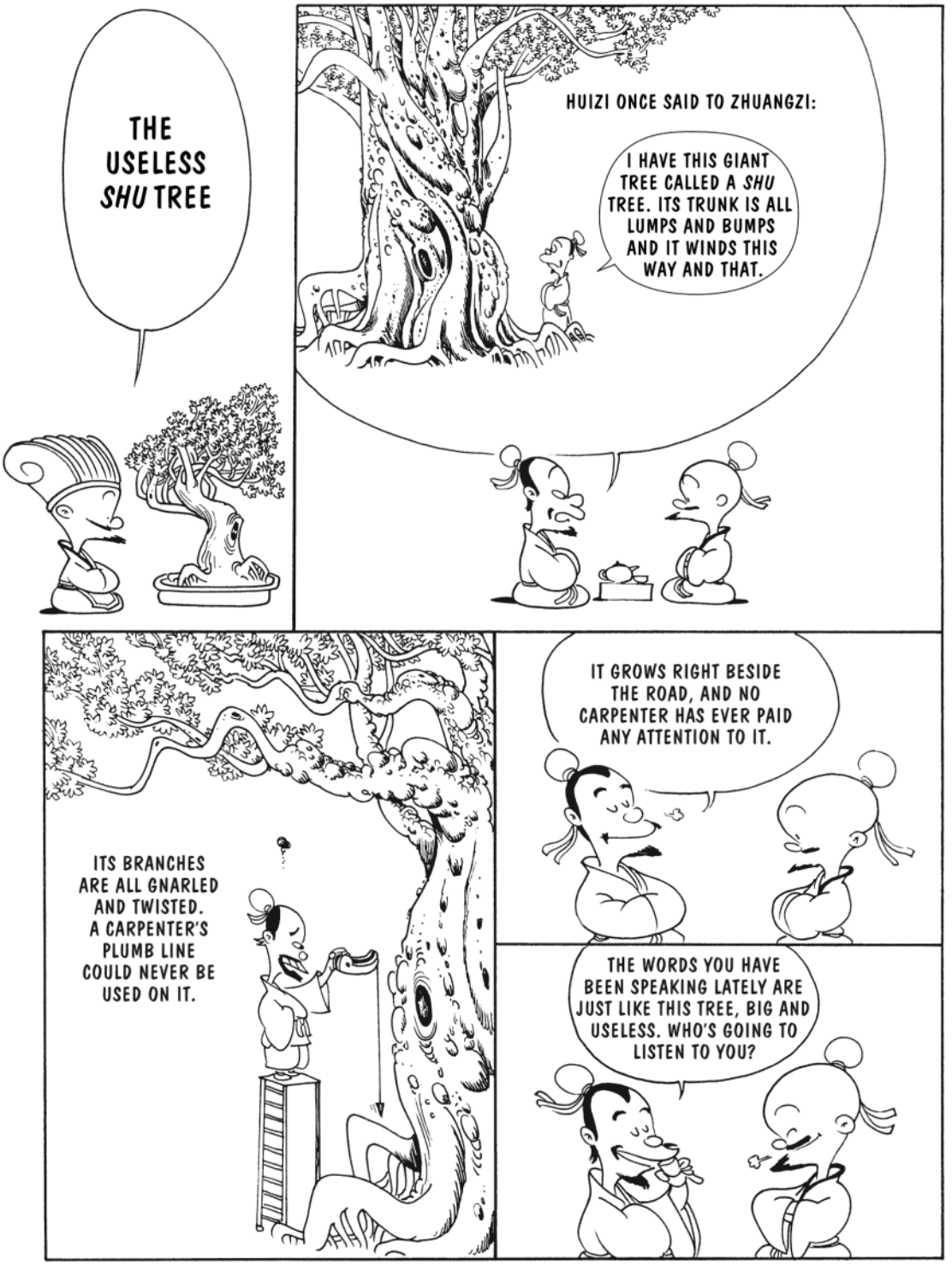
惠子謂莊子曰：「魏王貽我大瓠之種，我樹之成而實五石，以盛水漿，其堅不能自舉也。剖之以為瓢，則瓠落無所容。非不呺然大也，吾為其無用而掊之。」



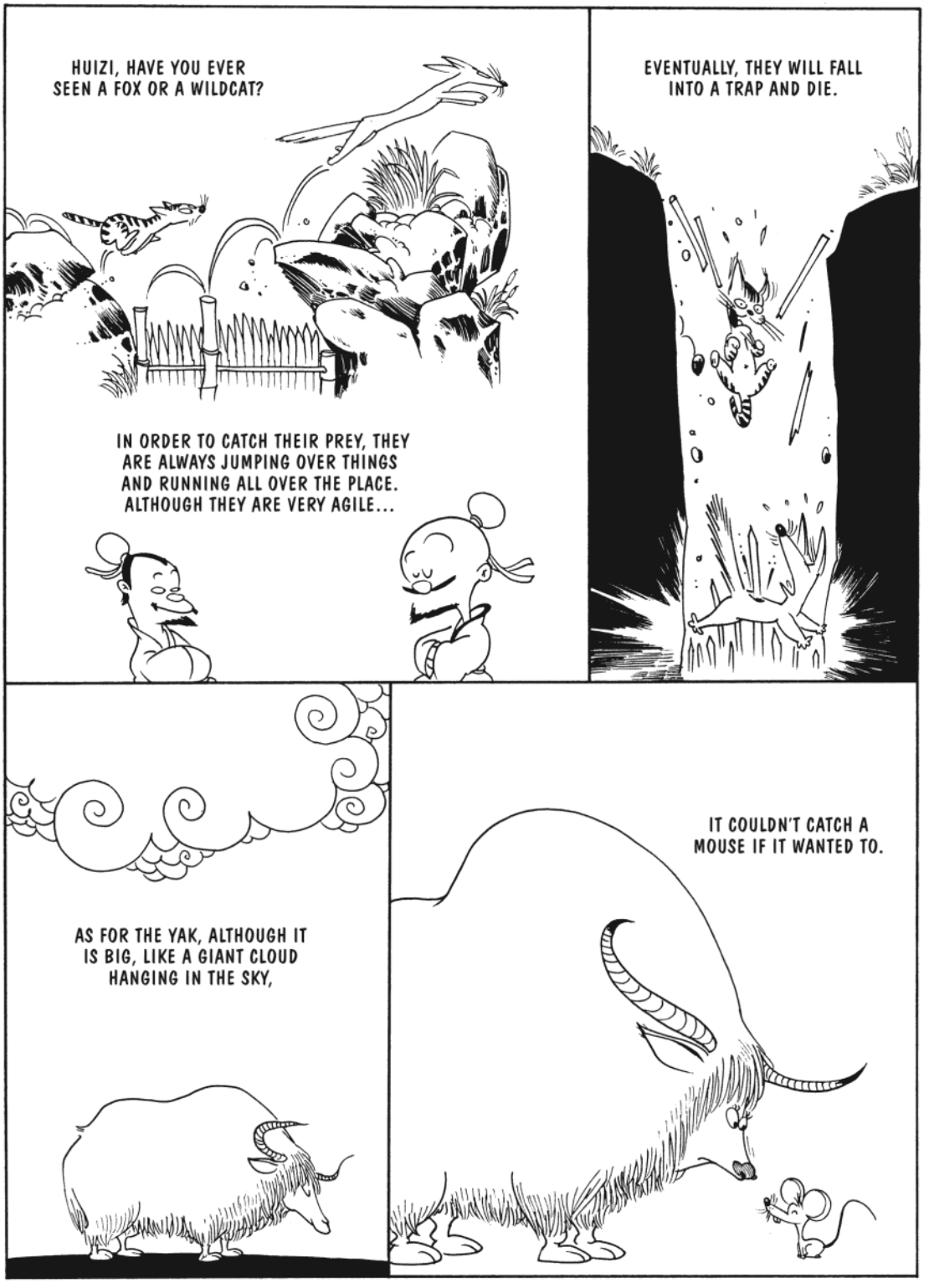
越有難，吳王使之將，冬與越人水戰，大敗越人，裂地而封之。能不龜手，一也；或以封，或不免於洴澼絖，則所用之異也。



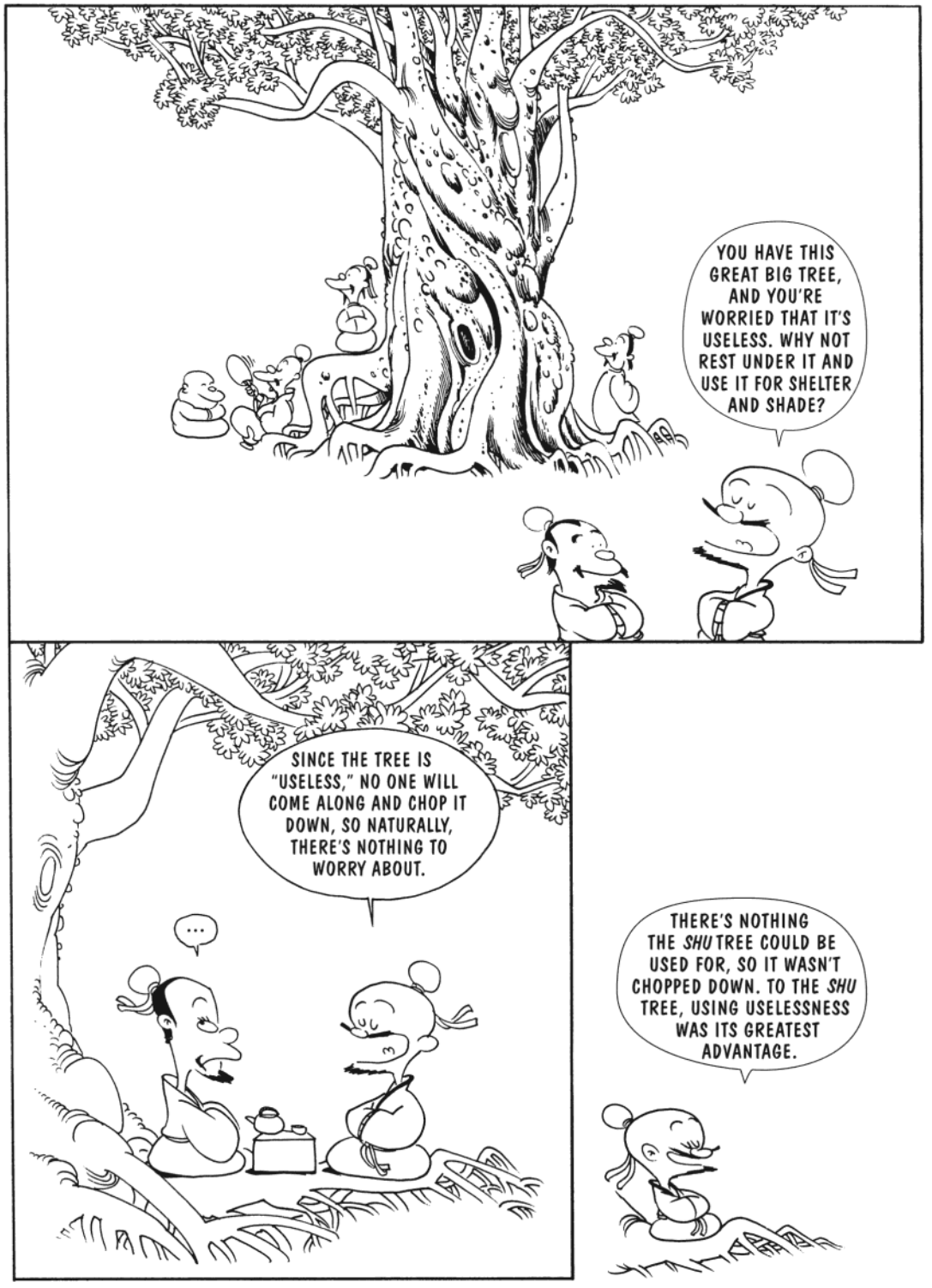
惠子謂莊子曰：「吾有大樹，人謂之樗。其大本擁腫而不中繩墨，其小枝卷曲而不中規矩，立之塗，匠者不顧。今子之言，大而無用，眾所同去也。」



莊子曰：「子獨不見狸狌乎？卑身而伏，以候敖者；東西跳梁，不避高下；中於機辟，死於罔罟。今夫斄牛，其大若垂天之雲。此能為大矣，而不能執鼠。

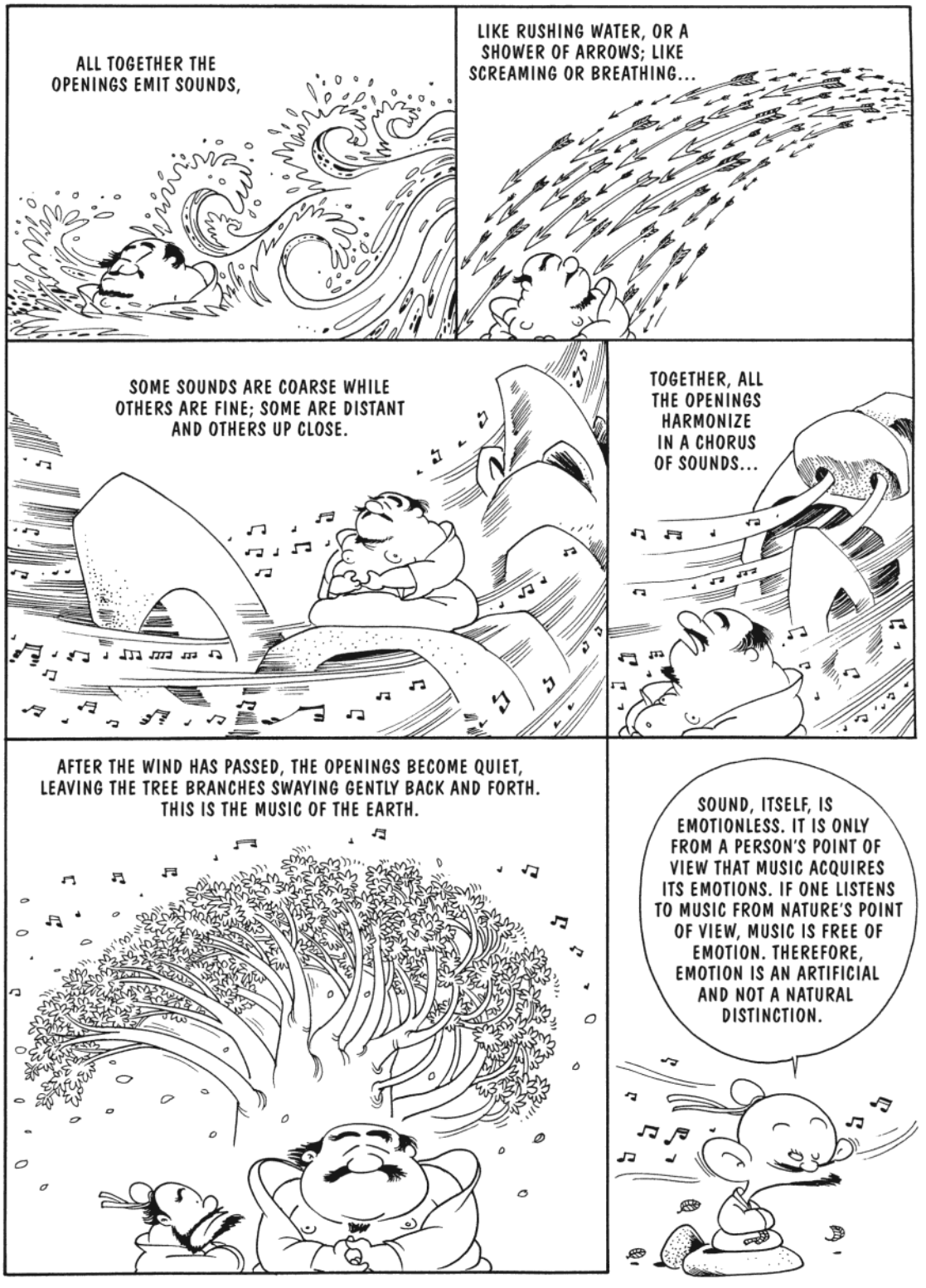


今子有大樹，患其無用，何不樹之於無何有之鄉，廣莫之野，彷徨乎無為其側，逍遙乎寢臥其下。不夭斤斧，物無害者，無所可用，安所困苦哉！」



CHAPTER 2

# On Seeing Things Evenly






激者，謞者，叱者，吸者，叫者，譹者，宎者，咬者，前者唱于而隨者唱喁。泠風則小和，飄風則大和，厲風濟則眾竅為虛。而獨不見之調調，之刁刁乎？」