

Man and Tree, Tumor and Burl: Complicating the Ecology of Illness in Early and  
Medieval China

**N. Harry Rothschild**

Botanist and tissue specialist Philip White defines tumors as “growths of plants, animals or men in which the normal processes of control are, for some reason, ineffective, so that continued cell division results in massive disorganized development.”<sup>1</sup> A response to the damage of disease, age, and environmental stress, the tumors that grow on trees, uncontrolled growths of wood cells ranging from tiny grains on twigs to huge intumescences of more than a meter, are known as burls.<sup>2</sup> White’s definition suggests that humans share with flora and fauna certain aberrant biological processes. Contemporary ecologist Nalini Nadkarni observed that patients suffering from cancer might look to trees for inspiration, noting that, “trees can sustain tumors (“burls”) for decades.”<sup>3</sup> In short, both biologically and metaphorically, modern scientists and naturalists have identified a consonance between abnormal growths on the human body and those that occur on flora and fauna in the natural world.

---

<sup>1</sup> Philip White, “A Tree Tumor of Unknown Origin,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 44.4 (1958): 339.

<sup>2</sup> In “The relevance of folkloric usage of plant galls as medicines: Finding the scientific rationale a study of the medicinal utility of plant galls,” *Biomedicine and Pharmacotherapy* 97 (2018), Seema Patel, Abdul Rauf, and Haroon Khan refer to burls as “a form of gall” that are “adaptations to stress, be that climatic, mechanical, or pathogenic” (245). R. Bruce Alison, *Every Root an Anchor: Wisconsin’s Famous and Historic Trees* (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2005), 70, notes that the damage that prompts the growth of burls may be caused by insects, fungus, or physical abrasions. While White remarks, in rather vague fashion, that burls grow “for some reason,” the research of Peter del Tredici indicates that, in redwood trees at least, “Trunk-burls are probably best interpreted as a case of uncontrolled bud and cortex proliferation induced by old age, traumatic injury, or environmental stress.” See del Tredici’s article “Lignotubers in *Sequoia sempervirens*: development and environmental significance,” *Madroño* 45 (1998): 259.

<sup>3</sup> Nalini Nadkarni, “Not Preaching to the Choir: Communicating the Importance of Forest Conservation to Nontraditional Audiences,” *Conservation Biology* 18.3 (2004): 604. In *Hiking Rocky Mountain National Park* (Guilford, CT: Morris Publishing, 2012), naturalist Kent Dannen cautions that while the burl’s “dense, contorted, wild, and disorderly grain structure” may be analogous to cancer in humans, the “medical analogy” should not spoil the burl: burls are “benign in that they do not harm the tree” (223).

In many respects, the contemporary insights of White and Nadkarni are not so different from the understanding of the correspondence between tumors and burls in early and medieval China. Two millennia ago in China, similar congruencies were drawn between deviant outgrowths of flesh and wood, of sinew and pith; there, too, the malformed arboreal growths were understood as goiters or tumors attached to trees.<sup>4</sup>

When analyzing the correspondence of tumors and burls in early and medieval China, the consonance between the human (*ren* 人) and natural (*tian* 天) worlds, one must take into account a central, deeply-imbedded cultural concept: the “mutual responsiveness between Nature (Heaven) and Man” (*tianren ganying* 天人感應).<sup>5</sup> In the *Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong Yong* 中庸), Eastern Zhou (771-481 BC) sage Confucius remarked that perspicacious sage kings of antiquity grasped “the transformative and regenerative processes of Heaven and Earth,” and thus patterned their governance upon the movements of the cosmos and the seasonal rhythm of nature.<sup>6</sup> From this and other sources, Joseph Needham reasonably observed that in early China such human laws, poetically and metaphorically derived from these larger elemental and cosmic processes, “mirror[ed] certain desirable qualities seen in non-human nature.”<sup>7</sup> Contemporary scholar

---

<sup>4</sup> In the Chinese sources discussed herein, several noted exceptions aside, the characters *liu* 瘤 (tumor) and *ying* 癭 (goiter) are used for burls.

<sup>5</sup> Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒 (179-104 BC), the famous Han dynasty Confucian scholar-statesmen, helped systematize and amplify this idea of the “mutual responsiveness between Heaven and man.”

<sup>6</sup> Confucius, trans. by Andrew Plaks, *Ta Hsüeh and Chung Yung* (The Highest Order of Cultivation and On the Practice of the Mean) (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 53, entry 32.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Needham, “Human Laws and Laws of Nature in China and the West (II): Chinese Civilization and the Laws of Nature,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 12.2 (1951): 201.

Wang Yuquan articulated the moral implications of this principle of “mutual responsiveness”: “Evil done by a ruler finds its reflection in natural phenomena. Thus, any anomalous happenings in nature, such as eclipses of the sun and moon, and any calamities, such as floods droughts, earthquakes, locusts, were construed as signs of warnings by Heaven toward the misbehavior or misgovernment of the ruler of man.”<sup>8</sup> Mark Elvin, an environmental historian of late imperial China, coined the term “moral meteorology” to describe this phenomenon or the notion that “seasonal or unseasonal, appropriate or excessive” weather and climate accorded with virtuous or improper conduct of the ruler.<sup>9</sup> In premodern China, this concept extended far beyond meteorology to a wider range of natural and environmental phenomena.

This correspondence between the human and natural worlds is readily apparent in the works and words of celebrated seventh century master physician Sun Simiao 孫思邈, who claimed that “Heaven and humanity are identical.” When early Tang 唐dynasty

---

<sup>8</sup> Wang Yu-ch’uan, “An Outline of the Central Government of the Former Han Dynasty,” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 12.1/2 (1949): 164-65.

Referring to this *ganying* 感應 as “an all-pervasive paradigm in every aspect of medieval [Chinese] thought,” James Benn defines it as “stimulus-response” or “sympathetic response.” In his articulation, “*ganying* determines the relationship between humans and heaven. It is understood that human actions and emotions can and do cause cosmic response and transformation.” See James Benn, “Biographies of Eight Autocremators and Huijiao’s ‘Critical Evaluation,’” in Wendy Swartz, Robert Campney, Yang Lu, and Jessey Choo, *Early Medieval China: A Sourcebook* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 545-46.

<sup>9</sup> Mark Elvin, “Who Was Responsible for the Weather? Moral Meteorology in Late Imperial China,” *Osiris*, 2nd series Vol. 13 (1998): 213–14. Elvin traces the conceptual origins of “moral meteorology” back to the “Great Plan” (Hongfan 洪範) chapter in the *Book of History* (Shangshu 尚書), one of the earliest canonical works. In *Retreat of the Elephants* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), Elvin elaborates and further develops “moral meteorology”—this notion that “the Chinese understanding of the environment interacted with orthodox morality, and...favorable or unfavorable weather was seen as a message of Heaven’s approval or disapproval” (xx). See in particular Chapter 12, “Imperial Dogma and Personal Perspectives.”

(618-907) poet Lu Zhaolin 盧照鄰 asked Sun the guiding principles of medicine, the doctor responded:

I have heard that if one is skilled at talking about Heaven, one must substantiate it in the human realm; if one is skilled at talking about humans, one must also root it in Heaven. In Heaven, there are four seasons and five phases; winter cold and summer heat alternate with each other. When this cyclical revolution is harmonious, it forms rain; when it is angry, wind; when it congeals, frost and snow; when it stretches out, rainbows. These are the constancies of Heaven and Earth. Humans have four limbs and five internal organs. They alternate between being awake and sleeping. In exhaling and inhaling, spitting out and sucking in, essence and *qi* leave and come. In their flow, they constitute provision and defense, they manifest as facial color, and they erupt as sound. These are the constancies of humanity. *Yang* employs the form, *yin* employs the essence. This is where Heaven and humanity are identical. When [the constancies] are lost, if [*qi* and essence] steam upward, they cause heat; if they are blocked, cold; **if bound, they become tumors and excrescences; if they sink, abscesses** 結而為瘤敖, 陷而為癰疽; if they scatter wildly, panting and dyspnea; and if they are exhausted, scorching and withering. Their symptoms arise on the face, and their transformations move around in the body. When one extends this analogy to apply it to Heaven and Earth, it is also likewise. Thus the waxing and waning of the Five Planets, the irregular motions of the constellations, the eclipses of the sun and moon, the flight of shooting stars, these are Heaven and Earth's symptoms of danger. Unseasonable winter cold and summer heat are the ascent or blockage [of *qi* and essence] in Heaven and Earth. **Upright boulders and upthrust earth are the tumors and excrescences of Heaven and Earth** 石立土踴,天地之瘤敖也. Collapsing mountains and caved-in ground are the abscesses of Heaven and Earth. Scattered winds and violent rains are the panting and dyspnea of Heaven and Earth. Dried-up streams and parched marshes are the scorching and withering of Heaven and Earth. An excellent physician guides [*qi*] with medicines and [lancing] stones and rescues with needles and prescriptions. A sage[ly ruler] harmonizes [*qi*] to perfect his power and uses this as support in order to manage the affairs of humanity. Thus, the human body has illnesses that can be cured, and Heaven and Earth have calamities that can be dispersed.<sup>10</sup>

There is a consonance between the earth and the human body. During illness, the human body suffers afflictions equivalent to seismic distress, to the erupting growths that pock

<sup>10</sup> *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 [Old Tang History], comp. Liu Xu 劉煦 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997; hereafter *JTS*), 191.5095-96. Slightly modified translation from Sabine Wilms, <https://www.happygoatproductions.com/sun-simiao-biography/>, accessed 10 December 2016.

and gaping crevasses that score the terrestrial crust. When the flow of one's male *yang* and female *yin* essences are obstructed or out of kilter, disease and illness ensue; when the flow of these terrestrial ethers is constricted or become disharmonious, mountains crumble and marshes wither.

Buddhist texts from the same era make similar claims: Daoshi's seventh century *Pearl Forest of the Dharma Garden* reads, "When mountains crumble and the ground sinks, it is due to the ruptured carbuncles and ulcers of heaven and earth."<sup>11</sup> In that same text, in a section titled, "causality of stimulus-response" (*ganying yuan* 感應緣), a similar passage appears: "Thus, erect stones and upthrust soil are the acne and pimples of heaven and earth; collapsed mountains collapsing and sunken earth are carbuncles and subcutaneous ulcers; pelting rains and violent winds are the turbulent *qi* of heaven and earth; when rain and moisture fail to fall and rivers run dry it is the parched withering of heaven and earth."<sup>12</sup> These eruptions do not arise without cause.

In Confucian and Buddhist traditions, tumors appear in some instances as moral retribution, as punishment meted out as a result of bad conduct, of transgression—or, alternatively, as an unfortunate malady that might be potentially remedied by ethical conduct. On the Confucian side of the ledger, there is a story of Zeng Kangzu 曾康祖, a filial son from the Northern Qi 齊 (550-577), whose mother suffered from breast cancer (*ruyong* 乳癰) that physicians deemed incurable. Weeping piteously, the son knelt and, with both hands, solicitously cupped her cancerous breast. Miraculously, his mother's

---

<sup>11</sup> Daoshi 道世 (d. 683), *Fayuan zhulin* 法苑珠林, *Taisho Tripitaka* (hereafter T.) 53.2122, chapter 80.

<sup>12</sup> *Fayuan zhulin*, T. 53.2122, chapter 63.

tumor was then cured.<sup>13</sup> This feel-good anecdote—situated in the *ganying* section of the Song collection *Miscellaneous Records of Taiping Era*—shows that sincere filial devotion can elicit a positive response from the gods/spirits, from the cosmos. In a Buddhist text dating from the Eastern Jin 東晉 (265-420), the *Sutra on Karmic Retribution for Hungry Ghosts*, a tormented spirit in the underworld asks, “I have received this form, these swollen feet and this goitered neck. From what sin does this result?” The telling answer is, “When you were human you made men and livestock bear heavy burdens without scruple, now you have received due karmic retribution in hell.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, in Buddhism a tumor could serve as a karmic “scarlet letter” betokening one’s crimes against the Buddha and the faith. These two instances share a moral calculus: principled Confucian filial piety was rewarded with the disappearance of a tumor, while contravention of Buddhist ethics resulted in tumescent torment as eternal punishment.

If cosmic and natural events can be understood as reflections and responses to human conduct and action, and if human principles are apprehended as poetic and metaphoric extensions of larger elemental processes, then did people in early and medieval China simply understand the growth of tumors as moral punishment meted out by all-seeing Heaven (*tian* 天) or the Buddha? If so, this principle, one would think that the grotesque, malformed intumescences bulging from trunks of trees would be relegated

---

<sup>13</sup> Li Fang 李方, *Taiping guangji* 太平廣記 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1996; hereafter *TPGJ*), 161.1165. This passage is originally found in another sixth century source attributed to Lu Sidao 盧思道 (535-86), no longer independently extant, called *Gathered Folk Anecdotes* (Tan suo 談纂). Fufeng 扶風 is located west of modern-day Xi’an, along the route to Baoji.

<sup>14</sup> Author unknown, *Egui baoying jing* 餓鬼報應經, T. 17.746. The underworld of the hungry ghosts is one of three bad realms of Buddhism, along with the realm of animals and the hells.

to the realm of the wicked and inauspicious. Surprisingly, this is not the case: the symbiotic system of *tianren ganying* was neither all-encompassing nor all-embracing.

Examining a series of passages involving burls in a wide range of early and medieval Chinese texts, this article seeks to complicate the schema of the moral universe of *ganying*. The anomalous tumescent growth, whether on tree or man, did not simply betoken evil. At different times, the polysemous tumor-burl might augur future greatness, serve as a miraculous womb chamber, help one assume a twisted guise assumed to survive tumultuous times, impress with its remarkable aesthetic asymmetry, or merely provide a moment of levity.

### **Burls and Goiters in the *Zhuangzi*: The Survival and Flourishing of the Disfigured**

Recent work on Daoism in the field of disability studies provides a surprising source for a clue into one of the reasons burls are not necessarily viewed as betokening inauspiciousness or evil in early and medieval China.<sup>15</sup> Michael Stolfus and Darla Schumm argue that in the Daoist worldview “efforts to categorize human health and vitality into organized medical distinctions and constructed social models are fluid and

---

<sup>15</sup> Though it is well beyond the purview of this paper to explore them all, there are, outside of Daoism, a number of other positive representations of the disabled and deformed in pre-modern Chinese thought. For instance, a number of celebrated shamans were known to be hunch-backed or crippled—see Edward H. Schafer, “Ritual Exposure in Ancient China.” *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 14 (1951): 130-84, esp. 160-62. And hard-edged Confucian thinker Xunzi 荀子 held up a lengthy parade of the deformed including many of the most significant culture heroes of ancient and early China:

Moreover, in appearance King Yan of Xu’s eyes were so protruded that he could see his forehead. Confucius’ face looked like it was covered with an exorcist’s mask, the Duke of Zhou’s body was like a broken stump. Gaoyao’s complexion was like that of a shaved melon. Hongyao’s face had no visible skin. Fuyue looked like he had a fin emerging from his back. Yi Yin had neither beard nor eyebrows. Yu was lame, and Tang was paralyzed. Yao and Shun had irregular pupils. Should we who follow them consider critically their will and intellect and compare them in terms of the character of their culture and learning? Or should we take note only of differences in size to discriminate between good and bad and so cheat and bring scorn upon ourselves?” See *Xunzi: A Translation and Study of the Complete Works, Volume 1, Books 1-6*, trans. John Knobloch (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 203-04.

incomplete,” which serves “to destabilize typical categories used for defining chronic disability thereby enabling us all to think more creatively and holistically about the complicating role of disability in human experience.”<sup>16</sup> With no generic or normative template for the human body or form, Daoist holism and skepticism of normative conceptual categories serves to mute the distinction between able and disabled.<sup>17</sup>

In particular, parables and stories contained in the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, a work of the fourth century B.C.—the very heart of China’s turbulent Warring States period (481-221 BC)—attributed to the Daoist sage Zhuang Zhou 莊周, complicates categories like useful and useless, able and disabled. Much as Simi Linton’s epiphany after a paralyzing car accident that her disability afforded her the alternative “vantage point of the atypical, the out-of-step, the under-footed,”<sup>18</sup> Zhuang Zhou, with numerous anecdotes involving amputees, hunchbacks, and men addled with goiters, recognized that the disfigured often apprehended reality through a fundamentally different lens, endowed with greater virtue and insight that allows them to outflank or earn the admiration of those fettered and

---

<sup>16</sup> Michael Stolzhus and Darla Schumm, “Beyond Models: Some Tentative Daoist Contributions to Disability Studies,” in *Disability and Religious Diversity: Cross-Cultural and Inter-Religious Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 119. In recent years, there has a number of other significant works on what Daoist perspectives might contribute to Disability Studies. In “Daoism and Disability,” a chapter in eds. Darla Schumm and Michael Stolzhus, *Disability and World Religions: An Introduction* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016), Andrew Lambert maintains that “Daoist thinking about the body undermines normative thinking about it that attributions of disabled are often dependent upon; and Daoism warns against the premature inferential leap from perceived and pronounced incapacity to a more general ‘uselessness’” (71). Olivia Milburn, “Marked Out for Greatness? Perceptions of Deformity and Physical Impairment in Ancient China,” *Monumenta Serica* 55 (2007): 1-22, notes that the *Zhuangzi* “comprehensively rejected” society’s “conventional attitudes toward the poor, criminal, and disabled,” recognizing that these groups might possess alternative perspectives and insights lost on most. Also see Crismon Lewis, “‘Use of the Useless’: Assessing Depictions of Disability in the *Zhuangzi*,” Thesis, Department of Asian and Near Eastern Languages, Brigham Young University, 2014. I would like to thank my colleagues Sarah Mattice and Greige Lott for bringing these sources to my attention.

<sup>17</sup> Lambert, “Daoism and Disability,” 76.

<sup>18</sup> Simi Linton, *My Body Politic: A Memoir* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), 3.

blinded by normative values. John Major has observed this recurrent pattern, remarking that frequently in Zhuangzi's short parables and anecdotes one finds, "a certain person or living thing has a defect that renders it useless from a conventional point of view, and takes advantage of the situation to nurture its own life." A recurrent motif in the *Zhuangzi*, efficacious "uselessness" serves a key to survival in both natural and human realms.<sup>19</sup>

In one passage in the *Zhuangzi*, powerful hegemon Duke Huan of Qi 齊桓公 (r. 685-643 BC), favoring the advice of a subject with an enormous goiter 瘰癧, begins to look askance at the calligraphy brush-thin necks of his other ministers.<sup>20</sup> In another, Confucius, as he often is in Daoist stories, is exposed as pedantic and narrow, humbled by the broad-minded perspicacity of a criminal amputee—a man who, while his body may be damaged, kept his primal virtue intact.<sup>21</sup> As Andrew Lambert observes, in Daoism the diseased and deformed neither adopt a posture of suffering nor call for a pitying response: many deformed figures prove to be influential and charismatic.<sup>22</sup> Another episode confuses conventional standards of "usefulness" and "uselessness": Crippled Shu, a man with his "chin stuck down in the navel, shoulders up above his head, pigtail pointing at the sky, his five organs on the top, his two thighs pressing his ribs,"

---

<sup>19</sup> John Major, "The Efficacy of Uselessness: A Chuang-tzu Motif," *Philosophy East and West* 25.3 (July 1975): 266.

<sup>20</sup> *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), 37 (hereafter Ziporyn); *Zhuangzi: Basic Writings*, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 70 (hereafter Watson); Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2001), 80 (hereafter Graham). In this instance, because of the location on the body, the neck, *ying* 瘰癧, can be understood as "goiter." At other times, it means tumor, wen, or other sort of swelling. See also Olivia Milburn, "Marked Out for Greatness?" 17-18.

<sup>21</sup> Ziporyn, 35; Watson, 66-67; Graham, 78-79.

<sup>22</sup> Lambert, "Daoism and Disability," 78.

sews, washes laundry, and winnows grain to make a living and meanwhile is passed over when the state conscripts laborers or levies soldiers, avoiding the perils in a chaotic, decadent era that lead to the maiming or death of countless more “useful” members of society. He is able to survive and “finish out the years Heaven gave him.”<sup>23</sup> When one suspends straitjacketed normative definitions and assumptions about “able” and “useful,” the indwelling virtue and efficacy of those conventionally relegated to the categories of “disabled” and “useless” can be discerned. The so-called “useful” and “able,” in vying to show their use and ability, end up having their vitality consumed and exhausted.

The *Zhuangzi* imputes to burls, to the contorted tumescences of the sylvan world, many of the same qualities that he attributes to the disabled. Useful and useless, beautiful and ugly, warped and straight—all of these human-wrought labels, categories, and judgments—are but subjective artifice.<sup>24</sup> That which is warped and contorted, deformed and misshapen, possesses as great (or, likely, greater) a function, an efficacy, and an aesthetic value as that which is straight and unblemished according to conventional metrics.

For instance, the Daoist sage appreciated a “useless” gnarled ailanthus tree, its trunk swollen by a burl (*daben yongzhong* 大本擁腫), spurned by the carpenter as unfit for timber, defying square, measuring line, and compass; in the shade of its warped limbs one might, idle and easily, relax like the tree itself free from grief and pain.<sup>25</sup> In this

---

<sup>23</sup> Ziporyn, 31; Watson, 61-62; Graham, 74.

<sup>24</sup> See Chen Guiying, *The Philosophy of Life: A New Reading of the Zhuangzi*, trans. Dominique Hertzner (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 24-25.

<sup>25</sup> From *Zhuangzi*, Inner chapter 1, “Free and Easy Wandering” (Xiaoyao you 逍遙遊). See Ziporyn, 8; Watson, 29-30; Graham, 37. In this anecdote, Zhuangzi rhetorically outmaneuvers Huizi 惠子 (Hui Shi 惠施, fourth cent BC), of the rival School of Names. Albert Galvany, in “Discussing Usefulness: Trees as

sense, Albert Galvany points out, the warped and stinking tree, with its “gnarled and knotty trunk and branches twisted into incredible shapes,” defies human artifice, thwarting the tools and calipers of “uniformity and conformity” that fill “the repressive panoply, the disciplinary arsenal of the political and administrative institutions.”<sup>26</sup> The burl or knot has its own logic, a contorted grain that not only resists, but stymies, the plumb lines and rectilinear thinking used to reshape the natural world in accordance with human order. Elsewhere the *Zhuangzi* recounts the “piping of earth,” wondrous music created as the wind courses through mountain forests, whistling through massive trees, “a

---

Metaphors in the *Zhuangzi*,” *Monumenta Serica* 57 (2009): 78, notes that the ailanthus tree (chu 樗) mentioned in this passage, while of Indonesian origin, was known in China as a “noxious plant” from the hoary times of the *Book of Songs* (Shijing 詩經) in the Western Zhou dynasty (1045-771 BC).

The *Zhuangzi* contains a number of other anecdotes involving burl-ridden or otherwise “useless” trees saved from the axe by their perceived uselessness. Indeed, it is a recurring motif. The Carpenter Shi from the state of Qi walks by an enormous tree without a glance because boats made from its branches would sink, coffins crafted from its wood would rot, and its beams and columns from would prove vermiculated and unusable. The tree then appears to the carpenter and explains that, unlike those fruit-bearing trees damaged by rough human touch, it has worked long and hard to be useless (*Zhuangzi*, Inner Chapters, ch. 4; Ziporyn, 30-31; Watson, 59-60; Graham, 72-73). This is immediately followed by another anecdote about a massive “gnarled and twisted” (quanqu 拳曲) tree useless for beams and coffin wood, toxic to the taste. It is contrasted with catalpas, cypresses, and mulberries used in pillars and coffins, chopped down long before their Heaven-allotted time (Ziporyn, 31; Watson 60-61; Graham 72-73). Holy men (shen ren 神人) should aspire to mimic the supposed worthlessness of the former. At the end of the same chapter, the same theme is developed further: “The cinnamon tree is edible, and thus gets chopped down. The lacquer tree is useful, thus gets cut down” (Ziporyn, 32; Watson, 62). *Zhuangzi*’s deformed trees of prodigious size grow “completely free” of the tree husbandry and “constant cultivation” that destroys other trees deemed useful by conventional standards (see Galvany, “Discussing Usefulness,” 94-95).

In the Outer Chapters there are several additional passages. In the “Horse’s Hooves” (Mati 馬蹄), Chapter 9, to a carpenter who boasts that he is skilled at warping or straightening wood to fit the tasks, the *Zhuangzi* rhetorically asks, “Do you suppose the wood wants to match the compass, T-square, arc, or line?” (Ziporyn, 61). This is reinforced in the following chapter: “Destroying virgin woods to make utensils is the crime of the carpenter; to wreck the original way and pristine virtue is the abuse of the sage” (trans. from Galvany, 95). The section titled the “Mountain Tree” (Chapter 20, shanmu 山木), which complicates the ideas of worth and worthlessness, use and usefulness (Ziporyn, 84; Graham, 121); it also contains the passage “Straight-grained trees are the first to chopped down; sweet-watered wells are the first to run dry” 直木先伐, 甘井先竭 (zhimu xian fa, ganjing xianjie).

<sup>26</sup> Galvany, “Discussing Usefulness,” 79. Galvany goes on to remark that “*Zhuangzi*’s thought shows up the artificiality and the anti-natural character of this repressive [Confucian-Legalist) system...that legitimizes the reforming and homogenizing action of the tools of measure and measurement” (80). Lambert, in “*Daoism and Disability*,” argues that *Zhuangzi* does not place value on the ideal of the intact physical form because his alternative conception of body extends far beyond the generic physical form. While broken, disabled bodies may not fit “the conventional mold of the normal body” they often are an integral, bodily part of a “larger whole” in the surrounding environs of the natural world (77-84).

hundred spans around with hollows and openings like noses, like mouths, like ears, like jugs, like cups, like mortars, like rifts, like ruts.”<sup>27</sup> A wondrous symphony issues from knotted, misshapen trees!

As Galvany frames it, with trees and humans alike, “Zhuangzi renders ineffective, and turns on its head, any prejudice about malformation, deformity, or physical anomaly”: burls and gnarled “mass[es] of virgin wood never subjected to the ax” are analogous to the “wild” precivilized human being living in perfect harmony with the natural world.”<sup>28</sup> The burlled and deformed of the world can be endowed with greater virtue and insight; indeed, wisdom is reflected by their gnarled, burl-ridden countenance.<sup>29</sup> In these parables, while able men and straight-grained trees are exhausted and consumed, disfigured humans like Crippled Shu and “useless” trees survive and avoid calamity, living peaceably to full natural allotment of their years. Men with excrescences flourish—like the goitered retainer of Duke Huan of Qi, who gains prestige and renown—and contorted “useless” trees luxuriate, growing to prodigious size unmolested by human hand or chopping implement. One such treant appears to a carpenter in a dream, telling the craftsman that its apparent “uselessness” was, in fact, a long-cultivated and hard-won asset.<sup>30</sup>

Reflecting its wider cultural influence, the luxuriant foliage and welcome shade of Zhuangzi’s burlled or knotted “useless” trees grew from early Daoist roots to cast a wider

---

<sup>27</sup> Zhuangzi, Inner chapter 2, see Ziporyn, 9; Graham, 48-49; Watson, 31-32; Graham, 48-49.

<sup>28</sup> Galvany, “Discussing Usefulness,” 92 and 96.

<sup>29</sup> One might think of the wizened Treebeard and the wise, ancient Ents in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* stories.

<sup>30</sup> Ziporyn, 30; Watson 60; Graham, 73.

(if still salubrious) shadow. The conception is seamlessly transplanted in Ji Han's 稽含 (263-306) Western Jin 西晉 work on botany, *Trees and Plants of the Southern Regions* (Nanfang Caomu zhuang 南方草木狀). Of the narrow-leafed banyan tree, the author writes: “The wood is gnarled and bent and can neither be fashioned into utensils, nor used as lumber. It does not burn, so it is unfit for fuel. It has absolutely no use, so it cannot be harmed. It can shade over ten *mu* though, so people rest under it.”<sup>31</sup> Apparently the narrow-leafed banyan—possessing both the “uselessness” and inviting shade of Zhuangzi's ailanthus—had a truly massive canopy: Ten *mu* 畝 is roughly the equivalent of 1.4 acres!

### ***Burls as Precious Carving Wood***

When one examines the manner in which the burl—these oddities, these misshapen aberrations of nature, these grotesque growths—were utilized, spoken of, and handled, it tells a curious story. Despite the distinctive, grotesque appearance of burls, people, spanning cultures and time, have discovered in them both aesthetic qualities and utility. Aquatic pathologist and wood-turner Wolfgang Vogelbein has remarked that the peculiar “aesthetic appeal” and “intricate designs” of fish tumors are similar to the burl's “beautiful grain pattern, often enhanced by colors from bacterial infection or boring

---

<sup>31</sup> Ji Han, *Nan-fang ts'ao-mu chuang: A Fourth Century Flora of Southeast Asia*, trans. Li Hui-lin (Hong Kong: Chinese University of Hong Kong Press, 1979), 80. I would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewer for *Environment and History* for bringing this passage to my attention. The translation here is slightly modified from Li Hui-lin's. This passage (with a few minor variations) also appears in local gazetteers from late imperial China like the *Xin'an County Annals* 新安縣志 from Guangzhou 廣州 during the Jiaqing 嘉慶 emperor's rule (1796-1820) in the Qing.

insect's labyrinth."<sup>32</sup> Likely caused by a fungus or damage to the cortex, burls, *Scientific American* gushes, possess “beautiful variegated colors, bird's eye markings, and graceful wavy grain that far surpass those of any other wood in intricate design and color.”<sup>33</sup> Another term is also connected to these aesthetically-pleasing growths, the word *gutu* 骨鬪, which anthropologist Berthold Laufer contends, “denotes the burls or knotty excrescences on the trunks of various trees which...owing to their fine veneer, are chosen with a predilection for carvings, particularly of bowls.”<sup>34</sup>

Based upon his analysis of a collection of wooden belt toggles (*zhuizi* 墜子) Schuyler Cammann determined that many toggles fashioned in traditional China were crafted with wood from burls. Beyond their utilitarian function in helping to secure pouches, fan cases, knives and the like to a cord, these toggles served as auspicious tokens. Cammann claims that according to Chinese religious beliefs the excrescent burl, a

---

<sup>32</sup> Mark Shrope, “Science and Culture: Turning to Wood,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 111.47 (November 25, 2014): 16663.

<sup>33</sup> “A Black Walnut Burl,” *Scientific American* 108.18 (May 3, 1913): 408. No author given.

<sup>34</sup> Berthold Laufer, “Supplementary Notes on Walrus and Narwhal Ivory,” *T'oung Pao*, second series, 17.3 (1916): 359-60. This term *gutu* appears in *Xin Tang shu* 新唐書 [New Tang History], comp. Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1997; hereafter *XTS*), 39.1023, where it is listed with ginseng, deer musk, and leopard tails and pelts as local tribute from Yingzhou 營州 in the northeast part of the realm, an area in modern-day Liaoning 遼寧 that sometimes fell under control of the Khitan (see also Laufer, 369). Laufer contends that *gutu* means something with an “osseous nature,” and convincingly argues that it may well indicate walrus ivory.

Burl-carved bowls certainly are not unique to early China. Laufer notes that from obdurate burls of oak, maple, and other trees, Tibetans carve beautiful eating-bowls with a “peculiar veins,” with an ivory-like appearance. Laufer (360) notes the ivory-like appearance of these obdurate Tibetan bowls that led to the confusion between wooden *gutu* 骨鬪 and bone *gutu*. Many groups of American Indians—from the Micmac to peoples of the Great Lakes region to the Pacific Northwest—fashioned out of burls ceremonial bowls, vested with “supernatural powers” and “important social and religious functions.” See Evan Maurer, “Representational and Symbolic Forms in Great-Lakes Area Wooden Sculpture,” *Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts* 62.1 (1986): 10. In late imperial China, camphor, cypress, willow, birch and rosewood burls, sometimes known as *huamu* 花木, flower wood, were used in furniture making. See Kaner, J., et al., “A Re-evaluation of Woods Used in Chinese Historical Furniture,” *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov*, Series II Vol. 6 (55).1 (2013): 17.

“supernatural swelling,” contained an “indwelling divine spirit,” “a great part of the magic spirit...[the] inner essence of the tree,” thus making its gnarled grain particularly prized for toggle amulets. The irregular contortions, the twisted grain of the burl, creates “a number of small knots in confused clusters,” a characteristic that held a tremendous aesthetic appeal as the swirling grain was “like rushing waters parting around rocks of a swift-flowing river.” In polished, oiled toggles these convoluted grains appeared as mountains or fantastical creatures. Thus “endowed with special powers and virtues,” the burl was ideal for fashioning auspicious or apotropaic pendants.<sup>35</sup> Their unique, idiosyncratic grain was also cherished in Chinese furniture making.<sup>36</sup>

The notion that burls possess an inordinate numinous power is borne out in a number of passages. One passage from *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era* (originally from the tenth century Liu Xun’s 劉恂 *Records of Strange Things in Guangdong and Guangxi* (Lingbiao luyi 嶺表錄異) corroborates Cammann’s claim that people believed tokens crafted with wood from burls contained a mystical potency:

Amidst the Southern Peaks grow many maple trees. Quite a few of the older trees developed tumescent burls (liuying 瘤癭). After violent thunder and torrential rain, these excrescences suddenly grow three feet overnight! Southerners call them “maple men” (fengren 楓人). A shaman of Yue 越 said, “If you obtain them, you can carve spirits and demons. Because they are extraordinary, they possess numinous efficacy.”<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>35</sup> Schuyler Cammann, “Magical and Medicinal Woods in Old Chinese Carvings,” *The Journal of American Folklore* Vol. 74, No. 292 (April-June 1961): 119-23. Margaret Duda has also written on the use of burls for toggles, see *Traditional Chinese Toggles* (Singapore: Editions Didier Millet Pte, 2011), 26.

<sup>36</sup> Zhang Xiaoming, *Chinese Furniture* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 35.

<sup>37</sup> TPGJ 407.3289.

The name “maple men” suggests that like ginseng root or mandrake, these burls took on human shape or form.<sup>38</sup> Like tumors in the human world, burls were extraordinary in the arboreal realm. The rapidity of the growth of the “maple men”—apparently nurtured by storms and violent rains—attests to their numinous essence. With their unusual and contorted, yet humanoid, form, these excrescences and the tendrils that grew from them could be used to craft spirits (shen 神) and demons (gui 鬼), presumably allowing the shaman to use these talismanic effigies for blessings and protection.

Nobles from Luoyang travelling southward to greater Mount Song—an area dotted with Buddhist temples and Daoist monasteries where emperors built summer palaces to escape the heat—bestowed various gifts upon ascetics and recluses wandering the mountains including tokens carved from wooden burls. In a passage from the *New Tang History*, Wu Youxu 武攸緒, a nephew of female emperor Wu Zhao 武曩 (r. 690-705), was a recluse who wandered around the mountains south of Luoyang living in straw huts by winter and stone caves in the spring. He didn’t accept gifts that princes and dukes offered, whether elaborate gold and silver four-footed wine vessels and cauldrons, or simple and spare deerskin cloaks, undecorated screens, and rough-hewn burl cups (yingbei 癭杯).<sup>39</sup> When fashioning a cup, the curious, swirling grain of the burl would make a beautiful, variegated vessel. One might surmise that the nobles from the Eastern Capital presenting carefully-crafted yet unadorned, naturalistic, rough and simple items is evident of an emergent aesthetic—a recluse’s rustic chic, perhaps anticipating the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic that reached its maturity centuries later in Japan.

---

<sup>38</sup> For a comparison of these two “man-shaped” roots, see Stephen Fulder, *The Book of Ginseng: And Other Chinese Herbs for Vitality* (Rochester, Vermont: Healing Arts Press, 1993), 106-07.

<sup>39</sup> XTS 196.5602.

In the “Treatises on Flora” (Caomu 草木) section of *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era*—originally from a collection of “accounts of anomalies” (zhiguai 志怪) dating to the Tang, the *Yuanhua ji* 原化記—there is another passage which clearly supports that notion that burls were carved into precious items and that these growths contained great numinous potency.

Once the son of scholar-gentleman (shiren 士人), a master wood carver, passed a massive, outspreading locust tree on a mountain road between Chang’an and Luoyang. At its root were four huge burls 瘤癭 the size of *weng* 瓮—earthen urns. Because he didn’t have an axe or saw, and feared someone might take the burls, he conceived of a plan and cut paper into paper money which he fastened to the burls 樹瘤. That way, other by-passers would think the locust tree was a spirit tree (shen shu 神樹) and wouldn’t dare cut it down. Later, he led back a troop of men with axes and machetes to cut down the tree. When they reached the locust tree, they found paper money everywhere, votive images, and a small niche to burn incense. At first the young gentleman laughed and remarked, “The ignorant villagers really believed in the spirit. They sure are muddle-headed!” But when they were about to sever the burls with axes an imposing purple-robed spirit intervened, and barked, “Cut not this tree!” The gentleman responded, “I’ve been here before. I saw the locust burls 槐瘤 and wanted them, but lacked axes and saws. I was afraid someone else would take them so I cut up paper money to protect my property. There was no spirit here before. How is it that Your Eminence came to stop here?”

The spirit replied, “After you, Sir, cut up the paper money and fastened it to the tree, everyone said it was a “Spirit Tree” that could grant good and ill fortune, and all came to offer prayers and present sacrifices. Thereupon the clerks in the underworld sent me to receive these prayers and offerings. So now there’s a spirit here! If you persist, you’ll meet with disaster!”

The gentleman paid no heed.

The spirit asked, “Why do you need these burls?”

“I wish to carve them into precious vessels,” answered the young artisan.

The spirit answered, “If that’s how it is, can I redeem the tree for a good price?”

“Okay,”

“How much will it take [to make you leave],” asked the spirit.

“100 bolts of silk,” the craftsman responded.

“Then,” answered the spirit, “I shall now present you with 100 bolts of silk. Five *li* from here there is a ruined tumulus. The silk lies within.”

When the gentleman and his attendants arrived at the site of the ruined tumulus, they discovered the promised silk inside. Not one bolt was lacking.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> TPGJ 416.3389.

This curious negotiation between artisan and spirit in this anecdote reinforces the sense that burls were carved into valuable and precious utensils and vessels: Four unworked good-sized locust burls commanded 100 bolts of silk—25 bolts of silk per burl. One gets the sense that the huge burls marked the locust tree as extraordinary, an arboreal anomaly suited to host a spirit or a divine presence (though despite the tutelary spirit’s imposing manner and threats, the artisan remained wholly unintimidated).

### ***Burl as Womb Chamber: A Buddhist Miracle Tale***

Buddhist miracle tales are a sub-genre of *zhiguai* 志怪 stories, “accounts of anomalies.” Robert Campany, who has extensively researched and analyzed these stories, contends that beginning in the fourth century literati who sought “to promote Buddhist values and practices,” deployed such “accounts of anomalies,” already an established Chinese literary genre—to reach a skeptical non-monastic audience.<sup>41</sup> By the Tang, when Buddhism was part of the very cultural fabric of the realm, such stories were widespread and mainstream. Appearing in the *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era*, originally from the *Shi yi* 史遗 (Historical remnants), a burl makes a curious appearance in one such account as a womb chamber that births a promising scholar:

Wang Fanzhi 王梵志 was a man of Liyang in Weizhou. In the time of Sui Wendi 隋文帝, fifteen miles east of Liyang in a grove of crabapple trees Wang Dezu 王德祖 discovered a tree with a growth the size of a *dou* 斗-measure. After three years it began to get rotten, so Wang Dezu peeled off its bark and discovered a fetus. He took it home and raised it. After seven years the child could speak and asked, “Who has raised me? What is my name?” Wang called him Sylvan Brahma (linmu fantian 林木梵天), but later changed it to Wang Fanzhi. The child said, “The Wang family

---

<sup>41</sup> Robert Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012), 2.

raised me, so I can take the surname Wang.” Fanzhi then composed poems and showed them to people. They were profoundly meaningful.<sup>42</sup>

A man discovers an infant born from the rotted pith of a crabapple burl. Originally bestowing upon the foundling the grandiose name Sylvan Brahma, but perhaps feeling that such a name projected Buddhist hubris and might bring misfortune on the child and the family, the father-finder changed it to the more modest Wang Fanzhi. The foundling became a well-known poet. Rong Xinjiang describes Wang Fanzhi’s (his name can be understood as Wang the Brahmacerin, Wang the [Buddhist] abstinent) poetry as folksy and “simple and easy to understand,” yet acknowledges that some manifest a “pessimistic ideology that preach[es] about karmic retribution.”<sup>43</sup> Again, the tumescent growth turned out not to be ill-omened; it engendered a talented poet. The child born of a tree calls to mind the Japanese story of Princess Kaguya, a tiny princess from the lunar realm of spirits and gods discovered by an old bamboo cutter in the knot or joint of a bamboo tree. This Heian-era story, written in the early tenth century and referenced in the *Tale of Genji*, may have its origins in Tang China.<sup>44</sup> *The Tale of the Hollow Tree* (Utsubo monogatari うつぼ物語) features a filial prodigy-hero raised by his mother, who teaches

---

<sup>42</sup> TPGJ 82.525.

<sup>43</sup> Rong Xinjiang, *Eighteen Lectures on Dunhuang* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), Lecture 14, 410. Wang Fantian’s poems have been found recorded on documents unearthed in Dunhuang 敦煌.

Charles Egan identifies his verses as vernacular “proselytizing poems.” See Egan, *Clouds Thick, Whereabouts Unknown: Poems by Zen Monks of China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 177. Egan also translates the passage from the *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era*. Instead of “Sylvan Brahma,” he translates his initial name as “Brahma deva of the Tree.” Wang’s poems made the rounds in Tang and Song China, and circulated in Heian Japan. Stephen Owen, in *The Cambridge History of Chinese Literature*, 320 and 326, contends that Wang Fanzhi was very possibly not a person, but “the name under which a type of moralizing and pedagogic poem was gathered.”

<sup>44</sup> For a translation of the *Takatori monogatari*, see Donald Keene’s translation in *Traditional Japanese Literature*, Haruo Shirane ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 114-28. For the reference in *Genji*, see Murasaki Shikibu, *The Tale of Genji*, Washburn trans. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2015), 365-66. Recently, the story was vividly retold in Isao Takahata’s *The Tale of Princess Kaguya* (Toho Studios, 2013).

him how to play a magical zither, inside a hollow cedar tree in the mountains.<sup>45</sup> Tree-born beings like Wang Fanzhi or Heian Japan's Princess Kaguya were extraordinary.<sup>46</sup>

### ***Prophecy of a Goiter-Riddled Son of Heaven***

In the *Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance* (Zizhi tongjian 資治通鑑), shortly after the restoration of the Han dynasty, it is recorded that in 26 AD, seeking to overthrow the fragile throne, Prince of Zhending Liu Yang 劉楊 created a prophetic verse that went, “After the red nine, the burl-ridden willow will rise as lord.” Yang suffered from goiters (ying 癭) and wished to deceive the masses. “赤九之後，癭楊為主。” 楊病癭，欲以惑眾. According to intertextual annotations attributed to Li Xian 李賢 (651-84), reputed second son of female emperor Wu Zhao, the Han dynasty was associated with the virtue of fire (huode 火德) and the color red (chi 赤); ruling emperor Han Guangwu 漢光武帝 (r. 25-57 AD) was the ninth generation grandson of Han founder Gaozu 漢高祖 (r. 202-195 BC). Helpfully, the commentator goes on to explain that “goiters initiate on the neck and are attached to the pharynx” 癭生頸而附於咽. According to the “prophecy,” Liu Yang, “the burl-ridden willow,” would succeed Han

---

<sup>45</sup> For a plot synopsis of *The Tale of the Hollow Tree*, see Shuichi Kato and Don Sanderson, *A History of Japanese Literature: From the Man'yōshū to Modern Times* (Japan Library, 1997), 64. The contemporary anime *Kubo and the Two Strings* (Focus Features, 2016) draws on elements of this story.

<sup>46</sup> While there is no miraculous birth involved and the tumescent growth in the story is not a womb chamber, there is another anecdote from Duan Chengshi's 段成式 late Tang work *Scattered Morsels of Youyang* 酉阳杂俎 associates Tang poet Zhang Wengui 張文規 with burls. In a scenic spot to the east of Luoyang, Zhang (from nearby Yishi 猗氏) had an estate near the confluence of three streams. Suddenly the branches of one of the bamboos sprouted a growth (ying 癭) the size of a plum.

This story appears in *TPGJ* 412.3350. Zhang Wengui lived during the late Tang (ninth century). Several of his poems are contained in Dong Gao 董誥, *Quan Tangwen* 全唐文 [Complete Anthology of Tang Prose] (Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 1996; hereafter *QTW*), ch. 366.

Guangwu as ruler and emperor. Allying with bandits, Liu Yang tried to ride this claim to be a prophesied rightful son of heaven to the throne; however, he was expediently and unceremoniously defeated and executed by Han troops.<sup>47</sup>

The goiter in this instance was represented as a portentous anomaly, part of a prophecy indicating that Liu Yang is the chosen one, worthy of being a new emperor. Liu Yang's gambit, spinning Five Phases (wuxing 五行) theory and his disease into a cloth of folksy prophecy, was apparently the sort of ruse that the masses might believe. Chinese history features a number of extraordinary figures who possessing unusual physical defects or characteristics. Liu Yang perhaps sought to join the ranks of sages and culture heroes possessing unusual physical defects or characteristics, Han dynastic founder Gaozu with the constellation of 72 moles on his thigh, four-eyed creator of script Cang Jie 倉頡, four-nippled sage ruler King Wen 文王, and lame and hunchbacked flood-queller Yu the Great 大禹. While it was not the norm, being misshapen or deformed could potentially mark a special heavenly dispensation.<sup>48</sup>

### ***The Burl in Humorous Anecdotes***

In the “Humorous Anecdotes” (hui xie 詼諧) chapter of *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era* there are two stories that involve burls. The first comes from Hou Bai's 侯白 early Sui-era *Record of Smiles* (Qiyán lù 啟顏錄) :

---

<sup>47</sup> *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 [Comprehensive Mirror for the Advancement of Governance], comp. Sima Guang 司馬光 (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1995), 40.

<sup>48</sup> In “Marked Out for Greatness?” Olivia Milburn illustrates that in ancient and early China there were complex and varied views and perceptions of physical impairment. Of course, deformities did not always mean that one was “marked out for greatness.” Indeed, Milburn contends that, “for the vast majority of disabled people, their lives were a constant struggle against prejudice and discrimination” (22).

A man from Shandong married a woman from Puzhou. They were deeply worried that she would develop a tumor 癭, for his wife's mother had a very large goiter on her neck. After they were married for several months, the man's father-in-law, suspecting his son-in-law wasn't clever, set up a lavish banquet gathering all his relatives, to test him. The father-in-law asked, "You've read books for a spell in Shandong and should have grasped some principles. So why is it that the swan and crane sing so?"

The son in law answered, "Because nature made them so."

The father-in-law asked, "Why is that pines and cypresses are evergreens?"

The son in law replied, "Because nature made them so."

The father-in-law continued his inquest: "And why do roadside trees develop burls (gutu 骨鬲) or rot?"

The son-in-law answered, "Because nature made them so."

The father-in-law scoffed, "You've completely failed to recognize the principle. For what cause have you been idling in Shandong? Cranes and swans sing so because their necks are long. The pine and cypress are evergreens because they have stout hearts. Roadside trees develop burls because carts scrape them—how is it that all of this as nature deems?"

The son-in-law asked, may I propose a toast and respectfully rebut all that I have just heard?" The father-in-law allowed it, so the son-in-law responded, "A toad can sing yet it has no long neck. Bamboo remain green all winter, yet do not have a stout heart. Your wife's neck has a massive goiter, and yet no carts have scraped it off."

Thus, the father-in-law was left ashamed and speechless.<sup>49</sup>

The punch line in this humorous anecdote hinges on a general acceptance of the fluid metonymy between the burl on a roadside tree and the goiter on a mother-in-law's neck. Rhetorically outflanked by his son-in-law and publicly reminded of his wife's grotesque goiter, the scheming father in law was made to look the fool. While there is no social or moral stigma attached to the goiter (it did nothing to stop the joining of the two families), its lumpy presence is fair game for the son-in-law's comic riposte.

Another humorous anecdote involving a burl appears in a ninth century Tang text, *Miscellaneous Writings of Master Lu* (Lushi Zashuo 盧氏雜說), written by Lu Yan 卢言

---

<sup>49</sup> TPGJ 248.1922-23.

(and also appearing in the “Humorous Anecdotes” section of *Miscellaneous Records of the Taiping Era*):

In the Tang, in the days when Duke of Jin Pei Du was prime minister, someone sent him a locust tree burl 槐癭. He wished to have it carved into a pillow. At this time, he summoned Yu Wei, a court gentlemen whom all of society said had an extensive knowledge of the natural world, to examine it. After turning it over in his hands for some time, Yu Wei explained: “This locust wood burl is female. I’m afraid it’s unfit for use [as a pillow].” Pei Du asked, “Sir, how old are you according to the sexagenary cycle (of heavenly stems and earthly branches)?” Yu answered, “Like you, Duke, I was born in the jia-chen 甲辰 year.” Then the Duke laughed, “In that case, Sir, you are the female *jia-chen*.”<sup>50</sup>

Yu Wei’s response illustrates that even back in the mid-Tang, a learned naturalist already possessed the knowledge that some arboreal species like the locust were dioecious, having separate male and female trees that possessed different qualities.<sup>51</sup> Locust wood was frequently used for pillows.<sup>52</sup> Part of the humor may involve Pei Du’s consternation that the expert Yu Wei has declared an excrescent (male, phallic) growth of wood (a male element in Five Phases theory) as female.<sup>53</sup> Less knowledgeable in the realm of botany, Pei Du likely found the notion of gendered trees droll—indeed, the very idea that the wood of the female tree might, possessing the character of soft and pliant feminine *yin* 陰, be unfit for carving (as folks liked hard pillows, these headrests were made of wood,

---

<sup>50</sup> TPGJ 250.1944.

<sup>51</sup> In Yuan manuals like *Collected Essentials of Agriculture and Sericulture* (Nongsang jiyao 農桑輯要), knowledge of dioecious plants and trees like the ginkgo is recorded in some detail. See Joseph Needham, Nicholas Menzies, and Christian Daniels, *Science and Civilization in China*, Volume 6 (Biology and Biological Technology), Part III (Agro-Industries and Forestry) (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 582.

<sup>52</sup> A passage in Wu Shiji’s 吳師機 (1806-86) late Qing dynasty work *Liyue pianwen* 理澹駢文 (Rhymed Discourses on External Therapies) claims that using locust wood for pillows is as natural as Heaven covering Earth.

<sup>53</sup> For more on the role of wood within Five Phases theory, see Needham, Menzies, and Daniels, *Science and Civilization in China*, Volume 6, Part III, 645-48, subchapter “From cosmology to autecology.”

porcelain, jade and other obdurate male/hard *yang* 陽 materials in pre-modern China) may have struck him as comic—and thus he turned it into a joke connected to their disparity in status.<sup>54</sup> Emperor Xianzong 憲宗 (r. 805-20) bestowed the title Duke of Jin upon Pei Du in the twelfth month of 817,<sup>55</sup> so the episode involving the locust-wood pillow likely took place when the chief minister was at the peak of his power. If trees can be male and female, superior and inferior, senior and junior, Pei seems to have mused, then why not one's zodiacal year-signs from the sexagenary cycle? Therefore, Pei Du is jokingly saying something to the effect that “if we are a couple of *jia-chen* born persons, then you are the female and I'm the male”—after all, as a chief minister he is the man of superior/senior/older status, thereby making him effectively male to court gentleman Yu Wei's inferior/junior/younger female status in the normative Confucian patriarchal hierarchy.<sup>56</sup>

### **Conclusions**

---

<sup>54</sup> Pei Du 裴度 (764-839) was a chief minister in the second half of the Tang dynasty, a towering figure who served as chancellor to four consecutive Tang emperors. For his biography, see *JTS* 170.4413-35. Outside of this passage, little is known of low-level official Yu Wei 庾威, who does not appear in any of the dynastic histories.

<sup>55</sup> *JTS* 15.462.

<sup>56</sup> Using one's birth year to socialize seems to be a tradition of sorts among senior and junior colleagues. Perhaps having the same birth year (tongnian 同年) in the sexagenary cycle could mark a natural affinity: both Pei Du and Yu Wei have the *jia-chen* year sign, so they were born in 764 (the *jia-chen* year of the cycle lasted from 7 February 764 to 25 January 765). Perhaps as well as having a far higher position in the state bureaucracy, Pei was born some months earlier than Yu.

A similar joke from a later period can be found in chapter 26 of Feng Menglong's Ming-era *Outline of Conversations Old and New* (Gujin tan'gai 古今談概):

Cheng Wenhui and Pang Gongci were both born in the *wu-zi* year. At that time Cheng Wenhui was already a high official and Pang was a minor official. So he jokingly said to Pang, “So you, Sir, are the lesser *wu-zi*.” Later, Pang was promoted to high office. Cheng kidded, “Ah, so now the greater *wu-zi* has become lesser than the lesser *wu-zi*!”

The eminently human desire to render suffering meaningful or intelligible, which across many cultures begets the notion of karmic retribution, the deep-seeded idea that illness “is a payment or punishment for spiritual debts,” that “old sins cast long shadows.”<sup>57</sup> Given the consonance between the human and natural realms in early and medieval Chinese thought, between the goiters, tumors, and carbuncles that grow on men and the burls that grow on trees, one might expect burls to be a malignant presence, perhaps an indication of an evil spirit or a token of inauspicious ethers.

But this is not the story of burls that is told in Daoist parables, humorous anecdotes, calculated prophecies, and accounts of anomalies in early and medieval China. It is telling that in no single instance is the burl seen as a deformity that reflects an unlucky or evil aspect of a tree. Possessing beneath their outspreading canopies the secret to surviving a battle-ravaged and contentious time, the burl-addled trees of the *Zhuangzi*, a Daoist text from the Warring States era, confounded and complicated exploitative human judgements of “useless” and “useless.” In later early medieval and medieval texts the latent efficacy of the gnarled burls, the indwelling value and power that the Daoist sage had recognized and so profoundly appreciated, was further substantiated and actualized. In various instances, burls—possessing an innate beauty as if all the swirling, demiurgic energies of nature unbridled were concentrated in a solid primordial mass—begot marvelous beings, inspired auguries of greatness, and were carved into elegant vessels.

---

<sup>57</sup> Richard Shweder, Nancy Much, Manamohan Mahapatra, and Lawrence Park, “The ‘Big Three’ of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity) and the ‘Big Three’ Explanations of Suffering,” *Morality and Health*, Allan Brandt and Paul Rozin, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 119-20.