



## Telling Tales About the Yijing

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## Abstract

This essay explores the cultural translation of the Chinese classic, the *Book of Changes* or *Yijing* (易經) through a reflection on my own attempts to adapt, use and misuse the text in literary form. My own engagement with the *Yijing* began when I set out to write a novel-of sorts based on the Chinese classic. The process of writing this novel, *Sixty-Four Chance Pieces: A Book of Changes* (Earnshaw Books, 2015), has required not only that I culturally translate the *Yijing*, but that I allow myself to be culturally translated in turn by this text. By combining theoretical approaches from China and the West, and by crossing between theoretical reflection and storytelling, this essay explores the complexity of this double cultural translation of readers and texts by asking what it might mean to understand, misunderstand or fail to understand a text as it is transmitted between often divergent contexts.

## Contributor Note

Will Buckingham is Reader in Writing and Creativity in the School of Humanities at De Montfort University. His work cuts between fiction (*Sixty-Four Chance Pieces*, 2015; *The Descent of the Lyre*, 2012; *Cargo Fever*, 2007) and non-fiction, in particular, philosophy (*Levinas, Storytelling and Anti-Storytelling*, 2013; *Finding Our Sea-Legs*, 2009). He is currently working on a project exploring the uses of the early sixth century text, the *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龍), or *Carving Dragons and the Literary Mind*, as a manual for writers.



## Introduction

It was around seven years ago that I had the idea of writing a novel built around the sixty-four hexagrams of the *Yijing*. The book was to be called *A Book of Changes*, made of sixty-four stories, each one drawn from one chapter of the ancient Chinese divinatory text. I had imagined that the *Yijing* could act as a kind of story engine, one that might be capable of generating, through various randomising procedures, new tales and new possibilities. It was an idea that arose from my fascination with the work of the Oulipo group, and my obsession with the formal literary experiments of the Italian novelist Italo Calvino. In other words, my interest at the time was formal, philosophical and methodological rather than either Sinological or esoteric.

When I set out on the project, I knew no Chinese, and I bore considerable scepticism towards the *Yijing*, towards divinatory methods in general and, in particular, towards the strange appropriation of the *Yijing* in the West as a New Age classic, filed alongside books on crystal healing, dowsing and contacting your angels. And yet, as I started to grapple with this, one of the strangest amongst all of the strange books in the world, I found myself progressively sucked in. Books are never passive in the hands of their readers. They are often resistant to readers' purposes. They place demands upon their readers, open up problems for them. Not only this, but books do not live in isolation, but are instead hubs in a seething nexus of inter-related things: other ideas, other texts, other objects, other persons, and so on. Over the seven years that followed, I was increasingly drawn into this seething web; and the more deeply entangled I became, the more I realised that what I was dealing with was, in a

fashion at least, the *cultural* translation of the *Yijing*. This essay is an account of this attempt at cultural translation. It is an account of some of the various transformations and crossings that have taken place whilst attempting to wrestle with this strange and compelling text. And it is also an attempt to say something about what cultural translation might be.

I will begin by talking a little more about the itinerary that I have followed in researching and writing this novel. Then I will move on to explore broader questions of cultural translation – what it might be, and what it might mean to engage in cultural translation. Then I will raise one question that has pursued me throughout the course of this project: the question of misunderstanding, or even of *not* understanding, in relation to cultural translation. Finally, by way of demonstrating this cultural translation *in practice*, I will end not with a conclusion, but instead with a story, one that is drawn from hexagram thirty-two of the *Yijing* – a story that will act, perhaps, as a testament to all of my own understandings, misunderstandings and non-understandings in relation to the *Yijing*.

### 1. In Pursuit of the *Yijing*

Early on, knowing no Chinese, I had no other choice but to work with translations of the text. I scoured second-hand bookstores for English versions of the *Yijing*; I ordered large quantities of out-of-print books that turned up days later in the post; I accumulated one after another version of the text; and before long I had a goodly-sized shelf full of translations and commentaries. With this as a starting point, I set about devising stories,

drawing on now this translation, now another.

I had no strict method for moving from the hexagrams to the stories, but I had a few rules of thumb. The stories had to arise organically out of my reading of the text itself; each story had to have some kind of pivot around which it turned, had to involve some kind of transformation or change; and each of the stories had to throw some reflected light back onto the *Yijing* itself, even if this was in the most obscure fashion. The first few stories came relatively easily; but I soon found myself grinding to a halt, and the reason was one of translation. A year or two into the project, I became unsettled by the fact that the more translations of the *Yijing* I accumulated, the less capable I was of orientating myself in the book. It was as if each translation I picked up obscured all the others, as if they were all pulling in different directions. And amongst all of this translation and re-translation, I was increasingly uncertain what the *Yijing* actually *was*: the heart of the text remained almost impossibly stubborn and out of reach.

Being more than a little stubborn myself, I was not going to give up that easily. So I resolved upon three things. Firstly, I committed myself to reading much more intensively about the *Yijing* in its original Chinese context, to set it back in the context of Chinese politics, metaphysics, philosophy, religion, aesthetics, ethics and literature. Secondly, I realised that there was nothing for it but to embark upon the forbidding task of learning Chinese, and so I started to plough my way through learning *hanzi* and getting my mind and my tongue around a language that I had never intended to learn. And thirdly, I decided that I would need to go to China, to talk to people who knew.

So back in 2010, thanks to a grant from the British Academy, I took my yarrow stalks and a selection of translations of the *Yijing*, and I spent two months travelling back and forth through China, carrying out research for the book. As a novelist rather than a scholar, my understanding of research has always been somewhat loose. On the one hand, I engaged in many academically respectable activities. I visited universities and libraries, I met with scholars, I visited important sites associated with the *Yijing*, but at the same time, much of the *real* research for the book took place elsewhere – whilst travelling long distances in the company of crazed diviners and *feng shui* masters in the hard seat compartment of the train; or whilst falling into ponds with Daoist philosophers; or whilst talking about Confucius with dog-meat vendors. As I travelled around, covering large distances and circling the strange empty hub that was the *Yijing* (I am mindful of Laozi's contention that it is the empty space at the hub that makes the wheel turn...) I found myself having one conversation over and over again. The conversation went like this:

*Traveller*: What are you doing here in China?

*Me*: I'm researching a novel.

*Traveller*: A novel, what about?

*Me*: The *Yijing*.

*Traveller*: [Long pause, followed by shaking of the head] Oh... the *Yijing*! That is a very difficult book to understand. I'm Chinese and even I don't understand it...

Soon I started to realise that almost *everyone* I met in China, unless they had a professional interest in the *Yijing*, claimed not to understand the book. Indeed, it seemed to me that for most

people in China, there were two things that were known about the *Yijing*: the first was that it was a very deep, very profound repository of understanding and wisdom; but the second was that it was *so* very deep and very profound that ordinary mortals (let alone foreigners) could have no access to this understanding and wisdom.

## 2. Cultural Translation?

I never set out to be a translator of the *Yijing*, not in any sense. My intention was simply to explore the relationships between formal constraint and creativity in the writing process, and along the way to write some intriguing and compelling stories. I saw the *Yijing* merely as a means to this end. The art or science or whatever-it-is of translation is not something to which I have ever aspired. Nevertheless, it seems to me, whether I like it or not, that in this strange project of wrestling with the *Yijing*, over the last seven years I have been engaged in multiple acts of cultural translation, that I have in various ways been involved in translating the *Yijing*, and that conversely the *Yijing* has been involved in translating *me*.

I am using the term 'cultural translation' – a term first used within anthropology in the 1950s – because it more closely mirrors this strange process of getting to grips with the *Yijing*. The term itself is now in such widespread use, employed in such startlingly different contexts for such startlingly different ends, that it arguably risks becoming empty of meaning altogether; however, it seems to me that the notion of cultural translation still has a usefulness in that it recognises that texts are not just texts, but that they are, as I have said of the *Yijing*, hubs (empty or otherwise) that bring together

complex networks of relationships between disparate things. The complexity here is important. A simplistic 'ideal' notion of translation – what one might call the 'classical notion' of translation – might be something like this: translation is a process of ferrying 'meaning' from one context to another, without losing too much along the way. And just as a skilled waiter might deliver to a customer's table a glass of water or coffee without spilling a drop, so a skilled translator may be able to carry over a text from, say, Chinese to English, without any loss of meaning. Certain bounded cases of translation are indeed more or less like this: the translation of technical manuals, for example. But even in these cases, culture intrudes such that the translations cannot, and *should not*, map on to each other precisely. Imagine, for example, the transformations that might be necessary in translating a manual for the use of a bidet from French (such a device being commonplace in France) into English (bidets being viewed with a mixture of amused bafflement and creeping terror in the country of my birth). Culture is *always* at stake in translation; but it is at stake in some cases much more than in others, and when what is being translated is not just a text, but a cultural hub like the *Yijing*, the question of translation might mean becomes extraordinarily complex.

And yet for all its complexity, cultural translation is an everyday act. It is not something that is only the domain of experts. We all live in a world that is profoundly mixed and heterogeneous, that demands of us that we translate between often very different contexts. Whether it is a non-China specialist from the West writing a novel based on the *Yijing*, or an impromptu football match between members of a mosque in Yorkshire and the group of right-wing

English nationalists who have turned up outside to protest, or the craze for Latin dance amongst the urban socialites of Hong Kong, cultural translation goes on all the time, simply by virtue of the fact that the worlds in which we live are complex, diverse and endlessly intermingled. This being the case, then perhaps the best way of thinking about what cultural translation might mean is not to start at the top with the domain of professional translators, and then extrapolate from there, but instead to start from the broad mass of everyday practices of cultural translation – and if we occasionally stumble across a professional translator (they are few and far between), to treat them as a special case. And for those of us who are not professional translators, these everyday cultural translations in which we are involved are often baggy and *ad hoc*, more like acts of *bricolage* than like a precise art or science. We want, above all, to *get by*.

If, etymologically speaking, translation is an act of ‘carrying over’, deriving from the Latin *translatum*, it seems to me that the image of the waiter with the glass of water is not quite appropriate as a model of this ‘carrying over’, because it is too *skilled*, too high-brow. When I say to a friend, ‘Have you got the keys?’, they do not give them to me on a silver platter like a valet. Instead they *sling* them at me, and I catch them, or I fumble and drop them. Our everyday lives are messy like this, a mess that scholars try to sweep away whenever they see it encroaching. But this messier, broader and baggier notion of cultural translation seems closer to what *actually goes on* when we get to grips with something that is itself as messy, broad and baggy as a ‘culture’.

Were I pushed to formulate this with more philosophical precision, I would favour the approach taken by Michel Serres, for whom translation is that act of cutting passages between worlds, of finding new lines of connection or of opening up channels of communication (Brown 2002). Serres writes:

I thought that the exchangers were intermediaries, that interference was on the fringe, that the translator was between instances, that the bridge connected two banks, that the path went from the origin to the goal. But there are no instances. Or more correctly, instances, systems, banks, and so forth are analysable in turn as exchangers, paths, translations, and so forth. (Serres 2007: 73)

Translation here is no longer a specific instance of crossing or substitution between two pure and unmixed substances. Nor is it a movement between a clearly defined source ‘text’ and an equally clearly defined target ‘text’. Instead, it is a seething network of crossings and passages and movements in which it is hard to isolate for long any kind of stable boundary. Translation is no longer a special case, but instead something that is always in process. Not only this, but in this more everyday experience of translation or ‘carrying over’, participants in this web of cultural translation find *themselves* ‘carried over’. In translating we *find ourselves translated*, so that we are not quite what we were before, as I am not quite what I was before I started out grappling with the *Yijing*.

The scholarly tendency is, always, to divide the flux, to separate things back out into objects that are logically distinct and that are only then brought into relation; but the participant in this kind

of cultural translation already knows, as they find themselves drifting into a world that is transformed for better or for worse, that this flux admits of no division, and that we have no choice but to ride the waves and to get to know the currents as best we can.

What is attractive to me in this notion of cultural translation is that it brings into play something that is often seen as the enemy of translation, but that secretly accompanies it all along, and that is *non*-understanding. Think of those Chinese readers of the *Yijing* who protest that they do not understand the text. As cultural translators of our worlds, *non*-understanding accompanies us constantly for the simple reason that a large proportion of our relationships with the world is made up not just of understandings and things known, but also of misunderstandings and non-understandings and things not known. Thus, in translating from one cultural context to another, sometimes what needs to be carried over is not just clarity, knowledge or certainty, but instead unclarity, non-knowledge or uncertainty.

### 3. On Failing to Understand the *Yijing*

Let me return to that repeated conversation in which I found myself engaged whilst in China. It seems to me that for many ordinary – which is to say, non-specialist – Chinese readers, a large part of the relationship with the *Yijing* is based around *not* understanding the text. It needs to be stressed here that not understanding is just as much a kind of relationship as is understanding. Let us say that you and I – just for the sheer fun of it – are reading the same book by Derrida. We agree to go away and read it

separately, and to get together a week later and discuss what we have made of it. When we meet again after a week, you smile at me over your coffee and say, 'That was marvellous!' I, on the other hand, feel shame-faced. Grimacing, afraid of making eye contact, I look down at my cup and mumble, 'Oh... I didn't really understand a word'.

Here we are, both of us already in some kind of relationship with the book. Let us say that we have both read the book with equal assiduity, that we have both made copious notes, that neither of us is terminally stupid, that both of us *wanted* to understand the book to the extent that we were sufficiently charitably inclined such that, if we found ourselves banging up against difficulties whilst reading, we were willing to persevere in the conviction that there was *some reason* Jacques was rabbiting on in this fashion. My question now is this: who has the deeper relationship with the book? Me, who didn't understand a word? Or you, who find it marvellous? The answer is not obvious.

If not understanding is indeed a kind of relationship, then it seems to me – when it comes to the *Yijing* – that for readers both in China and in the West, it is almost the paradigmatic relationship with the text. And who could not be baffled by such a deeply *weird* book. But this bafflement or non-comprehension is not a kind of non-relationship. And, besides, there is a strong philosophical pedigree to the idea that the *Yijing* is something that might be refractory to our attempts to understand it, or to pin meanings on to the text: no less an authority than the twelfth century philosopher Zhu Xi wrote that the *Yijing* is an 'empty object' (Gu 2005: 101). Just as the empty space at the hub is necessary for the wheel in Laozi,

according to Zhu Xi it is precisely because of the 'emptiness' of the *Yijing* that the text can cover all principles. If 'empty object' sounds too metaphysical one could perhaps use the language favoured by Michel Serres and call the *Yijing* a *quasi-object*. Or else, in more homely language, we could call it a *baggy* object. Whatever kind of object we call it, the *Yijing* is clearly an object that is not well-defined and well-bounded: those tendrils that lead out into Chinese traditions of literature, politics, statecraft, philosophy, metaphysics, music, art, ethics and science – not to mention its infiltration into Western culture, through the likes of Jung, Bob Dylan, Philip K. Dick and others – are so numerous and complex that when dealing with this text we are always dealing with something *without clear margins*; and in the absence of clear margins, the question of what understanding, not-understanding and misunderstanding might mean becomes much more blurred and contentious. We could formulate a principle here: the greater the bagginess of any object of understanding, the more difficult it is to formulate what it might mean to understand, to not understand or to misunderstand that object.

When I started thinking about the *Yijing*, I simply wanted to gain a foothold in understanding the text, for my own purposes. As time went on, I began to ask myself the more far-reaching question of what it might mean to understand the text as a Chinese reader might understand it, and how I might carry these understandings across into my own work in English. It was some time around then that I started on learning Chinese; but at this point, I think, I was still in the thrall of the classical notion of translation. But more and more, I found myself asking a further question, one that complicated the

matter considerably. The question was this: if I did not understand the *Yijing*, and if most readers in China did not understand the *Yijing*, then *were we not understanding the text in the same way?*

This question, it seems to me, opens up the shadow-side of translation, the side of translation that involves not just taking account of knowledge, but also what Serres calls non-knowledge (Brown 2002). For a professional translator, who works within fairly constrained bounds, non-knowledge might be seen to be a minor fault that could be eradicated by simply increasing the limits of what is known; but for the rest of us – inveterate cultural translators that we are, as we kick footballs around the courtyards of mosques, or practice the tango in Hong Kong, or wrestle with texts such as the *Yijing* – we get by doing what we can, in shadow and in light, knowing that knowledge will never outweigh ignorance, and too engaged in the game to worry about whether what we are carrying over is pure or whether it is mixed.

#### 4. Fish Traps and Fish

At this point – having raised the outrageous thought of translating non-knowledge from Chinese to English, or from English to Chinese, or from anywhere to anywhere else – I am going to interrupt these speculations, and to cut to the chase with a story from Hexagram thirty-two of the *Yijing*, *heng* 恆. First, let me provide the relevant text from the *Yijing*, both in Chinese and in translation.





32

恆

**heng**

恆亨。无咎。利貞。利有攸往。

初六。浚恆貞凶。无攸利。

九二。悔亡。

九三。不恆其德。或承之羞。貞吝。

九四。田无禽。

六五。恆其德貞。婦人吉。夫子凶。

上六。振恆凶。

*Perseverance, success. No blame. Favourable augury. There is profit in moving forward.*

*Six at the first: perseverance in the depths, the augury is inauspicious. There will be no profit.*

*Nine at the second: regret disappears.*

*Nine at the third: not persevering in his power, he will bear embarrassment. A stingy augury.*

*Nine at the fourth: a field with no game.*

*Six at the fifth: perseverance in the power of the augury. Fortune for the woman. Disaster for the man.*

*Six at the top: trembling perseverance: disaster.*

The story associated with hexagram thirty-two was one of the later stories that I wrote for *A Book of Changes*. I have chosen it here because it is not wholly unrelated to these thoughts on cultural

translation and on the relationship between understanding and not-understanding. The hexagram name, *heng*, has been taken to have various shades of meaning, including 'permanency', 'constancy', 'duration', 'perseverance' and so forth. It seems to me particularly apt that this should be so, as this was a story that only emerged after considerable patience, reading and re-reading the text. When I started out thinking about this hexagram, I was much taken by Richard Rutt's contention, in his translation of the text, that the character *jun* 浚 was a loan for the *jun* in *Di Jun* 帝俊, the legendary Shang dynasty emperor. I was not sure that I believed Rutt on this; but as a storyteller, it was an intriguing possibility. Rutt went on, in a bit of admirably free-wheeling speculation, to suggest that this *jun* referred to the 三足鳥 *sanzuwu* or three-legged crow of Chinese mythology (Rutt 1996); and so when I first sat down to write this story, which seemed tantalisingly out of reach, it began life as a tale about a crypto-ornithologist setting up a hide to capture an image of a wholly mythical three-legged bird.

I finished the story and put it to one side; but something didn't ring true, both about Rutt's reading, and about the story that I had written. I felt that I still had unfinished business with hexagram thirty-two, or else that hexagram thirty-two still had unfinished business with me. Either way, whether I was being culturally translated or the text, I felt that the translation was incomplete. And so I returned to look at the text again. I was troubled by that *jun* 浚, by Rutt's too enthusiastic attempts to ignore the depths here, and I found myself thinking more watery thoughts. Then something happened that is hard to account for, but that will be familiar to readers of Zhuangzi: the bird in the story I was



writing miraculously transformed itself into a fish. Fish and birds, after all, tend to do this in China (see for example Carr (1993) on bird-fish in Chinese myth). So all at once, I ended up plummeting from the lofty realms of crypto-ornithology to the depths of crypto-ichthyology; and having found myself unexpectedly concerned with fish and with questions of trapping fish, I could not avoid the famous passage in the *Zhuangzi* that will be familiar to almost all Sinologists:

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've gotten the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've gotten the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him? (Watson 1968: 302)

By now a story was taking shape, a story about setting out to capture a mythological fish that transformed into a mythological bird. My fish, of course, being mythological had to be uncatchable; and whilst the passage I have quoted above is sometimes taken by readers to be about grasping hold of elusive 'meanings' whilst simultaneously doing away with words, in my fishy speculations, I stumbled across Hans-Georg Möller's persuasive reading of the passage suggesting – in line with Laozi's wheels and hubs, and in line with Zhu Xi's contention that the *Yijing* is an empty object – that *Zhuangzi* is not so much concerned with getting fish, rabbits and meanings, as about seeing how we might find the conditions by means of which 'things such as traps, snares, and words' are themselves to be forgotten (Möller 2000: 497).

It was at this point that I had everything I needed to build the following tale. It was a story that – like all of the stories in *A Book of Changes* – was born out of a rag-bag of knowledge and non-knowledge, out of understandings and misunderstandings and non-understandings, out of a collision between objects and empty objects and *quasi*-objects, out of multiple crossings and passages. But, here it is, nevertheless: my 'cultural translation' of one particular hexagram of the *Yijing*.

恆

heng

I set out to catch the great fish Kun, who lives in the waters of the northern darkness, who transforms into the bird Peng and rises to soar over the mountains.

All this was thirty years ago, or thereabouts. I was forty, employed in the faculty of biological sciences at a leading university, and fish were my life. They had been ever since those childhood summers lying on my stomach by the riverbank, watching quick minnows move through the reeds and pike hang motionless in the shadow of the bank. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, I had completed a PhD in ichthyology, and lent my name to several species of small, nondescript, silver fish. By my fortieth birthday, the university had seen fit to grace me with the title 'Professor', and a contract that ensured that my teaching duties were few and my research leave generous. So that particular summer, I travelled in the northern regions, the rivers and the lakes; and it was there that I heard about Kun.

I turned up in a quiet village by the side of a lake in early summer and communicated my intentions to the villagers in what I knew of the local language. Fish, I said to them, I am interested in fish. Tell me about the fish that you find in the lake. And so they told me about Kun, about how he would rise from the waters and transform into Peng, and how Peng would sink into the depths and become Kun. I asked if there were any other fish, aside from Kun, and they said there were several small, nondescript, silver fish, but that Kun was more impressive than all the other fish put together. So I said that I would like to see this Kun, and they told me that Kun was easy to see, because he was the biggest thing in all the lake, and because when he transformed into the bird called Peng and soared high above the mountains, he became the biggest thing in all the sky. This seemed to me improbable, but the villagers said they had seen this with their own eyes: they spoke about Kun in the same offhand way that they spoke about the mountains or the lakes or the bears that roamed in the forests. Look, they sometimes said, there he is, in the water: but I could only see the lake. So I asked them: may I catch Kun? As a specimen? For the sake of science? And they laughed. No, they said. Kun cannot be caught. But if Kun *can* be caught, he can only be caught with a rod without a hook.

I hired a houseboat, paddled it into the centre of the lake, accepted the generous offer of a fishing rod and line without a hook, and there, on the boat, in the middle of the green waters, I settled down for the summer. I set up my Primus stove and watched the shadows of the clouds roll across the mountains as the gas hissed and the water for the tea came to the boil.

In the weeks that followed, I caught several species of nondescript, silver fish, hitherto unknown to science. I identified them, named them after myself, and came to the melancholy realisation that this pursuit of knowledge, this naming of small portions of the world after myself, no longer made me happy as it once had done. Sometimes in the evenings, I took up the rod, cast the hookless line that had been given to me by the villagers, and watched the float bobbing on the surface as I sipped on cups of tea and thought about Kun, the great fish that transformed into the bird Peng.

I drank a lot of tea that summer, there in the bluegreen silence with my rod in my hand, watching the still waters and feeling the hours pass. Sometimes the villagers punted their canoes up, bringing food and other supplies, and moored alongside my houseboat, and asked how I was getting on; and sometimes they came on board and we drank beer together and they told me stories about Kun. From time to time, they would point and say, *There! There he is!* – but I could see nothing at all.

For most of the time I was on my own, looking into the lake. There is an art to looking at water. It is a matter of shifting your focal length so that now you are looking to the depths and now to the shallows; and if you have not learned this art, then even a fish as large as Kun might be staring right up at you from the dark water, and you wouldn't know it. There is no right way to look at water. But there are innumerable wrong ways.

I stayed for two months on the houseboat, amid those incomparable mountains on the green waters of that matchless lake. Then, the night before I was due to leave, came the dream; and because it was a dream, it is hard to describe or to explain. The purpose of a

fish trap is to catch fish. When you have the fish, you forget the trap. The purpose of words is that they act as snares for meaning. When you have grasped the meaning, then you can forget the words. But meanings are as fast and slick and shimmering and hard to capture as minnows; and like minnows, when they are plucked from the waters, they quickly die. But let me try nonetheless, because if you throw away the words, then what do you have?

In this dream, my mind was a great bluegreen lake, and within this lake I sensed the great fish Kun, massive and buoyant, between the sunlight above and the darkness below. It was then that I knew he had been there all along, only I had not been looking in the right way. So huge was the fish that I feared for a moment that, were he to move at all, my head would split apart. Then, as I marvelled at his magnitude, the great Kun moved with a quickness beyond comprehension. He surged upwards and

broke the surface of the water above me and all at once he was feathered and the colour of bronze, and I knew then that Kun was Peng and Peng was Kun, and both were as real as the mountains and the lakes and the bears and the houseboat and the hissing Primus and the distant, twinkling lights of the village; and in the middle of this explosion of colour and certainty that I woke, clutching my head, astonished that it had not split apart, terrified all of a sudden of the rocking depths beneath my fragile boat.

Then I looked up at the sky and I saw what I thought at first was an eagle; but the bird seemed to shrink before my gaze until it was the size of a pigeon, a blackbird, a wren. Then there was nothing left but the sheer blue of the sky and the knock knock knock of the waves against the side of the boat.

I picked up the fishing rod and reeled in the line.

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