

Original Paper

An English Translation of the Ode to the Wren Written by Zhang Hua and the Thought on the Usefulness of Uselessness

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Received: February 20, 2024

Accepted: March 5, 2024

Online Published: March 22, 2024

doi:10.22158/sssr.v5n1p181

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/sssr.v5n1p181>

Abstract

The author uses the wren as a metaphor to express thinking on the usefulness of uselessness. Anything that can satisfy people's desires and needs is deemed useful, whereas anything that fails to meet these criteria is deemed useless. Through comparing the divergent destinies of "useful things" and "useless things", it is widely understood that the former serves a practical purpose while the latter does not. While "usefulness" fulfills specific needs of society, it also carries the potential to bring harm to themselves. In contrast, "uselessness" frees both individuals and objects from being valuable tools, enabling them to exist safely and fulfill their inherent potential through their very "uselessness".

Keywords

wren, uselessness

1. Overview of Ode to the Wren

"Ode to the Wren" is one of Zhang Hua's most representative pieces of prose. Despite being a humble and seemingly insignificant bird that is born among weeds and grows up under fences, the wren is able to find joy in its existence. Although it may not possess the same level of beauty as the eagle, osprey, swan, goose, peacock or kingfisher, it has managed to survive and avoid the tragic fate of being hunted by humans.

The author intends to use the wren as a metaphor to illustrate its unique advantages and strengths.

Despite the fact that wrens may not have significant ornamental or culinary value, they exhibit modest needs, basic requirements, and are satisfied with minimal resources. Wrens have a broad-minded attitude and are able to perceive the world without prejudice. They can perceive both good and bad, honor and disgrace, without making distinctions between them. Furthermore, they possess the ability to fully embrace the present, derive pleasure from the mundane, and exhibit a sense of satisfaction towards their destiny.

Wrens indicate a state of mind that is transcendent and free-spirited, reflecting ideas which emphasizes simplicity, truthfulness, and the wisdom of humility. Conversely, it is truly tragic for birds of prey and beautiful birds who boast off their physical prowess and stunning plumage. Humans admire and pursue their well-developed muscles and gorgeous feathers, making them targets for hunting. As a result, they may either perish or be captured and confined to cages. These birds were once able to soar freely in the vast sky and sea, but now they have been domesticated and enslaved, losing their freedom and unique personalities. They are trapped both physically and mentally, enduring unbearable suffering.

It is the belief of many that every entity in the world, be it a living being or an inanimate object, deserves to experience freedom and comfort. Their existence should not be limited to serving the utilitarian needs of others. This principle applies to both individuals and objects. Only by nurturing their inner selves can they develop organically and attain their genuine worth and significance.

2. An English Translation of the Ode to the Wren Written by Zhang Hua

The wren, a tiny bird, dwells amidst the foliage, thrives beneath the hedges, flies just a few feet above the ground and is content with the truth of following the natural course of life. Its plumage is of a pale hue and its body is ungainly and small, thus it is unused by man for hunting. It is diminutive in stature and dwells in wetlands, so the outer world is unable to harm it. The wren' flocks flourish, swarming and migrating in large numbers, thriving with their own joyful enthusiasm. The vultures, ospreys, cranes, wild geese, peacocks, kingfishers either soar into the vast expanse of sky, or dwell in the distant periphery. Their feathers, like a canopy of sapphire, stretch aloft towards the heavens, and their beaks and talons, fierce and fearsome, are enough to defend themselves. However, these big birds are all shot to death with arrows and their feathers are offered to the court as tribute. What is the reason for this? Because they are valuable resources for humans. Words possess simplicity that can be entrusted with profound meaning. Objects possess minute intricacies that can be compared to the profound principles of wisdom. Thus, I have composed this 'Ode to the Wren'.

The Nature weaves an infinite tapestry of forms, shaping all things and lives into an array of diverse shapes. And yet, the wren, this tiny avian creature, also embraces the essence of Yin and Yang to sustain its own existence. The wren's feathers are not suitable for the adornment of artifacts, and its flesh cannot be placed in the ritual vessels for offering. Even when birds of prey like eagles and harrier eagles soar majestically above, spreading their swift wings and paying no attention to the wrens beneath. So how could the wren possibly be to worry about getting caught in the bird-catching net? Wherever verdure abounds and flourishes, the wrens will gather and build nests there. The wrens can fly, but they don't soar very high into the sky. They simply fly, without rushing out of the forest. The wrens fly, neither soar high into the sky nor make haste to escape from the forest. Their shelters are simple and their needs are easily satisfied. The nests they build on the trees only occupy a branch, and each repast they take is limited to a handful of grains. They do not stay long in any place where they once settled and lived, and they do not linger in one place for a long time when they fly. The wrens

never esteem the place graced with thorns to be of lesser veneration, nor do they hold in high esteem the terrestrial paradise burgeoning with lavender orchids. They soar into the air, flapping its wings with delight, and stand poised upon the earth with serene grace. They embrace destiny, and are at peace with the world. Don't assume that these small birds are ignorant; their way of life is similar to that of the wise. Not carrying treasures will not attract unexpected calamity. Not adorning the exterior will not attract nuisance and misfortune. Adhere to principles with humility and self-discipline, and avoid being arrogant and conceited. Actions are carried out in accordance with proper law and discipline rite, while avoiding unnecessary complexity. Follow the inherent nature, one must not pursue the worldly illusions with being tempted by worldly deceit. The fishing eagles boast sharp beaks and claws, whereas the cranes and herons gracefully wander through the skies. The cranes-like birds soar amid the profound and treacherous valleys of the mountains, while the peacocks and kingfishers dwell in the remote periphery of the earth. Wild ducks take a flight at dawn and wild geese return home in the evening, soaring high with their wings outstretched, boasting beautiful plumage and plump muscles. So they are all shot to death even though they are innocent. Though they carry reeds in their beaks, guarding against arrows and bows, but in the end they fall prey to the hunters. The eagles, feared for its ferocity, can still be ensnared and restrained by a rope. While the parrots, known for its cleverness, may find itself confined within a cage. These powerful bird's ambition has been subdued and tamed, and they have submitted to human domestication. They descend from the nine layers of the azure skies in solitude and are imprisoned alone in the garden of imperial palace. These imprisoned birds alter their voice in submissive harmony to the will of its master, yielding their wings in contentment as a plaything for their master. Yet they continue to harbor a longing for the woodlands of Mountain Kunlun and Mount Tai, holding in awe tall pines of Mount Longshan. Despite having been bestowed with favor today, they cannot help but feel that my present freedom and composure fall short of the days gone by. Yuan Ju, a kind of sea bird, come to this haven to seek shelter from the wind. The majestic sparrows from the remote western area of Tiaozhi have traveled over mountains and hills to reach this place. The flocks of birds migrate in convoluted patterns, their wings unfurling cautiously as they are gliding through the sky. Whenever birds' limbs are excessively large, they become vulnerable to external threats. Let alone their magnificent and delicate appearance that are even more susceptible to harm. Yin and Yang shape everything, and everything is interconnected and blended seamlessly into a unified whole, like a kaleidoscope of diverse colors and complexions, each one distinctly marked by its own unique characteristics. A kind of tiny insect Jiao Ming is building the nest on the eyelashes of mosquitoes, while the majestic roc Kun Peng is gliding through the heavens. When compared with the eagle soaring high above, the wren falls short; yet it still surpasses the tiny insect Jiao Ming. When I contemplate the enormity of the universe, how shall I discern the distinctions between the vast and the minuscule because their differences are so subtle.

References

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