

# Shih-Han (Sally) Huang

## *Curriculum Vitae*

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### AREAS OF SPECIALIZATION

Ethics; Chinese philosophy

### AREAS OF COMPETENCE

Aesthetics; applied ethics; hermeneutics

### EDUCATION

2025 (expected)	<b>PhD. Philosophy, Duke University</b> Certificate in College Teaching
2018	<b>M.A. Philosophy, Simon Fraser University</b>
2015	<b>M.A. Philosophy, National Taiwan University</b>
2011	<b>B.S. Electrical Engineering, National Taiwan University</b>

### DISSERTATION

#### **The Role of Play in a Good Life: From Zhuangzi to Perfectionism**

Committee:

David Wong (chair), Owen Flanagan, Wayne Norman, Gopal Sreenivasan, Wenjin Liu

### WORKS IN PROGRESS

“To Love Surprise like a Butterfly: A Zhuangzian Life of Playing”

Revised and Resubmitted to *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy*. Jul 19, 2024.

### PRESENTATIONS

“Analysis of Playfulness: Loving Failure,”

2nd Annual Duke-UNC Graduate Conference. Chapel Hill. Mar 2, 2024.

“The Power of Images: The Zhuangzi’s Demonstration of the Ideal of Playfulness,”

International Society of East Asian Philosophy, online. Sep 15, 2023.

“Flexibility in Itself as an Ideal: The Playful Spirit of the Zhuangzi,”

17th Annual Midwest Conference on Chinese Thought, Toronto. Mar 12, 2023.

“Flexibility in Itself as an Ideal: The Playful Spirit of the Zhuangzi,”

North Carolina Philosophical Society Annual Meeting, Durham. Mar 4, 2023.

“Zhuangzi and Rights talk,”

APA Eastern Division meeting, online (colloquium paper). Jan 15, 2021.

“On the Idea of Besire,”

APA Central Division meeting, Kansas City (colloquium paper). Mar 3, 2017.

**As Commentator:**

Comments on L. K. Gustin Law’s “‘Flying by Not Having Wings’—In and beyond the Zhuangzi,”

APA Central Division meeting, New Orleans, Feb 21, 2024.

**FELLOWSHIPS**

2022-23	Kenan Institute for Ethics Graduate Fellowship, Duke University
2020-21	Summer Research Fellowship, Duke University
2015	Paul Tang Graduate Entrance Fellowship, Simon Fraser University
2015	Graduate Fellowship, Simon Fraser University

**TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

**As Instructor at Duke University:**

Aesthetics (spring 2024)

Chinese Philosophy (fall 2023, taught with Wenjin Liu)

Introduction to Philosophy (fall 2024, spring 2023, fall 2022)

**As Teaching Assistant:**

**Duke University**

World philosophy (spring 2022, Owen Flanagan)

Neuroethics (fall 2021, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Scott Huettel)

**Simon Fraser University**

Critical thinking (summer 2018, spring 2017)

Moral problems (spring 2018)

Introduction to logic and reasoning (fall 2017, fall 2016, summer 2016)

**PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

**Department of Philosophy, Duke University**

Organizer, Work-in-Progress Graduate Student Workshop (fall 2024)

Diversity, Equality, Inclusion (DEI) Committee (spring 2024, fall 2023)

Minorities and Philosophy (MAP) Representative (fall 2023)

## **REFERENCES**

David Wong

Susan Fox Beischer and George D. Beischer Distinguished Professor of Philosophy

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Owen Flanagan

James B. Duke Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Philosophy

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Wenjin Liu

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## DISSERTATION SUMMARY

### The Role of Play in A Good Life: From Zhuangzi to Perfectionism

My dissertation explores the role of play in a good human life, by engaging with the Chinese *and* western traditions. First, I analyze the nature of play. I argue that what makes “play” interesting for ethics is that we seem to have a love-hate relationship with it. On the one hand, play seems to be only for our immature part that we aspire to “grow out of”. On the other hand, a life without play seems to be too inhumanly heavy and harsh to be good. Following these opposing intuitions about play, I argue that the playful attitude, which carries us through the activity of play, is a *loving* attitude toward the experience of confronting the *unexpected* and the *uncontrollable*. A ball, e.g., is a great playmate because it moves freely, responding to our move with a countermove that is partly beyond our control—thereby surprising us. We may enjoy a sense of achievement when we succeed in mastering this “challenging” ball; but we enjoy a sense of *fun* when being challenged. The contrast between our “normal” life and playtime thus lies in the contrasting attitudes toward the world “going against our way”. In normal life, we cherish our ability to reduce the friction between us and the world by predicting and controlling it. In contrast, when playing, we confront the limit of our ability to predict and control—and, oddly enough, we love that. That is, in play, we do not just calmly accept, but rather, enjoy, desire, and pursue the experience of being surprised and losing control. It is this sharp contrast that makes our relationship with play complicated.

Using the above concept of play, with an emphasis on the surprising aspect of the playmate, I explore the role of play in the philosophy of Zhuangzi 莊子, a Daoist philosopher. I argue that Zhuangzi intends to inspire his readers to live a life of playing using a combination of arguments and images. First, I motivate my interpretation with the following puzzle: how can Zhuangzi be an anxiety-free—even joyful—skeptic? I criticize previous solutions to the puzzle and, along the way, present my interpretation of Zhuangzi’s skepticism. My interpretation focuses on Zhuangzi’s completion/deficiency argument for skepticism, which states that whenever we grasp some aspect of the matter, we always miss a lot more. Then I provide my solution to the puzzle—i.e., Zhuangzi can be a joyful skeptic *because* Zhuangzi is playful (in the sense that he holds a loving attitude toward surprise). I argue that Zhuangzi uses arguments to guide us to recognize our epistemic deficiency and thus to realize that we live in a world of surprise. Next, driven by his concern about living well, Zhuangzi wants us to embrace this world of surprise joyfully. To achieve this goal, he uses, not arguments, but appealing images of playfulness (a fluttering butterfly for example) to invite us to love surprise—i.e., to be playful like a butterfly. My playful interpretation of Zhuangzi is thus *mundane*: Zhuangzi’s vision about how to live is rooted in our mundane experience of playing—like a child playing with a ball or mashed potatoes.

In contrast to Zhuangzi’s recommendation of play, I explain the difficult situation of play in the western tradition, with an emphasis on the perfectionist account of goodness. According to perfectionism, the exercise and the development of certain human abilities is good. In almost all versions, these abilities include our abilities to know and to act. Admittedly, play, like most activities, involves the exercise of our abilities to know and to act, and possibly their development. But this cannot explain the real appeal of play—i.e., its fun. Rather, the fun part of play, which can make us burst into laughter, is when we are surprised and losing control—i.e., when our exercise of abilities to know and to act is frustrated. According to perfectionism, this frustration is bad or at least not good. Moreover, according to Hurka’s Aristotelian principle, loving what is good is itself good; loving what is bad is itself bad. It follows that loving the fun part of play is bad or at least not good. Following these common doctrines found in western ethics, we reach the conclusion that having fun playing is bad or at least not good.

Rather than resolutely siding with Zhuangzi or perfectionism, with playtime or the “normal” life, I propose to acknowledge both. For all of us, who are already oscillating between the two, the good news is that whichever side we are currently on, we are free from the guilt of indulging in something bad. On the other hand, the bad news is that whichever side we are currently on, we cannot escape the remorse of sacrificing another also important but incompatible good. I think this inevitable remorse is not a problem for my proposal, but simply a result of our complicated situation.