

Uncle Iroh, from Fool to Sage—or Sage All Along?

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Book Three of *Avatar: The Last Airbender* portrays Uncle Iroh as wise and peace-loving, in the mold of a Daoist sage. However, in Book One, Iroh doesn't always appear sage-like. Instead, he can come across as lazy, incompetent, and unconcerned about the fate of the world.

Consider Iroh's very first appearance in *ATLA*, in "The Boy in the Iceberg," after Prince Zuko sees a giant beam of light across the sky, signaling the release of the Avatar from an iceberg:

Zuko: Finally! Uncle, do you realize what this means?

Iroh: [playing a game with tiles] I won't get to finish my game?

Zuko: It means my search is about to come to an end. [Iroh sighs with apparent lack of interest and places a tile on the table.] That light came from an incredibly powerful source! It has to be him!

Iroh: Or it's just the celestial lights. We've been down this road before, Prince Zuko. I don't want you to get too excited over nothing.

On the surface, Iroh's reaction appears thoughtless, self-absorbed, and undiscerning. He seems more concerned about his game than about the search for the Avatar, and he fails to distinguish a profound supernatural occurrence from ordinary celestial lights. Several other early scenes are similar. Iroh appears inept, distractible, lazy, and disengaged, very different from the energetic, focused, competent, and concerned Iroh of Book Three.

We will argue that Iroh's Book One foolishness is a pose, and Iroh's character does not fundamentally change. In Book One, he is wisely following strategies suggested by the ancient

Chinese Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi (4th century BCE) for dealing with incompetent leaders. His seeming foolishness in Book One is in fact a sagacious strategy for minimizing the harm that Prince Zuko would otherwise inflict on himself and others—a gentle touch that more effectively helps Prince Zuko find wisdom than would be possible with a more confrontational approach.

We will also present empirical evidence that—contrary to our expectations before collecting that evidence—Iroh’s wisdom-through-foolishness is evident to most viewers unfamiliar with the series, even on their first viewing. Viewers can immediately sense that his superficial foolishness has a deeper purpose, even if that purpose is not immediately apparent.

Iroh as a Zhuangzian Wise Fool

Like Iroh, Zhuangzi mixes jokes and misdirection with wisdom, so it’s not always clear how seriously we are to take him. Zhuangzi presents several obviously fictional dialogues, including one between the philosopher Confucius (5th century BCE) and his favorite disciple, Yan Hui. Yan Hui asks Confucius’ political advice:

“I have heard that the lord of Wei is young and willful. He trifles with his state and does not acknowledge his mistakes. He is so careless with people’s lives that the dead fill the state like falling leaves in a swamp. The people have nowhere to turn. I have heard you, my teacher, say, ‘Leave the well-governed state and go to the chaotic one. There are plenty of sick people at the doctor’s door.’ I want to use what I have learned to think of a way the state may be saved.”¹

Zuko, like the lord of Wei in Yan Hui’s telling, is a young, willful prince, leading his companions into danger, unwilling to acknowledge his mistakes. Even more so, the Fire Nation is led into peril and chaos by Fire Lord Ozai and Princess Azula. If ever a nation needed wise

redirection by someone as practiced in conventional virtue as Confucius and his leading disciples, it would be the Fire Nation.

Zhuangzi's "Confucius," however, gives a very un-Confucian reply: "Sheesh! You're just going to get yourself hurt." Through several pages of text, Yan Hui proposes various ways of dealing with misguided leaders, such as being "upright but dispassionate, energetic but not divisive" and being "inwardly straight and outwardly bending, having integrity but conforming to my superiors," but Zhuangzi's Confucius rejects all of Yan Hui's ideas. None of these conventional Confucian approaches will have any positive effect, he says. Yan Hui will just be seen as a plague and a scold, or he will provoke unproductive counterarguments, or he'll be pressured into agreeing with the leader's plans. At best, his advice will simply be ignored.² Imagine a well-meaning conventional ethicist trying to persuade Zuko (in Book One), much less Ozai or Azula, to embrace peace, devoting themselves to improving the lives of ordinary people! It wouldn't go well.

So what should Yan Hui do, according to Zhuangzi's Confucius? He should "Fast his mind." He should be "empty" and unmoved by fame or accomplishment. "If you're getting through, sing. If not, stop. No schools. No prescriptions. Dwell in unity and lodge in what cannot be helped, and you're almost there."³ Advising another worried politician a few pages later, Zhuangzi's Confucius says:

"Let yourself be carried along by things so that the mind wanders freely. Hand it all over to the unavoidable so as to nourish what is central within you. That is the most you can do. What need is there to deliberately seek any reward? The best thing is just to fulfill what's mandated to you, your fate—how could there be any difficulty in that?"⁴

Zhuangzi's advice through his fictional Confucius is cryptic—intentionally so, we think, in order to frustrate attempts to rigidify it into fixed doctrines. Nevertheless, we will rigidify it here, into two broadly Zhuangzian or Daoist policies for dealing with misguided rulers:

- (1.) Do not attempt to pressure a misguided ruler into doing what is morally right. You'll only be seen as noxious or be ignored. Instead, go along with what can't be helped. "Sing"—that is, express your opinions and ideas—only when the ruler is ready to listen.
- (2.) Empty your mind of theories and doctrines, as well as desires for fame, reward, or accomplishment. These are unproductive sources of distortion, wrangling, and strife.

Zhuangzi advocates this two-pronged approach to dealing with misguided rulers, but he doesn't explicitly explain why this approach might work.

Here *ATLA* can help us understand Zhuangzi. We can see how Iroh, by embodying these policies (especially in Book One), helps to redirect Zuko onto a better path. We thus gain a feel for Zhuangzian political action at work. Iroh doesn't resist Zuko's unwise plans, except in indirect, non-threatening ways. He suggests that Zuko relax and enjoy some tea ("The Boy in the Iceberg," "Bato of the Water Tribe"), and at one point, he redirects their ship to a trading town in search of a gaming tile ("The Waterbending Scroll"). At another point, he allows himself to relax in a hot spring, delaying the departure of their ship ("Winter Solstice, Part 1: The Spirit World"). Despite these suggestions and redirections, he does not outright reject Zuko's quest to capture the Avatar and even helps in that quest. He does not make himself noxious to Zuko by arguing against Zuko's plans, or by parading his sagely virtue, or by advancing moral or political doctrines. Indeed, he actively undercuts whatever tendency Zuko or others might have to see him as wise (and thus noxious or threatening, judgmental or demanding) by playing the fool—

forgetful, unobservant, lazy, and excessively interested in tea and the tile game Pai Sho. In this way, Iroh keeps himself by Zuko's side, modeling peaceful humaneness and unconcern about fame, reward, wealth, or honor. He remains available to help guide Zuko in the right direction, when Zuko is ready.

A related theme in Zhuangzi is "the use of uselessness." For example, Zhuangzi celebrates the yak—big as a cloud but lacking any skill regarded as useful in ancient China and thus not forced into labor—and ancient, gnarled trees—no good for fruit or timber and thus left in peace to live out their years.⁵ Zhuangzi's trees and yak are glorious life forms, for whom existence is enough, without further purpose. Uncle Iroh, though not wholly useless (especially in battle) and though he can devote himself to aims beyond himself (in caring for Zuko and later helping Aang restore balance to the world), possesses some of that Zhuangzian love of the useless: tea, Pai Sho, small plants and animals, which need no further justification for their existence. Through his love of the useless and his simple appreciation of existence, Uncle Iroh unthreateningly models another path for Zuko, one of joyful harmony with the world.

We can distill Iroh's love of uselessness into a third piece of Zhuangzian political advice:

(3.) Don't permit yourself to become too useful. If the ruler judges you useful, you might be "cut down" like a high-quality tree, becoming a tool at the ruler's disposal. Be useful only to the extent required to avoid being noxious.

Iroh is an expert firebender with years of military experience who could surely be a valuable asset in capturing and dispatching the Avatar if he focused on it. However, Zuko rarely recruits Iroh's aid beyond the minimum. Through conspicuous napping, laziness, and distractibility, Iroh encourages Zuko and others to view him as a mostly harmless, and not particularly valuable, traveling companion.

By following Zhuangzi's first piece of advice (don't attempt to pressure a misguided ruler), the Daoist can stay close to a misguided leader in an unthreatening and even foolish-seeming way without provoking resistance, counterargument, or shame. By following Zhuangzi's second piece of advice (empty your mind of doctrines and striving), the Daoist models an alternative path, which the misguided leader might eventually in their own time appreciate—perhaps more quickly than would be possible through disputation, doctrine, intellectual engagement, or high-minded sagely posturing. By following Zhuangzi's third piece of advice (embrace uselessness), the Daoist can avoid becoming a disposable tool for the ruler's schemes. This is Iroh's Zhuangzian approach to the transformation of Zuko.

Throughout Book One and the beginning of Book Two, we observe only three exceptions to Iroh's Zhuangzian approach. All are informative. First, in multiple episodes Iroh is stern and directive with Zuko when instructing him in firebending. We see that Iroh is capable of opinionated command; he is not lazy and easygoing in all things. But elementary firebending appears to require no spiritual insight, so there need be no threatening moral instruction or questioning of Zuko's projects and values.

Second, Iroh gives Zuko one stern piece of advice that Zuko rejects, seemingly thus violating Policy 1. In "The Storm," Iroh warns of an approaching storm. When Zuko refuses to acknowledge the risk, Iroh urges Zuko to consider the safety of the crew. Zuko responds "The safety of the crew doesn't matter!" and continues toward the storm. When they encounter the storm and the crew complain, Iroh attempts to defuse the situation by suggesting noodles. Zuko is again offended, saying he doesn't need help keeping order on his ship. However, at the climax of the episode, when the storm is raging and the Avatar is finally in sight, Zuko chooses to let the Avatar go so that the ship can steer to safety. The viewer is invited to suppose that in making that

decision Zuko is reflecting on Iroh's earlier words. Iroh's advice—though at first seemingly ignored and irritating to Zuko, and thus un-Zhuangzian—was well-placed after all.

Third, consider Iroh's and Zuko's split in the fifth episode of Book Two, "Avatar Day," which was set up in the first episode of Book Two, "The Avatar State." Azula has tricked Zuko into thinking that their father Ozai wants him back. In an un-Zhuangzian moment, Iroh directly, though mildly, challenges Zuko's judgment: "If Ozai wants you back, well, I think it may not be for the reasons you imagine... in our family, things are not always what they seem." This prompts Zuko's angry retort: "I think you are exactly what you seem! A lazy, mistrustful, shallow old man who's always been jealous of his brother!"

The immediate cause of their split seems trivial. They have survived briefly together as impoverished refugees when Zuko suddenly presents Iroh with delicious food and a fancy teapot. Iroh enjoys the food but asks where it came from, and he opines that tea is just as delicious in cheap tin as in fancy porcelain. Zuko refuses to reveal how he acquired the goods. Iroh is remarkably gentle in response, saying only that poverty is nothing to be ashamed of and noting that their troubles are now so deep that even finding the Avatar would not resolve them. When Zuko replies that therefore there is no hope, Iroh answers:

You must never give in to despair. Allow yourself to slip down that road and you surrender to your lowest instincts. In the darkest times, hope is something you give yourself. That is the meaning of inner strength.

A bit of sagely advice, kindly delivered? This is the next we see of Zuko and Iroh:

Zuko: Uncle ... I thought a lot about what you said.

Iroh: You did? Good, good.

Zuko: It's helped me realize something. We no longer have anything to gain by traveling together. I need to find my own way.

Zuko's and Iroh's falling out reinforces *ATLA's* Zhuangzian message. As soon as Iroh deviates from the first of the three Zhuangzian policies—as soon as he challenges Zuko's morality and starts offering sagely advice, however gently—Zuko reacts badly, rejecting both the advice and Iroh himself.

Zuko and Iroh of course later reunite and Zuko eventually transforms himself under the influence of Iroh, with Iroh becoming more willing to advise Zuko and dispense explicit wisdom, in proportion to Zuko's readiness for that advice and wisdom. Apart from his un-Zhuangzian moments in the first part of Book Two, Iroh "sings" only when he is getting through, just as Zhuangzi's fictional Confucius advises. Otherwise, Iroh acts by joke, misdirection, and a clownishly unthreatening modeling of peaceful humaneness and unconcern.

Viewers Appreciate That Iroh Is Wise from the Beginning

Iroh's wisdom in Book One is hidden beneath a veneer of foolishness. We thought that ordinary, first-time viewers might tend to agree with Zuko's angry assessment of Iroh as lazy and shallow. Viewers who are more knowledgeable, we thought, would be more likely to see the wise motives behind Iroh's facade. We decided to test this empirically by recruiting online participants to view three scenes, and then rate Iroh's wisdom.

Our approach fits within the general framework of "experimental aesthetics." A central aesthetic property of a work of art is how people respond psychologically to it. Those responses can be measured empirically, and in measuring them, we gain understanding of the underlying mechanisms by which we are affected by a work of art. If Iroh is perceived differently by viewers unfamiliar with the series than he is by knowledgeable viewers, then the experience of

ATLA changes with repeated viewing: In the first view, people read Iroh's actions as foolish and lazy; in the second view, they appreciate the wisdom behind them. If, in contrast, Iroh is perceived as similarly wise by unfamiliar and knowledgeable viewers, then *ATLA* operates differently: It portrays Iroh in such a manner that ordinary viewers can discern from the beginning that a deeper wisdom drives his apparent foolishness.

We recruited 200 participants from Prolific, an online source of research participants commonly used in psychological research. All participants were U.S. residents aged 18-25, since we wanted an approximately equal mix of participants who knew and who did not know *ATLA* and we speculated that most older adults would be unfamiliar with the series. We asked participants to indicate their familiarity with *ATLA* on a 1-7 scale from "not at all familiar" to "very familiar." We also asked six multiple-choice knowledge questions about the series (for example, "What was the anticipated effect of Sozin's Comet?"). In accordance with our preregistration at <https://aspredicted.org/a4kj6.pdf>, participants were classified as "knowledgeable" if their self-rated knowledge was four or higher and if they answered four or more of the six knowledge questions correctly.⁶

Somewhat to our surprise, the majority of respondents—63%—were knowledgeable by these criteria, and almost none were completely unfamiliar with the series: 95% correctly answered the first (easiest) knowledge question, identifying Aang as the name of the main character. Perhaps this was because our online recruitment language explicitly mentioned *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. It is thus possible that we disproportionately recruited *Avatar* fans or those with at least a passing knowledge of the series.

Participants viewed three short clips (about 60-90 seconds) featuring Iroh and another three short clips featuring Katara, in random order, with half of the participants seeing all the

Iroh clips first and the other half seeing all the Katara clips first. The Iroh clips were scenes from Book One in which Iroh is superficially foolish and that we described above: the opening scene described at the beginning of this chapter, the scene in which Iroh falls asleep in a hot spring instead of boarding Zuko's ship at the appointed time, and the scene in which Iroh "wastes time" redirecting Zuko's ship in search of a Pai Sho piece. The Katara clips were similar in length; they were clips from Book One, featuring some of her relatively wiser moments.

After each scene, participants rated the character's (Iroh's or Katara's) actions on six seven-point scales: from lazy to hard-working, kind to unkind, foolish to clever, peaceful to angry, helpful to unhelpful, and, most crucially for our analysis, wise to unwise. After watching all three scenes for each character, participants were asked to provide a qualitative (open-ended, written) description of whether the character seemed to be wise or unwise in the three scenes.

As expected, participants rated Katara as wise in the selected scenes, with a mean response of 1.85 on our 1 (wise) to 7 (unwise) scale, with no statistically detectable difference between the unfamiliar (1.95) and knowledgeable (1.80) groups.⁷ (Note that wisdom here is indicated by a relatively low number on the scale.) However, contrary to our expectations, we also found no statistically significant difference between unfamiliar and knowledgeable participants' ratings of Iroh's wisdom. Overall, participants rated him as somewhat wise in these scenes: 3.04 on the 1-7 scale (3.08 among unfamiliar participants, 3.02 among knowledgeable participants).⁸ (Although Katara was rated as overall wiser than Iroh, this is likely because we picked scenes of Katara displaying wisdom and Iroh displaying superficial foolishness. Different scene choices would presumably have produced different average judgments.)

For example, 81% of unfamiliar participants rated Iroh as wise (3 or less on the 7-point scale) in the scene described at the beginning of this chapter, where Iroh superficially appears to

be more concerned about his tile game than about the supernatural sign of the Avatar. (Virtually the same percentage of knowledgeable participants describe him as wise in this scene: 83%.)

The unfamiliar participants' written responses suggest that they tend to see Iroh's calm attitude as wise, and several unfamiliar participants appear already to discern that his superficial foolishness hides a deeper wisdom. For example, one writes:

I actually believe that though he appears to be childish and foolish that he is probably very wise. He comes off as having been through a lot and understanding how life works out. I think he hides his intelligence.

And another writes:

I am not familiar with the character, but from a brief glance he seems to be somewhat foolish and unwise. For some reason however, it seems like he might be putting on a facade and acting this way on purpose for some alterier [sic] motive, which would mean that he actually is very wise. I do not have any evidence for this though, it's just a feeling.

Although not all unfamiliar participants were this insightful into Iroh's character, the similarity in mean scores between the unfamiliar and knowledgeable participants speaks against our hypothesis that knowledgeable participants would view Iroh as overall wiser in these scenes. Nor did unfamiliar participants detectably differ from knowledgeable participants in their ratings of how lazy, kind, foolish, peaceful, or helpful Iroh or Katara are.⁹

Although these data tended to disconfirm our hypothesis, we wondered whether it was because the "unfamiliar" participants in this study were not completely unfamiliar with the series. Recall that 95% correctly identified the main character's name as Aang. Many, perhaps, had already seen a few episodes or already knew about Iroh from other sources. Perhaps

knowledge of *ATLA* is a cultural touchstone for this age group, similar to *Star Wars* for the older generation, so that few respondents were truly unfamiliar?

To address this possibility, we recruited 80 additional participants, ages 40-99 (mean age 51), using more general recruitment language that did not mention *ATLA*. In sharp contrast with our first recruitment group, few of the participants—7%—were “knowledgeable” by our standards, and only 28% identified “Aang” as the main character in a multiple-choice knowledge question.

Overall, the unfamiliar participants in this older group gave Iroh a mean wisdom rating of 3.00, not significantly different from the mean of 3.08 for the unfamiliar younger participants.¹⁰ (“Hyper-unfamiliar” participants who failed even to recognize “Aang” as the name of the main character similarly gave a mean Iroh wisdom rating of 2.89 [not statistically significantly different from the mean rating of the other participants].) Qualitatively, their answers were also similar to those of the younger participants, emphasizing Iroh’s calmness as his source of wisdom. As with the younger participants, some explicitly guessed that Iroh’s superficial foolishness was strategic. For example:

I’m not familiar with these characters, but I think Iroh is (wisely) trying to stop his nephew from going down “the path of evil.” He knows that playing the bumbling fool is the best way to give his nephew time to realize that he’s on a dangerous path.

And

He comes off a as [sic] very foolish and lazy old man. But i have a feeling he is probably a lot wiser than these scenes show.

We conclude that ordinary viewers—at least viewers in the United States who can be accessed through Prolific¹¹—can see Iroh’s foolish wisdom from the start, contrary to our initial hypothesis. Future research could potentially explore what tropes and cues are responsible for giving viewers such an early signal of Iroh’s wisdom.

A Zhuangzian Sage All Along

In Book One, Iroh behaves in ways that are superficially foolish, despite acting in obviously wise ways beginning around the middle of Book Two. There are three possible aesthetic interpretations. One is that Iroh begins the series unwise and learns wisdom along the way. Another is that Iroh is acting wise, but in a subtle way that is not visible to most viewers until later in the series, only becoming evident on a second watch. A third is that, even from the beginning, it is evident to most viewers that Iroh’s seeming foolishness conceals a deeper wisdom. On a combination of interpretive and empirical grounds, the third interpretation is the best supported.

To understand Iroh’s wisdom, it is useful to look to the ancient Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi, specifically his advice for dealing with incompetent rulers by following peacefully along with them, unthreateningly modeling disregard for fame and accomplishment while not being too useful for their ends. Since Zhuangzi provides no concrete examples of how this is supposed to work, we can look to Iroh’s character as an illustration of the Zhuangzian approach to political advising. In this way, *Avatar: The Last Airbender*—and the beloved uncle Iroh—can help us better understand Zhuangzi in particular and the Daoist tradition in general.¹²

¹ “Zhuangzi,” trans. Paul Kjellberg in *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy, 2nd edition*, ed. P. J. Ivanhoe and B. W. Van Norden (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), 226-227. Except where

indicated, all references to Zhuangzi are to Kjellberg's translation, with a few minor changes. In interpreting Zhuangzi, we treat only the "Inner Chapters" as canonical.

² Ibid, 227-228.

³ Ibid, 228-229.

⁴ For this passage we use Ziporyn's translation, which we find clearer than Kjellberg's, from *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings*, trans. Brook Ziporyn (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 29.

⁵ E.g., "Zhuangzi," 213.

⁶ Full methodological details, raw data, and supplementary analyses are available in the online appendix at <https://github.com/dschwitzer-PSL/Avatar-Schwitzergebel-Repository>.

⁷ Pooled $SD = 0.79$, $t(192) = 1.35$, $p = .18$.

⁸ Pooled $SD = 1.23$, $t(192) = -0.35$, $p = .73$.

⁹ The largest difference was on Iroh's kindness: $M_{unfamiliar} = 2.66$, $M_{knowledgeable} = 2.27$, pooled $SD = 1.07$, $t(192) = 2.49$, Bonferroni corrected $p = .13$ (10 comparisons).

¹⁰ Pooled $SD = 1.15$, $t(139) = -0.43$, $p = .67$.

¹¹ As always, it's somewhat speculative how well any research will generalize beyond the actual pool of participants who are recruited. But we think that the conclusion is of broader interest if we go for the bolder claim that viewers in general will recognize Iroh's wisdom. Of course, viewers from a far different culture might not know what to make of Iroh, or of the tropes on which the series relies.

¹² For helpful discussion, thanks to Jeremy Pober, the editors of this collection, and commenters on social media posts on Facebook, Twitter, and The Splintered Mind blog.