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Chuang Tzu  
Fung Yu-lan

# Chuang-Tzu

A New Selected Translation with an  
Exposition of the Philosophy of  
Kuo Hsiang



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# Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>The Happy Excursion</b> .....	1
<b>2</b>	<b>On the Equality of Things</b> .....	9
<b>3</b>	<b>The Fundamentals for the Cultivation of Life</b> .....	21
<b>4</b>	<b>The Human World</b> .....	25
<b>5</b>	<b>The Evidence of Virtue Complete</b> .....	35
<b>6</b>	<b>The Great Teacher</b> .....	41
<b>7</b>	<b>The Philosopher-King</b> .....	51
	<b>Appendices</b> .....	57
	Appendix I: Some Characteristics of the Philosophy of Kuo Hsiang .....	57
	Appendix II: The Third Phase of Taoism: Chuang Tzu .....	64
	<b>Glossary</b> .....	75



# Introduction

In China, Taoism has been as influential as Confucianism. It was more influential than Confucianism in the time of the “Six Dynasties”; viz., from the third to the sixth centuries. It was at that time that the Taoistic classics had their best commentators. Wang Pi’s “Commentaries on the *Lao-tzu*” and Kuo Hsiang’s “Commentaries on the *Chuang-tzu*”, for instance, have become classics themselves; I venture to say that some passages of their “Commentaries” are even more illuminating than the texts.

The sayings of Lao Tzu and the books of Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu are usually regarded as the earlier classics of Taoism. Lao Tzu’s book is brief enough, yet in it he spoke about many things. Sometimes his meaning is not clear and opens up many different interpretations. The authenticity of *The Book of Lieh Tzu* (*Lieh-tzu*) as we possess it is much questioned. A great part of the book is now regarded by most scholars as the production of the “Six Dynasties”. It is only in the *Chuang-tzu* that we have a well-developed philosophy; and a great part of that book, especially the “inner chapters”, is usually considered genuine. There are also side branches of Taoism, the ultramaterialism and hedonism of Yang Chu, for instance. But Chuang Tzu’s philosophy represents the main current of the Taoistic teaching. His book, with Kuo Hsiang’s “Commentaries”, is the most important literature of Taoism.

## The General Viewpoint and the Significance of Taoism

Before discussing Taoism in detail, it is better for us to get familiar first with its general viewpoint. William James divided philosophers according to their temperament into two classes—the “tough-minded” and the “tender-minded”. The “tough-minded” philosophers reduced mind to matter, the “higher” to the “lower”; according to them, the world is materialistic (at least nonspiritualistic), mechanistic and deterministic. Man is alien to the world, in which there is no God, no immortality, no

freedom. On the other hand, the “tender-minded” philosophers reduced matter to mind, the “lower” to the “higher”. According to them, the world is spiritualistic, in which there is God, immortality and freedom; and man, though insignificant he may appear to be, is inwardly connected with the whole. These are really the two points of view to see the world. Science takes the one point of view, religion, the other; the one is more congenial to intellect, the other, to feeling. Because the two viewpoints are different, science and religion are always in conflict. And how to reconcile this conflict has become a problem in philosophy.

In the history of philosophy, generally speaking, there were mainly two ways to reconcile these two points of view. Some philosophers (Kant, for instance) said that science is valid only in the phenomenal world; beyond the phenomenal, there is the noumenal world, which is not governed by the laws of science, and is the place for God, immortality and freedom. James, Bergson, generally speaking, both took this view. We may call it the pragmatic (in the broad sense of the word) point of view. Other philosophers (Spinoza, for instance) fully accepted the naturalistic conception of the universe, but in their system, by a peculiar combination, there is still place for God, immortality and freedom; man is still one with the universe, if only he can “see things under the form of eternity”. The so-called new realism in contemporary philosophy seems also to take this view. We may call this the neorealistic point of view. As we shall see, Taoism also took this view. Some people said that Taoism is naturalistic and scientific, while others said that it is mystic and religious. In fact, it is both.

Among the Taoistic classics, Chuang Tzu’s book is not only instructive but also interesting. Chuang Tzu was not only a philosopher but also a poet. His philosophy is like that of Spinoza; his style is like that of Plato. He expounded the laborious, abstract principles of Spinoza with concrete illustrations and poetic expression. His genius is both philosophical and literary.

## Tao and Te

*Tao* and *Te* are two important conceptions of Taoism. According to Taoism, *Tao*, or the Way, the Truth, is everywhere. In Chuang Tzu’s book, a story reads:

Tung Kuo Tzu asked Chuang Tzu: “Where is the so-called Tao?” Chuang Tzu said: “Everywhere.” The former said: “Specify an instance of it.” “It is in the ant.” “How can Tao be anything so low?” “It is in the panic grass.” “How can it still be lower?” “It is in the earthenware tile.” “How can it still be lower?” “It is in excrement.” To this Tung Kuo Tzu made no reply. Chuang Tzu said: “Your question does not touch the fundamentals of Tao. You should not specify any particular thing. There is not a single thing without Tao.... There are three terms: complete, all-embracing, and the whole. These three names are different, but denote the same reality; all refer to the one thing.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Chuang-tzu*, Ch. XXII.

This passage shows that *Tao* is not something transcending the world. It is in the world. It is everywhere. It is the whole.

The whole of what? The whole of the spontaneity or naturalness of the world. In Chuang Tzu's book, Chapter II, a person named Nan Kuo Tzu Chi is telling the story of the music of man, the music of earth and the music of nature. But after the description of the music of earth (the noise of the wind), he stopped. Then Tzu Chi was asked by Yen Cheng Tzu Yu: "The music of earth is the noise of the wind; the music of man is the sound produced by musical instruments; but what is the music of nature?" Then Nan Kuo Tzu Chi replied: "The types of the noise are extremely different, yet they all produce themselves. Could there be any other agency that excites them?" Every noise spontaneously produces itself; this spontaneity is the music of nature. In the same way, every thing in the world spontaneously produces itself. The totality of the spontaneity of all things is *Tao*.

Because *Tao* is the total spontaneity of all things, so it can do everything by doing nothing. As Lao Tzu said, it is "producing without possession"; and Chuang Tzu said:

O, my master! O, my master! He tears all things into pieces, yet he is not just. His blessing reaches all generations, yet he is not benevolent. He is more ancient than the highest antiquity, yet he is not old. He covers heaven, supports earth, and fashions the various forms of all things, yet he is not skillful.<sup>2</sup>

Passages like these seem to be paradoxical enough. But they are not. *Tao* is the total spontaneity of all things, and not something transcending the world. Everything spontaneously just is what it is and does what it does. So *Tao* is doing nothing. But from another standpoint what everything spontaneously is and does is also the works of *Tao*, since *Tao* is the total spontaneity of all things. *Tao*, therefore, can "do everything by doing nothing".

Taoists often said that *Tao* is "nothing", because it is not something transcending the world. Yet this "nothing" is not equal to zero, since it is the total spontaneity of all things.

Thus, by insisting that everything produces itself, Taoism destroyed the popular, or, in some instances, religious, conception of God, who is looked upon as the Creator. In this respect, Taoism is naturalistic. Yet, since there is the total spontaneity of all things, there is still unity of the world, which may also be called God, if one is pleased to call it.

Next we come to the conception of *Te*, or virtue. Lao Tzu said: "*Tao* produces a thing; *Te* maintains it".<sup>3</sup> Chuang Tzu said: "That which things get in order to live is called *Te*".<sup>4</sup> So *Te* is what an individual thing receives from *Tao*. The total spontaneity of all things is *Tao*. The spontaneity that an individual thing receives from *Tao* is *Te*. As some commentator said, the relation between *Te* and *Tao* is just like that between the water in river or lake and water in general.

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<sup>2</sup> *Id.*, Ch. VI.

<sup>3</sup> *Tao Te Ching*, 51.

<sup>4</sup> *Chuang-tzu*, Ch. XII.

## The Theory of Letting Alone

Everything has its own *Te*, or virtue. Everything has its own proper nature. Everything is happy, if it is allowed to be in accordance with its own nature. In Chuang Tzu's book, Chapter I, a story was told concerning the difference between the large fish and the small bird. Though there is a great difference between these two, yet both of them are happy, so far as they both act according to their own nature. Every modification of nature is the cause of pain and suffering. Chuang Tzu said:

The duck's legs are short, but if we try to lengthen them, the duck will feel pain. The crane's legs are long, but if we try to cut off a portion of them, the crane will feel grief. We are not to amputate what is by nature long, nor to lengthen what is by nature short.<sup>5</sup>

Yet in the world, most people try to modify the nature of things. Their intention may be good. But what they consider to be good may not be considered good by others. In Chuang Tzu's book, Chapter XVIII, he told a story about the treatment of a bird by the prince of Lu. There was a peculiar bird, newly arrived in Lu. The prince welcomed it with his state carriage and put it in the temple. He played before it the best music and served it with the best dinner. But the bird was frightened, very sad and not able to drink and eat. After 3 days, it died. "This is to treat a bird like a man, not as a bird". This is to impose one's own idea of good upon others. This is an example of the tragedies of our world. Taoism opposes institutions, rules, laws and government, because all these are to impose one idea of good (if it is good) upon the infinite variety of things. So the best way to govern the world is not to govern it. As Chuang Tzu said:

Let your mind make excursion in pure simplicity. Identify yourself with nondistinction. Follow the nature of things, and admit no personal bias, then the world will be in peace.<sup>6</sup>

## The Art of Living

The theory of letting alone is not only a political philosophy; it can also be applied as an art of living. In the human world, in the relations between man and man, we are always in a place of safety, if we will let everything do what it is fit to do, while we ourselves maintain the appearance of inferiority, ignorance and humbleness. In Chuang Tzu's book, Chapter IV, after a description of the appearance of a most awkward man, Chuang Tzu said:

If this man who was awkward in his bodily appearance was still able to make his living and complete his term of existence, how much more may he do who is awkward in his virtue?

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<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, Ch. VIII.

<sup>6</sup> *Id.*, Ch. VII.