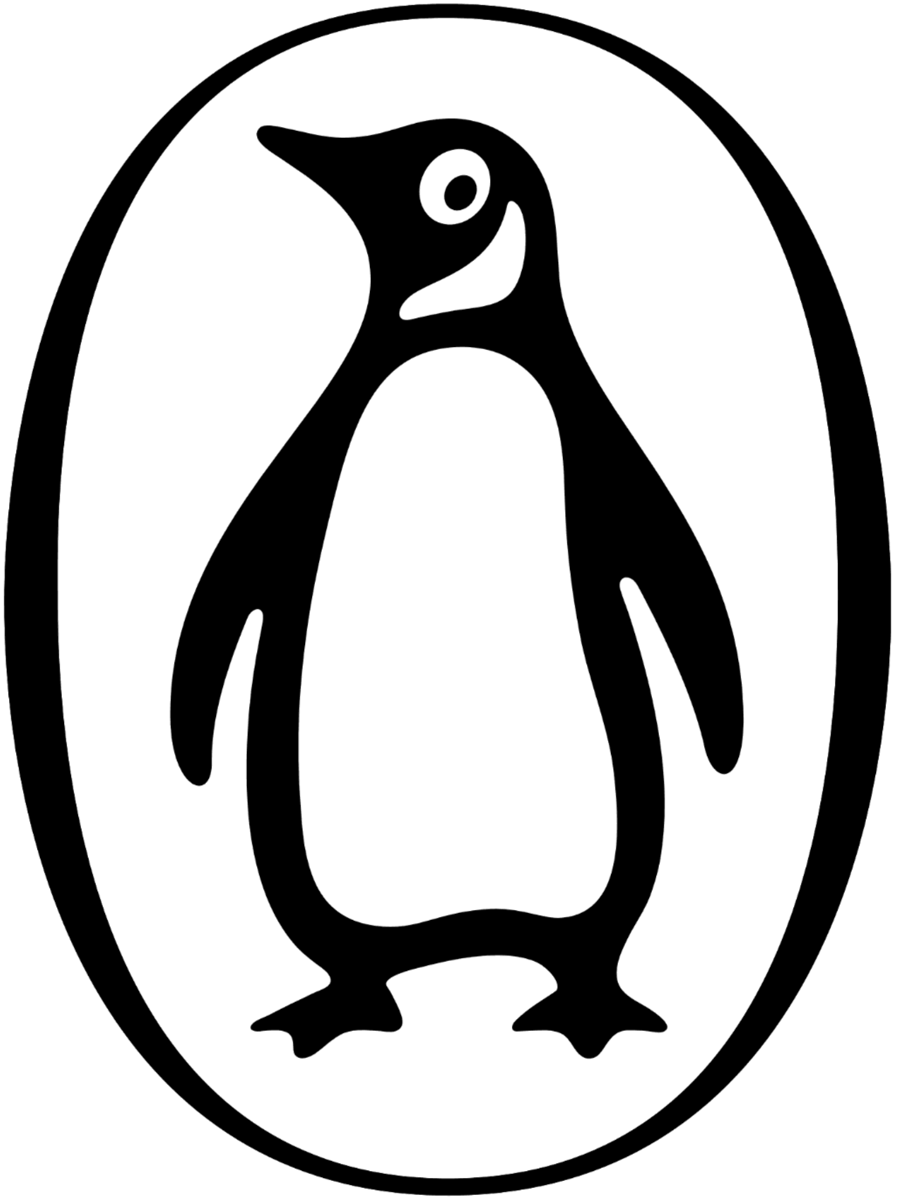

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Preface

Translating an author as rich, diverse and as intense as Chuang Tzu is an immense undertaking. There are few full translations of Chuang Tzu, so I felt that there was space for another, especially one aimed at a more popular market. For this reason, there are one or two ways in which this translation differs from others.

Firstly, I have adopted a simplified form of romanization of Chinese names. There are two commonly used systems: Wade-Giles and Pinyin. The differences can be seen in the way they spell the capital of China: Peking (Wade-Giles) or Beijing (Pinyin). In many instances, Pinyin gives a more accurate phoneticization of the Chinese – as in 'Beijing'. But in Pinyin, 'Chuang Tzu' becomes 'Zhuang Zi' – which is not as close to the original as the Wade-Giles. In using Wade-Giles, I have opted for a more familiar system for the average reader. However, to help the flow of reading, I have dropped the diacritical marks, and capitalized all parts of the name. Thus, in chapter 5, I have changed the name of the man with the terrible appearance from Ai T'ai-t'o to Ai Tai To. In chapter 4, the minister, Ch'u Po-yu, becomes Chu Po Yu. I hope purists will forgive me this in the interests of greater ease for readers.

Secondly, I have dropped some of the more obscure names which are given and only make a great deal of sense if one is able to see the puns in Chinese. For example, the last paragraph of chapter 18 in the Chinese contains detailed

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names for every bug and insect. I have dropped all but the most necessary because they get very confusing!

Thirdly, in the first seven chapters, we have marked out the text to show that it does not flow sequentially. The first seven chapters in particular contain self-contained stories and discussions. Trying to read Chuang Tzu sequentially is a mistake. The text is a collection, not a developing argument. In the first seven chapters, we have indicated this with clear breaks.

Approaching a text as ancient and as fascinating as Chuang Tzu, any translator needs all the help possible! Having translated a number of ancient Chinese texts in the last few years (The *Tao Te Ching*, the *I Ching*) I feel relatively at home in the linguistic and cultural world of China between the sixth and third centuries BC. But I was delighted to have three guides who either in part or in whole had made the journey into the *Chuang Tzu* and lived to tell the tale. In confirming or debating my own translations, I turned to these three other translators for inspiration or for argument. The three translators are, first and foremost, the excellent translator of the first seven chapters, Fung Yu-Lan, professor of Chinese in the USA and China during most of this century. His excellent translation *A Taoist Classic Chuang-Tzu* is published by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, from an original edition first published in 1931. It is masterful.

The second translator, who has translated the whole text, is Burton Watson of the Columbia University translation program. His *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, published by Columbia University Press in 1968 and still in print, is a joy to read. Clear and informative, it provides the most readable translation I have come across. I owe a great debt to Burton

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Watson, even if at times I differ from some of his usage and interpretations.

Finally, that master of translation – not necessarily for the ease of his translation but for the depth of his work – James Legge. Produced in the 1880s, his *The Writings of Kwang Tze* is a rich resource for any translator. It is to be found in volumes 39 and 40 of *Sacred Books of the East*, edited by Max Muller, Oxford University Press, 1891.

Apart from these books, I owe an immense debt of gratitude to colleagues. The Taoist scholars at the White Cloud Temple in Beijing, home of the China Taoist Association, taught me a great deal about how to read Chuang Tzu. To my old friend and first mentor in Chinese, Chang Wai Ming, I owe more than I can say. Over twenty years ago she taught me to love and enjoy the Chinese language and culture and I have never looked back. Her intensity of love for her own culture and language is truly infectious.

Jay Ramsay cannot read a word of Chinese – thank goodness! He thus makes a perfect sparring partner. As a poet he has a sense for English which challenges and thrills me as a writer. As someone who has entered into the Chinese world through the translations we have done together, he has a sense of Chinese symbolism and literature which is quite extraordinary. I owe him a great deal for making the most of my turns of phrase.

Elizabeth Breuilly is really the main other translator. Like Jay she knows no Chinese but she has a rigorous and vigorous understanding of English. She took sheets of barely legible scrawl sent back from all round the world – I translate as I travel – and turned it into readable English. She has given untold hours to this, as has Jo Edwards, who put most of it on

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disk. I cannot say how grateful I am to both of them for their work and for enjoying the old rogue Chuang Tzu as much as I have.

Martin Palmer
August 1995

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Introduction

When the School of Taoism first began to look for its roots, sometime around 100 BC, it identified three great founder teachers. These were, and still are, Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu and Lieh Tzu.

Taoism is the search for the Tao, the Way of Nature which, if you could become part of it, would take you to the edge of reality and beyond. One of the core teachings of Taoism is that:

> The Tao that can be talked about is not the true Tao.
> The name that can be named is not the eternal Name.[1]

In the light of this, perhaps it should not cause too much surprise to discover that, of these three founder-figures, only one can be definitely rooted in a given time and place! For Lao Tzu may well never have existed, and even if he did, he certainly didn't write the *Tao Te Ching*, the book usually ascribed to him as author. Lieh Tzu may also be a fictional figure. Again, even if he did exist, the book which bears his name contains few of his actual words and was probably composed some six hundred or more years after his supposed lifetime.

Which leaves us with Chuang Tzu. Of all the figures whom Taoism claims as its own from the extraordinary period of intellectual ferment of the sixth to third centuries BC, only Chuang Tzu emerges from the mists as a discernible figure.

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And the figure who does emerge is one of the most intriguing, humorous, enjoyable personalities in the whole of Chinese thought and philosophy.

The only 'historical details' we have of Chuang Tzu's life come from the first great historian of China, Ssu Ma Chien (died *c.* 85 BC). In his *Historical Records*, he tried to trace the histories of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu. He virtually gives up on Lao Tzu, lamenting that he found it almost impossible to discover any facts or details about him.

With Chuang Tzu he had more success. He says that Chuang Tzu was born in the town of Meng, which is thought to be somewhere in the present-day provinces of Anhui or Henan. His personal name was Chuang Chou, and it is as Chuang Chou that he is usually referred to in the book which we know as *Chuang Tzu*. The title 'Tzu' found in the names of the three founder-figures is an honorific title meaning 'Master'. In the text as translated here I have changed 'Chuang Chou' to 'Chuang Tzu' to avoid confusion.

Ssu Ma Chien goes on to say that Chuang Tzu worked as a minor official at Chi Yuan, which can be translated as 'The Lacquer Garden'. Quite what this means is unclear. Was this just a name of a place, in the same way that Salford means 'The Ford by the Willows', or was it actually an area of natural beauty? As with so much in the early histories of Taoism, we don't know.

The historian says that Chuang Tzu lived at the same time as Prince Hui of Liang (370–319 BC) and Prince Hsuan of Chi (319–301 BC). He also says that Prince Wei of Chu (338–327 BC) visited him. This puts him firmly into the last half of the fourth century and leads Needham to give his dates as 369–286 BC.[2] For once, we can be fairly sure about the

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approximate dates of such a figure.

Ssu Ma Chien continues his account by noting that Chuang Tzu was noted for his erudition, which was eclectic but rooted in the sayings of Lao Tzu, of which more later. He says that, because of this, Chuang Tzu's writings were largely imaginative or allegorical – a fact which is most definitely borne out by even a cursory glance at his book. It is also noted that his surviving writings in the first century BC were over 100,000 words in length.

Ssu Ma Chien then discusses three specific chapters of the book, chapters 31, 29 and 10, in that order, and claims they were written explicitly to refute the arguments of the Confucians and to 'glorify the mysteries of Lao Tzu'. It is then noted that some of the characters in his writings are figments of his imagination but that such was his erudition and skill in public debate that not even the greatest scholars of his time could defend themselves against his pitiless attacks on both the Confucians and the followers of Mo Tzu. Ssu Ma Chien goes on to state that Chuang Tzu's writings and teachings were like a tidal wave which swamped everything and could not be stemmed, and his work so free-flowing that no ruler has ever been able to encapsulate it or harness it to specific statecraft – unlike the *Lao Tzu*, which has often been subtitled 'A Manual of Leadership'.

To illustrate this and to highlight Chuang Tzu's own sense of personal freedom from the niceties of power or the temptations of title – a theme which he often explores – Ssu Ma Chien relates a story which is actually recorded in the book itself:

> Someone offered Chuang Tzu a court post. Chuang Tzu answered the messenger, 'Sir, have you ever seen a sacrificial ox? It is decked in fine garments and fed on fresh grass and beans. However, when it is led into the

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Great Temple, even though it most earnestly might wish to be a simple calf again, it's now impossible.' (Chapter 32, this translation)

In the version told by Ssu Ma Chien, Chuang Tzu goes on:

Go away! Don't mess with me! I would rather enjoy myself in the mud than be a slave to the ruler of some kingdom. I shall never accept such an office, and so I shall remain free to do as I will.

This exchange captures to perfection the spirit of Chuang Tzu which emerges from his writings. For unlike the *Tao Te Ching*, which tells no stories, contains no anecdote or personal details about anyone, the *Chuang Tzu* is full of stories, personalities, characters and incidents. It is a bag of tricks, knaves, sages, jokers, unbelievably named people and uptight Confucians! And through it strides the occasionally glimpsed figure of Chuang Tzu himself, leaving a trail of humour, bruised egos and damaged reputations.

There are two particular insights which the book affords us of the personality and personal history of Chuang Tzu himself, which bring him vividly to life in a way unusual for philosophers. The first is his great friendship and rivalry with the philosopher Hui Tzu. The two represented different strands of philosophy but were close enough to enjoy the delights of sparring. In particular, Hui Tzu took exception to one of Chuang Tzu's key points, that meaning depends entirely upon the context and that there is no such thing as a 'fact' which stands apart from the context of the speaker. The most famous example of this comes at the end of chapter 17:

Chuang Tzu and Hui Tzu were walking beside the weir on the River Hao, when Chuang Tzu said, 'Do you see how the fish are coming to the surface and swimming around as they please? That's what fish really enjoy.'

'You're not a fish,' replied Hui Tzu, 'so how can you say you know what fish enjoy?'

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Chuang Tzu said: 'You are not me, so how can you know I don't know what fish enjoy?'

Hui Tzu said: 'I am not you, so I definitely don't know what it is you know. However, you are most definitely not a fish and that proves that you don't know what fish really enjoy.'

Chuang Tzu said: 'Ah, but let's return to the original question you raised, if you don't mind. You asked me how I could know what it is that fish really enjoy. Therefore, you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. And I know it by being here on the edge of the River Hao.'

The intensity of this friendship of rivalry is poignantly captured in a story told in chapter 24:

Chuang Tzu was following a funeral when he passed by the grave of Hui Tzu. He looked round at those following him and said, 'The man of Ying had on the end of his nose a piece of mud as small as a fly's wing. He sent for the craftsman Shih to cut it off. Shih swirled his axe around and swept it down, creating such a wind as it rushed past that it removed all trace of the mud from the man of Ying, who stood firm, not at all worried. The ruler Yuan of Sung heard of this and called craftsman Shih to visit him.

' "Would you be so kind as to do this for me?" he said.

'Craftsman Shih replied, "Your servant was indeed once able to work like that, but the type of material I worked upon is long since dead."

'Since the Master has died, I have not had any suitable material to work upon. I have no one I can talk with any longer.'

This sad story brings me to the second detail which we can glean about Chuang Tzu from the book. Unlike perhaps our standard vision of the philosopher-sage of Taoism, whom we associate with remote mountains and an ascetic lifestyle, Chuang Tzu was married and brought up a family, though one does get the impression that, perhaps luckily for them, the bulk of the responsibility for rearing the children fell to his wife. These details come out in a story told in chapter 18:

Chuang Tzu's wife died and Hui Tzu came to console him, but Chuang Tzu

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was sitting, legs akimbo, bashing a battered tub and singing.

Hui Tzu said, 'You lived as man and wife, she reared your children. At her death surely the least you should be doing is to be on the verge of weeping, rather than banging the tub and singing: this is not right!'

Chuang Tzu said, 'Certainly not. When she first died, I certainly mourned just like everyone else! However, I then thought back to her birth and to the very roots of her being, before she was born. Indeed, not just before she was born but before the time when her body was created. Not just before her body was created but before the very origin of her life's breath. Out of all of this, through the wonderful mystery of change she was given her life's breath. Her life's breath wrought a transformation and she had a body. Her body wrought a transformation and she was born. Now there is yet another transformation and she is dead. She is like the four seasons in the way that spring, summer, autumn and winter follow each other. She is now at peace, lying in her chamber, but if I were to sob and cry it would certainly appear that I could not comprehend the ways of destiny. This is why I stopped.'

What is so wonderfully typical of these stories is the way Chuang Tzu uses incidents around him to deliver himself of a philosophical reflection or comment. Unlike the *Tao Te Ching*, which simply gives a saying or proverb and then comments upon it in a somewhat dry fashion, Chuang Tzu teaches through narrative, humour and detail. At times when translating this book, I was swept along by the desire to find out what happened next, or what point he was going to draw out of some incident. It must also be one of the few books written well over two thousand years ago that can make a translator burst out laughing aloud!

All of which brings me to the vexed question which has dominated the study of Chuang Tzu for centuries. Which parts of the book can be ascribed to Chuang Tzu himself and which come from different, later pens? The custom in many cultures of the past was to ascribe a book to a great figure from the past. By doing so you were not necessarily trying to claim that

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they had written every word. But neither were you too worried if people thought so, so long as they read it! Indeed Chuang Tzu himself comments upon the tendency to claim that one's own words are those of some great figure of the past as a way of gaining an audience. He saw nothing inherently wrong in this (see the opening of chapter 27).

So it was that around sayings or writings of a key figure, other writings which were felt to complement or expand those of the Master would be gathered. Eventually these would be edited and the entire collection known as the writings of, for example, Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu. A similar process took place in Judaism at roughly the same time. Thus, for example, the five books of the *Torah* (Genesis to Deuteronomy) were ascribed to Moses, despite the fact that they record his death!

That this happened to the book we know as *Chuang Tzu* is without doubt. We even know who did the final editing job which produced the text as we have it with three sections. It was Kuo Hsiang, who died in 312 AD. He divided the text into three parts:

Chapters 1–7: The Inner Chapters. Traditionally believed to have been written by Chuang Tzu;

Chapters 8–22: The Outer Chapters. Traditionally seen as being the product of the Yangist school of philosophy.

Chapters 23–33: Miscellaneous Chapters. A catch-bag of odds and ends.

It is thought that Kuo Hsiang edited his text down from a collection of fifty-three chapters, so what we have is a reduction from an even wider collection of material.

Almost from Kuo Hsiang's time onwards, the debate has raged about which bits Chuang Tzu wrote and which bits he

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did not. It has become customary to hold chapters 1–7 as being from Chuang Tzu. Yet some would maintain that when Kuo Hsiang spoke of 'Inner Chapters', he wasn't giving them any greater authority, but simply stating that their titles came from their content, whereas the next fifteen chapters take their titles from the first words of each chapter – from their outer skin as it were.

It is interesting that of the three chapters which Ssu Ma Chien specifically highlights in his life of Chuang Tzu, written some two hundred years after Chuang Tzu and some four hundred years before Kuo Hsiang, one appears in the miscellaneous section and two in the Outer Chapters. None appears in the Inner Chapters. This alone should caution us against making easy or simplistic judgements based upon the present order of the chapters. Personally speaking, having now worked my way through the whole text in Chinese, I would find it very hard to cut up the book into bits that are obviously from Chuang Tzu himself and bits that are obviously not. Rather, I believe that we have a great deal of material which comes from Chuang Tzu or which was directly inspired by Chuang Tzu's life and teachings. For example, the story of Chuang Tzu and the fish comes from chapter 17 and the tale of passing Hui Tzu's grave comes from chapter 24. Neither of these are allowed as authentic Chuang Tzu chapters by certain purists, yet they breathe the very spirit of Chuang Tzu just as much as, for example, the famous 'butterfly passage' of chapter 2.

There is a considerable industry in the remote and dustier shelves of Chinese studies, which engages itself in detailed and unending debate about which sections are genuine or not. But ironically, it seems that the author can speak more clearly to us

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if we do not concern ourselves with his existence or his authorship. For in the end, it really does not matter which bits come from the pen or life of Chuang Tzu and which are additions. The book simply should not be viewed as one consistent discourse. It is a catch-bag, an anthology of stories and incidents, thoughts and reflections which have gathered around the name and personality of Chuang Tzu. Trying to read the book through logically will only produce faint, ghostly laughter. And the one who will be laughing at you from afar will be the spirit of Chuang Tzu. For if there is one constant theme in the book, it is that logic is nonsense and that eclecticism is all, if you wish to open yourself to the Tao and the Te – the Way and the Virtue of all.

The *Book of Chuang Tzu* is like a travelogue. As such, it meanders between continents, pauses to discuss diet, gives exchange rates, breaks off to speculate, offers a bus timetable, tells an amusing incident, quotes from poetry, relates a story, cites scripture. To try and make it read like a novel or a philosophical handbook is simply to ask it, this travelogue of life, to do something it was never designed to do. And always listen out for the mocking laughter of Chuang Tzu. This can be heard most when you start to make grand schemes out of the bits, or wondrous philosophies out of the hints and jokes. For ultimately this is not one book but a variety of voices swapping stories and bouncing ideas off each other, with Chuang Tzu striding through the whole, joking, laughing, arguing and interrupting. This is why it is such an enjoyable book to enter, almost anywhere, as if dipping into a cool river in the midst of summer.

So you will find no great theories set out in this Introduction as to what Chuang Tzu means. Rather I want to try and set

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him, his terminology and some of his ideas into context and at times draw out certain comparisons with our own times.

To begin with, we must avoid calling Chuang Tzu a Taoist. He wasn't. There were no 'Taoists' in his day. There were thinkers who explored the notion of the Tao – the Way of Nature which, if you could become part of it, would carry you in its flow to the edge of reality and beyond, into the world of nature. Most of the great philosophers of the time struggled with the notion of the Tao, not least of them Kung Fu Tzu (better known in the West as Confucius). As is obvious from the number of times he crops up in the *Chuang Tzu*, Kung Fu Tzu was fascinated by the Tao. Indeed, he appears more often in the *Chuang Tzu* than either Lao Tzu or Chuang Tzu himself – albeit often in the role of a butt for Chuang Tzu's humour. But the point remains that, in his own writings, Kung Fu Tzu talks more about the Tao than the *Tao Te Ching* does, page for page.

What marks out the three books of the *Tao Te Ching, Chuang Tzu* and *Lieh Tzu* from, for example, the writings of Kung Fu Tzu is their insistence on experiencing the Tao as a path to walk, rather than as a term to be explained. Experience is all.

For example, take the story which Chuang Tzu tells in the first half of chapter 17, concerning the Lord of the Yellow River and the god of the North Ocean, Jo. The Yellow River has flooded because of the autumn rains, and the god of the Yellow River believes he is the greatest, mightiest being in the world – until he flows into the North Ocean. Then he realizes that he is puny in comparison to the North Ocean.

Jo of the North Ocean replied, 'A frog in a well cannot discuss the ocean, because he is limited by the size of his well. A summer insect cannot discuss ice, because it knows only its own season. A narrow-minded scholar cannot discuss the Tao because he is constrained by his teachings. Now you have

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come out of your banks and seen the Great Ocean. You now know your own inferiority, so it is now possible to discuss great principles with you.'

In other words, the god Jo of the North Ocean can now begin to teach the Lord of the Yellow River because the Lord has experienced the limits of his own knowledge.

This approach – that the Tao which can be talked about is not the true Tao – marks out those writers whom later generations titled as Taoists. It is captured in the famous phrase '*wu-wei*', which I have usually translated here as 'actionless action'. This is beautifully captured in what seems to be a direct quote from Chuang Tzu found in chapter 13:

> Chuang Tzu said,
> 'My Master Teacher! My Master Teacher!
> He judges all life but does not feel he is being judgemental;
> he is generous to multitudes of generations
> but does not think this benevolent;
> he is older than the oldest
> but he does not think himself old;
> he overarches Heaven and sustains Earth,
> shaping and creating endless bodies
> but he does not think himself skilful.
> This is what is known as Heavenly happiness.'

Further on in the same chapter he spells out *wu-wei* even more clearly:

> 'Heaven produces nothing,
> yet all life is transformed;
> Earth does not support,
> yet all life is sustained;
> the Emperor and the king take actionless action,
> yet the whole world is served.'

Wu-wei also encompasses the approach of Chuang Tzu to official status and power. He rejects anything which elevates

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one aspect of life over another. To him, all are equal, and he brings this out in various ways, such as the stories of Robber Chih. For example, at the end of chapter 8 he tells of Po Yi, a former king, who abdicated in favour of his brother and later died of starvation rather than serve an unjust ruler. For this he was held up by Confucians and others as a model of righteousness. Robber Chih, an invented figure, is used by Chuang Tzu at various places through the book as an example of utter greed, cruelty and ruthlessness. Yet in this text Chuang Tzu puts the two men side by side:

Po Yi died for the sake of fame at the bottom of Shou Yang mountain, Robber Chih died for gain on top of the Eastern Heights. These two both died in different ways but the fact is, they both shortened their lives and destroyed their innate natures. Yet we are expected to approve of Po Yi and disapprove of Robber Chih – strange, isn't it?

The term 'innate nature' is a key one in Chuang Tzu. '*Hsing*', as it is pronounced phonetically, is used throughout the text to indicate that which is naturally the way a given species or part of creation either simply *is* in its givenness, or how it reacts to life. In contrast to this innate nature, this *hsing*, which I sometimes have put as true nature, Chuang Tzu presents the artifices and ways of 'civilization' as contrary and destructive to the innate nature. Thus at the start of chapter 9 we have:

Horses have hooves so that they can grip on frost and snow, and hair so that they can withstand the wind and cold. They eat grass and drink water, they buck and gallop, for this is the innate nature of horses. Even if they had great towers and magnificent halls, they would not be interested in them. However, when Po Lo [a famous trainer of horses] came on the scene, he said, 'I know how to train horses.' He branded them, cut their hair and their hooves, put halters on their heads, bridled them, hobbled them and shut them in stables.

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Out of ten horses at least two or three die…

The potter said, 'I know how to use clay, how to mould it into rounds like the compass and into squares as though I had used a T-square.' The carpenter said, 'I know how to use wood: to make it bend, I use the template; to make it straight, I use the plumb line.' However, is it really the innate nature of clay and wood to be moulded by compass and T-square, template and plumb line? It is true, nevertheless, that generation after generation has said, 'Po Lo is good at controlling horses, and indeed the potter and carpenter are good with clay and wood.' And the same nonsense is spouted by those who rule the world.

From that point on in chapter 9, Chuang Tzu launches into one of his characteristic attacks on the way in which the people's true innate nature has been lost and broken. He pictures a perfect world when all were equal and none had any sense of being greater or lesser. They just followed their innate nature. He then depicts the fall from this age of primal, innate, natural living:

Then the perfect sage comes, going on about benevolence, straining for self-righteousness, and suddenly everyone begins to have doubts… If the pure essence had not been so cut about, how could they have otherwise ended up with sacrificial bowls? If the raw jade was not broken apart, how could the symbols of power be made? If the Tao and Te – Way and Virtue – had not been ignored, how could benevolence and righteousness have been preferred? If innate nature had not been left behind, how could rituals and music have been invented?… The abuse of the true elements to make artefacts was the crime of the craftsman. The abuse of the Tao and Te – Way and Virtue – to make benevolence and righteousness, this was the error of the sage.

Chuang Tzu sees all attempts to impose 'civilization' upon the innate nature of the world, and especially on the people, as a terrible mistake which has distorted and abused the natural world – the world of the Tao, the flow of nature. And so he stands firmly opposed to all that the Confucians stood for – order, control and power hierarchies. This is why the *Book of*

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Chuang Tzu was always ignored or despised by Confucians and why it, along with other such 'Taoist' classics, was never formally counted as being amongst the Classics of Academia in Imperial China. This man is a subversive, and he knows it! The *Chuang Tzu* is a radical text of rejection and mockery aimed at the pretensions of human knowledge and powers.

This rejection of the constructions of meaning which we place upon the world and which we then assume to be 'natural' is central to Chuang Tzu as it was to Lieh Tzu as well. They are perhaps the first deconstructionists. Let me give you an example from Lieh Tzu. In chapter 8 of *Lieh Tzu* we are introduced to a gentleman by the name of Mr Tien. He is about to set off on a long journey so invites his friends and relatives to come for a farewell banquet. As the dishes of fish and goose are brought in, Mr Tien looks benignly on them and says, 'How kind Heaven is to humanity. It provides the five grains and nourishes the fish and birds for us to enjoy and use.'

In response to this quaint piece of anthropocentrism, everyone nods in agreement, except for a twelve-year-old boy, the son of Mr Pao. He steps forward and says,

> 'My Lord is wrong! All life is born in the same way that we are and we are all of the same kind. One species is not nobler than another; it is simply that the strongest and cleverest rule over the weaker and more stupid. Things eat each other and are eaten, but they were not bred for this. To be sure, we take the things which we can eat and consume them, but you cannot claim that Heaven made them in the first place just for us to eat. After all, mosquitoes and gnats bite our skin, tigers and wolves eat our flesh. Does this mean Heaven originally created us for the sake of the mosquitoes, gnats, tigers and wolves?'

Here is the authentic voice of the Taoist. Here is the debunking of human pretensions and the re-assertion of the natural as the highest order. Here is the Tao of Chuang Tzu in the mouth of a

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twelve-year-old.

By stressing the abuses that have happened to our innate natures, Chuang Tzu constantly calls us to look with our heads on one side at what is 'normal'. He uses humour, shock tactics, silly names, the weirdest characters (such as Cripple Shu or Master Yu) and totally unbelievable scenarios (such as the 'willow tree' incident in chapter 18) to make us look again at what we hold to be true. He uses contradiction to explode convention. Take these exchanges from chapter 2:

> There is the beginning; there is not as yet any beginning of the beginning; there is not as yet beginning not to be a beginning of the beginning… I have just made a statement, yet I do not know whether what I said has been real in what I said or not really said.
>
> Under Heaven there is nothing greater than the tip of a hair, but Mount Tai [the greatest of the mighty sacred mountains] is smaller; there is no one older than a dead child, yet Peng Tsu [who, according to mythology, lived thousands of years] died young.

So where does all this leave Chuang Tzu in his understanding of life and his relationship to the rest of creation – the 'Ten Thousand Things', as it is put in Chinese? The next line in this quote from chapter 2 spells it out. If Chuang Tzu could conceivably be imagined uttering any kind of credal statement, perhaps this would be it:

> Heaven and Earth and I were born at the same time, and all life and I are one.

This is the understanding that Chuang Tzu wishes us to return to.

The uselessness of language is the other key point of Chuang Tzu's discourses. He wants us to break beyond words and to realize how they imprison us. This is captured in a quote from chapter 2 which echoes the opening of the *Tao Te Ching:*

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The great Way is not named,
the great disagreement is unspoken,
great benevolence is not benevolent,
great modesty is not humble,
great courage is not violent.
The Tao that is clear is not the Tao,
speech which enables argument is not worthy,
benevolence which is ever present does not achieve its goal,
modesty if flouted, fails,
courage that is violent is pointless.

I want to move on now from this glance at some of the key threads in Chuang Tzu's writings, to his place within 'Taoist' thought and belief. What was his relationship to the book we now know as the *Tao Te Ching?* Traditionally, the chronology of the three 'classics' of Taoism has been, first Lao Tzu with the *Tao Te Ching*, second *Chuang Tzu*, third *Lieh Tzu.*

Lao Tzu has been ascribed to the sixth to fifth centuries BC, while Chuang Tzu has always been known to be around the 330–290 BC era. It would thus seem that Chuang Tzu must have known of the book by Lao Tzu. However, as I have mentioned earlier, it is highly unlikely, even if such a person as Lao Tzu existed, that he wrote more than a few of the chapters of the *Tao Te Ching.* This book dates from around 300 BC at the earliest, though it uses much much older material.

When Jay Ramsay and I with our colleague Man Ho Kwok produced our translation and exploration of the *Tao Te Ching*, we discovered that each chapter consists of two very different strata, clearly discernible in the original Chinese. The first layer is a proverb, wisdom saying or oracle which has been passed down through generations and has become rounded and smooth as a result of re-telling. In quatrains which each have an identical number of characters, the saying is preserved in the midst or at the start of each chapter. Around it, written in a

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totally different style of Chinese, is a commentary, which indicates the fourth– to third-century BC world of China.

In *Chuang Tzu* we can see a similar process at work. At no point is there a direct quote from the *Tao Te Ching.* This is hardly surprising if the dates given above are accurate. The *Tao Te Ching* was not written down when Chuang Tzu was writing, or if it was, it was being compiled at roughly the same time. But it is clear that both books relied upon the same stock of folk wisdom, wisdom sayings and oracles. What is distinctive is the different ways each book handled the same common material. For example, compare how they each use a series of sayings about babies.

In chapter 55 of the *Tao Te Ching* we have:

> 'Those who have true *te*
> Are like a newborn baby.'
>
> – and if they seem like this, they will not be stung by wasps or snakes,
> or pounced on by animals in the wild or birds of prey.
>
> A baby is weak and supple, but his hand can grasp your finger.
> He has no desire as yet, and yet he can be erect –
> he can cry day and night without even getting hoarse
> such is the depth of his harmony.
>
> It's stupid to rush around.
> When you fight against yourself, it shows in your face.
> But if you draw your sap from your heart
> then you will be truly strong.
>
> You will be great.[3]

Chuang Tzu handles the same proverbial wisdom in a characteristically different way in chapter 23. Lao Tzu has been asked by Nan Jung Chu how one can protect one's life.

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Lao Tzu replies:

'The basic way of protecting life – can you embrace the One?' said Lao Tzu. 'Can you hold it fast?… Can you be a little baby? The baby cries all day long but its throat never becomes hoarse: that indeed is perfect harmony. The baby clenches its fists all day long but never gets cramp, it holds fast to Virtue. The baby stares all day long but it is not affected by what is outside it. It moves without knowing where, it sits without knowing where it is sitting, it is quietly placid and rides the flow of events. This is how to protect life.'

… 'Just now I asked you, "Can you become a little baby?" The baby acts without knowing why and moves without knowing where. Its body is like a rotting branch and its heart is like cold ashes. Being like this, neither bad fortune will affect it nor good fortune draw near. Having neither bad nor good fortune, it is not affected by the misfortune that comes to most others!'

So a common source in this instance is even cited as having been used in discourse by Lao Tzu, but it is used in very different ways. This is no rigid adherence to a fixed text – for no such fixed *Tao Te Ching* text existed. It is the use of a common source which later solidified into sacred texts – both the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu.*

So what was the religious background out of which these two great texts arose? We have to rid ourselves of any notion that they arose from a Taoist world. As I have said, there was no Taoism until much later. Indeed the philosopher Hsun Tzu, who lived from *c.* 312 to 221 BC, thus overlapping in his earlier years with Chuang Tzu, puts Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu into altogether different schools of philosophy in his list of such schools. By the time of Ssu Ma Chien, Chuang Tzu is being spoken of as a pupil of Lao Tzu's thought. It is obvious from Chuang Tzu himself that he holds Lao Tzu in very high esteem, even if he then goes off on his own path.

Perhaps it is more important in Chuang Tzu's case to see who he was *not* in favour of, for this gives us a clue to the

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religious thought from which he comes. He is an implacable enemy of the bureaucrats, the petty officials, the sages who teach benevolence and righteousness. He is opposed to all those who seek to tame or harness the innate nature of all aspects of creation, of nature – most especially that of the people. Ssu Ma Chien's inclusion of the story of Chuang Tzu rejecting outright any offer of a position of authority highlights this. But it is deeper than this. Chuang Tzu has a profound hatred of all that enslaves or controls the human spirit. In this he is against the state cult of Confucians, the cruel, almost fascist teachings of the Legalists and Mohists, who felt that human nature was evil and therefore had to be brutally ruled, and yet he is also against the sentimentality of those who believe that everyone is really good.

Chuang Tzu is fed by shamanism, the earliest stream of Chinese spirituality, but is also in touch with the latest thinking in fourth-century BC cosmology. He draws his inspiration for the flow of nature from the shamanistic role of acting as an intermediary between the spiritual and physical worlds, where the Way of Heaven is the superior Way and the material world just a pale reflection of the true reality of the Heavenly world. This comes out time and time again when he compares the natural way of Heaven and Earth with the unnatural way of the rulers, sages and Emperors. But he is also a man who is teasing out the depths in new terms and models which were beginning to percolate into general Chinese thought. Most important amongst these is the role and significance of the individual as a being in his or her own right within the cosmos. There is no place here for the subsuming of the individual within the needs of the state. In contrast to the State Cult of China, where the ruler is the intermediary between the rest of humanity and Heaven, Chuang Tzu sees the

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rulers as the problem, and turns to the right of individuals to strike out for their own salvation, their own sense of place in a world which they are encouraged to deconstruct and then to re-assemble by turning to their innate nature.

This is quite the most radical aspect of his religio-social thought and lays the seeds for the later rise of Taoism as a specific religious expression where individual salvation, purpose and meaning became the central tenet of the new religion. For in elevating the free individual against the incorporation and subsuming of the individual within the corporate, he is moving in a much more radical direction than the *Tao Te Ching* does and is challenging the whole superstructure of conventional Chinese religious and social life.

So where does he get this idea from? Heaven knows! But I would conjecture that much of it is from pure speculation and from his own logical developments from the contextual nature of all knowledge, which lead him to see all previous attempts to impose order and meaning on the universe as just so much wordy wind in the air. Because his critique of language and knowledge is so ruthless, he is left with nothing fixed, nothing 'given'. In such circumstances the human spirit can make great leaps forward. I believe that Chuang Tzu is one of the great innovators of human thought – a man whose time, maybe, has yet to come. Certainly the remarkable thing about him, to someone writing in the final days of the second millennium after Christ, is how modern he sounds, and yet how in his modern-ness he actually undermines that modern-ness's notion of its own modernity!

So I would claim that, while one can to some extent unravel the context of Chuang Tzu's arguments and the nature of his opponents, while one can see some antecedents of his thought

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in the shamanistic culture which these bureaucratic opponents were busy destroying, while one can see elements of what he was saying reflected in Lao Tzu, ultimately in Chuang Tzu we meet an original man. A thinker who broke through all the conventions of his time and entered new fields of thought. That he could do so with such humour, through such wonderful stories and with such amazing characters, puts him on a level with the most truly original and enjoyable thinkers the world has ever seen.

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聽鶯圖
南田仿衣畫柳有
一種瀟灑出塵之
致真不易到

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CHAPTER 1
Wandering Where You Will

In the darkness of the north there is a fish, whose name is Vast. This fish is enormous, I don't know how many thousand miles long. It also changes into a bird, whose name is Roc, and the roc's back is I don't know how many thousand miles across. When it rises in the air, its wings are like the clouds of Heaven. When the seas move, this bird too travels to the south darkness, the darkness known as the Pool of Heaven.

The *Book of Wonders* records a variety of marvels. It tells how 'when the roc flies to the southern darkness, the waters are stirred up for three thousand miles, and he rises up in a whirlwind, soaring ninety thousand miles, not ceasing for six months'. It is like the swirling of the dust in the heat, blowing around below the deep blue of Heaven. Is this its true colour? Or is it because it is so far away that it appears like this? To one flying above looking down, the pattern is indeed the same.

If the waters are not great enough, they will not have the ability to carry a large boat. Spill a cupful of water into a small hollow and even a scrap will look like a boat. However, if you try and float the cup upon it, it will just sit there, for the water is not sufficient to carry such a boat. And if there is not enough wind, it will not have enough strength to bear up the great wings. The roc needs ninety thousand miles and the strength of the wind below him, so that he can rest upon the wind. Thus,

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with the light of Heaven on his back and with nothing to restrain him, the great bird can follow his course to the south.

A cicada taught a young dove, saying with a laugh, 'I try to fly, with considerable effort, into an elm or sandalwood tree, but I find that, before I can reach it, I am pulled back down to earth. So what chance does this creature have of rising to ninety thousand miles and heading south?'

Someone who goes into the countryside with his lunch, and returns in time for the evening meal will be as full as when he left. Someone travelling a hundred miles needs to take enough food to see him through. And someone who travels a thousand miles needs to carry food for three months. What do these two understand?

The understanding of the small cannot be compared to the understanding of the great. A few years cannot be compared to many years. How do we know this? The morning mushroom does not know of the waxing and waning of the moon. The cicada does not know of spring and autumn, for theirs are but short lives. To the south of Chu there is a vast creature for whom five hundred years is but a spring, and five hundred years is but an autumn. In ancient antiquity there was a giant tree called Chun, for whom spring was eight thousand years and for whom autumn was eight thousand years. Yet Peng Tsu[4] is the only man renowned for his great age, something envied by many people, which is rather pathetic!

When the Emperor Tang debated with Chi, a similar issue arose, for he said:

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'In the barren north there is a dark sea called Heaven's Pool. Here there is a fish, several thousand miles wide and goodness knows how long. This creature is called Vast. There is also a bird, whose name is Roc, and whose back is like Mount Tai[5] and whose wings cover the heavens. He rises up on a whirlwind, ninety thousand miles high, soaring through the clouds and breaking through the clear blue sky, then turns to plot his course south, travelling to the southern darkness. A quail laughs at him, saying, "Where are you travelling to? I leap up high but come down again after just a few feet, falling to earth amongst the bushes. And frankly that is the best you can expect from flying! So where is that creature going?" This is what distinguishes the small from the great.'

Someone who can fulfil the duties of one office, or behaves well enough to please one district, or has enough virtue to please one leader and is used to rule one country, views himself in the same way as these creatures. However, Sung Jung Tzu[6] would laugh at such a person. The whole world might praise him but he would not do more as a result. The whole world might condemn him, but he would not be affected. He knew the difference between the inner and the outer and the boundaries between honour and disgrace, but he went no further. He did not care about the world's opinion, but there were boundaries he did not manage to overcome. The great Lieh Tzu[7] could ride the wind, going to the edges without concern, but returning after fifteen days. In the search for good fortune he knew no boundaries. Although he never had to bother with walking, nevertheless he needed some way of getting around. If instead he had risen through the naturalness of Heaven and Earth, travelled on the six elemental forces and voyaged into the unknown and unlimited, he would

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Hui Tzu spoke to Chuang Tzu, saying, 'The King of Wei gave me the seeds of an enormous gourd, which I planted and it produced a fruit big enough to hold five bushels of anything, so I used it to hold water, but it was then too heavy to pick up. I cut it into two to make scoops, but they were too awkward to use. It was not that they weren't big, I just found I could not make use of them, so I destroyed them.'

Chuang Tzu said, 'Dear Sir, surely the problem is that you don't know how to use big things. There is a man in Sung who could make a cream which prevented the hands from getting chapped, and generation after generation of his family have made a living by bleaching silk. A pilgrim heard this and offered to buy the secret for a hundred pieces of gold. All the family came together to respond and said, "For generation after generation we have bleached silk, yet we have never made more than a few pieces of gold; now in just one morning we can earn a hundred pieces of gold! Let's do it." So the pilgrim got the secret and went to see the King of Wu. He was struggling with the state of Yueh. The King of Wu gave the pilgrim command of the army and in the depths of winter they fought the men of Yueh on the water, inflicting a crushing blow on the forces of Yueh, and the traveller was rewarded by the gift of a vast estate from the conquered territory. The cream had stopped the hands chapping in both cases: one gained an estate, but the others had never got further than bleaching silk, because they used this secret in such different ways. Now, Sir, you have a gourd big enough to hold five bushels, so why didn't you use it to make big bottles which could help you float down the rivers and lakes, instead of

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dismissing it as being useless? Because, dear Sir, your head is full of straw!'

Hui Tzu spoke to Chuang Tzu, saying, 'I have a big tree, which people call useless. Its trunk is so knotted, no carpenter could work on it, while its branches are too twisted to use a square or compass upon. So, although it is close to the road, no carpenter would look at it. Now, Sir, your words are like this, too big and no use, therefore everyone ignores them.'

Chuang Tzu said, 'Sir, have you never seen a wild cat or weasel? It lies there, crouching and waiting; east and west it leaps out, not afraid of going high or low; until it is caught in a trap and dies in a net. Yet again, there is the yak, vast like a cloud in heaven. It is big, but cannot use this fact to catch rats. Now you, Sir, have a large tree, and you don't know how to use it, so why not plant it in the middle of nowhere, where you can go to wander or fall asleep under its shade? No axe under Heaven will attack it, nor shorten its days, for something which is useless will never be disturbed.'

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CHAPTER 2
Working Everything Out Evenly

Master Chi of the Southern District sat leaning forward on his chair, staring up at Heaven and breathing steadily, as if in a trance, forgetful of all around him. Master Yen Cheng Yu stood beside him and said, 'What is it? Is it true that you can make the body like a shrivelled tree, the heart like cold, dead ashes? Surely the man here now is not the same as the one who was here yesterday.'

Master Chi said, 'Yen, this is a good point to make, but do you really understand?

'I have lost myself, do you understand?
You hear the pipes of the people, but not the pipes of earth.
Even if you hear the pipes of earth, you don't hear the pipes of Heaven!'

'Please explain this,' said Master Yu.

Master Chi replied,

'The vast breath of the universe, this is called Wind.
Sometimes it is unmoving;
when it moves it makes the ten thousand openings resound dramatically.
Have you not heard it,
like a terrifying gale?
Mountains and forests are stormed by it,
great trees, a hundred spans round with dips and hollows,
are like noses, like mouths, like ears, like sockets,
like cups, like mortars, like pools, like gulleys;

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such a One.
He can certainly act, of that there is no doubt,
but I cannot see his body.
He has desires, but no body.
A hundred parts and nine orifices and six organs,
are parts that go to make up myself,
but is any part more noble than another?
You say I should treat all parts as equally noble:
But shouldn't I also treat some as better than others?
Don't they all serve me as well as each other?
If they are all servants, then aren't they all as bad as each other?
Or are there rulers amongst these servants?
There must be some Supreme Ruler who is over them all.
Though it is doubtful that you can find his true form,
and even if it were possible,
is it not meaningless to his true nature?
When someone is born in this body, doesn't life continue until death?
Either in conflict with others or in harmony with them,
we go through life like a runaway horse, unable to stop.
Working hard until the end of his life,
unable to appreciate any achievement,
worn out and incapable of resting,
isn't he a pathetic sight?
He may say, 'I'm still alive,' but so what?
When the body rots, so does the mind – is this not tragic?
Is this not ridiculous, or is it just me that is ridiculous and everyone else is sane?
If you allow your mind to guide you,
who then can be seen as being without a teacher?
Why is it thought that only the one who understands change and whose heart approves this can be the teacher?
Surely the fool is just the same.
But if you ignore your mind but insist you know right from wrong, you are

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like the saying,
'Today I set off for Yueh and arrived yesterday.'
This is to claim that what is not, is;
That what is not, does exist –
why, even the holy sage Yu cannot understand this,
let alone poor old me!

Our words are not just hot air. Words work because they say something, but the problem is that, if we cannot define a word's meaning, it doesn't really say anything. Is it possible that there really is something here? Or does it really mean nothing? Is it possible to make a proper case for it being any different from the chirruping of chicks? How is it that we have the Tao so obscured that we have to distinguish between true and false? What has clouded our words so that we can have both what is and what is not? How can it be that the Tao goes off and is no longer? How can it be that words are found but are not understood? When the Tao is obscured by pettiness and the words are obscured by elaboration, then we end up having the 'this is, this is not' of the Confucians and Mohists, with what one of them calls reality being denied by the other, and what the other calls real disputed by the first. If we want to confound what they call right and confirm what they call wrong, we need to shed light on both of them.

Nothing exists which is not 'that', nothing exists which is not 'this'. I cannot look at something through someone else's eyes, I can only truly know something which I know. Therefore 'that' comes out of 'this' and 'this' arises from 'that'. That is why we say that 'that' and 'this' are born from each other,

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most definitely.

Compare birth with death, compare death with life; compare what is possible with what is not possible and compare what is not possible with what is possible; because there is, there is not, and because there is not, there is.

Thus it is that the sage does not go down this way, but sheds the light of Heaven upon such issues. This is also that and that is also this. The 'that' is on the one hand also 'this', and 'this' is on the other hand also 'that'. Does this mean he still has a this and that? Does this mean he does not have a this and that?

When 'this' and 'that' do not stand against each other, this is called the pivot of the Tao. This pivot provides the centre of the circle, which is without end, for it can react equally to that which is and to that which is not. This is why it is best to shed light on such issues. To use a finger to show that a finger is not a finger, is not really as good as using something that is not a finger to show that a finger is not a finger; to use a horse to show a horse is not a horse is not as good as using something other than a horse to show that a horse is not a horse. Heaven and Earth are as one as a finger is, and all of creation is as one as a horse is.

What is, is, what is not, is not.
The Tao is made because we walk it,
things become what they are called.
Why is this so? Surely because this is so.
Why is this not so? Surely because this is not so.
Everything has what is innate,
everything has what is necessary.
Nothing is not something,
nothing is not so.
Therefore, take a stalk of wheat and a pillar,
a leper or a beauty like Hsi-shih,
the great and the insecure,

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the cunning and the odd:
all these are alike to the Tao.
In their difference is their completeness;
in their completeness is their difference.

Through the Tao they are all seen as one, regardless of their completeness or difference, by those who are capable of such extended vision. Such a person has no need for distinctions but follows the ordinary view. The ordinary view is firmly set on the ground of usefulness. The usefulness of something defines its use; the use is its flexibility; its flexibility is its essence and from this it comes to a stop. We stop but do not know why we stop, and this is called Tao.

To tax our spirits and our intellect in this way without realizing that everything is the same is called 'Three in the Morning'. And what is 'Three in the Morning'? A monkey trainer was giving out acorns and he said, 'In the morning I will give you each three acorns and in the evening you will get four.' The monkeys were very upset at this and so he said, 'All right, in the morning you will get four and in the evening, three.' This pleased the monkeys no end. His two statements were essentially the same, but got different reactions from the monkeys. He gained what he wanted by his skill. So it is with the sage, who manages to harmonize right and wrong and is content to abide by the Natural Equality of Heaven. This is called walking two roads.

The men of old understood a great deal. How much?

In the beginning they did not know that anything existed; this is virtually perfect knowledge, for nothing can be added.

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