

# Experience and Symbolization in Chuang-Tze

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When learning something new we begin without a clear direction. Our ability to find our way has not yet begun and we are faced with an inability to make distinctions. Yet, we do bring our own experiences and thoughts with us. Let us begin our study of Chuang-Tze by thinking not just about Chinese thought and Chuang-Tze. But, also, with Chuang-Tze. Here is how he describes the path from skill to no skill.<sup>1</sup>

Cook Ting was carving an ox for Lord Wen-Hui. Wherever, his hand slapped and shoulder lunged, foot stamped and knee crooked, with a hiss! With a thud! The brandished blade as it sliced never missed the rhythm, now in time with the Mulberry Forest dance, now with an orchestra playing the Ching-Sou.

"Ah, good!" said Lord Wen-Hui. "Has the craft reached such heights?"

"What your servant cares is for the Way. I have left the craft behind me. When I first began to carve oxen, wherever I looked I saw nothing but oxen. Three years more, and I never saw an ox as a whole. And by now, I come on it through theemonic in me, do not look with the eye. With the senses I know when to stop, but theemonic I want to run its course. I rely on Heaven's structuring., cleave along the main seams, let myself be guided by the main cavities, adapt to whatever is inherently so. A ligament or tendon I never touch, not to mention solid bone. A good cook changes his knife once a year, because he hacks. A common cook changes once a month, because he smashes. Now I have had this knife for nineteen years, and have carved several thousand oxen, but the edge is as though it were fresh from the grindstone. At that joint there is an interval, and the edge of a knife has no thickness; if you were to insert what has no thickness where there is an interval, then, what more could you ask, of course there is ample room to move the edge about. That's why after nineteen years the edge of my knife is as though fresh from the grindstone.

However, each time I come to something intricate, I see where it will be hard to handle and gravely prepare myself, my gaze settles on it, action slows down for it, I move the knife gently – and at one stroke the tangle has been unraveled, as a clod crumbles to the ground. I stand knife in hand, look round proudly at everyone, dawdle to enjoy my triumph until I'm quite satisfied, then clean the knife and put it away."

"Good!" said Lord Wen-Hui. "Listening to the words of Cook Ting, I have learned from them

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1 Both sections quoted in this paper are from what are called the "Inner Chapters." The book is generally broken up into the inner and outer chapters. The inner chapters are those said to have been written by Chuang-Tze and the latter could not have been written by him due to numerous anachronisms and stylistic differences.

how to nurture life."<sup>2</sup>

This passage is not only well known but it is quite pertinent to our task at hand. How can we start to learn from Chinese thinkers? In the beginning, we cannot know little but with care and diligence we can start to see different parts of the Chinese world without cutting so crudely. We must learn like the butcher to make the knowledge learned part of us so that it becomes tacit knowledge and not just jumbles of facts, visions, and symbols. But before we go on I would like to emphasize that for Chuang-Tze following the Dao is not a task that is capable of being completed. When the butcher confronts something difficult he stops to think and prepares himself. There is no point where following the Dao can become a technique which can be done without error or without thought<sup>3</sup>.

Let us continue, with another text which is also very well known. Its focus is on language and the Dao so it may well be suitable for our subject today.

Speech is not merely the blowing of air. Speech is intended to say something, but what is spoken may not be necessarily valid. If it is not valid, has anything actually been spoken? Or has speech never actually occurred? We may consider speech to be distinct from the chirps of hatchlings, but is there really any difference between them?

How has the Way become so obscured that there are true and false? How has speech become so obscured that there are right and wrong? Could it be that the Way has gone off and is no longer present? Could it be that speech is present but has lost its ability to validate? The Way is obscured by partial achievements; speech is obscured by eloquent verbiage. Thus there are controversies between Confucians and Mohists over what's right and what's wrong. They invariably affirm what their opponents deny and deny what their opponents affirm. If one wishes to affirm what others deny and deny what others affirm, nothing is better than lucidity.<sup>4</sup>

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2 Page 78-79 Translation by A.C. Graham from the book edited by Harold D Roth. *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang-Tze..*

3 This is particularly important to the study of ancient texts and/or texts written in foreign languages. It maybe assumed that one already has perfect understanding of one's own culture and is learning an alien culture which cannot ever be learned well. In this vein, we may see many books which give us the "real" Daism, or the "real" Plato for that matter. While the search for clarity is admirable the assumption that removing all ambiguity from thinkers who held that ambiguity is necessary in articulating experience is more than a bit odd.

4 Pages 14-15 Victor H. Mair. 1994 *Wandering on the Way; Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang-Tzu* New York: Bantam Books: New York

From this translation it would seem that Daoism according to Chuang-Tze would have speech which is not obscured be beyond right and wrong. Before we either agree or disagree with this it may be prudent to recall that we are reading a translation<sup>5</sup>. Let us look to another translation before we align ourselves for or against Chuang-Tze on language.

By what is the way hidden that there is a genuine or a false? By what way is saying obscured , that sometimes "that's it," sometimes "that's not"? Wherever we walk how can the Way be absent? How can what is said be present yet inadmissible? The Way is hidden by development of the lesser. saying is obscured by the by its foliage and flowers. And so we have the "That's it, that's not" of Confucians and Mohists, by which what is *it* for the one is not for the other, and what is not for the one for the other is. If you wish to accept what they reject and reject what they accept, the best course is to throw things open to the light.

In this translation, right and wrong have been rendered "that's it" and "that's not it." Large variances of translations point to either problems in the text or poor translations. Either way, the only way to find out way is to either go to the Chinese or to the author or a knowledgeable person from this tradition<sup>6</sup>.

Despite the allure of having a conversation with Chuang-Tze we can scarcely harbor the thought for he has he been dead for over 2300 years<sup>7</sup>. And in turning to the man who compiled the texts attributed to Chuang-Tze, Kuo-Hsiang, we still cannot find solid ground. Kuo-Kuo Hsiang struggled to put together the texts attributed to Chuang-Tze around 600 years later in the early fourth century AD.. While for centuries we knew little of what he thought of this task the introduction to the compilation of Kuo-Hsiang have just been discovered in the twentieth century in a Japanese Temple. In this introduction, he clearly states that his understanding of the deeper and stranger parts of texts said to be written by Chuang-Tze were limited so he focused primarily on what was easy to understand.<sup>8</sup>

If we turn to Taoism for help we also quickly run into difficulties. While the Taoist traditions still survive it is broken into two sides which seem to have almost nothing in common but name. There is the academic tradition of studying the works of Lao-Tze and Chuang-Tze which is

5 It should be noted that English translations were selected in preparation for this paper. That is, previously I had only studied Chuang-Tze in Chinese. It was only by going through these translations with a close friend and teacher that problems in the translations became distinct.

6 It may seem that a preference is given to Graham's translation over Mair's. As will be seen later this is not the case.

7 All we know about Chuang-Tze is that written by the Chinese Historian Su-Ma Chien. If true he lived from around 369 BC-286 BC.

8 Kirkland, Russel "The Historical Countours of Taoism in China: Thoughts on Issues of Classification and Terminology." *Journal of Chinese Religions* 25: 57-82

known by the name of Lao-Chuang. But any familiarity with the texts of either master give little support for Taoism being exemplified by the scholarly life of a man apart from society. On the other side, there is the Taoism of self-cultivation with temples, monasteries, and rituals. To complicate matters further, Taoism has lost the status it once had in the Tang Dynasty when Taoist masters were well represented in all parts of society. As Ruism<sup>9</sup> became more dominant we must take care to not be mislead into believing this has always been the case.

Now we will look to the Chinese. While having the Chinese at hand may illuminate the text of Chuang-Tze we must stay clear of two assumptions. The first is that we cannot understand anything of Chuang-Tze without knowing Chinese. The second is that knowing Chinese means we can understand Chuang-Tze. To do either would remove reflection from the task of interpretation. But, either way, any serious study of Chuang-Tze must be done with attention to how he articulated his experiences and this was done in Chinese. (However, it should be said that the punctuation marks are a recent addition. Also, I have made the sections shorter to show the rhythm and contrast between Dao and language more clearly.)

則	欲	以	故	言	道	言	道	言	道
therefore	want	so	therefore	language	Dao	language	Dao	language	Dao
莫	是	是	有	隱	隱	惡	惡	惡	惡
nothing	this one	this one	have	conceal	conceal	How	How	How	How
若	其	其	儒	於	於	乎	乎	乎	乎
like	it	it	Ruism	in	in				
以	所	所	墨	榮	小	存	往	隱	隱
as	of	of	Mohism	flourishing	small	be present	wander	conceal	conceal
明	非	非	之	華	成	而	而	而	而
being brighter	not this one	not this one	so	abundance	completion	so that	so that	so that	so that
.	而	而	是	◦	,	不	不	有	有
	instead of	instead of	this one			Not	does not	have	has
非	非	非				可	存	是	真
	not this one	not this one	Not this one			can be	(exist)	this is it	genuine
其	其	,				?	?	非	偽
it	it							this is not it	fake
所	所							?	?
of	of								
是	是								
this one	this one								

<sup>9</sup> I use the term Ruism instead of Confucianism as it is close to the Chinese. Although, I am not following standard practice the use of the term Confucianism will at times make nonsense out of translations. If we have Daoism and Buddhism we can certainly call Ruism by the same word the texts use.

With the Chinese at hand<sup>10</sup> one can clearly see how Chuang-Tze sets out the problems of knowing Dao and the problem of language going beyond itself. One key problem both for understanding Chuang-Tze and the Chinese of Chunag-Tze is what to do with 是 and 非 . While "right" and "wrong" make the English smooth they conceal the breadth of meaning intended. As 是 and 非 are demonstratives I think that A.C. Graham's tact of translating these as "this one" and "not this one" has some merit. But while obtaining a closer proximity to the text we have moved quite far away from beautiful English. And the Chinese is beautiful.

Nonetheless, what is important to see here is that not just abiding in this school or that school will one's thought become frozen in dogmatic slumbers to paraphrase Kant. It is in the very nature of language itself to objectify that which cannot be objectified. It is not because we have schools of thought that we have "this one" and "not this one" but, rather, because we have language.

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10 It should not be assumed, by any means, that this is presented as a superior translation. Translators are always faced with the problem of keeping consistency between terminology and capturing the meaning of sentences. Here the focus is on the former. Furthermore, this has been done primarily so that the text can be written and displayed in such a manner so that an audience without knowledge of Chinese may have the ability to see how the text was written while, also, able to ask questions and discuss parts of the text. Furthermore, note that not all Chinese words have been translated the same way each time. (Notice that I have translated 而 as "so that" and "instead of". The first word that would come to mind if we just had the word 而 alone would probably be "but.")

## Critical Bibliography:

This following list of books is a selection of books I have found useful and interesting. The books themselves contain more complete bibliographies which can help both scholars and beginners. Yet, there is a use and a place for critical bibliographies in that they help us begin to find our way. Notice that I am not listing any translations of Chuang-Tze here. This is for two reasons. First of all, I have only started to read translations in order to present this paper. (Previously, I only read Chuang-Tze in Chinese.) Second, I don't want to get into tedious arguments over which translation is right and which is wrong. As far as I can tell, most have some merit and one can see what they did and why.

1. deBary, W.T., and Irene Bloom, eds 1999, *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Volume 1, New York: Columbia University Press.

This is an anthology for those who don't like anthologies. Despite including texts which date from the earliest texts all the way up to 1600 the selection of texts and translations are of the highest quality. It should be noted that the second volume has not been received as well. For my part, I concur with this lack of interest.

2. Graham, Angus C. 1981. Chuang-Tze: *The Seven Inner Chapters*. London: Allen & Unwin.

Graham, Angus C. 1989. *Disputers of the Tao. Philosophical argument in Ancient China*. Chicago: Open Court

The scholarship and reputation of Angus Graham is only matched by his humility. Research continues and his works have already begun to be dated in some areas but they should remain on the bookshelves of Chinese Scholars for many more years. Furthermore, it would be quite difficult to find any works on Taoism which have not been influenced by his scholarship.

3. Kirkland, Russell 2004, Taoism, The Enduring Tradition. New York: Routledge

A very important book which explores what is Taoism. It covers, and uncovers, both modern and ancient dogmatic approaches to Taoism. Most importantly it shows how Taoism has become split into an overly academic tradition of textual interpretation and the religious self-cultivation, which at times lack the literary depth of the former, aspects

of Taoism.

4. Mote, F.W. 2003 *Imperial China 900-1800*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

The influence of Mongolia, the Manchurians, and other ethnic groups has not always been explored enough in books on Chinese History. Mote's work does much to rectify this. Furthermore, it is a good place to start to see the influence of empire and foreign rule in all research of Chinese studies. If nothing else, it dramatically shows that there is no evidence for considering China to be an isolated culture.

5. Roth, Harold D. 2003. *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang-Tze*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii's Press.

A gem of a book which is not just for Sinologists as here we can see the scholar at work. Furthermore, it contains a complete bibliography of all the works of Graham.

6. Saussy, Haun. 1993 *The Problem of a Chinese Aesthetic*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

This is an interesting book on the problems of translation, comparative literature, and, especially, allegory. For Eric Voegelin scholars it would be quite interesting to read this along with Voegelin's essay *The Beginning and the Beyond*. (It should be noted that a background in Chinese Literature is not needed to learn from this book.)

7. Wagner, Robert G. 2003 *Language, Ontology, and Political Philosophy: Wang Bi's Scholarly Exploration of the Dark*. Albany: SUNY Press.

This book, and others by Wagner, are quite interesting as he shows how Chuang-Tze has been interpreted in Chinese by the famous scholar Wang Bi.

Voegelin, Eric. 1990 *Equivalences of Experience and Symbolization in History* Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 12. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

Voegelin, Eric. 2002 *What is Political Reality?* Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 6. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

Voegelin, Eric. 1990 *The Beginning and the Beyond* Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 28. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

Voegelin, Eric. 2000 *In Search of Order* Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 18. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University

These are the texts I concentrated on in preparing for this speech.