

Sebastian de Grazia

ABOUT CHUANG TZU

About Chuang Tzu, the less one writes, the better. He has a fluttering identity that eludes the net:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou. Between Chuang Chou and a butterfly there must be *some* distinction!

Chuang Tzu is not unknown and unappreciated in this world; times have not passed him by. One does not have to rescue him from oblivion as Mendelssohn had to do with Bach. The paragraph above in which he wonders whether he is really himself or a butterfly dreaming it was a philosopher, is one of his famous puzzles, famous to the Chinese, that is. For millenia they have known he was a great writer and philosopher.

It would be nice if we could say the Chinese know Chuang Tzu but don't like him: we might then adopt him for our spiritual own. The Chinese like him, have liked him, and will like him forever. Perhaps, though, right now at least, we are in a better position than they to enjoy him. We confusitarians and contradictorians, ever seeming to fall apart at the seams, may understand a wild man like him better than mandarins and bureaucrats can.

Chuang Tzu is considered a Taoist. The word *tao* is familiar to Chinese philosophy in its elastic meaning of a road or way, the path of the model kings, the course of nature, the cosmic order or principle, the absolute, and by extension—truth, reality, and right conduct. The classical Taoist tries to follow the way of nature with all things and so to be free. The life to lead is one that follows the *tao*, to emulate nature

in its indifference to men, to take the example of the heavenly bodies, the plants and animals, the trees and streams, to do just what is necessary to get along, to let others be, and so to shy from all uniquely man-contrived institutions like language, civilization and government. Of the three great Taoists—Lao Tzu, Yang Chu, and Chuang Tzu—only Chuang Tzu (despite his own doubts) holds claim to actual existence.

In the ancient *Records of the Grand Historian* where the first account of Chuang Tzu's life and work is preserved, his personal name appears as Chou. He was born in a place called Meng, probably in northern Honan, south of the Yellow River, and lived from circa 369 B.C. to circa 286 B.C., about the same time as the great Confucian philosopher Mencius (although neither ever referred to the other). He once served as a minor official in Meng, but declined an offer of the premiership (by King Wei of Ch'u) lest he lose his freedom. "Go away," he said to the King's envoys. "I would rather play in the mud than be the slave of some king." A man of evident erudition he wrote a flood of over 100,000 words with great literary skill but aimed chiefly, the *Records* complain, at pleasing himself. From rulers and ministers downward, not one could turn them to practical use.

From his writings it appears he had a wife and children, and a close friend, the logician Hui Tzu. What he did for the wherewithal is not clear. He had some students but they were far from playing the significant role in his life that followers assumed for Confucius. At least on several occasions Chuang Tzu was in dire need. Did he beg, borrow or steal? He undoubtedly borrowed. Once when the smooth-talking Marquis of Chien-ho procrastinated about lending him some grain, Chuang Tzu, flushed with anger, told him to look for him next time in the market, in the dried fish bins.

Chuang Tzu's influence has been tremendous. Even among Confucians whose master and ideas he so soundly spoofed, he finds admirers. His writings have invigorated Buddhism in the growth of Zen, inspired Chinese art, particularly landscape painting and poetry, and supported the transformation of Confucianism into fifteenth-century Neo-Confucianism. His first and best commentator wrote about him near the opening of the fourth century. Since the fifth century no great scholar has taken it upon himself to further Chuang Tzu's ideas.

This brief account may leave only the impression that Chuang Tzu was an influential figure in Chinese literary history. He is more than

that. Like Shakespeare and Rabelais, Thucydides and Dante, he is uninterrestrial and gigantic. A man who hasn't read Shakespeare or Horace or Plato or Cervantes is not a cultivated man, and neither is the one who hasn't read Chuang Tzu.* Can this be true?

Let's see:

Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, "This thing called the Tao, the Way—where does it exist?"

Chuang Tzu said, "There's no place it doesn't exist."

"Come," said Master Tung-kuo, "you must be more specific!"

"It is in the ant."

"As low a thing as that?"

"It is in the weeds."

"But that's lower still!"

It is in the tiles and shards."

"How can it be so low?"

"It is in the piss and shit!"

Master Tung-kuo made no reply

This is Chuang Tzu (22). And this:

"How do I know that loving life is not a delusion? How do I know that in hating death I am not like a man who, having left home in his youth, has forgotten the way back?

"Lady Li was the daughter of the border guard of Ai. When she was first taken captive and brought to the state of Chin, she wept until her tears drenched the collar of her robe. But later, when she went to live in the palace of the ruler, shared his couch with him, and ate the delicious meats of his table, she wondered why she had ever wept. How do I know that the dead do not wonder why they ever longed for life?

This is Chuang Tzu (2).

And now this:

"Suppose you and I have had an argument. If you have beaten me instead of my beating you, then are you necessarily right and am I necessarily wrong? If I have beaten you instead of your beating me, then am I necessarily right and are you necessarily wrong? Is one of us right and the other wrong? Are both of us right or are both of us wrong? If you and I don't know the answer, then other people are bound to be even more in the dark. Whom shall we get to decide what is right? Shall we get someone who agrees with you to decide? But if he already agrees with you, how can he decide fairly? Shall we get someone who agrees with me? But if he already agrees with me, how can he decide? Shall we get someone who agrees with both of us? But if he already agrees with both of us, how can he decide? Obviously, then, neither you nor I nor anyone else can decide for each other. Shall we wait for still another person?

"But waiting for one shifting voice [to pass judgment on] another is the same as waiting for none of them...If right were really right, it would differ so clearly from not right that there would be no need for argument. If so were really so, it would differ so clearly from not so that there would be no need for argument. Forget the years; forget distinctions. Leap into the boundless and make it your home!"

This, also, is Chuang Tzu (2)

And this:

Chuang Tzu's wife died. When Hui Tzu went to convey his condolences, he found Chuang Tzu sitting with his legs sprawled out, pounding on a tub and singing. "You lived with her, she brought up your children and grew old," said Hui Tzu. "It should be enough simply not to weep at her death. But pounding on a tub and singing—this is going too far, isn't it?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're wrong. When she first died, do you think I didn't grieve like anyone else? But I looked back to her beginning and the time before she was born. Not only the time before she was born, but the time before she had a body. Not only the time before she had a body, but the time before she had a spirit. In the midst of the jumble of wonder and mystery a change took place and she had a spirit. Another change and she had a body. Another change and she was born. Now there's been another change and she's dead. It's just like the progression of the four seasons, spring, summer, fall, winter.

"Now she's going to lie down peacefully in a vast room. If I were to follow after her bawling and sobbing, it would show that I don't understand anything about fate. So I stopped."

This is Chuang Tzu (18)

Now to this:

I speak truly of softness, and of a sweet softness, strong, penetrating, delicious, and tranquil, that has nothing to do with certain little devotions (I hardly wish to call them such) made up of tears and small sentiments that like little flowers drop off at the first breeze of harassment.

This is *not* Chuang Tzu. This is Teresa of Avila (1515-1582), writing of the forms of religious ecstasy.

And what of this?

'It is not worth the trouble to talk to a man who has no respect for himself, and it is not worth the trouble to make a common effort with a man who has no confidence in himself. The former attacks morality; the latter says, "I do not think I am capable of abiding by benevolence or of following rightness." Benevolence is man's peaceful abode and rightness his proper path. It is indeed lamentable for anyone not to live in his peaceful abode and not to follow his proper path.'

'If the benevolent and the good and wise are not trusted, the state will only be a shell; if the rites and rightness are absent, the distinction between superior and inferior will not be observed; if government is not properly regulated, the state will not have enough resources to meet expenditure.'

This is not Chuang Tzu, either. This is his contemporary, solid, unmistakable Mencius.* *This* is Chuang Tzu:

Men eat the flesh of grass-fed and grain-fed animals, deer eat grass, centipedes find snakes tasty, and hawks and falcons relish mice. Of these four, which knows how food ought to taste? Monkeys pair with monkeys, deer go out with deer, and fish play around with fish. Men claim that Mao-ch'iang and Lady Li were beautiful, but if fish saw them they would dive to the bottom of the stream, if birds saw them they would fly away, and if deer saw them they would break into a run. Of these four, which knows how to fix the standard of beauty for the world? The way I see it, the rules of benevolence and righteousness and paths of right and wrong are all hopelessly snarled and jumbled. How could I know anything about such discriminations?"

You see how these writings distinguish Chuang Tzu from the others better than anything that might be said. In them, acts, words and thoughts are inseparable. When his friend Hui Tzu taunts him, for example, he retorts argumentatively. Here are the two of them strolling along the dam of the Hao River:

Chuang Tzu said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!"

Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?"

Hui Tzu said, "I'm not you, so I certainly don't know what you know. On the other hand, you're certainly not a fish—so that still proves you don't know what fish enjoy!"

Chuang Tzu said, "Let's go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy—so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing beside the Hao."

As a logician Hui Tzu was much interested in the attributes or secondary qualities of objects, like their color or taste. He was forever in dialectic over an imaginary white horse. Chuang Tzu sometimes chides him in verse for his narrowness. "You, now—you treat your spirit like an outsider. You wear out your energy, leaning on a tree and moaning, slumping at your desk and dozing—Heaven picked out a body for you and you use it to gibber about 'hard' and 'white'!" Above, as these friends walked leisurely along the Hao, Chuang Tzu for two exchanges—in an unusual, powerful construction of a conversation—let

the logician set a trap for him, then stepped out of it to demonstrate that if Hui Tzu couldn't take a stroll without hairsplitting again, well, two can play at that game.

Chuang Tzu loved this Hui Tzu. He is the only one to appear in dialogue constantly with Chuang Tzu. One day,

Chuang Tzu was accompanying a funeral when he passed by the grave of Hui Tzu. Turning to his attendants, he said, "There was once a plasterer who, if he got a speck of mud on the tip of his nose no thicker than a fly's wing, would get his friend Carpenter Shih to slice it off for him. Carpenter Shih, whirling his hatchet with a noise like the wind, would accept the assignment and proceed to slice, removing every bit of mud without injury to the nose, while the plasterer just stood there completely unperturbed. Lord Yuan of Sung, hearing of this feat, summoned Carpenter Shih and said, 'Could you try performing it for me?' But Carpenter Shih replied, 'It's true that I was once able to slice like that—but the material I worked on has been dead these many years.' Since you died, Master Hui, I have had no material to work on. There's no one I can talk to any more."

Grief, love, anger, contentiousness—surely these are not the traits of the man who walks in the Tao, who leans on the sun and moon and tucks the universe under his arm.

What do I mean by a True Man? The True Man of ancient times did not rebel against want, did not grow proud in plenty, and did not plan his affairs. A man like this could commit an error and not regret it, could meet with success and not make a show. A man like this could climb the high places and not be frightened, could enter the water and not get wet, could enter the fire and not get burned. His knowledge was able to climb all the way up to the Way like this.

The True Man of ancient times slept without dreaming and woke without care; he ate without savoring and his breath came from deep inside. The True Man breathes with his heels; the mass of men breathe with their throats. Crushed and bound down, they gasp out their words as though they were retching. Deep in their passions and desires, they are shallow in the workings of Heaven.

The True Man of ancient times knew nothing of loving life, knew nothing of hating death. He emerged without delight; he went back in without a fuss. He came briskly, he went briskly, and that was all. He didn't forget where he began; he didn't try to find out where he would end. He received something and took pleasure in it; he forgot about it and handed it back again. This is what I call not using the mind to repel the Way, not using man to help out Heaven. This is what I call the True Man.

The passages in which Chuang Tzu portrays the True Man are beautiful and unearthly flights of metaphysics and metaphor, poetic wanderings that form the mystical parts of his writings.

Taoism was the only mysticism to originate in China. It was born in China before China was called China. Whether Chuang Tzu himself was a mystic, whether his writings were simply mystically inspired, we do not know. Even had he experienced mystical states and these more fantastical passages reflected them, he would not be in a trance all the time. The experience is transient. Sometimes it occurs to the mystic spontaneously; more often upon resort to a technique of concentration, abstraction, or breathing. ("The True Man breathes with his heels," we have just learned above.) At some point though, the trance ends, the mystic returns to the ordinary world, perhaps to muse, perhaps to talk and write. Chuang Tzu pauses in his wanderings to tell us of them.

To make us understand these wild adventures he calls on all his worldly lore. We would be confused and not a little bored if Chuang Tzu told us only of leaps into the boundless. It is from this sorry earth that he leaps, a world recognizable in our own, of prisons, tortures and wars, of autocratic states, tyrants petty and tyrants grand, of soulless seductive machinery and hopeless heroics, a violent age fearful of the future. "When the leper woman gives birth to a child in the dead of the night, she rushes to fetch a torch and examine it, trembling with terror lest it look like herself." And it is back to this earth of misguided lives and misleading pathways that Chuang Tzu jumps again to show that he is not some clowning metaphysician fumbling with his shoelaces.

As an observer of acts large and small, human and animal, Chuang Tzu is superb. "Haven't you ever watched a man spit? He just gives a hawk and out it comes, some drops as big as pearls, some as fine as mist, raining down in a jumble of countless particles." Haven't you ever noticed that when "men get together to pit their strength in games of skill, they start off in a light and friendly mood, but usually end up in a dark and angry one...When they meet at some ceremony to drink, they start off in an orderly manner but usually end up in disorder..." Have you ever seen that when "animals face death, they do not care what cries they make; their breath comes in gasps and a fierceness is born in their hearts. Men, too, if you press them too hard..."

The same intimate observation guides his jolting passages about the ugly, deformed and grotesque. Chuang Tzu tells us why he writes about them. "Whether you point to a little stalk or a great pillar, a leper or the beautiful Hsi-shih, things ribald or things grotesque or strange, the Tao makes them all into one." This *one* is the One, the undifferentiated

unity of the mystic, a oneness in which multiplicity is obliterated, the core of the mystic experience wherein the mystic feels peace, blessedness, and joy at the apprehension of a unity in all. But Chuang Tzu would never write of it in so tedious a manner. Instead he makes you understand that the dirty, poor, evil, ugly, deformed, mutilated and grotesque cannot be foul in all points of view, that they are favored in some, and in others even fair and virtuous.

There's Crippled Shu—chin stuck down in his navel, shoulders up above his head, pigtail pointing at the sky, his five organs on the top, his two thighs pressing his ribs. By sewing and washing, he gets enough to fill his mouth; by handling a winnow and sifting out the good grain, he makes enough to feed ten people. When the authorities call out the troops, he stands in the crowd waving good-by; when they get up a big work party, they pass him over because he's a chronic invalid. And when they are doling out grain to the ailing, he gets three big measures and ten bundles of firewood. With a crippled body, he's still able to look after himself and finish out the years Heaven gave him. How much better, then, if he had crippled virtue!

Since Chuang Tzu wants to show you the Way, he must also show you that you cannot rely on the cliches of scholars and sages or of the model kings they liked to cite. To do this he mounts the most ingenious attack on the authority of rulers, bureaucrats, intellectuals, public opinion, history and logic ever seen. The Confucians are a natural target, for their *tao* is the way walked by the kings of old, those diviners and creators of ritual rules for rulers, the way of goodness and benevolence opposed to wickedness, of a great community of families filled with filial piety. And Chuang Tzu does lampoon them in song and parody. A picaresque example is the report he invents of a meeting between Confucius and the legendary Robber Chih. The Master had courageously set out to visit the dread bandit with the avowed intent of reforming him. He found him with his band of followers resting on the sunny side of Mount T'ai, enjoying a late afternoon snack of minced human livers. When Robber Chih heard of Confucius' mission, he flew into a great rage. His eyes blazed like shining stars and beneath his cap his hair bristled. "This must be none other than the crafty hypocrite from the state of Lu!" he roared.

"You make up your stories, invent your phrases, babbling absurd eulogies of kings Wen and Wu. Topped with a cap like a branching tree, wearing a girdle made from the ribs of a dead cow, you pour out your flood of words, your fallacious theories. You eat without ever plowing, clothe yourself without ever weaving. Wagging your lips, clacking your tongue, you invent

any kind of 'right' or 'wrong' that suits you, leading astray the rulers of the world, keeping the scholars of the world from returning to the Source, capriciously setting up ideals of 'filial piety' and 'brotherliness,' all the time hoping to worm your way into favor with the lords of the fiefs or the rich and eminent! Your crimes are huge, your offenses grave. You had better run home as fast as you can, because if you don't I will take *your* liver and add it to this afternoon's menu!"

At other times, though, foolish words are lent Confucius (or the great ancient kings) in one anecdote, and wise words in the next. The Yellow Emperor, the legendary figure whom Taoists revere as their founder, is given true words to speak often, but not always; even on him you cannot count; sometimes he, too, makes a fool of himself. Chuang Tzu invents names of people and places; he produces improbable stories in phony technical lingo, and has them acted out by pompous types. The mystical absolute he himself believes in he calls "the Great Clod" or "the Supreme Swindle".

Sometimes to silly questions he gives sillier answers. Sometimes he starts off a discussion, in a perfectly logical way toward a familiar philosophical problem; he lets language take over; in an instant you are struggling to keep your head above the language's unrelenting reasoning; the next instant in a welter of logical babble you realize that you have been had; finally, you see that not you but those who pose the question that way have been had:

Now I am going to make a statement here. I don't know whether it fits into the category of other people's statements or not. But whether it fits into their category or whether it doesn't, it obviously fits into some category. So in that respect it is no different from their statements. However, let me try making my statement.

There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is being. There is nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. There is a not yet beginning to be a not yet beginning to be nonbeing. Suddenly there is nonbeing. But I do not know, when it comes to nonbeing, which is really being and which is nonbeing. Now I have just said something. But I don't know whether what I have said has really said something or whether it hasn't said something.

For scholars he has a sentence of warning that they should daily chant on their knees.

Your life has a limit but knowledge has none. If you use what is limited to pursue what has no limit, you will be in danger.

For rulers and their servants, the state and public office, Chuang Tzu has a different sentence. "I have heard of letting men alone but never of governing them successfully." Keep away from public office, he further warns. Heaven lent you a skin; keep it whole:

If you do good, stay away from fame. If you do evil, stay away from punishment. Follow the middle; go by what is constant, and you can stay in one piece, keep yourself alive, look after your parents, and live out your years.

Once Chuang Tzu set out to visit Hui Tzu, his friendly rival, who had become, of all things for a logician, prime minister of Liang. Someone reached Hui Tzu's ear to say that Chuang Tzu was coming to Liang in order to replace him as prime minister. Filled with alarm Hui Tzu searched all over the state for three days and nights to find the man and dissuade or somehow forestall him. But then Chuang Tzu showed up of his own accord and to his friend told a little story:

"In the south there is a bird called the Yuan-ch'u—I wonder if you've ever heard of it? The Yuan-ch'u rises up from the South Sea and flies to the North Sea, and it will rest on nothing but the Wu-t'ung tree, eat nothing but the fruit of the bamboo and drink only from springs of sweet water. Once there was an owl who had gotten hold of a half-rotten old rat, and as the Yuan-ch'u passed by, it raised its head, looked up at the great bird, and said, "Shoo!"

Now that you have this Liang state of yours are you trying to shoo me? ,

We do not know what counsel if any Chuang Tzu gave to Hui Tzu. Quite possibly it was this: If a gentleman finds that he has no choice but to govern and look after the world, then the best course for him is to do do-nothing.

It is not Chuang Tzu alone but all of classical Taoism that teaches this lesson. It is often thought that Taoism recommends no action whatever. The error comes partly from contrasting active with inactive or inert. The contrast should be activist (or over-active) with active (or quiet that is just active enough, going along with nature). The contrast is not between *do* and *do nothing* but between *do* and *do do-nothing*, both terms active, the one excessive, the other not.

See men everywhere striving to win and gain, everywhere fighting to grasp and kill, everywhere seeking to grow big and dig out knowledge. Ask, knowledge for what? to solve which problems? and you find

yourself spinning in a circle. Why, to move heaven and earth and mankind, of course—again in order to profit and triumph, fight and kill, grasp and grow strong. Yet men everywhere find what they had struggled for was not what they want, see life slip their grasp, and in grief and sorrow, lose all and are killed. Why this struggle, contention, effort, striving, manipulating?

A man of the greatest longevity will live a hundred years, one of middling longevity, eighty years; and one of the least longevity, sixty years. Take away the time lost in nursing illnesses, mourning the dead, worry and anxiety, and in this life there are no more than four or five days in a month when a man can open his mouth and laugh. Heaven and earth are unending, but man has his time of death. Take this time-bound toy, put it down in these unending spaces, and whoosh!—it is over as quickly as the passing of a swift horse glimpsed through a crack in the wall!

So, why so agitated? Why not take it easy? To get what you want, be quiet, do little, go along with earth's life of plants and animals, and heaven's life of sky, stars and wind. "Do not be an embodier of fame; do not be a storehouse of schemes; do not be an undertaker of projects; do not be a proprietor of wisdom." This way is not for any particular kind of person but for everyone, from the most exalted to the humblest.

I take doing do-nothing to be true happiness, but ordinary people think it is a bitter thing. I say: perfect happiness knows no happiness, perfect praise knows no praise. The world can't decide what is right and what is wrong. And yet doing do-nothing can decide this. Perfect happiness, keeping alive—only do-nothing gets you close to this!"

Chuang Tzu obviously cannot refrain from talking and writing about the Tao. Here, again, he falls short of the ideal. The True Man leaves the confusion and muddle as it is. Criticisms like these would not trouble Chuang Tzu. The wise embrace things; the ordinary discriminate. He did not ask to be considered a Taoist; he did not ask to be measured up to the ideal. The Chuang Tzu we know is a man all of a piece, all of a whole, all the universe's, all his own. A bolt of lightning may split the hills open but not him.

Neither should other criticisms that might be leveled disturb him. To carp and criticize would simply show we take his words wrongly. Chuang Tzu counsels us several times to take words, his own included, not too seriously. "I'm going to try speaking some reckless words and I want you to listen to them recklessly."

Were we to tell him we had found contradictions in what he said, he would be apt to do a most unphilosophic thing. His students did just that, once: they confronted him to say, Yesterday *that* happened; now today *this* happens. "What position would you take in such a case, Master?" And what did the Master do?—"Chuang Tzu laughed."

In philosophy this is unheard of. Nobody ever said Confucius laughed. Chuang Tzu not only laughs; he knows others need laughter. Once, the recluse of the mountain forests, Hsu Wu-kuei, went to have a talk with Marquis Wu of Wei. The Marquis' advisor, overhearing bursts of laughter, was puzzled. In all the time he had known him the Marquis had never so much as bared his teeth in a smile. "Sir," he said, buttonholing the recluse as he emerged, "may I ask what you were talking to our ruler about?" "It has been a long time, I think," said Hsu Wu-kuei, "since one who speaks like a True Man has sat chattering and laughing at our ruler's side." Chuang Tzu will make you, too, spew your rice with laughter—if you take his reckless words recklessly.

The fish trap exists because of the fish; once you've got the fish, you can forget the trap. The rabbit snare exists because of the rabbit; once you've got the rabbit, you can forget the snare. Words exist because of meaning; once you've got the meaning, you can forget the words.

*A translation now exists by Burton Watson of *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1968). In the present essay I have used this translation.

*D.C. Lau has recently made a new translation of *Mencius* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1970) from which the above quotation is taken.