PENGUIN CLASSICS

The Book of Chuang Tzu

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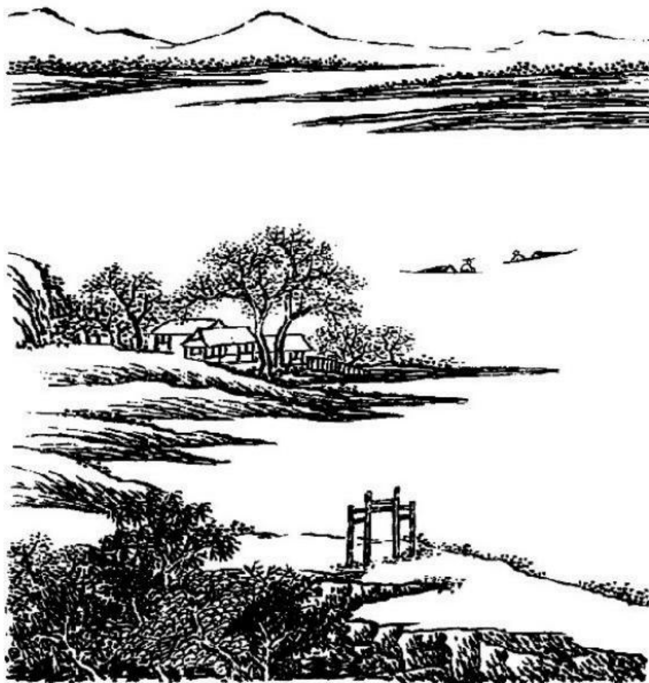

The Book of Chuang Tzu

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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. 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 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 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?'

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 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 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 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 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 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 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 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. 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 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 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:*

> 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 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. 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 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 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 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.