



Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings

Zhuangzi, *Burton Watson*

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The basic writings of Chuang Tzu have been savored by Chinese readers for over two thousand years. And Burton Watson's lucid and beautiful translation has been loved by generations of readers.

Chuang Tzu (369?-286? B.C.) was a leading philosopher representing the Taoist strain in Chinese thought. Using parable and anecdote, allegory and paradox, he set forth, in the book that bears his name, the early ideas of what was to become the Taoist school. Central to these is the belief that only by understanding Tao (the Way of Nature) and dwelling in its unity can man achieve true happiness and freedom, in both life and death.

Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings includes the seven "inner chapters," which form the heart of the book, three of the "outer chapters," and one of the "miscellaneous chapters." Watson also provides an introduction, placing the philosopher in relation to Chinese history and thought.

Witty and imaginative, enriched by brilliant imagery, and making sportive use of both mythological and historical personages (including even Confucius), this timeless classic is sure to appeal to anyone interested in Chinese religion and culture.

Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings Details

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Adam says

I found this to be a nice discussion of Taoism, worlds easier to extract meaning from than the Tao Te Ching, though not quite as clear as the Tao of Pooh. It has all the trappings of ancient philosophy: parables, dialogues, and very poor logical constructions (though, unlike in Plato, these are essentially irrelevant for Zhuangzi; the point is never expressed in logical terms, but rather by illustration in analogy and parable).

The parables are somewhat repetitious, both in tone and in ideas, and sometimes parables are explicitly repeated in slightly altered form. They express three central ideas:

1. That Virtue (happiness, lack of suffering, contentment) is to be found in a middle way, which makes no pretense to glory, riches, or power, nor to asceticism or isolation. It advocates acceptance of your lot in life as the truest road to happiness.
2. That fate is the ultimate determinant of the life you live. You are given a body, a society, a mind, etc, which all conspire to make you who you are and make you do what you do.
3. That all divisions of the world and experience into categories are fallacious and indeed the source of all discontent. This means that language and thought themselves are facetious and don't necessarily have anything to do with the objective universe, and that the only way to truly understand is to abandon all attempts to understand.

These ideas are pretty damned nice for a philosopher who thought such a long time ago. They're not perfect, of course, but I'd say it is probably worth reading. Maybe not. I dunno. Definitely read the Tao of Pooh over Zhuangzi, I'd say, but maybe complement them with each other.

This translation has a nice straightforward character, in that the translator provides many footnotes that are up front about the fact that in many places he didn't really know what Zhuangzi was trying to say. This makes it easier to find the spots that aren't worth trying to parse, since he points them out as dubiously translated and maintained from the original.

"Words exist because of meaning; once you've gotten the meaning, you can forget the words. Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?"

Joseph says

I've read this a number of times and I've read other translations ... for me Burton Watson is the best ... the humor shines through and the language Watson uses in his translation is clear and precise. He also provides useful footnotes which are located on the same page as the text

Here's a famous sample using the famous cleaver illustration: "However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until -- flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth coming to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away." (p. 47)

Here is Chuang Tzu at his most essential presenting "wuwei" which is not "non action" but just the essential action, not over acting. (Modern society could sure use a dose of wuwei.)

Okay, looking at Watson's translation he uses words which are deceptively simple yet surgically precise. That is why, Watson's translation remains for me the best.

Jess says

I almost felt like putting this on the "fantasy" shelf, so much of it was so purely fanciful. Chuang-tzu is, in the words of my prof, "a wild literary ride." Daoist in affiliation, this book is actually pretty drastically different from Lao-tzu's, and much more of the mystical side. The only reason why it's at 4 and not 5 stars is the lack of cohesiveness which plagues these +2000 year old texts. It can be a little hard to focus your attention at times when the thing is jumping all over the place. But it's still really a nice philosophical treat of a book.

John says

Amazing. The story about the "ugly" tree really stuck.

Max says

An excellent counterpoint to the mysterious poetry of the Tao Te Ching, this offers prose which is somewhat more comprehensible yet just as difficult to truly grasp. Both are wonderful ways of communicating the Taoist principles, both are books which I can always return to in times when I lose the way.

One particular thing I love about the writings of Zhuangzi is the humor- a key element for my practice of this kind of philosophy... not just accepting the world, but getting to laugh along with it's absurdities.

C Settles says

Burton Watson is the go to resource for translation of Zhuangzi. Virtually all writers of Daoist philosophy refer to Watson's translations. The basic writings (also called the inner chapters or writings) represent those that are attributable to Zhuangzi the person. The later or outer chapters are under dispute as to authorship but decidedly follow the direction set by Zhuangzi.

William Cheek says

It doesn't matter what your worldview is - Chuang Tzu is good food for the mind.

The basic allure is in the concept of casting off...everything. Our deepest thoughts and considerations are almost always blocked by certain premises that we are unable to see through. Chuang Tzu escapes these barriers, in a thrilling and powerful way.

At its basic level, The Way according to Chuang Tzu is not anchored in anything. Physical circumstance, metaphysical reality - these do not, well, MATTER. The Way is a philosophy that goes beyond all of this, rooted in nothing but the detached mind. There is no seeking, only understanding. There is no high, no low, only acceptance. It is a worldview as expansive and daring as any other.

That doesn't mean I'll be following this Way anytime soon - as thrilling as it is to mull over, its implications paint a picture of rather bleak and colorless detachment. Human suffering will not bring down the true Chuang Tzu sage, but neither will human celebration lift him up.

Still, though, Chuang Tzu's writing will tune your mind, sift your preconceptions, ask you to release - just for a bit - whatever it is you hold as true and to simply THINK.

And that is always a good thing.

Richard Thompson says

This book and the Tao Te Ching are the two great books of Taoism. I liked the Tao Te Ching better, but then I realized that until I could rid myself of the sentiment of thinking that my relative like or dislike of the two books was important, I certainly could not claim to have absorbed the teachings of the Tao. This book is a beautiful, complex and infuriating poem, which uses repetition, contradiction, and a structure like a Jackson Pollack painting to develop its themes in a way that simple explication could not do. The Tao is everything and everywhere (also nothing and nowhere) and is therefore mindfully embedded in every part of the form, words, stories, characters, themes and structures of this book. It is an incredible achievement of beauty and style that works on several different levels as a teaching tool. It is also sometimes irritating, hard to read and seemingly pointless, but that in itself is at least part of the point. And like the Tao Te Ching, this is a book that could stand up under many readings. It would show itself differently each time. For that reason it could easily go on a list of ten books that I would take with me to a desert island.

Long Nguyen says

preferred tao te ching

Tim says

This book contains the "inner chapters," not the entire Chuang Tzu, but generally considered the essential and least corrupt chapters. It's one of my favorite books, and after reading Watson's translation I'm unable to read anyone else's - it's wonderful (and there are quite a few weak versions, and weaker paraphrases). Of the Chinese classics I've read this is not only the most subtle and profound, it's sometimes absolutely hilarious. His parodies of Confucianism are a riot, his magical unrealism is timeless, his man dreaming he's a butterfly - or is it the other way around? - the useless tree that's preserved itself so long by being useless, not like all

those fructiferous trees It's a rare combination of inane silliness with serious reflections on human nature, existence, nature and metaphysics (if that's the right term).

Andrew Yuen says

I can't decide if I learnt something, or nothing at all.

This book has a mystic's tone, in just the same way that Wittgenstein's TLP does. As a translation, Burton Watson makes a great companion and the foreword provides the necessary context to read the work, illuminative for those who are unfamiliar with Eastern philosophy. His many footnotes were helpful in understanding the text as well.

As a philosophy, readers from the western analytic tradition might be left uncomfortable. The work is a bit obtuse and its aphoristic nature leaves one confused as to what one ought to do wrt the philosophy of the text, let alone if one ought to "do" anything at all!

As a poetic work, it's brilliant and provocative. Take what you will and learn from it, or don't.

Akemi G. says

GR keeps asking me if I've read this book because I've read Tao Te Ching. Well, I have read Chuang Tzu's writings in Japanese translation that comes with the original Chinese texts and footnotes. (Chinese characters represent not only the phonetics but also the meanings, and many modern Japanese translations of Chinese classics contain the original text to assist deeper understanding--even though I don't speak Chinese, I know the meanings of the characters. We've been reading such classics for generations; it's part of the cultural heritage of the area that received the ancient Chinese influence. In fact, the Japanese might read Chinese classics more than the Chinese today.)

Chuang Tzu wrote extensively, so editors/translators must choose which stories to include in the book. I trust that this English translation contains his essential writings.

Chuang Tzu defies definition. Yes, he was a Taoist. His thinking and writing are so limitless, however. Be mesmerized in the many imaginative stories and lose yourself. That's what these stories are ultimately about--to lose (or forget) the small self.

Jesus taught by fables. I find it interesting that Chuang Tzu did something similar on the other side of the continent.

Gregg says

Ursula K. LeGuin's "Lathe of Heaven" has a few quotes by Chuang Tzu inside; namely the one about a man dreaming he's a butterfly, who when waking questions if he's now a butterfly dreaming he's a man. This book is a collection of mind-bending parables about imaginary creatures, arguments between philosophers from different times, and places that don't exist.

kostoglotov says

The first-class philosophy and the evaluation of human life. The literature level is even more inaccessible.

Santiago Gonzales says

Great Taoist stories. I read a version translated by Burton Watson. You'll want to be familiar with the Taoist approach to make it an easier read, but perhaps with Taoist approach one should read and absorb and go with the flow rather than study up with knowledge!
