

A Sourcebook in Chinese Philosophy

Chan, W. (1969). *A sourcebook in Chinese philosophy*.
Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

CHAPTER 8—THE MYSTICAL WAY OF CHUANG TZU

A Book Review by S.A. Martin (2011)
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Faculty of International Studies—Prince of Songkla University



Chan (1969, p.177)

“He [Chuang Tzu] takes his readers to undreamed lands and stimulates them through conversations of the shadow, the skeleton, and the north wind,”

Overview of Chapter 8

- Chuang Tzu is the second philosopher in importance regarding Taoism
- He lived in the time of Mencius
- The “Chuang Tzu” is 33 Chapters
 - Chan (1969) provides a translation of only 2 chapters (2 & 6) and a supplement with ‘Additional Selections’
- Chuang Tzu often poses questions/concepts in 2 contexts: empirical & non-empirical

Chan (1969, p.177)

“His [Chuang Tzu] goal is **absolute spiritual emancipation** and peace, to be achieved through knowing the capacity and limitations of one’s own nature, nourishing it, and adapting it to the universal process of transformation”

Chuang Tzu in Context with Confucius, Mencius, and Lao Tzu (Chan, 1969: p.178)

■ Chan compares Chuang Tzu with Confucius

- Chan identifies areas of disagreement between Chuang Tzu's Taoism and Confucianism
- Confucianists want people to be transformed through education; Chuang Tzu leaves transformation to things themselves
- Chuang Tzu was "Prejudice in favor of nature and does not know man"

■ Chan compares Chuang Tzu with Mencius

- Mencius went beyond Confucius
- Chuang Tzu went beyond Lao Tzu

■ Chan compares Chuang Tzu with Lao Tzu

- The Tao in Lao Tzu was still worldly; the Tao of Chuang Tzu is transcendental
- Lao Tzu aims at reform; Chuang Tzu prefers to "travel beyond the mundane world"
- Chuang Tzu is more developed and clearly stated
- Chuang Tzu puts stronger emphasis on the individual (follow your nature and adapt to the environment)

CHUANG TZU and 'TAOISM'

- **Chuang Tzu [Chuangzi] – (bet. 399 and 295 BC)**
 - “He is quietistic, yet for him life move on like a galloping horse”
 - (Note: quietism is a therapeutic or curative approach to philosophy)
 - “He is mystical, but at the same time he follows reason as the leading light”
- **Chuang Tzu’s Taoism**
 - Nature is spontaneity and in a constant state of flux
 - “Incessant transformation”
 - Man as a companion of nature vs. man interfering with nature

Chuang Tzu's Impact on Chinese Philosophy (Chan, 1969: 179)

- “His **Impact on Buddhism** has been tremendous, especially in the development of the Zen School”
- Main source of inspiration on Chinese **landscape painting and poetry**
- Helped the transformation of ancient and medieval Confucianism into **Neo-Confucianism**

The Chuang Tzu Ch. 2: The Equality of Things

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- **Great knowledge is leisurely and at ease** (small knowledge is inquisitive and discriminative)
- **Great speech is simple; like simple taste** (small speech is full of detail)
 - “For speech is not merely the blowing of breath. The speaker has something to say, but what he says is not final” (p.182)

“Some of our minds are leisurely, some are deep, and some are serious. We scheme and fight with our minds... One’s mind shoots forth like an arrow to be the arbiter of right and wrong”

Chuang Tzu

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“It seems there is a True Lord who does so [produces the feelings and thoughts in our minds], but there is no indication of his existence” **Chuang Tzu**

Chan comments

“This sentence has exerted profound influence on Chinese thought and has fortified the long tradition of agnosticism... Any personal God or one that directs the movement of things is clearly out of harmony with Chuang Tzu’s philosophy ”

This & That (p.182-3)

THE AXIS OF TAO

When “this” and “that” have no opposites, there is the very axis of Tao. Only when the axis occupies the center of the circle can things in their infinite complexities be responded to. **Chuang Tzu**

- There is nothing that is not the “that” and there is nothing that is not the “this”
- The “that” is produced by the “this” and the “this” is also caused by the “that”
- When there is impossibility, there is possibility
- Because of the right, there is wrong; because of wrong, there is right”
- The right is an infinity; the wrong is also an infinity

Comments (Chan, 1969: 183)

- Things are not only relative, they are identical...
- Chuang Tzu is surprisingly similar to the dialectic of Hegel (1770-1831) and the relativity of Nagarjuna (C. 100-200 AD)
- Chuang Tzu is less conceptual regarding the synthesis of opposites)

“Therefore the sage harmonizes the right and wrong and rests in natural equalization. This is called following two courses at the same time” Chuang Tzu (Chan 1969:184)

Chan Comments

- The doctrine of following 2 courses is cardinal to most every Chinese philosophical school
 - Doctrine of the Mean
 - Book of Changes
- “Most Chinese follow the 3 systems of Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, and usually take a multiple approach to things.

The Chuang Tzu Ch. 6: The Great Teacher

Coming soon! 😊

Concluding Quote (Chan, 1969: p.179)

“His revolt against traditionalism and conventional standards, his poetic mysticism, his subtle individualism, his insight to human nature, his profound interest in how to live and how to respond to things, and his broad view of things remained inexhaustible sources of inspiration for the Chinese.”