Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries (review)

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Notes


4 – In fact, the identity of Meng Zhongzi is not specified in the *Mengzi*, but the Han exegete Zhao Qi 趙岐 identified him as Mengzi’s cousin. See Zhu Xi, *Sishu zhangju jizhu*, p. 242.

5 – The term “righteousness” is listed in the Glossary (p. 205) as a philosophical term.

6 – D. C. Lau translates the last three lines of *Mengzi* 4B2.6 as follows: “In what way do I suffer in the comparison? If this is not right, Tseng Tzu would not have said it. It must be a possible way of looking at the matter.” See D. C. Lau, trans., *Mencius* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 87. I think Lau captures the meaning and tone of the text accurately.

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*Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings, with Selections from Traditional Commentaries* is an excellent new translation of the *Zhuangzi*. Brook Ziporyn has produced an abridged and annotated edition of the classic for Hackett’s growing series of translations on early Chinese intellectual history. The closest competitors to this new edition are the translations by Watson (1968), Graham (1981), and Mair (1994). Ziporyn’s work succeeds in part because he manages to do both less and more than the others. With judicious abridgement (sixteen full chapters, including all seven “Inner” chapters, plus selections from six more—about two-thirds of the entire work) and valuable added commentary, this book is a great choice for the undergraduate classroom. Scholars will also find this a valuable addition to their shelves. The translation often provides a fresh perspective to old problems, and the selection of commentary delivers a focus and accessibility that engages—and encourages us to re-engage—the considerable commentarial tradition.

There are four parts to this text to be considered: the brief introduction, the four online explanatory essays, the translation, and the selections from traditional commentaries.

The twelve-page Introduction begins with the historical, ends with the philosophical, and finally points the reader to the online essays. The closing section of the
Introduction, “Multiple Perspectives of the Inner Chapters,” rather than attempting to “sum up” the *Zhuangzi*, instead describes a variety of points of view that Zhuangzi the author seems to take. The apparent contradictions are resolved in the longest of the online essays, “Zhuangzi as Philosopher,” where Ziporyn gives us an insightful analysis of the problem: the *Zhuangzi* is justifiably notable not only for pointing out (ontological and psychological) dependence and relativity, but also for embracing and celebrating the transformations between (necessarily limited) perspectives. It is precisely here that the famous phrase from chapter 1, “the Consummate Person has no fixed identity” (至人無己) (p. 6), finds its meaning.

The remaining three online essays are shorter and deal with translation issues, the categorization of the text’s chapters by A. C. Graham and Liu Xiaogan, and the use of the term *dào* in the *Laozi*, which Ziporyn situates between earlier (Confucian and Mohist) and later (Zhuangzian) uses. This last brief essay, introducing the counterintuitive and “ironic” use of the term *dào*, would be a useful assignment for students before reading either text.

Ziporyn’s translation stands up well against those of his predecessors. Sometimes it is more colloquial, as with “The Equalizing Jokebook” for *Qi xie* 齊諧 (p. 3), and “this Peng has quite a back on him” (p. 3). The latter example does not translate anything in the Chinese, and such additions are usually for clarification, but in rare instances I found them slightly puzzling, as with the addition of “or anything in a man” in “Is human life always this bewildering, or am I the only bewildered one? Is there actually any man, or anything in a man, that is not bewildered?” (p. 11). Sometimes the translation seems a little idiosyncratic. *Dao*, for example, is rendered as “course,” a compromise between Chad Hansen’s “guiding discourse” and the standard “way.” I think this works better in theory than in practice, however, because “course” sounds odd in some sentences, for example when Confucius says to the cicada catcher, “How skillful you are! Or do you have a course?” (p. 78). And the logic behind the inconsistent use of the uppercase for words like C/course, H/heaven, and S/sage was not always obvious to me from the context, and might prove distracting to undergraduates, even after being reminded that Chinese has no such distinctions.

But these are small matters. Much more often, the translation is a delight. Ziporyn’s lucid prose is often a marked improvement over his predecessors:

> Since he receives his sustenance from Heaven, what use would he have for the human? He has the physical form of a human being, but not the characteristic inclinations of a human being. Since he shares the human form, he lives among men. Since he is free of their characteristic inclinations, right and wrong cannot get at him. Minute and insignificant, he is just another man among the others. Vast and unmatched, he is alone in perfecting the Heavenly in himself.² (p. 38)

Footnotes are more plentiful than in the previous translations and are especially helpful with a text like the *Zhuangzi*. Shorter notes often provide background and explanatory information, as with the note on Song Rongzi in chapter 1 (p. 5 n. 9). Longer notes engage previous readings of a passage and defend Ziporyn’s own understanding and translation, as with the passage, considered spurious by Graham
and Mair, that ends with “He [i.e., the sage] may lose his life without losing what is most genuine to him, but he is not being a ‘man devoted to service’”\(^3\) (p. 41 n. 10).

The selections from traditional commentaries are the most innovative feature of this translation, in keeping with Edward Slingerland’s Analects and Bryan Van Norden’s Mengzi translations (also from Hackett). Ziporyn provides extracts from forty-seven commentators that offer valuable contextualization as well as a variety of perspectives from which to approach the text. Guo Xiang starts right off in chapter 1 with his signature exegesis of the “spontaneous attainments” (自得) of each being (p. 129). Wang Fuzhi, as if the opening metaphors of this chapter were not perspective-expanding enough, introduces the chapter by saying “All can be wandered in—indeed, all are nothing but this wandering”\(^4\) (p. 129). Shi Deqing connects the vastness of the Northern and Southern oceans to the vastness of the Dao, and then goes on to assert that “without the vastness and depth of the Great Course, the fetus of the great sage cannot be gestated”\(^5\) (p. 130), which provides an excellent starting point for both Buddhist and Daoist hermeneutics. Aside from introducing new interpretive concepts, the commentaries can also serve to explain the continuity of the text, particularly when this is not immediately apparent. The comments of Shi Deqing on the end of chapter 1, for example, conceptually unite the pericopes on Song Rongzi, Liezi, Xu You, and the Spirit-Man on Mt. Guye (pp. 131–134).

There are very few typos, “Qu Boyu” 趙伯玉 inexplicably changing to “Peng Boyu” (p. 29) probably being the only notable one. The bibliography could have included more articles in English for the undergraduate looking to write a paper, but overall Ziporyn’s translation is smooth, clear, and accurate, his notes are helpful, and his commentary selections bring new and welcome dimensions to the text as textbook and as an aid for scholarly research.

Notes

1 – 人之生也，固若是芒乎？其我獨芒，而人亦有不芒者乎？

2 – 既受食於天，又惡用人！有人之形，無人之情，有人之形，故羣於人，無人之情，故是非不得於身，眇乎小哉，所以屬於人也！謷乎大哉，獨成其天！

3 – 亡身不真，非役人也。

4 – 無不可遊也，無非遊也。

5 – 非大道之淵深廣大，不能涵養大聖之胚胎.