

BOOK REVIEWS

HUANG MINGZHE, 《黄明哲正解〈庄子〉》, *Huang Mingzhe Interpreting the Book Zhuangzi* (ZHONGHUA Book Company, 2021)

Prof Dr Huang Mingzhe wrote “*Huang Mingzhe: Interpreting Zhuangzi’s Book*”; it was published in July 2021 by the ZHONGHUA Book Company. As a Chinese philosophy doctor, Professor Huang has deep insight into Taoism, Buddhism, and the Chinese tea culture. His previous book, “*Huang Mingzhe Interpreting the Dao Te Ching*”, is another excellent work on Taoist ideology.

From this book, readers can gain new insights into the ideal realm of life, the limitation of cognition, the keys to health maintenance, a philosophy of life, the heritage of natural law, and natural governance from the perspective of Taoism, all in an understandable way. Prof Huang divided the content according to the main ideas into several sections. Each section presents the concepts at the beginning, is short to read and easy to understand, giving readers less stress about understanding philosophy. With Prof Huang’s interpretation, Zhuangzi’s fantastic imagination and sophisticated hidden rules can bring readers clarity in a mysterious world.

The *Zhuangzi* book was written in the Pre-Qin period and it originally contained 52 chapters; it was later edited into 33 chapters. The book’s contents can be divided into three main parts:

- The Inner Chapters,
- The Outer Chapters, and
- The Miscellaneous Chapters.

Scholars believe that Zhuangzi himself wrote the seven “Inner Chapters”. The main idea in the “Inner Chapters” is the Dao: the complete ideology of the integrity of people and natural law; all things are in symbiosis. The 15 “Outer Chapters” are generally thought to have been composed by Zhuangzi’s students. Finally, the 11 “Miscellaneous Chapters” have diverse sources.

In *Huang Mingzhe Interpreting the Book Zhuangzi*, professor Huang Mingzhe focuses mainly on the research and analysis of the seven Inner Chapters.

These chapters mainly cover Zhuangzi's cognition of the difficulties in the world of human beings and his hopes to discover the sources of right and wrong, of gaining and losing. The whole book covers one rule: all human beings are walking on the way of rights and wrongs, gains and losses; therefore, we must pursue openness and spiritual freedom.

Throughout his entire life, Zhuangzi pursues the state of being free and unfettered and makes this pursuit the substance of this work. What is the state of being free and unfettered? It can be interpreted as the experience of feeling the innumerable and untouchable natural laws within a finite life. If a person is at one with the natural laws, they can be in touch with all possible and potential feelings. This concept is the main focus of the first chapter, "Free and Easy Wandering".

The following six chapters cover:

- *Chapter 2. Treatise on Making Things Equal.* This chapter seeks to demonstrate the limitation of cognition as the barrier between natural law and human beings. We should favour a dynamic and developing vision for paradoxes and conflicts and find a mutually beneficial solution.
- *Chapter 3. The Pivot of Nurturing Life.* The author discusses the principles of being healthy, physically and spiritually, through the Golden Mean,¹ following the natural laws, respecting and accepting what a person gives and is given by birth, and regarding death as a liberation from life.
- *Chapter 4. In the World of Man.* We then read about possible strategies and skills that allow ease and success in the context of the human world, how to deal with power and how to benefit from spiritual retreat even in our chaotic society.
- *Chapter 5. The Full Virtue of People.* The ideal human actor is portrayed in this chapter in terms of deviations from the norms of human expectations. A person possessing outstanding morals can have a powerful personality and can be attractive to others regardless of their physical appearance.
- *Chapter 6. Follow The Prime Master Dao.* We learn here how to discover the source of truth, leading to understanding and obtaining Dao, and concerns death and our mistaken belief that the divide between life and death is a form of absolute.
- *Chapter 7. How Gods and High Kings Should Be.* In this final chapter, the author depicts the morals and characteristics which should define those in authority, a god or a king. Here we find that which can be understood as the ideal of governance and management rules: the most important thing is to obey the natural law, instead of acting as a master above the laws and above society.

¹ The golden mean (or golden middle way) is the desirable middle between the two extremes: excess and deficiency.

The classical book *Zhuangzi* is a very sophisticated philosophical work because of Zhuangzi's imaginative, iconoclastic, and irreverent ideologies but also because of the obscure classical Chinese words in cartoon-like tales. There are so many arguments, fables, stories, and dialogues full of grotesque and diversified imagination with little apparent scientific logic that many readers and scholars (from China or abroad) cannot follow all the ideas to their conclusion. Huang uses his understandable contemporary Chinese to clarify the profound meanings and logic hidden in the short tales in *Zhuangzi* based on the translations of critical words in the book. Furthermore, he combines current social issues with Zhuangzi's Taoist idea to search for the source of impetuosity and annoyance in modern society and to present solutions for readers. The cognition in modern society focuses on prosperity, failure, strategy, planning and more through the experience of diverse situations, which result in the redefinition of right and wrong. Emergent scientific inventions expand domains of knowledge and understanding and provide more variety in approaches to Zhuangzi's ideology. These are the considerations of this book.

Compared with *Tao Te Ching*, which explicitly shows personal cultivation and society governance, Zhuangzi presents the topics more implicitly about the paradox in the human's understanding of the world and the idea of returning to the original and liberated life. More than the traditional philosophy and thoughts, Zhuangzi put forward the method of how to find peace in spirit and body, which is a process of realizing Dao from awareness to vipassana.²

Awareness itself contains paradoxes: knowledge is supposed to be objective, and the subject comes to the foreground. Since the subject-object is highlighted, there is also the mind of right and wrong; it will form a self-awareness and people with different positions together will have various beliefs in life. Zhuangzi further expands the cognitive dimension of Taoism: natural law and human beings were initially one, but since the separation, people need to return to the origins, to reconnect natural law and man, to let life stretch and relax, to recognize and transcend the narrow ego, to let the mind and spirit be clear, to re-broaden the cautious world.

If our life is composed of various experiences, the mainstream culture only focuses on the standard of being good or bad and establishing a value system. This is very far from Zhuangzi's idea, which is to realize living and life through experience. Zhuangzi calls the one who achieves this realm the natural person or the supreme person. Huan interprets this as representing an independent and free personality. The essence of Taoism and even of the Chinese traditional culture is

² The Buddhist term "Vipassanā" often translates to "insight". It usually refers to the practice that seeks "insight into the true nature of reality."

the transcendent and profound spirit of dialectical development based on human beings and a community of destiny based on the coexistence of all things and the harmony of diversity.

It is well known that studying *Zhuangzi*, especially the chapter “Free and Easy Wandering” and the chapter “The Pivot of Nurturing Life,” benefits longevity and is beneficial in dealing with social relationships. These consequences are explained in the chapter “In the World of Man.” From *Zhuangzi*, there are three levels for people: Xiaozhi, Dazhi, and Zhizhi (小知, 大知, 致知), which respectively indicate social achievement, personal independence and ambitious vision, as well as freedom. Most people seek social achievement in modern society, such as a successful title and an abundant income, while pursuing anything irrelevant to material profit is considered unpracticable. Many people are lost in the first level of life.

The question of what kind of people we should become has evolved in various ways throughout history; in modern life, we appear to be equated to our gains and losses. Earning money, owning a car, a house, having a job title, all of which mean happiness and losing them is saddening. People’s lives centre on objects; the value of life is ignored. In Chinese society, involution has attracted attention from all walks of life. Involution is the experience of being locked in a competition that one ultimately knows is meaningless, accelerating without a destination, progress without a purpose. Students have to study even while cycling or eating; they are anxious, stressed, overworked, trapped in a status race. To enter a top university, students have to study until the middle of the night and throughout the weekend. Young people can only see one way to achieve dignity and be recognized as a person: earn top grades, land a well-paid job, buy an apartment, and find a similarly high-achieving spouse. Employees have begun to resent the involution of their lives, calling it the “996” (nine in the morning to nine in the evening, six days a week). The value of that single-minded market competition and the relentless hustle of its workforce is expected to propel China into a future of wealth and ease.

Essentially, life is a process of spiritual experience; if the control is lost, freedom is also lost. If there is too much concern on gain and loss, the ego is lost. The solution given by *Zhuangzi* is named Xinzhai (心齋), which means to have a spiritual cleansing, to let go of stereotypes, shackles, pretensions, and any outer influences, to put the mind at ease without a certain kind of paranoia. This is the basis of Taoism. The story of the sacred tree in *Zhuangzi* presents us with the attitude and action when faced with the society involution. Involution is a kind of unrestricted solicitation and drowning out the meaning of life. At this point, if you follow the involution, your future is inevitably closed. We need to learn to refuse various recommendations, temptations, and moral compulsions and seize the value of life and step forward. Even in a blundering environment, we can keep our

inner peace and ignore the comments. 无用之用 (the value in valueless) in *Zhuangzi* does not mean to waste life to cater to all kinds of perceptions or requirements but to keep to the original natural law, which is more efficient in dealing with the social relationships. There are many more such explanations in Huang's book.

From this book, readers can have a holistic understanding of Zhuangzi's Taoist ideology which is based on Laozi's ideology and develops it further. The easy-to-understand Chinese words and shared experiences in our daily lives explain the main concepts and logic in *Zhuangzi's* book, which is more entertaining for readers. The most attractive point in this book is the combination of profound philosophical thought with contemporary social phenomena. This combination facilitates a deeper understanding of the emergence of these issues by revealing the possible causes of these problems and some suggestions that may help treat the issues. In this impetuous modern social world, people can attempt to slow down their steps to recover inner peace and the original pursuit after reading Huang's interpretation; this was probably the author's aim. Indeed, if readers can gain better knowledge of classical Chinese and of the society of that time, they can understand the *Zhuangzi* and Huang's interpretation better.

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