INTRODUCTION

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The core of the *Chuang Tzu* was probably originally composed in the latter half of the fourth century B.C.E., but the text as a whole was not completed until toward the end of the second century B.C.E. To understand the nature of its compilation, we need to become familiar with the historical background and intellectual currents of the era when the book came into being.

The Chou dynasty (circa 1111–255 B.C.E.) was founded on feudalist principles that worked fairly well for a little over four centuries. During the Spring and Autumn period (771–476 B.C.E.), however, the authority of the Chou kings began to be undermined. While the Chou dynasty had not yet broken up entirely, it was divided into spheres of influence controlled by a dozen or so small feudal duchies. Late in this period, the *shih* ("retainer; knight") arose as an important new intellectual force in China. Gradually, they evolved from a warrior class to an influential group of scholars and political theorists who actively sought to alter the policies of the various dukes. Confucius is a good example of one such knight-scholar. Many of China's most prominent early thinkers came from this class, one of the four

main classes of Chinese society during the latter half of the Chou period, the other three being farmers, artisans, and merchants.

The Spring and Autumn period was followed by the Warring States period, also called the period of the Contending Kingdoms (475–221 B.C.E.). The deterioration of the Chou dynasty continued apace, with the imperial house being reduced to mere symbolic status. Real power was vested in the hands of the kings of the increasingly independent states who vied for hegemony. The number of significant states during this period was reduced to only half a dozen (see map, p. lv). Among themselves, they continually struggled for supremacy. Out of this constant conflict, two of the warring kingdoms, Ch'in in the far northwest and Ch'u in the south, finally emerged as the key powers. In 223 B.C.E., Ch'in defeated Ch'u and captured the heartland of China. A couple of years after that, Ch'in (whence the name China) established the first unified Chinese empire, the basic bureaucratic structure of which lasted until 1911, though undergoing countless rebellions and dynastic changes throughout history. To be brief, we may say that the Warring States period witnessed the demise of the old feudal regimes and their replacement by a centralized monarchy.

In spite of the political disruption and the social chaos of the Warring States period, intellectually this was by far the most exciting and lively era in the whole of Chinese history. Peripatetic philosophers wandered through the length and the breadth of the land trying to get the attention of any ruler who might be willing to put their ideas into practice. The Warring States period offers many interesting parallels with developments in Greek philosophy that were going on at the same time. We shall touch upon some of them here and in the Notes, but others deserve separate, intensive investigation for comparative purposes. Suffice it for the moment to say that the majority of China's seminal thinkers lived during this period and that it corresponds to the classical period of Greek philosophy.

Confucianism and Mohism

To understand the *Chuang Tzu,* it is necessary to realize that virtually all of the philosophical schools of the Warring States period were in dialogue with each other and, furthermore, that their vigorous debates are reflected in the pages of this book. Consequently, we would do well to make a survey of the most important thinkers of the age, especially those to whom the *Chuang Tzu* reacts most strongly.

The first intellectual tradition to coalesce as an identifiable school was that of the Confucianists. They were under the leadership of their namesake, the renowned early Chinese thinker, Confucius (551–479 B.C.E.). Confucius was active at the very end of the Spring and Autumn period, just before the outbreak of the Warring States period. Appearing during a time of sociopolitical upheaval, Confucius strove to restore order by propagating his doctrines.

Confucius was a man of great stature, both physically and in terms of his reputation. A profoundly conservative moralist who hearkened back to an imagined golden age at the beginning of the Chou dynasty, it was he who set the tone of reversion instead of progress that characterized the mainstream of Chinese social and political thought until this century and still has a profound influence on traditional Chinese intellectuals. His rationale for glorifying the past was based on the firm belief that the legendary sage-kings of antiquity could provide a model for good government in his own chaotic times.

Confucius' teachings are preserved in the *Analects* which consists largely of conversations between him and his disciples. In the *Analects,* Confucius asserts that a king should rule through virtuous suasion rather than through sheer power. His ideal leader was the superior man (*chüntzu*), a person who was guided by the highest principles of conduct. Confucius and his followers were very much concerned with issues of benefit and harm, right and wrong, good and bad. The Confucians were

moral absolutists, stressing *yi* ("duty; righteousness; justice") and *jen* ("humaneness; benevolence"). At the same time, they were very much status-oriented in their approach to social relationships, insisting that there was an unalterably fixed pattern of domination and subservience between ruler and subject, father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother.

For Chuang Tzu (Master Chuang), the Confucianists were much too stiff and stuffy, too hidebound and hierarchical. Master Chuang took great delight in making fun of Confucius and his disciples. So formidable were Master Chuang's indictments of the Confucianists that the syncretists who were somewhat sympathetic to them tried to co-opt him by writing several sections subtly espousing their cause and sneaking them into his book. These will be pointed out below ("Structure and Composition of the Text") and in the appropriate chapter introductions.

The Mohists, who were active during the fourth and third centuries B.C.E., were the first to challenge the heritage of Confucius. Their founder, Mo Ti or Mo Tzu (Master Mo), lived during the second half of the fifth century, having been born a few years after Confucius's death. It is significant that Master Mo was almost an exact contemporary of Socrates and that there are so many analogies between the system of thought that he propounded and various schools of Greek philosophy from the same period, but especially the Stoics. Tradition holds that Master Mo was originally a follower of Confucianism until he realized that it overemphasized rituals at the expense of ethics, so he parted company and founded his own school.

Master Mo was a skillful military engineer but devoted his talents solely to defensive works. In this sense, he might best be characterized as a militant pacifist. From the titles of ten important chapters of his works, we can gain an idea of the sorts of issues that occupied him and his followers: religion ("The Will of Heaven" and "Elucidating the Spirits"), philosophy ("Rejecting Destiny" and "Universal Love"), politics ("Elevating the

Worthy," "Conformity with Superiors," and "Rejecting Aggression"), morals ("Economy in Funerals," "Economy in Expenditures," and "Rejecting Music"). Master Mo was associated with workers, craftsmen, and tradesmen, quite unlike Confucius and his followers who were aristocratic in their orientation. The Mohists were fiercely egalitarian and tested all dogmas by whether or not they benefited the people. For Mo Tzu, everything was measured in terms of social utility. He criticized the Confucians for their skepticism of heaven and spiritual beings as well as for their fatalism. Consequently, a debate of huge proportions ensued between the Confucians and the Mohists. The Mohist style of argumentation was dry and wooden. This is one of the reasons why their teachings virtually disappeared after the third century B.C.E. and have only been brought to light again in this century. Because of the ostensible similarity in their doctrines, Christians have been especially interested in the Mohists.

The Mohists were scientifically minded. Their works include estimable treatises on optics and other technical subjects. So practically oriented were they that they even adopted the use of some simplified sinographs in an attempt to ease the burden of a difficult writing system. The Mohists subscribed to an ascetic discipline and behaved like religious fundamentalists. After the death of the founder, Mohism was organized into a church headed by a succession of Elder Masters that lasted for several centuries. As a man, Master Mo was admired by all, but his teachings are considered by most Chinese to have been far too demanding. In a nutshell, we may describe Master Mo as a spartan, populist activist and theoretician of rather dour disposition who advocated universal love, inveighed against excess and luxury, and believed that the only justifiable war was a defensive one—not at all to be scoffed at but, by the same token, not at all to the lighthearted taste of Master Chuang either. He considered the Mohists to be far too preachy and pragmatic, too mechanical and maudlin. We will encounter much wry ridicule of them in these pages.

Other Dominant Philosophies

Chinese historians speak of the Hundred Schools of Thought that flourished during the Warring States period, a round number serving to indicate the many competing schools. It was indeed the most vital period in the development of Chinese thought. All the schools came forth in response to the burning realities of the day and suggested a broad spectrum of solutions to cure the ills of the body politic. The leading thinkers were often government officials themselves or itinerant scholars who traveled from one feudal state to another promoting their programs for social and political reform, trying to find a sympathetic ruler who would put them into action. The ideas of these Hundred Schools are preserved in the conversations between their masters and disciples, in memorials and other types of documents, and in treatises of varying lengths. The chief concepts that all of the schools debated included the following:

Tao (pronounced *dow*)—the Way, or to be more etymologically precise, the Track

Te (pronounced *duh*)—integrity or virtue; etymologically rendered as "doughtiness"

Jen (pronounced *ren*)—benevolence; etymologically equivalent to "humaneness"

Yi (pronounced *yee*)—righteousness; etymologically rendered as "justice"

T'ien (pronounced *teeyan*)—heaven; etymologically equivalent to "divinity"

Each school had its own particular Way or Track. The Confucians, for example, promoted the Way of man, and the Taoists advocated the Way of the Way (cosmos or a universalized concept of nature). The *Chuang Tzu* responded to nearly all the other schools of thought during the middle and late Warring

States period. Since Master Chuang reacted to these schools, elements from a wide variety of sources are operative in his book. To understand the *Chuang Tzu*, then, it is necessary to have some sense of the competing schools of thought that were present during the Warring States period, beyond just the Confucians and the Mohists.

During the fourth century, a new figure enters the fray. This is the individualist Yang Chu. Most of what we know about Yang Chu may be found in the seventh chapter of the *Master Lieh* which bears his name. It shows him as an unorthodox personage, but not as someone who was truly licentious. His enemies called him an egoist and it was unfairly said of him (by a prominent Confucian) that he would not sacrifice a hair to benefit all under heaven. (What he actually said was "If nobody would sacrifice a hair, if nobody would try to benefit the world, then the world would become orderly." In other words, we should live and let live, not imposing ourselves on others nor letting others impose themselves on us. The Confucian distortion is both obvious and self-serving.) This was in direct contrast to Master Mo who was renowned as an extremely hard worker for the public good. The Yangists were intent upon protecting themselves from the dangers of involvement in political strife. Yang Chu held that man must nourish his Heaven-endowed nature by keeping it intact and striving for happiness. We may characterize his philosophy as a brand of moderate hedonism.

It was in this context, then—after Confucius, Mo Tzu, and Yang Chu—that Master Chuang appeared upon the scene. It is not surprising that these three thinkers loom so large in his book, because they had set the terms of the Warring States period's intellectual debates. But Master Chuang does something very unusual. Instead of joining them in a debate, he deflates them by undermining both their basic premises and the methods by which they argued them. Over and over again, Master Chuang demonstrates the futility of debate. Simultaneously with his attacks on disputation, however, a new group materialized who

espoused argument as a legitimate professional pursuit in its own right.

Appearing in the late fourth century, at about the same time as Master Chuang, were the Sophists or Logicians. Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to them by the literal translation of their designation in Chinese, the School of Names (or Terms), or the School of Names and Debate, because they did not actually develop any syllogistic reasoning nor discover any laws of thought. In diverse ways, this new school affected all the other schools that were active during the fourth century. The leaders of the Sophists were Hui Shih and Kungsun Lung. Like the Mohist school, from which they derived, they were in favor of universal love and opposed to offensive war, but they differed from their predecessors in practicing disputation for its own sake. It was the Sophists who devised a whole set of celebrated paradoxes, such as Kungsun Lung's famous "A white horse is not a horse." Many of these paradoxical statements are preserved in the *Chuang Tzu*, but they are included there almost as a sort of joke. Master Chuang was actually a close friend of Hui Shih's. He mischievously debated with him and poked fun at his logic-chopping.

It is worth noting that the author of the final chapter of the *Chuang Tzu* gives great prominence to Hui Shih, not only by placing him in the culminating position, but simply by devoting so much space to this otherwise largely neglected philosopher. There is, in fact, some evidence that this section of Chapter 33 may originally have been part of a separate chapter devoted to Hui Shih. Like Master Mo, he truly deserves to be called a philosopher in contrast to the vast majority of other early Chinese thinkers who dealt primarily with social and political problems rather than logic, ontology, epistemology, and so forth. Master Mo, interestingly enough, is similarly highlighted in this survey by being placed first and by being awarded generous coverage.

Another major personality who appeared on the scene at

about the same time as Master Chuang was Mencius (circa 372–289 B.C.E.). Whereas Master Chuang satirized Confucius, Mo Tzu, and Yang Chu, Mencius ardently defended Confucius and criticized the other two. For his advocacy of collectivism based on universal love, Mencius singled out Mo Tzu as Confucius's most dangerous rival. His focus was on human nature, a subject that had actually been brought to the fore by Yang Chu. Still, Mencius criticized Yang Chu sharply for his assertion of the primacy of the self over society. Mencius emphasized that human nature is basically good and that all men could become sages by fulfilling their inherent potential. He tempered the aristocratic side of Confucianism by being a champion of the common people and speaking out for humane government. This he did by stressing the role of the scholar-official in inculcating moral values in the ruler who, as a result, would be encouraged to treat his subjects more kindly. Of all the early Confucian thinkers, Mencius was the most concerned with individual human development, but always within the context of creating a good society. During the third century, Master Hsün, another Confucian thinker who was influenced by several other schools, declared human nature to be fundamentally bad, that it could only be kept in check by education and strict moral inculcation. Given these presuppositions, it is not surprising that he believed in authoritarian principles of government.

By the end of the fourth century, all but the Confucians had recognized that the authority of the ancient sages could no longer be depended upon as an adequate guide to the contemporary world that had changed so tremendously. Master Chuang was among those who denied the relevance of the ancient sages for the contemporary world. Furthermore, while Confucian humanism definitely put man at the center of things, Master Chuang thought of man as but one among the myriad things.

Wing-tsit Chan (*Source Book*, p. 178) has pointed out that the Confucians have by and large been critical of Master Chuang. Hsün Tzu (Master Hsün, flourished 298–238 B.C.E.) said that

he was "prejudiced in favor of nature and does not know man." Chu Hsi (1130–1200), the preeminent Neo–Confucian, complained, "Lao Tzu at least wanted to do something, but Master Chuang did not want to do anything at all. He even said that he knew what to do but just did not want to do it."

This antagonism to Master Chuang on the part of the Confucians is understandable, of course, because Master Chuang himself was so critical of them. Master Chuang often plays tricks on us by sometimes having Confucius speak like a Taoist and sometimes like himself. We can never be sure which is which unless we pay very close attention to the drift of an entire tale. The multiplicity of ambiguous personae in the *Chuang Tzu* is part of the exhilarating reading experience that it presents. Sometimes even Master Chuang himself is made to appear antithetical to what we would expect of Master Chuang by sounding Confucian, pedantic, or technical.

To summarize this survey of Chinese thought during the Warring States period, we may say that the Confucians were primarily interested in family relationships as the model for organizing good government, the Mohists were preoccupied by societal obligations, the Yangists were concerned with the preservation and enhancement of the individual, the Sophists were consumed by questions of logic, and the Legalists were focused wholly on the advancement of the ruler and his state. In opposition to all of these were the Taoists who viewed human society and politics as inevitably corrupting and sought to merge with the Way by returning to nature as contemplative quietists and hermits.

Perhaps the best and most authoritative introduction to Warring States philosophy is the concluding chapter of the *Chuang Tzu* itself. A systematic account of the outstanding thinkers of the age, this chapter presents—in tightly argued, analytical fashion—many of the themes and figures that appear in narrative form elsewhere in the book. From a strictly scholarly point of view, therefore, it may well be the most valuable chapter

of the *Chuang Tzu*, even though it was clearly not written by Master Chuang himself, but probably by the editor(s) of the book who brought together the disparate materials that go to make it up. "All Under Heaven" amounts to a critical review of the major (and some minor) thinkers of the pre-Ch'in period. Considering the unprecedented nature of its accomplishment, the last chapter of the *Chuang Tzu* is a most remarkable document, a veritable intellectual tour de force.

Relationship to the *Tao Te Ching*

Of all the philosophers who were active during the Warring States period, Master Chuang's closest affinities are naturally with Lao Tzu (the Old Master or Masters—there were probably more than one of them). Like the Old Masters, Master Chuang held that what can be said of the Way is not really the Way, and there are many other points of similarity between them. The Old Masters were the originators of the sayings that were compiled as the *Tao Te Ching* around the end of the third century B.C.E. Master Chuang quotes from the *Tao Te Ching* repeatedly; dozens of examples could be cited. Those who are well acquainted with the *Tao Te Ching* will frequently notice echoes of that text in the pages of the *Chuang Tzu*. What is intriguing, however, is that they usually are not exact quotations. In other instances, sayings attributed to the Old Masters are not to be found in the standard edition of the *Tao Te Ching*. This indicates that the *Tao Te Ching* was still probably circulating as oral tradition at the time of Chuang Chou and had not yet coalesced as a written text, certainly not the text that we know today.

The *Tao Te Ching* is extremely terse and open to many different interpretations. The *Chuang Tzu*, on the other hand, is more definitive and comprehensive as a repository of early Taoist thought. The *Tao Te Ching* was addressed to the sage-king; it is basically a handbook for rulers. The *Chuang Tzu*, in contrast, is the earliest surviving Chinese text to present a philosophy for the

individual. The authors of the *Tao Te Ching* were interested in establishing some sort of Taoist rule, while the authors of the *Chuang Tzu* opted out of society, or at least out of power relationships within society. Master Chuang obviously wanted no part of the machinery of government. He compared the state bureaucrat to a splendidly decorated ox being led to sacrifice, while he preferred to think of himself as an unconstrained piglet playing in the mud. The *Tao Te Ching* offers the Way as a guide for life and it propounds nonaction as a means to achieve one's purpose in the workaday world. Master Chuang believed that the Way had supreme value in itself and consequently did not occupy himself with its mundane applications. Rather than paying attention to the governance of human society (the fundamental concern of most early Chinese thinkers), he stressed the need for transcendence and the freedom of the individual from such worldly concerns. In spite of all the differences, however, Master Chuang was clearly attracted by the doctrines of the Old Masters and many of his writings may be thought of as expanded metaphors or meditations on the brief sayings of those early Taoist luminaries whose ideas have been enshrined in the *Tao Te Ching*.

There is no text listed in the earliest authoritative catalogue of Chinese books as having been written by the Old Masters (Lao Tzu), nor is there a *Tao Te Ching* in 5,000 sinographs (its legendary length) or in eighty-one chapters (the number in the received version) that can be dated to the pre-Ch'in period. This fits with my contention that a single Old Master never existed, that the text associated with the Old Masters is a Ch'in period (or from a time shortly before then, in the latter half of the third century B.C.E.) compilation of adages and wise sayings attributed to a type of sage, many of whom were active during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (722–221 B.C.E.), and that the text in question only came to be called the *Tao Te Ching* several centuries later under the impact of the rise of

religious Taoism (which itself came into being as a result of the massive influence of Buddhism upon Chinese society and thought around that time). The questions of the dating and authorship of the *Chuang Tzu* are no less complicated than those for the *Tao Te Ching*. We shall devote a special section to them below.

Although the problems surrounding the authorship of the *Tao Te Ching* and the *Chuang Tzu* may be dissimilar, their respective literary forms can give us some insight into their composition. The *Tao Te Ching* is written entirely in verse, snatches of which are also to be found in other texts dating to about the same period in which it took shape. One of the functions of gnomic verse, especially when it is rhymed, is that it is easily memorized. Indeed, in traditional societies where the technology of writing is not widespread, the regular structure of verse itself is a sort of mnemonic device. In contrast, unrhymed prose with its varying cadences is much harder to commit to memory and is a sign of the emergence of cultures premised upon the written word as the primary technology for preserving and transmitting information.

The *Tao Te Ching* is renowned for its density and brevity. The *Chuang Tzu*, on the other hand, is best characterized as being written in a "rambling" mode. This expansive style reflects the freedom of life advocated by Master Chuang. The very first parable in the book, about the inability of little fowl to comprehend the stupendousness of the giant P'eng-bird, is typical of the relaxed quality of the book as a whole.

The shape of the *Tao Te Ching* is exactly what we would expect of a body of sage wisdom that was normally conveyed orally—it was poetic and communal in the sense that its authorship was shared (that is, it cannot readily be attributed to a single, easily identifiable creator). The *Chuang Tzu* evinces a stage when writing was just starting to free itself from the exclusive control of priests and diviners (esoteric specialists in sacred lore

and ritual), and authorship by identifiable intellectuals was beginning to take on a more definite role in Chinese society. Therefore, the *Chuang Tzu* is fundamentally a work of prose, but it still includes sizable chunks of verse having an oral heritage, some of it gnomic as with the *Tao Te Ching*, some of it epic (though severely fragmented, as was all early Chinese myth that encountered the stridently anti-mystical strains of Confucianism), and some of it oracular (notably the stunning series of cosmic riddles that opens Chapter 14). I consider the verse portions of the *Chuang Tzu* as being oral wisdom embedded in the prose matrix of a single thinker and his followers and redactors. The transitional nature of the *Chuang Tzu* is further evident in the fact that much of its prose is highly rhythmic and parallel, partaking of certain qualities of verse. It might have been possible to set off more passages as verse or semiverse, but I have resisted the temptation to do so on the grounds that the *Chuang Tzu*, in the final analysis, is a work of prose. We must remember, however, that the Warring States philosophers, of whom Master Chuang was one, were mostly peripatetic persuaders who went about trying to convince the rulers of the contending kingdoms to adopt their policies and, through them, to bring peace to the empire. The word for persuasion in Classical Chinese is *shui*, which is cognate with *shuo* ("to say, speak"). Hence, even though the *Chuang Tzu* represents one of the earliest attempts in China to write discursive prose, it is still imbued with the oral tradition out of which it grew.

The third major Taoist text, the *Lieh Tzu*, is of questionable authenticity. Most scholars would agree that it was put together during the third century C.E. and that it was much colored by Buddhist sources. Nonetheless, the *Lieh Tzu* does contain some passages that undoubtedly are based upon pre-Ch'in lore. Master Lieh figures prominently in the *Chuang Tzu* and was even awarded his own chapter (32). The fourth major Taoist collection is the *Master Huainan* which dates to around 130 B.C.E. It is a highly eclectic work, selecting elements from a variety of sources.

The Question of Authorship

The *Chuang Tzu* in its present form was certainly not written by Chuang Chou, the putative author. Before explaining how we know this to be the case, let us examine what facts may be gleaned about the life of our supposed author. Born around the year 369 B.C.E., Chuang Chou was from Meng, a district of the northern state of Sung (it lay south of the Yellow River near the border between the modern provinces of Shantung and Honan). Though Sung was considered to be a northern state, Meng was very close to the border with the powerful southern state of Ch'u and consequently strongly influenced by southern culture. It is not surprising that later, in an imperial proclamation of the year 742, the *Chuang Tzu* was awarded the honorific title *True Scripture of the Southern Florescence (Nanhua chen ching)*.

Not much else is known of Chuang Chou's life except that he seems to have spent some time in Ch'u and in the Ch'i (a northern state) capital of Lintzu where he must have associated with scholars from the celebrated Chihsia "academy" that was located there. Chuang Chou probably died in about 286 B.C.E. In fact, the evidence for the existence of a historical Chuang Tzu (Master Chuang) is only slightly greater than that for a historical Lao Tzu (Old Master), the alleged author of the *Tao Te Ching*, which is virtually nil. In fact, as we have seen, the Old Master was most likely not a single historical personage at all but a congeries of ancient sages. Nonetheless, the great historian Ssuma Ch'ien managed circa 104 B.C.E. to devise a sort of "biography" for Chuang Chou in scroll 63 of his celebrated *The Grand Scribe's Records (Shih chi)*. Ever since that time, devotees have believed that Chuang Chou really did exist and that it was he who wrote the *Chuang Tzu*.

Here is what Ssuma Ch'ien actually had to say about Master Chuang:

> Master Chuang was a man of Meng and his given name was Chou. Chou once served as a minor function-

ary at Lacquer Garden and was a contemporary of King Hui of Liang and King Hsüan of Ch'i. There was nothing upon which his learning did not touch, but its essentials derived from the words of the Old Masters. Therefore, his writings, consisting of over a hundred thousand words, for the most part were allegories. He wrote "An Old Fisherman," "Robber Footpad," and "Ransacking Coffers" to criticize the followers of Confucius and to illustrate the arts of the Old Masters. Chapters such as "The Wilderness of Jagged" and "Master K'angsang" were all empty talk without any substance. Yet his style and diction were skillful and he used allusions and analogies to excoriate the Confucians and the Mohists. Even the most profound scholars of the age could not defend themselves. His words billowed without restraint to please himself. Therefore, from kings and dukes on down, great men could not put him to use.

King Wei of Ch'u heard that Chuang Chou was a worthy man. He sent a messenger with bountiful gifts to induce him to come and promised to make him a minister. Chuang Chou laughed and said to the messenger of Ch'u, "A thousand gold pieces is great profit and the position of minister is a respectful one, but haven't you seen the sacrificial ox used in the suburban sacrifices? After being fed for several years, it is garbed in patterned embroidery so that it may be led into the great temple. At this point, though it might wish to be a solitary piglet, how could that be? Go away quickly, sir, do not pollute me! I'd rather enjoy myself playing around in a fetid ditch than be held in bondage by the ruler of a kingdom. I will never take office for as long as I live, for that is what pleases my fancy."

Judging from the dates of King Hui of Liang (reigned 370–355 B.C.E.), King Hsüan of Ch'i (reigned 319–301 B.C.E.), and

King Wei of Ch'u (reigned 339–329 B.C.E.) who are mentioned in this account, Chuang Chou was roughly a contemporary of Mencius (372–289 B.C.E.). Ssuma Ch'ien states that Chuang Chou was born in Meng, located just north of Shang Hill City (Shangch'iu shih) in eastern Honan province. The location of the Lacquer Garden, where he is supposed to have held a minor position, is not certain. In fact, Lacquer Garden may not even be a place name at all but only a general designation for a plantation. Some scholars hold that it was located about fifty miles northeast of the modern city of Kaifeng (also in Honan province). It is noteworthy that none of the five chapters from the *Chuang Tzu* cited by Ssuma Ch'ien as written by Chuang Chou himself occur among the "inner," supposedly more authentic, chapters of the book.

We must remember that this skimpy biographical sketch was written more than two centuries after the time of Chuang Chou and that, during the intervening period, there were no other works that provided any useful information about his life. Furthermore, most of Ssuma Ch'ien's brief portrait of Chuang Chou is drawn from anecdotes in the *Chuang Tzu* itself. Since the *Chuang Tzu* is full of hyperbolic invention, this means that they have no necessary basis in fact. Aside from those recounted by Ssuma Ch'ien, there are a number of other memorable anecdotes about Chuang Chou in the later chapters of the *Chuang Tzu,* but these are largely apocryphal. According to these anecdotes and to the hagiographical legends that have grown up around him, it would appear that Chuang Chou was a highly unconventional person who paid no attention to physical comfort or social status. He is said to have worn raggedy clothing and to have tied his shoes on with string to prevent them from falling apart. Although he was poor, Chuang Chou by no means thought of himself as unfortunate or miserable.

There are a number of tales in the *Chuang Tzu* that indicate that Chuang Chou did not consider death as something to be feared. For example, when his philosopher-friend Hui Shih came

to console him upon the death of his wife, he found Master Chuang sitting sprawled out on the floor beating on a basin and singing.

> "When she first died, how could I of all people not be melancholy? But I reflected on her beginning and realized that originally she was unborn. Not only was she unborn, originally she had no form. Not only did she have no form, originally she had no vital breath. Intermingling with nebulousness and blurriness, a transformation occurred and there was vital breath; the vital breath was transformed and there was form; the form was transformed and there was birth; now there has been another transformation and she is dead. This is like the progression of the four seasons—from spring to autumn, from winter to summer. There she sleeps blissfully in an enormous chamber. If I were to have followed her weeping and wailing, I think it would have been out of keeping with destiny, so I stopped." (18.2)

When Master Chuang himself was about to die, his disciples planned an elaborate burial, but he protested, saying that all he wanted was for heaven and earth to be his inner and outer coffins, the sun and moon to be his paired jades, the stars and constellations to be his pearls, and all natural phenomena to be his mortuary gifts. Apparently, Master Chuang viewed death as a natural process or transformation. Death to him was but the giving up of one form of existence and the assuming of another. Master Chuang believed that the wise man or woman accepts death with equanimity and thereby achieves absolute happiness.

Occasionally, the names of ancient Chinese philosophers afford a clue to their affiliations or intentions (like Master Mo ["Ink," as used by carpenters in drawing a straight line], Master Kuan ["Tube," purpose unknown], Old Master [a hoary sage],

and Lieh Yük'ou ["Resist Tyranny"]). Chuang Chou's surname and name, which ostensibly mean "Solemn Round," do not help us much in this regard because he was anything but sedate, though he may well be thought of as slipperily circular.

The connection between Chuang Chou and the *Chuang Tzu*, though less tenuous than that between Lao Tzu and the *Tao Te Ching*, still presents obstacles of its own. As a historical personage, Chuang Chou remains an enigma. Inasmuch as there are almost no hard facts available about Chuang Chou the man, we are forced to rely on information that may be gleaned from the *Chuang Tzu* itself in an attempt to figure out what sort of person he was. As we have seen, however, this is not a very reliable procedure either, given the playful propensities of the author(s) of the text. Even the synoptic Chapter 33, "All Under Heaven," gives only an enigmatic, though endearing, account of Chuang Chou the individual.

Whether or not there ever was a Chuang Chou (there probably was), of one thing we can be sure: he did not write all of the *Chuang Tzu*. The sheer amount of blatantly contradictory ideological materials that occur in the various chapters alone is proof enough of that. The literary quality of the chapters is also tremendously uneven, some of them being among the finest masterpieces of Chinese writing, brilliantly conceived and expressed, while others are tritely composed and sloppily executed. The Sophist, Kungsun Lung, is mentioned three times in the *Chuang Tzu*. Since he was active after Chuang Chou, this indicates that the *Chuang Tzu* was compiled after the time of the master himself. In the survey of schools of thought that constitutes Chapter 33 and elsewhere in the text, Chuang Chou is discussed from a historical viewpoint. This is further evidence that the *Chuang Tzu* was put together by someone other than Chuang Chou. In order to find out who that might have been, we need to discuss in more detail the separate strands and layers of the book.

Structure and Composition of the Text

Since the middle of the third century C.E., scholars have regarded the *Chuang Tzu* as a composite text. The current edition (standard from the fourth century C.E.) has thirty-three chapters, but there is good evidence that a fifty-two-chapter edition of the *Chuang Tzu* existed as late as the first century B.C.E. Kuo Hsiang (d. 312 C.E.), basing his work on that of a previous commentator named Hsiang Hsiu, wrote the first extant and what many consider to be the best commentary on the *Chuang Tzu*. By doing so, he secured its position as the primary source for early Taoist thought. Kuo Hsiang was undoubtedly also the compiler of the *Chuang Tzu* in its present form.

The *Chuang Tzu* as we now have it is divided into three parts: the Inner Chapters (1–7), the Outer Chapters (8–22), and the Miscellaneous Chapters (23–33). The first seven chapters, the Inner Chapters, are considered by the majority of scholars to reflect best the thought of Master Chuang himself. Of the three sections, they are the most often translated and are widely considered to be the most authentic. This is not to assert, however, that they are the only excellent parts of the book. Many connoisseurs of the *Chuang Tzu*, for example, would claim that the most beautiful chapter is 17, which includes the magnificent dialogue between the Earl of the Yellow River and the Overlord of the Northern Sea. And Chapter 29, which contains the long, bizarre conversation between Robber Footpad and Confucius, is held by many devotees of the book to be the most humorous.

The great discrepancies among the contents of the various chapters are due to a number of factors. First are the doctrinal differences among the Taoist factions that came after Master Chuang and were identified with him. Some of these were undoubtedly affected to one degree or another by other schools and hence would have brought in material from them. Next are the non-Taoist thinkers who recognized the enormous appeal of

Master Chuang and wanted to appropriate part of his popularity to advance their own programs. The incorporation of sections by such thinkers in the *Chuang Tzu* further complicated the text. The *Chuang Tzu* is thus a very heterogeneous work that does not speak with a single voice. The number of ways of looking at the *Chuang Tzu* are as plentiful as the disparate facets of the text itself.

No one has yet discovered a trustworthy method for firmly attributing even the Inner Chapters to Chuang Chou, although a growing consensus tends to do so. Beyond the first seven Inner Chapters, some scholars see a number of other identifiable strands operative. Chapters 8–10 and parts of 11 reflect a primitive, naturalist cast associated with the followers of the Old Masters (Lao Tzu). Chapters 12–16 and perhaps 33 are said to belong to the Syncretists who probably edited the book as a whole. Their role will be further examined in the following paragraph. Chapters 16–27 are thought to represent the ideas of later members of Master Chuang's own school. Finally, there are the individualists of a somewhat Yangist disposition who seem to be responsible for Chapters 28–31. This breakdown by no means exhausts the complexity of the *Chuang Tzu*, but it does give some notion of the difficulties inherent in dealing with early Chinese texts.

The precise responsibility for the composition of the separate portions of the *Chuang Tzu* is shrouded in mystery. Nor are we on much firmer ground when it comes to determining who first collected them into a single volume. Several critical scholars now believe that the *Chuang Tzu* was compiled by Liu An (d. 122 B.C.E.), the Han dynasty Prince of Huainan, with the assistance of attendants at his court. The lavish, un-Chuang Tzu-ish praise of the sovereign in some of the Outer Chapters and Miscellaneous Chapters seems like the kind of sycophancy expected of the court literati who danced attendance upon Liu An. Liu An and his circle of scholars did espouse a brand of philosophical syncretism (aimed at reconciling differing schools of thought into a single system) that seems to be compatible with the overall

composition of the *Chuang Tzu* and especially the signaturelike final chapter. Still, we lack hard data to ascribe with confidence the initial editing of the *Chuang Tzu* to anyone in particular.

Kuo Hsiang's standard edition of the *Chuang Tzu* that has been transmitted down to us contains many commentaries that appear to have worked their way into the text. In the present translation, I have removed some of the more egregious instances (they have been transferred to the section at the back entitled Deleted Passages). All thirty-three chapters of the Kuo Hsiang edition of the *Chuang Tzu* have titles, but they do not derive from the period of the initial composition of the text and thus are not to be taken overly seriously.

The original heart of the *Chuang Tzu* probably consisted of relatively short, vivid parables and fables such as the opening paragraphs of the book. Another good example is the first paragraph of 5.5. The ensuing paragraphs beginning "Thus" and "Therefore" may be later explanatory additions. This pattern is frequently repeated elsewhere in the book: a short, graphic tale or parable followed by more abstract expositions of the point that it makes, e.g., 24.10. The two types of materials frequently clash in mood and in style. Naturally, it is the concrete narratives that are more memorable than the abstract expositions.

In short, Chuang Chou did not write the *Chuang Tzu*. For the sake of convenience, however, we may collectively refer to the nominal author(s) of the core passages of the *Chuang Tzu* as Master Chuang (Chuang Tzu), which is to say that we associate the text with the school of thought that was grouped around that shadowy name.

Importance of the *Chuang Tzu*

After the Old Master(s), the fathers of the Taoist church have always looked upon Master Chuang as the most important fountainhead of their tradition, but one wonders how much of Taoist religion the wag would have been able to stomach. A wide

spectrum of Chinese thinkers has similarly tried to pre-empt Master Chuang, or parts of him, for their own. But this is perhaps the most serious mistake in dealing with the protean Master Chuang, namely, to treat him as a systematic philosopher. Master Chuang's game is to put dents in, if not annihilate altogether, human thought processes. Rather than rationality, it is intuition that he favors. Such a figure can scarcely be taken as a model upon which to build a system of thought. The importance of the *Chuang Tzu* lies far more in its function as a literary repository than as a philosophical disquisition.

There are scores of famous passages from the *Chuang Tzu* that are among the most memorable in all of Chinese literature. Here I shall cite only two:

> The emperor of the Southern Sea was Lickety, the emperor of the Northern Sea was Split, and the emperor of the Center was Wonton. Lickety and Split often met each other in the land of Wonton, and Wonton treated them very well. Wanting to repay Wonton's kindness, Lickety and Split said, "All people have seven holes for seeing, hearing, eating, and breathing. Wonton alone lacks them. Let's try boring some holes for him." So every day they bored one hole, and on the seventh day Wonton died. (7.7)

This demonstrates graphically the disastrous consequences of going against nature. What makes us remember the lesson is not so much the contents of the doctrine espoused but the inimitable manner in which it is expressed.

> Once upon a time Chuang Chou dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting about happily enjoying himself. He didn't know that he was Chou. Suddenly he awoke and was palpably Chou. He did not know whether he were Chou who had dreamed of being a

> butterfly or a butterfly who was dreaming that he was Chou. Now, there must be a difference between Chou and the butterfly. This is called the transformation of things. (2.14)

Here Master Chuang is playing on the theme of transformation. So striking is the imagery that whole dramas have been written on this theme. If Master Chuang had been merely a pedestrian, prosaic philosopher, no one would pay any particular attention to his claim about the "transformation of things."

Conveyed by the literary grandness of Master Chuang is a grandness of soul. Through it, we are led to liberation. In the very first chapter, Master Chuang tells us that there are varying degrees of happiness. The greatest happiness is achieved through a higher understanding of the nature of things. For the full development of oneself, one needs to express one's innate ability. This is *te,* whose basic meaning for Master Chuang, as for the Old Masters, is integrity or character. *Te* is the manifestation in the individual of the universal Way/Track or Tao. The Tao is thus immanent in all creatures and things, even in excrement. (22.6)

That which belongs to beings and objects by nature is intrinsic or internal; that which is imposed upon them by man is extrinsic or external. All the myriad things in the world are different by nature and they have different innate abilities, but they are equal (each in their own way, of course) when they freely exercise their innate abilities. In other words, for Master Chuang equality exists only in the universal Way that both permeates and embraces the enormous variety of the myriad things. Yet, instead of letting a duck keep its short legs and the crane its long legs (8.1), man intervenes and tries to impose an artificial equality (that is, uniformity) by making them have legs of the same length. This runs counter to the nature of both the duck and the crane. Artificiality forcibly attempts to change things according

to its own conceptions and enforces uniformity (not equality). This is the purpose of all morals, laws, institutions, and governments, namely, to promote sameness and to eradicate difference.

The motivation of those who promote uniformity may be entirely laudable. For example, if they believe that something is good for themselves, they may wish to see others enjoy it too. In the process, however, they are more than likely to demean, if not destroy, those whom they intend to help because they oppose their individual natures. We may say, then, that Master Chuang was the first great proponent of true diversity and that he had the good sense to recognize that it could not be achieved through government fiat.

Master Chuang strenuously opposed the formal mechanisms of government. In his view, the best way to govern is through no government at all. In this, he agreed with the Old Masters, but for different reasons. The Old Masters were deeply concerned with governance, but advocated a minimalist policy simply because they felt that the more government there was the less effective it would be. For Master Chuang, however, the whole notion of government was problematic because of the opposition between man and nature. Better to let things take their own course, he would say, and not govern them at all, not even minimally. Lest he be misinterpreted, it is questionable whether Master Chuang's position is tantamount to anarchy, and he was by no means in favor of violence. It was not Master Chuang's business to describe what sort of governing apparatus there should be; his purpose was to tell us what government should not do.

According to Master Chuang, every person can achieve happiness for himself or herself. Just let them be. Master Chuang's social and political philosophy is quite different from every other thinker in early China in that it was directed toward the private person rather than to groups. He encouraged individuals to seek inner happiness rather than trying to enforce happiness through government policy. To him this was a contradiction

in terms. As soon as government intervenes in natural affairs, it destroys all possibility of genuine happiness.

Another lesson taught by Master Chuang through his parables is that of the humble artisans whose perfect mastery of their craft reveals a mastery of life itself. Butchers, wheelwrights, bell-stand makers, and others are shown to possess a superior wisdom that cannot be expressed in words and can only be acquired through experience and practice.

Modern critics often assert that Master Chuang was an anti-rationalist. The situation, however, is not quite so straightforward as that. While he is dubious about the efficacy of reason to solve all human problems, he does not assert its utter futility. To come to grips with Master Chuang's ambivalent attitude toward human rationality, we must explore the sources of his discontent with it. Master Chuang's animus toward rationality stems from historical circumstance. It was the Mohist plodding predilection for logic that left Master Chuang so disenchanted with this dull species of rationality. Master Mo's doctrines were so unusual in the context of Chinese thought that they had to be defended in open debate. As a result, he and his followers were the first thinkers in China regularly to engage in formal disputation. Honing their elocutionary expertise in this fashion, the Mohists came the closest of all schools in ancient China to constructing a coherent system of logic. Their initial success with this new technique of persuasion encouraged other schools to follow suit in developing the techniques of debate they had introduced. Consequently, philosophical disputation became endemic to the period. More than ever before, debaters paid attention to defining their terms, structuring their arguments, and seizing upon the fallacies of their opponents. Ultimately, as with Hui Shih and Kungsun Lung, logic became a pursuit for its own sake. Master Chuang was a younger friend and perhaps even initially a disciple of Hui Shih. His intimate familiarity with paradox and sophistry indicate that he must have dabbled with logical subtleties himself when he was young, but he obviously outgrew them.

Master Chuang's fascination with Hui Shih's brand of rationality stemmed from a desire to probe the limits of reason, not to deny its validity altogether. Master Chuang uses reason to put reason in proper perspective.

The late Mohist *Canons* (circa 300 B.C.E.) contain the most logically sophisticated texts from early China. In them, we see clearly the resort to reason as the arbiter of conflicting viewpoints. This approach, which had already become the hallmark of Greek philosophy and subsequently characterized the whole of the Western philosophical tradition, in the end was decisively rejected by later Chinese thinkers who preferred to rely more on moral persuasion and intuition. Master Chuang played a vital role in the emergence of Chinese skepticism toward rationality, turning it on its head and satirizing it trenchantly. In the *Chuang Tzu,* arguments that seem to have the appearance of reason are ironically designed to discredit it. Master Chuang was also very much interested in the intricate relationship of language and thought. His work is full of intentional non sequiturs and absurdities because he uses these devices to explore the inadequacies of language itself, an approach similar to that later taken by Zen masters with their koans. Again, we find Master Chuang ironically using a device to cast doubt upon the infallibility of that same device. This proves that he abandoned neither language nor reason; he only wished to point out that overdependence on them could limit the flexibility of thought.

Another key theme in the *Chuang Tzu* is that of relativity. A person who understands that big and little, soft and hard, good and bad are not absolutely counterposed transcends the ordinary distinctions among things and the distinction between self and other. In this way, he or she identifies with Unity and essentially becomes immortal.

Above all, Master Chuang emphasized spontaneity. He was a mystic who recommended freedom from the world and its conventions. Most philosophers of ancient China addressed

their ideas to a political or intellectual elite, but Master Chuang focused on those who were striving for spiritual achievements.

The *Chuang Tzu* was involved in a vibrant interaction with Buddhism as this originally Indian religion developed in China. Chinese Buddhists received more inspiration from the *Chuang Tzu* than from any other early Chinese text. This is especially true of members of the Zen (Ch'an) school. We may, therefore, say that one of the major contributions of the *Chuang Tzu* to Chinese culture was the role that it played in the evolution of Zen, which has now become a world religion, particularly in its Japanese guise. But this is a phenomenon that occurred long after the composition of the original text. There is, however, evidence of Indian influence in the very formation of the *Chuang Tzu*, some of which has been pointed out in the Notes on the Translation (see, for example, the entries on "breathing . . . from the heels" and "bear strides and bird stretches" in the Glossary of Terms). We should also pay attention to the ancient Iranian elements in the *Chuang Tzu*. To give only one instance, the story of Chi Hsien and Master Hu (7.5) is about a contest of spiritual powers between an Iranian-style mage and an Indian-style sage. The mage, Chi Hsien, also appears in 14.1 playing the role of dispenser of cosmic wisdom who can answer riddles that would stump even an ancient Chinese sage. The puzzles that he solves have an even broader, trans-Eurasian compass since they take the form of an extended series of riddles uncannily like those posed by early Indo-European seers and priests. Also awaiting further investigation is the striking resemblance of the colloquy on the joy of fishes between Master Chuang and Master Hui (17.7) to many philosophical dialogues found in the works of Plato. Master Chuang was not an isolated Chinese thinker, but the impressive product of a long process of national and international cross-fertilization.

Master Chuang is claimed by both religionists and philosophers, but I think of him more as a fabulist, that is, as a composer of fables and apologues. It is as a literary stylist that Master

Chuang had his greatest impact on culture—probably more than any other single Chinese author, succeeding generations of writers have turned to him for allusions, themes, turns of phrase, and modes of expression. Painters likewise have found abundant stimulation in the tales of Master Chuang.

The *Chuang Tzu* is, first and foremost, a literary text and consequently should not be subjected to excessive philosophical analysis. Unfortunately, this is practically the only way that scholars have viewed the text during this century. In my estimation, this distorts its true value. What is more, the *Chuang Tzu* is not merely a literary text; it is actually an anthology or compilation of literary texts. Hence it is even less susceptible to systematic philosophical analysis. This is by no means to say that the *Chuang Tzu* is devoid of importance for the history of Chinese philosophy. To be sure, it contains much valuable information that documents intellectual trends during the Warring States period, but these must be sorted out very carefully. Because of the heterogeneous nature of the text, it is extremely difficult, if not altogether impossible, to determine a system of thought to which Chuang Chou subscribed. The *Chuang Tzu* is a monument of Chinese literature; it is in this light that we should read and interpret it.