

# Introduction:

## Chuang Tzu, Martin Buber, and Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-tse

Martin Buber's *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-tse* (*Talks and Parables of Chuang Tzu*) is more than just an antiquated study of a Taoist text. It is the chronicle of a creative and exciting encounter between Buber and *Chuang Tzu*, between one of the modern West's most influential thinkers and one of ancient China's most inspiring literary documents. The volume represents a fresh voice in the longstanding sinological task of interpreting *Chuang Tzu*, it represents a turning point in Buber's philosophical development, and it represents a concrete example of what we in the academy call "comparative mysticism." It is the first of these subjects with which this book is primarily concerned, though the sinological inquiry cannot really be isolated from the other two issues; how Buber transformed Taoist philosophy and how he was transformed by it are simply complementary perspectives on the same comparative question. This study includes annotated English translations of the text translation and commentary portions of Buber's volume, as well as critical analyses integrating Buber's work into the sinological discourse. The point of departure is the complex interpretive history of *Chuang Tzu* itself, and how Buber's unique interpretive perspective brings crucial hermeneutic challenges to light.

### Background: The Text of *Chuang Tzu* as a Source of Perplexity

It is widely accepted that the philosopher named Chuang Chou lived during the fourth and early third centuries B.C.E., roughly two

hundred years after Confucius, and midway through the formative "Hundred Schools" Period that produced many of China's most profound thinkers. He wrote against a background of political instability, ongoing debates over moral criteria (principally between the followers of Confucius, who defended the ancient cultural legacy of classical learning and ritualized social interaction, and the followers of Mo Tzu, who advocated mutual benefit as an objective utilitarian standard), and an intriguing "language crisis" over the relationship between names and actualities. Chuang Tzu evidently left behind an uncoordinated body of writings—alternately couched in the vehicles of poetry, paradox, and satire—which coalesced with other assorted documents into a single book about a century after his death. Shortly thereafter, Han dynasty doxographers classified it with many other works under the fairly interchangeable bibliographic headings of "School of Tao" (*Tao-chia*) and "Huang-Lao," the latter referring to the teachings of Lao Tzu (the reputed author of the *Tao Te Ching*) and the legendary Yellow Emperor. The exact contours of the text remained quite fluid for several centuries—the search for fragments of up to twenty "lost" chapters continues to be an exciting and intermittently rewarding enterprise<sup>1</sup>—and it eventually reached its standard thirty-three chapter form in the hands of Kuo Hsiang, a third century C.E. philosopher and participant in the *hsüan-hsüeh* ("Profound Learning") movement which first categorized "Lao-Chuang" as a singular mystical tradition.<sup>2</sup>

From the beginning of this process of compilation through the modern era, the identity and purport of *Chuang Tzu* have been debated vigorously. And while it would certainly be a daunting task to reconstruct the entire interpretive history, its breadth can be well illustrated through a summary of some key and interesting moments in the life of the text. Over the years, *Chuang Tzu* has been variously identified as a mystic's chronicle, a work of radical individualism, a philosophical statement of freedom, and even a linguistic and epistemological treatise. It has indirectly informed the legacies of Taoist asceticism, landscape painting, and romantic poetry, while also contributing to the ancestries of traditions as diverse as Ch'an Buddhism and shamanistic immortality cults. The text has been viewed as both brilliant pastoral literature and the abject remnant of a moribund slave-owning class, and it continues

to be employed by a Taiwanese monastic community as a manual for meditation.<sup>3</sup> Given the complexity of the text's history within China, it is not surprising that the task of translating it into Western languages, a project that is barely a century old, has produced a number of disparate documents. The finest of the early translations—those of Herbert A. Giles (1889) and James Legge (1891)—often bear only a superficial resemblance to modern renderings. Even more puzzling is that the rigorous and technically dazzling translations by two excellent contemporary sinologists, Wu Kuang-ming (1990) and the late Angus Charles Graham (1981), at times hardly appear to be addressing the same text.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, it is Graham's landmark translation—the most thorough and ambitious historical-critical analysis of a classical Chinese text ever attempted—that provides an elemental framework to which most new sinological scholarship on *Chuang Tzu* invariably refers, just as Julius Wellhausen's documentary hypothesis defined Biblical study for subsequent generations. Building on the work of Kuan Feng and others, Graham identifies and dates five coherent voices within the text, including those of the historical Chuang Tzu (the seven "Inner Chapters" and textually misplaced fragments), later followers of Chuang Tzu addressing related themes ("School of Chuang Tzu"), a single idiosyncratic critic of civilization (the "Primitivist"), a group concerned with the nurture of the body (the "Yangists"), and an eclectic contingent emphasizing government and the establishment of social order (the "Syncretists"). Built into this textual arrangement is some exquisite historical detail on the origins and development of the text itself. For example, Graham attributes the original redaction of the text to "Syncretist" authors of the second century B.C.E.; Harold Roth takes this one step further by postulating a single compiler writing in the court of Liu An around 130 B.C.E. (Roth 1991:123). And while Graham's work hardly represents the final word on *Chuang Tzu*, it does bring into focus some crucial issues relating to translation and interpretation and provide sober scholarship to check the text's less disciplined readers. It is in the light of this watershed study, as well as the text's fascinating history, that one may begin to evaluate responsibly the possible contributions of Buber's Taoist studies.<sup>5</sup>

## Buber's Taoist Volume

Buber's *Reden und Gleichnisse des Tschuang-tse*, which includes a partial text translation followed by an interpretive "Nachwort," contains in its very structure a self-conscious hermeneutic framework. The first section, like Buber's translations of Hasidic texts, departs considerably from its original source in a number of significant ways. Most immediately apparent is that it includes only fifty-four essays and dialogues (which are selected from the first twenty-five chapters), unreferenced to the original text but provided with concise thematic titles. Many of the episodes are themselves incomplete. Some entire concluding or intermediate paragraphs are omitted, or the included portions are actually fragments taken out of context from larger essays. Even more important, if somewhat less obvious at first glance, is that Buber's limitations with the Chinese language prevented him from producing what today would be considered rigorous scholarship. As indicated only in the postscript to the original edition, Buber's work is based almost entirely on the available English versions by Giles and Legge, with particularly liberal use of the former. Buber's language may also suggest some familiarity with Frederic Henry Balfour's version (1881), the first complete English rendering. Virtually every line of Buber's translation can be traced to one of these sources, though he occasionally (and very significantly) paraphrases loosely, combines sources, and splices editorial comments from the various translators directly into the text. In addition, Buber evidently availed himself of uncredited, unspecified advice from Shanghai native Wang Chingdao, a visiting lecturer at the Berlin Seminar for Oriental Languages from 1907 to 1911.<sup>6</sup>

Though Buber was indeed aware that the original text included the writings of several different authors, Western language works addressing this theme were not in abundance during the early twentieth century, and he admittedly ignored the limited historical and philological data in his determination of the authenticity of the various passages and choice of translated material. In this regard, the extent of Wang Chingdao's influence is questionable at best, as correspondence from Wang to Buber (preserved in the Buber Archive) does not explicitly refer to the translation of *Chuang Tzu*, and Wang's only published writings demonstrate no interest in or

familiarity with the Taoist classical legacy.<sup>7</sup> In the final edition of *Reden und Gleichnisse*, Buber does acknowledge “comparing (available English versions) to the original with the help of Chinese collaborators” (15), but he mentions none by name and gives no suggestion that they aided him in any way beyond this technical capacity. He instead maintains that he selected material to support and illustrate the themes discussed in his interpretive essay. But regardless of how or by whom the passages were chosen, Graham’s subsequent critical scholarship demonstrates that a sensitive and uniform vision did indeed inform Buber’s selection of material. Buber’s first twenty-two passages are all taken from the seven “Inner Chapters,” while twenty-six more selections are from the section identified by Graham as “School of Chuang Tzu.” Only a small minority, Buber’s remaining six passages, are from authors who have more tenuous philosophical connections with the historical Chuang Tzu; three selections are from the “Primitivist,” two are from the “Syncretists,” and one, taken by Graham to be from a body of “easily translatable episodes which do not seem to add to the philosophical or literary value of the book” (1981:32), is not associated with any specific source. Parenthetically, Buber does not include any writings by the “Yangists.”

Buber’s interpretive “afterword,” which also incorporates a number of quotations from primary sources, is a treatise in nine untitled chapters that begins with a phenomenological introduction, moves through a discussion of the thought of Lao Tzu, and concludes with a discussion of the thought of Chuang Tzu and its relation to that of Lao Tzu. Despite this presentation, it is not a conventional commentary on translated passages of *Chuang Tzu*; rather, it is an independently standing essay on *Die Tao-Lehre* (“The Tao-Teaching”), which may actually be a fusion of two originally separate documents.<sup>8</sup> As noted earlier, it is supposedly the content of this completed essay that has determined the choice of illustrative selections in the translation. Though Buber did not vary the format of *Reden und Gleichnisse* in any of its subsequent editions, he nevertheless continued to treat this essay as an autonomous, prior work, including it as one of a trilogy of essays in *Die Rede, Die Lehre, und Das Lied: Drei Beispiele* (1917) and as part of a longer anthology in *Hinweise* (1953). When it was finally translated into English by Maurice Friedman in 1957 as “The

Teaching of the Tao," Buber characterized it as "the treatise which introduced my 1909 [sic] translation of selected *Talks and Parables of Chuang-tzu*" (ix).

The passages from *Chuang Tzu* that Buber cites in his afterword are, for the most part, not among those included in the body of the text translation. Buber refers by title to only four chapters from the translation, and of the thirty-two direct or indirect citations (some of which are as short as two words), only four also appear in the translation. Nevertheless, it should be noted that here, as with the text translation, Buber tends to select passages that later scholarship would demonstrate to be authentic or thematically related to the authentic passages. The "Inner Chapters" are cited fifteen times, and the "School of Chuang Tzu" section nine times, while the "Primitivist" is represented only five times and the "Syncretists" three times. Again, he does not cite any passages from the "Yangists." Also in the afterword, Buber nonchalantly quotes a number of other texts, which creates the illusion that he is drawing material from a rather wide range of Chinese sources, though he actually does not stretch very far beyond the texts used for the translation. The only significant addition is a dated rendering by Victor von Strauss of the *Tao Te Ching*, from which Buber coincidentally also includes thirty-two citations.<sup>9</sup> For much of the other cited material, however, Buber simply employs the translations of *Chuang Tzu* by Giles and Legge in a number of creative ways. First, he includes four snips of biographical information from Ssu-ma Ch'ien's *Shih Chi (Records of the Historian)*, which are merely culled from the introductions to the two translations, evident from identical glosses and ellipses. Secondly, he includes three citations from other Taoist texts (one from *The Classic of Purity and Rest*, two from *Lieh Tzu*), both to which he was directed by Legge's translation.<sup>10</sup> While the former had been available in German translation for quite some time (Neumann 1836), Buber was familiar with it only because Legge included it as an appendix to his *The Texts of Taoism*. Similarly, Buber evidently learned of Ernst Faber's translation of *Lieh Tzu* (1877) from Legge's references; in his brief glossary of characters appearing in the text, Buber's mention of Faber's work is simply a paraphrase of Legge. The afterword also includes one citation from the Buddhist *Maha-Parinibbana-Sutta* and one from the New Testament.

Buber's *Reden und Gleichnisse* enjoyed several printings over a period of four decades, undergoing two major revisions. For the 1918 edition, Buber made more than two hundred changes in the text translation, many of which were not particularly consequential. These included the standardization of the romanization of Chinese names, corrections of typographical errors, replacement of words or short phrases with more appropriate language, and various changes in mood, case, tense, compound words, grammatical particles, and paragraph divisions. Others were more substantial, as they involved translations of key philosophical terms, titles of chapters, whole sentences, or paragraphs. For a number of these corrections, Buber simply switched sources, replacing his translations or paraphrases of Giles with those of Legge, which, in these particular cases, tended to be closer to the original Chinese. Similarly, Buber made nearly one hundred more changes for the 1951 edition, most of which occurred in the first half of the book.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Buber made very few changes over the years in his afterword, and most of those that did appear in the later editions were inconsequential deletions. In addition, Friedman's English version included several more deletions, but these seem not to have been at Buber's suggestion, but instead to have resulted from errors in transcription or typesetting.<sup>12</sup>

### The Hermeneutic Challenge

Given both the interpretive history of *Chuang Tzu* and the complex position of Buber's Taoist volume, the task of evaluating possible contributions to a sinological discourse becomes particularly difficult. On the one hand, because the scholarly community still has not produced a significant consensus on the Chinese text itself, there is no single standard by which Buber's positions might be judged. That is to say, each specific interpretive lens—whether that of Taiwanese monastic Taoists or of analytical historians like A. C. Graham—would produce its own appraisal of Buber's work. On the other hand, Buber's translation and commentary arise from an intellectual milieu so tangential to traditional sinology that one must consider Buber's own philosophical agenda as well as the subtleties inherent in this kind of linguistic and cultural



cross-fertilization. In essence, the entire enterprise calls into question a range of hermeneutic issues concerning the nature of meaning and interpretation, such as whether one can responsibly reconstruct authorial intent without the benefit of historical-philological expertise, or, more importantly, whether *true textual meaning* is even to be found through this kind of reconstruction. In order to address the pressing sinological questions regarding Buber's encounter with *Chuang Tzu*, it also becomes necessary simultaneously to confront the hermeneutic problems that are implicit in such an investigation.

What I therefore undertake in this book is to evaluate Buber's Taoist volume with respect to different models of meaning, where each model is justified through a combination of established work in hermeneutic theory and the intentions suggested by Buber's work itself. In other words, I approach *Reden und Gleichnisse* not with an a priori definition of textual meaning or a single method of interpretation, but with a receptivity to the gamut of hermeneutic debate and a willingness to adapt to the demands of the document at hand. Thus, this project serves dual sinological purposes, as it examines sympathetically the possible contributions of one specific work toward an understanding of *Chuang Tzu*, while also broadening the larger question of what is actually meant by "understanding" a text such as *Chuang Tzu*. The hermeneutic challenge posed by this study is both to consider new answers to the customary questions and to rethink the questions themselves. It is also worth noting that the sinological foundation established by such a comprehensive study is crucial for Buber scholars wishing fully to determine the role of Taoist thought in Buber's later philosophical development. Moreover, any demonstrated relationship between Buber and *Chuang Tzu*, or even between the respective sinological and Buberian concerns, most certainly has significant ramifications for the current methodological debate in the comparative study of mysticism.

The body of this book is divided into two sections. The first consists of annotated retranslations of Buber's text translation and commentary (as well as his preface, postscript, and glossary), while the second consists of three hermeneutic chapters and a brief conclusion. For the text translation, each segment is referenced to its location (page, chapter, and line numbers) in the standard concor-



dance to *Chuang Tzu* (1956), with all rearrangements or omissions noted accordingly. Because of the implications of A. C. Graham's historical-critical work for any study of *Chuang Tzu*, each segment also includes a reference indicating to which hypothetical source it belongs (i.e., "Inner Chapters," "School of Chuang Tzu," etc.), as well as Graham's suggestions for textual rearrangement. Unless otherwise noted, the retranslation follows the 1951 edition; explanations are provided in places where important or interesting changes have been made since the first edition.

Since this portion is now three or more translative layers removed from the original Chinese, I follow Buber's German as precisely as possible, while keeping an eye toward his sources. When there is some ambiguity as to how a particular word or phrase should be translated, I choose the language that most closely approximates that of Buber's apparent source. For cases where the intent is less readily apparent, such as the many instances where Buber liberally paraphrases his sources, I choose the language that seems most appropriate to the context, though not without considering how the word or phrase has been conventionally translated or how Buber employs it in other works. And because most of Buber's renderings are actually composites, I indicate their sources only where there is a particularly interesting evolution to the translation, and in the few important instances where the gloss appears to be entirely Buber's own.

Despite the multiple layers of translation and the occasional laxity of both Buber and his source translators, there is a good deal of relevant Taoist jargon—particularly terms referring to the sagely person or to the qualities of that person—that is rendered somewhat consistently into German. The chart shown on the next page is a key to how these terms are translated by Buber and retranslated here; all exceptions are indicated in the annotations to the chapter.

For the translation of the commentary, all citations from *Chuang Tzu* within the body of the afterword are referenced to the standard concordance, identified by Graham's theoretical sources, and, when applicable, cross-referenced to the text translation (the page number in parenthesis next to the passage refers to its location in this book). All citations from the *Tao Te Ching* are referenced chapter and verse to D. C. Lau's translation (Lao Tzu 1963),

<u>RETRANSLATION</u>	<u>BUBER'S GERMAN</u>	<u>ORIGINAL CHINESE</u>
Virtue	<i>Tugend</i>	<i>te</i> (virtue/power)
Humanheartedness	<i>Menschenliebe</i>	<i>jen</i> (humanheartedness)
Righteousness	<i>Gerechtigkeit</i>	<i>yi</i> (rightness)
Sage	<i>Weise</i>	<i>sheng</i> (sage) <i>sheng-jen</i> (sagely man)
Accomplished man	<i>Vollendete</i>	<i>chih-jen</i> (utmost man)
Pure man	<i>Reine Mensch</i>	<i>chen-jen</i> (true man)
Superior Man	<i>Überlegene</i> <i>Überlegene Mensch</i>	<i>chün-tzu</i> (gentleman)
Man of virtue	<i>Mann der Tugend</i>	<i>te-jen</i> (man of virtue)

abbreviated in the notes simply as LT. Unless otherwise noted, the translation of the commentary portion follows the *original* edition, restoring it to its form prior to the publisher's accidental omissions in Maurice Friedman's translation; explanations are provided in places where changes occurred in later editions, or where my translation challenges in some important way that of Friedman's edition.

In addition to the issues mentioned above, the central purpose for most of the notes to the first two chapters is to juxtapose Buber's translated segments with the original Chinese, in order to illustrate exactly what "incarnation" of *Chuang Tzu* Buber was encountering. Annotating every place where the German departs considerably from the Chinese would be a prohibitive task, especially since Buber's main source, though described by Graham as having "a place on the margins of literary history" (1981:30), is, as Wing-tsit Ch'an simply states, "complete but not good" (1964:794). Were I to devote space to the analysis of each instance of questionable translation, this book would quickly be transmuted into a study of the works of Giles, Legge, and Balfour. Fortunately, Buber avoids most of the places where *Chuang Tzu* employs sophisticated technical repartee or complex epistemological argument, and he instead concentrates on parables, tales of sages, and the like; thus, much of his translation amounts to liberal, but serviceable paraphrase. With this in mind, I provide annotations with more current

translations of the original Chinese for the following: cosmological or metaphysical propositions, apparent descriptions of mystical experience, allusions to esoteric practice or training, passages making extensive use of the philosophical jargon of the “Hundred Schools” Period, language relevant to Buber’s dialogical philosophy, and language laden with obvious theological overtones. Because the afterword includes brief citations rather than complete stories, the quoted material tends to consist of provocative chunks that are severely decontextualized and pregnant with layers of ambiguity. When necessary, I provide the broader context for such citations. The translations from the Chinese are, unless otherwise specified, my own. I make no claim to be offering definitive translations; rather, I am attempting to produce—for the purpose of comparison—informed, plausible readings of the text that reflect my own interpretations in light of current translations, linguistic studies of literary Chinese, and Chinese dictionaries.

Each of the three hermeneutic chapters evaluates aspects of the text translation and commentary in light of a different model of meaning, although the connections among the apparently disjoint models are made clear as the book progresses. The first of these chapters addresses the historical question of reconstructing authorial intent, an enterprise that for many would be the first and only significant aim of textual study. Building on conclusions from this chapter, the next chapter questions whether *Chuang Tzu* itself demands a unique hermeneutic, and it expands the methodological discourse to consider the role of the reader and the various possibilities for interpretation. The third chapter, in many ways the culmination of this study, completes the process begun in both of the previous sections, as it employs hermeneutic reception theory in order to bring Buber’s I-Thou principle into direct dialogue with *Chuang Tzu*. In the conclusion, I briefly consider some of the broader implications of this project for textual studies in sinology, Buber studies, and the comparative study of mysticism.