

Christoph Harbsmeier

The *Zhuangzi* Commentaries



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Traditional Chinese intellectual culture is very basically an exegetic culture. It articulates itself through the interpretation and reinterpretation of a corpus of classical and canonical texts. Intellectual originality tends to translate into the traditional Chinese context as inventive reinterpretation of the past. Just as man, in traditional China, lived "in the shadow of his ancestors", so — intellectually — he lived "in the shadow of the sages of classical times". He interpreted the sages through his life. His life itself was interpretive. Intellectual action posed as reactivation of classical models. (And the actors as well as the models were indeed very largely males.)

In the mirror of the classical texts each generation and each school of commentators sees reflections of its own varying preoccupations. The commentaries are not only secondary sources for the correct interpretation of the classics. They are primary sources for the intellectual mode of a traditional intellectual culture.

My plan was to study and document in detail one such commentarial tradition, that of the anti-Confucian and intensely humourous philosopher Zhuangzi.

The book *Zhuangzi* (4th/3rd century B.C.) is recognized as one of the

most original and provocative works of Chinese literature. At the same time it is an important document in the history of Chinese logic.

Because of its abrupt, spontaneous, and pervasively humorous style, the *Zhuangzi* is a difficult text, both linguistically and philosophically, and it has been transmitted with a rich tradition of detailed commentaries. About five hundred such commentaries are known to exist, and some of these give us rich insight into various literary subcultures of anti-Confucianist and non-conformist personal sensibilities in China. I have assembled over two hundred such commentaries in the earliest accessible editions, and I have singled out for special study two dozen of the best extant works.

These commentaries include those by philosophers like Guo Xiang (died 312 A.D.), by the eccentric emperor Jianwen (503 — 511 A.D.), by linguists like Lu Deming (died 630 A.D.), by Buddhist monks like Cheng Xuanying (fl. 631 A.D.), by the iconoclastic Neo-Confucian philosopher Li Zhi (1527-1602), by a great Neo-Confucian philosopher like Wang Fuzhi (1619-1692), by philologists like Guo Qingfan (1845-1897), and by embattled Marxists like Guan Feng (who published his commentary in 1961).

The material I analyse from these commentaries is presented in the original Chinese and provided with literal, annotated English translations which pay special attention to the terminological and grammatical evolution of the language through the millennia. I approach the arguments and the literary rhetorics of the *Zhuangzi* by looking over the shoulders of some traditional Chinese commentators. Finally, my plan was to compare these traditional readings with modern Westernised interpretations which explain Zhuangzi's thought in terms of Western concepts such as anarchism, scepticism, individualism, cynicism, pessimism, relativism, and idealism.

In accordance with this plan I have concentrated first on an extensive and intensive reading of the traditional commentaries of the chapter "Free Rambling", which may be regarded as an introductory summary of the whole book and then on the philosophically crucial chapter "Treating Things as Equal".

"On Rambling" inspired very detailed aesthetic and literary commentarial attention of the traditional Chinese commentators. I have been able to identify the origin of much of the commentarial vocabulary in the literature on calligraphy and on landscape painting. (This reverses the well-known earlier influence of literary criticism on the theory and aesthetics of calligraphy and of painting.) I have been able to explore some of the traditional Chinese conceptual schemes of rhetorical analysis.

I found that "Treating Things as Equal" inspired different and much

more speculative and theoretical approaches by the traditional Chinese commentators. In writing the history of the commentaries of "Treating Things as Equal" I found myself writing a history of the perception of the most famous attempt to refute logical method through logical method in ancient China. In this history, older commentators and commentators writing in classical rather than colloquial Chinese became more prominent.

In all, I have now written in Berlin a complete manuscript on the *Zhuangzi* commentaries on these two chapters. This manuscript, in its present preliminary state, will form the basis of specialized courses on Chinese philosophy in various universities. The detailed philosophical interpretation of this difficult and complex Chinese material has been the main aim of my work at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

The last part of my original plan — the comparison with Westernized modern Chinese interpretations of Zhuangzi in terms of such concepts as "individualism", "relativism", etc. — I have not got down to in any detail.

A colleague at the Wissenschaftskolleg drew my attention to a crucial recent work on the history of Aristotelian commentaries in the West which has brought into focus several points of general importance for the comparative study of exegetic culture in China and in the West.

1. The question whether an argument or a claim commented on is or is not true, is of primary concern for commentators on Aristotle: they discuss not only what Aristotle said and what he probably meant to convey, they also ask whether what he was trying to say was correct or not, and what he ought to have said in order to get things right.

The Chinese commentators on Zhuangzi (even the fervent Confucians) do not place such emphasis on the question of truth. Even when, for example, Confucius is attacked and ridiculed pervasively in the book *Zhuangzi*, the Confucian commentators appear more interested in showing that Zhuangzi did not mean what he apparently said than in the question whether his attack was justified.

This observation on the status of the question of truth in the commentarial traditions will form the starting point for a comparative study of commentarial styles and techniques which will be the result of the work I have been able to do at the Wissenschaftskolleg. This will involve a detailed direct comparison between ancient Greek and ancient Chinese sources.

2. Another fresh point which I had not been aware of is that of the significance of the literary versus oral nature of various commentaries, and also of the semantics of stylistic choice in the commentarial tradition. A close study of the later aesthetic rather than purely philological commentaries of the *Zhuangzi* (which — incidentally — have not to my know-

ledge been the subject of detailed study in Chinese or in any Western language) reveals that these commentaries have a remarkably strong colloquial flavour. Many of them claim to be, and indeed appear to be, more or less literal recordings of oral expoundings by Confucian, Taoist or Buddhist masters of the meaning and significance of the *Zhuangzi*. Thus they provide an opportunity to trace the history of written literary, semi-colloquial, and then fully colloquial Chinese within one unified corpus. (The importance of the corpus of Aristotelian translations for the study of the historical evolution of the Greek language was already noted a very long time ago.)

The material I have assembled and translated so far provides, apart from the more general philosophical discussion, an annotated, specialized anthology on the history of the use of the various varieties of colloquial and semi-colloquial Chinese over the past two millennia.

3. Finally, in the course of analysing linguistically the material from my sources I have come to elaborate and develop a new scheme for the integration of the stylistic and historical dimensions into the general scheme of grammatical analysis.

The result of this new line of grammatical research is a manuscript on linguistic analysis, part of which was presented in a seminar for Berlin sinologists which I organised at the Wissenschaftskolleg. It was particularly rewarding to discuss this material with the group of very distinguished specialists in Chinese linguistics at the Humboldt University and the Academy of Sciences in East Berlin.

It is my own impression that the integration of a new formalism to describe parameters of grammaticalisation, lexicalisation, style, and historicity within an elaborated framework of grammatical immediate constituent analysis is perhaps in the end the most substantial innovative outcome of my work at the Wissenschaftskolleg.

One is, of course, happy to report on the tangible results of one's year at the Wissenschaftskolleg. But at least as important were the intangible interdisciplinary friendships that arose during this year and that will continue to inspire my work in the future. The Wissenschaftskolleg is to be congratulated for having created the conditions for such friendships to grow and to flourish.