

DAOIST SELF-STUDY GUIDES #4
Self-Study Guide to *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子

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The *Zhuāngzǐ* 莊子 (*Chuāng-tzǔ*; Book of Master Zhuang), also referred to with its honorific title of the *Nánhuá zhēnjīng* 南華真經 (Perfect Scripture of Master Nanhua [Southern Florescence]; DZ 670; ZH 616), is one of the earliest texts and most important scriptures of the Daoist tradition. Although traditionally attributed to Zhuāngzǐ 莊子 (*Chuāng-tzǔ*; Master Zhuang), the text is actually a multi-vocal anthology containing historical and textual material dating from at least the fourth to second centuries BCE. It includes teachings and practices associated with various anonymous, pseudonymous, and occasionally named elders of the inner cultivation lineages, the master-disciple communities, of classical Daoism. The received text was edited by Guō Xiàng 郭象 (Kuō Hsiàng; d. 312), a key representative of the Xuánxué 玄學 (Hsüán-hsüéh; Profound Learning; so-called “Neo-Daoism” [*sic*]) Daoist hermeneutical movement and quasi-eremitic salon, and consists of 33 titled and largely prose chapters. These are conventionally divided into the so-called Inner Chapters (1-7), Outer Chapters (8-22), and Miscellaneous Chapters (23-33). However, modern text-critical and revisionist scholarship divides the text differently. In addition to the Inner Chapters associated with Zhuāng Zhōu 莊周 (*Chuāng Chōu*; ca. 370-ca. 290 BCE) himself, there are at least the following lineages or “schools”:

1. Primitivists (chs. 8-10; parts of 11, 12, and 14). These individuals were influenced by the “old masters” (such as Lǎo Dān 老聃/老僮) and were active around the end of the Qín dynasty (221-206 BCE) or the beginning of the Early Hàn (202 BCE-9 CE). Emphasis placed on living simply, especially in seclusion from the world.
2. Individualists (a.k.a. Hedonists; chs. 28-31). These individuals were associated with Yáng Zhū 楊朱 (ca. 440-ca. 360 BCE) and were active around 200 BCE. Emphasis placed on following one’s own aspirations, possibly even desire-driven pleasure. Avoidance of any type of personal sacrifice; complete self-fulfillment.
3. Syncretists (chs. 12-16, 33). These individuals were a group of eclectic thinkers who may have been responsible for compiling the text sometime between 180 and 130 BCE. Emphasis placed on synthesis, integration, and pragmatism.
4. Zhuangists (chs. 17-22). These individuals were later followers of Zhuāng Zhōu, who strove to imitate the style and themes of the Inner Chapters. Emphasis placed on apophatic meditation, mystical union, and attaining a state of pure being and cosmological participation.
5. Anthologists (chs. 23-27, 32). These individuals collected fragmentary materials, including some that may derive from Zhuāng Zhōu himself and which could therefore also be placed in the Inner Chapters. Chapters associated with specific classical Daoist teachers.

A. RELIABLE TRANSLATIONS

Unfortunately, none of these are bilingual, lacking the classical Chinese source-text. We also have yet to have a translation that reorganizes the text according to the various inner cultivation lineages identified in the revisionist scholarship of A.C. Graham, Liú Xiàogǎn, Victor Mair, and Harold Roth.

(1) *Graham, A.C. 1981. *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*. London and Boston: Allen & Unwin. (Historical/Philological/Philosophical)

One of the standard and most influential translations of the text, especially in academic circles. Highly influential on the work of Graham's intellectual heirs, including Victor Mair and Harold Roth. The title is slightly misleading, as Graham includes select translations of passages from various other chapters. These include 8-11, 13, 15, 22, 28-31, and 33. In addition to providing helpful historical background, includes some insights into Graham's pioneering views about historical and textual strata, including associated "schools." Also important analysis of technical terms. At times overly idiosyncratic. Like every available translation, also lacks necessary attention to the central importance of contemplative and mystical apophatic praxis in the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. This often results in problematic interpretations from a conventional Western philosophical viewpoint.

(2) Hinton, David. 2014 (1998). *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Berkeley: Counterpoint. (Poetic)

Following a standard approach to the "core text," a poetic rendering of the so-called Inner Chapters (1-7), those associated with Zhuāng Zhōu. Similar in style and approach to the Addiss and Lombardo translation (1993) of the *Lǎozǐ*. Indebted to Burton Watson's earlier translation (see A.5 below). Highly readable and perhaps inspiring. May be compared to the renderings of Gia-fu Feng/Jane English (1974) and Sam Hamill/J.P. Seaton (1998). Problematic in its neglect of classical Daoism and the context-specific meaning of associated technical terminology.

(3) Mair, Victor. 2000 (1994). *Wandering on the Way: Early Taoist Tales and Parables of Chuang Tzu*. Rev. ed. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. (Literary/Historical/Philological)

Reliable and often inspiring complete translation. Influenced by Graham's earlier translation and views (see A.1 above). Noteworthy for Mair's translation of many of the Chinese names of the characters in the text and thematic organization. Includes attentiveness to technical terms and some recognition of actual master-disciple ("gurus and pandits") relationships documented in the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Also contains a helpful glossary of Chinese names and terms. Slightly problematic subtitle.

(4) Wang Rongpei, Qin Xuqing, and Sun Yongqing. 1999. *Zhuangzi*. 2 vols. Library of Chinese Classics. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press.

A catastrophically bad Chinglish translation, complete with historical inaccuracies and various conventional Chinese/Orientalist constructions of the text (e.g., Zhuāngzǐ as a disciple of Lǎozǐ). However, the "translation" is bilingual and includes the Chinese text, unfortunately in simplified Chinese characters. Outside of highly technical publications, the closest that one can currently get

to a bilingual version. Consult the Chinese; avoid the translation. Use in concert with the Graham (A.1) and/or Watson (A.6) translation.

(5) *Watson, Burton. 1964. *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*. New York: Columbia University Press. (Literary/Historical/Philological)

One of the standard translations. Partial translation, including the Inner Chapters (1-7) and chapters 17-19, and 26. A sound and essential initial distillation of the received text. Also helpful for providing background historical information and attention to technical terms. More accessible and readable than A.C. Graham (A.1). Includes some problematic translations, such as the occasional rendering of qì 氣 (“subtle breath”) as “spirit.” Also, like every available translation, lacks necessary attention to the central importance of contemplative and mystical apophatic praxis in the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism. Republished (2003) with Pinyin Romanization.

(6) *Watson, Burton. 1968. *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*. New York: Columbia University Press. (Literary/Historical/Philological)

A complete edition of A.5. Also republished (2013) with Pinyin Romanization.

(7) Ziporyn, Brook. 2009. *Zhuangzi: The Essential Writings with Selections from Traditional Commentaries*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing. (Philosophical)

Partial philosophical translation, including the Inner Chapters (1-7) and selections from chapters 8-10, 14, 17, 19, 20, 22-27, and 32-33. Helpful for providing selections from traditional commentaries on the Inner Chapters. Similar in style and approach to the Roger Ames/Donald Hall (2003), Philip Ivanhoe (2002), Hans-Georg Moeller (2007), and Chad Hanson (2009) translations of the *Lǎozǐ*. Like those publications, Ziporyn problematically interprets the *Zhuāngzǐ* as “philosophy,” with a lack of attention to the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, including the contemplative and mystical apophatic praxis at the foundation of the text. This leads to various problematic interpretations from a conventional Western philosophical viewpoint. Watson (A.5/A.6) and/or Graham (A.1) are superior in every major respect. Thus inspires reflection on the purpose of a “new” translation, especially as Ziporyn is indebted to (based on?) Watson and most of the major Daoist literature remains untranslated.

(8) Ziporyn, Brook. 2020. *Zhuangzi: The Complete Writings*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing. (Philosophical)

A complete edition of A.7.

B. SECONDARY STUDIES

Unfortunately, almost nothing has been published on the *Zhuāngzǐ* in terms of the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, including the associated apophatic practice and technical terms, or its place in the larger Daoist tradition, including Daoist interpretations and applications. In addition, the majority of readily available academic publications treat the text as “philosophy” and “Chinese thought.” They tend to use conventional Western philosophical constructions of classical Daoist views and practices in terms of “anti-rationalism,” “relativism,” “skepticism,” and the like, thus failing to recognize the actual contemplative and mystical characteristics and modes. Paralleling Western engagements with the *Lǎozǐ*, but this time “academic” rather than popular, this might be thought of as the “Chinese philosophy industry” (CPI). Not surprisingly, many of the individuals have university appointments.

(1) Ames, Roger, ed. 1998. *Wandering at Ease in the Zhuangzi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Philosophical edited collection discussing various aspects of the text. Helpful for identifying some key themes and concerns as well as understanding how the text is being engaged (constructed) in the West. From an applied and lived Daoist perspective, no single contribution stands out.

(2) Ames, Roger, and Takahiro Nakajima, eds. 2015. *Zhuangzi and the Happy Fish*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Another philosophical edited collection, largely characterized by conventional intellectualist and rationalistic engagements. Noteworthy for including some less well-known international scholars, but still primarily the “usual (philosophical) suspects” associated with and endorsed by Ames. Breaks little new ground from similar earlier publications. Different content, basically the same approach.

(3) *Cook, Scott, ed. 2003. *Hiding the World in the World: Uneven Discourses on the Zhuangzi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Another edited volume, but more inclusive, revisionist, and innovative. Includes important chapters on bimodal mystical experience by Harold Roth (1), merging and wandering by Rur-bin Yang (4), *wúwéi* 無為 (“non-action”) by Alan Fox (7), and the notion of *shén* 神 (“spirit”) by Michael Puett (9). Still contains some of the “usual (philosophical) suspects” (see A.7 above).

(4) **Journal of Chinese Religions* 11.1 (1983). Special issue on the *Zhuāngzǐ*, with Victor Mair as the guest editor.

Includes the seminal and extremely important, but largely ignored “Chuang tzu et le taoïsme ‘religieux’” (“*Zhuāngzǐ* and ‘Religious’ Daoism”) by the late Isabelle Robinet (B). Along with the articles by Harold Roth (B.3.1 & B.11.11) and Michael Saso (B.10.8) sets a necessary foundation for an accurate and informed understanding of the *Zhuāngzǐ* in terms classical Daoism and its seminal influence on the larger Daoist tradition.

(5) Kjellberg, Paul, and Philip Ivanhoe, eds. 1996. *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Yet another philosophical edited volume. Largely more of the same (see B.1 and B.2 above), but more comparative. The title largely tells it in all. The chapters on Cook Ding by Robert Eno (6) and on skillfulness by Lee Yearley (7) stand out. Note the recurring appearance of these volumes in the Ames-controlled SUNY Chinese Philosophy and Culture series (also B.1, B.3, and B.16). Insular academic discourse.

(6) Kohn, Livia, ed. 2015. *New Visions of the Zhuangzi*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press.

Another edited volume. Better than most, but still deficient. Largely “old visions” through new eyes and different lenses. Includes the “usual (philosophical) suspects” yet again. The chapter on hermits, mountains, and Yǎngshēng 養生 (Nourishing Life) by Thomas Michael (10) and the neurophysiology of zuòwàng 坐忘 (“sitting-in-forgetfulness”) by Livia Kohn (11) deserve reading and reflection. Conspicuous omission of Victor Mair and Harold Roth.

(7) *Lai, Karyn, and Wai Wai Chiu, eds. 2019. *Skill and Mastery: Philosophical Stories from the Zhuangzi*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

Another edited volume (are you noticing a pattern?), but with a focus on the themes of skill and mastery. (Think of all the needed Daoist edited volumes not being produced.) Philosophy, philosophy, and more philosophy. I wonder what Zhuāngzǐ would say standing near the Háo 濠 River. Perhaps he would *not*. Not philosophy. Contemplative practice, application, and experience. Beyond “skill” and “mastery.” More international in scope, the chapters on nourishing life by Franklin Perkins (2), embodiment by Steven Coutinho (6), Cook Ding and meditative flow by James Sellmann (8), as well as Woodworker Qing and matching Heaven by Kim-chong Chong (14) stand out. Noticeable omissions are contributions by Harold Roth and Lee Yearley, both of whom are key writers on this very topic.

(8) Li, Xiaofan Amy. 2015. *Comparative Encounters between Artaud, Michaux and the Zhuangzi: Rationality, Cosmology and Ethics*. Transcript 4. Oxford and New York: Legenda.

As indicated in the title, innovative and creative comparative *literary* study. Links the *Zhuāngzǐ* with European avant-garde and surrealist writers. Opens up the possibility of even more radical (re)readings. Zhuangist surrealism? One issue involves the use of a fairly conventional academic writing style.

(9) *Liú Xiàogǎn 劉笑敢. 1994. *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*. Translated by William Savage. Ann Arbor: Center for Chinese Studies, University of Michigan.

Drawing upon and developing the pioneering work of A.C. Graham and others, the main readily available academic discussion of the historical and textual strata of the text, including the various lineages or “schools.” Used in combination with Victor Mair and Harold Roth, provides helpful insights into the complex and multi-dimensional characteristics of the received text.

(10) *Mair, Victor, ed. 1983. *Experimental Essays in the Chuang-tzu*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

The earliest, and still possibly the best edited volume. Created a model and set the standard, for better or worse, for subsequent installments. The chapters on Daoist spontaneity and dichotomy by A.C. Graham (1), the concept of mind by Harold Oshima (4), the perfected person by Lee Yearley (7), and the Inner Chapters and modern Daoist meditation by Michael Saso (8) are most important. Of these, Saso's contribution is seminal and of enduring value, especially for Daoist practitioners.

(11) Mair, Victor, ed. 2010. *Experimental Essays in the Chuang-tzu*. St. Petersburg, FL: Three Pines Press.

Reprint of B.10 with four additional articles. Of these, the chapter on bimodal mystical experience by Harold Roth (11) (also in B.3.1) and on concepts of the body by Deborah Sommer (12) stand out. Coupled with Saso's chapter, Roth's contribution helps to establish a necessary foundation for more radical (re)readings of the text, especially ones attentive to the practice-based dimensions, whether historical or applied, including the accompanying Daoist apophatic training regimens and transformed ontological modes.

(12) Moeller, Hans-Georg, and Paul D'Ambrosio. 2017. *Genuine Pretending: On the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi*. New York: Columbia University Press.

More systematic academic philosophical interpretation of the text. Coupled with the earlier intellectual histories of Benjamin Schwartz (1985) and A.C. Graham (1989), provides some insights into the larger cultural context of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Like Moeller's similar publication on the *Lǎozǐ* (2006), also reveals how scholars of "Chinese philosophy" and comparative philosophy engage the text. So, still more philosophy. 吃飽了. At times, also tainted by Moeller's idiosyncratic (egoic?) ideas, a form of intellectual rumination that some ("non-Zhuangist") readers no doubt find entertaining. Lacks attention to the central importance of apophatic practice and experience in the inner cultivation lineages of classical Daoism, including the associated, seminal technical terminology contained in the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Often involves domestication and intellectual colonialism.

(13) Møllgaard, Eske. 2007. *An Introduction to Daoist Thought: Action, Language, and Ethics in Zhuangzi*. Oxford and New York: Routledge.

Similar to B.12.

(14) *Roth, Harold, ed. 2003. *A Companion to Angus C. Graham's Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Just what the title indicates (see also A.1 above). Edited by Harold Roth, one of Graham's former students and intellectual heirs, intended to give non-specialist readers access to associated articles, which were often published in more technical academic journals. Helpful for clarifying Graham's pioneering approach to and views about the text. Also includes a colophon by Roth in which he

presents a critique of Graham's textual scholarship and an attempt to resolve several outstanding text-historical issues.

(15) Wu, Kuang-ming. 1990. *The Butterfly as Companion: Meditations on the First Three Chapters of the Chuang Tzu*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Under-consulted, but thought-provoking reflections on the first three chapters of the received text. At the present time, the closest approximation of a Daoist contemplative reading.

(16) Ziporyn, Brook. 2003. *The Penumbra Unbound: The Neo-Taoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

The only Western-language book-length study of Guō Xiàng 郭象 (Kuō Hsiàng; d. 312), a key representative of the Xuánxué 玄學 (Hsüán-hsüéh; Profound Learning) Daoist hermeneutical movement and quasi-eremitic salon, and his *Nánhuá zhēnjīng zhùshū* 南華真經注疏 (Commentary and Annotations on the Perfect Scripture of Master Nánhuá [Southern Florescence]; DZ 745; ZH 617). Helpful for considering this early and highly influential Daoist commentator. May be profitably compared to Wáng Bì's 王弼 (226-249 CE) Xuánxué commentary on the *Dàodé jīng* 道德經 (Scripture on the Dao and Inner Power). Also in the Ames-controlled SUNY Chinese Philosophy and Culture series. Ziporyn's study is deficient on multiple levels. It fails to engage and synthesize much of the larger scholarly literature. Also attempts to fit Xuánxué into Ziporyn's problematic "philosophical readings," including constructing Xuánxué as so-called (Orientalist) "Neo-Daoism" (read: "Neo-Philosophical Daoism"). Largely rooted in academic careerism, intellectual colonialism, and Orientalist constructions.