

THE PHILOSOPHY OF ZHUANGZI AND THE COMMENTATORIAL TRADITION OF GUO XIANG

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Guo Xiang (also known as *Kuo Hsiang* or *Zixuan*) is the author of the most important commentary on Zhuangzi – one of the classical Daoist texts.¹ He is also known as the person who implemented the current arrangement of thirty-three chapters divided into inner, outer and miscellaneous sections. Although Guo's initial aim might have been to elucidate the ideas in the original text, his commentary on Zhuangzi represents a substantial philosophical achievement compared to the core text. It contains many original ideas and we shall examine the textual issues on which he is commenting in a try to get a deeper insight into their meaning. Guo Xiang² practiced his philosophical pursuits this way – within the framework of the Daoist classic – and his manner has served as a blueprint for the later Neo-Confucian synthesis of the Chinese thought.

¹ There is some controversy in the recent years over the true authorship of Guo's commentary - the earliest source, the *Jin Shu* (Standard History of the Jin Dynasty), accuses Guo Xiang of plagiarizing all but two chapters of the commentary from *Xiang Xiu* (d. 300 CE, writing a generation earlier). "Current scholarship, while acknowledging that Guo made use of Xiang Xiu's work and other earlier commentaries, still credits Guo as the principal author. The evidence for this recognition falls into three main areas. Firstly, the most innovative philosophical features in the commentary do not correspond with those in other works by Xiang Xiu. Secondly, in the early twentieth century, a postface to the commentary was discovered which details the work Guo carried out and finally, various linguistic analyses and references in other works suggest that Guo is the principal author." <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/guoxiang/>>10.10.2012

² Actually very little is known about the life of Guo Xiang: he lived in a time of great political upheaval and his own career was one of consistent and significant success. Unlike such contemporary figures as Ji Kang or Ruan Ji, who both retired from what they saw as a corrupt governmental system, Guo

Confucians, Daoists and Buddhists have engaged in constructive dialogue, building philosophical systems which include the achievements of all these three schools of thought.

The building of a theory must be looking for some idea or a premise that underlies all the prerequisites accepted or recommended by the reason, striving to judge or to build a better life principle. It is called upon to conceptualize the basic characteristics of thinking and at the same time paying attention to the overall theoretical consistency. *Zhuangzi* is not a mere theoretical book in this sense, but its ‘imaginary view’ of the world, displayed in the commentary ascribed to Guo Xiang, becomes more analytical and throws some light on the community composition, which Guo chose to present through the ideas of Zhuang Zhou. As a government official, he tried to evaluate the existing conditions and to explicate what is proposed to be achieved – the concept of the individual and the behavioral norms, consistent with the ideal system requirements. Following Mencius and Zhuangzi, Guo proposed the establishment of benevolent political ideals, but also called on people to carry forward the good essence of humanity through self-cultivation. At the same time he is looking to reestablish the traditional order, affirmed in an idealized sense by the theoretical approach revealing a positive way of thinking. Zhuangzi explores the goodness of human nature and the possible unity of the community with a deep distrust, so he is not busy launching a new program of social reconstruction. Ambitious and rich in his goals of moral enthusiasm, Guo Xiang wanted to capture a holistic picture of life from the heterogeneous *Zhuangzi*’s fragments, and then to show us a different regard to this issue.

remained to play what he regarded as the proper role of an engaged public dignitary. He maintained a high position within one of the six rebellious factions that contributed to the rapid demise of the *Western Jin* Dynasty. “Ji Kang and Ruan Ji pursued the ideal of overcoming orthodox teaching and following nature. The so called ‘orthodox teaching’ (*mingjiao*) includes the proper behavior being matched to the proper role, such as for a ruler or a subject. Different *xuanxue* figures accepted these ideals to different extents, but nearly all held them in distinction to *ziran*, naturalness or spontaneity. Guo’s concept of *ziran* contained all governmental and social spheres, so it made no sense to try to set the realms of *mingjiao* and *ziran* in opposition to each other.” Ibid.

There is a basic questioning about self-belief in the *Zhuangzi*: self-consciousness is the realization of life's most fundamental sense, so Zhuang Zhou claims that in the universal correlation no new idea is impossible. According to the second chapter – 'Equality of Things' – everyone has the inherent right of self-certainty in his own experience but to face the prospect of death is one of the most difficult personal challenges. Similarly, outside the daily life perspective, those with good physique may be disabled more than those living a healthy life if the selection criterion is the 'usefulness of the useless ones', achieving peace and longevity. The result of the Daoist perfection is often misleading: not only with the quest for immortality defying the common sense, but with a relativistic attitude towards morality threatening serious ethical rules. Taking into account this inconsistency, we have to mention that the important theoretical and practical implications in the *Zhuangzi* should not be confined to the lack of positive thinking and everyday conformism. The 'non-normality' expresses the need to negate the objectives confronting with real life, so the negative expression of ideas is rich in natural content and tangible vitality (Graham 1998, 186).

At the same time, there is an implicit invocation in Daoism to become more cautious with the traditional values opposing the freedom of genuine ideas and behavior. The satirical approach is extensively used in the *Zhuangzi* often in order to imagine a way of life that is depicted in the parables and anecdotes. The symbolism of the edifying stories and dialogues can be summed up in the mentorship of the great and venerable master as an ideal personal relationship, which excludes the kings, heroes, etc. on the basis of the mainstream values of these characters. On the other side, as long as you are willing for utilitarian benefits, such an orientation can be described as disturbing the intimate clarity and spontaneity of the pure mind. Following this direction, we might notice that "if the success is once awakened to take place for individual purposes, then even the entire country etiquette becomes a talisman of power violating the longstanding morals" (Wu Kuang-ming 1982, 123).

Strictly speaking, it is difficult to imagine a completely different way of life which may sound as unrealistic, as well as including the lack of a solid foundation, despite its reliance on the value of practical experience. It seems that there are two worlds in *Zhuangzi*: the natural

world, where self-cultivation is fully appropriate and the person does not have to experience the role of the vast majority. The voice of nature in the fables is intended to put away the philosophy of human drama, such as the monopoly of wisdom. One single story can evoke the situation described in the imaginary dialogues of Zhuangzi and cause varying degrees of emotional response. In the world of the imagination, there would be no hero without a supporting role: conducive to enlightenment or being conscious of people's suffering. The dialogical relations – e.g. between Confucius and Yan Hui according to the actual societal division, rest not only upon communal identity, but rather upon personal ability: there are many important 'talks about' (including onrush and defense) in such a relationship as the most basic exchange between friends. The discursive limitation is gaining insight into the natural pattern of loneliness: when Huishi died, Zhuang Zhou lamented the loss of his preceptor – not only subject of a constant debate, but a partner to discuss with the enjoyment of life itself.

Another specific world – the *human world* – involves the mortal human beings together with the celebrities. Ordinary people are not holders of pure wisdom: they languish in ignorance along with arrogance and confrontation. Therefore, the way of life of the anthropomorphic *God-like people* (*shenren*) is different from the social system requirements – they offer more sublime concepts and ideals than the experience of everyday existence. The majority of people make a living with routine labors; *shenren* are above such cares and the vain desire to be respected – they are 'wandering within the clouds'. This does not imply only the illusory world of imagination beyond the need of love and the vocation to be close to people, acting as teachers, counselors etc. The narrow-minded moan and groan – Zhuangzi describes them in a derisive manner; on the contrary the god-like sage doesn't have certain fears, injuries as well as the experience of facing death, although his is not forever immersed in the elusive sphere of the 'great truths'. Both ways of implementation: the lack of inner achievement or the ultimate *Dao*-realization, point to the mis/understanding of important features of the *Road*, but the nature of the problem is not the same. The first problem represents the reasoning of the unimaginative kind of person who is left always outside the imaginary realm, and the second issue, concerning the creative imagination is the conflict between reality and ideas (Allinson 1988, 149).

Zhuangzi's uncompromising rejection of power makes him avoid any collective social gestures, bringing plenty of frustration and leading to overall disappointment of the political experience. In contrast to Confucius, he talked of some monarchs and officials as 'nothing between heaven and earth to escape' to remind us how difficult is to survive surrounded by insidious maneuvers, mortal threats and diplomatic rumors. Therefore, the *Zhuangzi* refused any political suggestions principally not because of intellectual reasons, but as a question of position. Resisting any governance, his stance is basically not to politicize – the so-called *non-action* (*wu wei*) of the *Road/Way* (*Dao*). Compared with the pre-Qin philosophers, Confucius and Mencius, who considered politics as a natural existence and their only concern was good policy or bad politics, the distinction is between such issues like the answer of the question: What is politics? Xunzi has put forward the basic argument of politics, that is the answer why there must be political at all; while Han Fei put the political understanding of trickery. The implication is that only in politics we have a deep understanding of different types of hazards and mitigate them as much as possible, minimizing the 'unavoidable evil'. As a network of institutionalized facilities, politics is carried out for social security reasons, for person's control and to abandon the political system is in fact a rejection of any political construction. But this does not mean that the apolitical point of view has no immanent value or impedes the unfolding of many practical opportunities. Anti-political philosophy, whether it is criticism of specific political ideas or general political negation, can be a non-ideological standpoint, unifying the opposites.

Guo Xiang³ follows much of the Zhuangzi's advice about equalizing all the apparent contradictions in the universe and unfolds a scheme of mutual complementation between the opposing forces. For him the roles required by Confucian propriety are not simply imposed upon a natural system that would otherwise be chaotic and disordered. These positions and relations are, instead, the natural result of the system's spontaneous self-transformation – chaos is merely what results when one fails to

³ Guo Xiang is the most influential Zhuangzi commentator (III–IV c.), and through his commentary the next generations of learned men (mostly Confucians) melted the rebellious spirit of Zhuang Zhou with the neo-confucian concept the *Way of Heaven* (*tiendao*).

recognize his proper role. According to his teaching, one can indulge in non-action only if he complies with the indefeasible social order that reproduces approximately the constant heavenly constellations. In the period in which Guo lived, Confucianism has become a leading factor in the societal structuring and Daoism was able to co-exist with it only in a simplified and adapted for the purposes of the ruler type. So the focus is shifting from the process of personal cultivation to the level of interpersonal relationships and power mechanisms. Rather than self-forgetting and a sense of boundless wandering in the imaginary world, the social appeal is to give up personal freedom for the sake of climbing to the top of the ladder of success.⁴

Very similarly to Wang Bi – the other great figure of the *xuanxue*⁵ – Guo Xiang sought to synthesize the accepted Confucian morality within an ontological framework that would encompass the insights expressed in the *Zhuangzi* and the *Daodejing*. But while Wang Bi put the greatest emphasis on the unitary nature of reality, particularly in the concept of nothingness (*wu*), Guo emphasized both individuality and interdependence.⁶ His position is not as diametrically opposed to Wang’s as is often assumed – he does not claim that there is a dualist world around us, but maintains the use of *Dao* as the unitary, nameless and formless basis of reality. Guo calls the process by which all things come into existence ‘lone transformation’ (*duhua*) or ‘self-transformation’ (*zihua*). The claim that all things share equally in creating the world does not deny that

⁴ For the early Daoists a man who successfully cultivates himself achieves a deeper self-understanding, not moral (let alone political) superiority. Confucians recommended social cultivation of human nature, but Zhuangzi justified the universal equivalent in ontological sense: the sage treats everything fairly and without strict phenomenal distinctions.

⁵ The mysterious or profound learning movement

⁶ Wang Bi’s emphasis on *wu* came too close to occupying the place of an original cause. It was necessary for Guo to draw the line clearly, even if it meant contradicting the text on which he was commenting. In a note to a section of the *Zhuangzi* that leaves open the question of whether there is a creator, Guo writes: “The myriad things have myriad attributes, the adopting and discarding [of their attributes] is different, as if there was a true ruler making them do so. But if we search for evidence or a trace of this ruler, in the end we will not find it. We will then understand that things arise of themselves, and are not caused by something else” (Fung Yu-lan 1964, 43/ch. 2).

differences exist, but it does not translate them into demarcations of value. Whether one person may be less talented or intelligent than another does not affect the worth of that person, but rather helps in determining the proper role for him to play. Given the importance of self-transformation in Guo's philosophical system, he wished to apply an organizing principle, expressed as a process in which all things are responsible for their own creation and for the set of relationships that exist between themselves and the rest of the world (Zhang Dainian 2002, 217–219).

The natural, spontaneous state of affairs that results from the process of self-transformation is the so called 'self-so' (*ziran*).⁷ While many other Daoist thinkers distinguish *ziran* from the mundane social world in which we live, for Guo they are identical – even social hierarchy is the natural result of how things come to be as themselves. When we follow our natures, the result is peace and prosperity; when we oppose them, the result is chaos. Thus, Guo Xiang seeks to provide a specific interpretation to the doctrine of non-action (*wuwei*). For the neo-daoist commentator, if one has correctly perceived the way which all things share in the creation of *ziran*, then correct action in the world will follow naturally. Therefore, what Guo means by *ziran* is very different from what Western philosophers refer to as 'the state of nature'.⁸ Naturalness is the expression of a spontaneously peaceful and harmonious system, available to all who can recognize their place on the Road.

One key to the correct appreciation of one's place in the world is Guo's concept of the 'share' or the 'role' – he employs the idea of *qi*, 'vital energy' or 'quintessence', to explain the manner in which *Dao* imbues the world with life-giving force. One's natural allotment of *qi* therefore determines one's social position or 'role'; the proper functioning of the world and the personal happiness is maintained by the correct appreciation

⁷ *Ziran* is a compound of two different terms: *zi*, meaning 'self' and *ran*, meaning 'to be so', and can be translated as 'naturalness', 'the self-so', or 'things as they are.'

⁸ He writes that "taking no action does not mean folding one's arms and closing one's mouth" (Fung Yu-lan 1964, 85/ch. 11). In chapter 3 of the *Zhuangzi* we encounter the story of Cook Ding, who carves an ox not by using his senses or dexterity, but by equating his idea of who he is with his situation and the task at hand. <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/guoxiang/>>10.10.2012.

of one's place. This is not to say that Guo denies the possibility of growth and change, which are necessary parts of nature, including the functioning of the social system. "In the same way that the body has hands, feet and head that play different roles according to their different endowments, so the world functions best when people act according to their proper 'share'."⁹ Thus, one's implementation of the principle is both the allotment of *qi* received from heaven and the role one must maintain within the system without any difference between natural abilities and social obligations. For Guo, the Sage (*shengren*) is someone who directs his talent and understanding for the benefit of society, who is internally like a sage, but outwardly acts as a ruler.¹⁰

The philosophical emancipation of the representatives of *xuan xue* from the Six Dynasties led them to the integration of Daoist natural philosophy and post-Han Confucian thought. Namely – the correlation: absence – presence is seen through the following categorical orders: 1) physical form – function; 2) root – rhizome; 3) principle – item; 4) sense – word; 5) quiescence – move; 6) perseverance – amendment. As a kind of embodiment of meaning, the words are born as arising in the void of our mind, thus forgetting the words is the prerequisite of any awareness. Daoist accentuation on nonverbal knowledge reveals that speech does

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ In Guo's view, the former necessitates the latter - in chapter one of the *Zhuangzi*, we read the story of the sage ruler Yao, who attempts to cede his throne to the recluse Xu You, but is rebuffed. In the story, it is clear that Xu You has a greater level of understanding than does Yao, but Guo's commentary presents the matter differently: "Are we to insist that a man fold his arms and sit in silence in the middle of some mountain forest before we say that he is practicing non-action? This is why the words of Laozi and Zhuangzi are rejected by responsible officials. This is why responsible officials insist on remaining in the realm of action without regret ... egotistical people set themselves in opposition to things, while he who is in accord with things is not opposed to them ... therefore he profoundly and deeply responds to things without any deliberate mind of his own and follows whatever comes into contact with him ... he who is always with the people no matter what he does is the ruler of the world wherever he may be" (Fung Yu-lan 1964, 32/ch.1). It seems clear from these words that in Guo's view not only Yao is a better model for a ruler than Xu You, but also that Confucius is a better model for a sage than Zhuangzi.

not exhaust the fullness of the meaning – on the contrary: a word can be understood through the present *Dao* in every talk (making it meaningful). For the Chinese thinkers, the *emptiness* as a basic setting for the discussion of ontological problems has an axiological priority over the mode of presence and availability: the sage returns to the constancy of the absent. The latter becomes a holder of the constructive neo-daoist ontology that marks the limits of the philosophical discourse and the psycho-technical level of the *xuan xue* doctrine.¹¹

Our self-transformation is at each moment conditioned by all the transformations coming before us and we in turn condition all the transforms that come after us. By shifting the focus onto those relationships, *Guo* arrives at a view contrary to the ‘transcendent sage’ – i.e. radically different and innovative. While the traditional view of a Daoist sage was someone who withdrew himself from the mundane world, for *Guo* this notion is false and misleading. The social and political environments in which people relate to each other are natural and the proper course of action for a person who appreciates the particular relationship to others is not to run away, but to become involved. In other words, we must become engaged with the world around us, not only because of a common state of existence that we share with people and things around us. It is mostly a continuous act of creation that at its core makes us responsible for the rest of the world (for each living creature) and its proper maintenance.

The whole *Guo Xiang* ontology is revealed in two main theses: 1) everything produces itself by itself, and 2) self-transformations occur in the innermost sphere. The basic category in contrast to the *nothingness* of Wang Bi is the presence as a manifestation of the selfsame: *ziran er ran* – lit. ‘each item is self-natural because that is its intrinsic characteristic’. The category ‘unconditional’ (*wu dai*) refers to the fundamental independence for any objective setting in the process of continuous

¹¹ Its independence as an institutionalized complex *Daojiao* (the Daoist religious complex), despite the bureaucratization after Han dynasty, promotes the autonomy of classical Daoist philosophy, unlike the eclectic Daoism *huanlao*. The last occurs as a productive reconstruction in predominantly ontological sense with almost complete elimination of the cosmological diagrams, which raises the *xuan xue* syncretism and its terminology in turn underlies the Chinese reception of Buddhism (*Chan*).

change.¹² Hence naturally rises the question how the unconditioned by anything outside themselves, natural things are practically perceived as deterministic and interdependent; Guo Xiang's explanation can not be anything but axiological. The clear vision presumes dispositional reorientation of thinking and denial of any self-centered goal setting activity, which is extraneous to human nature.

Wisdom does not overlap with transcending withdrawal: Laozi's ascetic (the man of *Dao*) is dragging his bag in the dust of worldliness, because his vocation is to remain true to his destined time. The concept of human nature (*ren xing*) describes the current behavioral orientation, a predisposition to respond the call to achieve the Way, to rediscover the one-in-the-other (the ontological union) as a fulfillment of the inborn *Dao*-potency. Daoism not only honed to perfection the general principle of equivalence, but also encourages self-realization and the completeness of personal expression. The refusal of occupying privileged privacy does not mean negation of the phenomenon of personality, as some researchers suggest, but describes the basic inter-subjective correlation in the mode of mutual existence (Li Honglei 2003, 18–20).

For Zhuangzi, where the completed personality (*quanren*) wanders, there is no room for the social compromising, to which is subjected every person engaged in worldly affairs: beyond the struggle for prestige position, the so called boundless soaring (*xiao yao*) is the absolute counterpoint to the conformist manner of officialdom. The concept of self-modifying (*duhua*) is introduced to justify the individual self-sufficiency in the turbulent era of social commotion as an ontological category with personal connotations. *Duhua* synthesizes the three cognitive-existential aspects of the *xuan xue* philosophy: axiology, epistemology and psycho-technique, indicating the lifestyle of the righteous and enlightened sage – a man who is familiar with the freedom of universal transformations¹³ (Torchinov 1999, 138).

¹² Every thing corresponds to its nature, which is spontaneous, permanent and can not be modified – there is nothing to add or take away from what has arisen as an essential self-generating. The ontological base is complemented by epistemological and psychological characteristics: *unpremeditated* and *following its kind*.

¹³ Guo Xiang's ethics might be called metaphysical not in the sense that the values stem from some transcendent truths – his ontology is based on an

No change is possible outside *Dao* despite its perennial emptiness; who is familiar with the laws of constant change feels at home even at the *Great Ultimate (taiji)*. He is calm, empirically deserted and broad-minded, unlike the untrained mind incapable of existential predisposition-to-the-Road. The one, who has a clear vision (*ming*) as the openness and anticipation of productive operation, perceives the invisible processes behind the visible transformations and the hidden eventful world behind the ostensible perseverance. The *Dao*-sage has a complete understanding that heaven, earth, myriads of beings and he himself are one – everything finally stands in its place and the restored integrity may be seen through the purity of his original nature. The man of true wisdom is far distant from the chain alternation/passage of events and the knowledge that he has no control over nature brings him closer to spontaneous creativity – the productive co-operation with the Way.

Conclusion: Guo Xiang's Influence on Chinese Thought

The *Zhuangzi* has long been held in high regard as one of the main pillars of Daoist philosophy, as well as one of the most accessible, entertaining and popular philosophical works of any genre. However the important contribution of Guo Xiang to the way in which we understand the *Zhuangzi* is less well-known, particularly in its non-Chinese translations. He deserves credit not only for the external editing and arrangement of the text, but more importantly for developing a philosophical framework that allows for the continued dominance of accepted Confucian codes of proper behavior. Yet he still keeps open the possibility for profound philosophical discussion and wider insights on the nature of reality. While the earlier work of Wang Bi may have eased the entry of Buddhism into the Chinese mainstream, it is within the pattern provided by Guo that the three strands of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism have found a strategy for coexistence contributing to the success and growth of them all.

early Daoist postulate: the spontaneous *boundless soaring*, evolving into *wandering in the innermost*. This *lone transformation* is not a matter of generally applicable categorical imperative, but a simple regularity for all living creatures that transform themselves under the pattern of their own nature, building the structurally profound harmony of universal resonance.

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List of the Chinese Characters:

The ‘Equality of Things’ (齐物论)

Guo Xiang (郭象)

‘the self-so’ (自然 – *ziran*);

‘lone transformation’ (独化– *duhua*);

‘self-transformation’ (己化– *zihua*);

the unconditional (无待– *wudai*);

non-action (无为– *wuwei*);

the Road/Way (道– *Dao*);

the Way of Heaven (天道– *tiandao*);

nothingness (无– *wu*);

‘vital energy’ (气– *qi*),

‘lone transformation’ (独化– *duhua*);

'self-transformation' (己化 - *zihua*);
 'self' (自 - *zi*);
 'to be so' (*ran* 然);
 the human nature (人性 - *renxing*);
 the *God-like people* (神人 - *shenren*);
 the Sage (圣人 - *shengren*);
 Daoist religious complex (道教 - *Daojiao*);
 physical form (体 - *ti*);
 function (用 - *yong*);
 root (本 - *ben*);
 rhizome (末 - *mo*);
 principle (礼 - *li*);
 item (物 - *wu*);
 sense (意 - *yi*);
 word (言 - *yan*);
 quiescence (静 - *jing*);
 move (通 - *tong*);
 perseverance (常 - *chang*);
 amendment (变 - *bian*);
 everything produces itself by itself (物各自生 - *wu ge zi sheng*);
 self-transformations occur in the innermost sphere (独化与玄冥之境 -
du huaxuan ming zhi jin);
 'each item is self-natural because of its intrinsic characteristic' (自然而然 - *ziran er ran*);
 the completed personality (全人 - *quanren*);
 the boundless soaring (逍遥 - *xiao yao*);
 self-modifying (独化 - *duhua*);
 the *Great Ultimate* (太极 - *taiji*);
 clear vision (明 - *ming*).