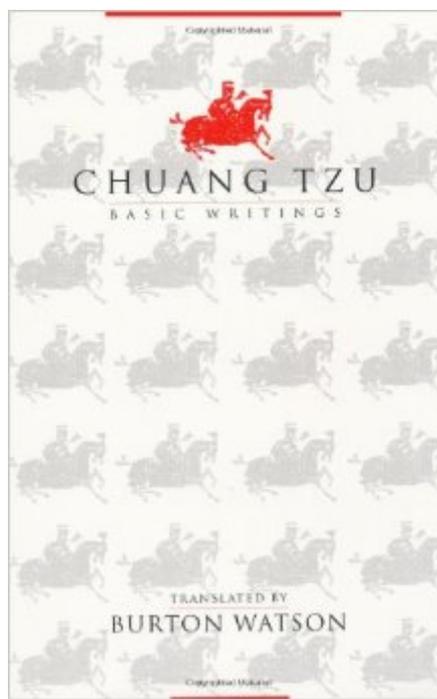


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Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings



Synopsis

The basic writings of Chuang Tzu have been savored by Chinese readers for over two thousand years. And Burton Watson's lucid and beautiful translation has been loved by generations of readers. Chuang Tzu (369?-286? B.C.) was a leading philosopher representing the Taoist strain in Chinese thought. Using parable and anecdote, allegory and paradox, he set forth, in the book that bears his name, the early ideas of what was to become the Taoist school. Central to these is the belief that only by understanding Tao (the Way of Nature) and dwelling in its unity can man achieve true happiness and freedom, in both life and death. Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings includes the seven "inner chapters," which form the heart of the book, three of the "outer chapters," and one of the "miscellaneous chapters." Watson also provides an introduction, placing the philosopher in relation to Chinese history and thought. Witty and imaginative, enriched by brilliant imagery, and making sportive use of both mythological and historical personages (including even Confucius), this timeless classic is sure to appeal to anyone interested in Chinese religion and culture.

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Customer Reviews

Anyone who may be coming to Chuang Tzu for the first time is in for a treat. Although Chuang Tzu is sometimes described as the most brilliant of all Chinese philosophers, what we find in him isn't what we normally understand by 'Philosophy' and isn't technical at all. His appeal is not so much to the intellect as to the imagination, and he chose as a vehicle for his philosophical insights, not tedious and lengthy abstract treatises, but brief and witty anecdotes and dialogues and tales. His

humor, sophistication, literary genius, and philosophical insights found their perfect expression in his brilliant fragments, and once having read them you never forget them. Not much is known about Chuang Tzu, other than that he seems to have lived around the time of King Hui of Liang (370-319 B.C.). The received text of his book, which is sometimes referred to as 'the Chuang Tzu' (CT), is made up of thirty-three Chapters. Most scholars seem to feel that the CT is a composite text, and that only the first seven - the Inner Chapters - plus a few bits from the others are Chuang Tzu's own work, the remainder being by others. Among the better known of his translators, all of them excellent, are Arthur Waley, Burton Watson, and A. C. Graham, though only the latter two translated the complete text. An abridged version of Watson's complete translation has now been made available for those who want to confine themselves mainly to the Inner Chapters. Watson has always struck me as an eminently civilized scholar and as a brilliant translator. Unlike certain others, he wears his scholarship lightly, and doesn't overburden the text with extraneous matter. His many translations from Ancient Chinese Literature are of uniformly high quality, and are well worth having as they are books one often wants to return to. The present book won't, as I've said, give you the whole of Watson's Chuang Tzu. For that you'll have to find a copy of his 'Complete Works of Chuang Tzu.' But it will give you most of what is generally agreed to be Chuang Tzu, and everyone should read it. If you're not a Chuang Tzu enthusiast before you start, I can guarantee that you'll be one before you finish.

Most people have heard of Lao Tzu, the alleged author of the Tao Te Ching. However, cognoscenti know that the writings attributed to the Chinese "Taoist" Chuang Tzu are at least as interesting, challenging, and profound. Chuang Tzu shows his mastery of almost every form of writing in this work: parable, humor, philosophical dialogue, even what seem like brief philosophical essays. Sometimes the net effect is quite dizzying: what are we to make of the story of how Chuang Tzu was dreaming that he was a butterfly, and then awoke, but was unsure whether he was Chuang Tzu who had been dreaming that he was a butterfly, or a butterfly who was now dreaming that he was Chuang Tzu?! And how is a butcher who carves an ox carcass with seemingly supernatural grace and ease a model for how we should lead our lives? Understand this book or not, you'll have fun reading it! The eponymous book, the Chuang Tzu is actually a collection of writings by different authors from different periods. However, many scholars believe that the so-called "Inner Chapters" are by one hand. Watson's translation includes all of these, as well as selections from some of the other portions of the text. (Watson has also published separately a complete translation, although it is rather expensive.) Watson is a very gifted translator, and his love for this text shows. This is one

of the standard translations, and for good reason. (One tidbit: Watson seems to translate into English, not from the original Chinese, but from Japanese translations of the Chinese. Surprisingly, the result is very good.) There is much disagreement over how to interpret Chuang Tzu, so you may want to compare how different translators do different things with the same text. A.C. Graham's translation (soon to be reprinted, I understand) is excellent, with helpful introductory material, but Graham rearranges the text according to his own sometimes idiosyncratic view of how it should be organized. Victor Mair's translation is also excellent, and gives a reasonably priced version of the complete Chuang Tzu. (I often find Watson's English the most beautiful of the three.) For help in understanding the text, Victor Mair has edited an anthology of secondary essays on it, and so have Philip J. Ivanhoe and Paul Kjellberg. (Kjellberg has done an excellent but briefer translation himself, which is included in Ivanhoe and Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*.)

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