

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

---

As a Chinese intellectual living in China in the 1980s, I cheerfully anticipated China's political and economic reform after the closure of Mao's reign, but felt pessimistic about whether such reform, based as it was on **communist** ideology and a vast bureaucracy, would bring prosperity and well-being to my country. This predicament evoked my fascination in the great philosophers, Zhuangzi (庄子, 399–295 BCE) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who were frequently seen by Chinese intellectuals as having nothing in common except their marginalization. On the one hand, I found consolation in Zhuangzi's advocacy of detachment and disengagement from secular concerns, and I admired his independent and noble spirit of freedom (*xiaoyaoyou*, 逍遥游), which most Confucian, activist, and communist intellectuals had fervently opposed. On the other hand, Nietzsche's devastating attack on traditional and modern values had enormous appeal to, and in fact intoxicated, me and my generation of intellectuals, as his writings had intoxicated intellectuals in earlier turbulent periods of Chinese history.<sup>1</sup>

It was only later that I was able to articulate the two main purposes of this book. One is to interpret **Zhuangzi and Nietzsche's texts from a new perspective of religiosity**,<sup>2</sup> which crosses and transcends the boundary of philosophy defined conventionally. Here, religiosity is seen as a religious feeling or sentiment characterized by a **"religiously" profound and passionate concern** for things in life that are believed to be particularly meaningful, sacred, or sublime. I tend to set religiosity or religiousness free from the narrow but prevailing Western notion of religion premised solely on the God-human relation and directed exclusively toward a supernatural being or beings. Following some important thinkers of our time such as Emile Durkheim (the distinction of sacred and profane), Paul Tillich (ultimate concern, hidden theology), and John Dewey (religious experience), I define religiosity broadly to include religious feelings that are not necessarily directed toward a god or supreme truth. The feelings or **"spiritual sensibility"** (Roberts, 5) toward life, totality, infinity, perfection, responsibility, freedom, and liberation, etc., are for me religious in quality. Religiosity as such has existed throughout human

history and served as **the original inspiration and immanent drive of the development of religion and philosophy.** In this respect, religiosity is not something external to philosophy but an **indispensable part of it.** **From the perspective of religiosity, I believe, we can get a better understanding of philosophy including those aspects that may appear nonreligious or even antireligious.** I found that both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche exhibited profound religiosity, **which is essential for understanding their works.**

The other purpose of this book is to compare Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, by encountering their philosophical writings through the perspective of religiosity, in order to provide two great examples of philosophers in the history of world philosophy who made their philosophies capable of dealing with the fundamental problems regarding human liberation and spiritual freedom.

#### REINTERPRETING ZHUANGZI AND NIETZSCHE

As I pursued my post-Cultural Revolution fascination, I discovered that generalizations about the two philosophers abounded among Chinese intellectuals: Zhuangzi, the escapist, the relativist, a successor of egotist Yang Zhu (扬朱, ca. 440–360 BCE) or a mystic skeptic; Nietzsche, the rebel, the passionate worrier and relentless destroyer. The first attempt I encountered to make a serious comparative study of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche was by Chen Guying, a Chinese professor who in 1984 lectured in Beijing on the two philosophers.<sup>3</sup> I was invited to that lecture, which struck me as sensational rather than convincing, inspiring rather than referential. But it opened my mind to the gradual reconsideration of the two philosophers that has become the work of this book.

My decision to explore Zhuangzi and Nietzsche had in fact very little to do with Chen's lecture. The decision came instead from a great deal of reading and reflection on the writings of the two philosophers. The more I read, the more suspicious I became of previous stereotypes of them, and the more intertwined instead of opposed their fundamental orientations began to seem. Gradually I discovered in their writings more and more affinities, not only in their life experiences, writing styles, use of allegories, and common experience of being misunderstood in history, but also in their philosophical temperament and spirituality **amid their respective worlds.**

The most profound meeting point of the two is, as I now put it, their religiosity, their original drives and ultimate concerns **for freedom and liberation from traditional values in order to affirm life.** More surprisingly, I have found Zhuangzi and Nietzsche to be neither negative nor destructive, as reflected in common perspectives, but positive and constructive; **not passive but active,** because their concerns for human liberation and freedom ultimately rest upon the affirmation of life as it is, a very special **kind of affirmation that is rid of any reservation or calculation.** **With this conviction the course of my interpretation was set—to bring these two philosophers together to explore**

in each how the route toward human liberation is built and what human freedom might be conceived to be.

Most commentators have interpreted Nietzsche's philosophy from various perspectives<sup>4</sup> and raised countless controversial issues from analysis of his writings. Questions are debated among Nietzschean commentators: whether Nietzsche is a metaphysician (Heidegger, Kaufmann) or not (Jaspers, Derrida); whether he is a nihilist (Danto, Nishitani) or not; whether he rejects the existence of truth entirely (Rorty, De Man) or not (Heidegger, Kaufmann, Clark). Nearly all of these interpretations I found to be inspiring and in some cases quite plausible. But most commentators try to interpret an unconventional, "abnormal," or artistic philosophy by means of a conventional method, so that something significant in Nietzsche's work seems missing to me in their arguments. Most critics miss what I believe is the deep religious orientation of his writings, a misunderstanding that derives from the apparently antireligious, especially anti-Christian writings of Nietzsche and his outrageous proclamation that "God is dead." **This aspect of Nietzsche's work lures or distracts** one's attention easily away from Nietzsche's own religiosity as the soul of his philosophy.<sup>5</sup>

Curiously enough, some Western scholars have tended to interpret Zhuangzi as no philosopher at all, **but as a mere mystic and rhetorical thinker** (Schwartz, Wright, Creel), or **representative of religious mysticism in association** with Laozi, Nagarjuna, and the late Zen Buddhists (Smart). Measured by the ethnocentric standard of European philosophy, Zhuangzi was read by them with little attention to **the distinct religious dimensions of his stylistic philosophical work**, such as his critiques of language, reason, meaning, and morality, his unique art of paradoxical discourse, his reconstructing humanity based on *ziran* (自然) or "spontaneity," and finally his ultimate concern for human liberation and freedom. On the other hand, some scholars have perceived Zhuangzi as a relativist (Chad Hansen, David Wong), or a **skeptic** (Paul Kjellberg, Lisa Raphals), in a debate which cannot give readers a full understanding of Zhuangzi's philosophy. **The misunderstandings of Zhuangzi in Chinese history** are much more serious than in the West,<sup>6</sup> and all these misunderstandings finally resulted in the severe and mistaken accusations against Zhuangzi by modern communists: that he is a pessimist, a reactionary, a relativist, a skeptic, a subjective idealist, a nihilist, and an escapist.<sup>7</sup> These perspectives derived from customary methods of philosophical analysis and interpretation, which have failed to grasp what I believe is essential in Zhuangzi's philosophy.

My own perspective on Zhuangzi and Nietzsche is quite different. In my analysis I give attention, as most commentators do, to the philosophical questions and themes in the writings of each philosopher. But what I have termed the religiosity of each philosopher is the Ariadne's thread which I use to pass through each labyrinth. From this perspective, both Zhuangzi's and Nietzsche's attack on traditional values was not so much an attempt to present another system of human values as an attempt to overcome and transcend all traditional

values to reach a state of liberation and freedom. For, according to Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, liberation itself is not a value in a customary sense, **but the transcending of all previous values**. So, unlike other commentators, when I examine the philosophical themes in the works of each, themes such as metaphysics, truth, knowledge, language, and morality, I think about how their arguments intimately relate to their ultimate concern with human transformation and liberation. I then return from this height to shed light on how they cope with these traditional philosophical questions. I hope my effort will provide a new horizon from which to look at both Zhuangzi and Nietzsche and will deepen as well as **broaden our understanding of their great philosophies**.

#### PERSPECTIVE ON COMPARATIVE PHILOSOPHY

I am not ignorant of the debates that exist over the possibility of comparative philosophy. Some scholars such as Richard Rorty argue that the difficulties of communication across boundaries of language, customs, and cultures make us virtually unable to understand each other. In Rorty's view it is impossible to do comparative philosophy at all. Postcolonialists, in a similar skeptical vein, argue that the work done thus far in comparative philosophy is flawed because its foundations rest solely on a Eurocentric colonialist mentality. They claim that such an approach tends to draw *other* cultures and philosophies into European categories and thus necessarily fails to arrive at fair comparisons. I am sympathetic to these concerns and recognize the difficulty in comparative study, yet I do not agree with them.

In my view, except for the very first philosopher, whose existence is shrouded by time, every philosophy must be comparative because every interpretation originates under the condition of the existence of *others*. The problems of communication are always present not only interculturally but also intraculturally. Even within the same tradition people still have difficulty in understanding each other. However, the existence of obstacles does not stop the ongoing communication and mutual understanding among different people. By the same token, Western philosophy is itself comparative. For example, contemporary American philosophers writing in English must confront Greek or German philosophical writings that emerge from cultures now removed in many ways from their own. Though the gap between contemporary Western philosophy and classical Greek philosophy may not be so large as the one between Chinese and Western philosophical traditions, nonetheless the contemporary Western philosopher is a stranger to much of Greek culture and philosophy in subtle as well as conspicuous ways. And yet the search for understanding continues in careful textual and linguistic study, in cultural and historical analysis and in comparative studies that attempt to bridge different cultures and different time periods.

Furthermore, the fact that colonialism and ethnocentrism have had a deep impact on the contemporary study of the East, as Said has maintained, and

on comparative philosophy, is undeniably true, but it should not lead us to renounce the possibility of comparative studies. Modern philosophy in the West began with the rediscovery of the Greeks, **some of whose works were** brought to Europe through Arabic texts. Who can prove that the Golden Age of Athens **about twenty-five hundred years ago had nothing to do with** influence that came from the East? In this postcolonial age, the important thing we must do, both former colonizers and the formerly colonized, is to overcome the colonialist mentality in active and positive ways, not through angry confrontation but by comparative studies. As a matter of fact, comparative study or dialogical strategy is one of the best antidotes for the colonialist illness, so that we might bring to the fore a real pluralist, open, and free intellectual environment.

Through a healthy dialogue with each *other* and with different traditions, we will become more and more aware that every philosophy is indeed a perspective, and not a final and exclusive truth. That being so, what we should disdain is absolutism and dogmatism, which are the hidden foundations of colonialism, **just as fiercely held particular beliefs are its apparent foundation.** We should not disdain the search itself for understanding across cultures. Refusing to grant meaning to such comparative studies precludes the possibility of finding any common ground for mutual understanding. Just as two individuals can only hope to understand one another through conversation, two cultures can only hope for mutual understanding through an attempt to communicate, and if the process of communication is pronounced impossible before it begins, the two individuals or cultures will seem irrevocably alienated from one another. This attempt at a conversation between cultures is the work of comparative studies. Whatever difficulties in understanding may appear, they appear in the course of conversation and comparison, not before the process begins, and only an engagement in comparative thought can confront these difficulties, not a refusal to engage. No matter what difficulties indeed confront us in comparative studies, we still must search for such common ground to respect the plurality of our world.

Such common ground I believe I have found in the two seemingly disparate thinkers, Zhuangzi and Nietzsche. Divided by culture, by language, and by centuries, Zhuangzi and Nietzsche reflect a common concern with spiritual emancipation. This is why I have chosen to bypass interesting debates over comparative studies in spite of the important epistemological questions they raise. Interesting as these debates are, I have worked on this **project from the** conviction that comparative studies are both inherent in the work of philosophy as well as meaningful.

#### METHOD AND PLAN

Since the two philosophers I have chosen to examine are among the most intensively studied, it is impossible for me to consider exhaustively the commentaries their work has inspired. As a result the methodology of this study

has been primarily textual and thematic. I will focus basically on the original texts rather than their commentators, though they too have been the focus of my reading and research. In dealing with the full corpus of each author, some works of which remain controversial in significance and authenticity,<sup>8</sup> I have developed my thesis based on my research and my understanding of their writings. In the *Book of Zhuangzi*, I follow the consensus that the seven inner chapters were written by Zhuangzi himself. I base my analysis of his thought on these chapters; the rest I use as secondary sources. In Nietzsche, I will pay more respect to his own selection of his published writings than I will to the *Nachlass* published after his final breakdown (1888–1889). The *Nachlass* I will use occasionally as supplementary references.

During the process of this research, I found many problems in existing translations of Zhuangzi<sup>9</sup> that do not harmonize with my understanding of the text. I made some changes by translating most of the cited text myself with the help of my predecessors.

Again, this is a thematic study based on original texts and philosophical analysis rather than a study of Zhuangzi's and Nietzsche's thinking in its socio-cultural and historical context. I have concentrated particularly on those elements in the works of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche in which I could best point to the ultimate religiosity of their writings. The significance of sociocultural and historical factors is undeniable, and I have explored such factors throughout my research for this project. But to attend fully to these historical and sociocultural factors requires the concentrated attention of another work.

In what follows I shall present an overall interpretation of both philosophies respectively within their own contexts. My considerations in choosing such an approach are these: First, in my own reading of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche, I have found a unique brand of "religiosity" in their works that emphasizes the need for human liberation from all traditional values in order to affirm life. This will best be shown by first bringing to light how this religiosity manifests itself in the respective contexts of the two philosophers, whereas an attempt to glean this religiosity through a point by point comparisons of themes would not be convincing to those who are well versed in the texts of these thinkers. This particular reading of each philosopher in his turn is the first contribution of this book, a reading which I do not believe has previously been given to either.<sup>10</sup>

Secondly, having discovered the religiosity of human liberation in both, I try to present the thematic similarities in both that make this religiosity possible. That is to say, what is of central importance for this study is the articulation of a philosophy of human liberation that can be found in both Nietzsche and Zhuangzi, and in order for this particular articulation to be relevant to cross-cultural philosophical reflection, I first take it upon myself to show how this theme of liberation and life-affirmation is expressed by each philosopher, and only then show how the "philosophical religiosity" which I have discovered from my own readings can be formulated in a thematic comparative dialogue between Zhuangzi and Nietzsche.

Thirdly, I will reflect on what sort of relevance and impact this philosophical religiosity can have for both Western and Chinese philosophical contexts in an age of thinking challenged by postmodernism on the one hand and cultural confrontation and dialogue on the other. The philosophical religiosity of human liberation is relevant not only to the Western or Chinese philosophical scene in isolation, but is of importance to both in their confrontation and dialogue with one another.

The main body of this book is divided into five chapters. In chapter 2, I examine closely Zhuangzi's main ideas, interpreting his writings in light of how he arrives at his sense of human liberation and life affirmation. I examine the concept of Dao and its background in ancient Chinese history from which Zhuangzi's unique philosophy derives. I then describe how Zhuangzi deconstructs the "metaphysical" meaning of Dao and *wu* and examine his critical yet creative approach to knowledge, truth, language, and morality, liberation from which is the precondition of ultimate emancipation. In the final section I illustrate a religiosity manifested in Zhuangzi's perspective of Dao as *xiaoyaoyou*, as realized freedom in this world.

In chapter 3, I examine carefully Nietzsche's writings, from his "reevaluation of all values" to his method of genealogy, from his negation of metaphysics, true knowledge, religion, and morality to the creation of his own perspective of the world. I analyze the doctrine of the will to power, the notion of the *Übermensch*, the Dionysian spirit, and the doctrine of eternal recurrence as expressions of his ultimate affirmation of life and the core of Nietzsche's religiosity.

In chapter 4, by looking at each philosopher in light of the other, I propose a way of seeing the two as complementary in philosophical outlook. Bringing attention to several aspects of their philosophies, such as their linguistic strategies, their conceptions of truth, knowledge, and interpretation, their critiques of morality and their ideas of nature as a unity of differences and as the world of life, I argue for seeing each as ultimately concerned with human liberation.

In the concluding chapter 5, I reflect on some of the implications this philosophy of human liberation has for the philosophical as well as religious discourse of the contemporary world, both in China and the West. First, I take a look at the recent philosophers such as Derrida, Foucault, and some other poststructuralist thinkers, to examine critically their relation to Nietzsche and Zhuangzi and to show that the philosophical religiosity of the latter may offer something positive to the epoch after the death of "God" and "Man." Then I illustrate historically the studies of Zhuangzi and Nietzsche in China to see how my project can enrich or "multiply" the scholarship of the subject. Finally, I return to my main thesis to elaborate how the concept of religiosity, shown in Zhuangzi and Nietzsche's philosophies, would possibly affect the studies of philosophy and religion in the future.

After all, in the creative and vital spirit of Nietzsche's work, as in the tranquil and inward spirit of Zhuangzi's work, a surprisingly similar vision of

human freedom exists—one in which spiritual transcendence is possible by affirming life “religiously” as sacred and divine. To argue in this way for the religiosity of Zhuangzi’s work may be less idiosyncratic, but the strange and paradoxical position of arguing for the religiosity of Nietzsche’s work has proved surprisingly fruitful for philosophical analysis. Only those who would narrow all religious sensibility to forms of otherworldly theism would find Nietzsche’s philosophy atheistic and antireligious. I do not, and thus find in Nietzsche’s writings, as in Zhuangzi’s, religious striving, **liberation, and the** promise of spiritual transformation.