

BOOK REVIEW

Christine Abigail L. Tan. *Freedom's Frailty: Self-Realization in the Neo-Daoist Philosophy of Guo Xiang's Zhuangzi*

**SUNY Press
2024, 218 pages**

Freedom's Frailty brings out the sociopolitical dimensions of the thought of Guo Xiang, a commentator and philosopher from the third century. Guo's commentary on a key text of Daoism, the *Zhuangzi*, profoundly shaped how it has been interpreted. Christine Abigail Tan brings Guo's views on freedom and self-realization into dialogue with liberal theories of freedom and autonomy. She presents the concept of "freedom in" as a third alternative to the two senses of liberty that Isaiah Berlin famously opposed to each other, namely "freedom from" and "freedom to." A form of "dependence-based autonomy," "freedom in" is premised on ontological and epistemological concepts that are antithetical to the western Anglophone tradition, such as what Tan refers to as the "logic of convergence" and the notion of a dialectical self.

The *Zhuangzi* is one of two central works associated with Daoism, the other being the *Laozi* or the *Daodejing*. These two texts take their titles from the names of the figures traditionally thought to be their authors, i.e. Zhuangzi and Laozi, who lived in the 4th century BCE. However, the *Zhuangzi* is now "accepted to be the work of many hands" (Ziporyn 2003, 15), and Guo Xiang is credited as the one who compiled and arranged its present version of thirty-three chapters. Consequently, the meaning of the *Zhuangzi* is inextricable with Guo's commentaries, an hermeneutic relationship that Tan (2024, 20) likens to that between Plato and the ideas of Socrates. She thus treats any concept of political freedom that can be gleaned from the *Zhuangzi* as mainly attributable to Guo.

Daoism itself is often held up as a worldview that values freedom more than the structured, hierarchical system of Confucianism. These religions, which make up classical Chinese philosophy, emerged during the breakdown of the Zhou dynasty's social institutions and the waning of the belief in the so-called "mandate of Heaven." Whereas Confucius advocated the practice of virtue through ritual propriety (*li*), Daoism is characterized by an, "across-the-boards rejection of all moral cultivation." Its philosophy was perceived to be, "free of any well-defined hierarchy, any complex system of obligations and responsibilities" (Ziporyn 2003, 12). Indeed, in place of a punitive Heaven, the Dao—which can be translated as the way or, "guiding discourse"—orders the world in a paradoxical way. As the *Laozi* text famously begins, "The Way that can be spoken of is not the Eternal Way." This suggests that, as Ziporyn

(2003, 13) puts it, “the esteeming and commitment to a particular value perspective is precisely what undermines the attainment of the desired value.”

How can such a seemingly relativistic view of freedom possibly be appropriated for political ends? Tan shows how. Her book begins with a chapter that introduces the Western discourse on freedom, which distinguishes between metaphysical freedom and political freedom. Metaphysical freedom involves the question of agency and determinism, and as such, it is, “deeply embedded in the problem of free will (Tan 2024, 5).” In her analysis of its roots, Tan shows how metaphysical freedom is bound up with the idea of a God in whose likeness we have been created, and whose benevolence can only be reconciled with the reality of evil through the presumption of human free will (Tan 2024, 9). Political freedom, on the other hand, involves the moral problem of what liberties individuals should be accorded in the sphere of political relations. Here, the debate turns on questions such as “‘Why should I (or anyone) obey anyone else?’ ‘Why should I not live as I like?’ ‘Must I obey?’ ‘If I disobey, may I be coerced?’ ‘By whom, and to what degree, and in the name of what, and for the sake of what?’” (Berlin 2002, 168).

In contrast to Western discourse, in classical Chinese philosophy, there is no such metaphysical freedom/political freedom distinction. Indeed, there is not even a direct translation of the term “freedom” (Tan 2024, 4). However, Tan is quick to point out that this does not mean that Chinese philosophy does not have an equivalent *political* concept for it. Unfortunately, in Isaiah Berlin’s famous analysis of liberty, he conflates Daoist freedom with a kind of spiritual freedom that favors a “retreat into the inner citadel.” For Berlin (2002, 182), “the traditional self-emancipation of ascetics and quietists” is not real freedom, but only a specious form of it; i.e. it is a way of changing oneself in the face of one’s inability to change the situation. This logic is not unlike the neoliberal valorization of subjects’ resilience to the status quo (“Filipinos rebounded so quickly after being inundated by the floods!”) as a way to undermine any possible resistance against the regime of the free market (“Filipinos do not need to demand flood relief or better public infrastructure from government”). Let us practice non-doing or *wu wei*.

Tan rejects this misinterpretation of eastern spiritual freedom. She also rejects the binary opposition between negative liberty and positive liberty, presented in Berlin’s essay entitled “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Negative liberty, also called “freedom from,” pertains to the absence of obstacles, barriers, or constraints. Meanwhile, positive liberty, also called “freedom to,” pertains to the possibility of acting in such a way as to take control of one’s life and to realize one’s purposes (Carter 2021, 1). To cite a simple example, you have negative liberty if no one is preventing you from going up to the roof deck of a skyscraper—let’s say that it is freely accessible to the public. However, if you are acrophobic and cannot enjoy a party on the roof deck, even if you wish you could, we can say that you lack the positive liberty of acting toward that end.

Berlin’s conclusion is that a liberal society should guarantee a modicum of negative freedom: “If I wish to preserve my liberty.... I must establish a society in which there must be some frontiers of freedom which nobody should be permitted to cross” (Berlin 2002, 210). For example, my right to privacy and freedom of speech, religion, or association should be respected by the state and my fellow citizens.

However, a liberal society need not guarantee positive freedom, and in some occasions, may even have to eschew it. This is because, in Berlin's view, positive freedom as self-realization or actualization has often been used to justify bending individual will into the service of the collectivity. For example, in Plato's vision of the well-ordered state, people are put into distinct and hierarchically arranged social classes. Here, people have the positive freedom to excel according to their purported nature, but this self-actualization is bought at the cost of being constrained to a role, i.e. at the cost of their negative liberty. (Plato's ancient utopia of course is turned into a modern dystopia in Aldous Huxley's 1932 novel *Brave New World*.) The upshot of this is that for Berlin, "freedom from" and "freedom to" are, practically speaking, often inevitably be pitted against each other, and hence tend to be mutually exclusive. If this is the case, Berlin believes that negative freedom is the one that is truly worth having, inasmuch as it is the one that can safeguard individualism and autonomy. The following passage from Jiang (2012, 71) sums up Berlin's position:

He defends the superiority of negative freedom by offering a spirited critique of the various ways positive freedom has been perverted and abused in the service of political suppression and tyrannical governance under the banner of achieving "higher" political and social ideals, whether genuine or cynical, making a powerful case for the necessity of privileging negative freedom over positive freedom in a liberal democracy.

In relation to classical Chinese philosophy, Jiang (2012, 75) notes that "In general, the Chinese intellectual traditions tend to focus on positive freedom, requiring a person to engage in moral/spiritual cultivation to achieve self-realization and self-mastery." Furthermore, "The Zhuangzians, with their general antipathy toward politics, tend to cede the ground of political discourse to others, mostly the Confucians, in premodern China" (Jiang 2012, 84).

Tan refutes Jiang's claim that there is a dearth of political thought in Daoism. She also exposes and upends atomistic assumptions about how we know and what the self is, which underpin western Anglophone discourses about political freedom. As an alternative, she presents the notion of "freedom in," her term for the paradigm of freedom that can be cleaned from Guo's commentary to the *Zhuangzi*. "Freedom in" is

a freedom that is necessary and singular inasmuch as it is purely contingent in constitution and transformation, in relation to the necessity of everything else's contingency; one that is satisfied and at ease, not in spite of, but because of the *other*—that is, the convergence of subjectivity with objective order. (Tan 2024, 150)

Tan presents her case by expounding on "the logic of convergence," which dissolves the split between necessity and contingency, and then offering a view of the self that similarly dissolves the binaries of whole/parts and internal/external. The last two chapters discuss autonomy and self-realization in the Daoist sense, i.e. by way of Guo Xiang's interventions into the *Zhuangzi* text which transform its ideas about freedom into politically useful concepts.

The book, with its intricate textual analysis, is a key contribution to Chinese philosophy. On the whole, it is an original exploration into the sociopolitical dimensions of the thought of Guo Xiang. Tan brings Guo's views on freedom and self-realization into dialogue with liberal theories of freedom and autonomy, which no other scholar has done in such a substantial and comprehensive manner.

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