Book Reviews


When—in the spring of 1998—I reviewed Kristofer Schipper’s Dutch translation of Zhuang Zi’s “Inner Chapters”, 1 I announced that Schipper’s translation of Zhuang Zi’s complete writings would see the light of day in the course of the subsequent winter. That was the rumor that circulated at the time. It took just a little bit longer—some eight or nine years. Finally, since the spring of 2007, readers of Dutch are able for the first time to get acquainted with the entire Zhuangzi, translated directly from the original (all earlier, partial translations having been based on other translations in Western languages).

With a potential readership consisting of barely more than 20 million native speakers of Dutch or Flemish, Schipper’s translation is a relatively small publication. As many readers of T’oung Pao do not read Dutch, offering a lengthy discussion of its qualities seems out of place here. Suffice it to say that, generally speaking, it is quite faithful to the original and rather successful in rendering into Dutch the richness, the philosophical depth as well as the humor that pervade the pages of the Zhuangzi. At times one wishes one would read more about the exact significance of certain philosophical notions in the specific context of the Zhuangzi. “Virtue”, to name but one example, is one of these concepts frequently encountered in other traditions of thought and having a distinctly different meaning in each of them. The reader would certainly benefit from an explanation of Zhuang Zi’s views on “virtue”, all the more so because its Dutch counterpart, deugd, is even vaguer than the English notion. Unfortunately, because this book was intended for the general public, space for annotation was restricted, leaving certain issues untouched.

What makes Schipper’s approach unique, though, is that he is able to use his intimate knowledge of Daoist religion to bring to light layers of meaning in the text that had thus far remained undetected. Aided by his knowledge of frequently overlooked Daoist commentaries on the Zhuangzi, and of Daoism’s ritual practices, Schipper is able to point at links between Daoist thought and religious practice hitherto unnoticed. Schipper, as is well known, defends the view that religion

precedes philosophy (a point which he reiterates in his Introduction, pp. 21-23). Yet, whenever he suggests a link between the Zhuangzi’s world of thought and the world of Daoist religion, he invariably does so with a great measure of modesty and circumspection. Such is the case with the famous and very ugly Aitaituo (Ch. 5). One passage in Aitaituo’s description, which, translated literally, reads: “And yet males and females unite in front of him”, has long puzzled commentators as well as translators. Guo Xiang and Cheng Xuanying interpret “males and females” as solely pertaining to the animal realm, which does not fit the context. Burton Watson opted for a vague translation: “And yet men and women flocked to him”. Schipper, on the other hand, explicitly translates “En toch komen mannetjes en vrouwtjes bij hem paren” (And yet, males and females come to mate in his presence), drawing our attention in a footnote to possible parallels with the sexual rites of the early Celestial Master movement (p. 100, n. 36).

Naturally, every translation has its flaws. I wonder why Schipper found it necessary to translate tianxia (all-under-heaven, the empire) in three different manners, to wit, “het rijk” (the empire), “de hele wereld” (the entire world) and “het Hemelse Rijk” (the Heavenly Empire). The latter translation in particular seems a bit inappropriate, and Schipper’s own footnote explaining why he shifts between the three translations (p. 48, n. 17) cannot resolve our doubts. Similarly, “niets doen” (doing nothing) is too limited a rendering of wuwei, a notion of such fundamental importance that it too would have deserved a few paragraphs of explanation. Schipper’s translation of the final characters of Ch. 17 (“Autumn floods”) demonstrates how one word can create a world of difference in the interpretation of a passage. Zhuang Zi, in his final reply to Hui Shi, who initially expressed his doubts about Zhuang Zi’s ability to understand the joy of the fish, invites Hui Shi to go back to the beginning of their argument and says: “You said: ‘How do you know what the fish enjoy?’ This indicates that when you asked that, you already knew that I knew it.” And then Zhuang Zi concludes with the words Wo zhi zhi Hao shang ye, literally: “I knew it above the Hao” (they were having their discussion standing on a bridge over the River Hao). Zhuang Zi is playing here with the double significance of the question word 问, which can be read as both “how” and “where”. He thus defeats Hui Shi twice, once using the force of logic, and once more playing with words and their double meanings. Zhuang Zi’s final sentence in Schipper’s translation goes: “En ik weet het, omdat ik nu hier op de brug van de Hao-rivier loop” (p. 235). In other words: “And I know it, because I am now walking here on the bridge over the River Hao.” Schipper’s because adds an element absent from the original and prompts the translator to add in a footnote, irrelevant to this particular context: “Out of an intuitive knowledge that comes from being at harmony with the natural world.”