Skepticism, Poetic Imagination and the Art of Non-Instrumentality: Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu

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1 Since in Oakeshott’s works, he always uses the Wade-Giles system in transliterating Chinese names, I would like to follow Oakeshott in using the Wade-Giles system instead of the nowadays more commonly used pinyin system in this paper for Chinese names if those names have already been mentioned in his works for the purpose of easy identification. As a result, “Chuang Tzu” instead of “Zhuangzi” is being used here. Likewise, I have consulted a number of English translations of Chuang Tzu in the process of writing this paper; most of them also use the Wade-Giles system. In citing those translations that are using the Wade-Giles system, the quoted citations will also follow their usage in this paper. Otherwise, I will follow the pinyin system when Chinese names/terms are being mentioned.
Abstract

Chuang Tzu is the classical Chinese philosopher that Oakeshott has referred to most in his works. For example, in Rationalism in Politics and other essays, Oakeshott mentions Chuang Tzu in five extensive footnotes. Given Oakeshott's sparing use of footnotes, this is a phenomenon. Yet to the best of my knowledge, there has been no scholarly discussion on how the thought of these two very original thinkers, separated by over two thousand years in time in two cultures, may be related to each other.

Oakeshott quotes the story of Duke Huan and the wheelwright in Chuang Tzu's work to show that written words alone can never capture the essence of human wisdom. Oakeshott himself argues that technical knowledge and practical knowledge are inseparable and it is wrong to regard the former as sovereign. Oakeshott's skeptical approach is derived from his idea of the conditionality of all forms of theorizing, and this has affinity with Chuang Tzu's recognition of the perspectival and contextual nature of human understanding.

In criticizing the Rationalist's approach to morality, Oakeshott again refers approvingly to Chuang Tzu, who criticizes Confucius' abstract principle of benevolence. To Oakeshott, moral ideals are sediment; they have significance so long as they belong to a form of life. Likewise, Chuang Tzu famously alludes to the non-abstract and non-substantive nature of morality: “When the springs dry up and fish are left stranded on the ground, they spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit—but this would be better if they could forget each other in the rivers and lakes.”

Chuang Tzu is the most lyrical philosopher in China, whose works are filled with rhapsodic language describing how human conduct or imagination may attune to the rhythm of Dao. Great philosophy and great literature find a meeting point here. Likewise, Oakeshott admires Hobbes' Leviathan as a masterpiece of literature in western civilization. In other words, in the conversation of mankind, philosophy and poetry may converge, allowing poetic imagination to take flight while one is philosophizing. In Chuang Tzu's famous Butterfly Dream (i.e. how Chuang Tzu does not know if he is Chuang who has dreamt he is a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he is Chuang), we find echoes of Oakeshott's discussion of poetic imagining in which “self and not-self generate one another.”

All these similarities and shared themes are possible because both Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu appreciate profoundly the poetic character of all human activity. They are not prepared to accept the supremacy of instrumental rationality. They are imaginative enough to escape from the “deadliness of doing.” This can best be revealed by their ideas of friendship and play. Finally, it shall be argued that Oakeshott's non-instrumental understanding of civil association may form a basis of developing Chuang Tzu’s idea of kingship whereby the prince is there to facilitate the people to find their own delight instead of to use the government for the pursuit of practical or moral achievements.
Introduction

In my view, there is one aspect in the scholarship of Michael Oakeshott that has been very much neglected: namely, his interest in classical Confucianism and the work of the famous classical Daoist thinker Chuang Tzu.

Oakeshott refers to Confucius and Confucianism quite a number of times in some of his major works. For example, in his influential introduction to *Leviathan*, Oakeshott compares Hobbes’s philosophical system with Confucius’s idea of having one thing permeating his thought. Likewise, Oakeshott points out that Confucius had come up with the maxim “Do not to another, which thou wouldest not have done to oneself” long before Hobbes when he discusses Hobbes’s “convenient articles of peace” in his moral writings. In *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, Oakeshott uses the principle of the mean, which was allegedly developed by Confucius’s grandson Tzu Szu, to support his argument that there is a need to find a habitable middle region in politics in which one may escape the self-destructive extremes. He also endorses Confucius’s idea that “moderation lies in deficiency rather than in excess” in the same work. In his discussion of modern Rationalism and the breakdown in the effectiveness of moral education, Oakeshott refers to the teaching of another great Confucian thinker Mencius.

As regards Chuang Tzu, he probably is the classical Chinese philosopher that Oakeshott cites most. In the 1962 edition of *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, Oakeshott mentions Chuang Tzu’s work in no less than five extensive footnotes when he is criticizing modern Rationalism and abstract moral principles, describing the conservative disposition, or analyzing the unique mode of poetic experience. Given Oakeshott’s sparing use of footnotes, this is quite a phenomenon. Oakeshott also ends his study of *Leviathan* by quoting a famous paragraph in “The Great and Venerable Teacher” Chapter of *Chuang Tzu*, in which he compares the peaceful human condition achieved by civil association to that of the fish on dry springs moistening each other and keeping each other wet with their slime for survival.

While it is fair to say that classical Chinese thought may only occupy a relatively marginal place in the development of Oakeshott’s philosophical ideas, the interest shown by Oakeshott in Confucianism and Chuang Tzu at least warrants some scholarly examination, with the hope that comparative studies of this kind will enrich our understanding of the scholarship of Oakeshott as well as of Chinese classical thought. Yet, there have been very few published works found in this area. I have gone through the “Michael Oakeshott Bibliography” on the Michael Oakeshott

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3 See “The Moral Life in the Writings of Thomas Hobbes” in *ibid.*, p. 95.
6 *ibid.*, p. 9 n, 2, p. 36, n. 1, p. 73, n. 1, p. 178, n. 1, and p. 238, n. 1.
7 In this paper, I mainly rely on Burton Watson’s *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, New York & London: Columbia University Press, 1969 for the English translation of Chuang Tzu’s works, though if in my judgment there is a better alternative translation available, I will use the better one instead. If I think that I can improve on Watson’s (or other’s) translation, I will use a pair of [ ] to insert to the translated text to indicate my preferred translation. Oakeshott did not use Watson’s translation since many of his published works pre-dated that of Watson’s translation.
8 *Hobbes on Civil Association*, p. 79.
Association web site, which was just updated in April 2009,\(^9\) but I cannot find any published work on Oakeshott and Chinese thought there. I understand that in the first Oakeshott Conference held at the London School of Economics back in 2001, there were two articles on Oakeshott and Chinese thought, one by Zhang Rulun on Oakeshott and Chinese liberalism, and the other by Roy Tseng comparing Oakeshott's concept of individuality with that of Confucius's.\(^10\) Other than these, it is difficult to find any other scholarly work on Oakeshott and Chinese thought. To the best of my knowledge, none has been published on Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu. This paper is an attempt to try to rectify this in a small way by comparing Oakeshott's philosophical ideas with those of Chuang Tzu's, particularly in the areas of skepticism, poetic imagination and the non-instrumental conception of politics. It is believed that such a comparison may help shed light on their respective philosophy and better understand the relationship between these two original thinkers who are separated by over two thousand years and who lived and wrote in two very distinctive cultures.

**Knowledge, Morality, and the Poetic Character of Human Conduct**

In criticizing modern Rationalism, Oakeshott believes that in his pursuit of certainty, demonstrability and clarity, the Rationalist refuses to admit that there are two sorts of human knowledge, namely technical and practical knowledge. The reason is that only the former can be formulated into rules that can be deliberately learned and capable of universal application at distinct starting and ending points by any rational being, whereas the latter can neither be taught nor learned explicitly, but only imparted and acquired in actual practice that is often embedded in a body of evolving habits and custom. From this, according to Oakeshott, the Rationalist wrongly concludes that technical knowledge is sovereign and that practical knowledge is not knowledge at all but superstition.\(^11\) Oakeshott goes one step further to say that: “nowhere...can technical knowledge be separated from practical knowledge, and nowhere can they be considered identical with one another or able to take the place of one another.”\(^12\)

It is in this context of criticizing modern Rationalism's idea of knowledge that Oakeshott cites Chuang Tzu's story about the exchange between an old wheelwright Pien and Duke Huan of Ch’i on the kind of knowledge and knack that you cannot hand down by words or books. Oakeshott cites the story in full in a footnote, and that story is drawn from the last paragraph of “The Way of Heaven” Chapter of *Chuang Tzu*:\(^13\)

> Duke Huan was in his hall reading a book. The wheelwright Pien, who was in the yard below chiseling a wheel, laid down his mallet and chisel, stepped up into the hall, and said to Duke Huan, “This book Your Grace is reading—may I venture to ask whose words are in it?”

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\(^13\) The story cited here is drawn from Watson's *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 152-153, the translation of which is more accurate and a bit different from the one used in Oakeshott's *Rationalism in Politics and other essays*, 1962, pp. 9-10. Philip J. Ivanhoe points out to me that there is a considerable literature on the “knack or skilled stories” on the *Chuang Tzu* in English pioneered by A. C. Graham's path breaking works on Chuang Tzu. For a recent good discussion of these stories, see Lee H. Yearley’s “Zhuanzi’s Understanding of Skillfulness and the Ultimate Spiritual State” in Paul Kjellberg and Philip J. Ivanhoe eds. *Essays on Skepticism, Relativism, and Ethics in the Zhuangzi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, pp. 152-182.
“The words of the sages,” said the duke.  "Are the sages still alive?"
"Dead long ago," said the duke.  "In that case, what you are reading there is nothing but the chaff and dregs of the men of old!"
"Since when does a wheelwright have permission to comment on the books I read?" said Duke Huan.  "If you have some explanation, well and good.  If not, it's your life!"

Wheelwright P'ien said, "I look at it from the point of view of my own work.  When I chisel a wheel, if the blows of the mallet are too gentle, the chisel slides and won't take hold.  But if they're too hard, it bites in and won't budge.  Not too gentle, not too hard—you can get it in your hand and feel it in your mind.  You can't put it into words, and yet there's a knack to it somehow.  I can't teach [explain] it to my son, and he can't learn it from me.  So I've gone along for seventy years and at my age I'm still chiseling wheels.  When the men of old died, they took with them the things that couldn't be handed down.  So what you are reading there must be nothing but chaff and dregs of the men of old."

Here, both Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu have expounded a highly skeptical view on rationality: that concrete human knowledge is constituted by something that cannot be deliberately learnt through words or by books because that part of human knowledge cannot be formulated into rules or formula; instead it can only be imparted through practice (e.g.: getting it in your hand and feeling it in your mind).  In other words, concrete human knowledge can never be exhausted by rational reasoning or technical knowledge alone; it must be partnered with practical knowledge or a knack that can only be acquired through actual practice.  Theory and practice must therefore join hands in order to achieve concrete human knowledge.  To separate theory or rational reasoning from practice, like the modern Rationalist, will only lead to abstraction and distorted conclusions in human understanding.

One fundamental point implied by this view of the inseparability of theory and practice is that there always exists an element of uniqueness and contingency in concrete human understanding.  While the formal and theoretical part of our knowledge may help us formulate explicit rules and precepts to further our general understanding or for universal application, the practical and know-how part of our knowledge can only be achieved via actual practice on each and every concrete occasion, making the achievement of concrete human knowledge on each occasion somewhat unique, since it cannot be achieved by just following repeatable rules or rational reasoning alone.  In other words, what this view of inseparability is saying is in fact an admission that in human understanding and practice, there is always a creative and poetic element inherent in it that cannot be replaced by formulated rules and reason.\(^\text{14}\)

On this, perhaps Chuang Tzu's famous story of how a good cook manages to realize the Way/Dao in his most skilful carving of an ox is best to illustrate the poetic element of human activity:

Cook Ting was cutting up an ox for Lord Wen-hui.  At every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee—zip! zoop!  He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.\(^\text{15}\)

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\(^\text{14}\) Rationalism in Politics and other essays, 1962, p. 72.
\(^\text{15}\) The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, p. 50.
The allusion to dance and music with perfect rhythm of Cook Ting’s skilled execution of the carving of the ox by Chuang Tzu is vividly narrated here. When the Lord was amazed by the cook's extraordinarily marvelous act, he asked Cook Ting of its secret. And Cook Ting replied:

“What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.”

Here, what Chuang Tzu is trying to describe is how the perceptual part of our knowledge becomes less and less dominant (“first...all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox”) while the know-how part becomes more and more important (“now I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants”) when the cook becomes more and more accomplished in performing this knack. In other words, if you want to have accomplished concrete human knowledge and allow “spirit moves where it wants”, you cannot just follow formal or explicit knowledge alone, you will have to rely on practical know-how that you can only acquire through actual skilful practice, which is unique on every occasion when it is being practiced.

However, this does not mean that practical knowledge can totally replace technical knowledge. As Cook Ting went on to say:

“However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I'm doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until—flog! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground.”

When complication arises, Chuang Tzu counsels that one has to resort to conscious assessment by keeping one's eyes open and watching out in order to tackle the difficulties, and with great subtle skills, the task will be accomplished as intended with great style:

“[After the whole ox comes apart.] I [Cook Ting] stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

From these stories, it seems clear that Chuang Tzu is in total agreement with Oakeshott that technical knowledge must be in partnership with practical knowledge in order to achieve concrete human understanding or to have accomplished human practice, although in the story of the wheelwright, it appears that Chuang Tzu has gone one step further to suggest that practical knowledge is far superior to technical knowledge. Without the former, the latter is no better than “chaff and dregs.”

\[19\] *Ibid*.
\[20\] Immediately before Chuang Tzu tells us about the story of the wheelwright, he says: “Meaning is what gives value to words, but meaning is dependent on something. What meaning depends on cannot be expressed in language, yet
What is also clear is that in practical knowledge, there is always a spontaneous and poetic element that not only is realizable in actual practice, but also the practice itself cannot rely on some pre-articulated rules or precepts alone for guidance; instead, the practice itself is a concrete whole in which “the spirit moves where it wants” and the practitioners “follow things as they are.” In other words, the form (method used or idea contemplated) and content (the substantive act itself) of the actual practice are inseparable. Since to Oakeshott “nowhere...can technical knowledge be separated from practical knowledge” and since there is an inherent poetic element in practical knowledge, Oakeshott believes there is a poetic character in all human understanding. As Oakeshott says, “[a] poem is not the translation into words of a state of mind. What the poet says and what he wants to say are not two things …they are the same thing; he does not know what he wants to say until he has said it.” The inseparability of the form and content of poetic activity is clearly captured here.

This is a highly skeptical view on rationality since, according to this view, inherent in all human understanding there is a creative and poetic element that cannot be spelt out by universal rules and reason, and there is something unique on each occasion of concrete understanding, and hence concrete human understanding ultimately is not totally determinable in advance, making the claim of certainty and universality of Rationalism highly suspect.

To Oakeshott, what is true of poetry is also true of moral activity: “Moral ideals are not in the first place, the products of reflective thought, the verbal expressions of unrealized ideas, which are then translated...into human behaviour; they are the products of human behaviour, of human practical activity, to which reflective thought gives subsequent, partial and abstract expression in words.” However, if like the Rationalist who takes reflective thought as sovereign and dismisses the more spontaneous side of moral behaviour as irrational or superstitious, nothing but confusion and moral disorientation ensue. On this, Oakeshott twice refers to the alleged encounter between Confucius and Lao Tzu (another great Daoist thinker) as recorded in *Chuang Tzu* on the undesirable consequence of making an abstract and reflective morality like that of benevolence and righteousness supreme as advocated by Confucius, and the following text from “The Turning of Heaven” Chapter of *Chuang Tzu* is what this encounter is about:

Confucius called on Lao Tan and spoke to him about benevolence and righteousness. Lao Tan said, “Chaff from the winnowing fan can so blind the eye that heaven, earth and the four directions all seem to shift place. A mosquito or a horse-fly stinging your skin can keep you awake a whole night. And when benevolence and righteousness in all their fearfulness come to muddle the mind, the confusion is unimaginable. If you want to keep the world from losing its simplicity, you must move with the freedom of the wind, stand in the perfection of

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22 It should be pointed out that Oakeshott further developed his idea of practical reason after his critique of Rationalism by incorporating Aristotle’s conception of rhetoric in political discourse, in which political arguments, by relying on materials that are probabilities, signs and examples, are designed to recommend what to do and what not to do in a contingent situation where there are possible alternative actions that are more or less persuasive but, strictly speaking, can not be refuted by demonstrative reasoning. See his “Political Discourse” in *Rationalism in politics and other essays*, 1991, pp. 70-95. I am grateful to Noel O’Sullivan for reminding me of this point. It appears that there is no parallel found in Chuang Tzu’s thought in this additional skeptical approach in Oakeshott’s idea of practical reason.
23 Ibid., pp. 72-73.
24 See *ibid.*, p. 36 and p. 73.
Virtue. Why all this huffing and puffing, as though you were carrying a big drum and searching for a lost child.\textsuperscript{25}

To make abstract reflective morality sovereign will not only bring confusion to humankind, it also invites endless moral contentions:

Hence, all under heaven were in a great panic, and the Confucians and the Mohists arose. It was because of their doing that there first came to be morality, but what can you say of the way things have ended up now?\textsuperscript{26}

The emergence of reflective morality also coincides with the emergence of moral contentions, just like when the Confucians have created the principle of filial piety, the Mohists starts attacking it with their principle of universal love as recorded in the above passage of \textit{Chuang Tzu}.\textsuperscript{27} Here, Oakeshott again shares Chuang Tzu’s observation: “There is...no ideal the pursuit of which will not lead to disillusion...Every admirable ideal has its opposite, no less admirable. Liberty or order, justice or charity, spontaneity or deliberateness, principle or circumstances, self or others, these are the kind of dilemma with which this [abstract, reflective] form of moral life is always confronting us, making us see double by directing our attention always to abstract extremes, none of which is wholly desirable.”\textsuperscript{28}

To Oakeshott as well as to Chuang Tzu, moral ideals, therefore, are a sediment; they must be suspended in a concrete moral form of life in order to make them morally meaningful and significant, drawing off the liquid in which our moral ideals are suspended will only impoverish our moral sensibility, as Chuang Tzu famously says:

When the springs dry up and the fish are left stranded on the ground, they spew each other with moisture and wet each other down with spit—but this would be much better if they could forget each other in the rivers and lakes.\textsuperscript{29}

\textbf{Language, Reasoning, and Modes of Experience}

Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu do not stop their skepticism at technical knowledge and abstract principles. In fact, both of them come to the same conclusion that all human understanding must necessarily be conditional. In order to better understand this, I propose to take a look at their views on language first.

In the most epistemologically oriented chapter of \textit{Chuang Tzu} “Discussion on Making All Things

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu}, pp. 162-163.
\textsuperscript{26} This passage can be found in the same section of \textit{Chuang Tzu} that records the encounter of Confucius and Lao Tzu as mentioned in note 24. However, here I do not rely on Watson’s translation since his translation is probably derived from a confused text of the original Chinese work. Instead, the translation here is from Victor H. Mair’s \textit{Wandering on the Way}, p. 141.
\textsuperscript{27} As A. C. Graham observes: “Confucius was a conservative who set out to restore the moral and cultural heritage of the Chou, himself unaware of the originality of his own reinterpretations of the tradition which he was refining and clarifying. Late in the fifth century BC his earliest rival Mo Ti (Mo-tzu) was the first to propose new foundations; he laid down the principle of universal love, and submitted traditional rules and institutions to the test of whether in practice they benefit men or harm them, or benefit everyone or some at the expense of the rest. The rivalry between Confucians and Mohists continued until the end of the age of the philosophers. For Chuang-tzu, it only confirmed that moralists arguing from different standpoints can never reach agreement”. See \textit{Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters}, trans. A. C. Graham, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Co. Inc., 2001, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Rationalism in Politics and other essays}, 1962, p. 69.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu}, p. 163.
Equal,” the conventional nature of human language is arrived at in a highly rhetorical manner:

Words are not just wind. Words have something to say. But if what they have to say is not fixed, then do they really say something? Or do they say nothing? People suppose that words are different from the peeps of baby birds, but is there any difference, or isn’t there? What does the Way rely upon, that we have true and false? What do words rely upon, that we have right and wrong? How can the Way go away and not exist? How can words exist and not be acceptable?

Here, Chuang Tzu tries to contrast human language with physical sounds like wind and animal sounds like the peeps of baby birds. If we want to use human sound to say something, we will have to fix our words somehow in order to give them meanings. What fixes our words and give them relationships like right and wrong? Chuang Tzu goes on to say,

What is acceptable we call acceptable; what is unacceptable we call unacceptable. A road is made by people walking on it; things are so because they are called so. What makes them so? Making them so makes them so. What makes them not so? Making them not so makes them not so.

Comparing these remarks with Oakeshott’s discussion of Hobbes’s idea of language and its relationship with reasoning, we find that there is a close affinity between their views. When analyzing Hobbes’s view on language, Oakeshott says,

Language, the giving of names to images [that derive from our sense experience], is not itself reasonable, it is the arbitrary precondition of all reasoning: the generation of rational knowledge is by words out of experience. The achievement of language is to ‘register our thoughts,’ to fix what is essentially fleeting.

In other words, things are so because we name them so. We fix words to things to make them so, just like a road is made by people walking on it. With the creation of this precondition, it is possible for man to communicate his thoughts to himself and to others, and to make definitions, to relate the names in a certain manner, to come up with propositions and rational arguments. However, as Oakeshott immediately reminds us: “though reasoning brings with it knowledge of the general and the possibility of truth and its opposite, absurdity, it can never pass beyond the world of names.” Reasoning, therefore, can only help us draw conclusions about the nature of names, not the nature of things. Oakeshott then quotes Hobbes to say, “by means of reason we discover only whether the connections we have established between names are in accordance with the arbitrary convention we have established concerning their meanings.” Oakeshott describes this as at once a nominalist and profoundly skeptical doctrine, since human understanding deriving from reasoning in theory can never tell us for certain what the objective world out there really is.

The inter-subjective nature of human reasoning has at least two related implications. First, we can fix the name to a thing in order to create a convention only if we start from some shared or

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30 Ibid., p. 39.
31 Ibid., p. 40.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
agreed assumptions. Otherwise, a thing that is called a horse by me might be called a non-horse by you and in that case, we could have no agreement but confusion. Just like a road can most readily be made if people walk on the same track time and again instead of each one walking on his or her own separate way. Second, since reasoning must start from somewhere and fix something that is fleeting, it must differentiate and discriminate and is therefore necessarily partial and conditional relative to the totality of experience. Apparently, reasoning is a somewhat paradoxical activity. On one hand, we will have to start with some agreement and shared assumptions before we can reason. But at the same time, we also will have to make discrimination and exclusion in order to distinguish a “this” from a “that” and to make claims and draw up conclusions. When things are still fleeting, there are no boundaries and hence no understanding. As Chuang Tzu perceptively says,

The Way has never known boundaries; speech has no constancy. But because of [the recognition of a] “this,” there came to be boundaries. Let me tell you what the boundaries are. There is left, there is right, there are theories, there are debates, there are divisions, there are discriminations, there are emulations, and there are contentions.35

Once there are boundaries, we must necessarily leave something out in order to make discriminations. Understanding is therefore necessarily partial and conditional:

To “divide”, then, is to leave something undivided: to “discriminate between alternatives” is to leave something which is neither alternative. “What?” you ask. The sage keeps it in his breast, common men argue over alternatives to show it to each other. Hence I say: “To ‘discriminate between alternatives’ is to fail to see something.”36

What, then, do we make of Oakeshott’s philosophical idealism as expounded in his Experience and Its Modes,37 in which philosophical understanding is regarded as “experience without presupposition, reservation, arrest or modification” and “Philosophical knowledge is knowledge which carries with it the evidence of its own completeness”?38

I am of course aware of the controversy among Oakeshott scholars over whether Oakeshott had fundamentally abandoned his earlier “absolute idealism”39 of unconditional philosophical understanding and adopted, in his later works such as “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind”40 and On Human Conduct,41 a more skeptical approach to philosophy by recognizing that philosophical understanding is, in fact, an endless undertaking to examine and disclose the conditions of existing or enjoyed conditional understanding. The latter view not only implies an infinite journey of conditional understanding, but also admits that the only unconditionality in philosophy is the continuous recognition of the conditionality of the conditions in human understanding.42

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35 The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, pp. 43-44.
36 I follow A. C. Graham’s translation here instead of Watson’s, since I regard Graham’s interpretation as more cogent in this section. See Graham Chuang-tzu: the Inner Chapters, p. 57.
38 Ibid., p. 2.
39 This term is used by Steven Anthony Gerencser in his The Skeptic’s Oakeshott, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000 to represent Oakeshott’s conception of philosophical understanding as the supreme unconditional understanding of total experience.
40 “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind” can be found in Rationalism in Politics and other essays, 1962, pp. 197-247.
42 Ibid., p. 11. Gerencser, as shown in The Skeptic’s Oakeshott, is perhaps the most forthright in arguing for this
For the purpose of this paper, I am not going to examine in detail the arguments for or against such a claim of fundamental change in Oakeshott’s philosophical position. Very briefly, my position is that on the whole, Oakeshott is sufficiently ambiguous in *Experience and Its Modes* to allow both camps to cherry pick evidence to support their arguments. The ambiguities notwithstanding, when it comes to philosophy understood as unconditional understanding, *Experience and Its Modes* is not confident that such an undertaking is humanly possible for actual realization, since philosophical understanding as unconditional understanding is not only “difficult,” “dubious,” “decadent,” and “depraved,” it, in fact, “is not the enhancement of life, it is the denial of life,” “a man cannot be a philosopher and nothing else; to be so were either more or less than human.” What is sought in philosophy instead is “a criterion…which is critical throughout, unhindered and undistracted by what is subsidiary, partial or abstract.” Perhaps that is why, according to Chuang Tzu, common men will argue over alternatives with each other and only sages can embrace the totality of experience “in his breast.”

In recognizing the conditionality of the conditions in human understanding, Oakeshott has also identified a number of distinct modes of experience, each of which starts with a set of different shared assumptions and conditions that are not reducible to other modes of experience. In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott identifies historical understanding, practical understanding, and scientific understanding as three distinct modes. Poetic understanding is another one identified in “The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind.” In theory, according to Oakeshott, there is no limit to the number of these possible modes of conditional understanding, all that is required is that each autonomous mode must be able to discriminate experience from a distinct point of view that is not reducible to another mode of conditional understanding. The world of practical understanding, for example, postulates human beings’ never ending needs and desires. It presupposes that facts are alterable and accepts what works as true. The world of scientific understanding, in contrast, is concerned with what is constant and capable of being quantified. It aims to understand experience in terms of mathematically expressible laws and statistical generalizations and develops its truth criteria in terms of these generalizations. Any confusion in mixing these modes of understanding commits the error of *ignoratio elenchi* or the character of irrelevance. As Oakeshott says, “the word ‘water’ stands for a practical image; but a

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There is nothing in the world bigger than the tip of an autumn hair, and Mount Tai is tiny. No one has lived longer than a dead child, and P’eng-tsu died young. Heaven and earth were born at the same time I was, and the ten thousand things are one with me.

We have already become one, so how can I say anything? But I have just said that we are one, so how can I not be saying something? The one and what I said about it make two, and two and the original one make three. If we go on this way, then even the cleverest mathematician can’t tell where we’ll end, much less an ordinary man.

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43 *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 356.
47 The following passage from “Discussion on Making All things Equal” (see p. 43 of *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*) captures Chuang Tzu’s profound understanding of the paradoxical nature of human understanding, under which even if reasoning leads us to draw the conclusion of the ultimate oneness of experience perceived as a whole, by virtue of its nature of making divisions and discriminations, reasoning immediately breaks up such a totality:

48 *Experience and Its Modes*, p. 75.
scientist does not first perceive ‘water’ and then resolve it into $H_2O$: *scientia* begins only when ‘water’ has been left behind. To speak of $H_2O$ as ‘the chemical formula for water’ is to speak in a confused manner: $H_2O$ is a symbol the rules of whose behaviour are wholly different from those which govern the symbol ‘water’.

Chuang Tzu does not have such an elaborated theory of distinct modes of conditional understanding, which allows Oakeshott to develop two skeptical claims in human knowledge. First, since all modes of conditional understanding start with some shared but assumed conditions or postulates in the first place, it is always possible to critically examine the character and nature of these conditions in the unending quest for philosophical understanding. In other words, it is doubtful if any human understanding can claim itself to be final or definitive. Second, the fact that established modes of understanding should each be autonomous and irreducible to other modes implies that no single mode of conditional understanding is sovereign; using the criteria of one mode to judge or override another mode of understanding commits the error of *ignoratio elenchi*.

A careful reader of *Chuang Tzu*, however, will not find it difficult to identify parallel insights consistent with Oakeshott’s modal theory of human understanding embedded throughout this classical work. In his discussion of the modal character of poetry and how the activity of being an artist is different from the activity of being a teacher or an entertainer or other endeavours in the practical (instead of the poetic) world, Oakeshott refers to Chuang Tzu once more, this time to Chuang Tzu's anecdote of an outstanding artist to support his claim that the activity of being an artist can only be emerged and perfected if he or she can go beyond practical or other instrumental considerations.

Woodworker Ch’ing carved a piece of wood and made a bell stand, and when it was finished, everyone who saw it marveled, for it seemed to be the work of gods or spirits. When the marquis of Lu saw it, he asked, “What art is it that you have?”

Ch’ing replied, “I am only a craftsman—how would I have any art? There is one thing, however. When I am going to make a bell stand, I never let it wear out my energy. I always fast in order to still my mind. When I have fasted for three days, I no longer have any thought of congratulations or rewards, of titles or stipends. When I have fasted for five days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have fasted for seven days, I no longer have any thought of praise or blame, of skill or clumsiness. And when I have fasted for seven days, I am so still that I forget I have four limbs and a form and body. By that time, the ruler and his court no longer exist for me. My skill is concentrated and all outside distractions fade away. Only then do I enter the mountain forest and observe the heavenly nature of the trees till I find one of ultimate form. Only after the completed bell stand manifests itself to me do I set my hand to work. Otherwise, I give up. This way I am simply matching up ‘Heaven’ with ‘Heaven.’ That’s probably the reason that people wonder if the results were not made by spirits.

51 The bulk of this translated passage comes from *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 205-206, except that the last fifth to third sentences (i.e. “Only then do I enter the mountain forest and observe the heavenly nature of the trees till I find one of ultimate form. Only after the completed bell stand manifests itself to me do I set my hand to work. Otherwise, I give up.”) at the end of the passage come from *Wandering on the Way*, p. 183, which to me better convey Chuang Tzu idea on poetic imagining.
In commenting on this anecdote, Oakeshott remarks that Ch’ing’s “description of the activity of being an artist is almost entirely in terms of what he had to forget.” As we can see from the above quoted passage, before he could concentrate on his artistic activity, Ch’ing had to forget about worldly achievements (“congratulations or rewards”, “titles or stipends”, “praise or blame”) and conscious knowledge of craftsmanship (“skill or clumsiness”). He also had to forget about the physical world (“four limbs” and “form and body”) and about the original (largely practical or ritual) purposes of making the bell stand for the lord and his court (“the ruler and his court no longer exist for me”). He only started work once his total concentration helped him unify his artistic expression (“the completed bell stand manifests itself to me”) with the materials (“ultimate form” derived from “the heavenly nature of the trees”) that he had to work on before he could create such a marvelous work of art.

It is clear from this anecdote that to Chuang Tzu, artistic activity is independent of practical or physical concerns. Artistic activity is not the working out of some preconceived ideas or experience or forms into a work of art, rather, it is “matching up ‘Heaven’ (“the completed bell stand manifests itself to me”) with ‘Heaven’ (“the heavenly nature of the trees”) since “a poetic utterance (a work of art) is not the ‘expression’ of an experience, it is the experience and the only one there is. A poet does not do three things; first experience or observe or recollect an emotion, then contemplate it, and finally seek a means of expressing the results of his contemplation; he does one thing only, he imagines poetically.”

If my analysis and comparison above are plausible, it is not difficult to understand why Oakeshott is so fond of referring to Chuang Tzu, even though it is not typical of Oakeshott’s writing style to meticulously reveal sources that have influenced his ideas in footnotes. On the surface, the anecdotal style of Chuang Tzu’s works is very different from the philosophical and analytical style of Oakeshott’s essays. However, the fundamental insights they share in philosophical skepticism and their appreciation of the poetic element in human conduct are so many and so deep that it seems as if the two are having conversations with each other on a number of topics of common concern, in spite of the fact that Oakeshott was a British philosopher of the 20th century whereas Chuang Tzu lived in the northern part of China in around third century BC. One of the best English translators of Chuang Tzu once said: “Chuang Tzu uses logic only to attack logicians; to convey his positive vision he uses poetic metaphor.” The story of the old...
wheelwright P’ien, the marvelous Cook Ting, the encounter between Confucius and Lao Tzu, the metaphor of fish in dry springs, and the anecdote of woodworker Ch’ing all testify to Chuang Tzu’s ability to use lyrical and rhapsodic language to convey philosophical points. When we juxtapose Chuang Tzu’s extraordinary anecdotes with Oakeshott’s lucid and elegant analysis as I have done above to illustrate their philosophical arguments, there appears to be a kind of mutual chemistry that helps illuminate their works in a more profound way, thus enabling the readers to have a more thorough and vivid understanding of the criticisms made or the visions depicted. To me, this chemistry is that the clarity of Oakeshott’s analysis helps us arrive at a more structured and firm understanding of Chuang Tzu’s anecdotes, and Chuang Tzu’s lively anecdotes, in return, provide us with concrete and poetic illustrations that add flesh to Oakeshott’s philosophical analysis. What better examples can we find to illustrate that philosophy and poetry can converge, allowing poetic imagination to take flight while one is philosophizing?

Oakeshott, Chuang Tzu, and the Non-Instrumental Understanding of Politics

One reason to explain the relative neglect among scholars of the affinity between Oakeshott’s philosophy and Chuang Tzu’s thought might be this. Since Oakeshott is most famously known as a conservative political philosopher of the west, whereas Chuang Tzu is widely regarded as the most other-worldly transcendental thinker in classical Chinese thought whose focus is very far away from the mundane world of politics, people just assume that there is very little in common between them. I hope this paper so far has managed to demonstrate that such an oversight is misplaced and not justified. But it will be equally mistaken to go over the top to claim that Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu share the same insights in most if not all important aspects of their respective philosophy, or that one can start with an insight shared by both and then jump to the conclusion that they have the same philosophical theory to help explain that insight. A very good case in hand to show the fallacy of this is that even though both Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu believe that artistic activity is by nature fundamentally different from practical activity, unlike Oakeshott, Chuang Tzu comes to grasp this insight by more direct intuitive means that has nothing to do with Oakeshott’s highly elaborated modal theory of experience.

Likewise, even though we find in both Oakeshott’s and in Chuang Tzu’s works some very derogatory remarks on political activity, Oakeshott goes on to develop his masterly theory of

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58 Burton Watson once talked about the story of a famous Chinese poet-official of the 9th century Bai Juyi who found consolation in Chuang Tzu’s works after he was sentenced to exile because of his outspoken criticism of government policy. Bai’s feeling was expressed in his following poem:

Leaving homeland, parted from kin, banished to a strange place,
I wonder my heart feels so little anguish and pain.
Consulting Zhuangzi, I find where I belong:
Surely my home is there in Not-Even-Anything land.

Watson commented that Bai’s “reading of Zhuangzi has enabled him to view himself and his age from a loftier plane, one that transcends conventional concepts of time and place, duty and social position”, so that Bai was freed from his narrow identity of a here and now poet-official and was able to transform himself to a dweller in all time and place. See Watson Zhuangzi: Basic Writings, New York: Columbia University Press, 2003, pp. vii-viii.

59 In “The Claims of Politics,” Oakeshott says, “A society requires not only that its civilization should be guarded, but that it should be recreated. And the genius of the poet and the artist and to a lesser extent of the philosopher is to create and to recreate the values of their society…The last corruption that can visit a society is a corruption of its consciousness, and from this the politically active cannot protect it. If a society is to be saved from a corrupt consciousness it will be saved not by having its values and its civilization protected, but by knowing itself and having its values recreated. Indeed, political activity involves a corruption of consciousness from which a society has continuously to be saved.” See Oakeshott Religion, Politics and the Moral Life, Timothy Fuller ed., New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 95. Likewise, in The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu (pp. 93-94), we find the following:
civil association, which is a most important political philosophy of the 20th century in the Anglo-Saxon world, whereas the editor of Chuang Tzu “had to scrape the bottom of the barrel” in Chuang Tzu’s literary remains to come up with a chapter in the inner chapters of Chuang Tzu to talk about ideal kingship.

Compared with other Chinese classical thinkers, it is commonly agreed that Chuang Tzu’s contributions to political philosophy are relatively thin. Roger T. Ames is certainly right to say that “As a text the Chuang Tzu is for the most part addressed to the project of individual enlightenment rather than the social and political consequences [of having achieved] the higher state of mind [once unnatural obsessions and commitments have been set aside].” However, judging from what we have found in the inner chapters of Chuang Tzu, I think it is possible to say that there is enough material to outline a vision of politics that is consciously aware of its limited scope and non-instrumental nature, and that the most important thing for politics is not the realization of some moral goodness; instead, peace and order are far more fundamental than any practical (not to say perfectionist) pursuits in the art of government. In this respect, while we are not sure if given the opportunity, how Chuang Tzu would have developed these insights into a more systematic political philosophy, I think Oakeshott’s understanding of civil association can certainly provide us with a good reference point to contemplate the possibility of further substantiating these insights into a Chinese political theory that is different from the two mainstreams of traditional Chinese political thought that have dominated Chinese political philosophy for centuries: Confucian’s political moralism and the Legalist’s doctrine of total control in politics.

I said earlier that Oakeshott ended his introduction to Leviathan by quoting Chuang Tzu’s dried springs fish metaphor to indicate that the condition of peaceful co-existence and survival achieved by civil association should not be despised since this is the only condition that can be permanently established to allow mankind to pursue their separate Felicity with least frustration. Immediately after this metaphor, Chuang Tzu goes on to say: “Rather than praising Yao and condemning Chieh, it would be better for people to forget both of them and assimilate [transform] their ways.”

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61 See Graham’s Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters, p. 94. The seven inner chapters in Chuang Tzu are commonly regarded as written by Chuang Tzu himself, whereas other chapters might be written by his disciples or thinkers of later ages who identified their thoughts with Chuang Tzu. For an excellent discussion on this see Graham’s “How Much of Chuang Tzu did Chuang Tzu Write?” in A Companion to Angus C. Graham’s Chuang Tzu, pp. 58-103.
63 For a very good discussion of the Confucian’s and the Legalist’s conception of politics in the context of Wuwei (non-action) in the pre-Chin (pre-211 B.C.) period, see Ames’s The Art of Rulership: A Study of Ancient Chinese Political Thought, pp. 28-33 and pp. 47-53. Chuang Tzu’s political thought in some respect is similar to another great Daoist thinker Laozi. However, I suspect that there are more important differences than similarities between the two if we carefully compare Laozi’s classic Daodejing with Chuang Tzu, but such a comparison will touch upon so many complex issues that it warrants another full paper for a thorough discussion. For a good discussion on this, see Qianmu’s Chinese work “Daoist Political Thought” (Daojia Zhengzhi Sixiang) in Qianmu ChuangLao Tongbian (A General Analysis on Chuang Tzu and Laozi), Taipei: Dongda Tushu, 1991, pp. 113-142.
64 Wandering On the Way, p. 53.
Yao was one of the legendary Sage-Emperors of pre-historic China who is still regarded as one of the greatest saints by Confucianism. Chieh, on the other hand, was the last Emperor of the Xia Dynasty (21 to 16 centuries B.C.) in Chinese history who Confucian thinkers characterized as one of the greatest tyrants in history. The interesting point here is that when it comes to political order, what is of utmost important to Chuang Tzu is not moral perfection or moral condemnation. What instead is of utmost important then? In the “Fit for Emperors and Kings” Chapter of Chuang Tzu, Chuang Tzu denounces a ruler who imposes his personally preferred standards and regulations to transform his people, since this is not sustainable. Instead, he thinks that when a sage governs, what is essential is that “He makes absolutely certain that things can do what they are supposed to do, that is all.”65 In other words, what is most important in politics is not morality, but ensuring that what each is supposed to do can be done. To govern, then, certainly is not to pursue moral perfection, but to govern in an orderly manner and to make sure that such conditions are maintained. This very much reminds me of Oakeshott’s first discussion of Hobbes in his “Thomas Hobbes” published in 1935-1936, in which he said, “[since] there is never anything but a common error, that truth itself is a common error, and that since what is important is that it should be genuinely common, it must be fixed by authority.”66 In the end, this authority is constituted by the rule of law, which is general, non-instrumentally relative to any substantive purpose in the sense that the laws are there “not to bind the people from all voluntary actions; but to direct and keep them in such a motion, as not to hurt themselves by their own impetuous desires, rashness or indiscretion; as hedges are set, not to stop travelers, but to keep them in their way.”67

In such a context, perhaps it is easier to understand that contrary to Confucius who passes moral judgments on the “achievements” or “failings” of former kings by re-evaluating the historical record of the book Spring and Autumn, Chuang Tzu thinks it appropriate that a sage “debates but does not discriminates”68 the works of the former kings as recorded in Spring and Autumn, for while it is important to understand how the former kings governed their kingdoms, the point is not to judge them from a moralistic point of view.

While we cannot find any discussion in the inner chapters of Chuang Tzu on the concept of political authority, the fact that Chuang Tzu regards peaceful and orderly survival as far more fundamental to moral perfection in politics not only aligns him, at least in aspiration if not in detail, with Oakeshott and Hobbes, it also distinguishes him from Confucianism whose ideal kingship must necessarily be a morally exemplary sage-king. There is a nice legend at the end of the “Fit for Emperors and Kings” of Chuang Tzu that tells us how the pursuit of artificial goodness may undermine natural spontaneity and ends up in disaster:

The emperor of the South Sea was called Shu (Brief), the emperor of the North Sea was called Hu (Sudden), and the emperor of the central region was called Hun-tun (Chaos). Shu and Hu from time to time came together for a meeting in the territory of Hun-tun, and Hun-tun treated them very generously. Shu and Hu discussed how they could repay his kindness. “All men,” they said, “have seven openings so they can see, hear, eat, and breathe. But Hun-tun alone doesn’t have any. Let’s trying boring him some!”

Every day they bored another hole, and on the seventh day, Hun-tun died.69

65 The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, p. 93.
68 The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu, p. 44.
69 Ibid., p. 97.
Why is peaceful and orderly survival so important in politics? Because only this instead of active or instrumental government can allow the people freely to find their own delight. Referring to *Chuang Tzu* again, the story of the visit of Yang Tzu-chu to Lao Tzu illustrates this well:

Yang Tzu-chu visited Old Tan.

“Suppose we have a man”, he said, “who is alert, energetic, well informed, clear-headed and untiring in learning the Way: may someone like that be ranked with the enlightened Kings?”

“To the sage this is a slave’s drudgery, an artisan’s bondage, wearing out the body, fretting the heart. Besides, it’s the elegant markings of tiger and leopard which attract the hunter, and it’s the spryest of monkeys and the dog which catches the rat that get themselves on the leash. Can someone like that be ranked with the enlightened kings?”

Yang Tzu-chu was taken aback.

“May I ask how an enlightened king rules?”

“When the enlightened king rules
His deeds spread over the whole world
But seem not from himself:
His riches are loaned to the myriad things
But the people do not depend on him.
He is there, but no one mentions his name.
He lets [myriad of] things find their own delight.

He is one who keeps his foothold in the immeasurable and roams where nothing is.”

To Chuang Tzu, ideal kingship does not require an active and able prince who wants to achieve a lot of things through government. It does not require a prince with exemplary moral standing, or a government that is able to exert total control over the community. All these will either bring slavery or danger to the people and the political community. What is required is that the prince is able to create conditions whereby the people can find their own delight without depending on him, so that when people have achieved what they want, they do not even bother to mention the name of the prince. While it is not clear from *Chuang Tzu* how such a political vision may become possible in reality or how insights of such kind can be theorized to form a more or less coherent political and institutional framework to help us better understand what is implied in such political imagination, what Chuang Tzu favours certainly is something akin to Oakeshott’s idea of civil association, where the framework provided by the non-instrumental civil laws allows individual citizens to fully develop their potential and individuality with minimum conflict while the government, unlike the enterprise association that has a common substantive purpose to achieve by all members, has no common task for all except for the maintenance of the non-instrumental civil laws to create the political bond for all.

Although Chuang Tzu’s insights in politics are not systematically theorized, it is clear that they provide a rather unique vision in the Chinese context to nurture the development of individuality in a peaceful and orderly community whose major task is for the spiritual or otherwise enjoyment

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70 *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, p. 96
of each individual instead of the achievement of any practical, moral or collective undertaking, not to say to exert total control via regulations for the benefit of the ruling class. How to develop these insights into a full-fledge political philosophy will be an undertaking too big and too daunting for this paper to undergo here. But Oakeshott’s success in providing the western world a theory of civil association may well mean that with patience and enough imagination, thinkers in the Chinese context may one day be able to make use of Chuang Tzu’s insights to spell out a fully developed political philosophy that is consistent with the core visions of Chuang Tzu’s philosophy that allows maximum space for individuality to flourish both in the transcendent as well as in the political world.

**Conclusion**

A comparison of Oakeshott’s philosophy and Chuang Tzu’s thought appears to have achieved a number of things. First, if a thinker’s thought is sufficiently profound and original, time, space and even cultural differences are no barriers for him or her to engage in interesting and significant dialogue (albeit in a figurative sense) with another original thinker so that each can shed light on the other’s ideas to enrich our understanding.

Second, in the particular case of these two original thinkers, it is found that their respective philosophical imagination, when put together, produce a kind of magic such that one’s lyrical and anecdotal style helps provoke the other’s elegant analytical style to take flight and *vice versa*, making a comparative reading of their ideas most colourful and more profound.

Furthermore, the shared insights embedded in their respective philosophical imagination and logic do not need to share the same philosophical outlook or have the same philosophical foundation in order to make such a comparative study interesting. Indeed, it is argued in this paper that although there is no such thing as a theory of civil association found in Chuang Tzu’s insights about politics, the possibility and plausibility of such a theory helps one to imagine that behind Chuang Tzu’s fascinating insights, it is not impossible to theorize a coherent and more structured political philosophy that is consistent with Chuang Tzu’s vision on individual enlightenment and transcendence.

Apart from philosophical skepticism, poetic imagination, and the non-instrumental understanding of politics, a comparative study of Oakeshott and Chuang Tzu in my view can also touch upon their views on friendship, play, salvation and so on. One paper really cannot do justice to the breadth and depth of the overlapping philosophical and literary interests shared by these two thinkers. Nevertheless, I hope this paper at least proves that the neglect by the academic community of this aspect of Oakeshott’s scholarship should be rectified as soon as possible and it is to be hoped that more comparative studies of this kind will emerge to further enrich our cross-cultural conversation and imagination.\(^{72}\)

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