

Using the Useless : Chuang Tzu's Influence on Basho

無用の用—芭蕉における莊子の影響

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Introduction

When tracing the influence of one artist on another, one must guard against the dual dangers of imagination and exaggeration. By craft and guile, whether purposeful or unwitting, it is possible to drum up links between any two philosophers, poets, or even religious figures, no matter how disparate their visions. It is somewhat like Chuang Tzu's dreaded rhetoricians who cunningly "prove" that black is white and hard is soft. This is especially true with the task at hand: describing the influence of Chuang Tzu (396-286 B.C?), the seminal Chinese philosopher/poet, second only to Lao Tzu in the Taoist Pantheon, on Matsuo Basho, Japan's consummate haiku poet (1644-1694).

It is indeed true that there are glaring differences between Basho and Chuang Tzu. The text of Chuang Tzu is riddled with brazen, bombastic, shocking, argumentative, enigmatic, intentionally confusing, and paradoxical assertions and parables; Basho's haiku tend toward the subtle, selfless, serene. Even the respective genres of these two artists represent a polarity as extreme as heaven and earth, yin and yang. The Chuang Tzu text is rambling, disjointed, and repetitive with most scholars agreeing that only the first seven chapters of the 33, the so-called "inner chapters," were written by someone called Chuang Chou.¹ Basho's haiku are, of course, 17-syllable gems of terseness. Even Basho's travel journals, especially "Oku No Hosono Michi," are tightly controlled and succinct.

Basho may perhaps be compared to Shakespeare in that the readers of the Shakespearean plays and of Basho's haiku are unable to discover a distinct personality or presence of the artist in the work. A key element in Basho's haiku and artistic vision was *muga*, usually translated as selflessness. This quality has been described as "so close an identification with things one writes

of that self is forgotten.”² This quality, what John Keats praised as Shakespeare’s “negative capability,” is the result of the Joycean artist remaining aloof, paring his fingernails behind the scenes. It is akin to T.S. Eliot’s “objective correlative,” by which the subjectivity of the poet is seemingly annihilated — and the poetry resounds with a deeper resonance.

Antithetically, Chuang Tzu screeches, screams and squeals, “Me, me, me!” He frequently launches into diatribes aimed at teaching how to order the universe, rule the empire, wander and cavort in absolute freedom, live one’s life and face one’s death. His is a strong, tenacious spirit perpetually permeating the text.

So in light of these polarities in their respective natures and art, it might seem necessary to summon the ancient secrets of Taoist alchemy to depict Chuang Tzu and Basho as kindred spirits. But “influence” comes in various forms, some tangible, others less so, and this paper will attempt to trace various types of influence of Chuang Tzu on Basho. One type involves Basho’s use of direct allusions from Chuang Tzu such as Basho’s reference to the classic “butterfly dream” sequence. A second kind of influence revolves around the inclusion in the fabric of Basho’s work of subtle echoes and reflections, sometimes even refractions, of Chuang Tzu’s words, thought and methods. Material from Chuang Tzu is often subtly reworked to express Basho’s own temperament and unique vision with a residue of Chinese flavor. Finally, and perhaps most crucial, is the congruence in their respective belief systems of the presence of the ineffable, primeval source and shaping force of all under heaven; what Chuang Tzu calls the “Tao,” and Basho, “Nature.”

Poets and scholars in Basho’s era were well-versed in the poetry and philosophy of China — the work of the Tang poets Tu Fu, Li Bai, and Bai Ch’u-yi were copiously quoted — and Basho was known to be exceptionally enthusiastic in this vein, spending five of his formative years in Kyoto studying the Chinese classics.³ The extent of Basho’s enthusiasm for things Chinese is recounted by Asataro Miyamori:

[Basho] took lessons in Chinese classics from Ito Tan-an, a famous authority on the subject. During these years Munefusa [as Basho was then known], out of his passionate admiration of the Chinese poet Li Pai, which name signifies “The White Damson,” assumed the pen name of Tosei which means “The Green Peach.”⁴

R. H. Blyth goes as far as to insist, “...few men have been so cultured as Basho was, with his understanding of Confucianism, Taoism, Chinese Poetry, Waka, Buddhism, Zen, Painting, the Art of Tea.”⁵

The most direct and well-known allusion to Chuang Tzu in Basho’s haiku draws on one of the

most famous passages in Taoist literature:

Once Chuang Chou dreamt he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering around, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know he was Chuang Chou. Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Chuang Chou. But he didn't know if he was Chuang Chou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Chou....⁶

The following haiku which explicitly alludes to this passage in Chuang Tzu is a rare example of one of Basho's haiku which does not stand on its own poetic merit; if the reader is not familiar with the passage in Chuang Tzu cited above the haiku makes little sense:

kimi ya cho ware ya Soshi no yume gokoro

you, the butterfly,
I, Soshi's dream-heart

(All translations of Basho's haiku are my own).

"Soshi" is, of course, the Japanese reading of Chuang Tzu. This haiku would be one of many written by Basho dealing with butterflies and dreams, two poetic themes which fascinated Chuang Tzu as well and appear repeatedly throughout the Taoist text. There is a merging of the two images and the butterfly would become for Basho a recurring symbol for the transience and dream-like essence of man's existence. In fact, according to Kikaku, often described as Basho's favorite among his ten "philosopher" disciples, Basho was so moved by the butterfly passage in Chuang Tzu that he temporarily took the name "Kukusai," which is the Japanese rendering of the Chinese phrase for the joyous flitting and fluttering of the butterfly.⁷

For Chuang Tzu also, the dream represents a charged, recurring symbol and a vital cog in his Taoist Dharma. In addition to the previously cited butterfly dream passage, the Chuang Tzu text abounds in references to dreams to explain Chuang Tzu's perception of the human condition and the intricacies of his phantasmal cosmography. The following diatribe, for example, excoriates the dream-like delusional life of the man who doesn't follow his inborn nature and blindly lives by the unnatural values and assumptions of his society without challenging them:

He who dreams of drinking wine may weep when morning comes; he who dreams of weeping may in the morning go off to hunt. While he is dreaming he does not know it is a dream, and in his dream he may even try to interpret a dream. Only after he wakes does he know it

was a dream. And someday there will be a great awakening when we know that this is all a great dream. Yet the stupid believe they are awake, busily and brightly assuming they understand things, calling this man ruler, that one herdsman — how dense!...⁸

One more key dream reference in Chuang Tzu is worthy of note as it serves to make clear his view of the hallucinatory underpinnings of the Taoist concept of self:

...we go around telling each other, I do this, I do that — but how do we know that this “I” we talk about has any “I” to it? You dream you’re a bird and soar up into the sky; you dream you’re a fish and dive down in the pool. But now when you tell me about it, I don’t know whether you are awake or whether you are dreaming...⁹

While the haiku cited above concerning Chuang Tzu’s butterfly dream does share an overlapping philosophical vision of the Taoist belief in the delusion of self, most of Basho’s allusions from Chuang Tzu are intended to express his own poetic purposes and do not parrot Chuang Tzu’s meaning. Basho urged his disciples, “Do not follow in the footsteps of the ancients; seek what they sought.”¹⁰ Basho would seek his own version of truth, through his life and haiku, but would enrich his expression of it with the resonance and echo of the “Ancients,” especially Chuang Tzu. Donald Keene asserts that “Basho’s uses of Chinese materials were varied, but most often he sought to enrich his own experiences by associating them with the Chinese poets; far from making his own experiences any less true, the references gave them an added dimension.”¹¹

An analysis of a selection of haiku by Basho in which he used butterfly/dream imagery, drawing directly or indirectly from Chuang Tzu, will perhaps show how he clearly had his own poetic and spiritual agenda. He would, however, make excellent use of subtle allusions to infuse his writing with the reverberations and authority of Chuang Tzu. Basho believed that the notion of *rensou* — the association of ideas — was an important element in crafting effective haiku.¹² The more suggestion permeating a haiku, the more profoundly it would resound in the reader’s consciousness like the ripples created when a frog leaps into a still pond. Even if Basho greatly altered the meaning of an image he was to use in a haiku from the image’s original textual moorings in Chuang Tzu, the change itself would strike the reader that much more strongly in comparison with Chuang Tzu’s original usage.

The following are a sampling of Basho’s “butterfly haiku”:

1. chou tori no shiranu hana ari aki no sora

flower
unknown to bird or butterfly;
autumn sky

We observe here Basho's twist on Chuang Tzu not knowing if he were a butterfly dreaming he was Chuang Tzu or vice versa. In this haiku, the butterfly along with the bird encounter an unknown flower under the vast autumn sky. The butterfly once again is Basho's shorthand for the quality of dream-like, "unknowable" wonderment inherent in the natural world. In addition, while the butterfly is not familiar with the particular flower, its intuitive behavior is in no way altered by being unable to label it. Chuang Tzu often launches into tirades about how man is obsessed with naming and classifying "the ten thousand things under heaven" in order to maintain the illusion of his intelligence and superiority. The butterfly is not perturbed by its "ignorance."

2. oki yo oki yo waga tomo ni semu neru kochou

wake up, wake up
and keep me company;
sleeping butterfly

The reference in this haiku to Chuang Tzu's butterfly is unmistakable. However, we feel here Basho's humanity and joyous appreciation of the smallest creatures in the chain of being. Although this haiku draws on Chuang Tzu's butterfly, the inborn nature of Basho is manifest.

3. uguisu wo tama ni nemuru ka taoyanagi

has the bush warbler
assumed the graceful soul
of the sleeping willow?

The interpenetration of souls is no longer that of Chuang Tzu and the butterfly, but through Basho's haiku alchemy has become that of a bush warbler and a graceful willow tree. This haiku has engendered prolific commentary of which a sampling might serve to concretize the palpable link to Chuang Tzu. The following comments by respected haiku critics point out the looming presence of Chuang Tzu combined with Basho's own vision and sensibility:

Almost any poet, on seeing a willow tree hanging its branches as if in sleep, might compose a poem alluding to the butterfly in Chuang-tzu's dream. But Basho changed the allusion and referred to a warbler. In other words, he made use of the allusion but was not used by it. He deserves to be called the Chuang-tzu of haikai.

Ryota Oshima¹³

The graceful shape of a willow tree, looking as if it were asleep, led the poet's mind to the legend of Chuang-tzu and his dream, but the poet, in composing the hokku, replaced the butterfly with a warbler, a bird that has something in common with a willow in color and gracefulness.

Shuson Kato¹⁴

These comments on the above haiku suggest how tangible the bonds are between Basho and Chuang Tzu — and how sensitive many Japanese readers are to these literary links.

4. kochou ni mo narade aki furu namushi kana

not yet a butterfly
so late in autumn,
this caterpillar

Basho may here be lamenting that so late in his life he is not soaring on the wings of poetry, but grounded like a caterpillar destined to be mired in the mundane. This seems to be a rare example of Basho discriminating between the worth of one form of life over another. One perceptive critic, however, sees a bittersweet edge to this haiku:

It may seem that the poet is reflecting on his life and deploring the fact that he put on years in vain. Implicit in his reflection, however, is the nobility of mind that has brought him peace in his nonutilitarian pursuit. The poem faintly echoes the story of Chuang-tzu's Butterfly.

Chijitsuan Tosai¹⁵

5. fuku tabi ni chou no inaoru yanagi kana

winds blow
the butterfly—
it shifts on the willow

In this simple yet subtle haiku, the butterfly, and by extension all sentient beings, are at the mercy of the shifting winds of fate. As if in a dream, the butterfly adapts to the twists and turns of fortune.

6. morokoshi no haikai to han tobu kochou

asking
about the haikai of China,
to this fluttering butterfly

Basho states that this haiku is “Written on a picture of Soshi”¹⁶ whose butterfly has become a bridge to ancient China and the state of its poetry. Once more, Basho is clearly influenced by Chuang Tzu’s butterfly dream.

It is interesting to note that many of Basho’s most effective haiku employ dreams as their subject material. Of course, it cannot be proven that this is Chuang Tzu’s direct influence, however it is clear that the Taoist writer and the haiku master shared a fascination with the significance and symbolism of dreams. The following are three of Basho’s haiku that use dream imagery to convey the transience of life. The third is Basho’s final haiku uttered to approximately 60 disciples surrounding his death bed¹⁷ in Osaka in 1694¹⁸.

natsu kusa ya tsuwamonodomo ga yume no ato

summer grass
remains
of warriors’ dreams

tako tsubo ya hakanai yume wo natsu no tsuki

octopus trapped,
fast-fading dreams
under a summer moon

tabi ni yande yume wa kareno wo kakemeguru

sick on the road;
dreams roam
over desolate lands

The legacy of Chuang Tzu’s influence on Basho can even be detected in various haiku of Basho’s disciples. One of the most famous haiku by the previously mentioned favorite Basho disciple, Kikaku, is redolent of Chuang Tzu’s dream/reality disorientation.

kirareteru yume wa makoto ka nomi no ato

being stabbed in dream
was for real;
flea bite

Bordering on senryu, this playful haiku may be a parody of his haiku master's overly serious ruminations on the nature of reality.

Direct allusions and subtle echoes of Chuang Tzu are found not only in the haiku but throughout the other work of Basho as well: in the prose of the travel diaries, in his teachings to his disciples, and in the philosophical inclinations of his artistic notions. R. H. Blyth insists that Basho "wishes to have Soshi's peculiar flavor of spiritual thought, the Chinese 'local colour'. He brings him in almost as a habit."¹⁹ Even the choice of his name as a haiku poet has a direct connection with Chuang Tzu's thought.

The name "Basho" was not adopted until the poet was in his late 30s. As a younger man he used some 15 pen names,²⁰ among them the previously mentioned "Tosei" from Li Pai, and "Kukusai," the Chinese verbal phrase from Chuang Tzu's butterfly dream. In 1680, Basho's first hermitage was built outside of Edo in Fukugawa near the Sumida River by an admirer and haiku aspirant named Sampu.²¹ The following year a disciple named Rika gave the poet a *basho*, a banana or plantain plant. The following is an account of Basho's fascination with this plant that spawned the final pen name of haiku's greatest master. This name would ultimately be carved into Basho's gravestone in Gichuji Temple in the Shiga Prefectural town of Zeze .

The rare plant thrived and became "king of the garden," quickly reaching the height of the roof. ...By age 38, in 1682, he was so fond of the banana tree he began using the signature "Basho." He likened himself to the plant: it has neither use nor beauty; in temperate Japan its fruit was inedible; in wind or rain, the broad leaves shredded like "phoenix tails;" the trunk, too soft for lumber, resembled "dragon scales."²²

Throughout Chuang Tzu, the quality of "uselessness" is revered and set as a cherished goal for both the enlightened sage and the common man who want to avoid strife and live out their string of days. Basho's attitude toward the hallowed nature of things useless was surely influenced by the Taoist writer.

While Chuang Tzu's pious references to the useless are too many to cite in their entirety, a selection will serve to clearly establish the parallel with Basho's motivation in selecting his final pen name. It would be highly unlikely, considering Basho's familiarity with and admiration for Chuang Tzu that he was not adopting and adapting one of the Chinese writer's basic ideals, in much the same way as the *basho* plant itself was transplanted from its native habitat of China to Japan.²³

The first reference to the positive aspect of the useless appears in the climax of the opening section of Chuang Tzu, “Free and Easy Wandering,” a title that in itself proclaims the wonderment of travel that is useless, that is, without any fixed purpose or destination. Hui Tzu, the intellectual foil to Chuang Tzu’s creative dynamic, has complained of Chuang Tzu’s words being as useless as a certain tree whose trunk is gnarled and bumpy and whose branches are bent and twisted. Chuang Tzu replies:

Now you have this big tree and you’re distressed because it’s useless.
Why don’t you plant it in Not-Even-Anything Village, or the field of
Broad-and-Boundless, relax and do nothing by its side, or lie down for
a free and easy sleep under it? Axes will never shorten its life, nothing
can even harm it. If there’s no use for it, how can it come to grief or
pain? ²⁴

So much legend and myth has evolved concerning Basho’s banana plant that it might be useful at this juncture to hear the tale from the poet himself. The following haibun crystallizes Basho’s feelings and thoughts about the “useless” tree from which he chose his name:

Its leaf is wide enough to cover a koto. At times, blown down midway,
it pains you like the phoenix’s broken tail or, like a torn green fan, it
sorrows in the wind. From time to time its flowers bloom but they are
not florid, and though its stalk is thick, it is never axed. Comparable to
“useless trees in the mountain,” it is noble in character. Monk Huai-su
ran his brush on it, while Chang Heng-chu, looking at its new leaves,
gained strength for greater learning. I do neither; simply idling
beneath its leaves, I admire the way they tear easily in wind and
rain. ²⁵

The comparison of the banana tree with “useless trees in the mountains” and the fact that it is “never axed” are almost certainly references to Chuang Tzu and the Taoist ideal of the useless.

In Chapter 4 of Chuang Tzu, “In the World of Men,” Carpenter Shih’s apprentice asks why the carpenter ignores a gigantic oak tree standing by the village shrine. Shih then unleashes a tirade concerning the uselessness of the tree:

“Forget it — say no more!” said the carpenter. “It’s a worthless tree!
Make boats out of it and they’d sink; make coffins and they’d rot in no
time; make vessels and they’d break at once. Use it for doors and it
would sweat sap like pine; use it for posts and the worms would eat
them up. It’s not a timber tree — there’s nothing it can be used for.”²⁶

In short, Carpenter Shih could be bemoaning the worthlessness of Basho's cherished tree. However, that night the oak tree appears in a dream to the carpenter and through a classic expression of Taoist logic, convinces Shih that uselessness is truly useful on the most profound level — following the Tao of Heaven. The oak tree asks Shih in the dream:

What are you comparing me with? Are you comparing me with those useful trees? The cherry apple, the pear, the orange, the citrus, the rest of those fructiferous trees and shrubs — as soon as their fruit is ripe, they are torn apart and subjected to abuse. Their big limbs are broken off, their little limbs are yanked around. Their utility makes life miserable for them, and so they don't get to finish out the years Heaven gave them, but are cut off in mid-journey. They bring it on themselves — pulling and tearing of the common mob. And it's the same way with all other things.²⁷

The “In the World of Men” section culminates with a final peroration on this theme: “The cinnamon can be eaten and so it gets cut down; the lacquer tree can be used and so it gets hacked apart. All men know the use of the useful, but nobody knows the use of the useless!”²⁸

Save perhaps a kindred spirit/haiku poet in Edo Japan.

In a prose poem entitled “Genjuan no Fu,” translated by Donald Keene as “Prose Poem on the Unreal Dwelling,”²⁹ written near the end of Basho's life, the opening paragraph echoes Chuang Tzu's theme of uselessness and aimlessness, even to the extent of alluding to a fruit tree image: “My body, now close to fifty years of age, has become an old tree that bears bitter peaches, a snail which has lost its shell, a bagworm separated from its bag, it drifts with the winds and clouds that know no destination.”³⁰ The piece concludes with Basho stating (“boasting” in Taoist rubric) that he “labors without results.”³¹ Applying Taoist hermeneutics to decipher this prose poem, it becomes clear that Basho emerges with impeccable seal-of-the-sage qualifications.

As one continues to pour over Basho's oeuvre armed with a familiarity of Chuang Tzu's writing and philosophical notions, the veracity of Blyth's comment that Basho “brings him [Chuang Tzu] in almost as a habit” becomes increasingly clear. One mainstay literary device which Chuang Tzu employed with great effectiveness, and which Basho adopted for use in his haiku, travel diaries and literary criticism, was *gugen*, allegory.³²

In the following haiku, Basho reincarnates a Chuang Tzu allegory toward his own poetic end:

kouri nigaku enso ga nodo wo uruoseri

with bitter ice
the mole's thirst
quenched

The original passage in Chuang Tzu is a typical Taoist warning not to be greedy and seek more than is necessary to live in harmony with the Tao: "When the tailor bird builds her nest in the deep wood, she uses no more than one branch. When the mole drinks at the river he takes no more than a bellyful."³³

Basho informs us that the above haiku is dealing with the purchase of drinking water³⁴ and suggests the extremely Spartan conditions under which the poet lived. Among the groundswell of commentary this haiku has engendered, Imoto Noichi, translating the small animal as a rat instead of a mole, succinctly states the essence of its meaning:

...The rat in this haiku is different from Chuang-tzu's rat. The poet is here reflecting on his austere life by comparing himself to a rat that lives hidden from people's eyes. Just as the rat sneaks out to the edge of a river to drink water, the poet, who lives a secluded life at a modest hut in the remote Fukugawa district, quenches his thirst by sucking a piece of bitter-tasting ice since there is no drinking water. What the poem embodies is not a satisfied state of mind; the reader detects even a tone of self-derision in it.³⁵

Another commentator points out that Basho employs the word "bitter" to infuse the haiku with his trademark sense of *sabi*, a feeling of loneliness and desolation that is not in the original.³⁶

So whether or not Basho has transmuted the original allegory into an effective haiku, the point here is that knowledge of Chuang Tzu is essential to respond to the full resonance inherent in the haiku. As mentioned previously, Basho is using Chuang Tzu's image here, rather than being used by it. He was to implement Chuang Tzu's device of allegory to enrich his haiku.

The following is one more example of a Basho haiku based on a Chuang Tzu allegory:

sami dare ni tsuru no ashi mijikaku nareri

in early summer rain
the crane's legs
have become shorter

Basho is here alluding to a passage from Chapter 8 of Chuang Tzu, “Webbed Toes,” where the fundamental Taoist concept of the inviolability of inborn nature is expounded:

He who holds to True Rightness does not lose the original form of inborn nature. So for him joined things are not webbed toes, things forking are not superfluous fingers, the long is never too much, the short is never too little. The duck’s legs are short, but to stretch them out would worry him; the crane’s legs are long, but to cut them down would make him sad. What is long by nature needs no cutting off; what is short by nature needs no stretching....³⁷

If the reader is not versed in Chuang Tzu, the haiku is confusing. Basho is facetiously suggesting that the crane has transcended Taoism’s law of nature. Yamamoto Kenkichi, a noted modern scholar of Japanese literature, asserts that, “...it is an allegorical poem implying that a crane’s legs look shorter but have not been cut off. Readers will miss its humor unless they know Chuang-tzu’s allegory.”³⁸ The humor referred to here is a lingering influence on the early haiku of Basho by the Danrin School that was in vogue until the more mature Basho revolutionized haiku by, among other significant innovations, lessening its dependence on clever puns. Danrin haiku “...like the Chuang Tzu, disrupted commonly held perceptions through humor, parody, and allegory.”³⁹ The haiku above is a parody of Chuang Tzu’s injunction that the crane’s legs must, by nature, remain long.

The following haiku by Basho, while not alluding directly to Chuang Tzu, clearly employs the Taoist’s allegorical method to classify a fool:

gu ni kuraku ibara wo tsukamu hotaru kana

a fool in darkness
grasps thorns,
not fireflies

This haiku is a warning that the person who loses concentration and gets carried away will end up in a vulnerable situation. Katou Shuson, haiku poet and Basho scholar, confirms that “the poem utilizes an allegorical device borrowed from Chuang-tzu.”⁴⁰

Descriptions of fools abound throughout Chuang Tzu; Confucius is largely depicted as a consummate buffoon and the fore-mentioned intellectual Hui Tzu is the victim of a perpetual barrage of ridicule. In general, a fool by Chuang Tzu’s standards is often the man who loses

sight of the Tao and strays from his inborn nature. Basho is, of course, more subtle and less strident in his condemnation of the fool.

In a similar fashion, while Chuang Tzu shocks the reader with his extreme paradoxes that shake the very foundations of our most common assumptions, Basho employs subtle twists on our usual expectations to finesse us toward a wider appreciation of things. The following is a typical paradox in Chuang Tzu that catches us off guard and forces us to examine our perspective: “If we know that heaven and earth are tiny grains and the tip of a hair is a range of mountains, then we have perceived the law of difference.”⁴¹

In the following haiku, Basho surprises us with the joy of NOT being able to see Mount Fuji, which would usually be a great disappointment to most Japanese people. He is open to the perception of other beauty.

kirishigure Fuji wo minu hi zo omoshiroki

in misty rain
no view of Fuji today;
enthraling

The next haiku is one more example of how Basho breaks the mold of preconceived notions in a lighthearted manner, in opposition to Chuang Tzu’s strident and dogmatic paradoxical proclamations.

inazuma ni satorenu hito no toutsu yo

a flash of lightning
yet he remains unenlightened—
so precious

Faubion Bowers explains that “‘lightning’ suggests the sudden enlightenment (*satori*) achieved by Zen masters. Here Basho, in haikai’s seemingly perverse fashion, is happy not to gain transcendence from that flash in the sky.”⁴²

In addition to the haiku, the prose sections of Basho’s travel journals are also laced with references to Chuang Tzu, but these tend to be so organically integrated that they cannot be detected unless the reader is well-grounded in Chuang Tzu’s writing. Basho’s allusions drawn from Chuang Tzu are so well assimilated into the fabric of his text and mesh so well with his own view of the universe that they seem natural, unlike some of the allusions in the haiku that stick out like “webbed toes.”

In the travel journal of 1684, “Nozarashi Kikou,” translated as “Exposure in the Fields, A Travel Account” by Donald Keene⁴³ the very first sentence serves as a marked counterpoint to Chuang Tzu’s travel injunction in Chapter One, “Free and Easy Wandering”: “He who goes a thousand *li* will have to carry with him provisions for three months.”⁴⁴ Basho counters with: “When I set out on my journey of a thousand leagues I packed no provisions for the road. I clung to the staff of that pilgrim of old who, it is said, ‘entered the realm of nothingness under the moon at midnight.’...”⁴⁵ “The realm of Nothingness” referred to here is no doubt the Taoist paradise on earth, which Professor Keene describes as “a realm untouched by mundane human concerns, ‘the village of Not-Even-Anything’ of Chuang Tzu.”⁴⁶

The opening prose section of “Nozarashi Kikou” cited above is followed by the first haiku of this travel journal, which also draws on Chuang Tzu:

nozarashi wo kokoro ni kaze no shimu mi kana

weather-beaten bones;
this wind pierces my heart,
my flesh

There is an echo here of a passage from the 18th chapter of Chuang Tzu, “Perfect Happiness,” in which Chuang Tzu comes across a withered skull and ruminates over the possible cause of the man’s demise. After he finishes his discourse he settles in to sleep for the night with the skull as pillow. The skull then appears to Chuang Tzu in a dream and relates the bliss of the dead. Chuang Tzu asks the skull if it could be given life again would it surely not be overjoyed? “The skull frowned severely, wrinkling up its brow. ‘Why would I throw away more happiness than that of a king on a throne and take on the troubles of a human again?’ it said.”⁴⁷

In a preface to another haiku, Basho refers directly to this scene in Chuang Tzu, “...Chuang Tzu, who once used a skeleton for his pillow when he slept, said he could not distinguish reality from dream. His purpose in doing so was to suggest the insubstantiality of human life.”⁴⁸ The preface is followed by this hauntingly simple haiku which conveys this sense of impermanence:

inazuma ya kao no tokoro ga suzuki no ho

lightning—
where there were faces
now grass

Later in “Nozarashi Kikou,” Basho describes his visit to Tomaji Temple near Mt. Futakami: “In

the garden I saw a pine tree; it must have been about a thousand years old, big enough to hide an ox....”⁴⁹ This is a reference to the story previously mentioned concerning the useless tree about which Carpenter Shih complains: “...he saw a serrate oak standing by the village shrine. It was broad enough to shelter several thousand oxen and measured a hundred spans around, towering above the hills.”⁵⁰

In “Oi no Kobumi,” Basho’s travel journal of 1687, which Professor Keene translates as “Manuscript in My Knapsack,”⁵¹ the poet was provided by his numerous disciples with adequate provisions for his impending Odyssey. Basho once again alludes to Chuang Tzu’s travel proviso, “I made no effort to gather together three months’ worth of provisions for this journey.”⁵²

In “Oku no Hosonaghi Michi,” when Basho visits a place called Shiokoshi no Matsu, “Tide Crossing Pines,” he quotes a waka by Saigyō and then comments: “In this poem Saigyō said everything that could be said about the various sights. If one attempted to add a single word, it would be as futile as putting an extra finger on a man’s hand.”⁵³ The reference here is once again from Chuang Tzu’s “Webbed Toes” chapter in which he castigates “deluded and perverse” sages like Confucius who practice the useless and unnatural “ways of benevolence and righteousness”: “...he who has two toes webbed together has grown a flap of useless flesh; he who has a sixth finger forking out of his hand has sprouted a useless digit...”⁵⁴

In the “Genjūan no Fu” Basho is describing his idyllic life in his mountain hermitage and writes, in Keene’s translation, that very rarely when “visitors come from afar, we sit calmly at night, arguing with our shadows.”⁵⁵ Blyth translates the last part as “...I meditate on the truth of the Penumbra.”⁵⁶

The allusion is to a key passage in Chuang Tzu, located immediately before the butterfly dream passage at the climactic conclusion of Chapter 2, “Discussion on Making All things Equal.” Chuang Tzu is challenging assumptions that man can intellectually explain his actions and motivation. He insists that sentient beings follow the dictates of their inborn nature and attempts at defining cause and effect are useless:

Penumbra said to shadow, “A little while ago you were walking and now you’re standing still; a little while ago you were sitting and now you are standing up. Why this lack of independent action?”

Shadow said, “Do I have to wait for something before I can be like this? Does what I wait for also have to wait for something before it can be like this? Am I waiting for the scales of a snake or the wings of a cicada? How do I know why it is so? How do I know why it isn’t so.”⁵⁷

In addition to allusions to Chuang Tzu in Basho’s haiku and prose, such references to the Taoist

writer can also be spotted in his commentary on the haiku of his disciples. One such reference, among many, occurs in a collection of poetry entitled *Inaka no Kuawase* edited by Kikaku. A certain poet named Yajin wrote the following poem:

The barley by the wall
Laughs, it may be,
At the goose-grass's thousand years.⁵⁸

Basho then comments: "The barley by the wall is like the mushroom that knows nothing of the first of the month or the last day, like the tortoise that speaks of the Great Camellia Tree."⁵⁹ The reference here is from Chapter 1 of Chuang Tzu, "Free and Easy Wandering," where the discourse concerns how "Little understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come up to the long lived."⁶⁰ At this point Chuang Tzu launches into one of his allegorical tirades concerning man's entrapment in a delusional maze of false relativity:

...The morning mushroom knows nothing of twilight and dawn; the summer cicada knows nothing of spring and autumn. They are short-lived. South of Ch'u there is a caterpillar which counts five hundred years as one spring and five hundred years as one autumn. Long, long ago there was a great rose of Sharon that counted eight thousand years as one autumn. They are long-lived. Yet P'eng-tsu alone is famous for having lived a long time, and everybody tries to ape him. Isn't it pitiful!⁶¹

In addition to the many direct and indirect allusions to Chuang Tzu's writing on the part of Basho in his haiku, travel journal prose, and in his commentary on his disciples' haiku, Basho and Chuang Tzu share a number of themes. While it is difficult to know whether Basho's use of these key themes was influenced by his comprehensive knowledge of Chuang Tzu's work, or whether he was attracted to similar themes to convey his vision, the fact remains that there is an uncanny thematic and philosophical overlap.

Before exploring some of these shared themes, it is perhaps necessary for the sake of objectivity to mention that some critics, such as Haruo Shirane, point out that Basho and his circle of followers at the retreat in Fukugawa did dwell on a certain number of themes such as "poverty (*hin*), 'impoverished dwelling' (*hinkyō*), coldness, loneliness, and social failure," as a result of their fascination and infatuation with Chuang Tzu and the Chinese recluse poets.⁶² The suggestion here is that Basho's use of these themes was not heartfelt but rather an emulation of Chuang Tzu for the sake of crafting a haikai image.

It has even been eloquently asserted that Basho and his disciples were poseurs in "a cult of

poverty” and that “Later audiences were to look back at Basho as a cultural hero, as recluse and traveler who had freed himself of the bonds of Tokugawa feudal society, but it was a freedom attained primarily in the poetic imagination.”⁶³ Donald Keene comments on the number of Basho’s haiku reflecting the poet’s life of poverty and suggests “this theme may have reflected less on Basho’s financial difficulties than on his increasing absorption with Chinese literature, in which honorable poverty, representing a rejection of worldly ambitions, plays such an important part in poetic traditions.”⁶⁴

Shirane further insists that Basho, in his desire to establish a “haikai ideal,” assumed an “oppositional stance” which was “infused with wabi aesthetics and the Taoist philosophy and humor of Chuang tzu” to effect a “poetic persona who stands outside society and its values or who madly pursues poetic and spiritual goals.”⁶⁵

This deflating of Basho’s literary status, while not at all a wild-eyed interpretation, does seem somewhat cynical. It would be difficult to deny that certain of Basho’s poetic themes would have sprung from his individual character and vision whether or not he was acquainted with Chuang Tzu.

One such theme that both Basho and Chuang Tzu clearly share is a mistrust of unnecessary words. Basho’s very choice of the haiku genre suggests his inclination toward brevity and an avoidance of the anathema of verbosity. Harold G. Henderson credits Basho in this respect as being a “master in not ‘putting words between the truth and ourselves.’”⁶⁶ Basho expresses the point tersely in the following haiku:

mono ieba kuchibiru samushi aki no kaze

words spoken
turn lips cold,
autumn wind

This theme appears repeatedly throughout Chuang Tzu and in much of Taoist writing. Lao Tzu (“Roshi” in Japanese) commences the Tao Te Ching with this essential Taoist notion:

The way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant way;
The name that can be named
Is not the constant name.⁶⁷

The following represent a mere sampling of the innumerable philippics in Chuang Tzu railing against the pitfalls of words:

“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?...”⁶⁸

“[The sage] in the midst of the soundless, he alone hears harmony...”⁶⁹

“Those who know do not speak, those who speak do not know.”⁷⁰

“Eloquence is not as good as silence.”⁷¹

“Perfect speech is the abandonment of speech”⁷²

“Where can I find a man who has forgotten words so I can have a word with him?”⁷³

It is, no doubt, highly ironic that Chuang Tzu continuously castigates the use of words — in a work of over one hundred thousand words. Even Lao Tzu, whose work is a mere 5000 characters, is taken to task by the Chinese Tang Dynasty poet Pai Chu-yi for prattling on in defiance of his own anti-word dictates:

The speaker does not know; the knower does not
speak:

Thus we have heard from Roshi.

If Roshi is to be called a knower,

Why did he write five thousand words?⁷⁴

It might be asserted that Basho, in using the haiku form, which perhaps represents the world’s least verbose poetic genre, is less guilty of wasting verbiage than either of the Taoist masters.

Another theme that Basho and Chuang Tzu share is the appreciation of children with their pristine and unsullied nature that allows them to remain close to the fount of intuitive truth. Legend has it that Pai Chu-yi would read his poetry to an old peasant woman and a child and if either could not understand something he would revise it. In a similar manner, Basho says, “Get a three-foot child to write haikai.”⁷⁵ The following haiku by Basho indicate his reverence for children.

ko ni aku to mousu hito niwa hana mo nashi

“I’m weary of children”;
for the person who says this
there are no cherry blossoms

iza kodomo hashiri arukan tamarare

kids look,
let’s get outside quick,
hail!

The following two passages from Chuang Tzu will suffice to show the exalted position of babies in the Taoist cosmography and their unfettered freedom of spirit that as adults they will inevitably forfeit.

The baby howls all day, yet its throat never gets hoarse — harmony at its height! The baby makes fists all day, yet its fingers never get cramped — virtue is all it holds to. The baby stares all day without blinking its eyes — it has no preferences in the world of the externals.⁷⁶

The baby acts without knowing what it is doing, moves without knowing where it is going. Its body is like the limb of a withered tree, its mind like dead ashes. Since it is so, no bad fortune will ever touch it, and no good fortune will come to it either. And if it is free from good and bad fortune, then what human suffering can it undergo?⁷⁷

One final example of Chuang Tzu’s respect for the child occurs when the Yellow Emperor asks a young boy who is herding horses how to govern the empire. The young boy at first refuses to answer but at the Yellow Emperor’s continued entreaty replies:

“Governing the empire I suppose is not much different from herding horses. Get rid of whatever is harmful to the horses — that’s all.”

The Yellow Emperor, addressing the boy as “Heavenly Master,” bowed twice, touching his head to the ground, and retired.⁷⁸

This paper has up to this point tried to show how Basho had been significantly influenced in various ways by the writings of Chuang Tzu. This influence manifested itself in numerable allusions from Chuang Tzu interspersed among Basho’s haiku, travel prose and literary criticism. These references to the Taoist writer have taken the form of parody, echoes, ironic twists and thematic and philosophical overlap. It is at this juncture that the focus now turns to the most

essential and elemental artistic and philosophical congruence between the Taoist poet and the poetic Taoist.

Basho and Chuang Tzu conjoin in their mutual belief in, and wholehearted acceptance of, the source and force generating and shaping all creativity and creation — that which Basho calls “Nature,” and Chuang Tzu “The Tao.” At the heart and soul of Basho’s belief system is the notion of *fuga no makoto*, what Haruo Shirane translates as “the art of poetic truth.”⁷⁹ Shirane further points out that this concept is closely related to “following the creative...the force that gave birth to and governs the movement of all things in the universe,” an ideal repeatedly mentioned in Chuang Tzu, “a text that Basho was deeply influenced by....”⁸⁰ It has, in fact, been suggested that Basho became enamored of Chuang Tzu’s Taoism because “he thought it might lead him away from the turmoil of everyday life and into the world of nature where he could regain his true self.”⁸¹

In the famous opening passage of the travel journal “Oi No Kobumi” which follows, Basho makes clear the philosophical lynchpin of his own art and spiritual creed, which he believes to be the same principle that pervades the work of other distinguished artists and genres so revered over the centuries in Japan. It is interesting to note that in the following translation, Donald Keene prefers the word “nature,” while Haruo Shirane opted for “the Creative.”⁸²

One and the same thing runs through the waka of Saigyô, the renga of
Sôgi, the paintings of Sesshû, the tea ceremony of Rikyû. What is
common to all these arts is their following nature and making a friend of
the four seasons. Nothing the artist sees is but flowers, nothing he
thinks of but the moon. When what a man sees is not flowers, he is no
better than a barbarian. ...follow nature and return to nature.⁸³

Basho’s writings are laced with admonitions to his disciples and readers to “follow nature” in order to commune with the primeval force that underlies reality. He saw in the eternal cycles of nature “unchanging truth in fleeting form.”⁸⁴ Onitsura, one of Basho’s disciples, writes of how Basho “tried his utmost to master the hidden aspects of nature and reveal its secrets. What he tried to find was not the outward appearance of nature, but to touch its very heart.”⁸⁵ In line with this quest, Basho often encouraged his students to “Learn about a pine tree from a pine tree, and about a bamboo stalk from a bamboo stalk.”⁸⁶

Basho’s belief in the Tao of nature was not limited to the grandiose and beautiful; he wrote, “There is no subject whatever that is not fit for hokku,”⁸⁷ and Professor Keene asserts that for Basho “the smallest flower or insect if properly seen and understood could suggest all of creation, and each had its reason for existence.”⁸⁸

Chuang Tzu makes the same point, albeit in a slightly less poetic fashion:

Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, "This thing called the Way — where does it exist?"
Chuang Tzu said, "There's no place it doesn't exist."
"Come," said Master Tung-kuo, "you must be more specific!"
"It is in the ant."
"As low a thing as that?"
"It is in the panic grass."
"But that's lower still!"
"It is in the tiles and shards."
"How can it be so low?"
"It is in the piss and shit!"⁸⁹

In a similar fashion, Basho's haiku does not shy away from the earthy:

nomi shirami uma no shito suru makura moto

fleas, lice and a horse pissing
by my pillow

It is said that the pilgrim's motto *kenkon muju; doko ninin*, (homeless between heaven and earth, two travelers) was inscribed on Basho's sedge hat as he wandered the backroads of Japan.⁹⁰ Perhaps these words might refer to Basho and Chuang Tzu's Tao.

In conclusion, it is interesting to note that the Zen master and Buddhist Scholar, D. T. Suzuki, while acknowledging the strong congruence of thought and belief between Basho and Chuang Tzu, points out that in the final analysis certain deep-rooted attributes in the respective Chinese and Japanese psyches serve to temper the interconnection between them. He insists that Chuang Tzu is able to soar to heights of unfettered freedom while Basho ultimately must keep grounded to some degree lest he lose his equilibrium. According to Suzuki, Chuang Tzu is

...wandering in the realm of the Unlimited, where all things start and return. Basho must surely have been acquainted with those mystical writings. The Chinese mind is practical enough, but frequently it aspires to break through all the barriers that keep it within the rules of conventionalism; but the Japanese mind is so attached to the earth that it would not forget, however mean they may be, the grasses growing under the feet. Basho has no doubt a great deal of Taoism in him, but at the same time he does not fly away on the wings of the

wind or neglect things in his intimate surroundings or lose daily touch
with his mundane life.⁹¹

We may choose to focus on the dissonant chords in Basho and Chuang Tzu and attribute them to antithetical cultural traits as Suzuki suggests, or to differences in individual temperament. However, it cannot be denied that in many ways Basho found a kindred spirit in Chuang Tzu and was significantly influenced by him. Perhaps it would not be inappropriate to call Basho Japan's great Taoist haiku poet, thus emphasizing the convergent harmony in Basho of the extremely Japanese poetic genre infused with a fundamental strain of the very Chinese Taoist slant.

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- ³ Dorothy Britton, trans. *A Haiku Journey*, New York: Kodansha International, 1980, p.7.
- ⁴ Asataro Miyamori, trans. *Classic Haiku: An Anthology of Poems by Basho and His Followers*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2002, p.44.
- ⁵ R. H. Blyth, *Haiku*, 4 vols., Tokyo: The Hokuseido Press, 1949, 1: 335.
- ⁶ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p.49.
- ⁷ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1: 39.
- ⁸ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 47.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, p.88.
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- ¹² Harold G. Henderson, *An Introduction to Haiku*, Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958, p. 4.
- ¹³ Makoto Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters: Selected Hokku With Commentary*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1992, p.88.
- ¹⁴ *Loc cit.*, p. 88.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 271.
- ¹⁶ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:42.
- ¹⁷ Faubion Bowers, ed. *The Classic Tradition of Haiku*, Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1996, p. 24.
- ¹⁸ Keene, *World Within Walls*, p.119.
- ¹⁹ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:42.
- ²⁰ Bowers, *The Classic Tradition of Haiku*, p. 13.
- ²¹ Stryk, *On Love and Barley*, p. 13.
- ²² Bowers, *The Classic Tradition of Haiku*, p. 13.

- ²³ Britton, *A Haiku Journey*, p. 7.
- ²⁴ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 35.
- ²⁵ Hiroaki Sato, trans. *Basho's Narrow Road*, Berkeley, California: Stone Bridge Press, 1996, P. 48.
- ²⁶ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 63-4.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 64.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.67.
- ²⁹ Donald Keene, ed. *Anthology of Japanese Literature*, New York: Grove Press, 1955, p. 374.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 374.
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- ³⁴ Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters*, p. 78.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 78-9.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.78.
- ³⁷ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 99-100.
- ³⁸ Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters*, p. 73.
- ³⁹ Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams: Landscape, Cultural Memory, and the Poetry of Basho*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1998, P. 306.
- ⁴⁰ Ueda, *Basho and His Interpreters*, p. 74.
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- ⁴³ Donald Keene, *World Within Walls*, p. 80.
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- ⁴⁵ Keene, *World Within Walls*, p. 81.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.
- ⁴⁷ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, pp. 194-5.
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- ⁴⁹ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1:41.
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- ⁶⁰ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 30.
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- ⁶² Haruo Shirane, *Traces of Dreams*, p. 66.
- ⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 67.
- ⁶⁴ Keene, *World Within Walls*, p. 77.
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- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 240.
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- ⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 302.
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- ⁷⁵ Blyth, *Haiku*, 1: 241.
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- ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 266.
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- ⁸³ Keene, *World Within Walls*, p. 93.
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- ⁸⁸ Keene, *World Within Walls*, pp. 89-90.
- ⁸⁹ Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu*, p. 241.
- ⁹⁰ Britton, *A Haiku Journey*, p. 12.
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