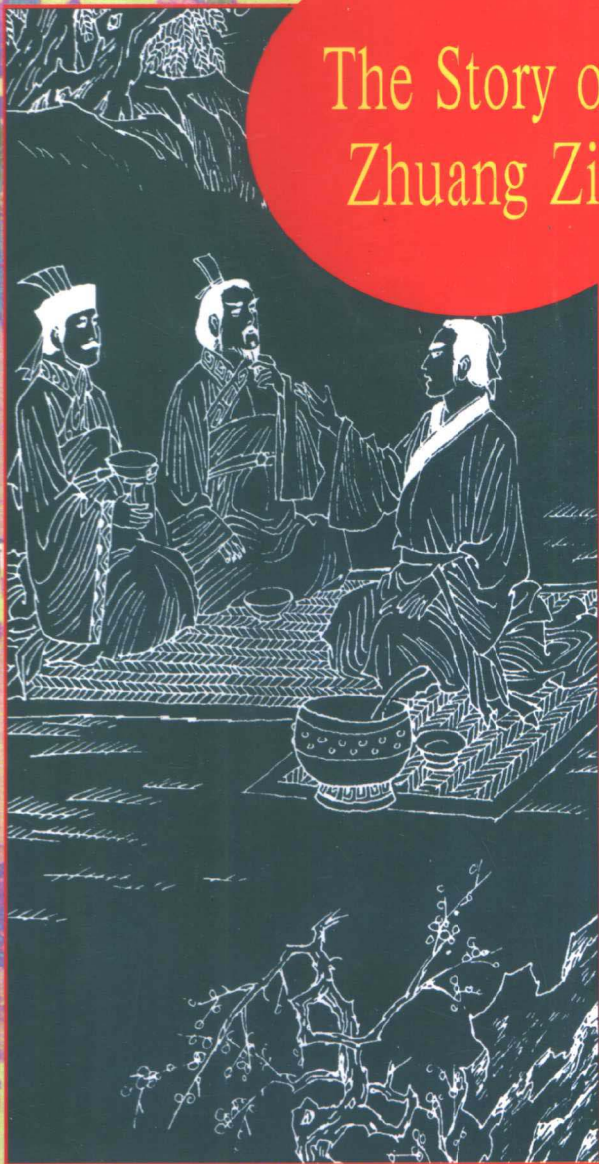


# The Story of Zhuang Zi



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**庄子的故事**

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Portrait of Zhuang Zi



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## Foreword

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770 BC-221 BC) were an epoch of great upheavals in Chinese history. After more than 250 years, the vast area ruled by the Zhou Dynasty (c. 11th century BC-256 BC) was no longer peaceful and prosperous, but was beset with crises. In 771 BC, the incompetent Zhou ruler, King You, was killed during an invasion by the Quanrong tribe from northwest China. Gaojing, his capital city (located to the southwest of present-day Xi'an City in Shaanxi Province) went into a decline, and the dynasty lost half of its land and people.

In 770 BC, his successor, King Ping, was forced to move the capital from the central Shaanxi plain to Luoyi (Luoyang, in today's Henan Province) in the east. This was the watershed which led historians to divide the dynasty into Western Zhou (c. 11th century BC-771 BC) and Eastern Zhou (770 BC-221 BC). Eastern Zhou itself is roughly divided into two historical periods. The former is



called the Spring and Autumn Period (770 BC-476 BC), and the latter is called the Warring States Period (475 BC-221 BC).

After the moving of the capital, the strength and prestige of the Zhou Dynasty declined disastrously, and the Zhou rulers lost all real control over the powerful dukes and princes, who ruled their territories as virtually independent fiefdoms.

The political and military struggles among the states ruled by the dukes and princes during the Spring and Autumn Period resulted in the dominance of the whole land by a handful of powerful states. The Warring States Period was thus ushered in, when these states — Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Wei, Zhao and Qin — fought continual wars against each other and engaged in endless intrigue for hegemony.

In 221 BC, the State of Qin, having conquered all its rivals, abolished the Zhou Dynasty, which by that time existed in name only. The First Emperor of the Qin Dynasty, Qin Shi Huang, is regarded as China's first unifier, as he was the first man to rule just about all of what is present-day China.

Important changes took place in all aspects of Chinese society during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. As the political situation changed from a rigid and ordered hierarchy

under the "Son of Heaven" (the Zhou Emperor) to one in which powerful ministers and regional strongmen came to the fore, the function of the patriarchal system based on blood relations began to weaken. People began to lose their awe of Heaven and the gods, and the traditional religion and superstitions were increasingly questioned. As a result of the development of the social productive forces, the long-time social turbulence, the collapse of the patriarchal order and the rise of the status of the common people, the aristocratic monopoly on learning and culture was gradually broken. More and more private individuals began to give lectures, expounding their theories of the universe and education, and the way the empire should be governed. A welter of schools of thought arose, such as Confucianism, Mohism, Taoism, Legalism, Military Strategy, Logicism, Yin-Yang, Political Strategy, Agriculturism, and Eclecticism, to name but a few. This phenomenon, unmatched in Chinese history either before or since, has been described as one of "A hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend."

The works of theory and practical statecraft which have been handed down from these schools exerted a far-reaching and positive influence on the development of the philosophy and culture

of later generations. At the same time, the different schools influenced each other, learned from each other and absorbed ideas from each other. They collectively made valuable achievements in the natural sciences, economics, literature and the arts, bequeathing an important legacy to the civilization of mankind.

Zhuang Zi (c. 369 BC-286 BC) was born with the given name Zhou in the State of Song. He is regarded as the chief representative of the Taoist school after Lao Zi. He attacked the official ideology of ritual, despised princes and dukes, refused to take an official post, and wandered all over the empire teaching his ideas. The book attributed to him, titled *The Book of Zhuang Zi*, has had a far-reaching influence through the ages with its forceful, natural and easy style, and wit and humor.

*The Story of Zhuang Zi* vividly portrays the great thinker's colorful life, interwoven with the historical incidents of his lifetime. It brings to life the splendor, tragedy and wonder of a distant age, with the intrigues and struggles of the mighty nobles, alongside the daily problems and thoughts of the common people.

Written as a popular literary biography, *The Story of Zhuang Zi* presents the principal features of Zhuang Zi's career, times and thought in the

form of a novel. All the protagonists, incidents and cultural features presented here are taken from the original sources. It is, so to speak, a work of both literature and history.

## Entering an Idyllic World

In the year 369 BC, the seventh year of the reign of Xi, King Lie of the Zhou Dynasty. Mt. Mengshan in the State of Song (spreading over the eastern part of present-day Henan Province, and parts of Shandong, Jiangsu and Anhui provinces) was covered with new greenery. Patterns of ripples rolled across the surface of Mengze Lake at the foot of the mountain, and the Menghe River ran like a white silk ribbon from half way down the mountain into the lake, completing a picture of refreshing beauty and repose.

No one would have guessed from this peaceful scene that the country was in turmoil, with the rulers of the major feudal states locked in deadly strife, sacking cities, ravaging the countryside and slaughtering the common people in a constant bloody struggle for supremacy.

Mengzhuang Village was a cluster of no more than a dozen houses situated on a small piece of flat land between the mountain and the lake. At the easternmost end of the village lived a family

named Zhuang. The head of the household was called Zhuang Laogong (Gaffer Zhuang), the honorific title being bestowed upon him because in his younger days he had been the market supervisor in Suiyang, the capital city of the State of Song (south of present-day Shangqiu County in Henan Province). He had dealt with all kinds of petty peddlers, vendors, shops and stores from day to day. He had such a reputation for honesty and fairness that the market traders were happy to pay their taxes, and those whose business was slack were sure to be given time to pay. Whenever a dispute arose, both sides were happy to allow him to arbitrate.

Gaffer Zhuang was nearly 50 years old when he moved his family to Mt. Mengshan. His wife Hui Ming was a native of the area, and he was sure that, although he had become well accustomed to the bustle of the capital and its marketplace, the tranquility of the countryside would suit him well in his retirement.

Hui Ming had been the daughter of a shoe peddler. She lost her mother when she was still a child. She and her old father eked out a living by weaving shoes from fibers taken from reeds they gathered from the lake, and selling them in the market at Suiyang. This way, they became acquainted with Gaffer Zhuang.

One day, when Old Hui and his daughter were peddling their shoes in the market, one of the bodyguards of Duke Xiu, ruler of the State of Song, came strolling by. Impressed by the quality of the shoes, Wei — for this was his name — told his attendants to take them all. Old Hui's request for payment was met with jeers and threats, and when Hui Ming appealed to the bully, he was struck by her beauty, so he ordered his men to bring her along as well. At this juncture, as the other peddlers were grumbling in indignation, Gaffer Zhuang appeared.

At the sight of this top market official, the bodyguard started to fumble in his pockets for money to pay for the shoes, but found to his dismay that he had not brought his purse with him.

Gaffer Zhuang, wise to the ways of the world, took in the scene at a glance.

"I see that you are in the embarrassing situation of not having the money to pay for these exquisite shoes," he said, meaningfully. "But never mind. I will lend you the required sum, and you can pay me back later."

With that, he handed over to Hui Ming, who by this time had rushed back into her father's arms, enough money to pay for all the shoes they had brought with them that day.

As the bodyguard and his cronies slunk away

with their tails between their legs, Gaffer Zhuang paid Old Hui for his future products in advance and advised him to stay away from the market in future, as he would send men to pick up his shoes from home. The friendship between them thus started culminated in Gaffer Zhuang marrying Hui Ming.

When he retired at the age of fifty, Gaffer Zhuang already had a three-year-old son. Now his wife was expecting another baby soon. Early one spring morning, he took his fishing rod and walked to Mengze Lake, hoping to catch some fish to build up his wife's health. On the way, he reflected on how good life had turned out to be for him. He found that life away from the noisy and crowded city suited him well. He found endless pleasure in the mountains, woods, lake and river. He had a virtuous and clever wife at home, and was about to be blessed with another son in his late years. Gazing into the water of Mengze Lake, the first thing he saw was his beaming face.

Flocks of birds were sporting on the surface of the lake, shoals of fish were swimming near the surface, and ripples were chasing each other in giddy pursuit. Fish rose to the bait one after another, and eventually he landed a fine fat carp. Its scales glittered in the sunlight.

Gaffer Zhuang carefully took the hook from



its mouth. He had caught innumerable fish with that very same rod, but he had never seen one like this before. Its ruddy body was as slippery, fine and smooth as the skin of a newborn baby. He held the fish as if it were the embodiment of something good. He looked hard into the carp's eyes, and the carp looked tearfully back at the aging fisherman, as if they were communicating their innermost feelings.

After some time, Gaffer Zhuang bent, and mechanically, as if it were the most natural thing to do in the world, put the carp slowly back into the water. The fish swam once in a circle, seemingly as a gesture of thanks, and swam off in the crystal clear water of the lake.

No sooner had the fish disappeared than Gaffer Zhuang heard someone calling him. "Gaffer Zhuang, you should go straight home! You've got another bouncing baby boy!" It was one of his neighbors.

Coming out of his reverie, Gaffer Zhuang snatched up his fishing rod and the basket half-filled with the fish he had caught that morning, and hurried home. The sun had already climbed over the top of Mt. Mengshan. The whole mountain was enveloped with the singing of birds and the fragrance of flowers. Even the quiet track under his feet was dotted with innumerable flow-