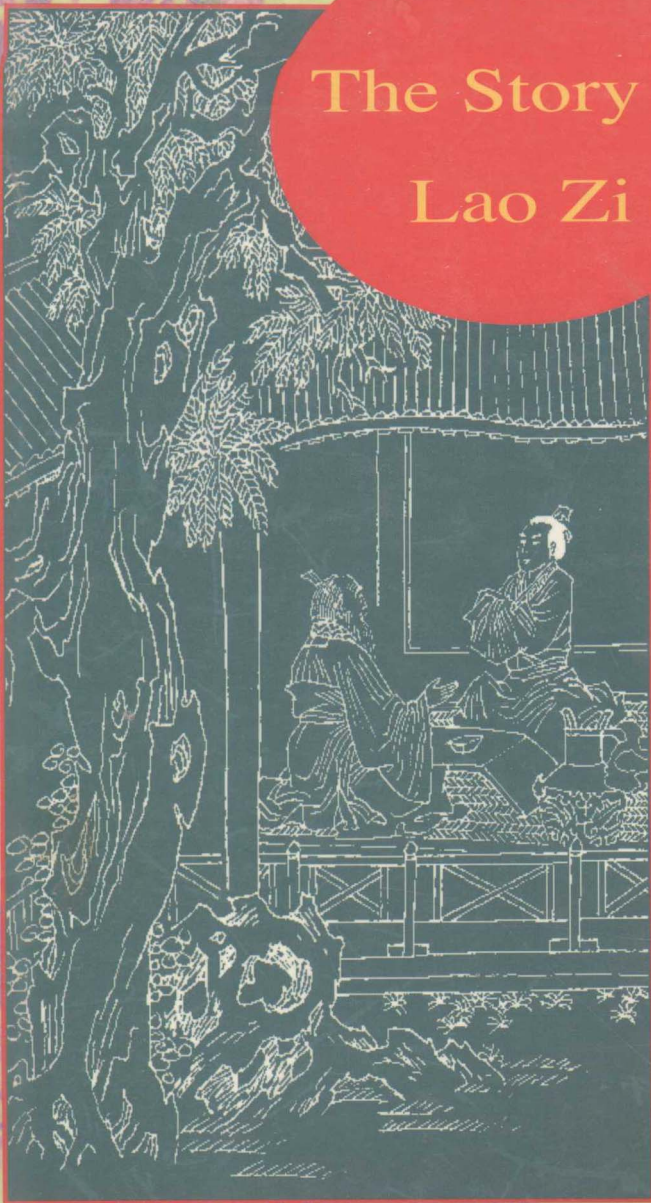


# The Story of Lao Zi



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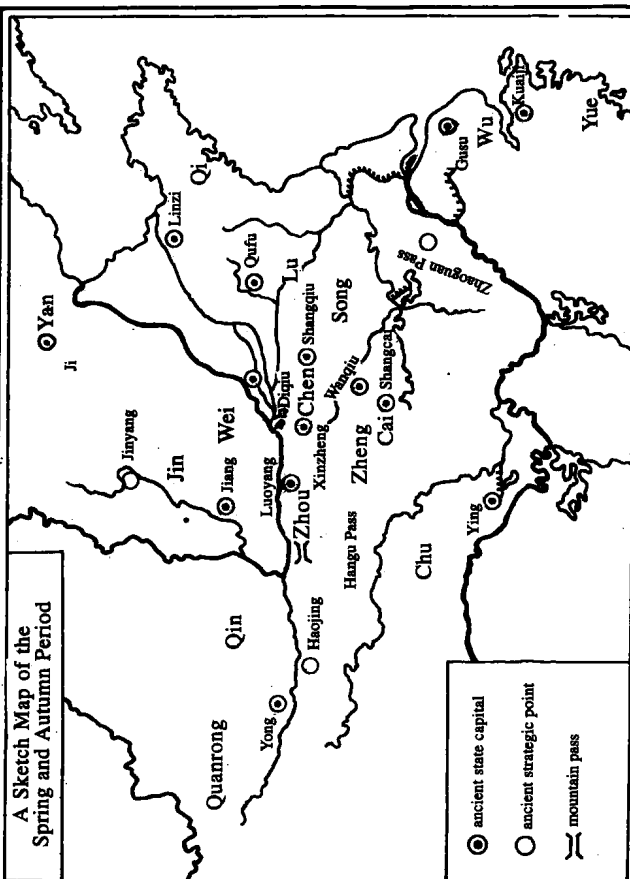
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**Portrait of Lao Zi**

A Sketch Map of the  
Spring and Autumn Period



- ancient state capital
- ancient strategic point
- ⌋ mountain pass

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## Foreword

The Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods (770—221 B.C.) was a time of turbulence in Chinese history. The Zhou Dynasty, after ruling for some 250 years (c. 11th century—256 B.C.), was in decline and faced a crisis. In the year 771 B.C., the fatuous King You of the Zhou Dynasty was slain in a battle with the Quan Rong tribe in northwest China. The capital Gaojing (located in today's southwestern part of Xi'an City in Shaanxi Province) was reduced to ruins, and lost half of its land and population. In 770, King Ping was forced to move the capital eastward to Luoyi (today's Luoyang in Henan Province). The Western Zhou Dynasty came to an end in 771 B.C., to be replaced by the Eastern Zhou Dynasty. The latter dynasty is traditionally divided into two historical periods—the first being called the Spring and Autumn Period (770—476 B.C.), the second, the Warring States Period (475—221 B.C.). After the move eastward, the strength and prestige of the Zhou rulers suffered a disastrous

slide. The Zhou king, theoretically the supreme authority, quickly lost control of the vassal states, which embarked on an endless round of political intrigues and internecine warfare.

The more powerful states contended for the supreme political and economic position, or hegemony over the others. In the early part of the Eastern Zhou Dynasty they included the states of Qi, Song, Chu, Qin, Wu and Yue. Later, during the Warring States Period the tussle was between the seven powers of Qi, Chu, Yan, Han, Zhao, Wei and Qin. In 256 B.C., the state of Qin extinguished the Zhou Dynasty—which by that time existed merely in name, conquered the other six states one by one, and finally unified China in 221 B.C.

Great changes took place in every aspect of Chinese society during the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods. Politically, “the ceremonies, music, and punitive and military expeditions led by the Son of Heaven (the Zhou ruler)” were usurped by the rulers of the vassal states. With the progress of culture and scholarship, ministers became more important in the governing of the states, and the patriarchal system, based on blood ties, gradually eroded. Thus there opened up paths to power for ambitious and educated commoners. At the same time, the traditional superstitious

reverence of Heaven, Fate and ghosts came under increasing attack. The monopoly of culture and literature which the official schools of the aristocracy had held since the Western Zhou Dynasty was broken down, as private academies sprang up all over the country. In this lively intellectual atmosphere, a large number of different schools of thought emerged, including Confucianism, Taoism, Legalism, Yin-Yang Theory, and many others. It was described as a time when "A hundred flowers blossomed and a hundred schools of thought contended."

This was one of the most stimulating eras in Chinese history as far as philosophy and cerebral inquiry are concerned. The great debates of the time led to significant developments in the fields of natural science, economics, literature and the arts, not to mention speculation about the universe and man's place in it. Chinese thinkers of this period thus made great contributions to human civilization.

*The Story of Lao Zi* introduces the life and career of one of the greatest of these thinkers, the founder of the system of thought called Taoism.

Lao Zi (or Lao Tzu), whose family name was Li and whose given name was Er (also Boyang or Dan), was a native of the State of Chu, in southern China. The book attributed to him, the

*Dao De Jing*, or *Tao Te Ching* (*Classic of the Way and Virtue*, or generally known as *The Book of Lao Zi*) had a great impact on Chinese philosophy of the succeeding periods. It has been translated into many languages, and printed abroad. It has also been published in English by the Foreign Languages Press, Beijing, titled *The Book of Lao Zi—A Taoist Classic*.

*The Story of Lao Zi* chiefly describes the sage's life and experiences: including his early youth, learning under the Teacher Chang Zong, journey to the south, his work as Curator of the Imperial Archives, his trip to the west, and his writing a book at Hangu Pass. Apart from recounting the background of the times in which Lao Zi lived, and the problems he wrestled with and overcame, the content and spirit of *The Book of Lao Zi* are naturally woven into the texture of the narrative, to give the readers an understanding of the thought of the sage.

Written in a popular style, the book presents vivid insights into the social and economic conditions of that time. Rivalries among the feudal lords dominated political life, giving rise to much hardship and suffering among the common people. This situation, in turn, spurred philosophers to seek solutions in ideal forms of government and ideal standards of conduct.

The characteristics of this book as a literary biography are its true-to-life images and rich historical content, so that it is a work of both literature and history. The chief characters and events are all based on real life, and the book serves as a useful guide to the thought of Lao Zi and an introduction to his writings.

# I. Early Youth

## Childhood Anecdotes

The story begins in the late Spring and Autumn Period, some 2,500 years ago. There was an area called Lixiang to the east of the Kuxian County seat (east of today's Luyi in Henan Province) in the State of Chu. There were about a dozen villages under the administration of Kuxian County, scattered within a radius of some five miles. One of the villages was called Qurenli. It was not large, having less than 100 households living mostly in old thatched cottages. But the lanes and the village as a whole were neat and tidy. A number of ancient trees bespoke the antiquity of the village, and gave it an air of sturdy vigor.

It was a sunny spring day in the third lunar month. The earth had suddenly awakened from its winter sleep. The mountains had turned green, the waters had become sparkingly clear, and the sun shone more brightly.

On a hillside only half a *li* southwest of the

village, there was a plum orchard. The plum flowers were in full bloom and their white petals, seen from afar, were like snowdrifts or clouds. A group of children, attracted by the plum blossoms, scampered out of the village toward the orchard, and disappeared among the trees.

They were pupils learning from a private tutor. They had become tired of staying at home studying all the day; Nature held more attraction than books for them. Taking advantage of their tutor being away visiting friends, they rushed out of their study room into the open countryside, whooping and cheering.

Arriving at the plum orchard, they pranced around gleefully like a troupe of monkeys let off the leash or gamboling fawns: Some climbed trees to pick blossoms, some rolled around and turned somersaults on the grass, and others tried to catch butterflies or dragonflies.

"Look, over there! It's the boy with big ears!" Suddenly their antics were cut short by this shouted comment, followed by a burst of laughter. Looking up the slope, they saw a group of strange children pointing and mouthing words like "big ears," "piggy" and "spiky worm" at them. The children in the plum orchard shouted back in indignation.

The children on the slope, seeing that their



comments had angered the other children, shouted something and then ran back quickly over to the other side of the hill.

The children in the orchard knew that the newcomers were from Gaoli Village, and no one wanted to chase after them. Among them a boy called Qu Yin, touching his hair, said with contempt: "They're the ones who look like spiky worms. If they dare to come here again, and I catch one of them, just see if I don't make him crawl back home."

Qu Yin was sure that he was the one the strange children had called a spiky worm. Unlike the other children, whose hair grew soft and manageable, and hung down to their shoulders, his was hard, rough and unruly. He had to tie it up with a slender band to stop it sticking up all over the place.

"Oh, forget it. One of them had a hare lip, but I didn't mention it. They didn't know what they were talking about. Turn a deaf ear, and they will stop. Don't take them seriously."

This was said by the boy who had just been called Big Ears. His real name was Li Er, a name which was connected with a story on everybody's lips.

He had been born under a century-old plum tree in his family courtyard. It was said that as