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Zhuangzi

The Free Wanderer — Exploring the Wisdom, Philosophy, and Mysteries of the Tao

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Free Sample · Chapter One

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PART ONE

The Man and His World

其人與其世

Chapter One

A Minor Official in a Time of Chaos

亂世中的小吏

Somewhere in the state of Song, in the fourth century before the Common Era, there was a grove of lacquer trees. Lacquer was a valuable commodity in ancient China. The sap of the lacquer tree, tapped from cuts in the bark and carefully refined, produced the glossy black and red finishes that covered the bowls, boxes, coffins, and musical instruments of the aristocracy. Lacquer groves were managed property, and someone had to manage them: keep the accounts, oversee the workers who scored the trunks, make sure the sap reached the workshops and the taxes reached the court.

For a time, that someone was Zhuang Zhou.

It is a wonderfully unglamorous detail, and it is almost the only hard fact we possess about the life of one of the greatest thinkers in human history. Sima Qian, the Grand Historian of the Han dynasty, recorded that Zhuangzi “once served as an official in the Lacquer Garden,” using a word for a low-level functionary. He was not a minister, not a general, not an advisor to kings. He was a petty bureaucrat assigned to a grove of trees. Perhaps he walked the rows in the early morning, watching the sap bead from the wounds in the bark. Perhaps, like the trees in his own parables, he reflected on how the lacquer tree is cut

precisely because it is useful. “The cinnamon tree can be eaten, so it is chopped down,” he would write. “The lacquer tree can be used, so it is hacked apart.” Whoever wrote those lines had looked closely at what usefulness costs.

The Grand Historian’s Notice

Everything we think we know about the historical Zhuangzi begins with a single short passage in the *Shiji*, the *Records of the Grand Historian*, completed by Sima Qian around 94 BCE. Zhuangzi does not even receive his own chapter. He appears in a brief note inside the biography of Laozi, tucked between the legendary founder of Daoism and the later thinkers Shen Buhai and Han Feizi. The entire notice runs to only a few hundred characters. Its essentials, freely rendered, are these:

> Zhuangzi was a man of Meng. His personal name was Zhou. He once served as an official at the Lacquer Garden in Meng, and he lived at the same time as King Hui of Liang and King Xuan of Qi. There was nothing his learning did not reach, but its root went back to the sayings of Laozi. He wrote a book of more than a hundred thousand words, most of it in the form of allegory. He wrote “The Old Fisherman,” “Robber Zhi,” and “Rifling Trunks” to ridicule the followers of Confucius and to make clear the arts of Laozi. “Weilei Xu” and “Gengsang Chu” are empty talk without real substance. Yet he was skilled at composing his writing and arranging his phrases, pointing to things and describing situations, so as to attack the Confucians and Mohists. Even the finest scholars of his age could not defend themselves against him. His words were boundless and overflowing, and he followed only his own pleasure. For this reason, kings, dukes, and great men could not make use of him.

The notice then tells the story of King Wei of Chu sending envoys with gold and the offer of a ministry, and Zhuangzi’s laughing refusal with

the image of the sacrificial ox. And that is all. No birth date, no death date, no family, no teachers, no travels, no account of how he died.

Several features of this little portrait deserve attention. First, Sima Qian places Zhuangzi firmly in the lineage of Laozi, the "Old Master," and this pairing would shape the reception of Zhuangzi for the next two thousand years. The phrase "Lao-Zhuang," Laozi and Zhuangzi together, became the standard name for the philosophical core of Daoism. Modern scholars are less certain about the relationship. The Inner Chapters of the *Zhuangzi* never quote the *Daodejing* directly, and Laozi appears in them only a few times, as a character rather than as an authority. Some historians have even argued that the *Daodejing* as we know it took its final form after Zhuangzi's lifetime. The relationship between the two great Daoist classics is better understood as a kinship of spirit than as a line of master and disciple.

Second, the chapters that Sima Qian singles out, "The Old Fisherman," "Robber Zhi," and "Rifling Trunks," are all from the later parts of the received text, the Outer and Miscellaneous Chapters. Most modern scholars do not believe Zhuangzi wrote them himself. This tells us that by the Han dynasty, the book circulating under Zhuangzi's name already contained a great deal of material by later writers, and that Sima Qian read it as a single work. The historian's Zhuangzi is already, in part, a composite figure.

Third, the notice emphasizes his literary power. Sima Qian, himself one of the greatest prose stylists in Chinese history, recognized a fellow master. His words were "boundless and overflowing," flowing like a flood that breaks every bank. That is a reader's judgment, and it has been confirmed by every generation of readers since.

Finally, the closing sentence carries a quiet irony. "Kings, dukes, and great men could not make use of him." In the language of the Warring States, to be "used" by a ruler meant to be employed, to have one's talents put into service. Sima Qian presents this as a fact about Zhuangzi's unruly genius. But Zhuangzi himself would have heard it

as the highest compliment. The whole thrust of his philosophy is toward becoming the kind of being that the powerful cannot use.

Zhuangzi and the Sad State of Song

Zhuangzi's homeland, the state of Song, occupied a modest stretch of the central plain, roughly around the modern city of Shangqiu in eastern Henan province. The exact location of Meng, his hometown, has been argued over for centuries, with claims advanced for sites in Henan, Anhui, and Shandong. What matters more than the precise spot is the character of the place.

Song had an unusual history. When the Zhou dynasty overthrew the earlier Shang dynasty around 1046 BCE, the victors allowed the descendants of the defeated Shang royal house to keep a small state where they could continue the sacrifices to their ancestors. That state was Song. Its people were, in a sense, the heirs of a vanquished civilization living on in the shadow of the conquerors. Some historians have suggested that this background gave Song culture a distinctive flavor, older, stranger, more attached to archaic customs and ideas than its neighbors.

Whatever the reason, the people of Song became the butt of jokes throughout the Warring States period. When philosophers needed a story about a fool, they often made him a man of Song. Mencius tells of the man of Song who was worried that his rice sprouts were not growing fast enough, so he went out and pulled on each one to help it along, then came home exhausted and announced that he had helped the sprouts grow. His son ran out to look and found them all withered. Han Feizi tells of the farmer of Song who saw a rabbit run into a tree stump and break its neck, so he put down his plow and waited by the stump for another rabbit to do the same. Zhuangzi himself tells a story about a man of Song who traveled to the southern state of Yue to sell ceremonial caps, only to find that the people of Yue cut their hair short and tattooed their bodies and had no use for caps at all.

There is something fitting about the fact that the most profound critic of conventional wisdom in Chinese history came from the place that conventional wisdom laughed at. Zhuangzi knew what it was to be considered a provincial, a misfit, an outsider. He turned that marginal position into a vantage point. From the edge of the world, the center looks different.

Song was also a state in trouble. During Zhuangzi's lifetime it was squeezed between larger powers, including Qi to the northeast, Wei to the northwest, and Chu to the south. Its last ruler, King Kang, also known by his personal name Yan, was remembered by later historians as a tyrant of almost legendary cruelty, a man who shot arrows at the sky and lashed the earth to show his contempt for Heaven, and who cut open the backs of hunchbacks to see what was inside. In 286 BCE, the state of Qi, in alliance with others, invaded Song and destroyed it. Song disappeared from the map. By coincidence, or perhaps not, 286 BCE is also the traditional date of Zhuangzi's death. If the dates are correct, he lived to see his homeland overrun and erased. We do not know whether he died before or after the catastrophe, and nothing in the text mentions it. But when we read his reflections on the fragility of every human arrangement, his insistence that states rise and fall like waves and that the wise do not tie their happiness to them, we should remember that he was writing in a country that was, quite literally, about to vanish.

The Age of Warring States

The larger world around Song was one of the most turbulent and creative periods in human history. The Zhou dynasty, which had ruled since the eleventh century BCE, had long since lost real power. The Zhou kings still performed their rituals in their shrunken domain, but the real power belonged to the great territorial states that had once been their vassals. By Zhuangzi's time, the leaders of those states had abandoned even the pretense of loyalty and were calling themselves kings.

War was the defining fact of the age. Earlier conflicts had been fought by aristocratic charioteers according to elaborate codes of honor. Now war had become industrial in scale. States built long defensive walls, conscripted massive infantry armies, and equipped them with iron weapons and the newly invented crossbow. Historical sources speak of battles in which tens of thousands, even hundreds of thousands, were killed. Whatever the exaggerations in such numbers, the scale of suffering was real. Peasant families saw their sons marched away and never return. Fields lay untended. Famine followed armies.

Zhuangzi's book carries the marks of this world everywhere, often in its most casual details. There are crippled men whose feet were cut off as legal punishment. There are rulers who use their people as fuel for their ambitions. There is the sharp observation that a man who steals a belt buckle is executed while a man who steals a whole state becomes its lord, and that benevolence and righteousness are then found at the lord's gate. There is the advice of Confucius, in one story, to his eager disciple Yan Hui, who wants to go and reform a violent young ruler: be very careful, because you are going to the court of a man who has a habit of killing those who correct him. The mood of the Inner Chapters is not one of serene detachment from a peaceful world. It is the calm of someone who has looked steadily at a world of violence and found a way not to be devoured by it.

The Hundred Schools

The same chaos that made life dangerous made thought indispensable. Rulers fighting for survival needed ideas: about government, about war, about the economy, about how to secure the loyalty of their people and the obedience of their officials. A new class of educated men, many of them from minor aristocratic families that had lost their lands, traveled from court to court offering their services. Some were practical administrators. Some were diplomats and strategists. Some were philosophers who believed that the world could be saved only by a complete transformation of its values.

Later historians grouped these thinkers into schools. The Confucians, or *Ru* (儒), followed the teachings of Confucius, who had died about a century before Zhuangzi was born. They emphasized ritual propriety, the cultivation of virtue, the proper relationships between ruler and subject, father and son, and the restoration of the ideal order of the early Zhou kings. The Mohists, followers of Mozi, rejected the Confucian emphasis on ritual and family partiality. They taught "impartial caring" (*jian'ai*, 兼愛), condemned offensive war, attacked expensive funerals and court music as wasteful, and developed sophisticated methods of argument. The so-called Logicians or School of Names, including Zhuangzi's friend Huizi, explored paradoxes about language, sameness, and difference. Others developed theories of statecraft, agriculture, cosmology, and military strategy.

In the state of Qi, the kings established what amounted to a government-funded academy near the Ji Gate of their capital. The Jixia Academy attracted scholars from all over China, who received stipends and lodging and were free to debate. Some of the most important thinkers of the age passed through it. Zhuangzi was apparently never among them, though he certainly knew the ideas that circulated there.

The most famous Confucian of Zhuangzi's own generation was Mencius, who lived from roughly 372 to 289 BCE, making the two men almost exact contemporaries. The contrast between them is instructive. Mencius spent much of his life traveling from court to court, accompanied by a retinue of disciples and carriages, lecturing kings on benevolent government. He met King Hui of Liang and King Xuan of Qi, the very rulers whose names Sima Qian uses to date Zhuangzi. The book of his conversations, the *Mencius*, records his debates, his travels, his relationships with rulers and students in considerable detail. We know where he went, whom he argued with, how he mourned his mother.

Of Zhuangzi we know almost none of this. Strikingly, neither man ever mentions the other. Two of the greatest minds of the fourth century BCE lived at the same time, in neighboring regions, moving among the same courts and the same debates, and neither left a single word about the other. Scholars have offered many explanations. Perhaps Zhuangzi was simply too obscure for Mencius to notice. Perhaps Zhuangzi deliberately avoided the circuit of courts where Mencius moved. Perhaps their circles never overlapped. Whatever the reason, the silence is eloquent. Mencius was a public man who sought to influence the powerful. Zhuangzi was a private man who refused.

The Poor Philosopher

If the historical record is thin, the *Zhuangzi* itself contains a number of stories in which Zhuangzi appears as a character. We cannot treat these as reliable biography. Many come from the later chapters, and all of them are shaped by the purposes of the storyteller. But taken together, they give us a consistent portrait of the man as his followers remembered him, and that portrait is vivid and endearing.

The Zhuangzi of these stories is poor. In one, he goes to visit the king of Wei wearing a patched robe of coarse cloth, with his sandals tied on with string. The king asks him, "Master, why are you so wretched?"

Zhuangzi corrects him. “I am poor,” he says, “not wretched. When a scholar has the Way and its virtue but cannot put them into practice, that is wretchedness. Torn clothes and broken shoes are poverty, not wretchedness. This is what is called not meeting with the right times.” He then compares himself to a monkey that leaps freely among tall trees but becomes clumsy and frightened when forced into a thicket of thorns. It is not that its muscles have changed, but that its situation does not allow it to use its abilities. “Now if one lives under benighted rulers and disordered ministers,” he concludes, “how could one hope to avoid wretchedness?”

In another story, Zhuangzi’s family is so short of food that he goes to borrow grain from an official called the Marquis of Jianhe. The marquis replies grandly that he will soon be collecting taxes from his fief, and then he will lend Zhuangzi three hundred pieces of gold. Zhuangzi flushes with anger and tells a story. On his way here, he says, he heard a voice calling from the middle of the road. He looked around and saw a carp lying in the dried-up rut of a cart track. “What are you doing here?” he asked. The carp said, “I am a minister of the waves of the Eastern Sea. Could you possibly give me a dipper of water to keep me alive?” Zhuangzi said, “Certainly. I am about to travel south to visit the kings of Wu and Yue. I will divert the waters of the West River and send them to meet you. Will that do?” The carp flushed with anger. “I have lost my element. I have no place to be. All I need is a dipper of water and I could survive. If you give me an answer like that, you might as well look for me in the dried fish shop.”

The story is funny, and it is sharp. It skewers every grand promise that arrives too late, every bureaucrat who answers immediate need with future plans. It also tells us, if we take it even half seriously, that the man who refused a minister’s post knew what it was to be hungry.

In still another story, a man from Song named Cao Shang returns from a diplomatic mission to the powerful state of Qin, where he has so pleased the king that he has been given a hundred carriages. He comes to see Zhuangzi and gloats. “Living in a narrow alley in a poor

neighborhood, weaving sandals to get by, with a withered neck and a sallow face, that is where I would fall short. But to win over the ruler of a state of ten thousand chariots in a single meeting and come home with a hundred carriages behind me, that is where I excel." Zhuangzi answers that he has heard that when the king of Qin falls ill, he summons physicians. The one who lances a boil receives one carriage. The one who licks his hemorrhoids receives five. The lower the service, the more carriages one receives. "Did you perhaps treat his hemorrhoids? How else would you have gotten so many carriages? Go away!"

The poverty in these stories is not romanticized. It is real, uncomfortable, sometimes humiliating. But it is chosen, or at least accepted, as the price of not licking anyone's hemorrhoids. The figure who emerges is neither a saint who has transcended material needs nor a resentful failure, but a man with a sharp tongue, a sense of humor, and a clear understanding of what success in his world actually required.

A Friend Named Huizi

The most important relationship in Zhuangzi's life, at least in the record left to us, was his friendship with Huizi, also known as Hui Shi. Huizi was a celebrated logician and statesman who served for a time as a chief minister in the state of Wei, also called Liang, under King Hui. He was famous for his paradoxes, ten of which are preserved in the final chapter of the *Zhuangzi*: "The sun at noon is the sun declining; the creature born is the creature dying." "I go to Yue today and arrived there yesterday." "The south has no limit and yet has a limit." "Heaven and earth are one body." He was, by all accounts, enormously learned. The last chapter says his books would fill five carts.

In the *Zhuangzi*, Huizi plays the role of the perfect sparring partner. He is clever, serious, practical, and invariably outmaneuvered. He tells Zhuangzi that his words are big and useless, like a great gnarled

tree that no carpenter will touch. Zhuangzi turns the insult into a parable. He challenges Zhuangzi's claim to know that fish are happy. Zhuangzi turns the argument inside out. He is the one who comes to condole when Zhuangzi's wife dies and finds his friend drumming on a basin.

Their friendship had its edges. One story tells how, when Huizi was chief minister in Liang, Zhuangzi went to visit him. Someone told Huizi that Zhuangzi was coming to replace him as minister. Huizi panicked and had the capital searched for three days and three nights. Zhuangzi then came to see him and told him a story about a magnificent bird, the *yuanchu*, a kind of phoenix, that flies from the southern sea to the northern sea, perching only on the sacred wutong tree, eating only the fruit of the bamboo, drinking only from the sweetest springs. An owl that had found a rotten rat looked up as the phoenix passed overhead and screeched, "Shoo!" "Now," Zhuangzi said, "do you want to shoo me away from your state of Liang?"

And yet, when Huizi died, Zhuangzi grieved deeply. Passing his old friend's grave, he turned to his companions and told them about a plasterer from the city of Ying who got a speck of plaster on the tip of his nose, thin as a fly's wing. He asked his friend the carpenter Shi to slice it off. Carpenter Shi whirled his axe like the wind and sliced the plaster away, leaving the nose untouched, while the man from Ying stood without flinching. Later, a ruler heard of this and asked Carpenter Shi to perform the feat for him. The carpenter said, "I could once do it, but my partner died long ago." "Since Huizi died," Zhuangzi said, "I have had no partner. I have had no one to talk to."

It is one of the most moving passages in the book, and it tells us something essential about the man. Zhuangzi's philosophy is full of talk about forgetting, about wandering beyond the bounds, about not clinging to anything. But the man who wrote it needed a friend to argue with, and when that friend was gone, something in him went silent. His freedom was not the cold freedom of someone who needs

no one. It was the warm freedom of someone who loved deeply and still refused to be owned.

Why the Silence Fits

It can be frustrating to know so little about a person who has meant so much to so many. We would love to know how Zhuangzi met his wife, what his children became, whether he had students who studied with him for years, what he looked like, how he died. The historical record gives us almost nothing.

But there is something deeply appropriate about this obscurity. Zhuangzi's whole philosophy is a critique of the desire for name and fame. In the first chapter of his book he writes that "the perfect person has no self, the spirit person has no achievement, and the sage has no name." The great man, in his stories, is often someone no one has heard of: a cook, a wheelwright, a hunchback, a madman who sings at Confucius's gate, a fisherman. The famous figures, kings and ministers and celebrated philosophers, are frequently the ones who understand the least.

A Zhuangzi with a detailed biography, a famous career, and a carefully preserved list of achievements would be, in a sense, a contradiction of himself. Instead, he slipped through history the way his perfect person slips through the world, leaving almost no trace except the words that still carry his voice. He became, in the end, what he had praised: the useless tree that no carpenter would cut, and that therefore lived to shade a thousand oxen.

This means that we must come to know him primarily through his text. The rest of this book will do exactly that. But before we turn to the great images of the Inner Chapters, we must look more closely at the one moment in his life that all the sources agree on, the moment that defined him for posterity: the day the king's messengers came, and he said no.

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