

## Introduction

Although his writings are peculiar, there's no harm in how they ramble and turn; although his rhetoric is irregular, it's extraordinary and worth appreciating; what's substantial in it is inexhaustible. Above he wandered with the maker of things, while below he befriended those who put life and death outside themselves, acknowledging no ending or beginning. — *Zhuāngzǐ* §33.6

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is an anthology of short, anonymous writings produced and compiled in China between the late fourth and the early second century BCE. It is one of the world's great literary treasures and the single most important source for early Daoist philosophy.<sup>1</sup> The text has exerted a profound influence on Chinese thought, literature, and culture, inspiring philosophy, poetry, idioms, proverbs, and visual art. It belongs on any short list of the great classics of world literature and philosophy, ranking among the most widely read and cited philosophical texts in the Chinese tradition, rivaling the Confucian *Analects* and the *Dàodéjīng*. Many of its stories have become familiar, beloved elements of Chinese culture, such as the butterfly dream (§2.17), the happy fish (§17.7), the frog in the well (§17.4), the giant bird who is mocked by a dove and cicada (§1.1), the useless tree (§4.4), or the cook who teaches his prince how to follow the Way and 'nurture life' (§3.2). Among its diverse parables, dialogues, and discussions can be found material of the highest philosophical interest, representing the culmination of critical, skeptical reflection on ethics, knowledge, language, political authority, self-identity, metaphysics, and the Way (*dào*) in classical Chinese thought.

### *Historical Context*

The bulk of the writings collected in the *Zhuāngzǐ* were likely produced during the third century BCE, the earliest portions of the material perhaps dating from the late fourth century, during the reputed lifetime of Zhuāng Zhōu, the anthology's namesake, and the latest from the early decades of the Western Hàn dynasty (202–9 BCE). Much of the material is thus probably from the last several decades of ancient China's 'Warring States' period (481–221 BCE), the culmination of the lively, dynamic period of intellectual ferment known as the 'hundred schools of thought'.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the Warring States period—up until the Qín dynasty unification in 221 BCE—the early Chinese world was divided among numerous *de facto* independent states, the more powerful of which competed for military, economic, and cultural dominance. The rivalry between major states and the administration of government through numerous

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<sup>1</sup> Other major sources include the *Dàodéjīng*, books 36–38 and 49 of *Guānzǐ*, selected sections of *Lǚ's Annals*, the *Huáinánzǐ*, and the *Lièzǐ*.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed account of the philosophy of this period, see C. Fraser, *Late Classical Chinese Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023).

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

smaller fiefs provided extensive opportunities for members of the educated ‘scholar-gentleman’ or ‘officer’ class (the *shì* 士) to find positions as state officials, political counsellors, bureaucrats, scholars-in-residence, and other acknowledged ‘worthies’, who might receive a stipend or land from a regional lord. From this class emerged advocates of numerous traditions of thought and practice, or distinct conceptions of ‘the Way’ (*dào*), the appropriate path of personal, social, and political life. The most prominent such members of the ‘scholar-gentry’ class were probably Confucius (Kǒng Qiū, d. 479 BCE) and Mòzǐ (fl. ca. 430 BCE) both of whom attracted fellowships of followers devoted to study, practice, and promulgation of their ethical and political ideals. These fellowships grew and spread across the major states over multiple generations. Devotees of the tradition of teachings and practices with which Confucius identified called themselves ‘Rú’ (‘Erudites’), while adherents of Mòzǐ’s path were known as ‘Mò’ (Mohists). Both were renowned for their commitment to ethical cultivation, focusing on the virtues of ‘benevolence’ (*rén*) and ‘righteousness’ (*yì*). The Ruists emphasized the connections between these virtues and ritualized norms of propriety; the Mohists tied them to an ideal of ‘inclusive care’ for all. Both groups adopted a practice of composing and collecting together texts by which to record and circulate their teachings.

The Ruists and Mohists were the largest, most prominent fellowships devoted to competing conceptions of the Way, but they shared the scene with many other schools of thought, ethical teachers, and social activists. Rival scholar-practitioners and their circles of followers advocated diverse views on ethics, politics, knowledge, metaphysics, and other subjects, sometimes meeting to challenge one another’s views, sometimes debating them in the courts of regional lords. The *Zhuāngzǐ* itself mentions a number of such figures by name, such as Yáng Zhū, who supposedly propounded an ethics devoted to care of the self; Sòng Xíng, an anti-aggression activist who held that a fulfilling life can be attained through a simple, austere lifestyle; Gōngsūn Lóng, a brilliant but frivolous disputer; and Huì Shī, a renowned dialectician, one-time high official in Wèi, and, according to a series of (probably fictional) dialogues, *Zhuāngzǐ*’s best friend.

Other figures in the intellectual landscape were associated with the famous Jìxià ‘academy’ or assembly of scholars sponsored by the state of Qí. The major Ruist thinker Xúnzǐ spent some years at Jìxià, and Zōu Yǎn, proponent of a conception of the Way grounded in the patterns of *yīn-yáng*, or negative and positive natural energies, may have been based there. Book 33 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, ‘All the World’—the earliest retrospective overview of earlier thinkers in the Chinese tradition—mentions several thinker-practitioners thought to have been resident at Jìxià, such as Péng Méng, Tián Pián, and Shèn Dào. Following the example of Jìxià, other regional rulers also convened convocations of scholars to serve as advisors and to enhance the prestige of their regime. The largest such assembly was sponsored by Lǚ Bùwéi (d. 235 BCE), prime minister of Qín, whose scholarly retainers produced a grand compendium of writings entitled *Lǚ’s Annals*.

*Zhuāngzǐ* stories also mention numerous otherwise unknown—and most likely fictional—teachers, bands of practitioners, and circles of like-minded friends. In §5.1, for instance, a man named Wáng Tái is said to have as many disciples as Confucius, who considers Wáng a sage. In §5.2, a prime minister is depicted studying under a mysterious master named ‘Uncle Dark Nobody’. In §§6.5 and 6.6, two circles of friends bond with each

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

other over their shared conception of the Way. In §21.1, a man named Tián Zífāng impresses a regional lord with a description of his teacher, who can enlighten people merely by changing his expression. Although these figures are probably invented, the depictions of them and other sagely characters attest to a context in which proponents and adherents of different visions of the Way joined together in learning and practicing their beliefs while regularly engaging in discussion with followers, associates, aristocrats, and opponents.

The *Zhuāngzǐ* writings were thus produced against the backdrop of a vibrant period of intellectual, ethical, and political activity in which a range of schools, circles, and lineages pursued different paths of inquiry and practice. This rich, diverse context is reflected in the material itself. Several sections of book 2, ‘Discourse on Evening Things Out’, present critical responses to the Ruists and Mohists, for example. Other sections of ‘Evening Things Out’ employ technical terminology that aligns with that of the Mohist dialectics and allude to the claims of disputers such as Huì Shī and Gōngsūn Lóng, who is also parodied in §17.4. Sections such as §18.1 and §22.1 elaborate themes from the *Dàodéjīng*, while §25.10d attests to a lively metaphysical debate among otherwise unknown figures. Numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* passages—§6.8, for example—criticize prevailing ethical values, such as the virtues of benevolence and righteousness, while others—such as §7.2—debunk widely affirmed political advice. Yáng Zhū and the Mohists come in for criticism in passages such as §8.1, while the Ruists are mercilessly roasted in stories such as §6.6 and §26.7.

If the *Zhuāngzǐ* critiques and responds to rival views of its time, from what standpoint does it do so? With what tradition or orientation were the voices in the *Zhuāngzǐ* affiliated? Among the various schools of thought during the Warring States, only two—the Ruists and the Mohists—identified themselves by widely used labels. The designations we now use for other doctrinal orientations—labels such as ‘Daoist’ or ‘Legalist’—were later, retrospective inventions, perhaps introduced by the Hàn dynasty archivist Sīmǎ Tán (d. 110 BCE). ‘All the World’, book 33 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, presents a survey of Warring States thought that identifies several sets of views later regarded as ‘Daoist’, but it distinguishes them into three different lines without using the label ‘Daoist’ (*dàojiā*) for any of them (see §§33.4, 33.5, and 33.6).

The writers of various parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* thus would not have thought of themselves as ‘Daoists’, and indeed on reading through their texts it seems unlikely any general label existed for their family of doctrinal outlooks or orientations. Some may not even have drawn sharp boundaries between their conception of the Way and those of other groups. Surprisingly, by far the most frequently occurring character in *Zhuāngzǐ* stories and dialogues is not Zhuāngzǐ himself but Confucius, who in many instances is used as an authorial spokesman to present the text’s point of view (see, for example, §§4.1, 4.2, 5.1, 5.4, and 20.7). These positive depictions of Confucius raise the possibility that the writers of some *Zhuāngzǐ* passages may have seen themselves as presenting ideas compatible with the Ruist tradition. At the same time, many other *Zhuāngzǐ* passages reject Ruist values and denigrate the figure of Confucius (for example, §§2.14, 5.3, and 6.6).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As this selection of examples shows, material that depicts Confucius positively is sometimes placed adjacent to or near material that depicts him negatively. In §5.4, the figure of Confucius is used as an authorial spokesman; in §5.3, he is dismissed as someone ‘punished by heaven’. In §20.4, he is mocked and sent off to live in the wilderness; in §20.7 he is the voice of Zhuangist wisdom.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

From our limited but growing knowledge of how texts were produced and transmitted during the Warring States and early Hàn periods, that the *Zhuāngzǐ* writings were preserved, passed down, and eventually placed in the Hàn royal archives attests to the existence of circles of scholar-practitioners who composed, collated, and transmitted the texts and perhaps also of readers or collectors who curated, recopied, and circulated them. Perhaps some of these circles resembled those depicted in the stories about Wáng Tái (§5.1), Uncle Dark Nobody (§5.2), and the oddball friends (§§6.5 and 6.6). Quotations from the *Zhuāngzǐ* in *Lǚ's Annals* (c. 239 BCE) suggest that members of such circles were among the scholars retained by Lǚ Bùwéi around the middle of the third century BCE, and the extensive borrowing from the *Zhuāngzǐ* in the rhapsodies of Jiǎ Yì (200–168 BCE) and especially in the *Huáinánzǐ* (c. 139 BCE) indicates that lineages of transmission persisted a century later. Given the freewheeling, broad-minded orientation of much Zhuangist thought, these circles and lineages were probably loose associations of like-minded thinkers or devotees, not disciplined organizations, and given the range of different outlooks present in *Zhuāngzǐ*, there were probably multiple such groups. We can think of these as forming a network of intersecting traditions of thought, practice, and perhaps literary appreciation. This network was apparently active and popular in the late Warring States and early Hàn periods.

### *The Zhuāngzǐ*

A first step in approaching the *Zhuāngzǐ* is to understand that, like the other pre-Hàn ‘masters’ anthologies—the Confucian *Analects*, the *Mòzǐ*, the *Guǎnzǐ*, and other volumes named after the ‘various masters’—it is not a ‘book’, in the sense of a coherent, deliberately produced work by a particular author. Nor is it the collected works of some great thinker, the person after whom it is named. It is a unique, anonymous anthology of brief, diverse writings assembled as a result of various quirks of early Chinese manuscript culture and the proclivities of its writers and early transmitters.<sup>4</sup>

At the time the *Zhuāngzǐ* was catalogued by Hàn dynasty archivists, it was a collection of fifty-two physically separate bamboo-strip scrolls (*piān*), the content of which I will refer to as ‘books’. Each of these scrolls would have been similar in various respects to a notebook or a commonplace book, into which someone had recopied memorable bits of writing, whether their own or others’. (The ‘books’ thus were not ‘chapters’, in the modern sense, as ‘chapter’ implies that the content is an integral part of a larger work.) The *Zhuāngzǐ* as a whole was a collection of such notebooks or commonplace books, in effect a small library. This collection had been assembled gradually, most likely in multiple stages, over the third century BCE and the early decades of the second century. The contents of the scrolls were the product of a long process of composing, editing, copying, recopying, and merging various short pieces of writing. This process would have been carried on through the efforts of numerous unknown teachers, disciples, writers, editors, and later readers, who wrote,

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<sup>4</sup> For an informative overview of early Chinese manuscript culture and processes of text production and transmission, see M. Lewis, *Writing and Authority in Early China* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999). For reflections on the formation of the *Zhuāngzǐ* itself, see E. Klein, ‘Early Chinese Textual Culture and the *Zhuangzi* Anthology: An Alternative Model for Authorship’, K. Chong, ed., *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 13–42.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

revised, copied, compiled, and shared the material. The collection as a whole was probably formed by merging several smaller collections, perhaps with geographically distinct origins. The writings themselves were anonymous, as the cultural practice of claiming and acknowledging authorship developed only later, during the Hàn dynasty. The material was highly composite, many of the scrolls themselves comprising multiple independent essays, stories, and dialogues likely produced by various hands, at various times, for various purposes. Content from different sources could be copied onto the same scroll, as illustrated by *Zhuāngzǐ* book 11, which presents two or more distinct ethical and political stances.

The earliest hard evidence of the existence of material contained in the extant *Zhuāngzǐ* is that *Lǚ's Annals*, a text firmly dated to 239 BCE, quotes from or shares parts of more than a dozen passages found in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.<sup>5</sup> One *Annals* passage (§13.3) attributes to *Zhuāngzǐ* words similar to the comment in §19.4 about becoming increasingly nervous as the stakes of a competition become higher. The *Annals* thus testifies that material now spread across more than half a dozen *Zhuāngzǐ* books was in circulation among the scholars assembled by Lǚ Bùwéi around the middle of the third century. Of course, this testimony shows only that some, not necessarily all, of the content of the *Zhuāngzǐ* was in circulation and that of the material in circulation some, not necessarily all, was attributed to *Zhuāngzǐ*.<sup>6</sup>

The next firm date we have recording the growth of the collection is c. 165 BCE, when a selection of texts that appear to be parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* were interred in a tomb at Shuānggǔduī, Fùyáng, in Ān Huī province, which was excavated in 1977.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the bamboo-strip scrolls recovered from the tomb were badly damaged by the weather, and most of the scrolls seem to have been broken or destroyed by ancient grave robbers, leaving only a few barely decipherable fragments. Still, it appears that the tomb may have originally contained material from what are now several different books of the *Zhuāngzǐ*.<sup>8</sup> A second excavated text, from a tomb at Zhāngjiāshān sealed in 167 BCE and excavated in 1983, attests to the existence of the Robber Zhí story, §29.1 in the transmitted *Zhuāngzǐ*.<sup>9</sup> It also

<sup>5</sup> The postface to the 'Almanacs', the first of the three divisions of the *Annals*, dates it to 239 BC. This division shares at least one anecdote with the *Zhuāngzǐ*, §24.6. The other two divisions were presumably completed later but before 235 BC, when Lǚ Bùwéi died. The *Zhuāngzǐ* sections I consider to be either quoted in or shared with the *Annals* are §§1.2 (*Annals* 22.5), 12.7 (20.2), 19.4 (13.3), 19.5 (14.8), 19.11 (19.5), 20.1 (14.8), 21.2 (18.3), 24.6 (1.4), 26.1 (14.8), and the several stories common to *Zhuāngzǐ* book 28 and the *Annals* (see the endnotes to book 28 in this volume). Other, partly parallel passages in my view can be explained equally well as alluding to shared idioms or other sources. The *Annals* passage that mentions Cook Dīng, for example (*Annals* 9.5), seems to me different enough from *Zhuāngzǐ* §3.2 that both might be elaborating on shared lore, rather than the *Annals* borrowing from *Zhuāngzǐ*.

<sup>6</sup> Liu contends that the *Annals* quotations indicate that the *Zhuāngzǐ* must have been completed by 239 BCE. Since the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus formed gradually, however, some portions could have been in circulation much earlier than others. See X. Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, W. Savage, tr. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1994), 52, 162, and the critical response in C. Fraser, *Review of Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, *Asian Philosophy* 7:2 (1997), 155–59.

<sup>7</sup> For details, see the summary of these materials in Klein, 'Early Chinese Textual Culture', 35–36, and Y. K. Lo, 'The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*', in K. Chong, ed., *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of the Zhuangzi* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 72–80.

<sup>8</sup> As Lo explains, the fragmentary condition of the excavated bamboo strips makes identification of these materials extremely tentative ('The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*', 74–80).

<sup>9</sup> Klein, 'Early Chinese Textual Culture', 38, and Lo, 'The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*', 72–73.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

suggests that the Robber Zhí story may have first circulated as a separate text before later being incorporated into the *Zhuāngzǐ* collection—after 167 BCE—a scenario that seems inherently plausible, given the story’s distinctive style, ethical stance, and length.

A major milestone by which to trace the evolution of the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a fixed collection of writings is the extensive borrowing of *Zhuāngzǐ* material in the *Huáinánzǐ*, a lengthy compendium produced by retainers to Liú Ān, prince of Huáinán, which was presented to the Hàn court in 139 BCE. The *Huáinánzǐ* reuses *Zhuāngzǐ* content in hundreds of places,<sup>10</sup> yet it explicitly quotes *Zhuāngzǐ* only once.<sup>11</sup> This treatment contrasts sharply with that given Lǎozǐ, the purported author of the *Dàodéjīng*, who is quoted extensively. A plausible explanation is that although the Huáinán circle obviously had copies of much or all of the material incorporated into the *Zhuāngzǐ*, they may not have regarded these writings as forming a fixed collection of texts attributed to *Zhuāngzǐ*. On the other hand, as Y. K. Lo points out,<sup>12</sup> the ‘Yào Luè’ overview appended to the *Huáinánzǐ* mentions ‘Lǎo-Zhuāng’ as a pair, apparently assigning *Zhuāngzǐ* the status of a figurehead for a body of texts, as Lǎozǐ was for the *Lǎozǐ* (*Dàodéjīng*). A plausible explanation of this pairing might be that over the long course of the production of the *Huáinánzǐ*, the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus acquired a status comparable to that of the *Lǎozǐ*. Harold Roth has plausibly conjectured that it was the Huáinán scholars who compiled the *Zhuāngzǐ*, assembling the fifty-two book version eventually placed in the Hàn imperial archive.<sup>13</sup> If that were the case, then we can see how *Zhuāngzǐ* materials might have been used extensively without attribution in the process of composing the *Huáinánzǐ* but then—perhaps as a result of the Huáinán scholars’ engagement with the material—compiled into and recognized as a distinct, named body of writings.

The biographical note on *Zhuāngzǐ* by Sīmǎ Tán in section 63 of the *Shǐ Jì* (*Records of the Grand Historian*, c. 91 BCE) describes him as having produced a large body of writing but mentions only ‘The Fisherman’ (now book 31 of the *Zhuāngzǐ*), ‘Robber Zhí’ (§29.1), and ‘Breaking into Chests’ (book 10), alluding also to Gēngsāng Chǔ (§23.1) and to anecdotes found in §17.5 and §32.9 of the extant edition. It gives no further information about the structure, content, or title of the *Zhuāngzǐ* collection as a whole. The much later *Hàn History* bibliographical catalogue (completed by 111 CE), based on the earlier work of Liú Xiàng (c. 26 BCE), records an edition of the *Zhuāngzǐ* comprising 52 books. This 52-book version is likely to have been the edition consulted by Guō Xiàng (252–312 CE), who produced the 33-book recension that has come down to us today. Guō’s aim in producing his recension appears to have been to provide a base text for his commentary, through which he presented his own thought, which he took to be an elaboration of ideas in the *Zhuāngzǐ*.

<sup>10</sup> H. Roth, ‘Who Compiled the Chuang Tzu?’ in H. Rosement, Jr., ed., *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts: Essays Dedicated to A. C. Graham* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), 118; Lo, ‘The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*’, 61–62.

<sup>11</sup> The quotation, in *Huáinánzǐ* chapter 12, is a variant of the lines in *Zhuāngzǐ* 1.1a about small knowing and the morning mushroom.

<sup>12</sup> Lo, ‘The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*’, 80.

<sup>13</sup> Roth, ‘Who Compiled the Chuang Tzu?’, 118–21. Klein proposes a scenario by which an edition produced by the Huáinán scholars could have come into the hands of Liú Xiàng. E. Klein, ‘Were There “Inner Chapters” in the Warring States? A New Examination of Evidence about the *Zhuangzi*’, *T’oung Pao* 96 (2011), 299–369.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

A number of editions of the *Zhuāngzǐ* were in circulation in Guō's time, of lengths varying from 26 to 52 books.<sup>14</sup> Guō consulted at least two of these, as he was familiar with the commentary in Xiàng Xiù's 26-book edition and he apparently worked from a 52-book edition. In a postface preserved in an ancient *Zhuāngzǐ* manuscript at Kōzanji temple in Kyoto, Japan, and quoted by the early Táng dynasty commentator Lù Démíng (ca. 550–630), Guō praises *Zhuāngzǐ*'s 'magnificent talent', which was 'renowned throughout the world', but complains that 'one-sided scholars, unable to comprehend his grand import, recklessly added peculiar expositions' to the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus, which were 'sophistical and motley' yet made up 'three parts in ten'.<sup>15</sup>

Some of this material, he reports, was bizarre or fantastic, 'like the Classic of Mountains and Rivers' or the 'Book of Dream Divination'. Some 'came from the Huáinán court' or 'disputed forms and names'. But in Guō's opinion all of these 'peculiar expositions' were 'vulgar and contrary in writing style, ultimately lacking depth or profundity, being merely difficult to understand, and thereby troubling later fools, causing them to get bogged down and lost'. Crucially, he gives titles for a handful of the offending writings, which he explains include both 'books' (*piān*) and 'sections' or 'pieces' (*shǒu*). These examples make it clear that Guō's editorial work included not only discarding entire 'books' but excising certain 'sections' within 'books'. He explains that he omitted these writings from his edition because he considered them unreliable as sources of *Zhuāngzǐ*'s 'thought' or 'intention'. So, he says, from among the corpus he selected the best parts, which attained 'completeness with the overall whole', yielding a total of 33 books. Cutting 19 of 52 books of course amounts roughly to, as Guō indicates, three parts in ten. Guō's edition became popular—the later commentator Lù Démíng, who was in a position to consult a range of editions, considered it to 'best accord with Mr. *Zhuāng*'s import'—and over the centuries other editions gradually fell out of circulation.

### *Zhuāng Zhōu and Authorship*

The *Zhuāngzǐ* is traditionally attributed to a man named *Zhuāng Zhōu*, about whom so little is known that we can reasonably question whether he actually existed. Only a few bits of purportedly historical information about *Zhuāng* are available from ancient sources. The brief biographical note in the *Shǐ Jì* reports that he was from a place called Méng, where he was once an official in the 'Lacquer Garden', and that he lived at the same time as King Huì of Liǎng (reigned 369–319 BCE) and King Xuān of Qí (reigned 319–301 BCE). Appended to the entry for the *Zhuāngzǐ* in the *Hàn History* bibliographical catalogue (c. 111 CE) is a note saying he was from Sòng 宋, a small, central state, perhaps where Méng was located. These biographical details are open to question, however, since the *Shǐ Jì* presents *Zhuāng* as a

<sup>14</sup> See the tables in Klein, 'Were There "Inner Chapters"', 302, and Lo, 'The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*', 46. The source of this information is Lù Démíng's introductory remarks to his commentary on *Zhuāngzǐ*.

<sup>15</sup> I translate from the version of the Kōzanji postface reproduced in Chiang Lung-Hsiang 姜龍翔, 'Further Inquiry Regarding the Authenticity of the Guō Xiàng "Zhuāngzǐ Preface"' 郭象〈莊子序〉真偽問題續探, 《國文學報》48 (2010), 35–64. Chiang provides a detailed overview of issues surrounding the authenticity of the preface traditionally attributed to Guō Xiàng and introduces new arguments in support of attributing the Kōzanji postface to him instead.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

follower of the teachings of Lǎozǐ, for whom it gives a more detailed biography, most of which consists of unfounded legend. The details reported for Zhuāng Zhōu could similarly be mere legend.

The *Shǐ Jì* describes Zhuāng as having produced voluminous writings, ‘mostly consisting of allegory’. Specifically, it credits him with writing ‘The Fisherman’ (*Zhuāngzǐ* §31.1), ‘Robber Zhí’ (§29.1), and ‘Breaking into Chests’ (book 10) ‘to belittle the followers of Confucius and elucidate the arts of Lǎozǐ’. Although all three of these texts indeed vilify Ruist ideas, only one of them—‘Breaking into Chests’—actually has any noteworthy affinity with the *Lǎozǐ*. Sīmǎ Tán praises Zhuāng’s writing skill and describes his words as ‘boundless like an ocean’ but remarks that his style amounts to ‘self-indulgence to suit himself’. He then presents a story that fuses elements from two anecdotes found in §17.5 and §32.9 of the received edition to illustrate how no ruler could employ Zhuāng. Like other *Zhuāngzǐ* tales about Zhuāng Zhōu, these stories are probably apocryphal.

Outside of the *Shǐ Jì*, one potential piece of evidence for the existence of Zhuāng Zhōu as a historical person is that ‘Resolving Blinkering’, book 21 of the *Xúnzǐ* (c. 250 BCE), includes him among a group of historical figures whom it criticizes for purportedly one-sided doctrines. The other figures mentioned are Mò Dí, Sòng Xíng, Shèn Dào, Shēn Bùhài, and Huì Shī. A plausible argument can be made for the historicity of each of these figures. Since he is included among them, then, perhaps *Zhuāngzǐ* is likely to be a historical figure as well.<sup>16</sup> However, a similar litany of criticisms in ‘Discourse on Heaven’, book 17 of the *Xúnzǐ*, deprecates the legendary—and likely fictional—figure Lǎozǐ alongside the purportedly historical figures Shèn Dào, Mò Dí, and Sòng Xíng.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, ‘Nothing Improper’, book 3 of the *Xúnzǐ*, criticizes Robber Zhí, a mythical character, alongside Huì Shī and Dèng Xī, supposedly historical figures. Clearly, then, the *Xúnzǐ* sometimes treats fictional or legendary persons as figureheads for doctrinal stances or value orientations it criticizes. That the *Xúnzǐ* mentions *Zhuāngzǐ* alongside several historical figures thus is not necessarily evidence for his historicity.

Are there other considerations supporting the historicity of *Zhuāngzǐ* that do not apply to the case of Lǎozǐ? One difference is that *Shǐ Jì* 63 places Lǎozǐ in the sixth century BCE (and says he lived to be 160 or 200 years old), far earlier than our current best estimates as to the dating of the *Lǎozǐ* (mid-fourth to mid-third century). By contrast, the approximate dates it assigns to Zhuāng Zhōu correspond roughly to a plausible conjecture as to the dating of the earliest parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus.

Another difference lies in the names of the figures. ‘Lǎozǐ’, or ‘Old Master’, seems almost transparently a name invented to serve as a figurehead for a mysterious book of wisdom.<sup>18</sup> The name ‘Zhuāng Zhōu’, on the other hand, calls for explanation. Why call the collection *Zhuāngzǐ*? Why compose so many stories about him? Why attribute remarks to him?<sup>19</sup> The simplest explanation may be that a person named Zhuāng Zhōu indeed was

<sup>16</sup> Lo argues along these lines (‘The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*’, 66).

<sup>17</sup> Of course, whoever wrote this *Xúnzǐ* passage may have believed that Lǎozǐ was a historical person, but the only evidence they could have had for this belief was traditional lore.

<sup>18</sup> *Shǐ Jì* 63 almost seems to acknowledge the implausibility of the name, as it claims that Lǎozǐ’s surname was actually Lǐ.

<sup>19</sup> Outside of anecdotes or dialogues, stand-alone remarks are attributed to *Zhuāngzǐ* in §§13.2, 25.6,



Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

involved in producing some early portion of the material—perhaps by writing it himself, perhaps by mentoring a circle of followers who wrote it—and that he was a colourful enough figure to inspire a genre of tales about him. This explanation is partly conjectural, of course, and our degree of confidence in it can only be low. Moreover, it is unlikely we will ever pin down the parts of the corpus in which Zhuāng might have had a hand, because the practices by which the texts were produced, edited, and circulated have thoroughly obscured any traces of authorship and shuffled material of different provenance together.<sup>20</sup>

The differences between how the *Xúnzǐ* and the *Shǐ Jì* treat Zhuāngzǐ are instructive, I suggest, regarding the implications of the Hàn dynasty attribution of the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus to Zhuāng Zhōu. For the *Xúnzǐ*, Zhuāng stands for a cluster of reasonably well-delineated ideas, while for the *Shǐ Jì* he stands for a broad genre of writing. The *Xúnzǐ* criticizes Zhuāngzǐ for being ‘blinkerred’ by attending to ‘Heaven’ without recognizing the importance of ‘the human’ and thus excessively focusing on ‘responsiveness’ to things while overlooking the value of applying initiative to change them.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not we find this criticism persuasive, it reflects themes—the relation between ‘Heaven’ or ‘Nature’ and human activity and the value of adapting to circumstances rather than struggling against them—that are indeed found in a significant portion of *Zhuāngzǐ* writings and could, in principle, have been associated during Xúnzǐ’s lifetime with a historical Zhuāngzǐ, if indeed there was such a person.<sup>22</sup> Xúnzǐ or his circle of students seem to have either read mid-third-century material later incorporated into the *Zhuāngzǐ* or heard about its ideas from someone familiar with them.

Sīmǎ Tán’s ascription of the Robber Zhí dialogue (§29.1) and the fisherman dialogue (§31.1) to Zhuāng signals a different sort of acquaintance with and use of the text’s namesake. On the basis of formal features, literary style, and the Zhāngjiāshān archeological findings, scholars today generally consider these two works among the chronologically latest parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus, dating probably to the early decades of the Western Hàn, roughly a century after Zhuāng Zhōu is supposed to have died. Moreover, aside from their critical attitude toward Confucius, these two stories are philosophically dissimilar from each other. Since Sīmǎ Tán ascribes both of them to Zhuāngzǐ, it appears he is employing Zhuāng mainly as a figurehead for a loose genre of writing—specifically, as he indicates, writing aligned with Lǎozǐ against Ruism. He displays no concrete knowledge of ideas from texts that a historical Zhuāngzǐ could actually have been associated with.

As the contrast between the *Xúnzǐ* and *Shǐ Jì* on this point suggests, Hàn dynasty readers may have attributed the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus to Zhuāng Zhōu with little or no knowledge of who composed the material or of specific philosophical theses associated with Zhuāng. The significance of the attribution may have been simply to label a body of literature

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26.8, and 32.3b.

<sup>20</sup> As Lo says, “There is no empirical evidence to prove beyond any reasonable doubt that Zhuang Zhou personally composed any particular part of our received version of the *Zhuangzi*” (“The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*”, 88).

<sup>21</sup> I base this summary of the Xunzian criticism on lines 21/22–24 and 17/44–46 of *A Concordance to Hsun Tzu*, Harvard-Yenching Institute Sinological Index Series, Supplement no. 22 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966).

<sup>22</sup> Intriguingly, however, these themes are not especially prominent in stories or dialogues in which Zhuāngzǐ appears as a character.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

expressing a general orientation or sensibility of thought that contrasted with other bodies of literature or orientations of thought.

As we saw, the *Zhuāngzǐ* materials were probably compiled into a fixed corpus attributed to Zhuāng in the Hàn, perhaps in the middle of the second century, around the time the *Huáinánzǐ* was finished. The Zhāngjiāshān archeological findings suggest that several decades into the Hàn dynasty (167 BCE), the Robber Zhí story was still circulating separately from other parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Zhuāngzǐ was firmly associated with some of the *Zhuāngzǐ* material before 239 BCE, when *Lǚ's Annals* attributed to him a remark in §19.4. Because of this association, he may also have become associated with further proto-*Zhuāngzǐ* material and become a stock character for use in whimsical stories. Some of the growing body of material may have been included because of various family resemblances in its content, some because of shared broad tendencies, such as opposition to Ruism, and some almost accidentally, because one reader or another chose to recopy it into a commonplace book alongside other writings they admired.

Inspired by an intriguing detail from the texts excavated at Fùyáng, Esther Klein has tentatively proposed a model for how material from a variety of sources may have been copied and collected together to form a growing body of materials eventually attributed to *Zhuāngzǐ*.<sup>23</sup> Among the more legible fragments recovered at Fùyáng is a version of the tale of Lord Yuán and the divine tortoise that now appears in *Zhuāngzǐ* §26.6. However, from the calligraphy on these fragments, it appears that at the time they were interred, they were not part of the same set of scrolls as the other proto-*Zhuāngzǐ* materials in the tomb. They seem to have belonged to a distinct collection of writings recorded in different handwriting. How, then, did the tortoise story end up in the *Zhuāngzǐ*? As Klein conjectures, imagine, before the death of the aristocratic occupant of the Fùyáng tomb, that visitors were permitted to browse his library and copy some of its manuscripts for their own use. Such visitors might select stories they admired from different scrolls or collections of scrolls and copy them together onto a single scroll of their own, which they might then add to their own library. An originally separate story, such as the divine tortoise, could have been copied onto the same scroll as proto-*Zhuāngzǐ* material and thus become part of a proto-*Zhuāngzǐ* collection. This sort of sharing, recopying, and mixing of materials from different sources was probably common in early Chinese manuscript culture. Obviously, for example, at some stage, someone copied the Robber Zhí story (§29.1), which in the Zhāngjiāshān manuscripts was a stand-alone text, onto a scroll together with the two dialogues (§§29.2, 29.3) that accompany it in the received text of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. Eventually, someone—perhaps scholars at the court of Huáinán—collated a large collection of such scrolls, perhaps rearranged and recopied them further, and titled them *Zhuāngzǐ*.

What did this title mean to Hàn dynasty readers, compilers, and collectors of texts? The case of the *Huáinánzǐ* itself is a revealing example. This compendium was composed during the Hàn by a team of scholars working under the patronage of Liú Ān, prince of Huáinán, who jointly gave it the title *Hóngliè*. Hàn dynasty archivists then retitled the work *Huáinánzǐ*—‘Master Huáinán’, referring to Liú Ān—in full knowledge that he was its patron,

<sup>23</sup> Klein, ‘Early Chinese Textual Culture’, 37.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

not its author. To Hàn dynasty compilers or archivists, naming a collection of texts after a person was not necessarily an attribution of authorship, in the sense of expressing a conviction that the named person had written the texts. The title of the collection functioned more like a brand, trademark, or figurehead for a tradition or orientation of thought.<sup>24</sup> A helpful analogy is to think of the title *Zhuāngzǐ* as similar to that of a magazine, such as *Forbes*, *Maclean's*, or *The Economist*. These titles name a corpus of writing with a certain broad editorial orientation containing articles by a range of writers expressing different views.

### *The Significance of the 'Inner' Books*

At some point early in the transmission of the *Zhuāngzǐ*—no one knows when—an unknown editor or editors selected seven series of writings and recopied them onto seven bamboo-strip scrolls, to which they gave three-word, thematic titles. (The other books in the corpus have two-word titles taken from words in their first sentence.) No one knows why these particular writings were selected. Probably they were regarded as highlights of or a representative selection from the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus, addressing seven key themes. Perhaps some were regarded as especially old and treasured. For whatever reason, these scrolls were placed at the head of the collection and labeled the 'inner' (*nèi*) books. Neither the *Shǐ Jī* nor the *Hàn History* mentions this subdivision, but Lù Démíng informs us that all the editions in circulation at the time of Guō Xiàng's recension had seven 'inner' books. Some had a further division between 'outer' and 'mixed' books, as Guō's does, while some did not. It is not known whether the content of the seven 'inner' books in these editions was completely the same, nor whether the content of the 'inner' books in the Guō Xiàng recension is identical to that of earlier editions.<sup>25</sup> It is possible that Guō moved material in or out of the 'inner' books.

In the transmission of the *Zhuāngzǐ* down through Guō Xiàng's recension, the significance of the 'inner' designation seems to have been unrelated to views about authorship or chronology. It appears to have implied only that early editors considered these books in some sense the *Zhuāngzǐ* anthology's core. In the Kōzanji postface, Guō himself expresses the belief that his redaction excises material 'recklessly added' by later, benighted writers, the result being an edition that preserves only writings that reflect 'Zhuāngzǐ's thought'. As we saw, he emphasizes that the remaining material cohered into an 'overall whole'. The implication is that all of the material is equally 'Zhuāngzǐ's thought'. Guō says nothing to suggest he regards the 'inner' books as distinctive or privileged in any way.

Nor do Warring States and Hàn sources imply that the 'inner' books held any special status.<sup>26</sup> *Lǚ's Annals* contains at most two significant parallels from the 'inner' books (from §1.2 and §3.2) and well over a dozen from other books. Its one explicit quotation of *Zhuāngzǐ* is to a passage in an 'outer' book (§19.4). The rhapsodies of Jiǎ Yī (200–168 BCE) borrow extensively from *Zhuāngzǐ* materials but draw mainly on the outer books, with only three

<sup>24</sup> The trademark analogy is Lo's ('The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*', 88).

<sup>25</sup> Lo, 'The Authorship of the *Zhuangzi*', 50.

<sup>26</sup> This point has been persuasively argued by E. Bruce Brooks, 'The Disunity of the *Jwangdz* "Inner" Chapters', *Warring States Working Group Note* 114 (1996), and Klein, 'Were There "Inner Chapters"?'.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

loose parallels from the inner books.<sup>27</sup> The *Huáinánzǐ* (book 12) attributes one line from an ‘inner’ book to Zhuāngzǐ (a variant of the remark about ‘small knowing’ in §1.1a) but borrows extensively from many parts of the corpus. The *Shǐ Jì* mentions only several books now found in the ‘outer’ and ‘mixed’ divisions.<sup>28</sup> Early sources simply do not highlight the ‘inner’ books for special attention.

Beginning with the renowned Sòng dynasty man of letters Sū Shì (1037–1101), scholars started to express doubts about the authorship of various books of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, anachronistically projecting onto an early ‘masters’ collection a conception of authorship that would have been alien to its Warring States and early Hàn compilers and readers. Sū himself doubted that books 28–31—‘Yielding the Throne’, ‘Robber Zhí’, ‘A Persuasion on Swords’, and ‘The Fisherman’—could have been Zhuāng’s work on the grounds that two of them, ‘Throne’ and ‘Swords’, were too shallow, while ‘Robber’ and ‘Fisherman’ disparaged Confucius, whom in his view Zhuāngzǐ admired.<sup>29</sup> In the Míng dynasty, numerous scholars began to associate the ‘inner’ designation with authorship. Zhèng Yuàn (b. 1443) speculated that ‘only the inner seven books are Mr. Zhuāng’s original writings’, the remainder being the work of ‘his followers’.<sup>30</sup> The early Qīng thinker Wáng Fūzhī (1619–1692) remarks that ‘the outer books are not Zhuāngzǐ’s writings’ but the works of his students, which lack the continuity of thought displayed by the ‘inner’ books.<sup>31</sup> Until recently, contemporary scholars have tended to agree with Wáng’s opinion.<sup>32</sup> A. C. Graham, for instance, described the ‘inner’ books as ‘homogeneous in thought and style and generally recognized as substantially the work of [Zhuāngzǐ] himself’, by contrast with the ‘outer’ books, of which ‘none can be plausibly ascribed to [Zhuāngzǐ]’. He followed Sū Shì in considering books 28–31 to be inconsistent with the rest of the corpus and proposed that among the ‘mixed’ books 23–27 contained a heterogeneous collection of material by Zhuāngzǐ’s followers shuffled together with fragments of the master’s own writing.<sup>33</sup>

The hypothesis that the ‘inner’ books mark a difference in authorship is in effect a retrograde position reached by starting from Guō Xiàng’s view of the thirty-three books as equally expressing Master Zhuāng’s thought and then paring away books that scholars have

<sup>27</sup> Brooks, ‘The Disunity of the Jwangdz “Inner” Chapters’, 4, Klein, ‘Were There “Inner Chapters”’, 352–55.

<sup>28</sup> Lo helpfully identifies other possible allusions to or borrowings from the ‘inner’ books in the *Shǐ Jì* (‘The Authorship of the *Zhuāngzǐ*’, 60–61). Still, the point stands that the *Shǐ Jì* assigns no special priority to the ‘inner’ books over the others.

<sup>29</sup> *Sū Shì Wénjí* 蘇軾文集 (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1986), 11:347–8. Sū’s remark is unfounded, since many other parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ* also denigrate Confucius.

<sup>30</sup> 《井觀瑣言》 [*Trivial Remarks Observing from a Well*], vol. I, accessed through the Chinese Text Project, <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=203416>.

<sup>31</sup> 《莊子通·莊子解》 [*Zhuāngzǐ Overview and Zhuāngzǐ Explications*] (Taipei: Liren Shuju, 1995), 76.

<sup>32</sup> For a helpful overview of recent textual scholarship on the *Zhuāngzǐ*, see E. Klein, ‘Reading the *Zhuangzi* Anthology’, in C. Defoort and R. Ames, eds., *Having a Word with Angus Graham at Twenty-Five Years into his Immortality* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2018), 11–26.

<sup>33</sup> *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), 27–28. Liu Xiaogan has also argued that the ‘inner’ books form a distinctive set of writings attributable to Zhuāng Zhōu. See Liu, *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, and ‘Textual Issues in the *Zhuangzi*’, in X. Liu, ed., *Dao Companion to the Philosophy of Daoism* (Cham: Springer, 2015), 129–57. Liu’s arguments are rebutted in Fraser, *Review of Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, *Asian Philosophy* 7:2 (1997), 155–59.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

considered incongruous with the rest—first books 28–31, then the entirety of the ‘outer’ books and various further pieces of the ‘mixed’ books. The hypothesis is driven less by positive arguments for the unity of the ‘inner’ books than by negative claims about incongruities between the ‘inner’ books and the others. The distinctive status of the ‘inner’ books is often simply assumed as a premise.<sup>34</sup> In fact, however, if we set aside the framing assumption that the ‘inner’ designation reflects some special status, such as shared authorship, we can see that the content of these books is actually deeply heterogeneous—so much so that the argumentative challenges facing any attempt to justify attribution to a single author are probably insurmountable.<sup>35</sup>

To give just a few examples, §6.1c, which describes how the sage uses the military to destroy states, and §6.1e, which endorses punishment and ceremonial propriety, seem sharply unlike any other material in the ‘inner’ books. The paean to the ‘genuine human’ in §6.1 does not suggest shared authorship with the scepticism about universal judgments of value in §2.13, nor with §1.1c, which mentions three types of ideal figures but not the ‘genuine human’. A number of sections display no obvious connection to any of the other material, such as the litany of legendary figures in §6.3b, the story of Yáo’s urge to attack the foreign tribes (§2.12), the elderly woman who possesses the Way of the sage (§6.4), and Húzi’s encounters with the physiognomist (§7.5).<sup>36</sup> Like the *Zhuāngzǐ* as a whole, the ‘inner’ books present a boisterous medley of writing on different topics, in different keys and voices, which is anything but ‘homogeneous in thought and style’. There are no persuasive grounds for attributing them to a single authorial voice—and, accordingly, no cogent grounds for assigning them a privileged status as a repository of ‘original’ or ‘authentic’ *Zhuāngzǐ* writings.<sup>37</sup>

What, then, is their significance? Most likely, they are the result of early editors’ partly arbitrary topical selections from a large, miscellaneous body of material of varying provenance and quality. Given how manuscripts were compiled and circulated in the Warring States and early Hàn, it is unlikely the editors could have had any reliable information about the authorship of the material or would even have cared about the matter. Accordingly, there is no cogent basis for assigning the ‘inner’ books as a group any special authorial or historical status. Some of their content may be among the highest quality material in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, if for no other reason than that it was selected for quality. But much material of equally high quality can be found in other books as well.

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<sup>34</sup> In ‘How Much of Chuang Tzu Did Chuang Tzu Write?’, for example, A. C. Graham simply assumes the seven ‘inner’ books were authored by *Zhuāngzǐ*. See Graham, *Studies in Chinese Philosophy and Philosophical Literature* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 283–321. Liu declares as a methodological starting point that he takes the ‘inner’ books to be a ‘block’ distinguished from the other books (*Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, 47).

<sup>35</sup> For a detailed argument for this contention, see Chris Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ: Ways of Wandering the Way* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

<sup>36</sup> The diverse, unrelated stories in book 6 and book 7 also speak against what we might call the ‘editorial hand’ thesis—the view that, despite the diversity of their content, an unknown ancient editor has arranged each of the ‘inner’ books to form a composite yet coherent work.

<sup>37</sup> As Lo says, ‘The traditional view that Zhuang Zhou wrote the Inner Chapters but not the Outer and Mixed Chapters in our received *Zhuangzi* lacks hard evidence’ (‘The Authorship of the *Zhuāngzǐ*’, 93).

*'Chapter' Classifications*

Since Sū Shì's observation that *Zhuāngzǐ* books 28–31 seem distinctive from the rest, readers have noted differences in the style, themes, and philosophical tendencies prominent in certain clusters of books. These differences have prompted scholars to propose various schemes for classifying the books into groups. Two well-known such classifications are those of A. C. Graham and Liu Xiaogan. Graham divides the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus into six clusters of writings: (1) the 'inner' books, which he attributes to Zhuāng Zhōu and supplements with selected material from the 'Mixed' books that he believes are also Zhuāng Zhōu's writing; (2) books 8–10 and the first half of 11, which he proposes were written by an author he dubs 'the Primitivist', whom he dates to c. 205 BCE; (3) portions of book 11, 12–15, and 33, which he attributes to an early Hàn school of thought he calls the 'Syncretists', while other portions he sees as containing miscellaneous material (he distinguishes book 16 as unrelated to any other *Zhuāngzǐ* content); (4) books 17–22, which he sees as later material aligned with the 'inner' books and dubs the 'School of *Zhuāngzǐ*' writings; (5) six 'ragbag' books, 23–27 and 32, containing heterogeneous and fragmentary material, some of it by Zhuāng Zhōu; and (6) books 28–31, which he proposes are works from the school of thought associated with Yáng Zhū that were written around 200 BCE.<sup>38</sup>

Liu proposes four divisions: (1) the 'inner' books, which he too attributes to Zhuāngzǐ; (2) the writings of the 'transmitters' or expositors of Zhuāngzǐ's philosophy, which include books 17–27 and 32; (3) writings attributable to the 'Huang-Lao school', a syncretic movement combining Ruist, Daoist, and Legalist thought, which include books 12–16, 33, and the second half of book 11; and (4) the writings of the 'Anarchists', which include books 8–10, the first half of 11, and 28–31.<sup>39</sup> Unlike Graham, Liu contends that compilation of all the material was completed by 241 BCE.

A detailed critical evaluation of the methodology and assumptions driving these classifications is beyond the scope of this Introduction.<sup>40</sup> For our purposes here I want only to emphasize a general, major problem that undermines both: with the exception of Graham's 'syncretist' classification, both sets of proposals treat the 'chapter'—the contents of entire *piān*, or what we have been calling 'books'—as a basic unit of analysis, when, as we have seen, the units by which the *Zhuāngzǐ* materials were originally compiled, read, and transmitted were not 'books' but much shorter units, brief pieces of writing that could be read independently. These are what Guō Xiàng referred to as *shǒu* and in modern Chinese are usually called *zhāng*. For convenience I will refer to these pieces as 'sections'.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Graham, *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 27–29.

<sup>39</sup> Liu's classification is summarized in a table in *Classifying the Zhuangzi Chapters*, 88.

<sup>40</sup> Readers may want to carefully examine, for example, whether labels such as 'primitivist', 'Huang-Lao', or 'Yangist' are well defined and whether they indeed pick out characteristic, shared features of all the material to which they are applied that clearly distinguish this material from that in other parts of the corpus.

<sup>41</sup> The 'section' may often have been the basic unit of composition, but 'scratchpad' sections such as §6.2 and §15.2 suggest that writers sometimes composed short remarks that were then used as building blocks for longer sections. Parts of §6.2, for example, are reused in §§6.5, 6.6, and 14.6, while parts of §15.2 are reused in §13.2. Moreover, it is likely that sections were sometimes elaborated or extended accretionally, by appending further remarks or adding a new scene to an anecdote. The closing line of §1.1 is probably such an appended remark, and §21.2b is quite obviously an appended

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

Because the material originated as short sections, in some cases the content of books or blocks of books that Graham's or Liu's classifications group together is actually highly diverse. As we have seen, the 'inner' books are internally heterogeneous, containing sections that present a variety of topics and outlooks that tend to be obscured by declaring them a unified body of material. Similarly, placing a single label on other groups of books—such as 'School of *Zhuāngzǐ*'—is potentially misleading, in two respects. It implies that the material within a block of books shares a uniform outlook, when in fact the various sections in that block may be deeply heterogeneous, and it implies that a sharp distinction obtains between material within a block of books and other material, when in fact there may be significant connections between them. To give just two salient examples, Graham classifies 'The Fisherman', book 31, as belonging to a block of 'Yangist' writings, which he treats as distinct from other, 'Daoist' material.<sup>42</sup> Yet a prominent normative motif in 'The Fisherman' is 'genuineness', which aligns it thematically with various sections in the 'inner', 'syncretic', 'School of *Zhuāngzǐ*', and other 'mixed' books. Among the most distinctive themes in books 8–11, which Graham labels 'Primitivist' and Liu 'Anarchist', is an appeal to people's inherent nature (*xìng*) as a source of basic norms. But this theme is prominent also in numerous sections in the 'syncretist' and 'ragbag' books.

Although classifications at the level of the 'chapter' or 'book' may highlight certain features of portions of the *Zhuāngzǐ* anthology, then, they tend to obscure both the heterogeneity of the material within the same group of books and relations between material in supposedly distinct groups. For these reasons, the present edition proposes a different approach to reading and interpreting the anthology.

#### *A Collection of 'Discourses'*

How, then, should we read the *Zhuāngzǐ*, if it is an anthology of short writings that address a variety of topics from a plurality of perspectives, pursue various purposes, explore a range of themes, and express diverse outlooks?

Since sections are the basic constituents of the anthology, interpretation and discussion of *Zhuāngzǐ* materials must begin from the level of the individual section. The primary object of interpretation is thus not the anthology as a whole, nor sets of books, nor entire books, but individual sections. Interpretations of groups of sections or of the overall outlook of broad parts of the anthology must be built up from interpretations of individual sections. Moreover, we cannot justifiably presuppose that the doctrinal outlooks of different sections will be unified, coherent, or complementary. Some sections may agree or cohere in various ways, but we cannot assume in advance that they will. Some sections may disagree or present divergent stances. Claims about relations between sections must be founded on interpretations of the individual sections themselves. Perhaps in some cases—book 1, 'Freely Wandering About' might be an example—we can argue that an editorial hand has produced a 'collage' of sections which forms a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. But the

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scene. Passages such as §5.3b and §5.4c may well be accretional expansions that add further scenes to pre-existing anecdotes. §6.5 combines what could originally have been two independent but similar anecdotes into a single longer section.

<sup>42</sup> Graham, *Chuang Tzu: The Inner Chapters*, 28.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

‘collage’ hypothesis must rest on, rather than dictate, our interpretation of the sections.

Nor can we presuppose just what the rhetorical purpose of any individual section is. Some passages may advance argumentative claims or theses. Others may aim to undermine various viewpoints or raise questions without seeking to establish a constructive stance of their own. Still others may playfully explore different perspectives without endorsing or privileging any of them. Some may invite us to experience a certain outlook or sensibility through narrative or poetic means. Some may be jokes. Others may be works of literature offered for aesthetic appreciation. Some, such as §13.3b, appear to reflect political controversies; others, such as §11.3 or §25.7, may be protest literature. Our account of a section’s purpose must emerge from the process of interpretation, with due attention to respects in which the culture of inquiry, rhetoric, and practice from which the *Zhuāngzǐ* materials were produced may have been different from what we are familiar with.

If we cannot assume in advance of interpretation that different sections present a shared outlook or pursue a shared rhetorical end, how can we contextualize individual sections as we read them? Against what broader context can we assess our interpretation to evaluate whether it is defensible? In reading a unitary book, we check to see whether our interpretation of one part is consistent with our best interpretation of other parts. But in reading the *Zhuāngzǐ* sections, the best interpretation of one section might be that it disagrees with or diverges from other sections.

I propose that we approach the *Zhuāngzǐ* material by reading the sections as contributions to a variety of ‘discourses’ or ‘conversations’, which may intersect and overlap in various ways. Think of the anthology as a collection of anonymous discourses—similar to an archive of unsigned discussion forum posts and responses—that, among other things, explore, defend, or criticize various views on a range of topics or issues. Individual sections may or may not cohere with one another to form a single, integral doctrinal outlook. But many of them clearly cohere as contributions to threads of discourse about shared topics, based at least partly on shared premises and assuming an at least partly shared conceptual framework.

In some cases, these discourses may converge on a roughly coherent thesis or position. In others, they may explore or debate a topic from various perspectives, without agreeing on a particular standpoint. Numerous sections question the nature and scope of justifiable political control. Obvious further examples include sections that explore the relation between ‘Heaven’ and ‘humanity’; the grounds of value distinctions; the pressures of dealing with social and political responsibilities; the contextual nature of ‘usefulness’ and ‘worthlessness’; the nature of the Way (*dào*) and its relation to conventional moral norms; the content and functioning of human Virtue (*dé*), or ‘agentive power’; the performance of skills and their significance as illustrations of following the Way; and our relation to death.<sup>43</sup>

Such threads of discourse are themselves parts of a wider ‘*Zhuāngzǐ* discourse’ constituted by the anthology as a whole, which in turn can be considered part of the overall discourse of late Warring States through early Hàn thought. Some discourses within the *Zhuāngzǐ* will thus intersect with those in other early ‘masters’ texts in various ways. One

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<sup>43</sup> Readers will find several of these discourses reflected in the extensive cross-references in the Explanatory Notes.



Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

obvious example is that *Zhuāngzǐ* discourse on people's inherent nature, or *xìng*, is part of a broader discourse about *xìng* that includes sections of the *Mèngzǐ*, *Xúnzǐ*, and *Lǚ's Annals*.

This discourse-centered approach constitutes an attempt to acknowledge the complexity and richness of the *Zhuāngzǐ* corpus by foregrounding the plurality of themes and orientations it contains. The aim in identifying, interpreting, and explaining such discourses and the sections that constitute them is not to reconstruct 'the' standpoint of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, as it is unlikely any determinate, unified standpoint ever existed. It is simply to understand and explore the content and implications of the range of fascinating, instructive, and inspiring lines of thought we find in the anthology.

### *Themes in Zhuangist Thought*

Amid the blooming, bustling profusion of images, motifs, issues, paths, and exemplary figures in the *Zhuāngzǐ* emerge several overlapping clusters of especially prominent themes, taken up in different sections and discourses. To help orient the reader to some of these themes, a selection are introduced below.

The sections in book 1, 'Freely Wandering About', present a cluster of themes that recur, with variations, in different parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*. The first section (§1.1) takes us to the unknown, far reaches of the world, where a fantastic, massive fish transforms into a gigantic bird, which flies off to the opposite end of the world. The activity of the gigantic bird contrasts with that of small creatures such as a cicada and dove, who ignorantly laugh at it. Through this story, the section introduces the themes of transformation (*huà*), perspectives, and dependence (*yǒu dài*)—or, more specifically, the dependence of one's activity and knowledge on contingent features of one's perspective, which is subject to transformation. By implication, the text cautions that all of us are like the small creatures, insofar as our understanding depends on our perspective. Even the great bird, who has a far vaster perspective than the small creatures who mock it, is dependent on, and thus limited by, certain conditions, namely a huge accumulation of wind. Can one avoid the limitations on understanding and agency imposed by dependence on perspectives and contingent conditions? The section implies that although our activity inevitably depends on something or other, we can learn to 'ride along' with the patterns of nature and the process of change and so come to freely 'wander in the limitless'.

The theme of 'freely wandering about' suggests a conception of the Way as a process of constant adaptation to shifting circumstances, which cannot be signposted by any fixed norms, such as the norms of conventional morality. Such a conception is articulated in §6.8, which speaks of an 'aimless and wild, unbound and uninhibited, turning and shifting path' along which we may 'wander'. The theme of 'wandering' is taken up in various ways in dozens of sections across the *Zhuāngzǐ*. In the broader context of Warring States thought, it represents a distinctive, entirely novel approach to the issues of the nature of the Way, how to follow it, and thus the character of the good life.

One example of how the dependence of our activity on fixed perspectives can limit the paths open to us is our perception of utility. Any view of what 'works' or is 'useful' will depend on preconditions built into our perspective. Some *Zhuāngzǐ* sections explore how we might avoid frustration and follow a more fulfilling path by becoming adept at adjusting our

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

understanding of ‘usefulness’ to novel or changing features encountered in particular contexts (§1.5). Others consider how being ‘useless’ in others’ eyes might actually be ‘useful’ from our perspective (§4.4). Still others suggest that the flexibility and adaptiveness needed to follow an adept Way resist any fixed formulation at all, even a formulation in terms of the relativity of usefulness (§20.1).

The ‘Way’ (*dào*) is the core structural concept in early Chinese thought, standing at the center of various questions regarding the content and direction of the good life, the relation between human life and ‘Heaven’, or the natural world, and the very nature of norms or a normative ‘path’. Numerous *Zhuāngzǐ* sections explore different aspects or conceptions of the Way and of the very idea of normativity, pointing out the contextual, contingent nature of any path we might follow and the perspectival, limited character of value distinctions by which we mark out what is or is not an apt path. These sections often present a sceptical stance concerning claims about value or the Way, implying that they can be justified at best only contextually, provisionally, or perspectively, not ultimately or absolutely, and accordingly no determinate formulation or prescription can guide us in following the Way. Some sections present a constructive, contextually grounded Way of proceeding in the absence of any stronger justification for our view of the Way. Particularly crucial sections on these topics include several parts of ‘Discourse on Evening Things Out’, such as §§2.3–2.7, 2.11, and 2.13–15, the ‘Autumn Waters’ dialogue, §17.1, the ‘Know-Little’ dialogue, §25.10, and much of book 22, ‘Knowledge Wandered North’. But readers will find remarks on the nature of the Way or Ways in many parts of the anthology, including sections such as §22.2, which speaks of the ‘root’ rather than the ‘Way’.

If the apt Way resists formulation in fixed or explicit guidelines, how do we know whether we have attained it or are at least moving in the right direction? Various sections suggest that adept activity—successful performance of the Way—is marked by a frictionless ‘ease’ (*ān*), the experience of ‘flowing freely’ (*tōng*) or ‘reaching through’ (*dá*) to one’s end, and attaining practical ‘success’ (*dé*) or ‘good fit’ (*shì*). Such themes are explored in a range of passages that consider successful activity and the performance of skills. Relevant sections include discussions of successful or failed action, such the story of Huìzǐ’s giant gourds (§1.5), the monkey-keeper who adapted to his wards’ demands (§2.6), and the mistreated sea bird (§§18.5, 19.13), along with the many famed *Zhuāngzǐ* ‘skill stories’, such as the story of Cook Dīng (§3.2), the wheelwright who could not teach his son (§13.8), the hunchback skilled at catching cicadas (§19.3), the spirit-like ferry pilot (§19.4), the whitewater swimmer (§19.9), and the woodworker whose carvings resemble the work of spirits (§19.10).

Adept performance of the Way requires a responsiveness to one’s context that may be challenging to attain, especially in stressful circumstances, when facing matters that are beyond our control. Some sections explore various aspects of such difficulties, offering a range of suggestions as to how to cope with them. Especially prominent are the discussions of how to handle pressure and cope with the mercurial exercise of power in §§4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. Among the memorable bits of advice in these sections are that we can handle practical tasks more adeptly by purging or ‘emptying’ the mind of predetermined plans or tactics (§4.1) and by learning to ‘let the mind wander by riding along with things’, entrusting ourselves to ‘the inevitable’ while maintaining our own inward equilibrium (§4.2). An

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

intersecting thread of discourse suggests that to attain the focus needed for apt performance we must ‘forget’ extraneous factors (§19.4, 19.10), including potential negative consequences for ourselves (§4.2b).

For some sections, psycho-physiological equilibrium, including emotional equanimity, is a hallmark of what the texts call *dé*, here translated as ‘Virtue’, but also interpretable as ‘virtuosity’ or ‘agentive power’. Virtue can be thought of as our capacity for following Ways; it is the power inherent in things, including agents, by which we do what we do. For numerous sections of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, maintaining and applying one’s naturally bestowed Virtue is a core feature of the admirable life, manifested through a calm, adaptive resilience in coping with changing circumstances. Sections in which this motif is prominent include §§4.2b, 5.1, 5.2, 5.4, and 23.8. Virtue may also be regarded as a source of excellence or competence in action; sections that touch on this theme include §§13.5, 14.6, 20.1, and 22.5. Some sections present Virtue as connecting us with Heaven or Nature as a source of life and agency; on this theme, readers may want to compare, for example, §§12.8, 15.2, 17.1f, and 19.2. In other sections, Virtue is closely associated with the flourishing of our inherent, dispositional nature (*xìng*), which is central to the normative ethical view of some *Zhuāngzǐ* writings.<sup>44</sup> A common view in this latter discourse is that our inborn nature provides an inherent direction or mode of activity that constitutes a healthy, flourishing life, which conventional moral teachings disrupt.

Still other sections of the corpus place ‘genuineness’ (*zhēn*)—fulfilling what we inherently are—at the core of the good life. For example, §17.1f contends that ‘Virtue lies in Heaven’—in our endowment from nature—while explaining that if we attain an apt balance between ‘Heaven’ and ‘the human’, we ‘return to the genuine’. In §31.1e, ‘the sage takes Heaven as his standard and values genuineness, without being bound by custom.’<sup>45</sup>

These examples tie genuineness to Heaven or Nature, thus implicating a further major topic of discussion and debate in the *Zhuāngzǐ*, our relation to ‘Heaven’ and the interplay between ‘Heaven’ and ‘humanity’ or ‘the human’. ‘Heaven’ here stands for natural processes, the natural world, and our innate endowment as creatures; ‘the human’ refers to what we append or attach to our natural endowment. Some sections seem to posit an opposition between ‘Heaven’ and ‘the human’ while favouring a life that ‘fulfills the heavenly with us’ (§5.5b). An extreme view is that the ideal life lies in wholly merging with ‘heaven’s Virtue’ (§15.2). Other sections, such as §§6.1f and 17.1f, suggest that the ‘genuine’ human life lies in attaining a balance between the ‘heavenly’ and ‘human’ dimensions. According to §23.9a, the ‘whole’ person is both ‘skilled at the heavenly and also adept at the human’. Intriguingly, §24.12b explains that ‘the genuine people of antiquity applied heaven to attend to the human’, while §32.3b seems to disagree, contending that ‘the people of antiquity were heavenly without being human’.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>44</sup> For samples of sections that link Virtue to inherent nature, see §§8.1, 8.3, 8.5, 9.1, 9.2, 10.1c, 10.2a, 11.1, 12.8, 12.10, 13.5, 14.6, 16.1, 16.2, 19.2, and 29.1c. Other sections that invoke inherent nature, concentrated in books 12 and 13, do not link it to Virtue.

<sup>45</sup> Other sections that treat ‘genuineness’ include §§6.1f, 14.5, 15.3, 19.2b, 20.8, 21.1, 24.12b, and 32.5c.

<sup>46</sup> For a list of sections treating ‘Heaven’ and ‘the human’, see the notes to §5.5.

Fraser, *Zhuāngzǐ* (draft of 9/23)

A further major set of themes found in the *Zhuāngzǐ* is represented by the interplay of cosmological and political doctrines found in what are likely a collection of early Hàn dynasty writings influenced by the metaphysics and politics of the *Lǎozǐ*, also known as the *Dàodéjīng*. These writings are concentrated in books 11 through 16. One prominent topic that emerges from the material is a discourse about the application of ‘non-action’ (*wú wéi*) in governance. In some sections, such as §§10.2b, 11.1, and 11.5, non-action is an approach to allowing others to flourish without interference, letting the Way proceed without obstruction by not acting on one’s own initiative in a manner that disrupts the inherent tendencies of things. By contrast, in §§11.7 and 13.3, non-action is an administrative technique to be practiced specifically by the sovereign, while those below him engage in action as appropriate to their bureaucratic stations. (These two sections are part of a cluster, also including §§12.1, 12.2, 13.1, and perhaps other sections, that combines themes from the *Lǎozǐ* with bureaucratic and administrative concerns.) In this outlook, ‘non-action’ is a matter of allowing the apparatus of the state to function of itself, on the model of how the myriad things flourish without heaven and earth taking action on them. In §13.1, this approach to administration is complemented by a model of personal cultivation that emphasizes attaining stillness and non-action, such that one moves only as prompted by circumstances.

‘Non-action’ is absent from many other parts of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, a feature that distinguishes their outlook from that commonly associated with the *Lǎozǐ*. (The famous skill stories, for example, do not mention it.) It appears in discussions of the Way in §§6.3 and 25.10 and in remarks about personal cultivation in §§22.2 and 23.7. An especially distinctive essay—an outlier in the corpus—is §18.1, which argues that non-action can settle questions pertaining to value distinctions.

A distinct political discourse—one making no appeal to ‘non-action’—can be found in passages such as §§7.2–4, 12.10, and 12.12. In these sections, sagely political leaders may indeed take action, provided it is carefully guided by the context, in particular the values or interests of their subjects. §§7.2 and 12.10 present and then dismiss conventional political advice about the ruler cultivating virtues or setting forth standards so as to inspire obedience. In §7.2, the sagely leader is said to avoid such outward, heavy-handed displays of leadership; in §7.4, the ‘enlightened king’ is described as influencing people without their knowing it, causing all ‘to be joyful in and of themselves’ without drawing any attention to himself. A possible explanation of this subtle yet efficacious mode of leadership appears in §7.3: the sagely ruler ‘follows along with what is self-so for things’ without imposing ‘personal biases’. These passages thus articulate a light-handed approach to government, guided by ‘what is self-so’, that is distinctive in the early Chinese literature for its responsiveness to the subjects of political authority.

The themes and topics sampled here amount to mere hints of the philosophical and literary riches of the *Zhuāngzǐ*, offering a series of trailheads from which readers might set off rambling through the anthology’s startling, inspiring landscape of thought. There can be no single apt approach to the *Zhuāngzǐ*, nor just one message to take from it. The structure and content of this remarkable ancient collection of writings themselves instantiate a Zhuangist conception of the Way, offering a profusion of diverse, variously intersecting paths along which readers may wander for themselves.