Zhuangzi

C. 369–286 BC

As you read the biography below, think about how Zhuangzi created a work with lasting influence.

According to the biography written by the Han historian Sima Qian, Zhuangzi was born in the Chinese state of Meng. He served as a minor official in the government of his home state. At some point, he resigned his post because he wanted to pursue a quieter and more meaningful life.

Sima Qian says that the philosopher Laozi’s teachings formed the basis of Zhuangzi’s beliefs. Incorporating Laozi’s Daoist teachings, Zhuangzi not only taught the Dao, but also argued against Confucianism—another major philosophy of this period. While Confucianism focuses on improving society, Zhuangzi’s Daoism emphasizes a retreat from the laws of society, and a connection to nature. Zhuangzi’s writings were popular with those who supported the idea of leaving a life of service for one that allowed more individual growth.

Zhuangzi is considered one of the greatest writers and thinkers in Chinese history. His writings took many forms. He wrote narratives, anecdotes, fables, discourses, and allegories. His writing style is complex, and his work still has meaning today. In fact, during this century alone, almost 30 books in English were written about Zhuangzi, including translations of his work and analysis of his thought. But the main insight into his words and thinking are the result of editing and arranging that was done during the Jin dynasty. During this time Guo Xiang, another Chinese philosopher, adapted Zhuangzi’s work, taking it from fifty-two chapters to the current edition of thirty-three.

The most famous piece of Zhuangzi’s writing is about his dream of being a butterfly:

Once upon a time Chuang Chou dreamed that he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting about happily enjoying himself. He didn't know that he was Chou. Suddenly he awoke and was . . . Chou. He did not know whether he was Chou who had dreamed of being a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming.
that he was Chou. Now there must be a difference between Chou and the butterfly. This is called the transformation of things.

Besides his own literary contributions, Zhuangzi was influential in other areas as well. His teachings also had an impact on Chinese landscape painting and on poetry.


WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. Recall  How do Confucianism and Daoism differ?

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2. Express and Support a Point of View  Do you think Zhuangzi really had the dream about being a butterfly? Do you think it is a fictional story that he made up to convey the idea that he wanted to teach about? Explain why you think as you do.

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ACTIVITY

Create an illustration to go with the story of the butterfly. Your work may represent, explain, or extend Zhuangzi’s words. Create your illustration on a separate piece of paper.