

A Brief Analysis of The Ideal Personality of "Zhuangzi" and the Righteousness of "Health Master"

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Abstract

This paper explores the ideal personality depicted in Zhuangzi and the philosophical insights from the Treatise on Health Master. Zhuangzi's philosophy emphasizes spiritual liberation and a carefree, unrestrained mindset, offering a refuge from societal pressures. The ideal personalities—'the supreme person,' 'the divine person,' and 'the sage person'—embody transcendence and harmony with nature. The Treatise on Health Master discusses the balance between finite life and infinite desires, advocating for aligning with natural laws ("Yuan Du") to achieve mental and physical well-being. Through parables like Pao Ding's Ox-Cutting, Zhuangzi illustrates the importance of following inherent principles to attain mastery and inner peace. The paper highlights how Zhuangzi's teachings encourage detachment from materialism and acceptance of life's natural flow, fostering spiritual fulfillment and societal harmony.

Keywords

Ideal personality; spiritual liberation; health preservation.

1. Reflections on the Ideal Personality in Zhuangzi

Throughout history, the exploration and study of Confucian thought by Confucius and Mencius have far surpassed that of Daoist thought by Laozi and Zhuangzi. However, the Daoist philosophy of Laozi and Zhuangzi not only embodies the common perception of a negative and reclusive attitude but also contains profound insights into how to reconcile with society and oneself, as well as the pursuit of a tranquil and detached state of mind and an ideal personality. The teacher's patient and meticulous explanations in class deeply resonated with me, and I was captivated by the realm of freedom and transcendence depicted in the book 'Zhuangzi.' 'This led me to eagerly delve deeper into 'Zhuangzi,' where the more I read, the more I discovered the indescribable beauty of its artistic conception: it provides a haven for restless souls in turbulent times, liberates individuals from the complexities of society, and fosters a genuine and pure ideal personality through an open and inclusive mindset. In Zhuangzi's writings, the ideal personality can be summarized as 'the supreme person,' 'the divine person,' and 'the sage person,' which collectively embody a carefree and unrestrained spirit. While Zhuangzi is not unfamiliar to us, unlike the Confucian emphasis on personal responsibility to society, moral conduct, and the realization of social value, which is a practical approach to engagement with the world, Zhuangzi's pursuit is the spiritual and mental liberation of the individual, free and unrestrained, embracing a more open and inclusive mindset, and a transcendent approach to life characterized by detachment and transcendence. In today's society, more and more people are operating under excessive pressure, burdened with heavy responsibilities. At such times, we should embrace the free-spirited ideas of Zhuangzi, cultivating an ideal personality that can coexist peacefully with both oneself and society, thereby achieving true 'unbinding.'^[1] While most people strive to emulate Confucius and cultivate a humble gentleman, some also turn to Zhuangzi, learning to let go of biases and prejudices, follow nature, and accept its laws and rewards with equanimity, becoming a free and unbound individual. Zhuangzi's unique philosophy of detachment might offer us new perspectives, freeing us from the current ups and

downs and the mental exhaustion caused by excessive material pursuits. By discarding these materialistic comparisons, we can enjoy spiritual fulfillment and prosperity, enhancing our satisfaction and happiness in life. This, in turn, can help correct the restlessness prevalent in society, contributing our small share to social harmony and development.

2. Thoughts and feelings on Reading The Third Part of the Inner Chapter "Treatise on Health Preservation"

The initial reason for choosing this content to read carefully had to be admitted to be quite superficial, as it was the shortest one, and I thought I could finish it sooner. However, after reading it, I realized that its significance is unshakable. It not only bridges the past and the future but also contains philosophical insights that are worth pondering in detail.

The 'Treatise on Health Preservation' begins with an abstract and profound life philosophy: life is finite, but knowledge is infinite. It then elaborates on this idea through several concise and powerful fables. These fables, though seemingly unrelated and varying in length, are intricately linked. I will now share my insights and reflections on each section.

First, there is a disagreement over the title of this content, whether it should be 'Nourishing Life' or 'Life Nourishment.' After reviewing relevant materials, I lean more towards the former. A thorough reading of the entire text reveals that to live a long and healthy life, the most fundamental step is to be a 'Nourishing Life' master. This means preserving one's body and, in turn, nurturing one's spirit. The first sentence of 'Nourishing Life' states that while human life is finite, knowledge, human desires, and the pursuit of knowledge are infinite. Pursuing the infinite with a finite life is perilous. On the surface, Zhuangzi seems to advise against pursuing so much knowledge, but the deeper meaning is different. Firstly, if 'knowledge' is understood as human desire, it makes sense. Human desires are endless, and most people cannot achieve contentment, leading to much pain and anxiety, which is detrimental to health. Secondly, when one has acquired sufficient knowledge, they reach a certain level of scholarship, at which point they can freely discard knowledge and scholarship, breaking free from these constraints and achieving mental freedom. Zhuangzi then advises against doing good deeds for fame and profit, and not to commit serious mistakes or do bad things that would lead to punishment. Everyone has both good and evil, no one is absolutely good or evil. People have selfishness and good intentions, and Zhuangzi calmly affirms these, hoping that people can forget the worldly notions of good and evil. 'Yuan Du Zhi Wei Jing' (following the Dao as the standard) is considered the essence of the entire text and the essence of health preservation. Here, 'Du' refers to the Du Meridian. From the perspective of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), a person's health primarily depends on the Governor Vessel. When the Governor Vessel is unblocked, a person naturally feels refreshed and free from pain. The deeper meaning of Governor refers to the natural laws that remain unchanged by any external factors.' Yuan 'implies smoothness and adherence. This explains the concept of 'Yuan Du. 'This is the foundation for preserving one's health, nurturing one's family, and living a full life. The first fable we are familiar with is the story of Pao Ding's Ox-Cutting. I had always known this idiom to describe someone's exceptional and skilled craftsmanship, until I read Zhuangzi's 'Treatise on Nourishing Life.' Pao Ding, from seeing nothing but the ox to no longer seeing the whole ox, and then to the point where his senses were no longer aware of it, he spent nineteen years. By the time King Hui of Liang watched, he was no longer just cutting the ox but performing a passionate and unrestrained artistic performance. The term 'Sang Lin' aptly describes this. Pao Ding 'followed the natural principles' and 'adhered to the inherent nature,' which is the essence of 'Yuan Du.' He was not just cutting or slaughtering the ox but following the natural laws and the inherent development of things, cutting the ox smoothly and naturally. In Pao Ding's view, the ox's body structure has gaps, and his knife has no thickness, allowing him to cut the ox with ease and

composure, without causing the ox any pain, and he himself is in a state of complete freedom and ease, while his knife remains as sharp as ever. This teaches us that with independent cultivation and expertise, one can remain unaffected in any complex social environment, maintaining their original mood and state in dealing with people and matters. One will not become smooth due to being straightforward, nor will one become inferior due to being confident, nor will one become silent due to being talkative. Even if he is as skilled as a cook, he still takes precautions and stops to reflect when he sees others killing cattle. This is not a proud attitude, but a humble attitude and a cautious attitude towards the world. It is also a great way of keeping in good health. The ending of "keeping the knife well hidden" also illustrates this point.

The butcher's meticulous dissection of the ox, which preserves its entire body, contrasts sharply with the physical disability of the right teacher. Zhuangzi highlights that although the right teacher did not preserve his body, he accepted it calmly, believing it to be a natural part of fate rather than a result of human actions. He neither blames heaven nor feels inferior because he is different from a healthy person. Although his physical actions may be limited, his mind remains free, and he can still live fully and enjoy his natural lifespan.

The pheasant prefers to toil in a free and self-reliant environment rather than live a carefree life in a cage. It would rather forsake material satisfaction for spiritual richness, let alone humans. Each person has their own independent value, which should not be influenced by external factors. I believe the true value of life is as Zhuangzi taught us: to emulate nature, break free from constraints, and roam freely in this world. "Zhuangzi's philosophy of " ziran xiaoyao" (自然逍遥, natural and free and fluid wandering) offers an alternative wisdom ,one that dissolves attachments and allows individuals to return to an unburdened state of being"(Tiantian Yu,2025,p.16).[2]

Laozi passed away, and Qin Shi went to pay his respects. He only 'left on the third day,' without the usual wailing and weeping that he had seen in others. This seemed illogical and was not understood by others. However, in Qin Shi's eyes, Laozi, like himself, was a practitioner of Daoism. Coming into this world and leaving it were natural processes, requiring one to live in harmony with the times and follow nature. Among so many people, there must be those who pretend to mourn and cry when they do not want to, which goes against their true feelings and the will of heaven. Such deliberate actions are counterproductive. Here, Zhuangzi advises people to follow the will of heaven, adhere to the natural laws of things, forget about life and death, and not force themselves. " so the unity with "Tao" requires "being content with destiny". "Life or death, it is destiny", and people need to be completely resigned to it"(Shengping Huang, 2022, p.34).[3]In the entire text, my favorite line is not the final classic 'passing on the torch, 'but precisely this' living in harmony with the times.' Zhuangzi teaches us that no matter what situation we find ourselves in, we should remain calm and composed, focus on doing what we can, and then let things take their natural course.

The final sentence of "Treatise on Health Preservation" is hailed as a stroke of genius, and it also embodies the well-known concept of passing on knowledge and wisdom. All matter, including life, will eventually come to an end, but the spirit behind it will be passed down through generations, never fading away. This provides comfort to those who fear death. Since the day will come, and it is irreversible and unchangeable, one should accept it calmly, live each day to the fullest, which is also a form of 'following the Dao' and a way of maintaining health.

3. Sum Up

The book "Zhuangzi's Collected Annotations" is not only substantial on the surface but also profound within. Due to time constraints, I have not yet finished reading it, and there are still some obscure and difficult words that I need to carefully ponder. I aspire to reach the pinnacle

of scholarship, where knowledge is as natural to me as a skilled butcher to a skilled cook—so proficient that it requires no physical effort but only mental insight. Of course, I understand that the most important thing is to approach learning with an attitude of not forcing oneself and following the natural laws, mastering the knowledge I wish to acquire. This way, I can reduce anxiety and unnecessary mental strain, allowing me to focus on acquiring knowledge and improving myself.

4. Conclusion

The exploration of Zhuangzi's philosophy in this paper reveals its profound relevance to contemporary life, particularly in addressing the pressures of modern society. Zhuangzi's ideal personality—embodied by the “supreme person,” “divine person,” and “sage person”—advocates for spiritual liberation and a carefree, unrestrained mindset. This philosophy serves as a counterbalance to the Confucian emphasis on social responsibility, offering an alternative path to harmony through detachment and transcendence. In a world dominated by material pursuits and relentless competition, Zhuangzi's teachings remind us of the importance of inner peace and alignment with nature.

The Treatise on Health Master further deepens this perspective by examining the relationship between finite life and infinite desires. Zhuangzi warns against the peril of exhausting oneself in the pursuit of endless knowledge or material gains, advocating instead for a life guided by natural laws (“Yuan Du”). The parable of Pao Ding's Ox-Cutting exemplifies this principle, illustrating how mastery and ease arise from adhering to the inherent structure of things rather than forcing outcomes. This metaphor extends beyond skill acquisition, suggesting that a fulfilling life requires mindfulness, adaptability, and a willingness to follow the natural order.

Moreover, Zhuangzi's emphasis on acceptance—whether of physical limitations, as seen in the story of the right teacher, or of mortality, as reflected in Qin Shi's response to Laozi's death—underscores the value of equanimity. By embracing life's impermanence and releasing rigid attachments, individuals can achieve mental freedom and resilience. The concluding idea of “passing on the torch” symbolizes the enduring nature of wisdom, transcending the temporal bounds of individual existence.

Ultimately, Zhuangzi's philosophy offers timeless guidance for cultivating a balanced and meaningful life. It encourages us to prioritize spiritual richness over material accumulation, to seek harmony with nature, and to approach challenges with flexibility and calm. In an era marked by stress and disconnection, these teachings provide a roadmap for personal well-being and societal harmony, reminding us that true fulfillment lies in simplicity, mindfulness, and the courage to let go.

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