

# YANG Zhu

Yáng Zhū 杨朱

Flourished c. 450–350 BCE Philosopher

**Yang Zhu is believed to have been a hermit philosopher who advocated the importance of self-esteem and self-protection. Because his teachings countered the common call for self-sacrifice, his ideas were misrepresented and criticized by others, especially the Confucian scholar, Mencius.**

**D**iscerning who Yang Zhu was or what his philosophy advocated is difficult because no documents that he authored have survived. Scholars date Yang Zhu's life based on a passage in the *Collection of Stories (Shuoyuan)* by Liu Xiang (79–8 BCE), which claims that Yang had an audience with King Hui of Liang (370–319 BCE). *The Annals of Lü Buwei* (c. 238 BCE) state that Yang Zhu valued the self. Yang's philosophy was well known because the Chinese philosopher Mencius (Mengzi, flourished 371–289 BCE) claimed that the teaching of Yang Zhu and Mo Di (flourished 479–438 BCE) were popular during his time. Mencius distorted and simplified Yang's teachings, declaring him to be a hedonistic egoist, claiming that Yang would not remove one hair from his shin if he could benefit the people of the empire by doing so.

Because of the vagueness of the classical Chinese language, it is not clear whether Yang was an egoist and valued only his own person, or if he taught that each person should esteem himself. An egoist would not advocate that others should be egoists because that would not help the egoist benefit himself. Yang Zhu was not an egoist

because he taught that all people should value and protect their own lives. A Daoist text, the *Liezi* (c. 300 CE), contains a chapter entitled "Yang Zhu," which advocates seeking pleasure. It contains a reasonable explanation for why Yang Zhu would not pluck out a hair to benefit the empire because one hair will not be sufficient. One hair will lead to a pound of flesh, leading to a limb, then one's life, and finally others' lives. Someone who values life will not take this path. The eclectic Daoist text, the *Huainanzi* (c. 140 BCE), outlines three basic teachings of Yang's philosophy: keeping a person's human nature intact, protecting a person's genuineness, and not allowing the body to become attached to material things. This individualistic, protect-your-life thinking began in the Spring and Autumn period (770–476 BCE) among hermits and recluses who withdrew from the dangers of public life, becoming popular during the Warring States period (475–221 BCE) for practical reasons. Through history it serves as a reminder that a person must keep the body intact to live a fulfilling life. Yang disagrees with the majority of ancient Chinese philosophies that call on the individual to sacrifice, even die, for the greater good. Five chapters in *The Annals of Lü Buwei* promote Yang's philosophy. In that book Yang's self-preservation approach is offered to the ruler for his own protection; it is not for the common people because they must be willing to die for the ruler. In the Daoist text, the *Zhuangzi*, at least four chapters advocate Yang's philosophy. In the *Zhuangzi* Yang's teachings are used to persuade any person from any social status to realize that self-preservation is the utmost principle.

James D. SELLMANN

## Yangist Thought

Although the philosophies of Yang Zhu are often disputed and unclear, a few accounts do exist of his teaching and thought. In *The Construction of Space in China* the historian Mark Lewis discusses a passage from the *Liezi* that briefly captures Yang's theory on the central role of the body.

The clearest demonstrations of the central role of the body in Yangist thought are assertions of the absurdity of exchanging bodily parts for external objects. One example of this, or rather a parody of it, was the passage from the *Mencius* . . . in which the willingness to sacrifice bodily hairs distinguished rival philosophical traditions. A more elaborate version couched in terms favorable to the Yangist teachings appears in the fourth-century A.D. *Liezi*:

Qin Guli asked Yang Zhu, "If you could save the whole world by giving up one hair, would you do it?" Master Yang replied, "The world could certainly not be saved by one hair." Master Qin said, "If it would be saved, would you

do it?" Master Yang did not reply. Master Qin went out and spoke to Mengsun Yang. Mengsun Yang said, "You have not understood Master Yang's thoughts. Let me say them. If you could gain ten thousand in gold by having some of your skin peeled off, would you do it?" "I would." "If you could obtain a state by having one limb cut off at a joint, would you do it?" Master Qin remained silent for a while. Mengsun Yang said, "A hair is less than some skin, and some skin is less than a limb. This is plain. But if you accumulate individual hairs it forms a patch of skin and if you accumulate skin it forms a limb. Even one hair is certainly a tiny part of the body, so how could you treat it lightly?"

The relation between body and things is worked out in a set of hypothetical exchanges that mark the higher value of the former.


Source: Lewis, M. E. (2006). *The construction of space in early China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 18.

## Further Reading

- Graham, A. C. (Trans.). (1960). *The book of Lieh-tzu*. London: John Murray.
- Graham, A. C. (1989). *Chuang-Tzu: The inner chapters*. London: Unwin Paperbacks.
- Graham, A. C. (1989). *Disputers of the Tao*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.

- Knoblock, J., & Riegel, J. (2000). *The annals of Lü Buwei*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Kushner, T. (1980). Yang Chu [Zhu]: Ethical egoist in ancient China. *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 7(4), 319–326.
- Lau, D. C. (Trans.). (1970). *Mencius*. Middlesex, U.K.: Penguin Books.



Share the *Encyclopedia of China*: Teachers are welcome to make up to 10 copies of no more than 3 articles for distribution in a single course or program. For further permissions, please visit [www.copyright.com](http://www.copyright.com). PDFs available from [www.berkshirepublishing.com](http://www.berkshirepublishing.com).  Get Permissions