

# FROM STORYTELLING TO DRAMA: THE TALE OF JIE ZHI TUI

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Throughout the Han dynasty, in AD 220, the story of Jie Zhi Tui<sup>1</sup> was one of the most popular tales about any individual from the Spring and Autumn period (771-475 BC) in China. It was known from dozens of references, in poetry and prose, found across a vast geographical area. Very little is known of the historical figure of Jie Zhi Tui, but after his death, he would become famous across the Chinese world.

## **Historical Background**

Jie Zhi Tui was a native of the Zhou confederacy state of Jin, in present day Shanxi Province. During his lifetime, Jin became one of the most powerful and influential states in the confederacy, under the reign of Lord Wen of Jin (r. 636-628 BC), but prior to his accession the state was repeatedly riven by political intrigue and civil war (Weld 1990: 131). Jie Zhi Tui was to prove loyal to Lord Wen through many trials. In the end, however, when Lord Wen failed to reward his manifest loyalty, Jie Zhi Tui was said to have become a recluse.

The relationship between the two men began when, in 655 BC, the Honourable Chonger (subsequently better known by his posthumous title of Lord Wen of Jin) was forced into exile from his state, after his father, Lord Xian (r. 676-651 BC) had sent an assassin to kill him. At that time, the Honourable Chonger was living in the border town of Pucheng, to which he had been sent to remove him from the capital. Chonger was uninjured in the attack by the assassin, but his sleeve was sliced through. Fleeing from Pucheng, he initially sought refuge with his mother's family, the Di indigenous nomadic people of Jin. He lived with the Di people for over a decade before he began his famous travels around the Chinese world, treated sometimes with honour, at other times starving and despised. The Honourable Chonger visited the states

of Wei, Song and Zheng (Henan Province), Cao and Qi (Shandong Province), Chu (Hubei Province) and Qin (Shaanxi Province), before he was finally installed as the Marquis of Jin by his brother-in-law, Lord Mu of Qin (r. 659-621 BC). The use of the term *na* (to install) carried connotations of the use of force, and against the will of the people (Hu 1944: 8: 1a-1b). Throughout his travels, the future Lord Wen of Jin was supported by a small band of loyal followers, one of whom was traditionally said to have been Jie Zhi Tui. The Honourable Chonger was to rule Jin for only nine years before his death in 628 BC. During his time in exile, as he travelled from court to court within and without the Zhou confederacy, his family had been decimated by murder and political intrigue (Li 1988: 40). Lord Mu of Qin, married to the Honourable Chonger's half-sister, installed him in order to secure the internal stability of the state of Jin, and to create a friendly relationship with his closest neighbour.

Lord Wen of Jin was to prove one of the most successful rulers of his age. The geographical location of the state of Jin, "deep in the mountains, with the Rong and the Di peoples for neighbours, and far from the royal house" (Yang 1981: 1371 [Zhao 15]) as well as the prolonged civil strife prior to Lord Wen's succession, effectively prevented its rulers from taking an active role in the political life of the Central States before this time (Tong 1987: 147). Jin also had a long tradition of political isolationism. However, at a time when the power of the Zhou kings was imploding, assisted by the internal divisions in the royal family, Lord Wen was to prove instrumental in affirming the authority of King Xiang (651-619 BC) in the face of internal and external threats. Lord Wen restored King Xiang to the throne after an attempted usurpation by his younger brother, Prince Shudai, and his armies defeated those of Chu, the main enemy of the Zhou confederacy, in battle. For these achievements, Lord Wen was invested with the title of *ba* (Hegemon or Chief of the feudal lords) by the Zhou king. This exceptional title had only been granted once before, for similar services to the royal family.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the important role Lord Wen played on the international stage, he had an enormous impact on the future of the state of Jin. When he returned to the state of Jin, he had spent many years in exile, but it was far from a triumphant return. His accession was guaranteed by three thousand crack troops provided by Lord Mu of Qin, and the assassination of his nephew, the heir to the title of Marquis of Jin (Yang 1981 :414-415 [Xi 24]). His loyal followers, who had supported him throughout those years in exile and had endured humiliation and starvation with him, were expecting to be honoured and rewarded. Those who had chosen to remain in Jin and serve his murderous father and brother were hoping that he would not be too hard on them (Ban 1962: 2348). Lord Wen of Jin had to balance the claims of mercy and generosity, and in this accommodation, as he distributed the many rewards now in his gift as the new marquis, the claims of one of his followers, Jie Zhi Tui, were forgotten.

### **Historical Narrative and Storytelling in Ancient China**

China has a uniquely rich and ancient tradition of historical writings. A number of important historical texts from the pre-Qin period (prior to 221 BC) survive to this day, most famously perhaps the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), which gives a year by year account of events in the state of Lu from 772-481 BC, after which the Spring and Autumn period was named. Other accounts of the same time include the *Zuo Zhuan* (Zuo's Tradition), and the *Guo Yu* (Sayings of the States), all of which are to a greater or lesser extent presented as historical fact. Likewise there are a number of texts dating to the pre-Qin period, often considered to be "philosophical", compiled from the Warring States (475-221 BC) period onwards, that make use of historical events or personages, often the same as those known from the more overtly historical texts, to illustrate their theories. In the Han dynasty (206 BC-AD 220), a number of texts were compiled by Liu Xiang (c. 77 - c.6 BC), collecting together stories from books found in the Imperial library. It is however believed that in

many cases these historical tales are part of a long oral tradition, from which many of the variants known today derive (Karlgren 1926: 8). There has been a long and honourable tradition of telling historical tales in China. From at least the Song dynasty (960-1278), of all the members of the storytelling guilds, those recounting historical events were the most respected (Ruhlman 1959: 124).

The issue of an oral tradition for these ancient texts is highly problematic. It is generally recognised that there was such a tradition, but the nature of it has gone largely unconsidered, in contrast to the vast body of research on the oral origins of such literary forms as the Chinese novel. First, there is the question of transmission. It is true that the exact memorisation of lengthy texts is a great burden, and unlikely to be undertaken for anything other than extremely important information. However there is evidence that in some cultures, such a feat has indeed been undertaken. There is no particular reason to assume that an old oral tradition has necessarily always been corrupted by age. Such questions should be considered on an individual basis, in the light of the cultural context from which the storytelling tradition was derived. It might perhaps be useful to consider ancient China as a culture where there was both precise (*jing*) transmission and a less exact, storytelling (*zhuan*) tradition.<sup>3</sup> Stories about Jie Zhi Tui and other figures of the Spring and Autumn period came from the second tradition.

The stories which describe the lives and times of such historical figures as Jie Zhi Tui show all the problems and variations to be expected in such ancient texts. Some stories are known in many, sometimes mutually irreconcilable versions, while others seem to have been remarkably stable. Although some of these tales can confidently be said to be related, and the nature of that relationship can be defined, many versions and many interim variants have almost certainly been lost. Also, although many of these texts are known to have had a long oral transmission, the relationship between the lost oral versions and the surviving texts is unknowable. Even though two texts

may be closely related, is that because they are directly derived from one another, or from a common oral text, or was there an oral version in between? When these texts were finally written down, it is not clear if they were noted by a literate person from an oral rendition, or composed by a writer acquainted with the oral tradition. The antiquity of the written text in China makes such questions unanswerable. What is clear is that the oral tradition affected the earliest forms of written fictional text profoundly.

Stories about such historical figures as Jie Zhi Tui and his master Lord Wen of Jin were found in a wide variety of ancient texts. The development of these tales however seems very rarely to have been affected by their use as illustrative moral tales by writers of the various philosophical schools. This may be the result of the widely held belief in ancient China that tales from history served a moral purpose, so the stories were already cast in this mould before they were adopted by philosophers (Tan 1935: 50). Thus, when a story was used in a philosophical text to make a particular moral point, it was not doing violence to the tale, and it is noticeable that fundamentally the same story could appear in historical, philosophical and heterogeneous collections of ancient tales.

### **The Story of Jie Zhi Tui**

The story of Jie Zhi Tui is in essence the tale of a missed opportunity, and ignored loyalty. According to all versions of this story, Jie Zhi Tui was one of only a handful of supporters who followed the Honourable Chonger into a lengthy and difficult exile. He was said to have been one of his closest and most loyal companions during those hard and dangerous times, although not as close as Zhao Cui (Lord Wen's brother-in-law) or Jiu Fan (Lord Wen's maternal uncle) who also accompanied him into exile.

The earliest account of Jie Zhi Tui's life is given in the *Zuo Zhuan*, a text particularly associated with the state of Jin, and generally believed to have been compiled between 468-300 BC (Karlgrén 1926: 65). Although this text

was subsequently arranged as a commentary on the *Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn Annals), it includes many interesting tales about the leading historical figures of the day. This story recounts that when Lord Wen of Jin issued rewards to those who had followed him into exile, he gave nothing to Jie Zhi Tui, who was too modest to remind him. Jie Zhi Tui discussed his situation with his mother, and in spite of her promptings, he refused to bring himself to Lord Wen's attention. He declared that he would rather become a hermit than draw attention to himself. His mother decided to join him in his seclusion, out of admiration for his character. The historicity of all pre-Han accounts of reclusive behaviour is suspect. In this account, Jie Zhi Tui would seem to be engaging in "Confucian" (as opposed to "Daoist") eremitism: withdrawing due to the unsatisfactory nature of the contemporary social and political order (Berkowitz 1992: 4, 7). Later on, Lord Wen of Jin was said to have brought him to mind, and tried to tempt him out of seclusion; when he failed he granted Jie Zhi Tui the lands of Mianshang, *in absentia*. Lord Wen declared, "I do this to commemorate my fault, and to honour a superior man." (Yang 1981: 419 [Xi 24]).

The character of Jie Zhi Tui's mother, whose admiration for her son's character was such that she followed him into obscurity, formed an important contrast to the forgetfulness of Lord Wen. This earliest version was already a fully developed story, which was to have a particularly important place in representations of the second hegemon, Lord Wen of Jin. Lord Wen, otherwise regularly portrayed as one of the greatest rulers of his day, whose mercy and sense of honour formed a strong contrast with that displayed by other feudal lords of the day, could still occasionally fail in his duties. This failure added an important human touch to the portrayal of this great lord.

The next version of the tale appeared in the *Zhuangzi*, a text dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (Roth 1993: 57). This text added a new detail, stating that at one point during his period of exile, Lord Wen had been unable to go on due to starvation, and was only fortified enough to continue after Jie Zhi Tui

had cut a piece of flesh off his own thigh for him to eat. (In another tale about his exile, Lord Wen of Jin is recorded as having had to beg for food while passing through Wulu in the state of Wei, and for a joke, some rustics gave him a lump of earth instead (Yang 1981:406 [Xi 23]). Such a deed, though not so commonly recorded at this early date as it later became when such displays of virtue received government encouragement, was nevertheless the height of devotion, and to reward him as he deserved was therefore a matter of some importance, and Lord Wen's failure to do so correspondingly serious. This very violent interpretation of the story continued when Lord Wen, having failed to tempt Jie Zhi Tui out of seclusion with gifts, set fire to his place of retreat to smoke him out, and rather than return to the world, Jie burnt to death. The lack of specific details in the *Zhuangzi* text suggests that perhaps the reader could already be expected to be familiar with the details of this version:

Jie Zi Tui was loyal to a fault. He cut his own thigh in order to feed Lord Wen. Later on Lord Wen ignored him. Zi Tui was angry and left. He held a brand and was burnt to death (Wang 1988: 1186 [*Dao Zhi*]).

The *Zhuangzi* version of this story greatly emphasised Lord Wen of Jin's ingratitude. It was his duty to reward the man who had served him so nobly, and who had suffered so much in his service. Lord Wen of Jin might have been one of the great lords of his time, but on this occasion he was portrayed as having failed in a basic moral obligation: he did not remember the man who saved his life.

This escalation of the violence in the story seems to have been part of a general trend in the stories about Lord Wen. While still the Honourable Chonger, he was tricked into getting drunk by his wife and uncle who wished him to leave the state of Qi and attain his destiny, and according to the *Zuo Zhuan*, on waking to discover himself already on his way, Chonger chased his uncle with a halberd (Yang 1981: 407 [Xi 23]). In some versions, he was also

credited with blood-curdling threats to eat his uncle (Shanghai Shifan Daxue Guji Zhenglizhu 1978:344 [*Jin Yu* 4]). Another example of this violent behaviour occurred in the aftermath of Lord Wen's victory at the battle of Chengpu in 632 BC. Having captured the baggage-train of the Chu army, in the *Shi Ji* he is said to have set fire to their food supplies, and the fires burnt for three days (Sima 1959: 1668). This tale is generally accepted to have derived from a misreading of the original *Zuo Zhuan* passage, which stated that they *feasted* for three days (Liang 1981: 988).

In the third important strand that was woven into this story, Lord Wen, having failed to reward Jie Zhi Tui's past loyalty and devotion, was alerted to his omission by a rhymed sequence, in which Jie Zhi Tui's plight was couched in terms of a dragon and its attendant serpents. This poem was first given in the *Lüshi Chunqiu* (Spring and Autumn of Mr. Lü), a text dated to around 239 BC (Carson/Loewe 1993: 324), and compiled under the auspices of Lü Buwei (d. 235 BC), an important statesman of the state of Qin:

There was a dragon that flew  
And travelled all around the world,  
Five serpents followed him,  
To assist him.  
The dragon returned to his homestead,  
And took his rightful place,  
Four serpents followed him  
And got his sweet rain.  
One serpent thought this shameful  
And withered to death in the wilderness (Xu 1935: 12:6a-6b [*Jie Li*]).

This sequence, given with slightly variant wording, appeared in a number of texts in the Han period, and was most usually said to be a poem (*shi*) though it was occasionally described as a song (*ge*). The dragon is the future Lord Wen of Jin, and the five serpents would seem to be a reference to his five main supporters during his exile. In the earliest account of Lord Wen's five

followers, found in the *Zuo Zhuan*, their names are given as Zhao Cui, Hu Yan, Dian Xie, Wei Wuzi and Sikong Jizi (Yang 1981: 404-405 [Xi 23]). In his commentary on this passage, Yang Bojun noted that the identity of Lord Wen's five supporters was frequently disputed in ancient texts. In this case, the serpent who withered to death in the wilderness is a clear reference to the ignored Jie Zhi Tui.

The story of Jie Zhi Tui appeared in a number of texts edited by Liu Xiang. It was thus not until the Han dynasty that the three main strands of the story were woven together to make the final fully developed story. It is possible that the connection had been made some time earlier in the oral tradition, but it was not widely recorded in texts until the three collections of stories edited by Liu Xiang were circulated: the *Liexian Zhuan* (Traditions of the Illustrious Immortals) (Liu 1937: 16 [*Jie Zhi Tui*])<sup>4</sup>, *Shuo Yuan* (Garden of Stories) a text presented to the throne in 17 BC (Xiang 1987: 122 [*Fu En*]), and *Xin Xu* (New Prefaces) presented to the throne in 24 BC (Liu 1937: 117-118).

The Eastern Han dynasty scholar, Cai Yong (132-192), included Jie Zhi Tui's song in his collection of stories about the composition of songs, the *Qin Cao* (Zither Tunes). In this text, the song is called the *Long She Ge* (Song of the Dragon and Serpents) (Cai 1935: 16). The song, prior to this version, had changed very little, and in each case described the emotions of an excluded individual in very simple terms, as was usual with popular songs composed in the Warring States and early Han dynasty (Birrell 1988: 9). The *Qin Cao* represented the beginning of a new poetic tradition, where the poet threw himself into the emotions of a historical character to create a new work of literature. Although the song still made reference to the dragon and snakes of the original, and authorship was still ascribed to Jie Zhi Tui, it is very different in tone and literary merit from the versions produced over the previous centuries.

The story of Jie Zhi Tui continued to be popular after the end of the Han dynasty. As the short story was developed during the Age of Disunion

(220-581), the new literary form was validated by the stories written about familiar historical figures. One of those figures was Jie Zhi Tui, whose death formed the basis of a popular supernatural story. When Lord Wen fired the forest in which Jie Zhi Tui had hidden himself, as the flames reached him, a white crow was said to have flown up from the flames, cawing (presumably representing his soul) (Shen 1960: 396 [*Si Yan*]). Later Jie Zhi Tui's unburned remains were enclosed in a commemorative pavilion.<sup>5</sup> Although interest in the major figures of the Spring and Autumn period did wane significantly in the Age of Disunion, they still retained a hold over the public imagination.

### **The Story of Jie Zhi Tui and Yuan Drama**

After the end of the Han dynasty, the story of Jie Zhi Tui would routinely reappear in new literary forms at intervals. This tale of loyalty and trust tragically betrayed by one of the most powerful lords of the time was to prove perennially popular. The image of Jie Zhi Tui, already widespread during the Han dynasty, would be further enhanced by the festival dedicated to his memory, the *han shi* (Cold Food) festival. First mentioned in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, this cult spread throughout the Chinese world from the Taiyuan area of Shanxi province, once the heart of the state of Jin (Holzman 1986: 52-63). On the fifth day of the fifth lunar month<sup>6</sup>, people ate cold food, in memory of Jie Zhi Tui, burnt to death by his master, Lord Wen of Jin.

During the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), drama was the dominant literary form. As had happened in the past, this new genre was legitimised by themes drawn from the history of the Spring and Autumn period, presenting the audience with familiar figures described in a new way. For example, the play *Tao Zhu Gong Fan Li Gui Hu* (Fan Li, Lord Zhu of Tao, returns to the Lakes) by the early Yuan playwright Zhao Mingdao, described the conflict between the states of Wu and Yue at the end of the Spring and Autumn period, when the famous minister Fan Li fled his king's wrath and went to live in Tao (Wang 1999: Vol. 2, 553). A number of plays were written in the Yuan dynasty on

themes drawn from the conflict between Wu and Yue. These include *Wu Yuan Chui Xiao* (Wu Yuan Plays the Flute) by Li Shoujing (Ma 1957:46), *Bao Shi Tou Jiang* (Throwing Herself into the Yangtze Holding a Stone) by Wu Changling, and *Huan Hua Nü Bao Shi Tou Jiang* (The Girl who Washed Silk Gauze Throws herself into the Yangtze Holding a Stone) by Cao Diting (Ma 1957:69). At the same time, a play was written about the famous military strategist Sun Wu training women from the king of Wu's harem to fight, *Jiao Nü Bing* (Training Women Soldiers) by Zhou Zongbin (Zhu 1976: 61). Just as other historical figures had been chosen for treatment in drama, Jie Zhi Tui's legend was used to good effect.

Yuan dynasty dramatisations of historical stories from the Spring and Autumn period seem to have drawn extensively on written sources for their treatment of core events. However, in many instances it is clear that the playwright did not go back to the ancient sources, but instead drew upon later versions, thus incorporating elements that would be familiar to the audience from tales told by story-tellers, or from other literary genres which had developed the story. In the case of plays based upon relatively obscure historical events, the range of later versions would be restricted, and the playwright was more likely to have based his work exclusively upon ancient texts. Yuan dynasty historical dramas were often based upon events that had originally merited a few lines in the annals of the time, and hence required considerable development to produce a full-length play.

The play *Jin Wen Gong Huoshao Jie Zi Tui* (Lord Wen of Jin Burns Jie Zi Tui), by Di Junhou, is the only surviving drama by this particular mid-Yuan dynasty playwright. Di Junhou was a native of Pingyang in Shanxi province, hence perhaps his interest in this particular story (Wang 1999: Vol. 3, 282). This play followed the more dramatic line of tales about Jie Zhi Tui: when the Honourable Chonger starved in exile he cut a lump out of his thigh to feed him, Jie Zhi Tui's mother agreed to go into exile with him and a follower hung the *Long She Ge* on the door of the Jin palace, and Lord Wen of Jin fired the

forest to force him to come out. The last act of this play includes a number of lyrical descriptions of the flames that engulfed Jie Zhi Tui:

The blaze climbs higher, and the fire sends up red clouds,  
The darkest of smoke rises up in inky puffs,  
At the crackling boundary the flames leap in all directions,  
Quickly great billows of smoke and soot arise in confusion,  
Silently as the fire presses closer, concealed beyond the path,  
The fine man I once knew is hidden in this ravine of smoke (Wang 1999: Vol. 3, 298-299).

The importance of the story of Jie Zhi Tui lies in its continuing popularity. The performance tradition in ancient China is little understood, having been consistently overshadowed by the literary text. However this story was once handed down by oral transmission, before being enshrined in the written word. Before the end of the Han dynasty, the tale of Jie Zhi Tui was already known across the Chinese world. Then, many centuries after it had first been performed, the story of Jie Zhi Tui was used again as the inspiration for a dramatic performance. This story of a loyal and devoted man ignored and eventually killed by his master has proved to have an enduring popularity.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Jie Zhi Tui was also known in ancient texts as Jie Zi Tui. The Zhi or Zi is believed to be a vocative form, which would mean that correctly his name should be given as Jie Tui. However, one or other version of the vocative form is used in all surviving examples of stories in which he figures (Yang 1991: 4).

<sup>2</sup> The previous holder of this title was Lord Huan of Qi (r. 685-643 BC). Like Lord Wen of Jin, Lord Huan had fought against the growing influence of the southern state of Chu in the affairs of the Zhou confederacy, and attempted to adjudicate over the various internecine struggles in the Zhou royal family.

<sup>3</sup> This idea was current in the Han dynasty, when Liu Xi defined *jing* as *chang* (constant) (Tsai 1993: 25, 40). Liu Xie in the *Wen Xin Diao Long* also considers this interpretation of the term *jing* (Huang/Li 2000: 26) [*Zong Jing*]. In his work on the *Han Shi Waizhuan*, Hightower discussed the use of the term *zhuan yue* as meaning “There is a story (or tradition) that...” (Hightower 1952: 5).

<sup>4</sup> The attribution of the *Liexian Zhuan* to Liu Xiang was made in antiquity, though it is

disputed (Nienhauser 1986: 566). However, the text is certainly genuinely dated to the Han dynasty. The account given of Jie Zhi Tui's later life given in the *Liexian Zhuan* is closest to that of other culture heroes like Fan Li. In this version, Jie Zhi Tui disappeared, to reappear briefly thirty years later, selling fans by the sea.

<sup>5</sup> According to the gazette for Yicheng county, which covers the site of the former Jin capital of Jiang, Lord Wen of Jin was said to have built a temple to the memory of Jie Zhi Tui, at Fufu Shan, the site of his death (Ma/Ji 1976: 218). There was a further temple within the walls of the capital (Hu 1968: 362).

<sup>6</sup> The fifth day of the fifth lunar month was traditionally supposed to have been unlucky (Lu 1928: 61). Jie Zhi Tui was not the only famous figure of the Spring and Autumn period said to have died on this day: Wu Zixu, the loyal minister of King Fucha of Wu, was ordered to commit suicide, and was likewise said to have died on the fifth of the fifth (Ouyang 1937: 29).

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