



Talks on Dao Mountain

By Xiaoyao Xingzhe

A wake meandered gently from the stern in the calm river water. The little waves gleamed rose and crimson, mirroring the fiery sky, itself inflamed by the lowering sun. A slight jolt and creaking wood marked each scull as the boatman propelled us forward, and shook the leaves of the sapling that rested in the bottom of the small boat, spilling tiny showers of dark earth around our feet. The boatman, standing behind the fat Daoist, cackled repeatedly during a long monologue that included jokes, stories, and long sections of – to me – incomprehensible local dialect.

THE PASSAGE OVER THIS STRETCH of river would land us close to a certain place the Daoist had prepared for transplanting the sapling we carried, a tree that was “useful for both medicine and Medicine” as he put it enigmatically. The water ran wide with a laminar flow that left the surface quite still, although we had been caught in a nasty counter-current swirl soon after leaving the shore behind us. The

turbulence had only briefly stopped the cackling monologue of the boatman as he balanced in the rear of the boat, and now he seemed to be telling a story in his dialect, complete with different voices, and interrupted by his laughter at his own rendition. The fat monk chuckled now and then. Finally the boatman stopped the telling and seemed to be urging the monk to do something.

“He wants me to tell you this story,” the Daoist said. “I’m not great at this dialect, but it doesn’t really matter, I know the story. I won’t do all the voices though, if you don’t mind. My teacher used to love these stories, and seemed to think they were worthy of more attention than they get. I happen to particularly like this one.” Then he began.

Afanti was once the adviser to a rather foolish king, who consistently said the most inappropriate things at delicate times, such as in meetings with ambassadors of the powerful surrounding countries. It was generally left to Afanti to sort out the mess, although the king did sometimes realise that his lack of control over his thoughts and words caused some trouble.

One day, Afanti suggested a remedy. "Your Majesty," he said, "let me advise you without words. Let us tie a string to your toe, and run it behind the throne. While you are saying or asking the right things, I will do nothing. If you begin to get into trouble, I will simply pull on the string so that you will know to stop talking."

The king agreed.

That very day, two ambassadors of their most powerful neighbour – the king of which was secretly considering launching a war against them – arrived for an audience, with their entourage. After the initial formalities, the king asked: "Are the cats and dogs of your country all fat? And what of your mulberries?"

Afanti immediately pulled on the string, and the king stopped. The ambassadors were nonplussed. Afanti came forward and addressed them:

"When our king speaks, he does not waste words – his meanings are subtle, and not easily understood by undeveloped minds. He is aware of the perspicacity of your intellect, and thus he speaks in this manner. However, your scribes may not understand.

"Therefore let me explain: when he asks about your cats and dogs, he is inquiring about the general happiness and well-being of your populace, for if even the cats and dogs are fat, your people are most certainly prosperous!"

"Of course, we understood! But what about the mulberries?" asked the confused ambassadors.

"Ah, most wisely asked," said Afanti. "By this our monarch refers to your customary dress, for as all know, silkworms are fed on mulberry leaves, and a country with many mulberry trees has the resources for the most resplendent clothing, as well as all the other benefits of silk. Furthermore, mulberries are nutritious, and also have medicinal properties as do the leaves, twigs, and root bark. The fruits nourish the blood, the leaves brighten the eyes, the twigs relieve aching of the arms and shoulders, and the root bark stops cough and wheeze. Thus many mulberry trees

bespeak a healthy, strong, and wealthy populace."

The ambassadors were extremely impressed, and withdrew with great respect. They informed their own monarch that a country with a ruler as wise as this would surely be difficult to overcome, and that their plans for war should be dropped.

After they had gone, the king turned to Afanti and scolded him, saying: "Here I was saying the most wonderful things, as you yourself admitted, and you had to go and stop me by pulling that infernal string!"

One part of ourselves can be quite wise. If we allow it, and have enough discipline to recognise its promptings, the wise part can come to our rescue from time to time...

As he finished the story we both laughed, and the boatman who had also been listening and watching for my reaction laughed and looked satisfied. By then we had drawn close to the opposite shore, and the last light of evening was just fading. An evening breeze sprang up and waves lapped against the side of the boat.

The fat monk, pulling his grey Daoist tunic closer around him, said: "Stories like this, especially the Afanti stories, are not just jokes, they can show us how things work within us. For example, this story can show that even though we are often ruled by our most foolish tendencies, one part of ourselves can be quite wise. If we allow it, and have enough discipline to recognise its promptings, the wise part can come to our rescue from time to time, when we have through foolishness almost brought disaster upon ourselves."

The boat nudged the shore and the Daoist leapt out heavily and pulled the prow up to rest on the muddy beach. He leant over and picked up the sapling with its hessian-wrapped ball of earth, lifting it out of the boat with a grunt, and carrying it up the shore. As I stood up to get out of the boat, the boatman put his hand out to restrain me, leaning over to whisper in quite unaccented Mandarin: "Ni bidei xiaoxin neige ren, neige Daoshi." He pointed with his chin to indicate the back of the Daoist walking away up the beach, struggling slightly with the heavy sapling. I looked at him in surprise. Be careful of the fat Daoist? Whatever for?

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"I know that type," the boatman said with narrowed eyes and slightly curled lip.

"They're all tricksters and charlatans, try to gull you with deep-sounding words and hints of mysteries, just to get you involved in their schemes. Look at what he said about that joke I told, nothing but a load of crap. You be careful, I'm warning you!" And with that he pushed away from the beach. As the current caught the boat, it spun around and he sculled off into the darkness.

His words set off a welter of suspicions in my own mind, and I saw some of the interactions with the Daoist over the past week in a new light. What about that paralysis point, for example? I was still feeling the effects of the pain several days later – that was sadistic, I now thought. And he had lured me here, isolated, late at night ... anything could happen.

Don't be silly, another part of me said, he's been completely normal; extraordinarily open with you, in fact. Every undertaking he made to you has been kept, and more. And it was *you* who insisted on a demonstration of the paralysis point!

I trudged up the shore toward the Daoist, warring with myself. He had been cleaning the mud off his boots with a stick as I approached, and looked back now with what seemed a suspicious glint in his eye. He said "What were you two talking about so chummily?" He stood up, gripping the stick.

"Nothing," I said. "He just told me to watch my step."

"And so you should," he said. He threw down the stick, took off his cap, smoothed back his hair, replaced the cap and looked at me closely in the gloom. He shrugged and said in an irritated tone: "Hey, I thought you offered to help me with this! It's a pretty heavy load, this sapling, what with this ball of earth on it. Give me a hand – take the other corner of that hessian cloth and we'll carry it between us."

I did and we managed the sapling pretty easily, up the shore and into the wooded area beyond. As the sound of the river faded behind us, the undergrowth made the going a struggle and the darkness was thick. My suspicions returned. What was I doing here? Why did I agree to help him, especially at this time of night? What did

I really know about this so-called monk? Finally he seemed to find a narrow path, and we set the tree down for a rest, sitting on a couple of large rocks close by.

As if nothing had intervened, the monk resumed his comments on the boatman's story.

"That story has other layers," he said. "For example, instead of our idiot self, the King *could* represent the promptings of the Dao within us, our real ruler. To our everyday consciousness, those promptings sound like gibberish. But if we have developed our true intent, the *zhen yi*, the mind that can link both our intuitive side and our logical side, then this mind can interpret those promptings in such a way that they become meaningful for the everyday logical part of us."¹

"But which interpretation of the story is the right one?" I asked, confused.

He laughed in a way that seemed scornful to me now; it was too dark to make out his face. "That is like saying 'This peach is both sweet and moist – but which one *should* it be?'" Those two interpretations, by the way, are not the only possible meanings. These stories are designed deliberately to give you more flavour and nutrition the more you chew on them. But I will not chew your peach for you. Use your own head and heart on it." He stood up.

"Wait!" I said. "These stories are 'designed'? Who designed them and why do they seem just like jokes?" The boatman's words echoed in my head.

There was silence in the dark.

"There are many ways to convey knowledge," the fat monk said, finally. "If you label something 'Wisdom' people will often revere it, but may never really think about it. A joke or story, on the other hand, can get into the mind and convey a certain *pattern* that reflects reality, but which the conscious mind need not recognise at the time. But when that pattern occurs in life, the story that reflects it can arise within the mind, and helps one recognise the pattern. In this way, wisdom builds up, bit by bit. Come on, we need to keep moving."

We each took up our side of the hessian and moved off, shuffling along the little path through the bushes. He added, seemingly as an afterthought "and just by the way, jokes

and stories have a survival value that flies under the radar of any prevailing orthodoxy that might be hunting heretics.”

I still had my doubts and said, panting as we struggled with the sapling, “I’m sorry, I just don’t find this very believable. Wisdom in jokes, reflected patterns of reality, it’s all a bit far-fetched for me.”

“It’s like I keep telling you: you just don’t pay attention,” he puffed. “For example, didn’t you tell me that you have been out to the Mogao caves at Dun Huang? A thousand caves covered with Buddhist paintings! Didn’t you notice that most of those paintings were stories from the *Wu Juan Shu*?² Every one an animal story.” We negotiated a sharp turn on the path. “Those caves were designed for meditation. You join the dots.”

By then I was too tired to argue. We moved in silence through the darkness up the path. Gradually I became aware of the sound of flowing water.

“That’s the little stream we are after,” the fat Daoist said. “We’ll follow it up to its source, a little spring in a grotto. There’s a pavilion there where we can have a bit of shelter for the night. Tomorrow we’ll take this tree the rest of the way.”

Before too long we had found our way to the source, after climbing higher and entering a short gap, a narrow vale of stone whose rock walls rose above us on either side. At the end of the valley the walls opened out again to form a grotto in which I could just make out a small pavilion amidst a grove of bamboo, and an area of deeper black glittering with reflected stars.

“This is called the Pool of the Midnight Yang,” the Daoist said. “It is nourished by a spring that wells up from the depths of the mountain. This pavilion is here because wayfarers come to observe a strange quality about this pool: on clear still nights, nights with no cloud, and no wind, if one looks deep into the pool one may perceive a luminescence in its depths. Tonight looks perfect. Let’s put this sapling down, settle ourselves over by the pool, and see what we can see.”

The Daoist crossed his legs and sat, looking down into the pool. I did likewise. A restful peace settled around us. The pool seemed to have an incredible depth,

dark and rich. Gazing into it, I felt subtly drawn in, a gradual pulling forward until I had the sudden vertiginous sensation of falling *upward* into the midnight sky, surrounded by blackness and stars, my whole self expanding joyously outward in all directions, completely unlimited by any physical ... a rough hand grabbed the nape of my neck.

“Don’t touch the water!” the Daoist growled, as he dragged me back to an upright position, saving me from toppling headfirst into the pool, as I apparently had been about to do. “Pay attention, and keep your head,” he said. My heart slowly regained its normal rhythm.

We sat for perhaps an hour, and although the pool retained its rich limpid blackness, I did not see any luminescence in its depths. The Daoist refused to tell me what he saw, if anything. “You may have a chance some other time,” he said gruffly. “Let’s get some rest while we can in the pavilion. I am just going to give the sapling a taste of this water.”

He explained that the water from this particular spring was extremely nourishing for the vitality of plants and animals, but his special reason for giving the sapling the water now was, he said, “to foster a sense of recognition”. After planting the sapling in its place further up the mountain, its roots would seek deep into the substance of the mountain until it found the source of that vitalising spring. Those deep roots would secure the growing tree against even the strongest wind, allowing it to bend, but not become uprooted. The fat Daoist filled a large water bag to carry with us.

We spent what was, to me, a rather uncomfortable rest of the night at the pavilion, and rose as the sky lightened.

“Hey, this should help!” the Daoist said, drawing my attention to a large pile of cut bamboo behind the pavilion. He pulled out a couple of larger bamboo stalks to act as poles. We stripped off the smaller branches, then laid a couple of smaller poles crossways and bound them with creeper pulled from the rock wall. We then put the hessian cloth over the poles and tucked it under. This would make carrying the sapling much easier.

We made much better time after this,



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The changing of the moon, the number of sides on a seed pod, the branching of a tree – all of these things are signs that can be read. The book of nature is truly a repository of wisdom.

exiting the short valley and winding our way along the path up the mountain. Even with several breaks for rest and a drink, it had not yet reached noon before we arrived at the terrace where the Daoist planned to transplant the sapling. We stopped to catch our breath, mop off our sweat and take a look around.

It was a lovely place, on the same side of the mountain as the grotto where we had spent the night, with warm sunlight and gentle breezes. The pure air at this altitude was invigorating. “Yes,” he said seeming to read my thoughts. “This place is perfect: well-sheltered, facing south. Where the tree originally had been was completely unsuitable. Too cold, destructive winds, it would never have borne fruit. And this fruit is worth the effort.” Not only exquisite in taste and savour, he told me, but ultimately tonifying for essential qi, it was able to both extend life and eliminate disease. He went further, claiming that this fruit restored one to a harmony and balance that naturally aligned one with the Dao.

Again, the words of the boatman seemed to come fresh to my ears.

But there was no doubt that the Daoist valued this sapling. Evidence of his preparation was everywhere. Soft, well-tilled soil, black and rich; not a weed in sight; stones arranged in such a way that rainwater would be both directed to the area of the sapling, and drained away below.

With his own hands he dug deep into the soft soil, laid in the sapling, and filled the hole around the ball, stomping the soil down firmly. He then poured what was left in the water bag around the base. I watched this in dismay.

“Thirsty?” he laughed. “The tree needs it more than you do right now. But in the morning here, just as the light begins, there is a thick misty dew over the whole terrace that will keep the tree watered until it establishes its deeper roots.” He shook the empty water bag, and said, “Don’t worry, I have a friend who lives not too much further up the mountain. I was planning on taking you to visit him anyway, you’ll find him interesting.”

“What friend?” I asked, suspicion edging my words.

“He’s a kind of hermit,” the fat Daoist

said, apparently oblivious to the tone in my voice. “But the cave he lives in is no mere hole. Wait, you’ll see.”

With a last loving tap around the earth at the base of the sapling, he led the way off the terrace, in the opposite direction from the way we arrived. We made our way along the path through thick vegetation, crossing small streams here and there that tumbled freely down the slope beside us.

“Nothing reveals patterns of reality better than the study of nature, though,” the Daoist suddenly said, as if we had not dropped the subject the day before. “The changing of the moon, the number of sides on a seed pod, the branching of a tree – all of these things are signs that can be read. The book of nature is truly a repository of wisdom.”

Shakespeare’s phrase *find tongues in trees, books in running brookes, and sermons in stones* rose unbidden to my mind, and I wondered at the universality of certain states of mind.

As we climbed, the mountain became more rocky, but since we had nothing to carry the path was easy and in very little time we were standing before the residence of his friend. The views from this height were spectacular, stretching away until swallowed by the mists in the lowlands; down below, the river we had crossed was a thin ribbon of crystal in the early afternoon sun.

We were still taking this in when a clap of hands and a cry of “Eh, lai la!” from behind us made us turn. A tall figure in loose trousers and moth-eaten home-knit jumper, with a thin face, high forehead and a wispy beard came towards us. He was smiling, but it was his eyes that caught me: intelligent to the point of arrogance, yet warm as if he had endured much in his life. He grasped the Daoist’s hand, and when he turned to me I felt his fingers were calloused and strong.

“I have been waiting for you,” he said in an articulate bright voice. “Come in and sit.”

He led us into his home and study, which was built into the mountain. He saw my look of amazement.

“This was a natural cavern when I first came here 10 years ago, but I’ve been expanding it.” His tenor voice seemed to dance with electricity. The place was



impressive. There were high ceilings of natural stone and two large arched windows that looked out over the view we had been admiring. Another indeterminate source of light brightened even the inner chambers far beyond what I would have expected.

I heard a strange rumbling close to me, and turned to find the Daoist rubbing his substantial abdomen and grinning sheepishly.

“Forgive me!” the hermit said with a smile. “You must both be famished. Let me get you some food. It is all prepared.”

In fact the Daoist and I were both starving, having had only the water from the spring since the morning, so we accepted his invitation eagerly. We pulled some benches close to a long table, while he bustled about in his ‘kitchen’ – his cooking area was nothing but a lean-to just outside his door.

“A lay-woman from the village on the other side of the mountain comes up to cook for me once or twice a week,” the hermit said as he walked back in carrying some dishes. “We make our own soy-sauce, pickled vegetables and bean-curd, and of course these bean-sprouts.”

On the warm rice the taste of the simple fare was exceptionally delicious, and we didn’t object to a glass or two of fragrant warmed rice-wine “for visitors” as he put it.

Over lunch we chatted. The Daoist told him how we had met, and said that I was a fan of Liu Yi-Ming’s writing. The hermit approved.

“Liu Yi-Ming was an old man by the time he realised the Dao,” he said. “But he pared away a lot of the extraneous trappings that tend to accumulate around these practices. He brought it right back to essentials, and placed clear warning markers at all the places where people could get side-tracked. He also pointed out less obvious ways forward, characteristics of the path that people usually never notice.”

“Or actively resist!” the Daoist interjected. He related my doubts regarding the deliberate design of stories to reflect patterns of reality, then pushed aside his bowl and stood up, excusing himself.

After he had left the room, I hesitated for a moment, then decided that I had to confide in someone. I turned to the hermit, and confessed my half-held suspicions

regarding the fat Daoist, reporting what the boatman had said. The hermit’s bright eyes danced with amusement.

“If that boatman is who I suspect it is,” he said in his rather high voice, “and frankly our friend the Daoist would be unlikely to pick anyone else, that boatman is one of us, a wayfarer, and quite advanced.”

I was shocked. “But why would he sow doubts in my mind about the Daoist, if they were friends?”

“He did not sow any doubts, he only brought them to the surface, where you could see them for yourself,” the hermit smiled. Just then the fat Daoist returned, and with a glance at the hermit, I told him what we had been discussing.

He laughed delightedly as he sat down. “That’d be just like him,” he said. “I wondered why he was acting the rustic, with the local dialect and everything. He was setting up a lesson.” He raised his eyebrows. “So that’s why you were acting a bit weird all night.” He shook his head with a rumbling chuckle.

I confessed that I had hardly slept, and wondered aloud how bringing out doubts about someone could be helpful.

“Doubts are not a bad thing,” the hermit said, picking a grain of rice off his jumper. “Only a cult asks you to believe something without question. A real teacher would never stifle your doubts. They would however, like the boatman, encourage you to examine your own inner sense of what is true or false. One learns to differentiate the *feeling* of that sense of truth from a superficial or habitual tendency to be suspicious.”

He took a sip of rice-wine, then added “or an over-eagerness to believe, for that matter”.

“Anyway,” said the Daoist, “we should be noticing these tendencies of mind by ourselves. This is part of *xing ming shuang xiu* – the mutual cultivation of essence and life. A teacher is crucial for more delicate aspects of the process, but fellow wayfarers can help us, like our friend the boatman did for you. He must have thought you have some potential.” He paused. “Or maybe he thought you were hopeless, and was just pulling your leg.”

They both cracked up. The tenor laughter of one mixed with the baritone of the other



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was infectious, and after a moment I found myself joining them, even though the joke was on me. We stood up then, cleared away the dishes and cups, and I asked the hermit more about his study, which I had not yet seen.

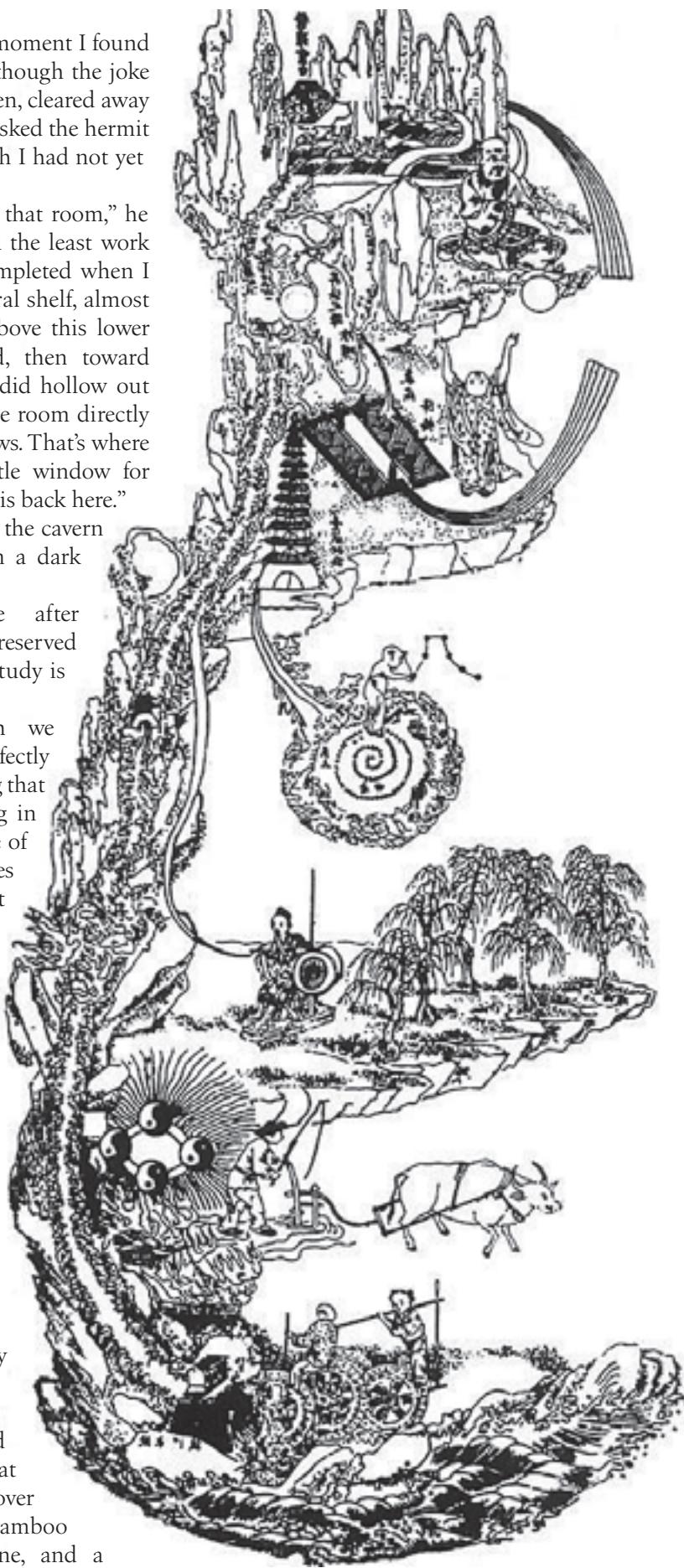
“Ah, I am quite proud of that room,” he said. “But it’s the one I did the least work on. It was pretty much completed when I found it. There was a natural shelf, almost another whole chamber, above this lower one.” He pointed upward, then toward the front of the cavern. “I did hollow out the forward small room, the room directly above the two lower windows. That’s where I sleep, and there is a little window for illumination. But the study is back here.” He led the way deeper into the cavern and I saw some barrels in a dark recess. He saw my glance.

“That’s our soy-sauce after fermentation, and some preserved vegetables,” he said. “The study is up this ladder.”

The room into which we emerged was almost perfectly round, with a domed ceiling that lifted to a circular opening in the center. Around the base of the walls were stone benches cut straight across so that the floor was square. A magnificent carpet with an octagonal medallion pattern was laid out in the middle of the room, and a wooden desk with bookshelves fitted into a niche where two sides of the stone benches converged. I touched the walls – white marble!

“I found the interior architecture already shaped,” the hermit said, looking around, “and who knows over how many generations? But by whom is a mystery.”

“A room like this could have many uses,” the fat Daoist agreed. Looking over at the desk I saw carved bamboo brush holders, an inkstone, and a



piece of calligraphy in bold seal script that appeared recently completed. The air was fresh and invigorating.

"This is the secret place that I come to when I need quiet inspiration," the hermit continued. "Vents keep the air circulating. The room is constructed mostly of traditional materials, but that aperture above us is a product of advanced science. It is a semi-permeable filter that restricts the harmful atmospheric influences while allowing the beneficial to pass within."

I could feel what he meant. The whole atmosphere of that room was extremely rejuvenating, in a quietly restorative kind of way. The sensation brought to mind other places, all too few, in which the combination of certain materials, the dimensions of the room, and the colours all combined to achieve a harmonious whole that felt nourishing just to be in, that made one feel alive.

We stood silent and content, absorbing the atmosphere of the surroundings. After a while, the hermit gave a deep sigh and smiled, then descended the ladder, followed by the Daoist. I lingered for a last look before going after them.

They had rearranged their chairs to face the windows, through which now poured the golden yellow of the later afternoon sun. I sat facing the same way, behind the table.

"Tell me more about *xing ming shuang xiu*," I said. "Liu Yi-Ming refers to it a lot. But what does it mean to mutually cultivate essence and life?"

The hermit turned his thin face towards the Daoist, who shrugged and pointed back with his chin. The hermit paused with an abstract look, then in his high articulate voice said: "Essence – *xing* – is the basic nature of your mind, so the study of essence is the investigation of your mind – exactly what we were talking about just now. You observe its superficial tendencies, and gradually take this back to basics. The Chan people call it 'seeing essence,' *jian xing*; we call it 'turning the light around': you maintain a quiet but steady observation of your mind's activities, until those activities become more and more subtle. When the mind has become very still, there is often a spontaneous movement from within; this is the crucial time to sense the quality of that

movement ..."

The Daoist interrupted, lifting a hand with the palm outward. "That's plenty for now, our friend's quite a long way from needing that level of detail," he rumbled. "He needs a general survey of the project more." He prepared himself with a sip of the now cold wine, then grimaced and set it down.

"Life –*ming*– is your everyday life, the balance between your activities and your *qi*, and your health. The study of life is the study of what you do with what you have, or as my hermit friend here would say 'how well you bring your resources to bear on your activities'. Are you efficient? Or do you waste your energy? Lots of those exercises we were doing last week, *tai ji*, *ba duan jin*, *dao yin*, *yi jin jing*, all of those are part of the science of the cultivation of life."

"OK," I said, "so you sit in meditation to turn the light around, and then you try to be healthy and efficient in daily life. But what does one have to do with the other? *Xing ming shuang xiu* means *mutual cultivation*."

"You're right about the mutual cultivation, but you are wrong about sitting in meditation," said the Daoist. "Sitting meditation is just the start, a beginning exercise to learn the basics of turning the light around, it is not the goal. We do not aim to become 'meditators'. The goal is to gradually learn to identify, and then attend to the source of mind, what we call *zhen zhi* –real knowledge– and to maintain access to that knowledge even while we use our everyday consciousness to be effective in the world. Of course it is easy to get swept away in our everyday superficial consciousness, and one may use periodic sessions of quiet sitting to restore contact, but meditating can become a trap just like anything." He got up and went out to the lean-to, and came back with a teapot and steaming kettle. He sat down next to me behind the table.

The hermit nodded from across the table, and took up the description in his clear tenor. "Mutual cultivation means that you use life to refine your contact with essence, and use essence to refine the quality and effectiveness of your life. Once you know this, and have some experience of it, you will discover that this operates in many areas of life. People and activities you would never have suspected reveal themselves to

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be enterprises for the mutual cultivation of essence and life. Some of these are very old, and still operating. Some are new. Some are superseded and no longer effective.”

The Daoist filled the teapot with the boiling water.

“I have an example that ties together everything we’ve talked about the last two days!” he said. “Stories reflecting patterns of reality, one’s inner sense of truth, the mutual cultivation of essence and life, and a source of teaching in broad view that no one sees. Do you remember how we talked last week about the special reading techniques you may need to use in this area?”

He poured out the tea into small cups, before he continued: “Did you realise that some of the most useful books for learning to read in that special way, and for learning much else, do not appear on the surface to be concerned with “Taoism” or “religion” or “philosophy” or “self-development” at all?” He paused to sip his tea noisily.

“That is correct,” agreed the hermit in his precise way. “On the surface these books might seem to be simply a collection of stories, or a novel, or a play, but underneath – for those who know how to read them – they can reveal a pattern of knowledge that becomes perceptible according to the degree of insight the reader has developed.”

The Daoist poured out more tea.

For some reason, I found myself irritated. Something seemed to push deep-set buttons in my subconscious. Maybe it was tiredness, but I was strangely affronted by this idea. “Name one!” I challenged. My voice was raised and there was a pressure in my head. “I just can’t believe – and I doubt that you would be able to convince me – that an ordinary novel, say, had other layers that I could not see. And even if it did, if this were true,” I added illogically, “why is this not common knowledge?”

To my intense annoyance, instead of taking up my challenge seriously the Daoist burst out laughing, and had to quickly lean forward and set down his teacup to avoid spilling it as he spluttered merrily. “How long did you say you had been studying Daoism?” he asked with a humorously incredulous look. “You remind me of the story told in Western China of the man who, when asked to lend his donkey, said

it was already gone, only to be immediately contradicted by the braying of the donkey itself from the back of his house. I think your donkey is alive and well, and the saddle is on you.”

He modified his rough words by reaching over and patting my knee, and smiling. “Why the anger? Take a few breaths and calm yourself. You know very well that in this area there is no ‘convincing,’ even if I was interested in doing so, which I assure you I am not. One either ‘sees’ the pattern, or part of the pattern, or one does not see it yet. As one learns, one sees more, and seeing more, learns.”

The hermit pursed his lips. “Don’t misunderstand,” he said to me. “Of course not every novel has these layers, just like not every joke has a deeper meaning. The ones that do, though, tend to endure, and we find them being told, or read, or acted, for years, even centuries. They nourish something deep within us. The others, no matter how funny or entertaining at first, quickly lose their ‘flavour’ and we become tired of them.”

I had calmed down by then. A bit. I had realised that my objection resulted from a feeling that they were talking down to me, while at the same time realising that I did not understand what they meant. The friction between these contraries had sparked the anger.

The hermit went on with a pacifying tone: “If you want the name of one such book, the deeper layers of which contain a detailed and comprehensive manual of Daoist alchemy, while on the surface seeming to be only a story of the fantastic adventures of a Buddhist travelling monk, it is none other than the *Xi You Ji* – the Journey to the West.”

This surprised me. *Monkey*, a manual of spiritual alchemy?! Comic scenes from the television show of my youth swam before my eyes. That was almost as ridiculous as saying that the *Wizard of Oz* had some depth or significance! Nonetheless I was intrigued, and the hermit fetched his copy of Liu Yi-Ming’s book about the Journey to the West³ and brought along another from 100 years earlier that spoke from the same understanding.⁴

We spent a pleasant several hours

examining and comparing these two texts, and in the end my original convictions had been seriously shaken. When I looked up, the sun was almost setting.

The monk then told me that he was planning on staying with the hermit for several days. The hermit, for his part, said that I was welcome to stay as well. But it was time to go, and as evening fell, I took my leave from the two friends, laden with provisions. Rather than head for the nearby village, though, I made my way back to the little grove, the pavilion, and the pool of the midnight yang, to wait for the stillness of night.

I will not say whether the luminescence appeared in the depths of the pool later, in the quiet darkness. But as the sun rose and I left the little grove to head down the mountain path, I had an eerie yet distinct presentiment that on reaching the river shore, the boatman would be waiting for me.

And he was.

Endnotes

1. 真意, *zhen yi*, True Intent, also referred to in alchemical literature as True Earth (because Earth harmonises the five elements), or the yellow woman (yellow being the colour of the centre), or the matchmaker (because she brings yin and yang together).
2. 五卷书 The Panchatantra, originally Sanskrit, 3rd century BC. Also known as Kalila and Dimna, The Lights of Canopus, or The Fables of Bidpai. Ramsay Wood has published a very entertaining modern translation of the first section of the book, entitled *Kalila and Dimna: Selected Fables of Bidpai*.
3. *Xi You Yuan Zhi* (The Original Meaning of the Journey to the West, 1778). This has been partially translated by Thomas Cleary in his *Vitality, Energy, Spirit*, 1991; and fully by Anthony C. Yu as one of the essays contained in the now difficult-to-obtain book *How to Read the Chinese Novel* edited by David L. Ralston, 1990.
4. Chen Shi-Bin's *Xi You Zhen Quan* (True Explication of the Journey to the West, 1696). Chen is also known as Wu Yi Zi, the Master who Realised Oneness. He primarily interpreted the novel according to the "golden elixir" (*jin dan*) alchemical practice.



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