

Two letters from Liu Yi-Ming

Translated by Xiaoyao Xingzhe^a

A letter in answer to General Su

YESTERDAY at the provincial capital^b you honoured me with your elder presence and did not disdain the wilds of the mountains for our talk, and the [Daoist] mnemonic rhymes you passed on I have found very beneficial. It is true when they say “when old friends meet, the warmth exceeds all class distinctions”.

When this patch-robed monk^c was young, I had no discernment of what was deviant or correct. I would ask anyone and study

a. As far as the translator is aware, these letters have not been previously translated into English. They were included in the recently published book *Qi Yun Bi Ji Ping Zhu* (Notes from Perched in Clouds Mountain, Annotated) by Sun Yong-Le.

b. Probably Lanzhou in Gansu, where Liu Yi-Ming spent most of his life.

c. The single character nà (衲) means a “cassock” or a patched robe, and is a humble expression for the wearer of such a robe. This will simply be translated as “I” or “me” throughout the rest of these letters.

anything, one day with Wang, another day with Li, a little bit of one then a little bit of something else. Nothing came of this.

Then I met a Daoist who taught stillness techniques and he passed on his learning which I practised assiduously as he instructed. This involved circulating *dantian* *qi*, passing the tailbone and coccyx, up the back to *Niwan* the mud pellet at the top of the head, then down past *Mingtang* the bright hall at the eyebrows and into *Huachi* in the mouth. Then descending past *Chonglou* the layered tower of the trachea into *Jianguo* the Crimson Palace (i.e. the heart) and gathering the fluids of the heart, finally entering the yellow court of *Huangting*.

As these phenomena manifested I was pleased that I had obtained this effective “medicine,” such that even on a winter’s day I could sit quietly in a desolate place with a body burning like fire and no sensation of cold. I congratulated myself that I had achieved the Dao, and had no need to seek out another teacher.

But then I met my first real teacher, the elder

Kan Gu, and as I listened to his discourses thought to myself that, compared to what I had learned, this was completely different. My heart was filled with doubts. But as I played over carefully in my mind what the teacher said each day, I found that every sentence made perfect sense, and only then did the realisation come that I previously had been completely deluded. So I laid out everything that I had learned before him, and he dissected it for me, exposing the inaccuracies, and going into great detail regarding the rationale for everything. Thereupon I read every book, comparing, investigating, discerning and differentiating, and went on for three years doing this. My teacher instructed me in the *spiritual turtle*^d method of nourishing *qi*, which practised the construction of a foundation for the self, and was not only extremely simple and easy, but also immediately effective, and could be practised sitting, standing, walking or lying down. Even with a thousand people in front of me, it would not impede my activities; I could work all day, meeting situations and dealing with matters, and it would not disturb my mind. Lively, active and adaptable, I could be flexible and creative, doing things in a laissez-faire fashion. Without intending it, Heart and Kidneys would interact; unforced, the *qi* and blood would course throughout the body; I was energetic and happy without even having to think about it.

This is what comes of my teacher's instruction, truly a case of "one talk with a wise man is better than 10 years of reading". His instruction is closely sealed and secret,

d. 灵龜養氣法 *Ling gui yang qi fa*. Although there have been formal *qi*-gong practices named "*Ling Gui Qi Gong*" it would be difficult to match the criteria Liu Yi-Ming specifies: immediately effective and able to be performed in any posture or during any activity. There is however a practice that Liu knew the General was likely to be familiar with, and that is the *Ling Gui Yang Zhi Fa* (Method for Cultivating the Will) contained in the *Gui Gu Zi*, a Daoist strategy text known as the *Master of Demon Valley*. Later he says this practice is closely sealed and secret, as Liu Yi-Ming holds that a person's practice should be individually prescribed by a teacher, and strongly advises against publishing "exercises" as this encourages people to experiment in ways that could well make them worse, not better. But I surmise that the practice outlined in the *Master of Demon Valley*, although not described in great detail, is in essence similar to that described at length in the *Secret of the Golden Flower* (NOT Wilhelm's but rather Cleary's translation).

and I dare not reveal it to outsiders, but the technique is only an rudimentary practice: one does not glimpse the inner recesses of the profound Dao. Nonetheless, I could differentiate the truth or otherwise of every koan or zen saying, and no capping phrase or verbal exchange^e could fool me.

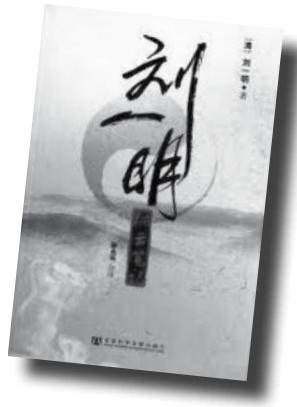
But I left my teacher too early, before I was clear about the later stages; running east and west, searching out all sorts of people, and in the end there was no outcome. A full 13 years later, I met Xianliu Zhangren, who in a few words burst apart my circle of doubt so that I could recognise the fundamental root of essence and life, which cannot be sought within the body, but could not be found outside the body: it must be made in the midst of emptiness.

You, honoured sir, have an intrinsic foundation that is deep and thick, and you are one who has come again and clarified your ancestral roots; of the 10 parts of the great work, you know seven or eight.

Now even though that intrinsic foundation is deep and thick, we can turn around 180 degrees and say that there are still areas of confusion, and within your reality there are, I'm afraid, some increments of falsity admixed. You should, honoured sir, examine yourself repeatedly, discarding fantasy and residual matter, advancing another level, penetrating into the inner chambers of Principle, delicately tasting the marrow of Dao. To do this you need to keep the true treasure in front of your eyes.

I have personally known, in all, five people who have come again: two were Daoists and three were lay people. Of the three lay persons, one was Master Gu from Suzhou, one was Master Wang from Longxi in Gansu, and the third was Master Chen from the Hannan district in Wuhan. Master Chen met Xianliu Zhangren [my second teacher] and was liberated;^f this is having delusion but becoming enlightened upon meeting a person. Master Gu was deluded by an official

e. Literally "kudzu wisteria" or "entangling vines," the term referred to impediments resulting from attachments to words and concepts, and also "a disparaging synonym for the verbal exchanges (*mondo*) by which Zen monks induced awakening or tested each other's understanding." (Quote from *Entangling Vines: Zen Koans of the Shumon Kattoshu*, by Thomas Yuho Kirchner).
f. Literally, 度脱 "crossed-over and shed" the human form.



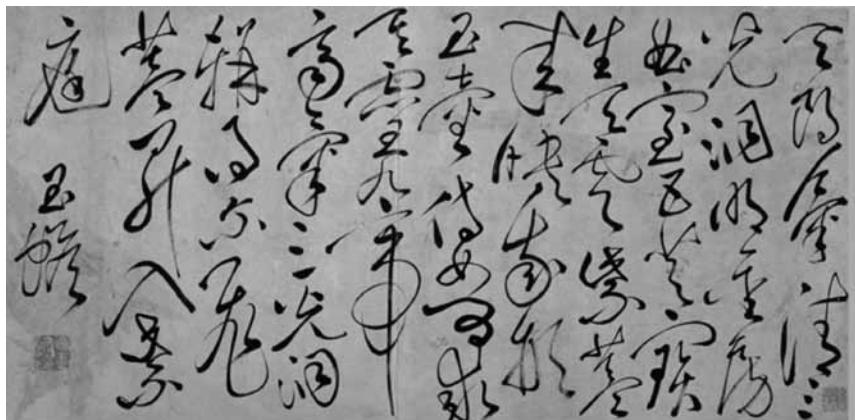
■ Xiaoyao Xingzhe is a wandering cultural correspondent for *The Lantern*.

career, while Master Wang in the end was deluded by business. Both of these men were celestially endowed with superior wisdom and clear discernment, but they drowned in fame and profit, wasting this life: truly a pity. Of the two Daoists, one was Master Dai from Halachigou, who despite generating wisdom from suffering did not know how to take the next step, and this formed his delusion. The other was the hermit Master Xu who from a young age avoided developing a conditioned and artificial consciousness. He appeared as if he were drunk or an idiot, he could associate with wolves and tigers or companion with venomous snakes and none would harm him in the least. His root of life was fixed firmly and if he met a talented person he would instruct them in the Dao of non-doing, completing the great task. This is having delusion but attaining completeness through another person.

In the past, Ziqing Zhenren^g was a person who had come again, and was only able to complete the Great Way through receiving the transmission of Chen Cui-Xu Zhenren. Bao Puzi was a person who had come again, yet had to be taught the secret by Zheng Si-Yuan Zhenren before he was able to enter the community of saints.

So even those who have come again still have areas of delusion, depending upon the depth or shallowness of the work they had done in their previous life. If the work done was deep, they need to meet a True Teacher who can give them an indication, then they will complete the Great Dao. If the work

g. Ziqing Zhenren ("True Person of Purple Clarity") is one of a variety of names for Bai Yu-Chan, the famous Daoist of the Southern Song dynasty who was also a noted artist and calligrapher. An example of his calligraphy can be found below.



done was shallow, or if they do not meet a proper person, they can grow old without developing.

Honoured elder, the work done in your previous life was deep, and in this life you have not been blinded, while also receiving fame and wealth: you have not lacked material support, and you have made great strides in progress all on your own right up to the very shores of the Dao.

All this is unlike your indigent correspondent whose means and karma are shallow and any achievement very difficult. Nonetheless despite the difficulty in achievement I was fortunate in throwing off the world of suffering very early, and living unfettered and free has had its own satisfactions, being undeluded by the dust of the world.

I have attached the piece entitled "Peng He-Lin's Inquiries on the Dao."^h If you, honoured elder, read it carefully and ponder, it should provide areas of spiritual understanding. Please do not reject it because it is written in the vernacular.

To a certain Mr Dong Shi-Chuan of Tongwei in Western Gansu

YOU once came to my house, and as soon as we met we got on very well and promised each other friendship that would last all our lives. Unexpectedly we had to part in a rush, and have been separated in the north and the south, living with two different climates and customs but with a single profound respect.

Fortunately it has been my pleasure to receive word that you will visit at Mid-Autumn, and I am sure you will not disappoint me: I will be sweeping the path and waiting. If you, esteemed sir, arrive as planned to honour my humble residence, we can become friends among the clouds, truly rich, searching out the precious pearlⁱ of Shakyamuni, able to enter the immortal Jade Capital and become appointed as celestial

h. A section of the *Zi Qing Zhi Xuan Ji* (Collection of Zi Qing's Indications on the Mystery). This section records in question and answer form a conversation between Peng Si (1185- 1252) and Bai Yu-Chan (1194-1229).

i. 穢珠 Literally a "millet pearl," the term appears in the third chapter of the Secret of the Golden Flower..

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officials – would that not be wonderful?

I have a copy in my library of Shang Yang Zi's commentary to the *Can Tong Qi*^j which is truly an important key to practical refining: [the meaning of] cauldrons, ovens, medicinal materials, the firing process, all of these are covered in it.

The commentary notes: "Within the indistinct dimness are things, before the separation of the polar attributes (*Tai Ji*), primal heaven and earth accumulate the true primal unified energy; that which is before *Tai Ji* is as if it were before the gods."^k This directly points out that unified single *qi* of the primal heaven is a thing without shape or form, and that formless can generate form, shapeless can give rise to shape, generating heaven, generating earth, generating man and giving rise to the ten thousand things.

If a person can know this, they can break through primal chaos, reverse the *qi* mechanism, battle with creation, turn around life and death and refine a limitless body of immortality, becoming as indestructible as a diamond. This is just as in the saying "know this, and you know all; with this one thing are ten thousand things accomplished."

But this one thing one needs to know to accomplish ten thousand is not at all comparable to simply closing the eyes and cultivating stillness, or making a fire in an oven to create a cinnabar pill, or any of the myriad side-tracks and deviant paths with which people love to occupy themselves. All of these take the false for the true, and if they don't fall into grasping, then they fall into pointless emptiness. Grasping and emptiness, neither comprise the Great Dao of Essence and Life.

The great *dao* of essence and life is one Way that belongs to the three religions. The Confucians say "single-minded;" the Daoists say "embrace the one;" the Buddhists say "return to the one." The sages of these three religions all use "one" to refer to the main subject, and thus it is said "There is only one Way [lit. 'not two *Dao*/Ways'] in heaven and

earth, and sages are all of one mind [lit. 'not two hearts/minds']."^l

"Not two Ways" means *one* Way, "not two minds" means *one* mind. One Way, one Mind. Mind is the Way, the Way is the Mind. Outside of the Mind is no way, outside of the Way is no Mind.

However this mind [literally "heart"] is not the mischievous mind associated with the physical heart, but rather the True Mind of Heaven and Earth, which the Buddhists call the Marvellous Mind of Nirvana.

This mind contains the true unified *qi* of the primal heaven, neither with form nor empty, yet with both form and emptiness; quiet, motionless; but a feeling then pervades.

If one can recognise this mind, this *qi*, and use it in the everyday activities of life, using reversal [meaning to go against one's conditioning] as a means of refinement, then each grain of dust in the great world is a pearly treasure – how can one not become an immortal, or not become a buddha?

That is how I see it; I wonder what you think?

j. An English translation of the *Can Tong Qi* – The Seal of the Unity of the Three is how he translates the title – based on Chen Zhi-Xu's (aka Shang Yang Zi) version has recently been completed by Fabrizio Pregadio. The commentary is not included word-for-word, however.

k. 太冥之中有物，则太极未分之 时，为先天地内蕴先 天真一之炁，居乎太极之前，乃象帝之先。

l. This is a quote from "Collected Works on the Return to the True" (还真集 *Huan Zhen Ji*) by 王玠 Wang Jie, dated 1392; part of the Daoist Canon, Taixuan Division. Wang Jie associated with the disciples of Li Dao-Chun, author of the *Zhong He Ji* – the Book of Balance and Harmony.

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