The Story of Han Xiangzi

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RETURNING HOME, HAN XIANG MANIFESTS HIS TRANSFORMATIVE POWERS

SHOOTING A PARROT, MME. DOU REMAINS ATTACHED TO HER ILLUSIONS

Vast the sea of suffering;  
Terrifying its stormy waves.  
The future consists only of nets cast by greed and ire,  
And snares set by lust and malice.  
Who can turn around and jump out of the pit of right and wrong,  
Becoming a leisurely, carefree, and ever-young matron?

At the third watch a fresh breeze wafted through the garden house and Xiangzi vanished. Reader, shall I say where Xiangzi went at that time? He went to see Master Zhong and then proceeded with him to an audience with the Jade Emperor, where he submitted the following memorandum:

Thanks to Your Majesty’s grace, my uncle, Han Yu, has already had a change of mind. However, my aunt, Mme. Dou, and my wife, Lin Luying, still cling to their delusions and are difficult to deliver. Obediently I await Your Majesty’s decision.

A golden lad transmitted the following decree of the Jade Emperor:

Mme. Dou was originally a Venerable Dame of the Upper Realm who was banished to undergo suffering in the ordinary world
because she stole a sunflower at the Immortality Peach Banquet. Luying was originally a jade maiden at the Empyrean Palace. Once, when the Dark Emperor dispatched celestial generals to vanquish demons, she stole a peek at the world below before the Gate of Heaven was closed again. Therefore she was banished to the common world, there to sleep alone, without a husband, so as to warn her and others against hankering after the mortal world. Together with Lü Dongbin and Lan Caihe, Han Xiang may make another attempt at delivering these two so that together they may complete their proper rewards.

Xiangzi said his thanks and then went on to an audience with the Queen Mother of the West. She said, “I am glad that Chonghezi has awakened to his previous existence. He will soon resume his former position. However, the Venerable Dame and the Jade Maiden are still on the path of confusion. Who will go once more to deliver them?”

“The Jade Emperor is sending me, together with Lü Dongbin and Lan Caihe, to make another attempt at delivering them. What advice can you give me?” Xiangzi said.

The Queen Mother of the West said, “As these two have been sunk in the world of dust for a long time already, their hearts are filled with greed for splendor, wealth, and honor. You must go to the Mahasattva Guanyin at Mount Putuo and borrow from her some objects used in effecting magical transformations. Only then will you be able to move them.”

“The Mahasattva Guanyin is a Buddhist worthy and as such does not agree with our Daoist School,” Xiangzi said. “Why should she be willing to lend us such devices?”

“Guanyin’s sole concern is to bring order to the world and save people,” said the Queen Mother of the West. “Why would she make distinctions between schools in this endeavor?”

“I shall carefully follow your orders,” Xiangzi said. He took his leave of the Queen Mother and departed the jasper terraces and purple palaces of Heaven. With his two companions he rode on a cloud to the Southern Sea for an audience with Guanyin. Having obtained a parrot from her, they left right away for Chang’an. And so,

Having just left the golden palaces to roam the South Sea,
They arrive in Chang’an the same day to spend the night.

Let us now recount how the next morning Han Qing came hurrying in to report, “It’s my fault for not paying better attention! When my elder brother stayed in
the garden house, nothing was wrong at the first watch, and everything was quiet
in the second watch. But at the third watch, as the bright moon was in the sky,
suddenly a fresh breeze passed through and my elder brother vanished.”

“Such strange events prove that it was a divine immortal who had descended
from Heaven,” Luying said. “It wasn’t Xiangzi who had returned home.”

“If it were a divine immortal, his actions would be serious and responsible,”
Mme. Dou said. “He wouldn’t engage in such frivolous trickery. This definitely
was one of those vagrant Daoists who play tricks on people to cheat them out of
their money. He will certainly come again today. We must steel ourselves
and not believe him. Whatever he says, be it that Lü Dongbin is coming or that
Xiangzi is returning—we’ll have nothing to do with this person. Let’s ignore him.”

“Mother-in-law, you are absolutely right,” Luying said.

At that moment, they heard the fisher drum again beyond the side wall. “Han
Qing, quickly call my child in,” Mme. Dou said.

“You just said that those Daoists are all tricksters and that we should ignore
them,” Han Qing pointed out. “Why have you changed your mind?”

“It may seem that I contradict myself in one breath, but when I heard the fisher
drum, the thought of Xiangzi pained my heart,” Mme. Dou said. “Quickly, go
bring him in. I want to speak to him.”

“It’s yesterday’s Daoist,” Han Qing reported. “He’s sitting in front of the gate
striking his drum.”

“Perhaps he is Xiangzi after all,” Mme. Dou said. “Call him in and I will ques-
tion him.”

Han Qing walked out of the great gate and called the Daoist. The latter fol-
lowed him in and, on seeing Mme. Dou, said, “Aunt, I knock my head.”

“My child, when you see me, you should just follow the rules of courtesy appro-
priate within the family,” Mme. Dou said. “Why do you speak of knocking your
head?”

“I dwell beyond the Islands of the Immortals and thus do not fall under the
usual rules of propriety.”

“Why do you always strike the fisher drum?” Mme. Dou asked.

“Because the people of the world are thick-skinned and unwilling to change
their ways, I have no choice but to tie that thick skin onto a bamboo tube, which
is called a ‘drum of stupidity.’ Intelligent people are awakened when they hear
this drum. Stupid people, on the other hand, won’t change their ways, even if you
beat the drum a thousand, nay, ten thousand times, until this thick skin rips apart.
All the same I keep drumming and singing my Daoist songs to get those stupid
people to jump out of this world of dust and noise.”

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“My son, when you rested in the garden house yesterday, why did you leave in the middle of the night and return only now?” Mme. Dou asked.

“I went to the Gate of Southern Heaven to have a word with my master Zhong,” Xiangzi explained. “That’s why I’m only here now.”

“How far is it from here to the Gate of Southern Heaven?”

“It’s 108,000 miles each way,” Xiangzi replied.

“If it’s that far, how come you are already back, having only left at midnight?”

Mme. Dou asked.

“After meeting with Master Zhong, I also went to visit the Mahasattva Guanyin on Mount Putuo in the Southern Sea,” Xiangzi explained.

“How far is it from here to Mount Putuo in the Southern Sea?”

“Much closer.”

“How many miles?”

“Only a little more than 84,700 miles.”

“To travel to both of these places and back would take a year, even if you could fly,” she said. “How could you have returned so quickly?”

“I ride the clouds and mists and don’t walk on the ground like ordinary people.”

“Stop telling such lies,” said Luying.

“On the Jade Emperor’s orders I have come specifically to deliver you and make you leave the family,” Xiangzi said. “How can you say I tell lies?”

“When my father-in-law was still alive, there was a fellow who kept pestering him, claiming to be a divine immortal come to deliver him,” Luying said. “But later when he submitted his memorial and the emperor in his anger banished him to Chaozhou, no divine immortal showed himself.”

“When at first I admonished Uncle to leave the family, he repeatedly refused to believe me,” Xiangzi said. “It was only when, on the road at Blue Pass, his horse had died, he was all alone, and tigers and wolves blocked his path that he called to me in tears to save him. If it hadn’t been for me, where would his bones be now? Instead he now enjoys a free and unfettered existence as Chonghezi in the immortals’ palaces of Great Veil Heaven.”

“Your uncle died in his office in Chaozhou,” Mme. Dou said. “The local officials reported it to the throne—who doesn’t know about this? Yet you tell wild stories about having delivered him to become Chonghezi and live happily in the celestial palaces.”

“My uncle’s death wasn’t real, but merely staged with the immortals’ marvelous method of release from the corpse.”

“There is nothing and no one to corroborate your story and we won’t take just your word for it,” Luying said.
“Many magical objects were used to deliver your uncle, yet still he refused to believe,” Mme. Dou said. “What have you brought now to deliver us?”

“Immortal goats, cranes, wine, and peaches you have all already seen, so I didn’t bring them along to deliver you,” Xiangzi answered. “Instead I made a point of borrowing a white parrot from the Mahasattva Guanyin to show to you.”

“I have a green parrot with a red beak who can recite poems and chant the Buddha’s name, but I have never seen a white one,” Mme. Dou said. “Where is it?”

Xiangzi waved his hand, and a white parrot came flying in front of Mme. Dou. Here is a poem to describe it:

_Hiding in the snow, flying in the snow,
A maid in a snowy robe surpasses one clad in gold.
Every sound in the snow calls out “prajna,”
Establishing a snowy refuge for this School of Compassion._

“What is special about this parrot?” asked Mme. Dou.

“He can fly, sing, dance, and chant.”

“Let him sing me a song,” she said.

“Parrot, what are you waiting for? Sing!” commanded Xiangzi.

Flying and dancing in circles, the parrot sang to the tune “Heard in the Stable”:

_OF parrots there are many,
But among them there is none that can equal me.
I have flown from the Southern Sea
To admonish you to a change of heart,
But you still covet laughter and song.
I am just afraid
That impermanence will come,
And though you may possess countless pearls,
You will find it difficult to avoid.
If you don’t turn back,
You will suffer for it.
Even if you were a brave hero,
You’d have to imitate Han Yu, who suffered hunger and thirst at the Qin River._

“A lot of rubbish,” Mme. Dou said. “Pay no attention to him.” She ordered a servant to fetch a bow and arrow and had the parrot shot dead.
“If you don’t believe, that’s up to you,” Xiangzi said. “I just fear that when the time of suffering arrives, any regrets will come too late.”

“In ancient times it was said that ‘it is dangerous to be a high official—it is like sleeping beside a tiger,’” Mme. Dou remarked. “It is because your uncle was an official at court that he suffered adversity. We women don’t go out and concern ourselves with public affairs. Thanks to the court, we receive a monthly stipend which allows us to enjoy a peaceful and honorable life. What suffering should there be? What regrets do you speak of?”

“When your emoluments are used up and your horses have fallen down, not even your nephew will come,” Xiangzi said.

“Where are you going?” Mme. Dou asked.

“Aunt, you still don’t understand: I shall return to the Zhongnan Mountains.”

“If you don’t want to remain at home, then go wherever you want and don’t bother us by your babbling.”

“I have told you over and over, yet you won’t change your mind,” Xiangzi said. “Having wasted all this effort, I shall now rest and make further plans.” Whereupon he strode out the door with his head held high. Alas,

This morning you would not believe a divine immortal’s words;
When later you have regrets, to meet me again will be difficult.

“Clearly this was a Daoist who had assumed my elder brother’s appearance,” Han Qing said. “He came here to stir up trouble for two days and now he has left again. It’s hard to know what to make of this.”

“Don’t talk so much. Just let him go,” Mme. Dou said.

“You’re absolutely right, Mother-in-law,” Luying said. “Let’s not argue with him any longer.” They both returned to their rooms right away. An ancient poem shall serve as illustration:

To take leave from him is easy, to meet him again hard.
Resentfully she enters her chambers, her fingers plucking a tired tune.
On the terrace of the twelve-storied tower she spends spring in solitude;
Behind the crystal curtains, she fears the cold loneliness of this season.

Let’s not talk any longer of Mme. Dou and Luying returning to their chambers, but tell instead how Xiangzi turned back to meet Master Lü. He said to him, “Master, Han Xiang knocks his head.”
Shooting a parrot, Mme. Dou remains attached to her illusions.
“How is your deliverance of Mme. Dou coming along?” Master Lü asked.
“I went to deliver my aunt, but she wouldn’t change her mind,” Xiangzi replied.
“What can be done?”
“What did you use to convert her?”
“I borrowed a white parrot from the Mahasattva Guanyin at Mount Putuo in
the Southern Sea, but my aunt is too attached to the splendors of this world and
won’t concern herself with the ultimate matters of life and death.”
“Tomorrow Mme. Dou and Luying are holding a banquet at the Chrysanthemum Pavilion,” Master Lü said. “We’ll invite the immortal Lan to accompany
us there and give it another try. Let’s see how it goes.”
“Many thanks, Master,” Xiangzi said.
Then the three divine immortals gathered some clouds together and descended
into the world of dust. Having manifested their yang bodies and arrived in the
city of Chang’an, they saw two old men playing chess by the window of a high
building. When one of them made a wrong move and wanted to retract it, the
other would not let him, and so they argued until their faces were all red and puffed
up. One of the two was surnamed Wo; he was the grandfather of Chang’an’s well-
known nouveau riche Wo Duicang. The other was surnamed Quan; he was the
father of Quan Yunfeng, another well-known character in Chang’an.
As the two were arguing over the chess move, Xiangzi said to Master Lü, “Mas-
ter, to win a single chess move, neither of these two is willing to give in. We should
teach these two greedy fellows how to admit defeat graciously. Would you like to
go and arbitrate between them?”
Master Lü gave them a look and then said, “These two old fellows have poten-
tial. We could use their chess talents in the Palace of Supreme Purity. I’ll convert
them, so our journey won’t have been in vain.”
Then the three Daoists lined up below the window and called, “Venerable bene-
factors, what chess move are you playing?”
“There is no almsgiving in chess,” one of the old men replied. “What do you
want?”
“We haven’t come to beg for alms,” Master Lü said. “My disciple’s chess skills
are very good, but he hasn’t dared to play since he left his family. When he saw
you two benefactors playing today, his old habit reasserted itself, and so he’s here
specifically to ask your instruction.”
“We’re completely at loggerheads over the retraction of one move,” said one
of the old men. “If you want, you may play a game with me, Master, but there
will be no retracting of moves.”
“Which move are you arguing about?” Master Lü asked.
“I moved this horse to take his chariot. He didn’t notice it and moved another horse. If my horse takes the chariot, I need only one more move to beat him. Therefore he wanted to retract his move.”

“It would useless to take his chariot, as it would only give you a draw. Why would you necessarily be the winner?” Xiangzi said.

“You come play!” the old man said. “If you can bring about a draw, I’ll spend a tenth of an ounce of silver to buy the three of you a vegetarian meal.”

“If I succeed in a draw, I don’t want you to buy us a meal with your silver. Instead, I want you to carry this gourd and shoulder this flower basket and leave the family with me,” Xiangzi said.

“Aren’t you afraid to give offense? You’re so young, yet you want an old man like me to become your disciple. Aren’t you rather overdoing it?” one of the old men said.

“Patriarch Peng, who lived to the ripe age of 800, would still have to yield to me before sitting down himself. You’re no more than seventy or eighty—how could that count as old?” Xiangzi said.

“I won’t argue with you about age,” the old man said. “If you can really play to a draw, I am willing to become your disciple and serve you.”

“Once a word is out, a team of four horses cannot catch up with it. You must not go back on your word when the time comes,” said Xiangzi.

“A man’s mouth speaks a man’s words,” the old man said. “This is not an animal’s mouth spitting out a man’s words. I won’t go back on what I said!”

Xiangzi then let the old man take the chariot and countered him move for move. After more than ten moves the game ended in a draw. The old man said, “I think you three are divine immortals. I willingly become your disciple and follow you as my masters.”

“If you can follow divine immortals, surely I can do the same,” the other old man chimed in. “As of now I shall carry the gourd and shoulder the flower basket. Let us leave the family together.” Having said this, the two old men went with Master Lü, the immortal Lan, and Han Xiangzi to the gate of the Han family’s mansion. They sat down, beat their fisher drums, and sang Daoist songs, making a stir among the crowd in the street.

When the Han family’s gatekeeper saw Old Wo carrying a gourd, he grabbed him and said, “Old greatgrandpa, you used to spend your days happily playing chess and drinking wine. Why are you carrying the gourd for this vagrant Daoist today? Is this your idea of fun? A saying goes, ‘If in youth you don’t run wild, you won’t be stiff in old age.’ You certainly know how to enjoy yourself, old man!”

An onlooker got hold of Old Quan and asked him, “You’re a rich man of city-
wide reputation. Why don’t you show more dignity than to shoulder a flower basket for a vagrant Daoist? I think your sons and grandsons must be unfilial, so that you have gone mad and come to act in this way.”

“I am not mad,” Old Quan said. “What is there to be unhappy about if I follow a divine immortal?”

The onlookers laughed and said, “Divine immortal!—you’re exchanging your gold for moldy bricks.”

When the people in the street heard this, they broke out in laughter. Old Wo and Old Quan just let them laugh, acting as if they did not hear them.

The gatekeeper went to report to Mme. Dou, “Outside there are three young Daoists. Although they are not very old, they have managed to hoodwink the old grandfather of the wealthy Wo Duicang, as well as the old father of Quan Yunfeng, into becoming their disciples and carrying their flower basket and gourd for them. They are now outside your gate, beating the fisher drum and singing Daoist songs. They have attracted a great crowd, and I can’t chase them away.”

“Call the three Daoists in and let me ask them what songs they are singing,” Mme. Dou said.

The gatekeeper called to the three Daoists, “Stop singing. The lady of the house wants to have a word with you.” When the three rose and went with the gatekeeper, Old Wo and Old Quan followed them inside.

Mme. Dou and Luying were sitting in the Chrysanthemum Pavilion. The three Daoists approached and knocked their heads.

Mme. Dou bowed in return and then asked them, “Where do you come from?”

“I do not deceive you, my lady, when I say that we have come from the Palace of the Eight Luminaries in Great Veil Heaven,” Master Lü said.

“This Daoist also claims he is a divine immortal,” Mme. Dou said to Luying. “I am no divine immortal, just an itinerant Daoist,” Master Lü said.

“Are you three all of the same surname?” Mme. Dou asked. “I am Master Two Mouths, this is Lan Caihe, and that is Han Xiangzi,” Master Lü replied.

“There is a Han Xiangzi in our family who was lured away by two Daoists. To the present day we don’t know where he is,” Mme. Dou said.

“This Han Xiangzi here is my lady’s nephew,” Master Lü told her. “His face has no resemblance whatsoever,” Mme. Dou said. “The other day a Daoist came claiming he was my nephew. He stayed in our house for two days before leaving again. How can you say that this one is Han Xiangzi? Even if he really were Xiangzi, I wouldn’t acknowledge him.”
“Since he is my lady’s nephew, why would you refuse to acknowledge him?”

“Why have you come here?” Mme. Dou asked.

“To deliver my lady so that she may leave the family,” Master Lü replied.

“To deliver me? What are you holding in your hand?”

“It is a magical painting,” said Master Lü.

Mme. Dou ordered an attendant to hang it up so that she could look at it. “It’s nothing but a landscape painting,” she said. “What’s so special about it, that you call it magical? I have the works of many famous painters in my house, but am tired of looking at them.”

“If my lady is tired of landscapes, I will change the painting to one of a blue bird and a white crane,” Lan Caihe said. “Please take a look.”

“Strange, indeed!” Mme. Dou said. “The picture has changed! However, I am not interested in paintings of blue birds and white cranes either.”

With a wave of his hand Master Lü made the birds vanish and instead there appeared a picture of the Immortal of the Rotten Axe-handle. Master Lü said, “My venerable lady, once Master Wang went out to seek immortalhood, to refine the elixir and enter the Nine Heavens. He spent only seven days in the mountains, but on his return a thousand years had already passed in the world outside. In front of the gate white mineral deposits had split the gilded well, and at the entrance of the grotto blue fungus covered what had been a field of white jade. Too bad that today as in the past people age easily, following the slivered moon down the great river. Surely this is a good painting?”

“Perhaps, but I just don’t want to look at it,” Mme. Dou said.

“If I call down the Immortal of the Rotten Axe-handle to exhort you to leave the family, will my lady believe?” Master Lü asked.

“The Master of the Rotten Axe-handle lived several hundred years ago. From where is he supposed to come?” Mme. Dou asked.

“From the painting.” He called in a loud voice, “Wang Zhi, come down and admonish the lady Han to leave the family.”

His voice had not yet died away when the Immortal of the Rotten Axe-handle stepped lightly down out of the picture, giving Mme. Dou and Luying such a scare that they were dumbstruck and their faces went ashen. Master Lü ordered, “Wang Zhi, kneel down, don’t frighten the Sagely Mother.”

With difficulty, Mme. Dou said, “Clearly this is trickery. There is no real Immortal of the Rotten Axe-handle. Han Qing, quickly chase them out. Don’t let them bother us.”

Wang Zhi began to sing a song to the tune “Goat on the Mountainside”:
“Venerable lady, don’t be impatient,
Death will come soon enough.
Though you may own ten thousand strings of cash,
When the end comes they will provide no refuge for you.
Who can compare with me, who knows no honor and no shame,
But lives a carefree, unfettered life without hassles.
Listen to my advice:
Nothing is better than to cast off all luxuries.
Suffering and worries!
Alas, how can you reach eternal life in this world of dust?”

“Half an empty phrase can destroy a lifetime’s luck. You shouldn’t speak in this way,” Mme. Dou said.

“Wang Zhi, you may return to the grotto palace,” Master Lü said. “Now I’ll call down a golden lad and a jade maiden to admonish the lady to leave the family.”

When Wang Zhi had returned into the painting, suddenly a golden lad and a jade maiden stood in front of Mme. Dou. Master Lü said, “Immortal Brother and Sister, take out your magical fruit and wine and sing a little song to exhort the venerable lady.” And together the lad and the maid sang a song to the tune “Old Drunkard”:

“We admonish you, our lady,
Count your blessings!
Splendor and luxury are like bubbles floating on water.
Although you may enjoy monthly emoluments of a thousand bushels of grain,
Why don’t you extract yourself from these attachments and turn your back on the world?
By turning back soon,
You save your mind many troubles.
If you don’t understand when to advance and when to retreat,
When the great floods come flowing in,
Mother and children will be separated like north and south—truly, it will be a great sorrow.
When you meet a fierce tiger on the road, it is hard to walk on.
If you do not cultivate yourself when we admonish you to,
In vain will you beg the divine immortals when the time of regret comes.”
When they had finished, Master Lü said, “Immortal Brother and Sister, you may return to the grotto palace.”

“The three of you are going to a lot of trouble to admonish me to leave the family,” Mme. Dou said. “However, I am a woman, and there is no way I could follow a Daoist whom I don’t know at all. Is there no guide I am well acquainted with?”

“Venerable lady, you are absolutely right,” Master Lü said. “If you agree to leave the family, I will call upon Xiangzi to be your guide.”

“Where is Xiangzi?” Mme. Dou asked.


“If you can call him here, I shall be willing to leave the family,” Mme. Dou said.

Master Lü pointed with his hand and said, “Immortal Brother, why aren’t you showing your original appearance yet?”

Immediately the Daoist took on the exact appearance of Xiangzi. Mme. Dou said, “Do you think you can move me with your tricks?”

“What if I delivered another person to accompany you in leaving the family?” Xiangzi said.

“Who?” asked Mme. Dou.

Xiangzi then scraped some black dirt from his armpit, mixed it with some mucus and saliva, and molded it into a big pellet. Holding it on his palm, he called out, “If there is anyone with the right affinity who will eat this magical drug of mine, I will deliver him to become an immortal.”

Old Wo hurried forward, took it, and swallowed it in one piece. Right away clouds lifted up his feet and he floated in mid-air.

Old Quan said, “Master, we both followed you together, why don’t you deliver me by means of a pill like this?” Thereupon Master Lü also scraped some dirt from his armpit, rolled it into a pill, and gave it to Old Quan. Old Quan ate it as soon as he received it, and he too was lifted up by a cloud.

Lan Caihe also made a pill of black dirt and called out, “Those with the right affinity, come quickly, don’t miss this opportunity.” Suddenly a slave girl named Golden Lotus, Luying’s personal attendant, dashed forth from behind a curtain, snatched the pill and swallowed it. The moment it went down, auspicious clouds surrounded her and like Old Wo and Old Quan she was lifted about ten feet off the ground.

Golden Lotus called in a loud voice, “Mme. Dou and Miss Luying, don’t be angry with me. Having the good fortune to meet an immortal master, I have escaped the fiery pit, and need no longer be a servant.” Then a breeze carried the three off into the clouds until they could no longer be seen.
Luying stepped forward and said, “Mother-in-law, if these Daoists are not
divine immortals, how could Golden Lotus and the two old men rise to Heaven
in broad daylight?”

“This is all black magic. Don’t believe them,” Mme. Dou said. “I remember
when your father-in-law was still alive he often mentioned a certain Cloud Ter-
race Monastery which was located on a mountain. More than one hundred Daoists
lived in this monastery. It was said that whenever five-colored clouds filled the
mountain valleys, they were sent by Heaven to welcome immortals. Those among
the Daoists in the monastery who didn’t want to remain in this world then bathed,
changed their clothes, and entered the five-colored clouds. When the clouds dis-
solved after a while, the Daoists were nowhere to be seen.

“This went on for several years, and people told each other about it. Eventu-
ally all who sought to ascend to immortalhood first prepared by means of fasting
and bathing and then came to Cloud Terrace Monastery to await the emergence
of the clouds so as to fly up on them.

“One day, an itinerant Daoist who was passing by this place saw a great crowd
of people, noble and common, high and low, all bowing toward the sky. When
he learned the reason for their behavior, he said, ‘If becoming an immortal were
that easy, there would be no space left in Heaven to accommodate so many immor-
tals.’ Right away he took up lodging in the monastery, intending to carefully observe
with his own eyes the events on the day that the clouds emerged.

“After several days, he happened to be sitting in the main hall discussing Daoist
doctrines with a priest named Wang when suddenly the monk on duty came to
report that the many-colored cloud had emerged on the mountain. Master Wang
immediately returned to his room, washed with hot water, and changed into fresh
clothes. In the meantime the cloud had gathered outside his door. Master Wang
slowly stepped into the cloud, which thereupon dispersed gradually.

“When the itinerant Daoist saw this scene, he said, ‘This cloud is the breath
of a poisonous monster. Alas, my ignorant fellow Daoist is already dead now.’
Then he traced the Steps of Yu and uttered a wind and thunder spell. Suddenly
thunder rolled and lightning flashed, and when it stopped again abruptly, the five-
colored auspicious cloud had vanished without a trace.

“At the head of the monks the Daoist went to investigate the matter. When they
crossed a mountain, they found Master Wang lying halfway down its slope. Quickly
they had some men carry him back to the monastery. A few steps farther on, they
came upon a venomous snake lying in a ravine, struck dead by lightning. It was as
thick as a rice peck and several tens of feet long. In its lair was a high pile of bones,
and countless hairpins and caps of the kind worn by Daoists. Now they under-
stood that all those who had ‘ascended to immortalhood’ had in fact been devoured by this poisonous pneuma. As for the clouds we saw today, how do we know whether they are true or false? It is not impossible that these three Daoists are monsters who have transformed themselves. How could divine immortals appear in this world? Daughter-in-law, don’t commit an error and fall into the snares of evil people.”

“Mother-in-law, your words make sense,” Luying said. “I won’t believe in them either.”

“You made a promise—why are you retracting it now?” Master Lü said.

When Xiangzi saw that Mme. Dou was not going to acknowledge him, he said, “Aunt, you are old, Uncle is not here anymore, and there is no blood descendant to continue the family line. Why do you remain attached to the family and refuse to turn back and change your mind?”

“Although your uncle is dead,” Mme. Dou said, “the court still grants me a monthly emolument, and I still have servants to direct as before. I have nothing to be dissatisfied with—what reason would I have to abandon all this and leave the family?”

“Venerable lady, although you live well at the moment, I am afraid that your fate will take a turn for the worse and you will suffer many setbacks,” Master Lü said. “Then dissatisfaction will quite naturally set in. I have a poem that I would ask you to listen to, my lady:

“When your destiny is troubled and the times are difficult, do not sigh;  
Then the scenery of Chang’an is suddenly not so praiseworthy anymore.  
With the ancestral property washed away, there is no refuge for you;  
Then you will realize that your earlier views were mistaken.”

“The next person to utter such unlucky words shall receive twenty blows with the stick!” Mme. Dou said.

“Mother-in-law, if you are afraid of unlucky words, why don’t you leave the family with me?” Xiangzi said.

“Your ancestors must have neglected to collect merit, that they gave birth to one like you,” said Mme. Dou. “How could you be my nephew? Get out, now! If you can only talk nonsense here, I’ll lodge a complaint with the office of the Ministry of Rites and memorialize the court to eradicate all Daoist establishments in the empire, so that the likes of you have no roof over your heads while alive, and no place to be buried when you’re dead.”

Master Lü laughed and said, “Xiangzi, Caihe, let’s leave quickly, so as not to implicate others and bring the people’s curses upon us.”
“Such stubborn attachment to confusion—our journey was in vain,” Caihe said. The three then gracefully walked out the door. Truly,

The road of the divine immortals clearly was close at hand,
Yet hapless and stupid people would not turn around.

What happened afterward? Listen to the explanations in the next chapter.