The Story of Han Xiangzi

Clart, Philip, Yang, Erzeng

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ON CHEATING MOUNTAIN, A WOODCUTTER SHOWS THE WAY

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER-IN-LAW CULTIVATE THEMSELVES IN MAGU’S HERMITAGE

Living a hundred years without becoming free—
Such a life was nothing but a floating bubble.
How eternally sad if the golden elixir went to waste;
What perennial sorrow if one became an immortal crane in vain.
Would a flood dragon who finds himself out of water
Dare to call the simurgh and phoenix down from their painted towers?
Roam at ease without restrictions;
Cross high mountains and watch the water flow.

Han Xiangzi summoned a white crane from the sky. Riding on its back, Tuizhi slowly ascended straight to the gate of the Three Heavens, where he met Zhongli Quan, Lü Dongbin, and other immortals. Here is a poem to illustrate it:

Among the piles of white clouds a crane comes flying
To guide Han Yu up the jade steps.
Auspicious clouds are wafting; immortal music is played;
The immortals jostle to ascend the jasper terrace.

“It has been a long time since I learned that you had left the family,” Master Zhong said. “Today you have successfully accomplished your proper rewards.”
“Don’t bring up what I said before,” Tuizhi said. “Though I had eyes to see, I did not.”

Then immortals carrying a golden decree written in great vermilion characters led him to an audience with the Jade Emperor. As the Jade Emperor prepared to promulgate a decree, he asked, “Han Yu, as you come here today, do you know why you were banished to earth?”

Silent at first, Tuizhi suddenly became aware of his past and said, “I was originally the Attendant Great General Chonghezi. Because I drunkenly snatched an immortality peach and shattered a crystal cup at the Immortality Peach Banquet, I was banished to the lower world. After that I became attached to my work and coveted official positions, thus spending a long time in the world of dust. Fortunately my nephew Han Xiang received a commission from Jasper Heaven to repay my original sincerity and save me from the entanglements of my human existence. On the occasion of this audience, I respectfully beg that in your celestial mercy Your Majesty will forgive my fatal sins.”

Immortals from the Three Offices of Heaven, Earth, and Humanity recommended that Han Yu resume his former post as Attendant General. The Jade Emperor approved the submission, and right away enfeoffed Tuizhi as an immortal of the jade realm and had him resume his former position. The immortals and Tuizhi thanked the emperor and withdrew, but we need talk no more about this. A poem shall provide a summary:

*By eating pneuma and clouds one gets to the origin of the Dao,  
Allowing one to roam freely in the grotto heavens.  
A limitless view of purple fungi and jasper herbs,  
Reversing old age and returning one to childhood and youth.*

We will not describe how Han Yu entered the ranks of the immortals and proceeded to a banquet at the Jasper Pool; instead let us relate how Han Qing chose an auspicious day and erected some huts on the beach. Although they were not great mansions, they did provide protection from the wind and rain. Just as he was about to move the whole family in, earth and sky darkened all at once. Thunder and lightning followed in rapid succession, struck the huts, and burned them down completely. They could not even save a single piece of furniture or other property. This is what is meant when people say:

*Withered grass is hit hard by frost;  
Faded flowers are destroyed by rain.*
A leaking boat is struck by sky-high waves;  
A broken hut is destroyed by a storm.  
A man with a broken foot has to cross a high ridge.  
A ram gets its horns entangled in a hedge.  
When time and destiny are against one,  
A single thunderbolt destroys all prospects.\(^1\)

When the people in the Han family’s party witnessed this scene, each and every one of them called to Heaven and Earth and cried bitterly. At this point of deepest sorrow, suddenly a fisher drum sounded urgently and a song was heard loud and clear. Listening to the far-off sound, Mme. Dou peered attentively in that direction, and saw a singing Daoist coming towards them.

*(To the tune “Golden Oriole”)*

“As sun and moon alternate between east and west,  
Alas, the life of humans is as short as a hundred years.  
How about seeking refuge in the School of Mystery?  
Your hair combed into a double knot,  
Your body clothed in cotton robes,  
Straw sandals and fisher drum are all you need to make a living.  
I laugh and giggle,  
Traveling by cloud to the ocean isles,  
Seeing through the stupidity of worldly people.”

Reader, shall I tell you where this Daoist came from? He was Lü Dongbin, who had transformed himself to point out the way to them. Therefore he struck the drum and sang his song just at the time of their sorrow, waiting for them to awaken of their own accord.

When Mme. Dou saw Master Lü, she called, “Master, save us!”  
“How am I to save you?” Master Lü asked.  
“We used to live comfortably in Chang’an, until we were expelled by that robber Cui Qun,” she said. “It’s his fault that we now have no roof over our heads and not half an acre of land below our feet. We have no clothes to cover our bodies, no food to fill our mouths. What are we to do?”

“On that mountain ahead, not more than a mile’s journey, there is the hermitage of a female master. It is very clean, and there is ample space. Go there and stay with her for a time,” Master Lü suggested.
“Many thanks to you, Master, for your directions, but I would feel embar-
rassed to visit her empty-handed,” she replied.

“Those who have left the family are concerned only with compassion and skill-
ful means. They use all their possessions to nourish believers everywhere. Why
worry about going empty-handed to see her?”

Having spoken, Master Lü turned around and left. Mme. Dou told Han Qing
to lead the way, and together with Luying and the others she slowly crossed the
beach and made her way toward the mountain.

Having walked for half the day, they saw only dense forests, snarls of brush-
wood, and grassy paths. The wind sang and the leaves trembled, birds called among
the abundant branches, yet no hermitage was to be seen anywhere. Although Mme.
Dou was afraid in her heart, she could only press ahead. She called to Han Qing,
“That Daoist said it was only a distance of little more than one mile. How come
we have walked for half the day and still haven’t seen a trace of the hermitage?”

“Mother, don’t worry,” Han Qing said. “Let’s just keep walking; the hermitage
is sure to be over there.”

However, having walked another few miles, they found themselves sur-
rrounded on all sides by high mountains and great ravines, steep walls and pre-
cipitous cliffs. Not only was there no hermitage, there was not even a road any
more. Greatly frightened, Mme. Dou called to Han Qing, “Let’s quickly go back
the way we came.”

But when Han Qing started to head back, he could no longer find the path
among the dense crags, trees, and underbrush. The group wailed in sorrow and
cried bitterly, calling out to Heaven. How had they ended up in this dark and for-
saken dell in the mountains?

“Mother-in-law, we have clearly fallen into someone’s trap,” Luying said.
“There is no way forward and none back. Are we to die here? Let’s pick up some
earth as a substitute for incense and pray to Heaven and Earth. If we are not fated
to die, a saving star is certain to come to our rescue.”

Following Luying’s proposal, Mme. Dou was just knocking her head and pray-
ing when they suddenly heard, ding-ding, dang-dang, the sound of an axe against
wood.

“Mother!” Han Qing said. “There’s the sound of wood being cut coming from
over there. Someone must be there. I’ll go talk to him and beg him to lead us back
to the main road.”

“If there is someone, do go quickly and ask him!” she said.

As she was speaking, they saw a woodcutter chopping firewood in the dell.
“Brother,” Han Qing called, “May I ask the name of this mountain? How is it that
we could get here, but now we can’t leave? We’d be very obliged to you, if we might bother you to show us the way out.”

The woodcutter laid down his axe. “This place is called Cheating Mountain and Cheating Valley,” he said, pointing. “Only cheating people walk on the cheating road. You are so good at laying plans, why did you come to Cheating Valley in the first place?”

“We made the mistake of listening to the words of a villainous Daoist. That’s why we came to these mountains,” Han Qing said.

“It was when you lived in Chang’an that you made the mistake,” the woodcutter said. “Why do you say you only now made a mistake by listening to this Daoist’s words?”

When Han Qing heard the woodcutter speak of a mistake they made in Chang’an, he thought to himself that the woodcutter must be an immortal. Hastily he knelt down and said, “I hope that the divine immortal will show us a way out.”

The woodcutter pointed and said, “There in the southeast, two divine immortals are sitting on top of that cliff. If you go there quickly, you will find a road.” As Han Qing lifted his head to look, the woodcutter took up his axe, and ran across the high mountain in no time at all. Indeed,

At first they did not believe the divine immortals’ words;
Today they realize that regrets come too late.

Han Qing had no choice but to lead the family toward the southeast, where indeed there was a walkable path which was not blocked by entangled trees. They felt assured that they would reach the road ahead. In the distance they saw smoke rising from kitchen fires, curling and swirling in the wind.

It looked like there were homes there, but when they arrived, all around were only dense woods and tall bamboos, no huts or shacks. Suddenly they saw two Daoists sitting on top of the rock cliff, before them a tripod cauldron from which the light of a flaming red fire shone forth. “Those two Daoists sitting there must be immortals,” Mme. Dou told Han Qing. “Go and ask them to deliver us from this calamity.”

Han Qing hurried to the side of the cliff and called in a loud voice, “Divine immortals, save us!”

The two Daoists were in fact Lan Caihe and Han Xiangzi. Earlier on, Lü Dongbin had taken the form of a woodcutter and directed the women to the cliff where the other two immortals were waiting.

Xiangzi saw Han Qing on his way toward them, shouting, and answered, “We
On Cheating Mountain a woodcutter shows the way.
are Daoists of the mountain wilderness, not divine immortals. We just begged some vegetarian food at the foot of the mountains and are now cooking it to still our hunger. If you want something to eat, we’ll give you some to help you. If you don’t want anything to eat, then suit yourself and leave as soon as possible.”

“We walked the whole day and would indeed like to eat something,” Han Qing said. “But if you give us some, you won’t have enough for yourselves. Masters, why don’t you deliver us so that we may escape our suffering, rather than sharing your meal with us?”

“The firefly can shine, but its light is not bright,” Caihe said. “How could we deliver you? Be off!”

“Oh dear! We have no place to go, either in Chang’an or in Changli County. Where do you want us to return to?” Han Qing said.

“In Chang’an you have grand mansions and an emolument of a thousand bushels,” Xiangzi said. “In Changli you have fields in the south and the north, melon patches and vegetable gardens. Why don’t you go and enjoy all that? Why do you talk as if you had no options left?”

“Now we only beseech you to save us,” Mme. Dou said.

“When first someone admonished you to leave the family, you said you were going to submit a petition to the yamen of the Ministry of Rites to have the Daoist monasteries on renowned mountains and the immortals’ dwellings in outstanding places all over the empire demolished,” Xiangzi said. “Not one was to be left standing. Those who spoke of leaving the family were to receive twenty-one blows with the stick and would find no mercy. Now that you’re in this difficult situation, why don’t you submit a petition to the Ministry of Rites to dispatch some men, sedan chairs, and horses and have you return in pomp and style by the main road? Instead you are asking a Daoist of the wilderness for help. What power and splendor do we rustic Daoists have that we could be of help to you?”

“Unenlightened mortals have but ordinary eyes and bodies,” she said. “They don’t recognize divine immortals. Master, please save our unworthy lives.”

“Master, if you don’t deliver us, I will tie my handkerchief to a tree and hang myself, forcing the local officials to arrest you and make you pay with your own lives,” Han Qing said.

“We ascetics roam the blue ocean in the morning and stay in Cangwu in the evening,” Caihe said. “Within a moment we can fly several thousand miles. Why should we be afraid that anyone might arrest us?”

“Saving a human life is worth more than building a seven-storied pagoda,” Mme. Dou said. “Why do you refuse to employ the bit of compassion required to save and deliver us?”
“I won’t beat around the bush, but ask you directly,” Xiangzi said. Are you honestly willing to leave the family today or are you just pretending?”

“Today I have given up all other hope and only wish to leave the family,” Mme. Dou said.

“Mother-in-law, earlier, when Xiangzi came home, you refused to cultivate yourself,” said Luying, standing beside her. “Today there is no Xiangzi around. How can we two women follow two masters to cultivate ourselves?”

“Well said,” Caihe replied. “We just wanted to be certain that you were honestly willing to leave the family. If you are, and want to see Xiangzi, there is no problem.”

“Master, where is my elder brother?” Han Qing asked. “If you help us find him, it will count as merit for you.”

“I happen to have met Xiangzi and I know where he lives,” Xiangzi said. “I can lead you to him.”

“We really, really are willing to cultivate ourselves,” Mme. Dou pleaded. “Master, don’t play any more tricks on us.”

“If you think we are tricksters, you better go and be somebody else’s disciples,” Caihe said.

“Masters, if you are divine immortals, why do you speak like extortionists?” Han Qing said. “It’s because we have been fooled so often that we can’t get ourselves to trust you now.”

“I may not be able to distinguish true and false right away, but if I have Xiangzi before my eyes, I will believe,” Mme. Dou said.

“In that case, Immortal Brother, we can reveal our original appearance and see if they recognize us,” Caihe said.

“Over there!” Xiangzi called out, pointing. “Xiangzi is coming!”

When Mme. Dou, Luying, and Han Qing turned around to look, they didn’t see any Han Xiangzi, but when they turned back again, there stood Xiangzi before them, saying, “Aunt, when I first exhorted you to leave the family, you said that although Uncle had passed away you still had the emoluments bestowed by the court, and that you lived in a grand mansion. Every day you could eat delicacies, drink good wine, dine on fat mutton, dress in silk gauze and finely ornamented cloth, and sleep on blue bamboo shoot mattresses in ivory bedsteads. You had more food than you could eat and more money than you could spend. Wasn’t that better than leaving the family? Why, then, are you today thinking of leaving the family?”

“Nephew, don’t bring up what I said before,” his aunt said. “Just remember that I raised you, and save me!”
“Xu Jingyang’s Zongjiao lu puts it well,” Luying said. “‘A loyal man won’t deceive. A filial son won’t rebel.’ Since you are a divine immortal, how come you don’t know the way of filial piety?”

“What makes you think that I don’t know it?” asked Xiangzi.

“Your uncle educated you, your aunt raised you. The debt you owe both of them is the same. You’ve already delivered your uncle to become an immortal, yet you refuse to deliver your aunt. Doesn’t that look as if you didn’t know the way of filial piety?”

“If that’s what you say, I shall deliver my aunt only,” Xiangzi said. “You can go home.”

“I have no home,” Luying said. “Where do you want me to go?”

“Go to the Cui family,” he suggested.

“Which Cui family?”

“The family of the minister Cui.”

“If I had been willing to go to the Cui family, we wouldn’t be in this mess today,” she responded.

“If you don’t go to the Cui family, then return to the family of Scholar Lin,”

“I am not returning to the Lin family either,” Luying said.

“If you refuse to return, can it be that you want to remain standing here in these mountains?” Xiangzi asked.

“The ancient saying puts it well,” Luying said. “‘If you marry a rooster, you have to fly with the chickens. If you marry a dog, you have to walk with the dogs.’ I married you, and lived with you. Since you’ve become an immortal, I am now the wife of an immortal. If I don’t go with you, where do you want me to go?”

“I received an imperial decree to deliver one person, not two. I can only deliver my aunt. How could I also deliver you?”

“When Xu Jingyang ascended to Heaven, he took even his chickens and dogs with him,” Luying said. “When Wang Lao rose to Heaven, one could still hear the sound of his servants turning the millstone in the sky. Since you are a divine immortal, why do you refuse to take your wife along?”

“The people you mention all already had their names inscribed in the registers of immortals—that’s why they got delivered,” Xiangzi told her. “You, on the other hand, are a common woman with no name in the immortals’ registers. How am I to deliver you?”

“The bond of husband and wife is one of the cardinal human relationships, and divine immortals are persons who completely fulfill the principles of human relationships,” said Luying. “You, however, have failed in all five relationships—how can you be a divine immortal?”
“You’re speaking in vain. There’s no way I will deliver you.”

“Brother, Miss Lin makes a valid point about morality,” Caihe cut in. “You have to deliver her. If you don’t, nobody in the world will listen any more to those who promote morality.”

“Brother, don’t let yourself be badgered by these Confucian moralists,” Xiangzi replied. “Miss Lin’s is a feminine morality; she speaks of the five relationships only because she has no other choice. When it comes to masculine morality, she will come up with other tricks. She’ll keep quiet about the five relationships, but speak of six relationships instead, until you don’t know any more where your head and feet are!”

“How can there be a difference between female and male in morality?” Caihe said. “As long as what she expounds is true morality, then men like us beyond the clouds must not speak of female and male. If we deliver her simply by virtue of that ‘morality,’ the benefits of expounding it in the world will be made clear.”

Xiangzi gave a laugh and said, “Aunt, Miss, I’ll deliver you today, but you still have the body and bones of ordinary mortals. You can’t proceed to the Purple Palace or ascend to the Jasper Pool directly. You first need to go to the hermitage of Magu, the Hemp Maiden, to cultivate and refine yourself for a few years.3 Shed this mortal body, change these mortal bones; only then can you complete the way of perfection, realize your rewards, and ascend to the Primordial Center.”

“Where is the hermitage of Magu?” Mme. Dou asked. “How far is it from here? Our feet are bound, and we don’t know the way. How can we get there?”

“Magu’s hermitage is in Nanchang Prefecture in Jiangxi, more than eight thousand miles from here,” Xiangzi said. “There are no wild beasts or poisonous insects on the way, nor are there ruffians and robbers, so you should get there within three to five months. As long as you keep a firm heart and a determined will and don’t stir up trouble, you won’t have problems on the journey.”

“I’m not stupid—why would I stir up trouble?” Luying said. “But during those three to five months on the road, how shall we find food to eat and inns to rest at? If we have to go begging from door to door and stay in makeshift quarters, what if we encounter frivolous youths and unrestrained students? An ugly donkey can in a short time change into a bear ready to commit evil deeds. Tell me, from whom are we to seek rescue then? Or perhaps the Master will take pity on us two indigent but determined widows and show us a broad road to salvation. That would be better than cultivating ourselves at the hermitage of Magu.”

“You say a journey of eight thousand miles is long and hard to make. When I want to go there, it takes me less than an hour. If only you acknowledge that I am the true Xiangzi, you can go the same way.”
“Why are you talking like this again? If our commitment to the Dao weren’t firm, we wouldn’t be willing to leave the family today,” Mme. Dou said.

When Xiangzi saw that their minds and intentions were indeed firmly set, he spread his sleeves, and within a moment two yellow clouds came slowly drifting down. He stopped the clouds, and they touched down on the ground like lotus leaves sprouting roots. Xiangzi then made Mme. Dou and Luying each sit on a cloud, and shouted, “Leave quickly!” The two clouds rose up higher and higher until they could be seen only indistinctly, and then they were gone. Truly,

From the sky stretches out a hand that takes the clouds
And lifts humans from the nets of Heaven and Earth.

Han Qing watched wide-eyed as Mme. Dou and Luying flew off on the clouds. He alone was left by the side of the cliff. Feeling embarrassed and not knowing what to do, he broke into loud wailing. Not even the two Daoists were to be seen any more, and he wasn’t sure whether they had been real or imagined. Han Qing beat his chest and stomped the ground. Now he cried, now he clapped his hands and laughed, saying, “Strange and absurd things happen in the world. It is really laughable. The lady and the young mistress were clearly standing here and talking, when suddenly two clouds descended from the sky and carried them off. There’s no trace to be seen even of those two Daoists, and I alone am left. If they had abducted me as well, I would surely have been lost! I suppose those two criminal Daoists were master pimps who deceived my sister-in-law and will make her a queen of whores. My mother will be the madam. How absurd! But I don’t seem to have any way out, either. What am I to do?”

As he was talking to himself, a sudden thundering sound scared him almost to death. When he looked closely, he saw that a large crack had opened in the cliff, from which a flood of water came surging out. While Han Qing, all flustered, sought to save his life, the water had already flowed up to his feet, and he was almost knocked over. Although he crossed two mountains and climbed up a tall tree, when he looked down the water was still rising.

Sitting in his tree he said, “There was an ancient who worried that the sky might collapse and the earth fall down, and that from the rupture a mighty river might spurt forth. People laughed at him and said that he worried too much. This flood today, however, clearly is caused by Heaven and Earth overturning, a kalpic disaster that will be difficult to escape. Who would have known that at such a young age I should suffer such adversity? I just said that when Mother and Sister-in-law ascended to Heaven on their clouds they were abducted by the
Daoists. Now they are no better off than I—even the Daoists are within the world’s fate and can’t escape.”

Looking again, he said, “The water is only filling that space over there, and only the people in that place will be harmed by it. I should be fine over here. But if I jump off the tree, where should I go? If the whole world is flooded and I alone am left, who will serve me? Who will till and plant the fields to feed me and keep me alive? I’ll be doomed to die.” After a while he added, “Although the Hans adopted me as their son, they also often humiliated me unnecessarily. The other day, that old dog bone Qian Xinyu also revealed my weak spot. Today this great flood has left me alone. In some way this is cause for joy, isn’t it?”

Then he said, “With the water rising so high the fierce tigers and poisonous insects all over the mountains will be disturbed and come rushing out. If I climb down from the tree and bump into one of them, I am as good as dead and buried.” Once more he spoke to himself, saying, “Hiding in this tree I’m lucky it hasn’t rained. If it rains—well, I’m not the Bird Nest Chan Master. How would I shelter from it?” After another while he said, “Up here in the tree I have nothing to eat or drink. If it doesn’t rain, I will be thirsty and shrivel up like a dried fish.”

After considering innumerable schemes, he still didn’t know what to do. Having no other choice, he climbed down from the tree. As it is said,

*Green Dragon and White Tiger always walk together;*

*One never knows how things will turn out.*

What happened to Han Qing afterward? Please listen to the explanations in the next chapter.