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PEACEFUL ABODES

Account of their homes by Yelü Chucai 耶律楚材 (1190–1244) and Xie Yingfang 謝應芳 (1296–1392)

Two men who lived through dynastic transitions write of the joys of the simple life in modest homes.

What brings joy? How does one live a happy life? Can one be worry-free? Over the centuries, philosophers, poets, artists, and religious leaders pondered these questions. Some celebrated joy derived from spending time with friends; others cherished solitary leisure; yet others claimed to delight in time spent with common people. As a result, poetry and prose work touching on the meaning of happiness is plentiful. Confucius and Zhuangzi, two of the most outstanding early thinkers, presented very different approaches to the topic. Influenced by the increasing emphasis on self-expression in literature and the arts and evolving views on office-holding and its alternatives, later writer-scholars continued their exploration, offering a large variety of understandings of ways to live a happy and fulfilling life.

A genre suited to writing about these issues was the ji (record), a type of prose work written to mark the completion of a studio, private residence, or government building. Whether the builder wrote it himself or turned to a friend, the goal remained the same: to explain the origin and significance of
the building and, more importantly, to explain its builder’s highest ideals and aspirations in life.

The first piece below, “Account of the Abode of Happiness amid Poverty” features a conversation between the Daoist Sanxiu and the lay Buddhist Zhanran (Yelü Chucai), during which the Buddhist enlightened the Daoist on the relationships between joy and worry, wealth and poverty, and the life of the gentleman and the ordinary person. Their references to Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist ideas reflects the cultural and religious atmosphere in northern China in the thirteenth century. The author of the account, Yelü Chucai, was a direct descendant of the founder of the Khitan Liao dynasty. Since his grandfather’s generation, his family had served the Jin state. After the Mongols took the Jin capital city, Yanjing (modern Beijing), in 1215, he became a trusted adviser to Chinggis Khan (1162–1227). He played a key role in the Mongol’s institutional, economic, and cultural policies after the Mongols conquered northern China.

Xie Yingfang was a much more minor historical figure. He came of age during the later years of the Yuan dynasty and, like many literati of the era, supported himself as a teacher in his home region (Jiangsu). He was there when rebel armies rampaged through, including the one led by Zhu Yuanzhang (1328–1398), the founder of the succeeding Ming dynasty. Throughout his long teaching and writing career, Xie Yingfang took it to be his duty to preserve Chinese culture and to reform popular thinking. He sought a life of simplicity and contentment for himself, perhaps because he had experienced so much adversity. As he remarked, “If my mind is at peace, how can I fail to be happy?” Although a Confucian scholar, in these essays Xie evoked key Daoist ideas. His references to the tortoise, the cosmic scheme of things, life as duckweed, being useless and living a safe life, and dying a natural death were taken from the Zhuangzi. This Confucian-Daoist fusion was not uncommon among Chinese scholars of his and other periods.

Account of the Abode of Happiness amid Poverty, by Yelü Chucai

The Daoist Sanxiu rented a place near the market in Yanjing and named his abode Happiness amid Poverty. I, the lay Buddhist Zhanran, visited him and asked, “Could you enlighten me on your happiness?” Sanxiu replied, “Clad in plain clothes and dining on coarse rice, I follow my innate feelings.
Sometimes I entertain myself with music. Other times I find contentment in reading. I chant the Way of the sages and follow the teachings of Confucius. Accordingly, I don’t socialize with people or receive guests, which has freed me of worry and doubt. Before I had not understood that gaining and losing generate each other, the way prosperity and ruin do. Realizing this is the source of my happiness.” When I asked if anything troubled him, he said, “Since I submit to the will of Heaven and am content with my lot, what do I have to worry about?”

I responded, “I’ve heard that whether a gentleman is poor and humble or rich and powerful, he has both worries and joys, never just one. The reason a gentleman studies the Way is not for his own sake. Rather, his goal is for his ruler to act like Yao and Shun and the people to benefit like the subjects of Yao and Shun. He would feel ashamed if there is a single man or woman in the world who has not benefited from a Yao and Shun–type king. For this reason, when a gentleman realizes his ambition and gets a position high enough to practice the Way and wealth sufficient to help others—wouldn’t this bring him happiness? Insisting on being humble and cautious when one could make a difference is like using rotten ropes to guide a six-horse carriage. Shouldn’t that be a source of worry?

“Likewise, a person who is poor and lowly can retreat from society and focus on cultivating his integrity. The fact that he is not in danger of inviting trouble due to his riches or high position should bring him joy. But he should be troubled by the vulgar state of popular customs, the impending decline of the Way of the sages, and the fact that no one in the whole world truly understands him. Your happiness is apparent. Don’t you also have the concerns I’ve mentioned?” Sanxiu stared at me without replying.

I smiled and said, “I understand what you’re thinking. You think that when a person is rich and powerful, he should hide his happiness and only display his worries, while when a person has no such advantages, he should hide his worries and draw attention to his joys. But why should one act this way? I am afraid that in my case, those who do not know me will think that I act proud when I am doing well and appear dejected when I’m not.” Sanxiu said, “Your words are an example of the saying, ‘Others have their thoughts, but I can see through them.’ I’d like to base my account on what you have said.”

Composed on the day of winter solstice in the bingzi year [1216] by the lay Buddhist Zhanran, Yelü (Yici) Chucai, courtesy name Jinqing, of Qishui [Shaanxi].
Account of the Tortoise Nest, by Xie Yingfang

In the spring of the bingshen year in the Zhizheng reign period [1356], I cleared a plot of land on Lake Ge [Jiangsu], where I built a house next to the residence of my old village friend, Mr. Liu. The house was small and barely big enough for me, my wife, and children. I therefore named it Tortoise Nest.

A guest once asked, “When do tortoises ever have nests?” I replied, “Haven’t you heard? A thousand-year-old tortoise nests under a lotus leaf. It uses the leaf as its nest because it does not require any effort on its part. My situation is similar. I got the land from a villager, which cost me nothing. Not only did my neighbors help build the house for free, but also all the materials were donated by local friends. I made no contribution. Now, hiding inside it, I am as quiet as a tortoise hiding in its cave. This is why I have named my house Tortoise Nest.

“The completion of my house was followed by beautiful spring days when everything was quiet and peaceful, so I invited my fellow villagers to celebrate. Carrying jugs of wine, we crossed ramie fields and stretches of mulberry, peach, and plum trees. Everyone had a good time dancing, singing, and cheering. Joining in the fun, I felt as happy as a tortoise dragging its tail in the mud. Although this joy was experienced outside my nest, it was building the nest that made it possible. My only regret is that, unlike the tortoise, I cannot possibly achieve immortality by preserving my vital energy through breathing exercises. The truth is that I would be more than happy if I manage to survive this adverse time and die a natural death. As for understanding turns of fate, solving the country’s large problems, and offering strategies to usher in great peace and cultural flowering, those tasks are for the other divine animals. I am content with the happiness derived from living in a small nest. Sharing the same sky with pots and jars, I do not know the differences between the pleasures of the large and small beings.”

My guest said, “The way you describe it, your life sounds very satisfying. From now on, I want to live the way you do and enjoy the same pleasures. What do you think?” I said, “Sure,” and my guest left in a good mood. I therefore recorded my conversation with him to commemorate the building of my Tortoise Nest.
Follow-Up Account of the Tortoise Nest, by Xie Yingfang

In the early eighth month of the same year [1356], the heavenly soldiers [Zhu Yuanzhang's rebel army] arrived from the west. They set everything on fire and ate the flesh of those who died. My Tortoise Nest and ancestral estate were both burned to the ground. I put my wife and children on a boat and headed east. We first passed Hengshan, then fled Wuxi [both in Jiangsu]. For a month, we repeatedly faced danger. We had to be very careful and dared not make a sound, yet our emotions were such that we could not help but turn our heads toward the direction of our hometown.

In midautumn of the next year, we reached Loujiang [Jiangsu], near the ocean. Living on the boat, we felt like floating waterweeds as we endured the winds and rain and the morning and evening tides. After a while, we left the boat and rented a place to live. Over the course of the next four years, we moved five times. When we heard that no one in our native place had survived, we all realized just how lucky we were to be alive. Even though we were poor, we did not mind it. In fact, we considered our life to be happy.

What brings me joy is that my cramped quarters and lack of work allow me to focus on reading the classics by the ancient sages and thus broaden my thinking. To have no regrets and worries is what I call clear understanding. Yet, in the larger cosmic scheme of things, my life is like duckweed. How is this different from a tortoise seeking a nest under a lotus leaf? This is why I give the name Tortoise Nest to every place we move to. Even though I live in tiny quarters, my mind has all the space it needs because I do not consider the building I live in as my home. Rather, I take the whole space between Heaven and Earth as my nest. For this reason, whether my dwelling is a grandiose palace or a crude hut makes no difference to me. What I know is that this nest has lasted for thousands of years since the time of creation. I and myriad other beings have occupied it and do not have to limit ourselves with fences and borders. Seen this way, why mourn losing the old nest?

It is of course true that many kinds of beings live in nests. Why have I repeatedly compared my house to a tortoise nest, rather than another kind? I have done so because tortoises are one of the four ling, spiritually efficacious animals. Ling beings can come to ruin when they choose to be useful in the world. Since the world does not use me, my life is safe. Alas, whether I am employed or my life is preserved is up to the Creator: it is not something that I the tortoise can decide. As long as I believe that my Heaven and Earth nest
will protect me, it is enough to stay calm. If my mind is at peace, how can I fail to be happy? Worrying that those who do not understand my thinking will consider it preposterous to give a name to a nonextant nest, I am taking the trouble to explain myself yet again.

**source:** Li Xiusheng 李修生, ed., *Quan Yuan wen* 全元文 (Nanjing: Jiangsu Guji Chubanshe, 1999), 43:1349.235–37.

**Further Reading**


