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## A PORTAL OF HIDDEN KNOWLEDGE: THE MOTIF OF THE BRIDGE IN CLASSICAL CHINESE LITERATURE

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Mihai Ionuț FĂT\*

\*PhD, former Peking University (PKU).

**Abstract:** *The present study aims to explore the multiple meanings attached to the motif of the bridge found in the Chinese early literature and elucidate the reasons behind its recurrence in different contexts and at different stages during the historical evolution of the Chinese medieval novel.*

*The method of research consists of analyzing some yet insufficiently explored sources, especially the legends compiled during the Qing dynasty (1636-1912) by different authors, while trying to shed light on their deeper significance with the help of the tools provided by disciplines such as anthropology and the history of religions.*

*The results can show that the landscape as depicted in the literature had the important role of hiding a deeper layer of reality that was made available only at an appropriate time to the protagonists of the stories in which the sacred is always accessed through landscape elements which serve as portals to an unknown dimension of their existence.*

**Keywords:** *Chinese Literature, bridge, Qing dynasty, Chinese Religion*

**Contact details**  
**of the** yingxiongtahai@yahoo.com  
**author(s):**

### INTRODUCTION

The bridge as a symbol has been especially present in Chinese art and literature. The Chinese painted landscape usually includes, among many other elements, a bridge and invariably a human silhouette crossing over it, towards some unknown destination.

In literature, the Chinese legends referenced in the ancient records and the medieval novels can provide a wealth of information that holds potential in shedding light on the meaning of such landscape symbolism, often charged as these are, with profound significance.

The endeavor to elucidate their meaning may seem to be too ambitious a task when dealing with an entire corpus of literature. However, instances in which such symbols appear to hold special

significance are not to be found so often in the body of the textual materials available, although their influence on culture has been substantial.

Direct references to such symbols as the bridge are scarce. Despite this scarcity, the symbol remains very influential and powerfully expressive, its power and significance being subtly present in the deeper layers of the cultural landscape and in a similar way like the symbol of the gate, which is more often found as colored in different nuances and shades in Chinese classical literature; similarly, the bridge also suggests a disclosure, an insight into the unknown, a portal that unravels.

That is why in researching this motif--almost equally symbolical to Classical Chinese culture and Chinese modernity-- it is necessary to determine , with regard to the context found in the available literary works, what this powerful “portal” can reveal after all, and what precisely is the content of the “revelations” related to it.

### ZHANG LIANG’S “REVELATIONS” ON A BRIDGE

For the modern Chinese, Han dynasty has been an essential period in defining their national and ethnical character. Most of the Chinese citizens are presently described as Han, even in their personal documents. The story of Zhang Liang 張良 (251-189 BC), the great strategist in the art of war that helped Liu Bang 劉邦 (b.256 BC, r.202 BC,d.195 BC), the founding emperor of the Han dynasty (202 BC-9 AD) to bring peace to a Chinese world visited by famine, war and disease and establish himself as the sole ruler of the realm, has long entered the memory of the majority of the Chinese. It became not a legend but rather a popular story retold by generations to come.

The way that this story made its way into the collective Chinese psyche had to do with a particular episode that remained as a hallmark of Chinese political culture.

The episode related to the bridge is recorded by Sima Qian 司馬遷 in his well-known “Records of the Great Historian” 史記 ( *Shiji* 史記 55, *Liuhou Shijia di-ershiwu* 留侯世家第二十五 [Prince Liu, Hereditary houses 25]: 2034-2035). According to Sima Qian , Zhang Liang came from a noble family in the state of Han 韓 and many of his forefathers served as prime ministers . He was trained in the Confucian classics and was familiar with the importance of Confucian rites for keeping an order of things, an order that was very much needed. During those turbulent times it happened that the mighty state of Qin invaded Han and destroyed it. Zhang Liang, although as yet not sufficiently mature to have an official function, felt the duty to perpetuate his family tradition of loyalty to the court of Han and swore vengeance against the invader. The invader and unlawful ruler was obviously Qin Shihuang 秦始皇, the future First Emperor of a united China. The “unifier” had a well known reputation for cruelty and sadism. Therefore, Zhang Liang later on sought help from an ironsmith that forged for him a heavy iron hammer with which he thought could crush and kill the vicious emperor and save the world from cruelty and injustice. However, his plans for ambush that involved waiting and throwing the hammer at the emperor when he was in a chariot failed, since the blow hit the chariot of his retinue instead. This event resulted in him being outlawed and pursued by the emperor’s men. He then ran away and went into hiding in Xiapi 下邳 (*Shiji*: 2034), nowadays in the Jiangsu province of China.

For Zhang Liang, becoming an outlaw pursued by authorities was not shameful. More shameful was to obey an emperor whose ideology had no principle, based only on an unquenchable thirst for power and long life. The tyrant would burn books and scholars alive, only to wipe out all those vestiges of a tradition that marked his childhood education, a tradition that considered the

family and the clan more important than a liege lord. That was precisely what a mighty ruler was afraid of. The despot would then utilise the regime of “reward and punishment” 赏罚 as a weapon to bring down his own enemies. The rule of law was a subterfuge meant to dismantle the power of local clans and concentrate it into his own hands. There was no rule, no principle and no morality in it. The Qin emperor became thus the archenemy of Confucianism everywhere. Even his loyal advisors fell victims to their own loyalty and were executed. Nobody could claim influence over him. His actions spoke by themselves. In contrast, for Zhang Liang, family came first and his family’s political allegiances demanded loyalty from him also. That is why, out of respect, to honor his forefathers and ancestors, he chose the life of a renegade. However, this renegade was about to bring down an empire and help build a new one.

The story tells how Zhang Liang, as he was wandering at leisure in Xiapi, was climbing a bridge he when suddenly came across an old man dressed in simple attire. The elder man deliberately let one of his shoes fall down from the bridge and asked Zhang Liang to retrieve it for him. Zhang Liang felt an impulse to respond violently to the old man for such a display of impropriety and humiliating demands. His upbringing, however, had taught him how to reign over his emotions, not let himself be controlled by temporary bouts of anger and brave the worst hostile conditions presented to him, especially that the impudent person was just an old man in need. So as an act of forbearance, he managed somehow to withstand the test and obeyed the elder’s wishes by accepting to lower his pride and retrieve the lost shoe. Then yet another demand came to test him again. The elder straightened his leg and ordered Zhang Liang to help him in putting the shoe on. For a normal person this may look absurd and an insolence taken to the extreme. However, Zhang Liang obeyed again, knelt and put the shoe on, without considering it self-humiliating. Then the old man left suddenly, without showing any gratitude to his younger benefactor, who remained in a state of bewilderment, in a kneeling pose and staring at the disappearing figure of the person that he had just paid service to, like spellbound. As he departed, the elder changed his mind and chose to suddenly turn back, found Zhang Liang’s whereabouts and told him that he may be just the person worthy to be taught something and in consequence urged the young man to meet him again at the same spot after five days, at dawn. Zhang Liang felt strange. He knelt down and uttered a confirmation. After five days, at dawn, he went to the designated spot, but the old man had already arrived and was just standing there in waiting. He admonished Zhang Liang for not being able to arrive in time earlier than him and, being dissatisfied with his lack of punctuality, he requested him to come back again to the spot and meet him after yet another five days.

After those five extra days had passed, Zhang Liang managed to arrive that morning, just after the cockcrow. He found the elder standing there and completely dissatisfied with him for being late again. The old man complained then about the same lack of punctuality and demanded the young man to come back after five more days. Zhang Liang, in order to make sure that this time the elders’ demand is properly met and that he won’t miss the opportunity, went there just before midnight. Not long after he arrived, the old man also came over and this time he looked pleased and happy. He gifted him with a book and told him that it contains guidelines that have the function of training him how to become a king-maker, somebody that can act as a teacher and a guide to those emperors in charge of the realm. He then mentioned that after ten more years Zhang Liang’s efforts will finally yield the expected result and after thirteen more years he should look for him, as he was a yellow stone at the foot of the Gucheng Mountains 穀城山.

After that he dashed away never to be seen again. Zhang Liang took the book and when the first rays of sunlight crept across the land he realized that the scroll handed to him was actually

Duke Jiang 姜太公's treatise on the art of war, a text whose content he would carefully study and put later into action (*Shiji*: 2036). The legend goes that he used the knowledge from the book in order to help Liu Bang establish himself as the new emperor. This way, the story became part of a foundational mythology, treasured by posterity in the Chinese world.

Within the story, introduced by Sima Qian as historical facts, there are elements that hold a symbolic meaning. Zhang Liang, by obeying the old man, had subjected himself to a series of initiatory trials that resemble, on a smaller scale, those of the labors of Hercules. This type of trials are often found within the Asian literature dealing with hagiographies and stories about spiritual heroes. It is worth pointing out, though, that Zhang Liang is the only historical figure in the entire body of Chinese historical literature portrayed in such a way. Of course, there are to be found within, some other Buddhist written sources and hagiographies describing the nature of such relationships, referring to the one between the master and his disciple. However, the officially accepted versions of history rarely contain such references, hence the importance of Zhang Liang's biography.

The apparent humiliation of Zhang Liang by the old man constitutes nothing but a part of an initiation process. However, it should not be considered as purely a trial. The episode was repeated and the same location was chosen. That was the bridge, the very place of an initiation. The old man was identifying himself with a yellow stone at the foot of a mountain, a stone fated to be found and worshipped in the future. Offerings, as implied, were made by Zhang Liang to him, who had taken the form of the stone, after a lapse of thirteen years, as requested (*Shiji*: 2048). Apparently, the stone was originally a part of a distant landscape and came into the world incarnated in a human form with a message to deliver on a bridge to a future adviser of kings. The book that was handed down by the elder had as author the first king of the state of Qi 齊, Duke Jiang 姜太公, the famous figure that, like Zhang Liang, holds a special place in the biographical series of the great historian. Its mention in the context of Zhang Liang's exile is also meaningful and has to do with some relevant parts of Duke Jiang's biography that correspond to Zhang Liang's life story.

According to Sima Qian, who is quoting different versions of the story, in one version Duke Jiang was a courtier of the Shang dynasty and during the last years, when the decline of the Shang rule took the form of an authoritarian and despotic regime, he sought to extricate himself from the court (*Shiji* 史記 32, *Liuhou Shijia di-ershiwu* 齊太公世家第二 [Grand Duke of Qi, Hereditary houses 2]: 1478). In secret he plotted to overthrow the dynasty and establish the future King Wen of Zhou as a ruler. He also contributed to saving the king, who was a prisoner, from the clutches of the last ruler of Shang, King Zhou (*Shiji*: 1478). In the case of Zhang Liang, the death of a dynasty had the same type of motivation. The pattern of circumstances was similar. Zhang Liang, much like Duke Jiang, found himself under the oppression of the same tyrannical rule and was mindful of threats to his own life. He also found what he needed only when he was marginalized and targeted and lead the life of a recluse, waiting for an opportunity to show his skills and render service to a more benevolent ruler. Both figures had a deep belief in the Confucian system of values and turned against rulers that didn't share them or, even worse, against those rulers that conducted purges against those that did, like in the case of Qin Shihuang.

What Zhang Liang once received on that bridge was actually his “mandate” and his “training”. He was transformed by it into a tool for accomplishing the will of Heaven. His purpose rose even above that of a king and his potential came to be recognized and treasured. What can be conjectured is that the stone may have been perhaps a mark on what once was Duke Jiang's grave in the northern part of the state of Qi. However, Zhang Liang took the stone as an item to be buried with later (as Sima Qian mentions in the biography), items like that becoming the usual offering of



yellow stones used by the common folk to commemorate them (*Shiji*: 2048). At the same time it constitutes a symbol, having the same materiality as the bridge. It symbolizes death but also endurance and resilience while the bridge suggests the relationship between the living and the dead, a crossing between worlds, an arch across time with the purpose to facilitate a transmission of hidden knowledge, a portal of initiation.

The picturesque and inspiring way in which Sima Qian approached his subject brought him closer to the style more often found in later Chinese medieval novels, his work having therefore not only a historic value but also a literary one, being a historical essay that provided a foundation of myth and legend to the subsequent developments of Chinese literature.

### WANG CHONGYANG'S STRANGE ENCOUNTER ON A BRIDGE

Sima Qian's records were in many ways a starting point for the later developments of the Chinese historical novel or historical essay. Although the Taoist hagiographical accounts were very much influenced by Buddhism and Buddhist literature, there are still some elements that can be traced back to an older strata of textual material. Relevant to this, it is necessary to mention it as compared to that of Ancient India. Chinese literature lacked one special genre, that of the epics, which appeared much later, together with the historical epic novels. In Chinese history, Ming dynasty was that epoch when the first substantial and consistent epic novels came to establish themselves as a crystallization of a long historical process of complex development. This process of the evolution of the Chinese medieval novel reached its apex during the Qing dynasty with "The Dream of Red Mansion" *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢 by Cao Xueqin 曹雪芹. Alongside it, among many others that bloomed during that period of literary creativity, there was one particular novel of a hagiographical nature worth investigating, "The Story of the Cause and Effects in the Lives of the Seven Realized Masters" 七真因果傳 by Huang Yongliang 黃永亮, that told the story of the seven masters who founded the seven branches of the Complete Reality School 全真 of the northern religious tradition of Taoism.

The plot begins with a visit by two beggars in a village where Wang Xiaolian 王賢廉 was a military official in the Dawei 大魏 village belonging to the Xianyang 咸陽 district. Wang Xiaolian 王孝廉 was the actual worldly variant of the more resonant name of Wang Chongyang 王重陽, a master known mostly by his Taoist name. The inhabitants of the village were all parts of the same clan with the family name Wang. In the village there were also quite a few affluent persons among whom there was an old lady that enjoyed the company of Buddhist and Taoist monks and often invited them over for discussions or religious practice. It happened that the two beggars also came to visit her for alms. However after having a closer look at them, the old lady became very judgmental and turned critical towards them, refusing to give alms. She criticized the two for not working, since according to her they looked young and healthy enough. The author drew then the conclusion that in fact, the old lady was only charitable to those that she could use or benefit from, whereas the beggars were not religious persons and could not attend to her religious needs. (Huang Yongliang, 1999, p.74).

This refusal lead them away and ending up knocking at Wang Xiaolian's gate where they were received very hospitably and treated humanely. The two dined together with the official and found the meeting to be an extremely congenial one at the end. They enjoyed greatly each other's company and when the time came for them to depart, Wang Xiaolian tried by all means to make



them stay for a longer while. As a result, while still insisting on going, allowed him to see them off and accompany them to where the village ends. On the way he asked them about their destination and found out that they were heading back to the place they came from.

That is the moment when the story makes the transition from reality to a world of mystery and wonder. Wang Xiaolian was lead by the two on a bridge that he couldn't recall, since the bridge wasn't part of the local geography that he knew. It seemed like a new surprising element that he had just discovered by exploring an area too familiar not to notice such details. On the bridge, the two suddenly became surrounded by an aura of mystery, looking very different. They transmogrified into divine beings and fetched somehow a pot of wine, seemingly from nowhere, since upon the arrival at his house he couldn't recall them carrying anything in their hands. He was given wine to drink and he found it extremely pleasant and soothing and at some point he fell asleep. After passing out he had an instant dream in which he was taken to the top of a mountain where in a pond there were seven growing golden lotuses that all bore names of his future disciples. Then he was told to come to the same spot on the bridge on the third day of the third month, according to the Chinese calendar. The two people were in fact, as it was revealed to him, Zhong Liquan 鍾離權 and Lü Dongbin 呂洞賓, two immortals that became his masters and instructors in the Taoist arts of immortality and meditation practice.

He then met the two again on the established date and received the necessary instructions. Then he attempted to extricate himself from family life and break his ties with the society around him by pretending to be mad. This step was taken as a result of a need for solitude and peace. Just like Zhang Liang and Duke Jiang, in a way, after discovering a new path of "salvation", the man found himself forced to leave society for his spiritual ideal. Although Duke Jiang and Zhang Liang were somehow motivated by the dangerous forces that they were exposed to, Wang Xiaolian was primarily determined by the sheer longing for spiritual salvation and a definite sense of purpose, since he had the life mission to find and educate those souls that were given to him in the spirit of a tradition that he embraced. Apart from this, at the bottom of all these aspirations was something that all the characters in the stories mentioned shared, that is the awareness of death and the unavoidable necessity to face it.

By comparing the cases of able men leaving society and leading reclusive lives, one can also discover striking similarities in their behavior. They all constitute obvious expressions of some kind of spiritual heroism and had an ideal set higher than themselves. Above all, they shared a common sense of a definite mission founded upon deep convictions. Because of this, they seemed to feel the burden of destiny weighing heavily on their shoulders.

According to the legend conveyed by the author, Wang Chongyang appears as such a person, chosen by destiny on that bridge, located somewhere in a space not revealed to common eyes, to accept the knowledge that was offered and to embrace a spiritual path which would ultimately lead him to immortality and fulfilment as a teacher of the other seven chosen golden lotus flowers. This account of the legend, like that of Zhang Liang's life in Sima Qian's chronicle, contains some striking elements that are important to highlight. One of them is the recurring motif of the bridge. The difference in the Taoist account consists of the bridge being originally hidden from normal, common eyes. Other Taoist accounts of the same story do not feature the bridge as a result of a revelation (Pan Chang, 1999, p.209).

A difference that should be noted is that in Sima Qian's account the bridge was not described as something revealed, but an accessible location, whereas Wang Xiaolian's bridge was a sacred space hidden in plain sight. The access to this sacred space was actually facilitated by the revelation

granted to him by the Taoist immortals, beings that he never recognized as such until the arrival at that designated location and seeing them transmogrified. However, the encounters that both Zhang Liang and Wang Xiaolian had were still very similar in nature. When the conditions were ripe the “veil” was dropped for them to have an insight into what Mircea Eliade originally defined as the “sacred” camouflaged into a “profane” world (Eliade, 1959, p.11). The experience of a hierophany came to be the main theme in both episodes. The name of the bridge given by the author Huang Yongliang is “The Bridge of Ten Thousand Fateful Coincidences” 萬緣橋 (Huang Yongliang, 1999, p.74). The “coincidence” in this case marked the entrance into another dimension of reality, much like the tales of the sacred (1981) of Mircea Eliade (where the protagonist finds himself in a new paradigm by being shifted from one plane of existence to another).

Apart from these considerations, an additional recurring element is the invocation of the number three, that is present in both stories. In Sima Qian the initiation process had three episodes in which the main character was tested by his new mentor as part of his training. Zhang Liang had to come for three times at the same spot in order to receive something that was promised, but of which he knew nothing. There was no indication that Zhang Liang felt that he was going to receive some secret knowledge from the old man. The historian describes him as somebody who doesn’t falter and serves without asking for a special reward, expecting only maybe some degree of gratitude. The old man felt that even such expectations of gratitude can be an impediment for Zhang Liang’s personal development, so he tried to make him discard his desire for gratitude by humiliating his ego and humbling him three times over. The importance was afforded to one’s ability of doing something for three times without being motivated by reward. The first two times may always be easier to bear, but the last one is always the one that counts. In the Taoist legendary account, according to the text, the number three appears to be connected to the calendar. The fixed date for Wang Xiaolian to meet the immortals again was precisely the third day of the third month, according to the Chinese traditional calendar, while the number of the persons present on the bridge was also three: the protagonist and the two immortals. Parallels here can be drawn with the use of number three, like the three temptations of Christ in the wilderness described in the New Testament. Three was a number of initiation that could also represent a process that a spiritual hero undergoes as part of his spiritual transformation. At the same time, in the “Book of Changes” 周易 and Laozi’s “Book of the Way and the Virtue” *Daodejing* 道德經, works representative for the early classical Chinese culture, the number three held the meaning of transcending dualities and adopting a perception of a world in which *yin* and *yang* combine in multiple ways that are complex and transcend simple categories of form.

The story of the bridge is present in all the known textual versions of the Taoist legend. Apart from that of Huang Yongliang, during the Qing dynasty “The Immortals-featuring Biographies of the Seven Realized Founding Masters” 七真祖师列仙传, written by an anonymous author, is yet another novel that tells the story, although without comprising the aspect related to the bridge as that of a hidden reality which reveals itself only on special occasions (Anonymous, 1999, p.4). The other accounts like that of Pan Chang in his “The History of the Golden Lotus Immortals” 金蓮仙史 mentions the name of the bridge as “The Bridge of the Drunken Immortal” 醉仙橋 because of the episode in which Wang Chongyang became drunk and passed out due to the effect of the wine given by his immortal companions. The idea of drunkenness is meant to imply more a state of otherworldliness and escape into the sacred dimension of reality than an abuse of the senses.



The volatile nature of reality is never what appears to be: the beggars were not beggars, the bridge was not a common bridge, the wine was not a common wine, but a mystical one. The profane elements, that in normal conditions were considered as quite common, were shown all of a sudden to have otherworldly qualities.

In the same way, the old man that Zhang Liang met on the bridge was, according to the account, a yellow stone. This yellow stone however was incarnated into a human being. Not even the Buddhist conception of reincarnation would theoretically support the idea that such an inanimate object can incarnate into a living being. That is why the stone becomes more of an ordinary object by which the "sacred" becomes revealed to the initiated, as it can be a bridge that is made of the same inorganic material.

According to some early animistic ideas, even plants or rocks can have a soul. As a conclusion, can be also presumed that the Chinese understanding of Buddhism combines the element of the transmigration of the soul with the archaic idea of the animate qualities present in apparently inanimate objects, thus obtaining the effect of the sacred camouflaging himself into the profane. The same theme one can find also being addressed during the later stages of the evolution of the Chinese medieval novel, culminating with the so called "Story of the Stone" *Shitouji* 石頭記, known also as "The Dream of Red Mansion" *Hongloumeng* 紅樓夢, in which the stone holds the same significance.

#### INITIATION THROUGH DEATH: THE LIBERATION ATTAINED ON A BRIDGE

The importance of the bridge as a place of initiation is also emphasised in the famous Taoist novel "The Story of How the Eight Immortals Attained the Way" 八仙得道傳 by Wugou Daoren 無垢道人, written during the Qing dynasty, at the famous White Cloud Monastery 白雲觀 in Beijing. The novel pieces together different stories collected by the author about the mythology related to the eight immortals and compiles them in a single work, coherent in style and valuable for understanding the evolution of popular literature in China.

Many of the stories included in the form of different chapters are mostly related to the spread of Taoist spirituality in China and the "deliverance" brought by the activities of the eight immortals inside the Chinese society of those times. Under the influence of Buddhism, the religious branch of Taoism adopted a messianic role. The Confucian lack of a soteriological dimension was thus supplemented with the legendary accounts of spiritual leaders like Wang Chongyang, who received spiritual learning from immortals in disguise. Like in the story of Wang Chongyang, in which the immortal Lü Dongbin assumed the role of the master of the founder of the Complete Reality School 全真教, the immortals always appear as beggars, hiding their true identity in the most humble way and awaiting for their target of deliverance to come into the range of their action. The missionary role of the immortals had a special character, that also included an aspect related to their own personal "deliverance", being among others the result of fate at work. Attaining the Way was therefore seen as an act of deliverance, very much similar to that of the Buddhist bodhisattvas, and probably inspired by it.

One such example is that of Lü Dongbin, an account related to the so-called "Bridge of Looking for Immortals" Wangxianqiao 望仙橋 that describes the immortal Lü Dongbin as being impressed by the example of a man's charity towards the poor. According to the author, the immortals at that time became fond of staying in Hangzhou, a city known for the beauty of its





scenery. The landscape and environment of the area described looked like a successful product of blending natural and man made elements. Lü Dongbin noticed that at Chenghuang Shan 城隍山, inside the Yongjin Gate 涌金門, there was one noodle shop keeper who took care of the poor and always gave them some food leftovers, while saving the remaining for himself. He was impressed by his dedication and the way that he dealt with his income which he spent mostly on alms giving. As per description, he was also a bachelor whose life resembled that of a hermit. Only his accumulation of merit lead him to walk on a path of deliverance (Wugou Daoren, 2014, p.619).

The immortal was aware of the potential of his subject so he visited his stall pretending that he was a mere beggar. He was given food that he took with his bare hands instead of any utensils. After having a taste of the food, he suddenly started to throw up and disgorge what was supposed to be a good nutriment. He therefore complained about the altered quality of the alms given. He voiced his complaint violently and gave back the food to the alms giver, warning him that he should not be offended by his lack of gratitude, since such dirty food should not be considered as worthy of being given as alms. The owner of the shop didn't react angrily and accepted the food back without any resentment (Wugou Daoren, 2014, p.619).

Just like Zhang Liang in Sima Qian's story, the shop keeper also had to humble himself. The test of humbleness constitutes therefore a part of that initiation process, meant to forge one's character and test it at the same time. However, no matter how worthy a person the shop keeper was supposed to be, he still failed to receive a direct teaching. His spiritual "labors" were far from being acceptable. What happened was that, as he received back the rejected food, a malnourished dog in a poor state came over looking for food at his stall. After having a taste, the dog instantly attained immortality and ascended to heaven in the form of a dragon. This miraculous episode was a proof that the beggar who visited his shop was actually a divine being. In consequence, he tried by all means to meet the immortal again and would regularly look for him on a bridge for that purpose, forsaking even his business in that search. However, no immortal would cross it again and because of that he turned so delirious and absent-minded that one day he fatally fell down from the bridge and passed away.

The author describes Lü Dongbin staying in waiting for just that particular moment in order to get the chance to "deliver" him. However paradoxical it may appear, the shop keeper had to undergo death before achieving deliverance, which happened through the agency of a master like the immortal himself. His tragical end was predictable, but it was only meant to complete that spiritual process with a fruitful and positive result. The dog that received the rejected food and turned into an immortal being is revealed as the one that Lü Dongbin previously harmed. In this way the immortal, who chose to mix with the worldly, had paid his older debts and by doing so reached a higher spiritual state. At least one of his past mistakes wouldn't come to haunt him anymore. Therefore, helping others had a double effect, being related both to others and to himself. In Buddhist terms, he was still affected by a past karma.

According to the most basic Buddhist understanding, divine beings are not exempted from the rule of karmic retribution and they still have to undergo serious trials in order to cleanse their own karma. Lü Dongbin's story reflects perhaps precisely this influence of Buddhist thought, although the approach cannot be entirely considered as Buddhist in nature. However the idea of "deliverance" 度, as the name of the chapter reflects, referring to the "deliverance" of the dog (度療狗) is a Buddhist concept that comes to provide with it something that was previously missing in the Chinese belief system, a soteriological dimension, to which missionary zeal becomes instrumental.



The bridge represents a place of initiation through the absence of the initiating master, based almost entirely on a blind fate that leads one to a final and tragical deliverance. The yearning for salvation and the devotion to that thought was therefore what materialized his spiritual aspirations. A parallel can be drawn here with the legend of Ekalavya from Mahābhārata, an archer that attained the supreme level of his craft by practicing before the image of a master, made of clay, that had never instructed him and only served as a motivation (*Mahābhārata* 1.123.10-13). In the same way, the shop keeper was inspired by the presence of a master that mistreated him and never offered him real instruction.

Withstanding humiliation was for the shop keeper the first test and death was the second, one after which he was not expecting to have any positive outcome. The loss of life however was not the end, and miraculously resulted in his “deliverance”.

## CONCLUSION

Early Chinese literature gives importance to symbols that later on became a part of a more elaborated narrative. The bridge is one of those symbols and maybe the most important one, since it represents a portal of initiation into a “sacred” mystery that lies beyond the veil of the ordinary, “profane” world, a portal which reveals itself only to those that are chosen by fate or by the will of an incomprehensible source of power and transformation.

The experiences on the bridge or related to it were hierophanies, manifestations of the sacred. Therefore the hierophany constitutes an empowerment. Zhang Liang wouldn't become the great strategist only by reading the book that was made available to him. He became great not because of his reading but because of the empowerment that he received from the old man. His knowledge was founded upon a relationship that he formed with a higher plane of existence, a relationship that couldn't be quantified or measured. This strong foundation was due to his experience and not to the information that he could glean from a text that was offered to him. Without such empowerment, bookish knowledge would have been useless and Zhang Liang would have remained just a normal person who happened to be a temporary incumbent of fate, soon to retire from his position. Like Zhang Liang, following a different tradition, Wang Chongyang has been the protagonist of the same bridge-trial. He also came to be initiated along the same lines. The shop keeper in the other story had a similar experience. For him the bridge was a portal to the “netherworld” that ultimately led to liberation.

With regard to the three examples in which the bridge motif is prominent, relevant is a general remark made by Mircea Eliade: “But it is especially the images of the bridge and the narrow gate which suggest the idea of a dangerous passage and which, for this reason, frequently occur in initiatory and funerary rituals and mythologies.” (Eliade, 1959, p.181)

Eliade also quotes ancient Iranian sources that describe the Cinvat bridge as a passage on the ecstatic journey of the mystics towards heaven (Eliade, 1959, p.182). He mentions a Pitt of Hell under the bridge, like a gateway to the Underworld. The idea of mystical ecstasy appears in both the story of Wang Chongyang and that of the shopkeeper. The shopkeeper fell down from the bridge also as a result of a state of ecstasy, assimilated to madness, that he experienced while waiting for the immortals to show up. Of course, the immortals didn't show themselves and precisely this absence induced in him a state of longing. This ecstasy of longing made him transcend his mortality and achieve liberation with the help of the divine beings that waited precisely for a particular moment.

In both Sima Qian's account and the Taoist novels, the motif of the bridge has generally a double function, and one more to be added in the last story. Since its significance has also a

syncretic character, particular to the Chinese thought, the meanings attached to it can be found somehow intermingled and hard to delimitate. The functions of the bridge therefore can be grossly summarized as : the initiatory function, the function of transmitting knowledge and the function of deliverance.

Eliade mentions the initiatory function and the funerary function. Although in the shopkeeper story the idea of deliverance is related to that of death, this doesn't imply any funerary rituals like in the other traditions referred by him. In this case death is seen as part of the initiation process that leads to deliverance.

However, a similar story, recounted also by Sima Qian in his records, is that of Laozi, the founder of the Taoist philosophy in which features a motif similar to that of the “narrow gate”, bearing a significance close to the one discussed by Eliade.

Laozi wrote his book and transmitted the knowledge when he was about to cross the Hangu Pass 函谷關. In this case the “passage” was also a place of initiation and at the same time one related to the transmission of knowledge. Laozi was persuaded by Yixi 伊喜, the guardian official of the pass, to write down his thoughts in the form of a book ( *Shiji* 史記 63, *Laozi Hanfeizi liezhuan di-san* 老子韓非列傳第三 [Laozi and Hanfeizi, Biographies 3]: 2140) that was left with him for safekeeping. The term “ pass” *guan* 關 is also employed by the later Taoist tradition of inner alchemy, referring to the three “passes” 關 or locks meant to be broken on the spine cord in order for the *qi* energy to ascend to the top of the head, a state of ecstasy being achieved (*Xingming guizhi*, p.523). However in the story of Laozi, relevant is the function of transmission . Laozi was initially reluctant to pass on his knowledge, considering this endeavour as useless. It was only upon Yixi's ardent demand that he paid heed to his advice and penned his thoughts down. The status of Yixi becoming Laozi's disciple is not shown clearly, although later traditions consider Yixi as the inheritor of Laozi's philosophical thought. What is evident is the idea of a text or a book as a sacred object (much like the hermetic “Emerald Tablet” or “*Tabula Smaragdina*” in the Western alchemical tradition). The text here represents knowledge, while the bridge or the pass constitutes the passage that can facilitate that transmission.

As it can be easily deduced, the bridge has in Chinese literature a multidimensional character, its meaning not being confined to a certain limited aspect , since it represents after all a passage, the symbol of transformation and transience .

Worth to note is that the significance of the “passage” in the Asian cultures refers especially to transcending the duality of perception. In the first two stories the occurrence of the number three is also meant to convey the same message of transcending the conditioned dual perception of things and to imply the immersion of the protagonist in a realm beyond worldly subjectivity and conventional categories.

The dual perception has to do with the existence of a subject and an object, while the multitude that transcends duality is represented as threefold (Noteworthy is the spinal cord bridge in the Taoist tradition of inner alchemy that presents three passes or locks to be broken before attaining an ecstatic state.). This quality of the number three has been pointed out also by Tavenner and explained as a way for primitive culture to designate the multitude (Tavenner, 1916, p.143) . The bridge, in relationship with the number three, is thus the very proof of the natural complexity of a universe that contains also the realm of the unseen. By opening a portal, the subject and object become united through dissolution, emerged together in a third state, a transcendent one.



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The bridge-portal is not only a passage but the very spot where the action takes place. As featured in the stories, the bridge is not to be crossed. There is no action of crossing implied. For the protagonists, the function of the bridge is not that of crossing over some sacred river, but that of confluence and encounter. In this place of confluence, the spirit world coexists with and relies upon the mundane. This is obvious in the case of the last story where Lü Dongbin had to clear one debt that he incurred for the harm he committed in the past. The description corresponds to that of a world where the immortals still inhabit the realm of the living and occasionally choose to bestow knowledge upon some worthy subjects. If there was no actual bondage or inter conditioning between the worlds, how then could it be acceptable for divine beings to engage in relationships with humans and descend from their lofty abodes into the mortal and dusty world of transient affairs ? Moreover, they appear to have pledged their assistance in order to cure the maladies of the world by getting involved into politics and providing the means by which benign political changes are affected, finding subtle ways to persuade the rulers to walk on a path of righteousness. Very much like in western medieval legends, politics and spirituality are somehow intermingled. Spiritual welfare depends on political stability and the ethics of rulership.

This type of mixture is particular to most of the Chinese thought. There is no rift between the world and the beyond and there are always bridges of communication between the worlds and portals of confluence that facilitate the transmission of knowledge through experience or written textual traditions, by which simple objects and surroundings become charged with the overwhelming and entrancing presence of the sacred. In Chinese legends the book itself is obviously a sacred object of knowledge that becomes thus charged with a deep significance, one element that was not mentioned by Eliade within his category of the “sacred”. This is also perhaps due to the fact that he focused more on analyzing the cultures that belonged to oral traditions, whereas in China, beginning with its oracular function in the case of the oracle bone texts *jiaguwen* 甲骨文, the act of writing became a sacred undertaking and had a magical or a divinatory one, which can further be seen from the book episode of the prophesied future by Duke Jiang and Zhang Liang’s offerings to the Duke of the “yellow stone” (Duke Jiang). The product of that particular act was also able to reveal the sacred as camouflaged in the profane.

The encounters on a bridge transforms a place that initially was meant to be very unstable and dynamic into one that seems timeless, spaceless and unchanging. There is a contrast between the mortal world of a bridge perceived as such, full of transient dynamics and the timeless wisdom conveyed by texts passed on from the divine to the living mortals in moments of never changing harmony, revealed in a state of spiritual wonder.

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