

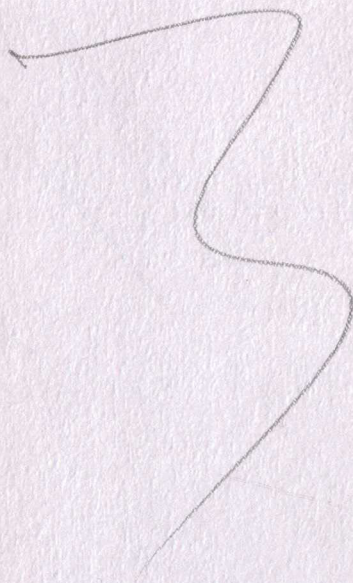
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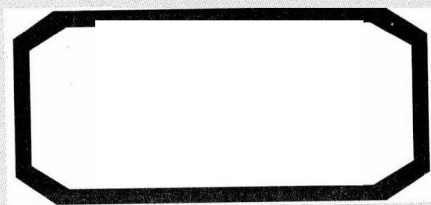
Liezi

Rider on the Wind

Zheng Yumin



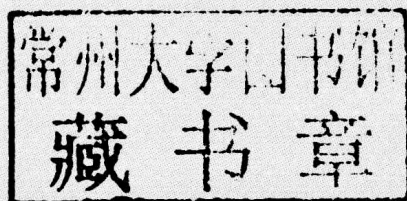
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I

Heaven's Revelations

1.1 The Origin of Heaven, Earth and Man: a Formula of Change

In the West, people believe in God; in China, there is the belief in Jade Emperor. But where do God and Jade Emperor come from? They are certainly born of their mothers. Since mothers can bear children, why should man be created by God? In the opinion of Liezi, Heaven, Earth, and man come from change. Everything in the Universe changes: it recycles with no return and reorganizes without reduction:

Master Liezi said, "In the past, the Sage accounted for all things of Heaven and Earth by the interaction of *Yin* and *Yang*. But where did Heaven and Earth come from, since forms are born out of the formless? It came from the Great Change, the Great Conception, the Great Beginning, and the Great Element. The Great Change was a state in which *Qi* was not yet formed; the Great Conception, a state in which *Qi* was being formed. The possession of form started in the Great Beginning and its qualities took shape in the Great Element. By now, *Qi* was a muddy whole with its forms and qualities and was therefore called Chaos. It could neither be seen nor heard nor touched; for this reason, it was also known as the Changeable. The Changeable became One. One became Seven. Seven became Nine. Nine was the upper limit and there-

fore returned to the very beginning. After that, the pure and light elements rose to form Heaven, the turbid and heavy elements sank to shape Earth, and the elements of *Yin* and *Yang* converged and created man. Therefore, there are such elements in the Universe from which all things spring up and grow.”

Liezi, 1.2

According to *Liezi*, Heaven and Earth, as carriers and containers, have their forms. The development of their forms went through five major periods in the long process: the accumulation of *Qi* in Great Change, the condensation of *Qi* in Great Conception, the birth of form in Great Beginning, the development of quality in Great Element, and the combination of *Qi*, form, and quality in Chaos with the mutual permeation and dependence of all things. The Chaos is characterized by change. It is formless, growing and multiplying without any boundary. The change goes from One via Seven to Nine and then restarts another cycle at One on a different level from the original. The clear and light elements gather and rise to form Heaven, the muddy and heavy elements gather and sink to form Earth, and what neutralizes in between shapes man.

In *Liezi*’s theory, human body is composed of various kinds of *Qi* — the clear, turbid, vigorous, healthy, evil, and harmonious. All things develop their forms by the accumulation of *Qi*, their quality by the accumulation of forms, their essence by the mutual accumulation of forms and qualities complemented with the vital energy of *Yin* and *Yang* in Heaven and Earth.

In the eyes of Liezi, Heaven, Earth and man came into being in a process of cyclic evolution involving the changes of *Yin* and *Yang*. The Chinese character 易 (*yi*, “change”) consists of the hieroglyphic form of the sun (representing *Yang*, the positive element) above and the moon (representing *Yin*, the negative element) below. Between the initial Great Change and the climactic Great Element are the continual Great Conception and the complex Great Beginning, run through by an unchangeable thread of change — different in time, degree, relevance, and pattern in different cases, conditions, and contexts.

1.2 There Is Neither Life Nor Death: Living Creatures Are Passers-by

Liezi set a scene near a roadside restaurant to demonstrate his philosophy of life: Man neither lives nor dies:

On his way to the State of Wei, Master Liezi took a rest by the roadside to have some food. He caught sight of a hundred-year-old skeleton, went over to pull out the weeds around it, and then remarked to Bai Feng, one of his disciples, "No one knows except the skeleton and me that spirit never lives nor dies. Does it really pay to be sad over the dead? Is it worthwhile at all for the living to be happy?" ...

Liezi 1.4

Liezi was by no means an anthropologist. The skeleton he noticed close to the restaurant was around one hundred years old, rather than the bones of a centenarian. His attendants were fearful at the sight, but Liezi was composed. He took this opportunity to lecture on his philosophy of life: There is no life or death. Look at this pile of bones. Does it mean death? No. His genes might still be active in his offspring. Now look at me. I am quite natural and I act naturally, but I am walking in his direction. Man is no more than a passer-by. Therefore, living beings are never born; the dead creatures never die. Life is

met by death while death is a continuation of life. They inherit and transform each other; therefore, there is no sharp line between life and death. For this reason, it is unnecessary to be unduly sad over death or over-delighted with life.

Here, Liezi emphasized the relationship between life and death, the implication of life, and the right attitude toward life. He distinguished between exogeneity, which leads inexorably to disappearance, and endogeneity, which necessarily lasts and becomes immortal. In his view, body form is merely the external phase of life instead of its totality, and life also contains spirit, belief, thought, feelings, love, benevolence, and the mechanism of heritage. Some people are alive in body but are actually dead because they do not get the truth of life, while others are dead in body but are actually alive because they enrich the implication of life. Therefore, the attitude toward life should be turned to the emphasis on this existence and inheritance without neglecting either shape-body or mind-body. It simply will not do to be sated with food and heavily made-up without being equipped with belief, benevolence, and moral support.

1.3 Liezi on Evolution: Everything Changes by Nature

Liezi is the Chinese counterpart of Charles Darwin. Separated by more than 2 millennia, both made careful and close observations and shared a common orientation in views: evolution. Interestingly, Darwin believed that human beings evolved from apes. But from what did the apes evolve? He offered no answer. He conducted frequent practical experiments. His last paper dealt with the relationship between earthworms and soil. And in order to study the sensory organs of the worm, he even played music to them and discovered ultimately that the creature is deaf but photosensitive. On the other hand, Liezi, a philosopher, lacking the ideal mode of research over 2,000 years ago, who depended solely on comprehension and his theory of Great Change, said:

... All species develop through their own mechanisms of change: frogs grow into quails and live close to water, accompanied by large crowds of aquatic plants. Away up, moss is generated where water and earth converge, and higher on land, they grow into plantains. Plantains grow in the dirt and out comes dark-footed grass whose root is overgrown with bombyx and whose leaves are transformed into butterflies. Butterflies metamorphose into moths under the oven and with the warmth there appear with a

fresh skin and a new name called Quduo. A long time afterwards they again metamorphose into birds called Qianyugu out of whose saliva come the parasites called Simi, which beget sour-sucking worms Yilu and then Huangkuang and again worms of Jiuyou followed by midges and firebugs. Sheep's liver turns into the red root of madder, horse's blood into wildfire, and human blood into will-o'-the-wisp. Snipes change into sparrow hawks and back through cuckoos. Swallows become clams; field mice become quails; rotten melons become fish; tough leeks become amaranth; old ewes become apes; and fish eggs become insects. Animals named Lei in the Danyuan mountains are self-fertile hermaphrodites. Lakeside birds called Yi become pregnant when their eyes meet. Tortoises called Dayao are female only; wasps named Zhifeng are solely male. One-sided lovers may reproduce without marriage: Jiang Yuan stepped on the huge footprint of a deity and gave birth to Houyi, the forefather of Zhou; a lady dreamed of an immortal and bore in mulberry trees Yi Yin, the famous minister of the early Shang. Dragonflies are born in wet surroundings and midges in sweet wines. Shootless adult bamboos with grass of Yangxi close around will soon beget worms of Qingning. The insects in turn produce leopards produce horses produce humans who eventually return to the great Nature. Everything comes from and goes back to the natural cycle of change.

Liezi, 1.4

Here Liezi demonstrates the origin, motivation, type and process of species. He starts from water which he believes to breed frogs and vast crowds of aquatic plants. Away from water moss grows on wet soil, and further up on the land, the ecosphere develops in different ways and various forms. He cites many examples of transformation and observes peculiar creatures and phenomena like parthenogenesis, bisexuality, and unusual manners of female conception. In his view, transformations occur in various forms and different ways within the panorama of great Nature.

Be careful not to fall into the trap of empiricism. How can frogs evolve into quails and horses into humans? Empirically speaking, this is a baffling statement. Were he conscious of our incomprehension, he would surely be offended. However, it should be pointed out that he differed from us in that the system of knowledge he possessed existed on a different level. What were the intentions behind his explanation? First of all, he intended to explain his theory of Great Change, a state in which *Qi* is unformed, Great Conception, a state in which it is being formed, Great Beginning, its possession of a form, and Great Element, its qualities take shape; the Changeable becomes One, One becomes Seven, and Seven becomes Nine. The proof he offered was based on the conception that the created must create and the changed must change, therefore, there are always creations and changes. He insisted on the important role *Qi* plays in making life and demonstrated that the various types of *Qi* — the clear, muddy, healthy, evil, neutral and vigorous, once coming together in harmony and balance, will comprise various forms of life. Though different in shape, these forms of life have one thing in common:

they share the same *Qi* and origin. In fact, all species are common. All that is totally unrelated in our system of knowledge is related and interchangeable in his system of learning. Can there be some relations between a tiny insect and a large beast like tiger? Yes. In Liezi's learning, they are intimately related. That is why we Chinese still call a tiger a big insect. And modern science has proved that rats and humans share over 90% of their genes. How can horses produce humans? This was believed by some to be a slip of the pen, while others searched for suitable cases in history and claimed to have found one in the 21st year of Duke Zhao of Qin recorded in the *Records of the Great Historian* by Sima Qian. Even if this were true, it would still be a unique case; besides, it happened 40 years after Liezi, who could not possibly have foretold its occurrence. The change from horse into man should actually be understood to mean the mutual generation and transformation of *Qi*. Liezi's hypothesis of evolution is supported by his own system of theory whose kernel ideas consist in integration and assimilation. Therefore, being in a primordial unity and a common field of *Qi*, all creatures, whether living or non-living, no matter plants, insects, birds, beasts, or human beings, are in a constant state of mutual creation and transformation.

Whereas Liezi had full confidence in his own theory, we do not and are therefore inclined to question his peculiar modes of thinking as heretical. With a mastery of his theoretical assumptions, however, we will realize that he might as well be regarded as Darwin's senior since he was equally interested in evolution. Liezi did not simply list the creatures; he generalized the mode and process of evolution, and it is particularly praiseworthy for him