

The Eight Immortals

The Eight Immortals remain favorable folk heroes in Taiwan today. Believed to bring long life and good fortune, they can be seen in temples, homes, and shops, spreading hope and laughter wherever their images appear.

As a result of today's more open atmosphere in the People's Republic of China, the Legends of the Eight Immortals reappear there also.

Immortal

The Chinese are noted for having a special appreciation of the physical world around them. They value life highly, and before Buddhism made its mark, always pictured paradise on earth. Because of this worldly orientation, the early Chinese never welcomed death as a step towards heaven. Instead they saw it as a regrettable and possibly unnecessary event! It was therefore natural for them to seek ways to prolong earthly existence rather than to depend upon a god to grant immortality.

Taoists were the leaders in the search for the secret of life.

Their alchemists mixed magic potions from various substances. History records that commoners and emperors alike died after testing such formulas advertised to make them immortal.



Han Xiangzi

Adventurers under Taoist auspices, set out in ships to find the Isles of the Blessed where the magic peaches of immortality were believed to grow. More cautious and disciplined Taoists retired to the mountains where they sought to gain everlasting life by discard-

ing worldly desires and cultivating the Tao.

There was often mention of eight immortals. The number eight was probably favored because eight was frequently used in literature to mean "and so on" when referring to a number of people. Besides having historical precedents, eight may have been the maximum number of immortals that small theatrical troupes could portray.

Human gods

In Chinese legends immortals are different from gods. Gods are respected and regarded with awe and solemnity, while immortals are treated like good friends. In the many tales about them they are both heartily teased and lovingly appreciated.

An adventurous bunch, the Eight Immortals roam the universe free from responsibilities and cares. Spontaneous and fun-loving, they delight in the joys of life, including fine wine and beautiful women. But, they sometimes become angry or frustrated, and on occasion have been punished by the rulers of heaven for their mischievous deeds. From these attributes it is easy to understand why Chinese identify with them and count them among their favorite legendary figures.

Who is Who ?

When speaking about the

Eight Immortals, we refer to Li (Tieguai), Zhongli (Quan), Lan (Caihe), Zhang (Guolao), He (Xiang), Lu (Dongbin), Han (Xiangzi) and Cao (Guojiu). For our present purposes, we will give only a brief and general description of each immortal.



Lan Caihe

Two beggars and a General

Li Tieguai is quite ugly. He has enormous eyes bulging out from his long sunken face, wooly hair darkening his swarthy complexion and a withered stump for one leg. Still, the "Iron Crutch Immortal", as Li is called, has won the hearts of Chinese. Despite his infirmity Li is always in good humor, even though he knows the meaning of pain.

According to one legend Li

learned the secrets of immortality from the Queen of the Western Paradise herself. This legend tells that Li's parents died before he could talk and he was left in the charge of a cruel stepsister. One



Li Tieguai

day he escaped to the mountains where the Queen of the Western Paradise found him sick and alone. With her magic remedies she cured an ulcer that had eaten away his leg, and took him in as a pupil. After presenting him with an iron crutch she sent him out as a Taoist missionary.

Li represents the sick, the maimed, and the beggars, who at one time were no small minority in China. He always carries a pilgrim's gourd stocked with magic medicines. In folk representations he is always shown with his gourd and his crutch. Li is second only to Lu Dongbin in the hearts of the Chinese today. Both of them are famous for their willingness to help mortals.

Zhongli Quan is the leader of the Eight Immortals. He is fat and tall, with a beard that flows to his navel. His hair is coiled perched on the top of his head. He is the soldier among the Eight Immortals. He also excels in literary arts and calligraphy. Though he was a general and very adept with weapons, he is seldom seen dressed in military garb.

"No one really knows who **Lan Caihe** is," warns the ditty that prefaces the earliest biography of the Eight Immortals. Usually he is pictured as a crazy country bumpkin who roams the hills with one foot bare and one foot booted. In winter he wears a thin, tattered blue gown, but in summer he bundles up in wadded underwear or a thick quilted robe. A wandering minstrel, he sings nonsense songs. Sometimes, however, his verses have a deeper meaning. He ridicules the fleeting frivolities of this world that people take so seriously.

In most modern descriptions he is a clean-cut youth with a basketful of flowers slung over his arm. Sometimes he is even depicted as a woman. The theater probably was responsible for this. Small troupes which staged plays throughout the Chinese countryside were limited in the number of their actors. As a result, a person who played one of the women's roles in regular operas also acted the part of Lan Caihe when they presented the Eight Immortals.

Granddaddy and the Housewife

Zhang Guolao is the granddaddy of the Eight Immortals. Born bearded like the great Taoist teacher Laozi, he lived on earth so many years that he came to symbolize old age itself. Zhang Guolao was a recluse preferring the life of a celibate and ascetic to the luxuries and dangers of officialdom. He was also the great magician of the Eight Immortals. He was particularly famous for his ability to make himself invisible, and to make the dead breathe again.

He traveled China on a white mule which he rode backwards, guiding it with telepathy. Zhang Guolao was frequently called to court to entertain the Emperor with magic tricks. Favorites among Zhang Guolao's repertoire included making himself invisible, drinking a cup of poison and

shooting down birds or wilting flowers with a quick point of his finger.

One night the emperor invited Zhang Guolao to drink with him. Zhang declined the wine.



Zhang Guolao

claiming that he was a poor drinker, but volunteered his young attendant who reportedly could down a whole cup of wine before becoming drunk. The Emperor called the boy, and together they drank. When the lad finished the last swallow he suddenly reeled over backwards. He hit the ground and immediately changed into a golden wine cup. Zhang Guolao had played another trick. He had changed the wine cup into a boy, but of course the lad could only drink as much as the cup could originally hold.

Beautiful **He Xiang** is the only woman among the Eight Immortals. In this role she must get along with her seven male companions and at the same time represent the female aspect of life. He Xiang is actually a composite picture made up of several different ladies.



He Xiang

One of the legends tells how as a child He Xiang was a slave in the home of her cruel stepmother. Forced to toil night and day with little food and no material comforts, the poor girl sometimes was so hungry that she would escape to the forest where

she feasted on moonshine and sipped evening dew.

Her life was so miserable that the immortal Zhongli Quan took pity and decided to raise her to the Upper Sphere. In his hurry to free her he lifted her from the kitchen without a word of warning. She was still clutching her soup ladle when she reached the land of immortality.

The kitchen ladle became her symbol, though sometimes a lotus stem is substituted in its place. The transfer from ladle to lotus probably occurred because of Buddhist influence; the lotus is the sacred flower of this religion and its shape somewhat resembles a kitchen ladle. Though He Xiang was no homemaker - always preferring the freedom of the hills to the confines of the kitchen - her sex was enough to earn her the position of patron of household management, a title still recognized today.

Popular Lu

“Music echoed from the walls and a heavenly fragrance filled the room where the woman lay about to give birth. Suddenly a white crane flew in the window and mysteriously disappeared inside the bed of the mother-to-be. Not long thereafter Lu Dongbin was born. It was a fitting beginning for the man who was to become the most popular of the Eight Immortals.

The magic double-edged sword is Lu's symbol. The weapon, known as the "Devil Slaying Saber" was excellent for combating evil spirits and dragons. In addition to the sword, Lu Dongbin sometimes carries a fly whisk or a cloud sweeper, which is the Taoist sign for those who can ride on clouds.

With traditional literary credits behind him, Chinese students have prayed to Lu Dongbin before exams, hoping that he will reveal the upcoming theme to them in a dream.

There are many legends about Lu Dongbin's adventures on earth after he became an immortal. In general these fall into the following categories: 1) stories about Lu Dongbin helping people; 2) stories in which Lu Dongbin tests potential immortals; 3) stories of Lu Dongbin's fallibility; and 4) stories of Lu Dongbin amusing himself.

In the stories about Lu Dongbin helping people, generally the good or the unfortunate are rewarded, though sometimes the reward is taken back when not properly appreciated.

Stories in which Lu Dongbin tests potential immortals reveal much about the common Chinese perception of what it takes to become an immortal. Usually the good are favored (though not necessarily) - but fate or luck seems to be the biggest factor. If a person is

too anxious to reach the Upper Sphere, he may miss the chance; on the other hand he may refuse the opportunity but be forced into



Cao Guoji

immortality anyway. The general impression after reading these tales is that immortality, though definitely desirable, is not something that can be worked for by "doing good" in the Christian sense. A person can only remain alert to the chance in case it does come.

One of the most endearing traits of the immortals is that the Chinese do not see them as infallible or omnipotent. The can joke about their faults and enjoy telling stories in which an immortal comes out the loser in a contest of wits.

Finally, Lu Dongbin has the reputation of being the lover among the Eight Immortals. Many legends describe his sexual exploits with beautiful maidens or



Lu Dongbin

goddesses. In China, people never trust him with problems of romance. The pilgrims who venture up the thousand steps of the Zhi-nan temple to spend the night usually leave their girl friends behind, because Lu Dongbin might be tempted to take the lady for himself

The legends about Lu Dongbin portray an immortal who in many ways resembles a normal man. His physical characteristics are not outstanding or unusual. He appreciates wine and beautiful women and is not above getting angry, playing practical jokes, or quitting in disgust. Given these traits, it is not surprising that Chinese identify with him on a personal level and have singled him out as their favorite immortal, for Lu Dongbin makes immortality seem within reach for everyone.



Zhongli Quan

Han and Cao

Finally there are still Han Xiangzi and Cao Guojiu. Han, like Lan Caihe, represents youth today. His symbol is a jade flute and he is now honored as the patron of musicians, a position originally held by Lan. Because of superficial similarities between Han and Lan, i.e. youth, music, flowers, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish them in pictorial representations, though Han is usually dressed in much finer clothes than the rags of Lan.

Dressed in royal robes and wearing an elaborate court head-dress, Cao adds a touch of class to the rather motley crew of Eight Immortals. Believed to be the last member of the group, he represents the nobility in China. A very handsome man, Cao Guojiu is usually pictured in full court garb. His symbol, appropriately enough, is a tablet of admission to the court.

(The above is adapted from the Verbiest Courier Quarterly Newsletter and used with permission)

Another bumper crop of vocations

The coming of summer every year marks the time of new vocations for the Church in China. On June 29, 17 graduates of the Southern and Central Seminary in Wuhan were ordained to the priesthood. They come from 10 dioceses and 4 provinces. They are pictured below with Bishop Dong Guangqing (Wuhan) and two of their professors.

