

Yin and Yang

By Nguyễn Văn Sâm

With great seriousness Mrs. Ngan maneuvered the tips of three joss-sticks into the flame of an oil lamp which was puffing forth a great deal of smoke. The joss-sticks burst into flames and she put the flames out by fanning them gently with her other hand. Standing in front of the altar and holding the sticks prayerfully in front of her, she bowed several times and then placed the sticks into the sand in the glass she was using as an incense-burner. The food was already displayed on the altar. Four bowls of white bean compote, the bowls chipped and only half full of compote, had been intentionally placed far apart to give the appearance of abundance. There were also two plates of shredded chicken, a half of a chicken which had been sold to her on credit by a seller she had known for several decades. She had mixed the chicken with a lot of cabbage and half of a freshly picked banana flower. The chicken salad looked attractive due to the nicely blended colors.

Performing rites to call the spirits? Yes, merely performing the rites. The meagerness of the offerings as compared to more abundant times brought her only a mild happiness as she organized the holy ritual for being reunited with the dead. The smoke and the scent spreading out within the small house reminded her of some Tet festivals in the glorious past which now had flown away forever. In those days, when she was a child, she had waited with impatience to show off her brand-new clothes and had been allowed to do what was forbidden on other days. She had felt important then, had received more attention and had no responsibilities. Now, during that same period of time, Tet, she had too many responsibilities and no longer anyone to pay any attention to her. The daughter who had been by her side for so few years, had died suddenly last year of tetanus after cutting her hand on some scrap iron she was collecting for a school money-

making project. Her mother, due to poverty, only applied some threads of tobacco to the cut with the hope that the wound wasn't serious. Since she was now alone she left her house before daybreak and returned after dark to lay down exhausted. All day long she purchased small meals from other peddlers along the road and drank her water from the fountain at the market. Having a good meal or a bad meal depended on the success or failure of her peddling. Torrential downpours or scorching sun, no matter what adversity she faced, she stood alone and was unable to open up to anyone else.

She pressed her hand on the left side of her chest and no longer felt the softness that once had been there and caused men to look at her with desire. Now she felt only a slight pain beneath her heart caused by some unrevealed trouble. She held her breath waiting for the pain to pass. "How strange," she exclaimed, "this time the pain lasted longer than usual." It was an unwelcome announcement of the pains presence.

Standing before the *"incense-burner"* with her palms pressed together, she prayed, "Will the souls of our ancestors and my father come to visit and eat of this simple offering." She hesitated for a second. "It is O.K. not to call my ancestor's names." She remembered the names of her parents but had forgotten totally her father-in-law's name. While she was praying she was also remembering she had been told that the souls of one's ancestors who died long ago and had been reincarnated could not come back to this world to enjoy the offerings. That must be so because how could their descendants remember all of those names to worship. "My mother, who died over thirty years ago, giving birth to me, is surely not still in the world of the dead." However, she still called her mother's name as well as that of her father. Remembering her father-in-law, she wanted to call his name but was a little puzzled. "My husband's father died less than a year ago so he could possibly come here. How strange that my memory has become so bad that I cannot remember his name.

Squinting her eyes in concentration, she rummaged through her memory for her father-in-law's name which she had only heard a few times.

"O.K., I give up." She took three more incense-sticks and struck the match to light them. The match was too short and the sulfur at the tip was too soft, so she used three or four more and struck them harder. There was a quick crackling sound but the fire went out instantly. She threw those damn matches on the floor and picked up some others. This time the matches flared up and rapidly lit the incense-sticks. Holding the incense-sticks, she placed her palms together and prayed, "Would the soul of my father-in-law, wise in life and holy after death, come back to this world and partake of the welcome meal during the Tet celebration." Again jabbing the incense-sticks into the sand in the glass, she smiled to herself. "Praying, O.K., I cannot do anything else because I don't remember his name, so I don't know if his soul can come back. I am so forgetful now."

She bowed toward the altar several times. As she did, she felt the pain in her back at the level of her waist. The same place had been aching for many years. The pain that torments women who have given birth many times. "I have only had three children, which is not many, so it is probably from later years when I was working too hard and eating a bad diet, stuffing my stomach with any food, to fill the emptiness. So my body and my strength are crying out to be built up."

Smiling at her thought as to the cause of her back pain, she struck several times at the site of the pain with her fist. The outer pain made her temporarily forget about the constant dull inner pain. "How miserable, all the organs in my body feel like loose teeth in an older person, wobbling and ready to decay. No part of my body stayed in good enough condition to allow me some joy in my poor life. If one of my organs does not have one trouble then it has another. If the side is okay then the spine hurts; if the heart and lungs are good, the kidneys and bladder are

bad. Our ancestors, in the old days, without any scientific knowledge, probably said it right 'The body is like a jar of dead fish sauce, ready to decompose!' My body is no longer my pride but has become a load of misfortune, vexation and anxiety."

She looked towards the altar. Up to now the ashes had not fallen off the sticks even though the sticks had curved over, from burning, almost into a complete circle and yet they still looked like they were unburnt. The sand in the glass was not covered with ashes so it still looked unsoiled, unlike in previous anniversaries. People believe that this is a sign of the return of the ancestors. She suddenly began straightening her clothes to make them more presentable. "The dead are now present in this house and are partaking of my offering. I must not look so slovenly." She hurried to the chest to find some small glasses, filled them with water and put them on the altar. "Please forgive me, grandfather, grandmother, father and mother, for not having a small amount of alcohol for this celebration, but it is hard to find and too expensive now." She stood at attention in front of the altar as if she were ready to serve her ancestors who were eating. Suddenly she felt ashamed of herself for telling the ancestors that the alcohol was too expensive for her to buy. Buying a small amount of alcohol for the ancestors would not have been too heavy a load. Indeed poverty restricts the ability to make wise decisions. All the people are living under the continual hardships of poverty, almost like they are living in a dying world. I wish my husband would come back and see my situation now. I wish he would complete the paperwork faster so I can fly from this place sooner. If he had done the paperwork a few years earlier my daughter would not have died at the first-aid station. I wish I would win the first prize in the lottery just once. Now there is a drawing every day and a winner for each drawing. So many times I skipped a meal to have the money to buy almost a dozen tickets for each drawing but I never won, not even the small prize from having the two last digits on a ticket.

It seemed that there was a silhouette, or maybe two, moving swiftly from the altar to the door then back to the altar. She concentrated, staring at them, but could see nothing. In the distance, she could hear the sporadic sound of firecrackers, which sounded much duller than in previous Tets. This may have been due to the shortage of the powder or the bad wrapping of the paper around the firecrackers. Outside, the sun was rising and she could hear the voices of people and the sounds of their sandals as they walked in the street. She was suffering from conflicting emotions. On the one hand she was pleased that the spirits were viewing her poverty stricken situation but on the other hand, she was frightened that the spirits were visiting her. "Maybe the two silhouettes were real spirits and not the result of my eyes deceiving me."

Suddenly she shuddered as if a cold hand had caressed her head. She sneezed. "I've got a cold," she murmured, "In the days of Tet the wind is more unhealthy than in the other days." Tet is the mingling of the old year and the new year and also the reunion of yin and yang or opposites. So in the wind there is much of the coldness of the yin influence which can make a weak person become ill and even confined to bed. She went to the inner room to get another coat to wear. "The spirits have reproached me this way probably so I can't enjoy the Tet celebration!" she thought to herself.

Looking down at her threadbare sleeves she was saddened in her heart. She looked around the room to see if she owned anything of value. Then, she looked at the incense-sticks in the burner and again wished that her ancestors would help her win the lottery so she could escape from the poverty she had been living in for almost a decade.

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"Wait for me, let's go together and keep each other company. If you are in such a hurry now, why did you come out so late?"

"I didn't know; so I kept on waiting for more papers like before but this time, for Tet, we were free to go. Woe is me! Nobody told me that so I paced back and forth waiting until there were only a few left and I understood that I could leave. I left and was pleased to meet you here."

"In hell the feeling of human solidarity is less because everybody knows that this place is only temporary while waiting for orders to be reincarnated up there in human or some other form. Worried about one's own future, no one pays attention to anybody else."

"Indifference to the problems of others is a human characteristic anywhere no matter what form they are in. No worries are more important than our own."

"I have a chance to eat now, you know. I knew by the scent of the joss-sticks, that someone had invited me but I must wait until my name is called in prayer so I will know which house to enter. That's my daughter and your daughter-in law."

"I also smelled the inviting scent but I felt uneasy because nobody has called my name."

"Indeed, maybe she forgot her father-in-law's name. Up there, forgetting the names of the dead is common. Come with me and be my companion on the journey. During these days, in the harmony of yin and yang, we can leave without traveling permits, provided that we return here at dusk. They fear that at night we might stroll about and harm humans."

"Yes, so many of the spirits took the opportunity to take advantage of their miasma to disturb the peace and order of the living world. In normal days, even when we receive the inviting scent and hear our names called, we can't go, can we?"

"We must have a traveling permit on normal days, but if our descendants don't call our names it is even more difficult. July 15th is the only day of the year when the spirits are free to travel when they want to. Generally speaking, the corruption of the bureaucracy

in hell is somewhat the same as that in the living world."

"When they ask for my identification, I don't know how to manage. Asking a ghost for identification- sorry, you too are a ghost - is asking that ghost to carry around an extremely heavy tombstone to show !"

" I hope that the bureaucracy that makes people suffer will soon end. Let's go visit our daughter, Ngan."

"Yes, after that I will take the time to see that bad guy, her husband, and the children. How miserable the children are. Sometimes, I think it is better to just forget about the living. 'Forget everything' is the lesson we are taught every month anyway. But my heart still hurts for them. When I was alive, I took such great care of them, that to stop caring so abruptly, as we are taught here, is not easy. Knowing that they are in trouble still breaks my heart."

"But there are a number of ghosts who can forget abruptly! They can stay joyful even when their close relatives die and come here. They don't give them a second thought."

"That number, I think, is limited. Regardless of those lessons, the longer you live up there, the harder it is to forget your memories when you come here. What's needed is a kind of bleach, I think, to remove totally the remaining feelings of those who come here, like the forgetting potion for us ghosts -sorry, again- when we reincarnate."

"There is certainly some kind of bleach, but they don't use it when we are still in hell. The more sensitive the souls are, the more they suffer their losses. The misery is from the heart and those who are still soft-hearted only suffer more. Stopping our misery is something we must manage for ourselves because they don't care about our suffering. They do provide a sufficient amount of forgetting potion when we are reincarnated. Otherwise, once reincarnated, we would go looking for our old relatives. Then, there would be a real mess with the old and new relationships because 'the son would be born

before his grandfather was reincarnated and thus would be older than his grandfather,' as a Vietnamese saying goes."

"Umm...but the forgetting potion itself is not always efficient. In some cases there is no results at all. Some reincarnated spirits have no need to go through the learning process again. Those that Lao-Zi called 'Babies born with knowledge' still remember their knowledge and skills, even when they have forgotten their relatives."

"Yes. In the past in my village of Linh Xuan Thon, in the Thu Duc district, there was a child, four years old, who had never seen a husking factory and lived far from one; but, interestingly enough, he could tell the owner where the husking machine was having a problem, why there was a problem and how to fix it. "

"That is the case with several child prodigies. Coming to the world without forgetting, they learn little but know much. To them it is just a review. Easy!"

"Oh! We are near where the world and hell intersect. Grasp my hand if you need to. For about a decade I've crossed this region two or three times a year so I know that it will take us about ten minutes . In this region we will see nothing even if we open our eyes. A region completely dark, to me, it seems very far, as though it has no limit. Even though they cannot see, those who have a traveling permit can go through this region with the wind. When the sound of the wind ceases, you can open your eyes and see the familiar scenery of previous days and you have arrived. Anyone without a traveling permit can only move around and around in that ink-black region for many days until he is arrested and thrown back into hell and put in the dark cell; the pitch-black darkness of hell!"

"It is so interesting. The two worlds are separated by that ink-black zone, so the living called this world 'the region of darkness.' That region helps keep them from coming down here. Where is your hand?"

"Here! However in some cases they do get lost. If a person faints or goes unconscious for some reason and comes here, they are immediately pulled back by a positive force. They know and see nothing. When they recover consciousness they remain normal, and don't know what was happening in that region. That region is completely dark, you know."

"I heard that there are some people who can go through this dark region into hell and then can go back to their world."

"Yes, that happens often. In early times, in China, there was Mr. Lam Tu Ky who had gotten lost and passed through the dark region into hell and was allowed to return to his world. He wrote the book '*Coming Back From Hell*' in which he told the story about the punishment there. It is regrettable that I had the opportunity to read that book when I was alive but I didn't believe it. On the other hand, in our country there was the case of Mr. Thu Huon. He was a land register official during the Minh Mang dynasty who was led by one of his former acquaintances who was living down here. Mr. Thu Huon was extremely terrorized by what he saw so when he went back to his world, he built a houseboat at the confluence of two rivers, at Nha Be, to provide food and lodging for boatmen in need. Those who were poor and with inadequate food supplies when they were unable to reach their destination on time due to unforeseen circumstances. He gave all his property and money out of charity."

"How strange, two worlds totally separated with a whole region of darkness and still someone can cross over."

"Yes! In the world things don't occur the same all the time. From time to time something very unusual will happen. There is a story about a woman who gave birth to one hundred eggs, there is a story about gold fish living on tree tops and there are stories about fish rain and shrimp rain so, a story about someone lost could be true. In the story *Lost to Heaven*, Mr. Tu Thuc got lost up to heaven and met fairies. If getting lost up to

heaven can be done, then why can't you also get lost down?"

"Do you want to speak about the stories in *Lieu Trai Chi Di (Strange Ghost Stories)*?"

"Yes, I think the author Bo can understand the mysteries of the universe so he can write about lady ghosts who get lost in the living world and marry the men and about men who get lost in hell and marry spirits. Getting lost or being led here, it is all the same. Ah, we arrive at last ! Do you smell the bad odor like the smell of blood in the wind? That is the odor of the selfishness of the human heart. Along with that odor we also find the stench of excrements. That is the odor of human vanity...let's open our eyes."

"How odd. Since I was born until last year, sixty years of life, I had never noticed that odor. Now, after only one year, I come back and discover it."

"If you live amidst the odor you become accustomed to it. Like a person in a dirty toilet, at first he notices the odor but after a while he doesn't. Those living in the Go Vap market district cannot smell the stench of raw fish while people coming in on a train can. Similarly, babies fresh from the mothers' womb will cry all the time: maybe it is because they can't stand the stink of the new world."

"Yes! But why, from time to time, do we notice a slightly sweet smell here?"

"That is the smell of resentment from innocent victims and of the endurance suffered under glaring injustice."

"So, when we sniff the air, we know what is happening around us, don't we?"

"Yes, all real ghosts can; for example the much referred to, 'house-corner ghost,' who knows everything happening in a family. We can, at just a glance, tell where the hidden gold is, the number for the winning lottery ticket and who will be elected president of a country. O.K., let's enter our daughter's house. Do you see the incense-sticks in the burner are burnt but the ashes have not fallen. That's the sign of permission for us

The old Nghia gave his daughter a caress on her head. She went to sit on a cheap, poorly made chair and looked sadly out the window. She shivered, stood up, and went to the altar and rearranged the incense-sticks to make sure no ashes fell into the compote. Unintentionally, her hand moved right through her father's belly. The old Nghia looked at his friend and smiled. The old Nhan pulled his friend aside and said, "It is not good." He looked at his daughter-in-law and then at his friend. His friend said, "I have become used to their touch and don't try avoiding it anymore. At first, I paid attention to it but later I didn't care if they stepped on my neck or my head. Sometimes, to move faster, I even went through walls. One adjusts oneself to the circumstances."

Still standing before the altar, Mrs. Ngan was looking over at a table that held a smiling photograph of her husband. The old Nhan was also gazing toward the photograph of his son as his daughter-in-law walked through his body. She shuddered again as she felt a stream of chills running through her body. She lifted the photograph towards her face, as though to kiss it and then replaced it on the table.

Two teardrops spilled from her eyes and rolled down either side of her nose. She used her hand to wipe them away.

The old Nghia tried to clasp his daughter's hand to lead her to the door and show her something outside but his ghostly hand could clasp nothing. He saw his daughter looking towards the altar so he ran around and stood facing her. He put his forefinger into a glass of water that was on the table and attempted to write in the air in front of her. But she noticed nothing. Hearing the explosions of the firecrackers, she looked outside. The old Nghia stepped next to her and whispered something into her ear as if to give her some advice. She still noticed nothing and stepped out to look into the street. Once more he tried to clasp his daughter's hand and asked his friend to clasp her other hand to help him lead her out of the house. But she sneezed

once and hurried back in. The old Nhan took out a sheet of paper and a pen and handed them to the old Nghia. The latter hurriedly wrote some words on the paper and held it up in front of his daughter's face. She didn't look at the paper but just stooped to tidy her messy clothing.

Looking at her, the old Nghia was disappointed. He turned around but he didn't see his friend anymore. About one minute later the old Nhan reappeared. He whispered, "I went there and saw that lousy guy, my son, and he was having a huge meal with another woman. I was so angry I rapped him on the head with my knuckles. I also stirred the alcohol, in both their glasses, with my finger. Doing so just to relieve my annoyance because I am nothing and cannot punish him."

Sadly, the two silhouettes looked around for the last time then holding hands they dove down into the ground. On the altar, the ashes on the incense-sticks fell simultaneously onto the sand in the incense-burner, scattered over the compote, and dusted the chicken on the plates.

Giving a long sigh, Mrs. Ngan picked up the bowls, blew off the ashes and spoke softly to herself, "Worship? O.K.! Worship. Pray? O.K.! Pray. But the ancestors certainly couldn't help me win the lottery. Yin and Yang are truly separated so one can't communicate. Giving blessings or calamities to one is done by other people and not by the spirits. O.K.! Tomorrow I will stop celebrating Tet and throw myself into any work. That's the only certain way to get some money."

Dusk had fallen outside. The firecrackers crackled more frequently. Their small dull pops couldn't eliminate the sadness from the heart of the woman who heard them.

Houston, Texas, 3-1990

(Translated from original Vietnamese version by the author)