

Eight Immortals of Taoism - Yanling Johnson

Zhong Li-Quan

Also called Zhong Li, Zhong Li-Quan lived in Xian Yang City, Shanxi Province during the Han Dynasty. According to an interesting legend, the day before his pregnant mother gave birth a giant came into her room and introduced himself as the ancient deity Shen ' Hongzhi. He told her that he would be born into her family. Then a sudden shining aura appeared like fire spreading in the room, and a large baby boy was born who was the size of a three-year-old. His extraordinary looks showed his unusual background: he had a round, big head with a broad forehead, thick earlobes, long eyebrows, deep eyes, a big high nose. His facial and lip color was rosy; his nipples were far apart and his arms were long. He never cried nor wanted to nurse for seven days. Then he suddenly spoke, saying "I spent time in the Jade Emperor's Purple Palace and my name is written there." When he grew up he became a high official and was assigned the position of general commander to fight enemies who invaded northern China. He was defeated, and then disappeared in Mount Zhong Nan. In the mountains he met several celestials and learned from them. He practiced and eventually became an Immortal. He learned martial arts and the secrets of cultivating into a celestial being, becoming various deities such as Dong Hua and later Hua Yang. He also helped Lu Dong-bin become a celestial. Zhong is considered one of the Five Northerner Taoist Ancestors. In most paintings he looks free and relaxed and carries himself like an ordinary man.

Zhang Guo Lao

Zhang Guo Lao was a real person whose life was recorded in historical records. He lived in Mount Zhong Tiao in Zhang Zhou County. A Taoist during the Tang Dynasty, he had developed super powers and people believed he had lived several hundred years. It is said that he often sat backward on a white donkey that was transformed from his "paper cut" (an art form) and traveled between Shanxi and Shanxi provinces to teach people how to be kind. At night he changed the donkey back into paper again. The Tang emperors sent invitations to him but he refused to go. Later when the female emperor Wu Ze Tian persisted in inviting him, he had to go but "died" halfway there, then secretly returned to the mountains. Many years later during the Middle Tang, Emperor Xuan Zong finally got him to the Forbidden City. The emperor wanted him to marry Princess Yu Zhen. Zhang Guo Lao refused. He sang a poem, "To marry a princess will be like reaching the sky, which a man would love but which only can give me trouble." He begged the emperor persistently to allow him to return home. On the way back, he died at Pu Wu County in Mount Huan. His disciples said he had become a celestial and went to heaven. The Emperor ordered a temple to be built in Pu Wu County in his memory.

Tsao Guo Jiu

"Guo Jiu" means the brother-in-law of an emperor. Tsao was said to be the brother of the Empress Tsao, wife of Ren Zong, Emperor of the Song Dynasty. So the statue of him is different from the rest of the celestials; he wears an official robe. In his hands he carries two jade yin- yang planks. He had a very kind and merciful heart and liked a simple life. He was so deeply ashamed by the things his brother was doing, such as stealing from the people and killing them, that he left his family and went into the mountains to study Taoism and cultivate himself. One day Immortal Zhong and Lu went to test him. They asked, "What are you studying and cultivating?" Tsao responded, "Tao." "Where is Tao?" Tsao pointed to the sky. The two Immortals asked again, "Where is heaven?" Tsao pointed at his chest. The two Immortals smiled and knew that he had learned the truth of life, so they gave him directions and Tsao became a celestial too.

Li Tie Guai

"Tie Guai" means "iron walking cane." Legend says his real name was Li Xuan. There are many stories about him. Originally he was a handsome, strong, tall man. One day he told his disciple that he was going to meet Lao zi and would be gone for seven days. If his shen spirit did not return to his body form on the seventh day, his disciple should burn the body. So he sat in deep meditation and his soul went to the meeting. Unfortunately on the sixth day the disciple's mother was in critical condition and he had to leave the temple to take care of her. The disciple had no other choice but to burn his teacher's body. Soon Li's soul came back but could not find his body. In the forest he found a man who had just died of hunger, so he went inside. He discovered the body had only one leg. Just when he was going to get out of that body he heard someone laughing and clapping hands. It was Lao zi, who stopped him from jumping out of the body. "Tao does not care about the appearance," he said. "This look of yours is fine. As long as you r ^011^ is plenty, you are still a real celestial." Lao zi gave him a gold band to hold the messy hair and an iron walking cane. Li Tie guai often carries a bottle gourd on his back when he comes to visit our world. The bottle gourd contains herbal remedies that have magic powers and he uses them to cure people and save their lives.

Han Xiang Zi

Han Xiang Zi often appears as a nice-looking young scholar. He carries a long bamboo flute in his hand. He was the nephew of the famous literary giant and senior official Han Yu. It is said in his previous life he was the daughter of the Primary Minister An Fu, and was a beautiful and very intelligent girl during the Han Dynasty named Ling Ling. The emperor wanted An Fu's daughter to marry his nephew, but An Fu refused. So the emperor sent him far away to do hard labor. Ling Ling was angry and sad; she died and her soul went into a white crane. Immortal Zhong and Lu helped her leave the body of the crane and be reborn again as a boy in Han Yu's family. The boy was named Xiang Zi. Han Yu raised him since both his parents died when he was young. When he grew up he wanted to be a Taoist but was rejected by his uncle. Nevertheless he still went to Mount Zhong Nan and practiced Taoism. He was guided by Immortal Zhong and Lu again and succeeded in cultivating himself into a celestial. Han Xiang Zi tried several times to help his uncle understand Tao but Han Yu refused. Later Han Yu was demoted by the emperor because he disagreed with him. On his way to his new lower post, a sudden heavy snow buried Han Yu. Han Xiang Zi saved his life and finally Han Yu began to realize that the real world was only a place to learn about Tao. He became immortalized too.

Lan Tsai-Heh

Lan Tsai-Heh is often portrayed carrying a flower basket. It was said that he was the Big Feet Deity who was born on earth, but in plays about him he was often dressed up like a girl. According to legend he was a traveling Taoist who liked to wear shabby clothes and a wide wooden belt around his waist; on one foot he wore a shoe and the other foot was bare. In summer he wore a heavy coat, but in winter he bared his upper body and often slept in the snow, where his body heat melted the snow and transformed it into steam. He often looked drunk, singing about being kindhearted while clapping two bronze music planks. He acted as if he was crazy but in fact he was not. Often followed by a crowd, he was given coins, which he strung together and pulled, across the ground, often losing some. He either gave the money to the poor or used it to buy wine. Some people saw him when they were children and again when they were old, and they said he never changed his appearance. One day when he was drunk and singing in a restaurant, sudden music came from the sky and cranes began soaring through the air. He stood up and said, "Time to go!" He left his shabby clothes on the floor and wearing a beautiful robe, rose up into the sky and disappeared. This is one of his popular songs:

Dancing Lan Tsai-Heh, how long can this world last?

A beauty's face is like a spring/flower, a year/lies by like moving a weaving shuttle;

The ancients passed away in muddled heads, then more have to come to this world today.

Riding on my phoenix in the morning I watch the green tides ebbing,

In dusk I watch white waves covering the green trees and fields. Long lasting lives and scenes are only up in the above. Where the majestic palaces are built of splendid gold and silver!

Heh Xian-Gu

Heh Xian-Gu is the only female celestial of the Eight Immortals. There are many legends about her. According to the records, she was born on the seventh of March in one of the years during the Tang Dynasty. It is said when she was born, purple clouds rose in the room and six bunches of auras appeared above her head. She was an extraordinarily bright child. When she was fifteen she dreamed a celestial taught her how to take mica powder (a mineral.) She did and she began to run as if she were flying. In the morning she went to the faraway mountains and came back at dusk, bringing fruit for her mother. As time went on she no longer ate food but ate Chi-on Pigu. It is said that Immortal Heh predicted a highly accurate future. When the female Emperor Wu Ze Tain invited her to the Forbidden City, she set out on the journey but disappeared halfway there. Another saying was that Immortal Lu guided her to become a celestial. The poem on the columns outside the temple reads. In the universe, the purple Chi shows the magic power of Tao; deep in the white clouds is where the celestials live.

Lu Dong-Bin

The temple for Immortal Lu Dong-bin was built in 1887. Immortal Lu is the most influential Immortal of the eight and is known by young and old alike. It is said he was a family member of the Tang Emperor's family, and his surname used to be Li. But after the female Emperor Wu Zetian seized power, he had to hide like his other family members to avoid being jailed or killed. So he went to the mountains and changed his last name to Lu. It is also said that he was the grandson of Lu Wei, a Tang Dynasty high official. One day before he attained Tao he met Zhong Li-quan, who loaned him a pillow. Lu fell asleep on the pillow quickly. He dreamed that he came in first in the highest imperial examination and became a high official, married a beautiful wife and had a nice family for ten years. Then he offended the emperor, who punished him by sending him far away from his family. He felt broken up when he awoke, but noticed the rice soup that Zhong had been cooking before he fell asleep was not yet done. He suddenly realized how short and unfortunate a person's life on earth could be. He wanted to get beyond that and begged Zhong to teach him. Zhong tested him using money, life and death, irritation and so forth, ten kinds of testing/ yet nothing shook Lu's determination to pursue Tao. So Zhong taught him and Lu became an immortal and gained phenomenal power. One day, however, the Fire Dragon Deity taught Lu that the crucial practice, which was also what he had been practicing for cultivating the highest level of Tao, was to put an end to feelings of greediness, anxiety, longing and disturbed emotion. He applied himself to cultivating Tao and vowed to help people the world over. He finally attained high level Tao. It is said that he often travels and changes into different people in order to help others; he helped several become celestials. There are many moving and interesting stories about Lu. People call him Immortal of the Sword, Immortal of Poetry, and Drunken Immortal because he was a very good martial arts master, a great poet and literati and loved to drink wine. He was considered one of the five establishers of the Northern Branch Taoist School. On his birthday, April 14, there is a big ceremony in the Monastery. The poem on the pole outside the temple reads:

One dream on the pillow laid bare the truth of one thousand years of lives that are only empty dreams,