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## Wei-Huang Zao

魏黃灶\*

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There is a “small business” located near the Baoying Temple in the town where I grew up. The sign outside lists four services: fortune-telling, auspicious day selection, auspicious name selection, and fengshui geomancy. Underneath are the words “Gourd Guru” in larger lettering.

The title of Gourd Guru was inherited by a high school classmate of mine, Wei-Huang Zao by name. He is the fifth bearer of the title, so I suppose we might have called him Gourd the Fifth, as if he were a European aristocrat. It has always seemed simplest to call him Gourd Guru. But perhaps because out of humility, perhaps because he considered the designation inelegant, he never permitted people to call him Gourd Guru. He used to say that all he had inherited was the sign itself and the business indicated thereupon: his name was Wei-Huang Zao, thank you very much.

But small town people do not pay any attention to such niceties. Gourd Guru had always been Gourd Guru, regardless of whether he was first or last in line, patriarch or scion. Who else were you going to ask if you wanted an auspicious wedding day, a name for your newborn, or a burial spot with good fengshui? We knew his real name was Wei-Huang Zao but went on calling him Gourd Guru just

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the same. We went on calling him that behind his back or even to his face for so long that the moniker simply stuck. Even Wei-Huang Zao himself would turn his head if he heard someone holler: "Gourd Guru!"

Folks say that in the days before Taiwan was severed from the Motherland and yielded up to Japan, Gourd Guru's first ancestor in Taiwan was a young man from Quanzhou in Fujian Province. He had gotten some schooling there. When he grew up he crossed the Taiwan Strait and wandered all around Taipei, without really getting anywhere. He kept wandering, making his way to this town on Taiwan's east coast and finding a job there doing odd jobs in a grocery store that sold gourds and other kinds of vegetables. At the time people called it the Gourd Store. Right beside it there were a couple of coffin vendors. The family of the owner of the Gourd Store had been in Taiwan for a long time. They had prospered but had not waxed fruitful and multiplied: the owner had a single daughter, an only child. Finding the new immigrant honest, the owner married his daughter to him, with the understanding that if the marriage produced two boys, one would take the father's name, the other the mother's. After the owner died, the immigrant won the approbation of all the people in the town, on account of the way he handled his father-in-law's funeral; as the only literate person in those parts, he took care of everything, from buying the coffin to selecting the date of the funeral. His fame soon spread, and people buying coffins at the coffin sellers next door who needed advice on this or that began bringing their business to the young man from Quanzhou. Eventually, this young immigrant who had gotten his start in a grocery store moved on, but the title Gourd Guru followed him wherever he went.

He did not forget father-in-law after establishing himself as Gourd Guru, and so when his only son was born, he had the child do double duty by giving him a double surname. It was not until my classmate mentioned it one time in our senior year in high school that I realized his name was Wei-Huang Zao and not Wei Huang-Zao.

The Wei-Huang family passed their days in peace and

prosperity. But the services offered by Gourd Guru—especially fortune-telling but also auspicious name and day selection as well as fengshui—were all more or less related to the very principles of fate itself, and thus to the workings of Heaven. Gourd Guru was in daily danger of revealing the workings of Heaven, which is strictly taboo and highly risky. For if you look at the lives of famous fortune tellers, though they can often help the lost ford the river of troubles or the unlucky change bad luck into good, they are not themselves very fortunate, especially when it comes to the problem of progeny. Some fortune tellers fail to father any children at all, while others have only girls. Gourd Guru's family had kept up the continuity the family line for five generations—every generation had produced a single son. This was a rare achievement in this line of work, due, folks say, to a combination of ancestral protection and good deeds—karmic seeds planted in the field of fate.

A fortune teller accumulates good karma in a very particular way. When he shares his observations of the workings of Heaven he must practice restraint. He may know the whole truth but can only reveal a small part of it, for a total disclosure would interfere with the operation of the Heavenly way. This is why when he tells your fortune you never quite know where he is going; he seems to ramble, to go off on tangents that conceal as much as they reveal. He may see a fatal demon by your side, but he cannot tell you that death is nigh. For such mortal matters, he could not change anything even if he told you the whole truth. All he can do is urge you to change your ways, though usually you cannot change, or it is too late for you to change. A fortune teller knows that fate is fate because it is mostly fixed, set in stone; it just has to be respected. Though he may be able to help you change a small part or some unimportant aspect of your fate, he too must know his place and not try to change too much, lest he break the law that Heaven has laid down for the human realm. A fortune teller has to take care not to "defy Heaven," which is what Confucius was talking about when he spoke of being "in awe of the dictates of Heaven."

It was only in Wei-Huang Zao's grandfather's time that the business moved to its present location by the Baoying Temple. The coffin dealers were still there at the original location, but his grandfather had long desired not to have anything to do with them. Gourd Guru had made his mark doing fengshui and auspicious date selection, and a location near a coffiner provided an endless amount of that kind of business. Which had its own limitation: he was doing so many fengshui analyses of the shady final resting places of the dead that nobody asked him to do the sunny dwellings of the quick—people wanted to avoid all that negative energy. His auspicious date selection business was the same: once most customers wanted days for funerals and burials, people planning weddings and other celebrations took their patronage elsewhere. Wei-Huang Zao's grandfather had discovered that the services he was offering were basically those of a funeral home, that he was living proof of the proverbial wisdom that "loss and gain are brothers twain." So he decided to leave and set up shop somewhere else, to make a fresh start.

In the new location, Gourd Guru moved away from the "shady" side of the business towards auspicious date and name selection. Soon he was raking it in. Wei-Huang Zao told me that at the height of Gourd Guru's prosperity he had chosen the names of almost half the kids of all the notables in the town. In his grandfather's and father's day, most Taiwanese people had to choose both Chinese and Japanese names, so they were always busy.

In high school, Wei-Huang Zao's grades were less than spectacular, and since he did not participate much in group activities, nobody paid much attention to him. But he was very briefly at the center of attention, when he got married less than a month after graduation. It goes without saying that he did not go on to university. Later, at a class reunion, we suddenly remembered this one time before winter vacation in our senior year when the military instructor took us to the Dongshan Shooting Range. After the activity was over, a couple of classmates went to a nearby temple to draw lots. They

wanted to know what was in store for them after graduation. Wei-Huang Zao was with them. Everyone got a different message on a slip of bamboo and laughed it off. Nobody took it seriously, except for Wei-Huang Zao. His message contained the words "your family's united: be happy and eat," which is a line from a quatrain:

See how heavy hangs the grain.

This union is good, a mutual gain.

Go home, be at ease, take a rest, take your seat.

Your family's united: be happy and eat.<sup>1</sup>

The others made fun of him. But who would have thought that less than a year later he would prove the poem prophetic? By winter break of the following year, when we all came home from college, we were still halfway through freshman year, while Wei-Huang Zao had already been blessed with a son.

He got married and had a child so early in life because his father had been over fifty when he had been born and over seventy when he had graduated from high school, and because of the line of work his family was in. The birth of his son was a supremely happy event in the Gourd Guru family. They went all out for the dumpling feast at which the baby was presented to the community at three days of age: the whole street was filled with tables; cars had to make a detour. It was extremely lively, and all our classmates attended. Wei-Huang Zao talked like a big shot that day: he said that every year on the anniversary of the feast, he would not only hold a class reunion but also take care of the catering. His father put his hand on his chest to show that he stood behind his son's promise. The air that day was filled with excitement. But Wei-Huang Zao never made good on his word. There was never any annual class reunion. Wei-Huang Zao did not even attend our ten year reunion. And he was the only one who failed to show.

A couple of years passed and one time when I was home for a visit I was dragged out to some gathering by a couple of classmates. Wouldn't you know it, we ran into Wei-Huang Zao. He had changed

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<sup>1</sup> The whole quatrain is: 禾稻看看結成完。此事必定兩相全。回到家中寬心坐。妻兒鼓腹樂園圓。

so much we hardly recognized him. Only in his early thirties, he had lost all his hair. He had lost all his neck as well. And his gut was so big, he joked, that he would soon be unable to find a belt big enough to fit him. I asked him why he had missed the last reunion, and he said, eruditely, "*lugebam*." I asked him if he meant his father and he nodded. I expressed my condolences, and any thought I had had of reproaching him for failing to attend vanished.

Later I learned that mostly when the classmates who had settled down in our home town got together, which they did often, they did not necessarily meet as "classmates" anymore attending a "class reunion." They were now just friends and associates. Anyway, a couple of them told me that sometimes they simply could not understand what Wei-Huang Zao was saying. When he said "*lugebam*," for instance, I had to translate from the classical language so the others could understand: he was mourning—mourning the death of his father.<sup>2</sup> It finally dawned on me that to perform the Gourd Guru "services," Wei-Huang Zao was often looking things up in dusty tomes on the yin and yang of fortune-telling written for the classically educated reader. After a while, some of the terms he was looking up snuck into his speech. Only people like me who had studied the classical language in university would understand them. To regular folks, Wei-Huang Zao and I must seem like "living fossils."

We had already been talking for a while, when somehow the conversation turned to nomenclature, perhaps because Wei-Huang Zao was sitting with us. One classmate asked him whether the key to naming was the number of strokes in the characters in a person's name. After all, that is what most books on the subject said. Wei-Huang Zao said: "That's not the key. The number of strokes is indeed important: it's related not only to the balance of yin and yang but also to the cycle of the five elements of metal, wood, water, fire and earth. All of this is discussed in *The Changes Explained*." When he mentioned the title of the book about the *Yijing*, *The Book of Changes*, he glanced over at me to see if I had heard of it. Then he went on:

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<sup>2</sup> Wei-Huang Zao uses the classical Chinese term 丁憂 *dīngyōu*, which literally means 'to encounter sorrow,' the sorrow of a parent's death.

"The most important consideration is not the number of strokes but rather the balance of yin and yang. For each person the first thing you've got to know is what we specialists call the "framework" of his fate. Otherwise you won't be able to make the proper adjustments when you choose his name. Everyone agrees that life is a matter of fate: Westerners also judge people's personalities based on astrological sign. You know: Leos are lion-hearted, Virgos are reserved, and all that. Nomenclature must be based on the particularities of individual personality, so that you can even out a person's strengths and weaknesses. What I'm trying to say is that, as with everything else, you can't reduce naming to a single rule. Talking about naming without reference to the framework of a person's fate is meaningless."

"Are you saying that according to the science of namology you can't ever say a certain name is necessarily good or bad?"

"What I'm saying is that what it says in the book you've been reading isn't necessarily wrong, but if all you consider is the number of strokes in the characters, there'll be problems. Westerners say "one man's poison is another man's tonic." Naming is the same. A name might be suitable for one person but not for another. Certain names might be curses, and if you don't believe me, name your kid Chiang Kai-shek or Mao Zedong and see what happens."

"What would happen?"

"Well, Chiang and Mao both had fates of epic proportions. They were able to live up to their names. For other people, these would be highly inauspicious names, maybe even fatal. Part of the science of fortune-telling is the principle of "deflecting the blade," but to do that the person has to have something going for him. You all know the story of the spineless Adou? Adou was the son of Liu Bei, the great general who claimed descent from Liu Bang, the founder of the Han dynasty? He had the imperial surname, just like his father, but he didn't have the right stuff. Lacking an imperial fate, he soon ruined what his father had worked so hard to achieve."

"You just mentioned naming someone to smooth out his

strengths and weaknesses. What does that mean?"

"That's too complicated to explain in a few words. If your preordained fate lacked metal, putting some metal in your name might make up for it. I'd fortify your name. If your fate lacked water, I'd add some water to your name. But you can't follow this formula blindly. It's a bit like Chinese medicine. If a person's heart-fire is burning too hot, you don't necessarily want to reduce the fuel. A wise doctor would strengthen the kidneys, because the kidneys govern water, and if there's enough kidney-water the heart-fire won't burn out of control. These therapeutic tricks are like the martial arts move "striking the tiger from the other side of the mountain," where you hit someone in one place but hurt him in another: the effect is manifested elsewhere. The operative principle is recorded in the *Yijing*: as yin and yang balance each other, so an effective treatment involves both gentle and harsh therapies. Simple in theory, it's not so easy in practice. To make it work, you can't stop observing and learning, and experiencing the principle in daily life."

"Your given name, Zao 灶, is composed of the characters for fire and earth. Does that mean that your fate lacks fire 火 and earth 土?"

"Yes and no." Wei-Huang Zao sighed, paused, and then began telling us the story of his name. When his great-great-grandfather founded the family business, he drew up a table of characters based on which the names of his descendents were to be chosen. Since Wei-Huang is a double surname, the given names were all going to be single characters: on the table of names the founder only wrote out a single column of characters. Each character in the table had a certain key component that had to be included in the given name of each son in the corresponding generation; each male's generational status was therefore marked by his given name. But though the founder's design was thorough, it was limited in application, because each of the five generations produced only a single heir. The character for the names of the progeny in Wei-Huang Zao's generation was Yu 宇, consisting of 宀 and 于. Wei-Huang Zao was an only child, so they just decided to go with the character in the table

him Wei-Huang Yu 宇.<sup>3</sup> There was no room for discussion, because the matter had been decided by the founder.

From the day he was born, however, Wei-Huang Zao was sickly. There were several times his little life had to be yanked back through the Gate of Ghosts. None of the famous doctors the family sought out were able to give a diagnosis. One night Wei-Huang Zao's father sat bold upright in bed after he recalled one of Confucius's maxims from the *Analects*: "If names be not correct, language is not in accordance with the truth of things. If language be not in accordance with the truth of things, affairs cannot be carried on to success." Realizing there might be something wrong with his son's name, he got up and did a divination. The hexagram, one of the sixty-four hexagrams elucidated in *Yijing*, that came up was *fu*, meaning "again." Obviously he was supposed to reconsider something: his son's name. So the next time he stood at the ancestral altar, Wei-Huang Zao's father expressed his misgivings about the name his son had been assigned. That evening, Wei-Huang Zao's great-great-grandfather appeared to him in a dream and said: "I had no idea my great-great-grandson's fate would be so deficient that he would be unable to bear the name *yu* 宇. The character *yu* represents Heaven, the supreme height. But the top part 宀, which looks rather like a hat, is heavy. The person named *yu* must have a fate sturdy enough to support this mantle. If not, the person will be crushed, perhaps to death, by the weight of his own name. I perceive that of the five elements this little great-great-grandson of mine is deficient in fire and earth. Without earth his life will lack foundation; without fire he will want force. He is not the type of person who can wear such a big hat. Let's change his name to Zao 灶, the character with fire 火 on the left and earth 土 on the right. This way we can at least save his little life." After the change, Wei-Huang Zao got better. He survived! "He didn't just survive," one classmate joked: "He even grew into a big fat pig!"

We had that conversation thirty years ago. I did not see Wei-

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<sup>3</sup> If Wei-Huang Zao had had younger brothers, they would have been given auspicious given names with the same component 干, for instance 玕, 杆, 杆, 邢, or 宰.

Huang Zao after that, though when I went home and got together with classmates I would pick up bits and pieces of news about him. His only son had reached an age at which he could inherit the family business. But the sixth Gourd Guru in the family line went to Taipei to take electrical engineering or something in university. After graduation, he went to work in a factory, and was doing quite well for himself last I heard. He did not feel like staying at home. If Wei-Huang Zao had insisted on him carrying on the family tradition, the boy would have faced the ancient Chinese moral dilemma: sometimes it is "impossible for a person to be both filial to his father and loyal to his lord." In this case, by following in his father's footsteps the son could not have remained loyal to himself.

But this year, right around Tomb Sweeping Day, I ran into Wei-Huang Zao while passing by the Baoying Temple. He still recognized me, and asked me to sit down with him in his little studio. When we graduated from high school, it had been quite grand; but now half the space was rented out to an herbalist, with the other half, shabby and dim, for Wei-Huang Zao. Stout the last time I had seen him, he now looked worn out: he could not stop wheezing; obesity tends to age people. After pouring me a cup of cold tea, he slovenly took a drink right from the spout of his teapot. I asked how business was and he smiled, shaking his head: "I get by. Once in a while I get cases, but mostly they're personal favors." He paused a while before continuing. "It's for the best that fewer and fewer people believe in this fortune-telling stuff. It's like I told my son: 'You keep working at the factory. You don't need to worry about taking over the business. When I die, fortune-telling will die along with me!'"

He finished speaking and looked outside. It was dusk. People were getting off work. It was a small town, but the din from the scooters roaring by was deafening. I felt suddenly distraught. I told him I had to go and said goodbye. The whole time, I had not touched that cup of tea. Wei-Huang Zao just kept staring out into the street, vacantly. I understand how he felt, but at the time words failed me: there did not seem to be anything to say.